

Heart's Desire
By Deatri King-Bey

“I owe you an apology about the other night. I’ve put us both in an awkward position.” Feeling like an employee summoned to see the boss instead of the other way around, John glanced across his desk at Eric. Guilt ridden, John averted his gaze to the family pictures on the bookshelf in the distance. It felt as if all eyes were on him, judging him. He pushed away from the desk, the memories and the shame. “I’ve never acted so inappropriately. There’s no excuse for my behavior.” Wishing he’d remained seated, he rested his hands on the headrest of his executive chair.

Eric fidgeted with the stud trim of the leather arm chair. “What happens on the road stays on the road.”

“I appreciate your discretion, but I feel I owe you an explanation.” He held his hands up slightly. “Not excuses, but some reasoning.”

“You don’t owe me anything. Let’s forget it happened.”

“I wish I could.” His hands dropped to his sides. How could he explain something he didn’t fully understand himself? “Look at me: I hit the half century mark a few weeks ago, any day now my gray hairs will outnumber my black hairs and Ben Gay is quickly becoming my best friend. I’m not blaming my behavior on a midlife crisis. I love my wife with all my heart, my business just entered the hundred million dollar club, my children are happy, and I have a grandson. My life is great, I have no complaints.”

An exhilarating rush flowed through him as images of Carmen undressing filled his mind. He turned toward the window. “I hate to admit this, but,” he smoothed his hand over his salt and pepper mustache, “it was great having a beautiful, twenty-year-old woman after me. For a brief period of time I was thirty again, young again, on the prowl again. Hell, your thirty. You know how it is.” He lowered his head into his palms and massaged his temples. “I just thank God I came to my senses before it was too late.”

From the edge of his seat, Eric stated more than asked, “You mean you took her to your room then didn’t have sex?”

John glanced over his shoulder into Eric’s perplexed face. “I won’t lie. I came awfully close, but couldn’t do it.” He released an anxiety laugh. “I know. I could have gotten away with it. I missed my chance.” He went through the pictures that sat on his desk. His favorite one of

Leslie, his wife, was missing. Or had he taken it home as he'd meant to?

"You can tell me to go to hell. But why didn't you do it?"

"I love my wife and the life we share," he answered simply. He examined the young man sitting across from him. They'd been on several business trips together over the past year, yet he knew next to nothing about him. Eric would listen to him ramble about Leslie for hours, but never mentioned his own life. He corrected himself. He never allowed the young man to get a word in edgewise. "You're about to go on vacation, right?"

"It's Phoenix or bust."

"We vacationed there the summer before last. Leslie's people come from Flagstaff." Seeing he'd veered the conversation to Leslie again, he stopped. An awkward silence filled the room. John could talk about Leslie or business for days, but he found simple small talk difficult at best. Leslie was their charisma. His heart warmed with thoughts of her. She made him complete. Maybe he'd take a few days off and attend the conference with her. He wasn't too excited about her leaving town without him anyway.

Eric finally said, "I'm glad you came to your senses. You have a beautiful wife and everything you've ever said about her sounds," he hunched his shoulders, "I don't know. I can tell you love her."

"That I do." He paused. "I know I've made you uncomfortable. I apologize for putting you in this position and for my behavior. Both will never happen again. Why don't you take the rest of the day off? Beat that Friday traffic.

Don't worry. I know the boss personally." They both chuckled.

"I believe I'll take you up on the offer." He stood. "I have packing to do."

"Leslie," called John as he stepped onto the marble foyer of their palatial ranch style home. She didn't answer, so he walked through the family room into the kitchen, turning on the lights along the way. She hadn't left a note on the refrigerator, and dinner wasn't fixed. He opened the door connecting to the garage and peeked inside; her car wasn't there. His annoyance quickly changed to worry. It wasn't like Leslie to leave without contacting him first or leaving a message.

He returned to the family room to check the caller ID. Her mother hadn't been feeling well. Maybe she'd taken a turn for the worse, and Leslie rushed out. He scrolled through the numbers.

Relief washed through him when he saw Leslie's number. He played the messages, deleting the dozen he'd left before he came upon crying. He held the phone close to his ear. It was definitely crying, and it sounded like Leslie.

"J-john," she finally choked out his name. "I... I can't..." The line went dead.

He frantically hit buttons trying to replay the last message, thinking his Leslie was in trouble and needed him. The phone did everything except replay the message. He threw the cordless phone across the room. It crashed against the wall and shattered to pieces.

He paced from the entertainment center across the room to the wet bar. What if she were kidnapped? After the feature article in Forbes Magazine about his distribution company and family, every crazy out there would know what she looked like and how to find her.

He ran his hands over his short wavy hair, calculating how much cash he could come up with quickly. He'd give anything to get Leslie back. He had three million readily available and had access to another twelve if needed. He bowed his head, praying for her safety.

A sparkle in the carpet caught his eye. He knelt on the floor to examine closer. He picked up her engagement ring. She wouldn't have taken it off voluntarily. He pulled his cell phone off of his belt clip to call his brother, a detective for the Dallas police department, when he saw an overturned photo under the coffee table. He figured the kidnapers must have taken her picture to show her condition.

He reached forward, afraid she'd been harmed and the ransom would be more than he could raise. It didn't matter the price. He'd come up with the money somehow. He hesitated before touching the photo. Maybe Robert, his brother, needed to dust it for prints. He took the handkerchief out of his front breast pocket then used it to cover his hand as he picked up the photo and flipped it over.

Hands trembling, he held the picture of him sitting in the corner of the hotel bar kissing Carmen. "Oh my God," he gasped. If Leslie saw the picture she'd think he... "Shit!" What if there were more pictures? He couldn't finish the thought. He had to find Leslie and explain.

He dropped the picture then ran to the bathroom off of his bedroom. Her toiletries were gone. "No, no, no!" He rushed into their bedroom and yanked the drawers out of the dresser. Her underclothes were gone. "Please, God, make it stop."

Breathing ragged, he staggered to the bed. Realizing he still had the cell phone in his hand, he used what little faculties he had left to speed dial his brother.

Autopilot carried Leslie from the Dallas Fort Worth Airport to her hotel room on the edge of Upper New York Bay. Autopilot fully engaged, she checked in, unpacked her bag then closed the heavy drapes. She could see the Statue of Liberty from her room, but she wasn't interested in sight seeing.

A surreal Leslie stared into her dark eyes from the restroom mirror: not happy, not sad, not. She ran cold tap water in the sink and splashed her face. It should be safe to turn the autopilot off now. She was over the shock. She filled one of the short glasses setting on the counter with water.

She brought the glass to her lips. An image of John slow dancing with Carmen came to her mind. The still water in the glass rippled, as if a small pebble had been dropped into a calm lake. John sitting in the corner kissing Carmen drawing his hands through her hair increased the ripples to waves. John leading Carmen into his hotel room. She couldn't breathe. The waters splashed over the rim of the glass. The pictures were so clear. She could see into his room: Carmen stripping, him kissing her body, him smiling as he closed the curtains. The sharp clank of her glass tumbling about the sink echoed off of the bathroom walls.

Chest constricted, even the slightest inhalation gripped her. She crumpled to the floor. This had to be a heart attack. Where was that autopilot when she needed her? She couldn't depend on anyone. She crawled to the bed then lay lifeless, waiting on death to take her.

"Has Leslie Gibson checked in yet? I believe she may be under the name John Gibson."

The clerk checked her terminal. "Yes, sir."

"What room is she in?"

"Sorry, sir, but we don't give out our guests' room numbers." The clerk motioned toward a large black phone setting on a marble topped pedestal near the end of the check-in counter. "You may use the house phone to connect to guests' rooms."

"Thank you."

She handed his credit card back to him. "Enjoy your stay."

"I will."

Robert disconnected then tossed his cell phone into John's lap. "How could you cheat on

Leslie?” He sped his Lexus down the highway to John’s office. The defeated shell of a man sitting beside him couldn’t be the brother he’d always looked up to.

John watched out the passenger window as the sun rose over the city. “I swear I didn’t.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but that is you in the pictures kissing someone other than your wife. Hell, they even got shots of you in the hotel room.”

“I swear to God.” He sorted through the damning pictures. “After I closed the curtains, I came to my senses. I didn’t do it.”

“Well you should have because no one will believe you didn’t. You were set up.”

“I can’t believe this.” He stared at the stack of photos. “Who would do such a thing? No this can’t be.”

“I know you like to think you’re the big mac daddy and all, but my contact in LA confirmed Carmen’s a con artist. Who stands to gain from throwing your family into upheaval?”

Defeat rearing its ugly head, John fought back. He picked up Robert’s phone. “I’ve got to call Leslie and explain. I can’t lose her.”

“Oh no you don’t.” He snatched the phone from John. “You’ll be lucky if you get one chance with her. When you speak to her, we’ll have all of the evidence. No matter what, your ass was wrong. You shouldn’t have fallen for the trap, but maybe you’ll get lucky and she’ll consider the extenuating circumstances to your lax in judgment. The other day you were talking about buying out some small internet firm. Maybe one of the partners doesn’t want to sell. Everyone knows Leslie’s your life. If you’re busy chasing her, you’ll forget about them.”

John shook his head. “That sounds flighty. This whole thing’s a mess.”

“I don’t know the who or why. I do know that someone set you up, and we need to figure out who fast or you’ll lose your business and your wife. Have you angered your assistant?” He merged onto the off ramp.

“Gloria isn’t involved in this. You’re letting the cop in you go overboard.”

“Who else knew your whereabouts? Someone had to give Carmen and the photographer the information.” He stopped at the light then turned right.

“At least a dozen people knew what hotel I’d be staying at.”

“Have you noticed anything out of the ordinary at the office? Anyone acting strange?”

He shook his head. “No. I can’t think of anything. Except.” He shrugged, waving Robert off. “Never mind. It’s nothing.”

“What?” Robert turned into the parking garage.

“One of Leslie’s pictures is missing.”

“Who the hell would steal a picture?” He pulled into a parking space.

Fear returned with a vice grip. “What if someone is after Leslie?” John bolted out of the car. “What if she’s in trouble? I’ve got to find her.”

“Slow down.” Robert followed close behind. “You’re too emotional. I’ll handle this.” He grabbed his brother’s arm, stopping him. “Put your faith in me. I know what I’m doing.”

John ran his hands over his face. “If anything happens to her,” he trailed off. “I love her. I can’t lose her.”

Robert prayed he’d never see his brother so broken again. He embraced John. “You two love each other. It’ll be a lot of work, but you two will make it through. First we need to find out what we’re dealing with.” He released his brother. “Come on. We need to snoop through Gloria’s desks and anyone else who knew your whereabouts.”

“I have to tell her I love her.”

“Stop forcing yourself on her. You’ve already called four times since I’ve been with you. She needs time alone.”

Leslie stared at the phone, deciding if she should answer. She’d known John would find her eventually. She’d let it ring two more times, then answer. The ringing stopped. “Coward,” she called herself. The phone began ringing again. He’d never give up. She drew in a deep breath then answered the phone with a calmness she didn’t feel. “Hello.”

“Um, I’m sorry, but is this Martin Harris’s room?” asked a smooth male voice.

She felt like the weight of the world had been removed from her shoulders. “Sorry, but you have the wrong number.”

“I apologize, but I’m glad.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Glad? Okay,” she drawled out.

He chuckled. “Yes glad. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have heard your lovely voice.”

Totally embarrassed, she flushed. She had no idea what to say.

“May’s come in with a bang,” he continued. “It’s beautiful outside. I hope you aren’t stuck inside all day.”

The only light in the room escaped between the drawn drapes. Hiding from the world

wasn't working. Feeling sorry for herself wasn't working. "I hope you get out to enjoy this beautiful day also."

"I will. Goodbye."

She hung up then opened the curtains. Sun rays poured into the room, blinding her right after she'd seen how correct the man was about the day's beauty. He'd actually complemented her voice like she was a radio personality or something. She wondered what the woman kissing her husband sounded like. She grinned as birds chirping came to her mind.

Leslie strolled along the boardwalk toward the Statue of Liberty. Happily married twenty-one years then bam. When had things gone wrong? Why hadn't she seen the signs? They argued from time to time, but nothing out of the ordinary. She leaned against the railing, praying for composure. She'd never felt insecure before but was making up for lost time in the insecurity department now. Why wasn't she enough for him? He'd always been enough for her.

Her eyes burned and throat tightened. She settled on one of the benches, watching the ferries of tourist enjoying the bay. She loved John with all of her heart but was old enough to know that love wasn't enough. She deserved—no—demanded that along with the love came trust, respect and commitment.

A couple nodded as they passed. The man was older and had the woman on his arm like a trophy. John was ten years her senior. She could remember the times he'd paraded her around. She'd thought their relationship was deeper than the superficial, but he obviously wanted to throw the old trophy in the closet for a brand new shiny one.

Past sick of feeling sorry for herself, she gave herself sixty seconds to wallow in self-pity then she had to quit. She looked at her watch. Sixty seconds passed. She didn't feel better, but she did head back to the hotel. She'd left Dallas in a hurry and needed to go shopping for more clothes. No matter how much she wanted to crawl into a hole, she had to keep living life. She wouldn't fall apart. She'd make it through this rough patch.

He downloaded the new images from the digital camera onto the laptop. Soon they'd be together again. He pushed away from the hotel room desk then went to the closet and took out his briefcase. He sorted through the binders inside until he found Helen's obituary. He lightly brushed his index finger over his wife's picture. He knew she'd find a way to come back to him. They could kill her body, but the spirit lives forever.

He returned to the computer with the obituary in his hand then viewed the pictures he'd taken of Leslie as she walked along the boardwalk. She looked so sad, defeated. "I'm sorry I've caused you this pain, but you don't remember. As long as John was in the picture, you'd never remember. I'll make it up to you. I promise." He gently stroked the image of Leslie looking over the bay. "You've only improved with age, my sweet."

Leslie unpacked her shopping bags then went into the bathroom to wash her hands and face. She smiled at her reflection. John loved her long hair, so, while out, she'd had hers cropped short. It looked good if she did say so herself. She fingered the tiny curls that framed her face. The stylist had asked to dye her hair, but she'd earned her few gray hairs and wasn't about to hide them. She couldn't be twenty again, and if that's what John wanted, well he'd better look elsewhere.

Finished refreshing herself, she flicked on the television. Every channel seemed to play something to remind her how alone she was. It was Saturday. The day she and John had always celebrated as their day. No matter how busy either of them was, they'd spend Saturdays together. She needed a distraction, anything to take her mind off of John. She took the novels out she'd bought while she was out. None of them held her attention.

She set a murder mystery on the nightstand and noticed the message indicator light was on. Her heart floated above the clouds. Even though she'd e-mailed John telling him not to contact her and refused to answer the million messages he'd overfilled her voice box with, she got a kick out of him looking for her. It made her feel wanted.

With recognition of the voice on the machine came a heavy heart. It wasn't John. He wasn't looking for her. "Hey, Martin, I checked in last night. I'm in 1707. Call me as soon as you return. It's important."

Ego bruised, the confidence she'd rebuilt slipped away. It wasn't like it was hard for John to find her. The hotel room was in his name also. He obviously didn't want to find her. She wiped away her tears. When she'd left Dallas, she hadn't intended on this being a chase. This wasn't a game. She was running away from the pain. But now she was hurt that he hadn't cared enough to come after her and proclaim his undying love. She laughed at herself for sounding so romance novel, but those were her true feelings. Had she been so wrong? After over twenty years, had she meant so little to him? Now that their children were grown, he didn't need or want her any

longer?

She stared at the phone a long while. John wouldn't be calling. The least she could do was call the guy who'd left the message and tell him he'd had the wrong room. He'd said it was important. She picked up the phone and dialed to connect to 1707.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello. You don't know me, but you accidentally left a message on my room phone for Martin to call. I just wanted to let you know so you wouldn't be waiting for him."

"Umm, but I do know you. You're the one with the lovely voice. Now I see your heart is just as lovely. Thank you. I'm in your debt."

She flushed at the man's flirting. And Lord help her, she didn't mind. At least someone wanted her, even if only to hear her speak. She brushed the imaginary wrinkles out of her sundress. "It was nothing. I hope you haven't been stuck in your room all day waiting on his call."

"Oh no, my sweet, I took a short walk earlier."

Sweet, he called me his sweet. She laughed internally. No one had flirted with her this way in years. If he knew she were a grandmother, he'd be singing a different tune. "Well I don't want to keep you. Have a good evening."

"I will if you join me. How about dinner?"

Her mouth dropped wide open. She was tempted to say yes. John didn't want her, but here was a man that wanted her sight unseen. "I'm flattered, but I'll have to pass."

"Oh, you're married aren't you? I apologize. I didn't mean to offend you." He chuckled nervously. "I don't usually ask strangers out on dates. There was just something about your voice. I'm sorry."

She bit on her bottom lip. He sounded nice and was obviously from out of town. He probably didn't know anyone besides the illusive Martin and was lonely. "Actually, I'm recently separated. Very recently."

"I'm sorry to hear that. This must be a difficult time for you."

"I've been better." She tangled the phone cord between her fingers. "I have a novel calling my name. It was nice speaking with you again. I hope you catch your friend. Goodbye." She hung up. It was true. She was separated from John. She'd been married more years than she'd been single. She didn't know if she even knew how to be single.

Robert paced about John's office. "Who else knew your itinerary?"

John leaned back in his executive chair. "I'm tired of snooping on my employees. Maybe you're wrong about an insider. I want to find Leslie. It's Saturday. We always spend Saturday together."

"You can't go to her until we know what happened. Everyone's suspect until we figure out what's going on."

"Fine. We'll do one more, then you're helping me find Leslie." He called the security desk, again, for them to unlock the door and drawers.

Leslie found a seat in the hotel lounge. An outgoing person by nature, she thought being surrounded by people having a good time would help break her out of her depression, eliminate some of the loneliness or at least take her mind off of John. But she just didn't have the will to mingle. She watched the couples, wondering what else she didn't have in her and why her husband turned to another woman. She knew she wasn't the most beautiful woman in the world, but she could hold her own. They had the same interest, she stayed in shape and she enjoyed sex. She crossed her arms on the table then lowered her head. Why did he want this woman? What was wrong with her?

Someone clearing his throat caught her attention. She lifted her head and saw a handsome young man standing before her. She didn't feel like being bothered. She wanted to finish feeling sorry for herself. She offered a polite smile.

"May I have this seat?" he asked.

Her smile turned into a genuine smile. "Well hello there, Mr. May I Speak To Martin Harris. Fancy meeting you here."

He returned the smile as he pulled out a chair and sat beside her. "Hello, Ms. Loveliest Voice Anyone Will Ever Hear."

If she weren't already smiling, she'd of plastered a big ol' goofy grin on her face. Fear trickled through her. She brushed her hands over the risen hairs on her arms and the fearful feelings away as insecurity. She hated this new insecure person she'd become.

Being alone after all of these years was scary. She turned away from the man's dark, penetrating gaze and watched the doorway. She wanted to escape, wanted her old life and

wanted John. She sighed, drawing her hands through her short cropped hair. It hurt like hell, but John didn't want her and in all honesty, she didn't want to change who she was. She liked her old self. She wanted to be that self-assured woman again. She closed her eyes, affirming that John was a major part of her life, not her life.

"I'm sorry," came the man's soft voice then the gentle touch of his thumb to her cheek.

She opened her eyes and could barely see him through the tears.

He drew her into his arms, allowing her to sob on his shoulder.

She didn't know what was worse: crying on a complete strangers shoulder, crying in public on a complete strangers shoulder, or actually feeling comforted by a complete stranger's embrace. Humiliated, she didn't want to raise her face. "I'm the one who's sorry. You're too kind." She took a napkin off of the table then nervously pat it on the shoulder of his Yankee T-shirt, trying to dry her tear marks. "I don't even know who to thank."

He gently took the napkin from her then held her hands in his. "I don't know your pain, but I know pain." Their gazes locked. "The pain of my wife's passing..." he trailed off. "It's been ten years, but sometimes..." He shook his head. "The pain will always be there, but it becomes bearable. You'll make it through this."

She chastised herself for wallowing in self-pity when this man had lost his wife. "I'm truly sorry for your loss."

"I'm fine, just as you will be someday." He stood, holding out his hand. "I think we could both use some fresh air."

She laced her arm around his. "Sounds like an excellent idea. Since I've blubbered all over you, the least I can do is introduce myself. Leslie Gibson." They walked out arm in arm.

He looked down into her eyes. "Erickson Davis."

"Thank you, Erickson. For everything."

"I'll kill him!" John hurled Eric's office chair across the room. It smashed into the bookshelf then crashed to the floor. "I'll break his fucking neck!" He shoved everything off of the desk from the computer to the missing picture of Leslie.

Robert tackled his brother to the floor, holding him in a bear hug to keep him from destroying the office and harming himself. Though fifty, John was a large man and in excellent shape. "Stop this." He held on tightly, refusing to release John until his body relaxed and he

calmed.

John pushed his brother away, drew in his legs and rested his head on his knees. After a long while, he mumbled, “Oh, God, I know I’m not one of your favorite five right now, but please...” His throat tightened and eyes watered. “Please protect Leslie.”

Nothing could be said, so Robert remained silent. Eric had pictures of Leslie stashed in the bottom drawer of his desk: her walking into and out of work, at the grocery store, taking her morning stroll, going into and out of the gym, in the yard... Hundreds. He also had additional pictures of John and Carmen and a few shots of women they didn’t recognize.

“What are we going to do?” John asked.

“Get your wife back.” Robert helped his brother stand then went to the desk and called in a few favors. He needed to know everything about Erickson Davis from his birthplace to his present location. He also called John’s credit card company to see what the last purchases were.

“The good news is she’s in New York.”

“What’s the bad news?”

“It’ll take a while to get information on Eric and locate him.”

John snatched the phone off of its base. “Well you can stay here. I’m warning Leslie then going to New York.” He dialed then held the phone to his ear. “Shit!” He deleted all of the messages on her voicemail then left one telling her he loved her and was sorry. After he rambled on about Eric, he called the hotel in New York and left a message in her room.

“What are you doing?” he asked Robert.

Robert put his thumb over the receiver of his cell phone. “Making our flight arrangements.”

John nodded at his brother then redialed the hotel. “Could you tell me if Eric Davis has checked in yet?” He slammed the phone down. “Shit!”

Robert ended his call. “Our flight leaves in three hours.”

“Three hours! He’s in New York. Hell, I’ll charter a plane. I need to get to Leslie before that bastard hurts her.”

Robert held his hands out. “Slow your roll. I know three hours seems like an eternity right now, but by the time you charter a plane, we could already be in the air. I’m about to say the impossible, but try to calm down. She’s been shopping and at the beauty parlor most of the day. He probably wants to wait a few days for her to get over the shock before he approaches.”

“Thanks for keeping me company and walking me to my door,” Leslie said. “You’ve been too kind.”

Erickson glanced at his watch. “It’s barely eight. Let’s order a movie.”

On the surface, allowing a man into her room sounded like a bad idea, but they’d talked for hours, and he was a genuine nice guy. She could see her ordeal with John already had her leery of men. She wondered how long before she became captain of the Men Ain’t Shit brigade. She stepped to the side. “A movie would be nice.”

“I’m starved. Room service time.” He sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the phone. “My treat. What do you want? I’m having steak.”

Nerves on edge, door still open, she looked from Erickson to the hallway. She didn’t know when she’d become so paranoid. She laughed thinking great, now she was a paranoid, insecure, unwanted, old broad. She closed the door.

“What’s so funny?”

“I lost my mind for a few seconds there.” She opened the television cabinet and took out the remote control. “A salad would be nice. Preferably one with grilled chicken and Italian dressing, no bacon. Thanks.”

“You need some real meat. I’ll share my steak with you.”

“Thanks, but I don’t eat red meat.” She surfed through the channels, assessing the situation. Erickson had been a true friend when she needed one, and she liked him. She scrolled through the movie selections. There was nothing wrong with eating dinner and watching a movie with a friend.

She glanced over her shoulder. The desire in his eyes before he cloaked his feelings took her by surprise. She knew he was attracted, but this was stronger. She quickly returned to scrolling through movies. Men had shown interest in her before, but no one had looked at her like that since—she bit on the edge of her nail—since a really long time. She didn’t know when John stopped looking at her the way he looked at the woman in the pictures.

After they finished eating, Erickson went to place their food trays on the outside of the door.

“Oh please set them on the desk,” Leslie said. “I can’t stand it when people leave the trays out there on the floor. It’s just a quirk I have.”

“No problem.” He set the tray on the desk, which was beside the door, then returned to the bed. He’d already kicked off his shoes. “Scoot over.”

She hesitated then scooted over so he'd have room to sit beside her, their backs against the headboard. He programmed the movie and they watched. Well, he watched. Her mind continually drifted to John.

Had she lost the desire for him? Had he missed seeing it in her eyes, so he searched elsewhere? Were they still in love but had fallen out of lust? She snuck a peek at Erickson. She could remember when John was thirty. She closed her eyes. He was always handsome, but now... The thought of his touch cause her to flush. Her heart still raced when she heard his footsteps nearing. No, she hadn't lost the desire for him. If anything, it had been stronger than ever. She sighed, admitting her desire for him was still strong. Why couldn't John want her the way Erickson did.

Yes she wanted love, trust, respect and commitment, but she also wanted passion. She wanted John to have a burning desire for her and only her. But she couldn't and didn't want to change. She wanted to be loved as she was, just as she loved him.

She felt a soft brushing on her face.

"Don't cry," Erickson whispered.

She hadn't realized she'd teared up. She opened her eyes. "I'm sorry. You must think me a loon."

He drew her into his arms. "No," he said softly. "There's nothing wrong with you."

"Then why doesn't my husband want me anymore?" She sniffed.

He tipped her chin up with his knuckle. "Because he's a fool." He brushed his lips over hers. "A complete and utter fool."

She closed her eyes and mind to the pain of John and allowed the acceptance of Erickson to take over. He wanted her. He'd take the pain away. She lowered her defensive shields, allowing him to explore her body. She looked into his passion filled eyes as he settled between her legs knowing soon she'd wake from this nightmare. John hadn't cheated on her, she hadn't run away and she wasn't in bed with a stranger.

Erickson's penetration was swift and harsh. Leslie silently cried as she plummeted to reality. This wasn't what she wanted. Tears filled then overflowed her eyes as Erickson continued thrusting inside of her.

"I know, baby," he said as he kissed her tears away. "It's so good." He threw his head back crying out as he hit his climax. He kissed her forehead then lay beside her drawing her close to

his body. "I've missed you so much."

Leslie was too distraught to catch what he'd said. She couldn't believe how far she'd fallen so fast. How could she allow this to happen? She felt nauseous. She darted out of the bed into the bathroom. Erickson followed close behind.

She increased the heat of the shower to its hottest setting, but she couldn't wash off the stains on her soul.

Erickson flushed the used condom then tried to step into the shower with her.

She shook her head vigorously. "Please don't. I can't," she cried. She felt so weak she could barely stand. She leaned against the shower wall. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have..." She slid along the wall into a crouched position, allowing the water to flow over her.

He backed away with his hands up slightly. "Don't worry, my sweet. I know you're confused right now." He turned on the sink tap. "I don't want to leave you alone like this, but I understand you need time to adjust." He cleansed himself then wrapped himself with a towel. "I'll check on you in the morning."

He continued talking, but she couldn't understand what he was saying. She couldn't understand anything. How had she ended up in this place? Why hadn't John come to save her?

Dawn finally arrived. John stood in the hotel window staring through the Statue of Liberty. He glanced over his shoulder at Robert who was receiving another fax and talking on his cell phone. John leaned his head against the window. He'd never felt so lost and helpless in his life. He wouldn't survive without Leslie. How could he have taken what they shared for granted? He silently prayed for her to give him the chance he didn't deserve.

Robert hung up the phone then rolled the chair around to face John. "Eric's wife died about ten years ago in a car accident. He was the driver. He had a nervous breakdown after that." He released an exasperated breath. "He was tried for stalking. He got off on a technicality and the woman went into hiding. He was accused of stalking a second time three years ago. This time the young lady ended up dead."

John gasped. He had to save Leslie. He crossed the room to leave, but Robert stopped him. "Wait a second. You can't go off half-cocked."

"The hell I can't!"

"We need to talk before you go. Please. Just give me two more minutes."

John’s blood pressure had shot so high his ears rung. He needed to regain control of his emotions before he saw Leslie. He stalked over to the bed and sat. “I can’t lose her.”

“You won’t, but what if she’s already slept with him or someone else?”

He shook his head vigorously. “My Leslie wouldn’t do that.”

“That’s just it. She’s been with you most of her life. She is literally your Leslie. Can you imagine what she’s been going through since she saw those pictures? She’s got to be on an emotional rollercoaster. Everything she’s believed in was snatched from her. Her reality is gone.” He momentarily lowered his head into his palms. “I made a mistake. You should have come immediately and told her in person you love her.”

“I’m here now.” He stood.

“What are you going to do?”

“Reclaim my wife, my life!”

“What if she’s been with someone else? Can you forgive her?”

“Forgive her? I’m the one that needs to be forgiven. Me.” He crossed the room. “She’ll wake to take her morning stroll soon. I want to catch her before she leaves.”

“Be careful. The extra pictures in Eric’s office were of the dead girl. Hopefully we’ll have a warrant for his arrest soon.”

After getting a key to Leslie’s room from the hotel clerk, John let himself into their room. The first thing he noticed was the food tray had bits of steak left on it. He grimaced. Eric loved steak. He ordered it every time they’d gone out. He saw a scribbled note from Eric on the desk saying he loved her.

He subdued his rage then looked around the room. The chase lounge was pointed toward the window, and the bed was an empty, crumpled mess. The thought of Eric and Leslie having sex made him sick. He rushed into the bathroom to get a glass of water. It must have killed Leslie seeing him and Carmen together. He’d never forgive himself for hurting her.

Leslie heard water running in the bathroom. She could have sworn she’d turned the tap off. She stretched then kicked her legs off of the chase. She looked at the bed. She couldn’t bring herself to sleep in it last night.

John stepped out of the bathroom, startling her. She automatically held her robe closed tight

but heated as his passion filled gaze traveled over her face and body.

He crossed the room, reaching for her. She backed away from his touch. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come for you.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and raised a brow. “I don’t want you,” she said with a confidence she didn’t feel. “Go back to your little girl.”

“One minute for each year of marriage is all I ask. Please.” He motioned toward the chase. Holding a folder, he knelt before her on the floor. “I’m sorry.” He set the folder aside and rested his hands on her bare thighs.

She pushed his hands away. “Sorry isn’t good enough.”

“You’re right. I can never make up for what I’ve done, but I wanted to tell you everything.” He told her about Carmen and Eric and showed her the photos, police reports, and news reports.

She couldn’t stop trembling. “Oh my God. What have I done?” She ran into the bathroom convulsing with dry heaves.

He forced her to stand then held her tight. “I’m so sorry, baby. This is all my fault.”

She shook her head. “But you don’t understand. I... I... I...” She couldn’t say it. She was too ashamed. “I don’t know what to think.” Her husband was easily snared by a beautiful woman, and she’d made a fool of herself with a psychopath. Her life had spun completely out of control.

“I know what happened between you and Eric. He manipulated you when you were in a vulnerable moment. I don’t blame you. I blame myself. Please forgive me.” He wiped the tears from her eyes.

A knock at the door caught their attention.

“Leslie, open the door,” Eric said. “I’m sorry about last night. I shouldn’t have rushed you. Please let me in.”

She stiffened in John’s arms. He released her, but she held to him tightly. “Don’t go. I’ll call security.”

“Stay here.” He kissed her gently then went to answer the door.

John flung the room door open.

Eric’s gaze traveled from John to Leslie back to John. “No! You can’t have her!” He snatched the steak knife off of the tray and stabbed at John.

Taken off guard, John barely moved in time to miss the slash. Leslie ran to help John. He pushed her out of the way of the second slash, catching it in his shoulder. “Stay back!”

She ran for the phone, frantically pressing buttons for security.

Eric lunged. John caught his arm and yanked it down, around and behind Eric’s back.

The knife plopped to the floor. John shoved Eric into the wall with such force the tray on the desk rattled. Guests came out of their rooms to investigate. People stood in the doorway and hallway as John proceeded to pummel Eric.

“Security! Move out of the way.” Security and Robert forced their way through the crowd and ran into the room.

“Stop this!” Robert ordered.

John, straddled over Eric rearranging his face, froze at the sound of his brother’s voice. He pushed away from Eric and went to his crying wife, embracing her.

The security guard looked between the two men, unsure which to apprehend.

Robert took out his Dallas police badge. “I’ll take care of this if you don’t mind.” The security guard was more than happy to step aside.

“I need time alone with Leslie,” John said as he rocked her gently.

Robert nodded at his brother. “I’ve got you covered. Call my cell when you’re ready.” He cuffed Eric and dragged him out while explaining to security what was going on.

Knelt before John, Leslie washed the wound on his shoulder, thanking God the cut wasn’t very deep. She held the damp cloth to his shoulder, ensuring the bleeding had stopped.

He took the cloth from her, placed it on the nightstand then took her hands into his. “I love you, Leslie,” he said softly. “I’m so sorry I hurt you.” He drew his hand through her hair.

Missing his caress, she moved into his touch. “Can you still love me after what I’ve done?”

“I love you, but...” she trailed off.

“I’m willing to do whatever you think we need. If it’s counseling, I’m there. Anything.”

“Counseling won’t make you desire me again, like you did that woman.”

He tipped her chin up. “My indiscretion had nothing to do with you. There’s no excuse for what I’ve done, but I was feeling old and insecure. You are my heart’s desire. Only you.” Their gazes locked. The desire burning in his eyes sent her heart racing and her temperature rising.

He gently kissed her lips once, twice. “Let me love you.”

Stroke after powerful stroke she knew John was her one and only and she his. Their lovemaking rose to heights neither had imagined. Afterward, both sated, he cupped her into his body.

“You are my heart’s desire,” he whispered as they drifted into sleep.

THE END