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Kiss Heaven Goodbye

Written by Tasmina Perry

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KISS HEAVEN GOODBYE

TASMINA PERRY

headline
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Prologue

Summer 2010, Manhattan

He couldn't sleep. How could he? Nobody could rest with such a weight hanging over their head. Miles Ashford turned over and looked at the red digital numbers of his bedside clock: 3.45 a.m. He had taken a Xanax at midnight: it hadn't even made him drowsy. Had it been only twelve hours since his attorney Michael Marshall had called, telling him that a detective superintendent from the Royal Bahamas Police Force wanted to question him?

Miles sat up and reached for his cigarettes, hoping it would do something to relieve the anxiety – an emotion he was unused to. A man as successful as Miles Ashford had not got where he was today without being able to handle extreme pressure; he just didn't get rattled. Not when his $500 million residential project had to be shelved in Dubai last year. Not when the banks were breathing down his neck after the collapse of Lehman Brothers. Not even when he had run into a Kosovan gangster when he had tried to buy a series of brothels in London's Soho. All those things were just setbacks, concerns or irritations. This . . . well, this was different.

He swung his legs off the bed and reached for his navy silk robe, pulling it tightly around his body before walking through to his study. It was Miles' favourite room in his Fifth Avenue duplex, with a huge bay window that looked out on to Central Park. After dark, it resembled a black hole in the heart of the city. Whoever coined the expression 'the dead of night' was thinking of 3.45 a.m. in NYC. Even in the city that never sleeps, this sliver of time after the party people had gone to bed and the early risers – the market traders,

the workaholic Wall Street tycoons – had not yet started their day was a moment that was eerie and still.

Miles didn't turn on the light, content to just gaze out on to the city, letting the darkness and silence soothe him. He closed his eyes and immediately felt himself transported back to the island. For a second, his memory of that night was so clear he could almost smell the sea air, the pineapple bushes, the mangrove. Growing up, Angel Cay had been his Eden, a private pirate island to explore and to run wild in, rich with imagination and adventures. But not any more, not now.

He turned from the window and sat at his desk. His empire spanned a dozen industries and six continents, yet the glass surface of his work station was remarkably uncluttered. In two hours' time it would be set for breakfast by his butler Stevens and the world's most influential newspapers would be in a neat pile ready for him to read. But now it just contained a stack of contracts, a phone, a copy of *Fortune* magazine and a small desk lamp which finally, reluctantly, he turned on. Blinking in the yellow light, he picked up the sleek black phone and dialled his attorney.

'Miles,' said Michael Marshall. Not a question; the lawyer was used to being woken up at this hour by his employer. Strictly speaking, of course, Michael wasn't just Miles' lawyer. Michael Marshall was his fixer. Miles' father Robert had once had such a man in his employment: Dick Donovan, a super-efficient, can-do sort of fellow, the kind of man you'd trust with your most intimate business. Robert used to ambiguously refer to Dick as 'my man', and when a teenage Miles had once asked Dick what his specific role was in the family company, Dick had simply replied that he was his father's fixer. Miles had liked the phrase; just the right balance of subterfuge and security. Now, of course, Miles Ashford had his own fixer. He also had an army of Harvard-and Cambridge-educated lawyers working for him in his business affairs department who dealt with the complicated mergers and acquisitions and the endless tedious contract work associated with a company of that size. The more sensitive matters were dealt with by Michael. Michael was his personal guard dog.

'This isn't going to go away, is it?' asked Miles. He didn't need to spell it out to Michael; there was only one thing on both their minds that night.

The attorney paused. 'Fifty-fifty,' he replied cautiously. 'I spoke to the assistant commissioner in George Town when you left the office. He's sympathetic, but they can't turn a blind eye to what's been uncovered.'

Miles nodded. It was as he feared. 'Then set up another meeting with that officer from the Central Detective Unit for me.'

Marshall paused for thought. 'I can stall him, give us a little space to do our own investigations?'

'No,' said Miles. 'We should meet it head on. Tell him I'll go back to Angel Cay.' Despite his anxiety, Miles Ashford was a man of action. Sitting around worrying didn't suit him.

'As you wish. I'll set it up as soon as possible. Anything else?'

Miles hesitated. There were some things he hadn't shared with even his most trusted aide, but now the day had come, he wasn't going to face it alone.

'You need to make arrangements for some others to be present too,' he said. 'Other people are involved, and if I'm going back to the island, they're coming with me.'

He was careful that his voice showed no trace of emotion to his employee. There was a time when Miles knew little about self-discipline and control, when he had always given in to anger and impulse. But time, experience and necessity had changed that.

There was a long pause at the other end of the line.

'Miles, what is this? I can only help you if you tell me everything.'

'There's time for that tomorrow. I'll fill you in on the plane.'

Marshall took a deep breath. It wasn't the first time Miles had made an unusual request, after all. 'OK. What other people?'

'Alex Doyle, Grace Ashford and Sasha Sinclair,' he said in a low, steady voice, knowing that Michael would recognise the names immediately; anyone would. They were three of the most well-known names in the world, names that stood for fame and wealth and influence on an international stage.

'Your sister shouldn't be too much of a problem to get to the island,' began the fixer, 'but the other two . . .'

'Find a way,' said Miles flatly. 'I don't pay you to see problems, I pay you to find solutions. Make it happen.'

He hung up the phone. It had suddenly become warm in the office

and he pulled open his robe to let some air on to his skin. Miles tried to picture them, imagine their expressions when Michael called them and gave them the news. He found he could not. All he could see was their faces on the beach that night, the night which had changed all their lives for ever. He turned his chair back toward the window. Now, in the desk lamp's glow, the city had disappeared, replaced only by Miles Ashford's reflection, pale and ghostly. It was time to go back.

Part One

1

Summer 1990, Angel Cay, the Bahamas

'You're going to dinner dressed like *that*?'

Grace Ashford looked down at her denim Capri pants and French navy T-shirt and frowned at her best friend Sarah Brayfield.

'What's wrong?'

It was what she wore for dinner every night, with flip-flops and a ponytail. How was she supposed to turn up for dinner – in a ball gown and five-inch heels? It wasn't like they were dining at Langhan's; they were on holiday, and although *Architectural Digest* had just called her father's Caribbean bolt-hole 'the most idyllic private island in the Bahamas', the reality was it was just low-key and relaxed.

'What's *wrong*?' asked Sarah with a dramatic arch of her eyebrow. 'What's wrong is that we've been on a paradise island for one week now and you have made precisely zero progress with Boy Wonder. We need drastic action. And, more importantly, we need cleavage.'

Grace groaned. Sarah had always been very dramatic. Throughout their entire time at Bristol University her friend had toyed with the idea of being an actress before six job offers on the milk round had made her swap her plans for RADA for law college, declaring cheerfully that she was going to 'sell out'.

Fearing that the night ahead might take an embarrassing turn, Grace realised that it had been a mistake to tell her indiscreet, theatrical flatmate about her secret lust for Alex Doyle, her brother Miles' best friend – especially when they were all holidaying on the

Ashfords' private island at the same time: Miles to celebrate the end of A levels and his time at her own alma mater Danehurst School; herself to recover from the late nights and academic rigours of Finals.

Traditionally, Grace had always gone out of her way to avoid spending time with her brother and his friends. Even as a young child, she had always found Miles to be arrogant and underhand, and the people he chose to hang around with were much the same.

That was until he had brought home Alex last summer. Alex Doyle, with his spectacular good looks, sexy northern accent and poet-boy broodiness, was like a cross between the lead in a sixties French movie – Alain Delon perhaps – and John Taylor from Duran Duran, on whom she still nursed a secret crush. She hadn't meant to fall for Alex – after all, he was three years her junior – but ever since he had visited her in Bristol and followed it up with the letter she kept stashed away in her diary, she had felt the attraction was mutual. Or was it? She wasn't sure and she certainly didn't want Sarah tarting her up and making a fool out of her.

'Action? Cleavage?' She grinned at her friend. 'I'm the host this week, remember. It's bad form to go seducing house guests.'

Sarah began touching up her own make-up in the big gilt mirror. 'I'd hardly call your feeble attempts at pulling him seduction. The most you've said to him in the last three days is pass me a pineapple, despite him mooning around you for days.'

Grace felt a jolt of excitement. 'Has he? When?'

'Didn't you see him down on the rocks with his top off? I know I did, but he only had eyes for you, more's the pity.'

Sarah turned to Grace and pouted. 'In the words of Disraeli, action may not bring you happiness. But there is no happiness without action. You have to be bolder. Sit next to him at dinner. I want plans made for the holiday. Arrange to go up to Leeds or wherever it is he's from. Invite him to London. A gig. He's into music, isn't he? Find out from Miles who he likes and get tickets, anything to get him on his own. Seduction is really quite simple you know. Especially when you wear this.'

'Are you sure you should be going to law college? I think Sandhurst might be more appropriate.'

Sarah flung open the wicker wardrobe and pulled out a piece of leopard-print chiffon.

'What's that?'

'Put it on,' she instructed.

'It's see-through!'

Her friend's lip curled upwards in triumph. 'My point exactly.'

Grace hesitated before taking the kaftan from Sarah, wishing she could be more like her friend, the product of unmarried 'resting' children's TV presenters who had brought up their daughter to have a voice, a cause and cast-iron self-belief that she could do anything or be anybody she wanted to be.

Grace's parents on the other hand had given their daughter every material advantage. But the very wealth that had allowed it had drawn Grace into rather than out of her shell. She didn't like attracting attention to herself. She'd spent a lifetime hearing people whispering about her when helicopters dropped her off at school or her father's chauffeured Bentley picked her up from friends' houses. She'd hated it and as a result she liked to blend in.

Get a grip, she told herself, squashing down the disappointment she had felt all week. You've got a first-class degree; you can get an eighteen-year-old to snog you.

She was surprised as she caught her reflection in the mirror. It wasn't half bad. The kaftan was short and sheer and had a deep V-neck with topaz-coloured beads around it. The colour made her skin look more tanned and her long, thick hair more tawny, and the narrow silhouette added inches to her height. Five feet nine but not in a willowy way, Grace had wide shoulders from sports: lacrosse and netball. *Sturdy* was how her father frequently, painfully, referred to her, as if he was describing an oak tree, but the light chiffon had draped itself over her curves in an elegant and flattering way.

'Very Sharon Stone.' Sarah nodded appreciatively.

'Velma Flintstone, more like.'

She tried to pull down the kaftan a few inches to hide more of her thighs. 'Heck, it's short. I'm not sure my legs are good enough for something this mini.'

'Nothing a bit of blusher can't sort out,' replied Sarah thoughtfully.

She knelt down and started daubing long streaks of bronzer down the outside of Grace's thigh.

'What are you doing?' shrieked Grace.

'Slimming your legs by optical illusion, of course.'

'Well, well. What's going on down there?'

Grace looked up to see her friends Freya Nicholls and Gabby Devlin at the door. They were both wearing tiny string bikinis, and barely-there sarongs were wrapped around their concave waists.

'Just a little enhancement,' said Sarah, unfazed by the girls' disapproving looks.

Gabby flopped on to the bed, leaving dampness on the coverlet, while Freya pulled a bottle of MoÎt and another of Kir from her beach bag. Freya had a job lined up at the Lynn Franks PR agency in London as soon as they got back to the UK, and already she had older, more sophisticated tastes than the rest of them. The four girls were unlikely friends – according to Sarah, Freya and Gabby had dispensed with a sense of humour when they discovered that their stunning good looks were all they needed to carry themselves through life. But the two of them had taken Grace under their wing on their first day at Danehurst when she was lost and homesick, and they were sworn best friends for life by the time Grace realised they had almost nothing in common. And when they had followed Grace to Bristol to attend the polytechnic, it had seemed wrong to do anything else but invite them to live with her in the four-bedroom house in Clifton that her father had bought for her time at uni.

'Thought we'd get the party started early,' said Freya as Gabby went to fetch glasses.

'So how was snorkelling?' asked Grace.

'Amazing,' said Gabby, playing with the string of brown beads around her ankle. 'You should have come.'

'And leave *Valley of the Dolls* unfinished?' Grace grinned, holding up a dog-eared paperback. 'After a three-year diet of Chaucer, Milton and Shelley, this is like manna from heaven.'

'Forget the fish, the highlight of the trip was that new boat boy,' said Freya, grabbing Sarah's bottle of red nail polish. 'I'm not sure where he came from but he is cute, cute, cute.'

Gabby took a sip from her tooth glass of champagne and rolled her eyes. 'She's desperate for a holiday shag.'

'What about your boyfriend?' asked Sarah disapprovingly.

'What about him?' Freya smiled. 'What goes on on the island stays on the island.'

Grace took the bottle. 'He must be one of the guys my dad has shipped in from one of the other islands. He's got half a dozen clients coming here tomorrow evening after we've all gone, so they need to put on a show.'

She pressed the button on her cassette player and the sounds of Everything But The Girl floated through the speaker.

Listening to the soulful melody, Grace felt suddenly depressed and vulnerable. The fact that they were leaving tomorrow meant that all the fun, carefree days of school and university were behind them and the void of her real life was rushing up to meet her. Unlike Sarah, she wasn't sure where her life was going to lead. Since childhood, she had been told that she would go to work in her father's company, but she had no illusions that it would be a glamorous VIP role with a corner office and a place on the board. Her father had always seen Miles as his great successor and gave Grace the impression that her job would be a safe little distraction until she found someone suitable to marry, preferably someone with connections to add to the sheen of the family company, Ash Corp. It certainly didn't make her feel excited; it made her feel trapped and, in a fit of rebellion nine months ago, she had applied for an MA course at Oxford, forging a new fantasy of life as an academic, spending termtime in some dreamy, spired university town and her holidays on Angel writing the new *Gone with the Wind*. Now all she had to do was break the news to her parents.

She poured a generous measure of champagne into her glass, the bubbles fizzing over the top, and drank it down.

'That's the spirit, Grace,' said Freya. 'Let's get in the mood.'

Sarah pursed her lips. 'Grace needs some Dutch courage.'

'What for?' demanded Gabby eagerly, sensing gossip.

'She's going to cop off with Alex tonight.'

'Sarah!' Grace flushed.

'Miles' friend?' asked Gabby, frowning.

'How many other Alexs are there on Angel Cay?' Sarah replied.

'But he's eighteen, isn't he?' asked Gabby.

'Nineteen in September.'

'You cradle-snatcher!' laughed Freya.

'Actually, that means he's at his sexual peak.' Sarah grinned.

'I can see I'm going to have to get really, really drunk,' said Grace.

Outside, beyond the plantation's shuttered windows, the Caribbean sun was setting, flushing the sky the colour of a Bellini. The scent of honeysuckle and jasmine floated on the breeze.

'Where do you think we'll all be in ten years' time?' wondered Grace aloud.

'Back here hopefully,' said Sarah with a smile.

'I want to be married,' said Freya, 'To someone rich, gorgeous and famous.'

They all laughed.

'We'll all be married by then,' said Gabby, as if it was stupid to think anything else.

'Speak for yourself,' said Sarah. 'My mum and dad have got the best relationship I know and they've been happily unmarried for twenty-five years.'

'Your parents are just a pair of old hippies. Any couple not married after ten years do not want to get married.'

'They're hippies all right. But they're right for each other.'

'Screw that,' said Freya, holding up her left hand and waggling her fingers. 'I want a massive rock on here.'

Grace watched them, wondering to what degree their lives were already set. Freya was off to the glittering lights of Soho, Sarah clearly had found her calling as a lawyer – human rights most likely – and Gabby, who had spent her three years at Bristol trawling the students' union for the most eligible Old Etonians, was sure that her research and determination would bear fruit in a good marriage. Grace's parents had decided on her own fate from the moment she was born. But with her MA course tempting her, she knew she could change her destiny. Right here. Tonight, if she could find the courage to tell her dad she didn't want to join the family business.

No pressure then, she said to herself, smiling, feeling a flutter of hope as the champagne bubbles went to her head.

'To sexy men,' said Freya, raising her glass and downing the gently fizzing liquid in one.

'To Angel Cay,' followed Sarah.

Grace felt a rush of hope and expectancy. 'To tonight,' she said, clinking her glass against the others'. 'This is the last few hours of our youth and the start of the rest of our lives. Let's make it a night to remember.'