

THE
PERFECT
FAMILY

Robyn Harding



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Prologue

I STOOD ALONE in the street, watching the silent house turn down for the night. One by one, the lights blinked out, like stars dying in an inky sky. The upscale suburb was eerily quiet, no sound but my own breath. My own heartbeat. Still, I waited. And then I waited some more. The occupants had to be asleep. All of them. If someone heard me, if someone woke up, everything would be ruined. If I got caught, there would be serious consequences. Violence. Or even jail. But I wasn't going to get caught.

It was a beautiful house; anyone would say that. It was Craftsman style; they were everywhere in Portland. Older, two-story homes with covered front porches, chunky wood columns, big picture windows. This one had been renovated and updated. It wasn't huge or extravagant, but it was definitely expensive, and well maintained. The yard was manicured to perfection and you could probably eat off the paved driveway. Inside would be the same . . . an open floor plan with high-end furniture, valuable paintings, and designer knickknacks. All the shit that made a house appear elegant and refined.

But the people who lived there only looked perfect. They had

done horrible things. They kept horrible secrets. People like that made me sick. Fakes. Phonies. Pretending they were better than everyone else, when they were rotten inside. Now, they were stressed, panicked, falling apart. The thought made me smile.

Pulling my hood over my head and drawing the strings tight, I moved down the driveway. My sneakers were nearly silent on the pavement, but the red plastic jug banged against my leg, so I held it aloft. The scent of gasoline was already strong in my nostrils. Good thing I'd thought to wear gloves. The smell would linger on my hands and give me away.

I stepped onto the grass, cool and damp, and cut across the lawn to the side of the house. The camera over the door blinked at me, but I'd be nothing more than a dark blur on the screen. The family thought the surveillance would be a deterrent, but it wasn't. There was no way to identify me, no way to know who I was. Just another faceless figure lurking in the night.

At the side of the house, I squatted down, bouncing on my haunches. Adrenaline was coursing through me, my body vibrating with the need to enact my plan, but I forced myself to wait. And then I waited some more. To be safe. And to build up my courage. Because what I was about to do was serious. It could be fatal. But I couldn't back out now.

I don't know how long I crouched in the dark, but my knees were getting stiff and my right leg was starting to fall asleep. It was time. Bursting out of the shadows, I scurried to the decorative hedge that ran along the front of the house. Removing the lid from the gas can, I dumped the accelerant onto the shrubs, dousing the shiny green leaves with the toxic substance. A plant like this wouldn't burn easily, but the gas would erupt. It would burst

into flames, fire skittering across the foliage. There was a chance the porch railing could catch fire, that it could climb the wooden posts and ignite the second story. If the smoke alarms didn't work . . .

Well, the world would be a better place without people like the Adlers.

I lit the match. And let it drop.



SIX WEEKS EARLIER



Vivian Adler

(Viv)

I SAT CROSS-LEGGED in a pool of spring sunshine, my palms pressed together at heart-center. The morning light offered little warmth, but it bathed the bedroom in a flattering glow, and the color palette I'd chosen—muted blues and creams—created a seaside aura despite our suburban locale. My eyes were heavy, but not quite closed, as I breathed through my nose and took a conscious moment of gratitude. It was a *thing* I had been trying: starting each morning with a grateful heart. According to a podcast I'd recently listened to, being thankful was the key to health, happiness, and abundance.

Thomas was downstairs in the kitchen making coffee with his usual amount of banging and clatter. I tried to conjure some gratitude for my husband of twenty-two years, but that full feeling in my chest, that warmth and lightness, refused to materialize. I loved him, I did. He was an excellent provider, a great dad, and every morning, he got up and made coffee. But it's hard to be thankful for a man when he's cheating on you.

I had no proof, just a sick feeling in my gut. Thomas had been distant, distracted, and irritable of late. His job as a real estate

agent was always frenetic, he'd always kept odd hours. An affair would have been easy for him. But I'd trusted him . . . until now. We'd had rough patches before; what marriage hasn't? But even in our darkest moments, we'd always been a team, a unit. These days, we felt like two solo performers who'd left the band to go out on our own. He was George Michael. I was Andrew what's-his-name.

It could have been a midlife crisis; Thomas had turned forty-eight in February. Or perhaps something had happened at work. But another woman seemed the most logical explanation. My partner was attractive in a beefy, middle-aged sort of way. He had charm and style, a twinkle in his hazel eyes. I'd seen women flirt with him. Thomas had always acted oblivious, but maybe he wasn't? I exercised, ate salads, dyed away my grays. But we all know affairs are not about the spouse.

Sniffing his jackets for perfume and checking his collars for lipstick had provided no evidence. If I wanted proof, I'd have to search through his phone and his laptop. But he kept his devices close, protected by ever-changing passwords and facial ID. This was a relief, in a way. I wasn't ready to deal with the truth. I wasn't ready to blow apart my family. My entire life.

Abandoning my attempt to be grateful for my husband, I focused on my son, Eli, sleeping two doors down. He was home for the summer, had just finished his second year at the prestigious Worbey College. The sporty little boy with the green eyes and crooked smile was a man now, taller than his father, and the starting goalie for his college soccer team. But he was still my baby and I was grateful to have him home for four months. Or *longer*. . . . Eli had recently announced that he was dropping out

of school. Thomas was devastated. He had gone to a state college, couldn't afford to attend an esteemed school like Worbey. We'd made significant financial sacrifices for Eli's education, and now he was quitting. Thomas had blown up, had accused Eli of being ungrateful, of throwing his future—and our money—away. But our son held firm. He refused to explain his decision, simply saying, "I'm not going back."

I had insisted that we refine our approach: no more yelling, badgering, or interrogation. We would simply pretend that everything was normal, let Eli have time to process his issues. He had the whole summer to deal with whatever had upset him. And then, when he had, he'd realize that returning to school was his best option. The flicker of warmth elicited by thoughts of my adorable toddler was extinguished by our recent struggles.

There was no point in trying to summon gratitude for my seventeen-year-old daughter. Tarryn was going through the most unlovable of stages. She was sullen and condescending, seemed to consider her father and me (but mostly me) to be irrelevant, ignorant, tone-deaf boomers. (My explanation that we were, in fact, Generation X was met with an eye roll.) Tarryn still got good grades, she seemed to have friends, but my bubbly little girl had transformed into a surly, angry grouch.

But despite our struggles, we were the same family we'd always been. We were all healthy. We had a lovely home. And for that, I was—

"FUCK!"

It was Thomas. My heart jumped into my throat, constricting with dread. It's not as if my husband never swore, but he never swore at the top of his lungs at seven thirty in the morning. Some-

thing was very wrong. I scrambled up off the floor and ran down the stairs in my pajamas. The front door was wide open, and the living area appeared to be deserted. Peeking my head outside, I searched for my chagrined spouse. I folded my arms across my braless chest and stepped onto the porch.

“Thomas?” I called. But he was nowhere to be seen.

He rounded the corner then with the garden hose in his hand. His handsome face was darkened by a scowl.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

He looked up, scowl still in place. “Some goddamn kids threw eggs at the house last night. And at my car.”

That’s when I noticed the shattered white shells littering the driveway, the viscous goop already congealed on our plate glass window. Thomas’s BMW had been assaulted, too, shards of shell glued to the black paint.

“Why?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” he grumbled, screwing the hose onto the tap at the corner of the house. “Ask Tarryn. She might know what this is about.” He turned the water on and blasted the side of his car.

I retreated into the house, shutting the door behind me. Tarryn would be up soon. Perhaps our teenage daughter could shed some light on the assault. But Tarryn was seventeen, a junior in high school. Wasn’t throwing eggs a bit juvenile for her peer group? And she’d never had enemies before. She saved all her snarky comments for her family, seemed perfectly pleasant with her friends.

As I climbed back up the stairs, I felt fluttery and agitated. Logically, I knew this was not a big deal. Bored, unsupervised kids roamed the streets in search of mischief on a regular basis.

But this had happened at night. While we slept. The master bedroom was at the front of the house, so I would have heard the attack, had I not been in a deep sleep. What kind of parents let their children out after eleven on a school night? And why us? Our neighbors' houses appeared untouched.

Abandoning my attempt at gratitude, I stepped into the walk-in shower. I was meeting a client at nine, and I didn't want to be late. My interior decorating company was small but thriving, no longer a "hobby business"—unlike my client's vegan ice cream shop. Her hedge-fund-manager husband was backing the venture. It didn't matter that she was entering a saturated market, that ice cream was highly seasonal, or that her downtown location was not ideal. This wasn't about turning a profit. It was about creating something that was viable, that was *hers*. I understood that, and I was eager to help.

As I shaved under my arms, I reflected on my own business. It had never been funded by Thomas outright, but I still owed its success to him. I'd been working as a graphic designer (packaging mostly) when he asked me to help him stage his listed homes. I'd always had a flair for décor. And I loved sourcing furniture and unique treasures that would turn an empty or dated house into an inviting home. Word spread about my abilities, and other realtors hired me for staging. When buyers started employing me to decorate their recently purchased abodes, I quit the graphic design firm. My business was doing well, but we still relied on Thomas's income. I made a fraction of what he did.

Stepping out of the shower, I grabbed a towel off the heated rack. As I dried myself, I still felt jittery and my jaw was tense. It was an overreaction. The appropriate response to one's house

being egged was irritation, not this unnerving sense of vulnerability. I was being ridiculous. But I slipped into my robe and hurried to my bedroom.

My recent closet renovation filled me with instant gratitude. We'd knocked out the wall between the master suite and the small nursery next door. I'd had wardrobes installed allowing me to color-code my outfits. Angled racks held my shoes, cubbies displayed my purses, and shelves showed off my sweaters. In the center sat a small island with several drawers for lingerie, nightgowns, and jewelry. The project had gone way over budget—we were still paying it off—but the results were worth it.

Slipping inside, I shut the door on the sound of the hose running in the driveway. Thomas was still washing away the mess; I didn't need to worry about him interrupting me. I opened the third drawer of the center island and removed the mishmash of hosiery I kept in it. Then I lifted out the false bottom and set it aside. The secret compartment wasn't necessary in our safe Portland suburb, but it was the perfect place to keep my treasures: a bottle of deep-plum nail polish; one delicate hoop earring; a metal lighter; a corkscrew; and a small plastic bag filled with tiny blue pills.

I picked up the bag and looked at the pale-blue dots. I wasn't going to take any; I didn't even know what they were. But as I fingered my bounty, I felt myself relax.

The feeling of vulnerability slipped away. I was in control.