

Karma

Leonid McGill, prequel

by Walter Mosley, 1952–

Published: 2010



LEONID MCGILL SAT AT HIS DESK on the sixty-seventh floor of the Empire State Building, filing his nails and gazing at New Jersey. It was 3:15. Leonid had promised himself that he'd exercise that afternoon, but now that the time had come he felt lethargic.

It was that pastrami sandwich, he thought. Tomorrow I'll have something light, like fish, and then I can go to Gordo's and work out.

Gordo's was a third-floor boxers' gym on Thirty-first Street. When Leonid was thirty years younger, and sixty pounds lighter, he went to Gordo's every day. For a while Gordo Packer wanted the private detective to go pro.

“You’ll make more money in the ring than you ever will panty-sniffin’,” the seemingly ageless trainer said. McGill liked the idea, but he also loved Lucky Strikes and beer.

“I can’t bring myself to run unless I’m being chased,” he’d tell Gordo. “And whenever somebody hurts me, I wanna do him some serious harm. You know if a guy knocked me out in the ring I’d probably lay for him with a tire iron out back’a Madison Square when the night was through.”

The years went by and Leonid kept working out on the heavy bag two or three times a week. But a boxing career was out of the question. Gordo lost interest in Leonid as a prospect, but they remained friends.

“How’d a Negro ever get a name like Leonid McGill?” Gordo once asked the PI.

“Daddy was a Communist and Great-Great-Granddaddy was a slave master from Scotland,” Leo answered easily. “You know the black man’s family tree is mostly root. Whatever you see aboveground is only a hint at the real story.” Leo got up from his chair and made a stab at touching his toes. His fingers made it to about mid-shins, but his stomach blocked any further progress.

“Shit,” the PI said. Then he returned to his chair and went back to filing his nails.

He did that until the broad-faced clock on the wall said 4:07. Then the buzzer sounded. One long, loud blare. Leonid cursed the fact that he hadn’t hooked up the view-cam to see who it was at the door. With a ring like that it could have been anyone. He owed over forty-six hundred dollars to the Wyant brothers. The nut was due and Leonid had yet to collect on his windfall. The Wyants wouldn’t pay any attention to his cash-flow problems.

It might have been a prospective client at the door. A real client. Someone with an employee stealing from him. Or maybe a daughter being influenced by a bad crowd. Then again it could be one of thirty or forty angry husbands wanting revenge for getting found out at their extramarital pastimes. And then there was Joe Haller—the poor schnook. But Leonid had never even met Joe Haller. There was no way that that loser could have found his door.

The buzzer sounded again.

Leonid got up from his chair and walked into the long hall that led to his reception room. There he came to the front door.

The buzzer blared a third time.

“Who is it?” McGill shouted in a southern accent that he used sometimes.

“Mr. McGill?” a woman said.

“He’s not here.”

“Oh. Do you expect him back today?”

“No,” Leonid said. “No. He’s away on a case. Down in Florida. If you tell me what it is you want I’ll leave him a note.”

“Can I come in?” She sounded young and innocent but Leonid wasn’t about to be fooled.

“I’m just the building janitor, honey,” he said. “I’m not allowed to let anybody in any office in this here building. But I’ll write down your name and number and leave it on his desk if you want.”

Leonid had used that line before. There was no argument against it. The janitor couldn’t be held responsible.

There was silence from the other side of the door. If the girl had an accomplice they'd be whispering about how to get around his ploy. Leonid put his ear against the wall but couldn't hear a thing.

"Karmen Brown," the woman said. She added a number with the new 646 prefix. Probably a cell phone, Leonid thought.

"Hold on. Let me get a pencil," he complained. "Brown, you say?"

"Karmen Brown," she repeated. "With a K." Then she gave the number again.

"I'll put it on his desk," Leonid promised. "He'll get it the minute he gets back to town."

"Thank you," the young woman said.

There was hesitation in her voice. If she was a thinking girl she might have wondered how a janitor would know the whereabouts of the private detective. But after a moment or two he could hear her heels clicking down the hall. He returned to his office to stay a while, just in case the girl, and her possible accomplice, decided to wait until he came out.

He didn't mind hanging around in the office. His sublet apartment wasn't nearly as nice, or quiet, and at least he could be alone. Commercial rents took a nosedive after 9/11. He picked up the ESB workspace for a song.

Not that he'd paid the rent in three months.

But Leonid Trotter McGill didn't worry about money that much. He knew that he could pull a hat trick if he had to. Too many people had too many secrets. And secrets were the most valuable commodity in New York City.

At 5:39 the buzzer sounded again. But this time it was two long blasts followed by three short. Leonid made his way down the hall and opened the front door without asking who it was.

The man standing there was short and white, balding and slim. He wore an expensive suit with real cuff links on a white shirt that had some starch in the collar and cuffs.

"Leon," the small white man said.

"Lieutenant. Come on in."

Leonid led the dapper little man through the reception area, along the hallway (that had three doors down its length), and finally into his office.

"Sit down, Lieutenant."

"Nice office. Where's everybody else?" the visitor asked.

"It's just me right now. I'm in a transition phase. You know, trying to develop a new business plan."

"I see."

The slender white man took the chair in front of Leonid's desk. From there he could see the long shadows across New Jersey. He shifted his gaze from the window to his host. L. T. McGill, PI.

Leonid was short, no taller than five seven, with a protruding gut and heavy jowls. His skin was the color of dirty bronze and covered with dark freckles. There was a toothpick jutting out from the right side of his mouth. He wore a tan suit that had been stained over time. His shirt was lime green, and the thick gold band on his left pinky weighed two or three ounces.

Leonid McGill had powerful hands and strong breath. His eyes were suspicious and he would always appear to be a decade over his actual age.

“What can I do for you, Carson?” the detective asked the cop.

“Joe Haller,” Carson Kitteridge said.

“Come again?” Leonid let his face wrinkle up, feigning ignorance if not innocence.

“Joe Haller.”

“Never heard that name before. Who is he?”

“He’s a gigolo, and a batterer. Now they’re trying to tell me he’s a thief.”

“You wanna hire me to find something on him?”

“No,” the cop said. “No. He’s in the Tombs right now. We caught him red-handed. He had thirty thousand right there in his closet. In the briefcase that he carried to work every day.”

“That makes it easy,” Leonid said. He concentrated on his breathing, something he had learned to do whenever he was being questioned by the law.

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” Carson said.

“Is there a problem, officer?”

“You were seen speaking to Nestor Bendix on January four.”

“I was?”

“Yeah. I know that because Nestor’s name came up in the robbery of a company called Amberson’s Financials two months ago.”

“Really?” Leonid said. “What does all that have to do with Joe whatever?”

“Haller,” Lieutenant Kitteridge said. “Joe Haller. The money he had in the bag was from the armored car that had just made a drop at Amberson’s.”

“An armored car dropped thirty thousand dollars at the place?”

“More like three hundred thousand,” Kitteridge said. “It was for their ATM machines. Seems like Amberson’s had got heavy into the ATM business in that neighborhood. They run sixty machines around Midtown.”

“I’ll be damned. And you think Joe Haller and Nestor Bendix robbed them?”

Lieutenant Carson Kitteridge stayed silent for a moment. His gray eyes taking in the rough-hewn detective.

“What did you and Nestor have to say to each other?” the cop asked.

“Nothing,” Leonid said, giving a one-shoulder shrug. “It was a pizza place down near the Seaport if I remember right. I ducked in there for a calzone and saw Nestor. We used to be friends back when Hell’s Kitchen was still Hell’s Kitchen.”

“What did he have to say?”

“Not a thing. Really. It was just a chance meeting. I sat down long enough to eat too much and find out that he’s got two kids in college and two jail.”

“You talk about the heist?”

“I never even heard about it until you just said.”

“This Joe Haller,” the policeman said. “He practices what you call an alternative lifestyle. He likes married women. It’s what you might call his thing. He finds straight ladies and bends them. They say he’s hung like a horse.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. What he does is gets the ladies to meet him at hotels near where he works and goes in to teach them about how the other eight inches live.”

“You’ve lost me, Lieutenant,” Leonid said. “I mean, unless one of the she-guards at Amberson’s is Haller’s chicken.”

The elegant policeman shook his head slightly.

“No. No. This is how I see it, Leon,” the policeman said. He sat forward in his chair and laced his fingers. “Nestor pulled off the robbery but somebody let it slip so me and my crew got on his ass. He calls on you to find him a pigeon and you give him Haller. Don’t ask me how. I don’t know. But you set up the Romeo and now he’s looking at twenty years in Attica.”

“Me?” Leonid said, pressing all ten fingers against his breast. “How the hell you think I could do something like that?”

“You could pluck an egg out from under a nesting eagle and she’d never even know,” Kitteridge said. “I got a man in jail and his alibi girlfriend saying that she never even heard his name. I got an armed robber laughing at me and a PI more crooked than any crook I ever arrested lyin’ in my face.”

“Carson,” Leonid said. “Brother, you got me wrong. I did see Nestor for a few minutes. But that’s all, man. I’ve never been to this Amberson’s place, and I never heard of Joe Haller or his girlfriend.”

“Chris,” Kitteridge said. “Chris Small. Her husband has already left her. That’s what our investigation has accomplished so far.”

“I wish I could help you, man, but you got me wrong. I wouldn’t even know how to set up some patsy for a crime after it was committed.”

Carson Kitteridge stared mildly at the detective and the darkening neighbor state. He smiled and said, “You can’t get away with it, Leon. You can’t break the law like that and win.”

“I don’t know nuthin’ about nuthin’, Lieutenant. Maybe the man you caught really is the thief.”

KATRINA MCGILL WAS a svelte beauty in her day. From Norway or Sweden—Leonid was never sure which one. They had three kids, of which at least two were not Leonid’s. He’d never had them tested. Why bother? The Scandinavian beauty had left him early on for a finance lion. But she got fat and the sugar daddy went broke, so now the whole crowd (minus the sugar daddy) lived on Leonid’s goodwill.

“What’s for dinner, Kat?” he asked, breathing hard after scaling the five floors to his apartment door.

“Mr. Barch called,” she answered. “He said that either you pay up by Friday or he’s going to start eviction.”

It was the square shape of her face and the heaviness around her eyes that made her ugly. When she was young, gravity was in suspense, but he should have seen the curtain coming down.

The kids were in the living room. The TV was on but no one was watching. The oldest boy, the red-headed Dimitri, was reading a book. He had ochre skin and green eyes. But he had Leonid’s mouth. Shelly, the girl, looked more Chinese than anything else. They used to have a Chinese neighbor when they lived on Staten Island. He worked at an Indian jewelers’ center in Queens. Shelly was sewing one of Leonid’s jackets. She loved her father and never questioned her mother or the face in the mirror.

Shelly and Dimitri were eighteen and nineteen. They went to City College and lived at home. Katrina would not hear of them moving out. And Leonid liked

having them around. He felt that they were keeping him anchored to something, keeping him from floating away down Forty-second Street and into the Hudson.

Twill was the youngest. Sixteen and self-named. He'd just come home after a three-month stay at a youth detention center near Wingdale, New York. The only reason he was still in high school was because that was part of his release agreement.

Twill was the only one who smiled when Leonid entered the room.

"Hey, Pop," he said. "Mr. Tortolli wants to hire me at his store."

"Hey. Good." Leonid would have to call the hardware man and tell him that Twill would open his back door and empty out the storeroom in three weeks' time.

Leonid loved him, but Twill was a thief.

"What about Mr. Barch?" Katrina said.

"What about my dinner?"

KATRINA KNEW how to cook. She served chicken with white wine sauce and the flakiest dumplings he had ever eaten. There was also broccoli and almond bread, grilled pineapples, and a dark fish sauce that you could eat with a spoon.

Cooking was difficult for Katrina since her left hand had become partially paralyzed. The specialist said that it was probably due to a slight stroke. She worried all the time. Her boyfriends had stopped calling years before.

But Leonid took care of her and her kids. He even asked to have sex with her now and then because he knew how much she hated it.

"Did anybody else call?" he asked when the college kids were in their rooms and Twill was back out in the street.

"A man called Arman."

"What he say?"

"There's a little French diner on Tenth and Seventeenth. He wants to see you there at ten. I told him I didn't know if you could make it."

When Leonid moved to kiss Katrina she leaned away and he laughed.

"Why don't you leave me?" he asked.

"Who would raise our children if I did that?"

This caused Leonid to laugh even harder.

HE REACHED BABETTE'S FEAST at 9:15. He ordered a double espresso and stared at the legs of a mature woman seated at the bar. She was at least forty but dressed as if she were fifteen. Leonid felt the stirrings of the first erection he'd had in over a week.

Maybe that's why he called Karmen Brown on his cell phone. Her voice had sounded as if it should be clad in a dress like that.

"Hello?"

"Miss Brown?"

"Yes."

"This is Leo McGill. You left a message for me?"

"Mr. McGill. I thought you were in Florida." The roar of an engine almost drowned out her words.

"I'm sorry if it's hard to hear me," she said. "There was a motorcycle going down the street."

"That's okay. How can I help you?"

"I'm having a problem and, and, well, it's rather personal."

"I'm a detective," Miss Brown. "I hear personal stuff all the time. If you want me to meet with you, then you'll have to tell me what it's about."

"Richard," she said. "Mallory. He's my fiancé, and I think he's cheating on me."

"And you want me to prove it?"

"Yes," she said. "I don't want to marry a man who will treat me like that."

"How did you get my name, Miss Brown?"

"I looked you up in the book. When I saw where your office was, I thought that you must be good."

"I can meet you sometime tomorrow."

"I'd rather meet tonight. I don't think I'll get any sleep until this thing is settled."

"Well," the detective hesitated. "I have a meeting at ten and then I'm going to see my girlfriend." It was a private joke, one that the young Miss Brown would never understand.

"Maybe I can meet you before you see your girlfriend," Karmen suggested. "It should only take a few minutes."

They agreed on a pub on Houston, two blocks east of where Gert Longman lived on Elizabeth Street.

Just as Leonid was removing the hooked earpiece from his ear Craig Arman entered the bistro. He was a large white man with a broad, kind face. Even the broken nose made him seem more vulnerable than dangerous. He wore faded blue jeans and a T-shirt under a large loose knit sweater. There was a pistol somewhere underneath all that fabric, Leonid knew that. Nestor Bendix's street accountant never went unarmed.

"Leo," Arman said.

"Craig."

The small table that Leonid had chosen was behind a pillar, removed from the rest of the crowd in the popular bistro.

"Cops got their package," Arman said. "Our guy was in and out of his place in ten minutes. A quick call downtown and now he's in the Tombs. Just like you said."

"That means I can pay the rent," Leonid replied.

Arman smiled and Leonid felt a few ounces being placed on his thigh under the table.

"Well, I got to go," Arman said then. "Early to bed, you know."

"Yeah," Leonid agreed.

Most of Nestor's boys didn't have much truck with the darker races. The only reason Nestor ever called was because Leonid was the best at his trade.

LEONID CAUGHT A CAB on Seventh Avenue that took him to Blarney's Clover on Houston.

The girl sitting at the far end of the bar was everything Katrina had once been, except she was blond and her looks would never fade. She had a porcelain face with small, lovely features. No makeup except for a hint of pale lip gloss.

"Mr. McGill?"

"Leo."

"I'm so relieved that you came to meet me," she said.

She was wearing tan riding pants and a coral blouse. There was a white raincoat folded over her lap. Her eyes were the kind of brown that some artist might call red. Her hair was cut short—boyish but sexy. Her tinted lips were ready to kiss babies' butts and laugh.

Leonid took a deep breath and said, "I charge five hundred a day—plus expenses. That's mileage, equipment rentals, and food after eight hours on the job."

He had just received twelve thousand dollars from Craig Arman, but business was business.

The girl handed him a large manila envelope.

"This is his full name and address. I have also included a photograph and the address of the office where he works. There's also eight hundred dollars in it. You probably won't need more than that because I'm almost sure that he'll be seeing her tomorrow evening."

"What you drinkin', guy?" the bartender, a lovely-faced Asian boy, asked.

"Seltzer," the detective asked. "Hold the rocks."

The bartender smiled or sneered, Leonid wasn't sure which. He wanted a scotch with his fizzy water but the ulcer in his stomach would keep him up half the night if he had it.

"Why?" Leonid asked the beautiful girl.

"Why do I want to know?"

"No. Why do you think he's going to see her tomorrow night?"

"Because he told me that he had to go with his boss to see The Magic Flute at the Met. But there's no opera scheduled tomorrow."

"You seem to have it all worked out yourself. Why would you need a detective?"

"Because of Dick's mother," Karmen Brown said. "She told me that I wasn't worthy of her son. She said that I was common and coarse and that I was just using him."

The anger twisted Karmen's face until even her ethereal beauty turned into something ugly.

"And you want to rub her face in it?" Leonid asked. "Why wouldn't she be happy that her boy found another girl?"

"I think that the woman he's seeing is married, and older, way older. If I could get pictures of them, then when I leave him, at least she won't be so smug."

Leonid wondered if that would be enough to hurt Dick's mother. He also wondered why Karmen suspected that Dick was seeing an older married woman. He had a lot of questions but didn't ask them. Why question a cash cow? After all, he had two rents to pay.

The detective looked over the information and glanced at the cash, held together by an oversized paper clip, while the young bartender placed the water by his elbow.

The photograph was of a man he took to be Richard Mallory. He was a young white man whose face seemed unfinished. There was a mustache that wasn't quite thick enough and a mop of brown hair that would always defy a comb. He seemed uncomfortable standing there in front of the skating rink at Rockefeller Center.

“Okay, Miss Brown,” Leonid said. “I’ll take it on. Maybe we’ll both get lucky and it’ll be over by tomorrow night.”

“Karma,” she said. “Call me Karma. Everybody does.”

LEONID GOT DOWN to Elizabeth Street a little after ten-thirty. He rang Gert’s bell and shouted his name into the security microphone. He had to raise his voice to be heard over the roar of a passing motorcycle.

Gert Longman lived in a small studio on the third floor of a stucco building put up in the fifties. The ceiling was low but the room was pretty big, and Gert had set it up nicely. There was a red sofa and a mahogany coffee table with cherrywood cabinets that had glass doors along the far wall. She had no kitchen but there was a miniature refrigerator in one corner with a coffee percolator and a toaster on top. Gert also had a CD player. When Leonid got there she was playing Ella Fitzgerald singing Cole Porter tunes.

Leonid appreciated the music and said so.

“I like it,” Gert said, somehow managing to negate Leonid’s compliment.

She was a dark-skinned woman whose mother had come from the Spanish side of Hispaniola. Gert didn’t speak with an accent, though. She didn’t even know the Spanish tongue. Actually, Gert knew nothing about her history. She was proud to say of herself that she was just as much an American as any Daughter of the American Revolution.

She sat on the southern end of the sofa.

“Did Nestor pay you yet?” Gert asked.

“You know, I been missing you, Gertie,” Leonid said, thinking about her satin skin and the fortyish woman in the teenybopper dress.

“That’s done, Leo,” Gert said. “That was over a long time ago.”

“You must still have needs.”

“Not for you.”

“One time you told me you loved me,” Leonid replied.

“That was after you told me that you weren’t married.”

Leonid sat down a few inches away from her. He touched her knuckle with two fingers.

“No,” Gert said.

“Come on, baby. It’s hard as a boil down there.”

“And I’m dry to the bone.”...*but to a woman a man is life*, Ella sang.

Leonid sat back and shoved his right hand into his pants pocket.

After Karmen Brown had left him at Barney’s Clover, Leonid ducked into the john and counted out Gert’s three thousand from the twelve Craig Arman had laid on his lap. He took the wad from his pocket.

“You could at least give me a little kiss on my boil for all this,” he said.

“I could lance it, too.”

Leonid chuckled and Gert grinned. They’d never be lovers again, but she liked his ways. He could see that in her eyes.

Maybe he should have left Katrina.

He handed her the roll of hundred-dollar bills and asked, “Could anybody find a trail from Joe Haller to you?”

“Uh-uh. No. I worked in a whole ’nother office from him.”

“How did you find out about his record?”

“Ran off a list of likely employees for the company and did a background search on about twenty.”

“From your desk?”

“From a public library computer terminal.”

“Can’t they trace you back on that?” Leonid asked.

“No. I bought an account with a Visa number I got from Jackie P. It’s some poor slob from St. Louis. There’s no tracing that. What’s wrong, Leo?”

“Nuthin’,” the detective said. “I just want to be careful.”

“Haller’s a dog,” Gert added. “He’d been doin’ them girls around there for months. And when Cynthia Athol’s husband found out and came after him, Joe beat him so bad that he had to go to the hospital. Broke his collarbone. He beat Chris Small with a strap just two weeks ago.”

When Nestor asked Leonid to find him a patsy for a midday crime, Leonid came to Gert, and she went to work as a temp for Amberson’s Financials. All she had to do was come up with a guy with a record who might have been part of the heist; a guy who no one could connect with Nestor.

She did him one better. She came up with a guy that no one liked.

Haller had robbed a convenience store twelve years before, when he was eighteen. And now he was a gigolo with some kind of black belt in something. He liked to overwhelm the silly office secretaries with his muscles and his big thing. He didn’t mind if their significant others found out because he believed he could take on almost any man one on one.

Gert had been told that he once said, “Any woman with a real man wouldn’t let me take her like that.”

“Don’t worry,” Gert said. “He deserves whatever happens to him, and they’ll never follow it back to me.”

“Okay,” Leonid said.

He touched her knuckle again.

“Don’t.”

He let his fingers trail up toward her wrist.

“Please, Leo. I don’t want to wrestle with you.”

Leonid’s breath was shallow and the erection was pressing against his pants. But he moved away.

“I better be going,” he said.

“Yeah,” Gert agreed. “Go home to your wife.”

IT DIDN’T TAKE LONG to get through security at the Empire State Building. Leonid worked late at least three nights a week.

He didn’t want to go home after Gert had turned him down.

He never knew why he took Kartrina back in.

He never knew why he did anything except if it had to do with the job.

Leonid became a PI because he was too short to qualify for the NYPD when he was eligible. They changed the requirements soon after that, but by then he’d already been busted for unlawful entry.

He didn’t care. The private sector was more lucrative, and he could work his own hours.

HE FOUND a Richard Mallory in the phone book that had the same address that Karmen Brown had typed out on her fiancé's fact sheet. Leonid dialed the number. Someone answered on the third ring.

"Hello," a tremulous man's voice asked.

"BobbiAnne there?" Leonid asked in one of his dozen accents.

"What?"

"BobbiAnne. She there?"

"You have the wrong number."

"Oh. All right," Leonid said and then hung up.

For a dozen minutes by the big clock on the wall Leonid thought about the voice of the man who might have been Richard Mallory. Leonid thought that he could tell the nature of anyone if he could talk to them just as they were roused out of a deep sleep.

It was 2:34 a.m., and Richard, if that was Richard, sounded like a straightforward guy, a working stiff, somebody who didn't cross the line over into the Life.

This was important to Leonid. He didn't want to get involved following some guy who might turn around and blow his head off.

AT HALF PAST THREE he called Gert.

"—six-two-oh-nine," the recording of her voice said after five rings. "I'm not available right now but if you leave a message I'll be sure to call you back."

"Gertie, it's Leo I'm sorry about before. I miss you, honey. Maybe we can have dinner tomorrow night. You know—I'll make it up to you."

He didn't hang up for a few seconds more, hoping that Gert was listening and would decide to pick up.

THE BUZZER WOKE HIM. The clock had it just past nine. The window was filled with cloud—just a pillowy white gauze that didn't give three inches' visibility.

The buzzer jangled his dull mind again. Another long ring. But this time Leonid wasn't awake enough to have fear. He stumbled down the hall in the same suit he'd been wearing for over twenty-four hours.

When he opened the front door the two thugs pushed in.

One was black with a bald head and gold-rimmed glasses, while the other was white with thick greasy hair.

They each had five inches on Leonid.

"The Wyants want forty-nine hundred," the black man said. His mouth on the inside was the color of gingivitis. His eyes behind the lenses had a yellowy tint.

"Forty-six," Leonid corrected groggily.

"That was yesterday, Leon. That interest is a motherfucker." The black man closed the door and the white one moved to Leonid's left.

The white hooligan grinned and Leonid felt a hatred in his heart that was older than his Communist father's father.

The white man had coarse chestnut hair that had been hacked rather than cut. His eyes were bisected between blue and brown and his lips were ragged, as if he had spent a portion of his earlier life soul-kissing a toothy leopard.

"We wake you up?" the black collector asked, just now remembering his manners.

"Li'l bit," Leonid said, stifling a yawn. "How you been, Bilko?"

"Okay, Leon. I hope you got the money, 'cause if you don't they told us to bust you up."

The white man snickered in anticipation.

Leonid reached into his breast pocket and came out with the thick brown envelope he'd received the night before.

While counting out the forty-nine hundred-dollar bills, Leonid had a familiar sensation: the feeling of never having as much money as he thought he did. After his debt and interest to the Wyants, this month's rent and last on his apartment, after his wife's household expenses and his own bills, he would be broke and still three months behind on his office rent.

This made him even angrier. He'd need Karmen Brown's money and more if he was going to keep his head above water. And that white fool just kept on grinning, his head like a wobbling tenpin begging to fall down.

Leonid handed the money to Bilko, who counted it slowly while the white goon licked his ragged lips.

"I think you should tip us for havin' to come all the way up here to collect, Leon," the white man said.

Bilko looked up and grinned. "Leon don't tip the help, Norman. He's got his pride."

"I knock that outta him right quick," Norman said.

"I'd like to see you try it, white boy," Leonid dared. Then he looked at Bilko to see if he had to take on two at once.

"It's between you two," the black capo said, holding up one empty hand and one filled with Leonid's green.

Norman was faster than he looked. He laid a beefy fist into Leonid's jaw, knocking the middle-aged detective back two steps.

"Whoa!" Bilko cried.

Norman's frayed lips curved into a smile. He was looking at Leonid as if he expected him to fall down.

That was the mistake all of Leonid's sparring partners made at Gordo's gym. They thought the fat man couldn't take a punch. Leonid came in low and hard, hitting the big white man three times at the belt line. The third punch bent Norman over enough to be a sucker for a one-two uppercut combination. The only thing that kept Leonid's foe from falling was the wall. He hit it hard, putting his hands up reflexively to ward off the attack he knew was coming.

Leonid got three good blows to Norman's head before Bilko pushed him away.

"That's enough now, boy," Bilko said. "That's enough. I need him on his feet to get back out on the street."

"Take the asshole outta here, then, Bilko! Take him outta here before I kill his ass!"

Dutifully Bilko helped the half-conscious, bleeding white man away from the wall. He pointed him at the door and then turned to Leonid.

"See you next month, Leon," he said.

“No,” Leonid replied, breathing hard from the exertion. “You won’t be seeing me again.”

Bilko laughed as he led Norman toward the elevators.

Leonid slammed the door behind them. He was still in a rage. After all his pay he was still broke and hard-pressed by fools like Bilko and Norman. Gert wouldn’t take his calls, and he didn’t even have a bed that he could sleep in alone. He would have killed that ugly fool if it wasn’t for Bilko.

Leonid Trotter McGill let out a roar and kicked a hole in the paneled veneer of his nonexistent receptionist’s desk. Then he picked up the phone, called Lenny’s Delicatessen on Thirty-fifth Street, and ordered three jelly doughnuts and a large cup of coffee with cream.

He called Gert again, but she still wasn’t answering.

IT WAS A small office on the third floor above a two-story Japanese restaurant called Gai. There was no elevator, so Leonid took the stairs. Just those twenty-eight steps winded him. If Norman had fought back at all, Leonid realized, he would be broken and broke.

The receptionist weighed less than ninety-eight pounds fully dressed, and she was nowhere near fully dressed. All she had on was a black slip trying to pass for a dress and flat paper sandals. Her arms had no muscle. Everything about the girl was preadolescent except her eyes, which regarded the bulky PI with deep suspicion.

“Richard Mallory,” Leonid said to the brunette.

“And you are?”

“Looking for Richard Mallory,” Leonid stated.

“What business do you have with Mr. Mallory?”

“No business of yours, honey. It’s man-talk.”

The young woman’s four-ounce jaw hardened as she stared at Leonid.

He didn’t mind. He didn’t like the girl; dressed so sexy and talking to him as if they were peers.

She picked up a phone and whispered a few angry words, then walked away from her post into a doorway behind her chair, leaving Leonid to stand there at the waist-high barrier-desk. In the mirror on the wall Leonid could see through the window behind his back and out onto Madison Avenue. He could also see the swelling on the right side of his head where Norman had hit him.

A few moments later the tall man with a sparse mustache strode out. He wore black trousers and a tan linen jacket and the same uncomfortable expression he had in the photograph in Leonid’s pocket.

Leonid hated him, too.

“Yes?” Richard Mallory said to Leonid.

“I’m looking for Richard Mallory,” Leonid said.

“That’s me.”

The PI took a deep breath through his nostrils. He knew that he had to calm down if he wanted to do his job right. He took another, deeper, breath.

“What happened to your jaw?” the handsome young man asked the amateur boxer.

“Edema,” Leonid said easily. “Runs on my father’s side of the family.”

Richard Mallory was stymied by this. Leonid thought that he probably didn't know the meaning of the word.

"I want to talk business with you, Mr. Mallory. Something we can both make money on."

"I don't see what you mean," Mallory said with the blandest of bland expressions on his face.

Leonid produced a card from his breast pocket. It read:

VAN DER ZEE DOMESTICS AND IN-HOME SERVICE AIDES
Arnold DuBois, Agent

"I don't understand, Mr. DuBois," Mallory said, using the French pronunciation of McGill's alias.

"Du-boys," Leonid said. "I represent the Van Der Zee firm. We're just establishing ourselves here in New York. We're from Cleveland originally. What we want is to get our people in as domestics, care for the aged, dog walkers, and nannies in the upper-crust buildings. All of our people are highly presentable and professional. They're bonded, too."

"And you want me to help you get in?" Mallory asked, still a little leery.

"We'll pay fifteen hundred dollars for every exclusive presentation you get us in for," Leonid said. By now he had forgotten his dislike of the receptionist and Mallory. He wasn't even mad at Norman anymore.

The mention of fifteen hundred per presentation (whatever that meant) moved Dick Mallory to action.

"Come with me, Mr. DuBois," he said, pronouncing the name the way Leonid preferred.

The real estate agent led the fake employment agent down a hall of cubicles inhabited by various other agents.

Mallory took Leonid to a small conference room and closed the door behind them. There was a round pine table that had three matching chairs. Mallory gestured and they both sat down.

"Now, what is it exactly that you're saying, Mr. DuBois?"

"We have a young girl," Leonid said. "A pretty thing. She sets up a small table in the entry hall of any building you say. She talks to the tenants about all the various types of in-home labor they might need. Somebody might want an assistant twice a week to help with filing and shopping. Or they might already have an assistant but still need somebody to walk their pets when they're away. Once somebody hires one of our people, we're confident they will hire others as needs arise. All we need is your okay to install the young lady and we pay you fifteen hundred dollars."

"For every building I get you into?"

"Cash."

"Cash?"

Leonid nodded.

The young man actually licked his lips.

"If you can guarantee us a lobby in an upscale building, I can pay you as early as tonight," Leonid said.

“Does it have to be that soon?”

“I’m an agent on commission for Van Der Zee Enterprises, Mr. Mallory. In order to make a profit I have to produce. I’m not the only one out here trying to make contacts. I mean, you can call me whenever you want, but if you can’t promise me a lobby by the end of today, then I will have to go further down my list of contacts.”

“But—”

“Listen,” Leonid said, cutting off any logic that Richard Mallory might have brought to bear. He reached into his pocket and brought out three one-hundred-dollar bills. These he placed on the table between them. “That’s one-fifth up front. Three hundred dollars against you finding me one lobby that I can send Arlene to tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow—”

“That’s right, Richard. Van Der Zee Enterprises will give me control over the whole Manhattan operation if I’m the first one to bring in a lobby.”

“So I get to keep the money?”

“With twelve hundred more coming to you at eight this evening if you have a lobby set for me.”

“Eight? Why eight?”

“You think you’re the only guy I’m talking to, Richard? I have four other meetings set up this afternoon. Whoever gets to me when it’s all done, at eight o’clock, will get at least part of the prize. Maybe he’ll get the whole thing.”

“But I have a date tonight—”

“Just call me on the phone, Richard. Tell me where you are and I’ll bring you the money and the letter confirming to the super that Arlene can set up her table.”

“What letter?”

“I hope you don’t think I’m going to be handing you fifteen hundred dollars a week in cash without getting a letter to the super to show my boss,” Leonid said blandly. “Don’t worry, we won’t mention the money, just that Van Der Zee can set up in the lobby, offering our services.”

“But what if somebody complains?”

“You can always tell your bosses that you were thinking on your own, trying to offer a service. They won’t know about the money changing hands. At the very worst we’ll be thrown out, but that’ll take a couple’a days, and Arlene is very good at handing out those brochures.”

“That’s fifteen hundred in cash a week?”

“Twice that if we can find another Arlene and you can hook us up like I been told.”

“But I’m going to be out tonight,” Mallory complained.

“So? Just call me. Give me the address. And I’ll drop by with the form. We’re talkin’ ten minutes for twelve hundred dollars.”

Richard fingered the money. Then he tentatively picked it up.

“I can just take this?”

“Take it. And take the rest tonight, and then that much again once a week for the next four or five months.” Leonid grinned.

Richard folded the money and put it in his pocket.

“What’s your phone number, Mr. DuBois?”

LEONID CALLED HIS WIFE and told her to have his brown suit ready and pressed by the time he got home.

“Am I your maid now?” she asked.

“I got the rent and the expenses here in my pocket,” Leonid growled. “All I’m asking from you is a little cooperation.”

The private eye then called his cell phone service. When the voice on the line said to record a new message, Leonid said, “Hello. This is Arnold DuBois, employment manager for Van Der Zee Enterprises. At the tone leave me what you got.”

WHEN HE GOT HOME he found the suit folded on the bed and Katrina gone. Alone in the house, he drew a bath and poured himself a glass of ice water. He wanted a cigarette but the doctors had told him his lungs could barely take New York air.

He sat back in the old-fashioned tub, turning the hot water on and off with his toes. His jaw ached and he was almost broke again. But still, he had a line on Richard Mallory, and that made the detective happy.

“At least I’m good at what I do,” he said to no one. “At least that.”

AFTER THE BATH Leonid called Gert again. This time the phone rang and rang with no interruption. That was very odd. Gert had it set up so that her service picked up when she was on the line.

Sometimes he didn’t talk to Gert for months at a time. She had made it clear that they could never be intimate again. But he still felt something for her. And he wanted to make sure that she was okay.

WHEN LEONID GOT to Gert’s, near four, he found the downstairs door had been wedged open.

Her front door was crisscrossed with yellow police ribbon.

“You know her?” a voice asked.

It was a small woman standing at a doorway down the hall. She was old and gray and wore gray clothes. She had watery eyes and mismatched slippers. There was a low-grade emerald ring on the index finger of her right hand, and the left side of her mouth lagged just a bit.

Leonid noticed all of this in a vain attempt to work away from the fear growing in his stomach.

“What happened?”

“They say he must’a come in last night,” the woman said. “It was past midnight, the super says. He just killed her. Didn’t steal anything. Just shot her with a gun no louder than a cap pistol, that’s what they said. You know, you’re not safe in your own bed anymore. People out here just get some crazy idea in their head and you find yourself dead with no rhyme or reason.”

Leonid’s tongue went dry. He stared at the woman so intensely that she stopped rambling, backed into her apartment, and closed the door. He leaned against the doorjamb, dry-eyed but stunned.

Leonid had never cried. Not when his father left home for the revolution. Not when his mother went to bed and never came out again. Never.

THERE WAS A different bartender serving drinks at Barney's Clover that afternoon. A woman with faded blue-green tattoos on her wrists. She was thin and brown-eyed, white, and past forty.

"What you have, mister?"

"Rye whiskey. Keep 'em comin'."

HE WAS ON the sixth shot when his cell phone sounded. The ring had been programmed by his son Twill. It started with the sound of a lion's roar.

"lo?"

"Mr. DuBois? Is that you?"

"Who is this?"

"Richard Mallory. Are you sick, Mr. DuBois?"

"Hey, Dick. Sorry I didn't recognize you. I got some bad news today. An old friend of mine died."

"I'm so sorry. What happened?"

"It was a long illness," Leonid said, finishing the shot and gesturing for another.

"Should I call you later?"

"You got me a lobby, Dick?"

"Um, well, yes. A fairly large building on Sutton Place South. The super is a friend of mine and I promised him five hundred."

"That's the way to do business, Dick. Share the wealth. That's what I've always done. Where are you?"

"It's a Brazilian place on West Twenty-six. Umberto's. On the second floor, between Sixth and Broadway. I don't know the exact address."

"That's okay. I'll get it from information. See you about nine. Looks like we're gonna be doing some business, you and me."

"Okay, um, all right. I'm sorry about your loss, Mr. DuBois. But please don't call me Dick. I hate that name."

UMBERTO'S WAS an upscale restaurant on a street filled with wholesalers of Indian trinkets, foods, and clothing. Leonid sat across the street in his 1963 Peugeot.

It was after ten and Leonid was drinking from a pint bottle of bourbon in the front seat. He was thinking about when he had first met Gert, about how she knew just what to say.

"You're not such a bad man," the sultry New Yorker had said. "It's just that you been making your own rules for so long that you got a little confused."

They spent that night together. He really didn't know that she'd be upset about Katrina. Katrina was his wife, but there was no juice there. He remembered the hurt look on Gert's face when she finally found out. After that came the cold anger she treated him with from then on.

They'd remained friends, but she would never kiss him again. She would never let him into her heart.

But they worked well together. Gert had been in private security for a dozen years before they met. She enjoyed his *shady cases*, as she called them. Gert didn't believe that the law was fair, and she didn't mind getting around the system if that was the right thing to do.

Maybe Joe Haller didn't rob Amberson's, but he'd beaten and humiliated both men and women pursuing his perverse sexual appetites.

Leonid wondered if Nestor Bendix could have had something to do with Gert's killing. But he'd never told anyone her name. Maybe Haller got out and somehow traced his problem back to her. Maybe.

A lion roared in his pocket.

"Yeah?"

"Mr. McGill? This is Karma."

"Hey. I'm on the case. He is on a date but I haven't seen her yet. I'll have the pictures for you by tomorrow afternoon. By the way, I had to lay out three hundred to get this address."

"That's all right, I guess," she said. "I'll pay for it if you can bring me proof about his girlfriend."

"All right. Let me off now. I'll call you when I have something for sure."

As soon as Leonid folded his phone shut, a colony of monkeys began chattering.

"Yeah?"

"You knew Gert Longman, didn't you?" Carson Kitteridge asked.

Ice water filled Leonid's lower intestine. His rectum clenched.

"Yeah."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You asked me if I knew someone and I told you. Yeah. We were close there for a while."

"She's dead."

Leonid remained silent for a quarter face-sweep of his Timex's second hand. That was long enough to seem as if he was shocked by the news.

"How did it happen?"

"Shot."

"By who?"

"A man wielding a long-barreled .22 pistol."

"Do you have a suspect?"

"That's the kinda pistol you like to use, isn't it, Leon?"

For a moment Leonid thought that the lieutenant was just blowing smoke, trying to get under his skin. But then he remembered a gun that he'd lost. It was seventeen years before. Nora Parsons had come to him scared to death that her husband, who was out on bail before sentencing in his embezzlement trial, was going to come kill her. Leonid had given her his pistol, and after her husband, Anton, was sentenced, she'd told him that she was afraid to have the pistol in the house, so she threw it into a lake.

It was a cold piece. Nothing to it.

"Well?" Detective Kitteridge asked.

"I haven't owned a gun in twenty years, man. And even you can't think that I'd use my own piece if I wanted to kill somebody."

But still he thought he might give Nora Parsons a call. Maybe.

“I’d like you to come in for voluntary questioning, Leon.”

“I’m busy right now. Call me later,” Leonid said and then he disconnected the call.

He didn’t want to be so rude to a member of New York’s finest but Richard was coming out of the front door of Umberto’s Brazilian Food. He was accompanied by the haughty receptionist from the real estate company. Now she was wearing a red slip and black pumps with a gossamer pink shawl around her bare shoulders. Her hair was up.

Richard glanced around the street, probably looking for Mr. DuBois, then hailed a cab.

Leonid turned over the engine. He watched as a cab swooped down to pick them up. The driver wore a Sikh turban.

They went up to Thirty-second Street, headed east over to Park and then up to the seventies.

They got out at a building with a glass door and two uniformed guards.

Almost if they were posing, the two stopped on the street and entwined in a long soul kiss. Leonid had been taking photographs since he’d hung up on the cop. He had shots of the taxi’s numbers, the driver, the front of the building, and the couple talking, holding hands, dueling tongues, and grasping at skin.

They reminded Leonid of Gert, of how much he wanted her. And now she was dead. He put down his camera and bowed his head for a moment. When he raised up again Richard Mallory and the receptionist were gone.

“YOU AWAKE?” Leonid whispered in bed next to Katrina.

It was early for him, only one-thirty. But she had been asleep for hours. He knew that.

In the old days she was always out past three and four. Sometimes she wouldn’t come in till the sun was up—smelling like vodka, cigarettes, and men.

Maybe if he had left her and gone to Gert. Maybe Gert would still be alive.

“What?” Katrina said.

“You wanna talk?”

“It’s almost two.”

“Somebody I been working with the last fifteen years died tonight,” Leonid said.

“Are you in trouble?”

“I’m sad.”

For a few moments Leonid listened to her hard breath.

“Will you hold hands with me?” the detective asked his wife.

“My hands hurt,” she said.

For a long time after that he lay on his back, staring at the darkness before the ceiling. There was nothing he could think that did not damn him. There was nothing he had done that he could remember with pride.

Maybe an hour later Katrina said, “Are you still up?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have a life insurance policy? I’m just worried for the kids.”

“I got better than that. I got a life insurance philosophy.”

“What’s that?” Katrina asked.

“As long as I’m worth more alive than dead I won’t have to worry about banana peels and bad broth.”

Katrina sighed and Leonid climbed out of the bed.

Just as he got to the small TV room, Twill came in the front door.

“It’s three in the morning, Twill,” Leonid said.

“Sorry, Dad. But I got into this thing with the Rafferty sisters and Bingham. It was their parents’ car, so I had to wait until they were ready to go home. I told them that I was on probation but they didn’t care—”

“You don’t have to lie to me, boy. Come on, let’s sit.”

They sat across from each other over a low coffee table. Twill lit up a menthol cigarette and Leonid enjoyed the smoke secondhand.

Twill was thin and on the short side but he carried himself with understated self-importance. The bigger kids left him alone and the girls were always calling. His father, whoever he was, had some Negro in him. Leonid was grateful for that. Twill was the son he felt closest to.

“Somethin’ wrong, Dad?”

“Why you ask that?”

“Cause you’re not ridin’ me. Somethin’ happen?”

“An old friend died today.”

“A guy?”

“No. A woman named Gert Longman.”

“When’s the funeral?”

“I, I don’t know,” Leonid said, realizing that he never thought about who would bury his ex-lover. Her parents were dead. Her two brothers were in prison.

“I’ll go with you, Dad. Just tell me when it is and I’ll cut school.”

With that, Twill got up and headed for his bedroom. At the door he stopped and turned.

“Hey, Dad.”

“What?”

“What happened to the guy slammed you in the jaw?”

“They had to carry him out.”

Twill gave the father of his heart a thumbs-up and then moved into the darkness of the doorway.

LEONID WAS AT WORK at five. It was dark in Manhattan and in New Jersey across the river. He’d put twenty-five hundred dollars in Katrina’s wallet, dropped the film off at Krome Addict Four Hour Developing Service, and bought an egg sandwich with Bermuda onions and American cheese. He didn’t turn on the lights. As the morning wore on, the dawn slowly invaded his room. The sky cleared and then opened—after a while it turned blue.

Carson Kitteridge came to the door a little before seven.

Leonid ushered him to the back office, where they took their regular seats.

“Did you and Gertie have a fight, Leon?” the cop asked.

“No. Not really. I mean, I might’a got a little fresh and she had to show me the door, but I was sorry. I wanted to take her out to dinner. You’re not dumb enough to think that I would have killed Gert?”

"If somebody gave me information that you were involved with John Wilkes Booth I'd take the time to check it out, Leon. That's just the kind of guy I think you are."

"Listen, man. I have never killed anybody. Never pulled a trigger, never ordered a job done. I didn't kill Gert."

"You called her," Kitteridge said. "You called her from that phone on your desk just about when she was getting killed. It speaks to your innocence, but one wonders what you had to talk to her about at that hour, on that night. What were you apologizing for?"

"I told you—I got a little fresh."

"And here I thought you had a wife."

"Listen. She was my friend. I liked her—a lot. I don't know who did that to her but if I find out you can be sure that I'll let you know."

Kitteridge made a silent clapping gesture.

"Get the fuck out my office," Leonid said.

"I have a few more questions."

"Ask 'em out in the hall." Leonid stood up from his chair. "I'm through with you."

The policeman waited a moment. Maybe he thought that Leonid would sit back down. But as the seconds ticked by on the wall clock it began to dawn on him that Leonid's feelings were actually hurt.

"You're serious?" he asked.

"As a heart attack. Now get your ass outta here and come back with a warrant if you expect to talk to me again."

Kitteridge stood.

"I don't know what you're playing here, Leon," he said. "But you can't put out the law."

"But I can put out an asshole who doesn't have a warrant."

The lieutenant delayed another moment and then began to move.

Leonid followed him down the hall and to the door, which he slammed behind the lawman. He kicked another hole in the front desk and marched back to his office, where his gut began to ache from whiskey and bile.

"YES, MS. BROWN," Leonid was saying to his client on the telephone later that afternoon. "I have the photographs right here. It wasn't an older woman like you suspected."

"But it was a woman?"

"More like a girl."

"Is there any question about their, um... their relationship?"

"No. There's no doubt of the intimate nature of their relationship. What do you want me to do with these pictures, and how will we settle accounts?"

"Can you bring them to me? To my apartment? I'll have the money you put out, and I have one more thing that I'd like you to do."

"Sure, I'll bring them to you, if that's what you want. What's the address?"

KARMEN BROWN LIVED on the sixth floor. He pressed the number she gave him, sixty-two. He found her waiting at the door.

The demure young thing had on a dark-brown leather skirt that wouldn't keep her modest if she sat without crossing her legs. Her blouse had the top three buttons undone. She wasn't a large-breasted girl, but what she had was mostly visible.

Her delicate features were serious but Leonid wouldn't have called her brokenhearted.

"Come in, Mr. McGill."

The apartment was small—like Gert's.

There was a table in the middle with a brown manila folder on it.

Leonid held a similar folder in his right hand.

"Sit down," Karmen said, gesturing toward a blue sofa.

In front of the couch was a small table holding up a decanter half filled with an amber fluid and flanked by two squat glasses.

Leonid opened the folder and reached for the photographs he'd taken.

She held up a hand to stop him.

"Will you join me in a drink first?" the young siren asked.

"I think I will."

She poured, and they both slugged back hard.

She poured again.

After three stiff drinks, and with a new one in her glass, Karmen said, "I loved him more than anything you know."

"Really?" Leonid said, his eyes drifting between her cleavage and her crossed legs. "He seemed like kind of a loser to me."

"I would die for him," she said, gazing steadily into Leonid's eyes.

He brought out the dozen or so pictures.

"For this louse? He doesn't even respect you—or her." Leonid felt the whiskey behind his eyes and under his tongue. "Look at him with his hand under her dress like that."

"Look at this," she replied.

Leonid looked up to see her ample mound of pubic hair. Karmen had pulled up her skirt, revealing that she wore nothing underneath.

"This is my revenge," she said. "You want it?"

"Yes, ma'am," Leonid answered, thinking that this was the other thing she wanted him to take care of.

He had been half-aroused since the last night he saw Gert. Not sexy, but prey to a sexual hunger. The whiskey set that hunger free.

She got down on her knees on the blue sofa and Leonid dropped his pants. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this eager for sex. He felt like a teenager. But push as he would, he couldn't press into her.

Finally she said, "Wait a minute, Daddy," and reached around to lubricate his erection with her own saliva.

After his first full thrust he knew he was going to come. He couldn't do anything about it.

"Do it, Daddy! Do it!" she cried.

Leonid thought about Gert, realizing at that moment that he had always loved her, and about Katrina, who he was never good enough for. He thought about that

poor child so much in love with her man that she had to have revenge on him by giving her love away to an overweight, middle-aged gumshoe.

All of that went through his mind but nothing could stand in the way of the pulsing rhythm. He was slamming against Karmen Brown's slender backside. She was yelling. He was yelling.

And then it was over—just like that. Leonid didn't even feel the ejaculation. It all blended into his violent, spasmodic attack.

Karmen had been thrown to the floor. She was crying.

He reached to help her up but she pulled away.

"Leave me alone," she said. "Let me go."

She was in a heap with her skirt up around her waist and the slick sheen of spit on her thighs.

Leonid pulled up his pants. He felt something like guilt about having had sex with the girl. She was only just a few years older than his wife's girl, the daughter of the Chinese jeweler.

"You owe me three hundred dollars," he said.

Maybe sometime in the future he'd tell someone that the best tail he ever had paid him three hundred dollars for the privilege.

"It's in the envelope on the table. There's a thousand dollars there. That and the ring and the bracelet he gave me. I want you to give them back to him. Take it and go. Go."

Leonid tore open the envelope. There he found the money, a ring with a large emerald in it, and a tennis bracelet lined with quarter-carat diamonds.

"What do you want me to tell him?" Leonid asked.

"You won't have to say a word."

Leonid wanted to say something but he didn't.

He went out the door, deciding to take the stairs rather than wait for the elevator.

On the first flight down he thought about Karmen Brown begging for sex and then crying so bitterly. On the third flight he started thinking about Gert. He wanted to reach out and touch her but she was gone.

On the first floor he passed a tattooed young man waiting at the elevator doors.

When Leonid glanced at the young man, he looked away.

He was wearing leather gloves.

Leonid went out the door and turned westward.

He took four steps, five.

He made it all the way to the end of the block, and it was then, when he had the urge to take off his jacket because of the heat, that he wondered why somebody would be wearing leather gloves on a hot day. He thought about the tattoos, and the image of a motorcycle came into his mind.

It had been parked right outside of Karmen Brown's front door.

HE PRESSED EVERY BUZZER on the wall and someone let him in. He thought about taking the stairs but the elevator was there and open.

On the ride up he was trying to make sense out of it.

The doors slid open and he lurched toward Karmen's apartment.

The young man with the tattooed arms was coming out. He jumped back and reached for his pocket but Leonid hit him. The young man took the punch hard but he held on to the pistol. Leonid grabbed his hand and they embraced, performing an intricate dance that revolved around their strengths and that gun. When the kid wrenched the pistol from Leonid's hand, the heavier man let his weight go dead, and they fell to the floor. The gun went off.

Leonid felt a sharp pain at just about the place that his liver was situated. He leaped back from the motorcycle man, grabbing at his belly. There was blood on the lower half of his shirt.

"Shit!" he cried.

His mind went to November 1963. He was fifteen and devastated at the assassination of Kennedy. Then Oswald was shot by Ruby. Shot in the liver, and in excruciating pain.

That's when Leonid realized that his pain had passed. He turned toward his opponent and saw that he was lying on his back, gasping for air. And then, mid-gasp, he stopped breathing.

Realizing that the blood on him was the kid's, Leonid stood up.

Karmen lay on the floor in the corner, naked. Her eyes were open and very, very bloodshot. Her throat was dark from strangulation.

But she wasn't dead.

When Leonid leaned over her, those destroyed eyes recognized him. A deep gurgling went off in her throat and she tried to hit him. She croaked a loud, inarticulate curse and actually sat up. The exertion was too much. She died in a sitting position, her head bowed over her knees.

There was no blood under her nails.

Why was she naked? Leonid wondered.

He went into the bathroom to check the tub—but it was dry.

He thought about calling the hospital but...

The kid had used a .22-caliber long-barrel pistol. Leonid was sure it was the pistol Nora Parsons said that she tossed seventeen years before.

In her wallet the dead girl's license had the name Lana Parsons.

It was then that Leonid felt the heat from her jewelry and cash in his own pocket.

The killer had a backpack. It contained two envelopes. One was addressed to a lawyer named Mazer and the other to Nora Parsons in Montclair, New Jersey.

The letter to her mother included one of the photographs that Leonid had taken of Richard Mallory and his girlfriend.

Dear Mom,

While you were in the Bahamas with Richard last year I went to your house looking for anything that might have belonged to dad. You know that I loved him so much. I just thought you might have something I could remember him by.

I found a rusty old metal box in the garage. You still had the key in the hardware drawer. I guess it shouldn't surprise me that you hired a detective to prove that daddy was stealing from his company. He must have told you and

you figured you could keep his money and your boyfriends while he was dying in prison.

I waited for a long time to figure out what to do about it. Finally I decided to use the man you used to kill daddy to break your heart. Here's a picture of your precious Richard and his real girlfriend. The boy you say you love. The boy you sent through college. What do you think about that?

And I took the report Leonid McGill made about daddy. I'm sending it to my lawyer. Maybe he can prove some kind of conspiracy. I'm sure you framed daddy and if the lawyer can prove it then maybe they'll send both of you to prison. Maybe even Mr. McGill would testify against you.

See you in court.

Your loving daughter,

Lana

To the lawyer she sent a yellowing and frayed report that Leonid had made many years before. It detailed how Nora's husband kept a secret account with money that he'd embezzled from a discretionary fund he controlled. Leonid remembered the meeting with Mrs. Parsons. She'd said that she couldn't trust a man who was a thief. Leonid didn't argue. He was just there to collect his check.

Lana had included a copy of the letter to her mother in the lawyer's envelope. She asked him to help her get justice for her father.

Leonid washed his hands carefully and then removed any sign that he had been in the girl's apartment. He rubbed down every surface and the glass he drank from. He gathered the evidence he'd brought and the unmailed letters, then buttoned his coat over the bloody shirt and hurried away from the crime scene.

TWILL WAS WEARING a dark-blue suit with a pale-yellow shirt and maroon tie that had a wavering blue line orbiting its center. Leonid wondered where his son got such a fine suit but he didn't ask.

They were the only two in the small funeral-parlor chapel where Gert Longman lay in an open pine coffin. She looked smaller than she had in life. Her stiff face seemed to be fashioned from wax.

The Wyant brothers had fronted him fifty-five hundred dollars for the funeral. They gave him their preferential rate of two points a week.

Leonid lingered at the casket while Twill stood to the side—half a step behind him.

Behind the pair, two rows of folding chairs sat like a mute crowd of spectators. The director had set the room for a service, but Leonid didn't know if Gert was religious. Neither did he know any of her friends.

After the forty-five minutes they were allotted Twill and Leonid left the Little Italy funeral home. They came out into the bright sun shining on Mott Street.

"Hey, Leon," a voice called from behind them.

Twill turned but Leonid didn't need to.

Carson Kitteridge, dressed in a dark-gold suit, walked up.

"Lieutenant. You met my son Twill."

"Isn't it a school day, son?" the cop asked.

"Grief leave, Officer," Twill said easily. "Even prison lets up in cases like that."

“What you want, Carson?” Leonid said.

He looked up over the policeman’s head. The sky was what Gert used to call *blue-gorgeous*. That was back in the days when they were still lovers.

“I thought that you might want to know about Mick Bright.”

“Who?”

“We got an anonymous call five days ago,” Carson said. “It was about a disturbance in an apartment building on the Upper East Side.”

“Yeah?”

“When the officers got there they found a dead girl named Lana Parsons and this Mick Bright—also dead.”

“Who killed ’em?” Leonid asked, measuring his breath.

“Looks like a rape and robbery. The kid was an addict. He knew the girl from the Performing Arts high school.”

“But you said that he was dead, too?”

“I did, didn’t I? Best the detectives could tell, the kid was high and fell on his own gun. It went off and nicked his heart.”

While saying this, Carson stared deeply into McGill’s eyes.

Twill glanced at his father and then looked away.

“Stranger things have happened,” Leonid said.

Leonid had long since realized that Lana also found the pistol in that metal box of her mother’s. He knew why she’d killed Gert and had Bright kill her. She wanted to hurt him and then send him off to prison, like he’d done to her father.

It was as good a frame as he might have thought up himself. The lawyer would make the letters available to the cops. Once they suspected Leonid, they’d match his semen inside her. She would expect him to have kept the expensive jewelry. Robbery, rape, and murder, and he would have been as innocent as Joe Haller.

I’d die for him, she’d said. She was talking about her father.

“I been knowing about the case for days,” Kitteridge said. “The girl’s name stuck in my head, and then I remembered. Lana Parsons was the daughter of Nora Parsons. You ever hear of her?”

“Yeah. I brought her information about her husband. She was considering a divorce.”

“That’s right,” Kitteridge said. “But he wasn’t fooling around. He was embezzling money from their own company. They sent him to jail on the dirt you dug up.”

“Yeah.”

“He died in prison, didn’t he?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

LEONID BURNED the letters Lana had intended to incriminate him with.

His work for Lana’s mother had driven the girl to murder and suicide. For a while he considered sending the photograph of Richard and his girlfriend to Lana’s mother. At least he could accomplish one thing that she intended to do. But he decided against it. Why hurt Nora when he was just as guilty?

He kept the picture, though, in the top drawer of his desk. The shot of Richard with his hand up under the receptionist’s red dress, out on Park Avenue after a spicy Brazilian feast. Next to that he had placed an item from the *New York Post*. It

was a thumbnail article about a prisoner on Rikers Island named Joe Haller. He'd been arrested for robbery. While waiting to stand trial he hung himself in his cell.

