

A COMPLETELY GRIPPING PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE



THE ~~PERFECT~~ MARRIAGE



**HIS MISTRESS IS DEAD.
HIS WIFE IS HIS ONLY HOPE.**

JENEVA ROSE

THE PERFECT MARRIAGE

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*To Mom
My biggest supporter
My proudest fan
My favorite memory*

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PROLOGUE

Did he love her? He loved the way she looked at him—the way her bottom lip trembled and her foot quaked when she orgasmed. He loved the way her long chestnut locks fell in front of her doe eyes as she rode him and the way her slender back curved into a crescent moon when he thrust her from behind. Did he love her? He loved parts of her. But the question isn't whether or not he loved her. The question is... did he kill her?

SARAH MORGAN

“Not again.”

The disappointment in his voice fills the room and hangs there like a light fog, clouding us from one another. I take in a deep breath, removing the haze, and let it out just as quickly, clearing the path back between us. I don't need to look at him to know his eyes are disheartened and his lips are pressed firmly together. I don't blame him. I've disappointed Adam again. I run my hands over my golden blond hair taming any flyaways. It's wrapped tightly in a perfect bun. It's always wrapped tightly in a perfect bun. I slide a white blazer over an emerald-green blouse and straighten out my pencil skirt. My eyes meet his, locking us back into place.

“I'm sorry.” I tilt my head down, avoiding his gaze to lure him toward me. He takes the bait, walking to me, his six-foot-two stature towering over my petite body. He puts his hand to my cheek, lifts my chin, and kisses me softly on the lips. Every hair raises on my body. After ten years of marriage, Adam still does that for me. After ten years of marriage, I still do that for him—disappoint, I mean.

“We were supposed to leave for the lake house yesterday. You said you'd be able to today.”

I break our embrace and begin packing up my briefcase, my sense of responsibility outweighing my levels of sentiment. “I know, I know. It's just I have so much work to do and a huge closing statement to prepare for.”

Adam walks to the door frame of our master bedroom and leans against it. He folds his arms in front of his chest. There's nothing more that I want at this moment than to be wrapped up in his arms rather than wrapped up in a messy court case, but there are some things even I can't

control.

“You always have so much work to do. There’s always a big case you’re working on.” He narrows his eyes at me playfully but in a somewhat accusing way, as if I were now on trial.

“Someone has to pay the bills.” I give a small smile. That lands. He shakes his head so slightly I almost don’t notice it, but I need to acknowledge it. I place my hands on his shoulders. He pretends he won’t lean down to meet my lips, but I know he will. He can’t resist me, just like I can’t resist him.

He smiles, but his game of tug-of-war only lasts a few seconds before his body bends toward me. Our lips meet again—this time more passionate. This time our mouths spread, our tongues swirl, his hands run up and down my back. I consider calling it all off at that moment. I’ll quit the firm. We’ll sell this house, and we’ll move to our lake house in Virginia, just the two of us running hand in hand into our own fairy tale.

But reality sets back in.

“I have to go,” I whisper into his ear as I pull away. I’m always the first to pull away. Someday, we’ll be everything I always knew we would be but someday isn’t today.

“But it’s our tenth anniversary tomorrow.” He frowns. He still has the boyish charm I fell in love with, and it would be annoying if I weren’t also smitten by it.

“I’m going to try to make it there tomorrow.” I take a step back from him, surveying his disappointed face, the damage I’ve done.

He lets out a huff. “After ten years, you’d think I’d be used to you doing this... but I’m not.” Adam rubs his chin as if he’s contemplating what he’ll say next. “I’m just really fed up with it, Sarah.” He lowers his head and shakes it.

I close the space between us and bury my face into his chest. “I’m sorry. I know I’ve disappointed you. But regardless, after this case is over, I’m taking a week off work. I’ve already talked to Kent.” I look up at him with doe eyes, hoping he’ll be happy with this news.

He lets on a small smile. “Is this a real promise or a Sarah promise?”

I lightly pat his chest. “Oh, stop.”

He grabs my hands and pulls me in for another kiss. “I’ll stop when you stop.” He smirks. I kiss him again.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” From the closet I pull out a small wrapped box and present my gift to him. “I got you something.”

He looks at it and then at me. “You shouldn’t have,” he says taking the perfectly wrapped present. We had agreed after our fifth anniversary, we

weren't going to do gifts anymore, but I couldn't help myself. I know I've been neglectful, but this was my small way of making it up to him. He pauses for a moment and then carefully unwraps the gift. He lifts the box open unveiling a Patek Philippe grand complication watch with alligator band and a gold face. His mouth drops open.

"I've been looking at this watch for years... but this, this is too much," he protests while admiring the intricacies and design of the watch face.

"No, it's not—it's ten years of marriage." I pull the watch out. "Look at the engraving."

He flips it over and on the back is engraved, *5,256,000*.

Adam looks to me. "What's that?"

"That's how many minutes are in ten years." I plant a light kiss on his lips.

"You counted?"

"I'm always counting." I laugh as I help him put the watch on.

He holds out his wrist admiring it. "Is this so I can keep track of every time you're late or stand me up?" he teases. I roll my eyes at him.

"I'm kidding."

"No, you're not." I tilt my head. I know he's not kidding.

He lowers his arm and returns his attention to me, placing his hands on my shoulders, running them down my arms. "You're right, but I love you anyway, Sarah." He kisses me hard.

After untangling ourselves from a passionate kiss, we make our way down to the kitchen, a large and modern space with stainless-steel appliances, cream-colored cupboards, and granite countertops. I set my briefcase on the island and rummage through the fridge for fruit and water. I take some sliced pineapple and a glass bottle of San Pellegrino, which should tide me over until I send my assistant on a lunch run.

Adam pours two cups of coffee and places one beside my black Bottega briefcase. He removes the used coffee filter from the machine and walks to the garbage, pressing his foot on the pedal to open the lid. Just as he is about to discard the refuse into the can, a brief glittering of silver catches his eye.

"What's this?" Adam reaches down into the trash, pulling out the source of the luminescence. A torn envelope with a card inside.

"Your mom sent us an anniversary card," I reply without looking up from my phone.

"And you just... threw it away?" He crumples up his face.

"I read it. Acknowledged it. Digested it. What more do you want me to do with it?"

He pulls the card out of the ripped open envelope, and reads it aloud, “I can’t believe you lasted ten years! Happy Anniversary, my darling Adam and Sarah. P.S. Where are my grandchildren? Love, Mom.”

He smiles and walks to the fridge. “That was nice of her.” He begins searching through drawers for a magnet to secure his prize to the front of our stainless-steel fridge. I roll my eyes as I watch him add a piece of garbage to the refrigerator.

“What are you going to do today?” I change the subject. I’m just going to let this one go, and by this one, I mean his mother. I pick up the cup of coffee and bring it to my lips. It burns, but a good type of burn, like the small fires we sometimes need in our lives to remind us that we are alive.

“Well, now that I have nothing but time on my hands...” he says with a chuckle while looking at his new watch. I let out a small, polite laugh for his terrible joke. “I’ll probably head up to the lake house and get some writing done. Daniel needs more pages before he can pitch the book.”

I nod and take another sip. “The last ones you sent were wonderful. Your agent is going to love them. Make sure you send me your newest ones.”

“Do you mean that?” He skeptically raises an eyebrow.

“I mean everything I say... especially, about you.” I wink.

He sets his cup of coffee down and closes the distance between us, standing behind me with each hand on the countertop. He nuzzles and kisses my neck while pressing his pelvis into my butt. I giggle like a schoolgirl.

“Come tomorrow. Just for the day.”

“I’m going to try, even if I can just spend a few hours with you.”

“Do more than try. We’ve had the lake house for over a year, and you haven’t spent more than a night up there.”

“I said I’ll try.” I take another sip of my coffee.

He groans into my neck. “Please.”

“I’ll do everything in my power to be there tomorrow, and you and I can finally christen that lake house.” I playfully back into him. He pulls me in tight and kisses my neck.

“Now that is a plan I can get behind.” Adam turns me around to face him and runs his hands all over my body.

“Thank you for being patient with me.” I raise my chin so our eyes can meet, giving him my most bashful puppy-dog eyes to convey as much sincerity as I mean to express with my words. His eyes lock with mine.

“I’d wait a lifetime for you and then some.” He kisses my forehead, the tip of my nose, and then my lips. “Or at least another 5,256,000

minutes...” He smirks. “Now, hurry to work so you can hurry to me.” He playfully pats my butt as if I was running into a football game.

I pick up my bag and start toward the door. I tell him I love him.

“Love you more,” he says.

ADAM MORGAN

My fingers tap against the keyboard a few more times just as the sun is leaving its final stretch of light on this side of the world for the day. A breeze rustles the trees, shaking them of their fall-colored leaves, while laps of lake water gently lick the shore. I save the work I've done for the day and close my laptop—three thousand words will have to do. I toss my black-rimmed reading glasses onto the desk and run my hands through my ash-brown hair, pushing it off my forehead. I rub my temples a bit to alleviate a lingering tension headache and let out a deep sigh. As I stretch my arms out and roll my neck, a black squirrel darting across the yard catches my eye. It's not as if I haven't seen a black squirrel before, but it's a rare sight, and demands to be watched and noticed. I stare out of the large window behind my desk as the creature bounces from place to place, searching for food, complete in its sense of purpose and direction.

The lake house is an hour away from our home outside D.C. and it might as well be on a new planet. It's a verdant land that our forefathers would actually recognize, unlike the concrete and horn-blasted monstrosity that plays the part of our nation's capital. The house is far enough from the city to ensure no unexpected visitors but close enough for me to travel to whenever I need to be alone—or not alone, for that matter.

A secluded cabin on Lake Manassas surrounded by woods in Prince William County, Virginia, was just what my writing career needed, or at least that's how I sold the idea to Sarah. I had struggled to get the words out up until just over a year ago when we purchased this second home. It opened another world for me, a world in which I could write, a world full of obtainable desires, a world I could live in without feeling the constant pressure that I wasn't good enough. The natural beauty of the environment around me could be reflected into my work, and in this world I felt reborn.

Hardwood features so heavily in the make-up of our lake house that it feels like you've climbed inside a tree, rather than a human dwelling. The wide-open living area has large bay windows overlooking the lake and a massive fireplace adorned with various colored stones. A huge bearskin rug completes the sitting area and serves as a central point that separates it from the kitchen.

Forest-green marbled granite covers both the kitchen island and the countertops, and above and below are pine cabinets that have been stained to a rich almost caramel colored wood. Just off the sitting area, less than ten feet from the fireplace, over by the bay windows, sits my desk. This allows me the perfect view of all that nature has to offer in this neck of the woods and gives me the freedom of not feeling trapped in some small office.

It didn't take much to convince Sarah that we should purchase this home away from home. I think she could sense that I was drifting away—mentally, emotionally... or maybe she just wanted to show me that she could buy it. To remind me, once again, of her fiscal hold over me, wielding it as a show of power. Whatever the reason may be, I still got the house, so who fucking cares.

It was supposed to be our home away from home but turns out it's just my home. I've lost count of the number of times Sarah promised she'd come with me for a weekend but later canceled. This weekend was no exception, even on our tenth anniversary. I had hoped she'd make it down just for the day, but she phoned earlier telling me she had to go into the office once again. She also told me she loved me. She always tells me she loves me. I hold my wrist out, admiring my new watch. It's beyond expensive. Despite the cost, it was still a thoughtful gift. That's Sarah for you. She is thoughtful, even if she's never around.

I've always felt like Sarah was taking on the world, while I was just struggling to live in it. That's the woman she wanted to be, a powerhouse, a one-woman show where I just happen to be cast as an extra. It wasn't always like that. We met while I was in my third year of undergrad at Duke and she in her first. She was studying political science, while I was studying literature. Back then, we both dreamed of greatness. Sarah wanted to be a successful lawyer, and I wanted to go down as one of the truly great writers of our generation. Fifteen years later, one of us is still waiting.

Well, I suppose success flickered for me, for a moment, and went away just as quickly, and has yet to come back again. That's the funny thing about dreams. You always eventually wake up from them. My first book

was a success, not from a mainstream or commercial standpoint, but from a literary perspective. One critic even called me, “The next David Foster Wallace,” which I liked. The book has a nice cult following to this day, and I thought I’d duplicate that success, but books two and three have flopped by all standards, literary included. I’m surprised my agent has kept me on, and I’m sure if the book I’m working on isn’t a success, I’ll be getting the ax soon enough.

I’ve tasted a small sampling of triumph, but I haven’t exactly lived out my dreams. Sarah’s dream was to be a criminal defense attorney, one of the best. She’s not one of the best: she is the best—like I always knew she would be. I just never thought I’d resent her so much for it.

But like I said, it wasn’t always like this, and when I say this, I mean me running off to our second home any chance I get and her practically taking up residency at her office. After all, you don’t become the best criminal defense attorney by loving your husband.

One would think that living in solitude and wallowing in my own self-pity would make me one of the great writers, like a modern-day Thoreau or Hemingway. But to date I have all the alcohol usage of Hemingway, just none of the success to go along with it.

Sarah has her work, and I have mine, and there was a time when we had each other, but that time has passed.

We had met at a party, a complete stroke of luck as it was out of the norm for Sarah to attend one, she would go on to tell me later that night. She’d much rather have her face in a book than be surrounded by sticky, hormonal bodies in a basement of a college house—but there she was, standing in a corner, casually sipping cheap beer out of a Solo cup, looking more out of place than a nun in a brothel. She held a partial smile trying to mask her discomfort, but her body language gave her uneasiness away. She was leaning against a wall, one leg crossed over the other, the Solo cup hovering near her lips, glancing around the party, one arm crossed over her chest tucked underneath her other arm. She was trying to make herself as small as possible, blending into the background, going unnoticed. But to me, she was the only person in that room.

Her shoulder-length blond hair was practically glowing under the black lights, a staple of any college party in the mid-2000s. Her green eyes that were speckled with flakes of yellow held all the mystery in the world. Her slender body was covered in a form-fitting white tee and flared blue jeans. An inch of her midriff was peeking out, and I couldn’t keep my eyes off it. A sliver of her exposed, milky-white skin aroused me more than my ex’s fully nude body had. I watched her. I studied her. Before I had ever uttered

a word to her, I had memorized every curve, every line, and every freckle that I was privy to in that dingy basement. I pictured what she looked like underneath her clothes, and I would later find out that what I had envisioned was wrong. Her body exceeded the limitations of my own imagination. She was perfect, something I could neither conceive, nor comprehend.

It wasn't until an hour later when her eyes finally caught mine that I worked up the courage to go and talk to her. I towered over her petite body, but right from the beginning she always felt bigger than me, and I knew as soon as she realized it, she would be an unstoppable force.

At first, she was a little standoffish, giving one-word answers. I asked her name. She told me it was Sarah. I asked her who she was here with. She pointed to an inebriated, brunette grinding on a guy on the dance floor. I asked her if she wanted to dance. She said no. I told her she was beautiful. She shrugged her shoulders. I told her my name was Adam. She took a sip of her beer. I asked her what she was studying. She tapped her beer signaling she needed a refill and started to walk away. I grabbed her cup and poured my full cup of beer into hers. She smiled up at me taking the cup back and returning to her position against the wall.

“Smooth,” she said as she took a sip.

I leaned against the wall next to her, and we stood in silence for what seemed like hours. Right from the beginning with Sarah—it always felt like forever. She casually sipped her beer, while she scanned the party and kept an eye on her drunk friend. I pretended to study the room with her, but my only focus was on her. At minute nineteen, Sarah's friend told her she was leaving with the guy she had been grinding on all night. Her words slurred, her eyes glazed over, and her hair fell in front of her face as she held on to the hand of the man she would soon spread herself apart for. Sarah didn't seem pleased, but she told her to have a good time and to call her in the morning. It was the most I had heard her speak all night. Sarah remained composed, casually sipping her beer.

At minute twenty, she finished her drink and dropped the cup onto the dirty basement floor, kicking it into a corner. She stood there a little longer, her eyes bouncing around the party and then to the side at me. She shifted a little uneasily, and I wasn't sure if she was moving toward me or away from me.

At minute twenty-one, I decided to find out, and I asked her if she wanted to get out of here. She said yes. When I got her safely back to her dorm room, I expected to give her a kiss on the cheek and tell her goodnight. Sarah didn't seem like the kind of girl to give into her

impulses. As I went in for a small peck on her cheek, she pulled me inside, ripped off my clothes, and she puffed and gasped breaths of yes for the rest of that night.

Three years later, I asked her to marry me, and she said yes again. And although she has said yes to me countless times since then, I think that was the last time she truly meant it. If she hadn't been consumed with law school and then practicing law, I think we would have been—

The breeze sucks the front door closed with a slam. It startles me for just a split second, but I know it's her. Without even seeing her, I know her freckles are prominent from a day working the outside patio at the café. I know her brown doe eyes are lit up—filled with hope and joy. I know her long tousled hair sits underneath a hat she knitted herself earlier this fall. I know when she pulls that hat off, she'll still look effortlessly beautiful, messy hair and all. I know she'll be braless, wearing a form-fitting top and a dark thigh-length skirt. I know the waist of her shirt will be creased from where her apron sat all day. I know she'll smile when she sees me, and it'll take me less than sixty seconds to be inside her.

“Babe, I brought leftover baked goods from the café,” she calls from the foyer.

I hear her wrestle her shoes, knee-length socks, and jacket off. I pull two glasses from the wet bar. I pour scotch into each glass, and just as she enters I have one drink outreached to her. With a little bounce in her step, she takes the glass from me, chugs it, and sets it back down on the wet bar. The heat from the stone fireplace warms her skin, and I notice the goosebumps on her arms flatten.

Before I can take a second sip, she's unbuttoning and unzipping my pants. She drops to her knees and looks up at me with a devilish grin.



I drop her legs on the bed and walk into the bathroom, closing the door behind me.

I can still hear her panting from the other side of the door, trying to regain control of her own breathing. She doesn't make a sound, and I assume she's still lying there. I hope it's in ecstasy and not pain. Sometimes, I take things too far—it's like I black out and when I come to, I realize the error of my ways. I can't help myself. Kelly just does that to me. When I'm with her, my animal instincts take over.

Sarah used to do that to me. But now around her, I'm barely a man let

alone anything else.

At the vanity I look at myself in the mirror. A five-o'clock shadow has taken over my face, and my hair is out of place. My otherwise blue eyes are clouded with red. I can only stand looking at myself for a few seconds before I must look away. I'm not ashamed of who I am, but I'm not proud either. I splash some water on my face and then onto my chest, abs, and dick. I'm too tired to shower. I pat myself dry with a towel.

"Babe?" Kelly yells from the other room.

"Yeah, hon?" I answer as I start brushing my teeth.

"Your wife texted you."

I spit the toothpaste into the sink and rinse my mouth out, wiping my lips with my hand. Back in the bedroom, the lights are on now, and Kelly is sitting in bed, wearing a nightgown, while holding my phone. She smiles up at me.

"What did she say?" I slide a pair of Ralph Lauren pajama pants on.

"She wants to know what you're doing."

I take a seat on the bed next to her, pushing her long brown hair back. I gently kiss her neck and shoulder.

"Tell her I'm about to fuck the girl of my dreams again," I whisper. Kelly laughs and begins texting back.

"Your wish is my command." She giggles. I swipe the phone from her playfully and get out of bed. I quickly text back.

Since you couldn't make it to me, I'm coming back tonight to see you. No need to wait up. Love you.

Before I can set the phone down, Sarah texts back.

I love you too. I got a chance to read the new pages you sent over lunch, and they're incredible. I'm so proud of you XOXO.

I smile for a brief second, before a wave of guilt spans over me. I let out a sigh.

You're the best, babe. Let me take you out for dinner tomorrow night. Say yes.

My phone vibrates.