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Opening Extract from...

Strange Embrace

Written by Gail Levy

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GAIL LEVY


QUARTET

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PROLOGUE

Regent's Park, London. 22 October 1946. 7.35 p.m.

His shoes made a loud squeaking on the parquet floor so he didn't hear her approach. She must have been hiding somewhere and her bare feet had made no sound. The first sign was something whizzing past his head, roughly grazing his ear. He stared down at the long silver blade of the kitchen knife skidding across the Aubusson rug in front of him.

It spun to a halt by his feet, the sharp tip submerging about a quarter of an inch into one of the sideboard's slim wooden legs.

On the top, next to the decanter of whisky and a soda siphon, was a bowl of overblown roses. A few golden petals had fallen onto the gleaming wood. Thoughtfully, he gathered the petals up, crushing them between finger and thumb. Then he bent down, eased the knife out of the wood and placed it carefully besides the bowl.

When he turned, she was standing in the doorway. His voice was flat with shock.

'You could have killed me,' he said.

She was wearing a small diamond brooch in the shape of a half moon on a red woollen dress. Barefoot, hands hanging loosely at her sides, dark hair tied back. She didn't speak, just staring at him, blank faced. He felt quite clear-headed, though he was breathing strangely. They looked at each other across the frozen space. He felt his anger rise.

'You could have bloody well killed me!'

She turned and made a dash across the hall, then up the stairs, taking them two, three at a time. He caught her by the ankle when she was almost half way up and yanked her back. Her hand slid down the banisters. Before her foot had even touched the floor, she aimed a vicious kick at his face. He dodged it easily and grabbed the waist of her dress. The belt broke off in his hand. She landed a blow on his head with something she'd grabbed from the table – it

sounded like the crack of an axe on wood. He stood where he was, stunned.

She dropped the object – a heavy glass ornament in the shape of a bird, he now saw – twisted round and dashed up the stairs on all fours, only straightening to run across the landing. The bedroom doorslammed.

Got you, he thought grimly. He waited for a moment but couldn't hear the sound of a key turning in the lock.

The door opened noiselessly.

She was crouched in the corner, her face pressed into her knees, arms wrapped round, slowly rocking herself backwards and forwards.

'I said – you almost killed me, you bitch!' he yelled.

She spoke for the first time. 'Good!' she hissed, lifting her face. 'I'm glad!

Then he struck her across the cheek, he had meant to only clip her ear but missed and the swing gave his blow more weight than he intended. She almost fell but, steadying herself, looked up at him with dark hating eyes, a wide, stupid smile on her face. He felt the rage flaring up in him at the sight of that deliberately blank, meaningless grin. His head had started to throb quite badly where she'd struck him. For a moment, he lost control. He didn't know what he was doing. He just felt a blinding hot rage flooding through him, eliminating everything else.

He dragged her out of the corner by the neck of her red dress, ripping the front seam in the process, and flung her bodily on the floor in front of him. She didn't resist, only hanging limply so that she was a deadweight.

'You're mad!' he snarled. 'Quite mad. You know it, don't you?'

But still she smiled although he knew she hated to be called mad more than anything, opening her lips wide and baring white, even teeth.

He shook that heavy body again and again, thumping hard, shouting, 'Stop it! Stop it!' or something. And her dress was tearing, it was torn right to the waist, her hair was loose, her right breast exposed, and he held the nipple in hard fingers as he unbuttoned himself, his face pressed close to hers, her breath on his cheek, and suddenly, in that strange embrace, he didn't know whether he was

trying to hurt her or make love to her, he didn't know. He was thrusting into her again and again and, when it was all over, she looked up at him with such empty eyes that for a moment he imagined she really was mad and lost to him forever.

Her long hair was spread out around her and her face was pale, very pale. He could see the blue veins beneath the translucent skin of her throat.

When he lifted himself off her, the life returned to her dark eyes, and with it the viciousness, too. 'I hate you,' she said clearly.

She drew the torn material around her and began crawling backwards, away from him. An angry pink weal had come out on her cheekbone where he'd hit her. Her breathing was hard and uneven but she kept her gaze steadily on him. She didn't move it off him for a second, not until she reached the bathroom door. Then she reached for the handle and used it to pull herself to her feet.

Opening the door just enough to step through, she closed it, very quietly, behind her.

For the first time he realised he was hurt. There was blood on his forehead and his ear was burning. He felt sick. There was a foul taste in his mouth, really foul. It tasted like he had bitten into raw meat.

He buttoned his trousers and walked slowly down the stairs, staggering a little at first but soon regaining his composure. Across the white stone floor of the hall and out the house. Open the door and then close it. Using all three keys, he turned the locks carefully behind him.

He took the half dozen stone steps from the front door to the street. He did not carry his raincoat. He left it hanging on the peg in the hallway next to his hat although it was now drizzling gently.

ONE
ANGEL

'It's too late, my darling, too late,' he said. 'We've lost our little chance of happiness.'

'No, Maxim. No,' I said.

'Yes,' he said. 'It's all over now. The thing has happened.'

'What thing?' I said.

'The thing I've always foreseen. The thing I've dreamt about, day after day, night after night. We're not meant for happiness, you and I.' He sat down on the window-seat, and I knelt in front of him, my hands on his shoulders.

'What are you trying to tell me?' I said.

He put his hands over mine and looked into my face. 'Rebecca has won,' he said.

daphne du maurier, *Rebecca*

1

Court 1, The Old Bailey. September 1952

NGEL WANTED to place her hands over her ears and shut out the fanfare of trumpets that screamed out as the Judge, in ermine and crimson robes, took his seat in the courtroom.

Instead, she glued her eyes onto the counsel straight ahead of her, bowing vigorously at the rostrum, and tried to stop her gaze from straying towards the solid wood dock where the prisoner would soon stand.

It felt like every pair of eyes in the public gallery were locked onto the back of her head. Behind her – a sea of watchful faces. To her left – almost as bad – Laura's sympathetic gaze, Uncle Francis and Aunt Margaret ready to smile reassuringly the second their eyes met hers. And, seated at the crush at the back, Brioney Parsons, in a cheap fur tie and shapeless black felt hat, who had shaken her hand and murmured kindly before taking her seat, 'You mustn't blame yourself. It's really not your fault.'

Angel had smiled and nodded and ducked away as soon as she could, glad of the low brim of her hat. Because if it wasn't her fault, who the hell's was it?

Over to one side, before the witness box, rose the old wood-panelled seats of the jury. Twelve ordinary men and women who would weigh up the evidence put before them and decide the prisoner's fate. There was nowhere she could look that didn't make the butterflies do an ice-cold dance in her stomach and her hands grow clammy and damp. She stared down, feeling the familiar tightness in her scalp and tension at the back of her neck. *Not now, she thought. Please, not now. Not a migraine – that's all I need.*

She must have risen to her feet with everyone else at the Judge's entry because now she was sitting down again. Even tugging her skirt over her knees as if modesty still mattered to her. A warder was bringing the prisoner up the steps into the dock. Angel felt the

blood drain from her face. For a moment she thought she might faint. She felt light-headed, dizzy. She could hear the Clerk of the Court speaking but couldn't make any sense of his words.

' . . . All manner of persons having anything to do before my Lords the King's Justices . . . draw near and give you attendance . . . George the Sixth, by the Grace of God . . . '

She seemed to only make out part of what the Clerk was saying as if the volume of a wireless set were being twiddled on and off. Just when she most needed clarity, she found she couldn't hear properly, let alone think straight. Now he'd turned and was addressing the prisoner in the dock:

'You stand accused upon this indictment that you, on the 17th day of April 1952, feloniously, wilfully and of your malice aforethought did kill and murder . . . '

Did kill and murder . . .

She must have let out her breath too sharply at these words, or slumped a little on the hard bench, because Laura turned to her and squeezed her hand, looking concerned. Angel gave her a tight nod and smiled grimly. Sat up straight.

The Clerk's voice rang out clearly. 'How say you – are you guilty or not guilty?'

There was a silence. Quite a long silence. Her mouth was bone dry. The journalists on the bench in front of her leant forward, lips parted a little, eyes eager. The court stirred slightly. Through her own anxiety, Angel could feel the embarrassed hush of the crowd all around her as they waited for the response.

The Clerk asked again: 'Are you guilty or not guilty?'

'I am –'

Angel caught her breath. Was the plea going to be guilty after all? Oh, God, it is, she thought, it's going to be guilty . . .

She heard, 'I am not guilty.'

She closed her eyes for a moment and the images seemed to have been waiting for her in the darkness. Two years worth of memories called up in the blink of an eyelid –

– Laura in a pale blue dress, long skirt brushing the floor: 'Smile, Angel, for heaven's sake – it's a *party*, not a bloody funeral . . . '

– Richard, gazing down at her, blue eyes warm and admiring,

shouting above the noise on the dance floor: 'Frightfully hot in here, isn't it? Though I don't expect you feel it so badly in that dress . . . '

– Alex, stroking her cheek, whispering: 'I never thought I'd be happy again . . . '

The engagement party – God, she hadn't thought about that night in years. Now she remembered each moment vividly. How odd to think that if she had gone into any other room but the library that night she wouldn't be here now. *None* of us – she corrected herself, feeling mildly sick – would be here, now.

'The medical evidence' – a man's voice, a barrister's clear, confident voice – 'can definitely establish the direction in which the knife was held when it entered the victim's body . . . '

Angel opened her eyes and forced herself to concentrate as the prosecution began outlining the case for the Crown.

* * *

It must have been – what? – the end of May? Early June? Two years ago, anyway. Laura had knocked on the bedroom door and walked in without waiting for an answer.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

Angel had been lying face down on the floor at the time, poking an arm under the wardrobe. She sat up, blinking, her face flushed. 'Hunting for my other shoe.'

'It's over there.'

Angel looked in the direction Laura was pointing. 'Oh, yes,' she said, brushing her skirt. 'So it is.'

'Let me have a look at you,' Laura said, once she'd hopped across the room and eased her foot into the silver satin slipper. 'Mmm, nice, Angel. Very nice. But why do you look all sort of *hunched*?'

'I don't seem to know what to do with my arms.'

'What do you normally do with them?'

'That's the trouble. When I think about it they just seem to hang.'

'For God's sake. Just *relax*.'

'I feel I'm plonking down my feet like a cart horse.'

'Well, you are a bit. Can't you smile? It's my engagement party, you know, not a blinking funeral.'

'I can't dance in these shoes. I can't even balance properly.'

Laura looked at her as if she was stupid. 'Of course you can.'

'No, really. I don't think I'll be able to. All those steps.'

Laura took her by the elbow and pulled her over to the long cheval mirror. 'Look at yourself – just *look*,' she said impatiently. 'That dress really suits you.'

Angel gazed uncertainly at herself. A tall girl with grey eyes and fair hair in a white satin ball gown stared back at her. 'You don't think it makes me look a bit –'

'What?'

'Well, thin.'

Laura yawned, stretched. 'You idiot. You look very glamorous.'

'No, I don't.' She looked young and thin and nervous, Angel thought, making a face at her own reflection. The single dangling white silk rose sewn onto the shoulder of her dress was definitely a mistake, she decided, trying to press the rose flat. Her gaze shifted to the older girl standing beside her in pale blue. 'You really *do* look glamorous, Laura,' she said shyly. 'Like Greta Garbo in *Camille*.'

'Thanks very much – I suppose you're going to say in the death-bed scene?'

'Of course I'm not. I mean it – you look lovely.'

Laura smiled at her sweetly. 'All you need is the final touch.' She opened her little blue quilted evening bag, drew out a small cylindrical gilt case and screwed the base round. A narrow pink column rose into the air.

'Lipstick? Oh, no – no, I really don't think it's quite my –'

'Oh, do shut up. Don't move or it will go everywhere.' Laura stepped back after a moment to admire her work. 'Now, how does that look?'

They both gazed into the mirror.

'Terrible,' Angel grimaced. 'Actually beyond terrible. It makes terrible seem like a compliment.'

'Yes . . . Perhaps not *exactly* the effect I was hoping for . . .'

Grimly, Angel scrubbed her mouth with the back of her hand.

'Well, now you've smeared Coral Kiss everywhere,' Laura said dispassionately. 'Have you got a hankie?'

'In this dress?'

Laura searched in her bag and produced a tiny scrap of lace. 'Here. Now let's get downstairs before you do anything else to yourself.'

'Me? It was you who –'

'Oh, come on.'

Laura took one more look in the mirror, gave her embroidered bead belt a final tweak and was out of the door before she'd finished her sentence. 'Anyway –' she said softly, as they stood on the landing, peering over the top of the carved wooden staircase – 'I have a feeling that something special's going to happen to you tonight.'

'What kind of feeling?'

Laura shook her head. 'My lips are sealed.'

'That's just the lipstick.'

'Don't be snippy because it doesn't suit you. But just to show you how certain I am, I'm going to bet you half a crown –'

'Make it five bob.'

'A half-crown,' Laura repeated firmly, 'that in the morning you'll tell me something really wonderful happened. Oh, look, there's Richard –' In the hall below, amongst a crowd of people, they could make out the top of her brother's head. She gave a little giggle. 'Come on, let's go. I'll be right behind you.'

'Laura – you beast! Don't *push* . . .'

And of course something special *had* happened that night, though not what Laura had expected. Not quite what Angel had expected either, she thought later. Moving through the crowd, she could feel the excitement of a party all around her. She had to admit it was fun seeing the reaction of people she had known for years as she crossed the room – the flash of interest in their eyes when they saw her in a long white dress with her hair swept up. Quite ridiculous really, she thought, feeling the pulse in her wrists start to thump.

The great stone hall had been transformed into a glittering sea of diaphanous dresses and white waistcoats. In the ballroom, a platform had been built for the string quartet and later for the jazz band. Laura was swept instantly from her side but everything

seemed possible after the first glass of champagne, even dancing in heels, and on the parquet floor she'd helped wax a few days before, under the blaze of chandeliers, Angel soon found herself being twirled and squeezed by a succession of polite young men.

'Hot in here, isn't it?' Richard said, smiling down at her flushed face and shining eyes.

'Yes, isn't it.'

'Though I don't expect you feel it so badly in that dress. You look very cool.'

'Do I? I'm sweltering actually – ouch!'

'Oh, sorry – oh, my fault.' Shuffling his feet, he recovered his step. 'You've grown up,' he said seriously, once they were circling smoothly again. 'I noticed it as soon as I got back from Cambridge. Angel looks jolly nice nowadays, I thought to myself. I say, the next one's a quick-step. Shall we sit it out?'

'Good idea,' Angel said, gratefully.

'Better still, let's get out of this crowd. Grab a breath of air. We could go out into the garden and cool down. Be by ourselves for a bit.' When she didn't respond he stopped dancing and smiled at her. 'Well?'

Oh, no. 'Oh, yes, let's – ' she said lamely. 'That would be – ' She took a half step back. But, moving too quickly, her heel turned.

He grabbed her elbow. 'Here, steady on. You'll do yourself a mischief in those shoes. You all right?'

'Yes – I just . . . Thanks.'

When she looked up, his eyes, smiling down at her, were warm and friendly. Too friendly. Her heart missed a beat. She could feel his hand, hot and slightly damp, on her skin. She wished he'd take his sweaty hand off her because, looking at her like that, he was really giving her the creeps. Was *this* what Laura had meant by something special? Being made love to, in the garden, by Richard? Odd comments she'd had made over the last couple of weeks suddenly fell horribly into place. Angel looked at his familiar tall frame and thick fair hair combed back and shiny with what seemed to be several tons of brilliantine and her stomach tightened. He wasn't unattractive – just lanky and red-cheeked and slightly tipsy. Actually he was very like his father. It would be like Uncle Francis

kissing her, she thought, appalled, trying not to let the disgust show on her face.

'Thanks,' she said again, detaching herself politely from his hand. 'Look, I really must . . . I must just powder my nose . . . shan't be a sec . . . ' Throwing him a quick smile, she pushed her way through the flushed, excited crowd clustered round the dance-floor and hurried from the room.

At the end of the hall she hesitated, then turned sharp left and emerged cautiously into a stone-flagged passage. She'd take the French windows from the library and skirt round to the front of the house that way. With a bit of luck she could avoid Richard for the rest of the evening. On Sunday, first thing, he was catching the train back to Cambridge to continue the second year of a medical degree. It would be at least seven weeks before term ended and she'd see him again. Anything might have happened by then, she thought optimistically.

The passage was empty. She walked swiftly along it enjoying the sudden quiet. The wide doors to the library were slightly ajar. She threw a quick look over her shoulder and stepped inside.

It was dark in the library. The heavy velvet drapes were closed. Angel stood for a moment with her back against the door, breathing in the room's pleasant slightly musty odour. Pushing her hair back from her forehead with hot fingers, she slipped off the satin slippers, then, after a second's thought, unfastened her stockings and peeled them off too. It felt wonderful in bare feet without the pinch of heels. Dangling the shoes from a finger by their strap, she crossed softly to the French windows.

The keys were kept in a red Chinese lacquered box on top of her uncle's desk. Shifting the curtains a foot from the window, she jiggled the key in the lock. To be opened, the door had to be first pulled towards you, then pushed hard away and at the same time lifted slightly. She was beginning to push when a man's voice, quiet and deep, said: 'I'm afraid you may have closed it again. I think it's already unlocked.'

She jumped around, startled. There was a dark form she hadn't noticed sitting in one of the high-backed armchairs by the window.

'I hate these damn affairs, don't you?' the man said pleasantly.

She thought she was going to choke. 'Excuse me?'

'I find all this,' he gestured with one hand in the general direction of the party, 'a little boring. I rather supposed,' she caught a gleam of teeth, 'that you did too.'

'It wasn't that exactly – though I suppose I did want to –'

'Escape?' he supplied.

'Well, yes. Just for a moment.'

Another flash of teeth. 'Me too.'

She was standing in the soft light that fell into the room through the window but the man was sitting in shadow. She could only see his hand clearly, long fingers outspread on the arm of the chair, and the orange tip of the cheroot he was smoking. 'Don't you like parties?' she asked curiously, staring at the glowing tip.

The man pulled on the cheroot so that his expression was briefly visible and she could see that he frowned. 'I used to once. Not now.'

'Then why did you come?'

He shrugged. 'Bit of a mistake really. I'm staying nearby with friends for a few days. They suggested I join them – so I did.'

'What a pity.'

'That I came?'

'That you don't like parties any more.'

He didn't answer but sat and smoked his cheroot. She looked longingly at the unlocked French window, wondering when she could politely step through the door. For a moment the only sound was the faint music of the jazz band drifting across from the ballroom.

'And with whom did you come to this festive occasion?' he asked. 'Your boyfriend?'

'My – ? Oh, no. Actually I live here. Laura Merlowe is my cousin.'

'Laura Merlowe?'

'This is her engagement party.'

'Ah,' the man said. 'Then I'm sorry if I was rude about it.'

'That's all right.'

The orange tip glowed. 'And what's your name?'

'Angel. Well, Angelica, really, but everyone calls me Angel. The name's sort of stuck from childhood.'

'Mm. Angel. Rather nice. Suits you. I can see why it stuck.' From the shadows she could feel him considering her. A forehead and watchful eyes showed in the next couple of puffs. 'And you live here with – what was it? The Merlowes?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'So Angelica, whom everyone calls Angel, are you a Merlowe too?'

'I am, yes. Uncle Francis was my father's first cousin, you see.'

'Was?'

'He's dead, I'm afraid.'

'Your uncle?'

'Oh no – my father.'

'Where's your mother?'

'She died too,' she said apologetically.

He took another drag of the cheroot and stared thoughtfully at the red burn of its tip. 'Pretty tough, I should think. Becoming an orphan so young.'

'Yes. But . . . well, the Merlowes are awfully nice.'

'Not the same as one's own parents though, is it?'

'That's true,' she admitted. 'I suppose I did mind a bit when I was a child.'

He laughed at that. 'Aren't you one still? How old are you?'

She felt the colour rushing into her face. 'Eighteen.'

'Good God, really?'

'Hardly a child.'

'Almost though. Not exactly ancient, is it?'

She felt a spasm of irritation. 'It's old enough for most things,' she said coolly.

There was a cigarette box and a lighter on the table. She leant forward and took a cigarette from the box. 'How old are *you*,' she asked defensively, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

'I don't think you should ask a gentleman his age,' he said lightly. Then, 'Far too bloody old,' he muttered, any lightness disappearing.

His cheroot was almost out. Scowling moodily into the half-darkness he chewed on it for a moment, then shifted his weight towards the open window next to him and flicked the slim stub out.

Poor Aunt Margaret's irises, she thought. Some light fell on his face and she saw that he was dark, with what looked like black hair, and that he had heavy-lidded eyes beneath dark, winged brows and a strong, well-shaped nose. Only as he leant forwards to re-fill his glass from the decanter on the table did she see his face fully. Instinctively, she averted her eyes. But even a quick glance showed he was quite tall and, even in his dress-suit, clearly well-built.

Damn, she thought, feeling suddenly ridiculous standing there in bare feet, silk stockings strung round her neck, clutching a high satin slipper in each fist. Balancing on one leg, she reached down and worked a foot into a shoe, then, wobbling slightly, eased on the other. 'Well – ' she said, taking the cigarette from her lips – 'I suppose I really should be getting back . . . '

'Have some whisky before you go,' he suggested, nodding to the decanter. 'I'm sure your uncle won't mind.'

She wasn't so sure, especially after all the wine, but something in his tone decided her. Faintly challenging, provocative. Amused. 'Thank you, I will,' she said, taking a glass from him, aware that her hand trembled. She tossed the whisky down, feeling her eyes and throat firing up – opened her mouth wide and exhaled, the almost neat spirit nearly choking her, desperately hoping she wasn't about to show herself up and cough – 'Well – good evening . . . ' she said after a moment, breathing out slowly.

She supposed he'd say a polite good-night now, too, and she'd scuttle through the French windows back to the party, but he hesitated. He drained his glass of whisky and frowned into the empty glass. 'Would you like to go for a drive, Angel Merlowe?' he asked.

She stared. 'With you?'

'Well, yes.'

'When?'

'Right now. Tonight.'

'That's not possible.'

He put his glass down on the table and got to his feet – *very* tall, she thought. 'Why not?' he asked.

She stared back at him, feeling her heart beating rapidly again and wondering when it had begun to do so. 'Well – ' she said – 'it's

late and everyone will be wondering where I've – And besides, I don't know you. I don't even know your name.'

'It's Alexander Sorel. And you're right – it *is* rather late. Perhaps tomorrow instead? No, damn, I can't tomorrow. Sunday then. I'm not going back to London for a few days yet. Are you free on Sunday?'

Suddenly, alarmingly, she was conscious of a constriction in her chest. She could feel her pulse still running far too fast. *Dark brown eyes, a deep voice, hair almost black, the trace of a moustache along his top lip.* When in doubt, she told herself, be casual. Pretend this sort of thing happens to you every day. Just as well she'd had the whisky – Dutch courage, she thought. She heard herself say: 'Well, yes – yes, actually I am . . . '

'Good. I'll collect you at twelve. Wear a headscarf. The car has an open top.'

And that was the beginning, Angel thought, looking back later from the confines of a stuffy courtroom, listening to a case for murder being made out by the Crown. She closed her eyes. Oh, yes, that was exactly when it had all begun.