

# KEEPER OF MY HEART

---

BOOK 2 THE IMMORTAL KEEPERS

HM HODGSON

Copyright © 2021 by HM Hodgson

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons—living or dead—is coincidental and not intended by the author/s.

First edition 2021.


Ebook ISBN 978-0-6451286-5-9

Print ISBN 978-0-6451286-6-6

Edited by Sarah Proulx Calfee, Three Little Words Editing

<https://threelittlewordsediting.com> Proofread by Jo Speirs,

Nurturing Words <https://www.nurturingwords.com.au>

 Created with Vellum

“**W**hat the fuck?” Nate Jones said as he spun the

steering wheel of his unmarked police car into the Mountain View Road strip mall.

His headlights picked up a gleaming trail of shattered glass all the way to a jagged hole in the window of the cafe, the last business in the row of the normally neatly maintained shopfronts.

Nate’s hands clenched into fists. No one messed with his town. His people.

He cut the engine and headlights, his magic allowing him to see even in the dark surroundings. He eased into the predawn winter air, briskly rubbing his hands. The tang of wattle and eucalyptus carried to him on the sharp breeze.

Shit, it was cold. And quiet.

These shops wouldn’t open for hours yet, and this early on a Friday morning, the only action was blocks away over on Main Street. Not that the action was much, given Warragul was a country town, and it was bloody early.

A scraping sound echoed behind him.

Nate spun, and pain punched through his skull, a sharp crack renting the quiet. Something thudded to the ground.

He pushed hard through his core, managed to hold his balance, glimpsed a man rushing at him, fists raised.

Nate pushed out with his magic—a complicated, delicate sleeping spell raced from his lips—at the same time as he raised his fists. Ducking the incoming blow, he sent a hard, fast jab at the man. His fist connected at the same time as his spell.

The man dropped to Nate's feet, still but for the rise and fall of his chest with each breath. He was maybe midtwenties. Not a local. His eyes were open but unfocused, and he blinked slowly, sleepily. No longer a threat.

A high-pitched ringing echoed through Nate's ears, and he gingerly ran a hand over the back of his head. Nothing wet. But it hurt. Bloody hell, did it hurt.

Wincing, he shook his stinging knuckles, then grabbed his phone and called the station.

“Yeah, Kat. It's Nate. Can you head over to the Mountain View Road shops? I accidentally stopped a break and enter on my way in. Nah, I'm okay. Yeah, yeah. Laugh it out. But the guy got a lucky drop on me, so now *he* needs a pickup, and I don't want to leave the shop for anyone else to walk in and take what they want.”

Nate hung up to the sound of Kat's ongoing laughter.

But he didn't mind. He was more relieved that his spell and fist had handled the situation together. Cohesion between his magic and human reactions was seriously important—a lack of balance could impact either or both.

Not good for a cop.

He went to check on his attacker when the ringing in his ears grew louder.

Maybe that's why the connection happened. Hell knows, he'd been keeping it at bay for years now. But there, in the empty

car park, buffeted by the icy breeze, a wind-whipped knock echoed at the door to his mind.

Even with his attention diverted, he didn't risk answering the rap-rap-rap. But his focus was off because he left the mental door ajar.

And then the wind pushed through. And the World Tree entered his mind. It was the softest mental touch he'd ever experienced. Yet totally overwhelming. Thousands of years of wisdom, of experiences, filled his consciousness. Suddenly, the Tree filled his vision, a waning moon at its back.

A sharp chill racked Nate's skin right before the moon disappeared and the World Tree caught fire. It burned and burned till its incredible trunk, branches, and leaves were nothing but ash.

The cries of hundreds, thousands—millions—of people echoed through him as their world was lost.

Over the ashes, a figure, shrouded in a black hooded cloak, stepped down from an altar of mangled bleached bones.

Even as the ashes reached up in hesitant fingers to grasp at the cloak for help, the figure crushed them under a blood-red boot.

The image changed.

The World Tree stood as it was today. Its mighty branches swiveled like arms, reached out toward him, its leaves bent their tips in beckoning waves. The wind echoed his name as it whistled through the leaves.

*Nathaniel.*

It wanted him. Wanted him to become a Keeper.



The clock had just struck nine o'clock when Sim Morris charged through the hotel's wide lobby and veered into the public bar.

Frank was behind the counter, serving a mix of late breakfast coffees and early start beers to three regular customers, all sitting on the high stools at the bar. She said a quick hello to her regulars and gave a fast wave to Frank as she sailed past.

The regulars called out, "Hi."

"Welcome back," Frank said as he dried a glass with a white cloth almost the same color as his hair. "Time for a coffee?"

Oh man, she'd kill for a cup of coffee. "Thanks, but no can do," Sim said. "I've got to get to the accountant."

"No worries. And Nate stopped by while you were out. Said something about having a hearing this morning, and he'll come back later."

A surge of warmth flooded her belly, but Sim resolutely ignored it. She tightened her bag over her shoulder.

Detective Irresistible, with his rumpled blond hair, piercing blue eyes, and dimples—*dimples!*—was off-limits, even if her body was having a hard time accepting that order. Nate was a friend, had been from the moment she'd come to the country town of Warragul in Gippsland, Victoria, a year ago. And that was where she was keeping him.

"Got it. Thanks, Frank."

She forced Nate from her mind, ducked through the connecting door into the commercial kitchen.

"All good, Stu?" she asked her short-order cook and allround kitchen hand.

Stuart looked over the stainless-steel counter and gave her a thumbs-up. He had his wireless headphones in as he cleaned up the breakfast equipment. She gave him a thumbs-up back and kept going through the kitchen to the next connecting door and

into her office. She dropped her purse onto the desk and picked up her phone.

Damn it. What had started as a good day had officially taken a wrong turn. She was late. She hated being late. The impulse to just sit, okay, grab a coffee and *then* sit, hit her hard.

But there was no time for that. Sim straightened her shoulders, pulled on her braid. Okay, her hair was still tied back. She was good to go.

She dialed her accountant's office.

"Good morning, Ellison and Tyndall; how may I help?" said a man's cool and professional voice.

"Hi, Gary, this is Sim Morris from the Grand Hotel in Warragul. I have a meeting with Ms. Ellison at nine, but I'm running a bit late. I have to grab my paperwork, then I'll drive right over."

"Well, Miss. Morris, as it's just gone nine, and Ms. Ellison has another appointment at nine forty-five, you'll have to reschedule."

Sim winced, but she'd dealt with plenty of hard-asses in her time in hospitality. "Not a problem. Let me know when she can see me next, and I'll be there."

Minutes later, Sim ignored the urge to crash the phone back on the desk. Damn it. She'd specifically put this morning aside to get her bookwork up to date, and she'd had some questions for her accountant.

She tugged again on her braid, blew out a short hard breath.

Sim could run the operation of the pub just fine, but the financial stuff was still tricky, and she needed to concentrate to avoid making mistakes. She'd even put Tara into a rare day at childcare so she could focus on the numbers.

And four-year-old Tara had not been happy about it. Her angel had turned into a demon as soon as Sim went to leave. She'd clung to Sim's legs and yelled, screamed for Sim not to go. It had taken two of the childcare staff members to unwrap her baby's arms. And then the tears had started— great boulders of devastation that had rolled over the round cheeks, past the completely turned-down mouth.

No way Sim could leave Tara like that.

So she'd cuddled her close, and eventually, Tara had let one of the older staff take over the cuddle duty. Even as she'd walked away, Tara's hiccups had sent shards of pain through Sim's heart.

And now she'd missed her appointment.

Damn it. Sim sighed, dropped her head into her hands. What the hell had she been thinking? She was a server— sure, she'd even managed a café back in the city, but now she'd gone and purchased an old hotel, was actually an owner and manager. Biting her lip, she shook her head. She must've been loco.

But that's what you get when miracles happen, and you win the lottery.

With just over a million dollars in hand, Sim had suddenly been able to look after her family. From the moment Tara had come into the world, Sim had wanted to live somewhere her baby could grow up, could grow *into*.

And now she had the Warragul Grand Hotel. Not that the building was all that grand anymore—but it had been, once upon a time.

She was going to make the old girl a beauty again, eventually. And become part of a community in a way she'd never been before. She *could* do this. *Could* be a successful businesswoman—and not just because she'd won some money.



She'd make this business work because she was smart enough, capable enough, to do it.

Sim took another breath, lifted her head. Repeated her mantra. *You've got this. You're going to be fine.*

She just had a lot to learn.

The enticing scent of coffee drifted through the air, followed by the hum and whirr of the steamer out front. Her mouth watered.

A knock sounded at the door to the office, and Frank walked in holding a steaming mug. "Figured if you were still here, you'd want one."

Sim almost groaned. "You're an angel, Frank Williams."

The older man smiled, the wrinkles around his eyes scrunching up.

"What happened? I thought you had your meeting?"

Sim sighed over her coffee. "I did. Only Tara wouldn't let me go, so I was late. And of course, Ellison had another meeting booked after mine, so I've had to reschedule.

Damn it."

Frank gave her a crooked smile.

"Why don't you take some time for yourself? Stu and I have the place covered, and the brekkie crowd's gone. There are only a couple of rooms to do—we can look after them. Go enjoy your coffee. Take a moment to stop."

Sim smiled up at Frank. He'd been a godsend since she'd taken on the pub, always willing to help, and the locals loved him, given he'd known most of them from birth. She leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"You're amazing, Frank. But no, I'll do the rooms. Like you say—there's only two, and you do enough around here without carting linen up and down those stairs too."

“But—”

“Nope.” She held up a hand. “But once I do the rooms, then I’ll take that break. If you’re looking for me, I’ll be out back picking up some winter sun for a few minutes. Any more and I’ll turn into one giant freckle.”

After she finished with the rooms, she ducked up to the second-floor residence where she lived with Tara and her mother, June. She grabbed the book she’d been dreaming of having the time to read and a coffee.

Within minutes, she was downstairs and out the back door, inhaling the sweet air of the winter morning as she looked around her back lot.

Her heart swelled. This was something she was proud of, even though she’d had a lot of help.

This area had been unused when she’d moved in—half concrete, half dirt. The only saving grace had been an old lillypilly, its branches covered in a tough cracked bark that weathered the Victorian climate well. Now, broad leafy grass spread all the way to the back fence. Timber picnic tables sat beneath the lillypilly, and solar lights hung from the big branches. At night, it was beautiful out here. Almost magical.

*Uh-uh, not that word.*

Images from two months earlier—of the bonfire up at Nate’s family farm flittered through her mind, of Nate, his tall frame silhouetted against golden tongues of fire as the wind raced to howl around them, of his brilliant blue gaze holding hers.

Shivers raced over her skin as if she were back there, and the heat and energy pouring off him was a cord reeling her into him. Enticing her into his hard, wide chest. Closer to the tang of his scent.

Sim moistened suddenly dry lips. Uh-uh, no more Nate thoughts, and definitely no thoughts about the ... the *things* she'd seen that night.

Nope, she was here for some peace. Not the niggling, eerie sensation that something existed outside of her already hectic world.

She forced her focus back to her garden. Right now, those picnic tables invited *her* to take a seat. She slid onto one, looked up at her old building. Her heart filled.

Damn, but she loved this place. The worn timber handholds, the wrought iron balustrades. She'd even planted a climbing rose on the building's corners out here. Couldn't wait to see leaves and blossoms cover the building in time.

The redbrick building was built at the start of the last century. After she'd purchased the hotel, she'd only had enough money left to replace the most damaged carpet and fix the safety issues.

As hard as the work was, as steep as the learning curve was, it was hers. Theirs—Sim, Tara, and Sim's mother.

Inhaling deeply, she closed her eyes. Lifted her face to the sun. Welcome warmth settled on her skin, seeped into her pores. Contentment eased through her.

Then her phone played a tune. She took one more moment to enjoy the sun, then with a sigh, opened her eyes.

But before she could pick her phone up, a cloud passed over the sun. Goosebumps pricked over her arms.

Suddenly something icy and razor-edged speared into her chest, shoved away the warmth of the sun. Her breath whooshed out.

She gasped, tried to inhale, but then a huge punch of pressure smashed into her. Her body flew back off the bench.

Cool grass cushioned her fall. Clear sky filled her view until a dark silhouette moved into her vision and blocked the sun.

Sim tried again to draw a breath, but her chest was too tight, too compressed ...

And the world went dark.

