

A Fistful of God

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.

A Fistful of God

COPYRIGHT 2012 by Therese M. Travis

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Watershed Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

Watershed Books praise and splash logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First Watershed Edition, 2013

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-253-0

Print Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-254-7

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my four: Heather, Jon, Daniel, and Meg.
You are my greatest joys!

Praise for *Keeper of My Heart*

Rebecca Gresham has built walls so thick around herself no one can reach her...not even God. When handsome Adam McCormick comes to town, he discovers a sensitive caring young woman who wants to break free but can't escape her own prison. This story shows us God's redemptive love and the people he often sends to model it for us.

Tanya Stowe

Rebecca has lost her trust not only in men--but God as well. Then enter stage: Adam, who in their small town living, is unavoidable, especially since she has agreed to work as a receptionist at his veterinary clinic... This was a tender romance that I thoroughly enjoyed right from the start. I loved the way through Adam's prayers and influence, Rebecca's heart is turned back to her Savior. It reminded me of the Bible verse about a cord of three strands is not easily broken. This book is a "Keeper."

JoAnn Carter

1

Even in his sleep, Andy clutched the front of my shirt with his fist. He wasn't two yet, and he hated to be left with a babysitter at bedtime even though he loved to play with me during the day. I wiped sweaty curls off his forehead, and his shudders left over from his tantrum shook me, as if I'd been crying, too. I'd tried to put him down on his bed next to Lucas, his older brother. Andy wouldn't let me. Every time I leaned over the bed, he whimpered and clutched my shirt even tighter. So I carried him back to the living room and whispered into his sleeping ears that everything was OK, that everything would always be OK. And Andy went on sleeping on my lap as though he believed me.

His soft weight filled my heart with a kind of warmth that blankets never had. I stared at the top of his head, at his white-peach scalp. I loved this little kid with a fierce, kill-anyone-who'd-touch-him love. Like a mother, I guess. Like Mrs. Donaldson loved him—right through the stinky diapers and the snot he wiped onto my sleeve. Like a mother.

I went on rocking as much for me as him, for the sweetness of holding something I loved tight against me.

I still hadn't moved by the time the Donaldsons arrived home. Mrs. Donaldson gathered Andy and carried him off to bed. I watched her while Mr.

Donaldson counted out my pay. My arms felt light and empty. Funny how such a small body could be so heavy.

When Mrs. Donaldson came out she asked, "Do you want me to walk you home?"

"No, thanks." I took the wad of bills, which would be more than I charged—it always was—and stepped out. My walk home took me past all of two apartment doors to ours.

"That poor girl," I heard her say to her husband. "Who knows what—"

I slapped the metal railing so it clanged my protest and jammed my key into the lock. But I made myself settle into silence as I opened the door. No sense waking Mom if she was asleep.

Once inside I stumbled and knocked something over. I squinted, waiting for my eyes to adjust. Our apartment is never fully dark. The streetlights wouldn't allow that. Pretty soon I saw potted plants lined up under the living room window, all but the one I'd bumped. I straightened it, and the scent of rosemary clung to my fingers.

"Aidyn?" Mom called.

"Yeah, it's me." Who else would it be?

"What time is it?"

I clenched my jaw. Not this again. Couldn't she turn her head a bit to see the clock? I tiptoed to her door and leaned on the frame. "It's a little after eleven."

"So it's not Thursday yet?"

I turned away. Why should I talk to someone who didn't know what day it was? I wanted to run back to the Donaldsons', but I didn't belong there.

"Don't go yet." Mom sat up, wrapped her arms

around her legs, and started to rock, not slow and gentle like she just wanted to visit, but hard and jerky. I swallowed.

"You have school tomorrow." She didn't say it like a question, so I didn't answer. What could I say? Yeah, I have school. It's the middle of the week, middle of October. They haven't abolished school yet, far as I've heard. But she probably wouldn't understand the sarcasm. I nodded.

"You going to be able to get enough sleep?"

Oh, the concerned parent, now? This was rich. This was the woman who woke me, screaming, stumbling around, falling on her face, six nights out of every seven. And tonight she had to *worry* about me?

"I'm fine," I lied.

She stopped rocking, her fingers plucked at the sheet wound around her legs. I backed farther away.

"Wait," she said. "I quit drinking."

"Yeah, I noticed." No bottles had tripped me in the living room, just plants. No booze puddled on the coffee table or soaked into the matted carpet. She still stank, though, not of vomit, but she had that sour stench of old scotch oozing from her pores.

"Three days," she said.

She must have lost count. She had never, since my father died, gone three days without drinking.

"Good for you," I said. "Enjoy yourself tomorrow."

I bolted for my room. Even though she called my name again, I slammed the door behind me and locked it.

Why had I said that? In just a minute she'd get it, and she'd come in here screaming, tearing me apart. She'd say I had no faith in her. I wouldn't support her.

That it was all my fault she couldn't stop, and I was just going to push her back. So she might as well get herself a drink right now, because she couldn't stand how depressed her only kid made her.

But silence swallowed the apartment. I waited, unmoving, on top of the covers, and listened. The mockingbird that kept me company when I couldn't sleep seemed stuck on three different songs. Usually his repertoire had more variety, but it still sent me to sleep.

The next morning I sat on the cracked plastic seat of the kitchen chair and watched my mother. I hated the last few hours of her sobriety, because all I did was wait for everything to go wrong again. Every time she said anything—*anything*—I'd think, OK, what's that really mean? Do I have another hour, or ten minutes, or what?

She left for work before I left for school, and as she walked out she told me, "Have a wonderful day."

I gaped at her back as she ran down the metal staircase. For a minute there I thought she'd meant it. Really, Mom? A wonderful day? Well, you have a sober day. Oh, yeah, that would have been a great answer.

School that day stretched across a couple of centuries, and each time I thought of Mom, my stomach twisted. Only once did I manage to forget about her, when Jackson, the cutest junior at our school, walked past me and gave me his lopsided grin. My stomach lurched then, too, but it felt good, until I remembered who I was and who he was. A boy like Jackson Killain does not see a girl like Aidyn Pierce. A boy like that does not smile at a girl like me. I'd made a mistake.

And there went my stomach again.

After school, I did my homework, halfheartedly, as usual. Maybe less than halfheartedly. As the time for Mom to get off work crept closer, I watched the clock. *Now* she'd sign out and tell Toni, her boss, good-bye. *Now* she'd throw her purse into the car and start the engine. *Now* she'd grip the steering wheel, clenching her teeth. Would she come home, or stop by the liquor store first? And if she did that, who knew how late it would be before she got home, or if she'd get here at all.

I didn't expect to hear her key in the door a few minutes past five. I nearly threw up when I did.

She pushed her way in. She'd moved the plants before she left for work, so they weren't in any danger, but she lugged several more in her arms, along with her purse and a paper bag.

I hate to see my mom carrying brown paper bags, as if their rough color could disguise the shape of the bottle inside.

She glanced at me, set the pots on the floor, then had to squat as one tipped. She righted it and straightened, all the while guarding that bag. Right. Must have her favorite booze inside. She wouldn't take such care of it otherwise.

"You didn't make dinner, did you?" she asked.

"No." Why should I? She barely eats when she's drinking, and who cares what I eat?

"Good." She set the bag on the table and ripped it open. Smells wafted out, and she unloaded Chinese tangerine chicken, chow mien, and egg rolls. I swallowed.

"Let's eat. I'm starving." She held out a plastic fork for me.

I shook my head. "I'm not hungry."

"Why not?" She stood there holding that stupid fork, frowning at me like she didn't get it. I started to gather my homework, but I knew I couldn't get the papers into a single pile before I lost control. I jumped up and bolted for my room.

"Aidyn."

I turned.

The corners of Mom's eyes pinched and the bags underneath darkened. "Come on. I bought it 'specially for you."

"I said I'm not hungry."

"Chinese is your favorite."

How on earth could she remember that? She'd spent years forgetting me, forgetting everything she could about me. Why pick Chinese food to remember?

I stumbled to my room.

"Aidyn!" she called.

I slammed the door and curled on the bed.

I heard her voice again, saying, "This is Beth." A phone call, then. I wrapped my arms around myself. As tightly as I gripped, I couldn't stop my chest from heaving, couldn't stop the shaking or the tears or the fear. Mom on the phone meant danger, anger, and drunkenness.

She'd start out calm, but as she and her drinking buddy, Joyce, talked, her volume would rise. She'd slur, pause to take a drink, laugh, drool into the mouthpiece.

I pulled the pillow over my head so I wouldn't have to listen as she dragged the both of us back into her gnawing abyss.

A few minutes later, she tapped on my door. "I'm going out for a bit," she said. She sounded nervous.

OK, this was it. Going for the booze. No more waiting.

She pushed open my door and I sat up. "You're not driving, are you?"

She threw me a puzzled look. "Of course I'm driving."

"So tonight when you call me from jail, what am I supposed to do? I'll end up in foster care. They'll put me in a group home. I'm too—" I shouldn't have, I *knew* I shouldn't. The last time I'd smarted off, I'd won myself a split lip, but I said it anyway.

Mom flinched. "I'm not drunk, Aidyn." She didn't add the word "yet," but it hung in the air waiting to be heard. "I'll be home in a couple of hours, OK? Don't let anybody in."

Who would I let in? I didn't have any friends, not that she'd know. I'd lost my best friend almost four years before and had barely talked to anyone my age since.

Shannon, the betrayer, had once been my best friend. Now I still see her at school, but I swear she doesn't see me. She senses me, though, like a black, oppressive presence. She looks at me from the corner of her eyes, but I know guilt blinds her from seeing me head on.

No, I'd just become invisible, in the way of all friendless outcasts. My fault...my mother's fault. Who cared? Fact: you can't see outcasts unless you are one.

After Mom slammed the door on her way out, I crumpled on the couch, telling myself scary stories. Like riding in the car with Mom when she couldn't keep it in one lane. Or what would happen if I answered the door to a police officer and then spent the rest of my life knowing my mother had killed someone with her out-of-control driving. Knowing it

was my fault.

I stumbled to the front door and leaned against it, crying. Because you know what? After just three lousy days, I'd started to hope. How stupid is that? I threw my glasses at the wall and slugged myself in the face, trying to beat my hope to death.

I even tried to pray, but I could only get as far as asking, *why?* And I knew He wasn't going to give me an answer.

When I finished my tantrum, I had to find my glasses, straighten the frames, and wash my face. And nothing had gotten any better.

After that I pulled out every towel in the house and spread them on the couch and the floor where she was most likely to puke. If I didn't want the job of picking vomit out of the carpet, I had to protect it before she got sick on it.

Mom walked in a few minutes past nine. She smelled more like stale perfume than booze. Her clear eyes took in the towels and she scowled. "I haven't been drinking."

"OK." I folded one and put it on the coffee table. But the way she watched me made me leave the rest.

"Aidyn, we need to talk."

I said, "OK" again.

She sank to that one bare patch of carpet and reached for another towel, rolled it on her lap and bent over it, like she sheltered something precious. "I went to the church," she said. "They hold AA meetings there."

Alcoholics Anonymous, really?

"It's good. It's really good for me. I think it's going to be...I think." She stopped and met my eyes. "I mean, I can't do it for myself. I know I need...I need help, you

know?"

I watched her, frozen.

She went on. "The thing is, it's not guaranteed. I mean, I can't—" She snapped a thread from the towel and twisted it around her fingers. "You're not making this very easy, you know."

"I didn't even say anything!"

She shook her head. I guess even keeping all my thoughts to myself is a sin. "OK, on Saturday afternoons they have meetings. Alateen. I want you to go."

"To a *meeting*?" And what good would that do, besides announce to the last few people in the city who didn't already know that my mother drank?

"Aidyn, this isn't easy. This is the hardest thing I've ever done, I swear. You could at least—" She stopped and put her head in her hands. "Dear God, help me."

Who was she asking? And anyway, what could I do? No matter what, it would be my fault.

And like she knew what the truth was, she told me a lie. "It's not you, Aidyn. It's me. I know that. It's just, you don't know how many times I've told myself, 'Today. Stop drinking today. You can do it,' and then you'd mouth off to me, or I'd start thinking about your dad. The next thing I'd be halfway down the bottle, and I wouldn't even know how I got there." She swallowed, rolled the thread into a ball. "Even if...Aidyn, even if I can't do this, you need to go."

"What? To some meeting where kids sit around and talk about how much they hate drunks?"

Mom jerked, but she met my eyes anyway. "If that's what you need to do, yes."

"Boring." Frightening.

She stood up, and I could tell I'd gotten to her. A fierce, angry triumph filled me, speared through with ribbons of fear. Now what? But I already knew.

Mom rubbed a shaking hand over her sweaty face. "I'm going to Mass on Sunday. I want you to go with me."

Another hit, and this one made me bleed. "It's terminal, isn't it?"

"What?"

"You were at the doctor's a couple days ago. You're gonna die, aren't you?"

"I'm fine."

"How many months have you got?" We'd been through all this with Dad.

Mom sighed. "Sorry to disappoint you, Aidyn, but I'm perfectly healthy."

"He didn't check your liver, did he?"

She swore at me and spun around, her arms flailing, like she needed something to hit. I backed against the wall. "Can't you just—" She stopped, gripped her own shoulders, closed her eyes. "It's not your fault," she said. "I can't deal with this anymore tonight."

Neither of us said good night, but that wasn't a habit with us, anyway.

After I crawled into bed, I heard her through the wall, talking again. She and Joyce could go on for hours, though she usually kept the marathons for Friday night so the hangover wouldn't keep her from work. Toni had threatened to fire her; even I knew that much. But tonight—well, tonight, she needed to talk about her rotten kid.

Joyce could get a lot drunker than Mom before they both passed out. I'd seen it, all those lovely times

Joyce came to our place so Mom wouldn't be leaving me alone and neglecting me. I'd be cleaning up after Mom or covering her with a blanket wherever she'd passed out, and Joyce would manage to slosh another mouthful from the bottle. I could just imagine what I'd find in the morning.

Mom must have had a lot to say about me because the conversation went on and on. Blah, blah, blah.

I didn't ask her to think about me!

It wasn't my fault.

I listened to her voice, the long pauses in between. I hated the pauses most, because at least when she was talking, she couldn't be drinking. But the pauses grew, so many, so long, that I finally cried myself to sleep.

2

Saturday Mom started nagging about the stupid Alateen meeting before I rolled out of bed. I staggered after her to the kitchen and watched her slug down orange juice like it was her favorite scotch.

"It'll help both of us if you go," she said. Crooked strips of sun pierced the closed blinds and stabbed her face. But the dim room shadowed her eyes, and I figured they had to be bleary and swollen. I grabbed the cord and snapped up the blind so light flooded the room.

Mom winced and covered her forehead with her hand. "It's at three this afternoon."

I slammed my glass onto the table and juice sloshed over my hand. "Did you even think I might have something to do then?" I shouted and struggled to lower my voice. "I'm supposed to babysit."

"Aidyn." Mom waited for me to look at her. "I didn't know. You don't need to change your plans. There's always next week."

"What if I've got something next week?"

"You make it sound like I'm forcing you." Mom sighed and shook her head like she thought she could convince me how wrong I was. "You have to be ready for it, or it won't help." She took another drink and her hands shook. She *had* been talking to Joyce last night, and now she had a hangover.

Yeah, and she probably had vodka in that juice.

“Just like me.” Mom’s voice came soft and patient, as though she loved this deep, touching subject and knew I cared just as terribly about it. “If I hadn’t been ready to quit, I wouldn’t have been able to.”

Just like her—she thought I was like *her*? “I don’t have anything to quit!”

She raised one eyebrow at me, as though I had no idea what I was talking about.

“I’m not the one who drinks!”

“I know.”

“*I’m* not the one who throws up because I drink. *I’m* not the one who forgets stuff like birthdays and promises and field trips and teacher conferences because I drink. *I’m* not the one who pretends to quit and then lies and *lies*.” I jumped up and backed away, my fists pressed to my stomach.

“I did quit.” Mom stood, too.

I backed farther away. “You’re lying.”

“When did you think I was drinking?”

“Only last night,” I snarled. “Only when you were talking to Joyce. Only when you weren’t talking I knew what you were doing.”

“I was talking to...I was listening, Aidyn. That was my sponsor.”

“Was she drinking, too?”

Mom gasped. “Of course not! I swear. I haven’t had a drink since Sunday.”

“You’re lying!” I flailed my arm, grabbed something, and threw it. Orange juice sprayed my mother and the kitchen. “I hate you!”

She put her hands over her face, and I did the same, cowering, sure last Sunday would happen all over again.

“Oh, dear God,” Mom whispered. But I knew she

wasn't talking to me. For once, she was really praying.

I lowered my arms. She slumped against the warped counter, juice dripping off her chin, and she shook. "I don't need this, Aidyn. I'm having enough trouble trying not to drink."

We stared at each other, blame separating us.

"I'm sorry." Mom swallowed. If she went on swallowing her anger, she'd make herself sick. "For what I said, and for Sunday." She looked away.

"I thought you blacked out again."

"I wish I had." She looked up at me then. "Aidyn, I am so sorry."

Her tears mixed with the juice, but she still didn't wipe her face. I grabbed a towel. Too rough, I dragged it across her face until she snapped it away. I didn't care. She must be half drunk already, slobbery, sentimental, maudlin. She took the towel from me and clutched it to her chest. "Did I hit you?"

I shrugged. "You were too drunk to hurt me much."

"You have no idea how sorry I am." She turned, wiping the sticky juice from the table and cabinets. I leaned against the table and watched her.

She tossed the sopping towel in the sink. "I was out of control, and I hurt you, and I'm sorrier than you can imagine."

Mom never talked this way. That meeting must have affected her. That or the booze. Maybe she could hold it better now, but she still had to be drunk.

She pointed to the juice pooled on the edge of the sink and dripping to the floor. "You're out of control, too."

I snorted. "I'm not the one with the hangover."

Something sparked in her eyes. "For once, neither

am I.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re already half bombed.”

“No, I’m not.” She shook her head. “I know I’m shaky. I’m getting rid of years of booze. I can’t expect to feel great overnight. But I *am* feeling better.”

Something hot and acid crept up my throat. She always said that. She’d stumble through the door, shaking with need, then she’d hug that first glass and say, “This has been the worst day, but I’m feeling better.”

Now she held out her arms like she wanted to hug me, too. I purposely flinched, but it didn’t work that time. “I’m sorry I hit you, baby. I know you hate me because I didn’t love you enough. I’m sorry I was always drunk when you needed me.” She gave up reaching for me. “I’m so tired of being sorry.”

“I have to get my shower.” I turned away, as much to hide my shock as to leave. “And then I have to go to the Donaldsons’.” I glanced around. I tried to keep the kitchen clean, though how many times had I spent all my energy cleaning up her mess instead? “If you’re so wonderfully sober, maybe it’s time you took over the housework.”

Mrs. Donaldson opened the door when I knocked. “They’re still napping. You can take them to the park after they finish their snack, but be home by five. We’re going to my in-laws’ for dinner.” She made a face, and I laughed. She hated taking her kids there, but it was family so she felt obligated. “My husband should be home by then so you won’t have to stay.” She bustled off to her room to finish getting ready.

I sat at her kitchen table with my history book. I had to study for a test on Monday, but the words went blurry. I yanked off my glasses and rubbed away the