

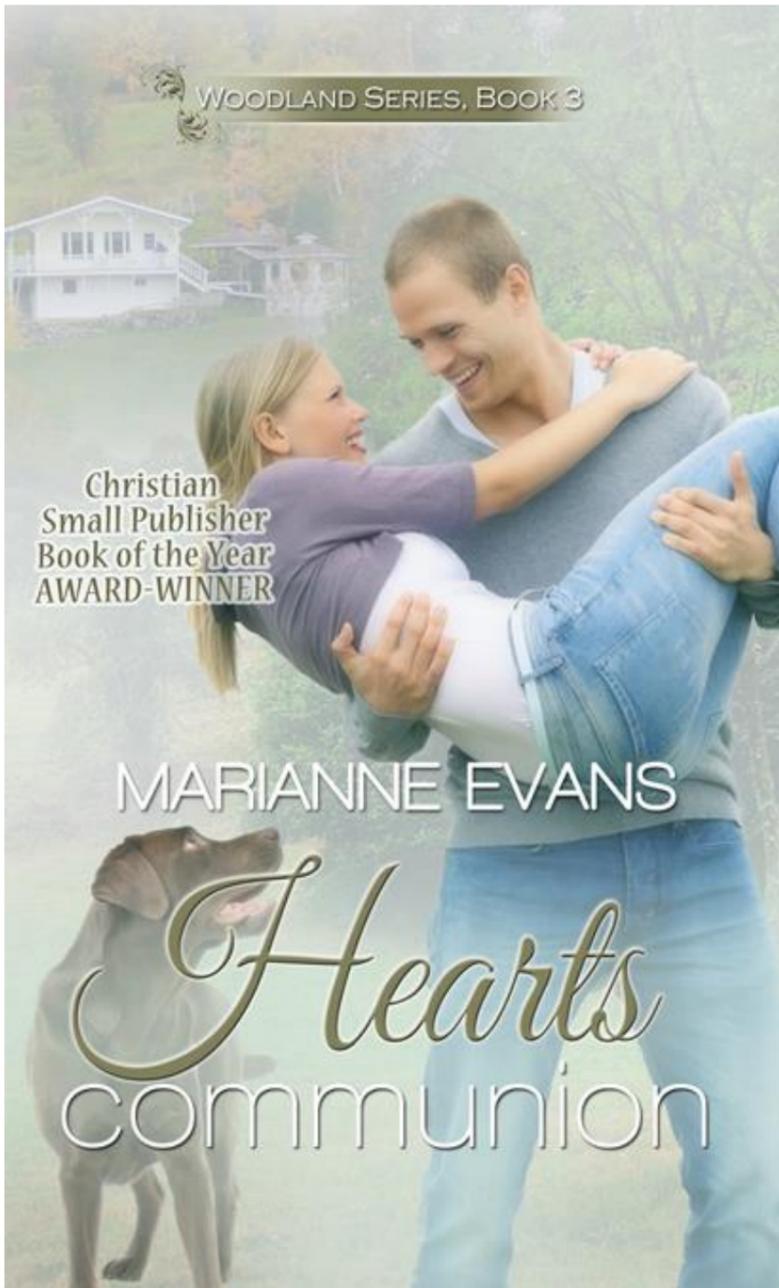


WOODLAND SERIES, BOOK 3

Christian
Small Publisher
Book of the Year
AWARD-WINNER

MARIANNE EVANS

Hearts
communion



Hearts
Communion

Marianne Evans

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Hearts Communion

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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Titles by Marianne Evans

Hearts Crossing

Hearts Surrender

Hearts Communion

Hearts Key (Coming Soon)

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the grace of God that is revealed through one simple, yet powerful gift: the gift of family.

Praise for Marianne Evans

Woodland Series:

Hearts Crossing is a Gayle Wilson Award of Excellence finalist for Best Novella of 2010 Southern Magic, the Birmingham Alabama Chapter of RWA

...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 / Brenda Talley, The Romance Studio on *Hearts Crossing*

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 / Silvermage, Night Owl Reviews on *Hearts Crossing*

Ms. Evans has once again delivered a book which I could not put down...I cannot wait for the rest of this series. If possible, it just got better than the first book. ~ 5 Hearts—Book of the Week, Brenda Talley, The Romance Studio on *Hearts Surrender*

Hearts Surrender is a satisfying, feel good romance that goes beyond mere happy endings...I can't wait for the next Woodland book to be published! ~ 5 Klovers—Recommended Read, Crystal, Kwips & Kritiques

1

Jeremy Edwards's cell phone came to life. A vibration sizzled against his hip, and as he unclipped his BlackBerry, the display screen lit up with an incoming text:

HELP! Ur nephew is raging with 101 fever. Can u pick him up from daycare n keep him 4 a while? Txt, don't call. Im in class. DESPERATE! APPRECIATE! C

Jeremy, JB to everyone who knew him best, re-read the missive from his brother, Collin. Collin's wife, Daveny, was out of town, pitching a corporate landscaping project in southern Ohio. Collin would be teaching his high school English class for another—Jeremy flicked his wrist and quick-checked his watch—two hours or so, depending on student demands.

So he stopped painting freshly installed drywall and stepped off the ladder, calling out to one of the crewmen at work on the task. "Greg, I'm gone for a couple hours. Tell Mindy I'll be back later tonight to install the dishwasher for her."

"Will do. See ya, JB."

Gotta love flexibility, Jeremy thought with honest gratitude. Leaving behind a living room buzzing with remodeling activity, he went to the kitchen of the modest, three-bedroom bungalow his construction company was helping to renovate. *Gratis*. There he grabbed his leather jacket from the spot where he had

draped it over a chair at the dining table. After sliding it on, he texted his “yes” to Collin’s request and hit the send button.

The project he currently spearheaded was part of an effort to give back to his hometown, especially as summer construction activity slowed down and a fiery Michigan autumn bent toward winter. That fact drove itself home as soon as Jeremy stepped out the back door of the kitchen and found himself buffeted by a stiff, biting wind. He stuffed his hands in his coat pockets, lowering his head as he jogged to his pickup truck.

He auto-started the vehicle, then his thoughts zeroed in on Jeffrey, his nearly three-year-old nephew. Jeremy grinned to himself. He was happy to help Collin. After all, Jeremy absolutely doted on his nephew – and everyone else in his family.

Climbing into the cab of his truck was a welcome relief from the elements. Before leaving, he pulled out his phone once again and performed a location search on Sunny Horizons Day Care Center. He had a vague idea of where the facility was located, but had never been there.

Navigation in place, he backed down the bumpy driveway of Mindy Nather’s home, frowning at the cracks he saw in the asphalt.

“Needs work,” he muttered, driving toward the business district of Saint Clair Shores. Meanwhile, he mentally mapped out crews, supplies and the time necessary to repair the driveway, tacking that aspect of the job onto the living room and dining room renovations, which were nearly complete. He used downtime at a stoplight to open up a pack of cashews and pour a few into his mouth.

Crunching the snack, he shook out some more and moved forward, following traffic to an area of the city that featured a number of stand-alone retail buildings. Behind them were neighborhoods full of nice homes, still-green grass and trees gone spindly and barren. JB munched on more cashews, chewing while he kept watch for the address of Jeffrey's daycare center. According to technology, he was getting close.

Sure enough, a minute or two later he spotted a wooden sign featuring a rainbow, a large sun full of rays, and the words *Sunny Horizons* painted in a variety of bold, primary colors. The moniker resided on a patch of grass in front of a well-maintained ranch-style home crafted of red brick that had been converted to commercial use.

Finishing up his get-me-through-to-a-late-dinner protein boost, Jeremy tossed the wrapper into a cup holder and turned into the parking lot. He brought the truck to a stop, thinking about his nephew. Poor Jeffrey. He'd take him straight home to Collin's place where the boy could rest up and recover in his own bed.

But what, exactly, should somebody give a sick two-year-old? How much of that liquid medicine stuff would Jeffrey need? While he considered, and made plans to call Collin on that count, JB walked past the window line of the facility and glanced inside

That's when his focus sharpened on the scene inside, and his footsteps came to an abrupt halt. A thought slipped into place with compelling impact: *What a gorgeous woman*. Long blonde hair fell forward in layers, framing a face that featured fair skin and expressive, baby-blue eyes. The straight, thick strands swung as she moved from place to place, spotting pre-

school kids currently playing Twister, which caused his insides to spark. Jeans and an aqua colored sweater showed off a trim figure. She laughed easily, talking the kids through difficult moves and exclaiming when players tumbled and fell.

Quick as a blink he watched the lovely lady shift focus. She turned away from the Twister competition and whisked up one of the smaller toddlers who lingered shyly near her legs. Lovely Lady stepped into a clear space. Face alight with pleasure, she spun the toddler, who seemed to laugh and enjoy it just as much as her female charge.

In fact, the sensation was contagious. Jeremy smiled in response to the pair.

And I'm still riveted to the sidewalk. He silently chastised himself, performing a mental shake that jostled him back to the moment at hand. *Stay on point, JB! Jeffrey. Nephew. Sick kid in need of help.*

He approached the entryway and stepped inside. But rescue mission or not, he looked forward to meeting the woman.

2

Monica Kittelski moved with long-honed ease through a sea of bustling children. She automatically dodged bodies, an obstacle course of shoes, socks, toys, even spinner boards that were being used to aid in a raucous game of Twister. Unaffected by the stream of movement and cacophony, she made her way toward the man who had just entered the lobby.

Jeremy, she thought. Jeremy Edwards. This must be Jeffrey's uncle. Collin had called a few minutes ago saying his brother would be picking up the sick toddler.

The noise level was off the charts, but the racket didn't even make him blink. Stepping up, already extending her hand, she gave him an inner nod of respect for that fact. He accepted the gesture, and Monica found herself pleased by the calloused texture and warmth of his skin against hers.

"I'm Jeremy Edwards."

She squelched a grin. "And I'm impressed." He simply arched a brow and waited, looking around, likely for his nephew. "You haven't even cringed yet."

His focus zeroed in on her, and Monica was caught off-guard by the sly, playful curve of his lips—the sparkle in his eyes that ticked against her nerve endings. The lips were full and expressive. *Nice.* Her

heart rate shot up, and a fluttery, tingling sensation washed through her body.

"No worries. I'm not *quite* a rookie."

Monica smiled, and so did he. "I've seen many a man stagger to their knees upon entering the bedlam of afternoon game time. I'm Monica Kittelski. The owner."

"Hello, Monica Kittelski. Daveny raves about you. And I won't be staggering any time soon. I'm used to kid chaos, so I guess I'm not just *any* man."

"Guess not," she sassed right back. "Thanks for getting here so quickly."

"Not a problem. Glad I could help out."

The playful spice of his personality dissolved into familial love and protection when he caught sight of little Jeffrey shuffling out of Monica's office, holding hands with Deborah Nielson, the co-owner and facility director.

Jeremy knelt to Jeffrey's level and opened his arms. "Come here, Chief."

It was those little things that told the full story here—the way Jeremy embraced Jeffrey—fevered kid or not—and the low, tender tone of voice.

Listless, Jeffrey snuffled, his chin trembling as he sank into his uncle's embrace. Jeremy lifted him up, and then turned his attention back to Monica. Residual tenderness lived in his eyes.

"Chief?" Monica asked, charmed by the nickname.

Jeremy nuzzled Jeffrey's plump, overly red cheek. Jeffrey seemed to fight tears, but a few spilled nonetheless, trailing against his skin. "Oh, man, buddy, you're on broil. Let's get you home." He peered up at Monica. "It's kind of a long story." Over Jeffrey's head, he delivered a lingering, steady look. "I'll have to tell

you about it some time.”

She could only hope. “I’d like that.”

Jeremy made to leave, moving between the two plastic floor mats where kids currently called out and contorted like pretzels. He carefully stepped his way toward a low-slung wooden coat rack with small, square storage cubbies on top.

“Twister gives them the chance to learn colors, flexibility and left versus right. It’s the best of all worlds.” The teacher in Monica came to the fore as she led the way, or, maybe it was a touch of nervous chatter meant to deflect her intuitive reaction to the man. Monica pushed that idea aside for later consideration.

He glanced over his shoulder and their eyes tagged. “Best of all worlds is also that spinning session I watched you perform through the window a few minutes ago. Wish I’d’ve had more teachers like you growing up.”

Monica’s poised, smooth footsteps nearly ended in a tumble at his comment. Her heart actually stuttered.

“I’ll just get his coat,” Jeremy said, evidently unfazed by her startled silence and affected reaction.

“There’s a plastic tub as well, right above it, with his afternoon snack.” Monica glided a gentle hand against Jeffrey’s back. The toddler took a deep, shaky breath and stuffed his thumb in his mouth, closing his eyes. “Poor pumpkin. He sure seems relieved to see you. He’s been hit pretty hard. Here, don’t disturb him. You’re just taking him to the car.” Monica pulled down his coat and went to work. “We’ll tuck this around him nice and snug.”

She lifted the hood up and over his head for additional protection. As she ministered, Jeremy’s eyes

went wide. "Houston? We have a problem."

Monica looked up at him. Boy, did he have great—no, make that *awesome*—dark brown eyes. "What's that?"

"I don't have a car seat. Oh, man. Guess I bragged too soon. I *am* a kid rookie."

More like a deer caught in the headlights, Monica thought with compassion. He started to look around a bit frantically, so she didn't wait long before coming to the rescue. "Know why they pay me the big bucks?"

He chuckled. "You know? I'd love to knock that one right out of the ballpark, but I'll refrain."

She rolled her eyes, but didn't restrain a grin. He was cute—in so many ways. "Because I'm prepared. Stay here. I'll be right back."

Monica went to her office and opened a spacious utility closet where she stored any number of odds and ends—among them a couple of ready-to-roll car seats. It paid to think ahead; in her line of business, stuff like this happened all the time. She lifted one and rejoined Jeremy, who looked at her as though she had transformed into Houdini himself.

"You just earned every word of praise Daveny ever spoke about you."

"Charmer." Monica scanned the activities taking place in the great room. Satisfied the kids were adequately supervised by Deborah and a trio of teachers, she gestured toward the exit. "I'll help you buckle it in. You just take care of the bambino."

"Thanks. Really."

Stepping outside, a brisk wind cut straight through her. Fall, she realized with chagrin, was giving way to winter without much of a fight. Jeremy unlocked his pickup with the keyless entry and auto-

started the engine. Monica prepped the car seat. Fortunately he stood behind her, with Jeffrey snuggled in his arms, and he blocked the wind.

That is, until she straightened and turned around. A large chunk of hair skittered straight across her face. She reached up to slide it out of the way and immediately noticed she held Jeremy's full attention. The smoky heat of his gaze did delicious things to her insides; suddenly it didn't feel quite so cold anymore.

"All set," she said. "Just settle him in and drop the safety bar into place. It'll lock right up, and he should be good to go."

Jeremy didn't move right away. He gave a tiny, almost imperceptible shake of his head. "I'll bring this back tomorrow. Seriously, I owe you. I got the call from Collin and just took off. Didn't even think about how I'd get him home."

"No problem at all; that's what I keep this around for. I'll see you tomorrow."

Those deep-set, mahogany eyes fixed on her. When he smiled, it felt like the first rays of sun at daybreak. She took a deep breath and turned, hugging her arms to her midsection as he moved to leave. The wind blasted against her once again.

"Count on it, Monica." The chattering branches of nearby trees and tumbling leaf noise nearly drowned out his answer, but her name on his lips warmed her insides once more.

3

The next morning, Jeremy climbed into his truck and shut the door. Glancing to the right, he caught sight of the car seat that rode shotgun. He grinned like a fool, starting the engine and cranking the heat.

His timing, admittedly, was deliberate. At just after 10 AM, he wouldn't be missed at the project site for another hour or so. He had a bit of that precious autumn-into-winter flextime to spare. Meanwhile, the morning rush of parents dropping off their kids at Sunny Horizons would most likely have dwindled by now. He hoped he might be able to take advantage of some additional one-on-one time with Monica Kittelski when he returned her gear. The idea left him buoyed.

Sure enough, when he arrived, the semi-circle drive leading to the facility was empty, with a handful of cars lined up neatly in a lot to the rear. Jeremy parked and walked inside, car seat in tow. He was greeted promptly by the smiling staff member who had brought Jeffrey out of Monica's office yesterday. What was her name again...?

"Mr. Edwards, right?"

She offered her hand, and he shifted the car seat to accept the gesture. "Hi. Jeremy, please."

"Jeremy, I'm Deborah. Nice to meet you."

"Same here." Deborah was tall and slim, with

short, curly salt-and-pepper hair—maybe in her late forties. She seemed, by nature, a bubbly and warm-hearted woman. He couldn't help but return her positive energy, though as discreetly as possible, he searched for Monica.

"I'm sure Monica will appreciate the quick return. I'll let her know you're here."

"That'd be great. I'd like to thank her." He paused a beat. "Ah, for the loaner."

Was he just imagining Deborah's sly grin, those knowing eyes? She turned and walked away—headed to a doorway on the left of a short hallway. Moments later, out came Monica. Seeing her again hit him just as hard today as it had yesterday. Sunshine hair was held back by a brown clip, which naturally drew his eye to her slender neck, to the soft angles of her face. She entered the room, full of supple, alluring grace, and her energy instantly filled the space. Those clear, blue eyes brimmed with warmth. Jeremy took her in, and savored, enrapt.

"Jeremy. Hi."

"Hi, Monica." He indicated his delivery. "Where can I put this for you?"

She gestured in the direction of her office. "Right over here. Come on back."

He followed her.

"Are you in a hurry? Can I offer you a cup of coffee?"

An excuse to stay for a bit? You bet. "I'm in no rush. Coffee'd be nice."

"Least I can do since you returned the car seat so fast."

"Trust me—the speed of return is fear-induced."

"Oh? How's that?"