

THE PERFECT HUSBAND

CHAPTER ONE

Tess Williams awoke as she'd learned to awaken--slowly, degree by degree, so that she reached consciousness without ever giving herself away. First her ears woke up, seeking out the sound of another person breathing. Next, her skin prickled to life, searching for the burning length of her husband's body pressed against her back. Finally, when her ears registered no sound and her skin found her alone in her bed, her eyes opened, going automatically to the closet and checking the small wooden chair she'd jammed beneath the doorknob in the middle of the night.

The chair was still in place. She released the breath she'd been holding and sat up. The empty room was already bright with mid-morning sun, the adobe walls golden and cheery. The air was hot. Her T-shirt stuck to her back, but maybe the sweat came from nightmares that never quite went away. She'd once liked mornings. They were difficult for her now, but not as difficult as night, when she would lie there and try to force her eyes to give up their vigilant search of shadows in favor of sleep.

You made it, she told herself. You actually made it.

For the last two years she'd been running, clutching her four-year-old daughter's hand and trying to convince Samantha that everything would be all right. She'd picked up aliases like decorative accessories and new addresses like spare parts. But she'd never really escaped. Late at night, she would sit at the edge of her daughter's bed, stroking Samantha's golden hair, and stare at the closet with fatalistic eyes.

She knew just what kind of monsters hid in the closet. She had seen the crime scene photos of what they could do. Three weeks ago, her personal monster had broken out of a maximum security prison by beating two guards to death in under two minutes.

Tess had called Lieutenant Lance Difford. He'd called Vince. The wheels were set in motion. Tess Williams had hidden Samantha safely away, then she had traveled as far as she could travel. Then she had traveled some more.

First, she'd taken the train, and the train had taken her through New England fields of waving grass and industrial sectors of twisted metal. Then she'd caught a plane, flying over everything as if that would help her forget and covering so many miles she left behind even fall and returned to summer.

Landing in Phoenix was like arriving in a moon crater: everything was red, dusty, and bordered by distant blue mountains. She'd never seen palms; here roads were lined with them. She'd never seen cactus; here they covered the land like an encroaching army.

The bus had only moved her farther into alien terrain. The red hills had disappeared, the sun had gained fury. Signs for cities had been replaced by signs reading STATE PRISON IN AREA. DO NOT STOP FOR HITCHHIKERS.

The reds and browns had seeped away until the bus rolled through sun-baked amber and bleached-out greens. The mountains no longer followed like kindly grandfathers. In this strange, harsh land of southern Arizona, even the hills were tormented, flayed alive methodically by mining trucks and bulldozers.

It was the kind of land where you really did expect to turn and see the OK Corral. The kind of land where lizards were beautiful and coyotes cute. The kind of land where the hothouse rose died and the prickly cactus lived.

It was perfect.

Tess climbed out of bed. She moved slowly. Her right leg was stiff and achy, the jagged scar twitching with ghost pains. Her left wrist throbbed, ringed by a harsh circle of purple bruises. She could tell it wasn't anything serious--her father had taught her a lot

about broken bones. As things went in her life these days, a bruised wrist was the least of her concerns.

She turned her attention to the bed.

She made it without thinking, tucking the corners tightly and smoothing the covers with military precision.

I want to be able to bounce a quarter off that bed, Theresa. Youth is no excuse for sloppiness. You must always seek to improve.

She caught herself folding back the edge of the sheet over the light blanket and dug her fingertips into her palms. In a deliberate motion, she ripped off the blanket and dumped it on the floor.

"I will not make the bed this morning," she stated to the empty room. "I choose not to make the bed."

She wouldn't clean anymore either, or wash dishes or scrub floors. She remembered too well the scent of ammonia as she rubbed down the windows, the doorknobs, the banisters. She'd found the pungent odor friendly, a deep-clean sort of scent.

This is my house, and not only does it look clean, but it smells clean.

Once, when she'd taken the initiative to rub down the window casings with ammonia, Jim had even complimented her. She'd beamed at him, married one year, already eight months pregnant and as eager as a lap dog for his sparing praise.

Later, Lieutenant Difford had explained to her how ammonia was one of the few substances that rid surfaces of fingerprints.

Now she couldn't smell ammonia without feeling ill.

Her gaze was drawn back to the bed, the rumpled sheets, the covers tossed and wilted on the floor. For a moment, the impulse, the sheer *need* to make that bed--and make it right because she had to seek to improve herself, you should always seek to improve--nearly overwhelmed her. Sweat beaded her upper lip. She fisted her hands to keep them from picking up the blankets.

"Don't give in. He messed with your mind, Tess, but that's done now. You belong to yourself and you are tough. You won, dammit. You *won*."

The words didn't soothe her. She crossed to the bureau to retrieve her gun from her purse. Only at the last minute did she remember that the .22 had fallen on the patio.

J.T. Dillon had it now.

She froze. She had to have her gun. She ate with her gun, slept with her gun, walked with her gun. She couldn't be weaponless. *Defenseless, vulnerable, weak.*

Oh God. Her breathing accelerated, her stomach plummeted, and her head began to spin. She walked the edge of the anxiety attack, feeling the shakes and knowing that she either found solid footing now or plunged into the abyss.

Breathe, Tess, breathe. But the friendly desert air kept flirting with her lungs. She bent down and forcefully caught a gulp by her knees, squeezing her eyes shut.

"Can I walk you home?"

She was startled. "You mean me?" She hugged her school books more tightly against her Mt. Greylock High sweater. She couldn't believe the police officer was addressing

her. She was not the sort of girl handsome young men addressed.

"No," he teased lightly. "I'm talking to the grass." He pushed himself away from the tree, his smile unfurling to reveal two charming dimples. All the girls in her class talked of those dimples, dreamed of those dimples. "You're Theresa Matthews, right?"

She nodded stupidly. She should move. She knew she should move. She was already running late for the store and her father did not tolerate tardiness.

She remained standing there, staring at this young man's handsome face. He looked so strong. A man of the law. A man of integrity? For one moment she found herself thinking, If I told you everything, would you save me? Would somebody please save me?

"Well, Theresa Matthews, I'm Officer Beckett. Jim Beckett. "

"I know. " Her gaze fell to the grass. "Everyone knows who you are."

"May I walk you home, Theresa Matthews? Would you allow me the privilege?"

She remained uncertain, too overwhelmed to speak. Her father would kid her. Only promiscuous young women, evil women, enticed men to walk them home. But she didn't want to send Jim Beckett away. She didn't know what to do.

He leaned over and winked at her. His blue eyes were so clear, so calm. So steady.

"Come on Theresa, I'm a cop. If you can't trust me, who can you trust?"

"I won," she muttered by her knees. "Dammit, I won!" But she wanted to cry. She'd won, but the victory remained hollow, the price too high. He'd done things to her that

never should have been done. He'd taken things from her that she couldn't afford to lose. Even now, he was still in her head.

Someday soon, he would kill her. He'd promised to cut out her still-beating heart, and Jim always did what he said.

She forced her head up. She took a deep breath. She pressed her fists against her thighs. "Fight, Tess. It's all you have left."

She pushed away from the dresser and moved to her suitcase, politely brought to her room by Freddie. She'd made it here, step one of her plan. Next, she had to get J.T. to agree to train her. Dimly, she remembered mentioning her daughter to him. That had been a mistake. Never tell them more than you have to, never tell the truth if a lie will suffice.

Maybe J.T. wouldn't remember. He hadn't seemed too sober. Vincent should've warned her about his drinking.

She didn't know much about J.T. Vince had said J.T. was the kind of man who could do anything he wanted to, but who didn't seem to want to do much. He'd been raised in a wealthy, well-connected family in Virginia, attended West Point, but then left for reasons unknown and joined the Marines. Then he'd left the Marines and struck out solo, rapidly earning a reputation for a fearlessness bordering on insanity. As a mercenary, he'd drifted toward doing the impossible and been indifferent to anything less. He hated politics, loved women. He was fanatical about fulfilling his word and noncommittal about everything else.

Five years ago, he'd up and left the mercenary business without explanation. Like the prodigal son, he'd returned to Virginia and in a sudden flurry of unfathomable activity, he'd married, adopted a child, and settled down in the suburbs as if all along he'd really been a shoe salesman. Later, a sixteen-year-old with a new Camaro and even newer

license had killed J.T.'s wife and son in a head-on collision.

And J.T. had disappeared to Arizona.

She hadn't expected him to be drinking. She hadn't expected him to still appear so strong. She'd pictured him as being older, maybe soft and overripe around the middle, a man who'd once been in his prime but now was melting around the edges. Instead, he'd smelled of tequila. His body had been toned and hard. He'd moved fast, pinning her without any effort. He had black hair, covering his head, his arms, his chest.

Jim had had no hair, not on head, not on his body. He'd been completely hairless, smooth as marble. Like a swimmer, she'd thought, and only later understood the full depth of her naiveté. Jim's touch had always been cold and dry, as if he was too perfect for such things as sweat. The first time she'd heard him urinate, she'd felt a vague sense of surprise; he gave the impression of being above such basic biological functions.

Jim had been perfect. Mannequin perfect. If only she'd held that thought longer.

She'd stick with J.T. Dillon. He'd once saved orphans. He'd been married and had a child. He'd destroyed things for money. He sounded skilled, he appeared dangerous.

For her purposes, he would do.

And if helping her cost J.T. Dillon too much?

She already knew the answer, she'd spent years coming to terms with it.

Sometimes, she did wish she was sixteen again. She'd been a normal girl, once. She'd dreamed of a white knight who would rescue her. Someone who would never hit her. Someone who would hold her close and tell her she was finally safe.

Now, she remembered the feel of her finger tightening around the trigger. The pull of the trigger, the jerk of the trigger, the roar of the gun and the ringing in her ears.

The acrid smell of gunpowder and the hoarse sound of Jim's cry. The thud of his body falling down. The raw scent of fresh blood pooling on her carpet.

She remembered these things.

And she knew she could do anything.

© 1998 by Lisa Gardner

All Rights Reserved