



MARIANNE EVANS

A

FACE

in the

Clouds

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*A Woodland Church Bonus Story*

Marianne Evans

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## **A Face in the Clouds**

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## Dedication

This story, and the circumstances surrounding it, belong entirely to the inspiration, love and grace of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory.  
Always.

**Woodland Church...nourishing faith, nurturing love**

Find your way to Woodland Church! Enjoy the first two releases of the acclaimed Woodland Series by Marianne Evans:

Hearts Crossing - Finalist in the Gayle Wilson Award of Excellence contest sponsored by the Birmingham, Alabama chapter of Romance Writers of America.

Hearts Surrender, Book 2 of the Woodland Series - Book of the Year Finalist, Christian Small Publishers Association



Paul Hutchins took custody of a beat-up flyer handed to him by his colleague, Sandy Pierson. He gave the cover a quick glance.

*Surrendering to Christ*  
*An Artist's View of Salvation & Grace*

The urge to groan hit hard, but he swallowed it back. His wince, however, would not be denied. "Sandy, c'mon. *Really?*"

"Yes, *really*. It's part of the Easter Series for Community Focus. I need you on this story."

Seated at his desk, Paul looked up into emerald colored eyes that were faultless and resolute. Her hands were fisted and perched on her hips in a challenging posture. Paul leaned back in his chair. "I appreciate the nod of confidence, but *me?* You could recruit a reporter much more attuned to a story like this—"

"Do you want to argue about it? I'll take it to the news director if I have to." Brows shot up in challenge over those beautiful eyes of hers—eyes that zapped his body with warmth and left it melted, despite an impending squabble.

"Miss Pierson, are you attempting that whole 'embracing-the-pleasures-of-being-the-executive-producer' thing?" He delivered a teasing grin, but the gesture fell flat when it wasn't well received. Sadness touched her eyes. That stopped him at once.

"You're available, so I asked for you to be assigned. This piece has the potential to be very meaningful. I envision it as a reminder to Metro Detroit of what the Easter season is all about." She lifted her chin, returning at once to the spunky Sandy Pierson he knew—and loved. She pointed at the flyer he held. "So, here's the drill. The event starts at seven o'clock tonight. Woodland Church. We need to leave here a little before six." She retraced her steps across the threshold of his small, somewhat cluttered office at WWJ Radio. Before leaving, though, Sandy looked over her shoulder. "I'll be there, too, field producing, if that helps any."

"Of course it does." Paul's lips curved. The softness in his heart came through in his tone. "I'm just giving you a hard time. It'll be fine." He gathered a restorative breath, wishing he could infuse his words with greater enthusiasm. "No worries. OK?"

Their eyes held, and she firmed her lips. *Nope*, he thought, *she's not one bit fooled*. "Well. OK, then."

Sandy's emotionless response and remote mood remained with him long after her exit.

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*Church, Easter and religion. It's nothing more than tender myth. Well-meaning hyperbole. Why don't people understand that? I don't want to go. I don't want to go. I really don't want to—*

"Mary DuVall has a Master's Degree in Art Education." Sandy's voice cut into Paul's inner diatribe. While he drove, she read from the creased and rumpled program sheet she had given him earlier. "In basic terms, she's a 32-year-old missionary who has



traveled all over the world bringing God's Word to places like Serbia, India, Africa, Italy and even Russia. She's Detroit born and raised, and she's forsaken a traditional educational career in order to dedicate herself to creating Christian artwork in a formalized worship setting. Her chosen media is chalk."

*Why?* The question rolled through Paul's mind. Perhaps there was something to be admired here, a nod of respect to be given, but his gut reaction was captured perfectly within that one small word.

They drove east, toward Woodland Church in Saint Clair Shores and Sandy continued reading from the brochure. "The bulk of the money she raises stays in the places where she visits. She's determined to do what she feels is most important: spread the word of Christ. That's how she came to develop the program we're seeing tonight. Churches bring her in. Goodwill offerings and auctions of her work keep her mission viable." Sandy stretched her legs. Leaning against the door, she faced him. "There aren't many left like her in the world. That's sad."

*More like rational,* Paul thought, but he kept that opinion to himself. The subject of Christian faith rode against an increasingly tense line between them, and for the life of him, he just didn't get it. He wanted to write off the idea of religion, or at the very least, agree to disagree. To Sandy, however, faith was important. Important enough to fight for.

Silence fell, and Paul embraced it for a moment.

"How did the flyer get so crumpled up?" The question meant a lot to him, because he knew Sandy well. Giving him a battered up assignment program wasn't her standard operating procedure. Diversion from the topic of Christianity was simply an added

bonus.

Sandy's eyes went wide with surprise, and he knew at once he had struck a nerve. He reached across the console of the SUV and slipped his fingers against hers, taking hold of her hand. His focus returned to the road ahead.

"Because I nearly threw it away." The words came out on a husky whisper; she looked out the passenger window as the buildings and homes zipped past.

"Why?" He treated the word like the soft caress he longed to deliver. He wanted Sandy to know he cared—deeply. In further encouragement, he gave her fingertips a squeeze. He was alone with her now, outside the glare of the office spotlight. He could openly touch the woman he loved.

"Because I want you here so badly, but I know you'd rather have a tooth pulled. This could be a powerful opportunity for us to share something meaningful, but it won't be. Instead, you'll fight the subject matter every step of the way." Her lips twitched downward. She shrugged. "Realizing that fact, I did battle with my temper when I found out about it, and my temper won. For a moment, anyhow."

The behavior was so typical of his petite, redheaded fireball. Sandy possessed a spine of steel equalized by tenderhearted innocence. Her words punched him hard. "Because of me. Because of my beliefs."

She clucked her tongue, and he noticed the way she cast him a quick, sad glance. "No, not because of *you*. Because of *us*." She pulled her hand slowly away from his grip. She took hold of his leather portfolio, which rested on her lap and fidgeted with the button clasp. "We want different things, and those differences

are coming between us. In my case, it's history repeating itself, and it breaks my heart. I want you to know Christ, and draw close to him. I love the relationship we've found together, but I know how you feel about matters of faith. It's like a huge wall I can't scale. Your world is based on the things you can see, and touch."

"*And feel.*" He added the descriptive in his own defense. He wanted to assure her that those pragmatic traits she detailed weren't all bad; nor were they all encompassing. A straightforward outlook didn't keep him from having a heart. "On top of that, I hope I don't need to remind you that I'm not your ex-fiancée, Collin Edwards."

"I know that." She returned the brochure to the interior pocket of his notebook. "But a key similarity remains. He walked away from God and part of him became closed off as the result. It ended our engagement."

"A key similarity?" Paul shook his head. "That's more like a key *difference*. First of all, I'm not closed off. Not when it comes to you. Furthermore, while Collin eventually made his way back to God—and I say this with due respect to your differing point of view—I've never been convinced that God exists in the first place. That's been clear between us from the start."

Sandy gave him a plaintive look. "You're right. At least he believed in God to begin with."

Paul groaned.

Sandy wilted. "Like you, Collin recognized the blessing of love. He met Daveny, and married her. He's where he was meant to be. I am, too. But Collin returned to God; he found his way back to everything good. I want God's love—for *us*." She ignored the

prickly glower he delivered. "I pray for that."

She went quiet, and Paul didn't try to step in. Her analysis held him in a grip that tightened incrementally around his heart.

"When it comes to God, you shove everything aside that might point toward His existence. But at the same time, I know how deeply you feel things, Paul. You have a wonderful heart. That's part of why I love you so much. I'm torn in two about my feelings for you."

The declaration would have filled him were it not chipped and cracked by the impact of her doubts. At a stop light just before the turn in for the church, their eyes met and she gave him a tremulous smile. A shimmer of hope remained in play.

"Believe it or not, your reporter's instinct toward authenticity and revealing the truth is a big part of what I admire about you. There's nothing wrong with facing the world honestly, but you need to make room for a few other truths."

"Like God."

"Yes, and the fact that life holds as much mystery, and as many intangibles, as it does realistic things you can hold tight with both hands."

She wanted him to change. Right down to the soul. Paul continued to study her, waiting for the light to turn green. She was hurt enough that she had almost stepped away from tonight's event—out of a frustrated sense of love. Yet here they were—together—out of a frustrated sense of love.

And if he wasn't mindful of her beliefs, she'd step away from him.

Paul navigated the rapidly-filling parking lot of Woodland Church. Once they stopped, he killed the

engine and used a restraining hand to keep Sandy in place. He closed the space between them and gave her a kiss that lingered and thoroughly tasted. He felt the gesture ease a bit of the tightness in her shoulders and back. "I'll keep an open mind, OK?"

She touched his face, and there was yearning in her eyes. "Keep an open heart. That's much more important."

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Paul had visited Woodland Church a couple of times to attend Sunday services with Sandy. Admittedly, as far as churches went, he had been impressed. Woodland featured a perfect blend of the old and new. From the front, with its stately red brick façade, the church assumed an air of tradition. A soaring bell tower was tipped by a cross that shone in the light of a setting sun. Stretching to each side, however, came the evidence of modern worship: the walls of an expansive sanctuary, a meeting hall and a line of conference and classrooms. The facility was beautifully tended, with tall old trees, a pond with a lovely wooden bridge crossing its expanse, and freshly toiled flowerbeds just waiting for spring to take firm hold and restore life.

He followed Sandy, and double-checked his watch. So many people had already arrived, he wondered if they might be running late, but they were actually early.

"I think there's going to be a great crowd. I'm really happy for Mary!" Sandy's outlook performed a radical shift once she'd stepped through the double doors of the church. Her features took on a glow he

saw reflected in many of the faces around them. The beauty was undeniable, but what was it based on, really? That's what always caused him to stymie. It was also the reason he had attended church with Sandy just a few times, even though she attended each week and helped out whenever she could with the facility's myriad of activities.

In mere seconds, he absorbed much. People hugged and called out greetings. Some formed groups, launching into animated conversations that ranged from their children's soccer games to impending graduation ceremonies, or from marriages to job and health issues. This was life shared and celebrated, and the recognition of its overflow caused him to go still. Here he saw people seeking no other agenda than thankfulness toward their creator, and an effort toward goodness, and community. Woodland hummed with their combined power.

An edgy and unexpected slice of need lanced his heart. A mysterious feeling slid free, then wrapped around him, trying hard to take root, and grow. Paul forced the sensations into remission.

*This is nothing more than an assignment, he chided himself. It's just like any other. No need to get carried away by atmosphere. Book it, air it, and then move on to the next.*

But then, he looked at Sandy, and his chilly mindset thawed. Content and happy, she took his hand, lacing her fingers through his. Her eagerness enveloped him, moving softly through his heart.

"There's Pastor Ken, and his wife Kiara. Let's say hello. He'll be able to direct us to where the interview with Mary will take place." Sandy took the lead, clearly in her element. Paul admired her faith-filled drive—even if he couldn't embrace it.

“Hey, Sandy!” The Pastor welcomed her with a hug. “I’m glad you made it.”

“Hi, Ken! I wouldn’t miss this, and I can’t wait to meet Mary. Kiara, how are you?” The women exchanged hugs as well. Paul accepted their greetings, then hung back, still fascinated by the world taking shape around him.

He took note of details—like the brightly lit sanctuary, the subtle aroma of Easter lilies, the hubbub of growing noise and activity. The glow of the stained glass windows dimmed incrementally as sunlight waned and evening rolled in.

“Paul?”

When Sandy called his name, he gave himself a shake.

“Mary’s waiting for us in Conference Room 1D. You ready?”

“You bet.” He clutched his portfolio tightly and straightened against an onslaught of...of something...something he couldn’t readily identify.

But the word *longing* is what came to mind first.

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“So let me get this straight. You have no idea at all what you’re about to create?”

“None whatsoever.”

Paul blinked, flabbergasted. He shook his head, taking in the demure, smiling artist who sat across the table from him. “I don’t understand.” The words escaped in a mutter.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sandy go still. She focused on him with stricken eyes, her disillusionment tangible. Her mouth went tight, and

her eyes brimmed with sad disappointment. Inexorably, centimeter by emotional centimeter, he felt her pulling away from him. He had sensed it ever since she gave him the assignment, and now, matters were getting worse.

In an instant he regretted his lack of control.

It felt like he was fighting against an unwanted call on his heart—from the sweetness he craved whenever he was with Sandy, and from a more mysterious form of magnetic power that pulled at a stark, freshly acknowledged emptiness in his soul.

Regardless of those issues, Paul knew his skeptical attitude needed to be tempered...promptly. He tapped his pen against the notepad that rested on the table in front of him. He straightened, trying to find a comfortable position in his standard-issue plastic and metal chair.

“Being a reasonable person, I understand how crazy that sounds.” Mary lifted her shoulder in a dainty shrug then laughed in a way that was self-deprecating. “I guarantee you this: if God weren’t in charge of these hands” —she lifted them in emphasis— “I’d be pretty terrified right now.”

Still, he couldn’t comprehend her logic. “You’re not afraid? You know inspiration will hit? You know the outcome will be a success?”

“I don’t. *God* does.”

Paul openly puzzled He stretched back, staring at her. He huffed a breath. Too bad if she could sense his disbelief. This was crazy. Way too ethereal for his taste.

Once more, he slid a glance toward Sandy. Presently she monitored feedback levels on the sound equipment as they recorded the interview for editing and playback tomorrow morning on the Community



Focus spot. Brows furrowed, she discreetly shook her head. He gave her a desperate, doleful look in return.

The interlude took no more than a heartbeat, but a heartbeat was all it took for Mary to pick up on his escalating sense of unease.

"I'm sure all of this strikes you as disorderly, or inefficient. I forget sometimes that in talking to the media, I'm talking to people who deal with realistic cause and effect. Pragmatism."

Paul worked his features into smooth attentiveness, but he was starting to hate that word. "I'm afraid that's a job hazard, yes. Sorry if I seemed a bit put off. I didn't mean to downplay your efforts and talent."

"Don't apologize. I understand the need for verification. Day in and day out, Christians across the globe pray to God for signs, for immediate answers or miraculous intervention. When they don't receive results that coincide with their own plans and timing, some of them step away. They wash their hands of faith. I'm afraid that's a *cultural* hazard." She gave him a pointed look. "We're living in a society based increasingly on scientific quantification and instant gratification. In doing so, I believe we've lost sight of the larger truth."

"Which is?"

"That God is God, and we're not. We're imperfect, and our ways aren't His ways. Only He has the Master Plan. I love Him, so I trust Him. I like to think of it in the context of a young child who trusts in the love and providence of their parents. Some answers are prompt and easy—others are a struggle."

OK, she had his attention now. He watched her, his pen and paper unused while he waited for more.

"You want proof of God's existence?" Paul nodded at Mary's question. "Well, I think I may have hit upon a piece of the answer."

He couldn't wait to hear this. Solving one of the great mysteries of humankind's existence? Bring it on.

Mary folded her hands and looked him straight in the eyes. "Something happened that day."

"Which day?" He wasn't being a smart aleck; he was sincere. There were so many days of note in the time period of Christ's ministry. Where was she going with this?

"The day of Christ's resurrection. You see, His crucifixion, His ministry, it's all real, and documented in the pages of history—no matter what your philosophical belief."

She paused, and something swept through Paul's spirit that melted the edges of his resolve. He fought against it, but to no avail. His perceptions tunneled down to their exchange, to quietly spoken, but emphatic words.

"But three days following His entombment, He arose. He left behind an empty grave. He defeated death forever. That's *my* belief. You, on the other hand, are a realist. You deal in facts. And that's not a criticism. That's not a bad manner of living at all. In fact, it should be lauded...in measures that take my next point into account."

She reached out for her steaming cup of coffee and her hand bumped against his. He swore, by all that was as true, a circuit of electricity flowed free and weakened the wall that encapsulated his heart.

She took a sip, then continued. "In ancient Judea, there was no means of mass communication. There was no way to tell, and share, an event except through

eyewitness accounts, and the telling of news from one person to the next. Still, His word spread like wildfire, encompassing not just His homeland, but the world. Such a development is nothing short of miraculous."

Paul could hardly remember to breathe. He was riveted.

"Over two millennia later, Jesus' impact remains an overwhelming force. These are *facts*."

Paul couldn't argue them, either. Nevertheless, the idea of a hoax clung to him. Thoughts of well-crafted mythology sifted through his mind like so much hourglass sand, although the winds of Mary's words blew against those sands, scattering them into confusion.

They wrapped the interview. Paul already knew the artist's final exposition would form the centerpiece of the entire segment. He trembled as he gathered his notes. He needed Sandy. He wanted the assurance of her brightness and care. She stayed with the tech crew, though, helping them wrap up. For the time being, she offered nothing more than furtive glances and distance.

He shut out the clamor of equipment being broken down, but Mary DuVall's words echoed through his head.

At last, Sandy stepped up, offering enthusiastic thanks to Mary for her time. Paul, meanwhile, hurriedly stuffed his portfolio into his computer case. Making a grab for his coat, he stopped short when Sandy rested a hand against his arm.

"Can we talk?"

*Oh, thank goodness*, he thought. "Of course."

He longed to wrap his arms around her, draw her close and ignore everything but the two of them. Being

with Sandy warmed his heart, left him wanting to be her other half, her partner. Because she was most certainly his.

The room emptied quickly. He waited on her, sensing something disturbing in the way she avoided his eyes, the stiff way she held herself.

As soon as the conversation became private, Sandy spun on him. "You were rude!" Paul blinked heavily, not expecting to see—and receive—so much pain. "You're hurting me so much and I don't know what to do about it." She shrugged hugely. "You and I? We're two different people, with two different belief systems. I'm done kidding myself that the differences between us can be reconciled, and after this"—she gestured across the room at large—"I'm not sure I want them to be. I'm not going to bend, and either are you."

Her words hit him with the finality of a steel door closing in his face and locking down tight. This was *not* what he wanted. He loved her. Didn't she see that? "Sandy, I asked some pointed questions, that's all. And her answers were fantastic. You should be happy with the results. We got a great interview."

He was breathing hard, stormed by panic because she didn't flinch. Sandy was resolved. Sad, but resolved.

"Paul, it's not just the interview." She folded her arms against her waist. He broke at the way she physically defended herself against what she felt for him. He stepped in, gently pulling her arms free so he could draw her close. She backed away. Tears beaded in the corners of her eyes, sparkling against her lashes. He tried to touch her face; she slipped smoothly from the gesture.

"Don't do this, Sandy. I..." He stumbled, flustered

and afraid. "I'm..."

"You're what?"

She didn't snap the words; she wasn't angry. Rather, she seemed plaintive, as though she were seeking answers for her own heart as well. Paul had no idea how to answer her, but thoughts tumbled and rolled: *I'm confused. I'm moved by what Mary had to say, but I need to think, to assimilate. I can't do that with you standing here right now, putting my heart so violently at risk. How can I explain this to you? I heard what she said, and it touched me, but I need more time! I need...affirmation. Give me a chance.*

At his silence, a sigh passed through her. Paul focused on her mouth. He'd felt the silk of her lips in many a stirring kiss. He had received the precious gift of being allowed into her deepest heart. Now, blockades went up. "I'm so tired, Paul. All I've ever wanted is a good man, who holds God up, and puts relationship with me into a place that's sacred. It's what I'm *supposed* to have."

All at once, she relaxed, though her conviction remained tangible. She searched his eyes, deeply, stroking against the very core of his soul. "I know you can't see it, but Mary's words are true. Her convictions are a mirror of mine." Sandy moved a hand toward his. At the last second, she held herself in check. Her hand returned to her side in a clenched fist, but her eyes remained calm and loving despite the pain that resided there. "Something rolled away that stone and lifted Christ away. People who share your mindset might point to elaborate conspiracies, or political intrigue, but you'd be wrong. The answer to it all is *God*. His love for us built a bridge to heaven. Until you can see that, unless the stone is rolled from your own heart, I can't