

"The emotions are on mark
in this compelling read."
~Romantic Times

THE KEEPER'S SECRET

AN INSPIRATIONAL
ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

PENELOPE MARZEC



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Penelope Marzec

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Dedication

For Bobbie L.

With grateful acknowledgement to Trooper Michael
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What People are Saying

“Marzec continues to deliver thought-provoking inspirational romance. This suspenseful tale of betrayal and murder lead both the hero and the heroine to examine their spiritual lives. The emotions are on mark in this compelling read.” ~ Romantic Times Book Review by Faith V. Smith

1

Bryce Johnson stood at the back of the church and searched through the pews for any sign of Evie St. Marie. When he didn't see her, he breathed a sigh of relief. Sliding into the last row on the right side of the middle aisle, he nodded back to the other congregants who turned and smiled. Then he tried to relax. Being a state trooper caused him to be hyper-vigilant all the time, but once a week in church he struggled to let his guard down. It used to help him let God in, though lately God seemed more distant than ever and focusing on faith became almost impossible. He blamed much of it on Evie St. Marie. One month ago, she claimed her husband Jack vanished after taking a walk on the beach at night. Bryce didn't believe her.

Colored rays of light streamed through the stained-glass windows. The cool air inside was a blessing as the heat of the June day outside in the small bayside town of Shucker's Point, New Jersey, became unbearable.

Closing his eyes, Bryce considered offering up a brief prayer, but it would do no good. He needed answers about the disappearance of Jack St. Marie and he wouldn't get any from the Lord. The scientist may have drowned if he walked out into the bay, suffered a

heart attack, and went under. But Jack St. Marie's doctor doubted that.

Bryce rubbed his forehead as a dull ache wove through it. Until now, Shucker's Point never had a murder on the record. It seemed the small town's perfect record ended. Two months before Jack St. Marie's disappearance, Bryce answered a call and found Evie holding a gun aimed at her husband.

The gun in her hands was registered to Jack St. Marie, but it had no ammunition in it. Jack took the whole episode lightly, refusing to press charges against his wife. Still, the incident stuck in Bryce's mind. His natural impulse was to draw his own gun that day. He might have killed the girl he wanted to marry in high school. The pain in his head intensified.

Opening his eyes, he shrugged his shoulders and loosened up some of the tight nerves in his neck. Evie St. Marie slipped in the side door, and all Bryce's efforts to unwind vanished.

What was she doing here? Evie didn't *belong* in church. In high school she seemed determined to break every rule for the fun of it. How dark had her soul become?

A sudden spark of anger flared up when Bryce remembered the time he'd tried to stop her from driving around the flagpole in front of the school in one of her friend's cars. She'd nearly ran him over, but she'd apologized to him after the incident. He'd stared into her blue eyes and nearly melted on the spot. He'd drawn his hands into fists to control his surging emotions. Yes, once Evie St. Marie could tie him

around her little finger. He'd kept her secret all these years, but lately it weighed on his conscience.

Bryce clenched his jaw. He would never let his heart rule his head again. Especially since he'd seen the blind fury in her eyes when she'd held the gun level with her husband's heart.

The hymn started and everyone stood up.

Bryce fumbled with the hymnbook. Evie's presence rattled him so much he couldn't find the page, though he knew the hymn by heart. It was an old one. He enjoyed those the most. The hymns sung in church stayed with him all week long. He would catch himself humming the melodies of the songs at odd moments. While he didn't pray anymore, the hymns still comforted him.

...though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see...

Sinful! Evie could be the worst of sinners. The service continued but Bryce didn't hear a word. His thoughts continued to circle around Evie. She sat seven rows ahead of him. He only caught a glimpse of her brown hair, caught up in a clasp that kept her curly tresses anchored at the base of her neck. Bryce knew each strand would be fighting to break free because everything about Evie could never be restrained.

Maybe she assumed showing up in church would help to remove any doubt from her, but she would be wrong on that account. The data Bryce already gathered should be enough to convince the grand jury this case needed a trial despite the absence of a body.

The last hymn happened to be one of the newer praise songs, which jubilantly welcomed everyone in

the church. Bryce disagreed with that idea. He grew warmer as he seethed inside.

The service ended. Bryce opted to skip the doughnuts and coffee in the basement. He hurried out the side door. The majority of the parishioners would rush downstairs to see if they could snag a jelly doughnut before anyone else.

The bright sunlight nearly blinded him when he stepped outside. He reached into his pocket for his sunglasses. Thanks to his job, he could count on getting cataracts before he hit forty. Even so, until Evie's husband vanished, he felt satisfied with his work.

"Bryce!"

He stiffened when he heard her coming up behind him. She was the last person he wanted to see, but it would be impossible to avoid her. A few other church members also decided to skip the calories in the basement and were strolling out to their cars. In a small town, nobody missed anything. If he ignored Evie the news would spread everywhere.

He turned around, but the shock of seeing her up close hit him like a blow to the gut. He barely caught himself before he sucked in his breath with surprise.

"I'm so glad you didn't leave yet." The same warmth mingled with a touch of honey lingered in her voice. That hadn't changed. However, by the looks of her, she might have a conscience. There was no denying she'd changed drastically within the span of a few months.

"I don't have time."

"I won't take a minute. I...I need some extra help at

the lighthouse. I only have the two volunteers, but this is the beginning of the busiest time of the year. I know you have contacts with whoever is in charge of some of those kids who are required to do community service, so I hoped it would be OK for one of them to serve out their sentence at the lighthouse."

He scrutinized her from head to toe as she talked. A touch of concern mixed into his whirling emotions. From his estimation, she'd lost fifteen or twenty pounds. Her dress hung loosely about her shoulders. While she still appeared tan, the hollowed-out cheekbones and the dark smudges beneath her eyes gave her a sickly appearance. Did grief cause the change or fear of retribution?

A sudden wave of regret washed over him. For a moment he didn't see her as she was but as she used to be. The memory flashed through his mind, sparkling with more brilliance than the noontime sun over the waves on Delaware Bay. Always irrepressible, she used to make him laugh until his sides ached. He thought about the way her hair felt when he'd touched it so many years ago. He wanted to touch it now.

Shocked at the way his mind wandered, he crossed his arms over his chest and shoved wayward ideas away. He narrowed his eyes. "There's one local teenager. Seventeen. The judge isn't giving him a second chance and he knows it."

"That's good. He won't want to make any more mistakes."

Her smile reminded Bryce of a rainbow in the sky after a shower, spanning the bay from one end to the

other. The sight of it sent a fine steel blade twisting through his heart. *Why does she still have that effect on me?* It made him both furious and depressed at the same time. "He has no respect for authority," he warned and caught a glint of neon in her blue eyes.

The seventeen-year-old boy stood as tall as her. Though wiry, Bryce didn't doubt the gangly kid could easily overpower her. Especially since a small squall on the water might blow her away. "And he comes from a dysfunctional family."

Her smile faded as a wistful expression stole across her features. "We're all traumatized in one way or another." She cast her gaze downward.

Immediately, Bryce's fury threatened to erupt. She put on such a perfect act, as if she was the one wronged by Jack's disappearance! *Traumatized?* Bryce wanted to shout. *How did you kill him?* Instead, he glowered at her, barely reining in his contempt. "I can't make any promises about getting him to work for you."

"I understand." She reached out to touch him but he dodged her outstretched hand and turned away.

With a few long strides, he reached his car. Getting in, he turned on the air conditioning to full blast and pulled out of the church lot.

But Evie made her way through the graveyard in the back of the church. Again Bryce felt that punch in his gut because he knew exactly which graves she would be seeking out. Her mother and father died when she was only fourteen.

An ache erupted in his heart and settled in like a

solid lump of stone. He knew far too much about Evie St. Marie. In fact, he knew too much about everyone in Shucker's Point. Never live where you work, some cops said. Until now, that maxim hadn't mattered at all to Bryce, but lately he understood the reasoning behind it. In their small town, gossip flew about like the salty brine in the wind, but there were secrets that most people would rather die than reveal. He kept Evie's secret all these years. But how long could she hide the truth about her husband's death? Would he be able to uncover enough evidence to have a jury convict her?

Would he get over the pain after that?

~*~

Evie stood in the shade of the scrub oak in the graveyard next to her mother and father's headstone as Bryce's car pulled out of the church's parking lot. With his crew cut, the dark sunglasses, the taut line of his mouth, and his powerful physique, he stood every inch the imposing trooper he always wanted to be. Even out of uniform, he held himself rigid and inflexible. He always saw things as either good or bad. There could never be any shades of gray in between with him. Yet, he still made her heart skip a beat.

However, seeing him today made her feel even more miserable because she knew exactly what he thought of her. The condemnation in his eyes chilled her. Once, his soft brown eyes looked at her with adoration, and now they appeared as cold and hard as

bronze.

She feared asking him for help, but she needed it desperately. Next weekend, Shucker's Point would host the Clam Festival and busloads of tourists would arrive at Slater's Light, since the lighthouse was always a part of the festival activities. She had to get ready for that and she didn't know how she would accomplish all of it.

Despite her pleas, the commissioner of the park system never found enough funds for a second employee. Evie relied on her senior citizen volunteers but they were unable to do much physical labor. Lately, rumors circulated that the lighthouse might have to close due to budget cuts. She suspected that wasn't completely true. The commissioner was uneasy. The story about Jack's disappearance received national media attention.

If the park system closed the lighthouse, what would become of her and Glynis? Evie loved being a park ranger. It was her first job out of college and the only one she really wanted. Once she gave birth to Glynis, it became even more important for her to keep the job due to her rocky marriage. Besides, Glynis, at the age of four, still required a lot of mothering and being a park ranger gave Evie more flexible hours.

In addition, as the ranger at Slater's Light, she got to live in the old keeper's cottage. Everything about the situation worked until Jack's disappearance cast suspicion upon her. Sometimes, she wondered if her husband devised this situation as a more inventive way to torture her.

"My goodness, why aren't you enjoying those doughnuts in the church?" Jessica Olsen stood in Evie's path. The retired schoolteacher volunteered at the lighthouse every weekend and had become Glynis's favorite babysitter.

"I don't have time for doughnuts," Evie sighed. "Glynis will be done with her Sunday school class in a few minutes and then I open up the lighthouse at eleven. There's a lighthouse challenge going on today so I will be guaranteed plenty of visitors."

"Dear me. How could I forget about that?" Jessica clicked her tongue. "Must be one of those 'senior moments' I have now and then. Sure hope I don't lose my mind completely. It's tough getting old."

"You're not that old," Evie scolded. Jessica treated her like a daughter. She missed being someone's daughter since the death of her parents. Jessica held a special place in Evie's heart because she was responsible for getting Evie to accept the Lord.

"I'm as old as the hills!" Jessica laughed. "And I've got the wrinkles to prove it."

"Those are laugh lines. You told me so yourself."

Jessica had also taught Evie to be a better mother. The gray-haired woman raised three children of her own. However, her adult children had moved out of state and she only saw them and her grandchildren a few times a year. Jessica was happy to become a surrogate grandmother to Glynis.

"Some days they are laugh lines; today they are wrinkles. Now I'll take you inside and watch you eat a doughnut before you pick up Glynis. Take it from a

wise old woman, a doughnut a day keeps the wrinkles away." Jessica wound her arm through Evie's and they walked back to the church.

Evie didn't want to eat anything, but she'd humor Jessica.

"I saw you talking to Bryce Johnson," Jessica said.

"I asked him if he knew of any young teenagers assigned to community service. I'm hoping I can get someone strong enough to be pulled around by that old lawn mower on the lighthouse property."

A frown creased Jessica's forehead. "Those kids are usually tough to handle."

"I was one of those kids, so I understand them."

"Oh, you weren't like *those* kids. You were a bit mixed up and angry because you were missing your parents and your relatives didn't help the situation... Well, they weren't very Christian, were they?"

Evie shook her head. "They believed Sunday was a day for sleeping in."

"Seems a lot of people feel that way today." Jessica let out a soft sigh.

"True." Evie shrugged. "Anyhow, I can't blame my relatives for the way they treated me. I was an extra mouth to feed in addition to being a handful of trouble." A cold stone settled in her stomach. Without Bryce's vow of silence she would certainly have gone to jail. Now due to that incident and the one where Bryce found her aiming a gun at Jack, he believed the absolute worst of her.

Despite the heat of the day, the icy fear that gripped her since Jack's disappearance kept her

shivering.

Jessica drew her closer and patted her arm in comfort. "You were really hurting down deep inside. I knew you in the second grade and you were such a sweetheart. Smart as a whip, too. Do you know I always suspected that Bryce Johnson was in love with you? Goodness, he stared at you all the time even as young as he was then."

Evie stopped walking as her throat tightened with emotion. "That man is barely civil to me. He thinks I murdered Jack."

"Now, now dear. I'm sure he must remain unbiased and investigate the situation from all angles."

"I think..." She shuddered. "I think Jack left me for some younger woman. But he wanted to make it look as bad as possible for me."

Jessica gave her arm a squeeze. "No more of that kind of thinking. I've been praying for you and so have a lot of other people. You concentrate on taking good care of yourself and your daughter. Let the Lord be in charge of your worries."

"I keep trying, but it is eating me up. I hoped that despite Jack's attitude, Glynis might have a good stable home life with me. She needs speech therapy and I keep thinking it's all my fault that she has the problem—"

"Don't blame yourself for that," Jessica interrupted. "Glynis went through a series of ear infections when she was learning to speak."

"But I didn't know what the problem was at first. I should have gotten her to the doctor sooner."

“Glynis will be fine unless you don’t eat and get enough rest. Your daughter needs a healthy mother, so make that your goal.”

Evie swallowed hard. “You’re right.”

“Of course, I am. I can’t help myself when it comes to giving advice. All teachers are a bit bossy.”

“I noticed.” Evie gave Jessica a wan smile, ignoring the painful knot inside her. Without Jessica and her other friends, she didn’t think she would have survived the shock of Jack’s disappearance. Everyone at church helped her, and showed true compassion. All except Bryce who would never trust her after what she did in high school, but especially after he saw her standing at the door of the cottage with a gun in her hand and hatred in her eyes.

Evie could barely swallow as she thought about that horrible day. Jack’s anger frightened her. As usual, it came about due to some task she’d failed to do for him. But Glynis was sick that day with another ear infection and needed to see the doctor. That did not matter to Jack. He taunted Evie and knew exactly which buttons to push. He told her he would have her declared an unfit mother and Glynis would be taken away from her.

For the first time ever, he threatened to slap Glynis around, give her some bruises, and then blame the beating on Evie. He laughed and boasted that the authorities would believe him because he was a well-respected scientist. He kept goading her until in desperation she’d grabbed his gun. It wasn’t loaded. She had no idea where he hid the ammunition and she

didn't care. Jack laughed at her. Evie told him that if he laid a finger on Glynis, she would hit him with the gun. That's how distraught she had been.

Jack timed his call to 911 perfectly.

Bryce arrived in time to see Evie hysterical with the gun in her hand. Bryce aimed his gun at her. The fear of that moment still chilled her.

Jack smiled when she screamed and dropped the gun.

And Bryce believed every word of the story Jack made up.

~*~

Bryce needed to make only two phone calls to get permission for that seventeen-year-old kid to complete his community service project at the lighthouse. Three hours later, he glanced over at the sullen boy sitting in the passenger seat of his unmarked car. Tommy Lansdowne's jeans had more perforations than a target on the firing range. While ripped and worn jeans could be bought at high prices in trendy stores, Bryce doubted the kid had any intention of being in style. Tommy, his mom, stepfather, and stepbrother lived in a rundown four-room house on the edge of town. The place deserved to be bulldozed.

Bryce met the stepfather two years ago. He clocked him going ninety miles an hour late at night on the highway. The guy thought he could get away with the ticket and plead not guilty. Bryce sure hoped Tommy was smarter than his stepfather.