

## *Hope - A Story of Devotion*

Excerpt – Judge Hudson’s night on the town . . .

Saturday evening, on the other side of town, the rich and the powerful gather at Lincoln Center. It is a benefit concert, by invitation only, the black tie and designer gown crowd. Judge Stanley Hudson was pleasantly surprised the day before when his colleague, Judge Brian Devereux, visited him and handed him an invitation, urging him to attend. He said the ticket was already paid for; a ticket intended for his brother, who unfortunately, had been called away on business. It would go to waste.

As Judge Hudson strolls through the reception area, he is keenly aware of the scattered conversations taking place around him. Frequently, he overhears bits and pieces of what can only be chatter about his case.

“It’s ridiculous. How could she not know what was going on?”

“I heard William gave her a sizable contribution.”

“Jonathon Weiss must be mortified.”

Truth is, Stanley Hudson is a bit out of his element. He is a modest person, conducts his life simply. He is not ostentatious. Since his divorce he doesn’t go out much, choosing to throw himself into his work. He continues to stroll through the crowd, martini in one hand, occasionally picking up a delectable snack being circulated by very young ladies with very tight shirts, each with exactly two buttons open and fairly short skirts, dressed all in black. He has to remind himself that any one of these young women could be a friend of his daughter’s. Worse than that, she is away at school and does a bit of part-time catering work for pocket money herself. She could be here, dressed like this too. There is something unsettling about the whole thing.

Judge Hudson wanted to be sure to thank Brian for his kindness and is glad to see his friend walking towards him. “Stan, good to see you. Glad you could make it.”

“Brian, thank you so much for the ticket. I very much enjoyed the initial set, and the food is fine, my martini just right.” He raises the glass and strikes it against his colleague’s in a mock toast.

“My pleasure, old boy. Us bachelors have to stick together. You’ll notice there is a bit of the old ‘eye candy’ about. It’s worth getting all dussied up in these monkey suits just for a bit of that, aye?” Both men smile in agreement. “Ah, look old friend, at three o’clock, in the shimmering blue dress.” Stanley shifts his eyes to the proper clock position and picks out the tall, thin blond seemingly headed their way. He can’t help but think about the old song with the refrain, ‘Devil with the blue dress, blue dress on . . .’.

Brian calls her over, waving his arm and raising his voice above the din, “Monica, Monica, over here,” and as she approaches he continues, “How are you dear? You get more beautiful every time I see you.” Then turning towards Stan, “This is my friend, Stanley, Judge Stanley

Hudson. Stan, this is Monica Moore.” They exchange an appraising look with a weak handshake, accompanied with the polite,

“How do you do.”

“Pleasure to meet you.”

Stanley can’t help but have his eyes drawn to the long necklace gently swaying between her breasts. “Judge Hudson, I’ve seen your picture in the paper. So, you’re the man that is going to keep our city safe from the terrorists,” she says.

Stanley doesn’t know quite how to respond but after a second decides to just be playful, saying, “Well, someone has to do it.”

“Yes, underneath that tuxedo he has a big S on his chest,” Brian chirps in.

With that, the lights flicker indicating the second half of the program is about to begin. Brian excuses himself to run to the rest room. Monica stays with Stanley, takes his arm and chats gaily as they follow the flow of the crowd back towards the auditorium. They take seats next to each other and Stanley finds himself glad to have this attentive and attractive creature so near.

Throughout the rest of the program they whisper together as newly introduced friends might. He is in unfamiliar territory. When she turns to speak to him she is quite near. He can smell her perfume and feel her warm breath on his ear as they make every effort to be polite to those around them. When it is his turn to speak he does the same, the advantage of this being he can look at her without meeting her eyes. More than once, she touches the side of his arm with her hand as she speaks. She has her legs crossed as she sits, her stocking leg exposed, her foot bobbing up and down with her shoe dangling loose off her heel, held in place only by the toe hold. Normally an ardent listener of fine classical music, he barely hears the notes, his thoughts turned from the music to his new friend.

When the program ends they remained seated and let the bulk of the crowd worm its way out before they stir. She ropes her arm through his as they walk out of the venue. Again feeling awkward, Stanley does not know exactly what to do or say; he is too polite a man to assume too much. After all, they just met. He searches his mind for the right words. What do girls today expect he ponders? They had already established that they both had a car in the parking garage, so there would be no need to share a ride home. Unsure of himself but not wanting the night to end, he makes a desperate suggestion as they near the door. “How about a drink?”

She makes a mock look of surprise and says, “I thought you would never ask. Perhaps just one. I know of a quiet place, quite nearby, follow me your honor.”

They make a left out the door and walk about a block before they come to an upscale bar, the kind one would expect in this neighborhood. It is dimly lit, the outer edge of the room made up of small, two-person booths and the occasional circular one designed to handle a small group. The bar is across the room, busy. Two bartenders work feverishly to keep up, literally all the chairs are taken and other patrons stand behind them either in conversation or crowding in, seeking a drink. They take a small booth. Stanley looks around the room as they settle in. It appears to be full with guests from the show, many of the ladies are dressed for the event and the

men, still in black tie. He half hopes someone he knows will notice him. Monica makes a stunning appearance. He is thinking wouldn't it be grand if one of his ex-wife's friends saw him. He continues to scan the faces even as he gives her the attention she deserves. Unfortunately, most of the crowd is a bit blurry. Still vain, he isn't wearing his glasses; sitting this close to her they aren't necessary. He is beginning to feel conscious of his age, hairline receding, graying. He often thinks that perhaps his time has passed. It is not fair really, he deals with women surely older than he every day and they have an advantage. They use make-up to appear younger, that and the fact that they retain their hair, along with spending money on keeping the gray out, it surely isn't fair; even an old barn looks better with a fresh coat of paint. Sitting here with Monica makes him feel like a younger man. Yes, it would be great if someone he knew saw him here with her.

The waitress comes around and he realizes he hadn't thought about what to drink. Gladly, she turned to Monica first who orders an Irish Coffee. Perfect, he thinks, this one knows just what she wants, "I'll have what the lady is having," he says. They banter a bit, friendly, playful, and the drinks soon come.

He feels flush. The hot coffee laced with the strong liquor goes down warm and easy. Monica sips hers with an even pace. When it came she held it aloft in both hands keeping it near her mouth. The cream staying on her upper lip as she indulged. Stan is able to watch her closely as they sit across from each other, separated only by a few feet in the concave booth. He is conscious of looking at her too much and attempts to divert his gaze but inevitably his eyes come back to her. Monica's gown is open at the neck revealing a delicate yet seductive frame. The neckline plunges but the dress hangs in place as if by magic just above what might be considered too revealing. Stan shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

"So, Judge Hudson," she says in mock adoration. "What can you tell me about this 'terror plot,' is it safe for a girl to walk about the city?" He smiles. He likes the idea that people think him endowed with some knowledge or power beyond what he actually has. Loosed by the alcohol and encouraged by her presence he maintains the playfulness when he normally would have been ill at ease.

"I don't know if it is ever safe for a woman to walk in the city. Especially one as charming as yourself."

Now it is her turn to watch him closely, he feels her eyes looking directly into his and diverts his gaze. He loses track of his thoughts, then collects himself and continues, "The case is really not a difficult one. I can't really talk about it, you know." Still her eyes bore into his and he looks away again, down at his hands which hold the nearly drained mug. She seems to expect more and he is willing to give it to her. "Monica, you realize you must be discreet?"

"Stan," she replies, as she leans forward, the dress popping open just a bit more as she presses against the edge of the table to move closer, and strokes the back of his now trembling hand. "You never met a girl as discreet as I can be."

He smiles back at her. "Yes, I'm sure. As I said, it is not a difficult case, really. The papers have pretty much printed all that is relevant. It all hinges on what the government can actually prove. Not conjecture. Not supposition. But proof my dear, concrete, relevant proof. That said,

this case has ‘political considerations.’ The city needs to show the populace that it is making it safe for . . . ‘a girl to walk the streets’ to use your phrase and the government needs to prove that all the money it is spending on anti-terrorism is bearing some fruit. And the people, the people want someone to pay for what was done in the past and to hopefully deter what might be planned for the future. Essentially, someone has to pay.” Here he hesitates before continuing. “So, while the case itself, or rather the facts of the case, appear straightforward on the surface, how it all works out is not so simple.”

“That’s interesting. That is almost exactly what my brother said. I believe he used the same term you did, ‘political considerations.’ Here she sits back, appears to think, and shaking her head in a worried fashion, she leans forward again and continues, almost whispering. “Stan, I can’t imagine being in your shoes.”

“What do you mean?”

“Screw the political considerations, from what I read in the papers it doesn’t appear this woman doctor running these clinics would have any reason to send money to terrorists. In your shoes I’d be more worried about the ‘personal considerations.’ Jesus, Stanley, she is supported by a list of who’s who in this city. Jonathon Weiss helped her raise money. Stanley, a man like that, he has connections everywhere. If she goes down how do you think he will look? Listen Stan, I know people who are connected to Jonathon Weiss. He has a way of taking care of people that take care of him. You are going to get tired of being a federal judge someday and you talked about your daughter and your son, both in college. Having a guy like Jonathon Weiss on your side would be a great thing.”

“Monica, do you know Jonathon Weiss?” he asks.

She arches her pencil thin eyebrows as if to convince him, and says, “Let’s just say Stan, that I’ve worked on a number of projects with Jonathon.”

Innocently, he says, “Monica, I couldn’t do anything unethical.”

“Stan, I’m not saying that. You said yourself it comes down to what the government can actually prove. But if I was in your shoes, I would use my discretion. Jonathon Weiss doesn’t have to tap you on the shoulder himself and ask for a favor. He doesn’t work like that. But if I’m in your position, I would just do my job and if it happens to all work out . . .” and here she shrugs a bit, “and he thinks you’re a friend. What harm could come of that?”

Stanley sits back and begins to think through all the implications of this night and what Monica has said. He must have stayed too long in this muted stage because he hears her say, “Listen, we both have to drive. I can’t possibly have another drink and drive home after that. You are going to be so busy until this terrorism case is wrapped up. Let’s see how it goes, and call me.” She reaches into her purse and hands him a card. “If it all works out I’m sure I could be available, perhaps if the conditions are right we could spend more time together.” With that she snaps the purse closed, squeezes his hand which still holds her card, and quickly leaves. He watches her go, the shimmering blue dress catching the muted lights of the bar as she sways. He shifts in his seat, reminded of his desire.