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MOVE TO STRIKE

PERRI

O'SHAUGHNESSY

BREACH OF PROMISE



"GRIPPING COURTROOM DRAMA . . .
HEART-STOPPING . . . RIVETING."

—BOOKLIST

BREACH OF PROMISE

PERRI O'SHAUGHNESSY



ISLAND BOOKS

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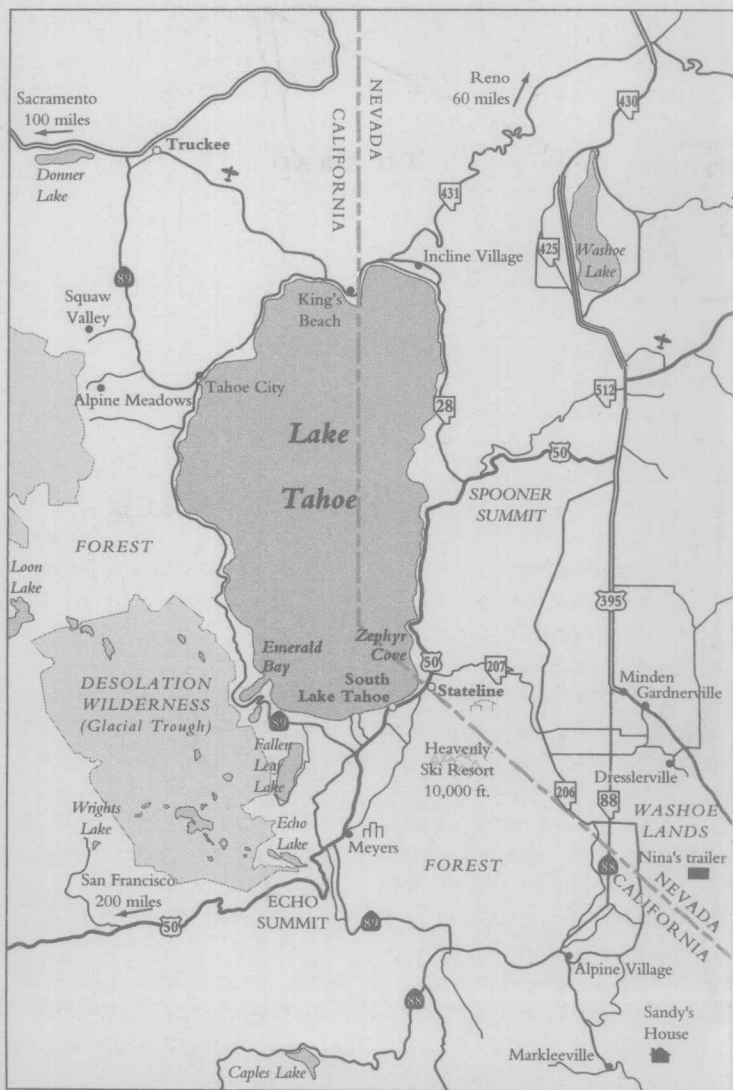
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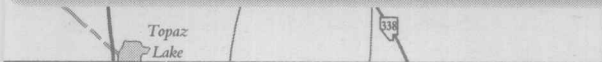
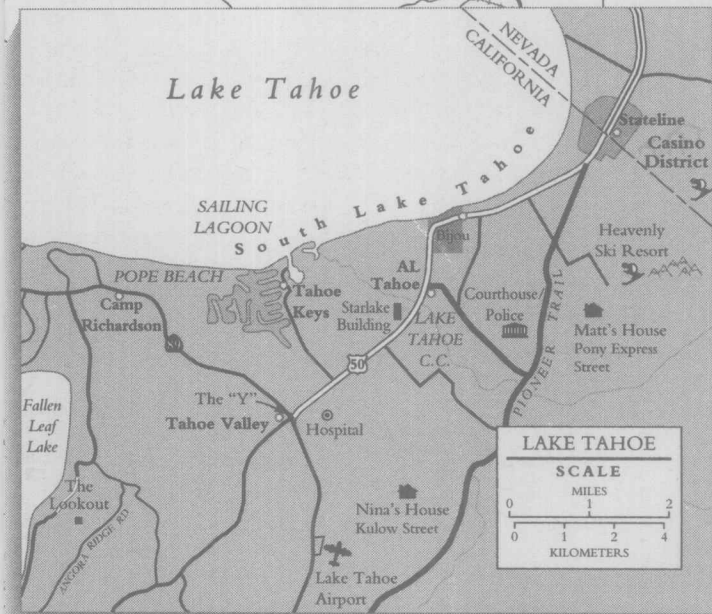
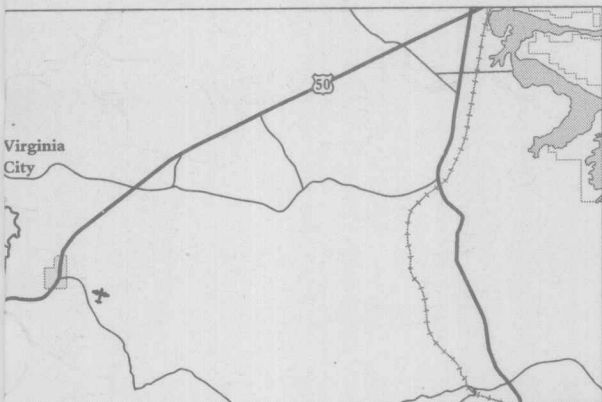
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TO BRAD





PROLOGUE

AT TEN YEARS OLD, OVER A BREAKFAST OF TEPID oatmeal, I read my first newspaper article, a story designed to grab you, a squib on page two, where they put the sensational stuff. My aunt ripped it out and thrust it in my face. A guy on his way home from the movies fought with a mugger, shot him dead, and died of stab wounds.

All for sixty dollars.

So two fools died for sixty bucks, and two fools killed for it. Sad, wasn't it? My aunt sure thought so. So did I. I knew one of the dead men.

There was a lesson in it for an impressionable ten-year-old, just like there is for you when you read the same story a couple of times a year. Look at that! you say. He's dead, and for what?

Sixty dollars!

Why, that's not even enough to buy a decent meal in a restaurant these days. Not enough to pay rent on a cardboard box. Not enough to die for!

That morning, while my aunt preached in the back-

ground, I read the story again and felt like someone in a tree house watching ants marching up the trunk. Young as I was, listening with half an ear to her interpretation, I realized the meaning of what had happened better than she did.

Now I understand it even better.

That mugger didn't take time to question the wisdom of his actions. He was too busy trying to quiet the nerve-wracking din of his body needing things. Like Billie Holiday once said, "You've got to have something to eat and a little love in your life before you can hold still for any damn body's sermon on how to behave."

Sixty was enough for him. Enough to feed him and the family for a couple of days. Enough for a fix. Enough to get somebody else off his back. Enough to make any risk worth it. Enough to strike out at another miserable soul and take his precious life away.

Now that I'm an adult, I see the brief struggle between two ants for a crumb even more clearly. And, like you, I'm everlastingly surprised at the meanness of people's aspirations. I wouldn't risk my life for sixty dollars; I've been sophisticated by my culture. Plus, I have what I need.

Unfortunately, there's a vast, arid wasteland between what I need and what I want. And I've discovered something else.

I have to have what I want.

Now, you're thinking you're above all that. Well, maybe so. But try something for me. Take a moment one dark night. Imagine yourself lying at the center of a mattress stuffed with big bills, how soft that would feel, how secure, how sensual, how gratifying . . . how pleasurable! How cosmopolitan to lie there on

money touched by so many hands, that has fallen from the sky to feather your nest at last. All of a sudden, you'd be the luckiest person alive. No more kissing ass for you! Get your own licked for a change.

Sounds like fun, doesn't it.

And indulge yourself in one more sick and twisted daydream. You can have all the money you ever wanted. You don't have to steal it. No, the money is yours for the taking if you'll do this one thing. . . .

You'd grab the chance. Of course you would.

But you wouldn't sell your soul cheap. You'd demand enough to quiet once and for all the silent roaring of your desires. Your number might not be the same as mine, but there is a number.

Admit it. You'd kill for it.

Just like me.

Better to ride in a limo than walk on a street these days. You never know who you'll meet out there. Maybe someone like my father, holding a knife tight in his fist, needing your money. Maybe someone like me. Deadly as I have to be.

Life's hard lessons. You want to be the one who walks away alive . . . and rich.

Rest in peace, Dad.

BOOK ONE PARTIES

*Now look here,
if you were really superior,
really superior,
you'd have money,
and you know it.*

—D. H. Lawrence

1

NINA REILLY OPENED THE WINDOW IN HER OFFICE in the Starlake Building on Highway 50. Warm air smelling of toast and dry grass drifted in to mingle with the brittle cool of air-conditioning. Outside, every shade of rust and gold shimmered in a hot October wind that rustled papers on her desk. In the distance, brightly colored sails waved against the blue backdrop of Lake Tahoe. She could sense a shift in the weather. The sultry air held a tang in it, like the end of something sweet, lemons in sugary tea.

Leaning through the opening to catch a ray of sunshine, Nina watched as a man and a woman in spotless white athletic shoes, plaid shirts tied around their waists, dropped hands so that the woman could stoop and gather some carrot-colored leaves from the ground. She held her little pieces of autumn like a bouquet, dancing a quick step or two in front of the man on the sidewalk. The man continued walking, apparently unwilling to play the game. Giving up, she resumed her place beside him, dropping her leaves one

by one as they went on, like Gretel casting off a trail of crumbs.

"Way to keep this place energy efficient," Sandy said, standing in the doorway to Nina's office, hands on her womanly hips. Today she wore a fringed blouse and a shiny silver concha belt that jingled like coins when she moved, khaki pants, and cowboy boots, which made her look like an over-the-hill rodeo rider. Sandy enjoyed dressing for the office but she would never look the part of a legal secretary.

Two years earlier, she had worked as a file clerk at Jeffrey Riesner's law firm, a couple of miles west on Highway 50. In spite of Riesner's dissatisfaction with her work, her character, her looks, and her air of superiority, Nina had hired her when she had begun her solo practice in South Lake Tahoe, one of her more astute moves.

Sandy knew everyone in town and had a titanic strength of purpose that co-opted or crushed everything in its path. A lawyer starting up a practice in a new place needed to get clued in fast, and Sandy had brought in the vital first clients, organized the office, and installed herself as Nina's keeper. Nina knew law. Sandy knew business, everyone's business.

"What a day," said Nina. "Not that you'd guess it in here."

"High eighties?" Sandy said. "One of the last warm ones this year. Too nice to be inside."

"That's right. Let's blow this joint. It's four-fifteen and I can't think anymore."

"Not yet. You have a call on line two." Sandy jiggled her eyebrows significantly.

"Who is it?"

"Lindy Markov's secretary."

"Do I know Lindy Markov?"

"If you don't, you should. She wants to invite you to a party Mrs. Markov is giving this weekend."

"What kind of party?"

"She does a lot of charity work and hosts a lot of community get-togethers. This particular shindig is a birthday party for her husband, Mike Markov."

Nina closed the window, turning back to her desk. "Tell her I'm busy, Sandy. Give her my regrets."

But Sandy, a Washoe Native American whose people had practiced stubborn resistance for hundreds of years, gave no sign that she had heard. "Lindy and Mike Markov are the biggest employers in Tahoe. They live up near Emerald Bay. This is a golden opportunity."

"Why? I'm too broke to be an asset to any worthy causes."

Sandy spoke again, her deep voice measured, reminding Nina of Henry Kissinger in his glory years pushing governments around. "And that's exactly what you should be thinking about. We're in business here. And we need more money coming in. You've been tapping into your personal account to pay the office rent, haven't you?"

What could she say? The omnipotent Sandy knew all.

"Maybe they need a lawyer," Sandy said.

"I don't like going to things like that alone," Nina said.

"Paul's coming up this weekend. He called while you were in court this afternoon."

"He's back from Washington? I thought he was going to be gone longer. Anyway, what's that got to do with . . . ?"

Sandy shrugged. "I happened to mention the party. He's up for it."

"I see," said Nina.

"He'll pick you up on Friday at six. Don't be late."

"And if I still say no?"

Sandy heaved a fulsome sigh, her belt jingling slightly with the strain. "Then I'll have to go for you. Someone has to network around here. If you want to pay the rent and the Whitaker bill and Lexis, the new computer, my raise . . ."

"Which raise would that be?"

"I'll be needing a slight raise if I'm going to have to party for you."

"Okay, Sandy. You win. Which line is she on?"

"No need for you to talk to her." She turned to leave. "I'll confirm that you're on the list."

"You already told her I was going?"

"I thought you might. After you had time to think about it."

"Wait. Where is this party?"

"On the lake," said Sandy. "They're chartering the *Dixie Queen*. Taking off from the Ski Run Marina."

Paul picked Nina up early that Friday, treating her to a hug that bordered on the obscene. "Three weeks," he said. "God, how I've missed squeezing your cute little bum." While the words were light, she felt his scrutiny. Three weeks was just long enough for them both to feel the distance.

A good eight inches over her five feet four, blond, and forty, with two licks of gray around his temples and two marriages behind him, Paul seemed to have been in her life forever. An ex-homicide detective, he had his own business as an investigator in Carmel. They

worked together sometimes. They also slept together sometimes.

She was derailed by other men, sometimes. Just a few months before, she had engaged in an intense flirtation with Collier Hallowell, the associate DA she had always respected. That had ended when Collier's personal hang-ups got in the way. So that left her and Paul, a lousy fit who grated on each other, sometimes.

But every once in a while, when they connected, they went deep down to a place that kept them coming back to each other.

As they drove to the marina, Paul quizzed her about her activities in the past few weeks. Nina talked about the house she and her son Bob had recently bought. "We're making it homey," she said. "It's just that none of us knows exactly what that means. I stockpile paper in every corner. Hitchcock has taken up residence in the ski closet and spreads kibble all over the kitchen floor. Bob rides his skateboard through the downstairs." When she turned the questions on Paul, he was uncharacteristically closemouthed. He couldn't tell her much about the Washington, D.C., job, he claimed. And what was there to say about staying in a hotel?

Paul wasn't teasing her. She sensed his preoccupation and wondered about it. Meanwhile, she could think of many things that might happen with him in a hotel and she spent at least part of the ride to the boat holding that thought, just enjoying his proximity and his big, comforting presence.

At the parking lot for the marina, not too far from Nina's office, Paul pulled his Dodge Ram van in tight beside a creamy-white Jaguar.

"This is something," Nina said, stepping down into a parking lot crammed full of gleaming metal. "Oh,