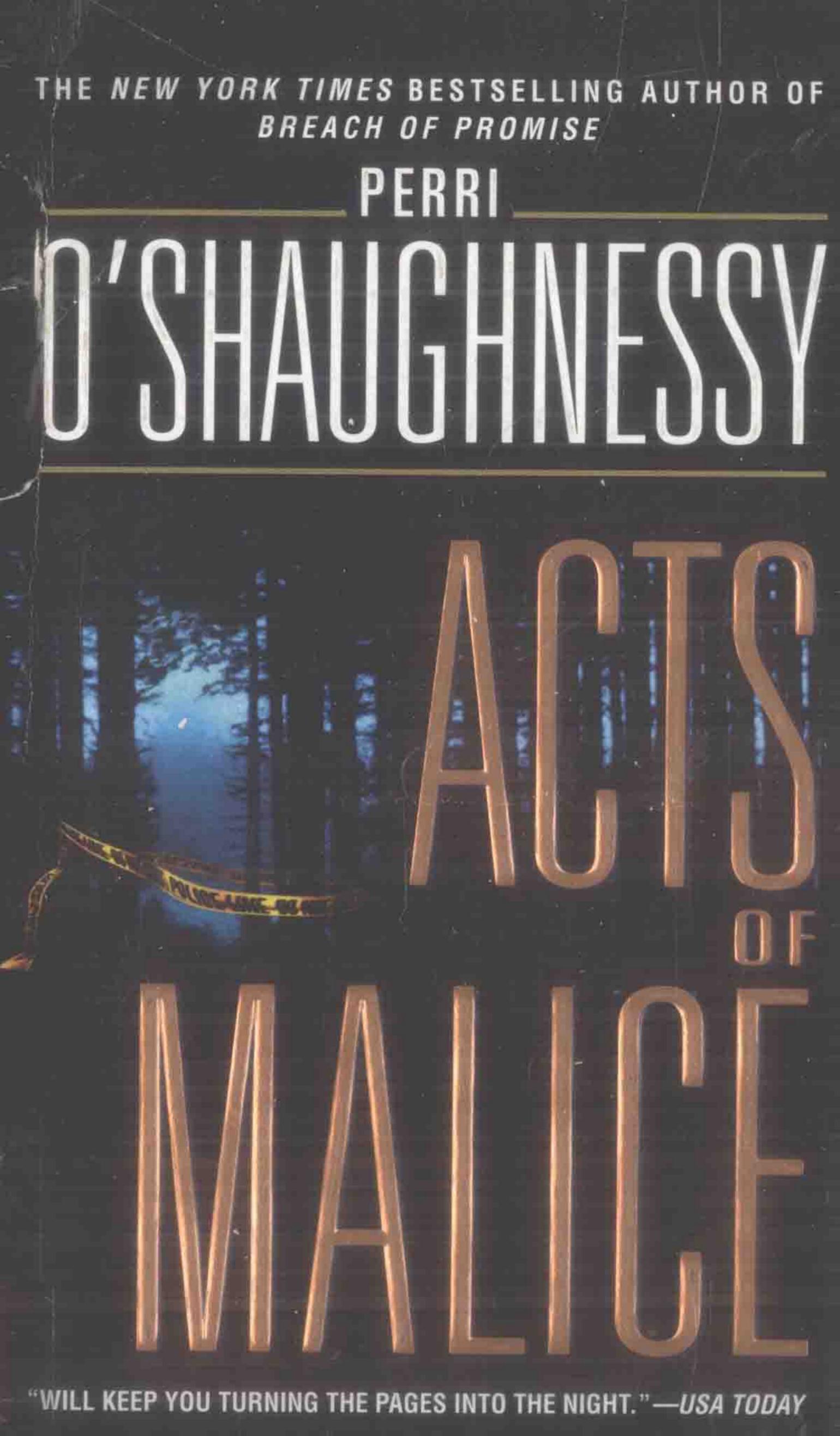


THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
BREACH OF PROMISE

PERRI

O'SHAUGHNESSY



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OF
MALICE

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ACTS OF MALICE

PERRI
O'SHAUGHNESSY



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*Dedicated to the memory of Kathleen Miller O'Shaughnessy
and to the Miller family*

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(*Excerpts from* THE STATE BAR OF CALIFORNIA
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PROLOGUE

PRETENDING HE WAS still asleep, he felt his wife crawl out of bed.

Outside, he could hear birds. That meant last night's snowfall had stopped. He wondered if the sun had finally blasted through the layer of clouds that had cursed the sky the past several days.

Jim Strong didn't move, didn't even open his eyes. He followed the sounds as Heidi got ready in the bathroom, the ritual of every morning: splash water on her face, brush her teeth, search her face in the mirror until it was all back in place, her past, her present, her secrets.

She sprayed her hair and ran her fingers through it over and over. She squeezed sun block onto her hands and rubbed it on her pale skin. Every sound, so placid, so falsely suggestive of domestic peace, aroused a fresh wave of anger in him. She had no right to be so sure of anything. Not after what she had done.

He controlled his breathing as she came softly into the dim bedroom and paused at the foot of the bed. He felt her eyes landing on him, and stopping to prowl over his face. Then she turned away. He watched through slitted eyes as she slipped the long T-shirt off over her head, her long white back with the bumpy spine, the

tight calves, and delicate feet that she was inserting quietly and carefully into her tights.

She was so very beautiful. After three years, he loved her more than ever. She had seemed so blunt, so honest, like he was, forceful, an athlete with her own code of honor.

He had always thought, if she ever cheats on me I'll—but now that she had, he didn't want to hurt her. He just wanted her to turn back toward him, where she belonged.

The ski bibs slid like satin over her body. Balancing on one leg, she pulled on her raglan socks, then tiptoed out of the room, carrying her boots and parka.

He opened his eyes. He could hear better with his eyes open. Now she drank a glass of milk greedily, down to the last drop. Now she stuffed her keys into her fanny pack, and shut it with a zip. Now she bumped into the fish tank, and now . . .

She was leaving.

Out on the street, she scraped snow off the windshield. Then the cold motor turned and started up. She didn't wait as long as usual for it to warm up. Forcing it into action, she took off.

He threw off the covers and jumped out of bed. Pulling up the shade, he saw what the new storm had brought: sunshine in a searing white blaze, and at least two feet of new snow, feathery and dry.

Was she going to meet her lover? He studied the heavily burdened trees, aware that for once in his life he didn't know what to do.

No matter. It would come to him.

At Paradise, both quad lifts were operating and the hill was jammed with skiers. Carrying his Rossignols

over his shoulder, Jim walked along the wall of the lodge and examined the rows of skis.

No sign of Heidi's K2s. He would know, since he'd watched her a hundred nights waxing them and fiddling with the bindings, getting them perfect. He went into the lodge restaurant.

"Seen Heidi?" he said to the day hostess, who looked like Heidi, but was chunky and plainer. Gina something, her name was. He had let her know when she was hired that part of the job was to help him keep tabs on the rest of the family.

"No, sir." That was good. He liked respect. He was the boss. "I think she was in about half an hour ago. She couldn't wait to get out on the powder."

"Who was she with?"

"Um, nobody. Your father's already in the back office, Mr. Strong."

"Okay." He didn't want to see his father right now. "My brother show up?"

"Alex and Marianne just left," the girl went on. "They were arguing. I think they separated."

"The gang's all here," Jim said. He chucked her under the chin. He knew she didn't like that, which made him enjoy the gesture even more. He was angry at her for looking like Heidi.

"Gangbuster day," she said with a bright phony smile, and went back to work.

Pulling on his goggles to cut the glare, Jim trudged outside. He wondered where Heidi might be skiing. Off-trail somewhere, probably. Maybe somewhere with Marianne. She was probably filling Heidi's head with ideas about leaving him.

On the other hand, it was Marianne who had warned him to watch Heidi in the first place, good

advice, as it turned out. He had watched and watched until Heidi screamed at him to stop spying. Then he had told her he knew.

With that half-defiant, half-scared look he was beginning to know so well, she had admitted it. She had said she was thinking of leaving him. She had told him who it was, cutting him off at the knees.

The sun burned into his face. He leaned against the outer wall of the lodge and slathered on sunscreen.

He could just ski, forget about her, and get in a few runs. From the top he could see most of the trails, though if she was off-trail in the trees he would never find her.

He decided to cruise down some of the black-diamond runs. Give her time to meet her lover, if she had the nerve. He would catch up to her sooner or later, and then . . . something would happen.

He skied all morning on the expert runs. The powder was so sensational he even forgot her now and then, although the anger in him still burned like hot lead in his stomach.

He had never been in such virgin powder. Once he came across Marianne snowboarding along the Ogre Trail, her black hair flying over red bibs. He flew by her, lifting one pole in a salute, but he doubted Marianne had even seen him.

He saw no sign of Heidi. He missed her, wanted her by his side.

Later, at the lodge, he ate lunch. As he spooned thin vegetable soup into his mouth, the hostess told him she thought his father had gone for the day. She reported no sightings of Alex or Heidi.

After eating, he went out again. He was hunting.

The day had deepened into a mellow afternoon, still crystal clear on the slopes, warmer.

He fell through light and shadow on white crystals, weightless, swerving and turning and falling endlessly, then riding back up to do it all over again.

No sign of her. He had a brainstorm. Maybe she was skiing the Cliff. She had talked about it often, but he thought she had never followed through. Today, with the snow so tempting, the conditions so perfect . . . maybe.

He took the Bald Eagle run halfway to an opening in the forest and dodged into it, pushing up his goggles as he ducked in because of the dark that closed around him. The faint downhill trail they usually followed was buried under the snow, and he had to look sharp to avoid trees and gullies.

In a clearing on the side of the mountain, steep and wooded, expert territory, the trail opened up.

Heidi wasn't there, but Alex was sitting in the snow, fixing one of his bindings.

Jim skied straight across to him.

"What are you doing here?" Alex asked sourly.

"What's the matter? Did you break it?"

"I don't like the fit on one of them. I spent an hour working on this fucking binding this morning and it still doesn't fit. I mean, I can ski, but I really hoped for what I paid I could get it so tight my foot would be screaming."

"Sit there." Jim planted his poles and herringboned over to Alex.

"Watch yourself. It's a long slide and the Cliff is dead ahead," Alex said. He stretched his leg out so Jim could have a look. The ski stuck straight up into the air.

"I remember." Jim took Alex's boot. "I can't fix it

with you sitting there. Get your lazy ass up and stand on it. What did you do to your eye?" He helped Alex up and gave him time to kick out a level platform and stand on the ski.

"Gene Malavoy came up to me in the parking lot last night and laid into me. I don't even know what it was about. I fought him off and he ran. Know anything about it?"

"I fired him yesterday. Can't imagine why he'd go after you, though."

"Fired him? What did you do that for?"

"Let's talk about it later. Step out of the binding now. Seen Heidi?" Jim pulled a glove off with his teeth and got to work on the ice-encrusted binding.

"She's off duty today, isn't she?"

"Yeah. She's up here somewhere."

"Maybe she's with Marianne."

"I saw Marianne. On the Ogre. Alone."

"Marianne likes that trail."

"You doing the Cliff?" Jim said.

"I'm doing the side of the Cliff," Alex said.

"Pretty extreme run."

Alex looked at him sideways, on the alert for a challenge. He was three years younger. He had never been able to keep up with Jim. "It's only for people with a death wish," he said. "We did it. Remember? I was, what? Thirteen? And you were sixteen."

"Yeah, but we were crazy then. I still don't know how you made it. Only thirteen years old. Jesus, Alex. You skied like a sonofabitch back then." He slapped an open buckle shut on Alex's boot, and noted a slight wince as the boot tightened over his ankle.

"You don't think I can still do it?" Alex asked.

"I never said that," said Jim, getting up, watching it