



Leading Lady

HEYWOOD GOULD

"JERRY LOVES GLORIA."

Lang traced it with his fingernail on the cool, silken curve of Gloria's behind.

"Guess what I wrote," he said.

He slid his nail across the small of her back. She shivered and tried to suppress a moan. After all these years she still had to be seduced and he loved her for it.

The sun slanted through the blinds, but stopped discreetly short of the bed. Her body glowed like a pearl in the gloom. It was so quiet it seemed time had stopped.

He always wanted to make love on the afternoon of a score. He told her it relaxed him, but it was really his way of saying good bye. In case the thing went south that night and he got caught he wanted to make sure he had her smell in his nose and on his fingertips, her taste on his tongue, so he would have the memory that much longer until it faded. But he never told her that.

"Nervous?" he asked.

"Edgy," she said.

He explored the places on her body where one part ended and another began. The secret spot where her ass flowed into her legs. The downy trail to her navel, the smooth hollow of her belly and above it the hard ridge of her ribs that led to a meadow of soft flesh beneath her breasts. He kissed the warm pulse on her neck just under her ear. Her lips parted and she put her finger in her mouth as if she had forgotten something. Eyes squinty shut . . . Waiting . . .

Gloria, Gloria, Gloria . . .

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AUGUST 2006
"JERRY LOVES GLORIA"

Lang traced it with his fingernail on the cool, silken curve of Gloria's behind.

"Guess what I wrote," he said

She yawned. "I can't."

"You can too." He slid his nail across the small of her back. She shivered and tried to suppress a moan. After all these years she still had to be seduced and he loved her for it.

He traced "Gloria loves Jerry" on the other cheek. "Guess."

She turned over. Stretching languidly, she grasped the bedpost. "Gloria loves . . . pizza. I'm hungry, Jerry."

He nuzzled the fragrant stubble on her thighs. Her essence rose in a cloud around him. "I can never get you to say the L word."

"I say it and you'll be gone in the morning."

"After five years you still don't trust me."

She raised her belly off the bed and arched her back. "Can't trust anybody who makes me feel like this."

The sun slanted through the blinds, but stopped discreetly short of the bed. Her body glowed like a pearl in the gloom. It was so quiet it seemed time had stopped.

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Gloria, Gloria, Gloria . . .

"WHAT ARE WE STEALIN'?"

Gloria asked.

"Self Portrait by Isaac Levitan."

He showed her a photo of the drawing. The head of a long-haired young man with a trim goatee and an amused expression like he was laughing at a secret joke.

She stared at it, shaking her head. "This thing is worth millions? You can get a guy on Sixth Avenue to do it for fifteen bucks . . ."

"Aintcha got no culture, bitch?"

He read her the description he had taken off the Internet.

"The work of Isaac Levitan belongs to the highest achievements of Russian culture," it said, and went on about how Levitan had been friends with "the cream of the Russian intelligentsia and had been adopted by Anton Chekhov." He hadn't painted that many pictures in his short life. Most of his work was already in museums, so what was in private hands was priceless.

"What's the fat Albanian gonna do with this priceless work of art?" she asked

"Hanif won't do nothin'. He got the contract from Tony Rasso, who probably got it from Joe Di, who probably got it from some crooked art dealer. He pays us forty-five and gets a hundred from the dealer who's probably got a buyer lined up for a coupla mil. Everybody makes more goin' up the food chain. We're on the bottom. We do all the heavy liftin' and we get the least . . ."

"How do we go up to the next level?"

"Get different parents."

Lang had jogged past the building for a quick look. It was what they called "prewar," which meant built in the '20s with ledges and overhangs and flying buttresses that made climbing easy in case you had to get out fast. It had big picture windows overlooking Central Park. Fourteen floors with a penthouse, one duplex to a floor. Small lobby, one elevator, no operators. The elevators opened onto the apartments so all you had to do was push the floor button, pick the lock on the elevator door, and you were in. There was probably a silent alarm that rang at the security office. Not a problem. He'd be long gone by the time the cops showed up.

He had rented two rooms at the Orsini, a tourist trap across from Lincoln Center, for the drop. One room was down the hall from the other. The plan was for Gloria to get there early and watch through the peephole to make sure Hanif wasn't sending guys to rip them off.

She laughed at his precautions. "Look at all the money Hanif makes on you. He wouldn't hurt a hair on your head."

"Ever hear the story of the scorpion and the frog?" he asked. "The scorpion says, 'Gimme a ride across the pond on your back.' The frog says, 'If I do you'll sting me.' The scorpion says, 'No I won't 'cause I'll drown.' Off they go. But in the middle of the pond the scorpion stings the frog. As they're dyin' the frog says, 'Why'd you do this?' The scorpion says, 'I'm a scorpion, it's my nature.' Hanif's a crook. It's his nature to screw people even if he screws himself in the bargain."

Gloria winced. "I've had enough of this world, and the shmucks in it."

"Don't worry," he said. "After this you won't have nothin' to do with them."

She was still warm and flushed from the shower, a towel wrapped like a turban around her head. Lang nibbled a tiny hair curling out of one of her baby pink nipples. "How come you

always look so good? You never do anything but smoke weed and drink champagne . . .”

“When I hit thirty it’ll all start saggin’.”

“What’ll you do then, get surgery?”

“You kiddin’, I can’t wait to get fat and ugly. Maybe men will leave me alone.”

She put on a simple black cocktail dress and threw a distressed leather jacket over it for that “I could care less” touch. He wore the tuxedo with the black silk shirt and the red string tie with the diamond steer’s head clasp that he’d bought in Houston. Put his tools in a Mark Cross envelope.

At seven thirty they took a cab to Fifty-ninth and Fifth and walked along the park side. A line of gleaming limos was in front of the building. A young crowd, sleek and sexy, was streaming in. The paparazzi were making a commotion taking pictures at the entrance. It was a high-profile party, Security checking invitations at the door.

“This is a pretty stupid time to hit the building,” she said.

“It’s the only window we have,” he said. “Act impatient. Rich people don’t like to be kept waiting.”

She gave him a shove. “Take a walk around the block, coach. I know what to do.”

The wisecracks gave him a pang. Her attitude had fooled him for years. After going through three leading ladies who had broken down at crucial moments he thought he had finally found a cool customer. But after they became lovers, after he got through to her softness, he realized that the wisecracks were just a cover. She was scared stiff. But she always stepped up. A light rain began to fall. Chauffeurs opened beach umbrellas to escort their clients to the door. Lights blazed on the seventh floor where the party was, but almost every other window was dark.

Lang hid in the horde of autograph hounds and celebrity groupies clustered at the curb. A security guy checking invitations gave Gloria that look of disbelief guys got when they saw her. A paparazzo tried to take her picture and the security guy shoved him away. Then he escorted Gloria into the entrance. Lang could see she was getting a good look at the guest list. He walked to the door and heard her say, “There’s my husband.” She ran out and grabbed his arm. “Here you are . . .” And whispered: “We’re Fred and Molly Hutchinson. You came straight from work and forgot the invitation.” As they neared the entrance she went into her peevish rich wife act. “. . . And this photographer jumped up in my face—that creep over there—and wouldn’t leave me alone until this nice man chased him . . .”

The security guy blushed. “No problem . . .”

“Did you bring the invitation?” Gloria asked.

Lang slapped at his pockets. “Oh jeez, I must have left it in my suit at the office. Should I go back?”

“No, it’ll be all over by then.” Gloria turned pleadingly to the security guy. “Could you trust us, please. Fred and Molly Hutchinson.”

The security guy checked the list. “Where do you live?”

“Eight Seventy Third Avenue.”

He gave her a keen look. “That the building on the corner of Eighty-eighth?”

“That’s it,” she said with a secret “call me” smile.

Lang played the clueless husband. “Thanks man.”

They squeezed into the elevator with some giddy gay guys, who checked Gloria out, memorizing her style, while they talked about what was hot at the silent auction.

The elevator groaned and wobbled like the Ferris wheel at Coney Island.

“That’s New York for you,” Lang said. “Ten million-dollar apartments and they still have the original elevator.”

The door opened onto a gala scene. Everything was black and gold and bubbly. Guests did the room with the precise choreography of hardened party people.

"What if the real Fred and Molly show up?" Gloria asked.

"They'll give their tickets to the other security guy," he said.

"What if they don't?"

"They will," he said. "God protects drunks and cat burglars . . ."

Gloria grimaced in annoyance. "Can I get a straight answer?"

"Do one turn around the room and leave," he said. "Your work is done."

As soon as she hit the vestibule he could see heads turning. A waiter came up to offer her a cocktail.

The door closed and he pushed twelve. The elevator got to the floor and stopped. The lock was rudimentary, the same one they used on the mailboxes. He had a thin metal pick in his case. A push and a twist and the door slid open. A narrow foyer led to a large living room. Lang played his pencil flash across the room. If there was a motion sensor it had already picked him up. Worst case he'd have at least a minute. He took a deep breath and walked quickly into the living room, panning the flash. There was a lot of art on the walls, paintings with lights hanging over them. No simple pen, ink, and watercolor drawings. Could be in the study or the master bedroom.

He walked to the end of a long hallway.

The master bedroom was large and hexagonal. There was a round bed with black silk sheets under a round canopy. The smell of weed hung in the air. Bottle of cognac on the night table; big-screen TV with a pile of porno cassettes; Jacuzzi ,

douche, and a steam shower in the master bath: the room read "player," a guy whose money had come fast and shady.

Lang spotted the drawing in a short hall that led to the library. No light over it, a cheap lacquered frame. Hung in an obscure spot like it had been put up to cover an empty space on the wall.

He broke the frame and slid the drawing out. He rolled it up in plastic laundry wrap and put the package in a Bergdorf's shopping bag.

In the elevator, he turned the key, relocking the floor. He heard a blast of gaiety when he passed the seventh floor. Downstairs, guests were streaming in. The security guy didn't even see him leave.

In the cab he called Gloria at the Orsini. "Everything cool?"

"I'm watching Horny Housewives on Spectravision."

"Hold that thought, I'll be right over."

He called Hanif .

"Done?" Hanif asked.

"We'll be at the Orsini Hotel, room three eleven."

"Where you find this place, Hicksville?" Hanif loved his American slang.

"Look in the Yellow Pages."

Tour buses were double parked outside the Orsini. The lobby was full of anxious foreigners sitting on their luggage. Lang always got a room on a low floor so they could make a quick getaway. A red-cheeked family clutching theater tickets pushed their way onto the elevator as he got off .

He went to 321 and put the Bergdorf' shopping bag on the bed. He called room service and ordered champagne for 311. Piper Heidsieck was the best they had. As he walked down the hall he heard parental voices raised, toddlers screeching behind the doors. He knocked softly.

The door opened. A big guy with a blonde buzz cut and rim-less glasses stepped out of the darkness. "We got your girl," he said. He shined a flashlight beam on the back wall. It caught Gloria standing in the corner. A shadowy figure was behind her. A thick hand with a ruby pinky ring was over her mouth.

Hanif set me up, he thought.

Another guy came out from behind Buzz Cut with a big gun, maybe a .45. He put the barrel to Lang's forehead, while Buzz Cut frisked him.

"Give it up," Buzz Cut said.

"Look, we're all professionals here," Lang said. "Let's talk this over."

Buzz Cut shifted his weight. Lang knew what was coming and steeled himself. A big fist crashed into the side of his jaw. He staggered and tried to stay on his feet, but the floor came up and cracked him in the head. He heard a muffled shriek. It sounded like Gloria, crying. "Jerry . . ."

"You don't have to roughhouse the girl," he said.

Somebody kicked him in the ribs. The breath flew out of him. "Three twenty-one," he gasped. "Card key's in my pocket."

Buzz Cut stuck out his foot and rolled him over. Snatched the card out of his pocket. "Take the girl," he ordered.

Lang could hear Gloria cursing behind that thick hand. There was a scuffle as they dragged her out.

Buzz Cut stepped hard on the back of his neck. "If it's not there, she's dead."

"It's there. Why would I lie?"

The door opened. The light flooded in. The door closed. It was dark.

Lang tried to get up, then stopped. In the silence the air screamed like a million sirens. Someone was in the room. A chair squeaked. Lang focused on a spot at the corner of the bed.

A foot appeared. He grabbed an ankle and pulled.

A shot cracked, the bullet crashing into the rug next to him. He twisted the ankle and raised it off the floor. He could feel the guy fall back and fight for balance. Lang pulled harder. The guy went down with a thud that shook the room.

Lang scrambled over a thick, squirming body. He found the gun hand and twisted the wrist. Grabbed a clump of hair. Slammed a face into the floor once . . . twice . . . three times. The gun came loose.

Gotta get Gloria.

The guy rolled over pinning him against the bed. Lang slammed him in the head with the gun, but the guy kept coming, arms and legs churning.

Gotta get outta here.

Lang pulled the trigger. The gun jumped, the acrid smell of cordite biting into his nose. The arm went limp.

Lang crawled over the body.

"Gloria!"

He opened the door and stumbled out, blinking in the harsh light.

"Freeze! Police officers."

The hallway was full of guns all pointed at him.

Cops. How did they get here?

"Turn around or you're dead."

People rushed by him into the room. Somebody yanked the gun out of his hand.

"Major Hartung, get in here," somebody yelled. "Donofrio's down."

"Sonofabitch!"

Buzz Cut came at him. Then he was falling. Eyes closed, clawing at the air. Falling, falling, wind roaring in his ears.

Calling . . .

Gloria . . .

"THE RUSSIAN IS ANGRY,"

the Voice said.

Major Cliff Hartung, Delta Force on temporary assignment to Special Ops Domestic wanted to throw that stupid red phone against the wall. It had been an impossible operation from the get-go and now he was going to take the heat for its failure.

"I don't know what happened, sir. Last I saw Lang was out cold on the floor."

"Well he got up, didn't he?" the Voice said. "The Russian is calling all over town. He's spoken to my bosses and to their bosses. He wants to know what happened."

"I put him down hard, sir. All Donofrio had to do was to shoot him."

"You should have had two men in the room."

"With two men it would have been tougher to justify killing him while he was unarmed."

"Easier than trying to resolve the problem now that he is alive," the Voice said. "You should have picked a better man."

"Donofrio was the only reliable person we could get."

The Voice snapped. "The Army is like baseball, Major. Three alibis and you're out."

"Sorry sir."

"Do you know who the Russian is?"

"Yes sir, I recruited him," Hartung said, but he knew that wouldn't stop the lecture.

"He's our connection to all the big oil brokers in Central Asia."

"Yes sir, I know that."

"He's our best source of information in that area."

"I know."

"He makes a lot of money for a lot of important people."

"Yes sir, I surmised that."

"A word from him can make or break both of our careers. Do you understand that, Major?"

"Yes sir."

"We promised we would take that individual out of his life."

"I know, sir."

"Do you have any ideas on how to proceed going forward?"

"Not yet."

"Well, get some."

"Yes sir."

"TAKE THE DEAL,"

Lang's lawyer said.

"But it's a cover-up."

"It doesn't matter. You shot a cop . . ."

"I didn't know he was a cop."

"It doesn't matter. He's in a wheelchair with a tube in his dick. You could get fifteen to twenty-five for attempted murder of a law enforcement officer, tack on another three to seven for burglary. But they're willing to give you seven to twelve for assault with a deadly weapon."

"You know why? Because they stole the painting."

"They say you stole the painting and hid it. It's the official version. Nobody's going to believe your story."

"What about this Major Hartung?"

"There was no cop named Hartung on the team that arrested you."

"I didn't say he was a cop. He was a major. Maybe State Police. Maybe Army."

"For chrissake, there was no Major Hartung, okay? You were delirious. You had just shot a cop . . ."

"I shot him because he was trying to kill me."

"You can't plead self-defense. You shot a decorated police officer in the performance of his duty."

"But they killed Gloria."

"No one at the hotel remembers a woman of Gloria Pavlich's description."

"It was the cops, don't you understand?"

"It doesn't matter, don't YOU understand? You're a degenerate criminal who stole a work of art and paralyzed a heroic public servant for life. Take the deal."

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