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KEEPER
OF MY
HEART

THERESE TRAVIS

Keeper of My Heart

by

Therese Travis

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Keeper of My Heart

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Dedication

For Bill, for believing, thank you. For God. As
always, the glory is His.

Praise for *Keeper of My Heart*

“A charming tale, refreshing to the soul, with
characters that spring to life.”

~Pamela Griffin, three time ACFW novella award
winner

Chapter One

Haven Falls, VA, 1930

A festive atmosphere permeated the Saturday afternoon crowd waiting for a seat at the historic Waterfall House, just as it had when Rebecca Gresham used to come with her father. Some of the fierce tension in her back relaxed. As far as she could tell, no one pointed her out or leaned close to a neighbor to spread gossip about her. Of course, she couldn't see anything but fuzzy shapes any farther away than the end of her fingertips, so she couldn't be sure. But she hadn't done one scandalous thing in almost a year. People had to have found someone else to talk about by now.

Rebecca wouldn't have gone to the restaurant at all if her best friend from school hadn't written, begging Rebecca to meet her. Samantha hadn't been able to give a definite date as to when she'd arrive, just a general idea. Rebecca looked around and couldn't spot Sam's familiar figure. She sighed and wished everything didn't blur a few feet away from the end of her nose.

With her arms crossed over her cloth coat, she looked at the cobbled courtyard. How long would she have to wait? Within sound of Haven Falls was not a bad place to spend half an hour, but not in such a crowd. She'd get the waiter's attention, ask if Samantha left word for her to join them, and take herself off.

Still, she appreciated the fine blend of good food, fresh air, and living water. Her stomach growled in the first real hunger she'd felt in ages. If Samantha didn't show up, perhaps Rebecca would stay and treat herself. In the long year since her public shame, she hadn't eaten a restaurant meal, had barely poked her nose outside her house. Although unready and unwilling to face those who would remember her failure, she had forced herself this far. Now, something in the autumn-scented air bade her stay. That, and the conviction that no one noticed her.

When she glanced through the open restaurant door again, she saw a fuzzy Thomas, the sweet old waiter who had been her father's closest friend, wearing what she knew had to be a smile so brilliant she could have warmed her hands by it.

"I've got a single chair. Anybody here by their lonesome?"

People shifted and answered in the negative. Rebecca hoped he wouldn't call attention to her sorry state, but he crooked a finger at her, almost bouncing in delight.

"Rebecca, looks like you're all alone?"

She hunched her shoulders then nodded and squeezed through the line. Others made a path for her without grumbling, and Rebecca remembered how Thomas managed his customers, able to bestow favors without arousing resentment. But did he have to announce that she'd come by herself? She raised her voice, to prove she wasn't unpopular. As if anyone who knew her wouldn't remember how "popular" she'd become after she inherited her father's money. "Samantha thought she might come into town today—"

"Ah, no, she and her fellow were here last night. He couldn't wait, got that job in California so they couldn't stay. She mentioned you, of course, said I

was to give you her love and tell you to look for a whole slew of letters from her.”

Rebecca’s mouth twitched. She’d already received hundreds of letters, and while they were almost as good as hearing Sam’s voice, they couldn’t replace her warm hugs. With California so far from Virginia, Rebecca had no idea if she’d see her rambunctious friend again. She shrugged and followed Thomas to the table, stopping when she saw a dark-haired man already seated there. Rebecca didn’t ever want to deal with strangers again.

“Thomas, no, I don’t think—”

The seated man looked up. Shock pulsed through her, silenced her words, and left her shaken. His brown eyes seemed to promise a trustworthy friendship. Stunned, she shook her head and blamed her poor eyesight.

Thomas beamed at her, and she dragged her gaze away from the friendly face to listen to the old man. “It’s all right, Becca. I already asked him if he minded sharing, and he doesn’t. You know how I like to see all my tables full up.” Thomas pulled the empty chair out. “Here’s Rebecca,” he told the man, and another flash of hazel-brown and a reserved smile greeted her.

Once she sat down and pulled her cloche off, Thomas whipped out his order pad. “You know what you want already, Becca? And you, sir, you’ve had plenty of time to study that menu, so you must’ve decided.” He gave the man a piercing stare. “You never said your name, sir.”

Rebecca pursed her lips to keep her smile to herself. Poor stranger. Here was Thomas, acting as though only the man’s bad manners kept Thomas from knowing everything about him.

“Adam McCormack.”

At least he didn’t give some snide answer or try to put Thomas in his place, as if someone as special

as Thomas had a “place.” A memory of Crispin and the way he’d talked to and about her old friend rose, but she squelched it before it could overtake her and lead her down another melancholy path. Crispin was gone, and good riddance, but he’d taken an enormous amount of her trust with him.

“Well, Mr. McCormack, if the lady is ready to order, I’ll just let her go first.”

Mr. McCormack nodded.

“The house special,” Rebecca told Thomas.

“House special it is. Always recommend that.” Thomas scribbled a line. “And for you, sir?”

The stranger glanced at Rebecca before he said, “The special sounds good to me.”

“Excellent choice.” Thomas collected the lone menu and nodded. “Excellent, you mark my words.”

After he left, Rebecca tried not to meet the man’s eyes. Behind him, a vivid watercolor painted by a local artist depicted the famous waterfall, but now that her eyes rebelled against focusing on anything not right in front of her, she could barely make out the familiar scene. Memory more than sight showed her the thundering falls, mist rising from the tumultuous base. Every bit of decor in Waterfall House Restaurant reflected Haven Falls, from strings of silvery beads meant to look and sound like plunging water, to the wildflowers in bud vases, to the miniature cascade that burred over rocks just inside the entrance. The sound relaxed the patrons but didn’t overpower their conversations.

Waiters bustled past with trays of steaming meals and customers milled about, but Rebecca couldn’t see faces clearly enough to recognize anyone. She needed a visit to the eye doctor, but the thought of trusting her weakness to a man, doctor or not, left her terrified.

“Is he always so approving of his customers?” Mr. McCormack asked.

Rebecca jerked her attention back to her tablemate. “Thomas? I suppose so. He’s very friendly, you see. He knows people. Understands them.”

“But he doesn’t know me.”

Rebecca’s automatic defense of her old friend surfaced. “Perhaps not, but he’s worked here going on forty years. He’s developed a knack for figuring people out at first meeting.”

If only she’d believed Thomas when he first warned her about Crispin. She pushed that reflection into the overflowing bin of untouchable memories.

“I see.”

Rebecca narrowed her eyes. “If you don’t trust his taste, why did you order something he recommended?”

The man laughed. “Because you ordered it, and I figured if one of the locals didn’t have to look at the menu, it must be good.”

Rebecca stared down at her fingers, busy rolling the edge of the cloth napkin. “I take it you’re a traveling man.” Crispin had claimed to be a salesman. She shouldn’t have come here tonight. Everything reminded her of the man who’d betrayed her, and she wasn’t up to facing the memories. Not now, not ever.

“Yes, in a way, I am.”

“Why did you stop in Haven Falls? It’s off the normal route.” Ha. Now she knew all the questions she should have asked, too late.

He looked away as if seeking his answer from thin air and gave Rebecca a chance to view his profile. A Romanesque nose, deep-set eyes, fine lips—Rebecca caught herself up short. She didn’t need to get lost in some good-looking stranger’s attributes. Not again. She was not going to do that again. Crispin had left her with enough pain.

"I've been looking for members of my family." The soft words took her by surprise. "My mother's sister was supposed to have lived around here."

"And you haven't found her?"

"I have, in a way." Again, he looked across the restaurant dining room.

Rebecca studied the lines of pain etched around his eyes. What caused them?

"I learned that she died without leaving any children, so my search is ended."

"Oh. I'm sorry. It sounds as though you didn't know her." Rebecca cringed inside and wondered if she'd infringed on his sorrow. She wouldn't welcome anyone, much less a stranger, prying around her past.

"No, I didn't. She and my mother corresponded, but circumstances kept them from visiting after my mother moved away to marry my father."

The ache in his face touched her once again, but it intrigued her as well. "And yet, you grieve for her."

"For my mother, more than my aunt." He closed his eyes. "Mother passed away last year. I have no family now."

Rebecca nearly patted his hand and soothed him with "there, there," but she snatched her sympathy back just in time. He was a stranger, after all. He had no business eliciting her pity and she had none in giving it.

"Here you go, two house specials." Thomas deposited identical steaming platters of roast chicken, steamed vegetables, and a crisp baked potato before each of them.

Rebecca thanked him with more gratitude than a waiter merited. She watched, amazed, as Mr. McCormack folded his hands and bowed his head. She'd learned to say grace before a meal, but she'd seldom witnessed anyone offer it in a restaurant. Setting her jaw, she waited for the man to finish

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before she took up her fork. She'd been raised a Christian, but she and God had had a serious falling out back when Crispin left her, broken and humiliated, and she hadn't tried to make up with Him yet. Sometimes she doubted she ever would.

Chapter Two

Adam stared at the girl across from him, appalled at his own unwarranted speech. He had never been so free with personal information, but this Rebecca seemed to draw it out of him like sap from a maple. And since he'd shown her his true self in the shape of a prayer, she'd withdrawn from him. Had she something against Christians?

Still, the food was good, as he'd suspected it would be, and once he left this town, he would never see her again. If he left.

He glanced up from his plate, unable to keep his gaze off Rebecca's face. Something attracted him to her, though he wasn't sure what. Certainly, she possessed a gentle beauty, and though she didn't flaunt it, he noticed her sweet features. But he'd stopped in this town because of family, not because he thought to meet a potential sweetheart. And yet...

"Tell me about Haven Falls. I remember my mother's stories about growing up here, and something about the place feels like home."

She shrugged. "It's small. Close-knit, for the most part. Not many people pass through, and not many strangers settle here, either. When they do, they're like as not to have some nefarious scheme, but we're not as gullible as we look."

He raised his eyebrows at her bitter tone. "I take it someone has tried it?"

"Yes." She looked back at her meal but didn't

take another bite.

“I suppose if I assure you I’ve no wish to bilk any sweet old ladies out of their pensions, you wouldn’t believe me?”

“I suppose if I assured you we’ve no sweet old ladies on pensions in Haven Falls, you wouldn’t believe me, either.”

He laughed. What refreshing, if acerbic, humor. “I suppose we both must be unbelievers, then.”

The look that crossed her face reminded him of her reaction when he’d prayed. Perhaps God had brought him to this small town for a reason.

“Rebecca—I’m sorry, Thomas only gave me your first name. I’m not trying to be forward with you.”

He waited, and after a short silence, she said, “Gresham.”

“Miss Gresham, then.” But the cold name would never fit her in his mind. “I see you’re displeased to share a table with me, and I apologize for agreeing without making sure it wouldn’t offend you.” He held up a hand as she made to interrupt. “But strife won’t season the meal, so perhaps we should finish it in silence?”

What had made him say that? He’d set himself up to never hear her voice again.

She stared at her plate, unmoving for what seemed ages before she looked up. “I’m sorry. You’ve given me no reason to distrust you, and I shouldn’t have said that. Please forgive me.”

“I’ve nothing to forgive. Why don’t you choose a topic to discuss this time?”

She gaped at him. After another long silence, she said, “Well, that effectively chased every coherent thought from my mind!”

He chuckled. “I suppose it did. I seem to say the wrong thing each time I open my mouth.”

She smiled. “No. You have to admit we weren’t given a proper introduction. Conversation is bound

to be difficult.”

He nodded. “The food is as excellent as I expected.”

“Of course. This is the best restaurant for miles around.”

“Do you need anything?” Thomas approached the table to refill their water glasses and brush a few crumbs into his palm. “Everything going well for you two?”

Adam studied the twinkle in Thomas’s eyes. He seemed interested in far more than their meals. Rebecca assured Thomas that they needed nothing, and he went away, satisfied.

“He’s a bit like a father to me,” she explained. “Since my father died two years ago, he’s given me advice and—” She didn’t finish.

“He seems to be a very kind man.”

She nodded.

He ate a few more bites before asking, “As tomorrow is Sunday, I wonder if you can tell me about the local churches. I’d like to attend services.” He watched to see her reaction, but after a moment’s hesitation, she listed three.

“Thank you,” he said when she’d finished. “Which do you prefer?”

Again, she hesitated. “My father and I always went to the church on the corner of Main Street and Tenth.”

Her tone warned him to ask no further, and he obeyed, only offering a silent prayer for her heart to soften. Even if her clear eyes and ready smile weren’t meant for him, he could still pray for her.

A sense of dread filled Rebecca as she gave Mr. McCormack directions to the church. A part of her felt compelled to offer to accompany him the next day, but she squelched it. God wasn’t getting back into her good graces through a stranger’s smile.

They finished the meal with less and less talk. Once she left the restaurant, she'd never see him again; why worry about entertaining him or leaving him with a good impression? She thought he must feel the same; his gaze wandered around the room as if looking for someone more interesting. She felt small and overlooked and, for a moment, resented him. But better ignored than duped, she decided, and pasted on a distracted, aloof expression to show him she had no desire to attract his attention further.

Thomas brought their checks, and she managed to wrest hers from Mr. McCormack's hand. "I'm sorry, Mr. McCormack. Thomas, don't be silly! We shared a table, nothing more." She stood, clutching it to her chest as she dug in her handbag for payment.

"Old fingers. I meant to give you yours, Becca. Say, I heard you two discussing services. Why don't you show the gentleman the way? It's a bare five blocks and such a nice night. A bit of a walk would do you both good after cleaning your plates like you did."

Rebecca gaped at him. What was wrong with Thomas? Did he want to set her up with another stranger? Of course, he seemed to like Mr. McCormack. He'd never cared for Crispin and had been quite vocal about his dislike.

"That would be wonderful, if you don't mind, Miss Gresham. A walk through the town with someone who knows it well will go a long way to helping me learn my way."

Rebecca barely managed to keep from glaring at either of the men. "All right." She would point out the church to him, she decided. Better now than for him to ask her to show the way in the morning when she would have no ready excuse not to attend.

This Mr. McCormack seemed to have no problem following Thomas's suggestions, but the last

thing Rebecca wanted was to visit the site of her last confrontation with God. She'd had it out with Him, not out loud but still, right there in the church the Sunday after she discovered Crispin's true character. She'd railed at Him, called Him names that even now brought a rush of heat to her face, and promised she'd never again set foot inside His house.

Now, trust Thomas to attempt to manipulate her into going back. Thomas, who really did look on her as one of his children, who cared almost as deeply as her own father had.

"Finish telling me about Haven Falls," Mr. McCormack said after half a block of silence. He followed her down the steep track that led into the town square. As it leveled out, they passed a grocer hauling his wares in from the sidewalk and a group of men gathered around someone's smoking car.

"You should ask Thomas. He knows more about this place than anyone. And I should warn you. He sees himself as one of the town fathers, not just mine. Not in the sense that he helped to establish it, but in that he watches out for so many of us. Nothing gets past Thomas." Her tone roughened. If only she had remembered that a year earlier.

"Is that so?"

Something in his tone caught her attention, and she glanced at his face. A faint smile tipped the corners of his mouth, and the light of the sunset, just beginning to color the edge of the clouds, tinged his face with a much rosier glow than the artificial light inside the restaurant had done. A dimple shadowed one cheek, a little to the left and below his well-shaped nose, and his dark hair gusted across his brow as the wind picked up. His hazel eyes met hers, and she looked away, as angry with him as with herself or even Thomas. How dare he infuse her heart with even the slightest interest? She set her

jaw, determined she would take him to the church and desert him there. She would get a twisted sort of satisfaction from that, even if he never realized the rebuff.

“What do you know of the veterinarians in town?”

She glanced at him. “Animal doctors? Nothing, really. We have two or three, I think.” She allowed a group of children to walk between them before adding, “The one closest to my house is about to retire. Are you looking for one? Dr. Amotto can’t do much with large animals; he prefers small dogs, though that hasn’t brought him much business.”

He shook his head and moved closer. “I’m a veterinarian myself. I’ve made a study of other practices as I’ve traveled.”

“So you can go back to yours with a slew of new-fangled ideas?”

“Mine? Oh, my practice. No, I sold it before I left and put my equipment in storage. I had hoped to find a place to set up once again.”

She refused to look at him, only glared at the sunset spreading its spilled-paintbox array against the mountains. Why had she told him Dr. Amotto wanted to retire? He might think to take over that business and then be as close as two blocks from her home every working day.

She would not dwell on that. This Mr. McCormack—no, Dr. McCormack—would be long gone before she needed to worry. Instead, she concentrated on the fresh breeze brushing her face and on the passersby. She greeted two women she’d known in school and ignored their appraising looks when they noted the man with her. Dr. McCormack tipped his head to them and graced Rebecca with a smile as she glared at him. She faced forward again, her chin high to prove to him she had no concern for who he acknowledged.

His next words startled her. "You mentioned that this is the church your father attended. I take it you're not a member?"

"Not anymore." Rather than choose boorishness over an explanation, she pointed to Dr. Amotto's business. "There's where you can get information on animal doctoring. Of course, he won't be open tomorrow. And I'm sure you'll be gone by Monday."

"I'm not."

Interest, and now hope, burgeoned in her heart. Why did she let men get to her like this? Though to be honest, only Crispin had ever come as close.

She set her jaw. She'd only just met Dr. McCormack, and she wasn't about to fall for him. She'd sworn off men when she'd sworn off God, and some stranger was not about to persuade her otherwise.

Within a few moments, they reached the block from where she could point out the church. "I must get home."

He nodded, turning as if the building held little interest. "I'll walk you safely there, as a small thank you for your courtesy."

"No, you don't need to." Rebecca hated the panic in her voice.

He looked down as if studying the contrast of his rich brown coat with the mottled grays of the walkway. "I understand. Well, I'll walk with you until we need to take different ways. I'm staying at Mrs. Pierce's boarding house. Do you know it?"

Since it had been across the street from her home her entire life, Rebecca knew it well. She hoped he couldn't read her face. "Yes. In fact, we'll pass it." And then, when she'd seen him safely inside, she'd circle the block so as to come home from the other direction, so he wouldn't realize how close she lived.

"I hope you don't have much farther to go

beyond Mrs. Pierce's?"

"Oh, no, not far at all." Not even with her detour.

"I gather Haven Falls is fairly safe even after dark."

"Yes. We have a little crime but not much, and I know almost everyone here. I'm safe from them." *But not from you, Dr. McCormack. You're a stranger and far too attractive for my peace of mind.*

Adam studied the young woman as she marched him toward the boarding house. He felt like a schoolchild in trouble, hauled to the principal's office. What had he said? He thought back over their stilted conversation and settled on the church. She wasn't a member, now. She'd left it for some reason, something that made her angry, if he read her actions correctly, and didn't want anyone to remind her of it. He sighed. From the moment Thomas introduced her to him, he'd been entranced. In his travels, he'd met many beautiful and alluring women, but never one who wedged her way into his interest as Rebecca had.

"Here you are." Rebecca stopped and pointed to the building across the street. He sighed to see the familiar sign swaying in the breeze. The boarding house, however nice Mrs. Pierce strove to keep it, had little to attract him to it, and his walk with Rebecca spoiled him for a stuffy evening inside. He glanced at her as she pulled a few strands of loose hair from her eyes and tucked them into the barrette fastened at the side of her head. Her blush made him realize he'd been staring.

"I have to go back—the other way. It was nice to meet you. I'm sorry about your aunt."

Her goodbye sounded rehearsed, and he noticed her gaze flicker to the other side of the street twice—three times—before she stuck out her hand. He