

PERFECT FAMILY

PAULIUS KAJOKAS

A Novel

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PART I

The Facade

Chapter 1: Perfect Table

JOHNSON

The Smith house looked the same as it always did—white clapboard, black shutters, wreath on the front door no matter the season. Even in summer, Rebecca found a way to make it feel like a holiday. I parked along the curb because Harold liked the driveway clear, and because James’s car was already there anyway, angled like it owned the place.

Of course it was.

I killed the engine and sat for a beat, hands still on the wheel. Through the windshield, I could see the front windows and the neat line of hydrangeas like a row of well-behaved children. Somewhere inside, dishes clinked. The sound made my shoulders go up without permission.

Britt squeezed my forearm. “Hey,” she said softly. “We’re fine.”

I nodded like I believed it. Then I got out, smoothed my shirt, and went up the walkway I’d walked a thousand times.

Rebecca opened the door before we even rang. She always did that—timed it so she could pretend it was instinct, not surveillance.

“There you are,” she said, bright and warm. She kissed the air near Britt’s cheek, then did the same near mine. The kind of greeting that didn’t smudge lipstick, didn’t risk mess. “Come in. You must be starving.”

The foyer smelled like lemon polish and something roasted—Rebecca’s version of casual.

I stepped inside and felt the familiar shift, like crossing a line on the floor changed who I was allowed to be.

Harold’s voice drifted from the dining room. “Johnson.”

It wasn’t a question. It wasn’t even really a greeting. Just acknowledgment.

Harold stood at the head of the table in a crisp button-down with his sleeves rolled to mid-forearm, like he’d just come from his office and had decided to look approachable for exactly thirty minutes. He shook my hand, firm and quick, then nodded to Britt.

“Britt,” he said, and she smiled back, professional and polite in the way she did when someone tried to test her without making it obvious.

James was already seated, leaning back in his chair like it had been built around him. He was taller than me by a couple inches and wider through the shoulders, still carrying the body from his rugby days even if the sport had stopped carrying him.

He grinned. “Look who survived the trek,” he said. “How’s life in the big scary rental world?”

“Fine,” I said. I kept my tone neutral.

James’s eyes flicked to Brigit. “You guys still paying someone else’s mortgage? Wild.”

Brigit’s smile didn’t change. “It’s temporary,” she said.

“Everything’s temporary,” James said, like he’d learned philosophy once and kept the only line he liked.

Rebecca swept in behind us holding a white serving bowl, steam curling up. “Before anyone starts,” she said, “I made the chicken the way you like it, Johnson. With the crispy skin.”

Something in me tightened at the way she said it—like I was ten and she’d made it as a reward. Like my preferences were evidence she had me mapped best.

“Thanks,” I said anyway, because that was the script.

We took our places. I sat where I always sat, to Harold’s right. James didn’t move, didn’t offer to switch, didn’t even look like he considered it. Brigit sat beside me, her knee grazing mine under the table—an anchor, a reminder that I didn’t live here anymore.

Rebecca fussed with napkins even though they were already folded into perfect triangles. The table was set with the heavier plates, the ones she didn’t trust the kids with when the kids were still little.

Today there were no kids. We’d dropped them at Brigit’s sister’s after the birthday party—easier than dragging them into this.

Rebecca had made sure of that, too.

“Such a shame about the kids,” she said as she poured iced tea, her voice light. “But I understand. Last-minute things happen.”

I felt Brigit’s breath hitch beside me.

“We did tell you,” I said, careful. “We texted. This morning.”

Rebecca’s eyebrows lifted just a fraction. “Yes. You did.” She set the pitcher down as if it required concentration. “But I like to plan. You know that. I had everything set, and then—well. It’s just hard when you don’t give notice.”

Harold didn't say a word. He didn't have to. He cut his chicken with clean, efficient movements and let Rebecca do the correction for him.

I stared at my plate. My fork suddenly felt too small in my hand.

Brigit leaned forward. "The kids had that birthday party," she said. "And then the soccer thing changed times."

Rebecca waved it off, generous. "Of course. Of course." Then, softer, like she was imparting wisdom: "It's just, if you had told me yesterday, I could have adjusted. It's not good for children to be unpredictable."

My throat felt dry.

James snorted. "Unpredictable children," he repeated, amused. "God forbid."

Rebecca's gaze snapped to him. "James."

He held up a hand, grinning like it was all a joke, like he wasn't thirty-something and still eating lunch at his parents' table on command.

I chewed without tasting anything.

Rebecca tried a new tack. She always did—if one comment didn't land, she'd slide into another, smooth as a card trick.

"So," she said, brightening. "Harold and I were looking at flights last night."

Harold finally looked up. "Mm," he said, which could have meant anything.

"We might do Nantucket again," Rebecca went on. "Or maybe we'll try something different. Martha's Vineyard, perhaps. Or even Aruba." She smiled at Brigit. "Have you been to Aruba?"

Brigit shook her head. "No. Not yet."

"It's lovely," Rebecca said. "Just... effortless. The water is like glass."

James made a low appreciative noise. "Nice."

Rebecca nodded, pleased, then turned her attention to me with the gentlest tilt of her head. "You and Brigit could do something like that, too, you know. Once you're more... settled."

My fork paused halfway to my mouth.

It wasn't even what she said. It was the way she said it—settled, like we were currently unmoored, like we were floating because we'd chosen wrong.

"We're fine," I said. I aimed for calm. My voice came out tighter than I wanted.

Rebecca's eyes softened. "Honey, I know you're fine. I didn't mean—" She let the sentence trail off, a performance of innocence. Then she added,

breezy, “It’s just, those kinds of vacations aren’t exactly... easy when you’re still renting. And with Brigit’s student loans—”

Brigit’s hand stilled beside her plate. She didn’t look at me. She kept her face neutral, but I could feel her go rigid.

I felt heat climb up my neck. I heard my own pulse in my ears, fast and stupid.

“We didn’t ask for your financial advice,” I said.

The room went quiet in a way that wasn’t actually quiet. The air conditioner hummed. A spoon clinked faintly against a glass as Rebecca set it down.

Harold watched me over the rim of his iced tea. Not angry. Not surprised. Just watching, like he was taking notes.

James’s mouth twitched, trying to decide if this was funny.

Rebecca blinked, slow. Then she gave a small laugh, like I had made an awkward joke at a party.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she said. “There it is.”

I held her gaze.

“There what?” I said, though I already knew.

Rebecca leaned forward slightly, her voice warm enough to burn. “That sensitivity. You get so worked up so fast.” She shook her head with a little smile that made her look kind to anyone who didn’t know the difference. “No wonder you can’t just enjoy things.”

My jaw clenched. My tongue pressed hard against the back of my teeth, holding in everything that wanted to spill out.

Brigit’s knee touched mine again under the table—steady, steady—but it didn’t loosen the band tightening around my chest.

Rebecca sighed, almost fond. “Honestly,” she said, reaching for her napkin like she was wiping up a spill, “you’ve always been the sensitive one.”

Chapter 2: The Trophy Case

BRIGIT

I sat with my spine straight and my hands folded loosely in my lap, like I was waiting to be called on.

I didn't need permission to speak. I wasn't intimidated by Rebecca's curated dining room or Harold's quiet authority. I'd learned something in the first few minutes at this table: you could talk and still not be heard. Rebecca called it conversation.

Across from me, Rebecca dabbed the corner of her mouth with a linen napkin even though she hadn't spilled a thing. A tiny, precise gesture. The same kind of gesture she used to smooth over anything that threatened the picture—an awkward comment, an uncomfortable truth, a son who didn't play his part.

Harold barely moved. He didn't need to. He sat at the head of the table with his shoulders squared and his fork working steadily, and the entire room kept orbiting him anyway. When he looked up, the air shifted. When he didn't, it was somehow louder than speaking.

James lounged in his chair with an ease that was almost... practiced. Like he'd never had to earn his right to take up space. Like he'd been told his whole life that space would be made for him.

Johnson sat beside me, still and quiet, his jaw locked tight enough that I could practically hear his molars grind.

Rebecca's last line—You've always been the sensitive one—still hung in the room, dressed up as affection but sharp where it mattered. I saw Johnson take it the way he'd taken everything else: swallow, shrink, silence.

I waited for Harold to correct Rebecca, even gently.

He didn't.

I waited for James to say something—anything—that wasn't a smirk.

He didn't, either.

I inhaled, then tried to set my voice on the table like a normal thing.

“Actually,” I said, aiming for light, “we're doing okay. Renting isn't—”

Rebecca turned her head toward me with a pleasant smile that didn't reach her eyes. “Oh, honey, I know,” she said, and her tone was so warm it would've fooled anyone who didn't understand subtext. “I'm not worried.”

Then she turned back to Harold as if I had said nothing at all. “Did you see the weather for next weekend? It’s supposed to be perfect.”

I blinked.

It was the cleanest dismissal I’d seen in a while. No confrontation. No argument. Just a pivot so smooth it made me feel like I’d imagined myself speaking.

Johnson’s knee brushed mine under the table—an apologetic touch, barely there, like he was sorry I’d stepped into the current and gotten swept aside.

I kept my face neutral and reached for my water. I’d spent years learning how to keep my reactions from showing, how to stay professional even when someone tried to undermine me. It was a useful skill in medicine. It was also, I was realizing, a useful skill in this house.

“You know,” Rebecca went on, bright again, “the kids would have loved seeing James’s trophies.”

James perked up, like a dog hearing its name.

“Mom,” he said, but he wasn’t protesting. Not really.

Rebecca laughed, delighted. “Oh, don’t pretend. You loved it. You used to carry those things around like they were your children.”

Harold’s mouth twitched. “He earned them,” he said, and the way he said it made it sound like a verdict.

Rebecca set her fork down and gestured toward the living room, where I could already picture the display without seeing it. The Smith house was full of objects arranged to say something—framed photos, awards, newspaper clippings. Proof. Narrative.

“Remember that year you took the team to sectionals?” Rebecca asked James. “You were unstoppable. Coach Heller said you had—what was it?—‘natural leadership.’”

James leaned back farther. “Yeah,” he said, and there it was—that glow. That quiet satisfaction. “That was a good year.”

I glanced at Johnson.

He was watching his plate as if the chicken required intense focus. His shoulders were drawn inward. He looked smaller than he had in the car.

Harold continued, almost casually, “He still gets messages from guys on the team. They remember.”

“Of course they do,” Rebecca said. “How could they not?”

James’s smile widened. “They were jealous.”

I watched it happen in real time: the oxygen in the room pulled toward James like gravity. The stories got polished as they were told. The rough edges disappeared. The years in between—the ones where James hadn't moved out, hadn't built anything new, hadn't turned that high school glory into an adult life—were treated like a minor technical delay, not the main fact.

Rebecca scooped another spoonful of potatoes onto James's plate without asking. "And now," she added brightly, "he's doing that... what is it called, Harold?"

"E-sports," Harold said, as if it were a business term he'd learned for a client.

"E-sports," Rebecca repeated, the way she might repeat neurosurgery or venture capital, something impressive she didn't fully understand but liked saying anyway. "He's so talented. It's incredible, really. All that hand-eye coordination."

James lifted his glass in a mock toast. "Born gifted," he said.

I couldn't help it—my gaze flicked again to Johnson. He hadn't moved. Harold added, "He's building a following. Streaming regularly."

I had heard this before. A few months ago, at another "casual" family meal, James had described his plan in loose, confident terms. His schedule. His "brand." His audience. There had been no numbers, no specifics, nothing concrete. Just the certainty that it would work because it was James.

"And it takes a bit of investment," Rebecca said quickly, as if anticipating criticism that hadn't even been voiced. "You can't do it with just any equipment, Brigit. It's very competitive."

I smiled politely. "I'm sure."

"We just got him that new monitor," Rebecca continued. "The one with the fast refresh—Harold, what was it? One-forty-something?"

"One sixty-five," Harold corrected without looking up.

"See?" Rebecca beamed. "And the chair. And the headset. And the camera. But it's all for his future."

James nodded solemnly, like he was a startup founder.

I felt something cold settle under my ribs. It wasn't jealousy. I didn't care what James played on or how expensive his headphones were. It was the contrast that made my skin prickle.

Johnson and I rented a small apartment and budgeted groceries. We'd delayed a vacation because my schedule was insane and Johnson's job had

been uncertain for months. When we talked about money, it was careful. Responsible.

Here, money was a ribbon tied around James like a gift.

Rebecca reached across the table and patted James's hand. "We're proud of you," she said, and her voice softened into something almost reverent. "You have something special."

Johnson's fork scraped his plate.

It was a small sound, but it cut through me like a needle.

Johnson lifted his hand and dragged his fingers through his hair, hard, like he could smooth down whatever was happening inside his head. For a second, the hair parted.

And there it was.

A pale, jagged line high above his right temple—more up than over, in that strip of scalp that hair usually covered. Not a neat little childhood scratch. Not a smooth scar from a scraped knee. This was uneven, a seam that didn't belong on skin.

Johnson's fingers froze as if he'd felt the air hit it.

Then, just as quickly, he adjusted his hair back into place, a practiced motion that made it disappear again.

My throat tightened.

I'd noticed it before. Not clearly. Not like that. It had always been a flicker—catching it in certain light, in a certain angle. And every time I'd tried to ask, Johnson's entire body had reacted like I'd pressed on a bruise.

He didn't snap. He didn't yell. He just went... quiet. Shut down. As if the question itself was dangerous.

So I'd stopped asking.

We were married. We shared a life, a bed, a grocery list, a calendar full of work and obligations—and still there were corners of him I didn't touch because touching them made him disappear.

Across the table, Rebecca's eyes drifted toward Johnson's face. I watched closely, waiting to see if Rebecca's gaze went to the scar too, if her eyes followed his instinct to hide it.

Rebecca didn't look at his hairline at all.

She looked at his expression. The tension. The silence.

And she smiled, soft and knowing, like she'd just confirmed something she already believed.

“Oh, Johnson,” she said, almost sweetly, “don’t sulk. You get so sensitive about everything.”

Johnson’s jaw tightened. His eyes stayed down.

I held my water glass a little too firmly. I wanted, in that moment, to grab the tablecloth and yank. To ruin the place settings, to scatter the napkins, to force the truth out into the open where it couldn’t be managed.

Instead, I watched Harold keep cutting his chicken, unbothered.

I watched James smirk like the whole thing was entertainment.

I watched Rebecca control the room with nothing more than tone and timing.

And I watched the man I loved hide a scar like it was shame.

I took a slow breath through my nose, steadying myself the way I did before delivering bad news to a patient’s family.

Because scars didn’t look like that for no reason.

And whatever had put that seam in Johnson’s scalp had not been something a “perfect” family talked about.