

A romantic couple stands in a city square at night. The woman is wearing a bright red coat and a black beret, while the man is in a dark coat and cap. They are looking at each other and smiling. The background is filled with warm, golden Christmas lights, a fountain, and a tall monument column.

Sometimes, leaving home
is the only way to find
where you belong

Marianne Evans

Finding Home
a Christmas Romance

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Finding Home

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Dedication

To Clare Revell: Love and thanks for your awesome help and input on making sure this novel passed UK quality control. You're ace! ;-)

To Steve: You're a blessing God gave me that I treasure so much. Thank you for always letting me chase my dreams. When people ask me about the prototype for my heroes, yours is the first, and last, face I see.

Praise for Marianne Evans

Hearts Surrender, Christian Small Publisher Book of the Year Nominee "...a lovely romance...an affecting love story." ~ Romantic Times

Hearts Communion, Christian Small Publisher Book of the Year: "...a heartwarming romance." ~ Romantic Times

Hearts Key [Evans] writes with a level of heart and Christian substance that puts me in mind of Karen Kingsbury. ~ Rochelle Sanders

A Face in the Clouds Riveting, with an amazing storyline. I absolutely could not put it down. ~ Brenda Talley

Devotion

Evans has crafted an outstanding, beautifully written and compelling tale of love, loss, and second chances. ~ Sherry Kuhn

I recommend [*Devotion*] to anyone hungering for an amazing story of redemption from human weaknesses and the restoration of relationships that mean the most. [It is] a reminder of what is most important in life. ~ Jen Stephens

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5-6

1

The dance was as familiar as a Southern California sunrise. Stove to sink. Sink to refrigerator. Refrigerator to pantry. Alexa Gordon gathered supplies and stirred pots, flowing into her pastry baking exercise with effortless precision.

But a decided lack of heart.

She tightened her grip on the hot pad she held, going taut. *Six months have passed*, she chided herself. *Something's got to give.*

A glossy, hardcover book, featuring pastry recipes, rested open atop the spacious granite counter where she worked. Looking at it caused tears to build, stinging against the corners of her eyes, threatening to spill over. The book came straight from the hallowed halls of the world-famous food hall at Harrods—a favorite haunt when she had visited London in less heart-complicated times.

Following a few rapid, vision-clearing blinks, Alexa squared her shoulders. Near the book, a large glass bowl stood at the ready, filled with flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt. On a nearby cutting board,

she sliced cold butter into small pieces and dumped it into the bowl. Taking out her mood on the mix, she worked the combination until it was coarse and fell through her oil slickened fingertips in small crumbles.

Would this wretched cloud of sadness ever dissipate?

Her attention returned to the book once more. There was an inscription inside the front cover which she knew by memory—right down to the dips and curves of the handwriting:

*Lexie ~ Don't ever let sweetness dissolve from your life.
Love, Peter (Vannie, too, of course, but me most)*

Her gaze came to rest on a professionally mounted, sparkling night shot of London's famed Tower Bridge. A necklace of lights framed the bridge, and the illumination of the surrounding architecture transformed the night sky and water into a perfect, mirrored reflection upon the placid waters of the river Thames. The photograph captured just one of a million views her heart held of that magical city—and Peter. Vanessa, too, of course, but Peter most.

The photo rested within the metal curlicues of a small display easel. The easel was a find from Covent Garden, a treasure she had snapped up after spying it on the shelves of a small, bustling stall she discovered one spring afternoon while strolling Jubilee Market with Peter.

Blowing out a breath, she forced herself from the memory of curving, cobbled streets, rose-colored sunsets, and the massive dome of Saint Paul's Cathedral. She had been so happy then, so eager and idealistic.

Amazing what nearly three years of life and love had done to shatter that point of view.

Her throat constricted. In answer to that reaction, she diverted her attention. Whisking together some cream, an egg, and a dash of vanilla, Alexa continued her exercise in scone making, already anticipating the aromas and flavors to come.

The batter firmed up nicely. Her heart? Not so much.

She set aside the bowl and wiped her hands on the front of her apron. When had her life taken this sad and soul-draining turn?

She knew the answer and looked it square in the face.

Derrick. Derrick Maddox—code name Derrick the Destroyer.

Sorry, Lex. I just...I don't love you anymore. I can't marry you—not feeling the way I do. I've glimpsed my life ahead, and I don't think I have it in me to commit. Not after I've met Carrie. Carrie takes me to where I'm supposed to be in my life right now. My feelings for her are so intense I'm left wondering...is lifetime commitment and the whole 'til death do us part thing even realistic? She's modern, and open, and free with her spirit. I can't follow through on our engagement when I feel this confused. My feelings have changed. I've changed. It happens. Nothing stays the same. You're a wonderful woman and all, but...

But...

Alexa bit her lips together. It amazed her, the way a single, three-letter word could sever a piece of the spirit and chop confidence at the knees. Her chin quaked and her chest went tight. She tried to keep from crying, and failed. Tears splashed her hand as she braced against the counter. Tension performed a slow-build, starting at her shoulders, working up her neck.

Lifting her chin, she forced herself to finish the

scones. They'd make a nice offering for her parents at some point this weekend. Her motions lacked zeal, though. Now, even her passion for creating the most succulent pastries imaginable waned and evaporated.

She had to find a way back. She had to find joy, recapture a sense of happiness again. She had no other choice.

The temperature indicator on the oven emitted a sharp beep and she jumped. Pastry dough awaited her. In practiced motions, she formed the dough and sliced it into rounds with a cookie cutter. Parchment paper crinkled when she settled the circlets on a baking sheet. She placed them in the oven and set the timer.

My plans for you, precious child, are beyond imagining.

Alexa flinched at how filling, how real those words became to her, and the impact they possessed. She lifted her chin, unwilling to absorb the words of that calm, clear voice. Still, the Spirit breath slid through her soul with increased frequency of late as she struggled with issues of self-worth, and a mountain of doubts.

If you but have the faith of a mustard seed.

Alexa's shoulders slumped. An ache bloomed. So did the sensation of being somehow apart from everything she needed the most. She wanted fruition. She wanted joy. She yearned for fulfillment, happiness.

Oh, Lord, she answered in sad silence, if only I could find that tiny pebble of faith You're talking about.

While the scones baked, blanketing the air with a rich, toasted fragrance, Alexa retrieved clotted cream and strawberry jam from the refrigerator. Normally, the process of crafting baked goods filled her with joy and a sense of connectedness to her God-given gifts.

Not today.

A cool breeze, flavored by hyacinth and lilac, drifted through the kitchen window of her ground-level apartment, ruffling the edges of the tied-back cotton drapes. The gust of air drew her attention to the surface of her dinette, where her laptop hummed.

Facebook was up and running, as usual.

She had fifteen, maybe twenty minutes before the scones would be finished, so, she decided to indulge her passion for cyber connection and spend a few minutes checking in on her friends. Maybe she'd even throw out a status update.

Anything beat moping, and losing herself in thoughts of Derrick the Destroyer.

The first thing Peter Colby noticed on reviewing the newsfeed from his friends on line was an update from Alexa Gordon. Her post included a countdown clock, ticking relentlessly toward its assigned expiration date of midnight, December thirty-first.

"Thirty-odd days, twelve hours, five minutes, and forty seconds." He recited the statistics in a mutter, brows pulled together as he perused the screen. Rubbing at his chin, he propped an elbow on the fully outfitted, though cluttered, work desk that stood sentinel in a corner of his study. "That'd be Pacific time, of course."

Curious, he scrolled down a bit, so he could read her accompanying status report.

It's the Friday after Thanksgiving. Two local radio stations are already playing Christmas music 24/7. I have the day off work, but instead of shopping with the masses, I'm tucked into my kitchen, baking scones. That takes me to

a happy place. Frankly, I don't know whether to embrace the Christmas season or rejoice that the year is finally coming to a close. As you'll see by the accompanying time clock, I've opted for the latter option. I'll celebrate, but I pray the year to come will blow all the previous badness away. As most of you know, this hasn't been my best year. Not by a long shot.

He scrolled up, until he returned to the small square photo to the left. He enlarged it—studied it. The picture was his absolute favorite, even if it was nearly three years old. His sister, Vanessa had asked a friend to take the picture while they stood freezing at a local rugby match. Alexa's smile all but exploded from the photograph, expansive, full of joyful laughter. Her blue eyes sparkled like bubbles bursting to life in a flute of vintage champagne. Straight, chin-length hair of blonde swung free as she stood along the green grass sidelines on a sunny, though blustery day in England.

In this shot, Peter stood to Alexa's right, Vanessa to the left. He recalled giving the back of Alexa's neck a playful tickle just as the picture was clicked. Interesting, he thought, that his friend chose to revisit the photo—and that she was baking scones.

In the throes of a heart-tug, Peter clicked on the comment box and began to type.

Hmm. Scones. Clotted cream. Berries. I can almost smell them from here. Seems a trip to the UK is in order. The food hall at Harrods awaits. Christmas in London is just the thing to kick those ghosts to the grave. Vanessa and I happily and willingly extend free accommodation in London. Peter looked out the window of the apartment he shared with his twin, which overlooked a curved section of Belgrave Road in Pimlico. He allowed his imagination to run with him for a bit before he resumed data entry. *Picture the city like a scene from the pages of Dickens.*

Garlands of evergreen are lit and curved above cobbled streets. A thick blanket of snow covers the world as snowflakes tumble from the sky. The aroma of roasting chestnuts surrounds you (which, sadly, smell much better than they taste...as you know firsthand. Remember that culinary misadventure?) Come back to Britain. After all, you owe me my quid, right?

He posted the reply and grinned because he noticed she was listed as being online and available. Wouldn't it be fantastic if...

An instant 'like' from Alexa hit his notification list. That washed him with delight, and motivated him to linger for a bit to see what might come next. It didn't take long for Vanessa to chime in with a 'like' as well as a typically over-enthused comment of her own.

Squeeeee! Say yes, say yes! I'm loathe to agree with my mangy little brother, but, loving embraces await! Pubs and fun await! Come to the UK! Don't tease...book a flight!

Snickering because he had stirred the pot, Peter switched over to his company website, Colby Intellilink Worldwide. There, he logged onto the inter-company server so he could peruse e-mail and check on the status of a complex IT network installation for an eighteen-hundred employee company based in Denmark now extending its roots into English soil.

For the next quarter hour, he lost himself thoroughly in business matters, until his Facebook tab started to flash and blink with the receipt of a private message: *Alexa Gordon has messaged you.*

Business could definitely wait. He switched over to the social media with a decisive mouse-click.

Publicly, on his wall, she had written: *London? For Christmas? Really? Severely tempted....XO to you and Vannie. Miss you both bunches.*

A private message from Alexa had hit his mailbox as well.

Sorry, Peter, I won't give up my quid under any circumstance. It's far too precious to me. At this time of year, even though temperatures in southern California hover near the seventy-degree mark (Fahrenheit, of course, which makes it sound even more delicious—eat your heart out!) my spirit returns to the city of Parliament, Big Ben, Tower Bridge, and the sweeping undulations of the Thames (It seems broken-heartedness leads to poetry...who knew?) I'm so tempted...and I could swing it...if you're sure you're serious. It would be incredible to see you and Vanessa.

Peter caught his breath—and he didn't miss a beat before rapid typing: *How soon can you get here?*

Four o'clock neared in typical fashion. Peter was ensconced in his office four stories above Knightsbridge. His work, for now, was done, and he toyed with the idea of heading home early, so he turned toward his humming laptop in order to shut it down.

That's when a message box popped up. *Incoming call from Alexa Gordon.*

A video call? Really?

He clicked *open*, and in seconds, her smiling face came to life, inspiring a likewise reaction.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Colby."

He chuckled low and deep. "And a good *morning* to you, beautiful."

She laughed. "I couldn't wait to show you! I just picked up a new laptop with one of those built-in cameras. Isn't it cool? I saw you were logged on and

had to see if it worked.”

“Well, you’re coming through perfect. It’s great!” Peter dashed an imaginary tear from his cheek. Sniffled for good measure, and then winked. “I’m so proud. To think I remember teaching you the finer points of simple Internet search engines all those years ago. Just look at you now.”

Alexa was seated at what appeared to be her kitchen table. A bouquet of fresh flowers, pretty pink, purple, and white things, burst from a nearby vase. He could almost smell a sweet, summertime fragrance, despite being in the throes of winter. She leaned on her forearms, appearing relaxed and dressed quite smashingly for work.

“Vanessa would never understand the beauty of these microchips like you do, Mr. Computer Guru.” In emphasis, Alexa stroked her fingertips against the keyboard and grinned into the camera. She waggled her eyebrows. “So, are you impressed?”

“Very. But here’s a tip—all you have to do to impress me is give me a look into those gorgeous blue eyes.”

She stretched back in her computer chair, fingering back the wisps of her bangs in dramatic fashion. “Why else do you think I’d video call rather than e-mail?”

“Just as I thought. You’re a cruel vixen of torture.”

She laughed. “Perhaps. Can’t seem to be helped. A lady always likes to get the better of a rogue charmer like you.”

“Hmm. Rogue charmer.” He rolled the words around in his head, deciding he liked the moniker. “I could get used to that title.”

Alexa leaned forward once again. Framing her

from behind was a sun-drenched bay window. Hovering in via cyberspace, a few of her motions were stuttered by technology. For the most part, though, the visual came through vivid and lovely.

"What time is it by you?" Peter attempted a time-difference calculation. "Eight? You headed to work?"

"Yeah, soon." She pressed her lower lip between her teeth for a second. "There's another reason why I called." She shuffled something out of view and then lifted up a sheet of paper. "Can you see this?"

Peter moved in close to get a better look while Alexa brought the page forward. The camera focused on...he almost let out a whoop.

"You know," he said in a smooth, steady voice, "that looks suspiciously like a travel itinerary, Lexie. And I see the words London printed upon it a few times. Are you telling me you did it? You're coming?"

She pulled the paper away, and her face came back into view once more. She looked into the camera with those luminous, almond-shaped eyes and fluttered her lashes, wearing a playful smile that swept straight through his heart. He hadn't been joking about her eyes, and the camera did nothing to diminish her impact.

"I leave in a week, and I'll be there for nearly a fortnight." In emphasis, the last three words were spoken with a British accent that stirred Peter's laughter.

"Fantastic! Wait 'til I tell Vannie."

"Oh...let me! I want to do it."

"Of course." Peter ducked his head, chagrined by his rather blatant enthusiasm.

Alexa's gaze flitted to a corner of her screen. "Actually, it looks like she's on right now."

“Of course she is.” He harrumphed. “You know, I realize my sister is a much-sought-after personal shopper—a stylist to the stars and all that—but she really shouldn’t be using her time at Harrods to surf the ‘net.”

Alexa was distracted by typing out a message, but she snorted. “You’re one to talk. You’re online, and you’re at work. Besides, she’s probably just keying customers in to the hottest trends and styles.”

“You’re only defending her in the hope of a massive discount when you get here and go shopping.” Alexa kept typing, but she nodded emphatically. Peter chuckled. “And here’s the difference in rules and governing regulations. I own this company—in conjunction with my father, of course. Therefore, I’m allowed latitude. Vannie, on the other hand, doesn’t own Harrods. Although, she sometimes thinks she does.”

Alexa froze, stared ahead in dreamy wonder then emitted a sigh rife with longing. “Oh, if only she did. Talk about bliss...” Their eyes tagged when she looked into the camera. “We have to plan an afternoon there, OK?”

“Consider it done. I can’t wait to see you.”

Alexa tilted her head and her smile dawned all over again. He wondered. Had she always been so transfixing?

“I can’t wait to see you, either. I’ve been gone too long, and seeing the two of you will be the best pick-me-up ever. Thanks for letting me crash with you. I hope it’s OK...I’m not usually so spontaneous.”

“I fully intend to help you overcome that problem.” She laughed again; the sound played like a melody against his heart. Seeing her, even in electronic

form, made it plain how much he had missed her.

“Seriously. Are you being this nice to me because you mean it, or because you know how much I need to hear sweet nothings right now?”

“Yes to both.” He left it at that, smiling wide, which made her huff with put-on exasperation. “Keep us updated on your schedule.” She clicked a few more keys, likely finished with alerting Vanessa to her plans. She leaned back a bit. “Oh, and Lexie?”

“Yeah?”

He moved a bit closer to the monitor. “Don’t forget my quid. Cheers.”

“Cheers, Peter.”

The sound of her laughter is what took her to black on his monitor, and it lingered in his mind. He couldn’t wait until she was back in England.

2

Peter's quid rested in Alexa's palm—cool and weighty for so small a piece. She studied the golden coin beneath the light above her seat on the plane. Her mind drifted as the miles flew by.

"Here. Take this."

"What is it?"

Peter transferred a small, heavy coin, from his hand to hers. "A quid."

"What?"

"Quid."

"Come again?" She knew precisely what it was. After all, she had been in Britain for an entire study term. Thing is, she couldn't resist the opportunity to needle him for using British colloquialisms on an American.

With exaggerated superiority, Peter sighed. "It's a pound. There. Is that term easier for you to grasp, you Yank?"

"Much. I understand the term pound. PS? You guys lost the war. Get over it already."

They burst into mutual laughter, but Peter's grin lingered—and she took note of his intent regard. Then, following a habit Alexa had come to expect, he trailed his fingertips beneath the chin-length swing of her straight blonde hair. The motion caused his touch to glance lightly against her neck, and nerve endings tingled in response.

"Keep that coin in your pocket, Lexie-love. Bring it back to me one day."