

The Perfect Husband

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headline

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First published in Great Britain in 1998 by Orion Publishing Group

This paperback edition first published in 2012 by
HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

1

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7553 9617 7

Typeset in Sabon by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and
recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to
the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

1

Five years later

J.T. Dillon was drunk.

Outside, the white-hot desert sun was straight up in the sky, bleaching bones and parching mountains. Saguaro cacti seemed to surf waves of heat while sagebrush died of sun-stroke at their feet. And all over Nogales, people hid in darkened rooms, running ice cubes down their naked chests and cursing God for having saved August's apocalypse for September.

But he didn't notice.

In the middle of the cool green oasis of his ranch-style home, J.T. Dillon lay sprawled on his back, his right hand cradling the silver-framed picture of a smiling woman and gorgeous little boy. His left hand held an empty tequila bottle.

Above him a fan stirred the air-conditioned breeze through the living room. Below him a Navajo print rug absorbed his sweat. The room was well maintained and tastefully decorated with wicker furniture and sturdy yucca soap trees.

He stopped noticing such details after his first day of

straight tequila. As any marine knew, true binge drinking was art, and J.T. considered himself to be Tequila Willie's first Michelangelo. Shot number one seared away throat lining. Shot number two burned away the taste of the first. Half a bottle later, no man worth his salt even winced at the sensation of cheap, raw tequila ripping down his esophagus, into his stomach, and sooner or later, out his bowels.

By the end of day one, J.T. had been beyond conscious thought. The ceiling fan had become a prehistoric bird, his wicker sofa a tiger lying in wait. The toughest, meanest marine in the world had developed a bad case of the giggles. When he closed his eyes, the world had spun sickeningly, so he'd spent his first night with his eyelids propped open by his fingers, staring at the ceiling hour after hour after hour.

Now, on his fourth day of straight tequila, he'd gone beyond thought and surrendered most of his body. His face had gone first. He'd been sitting by his pool, swigging some great Cuervo Gold, and abruptly he'd realized he could no longer feel his nose. He tried to find it with his fingers – no dice. His nose was gone. An hour later his cheeks disappeared as well. No rasp of whiskers, no sting of sweat. He had no cheeks. Finally, not that long ago, he'd lost his lips. He'd tried to open them and they hadn't been there anymore. No lips.

It made it damn hard to drink, and he had twenty-four hours of serious boozing left.

He rolled slowly onto his side, discovering he still had arms and a remnant of a pickled brain. He squeezed his eyes shut and hazy images clustered behind his eyelids. He'd been a champion swimmer and percussion rifle shooter once. He remembered the welcoming smell of chlorine and the heavy

The Perfect Husband

weight of his black walnut rifle. He'd been a marine with 'raw talent, lots of potential' before he'd been asked to leave.

After the marines had come the stint as a mercenary, doing work he never told anyone about because then he'd have to kill them. The next image was more hesitant, still raw around the edges, as if it understood that even after four days of straight tequila, it had the power to bruise. He was back in the States. Rachel stood beside him. He was a husband. His gaze dropped to the little boy squeezing his hand. He was a father.

Now he was a drunk.

His manservant Freddie arrived, taking the silver-framed portrait from J.T.'s hands and replacing it in the safe where it would remain until next September.

'How are you doing, sir?'

'Uh.'

His iguana crawled into the room, its four-foot tail slithering across the red-tiled floor. The tequila screamed, 'Red alert! Godzilla attacks!' The sane part of him whispered through parched, rubbery lips, 'Glug, go away. I mean it.'

Glug pointedly ignored him, settling his plump body in a sunbeam that had sneaked through the venetian blinds and making himself comfortable. J.T. liked Glug.

'Water, sir?' Freddie inquired patiently.

'What day is it?'

'The thirteenth, sir.'

'Then gimme another margarita.'

In the distance a phone rang. The sound made J.T. groan, and when the noise had the audacity to repeat itself, he crawled painfully toward his patio to escape.

The sun promptly nailed him like a ball peen hammer. He

swayed onto his feet, squinted his eyes from long practice, and oozed straight tequila from his pores.

Dry heat, they'd told him when he first moved to Arizona. Sure it's hot, but it's dry heat. Bullshit. One hundred and twenty was one hundred and twenty. No sane man lived in these kinds of temperatures.

He'd spent enough time in jungles, pretending he didn't notice the water steaming off his skin or his own pungent odor. He'd learned to block out some of it. He'd simply inhaled the rest. The jungle lived inside him now. Sometimes, if he remembered Virginia plantations and the way his father had sat at the head of the table, clad in his full Green Beret uniform, his trousers bloused into glossy black Corcoran jump boots, his shirt pressed into razor-sharp creases and ribbons pinned ostentatiously to his chest, the jungle took up its beat in his veins.

Then J.T. would laugh. It was the one valuable lesson he'd learned from his father. Women cry. Men laugh. Whiners moan. Men laugh. Wimps complain. Men laugh.

When Marion had called to tell him the colonel was dying of prostate cancer, J.T. had laughed so damn hard, he'd dropped the phone.

Freddie emerged on the porch, austere in his neatly pressed linen suit. 'Telephone, sir.'

'Is it still the thirteenth?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Tell 'em to go away.'

Freddie didn't move. 'It's Vincent, sir. He's called four times already. He claims it's important.'

J.T. plopped down on the deck and dangled his fingertips into the pool. He'd dreamed of owning a pool like this most of his life. He half hated it.

The Perfect Husband

‘Sir?’

‘Vincent always thinks it’s important.’

‘He refuses to hang up, sir.’ Freddie placed the phone on the patio. His indignant sniff indicated what he thought of Vincent. J.T. rolled over on his back. Neither Freddie nor the phone appeared to be willing to go away.

Grudgingly he lifted the receiver. ‘I’m retired, Vincent.’

‘No kidding, old man.’ Vincent’s booming voice made J.T. clutch his forehead. ‘I got a live one for you, Dillon. Right up your alley.’

‘It’s the thirteenth.’

‘All over half the globe.’

‘I don’t take calls until the fourteenth, and I don’t take your calls any day. I’m retired.’

‘Dillon, wait till you hear about the money—’

‘I don’t need money.’

‘Everyone needs money.’

‘I don’t need money. I don’t need business. I’m out. Goodbye.’

‘Hey, hey, hey! Hold on! Come on, J.T. Hear me out, for old time’s sake. Listen, I met this woman. She’s really terrific—’

‘Good fuck?’

‘That’s not what I meant—’

‘Blond probably. You always were a sucker for blondes.’

‘J.T., buddy, don’t be such an ass. I wouldn’t have called you about just anyone – I know you’re retired. But this woman needs help. I mean, she *needs* help.’

‘Yeah? Grab a phone book, look up St Jude, dial the number. If anyone answers, let me know. I might try dialing it myself someday. ’Bye.’

‘J.T.—’

'I don't care.' J.T. hung up the phone. Freddie was still standing there. A bead of sweat traced his upper lip. J.T. shook his head.

'What were you so worried about?' he chided his manservant. 'That I'd say yes? That I'd give up all this for a thirty-second adrenaline rush? Freddie, I thought we knew each other better than that.'

'I'll bring you another margarita, sir.'

'Yeah, Freddie. We understand each other just fine.'

J.T. let his head fall back against the heat-proofed patio. The sun pierced his eyelids until he could see the red veins zigzagging his flesh.

Freddie reappeared with a salt-rimmed glass and set it by J.T.'s head.

'Freddie?' J.T. said.

'Yes, sir?'

'Let another call come through, and I will fire you.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Even if it's the colonel, Freddie. Do you understand?'

'Of course, sir.'

'Good.'

Freddie pivoted sharply and left; J.T. didn't bother to watch.

He tipped into the pool fully clothed. He sank all the way down. He didn't fight it, he'd never had to fight water. From the beginning, Marion had been able to do anything on a horse and J.T. had been able to do anything underwater.

His feet touched bottom. He opened his eyes and surveyed his kingdom, the sides of the pool formed by jutting red stone, the bottom that looked like strewn sapphires.

The tickling started in the base of his throat, the instinctive need to breathe. He didn't fight that either. He

The Perfect Husband

accepted it. The need, the panic, the fear. Underwater, he could accept anything. Underwater, the world finally made sense to him.

He ticked off the seconds in his mind, and the tickling in his throat grew to full-fledged choking. *Don't fight it, don't fight. Ease into the burn.* He passed the two-minute mark. Once he'd been capable of four, but that wouldn't happen today.

Two minutes forty-five seconds. That was it. He rocketed to the top. He broke water with a furious gasp, swallowing four gulps of air at once. His jeans and T-shirt were plastered to his skin, the tom-toms pounded against his head.

The memories were still in his mind. Rachel and Teddy. Laughing. Smiling. Screaming. Dying.

Every year he had his bender. Five days of remembering what he couldn't stand to forget.

Five days of blackness rolling over him like a fog and choking out the light.

After a minute he began to swim. Then he swam some more. Above him the air was dry, and the crickets began to sing as the sky turned bloodred.

'Are you alive?'

'Whuh?' J.T. groggily lifted his head. He'd passed out facedown on the patio. Something clammy was sticking to his skin. Wet clothes.

'Mr Dillon? Mr J.T. Dillon?'

He squinted his eyes, his pupils refusing to cooperate. Somehow everything seemed red, red and shadowed and ugly. He tried focusing harder. A human being appeared before him. She had black hair, which reminded him of an Elvis wig. He let his forehead sink back down.

‘Are you all right?’

‘That’s always been subject to some debate.’ He didn’t bother to look up again. ‘Lady, I don’t buy Avon products or Girl Scout cookies. On the other hand, if you have any Cuervo Gold, I’ll take two cases.’

‘I am not the Avon lady.’

‘Tough break.’ He had to be dying. Not since his first day at West Point had he felt this ill.

‘Mr Dillon—’

‘Go away.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Stand up, pivot one hundred and eighty degrees, and don’t let the gate hit your ass on the way out.’

‘Mr Dillon . . . please, just hear me out.’

He finally pinned her with a bleary gaze. She sat on the edge of a deck chair, perched like a scrawny dove and framed by the mesquite tree. Young. Really bad haircut. Even worse dye job. She tried to appear nonchalant, but her white knees were shaking. He groaned.

‘Lady, you’re out of your league.’

‘I . . . The . . . I . . .’ She stood up stiffly and squared her shoulders. Her face was resolute, but the rest of her ruined the impression. Her too-white suit was wrinkled and ill fitting. She’d lost a lot of weight recently, and the shadows beneath her eyes were too dark to speak of sweet dreams.

‘Mr Dillon—’

‘Freddie!’ he called out at the top his lungs. ‘Freddie!’

The woman’s lips snapped shut.

‘He went out,’ she said after a moment. She began to methodically shred her right thumbnail.

‘Went out?’ He moaned again, then shook his wet hair. Water sprayed out, a few drops hitting her silk suit, but she

didn't flinch. He sluiced a hand through his hair, wiping long strands back out of his face, and looked at his unwanted guest one more time.

She kept a careful distance. Close enough not to show fear, but far enough to be prudent. Her stance was solidly balanced and prepared for action, legs wide apart with one foot back, chest out, arms free. It gave him a sense of *déjà vu*, as if he should know something about her. But the intuition came and went too fast, and he didn't feel like pursuing it.

'Your friend left,' she said. 'I watched him climb into a sedan and drive away.'

'Huh.' He sat up reluctantly. The world spun, then righted. Considering that his blood had to be ninety percent tequila by now, his vision was much too clear. How long had he been out? How much alcohol had he sweated from his pores? He was sobering up too fast.

He ripped off his T-shirt and dropped it on the deck. Then his fingers went to work on his jeans.

'I want to hire you.' The woman's voice had gained a slight tremor.

He stripped the clinging denim from his legs and tossed the jeans onto the deck. 'Better.'

'I . . . I'm not sure this is appropriate,' she said.

J.T. turned on her with a scowl, hands on his hips. Buck naked, he looked her straight in the eye and wondered why the hell she hadn't smartened up enough to disappear by now. 'Lady, does this villa look like a convent to you? This is a private residence and I'm the beast in charge. Now, get the hell out of my sight or do something useful with your mouth.'

He gave her a sardonic smile, then walked away. Freddie

had left him a margarita on the poolside table. It was melted, but he didn't mind. He downed half in a single gulp.

'Vincent sent me,' the woman whispered behind him.

'That son of a bitch,' J.T. drawled without any real emotion. 'I'll just have to take him off my Christmas card list.' He downed the second half of the margarita. 'I'm counting to five. Be gone before I'm done, or heaven help you.'

'Won't you please just hear me out?'

'One.'

'I'll pay you.'

'Two.'

'Vincent did not tell me you were a pigheaded drunk!'

'Three.'

'I need a professional!'

He turned, his arms crossed over his bare chest, his expression bland. 'Four.'

Her face grew red. Frustration animated her body, bringing up her chin, sparking her eyes. For a moment she was actually pretty. 'I'm not leaving!' she yelled. 'Goddammit, I have no place else to go. If you'd just stop feeling sorry for yourself long enough to listen—'

'Five.'

'I won't leave. I can't.'

'Suit yourself.' J.T. shrugged. He placed the empty margarita glass on the table. Then, naked as the day he was born, all one hundred and eighty pounds of muscle and sinew, he advanced.