

The cover features a photograph of a young girl with brown hair and bangs, wearing a colorful striped shirt and a headband with a circular pattern. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. In the background, a woman in a yellow shirt and a child in a dark shirt are seen from behind, standing in a field of tall grass and flowers. The overall scene is bright and outdoors.

WOODLAND SERIES, BOOK 4

Night Owl
Review
TOP PICK!

MARIANNE EVANS

Hearts
key

Hearts Key

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 Key

COPYRIGHT 2011 by Marianne Evans

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given away to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version^(R), NIV^(R). Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.TM Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.whiterosepublishing.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2011

Print Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-090-1

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-091-8

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To those who share ministry, and talent, via the wonderful Christian music I listen to each day. I'm a fan, and I'm grateful. Also, to high school sweethearts everywhere who still remember that first flush of love—and longing.

Titles by Marianne Evans

Hearts Crossing

Hearts Surrender

Hearts Communion

Hearts Key

PROLOGUE

One Year Ago

Amy Samuels shifted an armload of groceries, so she could flex her shoulder muscles. The supermarket was just a few blocks away, and she walked there whenever she could. She needed the exercise to clear her mind, and ease stress.

The front door of her home stood open; she frowned, going tense. Seeing her husband's car parked in the driveway triggered an immediate, instinctive sense of disquiet.

Mark's home. In the middle of the day. Why?

The manufacturing company he worked for was in the midst of a big job, providing parts for the next generation of SUV's. He was busy, and she didn't expect him to be home until late tonight. To be honest, Amy had been looking forward to his absence and the inner peace she knew it would bring.

Why wasn't Mark at work?

She walked inside, trying without success to ignore the sound of slamming cupboards coming from the kitchen. Wouldn't you just know it? The line of fire was exactly where she needed to deposit her stash of groceries.

All of a sudden, glassware clanged and banged, coming dangerously close to crashing. Amy steeled

herself for battle.

“Mark? Mark, where’s Pyper?”

His answer was an unintelligible, guttural sound.

Alarms sounded in Amy’s mind, making her heart pound. “Marcey from next door was sitting with her while I shopped. What happened to Marcey?”

Braving it up, Amy crossed through the living room, taking stock. Her footsteps came to an abrupt halt. On an end table by the couch rested an open, well-sampled bottle of whiskey. Positioned right next to it she spied a tumbler, coated by dripping beads of condensation. Inside the glass were traces of gold liquid and a pool of melting ice. *So, Amy seethed, Mark had come home, and imbibed in the hard stuff. Nice.*

She wilted, but continued on to the kitchen. How long had the booze been out in the open? They had a rule about no whiskey in the house. What was a bottle of high-proof alcohol doing within potential reach of their four-year-old daughter?

In that instant a flashpoint occurred. Resignation and sadness morphed into rage. His reckless disregard for the safety of their daughter added fuel to her mood. “Mark!”

Mark Samuels stepped into the threshold, planting his feet firmly while he braced against the archway between the living room and kitchen. He wobbled a bit, but the stance said it all: drunken belligerence. “Back off on the sanctimonious vocals, Amy! I’m not in the mood! I’m not taking any of your crap! I mean it!”

She was so used to this. Instance by instance, Amy became immune to his menacing tone; it bore no impact or dissuasion. Calmly she moved past him and set her groceries aside on the small kitchen table. Then, she returned to the living room and picked up the

bottle and glass. The new food could sit and rot for all she cared. Amy pushed past him on her way back to the kitchen where she planned to dispose of both the whiskey and the glass.

“Back off?” She stepped up to the sink but turned to glower at her husband. “Back off when you’re home early from work, guzzling liquor? Where’s my daughter?”

“*Our* daughter,” he amended harshly, “is in her room. She’s being punished. She wasn’t listening and refused to do what I told her to do, so I sent her to her room until dinner.”

Amy stopped short. Dinner wouldn’t be ready for a couple of hours. On this humid, stifling summer day, being jailed in her room would be terrible for Pyper. Their home wasn’t air conditioned, and there wouldn’t be much for the four-year-old to do. Toys, games, and furnishings were sparse. In fact, it was a miracle they maintained possession of their home, considering the heavy debt load they carried and Mark’s sporadic income.

She became aware once more of the bottle and glass she held. “After I toss this out, I’m telling her she’s free to leave her room.”

“Oh, no you’re not.” Mark swore liberally as he stalked in close. Looking him straight in the eye, Amy poured the remaining whiskey down the drain and threw the glass into the sink so hard it shattered.

“I see. So you think *that’s* how it is.” Vindictiveness shone in Marks’ eyes. “That’s just *fine*.”

He staggered to the small china hutch tucked into a corner of the kitchen. Crafted of maple, it was well worn, a beloved heirloom from Amy’s grandmother. They had inherited the piece a couple years ago. Mark

yanked open the doors. With sloppy motions he reached inside. He grabbed stacks of dishes from inside and just let them fall.

Irreplaceable, depression-era glass and Rosenthal china smashed to the floor. "We even yet? Want s'more?"

Amy ran, pulling on Mark's arm in an attempt to get him away from the cabinet. But he was a big man, solid muscle; when she came near, he shook her off easily, sending her to the floor in a sprawl. She righted herself quickly, stumbling against the refrigerator.

"Stop it! Stop! *Please* stop!" Helpless, she could do nothing but watch while Mark swiped at an artfully arranged display of wine goblets. Soon they were reduced to nothing more than sparkling shards that decorated the hardwood floor.

Amy cried out, thinking of the beautiful memories held within those few precious mementos from her past: the family dinners, holiday celebrations, happy laughter. Her china was sacrosanct, one of the few things she refused to pawn in order to support her family.

The china and...

Mark spied her camera, a simple digital unit that was her lifeline to sanity. A part of what augmented her income as a receptionist for a fitness center in Sterling Heights, Michigan. Her heart lurched. *No*, she screamed in silence. *Please, no! I have a freelance assignment this weekend!*

The inner plea came just seconds too late.

He hefted the small, silver unit, which gleamed and still looked like new even two years after purchase because Amy pampered and cared for it. Photography was her release, her joy...and Mark was about to

destroy it!

He threw the camera against the wall; it burst apart on impact and Amy cried out, sinking against the counter.

"I got fire—laid off today." He continued to storm through the kitchen. "Stupid idiots in charge of that stinkin' factory don't know their left hand from their right." He spun toward her. "So if you push me now, I'll push you right back. If you get in my way, I'll take you right out of it!"

Amy didn't doubt that fact for a minute. However, she hadn't missed the slipup Mark made between being fired and being laid off. Her husband was defeating himself. Again. He was taking her right down with him. Again. Gambling, booze, and spotty work attendance had combined to do him in. Again. Amy scraped the very bottom of her heart, trying desperately to find even the tiniest piece of hope for her relationship with Mark. The effort was answered only in an emptiness that stole her joy, and ever increasing fears for herself and Pyper.

She wished for surcease, but all the wishing in the world wouldn't make the nightmare of living with Mark go away. Not this time. Amy knew she alone had the power to make a final move and end this abuse and insane pattern of living—not just for her sake, but for Pyper's as well.

Mark ranted on. "I lose my job, and I'm not gonna be able to get another one any time soon living in this Godforsaken place." Amy winced at his curse. Although she no longer attended church regularly, like she used to—back in happier, more innocent times—the use of God's name in vain scalded a place in her spirit and returned her to who, and what, she used to

be.

He kept on raging. "I don't want griping from you, Amy. If I want a drink after work, not you or anyone else is gonna stop me! You have a choice. Clean up this mess and deal with it, or get out of my sight!"

Frozen with terror, Amy stared as he kicked furniture, trashed cupboards, and systematically destroyed the kitchen. Then, something in her mind snapped. She couldn't hold back the cry of angry frustration that bubbled up from her chest. Now, every-day dishes joined the pile of chaos. She barely dodged being hit by the plate her husband threw.

This is insanity, she thought. *No one should have to live this way.*

"If it weren't for your drinking and gambling, we might make it! If you'd discipline yourself to live a normal life, you'd be able to function at work and keep a job! Instead you'd rather hock everything we own, right down to your soul, for a night of poker, or a night of drinking so you can go numb!" She pulled him away from the cupboard; anger-driven adrenaline made her strong. "It's easier that way, isn't it? Well not for me! I'm sick of it! I'm sick of being trashed—literally and emotionally! I'm sick of living in debt! I'm sick of being heartbroken! Most of all I'm sick to death and tired of not giving Pyper the life she deserves. You need *help*—"

"Get out!" Mark pounced on her like a rabid animal, shoving her against the kitchen counter so hard that an explosion of pain shot up her back and spine, and she lost her breath. An instant later, the back of his hand crossed her face with such impact she saw red haze and had to fight off nausea. "I said *get out!*"

Amy refused to give in. For Pyper's sake, she had

to persevere. She squirmed away from his grasp. This marriage was finished. With that realization came a degree of resolution that lent her additional strength.

“Fine. I’ll leave. But not without my daughter. She is *not* staying with you.”

In that instant, all the anger left his face. She watched as her words sank in. Only then did Amy realize her mistake. She had exposed her greatest vulnerability. Pyper. Mark remained just lucid enough to connect the emotional dots and play an ace.

“Get out of here if that’s what you want—but you don’t get Pyper. She’s *mine*.”

Her heart endured a shower of spears. How could she possibly leave without Pyper? She had to get to her daughter! Amy would never, ever leave without her.

She stared at her husband, her vision blurred by tears. She had to find a way to Pyper. Backing slowly away, she noticed the way he moved toward her, bullying her into the living room. He wore a gloating expression, moving her slowly, and inexorably, to the front door.

“Go ahead. Just try to get her. *Try it*.”

He deliberately blocked the hallway that led to the two bedrooms of their home. Amy could hear Pyper crying now, and that left her frantic. She wanted to scream—crumple up and wail.

God, please, please, give me strength! Send me help!

There came no instant answer, no miraculous flash.

“My things,” she objected weakly. Her belongings were all she could think of that might get her past him and into the hallway of rooms to grab Pyper.

Mark stood solid, his posture unyielding. He advanced her a few more steps toward the front door,

and away from Pyper. "Get 'em later. If they're still around."

Finally, as though he could tolerate her no longer, Mark shoved her onto the front porch and slammed the door shut. The dead bolt banged into place with added emphasis. Panic swept through her body and quickly overwhelmed. She had no purse. No keys. No cell phone. No money. She had nothing but the shorts, t-shirt and tennis shoes she wore.

And she didn't have Pyper.

Desperate, her breath exiting in a heaving, labored effort, Amy looked toward the front windows of the house. Fear kept her from thinking clearly, yet she had to figure out a way to get Pyper away from Mark.

Not giving herself time to reconsider, she climbed through a hedge of thigh-high evergreen shrubs that surrounded their house. Her clothes were no protection against the long, stabbing needles. The window to Pyper's bedroom was open. The sound of her daughter moving around inside only increased her obsession to get her free as she worked her way through the bushes as quietly and as quickly as possible.

Standing on tiptoe, Amy looked inside. The expression of bleak, hopeless fear on Pyper's face prodded her on.

"Pyper...Pyper Marie..." She didn't want to speak too loud for fear of alerting Mark. "Come to the window, sweetheart. It's OK. Come here to Mama."

Shaking, her wide eyes brimming with tears, Pyper inched her way to the window. "Mama, get me! I scared! Get me now! *Please!*"

Fat tears rolled down Pyper's plump, red cheeks. A thick, curling tumble of blonde hair fell to her waist.

Dressed in a tank top, shorts and flip-flops, the vision of her daughter consumed Amy, and spurred her on.

“Hush, baby! Hush! I’m not leaving you! I’m not going anywhere without you.” Scanning the window line, Amy thought out loud. “I’ve got to open the screen.” There wasn’t much a four-year-old could do to help, but as she spoke, Amy spotted a tiny hole in the netting of the screen that she might be able to use to pry the screen off and pull it free. She worked fast, jimmying the protective cover relentlessly, making the tear larger and larger.

Soon she ripped away the piece of finely-woven metal.

Sweat beaded her face. Nerve-inspired heat nearly sent her world into a tailspin. But in that instant, Pyper reached out for her, and Amy grabbed onto her for all she was worth. Her control firmly in check, Amy dragged Pyper through the window.

Freedom. Blessed, precious freedom. But for how long?

They ran down the street and headed toward a nearby convenience store. The life she chose with Mark had left Amy alienated from her family, from friends, and everyone else she had held dear just five short years ago. The only thing she knew she could do now was place a collect phone call to the most welcoming place she had ever known, and fall into the arms of a God she hardly believed in any longer.

As she prayed a prodigal might return to the sanctuary of Woodland Church, she dialed operator assistance. “Please tell Pastor Ken Lucerne that this is a collect call, from Amy Maxwell,” she said when the woman came on the line. Her voice shook. She knew Pastor Ken wouldn’t recognize her married name of

Samuels. Everyone at Woodland had known her as Amy Maxwell—the bubbly and sparkling life of the party, the leader of the youth group. Once upon a time, she'd been the girl most likely to succeed and take the world by storm.

Oh, how far I've fallen, she thought on a choking sob.

The call rang through and she waited, tightly clutching Pyper, praying insane, ridiculous prayers of promise and petition that Mark wouldn't spot her. That safety might be hers and Pyper's once more. Somehow. Some way.

"Ken Lucerne," came a warm, deep voice.

Amy nearly went faint with relief while the operator informed him of the collect call. She clung tight to Pyper; she clung tight to the edge of the plastic encasement of the public phone, cradling the receiver against her shoulder. Tears fell free, and she trembled.

"Yes, I'll accept the charges." The operator clicked off and Ken took it from there. "Amy, honey, what's the matter? Are you OK?"

She could barely talk she was shaking so bad. His tender concern allowed her the luxury of a complete, and much-needed internal collapse. "Pastor Ken, can you please...can you help me? I'm in such a huge mess, and you're the only one I could think of to help. I'm so sorry to bother you, I just...I..."

"Where are you?"

She didn't answer the question. "I don't know how long I can stay here. He might find me, and Pyper, and that'll be the end...of everything! I—"

"Sweetheart, rest easy. Where are you? I'll come get you." Though he interrupted, his voice was so reassuring. A calm in the storm.

"I'm at Robtell's Quick Mart on Groesbeck."

There was the slightest of pauses. "I can be there in ten minutes, fifteen tops. Are you in any kind of danger?"

"I just don't know anymore, Pastor Ken. I don't know anything right now. All I know is I'm scared! I need help!"

"Stay right there, Amy. I'm on my way."

Ken hung up abruptly, and she found she could actually breathe again. Pyper clung to her neck, burying her face in Amy's neck, shaking with tears. "Baby, I'm so, so sorry for putting you through this." She pushed through the doorway to the store. It was cool inside; that helped. There was also a deep, empty window ledge where Amy sank down and waited in an obscurity she embraced. Slowly she uncoiled, knowing she would need some aspirin for the pain that echoed through her back and her face. She rested her head against the cool plate glass and drew in deep, steadying breaths.

It's over, Mark. From this day on you are no longer a part of our lives, and neither is this horrible, sickening fear. Not once after this nightmare passes will I allow myself to look back.

1

Present Day

"Mr. Brock, we're pulling in at Woodland. You all set? Ready to go?"

"And then some." Tyler Brock moved to a nearby window next to Anthony, their driver. "Hey, Anthony? How long have we been on tour together?"

"Almost three years, sir. Why?"

Even as they spoke, the enormous tour bus swung into the parking lot of Woodland Church. The first landmark of Tyler's arrival home was the familiar, beautiful brick bell tower, topped by a gleaming, simple cross. The sight filled him with warmth. He smiled. Opposite the church crested the pristine, diamond-tipped waters of Lake Saint Clair.

"Well I'm just wonderin'. D'you think it might be possible for you to call me Tyler?"

Anthony chuckled. "No, sir. Sorry."

"Glad we got that settled." Tyler spared him a wry look.

The chauffer shook his head and grinned. "Likewise, Mr. Brock."

Theirs was an age-old back and forth. Tyler gave up the battle and instead looked outside the rectangular window as Anthony navigated the vehicle to a slow, shimmying stop. Tyler took note of familiar

surroundings. Michigan. Saint Clair Shores. Woodland Church. *Home.*

He really had been gone too long.

Excitement filled him, dancing across his nerve endings like a live wire. A crowd of people converged on the bus and the equipment semi that followed close behind.

The first face he saw belonged to Ken Lucerne. The pastor of Woodland Church stood at the front of the gathering of about a hundred or so people. Rimming the crowd were members of the local news media. Kiara, Ken's wife, stood next to him. The happiness that expanded in Tyler's chest increased.

He knew the drill. He had lived it repeatedly over the last four, almost five, years. But never here. Never at the heart of where he had been raised, and never at Woodland, his faith-home since birth.

He prepared to exit the bus. "Thanks for the smooth ride, Tony. As ever."

"Pleasure, as ever. Have a great concert, Mr. Brock."

In passing, before he trotted down the bus steps, Tyler gave Tony's shoulder an affectionate clap, and they traded nods. The rest of his team—both musical and technical—gathered up and prepared to walk out with him.

The doors whooshed open, unfolding into a world of smiling faces, camera lights, cheers, colorful poster-board signs, and desperate calls for his attention. The instant his feet hit the asphalt, the focus was on him, and it was chaos.

"Tyler! Tyler we love you!"

"Tyler, over here, please."

"Can you look this way?"