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Attorney Susan Sorella's freshly ironed white blouse stuck to her back as she hurried to the courthouse.

Her boss had given Susan her first felony to try. It was the third day of jury deliberations, a sunny day in early July, and past time for a verdict. She needed a not guilty.

At the food truck in front of the Boston Superior Court building, the barista with the handlebar mustache and upcycled apron served her a latte. She took a couple of sips, poured out the rest, tossed the cup in a trash bin, and made for the door. For once there was no line at the metal detector. Susan dropped her bag on the conveyor belt, flashed her bar card at the officer, hustled through the machine, and strode to the elevator.

Upstairs, Susan found an unoccupied bench in the corridor. She spread her files and briefcase beside her so she could have it to herself. She stared across at the blank wall and replayed the evidence from the trial in her mind for the hundredth time.

At a convenience store in Dorchester late at night, a man

in a Joker mask stormed up to the counter, yanked a pistol out of his pants, and fired three shots into the cigarette display. Tobacco flew everywhere. In a matter of seconds, he was out the door with the cash from the register. Despite the mask, the Vietnamese clerk sat in the witness box and pointed his finger at Sullivan as the perp. He claimed he could identify the defendant from the sound of his voice and the way he walked. The cops didn't find the mask or any money in the defendant's apartment. His mother testified he was watching TV with her at the time of the robbery. Not the best alibi, but something. Mom, a plain woman in her fifties with gray hair and a heavy Boston accent, made a good impression on the witness stand.

Susan had put the likelihood of the jury buying the ID at less than the chance the lottery ticket in her purse would pay off. Sullivan was dumb enough to rob a store where he was a frequent customer, but the jury didn't know that. Susan kept him off the stand so his nerves wouldn't give him the jitters. Jittery defendants looked guilty. He had a record, but since he didn't testify the jury didn't find out about that. They should have been back quickly with a not guilty. Instead, they'd been talking for three days. Something must have gone wrong. Susan closed her eyes. She pictured the jury returning to the box, the foreman standing and in a deep baritone declaring, "We find the defendant guilty as charged." She shook her head to drive the thought away.

There aren't many ways a lawyer can occupy herself while waiting for a verdict. None that work well. Susan carried recent court decisions she needed to catch up with in her briefcase. Today she couldn't get past the first page. Her heart and soul were in limbo waiting for the jury to return.

The day dragged on. Susan grabbed a croissant from the

bakery around the corner for lunch then went back to waiting in the deserted corridor. At four in the afternoon, her boss Jane Friley came barreling down the hall, her hair flying from side to side, huffing and puffing. She took a few seconds before speaking.

“Let’s go,” she gasped. “The clerk didn’t realize you were here and called the office to say the jury had a verdict.”

Susan’s heart sank. It was over. Waiting there, she’d held out hope the verdict would go her way. Now a certainty that the jury had found her client guilty drove all confidence from her mind. She stumbled through the courtroom door in a fog of trepidation, as though she were entering the hospital room of a terminal patient. Jane took her elbow and steered her to the defense table.

The court officers arrived with Sullivan and removed his handcuffs. He wore the same cheap gray suit he’d dressed in for the entire trial, wrinkled and soiled from conditions in the lockup. He looked at Susan.

“They say that when the jury’s out a long time it’s good for the defense.”

She tried to look hopeful. “Let’s hope they’re right.”

The prosecutor glanced at Susan. He gave her a smug smile look that said he had the case all buttoned up, just like his new Brooks Brothers suit. She sat up straight and nodded back, no smile. Bile rose in her throat. She’d never fully understood what dread was until this moment. She must’ve messed up. There were questions she failed to ask. Arguments she overlooked. She didn’t even know whether Sullivan had robbed the store. She’d never asked him. It wasn’t supposed to matter. She thought she could get a not guilty whether he’d done it or not. Now he was going to prison. Her fault. She wanted to start over. A second take. They didn’t give you that chance.

The jurors filed in slowly. None of them looked at the defense table. That was a bad sign. Their faces were grim. Susan looked at Mrs. Johnson, Juror No. 9 in the second row. Middle-aged lady in a lavender dress. A clerk at Bloomingdale's in the suburbs. Susan had almost rejected her as a juror. But the woman had smiled at Susan all during jury selection and had been carrying a book. Readers were supposed to be good jurors for the defense. How about a smile now? A nod? Nothing. No way to tell what she was thinking.

The judge took the bench and wasted no time. "Members of the jury, the bailiff informs me that you have a verdict. Is that correct?"

The foreman, a lanky young Black man dressed in a khaki sport coat over a black t-shirt and chinos, stood up. "Yes, Your Honor." He held out a slip of paper. Susan tried to read his face. Nothing.

The clerk retrieved the verdict form and brought it to the bench. The judge scanned it and looked up, frowning.

"Mr. Foreman, what say you? On the charge of robbery while armed, is the defendant guilty or not guilty?"

The foreman hesitated. Susan found herself taking Sullivan's elbow to reassure him. She didn't much like this guy. He had a reputation as a mean bastard. He was crude and more than once had made remarks suggesting he wasn't happy with a woman lawyer. He had six other cases pending. If he didn't go down on this one, he'd go down on something. Still, he was her client.

"Not guilty," the foreman said.

Susan had been holding her breath since the clerk handed over the verdict slip. She exhaled slowly. She grabbed Sullivan's hand and shook it. He looked shocked.

"You did it," he whispered. "You got me off."

In that instant, Susan knew he'd robbed the store. That poor clerk. She'd made him look stupid on the stand. She looked around, but he wasn't in the courtroom. Relief eclipsed her feeling of regret. She'd had a job to do. And she'd won.

The court officers cuffed Sullivan and started to take him away. With so many open charges, he had no chance of getting released from custody.

"Wait a minute," he said. He stared at Susan. He started to say something then glanced at the door that led to the lockup, and a dark cloud formed in his eyes. His features settled into an expression of hopelessness. "Thank you," he muttered.

Susan's eyes moistened. Jane rushed over, shook Susan's hand, and helped gather her things.

As they left the courtroom, a middle-aged bailiff nodded at Susan.

"Not bad for a rookie," he said.

She grinned. "You have any money on it?"

"You got me. I had fifty on a guilty verdict."

Susan shook her head. "Betting on jury verdicts is illegal, but I won't report it if you keep quiet about the fact that my sister was on the jury."

His eyes widened, then he caught himself and chuckled. "See you next time."

Susan and Jane got to the street and started walking toward their office.

"That was nerve-racking," Susan said. "They were out so long I thought for sure they would convict. I could use a drink."

Jane laughed. "You deserve one. I'm buying. Let's stop at the Parker House. We got a new client while you were tied up with this trial, and I can't wait to tell you what you'll be doing next."