



One Last Time

A NOVELLA

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1.

He wasn't sure if he was going to kill her.

James White, his heart racing, waited in his SUV. His Glock rested ready and loaded on the console beside him. Sitting taut, his eyes roamed up and down the front walk of the Omni Hotel.

I can't believe I'm sitting here. Eighteen years of marriage and now this? No, there's been some mistake. Amy's too committed to her family for this.

James's SUV lined up on the first row in the parking lot of the hotel. He had parked just out of the lights that brightened the hotel's entrance. Neither James nor the make and model of the SUV could be detected from the hotel's front door. James blended right in, as he wanted.

Only a few feet away from the hotel's door, the night's blackness blanketed the parking lot. High above, heavy clouds hovered, blocking any starlight. James liked the dark cover as well as the stillness of the pre-storm air. It seemed everything paused so he could focus on what was happening. On this night he needed that.

Life made sense until now. His family was Amy, and their son and daughter, Pete and Jill. His work building his business into the multiple seven-figure machine that it was. And, the future he looked forward to. He had planned, committed to, and worked it all.

Now, Amy's wrong judgment ruined it all.

James's smartphone dinged. He had set it to barely audible. He jerked it to his ear, agitated by the interruption.

"Yeah?" James half-whispered.

"James, I don't know about this. I normally don't have spouses around. It's a bad idea." Jack McPherson's voice came across as level but concerned. Rightfully so. McPherson didn't really know James very well. James had engaged the private investigator only a couple of weeks ago.

"I'm fine. I want to be here. I'll stay out of the way." James kept the same evenness with his own tone back to McPherson. James felt a tinge of regret at disrupting McPherson. They had gotten along well since James had hired him. But his many years of marriage had brought him to this point.

"Remember. These opportunities for proof can be rare. Let us do our work and get the pics and video for you. You'll be glad you did, believe me."

"I understand."

"So, no getting out of the car, right?" McPherson's voice was tight.

James drew a long, deep breath. No one walked on the sidewalk or could even be seen inside the lobby of the hotel. Maybe the whole notion of his wife heading here was wrong. McPherson may have gotten crossed up.

“Right, I’ll sit tight.” James didn’t like saying it, but he did.

“Wait,” McPherson’s voice pitched higher. An instant later, it rushed back in a cascade of energy. “Here we go. She’s pulled in.”

McPherson hung up, and James eased his phone from his ear. He set the phone within easy reach on the passenger seat next to his Glock. James’s heart picked up its pace, as he tried not to move much but still search around as best he could.

His eyes swept left to right. At first, he couldn’t see any car pulling into the parking lot. He had been sure to park in a tight row of vehicles where no spaces were available nearby.

Then to his left, he saw her.

Amy White hurried from the parking lot onto the sidewalk about fifty or sixty feet to the left of the hotel’s entrance, and James’s heart sank at once. Her petite five-four frame strode up the walk. Part of him still questioned whether there must be some mistake, and his hand edged closer to his pistol.

She briskly made her way up the sidewalk. Her fitted, black dress was one of James’s favorites. He knew Amy favored it, too. She usually wore it with her black, open-toed heels, and tonight was no exception. She carried herself with her usual perfect posture. Slowly, her face went from a serious intensity to a broad grin, and James shot his eyes to the right and the object of Amy’s stare.

There approaching from the right in the darkness was a tall figure in silhouette. The man wore a suit jacket and a grin, and his pace quickened in her direction. James could see the man’s thick head of hair before the man emerged from the shadows.

Amy reached the door of the hotel first, so she paused waiting for the man. As she did, the male figure finally entered the light of the hotel’s entrance.

Paul Horne. Married with kids and my business partner.

James’s heart sank even further. His stomach cramped. He bitterly smirked.

This can’t be happening.

There, in the doorway of the Omni Hotel, Amy White leaned up and kissed Paul Horne. They embraced quickly, and then Paul swept his eyes around the parking lot. It was only a cursory glimpse, as the two of them swiftly proceeded inside the hotel.

James squeezed his eyes shut, processing what he had just witnessed. He tried to imagine any other explanation for what was happening. He felt like he had been stabbed.

I should have known. If Paul would divert thousands of dollars in sales taxes without my knowing, why am I surprised by this?

There would be no more wondering what to do with Paul.

James's phone sounded out again.

It was McPherson.

"You're leaving now, right?"

"I know that guy, Jack."

"You do?"

"That's my damn business partner. Paul Horne."

"Yeah? James, I'm so sorry. This has got to hurt like hell."

"It's unreal. It really does."

"Listen, I've got it from here. I'm going to stay on site. I'll shoot more pics and video when she comes out. I can call when they're leaving. You should take off."

James stared at the front of the hotel. He struggled to breathe regularly. He shook his head. His right hand reached over and grasped the pistol.

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2.

James's life had crashed.

A strange lightness swept through him as he sat there. He breathed deeply, trying to calm himself. His mind reeled with a flurry of questions. On one hand, he searched for some innocent explanation, but on the other, he wanted to lash out hard.

Amy and Horne had just entered the hotel. They likely were checking in. A hotel employee probably would take at least eight or ten minutes to check them in. *I have eight or ten minutes.*

James snapped into action, sitting forward. His right hand slipped the Glock inside his leather jacket. Just under the jacket on his left side, a vertical shoulder holster strapped to his side. When he had bought the pistol originally, he anticipated needing to conceal and carry it at some point.

That point was now. The pistol fit perfectly in the sturdy holster.

James searched the area outside his SUV again, as he picked up his cell. Seeing no one, he pushed at his door and hopped out. The cool night air hit him. He slammed the door closed.

As he stood there, he noticed the same lightness about him he had felt in the truck. He chalked it up to shock. He forced himself to focus.

The hotel's façade loomed before him. James marched toward it. He faced ahead, but his eyes kept keenly aware of all around him. His left hand held his phone and his right hand flexed, ready to move.

Just as James wondered where McPherson was, there was movement to his left. McPherson couldn't have been more than twenty feet from him and closing in. James didn't stop walking towards the hotel and McPherson briskly angled to get to James at the sidewalk.

McPherson looked his sixty-something years as his lanky frame lumbered forward. Both men reached the sidewalk at the same time.

As McPherson stood to James's left, James paused long enough to look at him. McPherson forced a polite smile and tilted his head to his left. McPherson spoke softly but firmly.

"Hey, I need you to get out of here."

James pursed his lips and made a point to check in the periphery of his vision that McPherson's hands stayed by his side. While James liked McPherson, he really didn't know McPherson; McPherson was neither friend nor family.

"You can wait here. I won't be long." James's tone came across hard.

McPherson shook his head. "Bad, bad idea, James. You should leave."

A warning flashed in James's head. *Maybe four or five minutes left.*

"I'm gonna talk to them. This is bullshit. This isn't your life. It's mine."

McPherson's face reddened, and his hands went to his hips. When McPherson placed his hands on his hips, James's eyes darted there. The older man seemed to get that James watched him closely; McPherson now pleaded.

"Nothing good will come from you walking in that door, James. Nothing. You have to believe me on that."

James shrugged and stepped forward. When he did, McPherson stepped forward, too. James half-turned to him and snapped his words.

“Careful, Jack.” James’s eyes bore into Jack’s. “I mean it.”

McPherson took a deep breath and barked his likely last chance effort to stop James.

“James, damn it, you’ve got two kids at home. Don’t step in there.”

At the mention of his children, a heavy burning sensation washed over James. Gone was any lightness. Instead, the added dimension of the situation climbed up onto his shoulders. Every fiber of his being wanted desperately to continue into the hotel, but that moment of clarity, when she would be responsible, would have to wait.

James hated McPherson being right, but it was true -- his kids were at home.

If James went inside that hotel, then a couple of different things could happen. One possibility could mean his kids would lose at least one of their parents. James realized he had not planned for that scenario, and he refused to take that chance with his kids. He absolutely wouldn’t do it.

James realized McPherson still searched him for a sign of what he was going to do. The investigator’s eyes stretched wide. There was the slightest of quivers at McPherson’s bottom lip.

James quietly nodded to McPherson, and McPherson’s entire torso deflated in relief.

“Okay.” James hated walking away, but he vowed to remember this feeling. This unspeakable rage from his life snatched away. James knew he would tap into this again.

As he walked back to his SUV, James thought ahead. *This works out better after all. I have to do this right.*

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3.

James began by kicking her out of the master bedroom.

I want to see the look in her eyes when she learns I know. Let her hurt like I’m hurting. At least, there will be the satisfaction of that. What in the hell was she thinking?

Burning in his gut, he gathered armloads of her clothes and walked them down the hall to a guest bedroom. His feet glided on the hardwood floors in the hall, and he deliberately tried to avoid glancing at all the framed pictures on the walls from happier times.

The soft, smooth fabrics gathered easily in his arms. Three trips and most of her clothes were moved. Next, he went through her vanity in the master bath. He piled her cosmetics into a box, then he strode down the hall to the guest room furthest from the master bedroom. This distant guest room had the tidy look of the bedroom never used. This is where she belonged.

As he made his repeated trips down the hall and back, he struggled to avoid thinking about what must have been happening at the Omni Hotel. James's stomach churned. His head, right behind his eyes, throbbed. Deep inside it stirred in him that he would never look at her the same again.

The sweet, angelic Amy was forever gone.

Paul? Really? Why did it have to be Paul? Why?

His thick black hair pitched with his twists and turns clearing the personal belongings. His tall, thin frame ached from his tension. He couldn't keep his hands still, it seemed.

After his moving chore, he tried to go to bed and doze until she got home. There was no sleep, just tossing about. Over and over again.

A variety of thoughts ricocheted in his mind as he tried to make sense of this. He knew he had been preoccupied these last couple of years, trying to grow the business. But he expected she had understood that. At least she acted like she had.

A nagging truth kept popping up in his mind. The two of them had not shared much 'together' time at all. Neither of them had seemed to miss it though. He resisted the recurring thought that this was part of the cause. *Nothing excuses this.*

Her cover story to him earlier had been a travel club meeting, and she was due to return at ten-thirty. At ten-forty-five, he heard her downstairs. As soon as he heard her ascend the stairs, he was out of bed and standing at the bedroom door. *I'll be damned if she gets back in here.*

He swung open the bedroom door just as she crested the staircase landing. He planted his feet shoulder's length apart and folded his arms. His eyes glared at her.

Amy paused and looked back at him. She eased into her sweet smile while at the same time sporting tousled, blonde hair. *Tousled.* She squinted after taking in his defiant stance.

"James? Are you alright?"

His mind raced. A dark place deep inside wanted to charge at her. Or scream. *Pete and Jill are down the hall asleep. Keep your cool. Don't give her the satisfaction of losing it.*

"I'm fine. But you're not."

"Huh? What is wrong with you? What do you mean I'm not?" She faked a laugh.

"I moved your stuff down the hall. You're in the guest bedroom down on the right."

"*What? Why?*" Her eyes narrowed. Her head lifted defiantly.

"You know why."

She stared at him a moment and he detected calculations being made behind her pretty blue eyes. The seriousness of the moment was seeping in, and instantly she didn't like it. Gone was any smile, and her eyebrows pulled closer. Her words grew strained.

“What's the *matter*?”

He paused and let her languish in the murkiness of not knowing. *Watch her eyes as she learns that you know.*

She shook her head and her tone changed to more insistent. “James, I'm tired. I'm ready to go to bed. What's going on?”

James put his hands on his hips and leaned forward. His tone pitched higher. “Go on down the hall. Go to bed. That's where you're staying until you move out.”

She flinched hard at the words ‘move out.’

“I'm not moving anywhere.”

“Yes, you are. You absolutely are.”

Her eyes stretched wide. “Stop this. You're scaring me.” So many other times, he would have protected her from fear. Not this time.

She tried to slip to the side of him, but he shifted, blocking her path. She backed off a step and her eyes blinked up at him.

“You could just go over to Paul's.”

Her mouth gradually opened, and her eyes popped wide. The color left her face. Her lips quivered.

“But, then again,” he drew it out, relishing the pained look washing over her as her mind absorbed what she was hearing, “Jenny might not understand, huh?” At the mention of Paul's wife's name, Amy looked away.

She staggered a step back and shook her head. “James... .”

“If you tell me I'm wrong, I'm going to fucking kill you. I mean it.”

She stared back at him a second with one of the most serious looks to ever cross her face. He had expected to take satisfaction in blowing her cover, but suddenly the confrontation sickened him.

Her eyes filled with tears; she started shaking.

He shook his head. “Get out of my sight. You make me sick.”

He left her standing outside their bedroom, disintegrating into full sobs as he closed the door. He stumbled over to the bed. He sat on its edge and put his face in his hands. He didn’t know how long he stayed poised at the edge of the empty bed, but eventually he fell backward and drifted off to a restless sleep.

He had a vague notion she wasn’t through with trying to solve this tonight, but he hoped she’d stay away. She was so damned persistent. Always. But he wasn’t going to take any of her bullshit tonight. No crying, no remorse, no second chances. She’d better not push him too far.

For all her anguish at finding out he’d caught her, nothing had changed after all. He felt no relief.

The pain remained.

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4.

In the middle of the night, the bedroom door squeaked open, and a sliver of hallway light shined in.

He started to reach for his pistol. He saw her small frame stay at the doorway and her face peered inside. He didn’t yet reach for the pistol, as he shook his head to awaken more.

“James? Are you awake?” Her voice trembled.

“Go away!”

“James, please hear me out. I’m so very sorry. I can’t stand this.”

He bolted upright in the bed. *Did she just admit it, saying she’s sorry?*

“Go away.” He just wanted her gone.

“It doesn’t have to be this way. We can get past this.”

“You let this *thing* into our marriage, our home. It cannot be the same.”

“James, I made a mistake. I’m sorry.” There was a shrill in her voice.

“You disgust me. I’m filing for divorce in the morning.”

She shrieked, and he immediately thought about the kids.

He hopped out of bed and hurried to the door. In the light of the hall, he saw her eyes were

horribly red. Her hair extended outward like it had been pulled repeatedly. *Wish Paul could see you now.*

“James, I feel horrible... .”

He mocked her with a concerned tone. “*You* feel horrible?”

She vigorously nodded and something inside him churned. His left hand grabbed her upper arm. He turned towards the guest bedroom and pulled in that direction. Her arm went with him, but the rest of her resisted.

“James, no.”

Sharp cries sounded from her as he dragged her along.

“James, stop it. You’re hurting me.”

He got them to the guest bedroom and he pushed the door open. He yanked her to the doorway and then shoved her inside. She must not have expected this roughness, a way he’d never been before, as she stumbled awkwardly and sprawled onto the floor.

He gave it just a second to make sure she was okay, and when she raised to her hands and knees, he turned back away.

Her voice strained. “Please, don’t go. Hear me out.”

He hesitated only a moment and then closed the door. He heard her hands and knees banging at the carpet as she rushed to get to the door before it closed. Somehow, she managed to make it before the door completely shut. She slid between the door and frame, and her arms wrapped his legs.

His eyes shot down to her. She cried in spurts, choking out grunts and gazed up at him. He couldn’t remember ever seeing her look so panicked in the twenty years he had known her. Tears flowed and her mouth gaped wide.

“James, God I beg you. Don’t do this.”

“*You* did this, Amy. You did this. We can’t ever change what you did. You killed us.”

“Don’t shut me out. It’s not like you think. It’s just not.”

Rage engulfed him. He crouched to her. From the back of her head, he grabbed a handful of her blonde hair and pulled back on it. The tug angled her face squarely to his own. His words came forced.

“It’s not like I think? It’s not like I *think*?” He scoffed. “You have no clue what I already *know*.”

Her face tensed and she obviously registered his remark. As it appeared to sink in that he knew for certain, her mouth opened wide, and a scared wail began in her throat. Oblivious to anything else.

They both flinched as they heard frantic rumbling in the children's rooms down the hall.

His hand in her hair jerked hard and his other hand tried to cover her mouth. He edged his face closer to hers. He half-whispered angrily at her.

“Quieten down! You're scaring the kids.”

She stopped the wailing, but she still trembled and sobbed, sprawled on the floor.

He shook his head and brought his hands away. He stood straight and took one last glimpse of her at his feet. Her hands covered her face. He could not muster any feeling for her at all.

He turned and left her there.

Knowing her as he did though, he knew she wouldn't let him just leave her.

That wasn't her nature.

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5.

James wasted no time. His lawyer filed for divorce the next day. He didn't let her engage him at all for weeks, as he waited for the legal process to wind its way. When he showed no interest in talking or counseling at all, something changed with her. An acquiescence, of sorts.

She and James passed one another in the house wordlessly, and he acted like she didn't even exist. The children noticed the pall between them, and they too quieted. James found a new routine with them in the afternoons when he would work from home and be home for them after school. He renewed his focus on them. The children readily absorbed his attention.

Amy moved about as if in a fog. Her eyes deadened and her pace slowed. At first, the children tried to cheer her, but nothing would cheer her. Even their teases with Ace, their Beagle, didn't brighten her. Only as the divorce process winded down did she show any sign of life. However, lately she had seemed more energetic.

The children were in the backyard one evening, when she spoke directly to James for the first time in weeks. They stood in their breakfast room where they both faced out watching their children play, as they had done so many times before. Amy's voice was muted.

“My lawyer says the case is final next Friday.”

James looked over to her and nodded twice.

She started to speak, stammered something unintelligible, and then bit her bottom lip. Her eyes cast about the house she would soon vacate, and her shaky hand hooked strands of hair behind her ear. She kept her face in his direction, but she closed her eyes a moment. When she opened them, she spoke slowly.

“It would be nice to have dinner Thursday night. For old times’ sake. Just... .”

“Alright.” James surprised even himself, but he said it.

There was something inexplicably right about having dinner before they divorced. Eighteen years was eighteen years of their lives, he thought, and it wasn’t like she was acting as though she expected anything to change. ‘Old times’ sake.’

With the divorce nearly over, he thought to himself ‘why not?’ They shared a long chapter in each other’s lives, and if they were lucky, there would be future graduations and weddings with the kids. It struck him as the right thing to do.

Sure enough, Thursday night came and the finality of it all cast an emotional and relaxed atmosphere over them. Dinner was at an old favorite restaurant of theirs, and over a bottle of wine, they bantered over memories and the passage of so much time. He admitted to himself he was glad they had done this.

It was only after the dinner was over, and the wine was gone that there was any awkwardness. After the check was settled, long looks went back and forth. It was time to end the night.

They walked the couple of blocks back to their house, and as they reached it, she turned to him and hugged him desperately. He found himself squeezing her back. They were still embraced as she whispered in his ear.

“There’s one last thing I want you to do for me.”

He paused and then whispered back in her ear.

“What’s that?”

“Make love to me one last time.”

They both felt James gasp. It was so very unlike him, but her request could not have been more unexpected. They stayed clinched another moment.

In the emotional whirl of it all, they went to a luxury hotel. Virtually no conversation occurred, and the two older people who had married right out of college overcame awkwardness and all reason in a quiet bed high above the city and above all reality.

They held each other tightly, and their passion shared an intensity that would not be forgotten. Their intimacy felt deeply familiar while at times seeming profound. He caught himself noticing things she did, like gripping his shoulders, and then memorizing them for some future reflection.

Their night ended as silently as it had started. They hugged a last time. After goodbyes, she made her way down the hall..

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6.

The next day's hangover didn't only involve the wine. An emotional weight carried over from the night before, too. Their looks back and forth the next morning in court muddled the entire situation. He sensed something was off, even though the terms of the settlement were supposed to have been worked out.

Before court began, both of their lawyers talked directly. When James's lawyer returned to him, the lawyer bore a serious expression. James watched as the lawyer treaded carefully.

"There's an issue."

"An issue?"

"Well," the lawyer shrugged, "your wife's not sure it needs to be raised, but the lawyers are concerned."

James braced. He didn't get how there could be any problem. Everything had been worked out. The case was no longer contested.

"What? Concerned? I don't get it. Everything's worked out. Shouldn't this be routine?"

"Normally yes." His lawyer took a deep breath, "Let me ask you. Did you and your wife go out to dinner last night?"

"Um, yeah. We did. So?"

"The other lawyer says your wife commented to him it had been one of the best, but also saddest, nights of her life. The lawyer suspected the two of you may have been intimate, so he asked."

"He what?"

"James, he had to. There's something called 'condonation.' When two people are about to divorce, and adultery is involved as the basis for the divorce, then a condonation or forgiveness take place."

His lawyer let him absorb that before continuing on.

“Essentially, the law says that, where a spouse knows about the adultery and yet has sexual intercourse with the other spouse, then the sexual intercourse represents an act serious enough to condone or forgive the adultery that took place.”

James’s mind reeled with several thoughts. It wasn’t like he had thought it over and decided to forgive Amy. Instead, the emotional pull of it all, and the dinner they shared, combined to bring them to it. *What does this mean legally?*

“I’m not sure I understand why it should make any difference. That’s all private.”

“Not according to the law. James, it’s important because the whole case can be dismissed since the two of you had sex together.”

“What?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

James slapped his palm to his forehead and winced hard. “Unreal.”

“Listen, both lawyers were going to check with their clients. Let me go see what they have to say. Give me a minute.”

The lawyer didn’t leave for long, and when he returned, his question for James was straightforward.

“Your wife wants to talk to you directly.”

“Oh, geesh.”

“You don’t have to. I’m just passing along that she requested it. That’s all.”

James looked about the other people in the hall, all there for their own different significant matters. For a brief moment, James asked himself how he and Amy had even landed in such a predicament. Then again, he knew the pain she had caused had led them exactly to this place. Still, the night before remained fresh in his mind.

James turned his attention back to his lawyer. “Okay, tell her yes. We can talk.”

The lawyer left, and then Amy appeared. She wore a white dress she knew he adored. Her heels and some pearls topped off her look that more resembled her going out for the evening rather than attending court. Her glossed lips broke into a smile as she got close.

“Is this crazy or what?” Her tone sounded as incredulous as he felt.

“Damn right it is.” A mix of feelings surged inside him. Sure, he loved Amy. He always had. But he had prepared himself. They were divorcing today. This new complication didn’t feel right.

“Listen, I want to do whatever you want on this. I completely understand where you’re coming from. It’s just... I want you to know how very much I love you. And... after last night, I think you still feel the same way, too.”

She stole a breath, didn’t wait on him to respond, and pushed on. “I made a mistake, a mistake I regret. I will always feel horrible about it, will forever want to make up for it. Please know that.”

He swayed amid his inner turmoil. She brought her face just closer and continued.

“At the same time, we have eighteen years together. We don’t have to throw that away. *Let’s* not throw that away.”

Her hand gripped at his folded arms, and he hated himself for liking her touch. Just as strongly as he savored her touch, he also recognized in his gut a drive towards completing the case. Something felt oddly necessary about that. That was what he had intended all along and now they were there to do just that.

He let his arms fall away, and one hand lifted to her shoulder. In as gentle a way as he could muster, he explained his decision to her. He spoke softly but firmly.

“Listen, we can work on our relationship and get things right over time. But for now... we need to finish this out. I hope you understand.”

Her eyes first fixed on his with a shocked stare, and then they narrowed into dark slits. She withdrew backwards as she mumbled. “I’ve got to talk to my lawyer.”

Once Amy had left, it was only a few moments before James’s lawyer returned to him. The lawyer’s drawn expression did not bode well. The lawyer ruefully shook his head.

“I’m sorry. Your wife’s lawyer has notified the Judge about last night. The case is being dismissed. There’s nothing we can do.”

“WHAT?” James wanted to double-over, feeling like he had been punched in the gut. “She told me she would do whatever I wanted. I told her I wanted to go forward.”

“Well, all I can tell you is the lawyer raised the condonation issue with the Judge. It’s done.”

James staggered about. It all felt so unfair. Somehow, he had lost his divorce case.

How can this be right? She cheated. We all know that. Can this really be what’s supposed to happen?

He had no idea what he would do next.

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7.

In the weeks after the court hearing, the atmosphere in their household brightened. James and Amy warmed back to talking and interacting. The children relaxed more with their parents acting cordial again. The tension decreased and everyone moved forward.

James still felt unsettled, but he kept it inside. To him, the kids had heard enough animosity, so when they started smiling more, he didn't want to make matters worse. He re-doubled his efforts at being home for them when school released for the day.

The divorce case may have gone away, but James had sued Paul Horne to oust him from the business, and this crowded James's plate as well. James didn't talk about it with anyone, but the disappointment that came from Paul's betrayal rocked him. The affair came out of nowhere, and James still didn't know particulars. Wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Every time James thought about Paul, he became disgusted. The unrelenting fact was that he had worked alongside Paul, while James was going about his life with Amy, and in the meanwhile, they had *both* betrayed him. It stayed a challenge not to be bitter.

Strangely, in the weeks after the court hearing, Amy acted nicer and remorseful for what she had done, but yet she continued to sleep down the hall. At the same time, James didn't volunteer for her to return to the master bedroom either.

James had no idea what Amy must have been thinking, but for himself, the reasoning was straightforward. He wasn't really past what happened. Yeah, he could be nice and thoughtful with Amy, but it still stung. There were two mitigating factors that made it bearable for him, and he considered these two factors every day.

One factor was that James had never seen Amy as upset as she had been the night he kicked her out of the bedroom. She may have resumed her everyday life and her personality, but at times, she showed she had not gotten over that he had learned of her affair. Her confidence had not returned.

The other factor pertained to Amy's relations with him, and he couldn't get his head around this either. Every few days, she wanted them to be intimate. Sometimes it happened in her bedroom and sometimes in the master bedroom. Sometimes, she seized time when the children weren't around and instigated it.

Before the affair, she didn't act this way at all. The easiest explanation James figured was a sense of guilt that she struggled with. Whatever it was, James welcomed this new circumstance and didn't try hard to figure it out. They were on their way to healing.

It happened again one Saturday afternoon. She had been quiet all day. The kids went over to see

friends, and she went upstairs once they left. She called to James in the study, and when James poked his head out, she was standing at her door. She smirked to him and wiggled a finger, calling him to her. James didn't hesitate.

Their time together went as it usually did, with an energetic playfulness that hadn't been around in years for them until this fight. On this particular occasion, James noticed Amy a bit differently, and it hit him what it was he picked up on.

Not only were they not talking during this time, but she wasn't even looking to him or paying him direct attention. Rather, she stared off out the window or shut her eyes. It wasn't like she was occasionally distracted; she remained distant the whole time.

Afterwards, James brought it up. They moved slowly to find their clothes and get dressed for when the children returned, and James tried to be as nonchalant as he could.

"Our time alone together is great." He said it while he watched her pull on her jeans. She tugged the jeans over red satin panties he couldn't remember seeing before. Hearing him say that, she grinned but didn't offer more. Her eyes went back to her waist.

"You seem so very aloof though." His words hung in the air as she sat to put on her shoes.

She shrugged, glanced to him, and then put her attention back to her shoes while she spoke softly.

"Guess I'm still dealing with everything." She rose from the bed, and on her way out of the room, she slowed to remark back to him. "You seem like you are, too. Like, far away. You say nothing to me."

"Me? I didn't realize that."

She nodded, and then turned and opened the door.

James spoke up. "Maybe we should get some counseling." The idea seemed so very obvious to him now, but since they had resorted to being more physical than they had in years, he hadn't thought much of it before.

She stopped in the doorway, and she glanced back at him. Her face was blank, and she didn't readily agree like James had anticipated. Even worse, she turned back to the door and continued leaving.

"Amy?"

She looked down, and then spoke over her shoulder to him, still walking out. "Let's think about that, okay?"

He didn't answer, and she didn't stick around long enough to notice that he didn't.

The children got home before he could follow-up more. James was astounded at her apathy. They didn't interact anymore that night until bedtime, when James passed her upstairs in the hall. James spoke up.

“Hey, about this afternoon--”

She interrupted. “James, I'm going to see my lawyer next week.”

He stared at her with his mouth hanging open. “What?”

“I'm sorry, but this isn't working. I mean, we're talking and getting along, but... . Are you really happy?”

James couldn't believe what he was hearing. She stared back at him unflinchingly. He stuttered and thinly responded.

“Uh, uh, uh, the counseling idea... . We can, um... . On the counseling... .”

She shook her head and raised her eyebrows. She acted like she was trying to be as nice about it as she could, like she was trying to soften the impact.

“It's what is best, James. It just is. Give it some thought. You'll probably agree.”

With that, she disappeared into her room. He stood in the hallway and despised what had just taken place. The irony rocked him. He had been the one just a few weeks ago to want the divorce. Now, she saw no hope?

He staggered over to the master bedroom where he would toss and turn most of the night.

What the hell is happening here?

...

8.

The dark paneling and traditional furniture of James's lawyer's office gave off a somber tone that matched his mood. The hushed atmosphere was fitting. James had returned to get his divorce from Amy.

A steely determination filled James's chest. It was all he could do to wait for his lawyer to start their meeting, but once the lawyer finally did, James opened up.

“It's time to start things back up.”

His lawyer nodded. “It is? Tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s Amy. We were trying to make things work. Then, suddenly she did a ‘180’ on me. She says she wants the divorce. Just like that.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Well, thanks, but listen, I don’t want to mess around this time. This is bullshit. I want to hit her hard with everything we’ve got.”

“Hey, I want you to understand something. We have to start over again.”

“I understand. But at least you have the papers and everything. We’re talking some revisions, I guess. Otherwise, we’re ready to go, right?”

“No, it’s not the same. I mean, yes, we have the documents that we can prepare easily enough to re-start the process, but I’m talking about the substance of the case. It’s not like before.”

“What do you mean? ‘Not like before?’ “

“You’ve ‘condoned’ or ‘forgiven’ her affair, James. You can’t use that against her now.”

“What? This is all bullshit. That’s impossible.”

“It’s the law. You reconciled.”

“Wait, there’s gotta be something. This plays too easily her way. It really does.”

“Yeah?”

James wagged his head unable to believe his circumstance. “She was caught. I had her dead in the water. Then,” he gulped, “she played me. She really did. She manipulated me so I couldn’t use this affair in our divorce. Do you see?”

His lawyer held his hands in front of him over the desk. As he contemplated James, his fingertips tapped each other. The lawyer scrutinized James for a moment and then spoke deliberately.

“You’re right. She played you, and she manipulated the situation. I see that.”

“Am I screwed? She’s going to get away with it, isn’t she?” James’s head and shoulders sagged.

His lawyer leaned in towards James and spoke in a firm tone. “She’s not going to get away with it—Not necessarily. I’ve got an idea.”

...

9.

Appearances can be so deceiving.

James knew he looked anxious, with his hands unable to stay still and his legs crossing first one direction, and then the other. His energy raced just under the surface. He knew there were several moving pieces for court this morning.

Across and just down the hall, Amy sat fixed. Her posture perfect. Her eyes glued to the screen of her smartphone and her thumbs worked its screen.

Hell, she's up to something, too.

Amy had shown up at court looking so very attractive and composed, even to James. Most of the people at court looked sour or angry, but she appeared upbeat. Confident even.

Annoyed, he admired her curved form clad in a short silk dress and heels. Her hair was up and perfect. He briefly tried to remember when she had last tried so hard to look so good for him. He was soon past thinking about how she looked, as they were about to meet alone to talk before the hearing.

Outside of the courtroom, a long row of wooden chairs lined the wall next to the door of the courtroom. A few people took advantage of the chairs and sat, waiting their turn in court. James and Amy walked to the far end of the line of chairs to be able to talk.

James carried with him a large manila envelope. He got as far as he could away from others, and then he started their conversation. He didn't want to be there with her any longer than he had to.

James spoke evenly. "My lawyer says we're at an impasse. It's on the alimony issue. Do you really want a hearing?"

Her eyes peered back at him, unblinking. "James, my alimony request is reasonable. It really is. You can afford it, and I need it. It's fair."

"No, it's not fair." He paused, reminding himself not to let her get under his skin. "The law's clear that you're barred from alimony."

She shook her head vigorously. "I expect your lawyer's told you about condonation, James. That part of all this isn't relevant. We had relations. That condoned it. That evidence is basically nullified."

"Yeah?" James brought the envelope up and opened it. Inside there were large, glossy color photographs and a stapled twenty-one page report. "Take a look at these."

Amy held the pictures and started going through them. The photographs had only been taken two days ago, during a weekend when James's private investigator had surveilled Amy and Paul

Horne. The pictures were all date and time-stamped.

A few of the pictures showed them both coming into and going out of a W Hotel downtown. Pictures revealed them going into the hotel both Friday and Saturday evening, and then the written report stated how they didn't emerge until the next morning each time.

A second set of pictures displayed Amy and Horne at a concert. James was sure she would get where they were taken immediately. At first, the only reaction she really showed was moistening her lips as she thumbed through them. After a few more seconds, her head tilted down and she gave it two quick shakes. It appeared she needed a deep inhale to push forward.

She paused a long moment at the last couple of shots. Paul had walked her to his car after the concert had ended. Before she got into his car, they embraced, and a close-up caught them in a deep, passionate kiss. She slapped the pictures and report back together and pushed them to James.

“What’s the point of this? Why can’t you let go, huh?”

James returned the pictures and report back to the envelope. “Oh, I’ve let go alright. You are on your own. When you go speak to your lawyer, he will have seen these, too.” James paid close attention to her blue eyes. “He is going to explain to you that the law has a provision about condonation that most people don’t know about.”

Amy braced.

He continued. “The law says that, for condonation to apply, there’s an implied promise that the misconduct won’t be repeated. If it is, then the misconduct won’t be considered forgiven. Even the initial misconduct.”

James watched her shoulders sag and her face tighten. She huffed and then spoke in a low voice thick with emotion.

“James, I’m sorry. I didn’t want you getting hurt here. I certainly didn’t want you knowing at all. At the same time, things haven’t been right with us for a long time. You know that. This is best for everyone.”

James shook his head. “No, this is what’s best for *you*.”

“Fine, James. You are so damn self-righteous.”

With that, she spun in the direction of the courtroom, and she stomped off, her heels tapping away on the floor in a quick cadence. She never looked back, as she slung the door to the courtroom open to go consult with her lawyer.

There wasn’t satisfaction with what had just happened, but at least he knew she didn’t get away with this either.

Several moments later, James's lawyer emerged from the courtroom. Just as he and James had discussed, Amy and her lawyer wound up being undercut by the misconduct evidence so sorely that they had little choice. They were forced to back down. The lawyers put the terms and provisions together. After that, the Judge granted their divorce.

It was over.

James left the courtroom after wrapping up with his lawyer. Reaching the bank of elevators, he found himself waiting with a few people who had been at the same courtroom as he had and for the same reasons. He was relieved no one talked or really acknowledged each other. With no sign of Amy, he expected she had left.

An elevator dinged to their floor, and the people waiting, including James, gathered and boarded it. A distinct quiet stayed with the elevator car as it descended. Everyone stared forward.

It struck James how everyone on the elevator acted civilly and normal. He thought again about how three of the four others were coming from the same court room that he was. Each of them likely had just left their own difficult life event after it had unfolded up in the courtroom.

It's like everything's normal here. There's not a damn thing normal here. We never really know what someone else is going through.

As they all descended, James thought of how Amy would be leaving court about now and soon check her messages and catch up. James wondered whether she would immediately contact Paul. He hoped she would let Paul know that he had busted them yet again.

If only she were there. He would let her know how he had taken out Paul and would savor the look in her eyes.

Everyone in the elevator kept a considerate silence as the elevator brought them to the lobby. Once there, James felt like he almost floated to the exit and into the brightness outside.

No more than a few steps along the sidewalk, Amy eased beside him. He slowed to a stop and eyed her sly smile. His stomach twisted at her presence.

He glanced over. "I hope you enjoy your life with Paul," he said.

Squinting, she stared back a moment. "You... you're not just going to let me go back to Paul. I know you. You're not going to let that happen."

"Oh, don't worry, I'll let that happen."

Thinking back on yesterday afternoon, finishing off his business tie to Paul, and the way the pistol had felt so sure in his hand afterwards. Now, this. It could not get better.

He spoke carefully to her, wanting to make it as clear as he could. “I took care of the business yesterday. Cut all ties with Paul. He’d been embezzling. Funds meant to pay sales tax. He may even get prosecuted.”

Her bright expression darkened.

The feeling had been so sweet yesterday. The fear in Paul’s eyes as he signed the papers, knowing James held the proof to finish him. Paul had no choice.

As an appropriate coda to it all, James had gone to the range afterwards. Firing away the blasts, one right after another, this time at targets instead of those shots at her and Paul that he had contemplated before. The firing practice sank it into his soul that James had made the right choice after all.

“I know what you mean about going crazy. I almost did that with you and Paul.” He watched her eyes let that sink in. “But thank God, I thought better of it. Now, you two can have each other.”

“But, but—”

He turned and walked off.

Her voice cracked high behind him. “James, let’s go... one last time?”

He laughed. “No way in hell. I’ve had my one last time.’

Smiling, he kept going.

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

Thank you for taking the time to read my short story.

Thirty-four years practicing divorce law has caused a variety of stories, issues, and characters to swirl around in my imagination.

I would never, *never* use an actual case, or personality, or matter in one of my stories, but these kinds of situations can inspire fiction and I am working daily to try to put them out there. I want to get as much written and available in the coming years as I can.

Meanwhile, I will strive to have each story be as entertaining, provocative, and moving as I can make it.

Please let me know what you think!

I hope you'll visit my website at nicknwrites.com for all the latest releases.

Take care.

Nick