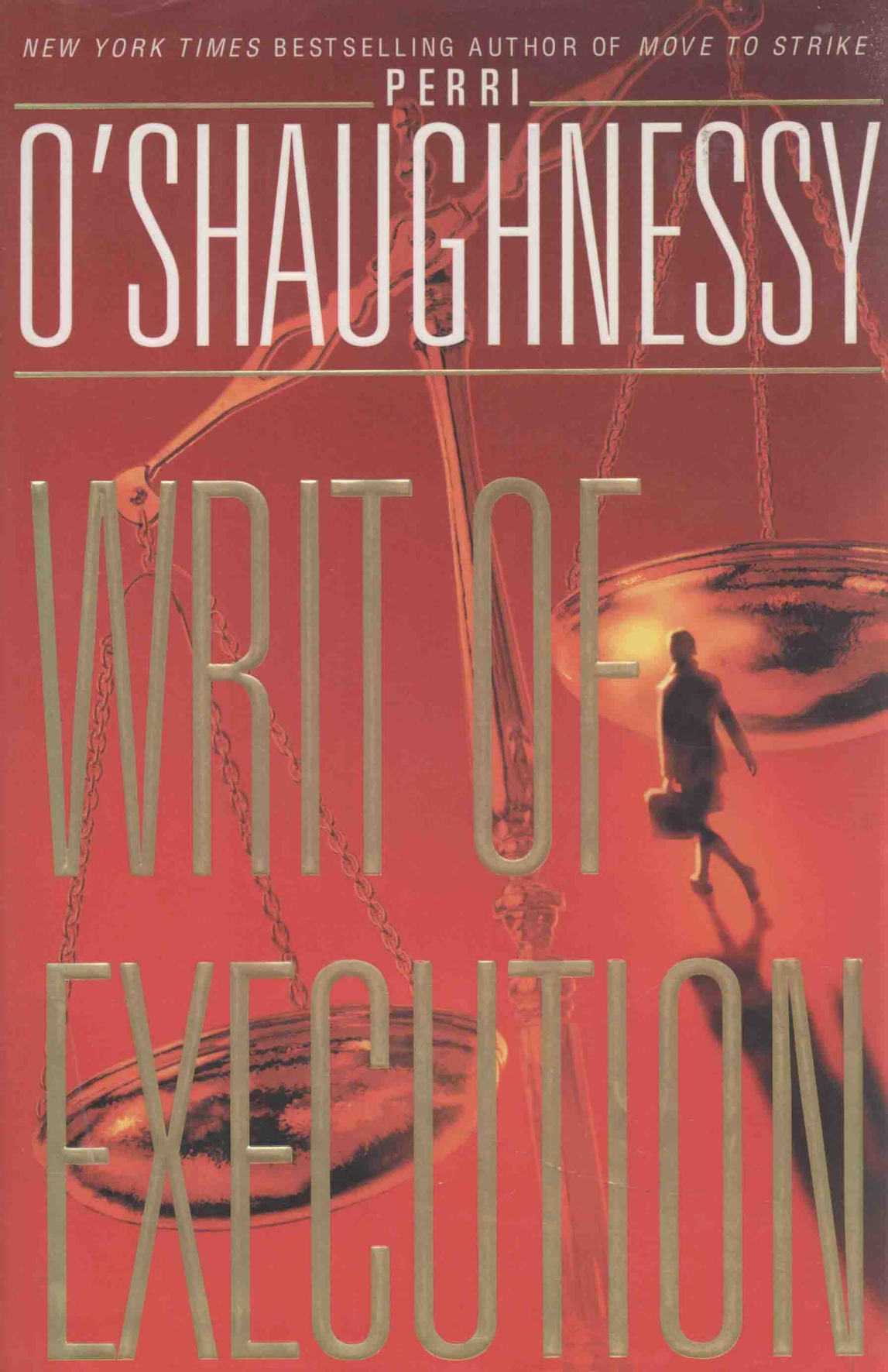


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *MOVE TO STRIKE*

PERRI

O'SHAUGHNESSY

WRIT OF
EXECUTION



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D E L A C O R T E P R E S S

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DEDICATION

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It's a strange thing, I haven't won yet, but I feel and think
like a rich man and can't imagine being anything else.

Dostoyevsky, *The Gambler*

Yet the ear distinctly tells,
In the jangling,
And the wrangling,
How the danger sinks and swells,
By the sinking or the swelling in the anger of the bells—
Of the bells—
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells—
In the clamor and the clanging of the bells!

Edgar Allan Poe, "The Bells"

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WRIT OF EXECUTION

1

KENNY DUMPED THE LEASED BLACK Lexus in the parking lot at Prize's Lake Tahoe casino at precisely ten P.M. on July fifteenth. Sunday night, Milky Way spilling over the black mountain ridge in a sixty-degree arc, no sleep for thirty hours.

He had driven into the Sierra from Silicon Valley, festering in hundred-degree heat, without stopping. At an altitude of over six thousand feet, South Lake Tahoe had a different microclimate, much cooler and drier. He could see the ghostly reflections of old snow pockets on the mountains looming over the casino district. As he climbed out of the car, stuffing his pockets with the few things he intended to take with him, he began to shiver.

Pulling nonessentials from his wallet and leaving them on the seat, he slid the worthless credit cards and the two thousand in cash into the pocket of his black silk sport coat.

He opened the glove compartment. The Glock gleamed in there.

He pushed his specs up on his nose and stashed the gun in the inner pocket of his jacket. Money and a gun. So all-American.

Prize's would be his last stop. This had not been his original intention, but a decision had hardened in his mind as he drove up to the mountains. That morning, before his courage fled, he thought, I will tell them, and then I will spend the rest of my life making it up to them. I will be a kitchen boy. I will hire myself out

for road construction. Anything. Somehow I will save them from what I did.

But as he drove alongside the surging American River, the idea of going to his parents with the news of his colossal failure began to seem pointless. He couldn't save them, and he didn't have the guts to face them.

They would find out soon enough.

The Five Happinesses restaurant would be sold first. He had worked at his family's Tahoe restaurant from the time he was eight years old, chopping vegetables and packing rice into small porcelain bowls, doing his homework in the back room with the Taiwanese news on the TV.

Then the frame house where his mother swept the porch each morning before going to the restaurant to cook, where he and his brother and sister had grown up, would have to go. He had ruined them all with his—his overconfidence! his cockiness! The big visionary with the big ideas! If only he had died at birth and saved his parents the misery of his life. His brother, Tan-Mo, stoic, solid, and destined for all the traditional successes, was in his second year at Stanford Med. Now Kenny had destroyed his life, too.

"I saved for thirty years, Tan-Kwo," Kenny's father had told him, using his Chinese name. "All consolidated. Savings, pension money, a loan against the restaurant fixtures." He had waved the check at Kenny while his mother watched, eyes watery, face perspiring above a boiling pot at the restaurant. Colleen, younger than her brothers by several years, had clicked away on her Nikon. "One, two, three, smile," she said. It was his parents' twenty-ninth anniversary.

Mr. Know-It-All, Mr. Brilliant Future, a shit-eating grin on his face, held out one hand for the check, shaking his father's hand with the other, a moment immortalized on Kodak paper in a steamy haze of bright colors that would never fade.

Four hundred fifty-seven thousand dollars. Years of hot summer days spent sweltering in the kitchen at the Five Happinesses, years of

holidays skipped, luxuries scrimped, and birthdays ignored. He had taken away their past and their future. He had squandered it all.

"Your father believes in you, Tan-Kwo. I know how much that means to you. But . . . what is this thing? This cityofgolddotcom?" his mother had asked him later that night.

"Just the City of Gold, Mom. The dotcom is only an address." In a fever of excitement about the check, his mind darting like a cursor around a thousand new possibilities now open to him, he had tried to explain.

"Sounds like dreams," she said when he finished.

She was so right.

But he had been convinced the money would roll in. The City of Gold was the next step for the Net—the step into beauty and poetry, like putting modern art up in a concrete bunker to make it livable and gladden the spirit. He should have known. The techies who ran the Net were too used to the industrial, minimalist look. The City of Gold was too lush a paradigm, too lyrical . . . too beautiful. . . .

Yesterday, for the first time since that day in the restaurant kitchen with his family, he had awakened from his dream. There was no more money. The venture capitalists he approached on Sand Hill Road talked to their experts, who said he was overreaching. Eyes fixated on his Palm Pilot, Jerry Casper of Wildt Ventures had said, "It's not like it was, where all you had to do was stumble over a sprinkler in this neighborhood to get your funding. We need to see a definite path, a rapid advance toward profitability."

The City of Gold would attract lawsuits, Casper claimed. And besides, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs had the basic platforms sewed up for the next century. They were sexing up Windows and OS X, but the files and the drop downs would stay. And the rebel companies using Linux weren't going to risk good money for a radical paradigm shift that would have to be marketed intensely because it was so novel.

Kenny leaned his head back and looked up at the brightly lit

twenty-story hotel and casino. He could smell the tang of the deep mysterious lake somewhere out there in the darkness.

Like a man under water who finally gives in and floods his lungs, he took a deep, ragged breath and pushed open the glass door to the casino.

Inside, flashing lights, gleaming metal, a low roar of voices punctuated by short blasts of ringing, and a feeling of entering a different universe where there are no clocks and no one ever sleeps. Slot machines squatted in long rows, and tourists cruised up and down the aisles or sat on stools pushing buttons. He joined the flow of people, looking for a dollar slot machine. It was important to him to pick the right one. Three reels only, a classic. Dollars, because he knew that by putting three in at a time he would be broke within two hours and in the right frame of mind to use his credit card one last time to check into a room.

And then—finis!

He had a mathematical vision of bracketed sets folding inward from infinity down to a single point. Himself, no longer quantifiable.

The casino would clean up after him. Hotel rooms were popular places to die. Broke tourists did it up here on a regular basis. Even though the windows in the rooms probably didn't open wide enough to allow impetuous jumps, there were options everywhere—the terry cloth bathrobe belts, the glass from a broken coffeemaker. . . .

The Glock would be easy and fast. He would think of a way to minimize the splatter of the brains which were the cause of this entire intolerable situation.

Kenny passed a group of blackjack tables and the craps table, where a crowd had gathered around and the stickman was hooking the dice. He could lose it faster there, but he wanted two more hours to acclimate himself to the notion of death and to prepare himself for his ignoble end. Let a slot machine decide how close his estimate came.

Ah. He spotted a bank of dollar slots called the Greed Machines. He walked closer, observing their rhythms. The Greed Machines spoke to him. Win, lose, die—very simple.

The logos on the reels of the Greed Machine were gold bars and dollar signs and little brown banks. He found an empty seat between a girl in a wheelchair on the left end of the aisle and a white-haired man wearing a denim shirt whose skinny rear was planted firmly on his stool on the right. Kenny pulled out the stool and crowded in with them. He liked being wedged between two human beings. Utter strangers, they still comforted him with their bodies, their single-minded joint pursuit. Piglets and puppies rooting together at the mother's teats must feel that same primitive comfort. Udder strangers! It reminded him of nights long ago when he and his brother slept together in the same bed.

He cast sidelong glances at his neighbors, fixing them in his mind—her asthmatic breathing, the sour odor of house drinks he emitted. They were important people, among the last he would ever see.

He inserted a hundred-dollar bill into the slot and the credit window blinked back "100 credits." He jabbed the Play Max Credits button and the reels began to fly.

In two minutes he blew the first hundred without registering a single gold bar, much less a bank.

Another hundred-dollar bill. He pressed, watched the reels blur, and saw that he had lost. He pressed again. He fell into a rhythm of steady losing, broken now and again by a cherry which gave him back six credits or a set of mismatched bars which gave him fifteen. The trend was rapidly downward, about one hit per twelve to fourteen plays. He'd expected that. Prize's was reputed to have the tightest slots at Tahoe.

His company had lost money in a similarly jerky but inexorable fashion over the past nine months. Heady days, when he and his temps sent out prospectuses and brochures and labored over the GUI, morphed into jittery all-nighters, when he fed himself on the illusion that

all he had to do was work his hardest and success would come. He lived and breathed in the City of Gold those nights until, incoherent with exhaustion, he slept, a cool blue screen saver his night-light.

He was losing fast. He put in another hundred while he stepped up the self-flagellation. He was stalling. If he wasn't such a coward he'd go upstairs right now and . . .

He didn't. The Glock pressed against his chest under the jacket. The stifling casino air smelled as rank as his freezer back at the condo in Mountain View, and the place was hot, but he couldn't take off his jacket, so he sweated.

The girl next to him talked to her machine, coaxing it. She lost faster than he did, but never lost the hopeful upward curve of her lips. Three small silver rings looped through each ear. Her dark hair was pulled sternly back from a wide, pale forehead. Every few minutes a biker-type Kenny took to be her boyfriend arrived to pass her a few twenties. She paid him with bright eyes and a big smile, like, Isn't this grand? And he'd pat her hand and wander off again to wherever he had chosen to unload his share.

She seemed to be fine above the waist, nothing wrong with her arms or her neck, but the legs beneath a long cotton print skirt never moved. She couldn't ski or hike, but she could gamble and be part of something, until the money was gone, anyway.

She would have loved the City of Gold. Kenny's software had been made for her. She couldn't walk, but she could have flown.

At this thought, which reminded him of how much he loved the City of Gold, Kenny's throat closed up and his eyes got so watery he had to take off the gold-rimmed specs and rub them on his sleeve.

He couldn't live without the City of Gold to work on, to play with, to believe in. For three years he had built it, slaved over it like Ramses' architect, every moment since he had graduated from M.I.T.'s master's program in computer science. The City would never exist. He would never have a better idea, never again have the passion and strength he had put into the City.

"Having a good time?" the girl said to him.

"Uh."

She gave him a sympathetic look. "It's just for fun."

"Fun. Yeah."

The cocktail waitress came around again and gave Kenny his Budweiser. The girl in the wheelchair was such a nice girl, a quiet girl, with a friendly mouth that would never say the cruel things he deserved. He felt a sudden urgent desire to spill his guts to this girl who unwittingly represented all humanity to him at this moment, but she was at it again, eyes stapled to her machine, so he slurped down some of the Bud instead. No sense ruining her night.

He was on beer three, and while successive beers did not taste better, the alcohol tingled through his arms and legs. Because he gave her five dollars each time she appeared with a fresh glass, the waitress kept him sharp on her radar. She hovered nearby, off to the right, ready to dip toward him at a nod. He angled his peripheral vision to include her black stockings.

He had hoped drinking copious amounts would dull the fear that lanced his stomach every time he thought about what he was going to do, but it had the opposite effect. His senses became hyper-acute. Sounds shrilled. The fabric of his jacket scratched. The colored lights pierced his optic nerves. The alley of shiny machines he sat in resonated with deep meanings, alluring and significant, all heaven and hell present in its seated figures.

The guy with the white hair on his right hit something, not a big hit, but the light above his machine flashed and twirled. Three gold bars—thirty credits with three dollars in.

"All right!" Kenny said, desperate for distraction.

The man showed no sign of pleasure. He hadn't even looked at the Credits Won display. He was watching the numbers gyrate on the marquee above them as people in four states pumped dollar tokens into Greed Machines. Kenny saw that he had whipped out a notepad in which he wrote with a freckled hand. He tucked it back into his shirt, snarling, "What are you lookin' at?"

Kenny felt a stupid smile form. He tried to stop it, but he had the habit of being inoffensive. He turned away, back to the business of rocketing toward oblivion. The man would be as flat as he was soon enough. The odds of winning on a slot machine were ridiculously low, especially on a progressive.

Suicidal odds.

Time passed and Kenny's world compressed. He was immune to the seductions that had been built into the slot machine, the bright logos flashing by, the ringing on occasional hits. His whole body vibrated with a fierce, growing fright as he punched the button, watched the reels spin much too quickly, saw them slam to a stop on—nothing, over and over. He tried not to calculate the speed at which he was losing, the percentage of the return, but he had the calculation habit, and the numbers marched through his head.

He ignored his watch. The machine would let him live as long as his destiny allowed. Then, one moment soon, he would reach into his pocket and find it empty. It would be time to go upstairs.

He considered burial arrangements. He would leave a note with instructions. His father was a Presbyterian, his mother a Buddhist. Go with the Buddhists, he decided. Better chance post-mortem with them. No nonsense about hell, just another rebirth. Maybe he would come back as a roach. A large, insensitive, unkillable, hard-carapaced cockroach like the ones in his dorm in Cambridge, scuttling at midnight around his PC, ignorant that the warm machine was imagining a new universe . . .

At least he would not experience again the humiliation of being a Chinese-American whiz kid flunking out of Silicon Valley.

Yeah, go with the Buddhists. He already felt like a cockroach anyway.

Kenny gulped down another Bud and motioned to the waitress. He wasn't a good drinker. The room swirled slightly, but the lights and the numbers sharpened as the acuity of his vision steadily improved. His neighbor on the right was also drinking beer, playing mechanically, cheekbones jutting like Ping-Pong balls above the

long angular slope of jaw, big white flipper-fingers jabbing at the button. His eyelashes were colorless, as if they had been attacked by some toxic plant mold. When he won a small payout, instead of seeming pleased, he waited impatiently until he could push the button again. He was a character out of an Ingmar Bergman film, emaciated and driven.

The girl on Kenny's left drank bourbon and soda, laughing to herself as her bell jangled. Thirty credits! When she saw Kenny had noticed, she gave him a wink and a thumbs-up.

At least they all had a buzz on. He liked her attitude. Too bad he couldn't be like her, playing for fun, without a care in the world. . . .

The absurdity of that thought hit him hard. She couldn't walk. And then a bruising thump of fear brought him back to his own situation as he took out a bill and his hand registered the sinister thinness of his bankroll.

He was spending the last two thousand of his parents' life savings. His failure had to be absolute.

The biker boyfriend came back. The smiles back and forth were tentative now, a little ritualized. Like, we *are* having a good time, aren't we? This time he didn't seem to have any money to give the girl. They consulted, heads together, his goateed chin bent over her.

She nodded and pressed the cashout button, but nothing clanked into the bin. Her friend appeared much older than she was, from what Kenny could discern under the baseball cap, and had to be sweating in the zipped leather motorcycle jacket.

Kenny groped around in his pocket. He had two of the hundred-dollar bills left.

The biker got behind her wheelchair and started pushing the girl away, but he looked back one more time, toward Flipper-fingers, who had just hit bar bar bar, giving him two hundred thirty dollars' credit.

"I'll be watching you," he said to Flipper-fingers.