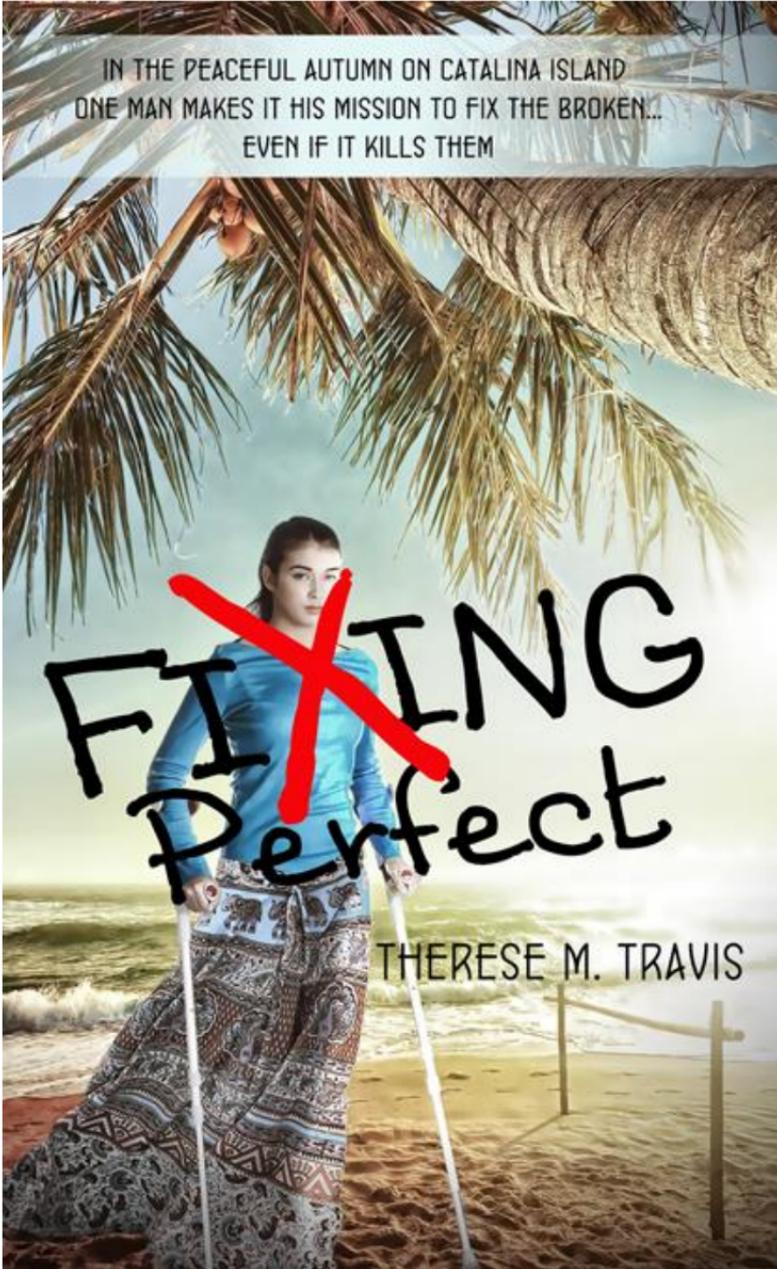


IN THE PEACEFUL AUTUMN ON CATALINA ISLAND
ONE MAN MAKES IT HIS MISSION TO FIX THE BROKEN...
EVEN IF IT KILLS THEM



~~FIXING~~
Perfect

THERESE M. TRAVIS

Fixing Perfect

Therese M. Travis

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Fixing Perfect

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Dedication

To my grandchildren, those I know and those yet to come. And, as always, to my Heavenly Father, in everlasting gratitude.

Prologue

She was beautiful. He couldn't see another thing he wanted to fix. Her hair, her eyes, her posture—all of it perfect.

He reached forward to readjust a curl but stepped back without touching her. No. She was absolutely perfect. She filled some essential part of him with a joy so sharp it could cut his heart.

He completed his work as the sun came up, bathing the scene in a rosy, sun-risen glow. Just as he finished, he heard the thud and scrape of running shoes, far off, but coming closer.

He gathered his supplies and slipped away as the jogger reached the boundaries of the park.

1

The young woman's body told a thousand stories, offered up a thousand cryptic clues, and not the least were the wires, the padding, the propping. Her limbs stretched and posed like a dancer mid-*plié*, one graceful hand twisted and bent over her turned head. The worst was the glimpse her body gave into the warped mind of the monster who had killed her.

Sam Albrecht backed a little farther away, hiding his pulsating anger inside clenched fists. He had to wait to do his job, wait for the detectives to gather all those clues, wait for the photographer to take her pictures, wait for his rage to cool before he moved her.

The jogger who'd found her huddled far enough away that she couldn't see the corpse any longer. Not that hiding from the body would save her from seeing it behind her eyelids forever, or in her nightmares. Sam turned so as to be able to watch the woman as well as the crime scene, his muscles at ease but ready to jump to help her if she needed it. She held a paper bag in case she hyperventilated again, and her brown hair escaped her ponytail and clung to the sides of her damp face.

This far up from Avalon's harbor, nestled on the landward side of Catalina Island, the sound of the sea faded to background noise, like a hush of wind or the swish of tires on wet roads.

A car pulled up, not one of the few private

vehicles allowed on the island, but one bearing official plates, and another officer got out.

Detective Jerry Macias surveyed the scene for a short minute before he turned his massive body toward Sam.

“You OK, buddy?”

Sam narrowed his eyes, not meeting Jerry’s gaze. The guy saw too much, understood too much, as it was. “Doing my job.”

“Yeah. It smothers something inside you, doesn’t it?” Macias nodded at the photographer and moved closer to the crime scene.

Sam went back to watching for the signal to load the body onto the gurney.

Seagulls wheeled overhead, curious, rapacious. Thank God the jogger found her before some of the more destructive animals got to her. At least her face hadn’t been touched by ravaging animals.

Only by the animal who had killed her.

Turn off the anger. Turn off the compassion. Turn off the gratitude that he wasn’t the one who had to tell her family. Even more harrowing than seeing the glimpse into the killer’s mind was the thought of dealing with her family’s grief. What if it were his sister? One of his friends? Robin came to mind, her black hair swirling around her shoulders as she swung a bat, her blue eyes glinting with pride when she connected with the baseball, and he shuddered. *Not Robin, please, God, not Robin. Don’t let this happen to Robin.*

He wasn’t sure how he knew this wasn’t the last painted and posed body he would deal with.

He took a breath when Macias started talking to the team. “It’s Lehanie Haro. Her husband will have to

identify her.”

Most of the response team had already given the woman her name. Even the jogger had called in to say she'd found Lehanie. Everyone on the island had heard about her when she went missing. Mostly they'd speculated on why she'd kidnapped the little girl she'd been babysitting. Now, they'd have to wonder what the guy who had taken them both was planning to do to Becca. Five years old, and in a pervert's hands. Because a guy who could do this could do anything.

God, why do You let these things happen?

Sam glanced at the jogger, saw she held up for now, and looked back at the body.

Lehanie had flaming red hair. But now, it was a dull black, flat and dry. Sam wondered if the killer had made her dye it herself, or if he'd done it to her. He swallowed. The guy had tried to change the color of her eyes, as well, but at least all he'd done was paint blue irises on her eyelids.

The things he might be doing to the five-year-old made Sam wish he didn't possess much of an imagination.

Macias must have been thinking the same. “The little kid she was babysitting was blonde, right?”

“She *is* blonde.” Sam wouldn't kill Becca off with his words before he had to.

“Yeah.” Macias shrugged, obviously concentrating on only the immediate aspect of the case. “Rigor hasn't set in. The lady who found her OK?”

“Somewhat.” Sam wasn't going to lie, no matter how expected. He peered at the wires wound through the woman's hair. He'd seen the telltale color at her roots, behind her ear. Her killer had posed her like a dancer and painted her like a stage performer.

He'd seen murders before, witnessed one himself not so long ago. But none of them sent his gut into cramps like this.

Sam's coworker, Trevor Graham, gripped Sam's shoulder. "Gotta move it. The photographer needs pics from this angle."

As he backed away, he once again had to turn off the emotions, the ache for the girl, her family, the small island community. But mostly, the fear for the little girl who, he had to believe, for now, was still alive.



Robin Ingram pushed away from the counter and rolled her office chair to the cabinet where she stored her things. Hearing her name, she looked up at the man standing across the counter from her.

Hair bleached white blonde, skin a deep yet creamy tan, and eyes so pale a blue they looked like ice cube shadows, made up the stunning man's face. She'd seen him around town. The island didn't have a wide range of residents, so she knew most of the regulars by sight, at least. But she'd never talked to him. She wasn't even sure she knew his name.

"You are Robin, aren't you?" He slid papers onto the overflowing co-op counter and leaned his elbows on a woven tapestry a customer had spread out.

She blinked. "Yeah, that's me. But my shift is over. Sorry. Grace will be here in a minute, and she can help you."

"That's OK." He grinned. White teeth, dimples, the guy had it all, so dazzling he made Robin's eyes prickle. Made her kind of glad she'd never run into him face to face before. He could overwhelm any girl.

"Missy said to get this to you, and you'd process it in the next few days."

"Sure. No problem." She took the papers, scooted back to the file cabinet and laid them in the overflowing box atop it. She could have, but managed to resist, checking out the name on them. She'd do that later.

He smiled but didn't move.

His regard made her want to squirm. She raised one eyebrow. "Anything else I can do for you?"

"No." His slight frown cleared. "You have the most amazing eyes."

"Thank you." She straightened the stack in the inbox and scooted a little closer to the cupboard.

"Yeah. Beautiful baby blues. I'd love to photograph you." He laughed. "That's why I'm applying here. Get some of my photos out there, you know?"

"Oh, sure, this is a great place to sell your work." She grinned and slid her chair another half inch farther from the counter.

"Yeah." He waggled his eyebrows, more like he needed to acknowledge her wariness, than that he wanted to pull something over on her. "I've seen you around town."

He had to have.

"Avalon's a small place. You get to know the townies pretty quick. Have you been here long?"

"A couple months. I noticed you right off." He shifted his elbow and slid the tapestry closer to the edge.

Robin reached for it. "Sorry, this is merchandise. I need to put it back where it belongs."

"Oh, I can do that for you." He slung the

needlepoint off the counter and turned. "Where does it go? Oh, wait. I see an empty hanger over there." He crossed the store in a few long strides and clipped the fabric to the tiny clothespins on the hanger.

"Thanks."

"Sure thing. I'm happy to help." Again, he stared into her eyes for a little longer than comfortable. "It's really nice to finally get to talk to you."

Robin let herself relax. He was tall and good-looking, and he must have seen her try to walk, and here he was, still trying to flirt.

"Well, I've got to get back to work. You take care now." He raised one hand, strong and neat, and saluted her before he left the shop.

"Yeah, you, too." She didn't even know if he heard her. He didn't turn. Fair enough. She didn't quite know what to think of him. Looked like a celebrity and talked like a politician but he was probably harmless. Maybe even slightly interested.

She shook her head. If he'd seen her crutches, he couldn't be interested. He wanted photo subjects, not a girlfriend.

Robin didn't want a boyfriend, anyway. At least, not one who wasn't named Sam and didn't meet her for lunch every day she worked a shift at the co-op. She took a deep breath. Just because certain guys weren't attracted to her didn't mean no one would ever be. Didn't mean she'd turn off everyone just because she had a little disability. Didn't mean she'd ever want one of those accommodating, faceless men who'd settle for someone like her, either. But that disability meant if she didn't get moving right then she'd miss seeing Sam for lunch.

She waited for the door leading from the co-op

shop out to the boardwalk ringing the bay to close, checked out the guy's name on his paperwork, grabbed her backpack and crutches and heaved herself out of her rolling chair.



A chilly wind danced its way from the beach, up the rocky and winding streets, and stopped to visit at the sole occupied bench in the tiny park before traveling on.

Sam breathed in the faint scent of brine and boat oil. Robin was late but she'd come. He wouldn't worry yet. Some days the trip from the shop to the park took her a little longer, though she usually managed a good clip.

And there she was, homemade backpack over her shoulders, painted denim jacket flapping with each swing of her crutches, and a hand-knit cap that matched her Pacific-under-a-brilliant-sun eyes. She looked up and something in those eyes caught at his heart. Those eyes had been doing that a lot, lately, and he wasn't sure how he felt about it. Sometimes he wanted to explore the message he found there; most times he shied away from how she made him feel, made him question. Although why he should question forming more of a relationship, he didn't know. Nothing wrong with one. He blinked, shoving that thought away for the moment.

When Robin eased onto the bench, she used one crutch for an extra balance point. He watched, but didn't reach out to help. Only if she started to fall would he offer. Better not to offend her. He'd done that once and didn't want to brave her wrath again.

Although her spirit made him grin.

Once settled, she shrugged out of the backpack and dropped it between them. "Sandwiches." She sounded a tad more breathless than usual, but one look at her face convinced him that was another subject he'd better not bring up.

He held out a brown paper bag. "Sodas." Italian cherry cream, kind of expensive but Robin's favorite. He liked to treat her once in a while. Or more often than that. And that made him uncomfortable, as well. But it didn't stop him from doing it.

"Perfect." She unfastened the pack and handed him a paper towel and a plastic-wrapped sandwich. It would be an entire meal, taste like ambrosia, and she wouldn't give him a list of ingredients even if he begged.

"If I tell you, you'll be able to make your own and then who will I have to eat lunch with?" she'd ask.

He always thought she was joking. "I'm too lazy to make my own lunch," he'd answer, but that never changed anything. Not that he minded. He just liked teasing her about it. Now, he said, "I'll say grace, OK?"

"Sure." She folded her hands and bowed her head, waiting for him to finish. She always said the same little poem she'd learned as a child, but he liked to put more variety into his thanks, sort of the way she treated her food creations.

"God of infinity, we thank You for our food, for the brilliant, talented hands that make it every day, for the beautiful weather, and for friendship. Be with us, guide us, and bless us as we finish our day." He almost added something about Lehanie Haro but stopped himself.

God knew about her death, may have already

welcomed her to heaven, but Robin might not have heard. He didn't want to add shock value to his prayers.

"Amen." She unwrapped her food, but slowly, as though she had more on her mind than eating. Maybe the news had reached the co-op.

He hadn't listened to the latest broadcasts.

Leaves spun down and littered the cracked cement walkway. Robin bent and swept a few together with one foot, but the breeze scattered them. She laughed and brushed several more out of her hair.

"You gonna eat?" He took a huge bite. She'd made his favorite, chicken salad with a yummy avocado dressing. He smiled around chewing. She liked to treat him just as often as he liked to treat her.

Sometimes he really liked what he thought that meant. Sometimes it scared him. Most of the time, he tried to ignore the questions that bubbled in his heart any time he thought of her. He wished they'd go away, but the thought of not seeing her, which was the only way he could think of to eradicate those questions, made his stomach hurt. So he just put up with the thoughts when he had to.

"Oh yeah." She took a much smaller bite, before she put the food back on the wrapper while she unscrewed the soda bottle. After that, she looked straight into his eyes, like she could read every thought he had. "Everything all right?"

He sighed. "You're going to hear about this soon enough. I thought you might have already. A jogger found the missing babysitter."

Despair filled her face. "Not Becca?"

He shook his head and knew before she opened her mouth that she understood the implication. "So

Lehanie is dead." Robin's lips pinched on the pain. "And she wasn't...she didn't have anything to do with kidnapping little Becca, did she?"

"She can't have. If she'd just turned up dead, the police might have still suspected her, but the way she was killed..." Murder and food did not mix. When was he going to learn that? He put down his sandwich.

Robin bent her head, her fingers worrying the beaded fringe of the scarf that peeked out from under the jacket. "So what does it mean?"

"It means there's someone really sick out there who still has a little girl." He remembered the way Becca looked in her pictures—soft, wispy blond curls, wide brown eyes, dimples on either side of her round chin. The pictures were everywhere, on posters and taped to plastic jars begging for donations, on the news and in the papers.

"She's so little." Her jaw clenched, biting off the words. "Just a baby."

"Yeah. I can't tell you any more details until I know for sure what the police will release to the media."

She nodded. "Does her family know?" She stumbled over her words. "Both families. They'll all have to hear. I can't imagine how Becca's parents will feel."

"By now, probably everyone has been told, yes. We got her out of there a couple hours ago." He finally managed to swallow bread sucked dry by sorrow. "Look, let's talk about something else, or we won't be able to eat."

She nodded again, her eyes distant and shadowed. "I hope you don't have nightmares."

So much for changing the subject. "I'll be all right."

It's been months."

"I know, but when I first saw you just now I thought—" She didn't tell him what was on her mind, didn't really have to.

The first few months after Henry's death, his murder had been all Sam talked about to her—the murder, the nightmares, his fears. And she'd listened. Over and over, to the same—or what probably sounded the same to her—details and guilt. And now he hadn't mentioned Henry or guns or dreams in a couple months. No wonder she worried.

"I'll be OK. It was ugly, really ugly, but I've seen stuff like it before." Not exactly like it, not even close. But he couldn't tell her that yet. "I'll be OK," he repeated.

"If you say so." Her wide blue eyes fastened on him, full of doubt.

"I do." He nudged her sandwich. "Come on, finish eating. I've got to walk you home pretty soon, and then get to bed. Two AM comes a little too early these days."

Her smile wavered and then strengthened. Good. Like all the other locals would be, she had to be devastated over Lehanie's death, but he didn't want it to bring her down. Didn't she have enough to worry about?

2

Late Friday afternoon Robin again sat behind the co-op gift shop counter, swinging one foot while she watched a few customers wander through the store. She tried hard to be glad any time anything sold, but she couldn't help the little thrill when it was something she'd made that someone picked up and, after deliberation, brought to the sales counter. The profit was nice; the satisfaction of having created something joyful was priceless.

Today, that thrill would be hard to come by, though not for lack of sales.

The store was made to entice women and children. Toys, hand-dyed blouses, hand-stitched purses, painted wood, and beaded ornaments crowded the shelves. A display of orange and purple Halloween items filled the narrow walkway leading from the front door to the belly of the shop, just begging kids to pop in and explore the offerings.

A couple with three little girls strolled inside.

Robin smiled at the woman and grinned outright when the oldest child went straight to the display of brightly dressed mermaids. She'd been making those dolls for more than a year, tweaking the design each time she put one together, and they were always a big seller.

"I've got matching paper dolls, too, right beside those."

The two older girls squealed while the youngest hugged a mermaid with a pink and orange tail.

The man stepped farther into the shop, glancing at the items for sale, but the mother hovered near the girls. When she saw Robin watching, she grimaced. "We just heard about that poor little girl and her babysitter. I mean, how they didn't find the little one." Her fist clenched over the youngest child's arm. "I'm not letting any of mine more than a foot away from me."

"I don't blame you." Robin half rose from the stool, but settled back down. "It doesn't make for a very relaxing vacation, though, I'll bet."

"It sure doesn't. You get so scared that some monster's gonna nab your baby. And don't even ask me about getting a babysitter."

The way the woman growled the words sent chills along Robin's neck. She didn't have kids, but she understood the fear.

The woman moved a step closer and lowered her voice. "They were locals, though, weren't they?"

Robin opened her mouth, at first resenting this woman's implication. But understanding took over. If those were her three little girls, wouldn't she grasp any hint of hope, no matter how small or how much it might hurt someone else, that they'd be just a little bit safer, because they didn't live on the island?

"They were. They are, I mean." She couldn't consign Becca to death without hope putting up a frantic fight, even if it was only over words. She rang up the family's sales and gave them a huge smile. "Stay safe."

"You bet."

A customer she'd been only marginally aware of

before wandered closer and leaned on the counter. She looked up into clear, pale blue eyes and started. Not a customer, then, but the photographer. She remembered the name from his paperwork. "Donovan, right?"

"You got it. You always here?"

"Me? No. Everyone does their share. I'm only here two days a week for three hours. If you get your photographs in, you'll have to do your time, too."

He grinned and nodded toward her display of dolls. "Those are yours?"

"The mermaids are, yes."

"They're cute. No wonder those kids couldn't leave without them."

"Oh, did you see that? The littlest one was so sweet." She let out a tiny breath.

He turned to stare out the door, his upper lip curling. "The mom was a little paranoid, though."

"I don't think so. She's a mother—and anyway, no one wants any little girls getting hurt. Much less what that—that *thing* did to the babysitter." She shuddered, remembering the few details Sam had been able to tell her. And even without specifics, dead was dead. No one wanted murder and kidnapping on the island. Lehanie had just gotten married and was probably planning her own family. "And who knows what he's doing to Becca."

He glanced at her, his eyes wide, at first, and then narrowed. "Right, yeah. Because she's still missing. I hadn't thought of that." Donovan scratched the back of his head. "But the way she acted, like they'd get snatched here in the store or even just because they're on the island. Overprotective."

Robin pinched her lips together. This guy just didn't get it. "But she might save her children's lives,