Alternate scene from Breach of Promise

A dingy gloom of clouds blurred into the lake alongside the road back to the office. Nina didn't want bad weather bother her, but it always did, reminding her that the sun did not always shine. Tahoe often brooded. A feeling of violence loitered like wolves in a den under the verdant landscape. Sometimes, Nina would imagine the tumult that must have accompanied the creation of these rugged peaks, with its giant's bowl of water at its center, the noise of a hundred earthquakes, the thundering of wind and rain.

She spent most of the rainy drive back to the office from the Markov mansion having second thoughts. Hubris was not enough to get her through a case as large as this one, with as much at stake. Interestingly, she found herself not worrying so much about the money, as about the issue of right and wrong. Searching her conscience, she wasn't certain she knew her own position on Lindy's rights. Mike never intended to marry her, of that Nina was certain. Lindy lived by his terms, whether she accepted them in her heart or not. Did she really think that what they had was the same as a marriage? Was it?

"You took Lindy Markov's case," said Sandy the minute Nina walked in the door without even looking up from her desk.

"Yes, I did," Nina said.

"Why am I not surprised?"

"I'm surprised. You ought to be surprised."

Sandy shook her head. Her hair, smoothed down tight against her scalp today, and glossy as black satin, gleamed, as did a glint of what Nina thought might be the barest hint of pleasure in her eyes. "Ha," she said. "True to form."

"Maybe you're thinking that I'm taking on the entire male establishment single handed? Or you're concerned that I may not have a legal leg to stand on? That this is going to be a costly battle that I'll most likely lose? That I'll lose not only Lindy's case, but some precedents will be set, most likely to the detriment of women?"

"Glad to see you've thought this thing through," said Sandy.

"Whatever doubts I may have going in, this is exactly the kind of case my whole life and legal career have been geared toward. So we're going to do everything right. We're going to get the brightest minds. I'm taking this case to trial and I intend to win it the old-fashioned way."

"You'll be wanting help."

"Get me Winston Reynolds. Let's see how his time is over the next couple of months. He's handled dozens of Hollywood palimony cases."

Sandy held up a yellow pad and peered at it "I talked with his assistant this morning," she said. "He's looking for a case like this one and he takes every opportunity to get out of L. A. Also, and this is from my more confidential sources, he's in deep trouble with the I. R. S. He needs a major case, today."

“You called down there and talked with his assistant? Why?”

She set the pad down. “Top man in the field. Figured you’d want to lasso him before Mike Markov did.”

“Yes, what a good idea,” said Nina coolly. Sandy meddled and took too many liberties. She redecorated the office on a regular basis. She hired her son to do any odd jobs she decided needed to be done. She had known even before Nina that she wouldn’t be able to resist the Markov challenge. The question was, who assisted whom here anyway? “Lindy Markov read an article about a woman who analyzes the makeup of juries and runs a consulting business,” NIna went on, hiding her aggravation because she both admired Sandy’s gumption and tried to tread lightly around her unpredictable touchiness. And where would she be without Sandy? Sandy found her a good half of her business, including this case, if full credit were to be assigned. “The jury we choose is going to be crucial in a case like this. She’s adamant about hiring a jury consultant. I wonder if I can find that article. Seems like I may have cut it out. What that woman’s name?”

Sandy reached into a red folder on the right hand side of her desk. “Jennifer Suchat. She’s also available.”

“You called her?”

“Lindy Markov located the article with her name, so I checked it out.”

“Oh,” said Nina. “Great.”

“Not your thing, is it?”

“Hiring a jury consultant? No.”

“Never had much use for them before.”

“Never had the money to hire one before. But no, I’m a lone ranger. I like to decide what direction to take all by myself.”

“Just you and your loyal horse Trigger,” said Sandy. “That would be Paul, I hope.”

“I can foresee conflicts. But I’m willing to be open minded since our client insists, and she’s paying the bills. Now is there anything I’ve forgotten, just to get things rolling?”

“More space for your consultants. The office across the hall is empty. I made a deal with the landlord, starting whenever you need the offices. You’ll be giving him some legal help with an eviction. I’ll call about leasing some furniture when you know what you need and when you need it.”

“Sandy,” Nina said weakly, “Thank God you’re on my side.”

They heard a knock. “Come in,” said Sandy. “That’ll be your lunch. You skipped it yesterday.”

Nina paid the delivery boy, unwrapped a paper bundle and took a bite. “Good, a sandwich. I was getting sick of salads. But I guess you knew that.”

“Now, sit down. And try not to blow your stack.”

“You have news for me,” said Nina. “See, I too have the gift of prophecy.”

“Mike Markov hired a lawyer this morning.”

Nina could not resist her satisfaction at the words. By hiring an attorney, Mike Markov had openly declared his intention to duke it out in court. She had a case. She had money. She

had an adversary. She was sitting pretty. “Who is it?”

“Who else?”

“Oh, shit. Mike’t tell me...”

“Jeff the prick,” said Sandy, “who else?”

Nina finished her lunch and spent an hour dealing with some paperwork that had to be done immediately. When the phone buzzed, she picked it up without asking Sandy who it was.

“Winston Reynolds?” she said. “I’m Nina Reilly.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Then a voice as familiar as it was unfamiliar spoke. “Hello, Nina. I guess you were expecting someone else. It’s me. Kurt.” He sounded slightly tentative, unsure of his welcome with her.

Bob’s father. He had come back into their lives the summer before, and, after completely overturning the certainties of her life with her son, he had gone back to Germany. He and Bob had had a long visit together in San Francisco before he had left the country, and were corresponding regularly. Sometimes Bob would share a snippet of a letter with her, but most of what passed between him and his father remained private. They had a relationship outside of her, almost in spite of her.

Bob knew that as much as she wanted him to know his father, she found herself unable to be comfortable with letters. She had written only a few, feeling awkward and inarticulate, and Kurt had written back friendly, conversational letters that made her feel sorry she had tried. She couldn’t keep it up for long. She

needed to touch a man, to see him. Writing was not an intimate act for her. It was work.

"This is a good line," she said. "I assume you're calling from Wiesbaden?"

"Yes. I could be in the room with you."

She didn't know if that meant he wished he was or not.

"How are you?"

In a voice voice progressively warmer and more enthusiastic as he relaxed with her, he filled her in. As he had written to her, he now had a large apartment that had been vacated by a fellow American rather suddenly. He had a job at a park working with a local group of ecologists to reestablish native plants in an arboretum that had fallen into ruins. In the evenings, he played with a classical quartet. He was talking with an orchestra about another tour in the fall but in the meantime, his life was settled and secure.

His calm made her nervous. He had an agenda, she knew the signs. She didn't want to hear his agenda. He was a terrible complication in her life. Whether he intended to or not, his mere existence had upset the balance of her relationship with her son. Her son now had another parent, another authority in his life who would help to shape him. She had been stripped of a role that had seemed all-consuming, all-powerful, and all-important when Kurt came back.

When he left again, she had thought things would return to normal. But they hadn't. More and more, Bob talked about the

music Kurt loved, his lessons in German, how he missed Kurt. And more and more she resisted the suggestion that Kurt become a bigger part of their lives. For her, he was in the past, except as the father of her son. She owed him for Bob, and she had done her best to show her thankfulness. But now she was sorry to realize she wanted the thousands of miles between them to form an obstacle too great to overcome.

"That's great news, Kurt. I'm glad you're doing so well."

"Are you Nina?"

"Of course I am."

"Because you remember what you promised?"

She searched her mind and came up empty. "What was that?"

"You said once I was settled, Bob could visit."

Of course. Kurt wanted Bob. He wanted too much. He always did. "Bob's in school, Kurt. He's not a little boy anymore, you know. He can't just leave. Sorry."

"I know that Nina. I want him to come for the summer."

So the thudding of her heart that had begun when she heard his voice had a cause. Kurt was back again, stirring up trouble. She wished he had never come back. She wanted Bob hers again, only hers, without Kurt's interference. "Did Bob write to you that we've just moved into a new house?"

"Sounds like a wonderful place."

"We're just settling in. I was thinking in the summer about all the things we could do together. We need to do some repair work, painting. I was going to take some time off."

“Nina...”

“I’m afraid it’s impossible,” she said. “And Kurt, I’d be very grateful if you didn’t mention this to Bob. He’d be torn and I don’t want to make his life any harder than it is. Moving away from Matt and the kids has been tough. He’s lonely.”

“How much time can you take off? A week? I know how hard you work, and you know how much I admire you for it. But here he can come to work with me every day if he wants. It’s a terrific bunch of people of all ages. Once we have our plan laid, we’ll do the labor ourselves. We’ll be weeding and planting outside, and we’ll be building a greenhouse. He can really help us out. What we do is much more like play than work, and he won’t be lonely.” And then he said, “And, I apologize if I’m out of line but I already wrote to him about it. I didn’t want to have to talk to you about it unless it was something Bob wanted to do.”

So Bob knew and hadn’t told her. They were ganging up on her.

“You had no right to involve a twelve year old boy in a decision like this! Of course he’s going to want to visit you. But it’s not like you live around the block. You’re thousands of miles away, in another country. He’d have to travel alone. To be blunt, my answer is no.”

“We can get him a nonstop flight from San Francisco to Munich, where I’ll meet him. The airlines provide attendants and personal care for unaccompanied minors. I promise you, he would be safe. But Nina, all these things are easily managed. They

aren't important really. The important thing is, you don't want to let him grow up. You're not ready to give him any independence."

"That's not it."

"Then, you're afraid."

"Any mother would worry about sending a boy on his own to a foreign country!"

"To visit his father," Kurt said quietly. "He would not be on his own. Granted, I have very little experience with Bob, but together, we'll work things out. And what about what you said last time I saw you? I thought we had an agreement. I thought you wanted me to be part of his life.

"I do, Kurt."

"Don't try to shut me out of his life again, Nina. I won't stand for it."

"No fear. Bob wouldn't either."

"Well, we're at a stalemate, because I won't take no for an answer. I want you to take a few weeks to think this over before making a final decision. You made me a promise. I expect you to keep it."

She hung up the phone, buzzed Sandy and told her to hold any and all calls, including any from Winston Reynolds or Jennifer Suchat. She needed a few minutes to remuster the high-powered, confident type they had a right to expect. Sandy objected forcefully. For once, Nina prevailed.

Letters were one thing. Bob had been happier since getting

to know his father, but sending him flying across the world, an attractive fantasy when Kurt had first proposed it, held an unacceptable element of risk, even danger, in her mind. It wasn't that she didn't trust Kurt...

Dissatisfied with herself, mad at Kurt for forcing her to make a decision that was bound to make her unpopular with her son, she mulled the hash she'd made of her life. Things had been easier when Bob had no father. Certainly, her life had been easier. After an hour laboring through files without thinking, she faced the fact that she could not work. In addition to everything else, Kurt and his unreasonable hopes had ruined her day.

She had canceled a meeting with a client, so she found herself drumming the table and chewing her expensive new fingernails. Grabbing her coat, she left with a brief word for Sandy, umbrella in hand, to walk the muddy paths down to the lake behind her office. She ought to take a few minutes a day outside of her office every day. What was the point of living in such a supremely beautiful place if she spent all her time cloistered beneath dropped ceilings and sheet rock walls ignoring the beckoning of flowers and freshly tipped pines? Paul was right. Life was too short...

And what about Paul and the problems buried beneath the fun and games? Lost in her thoughts, she stomped into a puddle so deep she got wet up to her ankles. Ice cold water slipped between the cracks in her shoes and her feet began a rhythmic squishing as

she walked and thought and got nowhere.

And then, out of the blue, on feet fleet as an antelope's, appeared Sandy, her long braid flying out behind her, her solemn cheeks ruddy, the heaviness of her body impressive and graceful as a redwood in a storm. She pulled up beside an astonished Nina, took a deep breath and said, "Better get back. We've got trouble."

"Winston Reynolds? I understand you've been contacted by Mike Markov's attorney." Nina had lied to break through the phalanx of secretarial obstruction Reynolds hid behind, claiming that she was a former client, a movie star, and telling the third young girl she spoke with, "I've done so well with the settlement he got me a couple of years ago, I 'm seriously considering a huge bonus for Winston, just to show my appreciation." A thin story that would never have fooled Sandy, it had just enough potential to worry a staff member with strict orders to let money talk.

"Who is this?" the gruff voice of Winston Reynolds asked.

"I'm Nina Reilly, a Tahoe attorney representing Lindy Markov, who will be suing Mike Markov in, for want of a better term, a palimony lawsuit."

"I see. Lady, you've been messing with my new secretary. She's confused enough."

"I apologize for that but I had to talk to you. Have you got an agreement worked out with Mr. Markov or his attorney, Jeffrey Riesner?"

"Not yet. They're shooting out feelers."

"Don't you usually represent plaintiffs in these actions?"

"Sure do."

"So how can you consider Mike Markov? I mean, he's being sued by this unfortunate woman. You have a reputation as a defender of the underdog."

"I do a lot of work for the overlords, too, Ms. Reilly. I get less publicity for that kind of work, and a lot more money. All depends on the case."

"I don't know what you've heard about this lawsuit, but I'd like to shoot a feeler at you, too."

"Always an enticing way for a female to get my attention."

Oh, my, thought Nina. With that kind of talk, he'd fit right in with Iron Jeff's gang. "Is it possible I can get you to hold off on making a decision until we get a chance to talk in person?"

"Ms. Reilly, I'm in L. A. Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you five hundred miles away?"

"Just an hour's plane ride away," Nina promised.

"I got to warn you. Riesner's quite persuasive."

"Are you talking legally or financially, Mr. Reynolds?"

"Call me Win," he said. "And the simple answer to that is, both."

"What time in the morning can I see you?"

"My days are booked. But I'm free tonight."

How could she possibly do this?

“Nine o’clock sound okay?”

“Nine is perfection. I tend to work late.”

“At your office?”

“Certainly not. You’ll be taking me to Masa’s. I’ll have my secretary make the arrangements and meet you there.”

“I’ll call the airline,” Sandy said when Nina stepped into the reception area, mouth open and ready to issue orders. “You won’t be able to get a flight from Tahoe. They’re repairing the airstrip after winter’s snow. How quick can you make Sacramento?”

“It’s a hundred miles. Give me three hours.”

“You’ve got two and a half. It’s a ticketless flight,” Sandy said, nodding. “You can walk right on the plane.”

“What’s on my calendar tomorrow? I don’t have court, or have I forgotten something?”

“No court. I’ll shuffle your appointments.”

“I hate to fly.”

“How much do you need this guy?”

“Without him, I’m dead.”

“See you Friday,” said Sandy, pointedly neglecting to remind Nina that she wouldn’t have to make the trip if she’d been paying attention to business.

Nina raced to the school to wrest Bob from a street hockey game he was playing with friends on the slushy asphalt field. He didn’t want to leave, and sulked through the ride home, glaring at her when she said he’d be sleeping at Matt and Andrea’s that night

without knowing for sure it was true. “There’s no place quiet to do my homework there,” he said. “Troy’s got way less than me and then him and Bree play around. And I don’t even have a desk there. I’m old enough to stay home alone. C’mon, Mom.”

“No, you’re not,” said Nina automatically. “And I know this is really a dumb thing to do to you on a week night. But I’ll make it up to you on the weekend.”

“How?” Bob asked as she pulled up to their house.

“How about a bike ride around the Baldwin mansion and Pope House?”

“What day? I’ve got a science project.”

“Sunday afternoon. Without fail. Try to finish your project on Saturday.”

“Mom, please. Don’t make promises you can’t keep. What are the chances?”

“Cynic,” she said. “But you’re right. It’s not a promise. I’ll just do my best. Don’t I always?”

Her son relented then, and in a rare moment of unselfconsciousness, let her hold his hand up the steep driveway to their house. Throwing her most expensive new powder blue suit and matching heels into a suit bag, she helped Bob stuff his backpack and books, called Andrea, and got her brother Matt instead.

“Matt, I’m embarrassed to ask you this, but I’m in a bind,” she said, without preamble.

“Hi,” said Matt. “And how are you, dear sister?”

“In a rush. Sorry.”

“What’s up?”

“I need a favor,” asked Nina, “just like I always seem to need a favor from you guys.”

“You don’t have to sound so guilty.”

She did feel guilty. She had never fully expressed her deep gratitude for all that Andrea and Matt had done for her and Bob when they arrived in Tahoe, friendless and practically destitute. They had given the best thing anyone could, a home for the single mom and the bewildered little boy.

“I wouldn’t ask except it’s the best place for Bob. I need to go out of town on business tonight.”

“You know, when you say you wouldn’t ask, you make me feel bad. In spite of everything that’s gone down, Nina, we’re a family. Please don’t make us out to be the exploited lackeys of your fiefdom. It’s patronizing. If we don’t want to do something, we will let you know, I promise. And you need to promise that you’ll continue to ask, anytime, for anything, okay?”

Relief swept over her in such an emotional rush, she found her eyes heavy and wet. Her estrangement from her brother had been a drag on her spirit. “Oh, Matt, of course. It’s just that...since we moved out...”

“We’ve all had some time to adjust to that, haven’t we? Time to get a move on.”

“Can I make dinner for you on Sunday night? Can’t I do something for you?”

He actually laughed. “And eat at midnight like we did last time you cooked for us? Ha! Anyway, Andrea’s planning some kind of celebratory feast. Hope you and Bob can join us. And to answer the second part of your question, yes, there may be something you can do for us.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll talk to you about it Sunday. It can wait.”

“Can I drop him at four?”

“Tell him it’s tacos, tonight. He likes tacos.”

For twenty-five bucks extra, a steal, she upgraded her ticket to first class, lounging back in the leather seat, staring out the window at the lights of California’s capital city twinkling below like a bejeweled Indian spread. The moment the plane left the ground, the flight attendant got out the free booze. Nina drank quickly in order to fit in the the stiff gin and tonic she felt she deserved after living through that afternoon and speeding the hundred miles to Sacramento, until her Bronco had choked and sputtered with fatigue.

She felt relaxed, very relaxed, when she disembarked at LAX, one of the first to get off the plane. Then she had to go back, pushing past the exiting gush of her eager fellow passengers, to get the bag she forgot. After a short conversation with the car rental agent, who told her there would be a slight delay, she grabbed a large caffeinated cola at a bar masquerading as restaurant. Taking a stool next to the black windows overlooking

the airstrips, as she sipped she watched lonesome looking business travelers nuzzle their drinks like old friends, and observed as a dozen planes took off and landed without crashing, marveling at the survival of all the fragile little packages of flesh, bones and guts crammed inside, holding on for dear life. She stopped at the restroom to change, removing her official travel clothing of soft stretch leggings and a sweater and exchanging them for the snug fitting suit, stockings, and shoes she had brought. At the mirror, she fluffed out her long brown hair, and liberally applied makeup to her face, including dark red lipstick. When in the Southland, she would do as the Southlanders do. Anyway, once in awhile she enjoyed saying hello in the mirror to this petite, glamorously lacquered stranger with the luscious red lips.

Standing in line at the rental car agency and studying the maze of freeways and streets she needed to memorize if she was going to arrive only fashionably late, she felt the last of the gin buzz fade away. That was good. She knew better than to show up on a California freeway with fewer than all her faculties.

The car, a radiant blue Neon with turquoise trim, was low to the ground and zippy as a sportscar. She joined in with the million other cars flowing through these arteries into the night, another bright speck in L. A.'s life blood. By her calculation, she avoided death twice before pulling in front of the restaurant and handing her keys to the parking valet.

The maitre d' was expecting her. He led her past the regular restaurant, where silverware and glasses clinked and people talked

in muted tones, where sounds and colors were as discreet and perfectly mixed as Hollywood effects, into a private room.

A black man at least a foot taller than her stood up, holding out a hand that looked as big as her head.

"Nina," he said, drawing her to him for a bear hug. "Good to see you." He held tightly to Nina, who, ensnared close enough to his chest to hear the loud drum of his heart, was too astounded to resist. Smothered and disturbed by the scent of spice and starch emanating from his brilliant white shirt, she shoved him away while he sent the maitre d' off with a tip and a wink.

As soon as the man was out of sight, Reynolds stepped quickly back from her, studied her expression, and laughed. "You're deciding whether to pop me, aren't you? Well, hold off until next time. It's just a little game I play. I've got a reputation to uphold." He pulled a chair out for her. She took her seat. "With luck, we'll make the gossip columns tomorrow. Good for business. Now if you'd hauled off and smacked me, it would be a sure bet."

Nina wondered how much of it was good for his business and how much was good for his ego. "I guess hello would be an anticlimax," said Nina. "But I will say you invite me to pop you one at your peril. So far, I don't like your game."

"Fair enough. You don't have to play," he said, not bothering to conceal his amusement.

"It's a lovely restaurant," said Nina, trying to assume a more comfortable stance. She had come a long way to talk with

this man, not to rise to his bait, so by God, she would talk.

"It is, isn't it? Too expensive for me ordinarily, so this is a real treat. Please thank your generous client for me." He had already ordered champagne. He poured her a glass, studying her openly, approval stamped all over his face. "Let me say right now how much I appreciate you flying down here just to take me out to dinner tonight." He took a sip of his wine, sighing with pleasure. "Ardent with desire. Would that be a fair characterization? My mama would get a kick out of a woman like you wooing a man like me."

"Mr. Reynolds..."

"Win, I said. Win."

"Win..."

"Before you say anything more, let me just tell you how stunning you look in that blue. Now there are people that would say brown hair and eyes are better set off by autumn colors, but I disagree. Contrast is beautiful. Red and green. Yellow and purple." He paused and drank again. "Black and white."

A waiter silently arrived before she could respond to this latest provocation, and they ordered. The restaurant featured fresh fish of every kind including what Nina suspected they used to call dolphin on menus but now called shark. Nina wanted shrimp but it was a messy food, so she ordered veal, figuring she wanted to concentrate her attention on Reynolds, not on whether she was dripping sauce all over her best suit. Win went for duck.

"Don't flatter me, Mr. R...Win. It's not necessary. I wish

I believed a nice restaurant meal with me would be enough to succeed with you tonight. I'm guessing it'll take much more than that. But you're right, I need you. I know my position. What I'm here for is to find out what yours is."

He leaned back in his chair swirling his wine in the glass, and, looking into its red depths, gave it a half smile.

"Let me tell you a little about what we've got," Nina went on when he didn't say anything. She knew the technique: give them enough rope... "I'm a sole practitioner with limited resources. I have a client that has what amounts to unlimited resources. We both want the best people to help me on this case, with the best experience and the best minds. And we're willing to pay whatever's necessary."

"From what I understand, your client is in no position to make those kinds of promises."

"There's some money available up front. In addition to an inheritance, she's got some trusts she may be able to tap into. And much, much more at the other end."

"If you win."

"We will. We have a strong case. Lindy Markov lived with Mike Markov as his wife. She worked alongside him for over twenty years, building a business from scratch."

"I understand everything is in his name."

"That's true. He put everything in his name and she agreed to that, because she thought they had a deal for life, to share everything equally."

He laughed a little. “So she says.”

“He’s introduced her as his wife. She says she has witnesses to oral contracts they’ve made over the years. She may even be able to dig up some letters he wrote early in the relationship that she says will back up her claim that they had an understanding, equal ownership in everything they built or accumulated during the relationship.” In spite of the low profile he was keeping, she could see he was tantalized by the way his ears pricked up at the news. Attorneys always loved the right things in writing.

She continued. “Everyone tells me you’re a very bright guy. Shrewd is the word most people use about you. The top attorney in this field. You’re also a savvy businessman.”

“Those are kind words,” he said, “thank you. You flatter me. You’ve probably guessed, I like being flattered, even when it is necessary.”

He was mocking her. She refused to be waylaid. “If Lindy Markov wins, she’s prepared to help set you on your way to being a rich man.” Lindy had taken little persuading. She seemed to have no sense about money, except that she needed it. Apparently, astute in business did not translate to astute in life. Mike had handled the personal bills. And at this point, with the poorhouse looming in her dreams, she had no qualms about pledging windfalls to consultants.

“I doubt Jeff Riesner’s ever seen an offer as generous,” Nina said, “much less passed one on to an associate. I’ve sketched out

the details of an agreement I'll send along to your office, if you're prepared to consider our offer. Oh, and there's another thing. Mike Markov's in a hurry. I expect this thing to go fast and furious."

He nodded. "Once in awhile, fast and furious is good, real good."

"Mr. Reynolds," Nina said, throwing up her hands in despair. "Is this too dull for you? Because I get the feeling you're not really listening. And if you can't take me seriously, we can't do business."

"Ms. Reilly," he said, "I'm hanging on every word. You're offering me the chance to stay up at Lake Tahoe, which I love, for an extended period of time, and to take a gamble on big money, which involves another weakness of mine. And your client's position in this palimony claim sounds better by the minute. It's a fact that Markov can well afford to divide his assets with a woman that worked for twenty years to help him achieve his heart's desire, and it may also be a fact that half of those assets are hers by rights. I had my doubts about Riesner and Markov to tell you the truth. I'm not sure I like or trust either one of them. You, I like, so, I apologize if I've given the wrong impression. It's a bad habit that comes of keeping people off-balance as a matter of course. I come in peace." He raised a glass.

She took a deep breath to rid herself of the anger that was slowly diminishing as he spoke, raised her glass to his, and clinked.

“Now,” he said, turning eyes as sweet as chocolate milk on her, “let’s do business.”

By the time the food came, they had finished the champagne and hammered out the beginnings of a deal. He ordered another bottle. He talked about his background, his athletic scholarship to UCLA, the shock of his teachers and coaches when he walked away from it and immersed himself in academics, his full scholarship to Yale Law School. Nina gave him as little as she could. She had gone to a small law school in Monterey, had a son, and was divorced, she told him, simplifying away the complexities. She liked the way with new people she could begin with a relatively clean slate.

“No man in the picture?” he asked, as the waiter brought the coffee. Leaning across the table, he put his hand on cream pitcher at the same moment she did; she couldn’t tell if it was intentional but from what she knew of him so far, everything was. He left his hand on hers for a long second, long enough for her to notice the velvety skin and heat of his body, then removed it. Then he sat back and watched with satisfaction as her hands betrayed her, trembling over her coffee, responsive as Pavlov’s dogs.

“I’m surprised a woman like you is not married.”

A woman like her. A woman alone and lonely, who missed having sex with a man. So much for coming off as the consummate professional. This was all Paul’s fault.

She counterattacked, but it was a weak thrust, and she knew

it. “You’re not married at the moment, either.” She knew of at least two ex-wives. “What’s the difference?”

“All work and no play,” he said. “Haven’t you noticed that about me yet?” He was laughing.

All play and no work described him better so far.