

Chapter One

Molly smoothed her skirt and straightened the jacket of her business suit, looking in the mirror for the last time before she left for work. It was early, still dark outside. Her shoulder-length light-brown hair had the right shape and shine, her hazel eyes accented with just a touch of eyeliner. She was attractive, but not conscious of it.

The past year had been extremely difficult for her, and she knew she wasn't herself. So often, she felt she was watching herself going through the motions of life.

Molly used to relish her job as a corporate attorney and was rewarded for her hard work with a promotion to chief counsel for her company. But her life wasn't her job, and that became all too apparent over the last year.

Even though she tried to put it out of her head for *just a minute*, she couldn't. It was exactly one year ago today that he died.

Grief hit in stages, and Molly felt she'd experienced them all. Jim and Molly had decided to wait for children, as both their careers were humming along, and they took advantage of their time off by traveling the world.

They'd met in law school, and from the day they first talked, they were never apart. It had been a great love and wonderful life, and their friends and family envied them. But now it was all over.

Molly was nearing forty years old and would never have Jim's child, perhaps any children, as she and Jim were trying before they learned of his illness. It was pancreatic cancer that took him just three months from the day they received the diagnosis.

He fought to live, including participating in experimental drug trials, but it was too late. Pancreatic cancer is so scary, as there often are no symptoms. He was vibrant and healthy, and then he wasn't. Molly had little time to adjust to the possibility of his death, and then there it was. Final. Irrevocable.

While she put up a good front by forging on with her life and deeply immersing herself in her work, Molly had trouble emotionally accepting her husband's death.

Both friends and family wanted her to begin to move on, even tried to set her up on dates. But she had no interest. She continued on, but the joy was gone. There was just this eternal flatness, this living, but not really *being*. She always hoped it would get better over time, but she didn't feel it yet.

Molly grabbed her purse, settled into her car, and backed out of the garage, heading out into the rainy New England early March morning. She gazed at the puddles alongside the road, ringed by the sprouting of new, emerald-green grass, and looked up to see the steeple of the old, white clapboard church on the corner.

She hoped the gray beauty of this day would lift her spirits. If not, she hoped her assistant, Cissy, who always seemed to find the exact right thing to say, could help pull her out of this mood. Her work was a refuge, and she could spend sixty to seventy hours a week buried in every tiny detail. It was a blessing really, but life didn't have the same purpose without Jim and their future together.

Molly arrived at her office and hadn't even taken off her coat when her assistant came in with lattes for them both.

Cissy, a petite blonde in her late forties, slipped into a chair and placed the coffees in front of them. "I know Jim died a year ago today and it has to be so hard for you. All your appointments have been pushed back until 9:30, so we can have a good gab. We can talk about Jim or whatever you want to talk about. It's your call."

Molly gazed at her assistant with great affection, and tears filled her eyes and spilled out onto her desk.

Cissy bounded up and grabbed some tissues. "I didn't mean to make you cry. I'm so sorry," she said, tears of her own brimming in her eyelids.

Molly wiped her cheeks and smiled. "There was no way I wasn't going to shed tears today. Thanks for delaying my appointments and giving me this time to gather myself.

"I don't want anyone else to know about this or to talk to others in the office about Jim. Once I'm ready for the day, I'll be okay." She showed the same spirit she'd demonstrated time and

again over the past year. Molly always tried to be a comfort to everyone else and pushed aside her own emotions, no matter how deep or warranted they were.

Cissy reached over and grabbed the photo of Jim and Molly from the back of her desk. Jim was tall with light-brown hair and a slim, athletic build. His smile was kind and open. “You must miss so many things about him.”

Molly took the photo from her friend and colleague. “This was taken on our honeymoon in Italy. We went to Sicily after touring the Amalfi Coast and posed for this picture in Taormina among ancient ruins. So beautiful...” she murmured.

“I miss talking to him, being with him, planning all our adventures and our future... and of course, the intimacy. I miss him so much.” Molly sighed. She knew she could talk to Cissy about anything.

Both women took a long sip of their lattes and were silent for a moment.

“Well, Jim was the love of your life. I've never heard you talk about any other. Was he your first?”

Molly's face clouded, and it was difficult for Cissy to read her.

“No, there was a passionate love before Jim, but it ended badly,” she answered quietly, eyes downcast.

Cissy wanted to hear the whole story, but the phone rang and Molly picked up. “Yes, Ken. I'll be right there. This does sound like an outstanding opportunity.” She hung up, nodded at Cissy, and moved urgently to see her boss, as he was resetting all their meetings, and just like that, the hectic day began.

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The time flew by in a whirlwind of meetings, phone calls, and frantic emails, and it wasn't until six o'clock that Molly and Cissy came up for air. Their company was a conglomerate, WHK Industries, and it had quadrupled in size in the last few years through organic growth and strategic acquisitions.

Ken Squareton, the CEO, had been with the company for thirty years, waiting through a few CEO successions for his turn to lead. He was a classic CEO in so many respects: tall and handsome and a brilliant visionary who commanded respect.

He could have left the company many times to take leadership jobs elsewhere, but that wasn't Ken. He was ethical and loyal to a fault, and perhaps that's why Molly held him in such high regard, as so many CEOs didn't share those traits.

Ken was also a mentor to Molly and helped her move up the ladder with him during her fifteen years with the company. He recently asked her to take on the company's philanthropy and foundation, as he valued the work they did in the communities in which they held a presence. Ken wanted Molly to expand their corporate citizenship programs globally.

She found this work fascinating and wished she had more time to devote to it, but her day-to-day legal work and her responsibilities with the company's board of directors kept her too busy. Nonetheless, Molly truly appreciated that Ken continued to give her more responsibility and challenging work.

When Jim died, she didn't know what she would have done without her job and Ken and his wife, Jen. They took Molly out for countless dinners and events and included her in family gatherings with their three wonderful sons, as Molly's family was back in the Midwest. She knew she had an unusual situation at WHK with Ken; the rest of corporate America was another story.

Molly was energized by all the confidential meetings that day about a potential acquisition that could transform their company. There would be lots to do in the coming weeks. It was good to feel excited again and engaged with her work. *Maybe I am making a little progress with my grief, she thought, even on this particular day.*

As Molly was trying to get through a few more emails, Cissy came into her office with a proposal. "I say we go out for dinner. You've had a stressful day, and I know getting through this particular day must be so difficult. So let's celebrate Jim's life with a really great bottle of wine and dinner."

Molly smiled at her assistant. Cissy Slocek was so intelligent and such a great person. She found herself pregnant at seventeen while still in high school, had the baby after she graduated at eighteen, and married the father. Unfortunately, her husband became an abusive alcoholic monster, and she left the marriage with her two kids and literally nothing else.

Cissy started working at the business as a temp when she was nineteen, working her way up over time to become a top executive assistant. If she were able to get an education and focus on her career early in her life, Molly had no doubt she could have done anything at the company, including her job or even Ken's.

She worked hard to give her kids all the advantages she didn't have when she was young. Her daughter, Erika, became a physician's assistant, and her son, John, was a software engineer. Cissy had done a fantastic job of raising them on her own; she couldn't be prouder of them.

It must have been awful for her to deal with her abusive husband. Not long after they divorced, he drank himself to death, so the kids only had their mother growing up. The hardships she endured were difficult to imagine, and Molly admired her so much.

She knew it was unusual to have such a close relationship with her assistant, but Cissy was exceptional. And both women worked hard to separate their business relationship and friendship.

"Well, it sounds like an offer I can't refuse," Molly said, smiling at her friend. "I suppose you already have reservations."

Cissy laughed and nodded. "Absolutely. It's our favorite, Bellini's."

The women shut down their computers and headed out.

Bellini's Italian restaurant was decorated in a very contemporary but warm fashion. The candles created a nice, soft glow, and the small vase with fresh flowers provided a beautiful centerpiece as the women dined on expertly crafted cuisine. They ordered one of the best bottles of Barolo and didn't blink at the price, as it was a special occasion to honor Jim.

"It's nice to have such a luxurious meal today with a great bottle of wine. It makes me think of Jim and some of our very best days together," Molly said, smiling sadly.

"Let's have a toast to Jim, a fantastic man and wonderful husband," Cissy said, raising her drink.

"Cheers," they both said, clinking their glasses.

"Well, with what's going on at work, it looks like we did the right thing in having our dinner tonight. It sure seems we'll be busy for some time." Cissy knew all the confidential information at the company, and Molly trusted her implicitly.

“You’re right,” Molly replied, nodding. “It looks like we’ll have plenty of late nights.”

“Given that we’ll be so busy and won’t have any time to gossip, I want to hear about this ‘passionate’ love you brought up this morning. I’ve been dying to know about this all day, but we were too busy,” Cissy said, winking at Molly with keen interest.

Molly squinted at her with a frown. “It’s kind of a long story...”

Chapter Two

Seventeen Years Earlier...

Molly couldn't believe she was about to graduate from the University of Wisconsin and then head to law school. What luck she had to be accepted at Northwestern Law School, which was several hours' drive from her Wisconsin hometown. She won a small scholarship, and her parents had saved everything to give her the kind of education they couldn't afford for themselves. She also worked up to three jobs during college to help defray the expenses. Molly never splurged on anything, but she thought graduation deserved a first-class celebration.

She had an outstanding circle of friends at school, and she knew they'd go for her idea to celebrate graduation with a party and a live band. Her roommate Ruth's parents' house would be perfect for the event.

Combing the classified section in the school's paper, she spotted the description of just the right band:

If you want a party band to get your friends moving, you need to hire Rockster Tunney. We're a four-piece rock band that can play rock classics as well as some of the most popular R&B favorites. You ask us, we'll play it. We're cheap, too, because we need the bread. Party on!

Molly dialed the number at the bottom of the ad.

A deep, resonant voice said, "HEEELLLLLOOOOO, this is Tunney of Rockster Tunney. What can I do for you?"

Stifling a giggle, Molly explained she needed a band for a graduation party. After some haggling, they agreed on two hundred dollars and set up a time to meet at the student union to discuss the set list. He argued about this a bit, but she insisted. She had to make sure this band was presentable and up to the task. Two hundred dollars was a lot of money!

On the day of their meeting, Molly ran over to the student union bar, which was located in the basement. The students didn't seem to mind the dark setting, as the bar featured a number

of excellent drafts. She looked around and saw a tall, lanky man with hair down to his shoulders, cowboy hat, and ripped jeans. It had to be Tunney.

He must have been about six feet three and looked to be about ten years older than her. He smiled as she put out her hand to shake his. "I don't usually meet women with a handshake, if you know what I mean," he said slyly.

Molly laughed out loud as she slid into the booth.

Tunney grabbed the waitress and ordered two beers. "Hope that's okay with you, 'cause you're buying."

"That's really forward of you, but I agree since I asked for this meeting," Molly answered.

Over the next hour, they talked about the songs the band would play, both rock and R&B, and the other members of the band. Rockster Tunney was made up of Tunney's brother Tam, cousin Murph, and best friend Brett.

It sounded like the band was pretty good. They'd played at some local clubs and opened for some touring rock acts coming through town. Molly found she really liked Tunney and enjoyed talking with him.

"Why do you and your brother have such strange names?" she asked him.

He smiled and said, "Well, those are the names we've used all our lives. My mom insisted on giving us these awful, traditional family names, and my dad immediately gave us nicknames. They seem to fit us."

"But what are your real names?" Molly asked, knowing she wouldn't receive a straight answer.

"You need to know me a lot better to find that out." He laughed. "And even then, I probably wouldn't tell you."

They agreed to chat on the phone just before the party in May.

As Tunney left the student union, he called out, "It's on the calendar in ink, boss!"

The weeks after Molly met with Tunney just flew by with exams, studying, and work. She helped out at the student newspaper, served as a teaching assistant, and did some tutoring on the side. It seemed she didn't have time to breathe.

Molly dated a bit, but it was nothing serious. It felt like most guys wanted more than she was willing to give, and some of the guys she really wanted to ask her out didn't. But Molly wasn't concerned. She focused on her studies, her work, her friends, and the graduation party.

Ruth and Molly went to Ruth's parents' house the week before the party to plan everything out. The partiers were asked to bring something, mostly finger foods. The band would perform outside, near the pool. Ruth's family was the most well-to-do of their crowd of friends and lived near the school. Her parents were off on a European holiday but would return in time for the formal graduation ceremonies the following week.

After a final call with Tunney, the band agreed to arrive around 8:00 p.m. The music had to stop before midnight because the girls were concerned the neighbors would complain about the noise. Ruth had promised her parents they would clean the house and make sure there would be no trouble. Fingers crossed.

The night of the party, Molly took extra care in getting ready. She wore her best jeans that showed off her figure and a silky mint-green top with a beautiful patterned scarf around her shoulders. Her hair was long and feathered around her face. She was looking forward to seeing Tunney again and meeting the rest of the band.

Molly was the first to arrive, and she and Ruth rushed around to get everything ready for the party. Extra chairs were set up, snacks put out, and other food stored in the fridge to serve later.

Bobby, Ruth's boyfriend, who she met in business classes, was the leader of the crew in charge of the drinks, which included kegs of beer, soft drinks, and cheap wine. Bobby was just a fantastic guy, always helping friends with schoolwork and chores like moving.

Bobby and Ruth had been dating for over a year, and it seemed really serious. They were one of the few couples Molly knew that could make it together long term. She envied their relationship. She wanted to understand what it was like to be in love like that.

Ruth and Molly weren't really sure how many people were coming, but they thought it could be as many as a hundred. But as guests came in a steady stream, both women felt they would exceed their estimates.

Molly spotted Tunney's cowboy hat above the crowd as he sauntered into the party. She'd already had a few glasses of cheap wine, so she greeted him with a hug. He gave her an amused look and asked where they should set up. She led him over to the spot, and he agreed it would work, as they had easy access to power at the side of the house.

"Well, Miss Molly, let me get this band set up and then I'll introduce them to you, *boss*," he shouted as he walked toward the van. Tunney always made her laugh.

Molly and Ruth walked over as the band was finishing their setup, and Molly introduced Ruth to Tunney. After a few quick words, Ruth excused herself. She wanted to freshen up before she addressed the crowd and introduced the band.

Tunney grabbed the guitarist, who had his back to Molly, and spun him around. "Molly, this is our lead guitarist and my brother, Tam..."

Molly reached out her hand to Tam and faltered. He was about two inches shorter and younger than Tunney and had collar-length dark-brown hair and steel-blue eyes. He wore a chambray shirt with jeans that fit him perfectly. Tam was gorgeous.

When their eyes met, she felt the attraction sweep through her. She'd never felt like this before. When she took his hand, she felt like she didn't want to let go.

Somehow she got her words out. "Oh... Tam, so nice to meet you." Molly finally took her hand away but couldn't stop looking at him. It was hard to tell how long they stood there, eyes locked.