



A SINGLE ACT OF INFIDELITY  
A LIFETIME OF FORGIVENESS

MARIANNE EVANS

devotion

# DEVOTION

Marianne Evans

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## DEVOTION

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## Dedication

There are three people, without whom this story would never have come to be:

**Nicola Martinez.** Nicola, you never fail to leave me amazed by your level of talent, commitment, and the deep affection you hold for your authors. It's an honor to work with you. I'm so blessed by your publishing savvy, support, and friendship. My wish is that every author in the world could work with an editor as wonderful as you. Your actions are always prayerful, anointed, and serve to remind me that there's a reason why our paths have crossed. I'm forever grateful for everything you do, and the beautiful person that you are.

**JoAnn Carter.** JoAnn, a long-ago e-mail tripped the wires for this story and ignited a holy flame in my heart about exploring the beauty that is Christian marriage—marriage that's a covenant, not a contract to be entered into then easily dissolved. You asked me to look at the idea of long-term love affairs, and the power of love and passion over time. I only pray I hit the mark in the pages of Devotion.

**Steve Evans.** You're my "DH"—and I couldn't be more blessed. God caused our lives to connect, and from there, remain forever entwined. You're an example to me of Christian love, selfless giving, and a heart that knows no boundaries. I can only hope to return half of the joy you've given me in our years together. Thank you for always supporting me and for taking me on a life/love adventure that I know will continue until our Lord calls us home. Plain and simple? I love you.



## Praise for Marianne Evans

This is a heartwarming as well as heart wrenching romance. Readers will empathize with the heroine's struggle with her feelings of unimportance to God. Her final acceptance of the hero's love as well as God's comfort is remarkable. ~4 Stars from RT Book reviews, Susan Mobley on *Hearts Communion*

*Hearts Crossing* - Gayle Wilson Award of Excellence Finalist

*Hearts Surrender* - Christian Small Publisher Book of the Year nominee

[Marianne Evans] stories evoke a powerful response. She writes with a level of heart and Christian substance that puts me in mind of Karen Kingsbury. ~Rochelle Sanders, reader on *Hearts Key*

...the Christian message enhances the lovely romance that develops. An affecting love story. ~ 4-Stars from RT Book Reviews, Susan Mobley on *Hearts Surrender*

I love inspirational stories that show characters' struggles with real life issues and how they connect with God...a novel of outstanding fiction. I highly recommend. ~ 5-Stars from author Joanne Troppello on *Hearts Communion*

Riveting, with an amazing storyline...I absolutely could not put it down. ~ 5-Stars, Book of the Week from The Romance Studio, Brenda Talley on *A Face in the Clouds*



Other Titles by Marianne Evans

**Woodland Church Series**

Hearts Crossing  
Hearts Surrender  
Hearts Communion  
Hearts Key

**Sal's Place Series  
(Coming Soon)**

Search and Rescue  
Beautiful Music  
By Appointment Only



# 1

“I don’t mean to push you.” Kellen Rossiter lifted the collar of his dress shirt and slid his tie into place, adjusting its fall. He stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, knowing his words weren’t entirely true.

“I know that.” His wife stood next to him at the double vanity. Dressed for bed, Juliet wore a floaty nightgown of dark green satin. She moisturized her arms, then her face. Kellen paused to watch her, captivated by the graceful, automatic motions, the soul-deep beauty she carried with a complete lack of awareness. The image of her left him to ache inside.

“I miss you when you’re not there.” He refitted the shirt collar then double-checked the knot on his patterned silk tie. “I like hearing your thoughts and impressions, but mostly I just enjoy being with you.”

Her shoulders sagged. Through the mirror, she tagged him with an apologetic glance. He had known the look was coming; she was ready for bed, after all. Plus, he knew the regret came from her heart. That’s why his statement about missing her, enjoying her, had lacked any form of condemnation. Just longing. He *did* miss her companionship and the feel of her at his side.

With increasing frequency.

“We used to have fun scouting talent at the local clubs, talking about anything and everything while we listened to music. Plus, this is supposedly a great new place, and we haven’t had a ‘date night’ in quite a while.” He paused again, just long enough to look at her once more. Gentle refusal still lived in her eyes, so Kellen braced himself for her ‘no thanks.’

“Sweetheart, you’ll be working. I get in the way when

you're shaking and moving." She smiled at him, sincerely. Her eyes were so soft, a beautiful shade of deep green. "Next time, OK? I'm seriously tapped out, or I'd let you tempt me." She moved close and tucked in tight, resting her head on his chest. Kellen wrapped his arms around her, ignoring the bite of disappointment, the urge for recriminations, like: *We have no children, Juliet, nothing that ties us down. I know you're busy with a hundred different activities that help our church, our city, and I know that fills you up, but what about us? Where do we fit together?*

The thoughts launched, but with practiced ease, he shot each one down. He was being selfish. She was tired. The winter season was giving way to spring around Nashville, and she had spent the entire afternoon and evening volunteering at a soup kitchen and warming center sponsored by Trinity Christian Church, where he and Juliet were active parishioners.

"Tell you what." Juliet leaned back in his arms. The curve of her lips, that promising sparkle in her eyes, almost cured his sadness. "I'll wait up for you."

Kellen nodded. He dotted her nose with a kiss; his hands slid against the glossy fabric of her nightgown. The color highlighted her ivory skin, and turned spectacular eyes to absolutely dazzling.

He made a vow to himself, then and there, that he'd get home early.

\*\*\*\*

Irritation riled him as he drove north on I-65. He didn't need to do this. It would be a typical late night/early morning spent at a club, this time listening to a jazz singer. Then, if he sensed any kind of potential, he'd have to host an introductory meeting. He wasn't supposed to be taking on new clients. His roster of represented musicians was exclusive, and full to overflowing. He would have much preferred an evening at home with Juliet. At least, that's what he told himself as intimate moments came along less and less often of late. Still,

Kellen couldn't resist that tickle in his gut, the excitement stirred by the prospect of discovering something—someone—extraordinary.

According to Associated Talent's Weiss McDonald, tonight's mission to Nashville's newest hot spot, *Iridescence*, would be a slam-dunk. Beyond that, Kellen's boss had offered nothing about who, or what, Kellen would be scouting.

"I refuse to taint your perceptions with any of my own." Weiss had said, seeming euphoric. "Go. See. Report back in the morning."

A sharp ache gnawed at his heart as Kellen navigated the narrow descent to an underground parking structure. Something didn't feel right about this. He should have stayed home with Juliet.

Leaving the car, he made his way into the office building that housed *Iridescence*. A swift elevator ride later, the doors parted to reveal a white marble lobby, a translucent podium decorated by a deep purple vase full of vibrant colored calla lilies.

*Nice*, he thought. *Definitely upscale and luxurious.*

He was led to a table near the window where wall-to-wall glass revealed a Nashville skyline bursting with lights and a carpet of added illumination that went on for miles. To his left was a large, raised dais presently curtained off by black velvet. In passing, he saw a face he recognized—Jack Collins—the owner of the club. Jack's eyes went wide when he looked Kellen's way. Kellen chuckled under his breath, sitting down.

A waitress stepped up promptly. "Good evening, and welcome to *Iridescence*. Can I get you something to drink?"

She was young, a gorgeous blonde whom Kellen took in, and dismissed, just as quickly, though he offered a kind smile. "Tonic and lime would be great, thanks."

"Right away." Her smile and attention lingered. Kellen's didn't. Of far greater interest was Jack Collins who worked his way to Kellen's table.

"Rossiter. Good to see you." Jack touched the arm of the waitress to get her attention. "Mindy, his tab is on me."

Further impressed, the waitress gave Kellen a second long look, which again he registered, then ignored. His focus homed in on Jack, and when the owner sat down in the chair opposite, Kellen leaned forward. "What am I in for?"

Jack's smile took off like a fast ride. The man's eyes flashed like a kid with a secret. "Seriously. Weiss didn't cue you in?"

Kellen lifted a shoulder. "Mumbled some new-age nonsense about not wanting to mess with my perceptions or some such ridiculous thing. So tell me. What's the deal?"

Jack sat back and kicked out his legs, flattening his hands against his stomach. He was a sharp man, hip and artful—with an eye for what would appeal to high-end customers. "Nope. I'm glad he didn't tell you about her."

"Her?"

Jack straightened and settled his forearms on the table. "Chloe."

*Lord.* For whatever reason, Kellen's mind drew pictures of a platinum blonde with buxom curves and slinky lines. He sank on the inside. "I'm here to see a woman named *Chloe*?"

"Yeah. Chloe Havermill. Listen, I've gotta see to some things right now, but stick around after the upcoming set. It's her last for the night. I'll introduce you."

Before Jack could dash off, Kellen put out a restraining hand. "Hey, don't cue her in. Don't stack the deck or get her riled up that there's an agent in the house. I'm here to listen. That's all."

Jack's eyes flashed, and his posture radiated confidence. "Yeah? Let's see if that's all you have to say once you hear her sing."

The man's stance was so definitive it took Kellen aback. His interest level inched upward.

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The lights dimmed until all that remained was a centered spotlight. The curtain across the dais glided open.

Conversations and dish clatter faded as the audience turned in unison, looking toward the stage, and waiting. A rhythmic, almost tropical drumbeat, accompanied by flowing bass, signaled the start of the Sade classic, *Paradise*.

The spotlight remained trained upon a woman who put to rest every doubt Kellen had felt upon hearing her name.

A long, silver dress dotted by sequins, flowed like water over a lithe body that was graceful and fluid. Spaghetti straps revealed toned arms, a long, slender neck. A straight column of black hair moved against her shoulders. He was positioned close enough to see that her large, wide-set eyes were violet.

*Violet.*

When she began to sing, her voice was nothing short of smooth magic.

From the opening notes, Chloe owned the room. She expressed the mood of the piece with pitch-perfect delivery. Her passion and skill rolled off the stage, slipping around the tables, enveloping her listeners. Kellen was stunned. Like the rest of the audience, he couldn't look anywhere else. Her voice became the only thing he could hear.

It was second nature for him to size up people physically. Such was the nature of his business. Talent was the important thing, yes, but beyond that came the mysterious and elusive factors of charisma and dynamic appeal.

What was the package here? What would be the strengths and weaknesses?

A flashpoint occurred, providing an immediate answer to those questions. Quite naturally, that answer was channeled into terms any agent in the entertainment industry would understand. If Carrie Underwood had sleek, jet hair and violet colored eyes, she'd look exactly like Chloe Havermill. Chloe had the same gorgeous skin and flawless bone structure. She had the same dazzling smile. And Chloe had an innocent sweetness in her eyes, a sweetness that would provoke fierce loyalty, delight, and mega-sales.

The longer he listened, and watched, the more he stared. Captured. The corner of his mouth curved up. He felt pleasure

just looking at her. That, coupled with the vocals she possessed, was an incredible intoxicant—because if this was how he felt, he was certain this was how America would feel as well.

He owed Weiss an apology for underestimation.

Kellen looked around, beginning to pay closer attention to the audience. They were enthralled. Chloe roped them in and fed their awed expectations. She drifted through smoky jazz ballad after heart-felt love song. The crowd, to a person, was completely behind her.

The set ended way too soon.

Not long after, Chloe entered the main room, accompanied by Jack. Moving through the crowd, she accepted handshakes and smiles, a few air kisses and delighted greetings while Jack led her to the table where Kellen sat. They were close enough now that Jack's guiding touch and directing head nod caused Chloe's focus to zoom in on Kellen, and it stayed put.

That's when it hit him—a lightning bolt of attraction. A primitive male response to undiluted sweetness and a beguiling manner. Chloe Havermill struck him not at all as an arrogant, entitled performer—this despite a world of talent. Kellen didn't even have time to consider his reaction before she stepped up, and looked at Jack, then back at him. Kellen stood, realizing his heart started to race, that his gesture stemmed from a mystifying call to be courtly.

Jack stepped into their elongated, intense silence. "Chloe, I'd like you to meet—"

"Chloe, honey!" Kellen's waitress stepped up and held her empty tray to the side so she could give the singer a tight hug. "Happy birthday! Been waiting all night to see you so I could say hello! It's a shame to be working on your big day!"

Chloe brushed that comment aside with a graceful sweep of her hand. "No worries. To me, this isn't work. It's a joy. Thanks for remembering, sweetie, and I'll talk to you later, OK?"

"You bet."

Kellen watched. Oh, he couldn't wait to work with this woman.

She turned back, wearing an expectant expression, waiting on Jack, who started to chuckle as Kellen's smile spread. He didn't let Jack introduce him. Not quite yet. "So, today's your birthday?"

"Yes. Yes, it is. Ah..." Chloe stumbled verbally, obviously confused about what was going on, and why she was standing at Kellen's table.

Kellen reached into the breast pocket of his suit coat and extracted a business card, making ready to hand it over while Jack tried again. "Chloe, I think you're in for a great present. I want you to meet a friend of mine."

Already she extended her hand. Kellen connected to her promptly, taking her hand in his, but not shaking, just holding on.

Jack performed the conclusion. "This is Kellen Rossiter. Kellen, say hello to Chloe Havermill."

Her eyes went wide. She breathed deep and the sequins of her dress shimmered. "Kellen. Rossiter."

Because of his hold, he felt her waver just slightly.

Jack chuckled. "Pleasantries dispensed with, I'll leave you to it." Jack speared Kellen with a look that reeked of 'I told you so.'

Chloe, meanwhile, gave her boss a fast, almost desperate look. "Can't you join us?"

Kellen pulled out the chair next to his, to distract her from Jack's exit. "I may have a tough reputation, Chloe, but contrary to industry myth, I don't bite. I'd like to talk to you privately." Kellen wanted her full focus, but he also wanted her to feel comfortable. The waitress—Mindy he recalled—breezed past once again and Kellen caught her eye. "Excuse me, Mindy. Would it be possible to order something to drink?"

"Of course. What can I get for you?"

"Another tonic and lime for me. Chloe?"

The interlude, as intended, gave her a few moments to

regroup, but she was still dazed, completely unguarded and unprepared for this meeting. “Umm...ice water works for me.”

“Are you sure you don’t want anything else?” Kellen resumed his seat.

“Positive. I don’t want anything stronger when I feel like I’ve been thrown into the deep end of the ocean.”

He smiled into her eyes and leaned forward across the slight space that separated them. He was charmed by her. A natural reaction, all in all. “You know who I am. I’m impressed.”

“No, actually, I’m the one who’s impressed.” She laced her fingers together and rested her hands on the table. “Anyone with a pulse in the music industry should know who you are. My nervous stumbling aside, I’m very pleased to meet you.”

The comment stunned and delighted him. Full of undisguised awe, her reply stirred a second rush of attraction that wasn’t entirely welcome. Kellen wrote off the response quickly, though. After all, any man within a glance of this woman would feel just the same.

He decided to play into the moment, knowing he could easily pull back.

“Well—now that my ego is sufficiently fed” --they shared a laugh-- “Happy birthday, Chloe.” He extended his business card, the one he had held since being introduced to her, and slid it across the top of the small, dark wood table. Their fingertips brushed innocently when she took possession. She lifted the card and studied the elegant, raised black lettering, fingered the heavy white card stock. But he also noticed the subtle tremble that worked through her hand.

“I’m almost afraid to ask what this means.” Her voice was a quiet murmur.

“Then allow me to verify what you already know.” Kellen went all business and dead serious. “What that card means is you’ve just been given the best present of your life, Chloe. Opportunity.”



She blinked. Joy, he saw, became juxtaposed against terror. "Because?"

"Because you're talented, and because I believe you deserve a shot. I want to give that to you."

Laughter, conversations, glassware chiming—the bar sounds surrounded them while Chloe openly searched his eyes. She studied him so deep, and with such intensity that Kellen could do nothing but embrace the silence and let her, maintaining a smooth professionalism he didn't feel on the inside. His pulse rate climbed. So did a heady, intoxicating roll of heat. The woman was exquisite.

"You honestly came here to see me?"

"I honestly did. And I'm not disappointed."

Their drinks arrived. She tapped her fingers against the glass, looking down in a flustered way as she slid her hair to the side. But then she looked up and gave him a smile. Kellen felt its impact straight through to the core. "Thank goodness for that much. I'm glad I didn't know you were in the audience. I'd've botched things up for sure."

Kellen highly doubted that statement. "For just that reason, I operate below the radar until it's time to make a move. Why unsettle the waters? On the recommendation of my boss, I wanted to see you perform without forewarning or prep. I get a far more honest performance that way."

For the next couple hours, they talked about everything. She was Ohio born and bred—a singer from the day she could speak. Her preferences leaned toward country blended with a soulful style of jazz. Five years in Nashville had taken her through the doorways of a number of clubs that dotted the District; she had even played The Stage and Tootsies.

Tootsies is where Jack Collins had found her, but now a chic, more high-end atmosphere called—one that was much better suited to her elegant looks and musical style.

She warmed quickly and offered her background details with increasing ease. He appreciated that she didn't mind revealing herself because his intrigue was absolute, and he wanted to know what he was getting into by representing her.

Chloe seemed to understand that without prompting.

Before he knew it, it was almost one o'clock in the morning, and the spell shattered.

*I'll wait up for you.*

Kellen double-checked his watch while Juliet's promising smile, her sparkling eyes, swirled through his mind and prompted him home. "I have to leave."

Chloe moved back with a nod and a chagrined expression. "I'm so sorry if I kept you."

"You did no such thing. I've enjoyed the time we spent talking."

"Me, too. I should have been home a while ago myself."

Boyfriend? Husband? They stood, and his attention darted to her ring finger. Empty. But that didn't mean much. He'd find out more on that later. "Call my office and let's set up a formal meeting. Meantime, my team will draw up an agreement for you to look over."

"I certainly will, and thank you again."

They walked toward the rear of the club. "Where's your car?"

"In the parking structure."

The idea of Chloe walking to her car all alone in a large, empty facility didn't sit well. "Let me walk you out."

She tilted her head; he watched a dangling gold earring brush against her bare shoulder. She folded her arms against her midsection and her eyes sparkled. "Are you always so chivalrous?"

Danger flags rose—vivid red and snapping in a stiff wind. Kellen obeyed the signs and delivered a business-like nod that he tempered with a grin. "Let's just call it looking out for my future investment."

Her smile only widened. "Let me grab my purse and coat. I'll be right back."

Kellen knew that smile of hers was going to haunt him. Big time.

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Kellen arrived home to darkness and silence.

*I'll wait up for you.*

Juliet's words echoed through his mind and guilt slid in.

Entering from the garage, Kellen walked quickly and quietly through the kitchen. The stove clock read one forty-five. He had never meant to stay at Iridescence so long. When he'd left Juliet, he'd fully intended to make good on his promise to return home promptly.

He removed his suit coat and draped it over his arm. He tiptoed up the stairs to their bedroom, sliding off his tie, loosening the top few buttons of his shirt. No shaft of light cut a line beneath the closed door. Of course she would be asleep by now. Guilt performed its second dance when he eased open the door and crept inside.

Tucked beneath the bed blankets, Juliet slept. He didn't need the milky, dim moonlight in order to see her. He needed nothing but the memories in his heart to draw the image of her soft, beautiful features.

What had gotten into him tonight with Chloe? He needed to figure that out—but not right now. He needed to pray about it—but the time for that would come later as well—when he was more focused, and rested. For now, he wanted Juliet. With all his heart.

He moved silently to the side of the bed where she slept. He sat down carefully, fingering back the tumbled waves of her silky, auburn hair. He bent to drop a slow, lingering kiss on her cheek, willing her awake, longing for clear, sweet eyes of deep green. He snuggled gently against Juliet's neck, nuzzling her with soft kisses. She responded by coming alert slowly, turning into the ready warmth he offered.

"Hi," she whispered in a husky voice.

"Hi." He backed away just far enough to stroke her sleep-warmed cheeks with his fingertips and cup her face. Any other loose-flung thought or desire promptly evaporated. In Juliet's presence once more, he was struck anew by the precious connection he shared with her—the wonder of their

love. "I'm so sorry I'm late."

She shifted beneath the blankets and feathered her fingertips through his hair. "Was it a successful night?"

Kellen fought the urge to squirm, and he battled back every image he held of Chloe. "Very. I think I've found a very gifted performer."

"I'm glad." She stifled a yawn and stretched out a bit. "I tried to stay up."

A craving took over him all at once. He held his wife, he drew her close, and they dissolved into one another, sharing a kiss deep and stirring. Loving Juliet was as beautiful as a dream, and as easy as drawing breath.

She turned toward the glow of the alarm clock, but Kellen brushed his lips against her throat and kept her from facing the hour. He took a breath and came upon the last tantalizing traces of lily of the valley perfume, a scent that would forever speak to him of Juliet. "Don't look. It's crazy late. Do you have to be up early?"

She pulled him toward her and made a happy sound against his cheek as she loosened a few more of his shirt buttons. Her fingertips skimmed against his chest. "Not *that* early."

He sank into a mix of emotions—pure, loving desire, then a longing that possessed two very distinct and potent layers. One belonged to his wife; the other belonged to the echo of a lightning strike—to a woman named Chloe Havermill. Tangled within himself, Kellen knew just one thing to be true: Juliet was the antidote. His wife was the author of his heart, and he loved her deeply. She would keep him centered. The sureness of their relationship would soothe away anything else.

First thing in the morning, he would drink in God's word like a parched man. He would return to his daily reflections and humbly, devoutly pray. Tonight, however, all he wanted to do was pour his love over Juliet like a benediction.

## 2

Dancing through misty, half-consciousness, Juliet burrowed into the welcoming depth of her pillow. The space next to her was nothing more than empty indentations and cool cotton, so she pulled Kellen's pillow close and stretched beneath the bed blankets. His scent filled her.

She perceived only bits and pieces of the world that slowly emerged—but all of it was familiar, and comforting. There was Kellen's almost silent tread as he moved from the bathroom to the closet. Next came the swoosh and click of hangers as he dressed. Finally she detected the crisp snap of metal coming together that signaled the end of his morning dressing routine when he placed his watch on his wrist.

Seconds later, his fingertips glanced against her cheek, drawing back a curl of her hair. The warmth of Kellen's body filled the air for a moment. When he kissed her cheek, she registered subtle spice, a more intense version of the aroma carried on his pillow. He let the contact linger, and Juliet smiled; her pulse quickened in response.

"Bye, love," he whispered.

"Bye." She turned to give him a hug, which he took in readily. A smile later, he was gone.

Well—never really *gone*.

Juliet gave up on the realm of sleep. Instead, she drifted for a few minutes on last night's memories and a sensation of happiness so rich and full it left her wanting to dissolve into the all-over contentment of being thoroughly loved.

She breathed out, her eyes fluttering closed. *Don't do it, she thought. Don't you dare let yourself hope. Don't even think about setting yourself up for yet another fall.*

The inner warning carried no weight. With hesitance, she