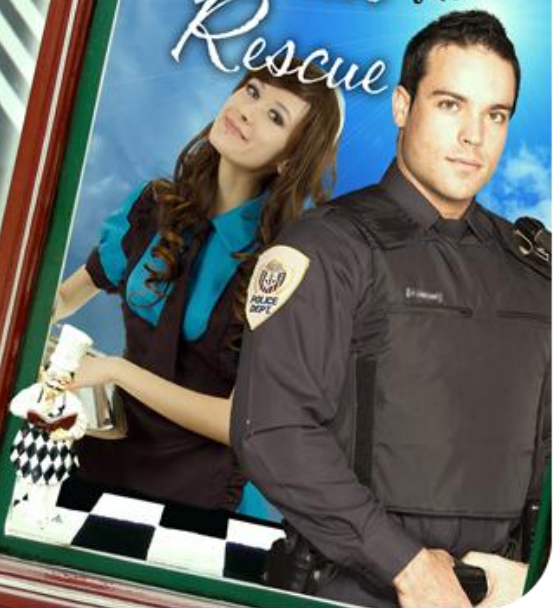


MARIANNE
EVANS

Today's
Special
Romance Platter #1

Search and
Rescue



Search and Rescue

Sal's Place #1

Marianne Evans

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Search and Rescue

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Dedication

I can't begin to express how much it means to me to share my writing ministry, but I'm not in it alone. I have a tremendous cheering squad right there with me, so a huge, and public thank you to: Steve, Beth, Dan, Mary, Mom...and Dad. Dad, I know you're smiling wide at this one from your armchair in Heaven.

Praise for Marianne Evans

You can always count on an emotionally engaging story when you pick up a Marianne Evans book. Her characters draw you in and you feel so a part of the story that your life, while you're reading, becomes a part of theirs. ~ Sherry Kuhn, Reader

Her stories evoke a powerful response. She writes with a level of heart and Christian substance that puts me in mind of Karen Kingsbury. ~ Rochelle Sanders, Reader

Hearts Communion, Woodland Series ~ Evans' latest is a heartwarming, as well as heart-wrenching romance. Readers will empathize with the heroine's struggles. Her final acceptance of the hero's love and God's comfort is remarkable. ~ Susan Mobley, RT Book Reviews

Hearts Key, Woodland Series ~ I loved this story and I'm looking forward to seeing what Ms. Evans writes next. ~ Maria, Night Owl Reviews Top Pick

Hearts Communion, Woodland Series~ Marianne Evans' writing style really pulled me in with this story. I will certainly be looking for more of Ms. Evans' works. Highly recommended! ~ Brenda C, Reader's Favorite Book Reviews

Other Titles by Marianne Evans

Woodland Church Series

Hearts Crossing
Hearts Surrender
Hearts Communion
Hearts Key

Single Title

Devotion

1

He will command His angels concerning you—to guard you in all your ways.

Psalms 91:11

“Hey, Sal, Mrs. Peterson’s sending back her order of spaghetti.” Jennifer Foster put a touch of spin on the rejected plate when she slid it across the metal dividing shelf between the kitchen and service areas. “She says she wants her noodles al dente.”

Sal Cocossa scowled. He planted his fists on hips covered by a speckled white apron. “Seriously.”

“She called it a pile of mush, but go easy. She’s having a bad day. Mr. Peterson’s back in the hospital.”

Sal’s expression immediately eased. “Is it his heart again?”

Jennifer nodded.

“So, you talked to her?”

“For the past couple minutes. Poor thing. She’s pretty much a wreck about it.”

“Fifty years of marriage tend to act on a person that way.” Sal gave a nod and returned his attention to the stove, sliding and jiggling a sauté pan full of caramelizing green pepper and onion, a generous heap of crumbled, homemade sausage, and diced garlic cloves. “I’ll take care of the replacement. Thanks, Jenny-Lynn. You’re good people.”

Jennifer adored sixty-year-old Salvatore Cocossa,

III and let him know it in the way she fluttered her lashes and smiled into his eyes. “Thanks, boss. Let’s give her *al dente*...and hope she doesn’t *dente* her teeth when she crunches into it.”

The quip inspired a spontaneous burst of Sal’s rich, chesty laughter. The reaction warmed Jennifer through.

A moment later, Sal called out the new spaghetti order then scooped up a whisk and lifted a metal bowl, scrambling up some eggs, back to work in the kitchen—master of the legendary diner, *Sal’s Place*.

Sal’s Place was an old fashioned, family-owned diner located on the Detroit riverfront. The restaurant had claimed its spot on the roadmap of Motown ever since the roaring twenties. Back then, Sal’s great-grandfather had opened and operated the restaurant. In those days, the juggernaut that was the industrial age had lifted Detroit to greatness and times weren’t just good—they were spectacular.

Jennifer’s glance touched upon black and white photos that chronicled the history of the diner. After ten years at Sal’s Place, she knew them by rote. The visual timeline crossed the walls like a history quilt. Her subsequent glance through the windows of the eatery told a much sadder story. Decayed buildings were barely lit against a fast descending early-autumn evening. Intermittent headlights from infrequent cars flashed against dingy bricks; some of the masonry was decorated by graffiti. To say this proud, tough city had fallen upon hard times would be gross understatement.

Battling a swell of sadness, Jennifer pulled away from the blight and returned her focus to the warm, bright atmosphere of the diner. She thought about Mrs.

Peterson and sadness turned into compassion. The food at Sal's Place was top rate; Jennifer knew there was nothing wrong with Sonya Peterson's order, but she also realized the overburdened, elderly woman had suffered much lately. Sonya needed understanding—and a healthy dose of good fortune. Jennifer knew the feeling, so she championed the idea of cutting this warmhearted regular a bit of slack for ornery behavior.

Awaiting the new plate of food, Jennifer took in the crowd. She checked the lineup of full tables on this Saturday night. There were plenty. Then she automatically tracked back to the front door, where a line of customers were queued to be seated. The place was jumping.

She took note of two uniformed men standing at the head of the line. Glimmering silver chest badges identified them both as members of the 3rd Precinct of the Detroit PD. They were vaguely familiar—semi-regulars. Being a hometown girl, Jennifer knew there was no more gritty form of serve and protect imaginable. Crime prevention—in downtown Detroit? Her problems amounted to nothing by comparison to what these men must witness each day. Her pulse quickened in automatic reflex. Talk about nobility in the face of daunting odds.

Besides, what was it about a handsome man in a uniform?

One in particular captured her focus and held it fast. He was the taller one, who sported the stripes of a Sergeant, short raven hair and a strong, solid build. He looked her straight in the eyes then quirked his lips in a deliberate form of acknowledgement. The reaction left Jennifer to wonder if he hadn't somehow heard the

exchange with Sal.

Her brows furrowed and the striking, mahogany-eyed man gave her a nod. Something in the undercurrents of that innocent moment left Jennifer acutely aware of herself. She flushed head to toe beneath his lingering regard and promptly looked elsewhere. Snagging a coffee pot—decaf due to the time of day—she prepared to make the rounds and return for Sonya’s plate once Sal called her table ticket. It’d be best, she figured, to move on to more worthwhile pursuits than ogling.

Still, while she moved through the restaurant, Jennifer watched Celia, their long-time hostess direct the two officers toward a booth. Sure enough, they ended up at one of Jennifer’s stations. Expectation danced along her nerve endings. Determinedly she doused that reaction and clutched the handle of the steaming glass carafe. Heat stemmed from nothing more than a temporary flame of infatuation, she thought, a headiness derived from the impact of a crisp, royal blue uniform. Or, maybe it was all that tough muscle juxtaposed against those warm eyes and that soft, knowing smile...

The officers sat. When the object of Jennifer’s admiration happened to look her way, she caught her breath and spun away fast, grateful she didn’t believe in mental telepathy. Strangely enough, though, being watched by the man left her feeling as though she had landed dead-center of VIP radar...if only for a moment or two.

Well, she thought ruefully, so much for not ogling.

Carrying a pair of large, plastic glasses full of iced water, Jennifer checked in at the four-top booth where the officers had been seated. She settled the drinks and prepared to take their food orders. The first thing the dark-haired one did was direct his gaze to her white, plastic nametag. Then, that captivating gaze lifted to capture hers.

“Hi. I’m Ryan Douglas.”

His accompanying smile stilled thoughts of a food order and shot a rich dose of *thrill* straight through her bloodstream. Her typical foray into the world of customer chitchat sputtered to a stop as well. He extended his hand in greeting. Inwardly Jennifer folded shyly. Really—why did the simple gesture, the idea of a touch—send her heart into an uneven rhythm? Why was he even doing such a thing?

She took hold of his hand and tried for the easy smile she delivered to patrons hundreds of times a day. Instead, when his fingers closed gently around hers, when the contact lingered, she all but froze, staring helplessly at him while her skin fired up hot.

She snapped to attention just in time release her hold and watch Ryan Douglas’s partner duck behind a large plastic menu wearing a way-too-big grin. She could have sworn she heard him chuckle, too.

Enough was enough. She lifted her chin and propped a hip against the column that framed in their booth. “I’m glad to meet you, Sergeant Douglas. What can I get for you today?” She congratulated herself on grabbing hold of some moxie. She even pulled her order pad and pen from the pocket of her apron, waiting.

“Well, to start with, I’ll take a helping of Ryan instead of Sergeant, along with an appetizer of

question and answer."

Audacious. Jennifer's eyes went wide. She blinked hard and lowered her order pad, once again stunned straight out of her waitress persona. "What? Question and answer?"

Her floundering stirred a playful sparkle in those deep-set, melted-chocolate eyes of his. "Mmm-hmm. Q and A. Tell me—do you prefer Jennifer, Jen or Jenny-Lynn?"

She thrust a hand on her hip and delivered a teasing glower. "So. You *were* eavesdropping."

"So. You *noticed* I was eavesdropping." His low chuckle stroked her inner ear and set butterflies loose in her tummy. "I wasn't really eavesdropping, though. It was more like *observing*." That smooth answer came along with a shrug of his broad, well-muscle shoulders. "Guess you might call it a job hazard."

Outmatched, Jennifer gave up the fight to maintain her guard and laughed. "Well, in answer to your question, it depends on who I'm talking to. Mom and Dad call me Jennifer. Sal calls me Jenny-Lynn because he likes the combination of my first and middle names. I'm Jen to pretty much everyone else."

He pondered that for a moment. "Hmm." He settled his focus on the menu. "I like to be unique. I think I'll call you Jenny. I like Jenny the best."

Something about the deep roll of his voice tripped her heartstrings all over again, so she shifted determinedly and decided to get busy with her job. "Fair enough. Be unique, and feel free to use Jenny any time, like when you're ready to order, for example..."

The playful retort dangled, causing Ryan's partner to sputter against a swallow of water. Ryan grinned. "Jenny, I'd love a regular coffee, black, two Coney dogs

and fries, please.”

“Done. And for you?” She addressed Ryan’s partner.

“The same please, along with a continuing side of sass.”

Jennifer delivered a satisfied nod—then a wink for good measure. “Will do. I’ll be right back with your coffee, gentlemen.”

Jennifer placed the order; all the while, a dreamy sense of pleasure colored her world—and pleasure was such a luxury. A smile curved her lips—one of those wonderful, feminine mystery smiles that stemmed solely from the interaction that had played out just moments ago. A round of playful banter with Ryan Douglas had been enough to prompt a warm glow and a heart dance.

She tended to the drink orders for her police officers then catered to a few of the counter-side customers who lined the front area by checkout.

She rounded the end of the long, bar-style seating area that was dotted by occupied stools, and tumbled awkwardly when a man stepped fast into her pathway. The stranger grabbed her arm and yanked hard, spinning her around to face the cashier—and shield his body.

“OK, sugar”—he hissed into her ear—“here’s what you’re gonna do for me. You’re gonna step up—real quiet—to that cash register. Make just one sound, make just one bad move, and you’ll be missin’ some vital fluids in those veins. *Move* it.”

Jennifer stiffened. Her lungs seized as she grabbed

for air.

His hold went snug around her waist and Jennifer found herself shoved forward toward the cash register. A glint of light on steel hit her vision the split second before the edge of a knife landed against her throat.

Oh, dear God, I'm trapped. Knifepoint...a robbery...God, please, help me!

The plea froze any reaction but terrified compliance. Odors hit all at once...residual marijuana smoke that clung to a grubby, stained trench coat, stale cigarette breath that skated hot and wet against her cheek, the stench of an unclean body.

The cashier, a new girl named Patty DeBussy, looked up, and a few staff members caught on to what was happening. Panic mixed with a need to keep matters as stable as possible for the sake of a crowded establishment. For a moment, Jennifer squeezed her eyes shut, praying for stillness and calm.

"Every bit of the cash, woman." The man's words were a menacing growl. "Right here—right now! You better do what I say!" Jennifer felt an increase in the pressure of the blade against her skin. Her eyes came open and she wanted to retch. "Put all of it into one of those little brown sacks I see right behind you. *Now!*"

The man jerked Jennifer's head back by her hair, pressing the knife just deep enough to ram home a life-threatening intent.

Patty gagged "She's bleeding! Please, don't hurt her! I'm doing it! I'm doing it!" Frantically Patty shoveled her hands into the now open cash drawer and tossed money into a sack as fast as she could. "Please, don't kill her!"

Jennifer's world went into a blinding tailspin. She wobbled. A sting built at the slice point of the weapon.

Spots danced in front of her eyes. Dizzying sickness worked her over, not because the weapon sank deep—yet—but because shock had morphed quickly into the recognition that she might not survive this robbery...even if the man received the bag of money Patty tossed across the counter.

Ryan searched out the face of the pretty young woman who waited on them. Jenny. The name curved through his mind sweetly and prompted a lift to his lips. Jennifer—Jenny—possessed captivating charm and a degree of shyness that intrigued him. Something about her pulled hard against the protective side of his nature, and protectiveness came as naturally to Ryan as breathing.

He found her...and instantly puzzled. All around her, at the cashier's station up front, came every indication of a building commotion. His brows furrowed. Alarm bells clanged through his head.

That's when he saw the knife.

He stood slowly and released a thrumming growl. "Druggies. They don't even respect the site of a squad car parked out front of a restaurant anymore."

Paul whipped his head around, following the direction of Ryan's gaze. He cursed beneath his breath. "Let's move."

"Carefully."

Guns drawn, moving in perfect tandem, Ryan and Paul stalked toward the robber from behind. Customers cut them a wide berth, some stifling gasps, others clutching their throats in wide-eyed alarm. A few of the smarter patrons bolted in the opposite

direction.

“Detroit PD,” Ryan spoke in a loud, brisk voice. “Two guns are pointed at your head. Hurt the woman and you’re going down immediately.”

Ryan’s stance was steady and rock solid. His aim on the perp was true. Taken by surprise, the trembling junkie spun in a jerky manner that further opened a fine line against Jennifer’s throat.

Ryan itched to clobber the man for every bead of blood that dribbled its crimson line over the knife and coated its shimmering surface. Evidently, this reprobate couldn’t afford drugs, food or a shower, yet he possessed a mighty fine piece of metal.

A moment of truth dawned; either a positive or negative consequence would occur. Into that sizzle of time, Ryan braced and prepared for either outcome. His muscles sang with tension, taut and coiled to spring, but his mind remained clear and sharp while he watched the would-be assailant for every nuance...every warning sign and indication of—

In a sudden move the man simultaneously dropped his knife and shoved Jennifer straight into Paul and Ryan’s pathway. She screamed, but before she hit the floor, Ryan cushioned the fall. He grabbed her tumbling body and pulled her in, shielding her as best he could while the robber took off and Paul chased. The two men blasted out the doors of the diner.

Assured of Jennifer’s safety, Ryan tagged her up with Sal Cocossa as fast as he could. Fleeting aware of the astonished, horrified expression Sal wore, Ryan took off after his partner.

Bursting onto the street, he picked up Paul’s trail. He spotted his partner’s charging form easily. He

clicked on the radio unit clipped to his shoulder as he shot a path east along Franklin. "Unit 24 with a 211 in progress at Franklin and Rivard requesting back up. Suspect headed east toward Chene Park."

The footrace was no contest. As Ryan caught up with his partner, Paul closed in on the thief and launched into a perfectly timed tackle that took the man down with a thud. Cuffs were clamped around the man's wrists before he could even squirm.

"No! No, no, no! Don't do this to me!" Their captive shuddered, issuing a pitiful wail. "I got a kid! I got a kid waitin' for me at home! I gotta get to him!"

Ryan's eyes connected to the man and he ground out an ominous sound. "Oh, you better hope not."

The perpetrator-slash-junkie seemed oblivious to the feral reaction. Instead, he nodded his head crazily. "And...and...his mama...she need to get to work, man! I gotta get to 'em. I do! Don't—don't do this! Please listen to me. You gotta understand what happened....I...I need...I needed..." The man sobbed while Paul yanked him to a stand. "There's a guy, he's waiting, and I need it...I need just one last hit. It'll see me through and see me clean. If you hear me for a just a second, I swear to you. I swear—"

"Know what? I have a better idea." Ryan stepped right into the man's space. "You listen to me instead. You threatened an innocent woman's life; you drew her blood while you attempted to rob a diner full of innocent customers. You're headed to jail. No options, no discussions. Furthermore, you have the right to remain silent..."

After Ryan rattled off the Miranda rights, he took custody of a ratted out wallet Paul pulled from the rear pocket of the man's trousers. According to the sparse

information found within, the man's name was Dennis Dellman. A laminated security badge further identified Dennis as an employee of Waste Disposal Services, Incorporated. Beyond that? Nothing much.

Paul informed dispatch of a successful arrest and they escorted the perpetrator to their squad car. Once the man was secured in the back seat, behind a heavy, cage-like shield, Paul's gaze tagged Ryan's over the roof of the car.

"Hey, Ry, I've got this. Why don't you check on Sal and the girl? She might need to pay a visit to emergency."

"I will. See you at Joe Louis Arena after booking?"

Paul smirked. "Yep. Overseeing the orderly exit of ten-thousand or so hockey fans'll be a nice change of pace after this, eh?"

"Y'think?"

Paul shrugged. "I've always been an optimist."

Ryan wanted to offer a droll rejoinder, a smart-aleck remark to further lighten the intensity of the last few minutes. Instead, all he could think was: *Well, Paul, that makes one of us.*

Seated at a tuck-away booth in a peaceful corner of Sal's Place, Jennifer rubbed her throbbing temples and tried hard to tune out the world. Electricity still buzzed though the restaurant. The rise and fall of urgent voices, of dissipating fear, continued to ride through the atmosphere. To Jennifer, that ebb and flow reverberated like nothing more than clanging noise.

Seated across from her in the two-person nook, Sal attempted to move past the hubbub as well. He

gathered her hands in his and squeezed gently. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I feel responsible."

Miserable, Jennifer shook her head. "Don't. That only makes me feel worse, and you don't deserve the burden, Sal. Honest."

Sal slumped forward, leaning his forearms against the table. "In almost ninety-years of operation, we've seen the best and the worst this world can give. Through it all, Sal's Place has only been robbed a handful of times." He harrumphed. "That's a miracle, when you think about it, but the folks who eat here look out for us. They got our back in a way. Still, it don't matter. Still, you take it personal. Know what I mean?" He scratched the back of his head and heaved a sigh that carried with it the weight of the world. "You're supposed to be safe when you're here."

This dear, sweet man had earned each one of the scraggly gray hairs that wound outward from his head. Jennifer tilted across the table so she could peck his cheek. She tried for a smile, but knew it came off weak and tired, just like her demeanor at the moment. "I *am* safe, Sal."

At that moment, Ryan Douglas strode through the doorway. He paused just long enough to scan the crowd until his gaze settled on Jennifer and Sal. Suddenly, she found herself fidgeting. She pulled her hands from Sal's grip and smoothed her fingers against loose wisps of hair, tucking them behind her ears. She settled her hands on her lap, but her fingertips beat restlessly against her thighs.

His presence left her nervous, and unsettled. Dazzled—in spite of it all.

When Ryan arrived at the table, he gave Jennifer's shoulder a squeeze then squatted next to her. "Paul's