

Tasmina
Perry

THE LAST KISS
GOODBYE


headline
review

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1

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Prologue

Buckinghamshire, early 1961

He was late, of course he was. Dominic Blake was always late, he was famous for it. If there was a party, a card game, even a wedding, you could be sure that Dominic would be the last to arrive, pushing back his hair, grinning sheepishly to charm his way out of trouble. It was all part of the act, but still. Dominic hated letting Vee down, but tonight it couldn't be avoided.

'Dammit,' he muttered as he took the corner too fast and bumped up on to the kerb. 'That'll have to do,' he said, jumping out of the AC Stag and dashing up the stone steps of Batcombe House.

'Evening, Connors,' he said to the elderly man who answered the door. 'They still eating?'

'Lady Victoria is in the dining room, sir,' said the butler. 'Although I believe pudding is just being cleared.'

'Splendid,' said Dominic, straightening his bow tie and pushing through the double doors.

He was greeted by wolf whistles and an ironic round of applause.

TASMINA PERRY

‘All right, all right,’ he said, holding his hands in the air. ‘I know, I’m a bloody let-down as usual.’

He crossed the room to the woman sitting just to the left of the head of the table and bent to give her a brief kiss on the cheek. ‘Sorry, Vee,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what you must think of me.’

‘You know damn well what I think of you, Dominic Blake,’ she said, but her words were undercut by the hint of a smile on her red lips. ‘It seems you have broken up my civilised dinner party, so I expect you to make it up to me with some scandalous gossip.’

‘I’ll do my best.’

‘Coffee will be served in the drawing room,’ she said, getting to her feet and addressing her guests. ‘Mr Blake will be dancing the fandango as penance.’

Dominic gave a showy bow to more whistles as the group rose from the table. The cream of high society, he thought as he watched. The men, faces flushed from claret, in suits cut by tailors inherited from their fathers; the women in silk and pearls, their eyes always moving. Money oozed from each of them: the way they walked, their laughs, the feeling that nothing could touch them.

‘Let’s have it then,’ whispered Victoria, moving close.

‘Have what?’

‘Your excuse, of course. I know you have one. What was it? Pressing meeting at the Admiralty? On the run from Maltese gangsters? A sick grandmother?’

Dominic laughed.

‘Not this time, Vee. I overslept, it’s that simple.’

‘Overslept?’ she laughed, glancing across at the elaborate gold clock on the mantelpiece. ‘Dominic, it’s nine forty-five in the evening. What are you, a vampire?’

THE LAST KISS GOODBYE

He leant in to whisper. 'Well, there was a young lady I met in the bar at Claridges, and she was very insistent that I—'

Victoria put a hand on his shoulder. 'No, no, on second thoughts, I don't want to know. I'll just content myself that you're here now. Besides, I hope it's nothing serious, this young lady at Claridges. I have invited a couple of extremely lovely women along this evening. Beautiful, connected . . .' she whispered theatrically.

'Any woman is a disappointment after you, Vee, you know that,' he laughed, giving her shoulders an affectionate squeeze.

Vee gave an ironic 'Ha!', but Dominic could see that she was pleased with the compliment. The funny thing was, it wasn't empty flattery: Lady Victoria Harbord was pretty much everything he'd ever wanted in a woman. She was beautiful, elegant and fiercely intelligent, yet she was generous and had a taste for the unconventional, which explained both the modern decor of the room and the fact that Dominic Blake – editor-stroke-adventurer – was invited to her soirées.

Perhaps if things were different, he thought, as a short, rotund man in a dinner suit came and snaked his arm around her waist.

'Dominic. You made it,' boomed Tony Harbord in his thick American accent. 'Now what are you gossiping with my wife about this time?'

'She's trying to set me up,' he grinned, winking at Victoria. As she smiled back, he wondered, not for the first time, whether his friend really was in love with the wealthy New Yorker. It would not have been the first time that a woman of impeccable breeding and title had married for money, but although Victoria and the much older Tony seemed like an odd couple superficially, Dominic was often touched, enviously so, to see the real affection between them.

'Good,' laughed Tony, snipping the end off the cigar he was

TASMINA PERRY

holding with a gold cutter. ‘The sooner you find someone, Blake, the better. You need to settle down, if only to stop you and my wife becoming the subject of gossip yourselves.’

Dominic had to admit it was a pretty good party. Sometimes, even with Lady Victoria’s uncanny knack of picking interesting people, society shindigs could be deadly dull, with everyone reverting to type: the men banging on about politics and the likelihood of a good shoot at the weekend, the women sticking to anecdotes about their children, every one of them a budding Rachmaninov, Picasso or Cicero.

Tonight, however, he had talked to a poet who believed plants could converse with each other, and a prominent Tory who hinted at a secret passion for naturism – ‘Don’t you find all these starched shirts so constricting?’ he’d asked.

He had sipped brandy with Jim French, a Texan industrialist friend of Tony’s, whom he had known previously only by his ruthless arms-dealing reputation. He had disliked French on sight, but had still recognised that he would make a fascinating profile for *Capital*, the magazine he edited. He had mentioned this fact to Victoria, hoping that she could engineer another meeting between the two of them, before she warned him it was not wise to make enemies of the rich.

The most rewarding conversation had been with a librarian from Oxford, who, with the minimum of prodding, had been glad – relieved, in fact, Dominic thought – to reveal that he had spent the war developing chemical weapons in a stable in Wiltshire.

‘Do you know,’ said the old man, ‘it was the best five years of my life. Yes, people were dying – my own brother was blown up at Arnhem, you know – but one had this great sense of *doing* something, of being part of something bigger than

THE LAST KISS GOODBYE

oneself, if that makes any sense. I'll be frank, young man, everything since has been something of a let-down.'

Dominic eventually excused himself to go and get some fresh air. As he looked back towards the party, he smiled, hiding it by raising his brandy glass to his lips. It was funny: he knew something about everyone here. Not all of it scandalous, some of it just revealing. But why did they tell *him*? In theory they should have avoided him like the plague. People knew he was the editor of *Capital*, one of the more playful but still heavy-hitting magazines on the news stand. He was also known as one of the biggest gossips and playboys in town, an image he was happy to cultivate. And yet he had always found that people opened up to him. Maybe it's my honest face, he thought with another smile.

The truth was actually much more straightforward: he got answers simply because he asked. The English were far too polite to enquire into other people's business, and consequently, when someone *did* ask, they were usually so relieved, everything poured out.

Dominic had noticed this at a very young age, when his parents' friends had come to visit at their modest rectory in the country. The rich loved to talk. Gossip, not money, was what made their world turn. And the one thing the wealthy liked to talk about more than anything else was themselves. No use making a killing on krugerrands or bedding your best friend's wife if you couldn't boast about it, right?

He found himself in the library, a room he knew had a set of French doors that led out on to the fragrant garden. He paused, running his finger over Victoria's fine collection of leather-bound books, then turned as he heard a noise behind him. A beautiful blonde was standing in the door frame, hand on hip, looking every inch a film noir femme fatale.

TASMINA PERRY

‘Hiding from me again, Dommy?’ purred Isabella Hamilton, wife to Gerald Hamilton, the cabinet minister. ‘You arrived so late, I thought you were avoiding me.’

She walked slowly, deliberately towards him, her heels clicking slowly on the library’s wooden floor.

‘I’d never hide from you, Izzy,’ he said, his mouth curling seductively. ‘But we don’t want any awkward situations. Not in front of everyone.’

‘You can put me in any awkward position you like, Dominic Blake,’ she smiled, drawing a finger up to his cheek and stroking it. ‘You know I’ll do anything you want. You only have to ask.’

‘Izzy, we can’t . . .’ he said, taking a small step back.

‘Why not?’ she whispered. ‘It’s not as if we haven’t done it before.’

A montage of delicious images sprang to the forefront of his mind.

‘I want you,’ she whispered into his ear.

‘Izzy, please.’ He was finding it increasingly hard to control himself.

‘I want you now,’ she breathed, brushing her lips softly against his.

He felt a stab of guilt, a shot of regret, and reached for her hand as he shook his head slowly.

‘We shouldn’t,’ he said more forcefully.

‘Why not?’ she pouted, pulling back.

‘Because we shouldn’t.’

Isabella took a moment to compose herself, knowing that she was not going to get her own way. Not this time.

‘You’re sure about that?’

‘I’m sure,’ he nodded.

‘Then I’d better get back,’ she said, her beautiful mouth pursing. ‘You know how Gerald misses me.’

THE LAST KISS GOODBYE

'I'm not surprised,' he replied with genuine affection.

Her expression softened and she kissed her finger and pressed it against his lips.

'Goodbye, Dominic,' she said, and he closed his eyes, enjoying the warm, suggestive touch, knowing that this was the last time he would feel it.

He watched her leave, her slim silhouette retreating into the light and noise of the party, and then lit a cigarette.

Pushing back a heavy green velvet curtain, he opened the French doors, enjoying the cold air slapping against his face, and blew a long, twisting grey smoke ring.

Here he was, at one of the most fashionable parties of the year, surrounded by society's beau monde, and yet he felt hollow and unsettled.

Maybe Tony was right. Maybe he needed to settle down. He'd had enough of using beautiful young women like Isabella, and all the other interchangeable blondes, brunettes and red-heads. Maybe he needed to change his life, although it was never as easy as that, he thought, frowning as he watched the smoke float up into the dark night air.

'Dominic.'

The voice was not at first familiar. For one anxious minute he thought that Gerald Hamilton had come to pay him a visit, before he registered an accent and recognised it.

'Eugene.' He smiled with relief, stubbing his cigarette out under the sole of his shoe.

He had known the Russian naval attaché, stationed at his country's embassy in Kensington since Christmas, and liked him a lot. At first he had been surprised that Eugene was invited to society parties and dinners such as the one they were at tonight – people were suspicious of the Soviets, and rightly so, with the Cold War raging. But the truth was that someone considered

TASMINA PERRY

mysterious and forbidden – someone like a handsome Soviet naval attaché – was as welcome in the salons of the upper classes as Dominic was.

‘How are you, my friend?’ he asked, extending his hand and resting it on the Russian’s shoulder.

Eugene simply nodded.

‘Can we talk?’ he asked.

Dominic was always ready to listen. He took his cigarette case from his pocket, opened it and offered his friend a tobacco-brown Sobranie.

‘Of course,’ he replied as they stepped out into the garden.

The air was fragrant, the smell of daffodils and damp grass potent and luscious, and the full moon spilled lazy, creamy light around the garden.

They sat down on a stone bench, and as Eugene began to talk, Dominic crossed his legs and blew another smoke ring, preparing to listen, not knowing that the conversation he was about to have was one that would change the entire course of his life.