

By Dan Barnett

He didn't even have to look to know who slipped him the note; he could smell her perfume as she walked by.

James stood frozen next to his wife; the note melting away in his sweaty grip. He didn't know what it said, but he had a pretty good idea.

James leaned in and told Nicole he was going to mingle. After a brief minute of questioning, James rushed off into the crowd. He shoved his way past several groups towards the bathroom; protecting the note like a precious diamond. He busted through the bathroom door, almost knocking another man over. He made his way to the stall and quickly locked the door. He fumbled around with the crumpled note and looked inside:

*Come to 305. I'll be waiting for you.*

"Okay," he said and let out a huge sigh.

James stepped out of the stall and splashed cold water in his face. *Is she for real*, he thought to himself. He had secretly hoped this was what Jasmine meant when she said she wanted to give him his Christmas present at the party, but he never thought it true. She had been acting much more flirtatious recently, and her recent comments made James think she was planning something...extra for this party. But right in front of Nicole? What was she thinking?

This was the first time years James felt this excited. He remembered feeling it the night he got Nicole pregnant. James just stared at her the entire evening; just relishing in her beauty.

But that was years ago. Their relationship suffered as soon as they got married. Nicole not only refused to work, her parents also slipped her money behind James' back. They'd laugh about it on the phone, but he knew it was happening the whole time. During college, he spent

nearly his entire day working, going to school, and studying. He would sometimes go entire days without sleeping.

In fact, James hadn't slept well in years. After Nicole had the affair, James couldn't sleep in their bed. Maybe it was the thought of another guy pleasuring her; maybe it was the thought that she enjoyed it. The idea kept him up at night. He couldn't even sleep in the same bed as her. He never knew if she had been with him in his bed, but the thought of it made him sick. He would lay there at night for hours, and when he finally felt tired, he'd move to the couch. Sometimes he would shower, get dressed for work and then sleep in his car just so he could leave as early as possible.

James stepped out of the bathroom and looked around for any familiar faces. None. There were many more people than before. The Christmas party was huge when the company was doing good; and this year, the company did excellent. The atrium, where many normally sat on their phones waiting to go to lunch or waiting for the bus, had turned into an extravagant "ballroom" with tinsel and white Christmas lights everywhere. The company even sprang to have long Christmas lights slung from the glass ceiling. The 30-foot silver Christmas tree sat in the center, which is where the CEO would be standing in about an hour to talk about the future of the company.

James stood there looking at the note. This was really risky. He couldn't believe that Jasmine would put him in a situation like this. She had to have seen Nicole standing there... Or did she? Come to think of it, had she ever even met Nicole?

No not a chance. Otherwise, Jasmine would have probably punched her.

James had never felt a connection to a woman like he had with Jasmine. Nicole was gorgeous, but she never liked anything James was in to. She hated every aspect of his job, she couldn't stand hiking and she always stayed at home when he went camping.

But Jasmine was just like him. She had the same career as he did, she loved the outdoors, and most importantly, she cared about James. Several nights in the week she would stay late and just talk. Their conversations soothed him in a way; she'd listen for hours as he vented about his marriage. He knew it was horrible to do this to one of his coworkers, but he felt connected to her. She never seemed to mind though; she always said, "Dammit James; how much do you want to pay me to make her disappear!" She would laugh after the comment, but she truthfully hated Nicole.

The crazy part was, the feelings between them were mutual. Jasmine would constantly say she felt connected to him. When her mother died about six months ago, she asked him to meet her at a coffee shop.

"I haven't told anyone yet," she said when he arrived and fell into his arms and wept.

James felt this feeling of excitement and fear. He was pretty sure he wouldn't get caught getting to 305, which was only one floor up, but *should* he do it? Nicole was horrible, but should he really sink to her level?

Just then, his cell phone buzzed. He took it out, and a text from Nicole read:

"Thanks for leaving me here with these people. They're talking about how to properly furnish a house. Now I can't walk away or I'll look rude. This is all your fault."

James shut his phone off and slipped it back into his pocket. He started to think about how to get upstairs.

305 was one floor up; where the executive offices were. He thought about the elevator, but he immediately changed his mind.

“Dumbass,” he said to himself. He thought about the conversation he would have with someone in the elevator; something about keeping his wife occupied while he went up and had an affair really quick. He chuckled, but acknowledged the elevator was a bad idea.

James started to think about the text message. How the hell was it his fault? Then again, everything seemed to be his fault. In the counseling sessions, Nicole would blame him for her affair. He would sit in the counseling sessions and just laugh inside. Nicole would go on and on about how he had left her feeling alone. He almost walked out the counseling the day she said, “well, if you wouldn’t be gone all the time, I wouldn’t have to find affection somewhere else!” He worked nine to ten hour days, five days a week, and had been on two business trips his entire career. Of course he never said much in the sessions; he would just sit there and let Nicole banter on about how lonely she is all the time.

Just then James thought of it.

“The staircase,” he said to himself.

The emergency staircase was tucked in the back corner of the atrium. James made his way through the crowd, hugging the back wall and doing everything in his power to avoid eye contact with anyone. He put his hand in his pocket, checking to make sure the note hadn’t magically fallen out. The party was much louder than it was before. Maybe more people were at the party. Maybe the drinkers were yelling over the crowd noise.

“I need a drink,” he thought to himself and snagged an abandon cup off one of the tables. His needed something not only to cool him down, but also to build his confidence. He slammed the entire drink and chocked it down. Cheap vodka and tonic.

Despite James' determination to get up to that room, he still had his doubts. Maybe Jasmine had something special she just wanted to give him in private...like something homemade...

Then James remembered the day before they shut down for Christmas. James was finalizing a contract before they closed down for the long Christmas downtime, and Jasmine came into his office.

"Hey you," she seemed very chipper; more so than normal.

"Hey, what's up?"

"I have a surprise for you," she said as she closed his office door.

"Really? Well I didn't get you anything," he had; he got her a brand new tent. He lied to Nicole and told her it was for him.

"That's okay; it's actually for both of us."

"Uh, okay? Is it something work related?" James shut his computer down and pulled himself around from the desk.

"No, it's something extra special. When can you come get it?" Her voice lowered a little bit and her tone changed significantly. James felt a wave rush over him.

"Uh, I uh... Nicole has a bunch of stuff already planned."

"Can you get away from any of it?" She started to move around the desk and sat down on the edge. James leaned back in his chair; he could feel the sweat building up on his palms.

"I could always stop by with the family."

"It's not that kind of present," she mildly giggled. James' heart rate shot through the roof.

"Uh...I'll be at the Christmas party tomorrow."

“Will *she* be there,” she said like a jealous girlfriend.

“I think so.”

“Then I’ll come find you at the party when I’m ready,” she said as she stood up and headed towards the door.

James shot up from the chair. “When you are ready for what?”

“When I’m ready to give you your present,” she said as she opened the office door and walked out.

“Holy shit,” James thought to himself.

James finally made it to the staircase. He turned the corner and walked towards the door of the stairwell. The lights were off and the red EXIT sign lit the end of the hallway.

“Perfect,” he thought to himself. “No lights. Nobody would know it’s me even if they saw me.”

But then he noticed the door had been propped open, and he could hear people in the stairwell.

“No,” he whispered and peeked into the hallway. He didn’t see anyone. He slowly stepped in and listened for the voices again. Downstairs. Laughter erupted from the lower staircase. The smell of cigarettes and the night chill rolled up the stairs. The smokers had apparently found a way to avoid going outside for their smoke breaks. James thought about going down and asking for a cigarette; he hadn’t smoked since college. Nicole told him if he didn’t quit she would leave him; a pretty habitual statement made by her.

As James ascended the staircase, he thought about how to keep this whole thing a secret. Once they started whatever this was going to be, they wouldn’t be able to stop. He couldn’t go camping more, but he was in line for the regional management position, which meant more

travel. Jasmine's team did the best work, so he could easily justify taking her team on nearly every trip. Nicole might have a problem with the travel, but he'd buy her that new car she wanted or send her on a vacation with her friends. That would shut her up for awhile. He only needed to play this out until Kristen went to college; about six or seven more years.

James was amazed at himself. Here he was, thinking about cheating on his wife, and honestly not really caring if he got caught. But he had been miserable for years now, and he wanted to do something for himself. And right now, that was getting that damn Christmas present; whatever it was.

Finally, James reached the top of the staircase. Waves of nervousness and excitement rolled over him. He was there. The smokers sounded a mile away now, and the buzzing of the lights above him were deafening. He was alone. Home free. He could get away with this and nobody would know except the two of them.

He stepped into the office hallway. He could hear the party faintly going on downstairs. The offices on the left overlooked the party; the offices on the right overlooked the parking lot. It was dark; shadows danced around the rooms and filled the hallway. Every office had glass walls, and all the blinds were down but not drawn. He looked at the room numbers. 305 was farther down.

James stood frozen at the front of the hallway in both terror and exhilaration. The only thing he could hear was his heartbeat; it was racing like he had sprinted up the staircase. All of his thoughts came rushing back to him; each one countering the next.

Suddenly, he started towards the office. It was like he was on auto-pilot; his mind had no control over his body. He felt his hands start to tingle as he moved down the hallway; his shadow shifting from side to side as he moved past the offices. Then he saw it. Room 305.

The blinds were also drawn, but these were closed. Shadows danced behind them, but a silhouette of a person never emerged. James' mouth felt like it was filled with cotton balls. He couldn't swallow. He was inches away from a horribly awful and euphoric mix of emotion and passion. His heart was beating so loud in his ears they began to ring. He began to reach for the handle.

Then the door swung open.

James and Jasmine dove into each other's arms, passionately kissing and groping. James kicked the door closed and loosened his tie while still locked at the lips. Jasmine went for his shirt and began unbuttoning it.

After a few seconds of both of them failing to undo the tie and unbutton the shirt, Jasmine pushed him onto a black leather couch that faced the desk. Jasmine straddled him and began to work on his tie.

James just stared. She was beautiful. Her hair was up in a fancy bun, and she was wearing a strapless red dress with a black cardigan over her shoulders.

James couldn't remember being this happy since...

Nicole.

"Wait," James cupped his hands over hers and she stopped working on the tie. The excitement on her face turned immediately to concern.

"What's wrong," she looked as if she had disappointed him.

James heavy sighed. "I can't do this."

Jasmine sat back for a second, and then leaned in and hugged him; tight. He grabbed her and pulled her in closer to her. He could hear her starting to sob a little.

“Hey; hey; don’t do that,” James said as he moved her to see her face. “This is great, okay?”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just thought you needed this...I thought you wanted this.”

“Oh, I do! Believe me, I do,” James slightly chuckled. “But it’s not what I need right now.”

“So you don’t like my Christmas present,” she said with a slight giggle.

“Honestly, this was the best Christmas present I think I’ve ever received,” he said and kissed her on the cheek.

James stepped out of the room and turned to Jasmine. His smile said enough to her, and she put her hand on his face. She told him, “I’ll wait until you get downstairs and then I’ll take the elevator.” James walked towards the staircase and made his way down. The cool air from the night swirled through the staircase, and James took a huge breath.

James reentered the atrium to see the party still going on. The CEO was finishing up with his speech, and everyone was clapping. James made his way to the bathroom and verified his hair and shirt buttons were good, and then headed into the party. He walked around for about five minutes and looked for Nicole. When he didn’t see her, he went over, grabbed his coat, and headed to the car. As he stepped out, he noticed a man smoking on the side of the building. James walked over.

“You mind if I get one of those from you,” James asked.

The man handed him a cigarette and James lit it. As he walked towards the car, he remembered the cell phone. He powered it up and looked at the phone. 10 messages; all from Nicole.

James ignored the texts and just replied, “At the car.” A couple minutes later, Nicole came storming out of the party and towards the car.

“Where the fuck have you been,” she screamed from about 15 feet away from the car.

“You want to keep it down,” James snapped back.

“I’ve been texting you for about 30 minutes now, what have you...Are you smoking?”

Her voice was echoing off of every car in the parking lot. People were starting to take notice.

“Yes, I am. Now, do you want to keep your voice down?”

“Why the fuck are you smoking?”

“Nicole, stop.”

“Don’t tell me to stop! You have a serious problem right now!”

“Shut up and get in the car!” Nicole froze in amazement. James couldn’t remember the last time he raised his voice at her—if ever.

Surprisingly, Nicole walked around and got in the car. James stomped the cigarette out and stepped into the car. James turned and looked at Nicole.

“You are the one with the serious problem,” he said. “You don’t deserve an ounce of respect. You treat me like shit, and you never care about me. You’ve never cared about me.”

“You have some nerve...” she said.

“No, *you* have some nerve,” he said while interrupting her. “Did you forget you fucking cheated on me? Did you once ever think about what that did to me?” James. Paused and stared intently at Nicole. When she didn’t reply, he turned back towards the wheel and turned the car on.

“Drop me off at my parent’s house tonight,” she said, which was where Kristen was.

“I planned on it,” James said, not looking to see the look on Nicole’s face.

James opened the door of the dark house and smiled. He threw his coat on the couch, took a long, hot shower, laid down in his bed, and slept the entire night.