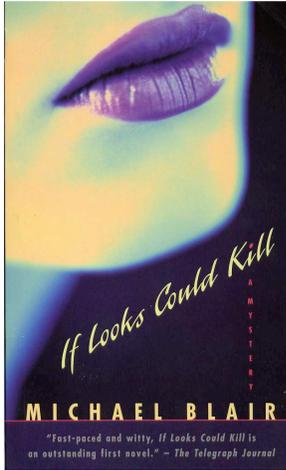


If Looks Could Kill

(A Granville Island Mystery)

by
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There was a roaring in my ears and I couldn't catch my breath, as if all the oxygen had suddenly gone out of the air. I wanted to run away, but I no longer had control of my legs. I just stood there, gulping air like a stranded fish and silently beseeching the bush league gods in charge of this corner of the universe to be merciful. Maybe it wasn't her, I thought. Maybe it was simply someone who looked like her, a resemblance heightened by a trick of the lighting. But it was her.

I moved toward her on rubbery knees.

"Vince, this is stupid," I heard her say to the man with her at the carousel. "Where is Sam? He should be doing this, not you. You'll only hurt your back again."

"How the fuck should I know where he is?" the man answered. "And watch who you call stupid." He was dark and hawk-featured, as squat and ugly as she was lithe and beautiful.

"I wasn't calling you stupid, Vince," she said. "What I said was —"

"Yeah, yeah, never mind," he said, waving away her reply.

Two years hadn't changed her much. Her face was a bit fuller, rounder perhaps, and her black hair was worn more simply now, more elegantly. But her wide-set, slightly almond-shaped eyes were the same deep indigo blue I remembered and her ivory skin still seemed to glow with an inner luminescence. I could feel cracks starting to form in the fragile emotional shell I'd grown since she'd left.

"Carla?" I said, my voice dry and brittle.

She stiffened at the sound of her name, turned and looked at me, her flawless features composed and her indigo eyes as hard as glass. She stared at me for so long I became irrationally certain she could not place me, didn't remember me. Then her expression thawed slightly and she bared her teeth in a smile.

"Why, Tommy McCall," she said brightly. "What a pleasant surprise. How long have you been standing there?" When she stepped close and kissed me on the cheek, I almost backed away. "Be cool, Tommy," she whispered close my ear as she not quite touched her lips to my other cheek. "Don't weird out on me."

“Vince,” she said, turning to her companion. “This is Tommy McCall. Tommy, Vince Ryan.”

Ryan stuck his hand out toward me. “McCall,” he said.

“Vince,” I said.

His hand was square and strong and he shook hands as though it was a test of strength. I gave back as good as I got, which brought a slight smile to his face.

Vince Ryan wasn't really ugly, but no one would ever call him handsome. His square face looked as though it had been put together from parts no one else had wanted: small deep-set black eyes under heavy, overhanging brows; a great hooked beak of a nose that had been broken more than once; thin, bloodless lips; and a wide powerful jaw that bulged with muscle.

When he finally released my hand, I turned back to Carla. I had imagined this encounter many times in the months after she'd left, played and replayed what I would say to her in my mind, but all I could think to say now was, “You're looking well.”

“I am well, thank you,” she replied. “And you? Are you prospering?”

“Prospering?” I said. It wasn't the kind of word I expected from her. “I'm not sure I'd say prospering exactly.”

“It's been, what, two years?”

“About that,” I said. It had been two years and four months, but who was counting? I became conscious of Hilly standing slightly behind me. “You remember my daughter, don't you?” I said.

“Is this Hilly?” Carla said, surprising me by remembering Hilly's name. “No, it can't be. How are you, Hilly?”

“I'm okay,” Hilly said.

“You're almost all grown up now.”

“I'm only twelve,” Hilly said.

Vince Ryan said, “Hiya, kiddo,” but at least he didn't pat her on the head. Good thing. Hilly might have bitten him. “Hey, nice rat,” he said as Beatrix poked her head out of Hilly's jacket to see what was going on. Bored, Harvey flopped down onto the floor with a grunt and a thud.

We all stood around in awkward silence. There were a million things I wanted to say to Carla, a million questions I wanted to ask, but my mind was a chaotic jumble of half-formed thoughts and feelings.

“What have you been up to?” I asked lamely. “Did you ever do any modelling?”

Carla shook her head and Vince Ryan laughed. It was a harsh, humourless sound, half bark, half cough. He placed his blunt, powerful hands on her shoulders, his thick fingers making deep impressions in the filmy fabric of her blouse,

pressing into the soft flesh beneath. I bit back the urge to tell him to take his hands off her.

“Carla works for me,” he said. “She’s my gal Friday. Not to mention all the other days of the week,” he added with a broad wink. “What do you do, McCall?” he asked.

“Do?” I said, as if I didn’t understand. I find the question annoying, on a par with “What sign are you?” or “What was your taxable income last year?”

“Yeah, do,” Ryan said, his heavy brows descending in a scowl so that his eyes were mere dark slits.

“Tommy’s a photographer,” Carla said.

“Oh, that’s right,” I said. “Sometimes I forget.”

“A photographer, eh? All those gizmos the Nips are putting in cameras these days, almost anyone can take pictures.”

“Yes, indeed,” I said. “Almost anyone.” Had he really said “Nips”?

“Well, it’s been a pleasure meeting you all,” Ryan said, smiling with all the sincerity of a politician hustling votes in a suburban shopping mall, “but we’re going to have to cut it short. We’re on our way up to Whistler. If my bloody driver ever gets here,” he added, looking around.

“A driver no less?” I said, looking at Carla. She gave me a wry smile.

“You ever done any skiing on Blackcomb Glacier?” Ryan asked.

“Horstman,” I said.

“What?”

“There’s no summer skiing on Blackcomb Glacier,” I said. “Only on Horstman Glacier.”

He shrugged it off. “Whatever. It’s not important. Probably won’t have time anyway. I’m working on a deal that will really put the place on the map.”

“Whistler seems to have done all right so far,” I said.

Ryan laughed his unpleasant laugh. “All right may be enough for some people,” he said, “but not for me.”

A massive blond beach boy type joined our little group, about doubling its size.

“Sam,” Ryan said. “Where the fuck’ve you been?”

“Sorry, Mr. Ryan,” Sam replied easily, offering no explanation.

“Those are ours,” Ryan said, pointing to a stack of matching luggage beside the carousel. Sam loaded the bags onto a cart and headed toward the exit.

Ryan nodded curtly to me and took Carla’s arm.

Carla, momentarily resisting, said, “It was good to see you again, Tommy.”

“Wait,” I said.

She stopped and turned, Ryan’s hand still on her arm.

I had spoken impulsively, with no idea of what I was going to say. There wasn't anything to say, I realized. Not now. "Nice to see you too," I said.

Ryan pulled her almost roughly toward the exit.

I held my breath, bracing myself for the crush of disappointment, for the same profound loss I'd felt two years ago when she'd disappeared without a word. When it did not come, I let the air leak slowly out of my lungs. I felt a peculiar sense of relief, as if I'd just awakened from one of those vividly real dreams in which a tooth has fallen out or I'd started smoking again. Carla had messed up my life once, and once was quite enough, thank you. As interesting as the wrapping was, I didn't need the hassle that came with the rest of the package. Nevertheless, I could feel the spot on my cheek where she'd kissed me and the heavy musk of her perfume still lingered in the air.

"Daddy?" Hilly said.

Mentally shaking myself, I said to Hilly, Beatrix and Harvey, "All right, troops, let's hustle."