



Woodland Series, Book 2

CK2S Kwips  
& Kritiques  
RECOMMENDED  
READ!

MARIANNE EVANS

*Hearts*  
surrender

In an unexpected, graceful motion, Ken caught her swing by the chains. He held her in place, suspended backward, with nothing but a cushion of air between them. All at once Kiara went dizzy and hyper-focused, tempted once more by that full, supple mouth, and the satiny-looking fall of his thick brown hair as he leaned over her. He was close enough to touch. In this moment, she wanted nothing more than to do just that.

"Some time, at some point, I'd like to hear more about that, Kiara. I'd like very much to know how you became the woman you are."

She looked at him steadily. "I'd bore you to tears. It's nothing extraordinary."

"All present evidence to the contrary." He set her gliding once again and Kiara's stomach performed a sparkling fall-away. She delighted in his words but forced herself to brush them aside before they could take root and sway her into believing he saw richness to her spirit. After all, it was part of Ken's persona to be gracious and encouraging.

But he continued, and those arguments splintered to shards when he said, "You're moving forward in directions that are not only admirable, but eye-opening—not just for you, most likely, but to everyone who's part of your life—don't hold to what other people see, or expect of you. Be who you are. And while you're at it, create the best version of yourself you can imagine. The only question, with the only relevance that matters, is this, Kiara: Who are you *now*?"



Hearts  
Surrender

by

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.

**Hearts Surrender**  
**Woodland Series, Book 2**

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## Dedication

To my church family at Guardian Angels. You're an inspiration to me in so many ways - and an ever-present reminder of God's community of love. Thank you for the blessing of your friendship and faith life. To Denise Ficorelli in particular, thanks for your help with the mission trip information and research questions. The youth of Guardian Angels are so blessed by your service!



## Praise for Hearts Crossing

Evans presented a plot that was impressive. I loved the way this book unfolded. It showed a realistic look at Christians without being preachy or over-the-top. I know anyone who reads this book will love it. In fact, I hope there is a sequel.

~5-Hearts , The Romance Studio

Ms. Evans knows how to set a scene. Her word descriptions put you right there until you can taste the scented breeze....It's a story which touches the heart and tickles the senses.

~4.5 Books, LASR

Hearts Crossing is a perfect example of why I love Inspirational romance: ...Beautiful writing and characters you won't soon forget.

~Award Winning Author, Cindy K. Green

Both Daveny and Collin are wonderful characters who have a delightful relationship. I enjoyed the path to Collin's returning faith and the sweetness of Hearts Crossing.

~4.5 Books – Top Pick/ Night Owl Reviews

...Hearts Crossing offers a wonderful reminder of the personal renewal and revitalization that is possible with God and I am looking forward to reading more from this author in the near future!

~4.5 Clovers / Crystal, Kwips & Kritiques





# 1

Kenneth Lucerne donned a weighty, calf-length vestment, the white, gold-trimmed mantle of his calling. In the seclusion of his pastoral office at Woodland Church, he adjusted its fit and fall.

Something in his spirit tried to ignite...and failed.

A centering breath later, he closed his eyes, and prayed. *God, grace me with the strength to fulfill the mission You have entrusted to my care. Grant me the heart and wisdom to share Your mercy, Your love, and Your truth. Please be with me, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Beyond the partially-opened door came the gradually building noise from the narthex as parishioners arrived for ten o'clock services.

Ken opened his eyes slowly, seeing and absorbing. First thing that hit him? Naturally, it was the brass framed photograph of his wife, Barb. He firmed his heart against a familiar onslaught of pain as his thoughts performed an auto correct: His *late* wife, Barb.

Outside the office, Ken heard the Edwards family arrive. Their voices stood out—won his interest by virtue of familiarity and deep affection. Exuberant conversations and laughter, so typical to the clan, were interrupted suddenly by the sharp, plaintive cry of a baby. A unison chorus of tender assurances followed, so too, a smattering of gentle coos.

A smile tugged against the corners of his mouth.

Today, Woodland would welcome in baptism the soul of two-month-old Jeffrey Lance Edwards, son of Collin and Daveny Edwards.

He attempted spiritual ignition once again and came closer this time.

Still, a void yawned before him, widened by the prospect of a loving family gathering. Moments like this intensified that deep, almost breath-stealing sense of loss, but he tried not to dwell on that fact. He couldn't afford to think of Barb, of losing the most precious person in his life. Not in a moment so full of God's joy and light.

Determination rode in, heightening his resolve to leave melancholy behind and meet God's present moment head-on, in his role as Pastor.

His heart's ignition switch flickered, sparked hot, and then fired to life.

Leaving the office, he walked a short corridor leading to the church proper.

"Have you ever seen such a perfectly shaped mouth in your *life*?" Collin Edwards asked the family assemblage.

Stepping up from behind, Ken stifled a laugh. Collin fit the stereotypical role of proud father to a 'T', but the emotion behind his comment was authentic and warming.

"Yes, I have," said Collin's wife, Daveny. "Every time I look at you."

Amidst laughter, and a few groans from Collin's brothers, Ken entered the circle of the Edwards family and clapped a hand against Collin's shoulder. "Have you ever seen such a proud *father* in your life?"

Through the enthusiastic welcome he received, through the teasing that ensued, Ken searched...and

found. *Kiara Jordan.*

He knew she'd be front and center. Daveny's best friend and business partner wasn't part of the Edwards family by blood, but rather by unanimous consent.

She gently lifted Jeffrey from Daveny's arms and brought the baby into a close tuck. She nuzzled his plump, pink cheek. The fall of Kiara's straight, honey-colored hair danced like a curtain around her shoulders, the satin of which Ken could nearly feel. For a moment, he just stared, taking his fill of a beautiful woman cradling an innocent baby.

"He is, without question, the *cutest baby ever*," Kiara said.

"Absolutely," concurred Elise Edwards, the equally proud grandmother.

Ken noticed the somewhat aged christening blanket draped over Kiara's arm. She would be up front with the whole family during the baptism, standing next to the gray and white marble font during the ceremony. Made sense. Daveny Montgomery Edwards, an only child, considered Kiara a surrogate sister.

"You want to see Pastor Ken, Jeffrey?" Kiara murmured, stepping close. She focused her gaze on his, her emerald eyes alive and sparkling. When she handed Jeffrey over, the light scent of a floral perfume drifted up. Like the woman who wore it, the aroma was evocative.

"How are you?" Ken asked quietly, unwilling to relinquish her gaze.

"Good. I'm sure glad to see *you* again. Welcome back." Her smile bloomed, large and beautiful—engaging. It took a few seconds for Ken to find his equilibrium.

"Thanks. It's good to be back."

"How was the mission trip?"

While Ken cuddled Jeffrey, Kiara rubbed the baby's back. The motion left him keenly aware of the connection between the three of them. "It was hard work—but very rewarding."

"You were in Louisiana, right? Just outside of New Orleans? Habitat for Humanity?"

"Exactly." The knowledge that this compelling woman had tracked his absence sent pleasure seeping through his bloodstream. Within her observations, though, Ken sensed an underlying current, one that traveled beyond simple interest. She cared about the answer. So he elaborated. "There's a world of great work being done down there. We helped build new houses, even assisted in improving dilapidated structures inside and out. We fed masses of homeless people, too. In fact, the whole program left me wanting to get members of our youth group motivated to donate some time and muscle to a mission trip of our own—maybe sometime this fall."

Jeffrey's back rub ended when Kiara went still, though her hand remained in place while she looked into Ken's eyes. Almost instantly, the baby started a restless squirm. "Really? What an amazing experience that would be." She retreated a bit, breaking the connection to Jeffrey. She looked down as she ran her fingertips against the tassels that edged the christening blanket. She looked up once more. "You must have enjoyed being a source of help and benefit. I give you a lot of credit."

Ken could tell her comment didn't stem from polite conversation or small talk. Images from the trip came to him, click-by-click, like a slideshow display.

He had witnessed helplessness, poverty, the destitute living conditions of over-burdened families. But he had also witnessed transformation—hope and rebirth delivered by hard working hands and giving hearts.

Giving hearts like Kiara's.

Not for the first time in the years since they had met, Ken sensed within her a quest, a longing for self-discovery. Trouble was, she fought that instinct, too.

So he challenged. "Maybe you can find out." He studied her for a moment. "I have a good memory. I'll remember this conversation if we end up putting the mission trip together. You may become one of my first adult recruits."

She blushed, looking away shyly while she shook her head. Her pattern, he knew, might be to step aside, but her heart turned her toward service—service that could be put to miraculous use.

Magnetized, Ken could have studied her features, that delicate flush of reaction, for much longer; however, family conversations, plans and questions took her away from his direct focus. Besides, more and more parishioners filtered in, sweeping him into his role as Pastor.

Ken tried not to be blatant about watching Kiara, but following their conversation, he had time to consider the ideas he had about crafting a mission trip that involved Woodland Church. In fact, the seeds of that plan took root and bloomed into a flare of color and life that was instantaneous. While he watched her move through the church, mixing with people and chatting, Ken knew he wanted Kiara involved—and he felt confident he could convince her to participate.

That fact alone provided a spurring push of motivation.

## 2

Even before they met in the common area of Woodland Church, Kiara knew Pastor Ken was back in town, following a month-long sabbatical to participate in a Christian outreach and mission program.

He'd been doing such things a lot during the past couple years—ever since his wife Barb passed away. He had spent weeks in the far reaches of Michigan's upper peninsula working with impoverished families and assisting their far-removed charitable organizations. During the winter months, he had spent countless hours at homeless shelters and soup kitchens around metro Detroit.

This past excursion had been his longest yet, however—a full month away from Woodland. Associate Pastor Ben McCallum always performed admirably, but the heart of Woodland Church beat strongest within the soul of its Pastor, Kenneth Lucerne. For almost a dozen years now—ever since his ordination, according to Daveny—Woodland was his home. Kiara often wondered if that wasn't the reason why in recent times being at the helm of the church seemed difficult for him. After all, at thirty-five, he was far too young to have suffered through the terrible life-quake of becoming a widower.

Despite it all, Kiara gave him tremendous credit for natural charisma, and nothing lessened the impact

of being in his presence once again.

Short brown hair, softly waved, framed a face that featured a strong, squared jaw and a pair of warm brown eyes that searched the faces of today's attendees, drawing them in one by one as he preached.

Kiara included.

Before she knew it, his gaze tagged hers. A slight quirk of his lips let her know she'd been busted for staring.

"Where there's love, there is self-sacrifice," Ken said, walking the length of the front line of pews. Kiara shook free of distraction and listened. "There's a giving over, one to the other. A surrender. By that I don't just mean the surrender of time, or of giving up a few hours...right now probably *more* than a few hours...of sleep to soothe the cries of a newborn baby." Ken smiled at Daveny and Collin who sat next to her. He slid his hand tenderly against Jeffrey's cheek. "What I mean by surrender is sacrifice. Love can't grow into place without self-surrender. If either withholds the self, love cannot exist."

Ken continued. "You know what? Sacrifice gets a bad rap. Sacrifice evokes the image and emotion of denial, of setting aside something we wish for. That's not the case here. When we speak of sacrifice in this instance, it involves nurturing and seeing to the needs of a newborn, sometimes as we set aside our own wants and needs. It's selfless. We give and teach as a baby becomes a toddler, and yet again, as that child grows to adulthood beneath the protective wings of a loving parent and family. Furthermore, those sacrifices aren't without benefit. For example? What a blessing, to witness the good that comes from watching a newborn grow into a self-sufficient being who remains,

always, a part of our hearts and lives. Ultimately though, our children reach independence. When that happens, a different kind of surrender takes place. A release of the ones we love to the fullness of life—knowing in our hearts that the unchanging truth of God’s ultimate shepherding always stays in place.”

The sermon concluded a short time later, and Ken invited the Edwards family to gather around a baptismal font stationed to the right of the altar. Kiara followed behind Daveny. Once everyone was in place, Jeffrey’s christening blanket was removed. Then, clothed only in a cloth diaper, he was handed to Pastor Ken.

Ken offered introductory blessings and a prayer before holding him over the warmed, gurgling water of the font. “Jeffrey Lance Edwards, the Christian community of Woodland welcomes you with great joy. I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

As he spoke, Pastor Ken dipped Jeffrey into the water three times. The family gathered in close and a few flashes went off, recording the moment. Swaddling Jeffrey in fresh, white linen adorned by a vivid red cross, and lifting the baby carefully, Pastor Ken walked the main aisle of the church in a ceremonious presentation to the parish of its newest member. Chills of pure joy skimmed against Kiara’s skin as piano music swelled and the congregation chimed in with a sung chorus of “Alleluia.”

Tears filled her eyes and spilled slowly down her cheeks. She looked over at Daveny, who watched the proceedings and glowed with happiness; her eyes sparkled with moisture as well and Collin tucked his arm around her waist, drawing her tight to his side.

They both looked so proud, so fulfilled. Kiara rejoiced deeply for her dearest friends and their newborn son—named in part for Collin’s late brother.

When Ken returned to the baptismal font, he handed Jeffrey to Daveny, but his gaze settled on Kiara’s at the moment a fresh trickle of tears fell free. She dashed them away fast. It was time to leave services temporarily so that Jeffrey could be dressed in his baptismal garments.

Before returning to the proceedings, however, Ken passed by and discreetly pressed an item into her right hand. A soft, snow-white handkerchief. He touched her with a smile that made her muscles go weak.



Seeking a few moments of peaceful meditation following services, Kiara ducked back into the church. It would take a while for the crowds to thin, for the Edwards family to accept the multitude of congratulations and admiring comments.

The idea prompted a smile and a sense of contentment on behalf of her friends. Daveny and Collin could make even the most jaded person believe in the power of love all over again.

Which became part of Kiara’s quandary at the moment.

She longed to taste that kind of happiness, but trying to find it always seemed to end her up in tight, complex emotional tangles. Like the situation she faced right now with her most current male admirer...

“You coming, Kiara?”

The summons startled her. Kiara turned when she felt Daveny’s hand come to rest on her shoulder. She

hadn't even heard her friend approach—testimony to the degree of distraction she fought. “Yeah, I am. Sorry.”

“No worries, sweetie. Just wondered about you is all.” Daveny sat next to her with a sigh. “OK, so the pudgy ankles are gone, the waistline is starting to resemble that of a normal human being again, but I'm here to tell you; Ken wasn't kidding. *Boy*, does sleep deprivation take it out of you.”

Kiara grinned. “I slept in until eight thirty this morning.”

“Wench.”

“Stop snarling. I may have slept through the night, but I don't have a beautiful baby boy to tend to. And I certainly didn't wake up next to a man the likes of Collin Edwards.”

“Was it Andrew, perhaps?” Daveny asked tentatively.

“No.” The reply was flat and lifeless.

Daveny paused. “Have you decided?”

On the inside, Kiara cringed. On the inside, she braced against...everything. Right versus wrong. God versus the devil in her soul.

In an instant, Kiara found herself thousands of miles away. She traversed the narrow, cobbled streets of Paris, hand in hand with a sexy, and admittedly, besotted suitor, her world painted a soft, dusky shade of rose. In her mind's eye, she saw the Eiffel Tower framed in the window of a five-star hotel where she lounged on a balcony overlooking the ancient, gorgeous city. She could almost feel a cool evening breeze ripple the glossy fabric of a satin robe and negligee against her skin.

Beyond the set of double French doors at her back?

Andrew—dark haired, olive skinned, a bewitching specimen—stretched out upon a king-sized bed, tangled up in its sheets, half covered by a plush down comforter...

“Kiara?”

Jarred back to reality by Daveny’s voice, Kiara took a deep breath and spoke from the heart. “I realize my ‘No’ should be automatic. It’s wrong. His offer to take me to France for a romantic getaway feels too much like a deliberate ploy. A blatant seduction. Payment for services rendered.”

Daveny didn’t agree, or disagree. But then, she didn’t need to. Like a good friend, she waited and allowed Kiara to come to terms.

“Why does it appeal to me so strongly?” Kiara wondered aloud. “Why is it so hard to just refuse and move on?”

“Because he’s attractive. He’s successful, and he’s absolutely enchanted by you, Kiara. He has been from the start of our landscaping project for his company. He’s offering you a trip that’s certainly a fantasy come true. Once in a lifetime.”

Daveny was correct. First class flight, the Ritz Hotel, a week of...

Surrender to mutual attraction.

But was it mutual? Was it *right*?

Kiara studied the simple altar illuminated by vibrant stained glass windows that framed its perimeter. She wondered. Did her longing to agree to this trip stem from feelings she harbored for Andrew, or from the fact that she felt increasingly lonely? After all, what woman wouldn’t enjoy being sought after by a well-to-do, sexy man who wanted to treat her like a princess?