



HEARTS HAVEN

JODIE'S SONG

MARIANNE EVANS

**FLOWERS...NOT THE ONLY
THING BLOOMING THIS SPRING**

*a special
Easter romance*

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Marianne Evans

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the hard working folks at WMUZ radio in Detroit. Thanks for bringing fantastic Christian music, and the Christian message, to listeners across southeast Michigan. You're such a blessing!

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*

The characters in this story make you want to pray with them. They also make you want to take a closer look at yourself and what God might have in store for you. ~ Renette S. on *Devotion*

This story is phenomenal. It felt so real the unwanted chemistry, the fears, the loss of trust. This story had me crying, hoping, and begging for them to make it. This is so realistic to the dangers every marriage faces. ~ Donna S. 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's 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*

Prologue

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.~1 Tim. 6:12

Jodie Cunningham navigated her car into a corner turn, clutching the steering wheel. The final bit of roadway that led to The Falls Tabernacle stretched before her. Angel Falls, Texas. Home. Despite anxiety and the somber mood that rode shotgun, her lips twitched upward. Nothing in the rural flatlands of southeast Texas seemed to change. That was a good thing. Assuring somehow.

Except for today.

She gathered her breath into a bone-deep sigh. Today—over the past several weeks actually—everything seemed to be changing and draining her spirit rather than soothing her soul. She shook off a black cloud of dread and blinked to clear her mind. Brow furrowed, she peered through the windshield at a site as familiar to her as daybreak, the stone edifice and soaring cross spire of Falls Tabernacle. This was where she had been baptized. This was where she had dedicated herself to Christ and met her Savior heart-to-heart.

Unfolding from her low-slung sedan, Jodie stared and absorbed for a moment then pushed ahead. She focused on the click of her heels against smooth, even

cement as she made her way to the doorway of the church, longing for anything that would distract from the heart-wrenching family drama set to unfold.

At that point, shiver-inducing feather strokes danced against her skin, followed promptly by a spine tingle. Angel wings seemed to beat against an ominous threat that brewed into an unseen tempest.

She slowed. Why did *everything* feel so *wrong* lately?

Squaring her shoulders, adjusting the strap of her black leather purse, Jodie stilled her nerves. Her outlook settled once she crossed the threshold of the church. Leaving behind the outside world felt akin to releasing a live wire. Sizzles of something indefinable—but potent—instantly left her senses. Thankful for that, she automatically scanned faces until she found the ones she sought.

First, she spotted her older sister. As always, Tracee and her husband and two kids—Alex and Melissa—occupied the third pew to the right. Head high, attention riveted, Tracee focused on the pastor, who was just beginning ten o'clock services. Jodie ignored the initial Scripture reading. Instead, different words crashed through her mind—the memory of her most recent telephone conversation with Tracee.

“Jodie, you have got to get down here and help me! Move away from that precious, ultra-glam career of yours just long enough to realize you have obligations outside of a pack of nameless radio fans! Step into the breach and help! Help Dad! He’s fading fast, and I can’t handle this anymore! He needs you. I need you.”

Echoes from that unusually scalding reprimand left Jodie to hang her head. Heat, a mercury marker of shame and regret, inched up her body. She eyed an

empty space in the rear-most pew, but for the moment remained tucked in the corner—far from her sister.

Next, rather than pay attention to the start of the sermon, Jodie took in the rest of the parish members, her gaze settling at last upon her father, ensconced as always in his assigned spot as an usher. He stood straight and strong, a brass nameplate pinned just below the line of a deep blue kerchief that matched his perfectly knotted tie and lent a pop of color to an impeccable black suit. The vision of him was so timeless, so precious, it took her breath away.

Mom would have been so proud...so smitten.

Jodie's hand flew to her throat where a lump built fast and thick. Their love had been so beautiful. Maybe that's why she found it difficult to find her way to commitment. The bar had been set very high indeed.

Her father had always possessed such dignity and honor, especially when it came to matters of reverence toward Christ and the church. Without a doubt, his example gave birth to Jodie's passion for serving...and ministering. The thick tuft of gray hair, mustache, and gently weathered face were familiar, but she noticed something different in his shoulders. His posture struck her as newly frail, somewhat weaker than she recalled from her most recent visit home a month or so ago. Looking deeper, she saw strain in the lines around his eyes—strain and a layer of pain time would never erase. Not this side of Heaven, anyway.

Two years without his other half, Elizabeth, had done more than age Grayson Cunningham. They had ravaged him and drained him dry. Tracee was right. The effects showed. Jodie's gaze darted to her sister. Still, Tracee could've been a bit more gentle-spirited and tactful about the declaration. Her sister wasn't

generally one to snap.

Fighting tears, Jodie finally tucked into the back pew, smoothing the lines of her slim, black skirt. Humidity built fast as spring came calling. Judging by the way her pink silk blouse already tacked to her warming skin, today promised to give folks an early taste of summer.

Crossing her legs, she settled and continued to watch her father. Something about his demeanor puzzled her. Dignified and respectful, he manned his usher station like always, but he didn't seem to be focused on the preacher. Instead, he stared ahead blankly, lips moving in silence while he clutched his hands into fists at his sides. Suddenly, the most awful, painful expression swept across his features.

"Daddy..." The word, the endearment, spilled forth on a whisper full of aching and sadness. "Daddy, what's *wrong*?"

In that instant, he swayed. His chest rose and fell in a shallow, unsteady way. Just as he blinked free of whatever trance-like moment held his mind, he lifted a trembling hand to his chest—right above his tender and massive heart.

Jodie let out a cry and lunged from her seat as her father collapsed.

1

A moving van ambled along the street not far from the spot where Kevin Mitchell knelt, cutting his spade into freshly cleared flower beds and tilling the soil. Rich black earth. Nothing felt like it, nothing smelled like it, and the arrival of spring only heightened his pleasure at being able to sculpt and tend the grounds of his uncle's apartment complex and the spot he called home as well, Heart's Haven.

When the vehicle neared the rental unit, Kevin paused from his outdoor preparations for its new occupant. He peeled off a pair of heavy duty work gloves and swiped residual dampness against his jean-clad thighs. Sure enough, the van slowed, brakes squealing a bit and disrupting a nest of hatchlings and their mama who swept briefly through the sky—then angled straight back home to the nest.

"Unit Fourteen. This is the spot."

Those words drifted from the open window of the van, issued by the driver who soon hopped from the parked vehicle and rounded to the rear, releasing a hooked latch.

Kevin watched while the guy who rode shotgun disembarked as well and hoisted a dolly from inside the truck. The second mover propped his equipment against the back tire and helped extend a worn but sturdy looking steel ramp. *All systems go*, Kevin thought.

He was about to join them and initiate a get acquainted conversation, but his footsteps stalled when the soft purr of a car engine and the arrival of another vehicle claimed his attention. A white convertible glided to a neat stop behind the van. The pilot was a woman with peaches and cream skin and long waves of chestnut hair. Her eyes were hidden by a pair of oversized sunglasses, which only served to intrigue him all the more.

Was this the new tenant? Uncle Andy had told Kevin a woman 'of about your age,' was arriving today. Kevin hadn't expected her to show up until later in the afternoon.

He switched direction and headed for her car instead of the moving van. Meanwhile, she bent to retrieve something from the floor of the passenger seat, giving him just enough time to be a southern gentleman and open the door for her.

She looked up as soon as the door came open, startled by his arrival no doubt, though the sunglasses provided a bit of a mask. She lifted them slowly away, and Kevin blinked when he absorbed the impact of luminous deep brown eyes that held a hint of surprise and what appeared to be a touch of shy pleasure at his gesture. Taking a woman by happy surprise made him feel good.

"Morning," he greeted straight off, wanting to set her at ease. "I'm Kevin Mitchell. I work here at the Haven. I'm freshening the landscaping for you. You're Jodie Cunningham, right?"

"Yes. Thank you." She lifted from the vehicle and when she stood, he realized the top of her head came right to his chin. What was it Uncle Andy and Aunt Vivian always said about a perfect man-to-woman fit?

Kevin sensed it right now—but the stray thought made him want to laugh. Seriously. He had gone too long without female companionship if instant and unreasoned attraction spawned thoughts like this.

The new tenant dipped her head and cleared her throat, moving away and toward the entrance of unit fourteen. Tentative steps led her beneath an arched trellis currently covered by green vines. Freshly pruned, the climber would soon bloom with hundreds of deep pink bougainvillea.

Kevin puzzled briefly over her hesitance and the shell-shocked vibration of emotion he sensed from her, but he knew better than to push and rush. Years spent coaxing life from the depths of the earth had taught him patience and the reward to be found in careful tending. If his instincts were on target, Jodie Cunningham just might require both.

Kevin finished the landscaping detail in front of Jodie's unit. He planted phlox of snowy white and deep purple, and then dug holes for hyacinth in shades of pink and lavender and white. The sweet aroma enticed him away from drudgery as he worked the soil and carefully placed the flowers.

While he groomed bushes and raked up debris, he took in the activity going on around him—the transport of a person's life from one spot to the next. A wide dresser passed by on a dolly managed by one of the movers. After that came the large pieces of a dark wood sleigh bed. By the time he laid soil for a batch of snapdragons, a flat screen TV, an oak entertainment unit, a dinette and a set of comfy looking leather

furniture had been toted inside by the moving crew.

He didn't see much of Jodie Cunningham, but that stood to reason. Judging by the series of neatly labeled boxes he watched the crew unload and cart inside, she was most likely keeping busy unpacking kitchen items, den items, and if the box markings were any indication, a sizeable selection of CDs and DVDs. The lady liked creature comforts and entertainment but seemed to indulge her passion while at home rather than at theaters, clubs, or concert halls. And he didn't notice any evidence of a 'significant other' as his Uncle Andy might be inclined to say. That recognition initiated a pleasant prickle along his nerve endings.

The lady is alone. He chided himself. Most likely she wouldn't appreciate the idea of a stranger being struck down by some sappy form of hopeful expectation. Are you this lonely? Really?

Scooping a rake full of dry leaves, he dumped the remnants into a tall paper refuse bag, re-centering in a hurry.

But soon Jodie exited her new space and trotted along the pathway that led right by him. Unbound hair bounced against her shoulders. She slipped her sunglasses from the top of her head but didn't put them on quite yet. Their gazes tagged—and she smiled. "The landscaping looks great, Kevin. I really appreciate it."

"My pleasure. I'm glad you like the results." She turned toward her car, and he found he hated to see her leave. "I'm looking forward to getting to know you."

She cast him a quick look that shot a ripple of shyness and uncertainty into the laden air. "Likewise. See you."

2

"I'm fine. I'm OK and I mean it, Jodie Ann. I'm still not understanding you. Not at all. You did *not* need to drop-kick your life in Dallas just because of my ridiculous dizzy spell."

Four weeks had passed since that incident. Now, Jodie perched on the armrest of the sofa in the living room of her childhood home; she pulled in deep, quiet breaths and forced back a groan. Her father reclined next to her, settling in for a nap. He closed his eyes and shook his head, weariness etched into every line in his pale features.

"Pop, it wasn't a dizzy spell; it seemed like a heart attack." She schooled her voice, maintaining the tender call of her emotions while she banked a building sense of weariness that plagued her mind and body these days.

So much had changed in her life during the past month, at a pace that left her reeling for purchase.

"Call it what you will, but the fact remains. You most certainly didn't need to give up everything you've built on my account."

Jodie's spirit tightened into a coil. She didn't know whether to hug her father tight or throttle him silly. At present, the pallor of his skin nearly matched the sandy hue of the blanket that covered his body. Worst of all, a level of defeat laced his words, a surrender of sorts. Such a thing was foreign to Jodie's experience. Despite

a gruff attitude, her dad was giving in, and that broke her heart.

She covered his hand with both of hers. Meanwhile, her sister, Tracee, delivered a scowl packed with resentment—a resentment Jodie fully understood. Why shouldn't her sister be bitter? From Tracee's point of view, Jodie had made her way to Dallas and become a Christian radio personality in the 'big city.' Tracee, on the other hand, had raised a family, seen to its welfare, and been their father's consistent source of support. Far less glamorous, but oceans more meaningful from Jodie's point of view.

Jodie understood the launch point of her sister's reaction, but it also tore her apart inside; Tracee's assumptions couldn't have possibly been more erroneous. Loneliness and longing, a spiritual hunger aching to be filled, drained Jodie's heart dry.

Her father didn't seem to have dozed off quite yet. His eyes came open, spearing Tracee. "And you, young lady, tend to panic when you shouldn't. I can manage without supervision."

Jodie bit her lips together to stem an outcry; she slid off the arm rest and paced. The oval braided rug, which bore a few frayed spots and earth tones that were faded by time, had covered the parquet floor ever since her middle school days. If she listened just hard enough, she could hear the scrape and bounce of a spirited game of jacks. She and Tracee used to love striking up a match on gloomy days. In this space, Jodie could breathe deep and come upon the memory of her mother's rose scent, her mother's smile and the soft touch of her kiss upon a cheek or forehead. Those had been such easy, carefree days.

That was another issue that built blockades

between Jodie and her sister. Since Tracee was their father's most ready and convenient target, she tended to absorb the majority of his arrows—arrows full of sadness, desperation, declining health...and fear.

Their father's faith was absolute. Still, as he had said a handful of times since their mom had passed away, no matter how devout his beliefs, that final crossover from this world into God's waiting arms was something he battled within himself.

Jodie exchanged a cautious glance with her sibling and stepped into the fray once more, kneeling near the couch. "Pop, don't be grouchy. Tracee isn't the one who led me here. What brought me back home is the love I feel for you, and for her. She's not the only one who freaks out—and with good reason, I might add—when you pass out at church and your heart goes into arrhythmia."

That piece of truth drew Tracee's cautious, steady regard. Jodie took hold of her dad's hand, a bit surprised to find it rather cold, considering the rapidly warming temperatures. Instinctively, she slid her thumb back and forth slowly against thin, vein-lined skin.

"This is new territory for us, Dad. You've never endured an episode like this. The cardiologist already had you monitored on a twenty-four hour Holter monitor and you've had an echo cardiogram so we can figure things out and keep you strong."

He scowled, and shades of his characteristic strength and authority bubbled to the surface. "The doctors said I'm fine."

"Yes." Tracee rested her hand on his shoulder. "But they're the ones who recommended the next round of tests. Whether you like it or not, we're going

to stick right to you and make sure you're OK."

We—such a powerful and encouraging word. Strengthened, Jodie's gaze connected with her sister. Subtle lines fanned outward from the corners of Tracee's eyes and a touch of dark color rode beneath them. For everyone's benefit, Jodie pasted on a smile. "Tracee is absolutely right. We're here to help. You need to stay strong."

A few hours later, Jodie strolled along the length of her parents' time-worn wraparound porch. A wispy imagining of Kevin Mitchell slipped through her mind as the sky paled, as stars bloomed and hot breezes turned temperate and sweet. Maybe the bed of freshly planted, multi-colored hyacinth she had cultivated today was what prompted her thought pattern toward the handsome landscaper. Perhaps that enchanting scent, coupled with the aroma of a gradually cooling night was what made her think of his approachability and kindness. She smiled, considering the warmth he exuded, his easy presence—because she craved both aspects so desperately right now. She had meant it when she said she looked forward to getting to know him.

Her lips twitched. Sure. Like that could happen. Time crunched, mentally exhausted, over committed, Jodie didn't hold out much hope for anything in the way of new relationships. Something like that would take nothing short of a miracle. Her focus remained on establishing a new life within a stressful set of family circumstances.

Swept into the advancing night, she savored the familiarity of the two-story farm house. Granted, her

mother had passed away a full two years ago; still, she considered this place to be *theirs*, and it was the only home she had ever truly known. Laying claim to one of the gliding chairs, she sank into the deep, comfy cushion and tipped her head back, beginning to rock. She closed her eyes, lulled by the peaceful melody of insects and the whispering rustle of a breeze that curved through the tall wild grass.

Odd that Kevin Mitchell came to life in her mind's eye all over again. In peaceful tranquility she swayed in time to her own internal beat and pondered her reaction to his ready warmth. Ease of self—was that it? That's definitely what she had sensed about him straight away.

At times like this, she wished she could rely on a script, on a safe pattern of living where right actions and motivations would lead to fair and just conclusions. Years on the radio had taught Jodie how to present her ideals in a positive and constructive way. Her passion came from sharing God's love with those who listened to her daily program.

But in real life—outside the confines of the studio—matters became much more complicated, especially over the past few years when family issues had become overwhelming.

The rattle of the screen door was followed by quiet footsteps that alerted her to Tracee's arrival. Reluctantly, Jodie lifted her head and waved toward the empty chair next to hers. "Join me?"

"Sure."

Crickets chirped and a night owl hooted mournfully from the branches of a nearby tree. "Thanks for making dinner tonight."

"No prob. Thanks for your help in the yard."