



The
Contest-winner
that Started
it all!

MARIANNE EVANS

Hearts
crossing

Woodland Series, Book 1

"How *do* you feel about God?" she asked gently.

"I *don't*," he replied. But then he softened, and gave her an apologetic look. "For now, if you don't mind, can we leave it at that?"

The answer, coupled with accompanying pain she sensed, left her wanting to press. She wanted to comfort and assure, but she didn't. She didn't want to intrude where she didn't belong. After all, they were just getting to know one another.

"OK, I will. For now. Just one question though. Is that why you don't attend church with the rest of your family?"

Again, like something divinely inspired, the words escaped before she could even consider them or hold them in check. All Collin did was nod.

The reactions, his character, intrigued her tremendously because he seemed a genuinely wonderful person. Daveny sensed as much in the way he behaved and the vibration of goodness he gave off.

Yet he seemed lost, too.

Perhaps God had more in store for her than renovating Woodland.

Hearts Crossing

by

Marianne Evans

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Hearts Crossing

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Dedication

Beth—Thank you, thank you for brainstorming this with me! I owe you, honey. Dan & Mary—you both mean the world to me. Having you at my side when I found out about this book's publication is a memory I'll forever treasure.

Prologue

Collin Edwards stood before the funeral assembly. Nervous heat crawled up his body and settled in. He clutched the edges of the podium where he stood and softly cleared his throat. The gesture was in vain. His throat constricted so much it hurt. Before the altar, just to the right, rested a flag-draped casket.

Collin looked down at a piece of paper upon which he had crafted the words to a eulogy. The words had refused to pour forth until just after three in the morning, not that he had slept much over the past few days.

He glanced at the cheat sheet. Tears built and stung. The white paper, the black scribbles blurred together into a hideous shade of gray.

“He took the bullet,” Collin began in a voice that felt far removed and tight, yet shockingly calm. “He answered the call to serve and protect, and he took the bullet. He helped a woman in need, a woman threatened by the man she loved, and he took the bullet. He was the oldest of our family, our leader and compass. And he took the bullet. He lived a life meant to enforce the law and the idea that we must do what's right. And he took the bullet. Lance Edwards was my big brother, my benchmark. Our family now bears a tremendous hole. Because he took the bullet.”

Only then did Collin take a conscious breath. Only then did he release his death grip on the podium. He slid the paper into a crumpled clutch and walked quickly to the first pew.

He didn't notice much right away. He didn't search out individual faces. The only image that immediately clung to Collin's consciousness was that of his mother, her head bowed, her shoulders shaking as she wiped her eyes free of the tears that simply kept coming.

He bit the inside of his cheek. Hard.

The service continued. Now, despite an odd form of detachment, images and sensations became a flood, spinning into place like the ever-shifting patterns of a kaleidoscope. Sunlight split into prisms by vibrant stained glass; the aroma of lilies, roses and carnations; the gleaming brass cross suspended above the altar, above them all.

The cross.

It offered Collin no comfort now. In fact, it felt foreign. Senseless. Pain roiled then overwhelmed him. Pain turned to resentment. Resentment bloomed into fury.

Where are You? He screamed in silence. *Where were You?*

This was Your plan? This was Your purpose for Lance's life? Obviously the answer is yes, so obviously You're a God of waste and pain.

Don't ever speak to me again about being loving and providential and merciful.

Just like that, a switch in his heart clicked from on to off, in his mind and his soul. Darkness rode in, and he embraced it. To do so was so much easier than dealing with the pain he felt, the guilt, the agony of

losing hope and the innocent joy of faith.

Never again.

Collin looked around, deliberately taking stock of Woodland Church of Christ. He captured everything in a definitive moment of resolution and life change.

Never again will I return to the home of a supposed Lord and Savior who would allow such a thing. It'll be better for me to stay away now, right, God?

Well don't worry. Never again will I darken the door of a church. And You keep as far away from me as possible, too. I want nothing more to do with You.

Ever.

1

Five Years Later

“Daveny, don't rush off. I want to talk to you.”

Daveny Montgomery squirmed inwardly but hid the reaction. Ten o'clock services at Woodland Church were freshly concluded. The narthex was filling rapidly with bodies in motion and the chatter of voices as greetings were exchanged and parishioners mixed and mingled for a bit before leaving. Children dodged through the maze of people, happily calling out to one another.

The summons of Pastor Kenneth Lucerne stalled Daveny's retreat to the parking lot. Hoping to make an unobtrusive exit from church, she quickly moved herself into a more welcoming mindset.

Pastor Ken had been part of her faith life for well over five years now, ever since the end of her college years. She adored him.

Crowds gradually thinned to small clusters; then Pastor Ken was able to give Daveny his full attention.

“So how you doing, kiddo?” he greeted.

Daveny stepped into a hug and gave him a smile. “I'm good, thanks.”

He chuckled, tucking her hand into the crook of

his arm. They walked outside to the expansive, if barren, entryway of the church building. Sunshine warmed the air even as soft, cool breezes curved inward through budding tree branches, making them chatter.

“Spring is here,” Pastor Ken observed. “Finally. You’ll be stepping into high gear over the next few months, huh?”

“I’m happy to say Montgomery Landscaping already has two big assignments lined up—one for a health club in Grosse Pointe and another for a loft development in downtown Detroit.”

“That’s my girl.” He complimented her, but cast her a sly grin. “Perhaps that’s why I’m not seeing you around quite so often these days?”

Daveny wilted, leaning on him in exaggerated physical apology. “Convicted. Sorry.”

He gave her hand a squeeze as they wandered the perimeter of the church building. “Apology accepted. You haven’t been gone *that* often, but I miss you when you’re not at service. Keep up the fight, Daveny. You’re needed.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied and meant it.

Daveny loved the Woodland church community, the faith life she had built here. Recently though, she found herself falling flat spiritually. She considered that fact as they continued to stroll. The setting was gorgeous. Towering pines and thick old maples filled a rolling tract of land just starting to wake up following a long, typically brutal, Michigan winter. Like her faith walk at the moment, it did its job, and was pleasantly utilitarian—but the grounds lacked zest. Spark. They needed an uplift.

“Did you hear about Jim Cavanaugh’s passing?”

Pastor Ken asked.

Sadness trickled downward from her head to her heart. "Yeah, Sarah Miles told me. He was a total sweetheart and a tremendous volunteer."

"He'll be deeply missed, not just because he was an active member of our church, but because of who he was as a person." Pastor Ken laughed, the sound warm and tender. "I'll always think of his homemade pasties each year when we have the International Dinner."

"They were my favorite."

"A taste of Northern Michigan for the down-staters," they said in unison, recalling one of Jim's favorite quotes.

"He was the kindest greeter," Daveny added. "People flocked to him when they entered church every week just to be able to shake his hand and get a smile and that big, boisterous greeting."

Daveny waited. Judging by the way Pastor Ken let the conversation dangle, it seemed he was about to elaborate. He bent, picking at weeds, dead leaves and a bit of overgrowth that spilled over the small black rubber edging of the narrow flowerbeds. Effective border shaping, but not at all picturesque, Daveny thought. Not at all what this church deserved.

Reviewing the grounds through the eyes of her chosen profession—a landscape architect—Daveny uncovered incredible potential.

A cross-tipped spire stretched into a cobalt sky devoid of clouds. Adding much to the setting was the fact that directly across Jefferson Avenue was Lake Saint Clair, a wide, sparkling blue jewel that dominated the horizon and added a gentle rumble of water life and boat sound to the air; especially on a restful and gorgeous Sunday morning like this.

"Jim had no children," Pastor Ken continued. "He had an older brother and a younger sister, both of whom passed on before him. I think that's part of what led him to be such a vital component of our church family." He stole a glance toward Daveny. "I can only assume that's why Woodland was named a beneficiary in his will."

Their meandering ended. Pastor Ken turned to face her fully. Daveny went into landscape design mode once again, thinking about how wonderful a wrought iron bench would be right now, a few of them perhaps, along the curved edges of the sidewalk that skirted the church. That way they could sit and be comfortable.

Pastor Ken continued. "He designated fifty thousand dollars toward restoration and beautification of the church."

Daveny's jaw dropped. She froze, staring at Pastor Ken. He simply smiled and nodded, saying, "I see you can already tell where I'm headed with this."

"Oh...ah...gosh..."

His laughter filled the rapidly warming air. Bird song and the light aroma of lily of the valley and hyacinth flowed into the atmosphere.

"You're an incredible designer and a remarkable woman. God needs to use that. Frankly, there's no one I'd trust more to make this project work. I discussed the idea with church council last week, and they're behind it one hundred percent. Contracts will have to be put together, as well as timing and fee schedules of course, but we want you to design and execute the exterior development." He paused just long enough to give her a kind and challenging look. "Can I count you in?"

“Count me in? It would be an honor. Just try to keep me away.”

Delighted, with seeds of vigor taking root, Daveny squeezed his hand as they sealed the deal.

2

"Mom, please. You're pushing. Again."

Collin stood firm, steady and unaffected when his mom, Elise, clucked her tongue. She turned from her salad-building exercise to give him a glare. She was a tad put-out, despite the fact that his reprimand had been quietly spoken. That settled his disquiet to simmer instead of boil.

"Collin Alexander Edwards, I'm not asking you to do anything but deliver paver bricks and some bags of mulch to the church. Just drop it and leave. The landscape company is going to be on site today and tomorrow so they need the materials as soon as possible."

"And since I happen to have a truck..."

"And since you happen to live in the area..." She paused from her lunch creation once again; this time she beamed at him.

Yep, Collin thought in resignation, I'm toast. Hooked right in. He couldn't hold out against his mom. Not when she smiled like that. Plus, like she said, he wasn't attending services or anything. This was simply a delivery job. Nothing to it. And it would help her out.

Collin relented and walked to the kitchen counter where she stood, timeless as a precious memory with her sweatshirt, blue jeans and page-boy style hair of

silver. Though he had already eaten lunch, he swiped a few slices of celery. A baby tomato. She slapped his hand and sighed.

"Do I get dinner tonight if I say yes?" he asked.

"A bribing mercenary," she muttered, continuing her salad creation. "I raised a bribing mercenary."

Collin pecked her cheek. "Where are the supplies I need to take?"

"The mulch is in the garage. On the cork board behind you is the receipt to pick up the pavers we bought the other day to donate to the cause."

He found and removed the receipt in question. Framed by a picture window overlooking the freshly mowed back yard, his mother paused to give Collin a final smile. "I appreciate this, and I'm counting on you for dinner. Love you, sweetheart."

He winked at her. "Thanks, Mom. I love you, too."

Marching orders in place, Collin turned to leave behind the sunny, airy kitchen of his parent's home.



The closer he got to Woodland Church, the more Collin's tension increased. He faced that fact without flinching and without apologizing.

He couldn't help the sense of anger he felt whenever he considered matters of faith and the topic of God's goodness, so he didn't try to stem the tide. Helping his mom is what mattered, and the thought kept Collin centered as he turned off Jefferson Avenue and into the church parking lot.

"Wow."

The single word exclamation was Collin's instinctive reaction upon seeing the church. Grounds

were torn up in large spots and contractors worked at the open sores. Collin slowed his truck to a stop next to a series of graders, haulers, and a semi that were presently swarmed by what he assumed were church volunteers.

He hopped down from the cab of his pickup and released the back latch, looking around for a person who might be deemed the leader of this renovation project.

And a project is exactly what this was. Major league. A sizable chunk of land to the rear of the facility was torn up as well. There, a hauler and backhoe were being put to use. Field stones and flat limestone pieces were positioned, ready for placement, and it looked as though some kind of water supply system was being put into place.

A pond perhaps?

Flower beds were being expanded and upgraded across the front and sides of the church. Bushes and trees stood in waiting, roots wrapped and tied in protective burlap. The grounds were a transitory mess.

The fact that he stopped to stare drew the attention of a passerby, an older, friendly looking man who called affably, "Need some help?"

Collin gave him a nod. "Delivery. Can you point me to the right person?"

"You bet. That'd be Daveny. She'll get you taken care of. Follow me over."

"Thanks."

They crossed the lot and closed in on a cluster of folks who were in scrubby clothes, water bottles and gardening tools in hand. At the center of it all was a slender, petite woman wearing jeans and a lime green t-shirt. They stepped up, and Collin realized she was in

the process of assigning volunteers to designated sections of the church grounds, occasionally consulting an overview spec sheet of the project spread out across a picnic table and secured at each end by a pair of weighty rocks.

During a pause in the delegation efforts, Collin's escort spoke up.

"Daveny, this gentleman brought us some supplies. Looks like the brick borders and mulch have arrived."

"Perfect. Thanks, Gabe."

She turned.

Her gaze lifted to his in greeting.

Collin's world tilted.

Something—something overwhelming and instantly captivating swept through him like wind song when she smiled. The gesture was radiant and warm, straight from the heart.

"Hi, I'm Daveny Montgomery."

Collin, meanwhile, stumbled over his own name, mentally stalling out while he stared at her. There was a purity he sensed, elusive and instantly haunting.

"Collin Edwards," he finally managed, taking hold of her extended hand. Firm grip, he noted. Skin, soft as silk. Nice.

"Glad to meet you—wait—*Edwards*. You must be one of Elise and Ben's sons."

Collin focused on a faint, fresh smudge of dirt on her cheek. The sight made his fingertips twitch with a longing to stroke it gently away. "Guilty as charged."

"They're amazing." Daveny's compliment was stated with a flat out degree of conviction. Something flickered through her eyes though, confusion it seemed. "You live around here?"

“Just a couple miles away.”

“Oh. I thought I had met all of the family.” Her confusion fell away, replaced by acceptance and kindness. “Let me recruit some volunteers to help unload.”

“OK.”

With a nod, she headed to a group of men who were ripping out a series of disintegrating rounded rubber boarder frames. As they ripped, they tossed the refuse into a rapidly growing discard pile.

Daveny wore a gray baseball cap that featured the green and white Spartan logo of Michigan State University. Her long brown hair was fashioned into a straight, shiny ponytail that she had tucked through the back end of her cap. The ponytail bounced in time to her movements, and Collin found himself smiling, strangely fixated.

Daveny Montgomery. Pretty name...

Then it occurred to him. Suddenly Collin understood why she seemed somewhat flummoxed by his arrival. Every week, the entire Edwards family made it a practice to attend ten o'clock services together at Woodland.

Everyone except Collin.

She probably wondered why he wasn't in the pews along with his obviously loving and close-knit clan—especially if he lived nearby.

The realization fell on Collin's heart as Daveny gathered their reinforcements. The weight was unpleasant, but it burned off nicely in the face of his bitterness. No matter Daveny's brightness and appeal, he refused to feel bad about leaving church life, and God, behind.

The unloading process didn't take long, but the