

A promotional image for a television show. At the top, three horizontal wooden planks are suspended by chains, forming a sign. The background shows a man and a woman smiling, with the woman holding a baby. They are standing in front of a building that appears to be a gas station or a small town shop, with a sign that says "LANG'S GAS & LAUNDRY".

HEARTS HAVEN

MARIA'S ANGEL

MARIANNE EVANS

A MECHANIC, A WIDOW, A BROKEN-DOWN CAR...  
SOMETIMES LIFE'S PURPOSE IS FOUND BY ACCIDENT

# Maria's Angel

Marianne Evans

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## **Maria's Angel**

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## Dedication

To my mom, Rhea DeSantis. You and Dad showed me the power of a forever love. Maybe that's why I enjoy writing, and reading, romance so much. I know how very much you miss him, and love him still. Your strength in loss, your sureness of faith inspires me, and has helped me hold on to the truth that God carries us through, and God is ever present. You're an amazing woman, and I love you very much.



## Praise

I felt like I was with these characters walking with them, crying with them, and wanting to reach out a hand or shoulder to cry on. This book will leave you in awe. Praises, Marianne. ~ Hope P. on *Devotion*

A gifted storyteller, Ms. Evans really captured my attention with this book and I can't wait to read her next offering. ~ Queen of All She Reads on *Devotion*

Evans delivers hope, love and restored faith with fluent writing and a passion for the broken heart being made whole. ~ Karlene J. on *Hearts Key*

One of Evans' many gifts is giving such life-like qualities to the characters that you feel they're your friends. You ache for them when they hurt; you glow with them when their lives have light. ~ Tanya B. on *Hearts Communion*







*Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.* ~ Hebrews 4:16

# 1

An ominous thump and flap stirred a shimmy that cut straight through the steering column of Maria Wilde's old model minivan. She sucked in a breath and clutched the wheel tight when her tires bumped over something unexpected. A fast check of the rearview mirror revealed the mangled remains of a thick, black band of rubber. All at once, the steering wheel seized tight, making even the slightest navigational adjustments next to impossible to execute. She couldn't steer.

Didn't that just figure?

Angling her vehicle slowly out of traffic and onto the right shoulder of the road became the equivalent of single-handedly dragging a stubborn elephant because the vehicle didn't want to cooperate whatsoever from a steering perspective. The process of stopping and throwing the car into park took a wrecking ball to the already weak walls of her composure. Maria crumbled against the steering wheel, resting her head against her tightly clenched hands. Tears stung, and her breath hitched.

*God—really—how much more can I possibly take? Please...please give me the strength to survive this.*

The cobalt bowl of a sky above her didn't part. The huge, puffy white clouds that stretched and moved didn't dissolve to reveal the instantaneous miracle for which she physically ached. Nope. Life was a lot tougher than that; a lot more complicated. What she needed to do, what she *had* to do, was find the way to keep marching on.

Maria steeled her spine and blinked tears into remission. What was the use of crying? Crying wouldn't solve the problems she faced nor would it help her move forward. Through the somewhat grimy windshield, she surveyed her surroundings. A flat, ambling stretch of brick buildings, canopied awnings, and quaint shops dotted each side of the two-lane road. Occasional passersby wandered in and out of view, wrapped up in conversations, or strolling with kids. Where was she, anyway? Mere hours ago she had left Dallas, headed due south. She had passed through Lufkin a few minutes ago. Shortly after that, she recalled passing a wooden sign laden by civic insignia that welcomed her to Angel Falls, Texas. Evidently she had hit the mechanical crisis point at the start of the town's peaceful little main street.

Great. Where was she going to find help in the middle of nowhere? Additionally, if she didn't find a gas station soon—the blasted low fuel light had been on for at least twenty miles—she was going to be planted here for a good long while regardless of mechanical issues. She had ignored the indicator for as long as possible, hoping to coast to her destination on fumes if possible.

A glance into the rearview mirror stilled Maria's spirit at once and reinforced the steel of her determination.

In the rear passenger seat, Lilly slumbered. Precious, beautiful Lilly. A powerful sweep of warmth cascaded through Maria's chest. Her six-month-old baby girl was tucked safe and tight into a car seat, further insulated by a snuggly soft blanket of pale green. Surrounding the innocent babe was every last possession Maria owned. The material items didn't amount to much, yet they managed to fill the van in its entirety.

Maria forced herself free of oppressive anxiety, reverting instead to survival mode. She began to coach herself.

*C'mon, Maria—don't surrender, solve the problem. You have to keep moving. You need to make it to Mom and Dad's new place in Huntington before Lilly wakes up wanting a lunch you can't afford to buy.*

Expelling a breath, Maria drummed fingertips against the narrow circle of leather. Not far away she spied a sign. *Lang's Gas & Collision*. At least the van was still running. She could probably gimp her way to the facility and see if there was anyone on duty who might be able to lend an assist. Angel Falls was picturesque, small-town personified; Lang's seemed to be her only option.

Fighting her steering wheel every bit of the way, inching into a turn that made her muscles scream, Maria made it to a gas pump and pulled to a stop. She sifted through the depths of her purse, grabbing her wallet. She already knew what she would find inside: a five dollar bill, a handful of change, and not much else. There were no credit cards that would be accepted and no checks she could write. Her bank account back in Fort Worth was closed.

She clenched the simple cloth case, squeezing

tight. Lilly would need formula soon, along with a serving of jarred baby food. Maria had nothing with her in the way of grocery items; she hadn't planned on an automotive breakdown that would keep her from arriving at her parents' new house before lunch. A five-spot and a few spare coins would have to see her through, and first things first, she needed to get some gas in the tank. Five bucks would get her just over a gallon of fuel. That allotment would get her to her folks' house, but what would she do about repairs? Her car was far from drivable.

A laden sigh rose from the depths of her body; her empty heart ached. For now, the only thing she could do was dash inside, find the attendant for some repair advice, and then call her folks to see if they could help with a repair loan.

Plans in place, she left a slumbering Lilly secure in the car seat. After locking the car, she trotted toward the convenience area of the gas station, taking note of the three service bays attached to the store. Two of the available spots were filled, and one of the cars under repair was hoisted on a hydraulic lift, but no one seemed to be nearby. Not a good sign. She frowned and walked inside, weaving through a narrow food aisle, trying to ignore the instant gnaw of hunger that prickled through her belly. Who knew how long she'd be stranded, and she certainly needed an energy boost. Heaving a reluctant sigh, she grabbed a couple packets of crackers and cheese and silently kissed her last remaining funds goodbye.

At the cashier's space, an attendant tracked her approach, offering a warm, welcoming smile. He was about her age, sporting wavy brown hair. Judging by the uniform shirt and faded jeans he wore, he seemed

to be the on-duty mechanic as well. While she drew near, he used an oil-spotted rag to mop his hands. Maria studied him for a moment. So, that's why the service area was empty. Apparently, the mechanic who stood before her ran the shop as well. He was tall and lean, tan. The name *Brody* was stitched above the breast pocket of his *Lang's* emblazoned shirt.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" Smooth and silky, the cadence of his voice was soothing and appealingly musical.

"I...I..." She cleared her throat and stood straighter, depositing her meager purchase on the counter between them. "I need these, please, along with the name of a good mechanic, if possible."

Brown eyes touched by hints of amber tracked to her car for an instant. Maria slid the cash across the counter. He captured the bill and gave her a nod. "My name's Brody Lang. You might call me the Jack-of-all-trades for this place. Is there a problem with your vehicle?"

Maria nodded then looked over her shoulder. "The steering went out, and I can hardly make a turn or navigate. I think I dropped a rubber belt of some sort, because I drove over it and it's not much more than a tangled mess on the road at the edge of town. Would you mind taking a look and letting me know what's wrong? Maybe you could give me a price quote."

Brody Lang stepped from behind the black-topped, scarred service counter of his shop. "I'd be happy to. Let's check it out."

A tight squeeze of pressure eased away from Maria's heart, and she breathed out, giving him a large, grateful smile. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

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The woman's relief was palpable. Odd, Brody thought. Something about her spoke of uncertainty—or displacement. He followed his customer outside, evening his typically long-legged stride to her smaller steps. She wore blue jeans like a dream and a simple layered t-shirt combo that provided some nice pops of red and blue color. Her unbound hair bounced as she walked. Soft curls of red caught the late morning sun. A crisp autumn breeze flavored by the smoke from a leaf fire lifted the waves, tossing them against her neck and shoulders. He looked forward to helping her. She struck him as a sweet thing, and beautiful in an innocent, pure way that he found instantly attractive.

Once he got a close look at the inside of her vehicle, his instincts about some form of displacement were confirmed. It looked like she hauled everything she owned. Was there even an inch of room left for air, or...

His brief survey of the van came to an abrupt stop when his gaze came to rest on a baby's car seat, complete with a baby. Ah. So, she was married probably stranded between cities as she travelled.

"Are you moving?" he asked.

She nodded. "To Huntington. According to the map it's not too far from here."

"It's just a few miles away. I have friends there. It's a nice town."

"That's where my parents live."

Brody was intrigued. Parents. A baby. A solitary lady who hadn't yet mentioned a husband. The numbers didn't quite jive. There wasn't a wedding ring

on her finger, either.

"There are two things I've found I hate dealing with as a woman alone. The first thing would be home repairs and maintenance. The second would be automotive issues."

The admission caused Brody's protective instincts to kick into high gear. "Well I promise to take good care of you, ma'am. No worries. Let's see what's going on."

Her features went soft and shy. "You don't have to call me ma'am. My name is Maria. Maria Wilde."

She extended her hand, and he took hold in a firm, but gentle way. "It's nice to meet you, Maria Wilde. Let's see if we can't get you back on the road."

"I'd appreciate your help. Lilly is going to wake up pretty soon, and once she does, she's going to be hungry."

Brody tried without success to tune out the way a look into her faultless, deep green eyes slipped straight into the cushion of his heart. She was a stranger in need of help, so he focused instead on the job at hand. She had mentioned a piece of rubber—a belt of some sort that had ended up on Main Street. Likely the vehicle had thrown a serpentine belt, causing the steering to lock.

Maria leaned against the side of the van and then seemed to think the better of that option, which made him grin as she swiped dust from her hip. "How old is your daughter?"

"Lilly's six months and feisty as can be."

Brody grinned at that. "Can you pop the hood for me?" While she complied, he retrieved a rolling back board and parked it at the front end of the vehicle. He stretched out and then slid beneath to conduct a brief

diagnosis. Yep, his initial assumption was correct. He slipped from beneath the van and lifted smoothly to a stand. "It looks like the belt slipped off the tension pulleys that drive your power steering. Did your air conditioning go out, too?"

She lowered her lashes. "Yeah."

Brody nodded, beginning a cross-check of the top of the engine. He didn't want to add to the burdens she seemed to carry. "The belt you lost drives the water pump and compressor as well, so when it slipped out of commission, it affected a few other mechanisms. In a way, you can be glad you lost it here and now. I'll get it repaired and the vehicle will run just fine."

An uncomfortable silence stretched. She shuffled from foot to foot. "The belt thing I need. Umm...will it take long to fix? Is it expensive?"

Brody studied her. Fair skin was sprinkled by a handful of subtle freckles. She was so earnest; tiny lines marked a furrow of concern between her brows. He longed to take away whatever weight pressed down on her slender shoulders.

He shook his head and blinked, stunned once more by the lightning-strike pattern of his thoughts. "Let me check my stock and make sure I have one on hand for your model." He moved toward the service bay, and she followed.

"How much do you think this will cost?"

"The belt itself is around fifty bucks." He didn't need to open the part drawer to know the price.

She winced.

"I can replace it for you in about an hour. It shouldn't be more than a hundred bucks all together." Registering her reaction to the price tag on the replacement piece, Brody had shaved his labor fees by



a solid thirty-percent. Now, he wished he had reduced the charge even more. There was no mistaking the panic that lit her features.

He caught a glimpse of the moisture that sheened those luminous eyes. Although she braced hard, she stilled a quavering chin by pressing her lips together, Maria Wilde couldn't disguise being overwrought. She executed a hasty spin, stalking straight to her van.

There, with her back to the shop, she crumpled against the side of the vehicle and wept.

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She couldn't take anymore. Not for one second longer could she hold her head up, take the punches, and keep struggling forward. Sure, it was only money. Sure, it was only a stinking van, but both were necessities. She needed money in order to maintain her vehicle, but she had nothing left—materially or emotionally.

Forlorn, she swept tears away, and her gaze happened to take in the remnants of her life, tucked inside a busted down vehicle. What would Jacob think of the mess she had made of her life without him? What had his sacrifice been for, really?

Inside the van, Lilly began to squiggle and kick...and coo.

Maria had two to three minutes, tops, before that coo of rousing would escalate into a full-blown hunger cry. She didn't mind. In that instant of her daughter's movement, she received the clearly defined answer to her question. Lilly. Their precious baby girl. Lilly was the reason for his sacrifice. Lilly and the love they had shared.

Trouble was a future without Jacob held nothing for Maria except soul-draining circumstances and a level of mourning that that ebbed and flowed, but never relinquished its hold.

Opening the sliding door of the van, she unfastened the restraints of the car seat, scooping Lilly into her arms. Focused exclusively on her daughter, she swayed and whispered soothingly against a silky soft neck perfumed by baby powder. She'd been forced to skimp on a lot lately, but she refused to compromise on anything having to do with Lilly's well-being.

How was she going to get out of this jam? Go running to Mom and Dad? Again? She needed to handle this situation without their help. She was intelligent, capable. Crippling grief or not, she needed to reassert her self-sufficiency.

"Excuse me, Maria?"

The tender summons made her jump, which caused Lilly to squawk and squirm. Oh, fabulous. She was having a meltdown in front of the man who was trying to help her. Talk about displaying a lack of grace under fire.

He touched her arm, offering stillness, and a brief swell of comfort. "I'm sorry for upsetting you."

"You didn't. I'm just...I'm...I'm a mess right now. This has nothing to do with you."

"Are you OK?"

Why lie? Why hide? What did she have to lose, really? "No. No, I'm not."

Brody Lang didn't flinch. He didn't shrink away. "May I offer a prayer? For you and your daughter?"

An emotional dam burst all over again. This time she swallowed back the cry of sorrow that pushed through her spirit. Still, tears tracked down her cheeks.

Maria squeezed her eyes closed and nodded, her knees weak to a degree that she sank against the side of the van.

He took hold of her free hand and rested a large, work-roughened palm lightly against Lilly's back. "Lord, please make Yourself known in this moment. Grant Your comfort, protection, peace, and provision upon Maria and Lilly. Bless and guide them on the road You mean for them to travel. Hold them close. In Your holy name we pray. Amen."

The words didn't dissipate into silence. Instead, they formed a shield Maria could feel, a Godly presence she had always embraced until...well...until.

For Brody Lang spoke just the kind of prayer Jacob would have offered.

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Brody crossed to the side of his shop where a line of metal cabinets was topped by a wall-mounted peg board from which hung a number of tools. He opened a deep storage drawer that held a batch of well-organized belts grouped by size and model type. In a matter of seconds, he extracted the replacement he would need for Maria's van. From the corner of his eye he saw her dip her fingertips into the front pockets of her jeans and rock back on her heels. Her eyes were downcast.

"I, ah...I need to set up some form of payment plan."

No way would he further wound her pride. He hefted a shoulder into a casual shrug. "If money is an issue, don't let that worry you. You can get it to me when you have a chance. Huntington's not far away.

Pay me back when you can." He paused long enough to draw her gaze. "I trust you, Maria. For now, let's get you home."

She chewed lightly on the corner of her lip, her brows furrowing once again over those large, deep brown eyes. Her somber expression piqued Brody's alert system all over again. Man, was she hurting. Why?

Brody didn't waste time speculating. Instead, he opted to problem solve. "I'm going to get to work on your car. Feel free to grab some more food from inside. There's also a fresh pot of coffee if you're interested."

"Mr. Lang—"

"Brody."

"Brody. I'm...I'm completely broke right now. I had just enough food and gas to make it to my parents' place, and obviously that plan went haywire. I can't pay for anything else beyond the couple of snacks I just bought. It might be a while for the money and payback. I don't imagine I'll be settled for a bit."

Desperation shimmered through her eyes, making them sparkle, but beneath that reaction, he sensed resolve—a mother's resolve—coupled with tender heartedness.

"Take care of Lilly, and yourself. Make a list of whatever you need to take, and I'll set up a bill that you can pay when you're able. I've got a few jars of baby food on the shelves. There's powdered formula nearby, too. Pick up some food for you, too."

"I can't."

"I insist." He stepped close. "What better way to celebrate the Thanksgiving season? Please. Let me help."

"No...really...that's OK. I don't want to take

advantage of your kindness.”

“It’s not taking advantage of my kindness if I offer, right?” He smiled.

“Wish I could argue the point.”

“You can’t, so go inside and stock up.”

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With Lilly tucked in her arms, Maria plopped her rainbow hued diaper bag on the cashier’s counter. Brody had said to make herself at home, and really, she had no choice but to follow his instructions. Lilly’s fussing intensified, so Maria pulled a can of powdered formula from the grocery shelf. Next, she searched for a sink where she could scour and clean a used bottle then mix Lilly’s food.

“What’s our best option, baby girl?” Maria scanned the shop while she murmured to her daughter. A directional sign pointed toward the restrooms, so she pushed her way inside the women’s stall, grateful to find a baby-care station where she could settle Lilly. Following a diaper change full of kicks and urgent squawks from her daughter, Maria prepped a fresh bottle of formula. She returned to the shop, wandering slowly and humming while Lilly happily—and greedily—ate.

It occurred to Maria that she needed to make a list of the goods she used. She could easily wait to eat; Huntington wasn’t far away. But if she was going to be here for an hour or so, maybe one of those apples stacked near the coffee and tea display would tide her over. And the coffee did smell awfully good. That wouldn’t cost much, right?

A receipt pad and a batch of pens rested at a tilt