

MARIANNE
EVANS

Today's
Special

Romance Platter #3

By
Appointment
Only



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Marianne Evans

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To Maurica House, my stylist for over twenty years now — You're the best, Mo ~ and this heroine, this story, is for you! After all, how many times did we talk about it while you helped make me 'pretty'???

And, to my children, Beth, Dan, and Mary, who exemplify the kind of heart, service, and compassionate empathy that I hope I captured in the pages of this story. I love you guys!

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 the heroine's struggles. Her final acceptance of the hero's love and God's comfort, is remarkable. ~ Susan Mobley, Reviewer

Other Titles by Marianne Evans

Novels

Hearts Surrender
Hearts Communion
Hearts Key
Devotion

Novellas

Hearts Crossing
Finding Home
Operation Breathless
Search & Rescue
Beautiful Music

Dollar Downloads

A Face in the Clouds

*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you;
I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a
heart of flesh. ~ Ezekiel 36:26*

1

Matt Bellinger lifted smoothly from the backseat of the chauffeured Town Car. Instantly, fat, heavy raindrops struck him hard, spreading fast against his tan trench coat. Chilly liquid slicked cold tracks through his hair before he could even extend his umbrella. Summer was giving way to fall in Michigan without much of a battle. Laden, gray clouds packed the sky, and a wicked wind cut across the packed parking lot.

Perhaps two dozen or so campaign supporters braved the elements and had gathered right on time, just as scripted and expected. So, ignoring the chill and in spite of the rain, he offered smiles and nods of greeting. A few members of the media were in attendance as well. That was a plus and provided a needed boost to his energy level. Still, a weary sigh built, masked by long-practiced and confident moves that led him into the crowd. Handshakes, camera flashes, and waves—each familiar element kicked off this typical, late-morning canvass as Matt prepared to court voters who presently dined at Sal’s Place, a legendary eatery on the riverfront of Downtown Detroit.

“Councilman Bellinger. Beautiful morning, eh?” That wry greeting came from his right and Matt pivoted, acknowledging the approach of one of the reporters covering this campaign stop.

“Jack. It’s good to see you.” They shook hands.

Jack Jessinak was a seasoned and grizzled beat reporter who covered the political scene for WWJ radio. He squinted at the sky and made no move to lift the plastic-wrapped microphone he held at his side. “I think we can wait until we get inside to pepper you with questions.”

“I appreciate the show of restraint.” Matt gave a chuckle then addressed the folks who gathered. He tilted his head toward the entrance of the restaurant. “Let’s get out of the rain. I’ll have plenty to say about the state senate race once I’m warm, dry, and enjoying a mug of Sal Cocossa’s fresh-brewed coffee.”

Relieved moans and agreeable chatter followed that decree. Matt strode toward the glass doorway. His assistant, Katie, moved ahead smoothly and held open the door.

Matt crossed the threshold of the diner and warmth engulfed him at once. Salvatore Cocossa stood behind a flat-top stove, scooping and tossing a fluffy batch of scrambled eggs, which he seasoned with a sprinkling of onions and green pepper. The aroma drifted through the air like a tantalizing promise, and Matt’s stomach performed an involuntary rumble.

Short and stout, with wiry gray hair that sprung from his head in a barely contained shambles, Sal sported a speckled black apron; a towel was slung over his shoulder. He dumped a heap of diced tomatoes into the egg mix and continued to stir until he took in the arrival of Matt’s entourage. Sal’s eyes widened, and

he wiped his hands on the towel. "Joey, take the stovetop for me. I've got two scrambled, loaded. Need a quartet of sausage links on the side."

"Gotcha, Sal."

One of the younger cooks stepped to the fore. Sal returned the towel to his shoulder and exited the kitchen, joining the front-door circus.

"Matt." Sal's lips curved, and Matt detected a twinkle in the older man's eyes. "It's been a while."

"Too long, Mr. Cocossa. It's good to see you again."

"You, too." Sal's gaze roved the press of bodies that now formed an untidy horde within the entryway of his restaurant. "You still travel light, I see."

The quip earned a round of laughter, with Matt leading the chorus. "Can you blame me for wanting to treat my hard working crew to some of the best food to be found in Detroit?"

Sal *harrumphed*, and then jerked a thumb in the direction of the kitchen. "Bet they'd appreciate the food a whole lot more if it were hand made by their boss."

Jack Jessinak's head swiveled. "Yeah. Sure. Do you really think the Grosse Pointe boy over there knows how to sling a spatula in a blue collar diner?"

Sal iced Jack with a single look. "In fact, I know he does."

Matt stifled a hoot and clamped a hand against Sal's shoulder. "Mr. Cocossa, just like in politics, the proof is in the results. Let's hit it." Matt slid out of his suit coat and yanked off his tie. He handed both items to a nearby staff member. "Do you happen to have a spare apron?"

"Always. Come on back."

Fully intrigued, members of the media paid close

attention to the proceedings. They lined the long counter at the front of the diner, where barstools dotted the perimeter, and customers turned to watch Matt as he stood next to Sal in the kitchen.

It took Matt less than five minutes to reacquaint himself with the processes and layout of Sal's Place.

Like a perfectly timed movie cue, long-time waitress Jennifer Douglas strode to the pass-through between the kitchen and dining room. "Sal, I need two Coney dogs, cheese fries, a tuna melt on rye, fries and coleslaw..." Her recitation smacked against a brick wall once she spied Matt instead of Sal. "Matt!" Without missing a beat, she charged for the entrance of the kitchen and launched into Matt's open arms.

Despite limited space, he lifted her off her feet and pecked her cheek. "Jennifer, you're still the prettiest waitress in town."

She laughed deep and long. "Well, you've certainly just locked up my vote!"

Camera flashes captured the spontaneous moment. Matt stepped back, hooking an arm around Jennifer's waist. "Now, now, now. Before tongues start wagging, I'd like you to meet Jennifer Douglas, who's happily married to newly appointed police lieutenant Ryan Douglas of the Detroit PD. Folks don't come any better in this city than Jen and Ryan. They've got two beautiful kids and a passion for this city I can relate to completely."

Jennifer fisted a hand on her hip and shot him the saucy look that was her trademark. "Oh, stop with all the chit-chat and charm. Get that food order going, hotshot."

"Yes, ma'am." Adoring Jennifer for playing into the moment, Matt double-timed behind the flattop,

flipping buttered rye bread until it was golden brown, scooping tuna into place and melting a piece of mild cheddar on top of the mix. Closing the sandwich, he sliced it neatly and set the plate beneath a warming light, calling out orders for fries and getting to work on the Coney dogs.

Meanwhile, front row spectators openly gaped.

“Matt Bellinger, heir to an automotive supply empire, society born and bred, knows his way around the kitchen of Sal’s Place?” Jack Jessinak shook his head in open disbelief, but his lips curved.

It was time, Matt decided, to take the media to school—especially Jack. By and large, the reporters who tracked his efforts to claim a seat in the state senate meant well, but they didn’t know his whole story. Not by a long shot.

“Let this be a lesson, folks. Never let appearances deceive you.” Matt used tongs to turn a pair of hotdogs until they were perfectly browned. He lightly toasted some buns. “Campaign stops like this motivate me.” His motions didn’t falter. “Connecting to constituents is what appeals to me the most when it comes to government service. What aggravates me to no end, however, is an inability to work past spin and posturing, rhetoric and faulty perception.”

Matt plated the dogs and ladled a stream of Coney sauce across the top. The fries came next then Jennifer whisked the offerings away after delivering a quick wink and an approving nod. He continued. “Like Jack observed, I’m Grosse Pointe born and bred. That may speak to some of you as a world of entitlement, or privilege, but some of the happiest and most bittersweet moments of growing up came to me right here, in the kitchen at Sal’s Place.” With meaning, he

glanced at Jennifer who had returned to the front and watched him with steady, gentle calm. "This is where I worked hard through the last two years of high school and my first two summers at the University of Michigan. Nothing was handed to me. My parents saw to that."

Out of necessity, Matt was poised and camera ready, but the words he chose next spoke to a nostalgic, grateful part of his heart. "I learned a lot here, from some of the most wonderful, solid people in Detroit. Their resolve fueled my passion for politics, and I've taken their example with me into the arena of government service where I sincerely wish to accomplish just one goal, a goal that's become my slogan and mantra. Betterment. For all."

Heather Cavanaugh inhaled the fragrant curls of steam that swirled upward from the surface of her coffee mug as she wrapped her fingertips around the ceramic. Heat and pleased anticipation chased away the chill of a gloomy, early autumn morning.

"Oh. My. Word."

Heather peered at her breakfast mate and best friend, Julie Lippo. "What's up?"

"Oh. My. Word."

"OK, Jules, now you're just being redundant."

"Some things are worth repeating. Turn around—but be subtle about it. Don't draw attention or anything."

Heather fought back a giggle at Julie's earnest, urgent tone.

"Take a look at the guy who just walked in.

Handsome and apparently a heavy hitter. He caused quite a ruckus because he entered like a rock star, but now he's sporting an apron and chatting with the crowd on the barstools while he stands next to Sal. Cooking. A man who's that good looking—cooking. I swoon, Heather. I tell you, I absolutely swoon."

Heather snickered. Seated across from Julie at a booth in Sal's Place, she had been happily occupied watching the undulations of a shimmering green swath of the Detroit River while folks scuttled along the rain slickened streets. Reluctant, she turned to look—to appease her friend and her own curiosity—not because she was interested in handsome heavy hitters who cooked. At all.

Still, once she saw him, Heather had to admit, Julie was right. The gentleman was incredible to behold, and yes, a commotion was definitely taking place at the front of the restaurant. Lots of folks gathered around the kitchen entrance watching the guy who cooked food and spoke to people who carried cameras, microphones, and the occasional 'Bellinger for State Senate' campaign sign.

"He's OK." Heather yawned, returning to the mystical beauty of a rain-swept urban view. She tipped back a bit more coffee, really needing to caffeinate those last few vestiges of tiredness after rising so early on a cold, wet Saturday. Generally the first day of the weekend was the one she observed by sleeping deep and long, indulging in the supreme luxury of not having to pay attention to an alarm clock or scheduled events. Today, in deference to this morning's breakfast with Julie, she had risen to the strains of news talk radio and a muttered growl of discontent when she realized she had to launch into work mode for a few

hours.

Inadvertently her gaze flicked back to the kitchen area. He sure was good looking, but seriously. A politician? That meant he was a man bent on satisfying the world at large via carefully chosen sound bites and feeding voters what they wanted to hear rather than embracing the stark reality Heather battled every day of her life as part of the ministry at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen.

A second shrug later she relegated the man to the farthest reaches of her notice and homed in on her friend. "OK, Jules, time to focus. It's go-time. We need to begin our annual mad dash to the end of the year, and we need to brainstorm some fundraising ideas. They've got to be fresh." Heather straightened in her seat. While she spoke, she lifted a wire bound notebook from the satchel she had tucked on the bench seat next to her. She fished out a pen, clicked it, and tapped it against her chin.

Julie, meanwhile, kept staring wistfully at her dream chef. Heather shook her head, regarding her friend with affection. Petite, with a thick bevy of dark brown hair, Julie was her right hand colleague at Capuchin, and Heather didn't know how she'd function without her.

"Hmm." Julie squinted, appearing to ponder. "How about we pay a visit to the 'if you can't beat them, join them' department?"

Heather fingered back the length of her hair and flipped it over her shoulder. "Sorry, babe. You lost me."

"The politics guy."

"Get over it already."

"No—I'm serious. Look at the media attention.

Look at the impact. Plus, he's got a well-orchestrated, perfectly humming power base in play because he's campaigning. He has influence. Think about something for a second, Heather. It's closing in on election day. The candidates are going full-bore. Let's see if this guy and candidates just like him are willing to throw their clout and effort into the ideals they talk about when they're on the campaign trail. We could corral a bunch of candidates and put 'em to work. We could tap state senate wannabes like the guy up front. We could hit up the folks who are running for state representative; we could even approach folks who are running for local office and council positions. It'd be a totally bi-partisan event. We could call it Feed Detroit...Inside and Out or something." Julie shrugged broadly. "All of this is just off the top of my head, but I think the idea has merit. Don't you?"

The concoction came from the top of her head? Julie's notion was fantastic. Intrigued, Heather looked over her shoulder once more. For a lingering span of time, she took in the man who had captured her friend's attention. In her mind's eye, Heather drew pictures of political magnets gathered as one, helping the destitute at CSK. The longer she considered the option, the better she liked it.

"Know what, Julie? Your marketing smarts are without equal."

"Really?" Julie beamed and preened.

Heather chuckled, nodding with enthusiasm. "Really. In fact, based solely on your impromptu bit of brainstorming, I can see an event like that coming together pretty clearly." Heather downed the rest of her coffee and sighed with pleasure at the flavor and energy boost. "Obviously Sal knows this guy, so when

I talk to him about his next food donation to Capuchin, I'll see if he can initiate a connection."

"Why not talk to this—" Julie craned her neck to read the campaign signs fully "—Matt Bellinger guy right now?"

Heather delivered an exaggerated sneer. "Oh, I'd hate to interrupt his dog and pony show."

"You're such a snob." But Julie giggled.

Kidding aside, Julie's idea fanned the flames of Heather's inspiration, so she continued to strategize. "We could have these guys size and label clothing for the thrift store, stockpile the food pantries, or work the service lines at the soup kitchen locations. It'd be awesome."

They framed in a few more fundraising ideas while scarfing fluffy waffles and crunching on bacon. Heather filled pages of her notebook with details in need of tending for the upcoming black-tie dinner event that was also an annual boon to the CSK's coffers. She and Julie mapped out a calendar of speaking engagements at local churches and civic functions to raise awareness of the overwhelming need for support. With hard work, money would begin to funnel in. Autumn always kicked off the busy season when it came to fundraising, but the effort was more than worthwhile. The seasonal clock now ticked relentlessly against helpless people who sought a simple meal, warmth for a few hours, or a cot to rest on as the nights grew long and temperatures plummeted.

When the meal bill was delivered, Heather took custody. "I have an appointment to style Sandra Smithson's hair, so I better scoot. She's after what she describes as 'the most fabulous up-do ever created' so she can wow her hubby's colleagues at some party

they're attending tonight."

Julie's eyes narrowed. "Shall we project an over/under on how late she'll show up at the salon?"

Heather giggled. "I'm down for an hour. You?"

"Hour plus thirty. Minimum."

"You'll probably win the bet. Still, the one day I don't get there on time is the one day she'll show up and pitch a fit. I don't like the way she abuses and undermines my time, but I do appreciate her business, and the other clients she's sent my way."

Saundra Smithson was a society darling and long-standing client of Heather's at the hair salon Optiva. Heather always liked to say her work as a stylist paid the bills, but her work as a volunteer and PR coordinator at Capuchin filled her soul.

Nourished by Sal's exemplary breakfast and fortified by spending time with her best friend, Heather strolled to the front, taking her time about leaving—for two reasons. First, a crowd of Matt Bellinger fans still packed the lobby. Second, she became absorbed by the hubbub, pulled into watching the proceedings as signs, pins, and flyers were distributed.

"How do you feel about your opponent's charge that you're too conservative, that you're out of touch with the majority of more liberal-minded citizens? What do you have to say about inclusiveness and the call to help those who are disenfranchised? Can a man with a privileged background such as yours truly relate?"

Matt Bellinger seasoned, scooped, and dished a pile of freshly scrambled eggs. Heather had to admit, he handled kitchen preps like a pro, and he oozed a mystical something, a magnetism that left Heather