

MARIANNE
EVANS

Today's
Special
Romance Platter #2

Beautiful
Music



Beautiful Music

Sal's Place #2

Marianne Evans

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Beautiful Music

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Dedication

To my husband, Steve ~ who fills my life with music,
and my heart with joy. I love you - and I can't thank
you enough for always being in my corner.

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

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

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

Five Stars ~ Reader's Favorite Book Reviews ~ 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, Reviewer

Other Available Titles by Marianne Evans

Woodland Church Series

Hearts Crossing
Hearts Surrender
Hearts Communion
Hearts Key

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Devotion
Finding Home

Sal's Place Series

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A Face in the Clouds

He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in Him. ~ Psalm 40:3

Prologue

“Callie, get out of the bathroom! Come on! I need to go. Now.”

Callie Phillips bit down on her lower lip until a bead of metallic flavor skated against her tongue. Blood. She sat on the commode in the bathroom, tears spilling over her lashes, her head downcast, her eyes closed.

“I’ll be out in a minute, Penny. Give me another minute.” She infused her tone with as much normalcy as possible, but wondered if her sister, who now surrendered the attempts at banging on the door, would buy her acting job. Her effort was hardly award worthy.

“Are you throwing up again? You really need to get to a doctor and get some antibiotics. That bug is kicking you flat, Cal.”

Callie didn’t answer, and Penny didn’t seem to care—instead, she groaned. Heavy footsteps and a door slam later, Callie found herself alone in the house, perched at the precipice of a life-changing nightmare. She couldn’t avoid facing the results of an innocent looking, slim white test stick. A minus sign in the

window and she would be able to breathe again. A plus sign and Callie couldn't begin to consider the ramifications—despite the mounting physical evidence of...

She gulped back the scream that built. A pair of tears dribbled down her cheeks as she reached a trembling hand across the bottle-cluttered sink to grab the pregnancy test. She closed her eyes once more. Before reading the results, she forced air into her lungs.

"Dear Lord," she whispered, "please, please don't allow this to happen. Please don't let me be..." She couldn't say the word pregnant aloud. To do so would lend it too much credence—and power. "I can't do this. You can't want me to do this. Not really. I'm not worthy of a child, and I'm certainly not capable of raising one. Think of the mess I'd make of some poor, innocent life."

The prayer faded on a vibration of helplessness that caused Callie's body to shudder uncontrollably. She looked down, now ready to face the answers.

Trickling tears became a torrent. Two strips were most definitely dissected at the center. Positive. Pregnant. Callie dissolved into sobs that she stifled as best she could while she cradled her head in her hands. It served her right for praying, for trying to approach God. What would He care? After all, she had done everything possible to shove Him away.

Why was she doing this? What possessed her to stop here, at Queen of Angels Church of all places? Driving from her family's home to her usual slate of classes at Wayne County Community College, trying

hard to maintain some semblance of normalcy, Callie became inexplicably drawn to the majestic spires and edifice of the cathedral.

Sanctuary. Perhaps that's what called her. She wasn't much for God, but she was compelled toward the protection of church. The granite building, so strong and stable, spoke to a part of her soul that craved solitude, peace and a place to go still and think.

After all, she hadn't lived a life that featured much in the way of stillness and peace, so she didn't generally spend a lot of time reflecting on circumstances. Doing so only stirred a shameful sense of disillusionment. Still, she needed this time, this space.

Especially now.

Daily Mass concluded as she turned her car into the parking lot, killed the engine, and waited, watching the crowds disburse. Soon, she exited her beaten up, but still functional, old car. She folded her arms against her middle and huddled against a strong gust of wind that blasted inland across the turbulent waters of the Detroit River.

She ignored the way a few of the passersby stared at her in open question, the way a couple of the departing parishioners stole doubtful glances her way as they steered their pre-school aged kids away from her path. Sure, she wasn't dressed for church in her worn jeans and a faded green hoodie that had seen better days. Still, she wasn't that off-putting, was she?

Evidently, she looked as upset as she felt.

She climbed the stairs, pushed open the door and stepped inside. Maybe the reactions she detected were simply misconstrued. Maybe guilt was going to work on her perceptions of everything.

The last few stragglers cleared out while Callie kept her head down and tiptoed down a vacant side aisle. She collapsed onto a glossy wooden pew, tilted her head back and closed her eyes, letting silent tears roll down her face unchecked. The release felt wonderful, and at this point, she didn't care who saw her. She knew, now, why she had come here. She needed to tell God how terribly sorry she was for what she was about to do.

"Hi. I wondered if I could help you."

Callie jumped, eyeing the man who stood at the side of the pew. He waited on her in a calm sense of quiet. The black, priestly clothes, the white-collar, would have intimidated her were it not for the rich, deep gentleness of the middle-aged man's eyes. Part of the bleakness she carried melted away before she could begin to launch a defense or prevent the thaw.

Given the warmth he exuded, a hole in Callie's spirit opened that she couldn't quickly fill or seal. Cracks intensified and gave way. She began to sob in shame, in guilt, and in earnest.

"I'm ruined. I'm...I'm just...ruined."

"No, you're not." He paused, not seeming alarmed by her meltdown. "It seems to me like you've ended up right where you need to be. Don't be afraid. Can you tell me what happened?"

Sanctuary. All over again the word played through her mind—a beautiful, melodious call.

"I've got no one to blame but myself for making stupid decisions right?"

The clergyman offered no answer to her question. Instead, he waited patiently.

"What is it they say about karma? After a while, it catches up to you and all that, right?"

"I don't believe in karma. I believe in the sum of our choices and how we move forward after each experience. Do you want to tell me about yours?"

Callie pulled in a deep breath and her chest trembled. She glanced down at the stone flooring. But then, she looked up, at a crucifix that nearly sent her to her knees. "I used to be faithful about church, especially when I was a little girl."

"You're local to Detroit?"

Callie nodded. "I don't know what happened." Yes, she did. She'd attempted to fill emptiness and emotional longings with the wrong things—parties, alcohol, relationships that should never—could never—be an authentic reflection of love. She knew that now, of course, now that the damage was done. "I'm in my second year of college. I had so many dreams."

"What happened?"

"I made mistake after mistake after mistake. That's what happened." She whispered the words, mindful of the sacredness of their setting, no matter what bruises and scars she brought to the altar. She remained transfixed by the gleaming brass image of Christ on a cross. Oh, could she relate to the pain. Thing was: Christ had hung upon the wooden beam in pure innocence. Not her. Not her by a long shot.

"I don't know quite why I stopped coming to church. I guess it started to just...well...not matter. I had better things to do, other things that seemed more in tune with who I am."

She snorted in derision of herself, of her ignorance. She was so deeply marred by sin. Especially now—especially given the pathway she considered when it came to her newly confirmed pregnancy.

“A lot of teenagers and college-aged people feel that way.” The priest gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Stepping away isn’t foreign to Christ.” He looked at the crucifix as well. “His closest friends left his side. He accepted their decisions then, and he accepts your decisions now, but He wants you to walk away from destruction and find your way back home again. Maybe that’s what drew you here.”

Once again, the priest’s kindness assured, and enveloped. Plus, his answer came quickly, with compassionate conviction. Callie experienced a tiny spark of hope but the spark died fast, squelched by the darkness of reality once her mind circled back to her dilemma. She had made her decision, the only one she could.

Should she unburden to this man? What did she have to lose, really? She’d never come back here again. Maybe talking would help. There was certainly no one else to listen.

So, for the first time, she opted to give voice to her moment of truth. “I’m pregnant, and I’m getting an abortion. I have no other choice.”

A long silence moved past, in a passage of time marked only by the pounding of her heart against her ribs.

“You must be terrified.” He showed no anger. No hailstorm of fire and brimstone fell from the sky. Instead, her compassionate clergyman leaned back comfortably against the pew and his eyes radiated tenderness.

“I need to...get rid of it. I...I have to get an abortion.” From there she rushed onto the ice rink that was her life and pushed forward in spite of the danger, wanting to attempt an explanation, wanting to justify a

choice this holy man would never condone, or accept.

She was such an awful person.

"I'm getting the abortion." Her tone bordered on defiance—and defensiveness. "I called the clinic on the way here. Women's Care United. I guess I'm here because I just want God to forgive me, and I want Him to know it's for the best that I not try to bring this poor little baby into the world." Repressed tears and emotion burst; her nose ran and she let out a desperate, keening sound, wiping her nose, ducking her head.

"What's your name?" He leaned forward on his knees, tilting his head, and he smiled at her. "I'm Father Craig O'Hara, by the way."

Callie fingered back a slice of hair. He wasn't yelling at her. He wasn't condemning her. Yet. "Callie. I'm Callie." No last name...no matter how nice he was. "You don't hate me?"

"Far from it, but I'm hoping you might open yourself just far enough to hear a different point of view."

Callie nibbled the corner of her lip and nodded.

"The way I see it, the circumstances that led to your pregnancy might make you heartsick. The life choices you've made up to now might leave you feeling lost, but nothing...and I do mean nothing...stops you from starting over, and creating the most beautiful things from the most terrifying situations."

"I wish."

"I know." He stopped there for a moment, long enough to deliver a pointed look. "Take very seriously the fact that you're not alone. You're not alone right now, and the life that's growing inside of you right now is one you need to take into consideration. The

baby you carry is counting on you.”

“Father, that’s exactly what I am doing. I’m doing what’s best. I’d louse everything up, and—”

“No. The being inside of you, the life you carry, is a creation of God...even if the circumstances surrounding it aren’t. You feel you can’t be a suitable mother right now. That’s nothing to be ashamed of. Instead, consider the option of carrying your baby to term. Consider the blessing you’d give to a childless couple whom you would gift with the opportunity to raise it, and love it, and give it the life God ordained when your son or daughter was conceived.”

For the first time during the course of their conversation, his tone went firm and sternly resolute. That, along with his use of the words son—daughter—captured her attention, and she could form no ready response for a moment.

“You don’t understand. My parents will be so ashamed. I’m in so much trouble with them as it is. They’d finally have cause to just shut me out. They’d finally, justifiably, just wash their hands of me. Know what? I can’t find it in myself to blame them anymore. I’ve made a gigantic a mess of my life, and it hasn’t even started yet.”

When she dissolved into sobs once more, Father Craig rested a stilling hand against her shoulder and waited, allowing her to empty and crumble.

Once Callie calmed, he looked into her eyes. “Do me a favor. Tell me what your life would be like if you could begin it fresh today, with nothing holding you back.”

Callie drew up short. No one had ever asked her that question before. Certainly, her parents cared about her, but they centered themselves on providing for

their family in what had become difficult and unstable employment and financial times. They didn't tend to dive deep, emotionally speaking. Meanwhile, Callie's older sister, Penny, was the golden child—the one dedicated to everything that was right. While Callie searched and fumbled, Penny made her way toward a better life, step by perfect step.

Ever since graduating high school, Callie had floundered, lost in a world of loneliness and emotional needs she had filled in any way she could, with any number of temptations that seemed so good and appealing at the time...

She shoved that noise aside so she could answer his question. "I love music."

Those three small words poured from her soul, wrapped in a blanket of longing and timid futility.

"I admire people who can create, or play music. I'm an artist myself. I love to swirl oil colors onto canvas, but put me near a keyboard and I'm helpless."

Callie gave him a wobbly smile. "Music fills me up. It makes me feel good. Connected. When I play the piano, I don't think about"—she went flush—"I don't think about mistakes and problems. I float with the music, and it carries me away, to a place that's beautiful."

"That's a gift, Callie. A grace. God gave you that talent and the need to fulfill it."

"Oh...I wouldn't go that far. It's just how I am, that's all."

"But, Callie, you're missing the finer point. You're the way God made you. You possess the characteristics and gifts God gave you. You're unique, and special, and He loves you—He treasures you, no matter what your past, no matter what you've done before. He

loves your unborn child as well."

Tears built in her eyes once more, blurring Father Craig's kind face, melding holy statues, stained glass, and church columns into a murky haze. "But why would He allow me to become pregnant? He's omniscient. He's wise and all-knowing, right? Why me? Why this?" The tears spilled. "It makes no sense at all."

"Maybe that's because His plan isn't just for you. It's for the life you carry as well. Maybe His plan and purpose is also about where life will lead you after you deal with this pregnancy. Remember and focus on that."

"A purpose?"

Father Craig nodded while she considered the idea. God's will and plan. If that was the case, then how could she reconcile her condition to what she needed to do in order to survive and start over again?

Tossed about and broken, she stood to leave. Her legs trembled, but she steadied herself by grabbing hold of the pew.

Father Craig lifted to his feet as well. "Before you go, let me get you some information I'd like you to take a look at before you make a decision, Callie. Come back and see me before your appointment, OK? I'll be here, and I'll be available for you. Will you do that?"

He was such a kind-hearted, gracious man. She nodded and he went off through a door at the side of the church while she stayed and chastised herself for every wrong choice that came to mind.

Her internal argument was interrupted by his return and his hand-off of a number of brochures which she glanced at and clutched, but didn't readily absorb. She chewed her lower lip, closed her eyes, and

prayed.

“What do you think you’re going to do, Callie? Can I help you in any other way? Please don’t hesitate to say so if I can.”

She tipped her head back and stared at the graceful, arched ceiling of the church. “I don’t know. Now, I just don’t know what I should do.”

There was a tiny instant when something flicked through Father Craig’s eyes—sadness, defeat—but then came a light of hope as well. She saw, and she marveled. In fact, his generosity of spirit prompted her further. “You’ve been really good to me, Father Craig. Thank you for that. I promise I’ll look this over. I promise I’ll come back before...well...before I...”

She stammered, but she meant what she said. No matter what happened during the next twenty-four hours, whether she had an abortion or not, she felt like she had found a home, a place of quiet grace, assurance, and peace.

She’d need that, no matter what came next.