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Opening Extract from...

Strings Attached

Written by Judy Blundell

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One

New York City
October 1950

The second act curtain was one chorus away when I spotted him. Third row on the aisle, smack in my sight line. I missed the beat and almost sent Shirley into the orchestra pit with my hip.

To get me back, Shirley gave me a pinch underneath the frothy short skirt, so hard it made my eyes water. Brush step, kick, shoulder roll. Mascara stung and my vision blurred. Ball change, pirouette, as he swam in and out of focus.

I could feel my heartbeat slam, even though the routine wasn't hard. Hold the note, arm up, finger pointed at Millicent March, the star, small and delicate with a thin soprano in constant quest of pitch.

Applause trickled over the footlights. Dust spiralled and settled. I saw his palms hit a few times, then stop. The question of why he was here made my nerves jangle.

Shirley turned on me in the wings as Millicent brushed by, drained of light and energy and comedy, just a thirty-eight-year-old beaten down by the effort of appearing as a coed onstage in a terrible musical with a half-empty house.

"What do you think you're doing out there, leadfoot?" Shirley spat the question at me like a wad of chewed gum. "There could have been a Hollywood scout out there, you know!"

Shirley thought there could be a Hollywood scout out there every night. As if they'd be cruising the chorus line of *That Girl From Scranton!* instead of the Copa Girls or the Lido Dolls. Shirley paid me a dollar a week to wash out her dance clothes and tights in the sink, because she didn't want the imaginary Hollywood scout to see chapped hands when he took her out to El Morocco after the show. *They won't be looking at your hands, Shirley,* I wanted to tell her. But I kept my mouth shut, because I was currently sleeping on her mother's couch. Ten bucks a week she charged me.

Even though I talked back to Shirley in my head, I envied her, too. Faith seems to grab people and not let go, but hope is a double-crosser. It can beat it on you anytime; it's your job to dig in your heels and hang on. Must be nice to have hope in your pocket, like loose change you could jingle through your fingers. Christ, I found myself jealous of everyone nowadays, even dimwits like Shirley.

The roses arrived as we all started in with the cold cream and tissues. The assistant stage manager stuck his arm in

with the bouquet. Newly married, he wasn't allowed to peek. The girls loved that and razzed him every chance they got.

"George, hand me my brassiere, will ya?"

"Georgie, zip me up, be a honey!"

"Come on in, we're decent – we just ain't dressed!"

Nancy, the quiet one with the fiancé, handed me the flowers. "Pretty," she said. "He didn't buy these in the subway."

No flattery, no snow job on the card.

I'd like to take you to dinner. Nate Benedict

No pleases or thank-yous, either. I tossed the card on the counter and bent over to fasten my stockings. I didn't want them to see my face. I'd get enough teasing as it was. My fingers were shaking and I couldn't manage the garter.

"Ooooh, Kit's got a hot one," June said.

"What about that boy you're still sweet on? The one in the army?" Edie asked. There was a hard edge to the question. Edie stared at herself in the mirror, leaning forward to reapply her lipstick. She was older than all of us, probably thirty, some of the girls whispered, but she would only admit to twenty-four. I was seventeen and told everyone I was twenty-one.

"Anybody got a pen?" Shirley trilled. "Kit's got to write a Dear John to the poor sucker."

I'd only been slapped in the face once in my life, but I still remembered the shock of it. If only I could've passed on that feeling to Shirley, special delivery. On one long cold

ride home to the Bronx, I'd mentioned Billy to Shirley, and had regretted it every minute since. Shirley had blabbed to the rest about my sweetheart in the service. Most of the girls respected that – you didn't razz a girl if she had a guy in uniform. They knew he'd be shipped to Korea after basic training. But Shirley didn't believe there was a topic you couldn't poke at. It could be the day of your mother's funeral, and she'd tell you to change your hat.

"Nah, I dropped him for your boyfriend," I said. "He says that when he turns on the light he gets spooked, because you look just like his mother."

Shirley's face got red as the girls laughed and catcalled – "Oooh, good one, Kit."

Dumb move. There went Mrs Krapansky's couch.

I grabbed my jacket and on the way out tossed the roses at George to take home to his pregnant wife. If only I'd learned to save my scene-stealing for the stage, maybe I would've actually been going somewhere.

Nate waited by the stage door. I couldn't tell by his face what he was thinking. I'd known Billy's mood before he said hello, if he was happy or sulky or crazy to see me. Nate's face was as clean as if he'd just scrubbed his feelings off with a washcloth. He was nothing like his son.

Why was he here? I sucked air into my lungs and stood with my chin up, braced for the hit.

"Billy?" I asked.

"No word," he said. "He hasn't shipped out yet."

I blew out a breath while I slowly pulled on my gloves. The pull of fear eased. I could talk now.

Nate waited while I adjusted each finger. I dressed older now, trying to look mature. Nylons and heels and my hair still pinned up the way I wore it in the show. "All dolled up," Aunt Delia would've said in a disapproving way. I did feel like a doll, painted and false, under his gaze.

He turned and we started walking east down Forty-fifth Street. It was almost eleven o'clock and the streets were still crowded. Every once in a while we had to separate to let a group of happy theatregoers through, then come back together again, like a dance. When I'd arrived at the theatre it had been a warm October evening, but now I could feel the chill through my jacket. I'd given my old winter coat to my sister before I left Providence. Muddie had probably already replaced the buttons and sewn velvet on the collar. Unlike me, she planned ahead.

"Lousy play," he said. "For this you left home?"

"Yeah," I said. "The bright lights of Broadway."

Broadway wasn't looking so good just then. A drunk across the way chose this moment to blow his nose in the gutter.

I wondered what the plan was. A steak on a big white plate would be grand, even if I had to make conversation for an hour or so. If I could get down a couple of bites, it would be worth it.

"So where are we going, Mr Benedict?" I asked finally, because the silence was driving me nuts.

"Here you are, all grown up in New York. I think you can call me Nate."

We kept walking, all the way crosstown, passing one restaurant after another. COCKTAILS AND SPAGHETTI blinked in cheerful, lipstick-red neon at me from a window. A man held the door open for a woman, and I heard her laugh as she walked in, her chin buried in a fur collar. I felt a blast of heat and noise. We kept on walking.

I sneaked a look at him. Back in Providence he was called Nate the Nose because his nose had been smashed in a fight when he was younger. It should have wrecked his looks, but it hadn't. Sometimes the papers called him "dapper gangster Nate the Nose Benedict", but he wasn't in the papers much. "I'm just an attorney," he always told the press. "I'm in business, not rackets." I wondered if any gangster called himself a gangster. Maybe even a famous mobster like Frank Costello called himself a businessman, for all I knew.

"You ever hear of a taxi? They have them here," I said after the fourth empty cab had streaked by. I'd never mouthed off to him that way, but I was cold and ticked at the way he expected me to fall in line. We were on a side street now, no restaurants in sight.

"Any minute now we'll be in the river," I said. Which, on second thought, was not the right thing to say to a gangster.

He looked at his watch. "Fifteen minutes from Times Square, if you walk fast."

"Twenty in heels," I said.

"Not bad."

He stopped in front of an apartment building. I stayed put. "This doesn't look like a restaurant," I said.

Instead of heading towards the front door, he motioned to me. There was a black iron gate that led to another door directly to the left. "I want to show you something," he said, his hand on the gate.

I wanted to just walk away, but I couldn't think of a reason. He pushed the gate and held it open for me. I followed. He put a key in the lock and went on, "This is what's called a maisonette. An apartment with its own entrance. You can go in through the lobby, or this way."

He pushed open the door and held it for me. It was just an open door. Nothing to be scared of. I'd known him most of my life. There were neighbours all around me, windows next to windows next to windows, all with people behind them. I could hear a dog barking. So why did I have the heebie-jeebies?

He hadn't told me one word of why he'd shown up or what we were doing, and now he expected me to follow along like a duckling. And look how he held the door open, not even seeming impatient or pleading, just waiting for me to do what he wanted.

I walked towards him, lengthening my stride on purpose, hitting my heels down hard like I had my tap shoes on. As I went by, he reached out and switched on the light. I tried not to flinch as his sleeve brushed mine. We

were standing too close. The door shut with a click as I walked further into the apartment.

The warmth hit me first, the radiator hissing heat. The living room was off the foyer, a pretty room with the lamps lit, nice but not fancy – a rug, a green couch, a table, two armchairs near a fireplace. Thick gold curtains on the windows, shielding us from the street. Through an archway down at the end of the apartment, I could see into a kitchen. A breakfast table with yellow legs was right up against the window where it would catch, I was sure, the morning sun.

I stopped in the middle of the rug, keeping my back to him. I was done with the chatter and the questions. It was up to him to start.

"I made a mistake with Billy," he said. "I should have understood him better."

"Seems like you should be telling *him* that, not me," I said. I kept on looking at the table with the painted yellow legs. It made you think of sitting there with a cup of tea on a Sunday afternoon.

"I tried," he said. "I wrote him a letter. Three, in fact. He sent them all back, unopened. So I'm sitting there at home, wondering how to make it right. I want to set things up for him so when he comes back he doesn't have to worry. I know what the two of you wanted. I heard him say it enough times – he was going to marry you and make a life for you both, here in New York."

"We don't want anything from anybody," I said. Leaving

out the part about my saying to his son *I never want to see you again*.

"So, the war interfered with your plans," he said. "That's what wars do. I got this apartment a while ago. I needed a place for business, but I don't need it any more. So now it's yours."

"Mine?" The surprise made me turn.

"Yours and Billy's. For when he gets back and you get married. You'll be eighteen soon, so you won't need permission. You might as well take it now."

"Now," I repeated, feeling dumb. Then I saw where he was going. "No." I was suddenly warm, so I stripped off my gloves and jammed them in my pockets.

"Where are you living now, some rooming house?"

"I have a room with one of the girls in the show." Mrs Krapansky coated herself with Vicks VapoRub every night before she went to bed. She charged me for everything – towels and hot water and a spoonful of sugar in my tea.

"OK, you ran away from home – that's your business. My business is my son."

"So leave me out of it!"

I saw his chest swell as he took a breath. What was he expecting, that I would thank him?

"I'm saying this wrong. I'm trying to give him a dream, you see what I mean? The dream he had. So he'll have something to think about. I know about war – I know you need something to come back to. So, please, Kit. Take the key. No strings. You wanted this, too."

I shrugged. “Everybody wants something.”

“That doesn’t mean they can’t get it.”

“You know this isn’t right.”

“No,” he said, anger in his voice now. “This *is* right. It just doesn’t *look* right. So don’t tell anybody, and nobody has to know.”

“Not even Billy?”

“Especially not him.”

“So you want me to keep a secret from him.”

“I think you can. If it helps him.” He eyed me. “You have before.”

“What about you?” I looked at him, gripping my gloves inside my pockets. “Don’t you ever give anything up?”

“I gave up my *son*!” Nate slammed out the words, and I saw a flash of what he would be like if he let out that rage full on. I saw Billy in him, the way you could never tell when he was simmering until he blew the pot lid off.

“So I can trust you,” I said. “That’s what you’re telling me.”

“You know you can,” he said. “For God’s sake, Kit, you’ve come to me before. You know I’m looking out for Billy, and that means looking out for you.”

“You weren’t so happy with me or my brother a couple of months ago.”

“I wasn’t so happy with Billy, either.”

“Yeah. Me, too. But I didn’t go blaming anybody for it.” I held his gaze, and he was the first one to drop his eyes. He knew I was talking about Jamie.

"Let's forget about that day. We were all upset. You can tell Billy that you got a job, that you have a place to live, a nice place. He'll have a furlough before he ships out, so he can see you here." He took a step towards me, and in that quick eager step, I saw Billy in him again, and this time tears suddenly were behind my eyes and I shook my head, hoping that would clear them.

He thought I was shaking it at him and he said, "After a while, you'll forget about our deal. I'll never knock on your door." He held up his hands, like he was surrendering.

I thought of telling him that Billy and I had argued that night. That the fight had been so bitter and terrible that I couldn't remember words so much as broken glass and a heart so twisted in pain and fear that I threw up in the bushes. If Nate could see a future, all I could see was a past that blocked it out.

He walked closer and slipped the key in my pocket, looking at me while he did it. I felt his hand brush mine and could smell his soap. I had to fight not to step back.

"I can't afford this place," I said.

"What, you think I'm going to hand you a bill?"

"You might. What if things don't work out the way you want?"

"I'm giving it to you, you got that? Till Billy comes back. The rent is nothing. I own the building – it's an investment. I won't call. I won't bother you. You have someplace to stay, pursue your dream and whatnot. Who knows – maybe you'll be a star, after all."

I didn't know any more if I had enough for that. It was one thing to dream of something and another to come and test it.

He could always read faces. "Don't sell yourself short."

"I'm not," I said. "But what's good in Providence isn't so special in New York City."

"Don't ever think that, Kitty," he told me. "You were something else when you were twelve, and you're something else today."

Even for a girl who was used to compliments, there were some that delivered the goods. I didn't want him to see the pleasure on my face so I turned and pretended to look around. I wished I could stop thinking of our apartment in Providence, crammed with beds and tables and pillows and shoes, or Shirley's lumpy couch and the smell of Vicks that I couldn't get out of my nose. I wished I could stop thinking of how swell it would be to pack my suitcase and tell Shirley I'd found my own place.

"So what do you say?"

I held out the key to him and shook my head.

"You know the favour I did your family," Nate said. "I didn't want to have to mention it."

"That's funny, because you just did."

"I told you back then, even when you were a little girl, you'd owe me a favour. And you shook on it."

"You're calling in a promise I made when I was *twelve*?"

Did I owe him this much?

I owed him this much.

"C'mon, I promised you dinner. How about a steak? There's a place around the corner that's good."

I wanted the steak. My mouth watered for it. The steak, and this place, and the radiator blasting heat, and the radio, and the pillows. I could see myself here, and I could see Billy knocking at the door in his uniform and me opening the door in a dress and heels and lipstick, welcoming him home.

Maybe I'd been dead wrong about Billy. Maybe the decision to stop seeing him was the latest in the long line of bad Corrigan luck. Wasn't it true that I was still crazy for him, that I had to stop myself from writing him every single night? That there were plenty of nights I left the theatre, hoping he'd be at the stage door in his uniform, with that hungry look in his eyes before he lifted me into his arms? How many times had I played that scene in my head – how I'd shake my head at him, telling him it was still over? Didn't it always end in a kiss?

There was too much going on in my head, and I was afraid some of it would spill out in front of Nate Benedict.

"I never eat after a show," I told him.

When we walked out, the wind hit us, cold and damp from off the river, and leaves crunched under our feet as we walked to First Avenue.

"I'll put you in a cab," he said.

He raised his arm and directed his next remark to the street. "You said a lot, but you never said you didn't love him."

The cab pulled over, and he handed in some bills to the driver. He cupped my elbow, helping me over the kerb. Our heads were close together when he murmured, "You and me, we want the same thing. His happiness."

I slid a bit in my heels and almost fell into the cab. He closed the door. I crashed back against the seat, looking through the window at him. He stood on the corner, bareheaded in the wind, hands in his pockets. It was like we'd made some kind of bargain. Another one, like the ones we'd made before.

In my pocket, my fingers closed around the key.