



Rekindled

Author: Jenna Brandt

Category: Romance

Description: Sometime God gives you a second chance because you're not ready the first time. Spencer Conrad was the high school quarterback and Molly Price was his school assigned English tutor. What started out as a forced arrangement turned into a secret romantic connection which ends horribly wrong. Ten years later, Molly returns home with a college degree, established journalism career, and a hot, new boyfriend. She wants to show everyone- especially Spencer-what a great life she has made for herself. Her 10-year high school reunion is the perfect place to do it. Molly also has a secret agenda. Set on revenge, she's determined to prove Spencer is guilty of underhanded deals with the local district attorney rather than believe he has turned over a new leaf. But as Molly investigates, she's shocked to find that Spencer isn't what she remembered. He's not the cocky (secretly scared) jock she once knew, he's now a noble defense attorney, a volunteer at the local boys' and girls' club, and a deacon in the church. When she runs into him at the local library, Spencer apologizes for what he did back in high school and tells Molly he would like to treat her to coffee to catch up. Worried his smoldering blue eyes and perfect dimples can still make her weak in the knees, she suggests a double date to keep him at arm's length. Can she forgive what he did to her when they were young? Will he stand up to the people who used to bully her, and finally set the record straight? And will they both realize that the chemistry between them when they were kids still lingers just below the surface, ready to break free and be stronger than ever before?

Total Pages (Source): 53

1

Ten years had passed since Molly left her hometown in utter despair. In that time, she completely overhauled her life, leaving her troubled past and adolescence behind.

Today, she was returning with a college degree, an established journalism career, and her hot, new boyfriend, Rick, an elite Seattle plastic surgeon.

As he drove his red Corvette through the streets of Bayfield, Washington, Molly realized little had changed with the small town she had grown up in. Main Street was still filled with the same two restaurants on each end, along with the grocery store, coffee shop/bakery, and salon.

She watched as people moved along the wide sidewalks next to the brick buildings. A handful of people were sitting on the benches, which had flower pots on the side of each one. The residents had on jackets and were carrying umbrellas, a common necessity in the town that regularly saw rain in the winter months.

“So, this is the town you grew up in?” Rick asked her, the disapproval obvious in his tone. “When you said small, I had no idea you meant this. I’m just waiting for a cow to come sauntering down the street,” he said snidely.

She forced herself not to show her irritation with his condescending judgment. She wasn’t sure why it bothered her anyway, considering that when she left a decade ago, she had convinced herself she was better off leaving the provincial place behind.

“No, the cows only come to town in the morning,” she said with sarcasm. “We must

have just missed them.”

He let out a small chuckle as he turned onto the small road that led to her parents’ house. “If I didn’t know any better, I would think you were upset. I know that can’t be the case considering how you’ve never wanted to come back here to visit until now.”

“I never had a reason until my boss gave me this assignment.”

“And your reunion has nothing to do with it? You’re not coming back here to show off your awesome life?” He reached out and patted her arm. “Otherwise, why would you have invited me along?”

She shrugged. “I’m not saying it won’t be nice to show the people from school they didn’t break me; however, it’s just a bonus. The reunion will be the perfect cover for my real reason for being in Bayfield.”

“Right, you’re investigating some lawyer from here.”

Molly stiffened, not liking how casually Rick threw around her real purpose for returning. She didn’t need him ruining her chances of finding out the truth for her story. She had spent hours online going over Spencer Conrad’s social media, local newspaper articles, and past case results after years of trying to forget about him. She knew all the public details of the past ten years of his life, including the fact that he went to Washington State University before going to Stanford law school. There was no mention of why he returned to Bayfield when he could have gotten a job anywhere, but it was one of the pieces she needed to figure out. Perhaps it would reveal a connection to the district attorney, Jeremy Jacks, the other person secretly accused of unethical conduct. She had looked into him too, not finding anything out of the ordinary. Until she figured it all out though, she needed Rick to stay quiet.

“Remember, we discussed how we need to keep my work part of the trip a secret. If anyone gets wind of the real reason why I’m here, they won’t talk to me, and my whole investigation will be over before it starts.”

“You’re so dramatic. You act as if everyone in this town cares about what happens to this guy.”

“You say that in jest, but you have no idea how right you are,” Molly said, pushing her long, blonde hair behind her ear. “Spencer Conrad is the darling of Bayfield. He has been ever since we were kids, despite the fact he was an awful person.”

“Wow, you really don’t like the guy, do you,” Rick stated. “I mean, every time he comes up, you become hostile. What’d he ever do to you?”

“Nothing I want to talk about,” Molly stated adamantly. “It’s in the past, anyway.”

Without her wanting it to happen, her mind drifted back to the first time she met Spencer Conrad.

Oh, goodness, there was Spencer Conrad coming through the front doors of the town’s public library. Molly saw him every day in the school hallways and in two of her classes, but she never talked to him. He was popular, being the varsity football quarterback—and Molly was most decidedly not part of the “in” crowd.

He looked good, really good, with his thick, black hair and his blue and white letterman jacket hugging his body in all the right ways. He had his backpack slung over one shoulder, and his hands shoved into the front pockets of his jeans.

Her eyes drifted to his perfect pair of lips, and for a moment, she let herself wonder what it would be like to kiss them. She knew she wasn’t the only one to imagine it. Every girl in school was obsessed with Spencer Conrad, but she had made it a point

to avoid his crowd. They were mean, and made it a point to pick on anyone unpopular. Even though she knew all the reasons that she shouldn't have a crush on him, Molly found herself doing it anyway.

"Stop it," she chastised herself. "Spencer Conrad is completely off-limits. Besides, you don't want to be with someone like him. Just keep this about tutoring."

As Spencer approached the table, he looked annoyed, like he didn't want to be there. Good, I don't want to be here either, she thought to herself.

"You're late," Molly stated with frustration, pushing her long bangs out of her eyes. "If this is going to work, you have to be on time."

He shrugged, placing his backpack on the ground next to him as he slung himself into a seat across from Molly. "What can I say, I had football practice."

"You're not the only one that has a busy schedule. I have commitments too."

"I'm sure; math and science club I'm betting, right?" he asked with a smirk.

"No, yearbook and church."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

“Ah, you’re one of those,” he said with a knowing smile.

“One of what?” Molly asked with confusion.

“A Jesus freak.”

“You know that’s offensive. I believe in Jesus, but that doesn’t make me a freak. You should really think before you speak,” Molly suggested to him.

His face pinched up for a moment as if he was thinking, then a moment later, he gave her a big grin, making sure to flash his smoldering blue eyes at her. “So, how are we going to do this?”

“Do what?”

“The coach said this was all lined up by the school,” Spencer said, gesturing between them. “You’re supposed to take care of this English thing for me.”

“Correction, the school counselor assigned me as your tutor. Mr. Marks wants me to help you pull up your grade since you’re in danger of failing.” Irritated that everyone jumped through hoops for him, she added sarcastically, “Otherwise, no more sports for you, and the town can’t have that. I mean, heaven forbid, the star quarterback for the Bayfield Lions can’t play anymore. It would be a sign the end of the world is coming.”

“Exactly, the team has a real chance of making it to State this year, but only if I can play. The season is over if I can’t.”

Ugh, he is so full of himself, Molly thought to herself. He literally thinks the world revolves around him.

Trying not to let his ego get to her, she focused on making it clear he wasn't the only one being inconvenienced by the forced arrangement. "So to keep you eligible to play, I have to give up three hours of my life every week."

He narrowed his eyes as he crossed his arms. "Hey, there's no reason to be so snotty. You think I like this? I can think of like five other things I would rather be doing."

"Only five? And I'm sure all of them center on the cheerleading squad," Molly mocked with a roll of her eyes. "I can think of a dozen myself, and all of them are much more practical than yours."

"Why do I feel like you're judging me, and you don't even know me," Spencer stated defensively. "Didn't you just say you're a Christian or something?"

Molly stiffened under his rebuke. He was right, she wasn't acting the way her parents or God would want her to.

She pressed her lips together as she averted her eyes. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I think we've gotten off to a wrong start, so let's just focus on working at raising your English grade. What's your latest assignment?"

Spencer bent over and opened his backpack. He pulled out a bent, blue folder and slid it across to her. "Everything's in there."

Molly opened the folder and glanced through it. "You have three essays you've never turned in; plus, a test you could have corrected to get some extra points."

"What can I say, I'm busy with football," he said as he rolled his shoulders, "but

that's why I have you now. How about I meet up with you in a couple of days and you can give me the essays so I can turn them in."

She shook her head. "No way; I'll help you write them, but I'm not doing your work for you."

"Seriously? You can't just do it?" Spencer asked with incredulousness as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"Nope, this is going to be a partnership. We're both going to put in 50/50."

He seemed to contemplate what she was demanding from him. After several moments, he unfolded his arms and said, "Fine, we'll do it your way."

As Molly looked across the table at Spencer, she wondered if she had made the right decision. Could she sit across from him three times a week and not be taken in by his good looks and charm? She didn't want to fall for the football star like all the other girls in her school, especially since she knew it would remain one-sided.

Pushing the troubling thoughts out of her mind, Molly picked up Spencer's first essay assignment and started to explain what he needed to do.

"We're here," Rick said, drawing her attention back to the present.

Molly's jitters were strong as they pulled into the driveway of her parents' two-story brick home. Though her parents had come to Seattle to visit at least two times a year, she hadn't set foot in her childhood home in a decade. Would everything be the same? Did they change her room, or was it exactly how she left it?

Being the baby of the family, her parents had doted on her. By the time she entered high school, her two older brothers had already started their own lives. One had

joined the military and was stationed overseas—he still was—and the other had moved to California for a job.

Her parents had spent their mid-fifties attending her debate competitions, academic decathlons, and church choir performances. By the time her senior year rolled around, she had become the center of their lives. She was certain it was the reason it had broken their hearts to send her away.

Even though they claimed to have done it for her own protection, she often wondered if they were embarrassed by the unflattering rumors that had circulated around town when everything went bad for Molly. She wondered if sending her to live with her aunt and uncle in Seattle, was more to do damage control for the family's reputation, rather than to shield her from getting hurt further.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

Rick climbed out of his Corvette as Molly did the same. He met her at the steps as he asked, "You ready to brave coming back home?"

She nodded, steadying herself as they walked up the steps. At the front stoop, Molly rang the bell. A few moments later, the door opened to reveal her mother, Beverly.

"Hello, there, Molly," her mother said as she reached out and gathered her daughter into her arms. "Welcome home."

"Thanks, Mom," she said against her mother's shoulder.

"We've missed you so much," her mother stated, continuing to hold onto her.

"Let the poor girl go, Beverly," Molly's father, Ken, stated from behind them.

Beverly did as ordered, quickly dropping her arms from around Molly. "Sorry I held on so long. It's just been forever since we've seen you."

"It's only been six months, Mom," Molly pointed out.

"Six months feels like forever when it's your child," Beverly corrected. "You'll understand soon enough when you settle down and have kids."

Beverly eyed the man next to Molly skeptically. "Aren't you going to introduce us to your new boyfriend?"

"Of course," She gestured to her boyfriend, "Mom, Dad, this is Dr. Rick Colson.

Rick, these are my parents, Ken and Beverly.”

Everyone greeted each other before moving into the nearby living room. Once inside, they took seats on the couch and chairs in the center of the space.

“Have you decided how long you are staying?” her mother asked with a hopeful tone.

“Well, at least through the weekend. The reunion is Saturday night,” Molly explained.

“I have to get back for work on Monday,” Rick stated. “I have two breast augmentations and a rhinoplasty scheduled.”

“But that doesn’t mean you have to leave, does it Molly?” her mother asked. “Can’t you stay on even if Rick has to get back to Seattle? Your dad can drive you back to the city later.”

“Quit hounding her, Beverly, or you’ll just end up driving her off quicker.”

Her mother nodded her head, her eyes averted to mask her disappointed expression. “You’re right. I should just be happy for the time I have with her.”

“Can we help you with your luggage,” her father offered. “We have you set up inseparaterooms upstairs.”

“Molly, you get your old room, and Rick, you can use the guest room.”

Rick raised his eyebrows in surprise. “We can’t share a room?”

“Not under my roof,” Ken stated adamantly. “We’re Christians. Only married couples get to share rooms around here.”

“Oh Dad, you don’t have to be so traditional. It’s no big deal. You can’t expect—”

Rick raised his hand towards her to stop her. “It’s okay, Molly. This is your father’s house. We should respect his rules.”

“Thank you,” her father said, “now let’s go get that luggage.”

“May I use the restroom first?” Rick asked. “It was a long drive from the city.”

“I can show him,” Molly stated, wanting a moment to make sure Rick was really okay with the sleeping arrangements.

As they made their way down the hall, Molly broached the subject. “I’m surprised you reacted so well to my father’s conditions for staying here. I honestly thought you would insist we go stay at a hotel.”

“Oh, I don’t plan to follow them the whole time. I just said that for his sake. Believe me, when everyone is sleeping, I’ll be sneaking into your bedroom,” Rick explained with a wink.

Molly wasn’t sure what to think of Rick’s plan. Though she didn’t necessarily agree with her father’s archaic rules, she didn’t like the idea of breaking them. She had been pleased, thinking Rick was being respectful. This new information, however, made her realize he hadn’t any intention of following through on what he said.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

“I think under the circumstances, it’s best if you don’t. My parents are light sleepers, and I want them to like you.”

He shrugged. “It’s only a few days. I guess it doesn’t matter in the grand scheme of things. But you’re going to owe me when we get back to Seattle.”

She chose to avoid addressing his innuendo, and instead pointed to the room at the end of the hall. “That’s the guest bathroom. I’ll meet you back in the living room once you’re finished.”

Molly turned and headed back down the hall. She hoped everyone could get along for the duration of their stay. The last thing she needed was her parents and Rick to hate each other. It would keep her from focusing on her true task for being in Bayfield—finding out the truth about Spencer Conrad.

* * *

Spencer watched the brown-haired man in the orange jumpsuit sitting across from him in the county jail. The man was obviously suffering from narcotics withdrawal. He was sweating profusely, his eyes were darting everywhere, and he was sporadically twitching and scratching his tattooed skin.

Compassionately, Spencer pushed a bottle of water towards the inmate. “Here, this should help some.”

The man gave him a surprised look as he reached out and yanked the bottle towards him. “So, how are you going to get me out of here?”

“I need you to give me a detailed account of that day, Mr. Burke. This is my third trip to see you, and you still haven’t told me where you were when the robbery happened. If you could just give me your alibi, we could build a defense around that,” Spencer explained to his client, Daryl Burke.

“Like I told you and the cops, I let Joe Gunders borrow my truck that night. I had no idea what he had planned, and I wasn’t involved.”

“I understand that, but the jury is going to want to know what you were doing during the time of the robbery. There’s even a possibility I can get this thrown out before it goes to trial if I can prove you weren’t there.”

Daryl shrugged. “That’s the problem; you won’t be able to. And even if you could, what I was doing wasn’t exactly legal. It would just get me into a whole other set of problems.”

“Why don’t you let me worry about that? I need you to tell me, so I can figure out the best way to defend you.”

The other man crossed his arms and eyed Spencer skeptically. “This isn’t my first time down this road. My last attorney messed me over bad. I ended up doing a whole year for a simple bar fight.”

“Mr. Burke, I’ve read your entire file,” Spencer said, patting the folder in front of him. “I’m aware of what happened to you three years ago. Let me make one thing clear, I’m nothing like your last public defender. I care more about my clients than getting my cases closed. If you work with me, I will do my very best to help you.”

“Fine,” Daryl said as he leaned forward onto the table. “But I’m telling you, it’s just going to make everything harder. I was with a woman friend of mine that evening.”

Spencer jotted down the information. “This can help. I just need you to tell me her name and where to find her. Once I get her statement on the record, I can present it to the district attorney along with a request for dismissal.”

“Yea, so that’s where we run into a problem,” Daryl stated as he cracked his knuckles. “She’s not going to want to go on the record. She’s skittish of cops and lawyers because of her job.”

“What does she do exactly?” Spencer probed. “Maybe we can figure something out.”

Daryl’s brows came together in a furrow as he rolled his shoulders. “She’s a hooker. I’m one of her regulars down at the Sundance Hotel.”

“Oh, well...” Spencer thought about their options for a few moments, then said, “We could have her give her statement, but leave out the part of what she does for a living. They just need to know where you were. She can verify it wasn’t at the robbery. It could still work. Do you have a cell phone number for her?”

Daryl shook his head. “No, she hates them. Thinks the government is listening through them. She usually works the corner by the hotel most nights. Her name’s Trixie.”

“What does she look like?”

“Brown, curly hair and a big rack. She’s also got a butterfly tattoo on her lower back, but that probably won’t help you find her.”

Spencer internally cringed at the description of the woman. It wouldn’t be his first time tracking down someone on the seedy east side of town.

“Okay, Daryl, that should do it for now,” Spencer stated as he put away his notepad

and files. "I'm going to work on this over the next couple of days." He stood to his feet and gave his client a nod. "I'll come back when I have some news."

As Spencer headed back to his office to check in and make a few calls, he mulled over the other three cases he was working on. He had two narcotics cases, one possession and one dealing, and a felony battery case. He was making good headway on the dealing case, as his client was willing to trade supplier information in order to get his charges pled down to misdemeanors, but the possession was harder since the college kid didn't have anything to trade. He was just stupid enough to get caught buying illegal prescription drugs. Since it was a first offense, Spencer hoped the district attorney would be willing to offer rehab with probation.

The most difficult of the three though, was going to be the battery case. It was his client's third offense, and the district attorney already made it clear there wasn't going to be any deals. He wanted the guy to go away for a long time. When Spencer got back to the office, he needed to make some calls to see if he could locate any witnesses that could prove the other guy provoked the fight in the parking lot of the smoke shop. Of course, the cops didn't take the time to interview anyone, but Spencer was great at finding overlooked witnesses.

Spencer walked into the Public Defenders Bayfield downtown office. He weaved through the cubicles until he reached the hallway that led to his office. Just as he came around the corner, he overheard his assistant, Jane, talking to one of the paralegals named Allison. He stopped moving and felt his stomach tighten as they mentioned a name he hadn't heard in nearly a decade.

"I couldn't believe it when I saw Molly Price at the coffee shop this morning," Allison stated. "I mean, she's got to be back in town for the class reunion, right?"

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

“I guess. I just didn’t think she would want to come back here, considering what happened before she left. I know I wouldn’t.”

“Wait until Spencer finds out she’s back in town. He’s going to flip out after the lies she told about him. I still can’t believe she wanted everyone to think they had a serious relationship when all that happened was that she tricked him into hooking up.”

“You know, the weird thing about all of that was that I had a few classes with Molly. She kept to herself and never caused problems. It shocked me when Tiffany exposed what happened. Molly never seemed like the type of person to do all of that.”

“Yes, but it’s always the quiet ones who go all fatal attraction on someone. Besides, can you blame her? It is Spencer Conrad after all. Everybody wanted him back in high school,” then, changing her tone to a whisper barely loud enough for Spencer to overhear, she added, “not to mention many of us still do.”

Jane let out a laugh. “He has held up pretty well over the years, with that full head of dark hair and charming smile.”

“Have you guys, you know, ever? I mean, with all the late nights you end up here working with him, mixing business with pleasure seems plausible.”

“No way,” Jane protested. “Spencer keeps it strictly professional, despite growing up together. I haven’t even seen him look at me that way, let alone make a pass.”

“Too bad, call it a hunch, but an office romp with him would be mind-blowing.”

Spencer decided he had heard enough. Making a “hum-hum” sound, he emerged from around the corner. “Good afternoon, ladies.”

Both froze, turning to face him with embarrassed expressions.

“I wasn’t expecting you back this early, Mr. Conrad,” Jane scampered to his side, patting her brown hair into place.

“Obviously,” he said with a narrowed glance at Allison, who tossed her black hair over her shoulder, trying to appear nonchalant.

“Can I get you anything?” Jane offered.

“Just any messages that I might have,” he said as he entered his office and set down his briefcase. “And a cup of coffee. I can tell it’s going to be a long day.”

He sat down at his desk and flicked the mouse to turn on his computer. He quickly typed in his password, but as he stared at the screen, he hesitated before doing anything.

Molly Price was back in town. Not a day had gone by since she left Bayfield that he hadn’t thought about her. He still felt tremendous shame and guilt, not only over what he had done to her, but what he let others do to her as well. He had been so foolish back then.

Spencer watched Molly as she read his first draft of his latest essay. Though he was making an effort to not let it happen, his eyes kept drifting to Molly’s tempting lips. He liked how they slightly moved as she silently read the words on the paper. He wondered what it would feel like to kiss those pink pillows of perfection, and to feel her soft curves against his muscular frame as he wrapped his hands in her hair.

He shook the image from his head, and tried to focus on English. Though they had started off in a rough spot, he had grown to admire the quick-witted, quirky girl that sat across from him. He had recently noticed she was cute too, with her long, blonde hair, green eyes, and button nose. He wondered why he had never noticed her before.

Because your friends will never let you live it down if you end up starting something with the class nerd, Spencer thought to himself. Stick to your own kind; cheerleaders are more your speed. They don't make you feel stupid every time you open your mouth.

If he admitted it to himself, however, Spencer liked the fact that Molly challenged him. He was tired of having lengthy, awkward silences with girls that simply wanted to be with him because of his popularity. He wanted more, but he wasn't sure he was willing to cross his friends to be with Molly.

Get it together and stop this before it's too late, Spencer chastised himself. You've worked too hard to let anyone destroy your reputation.

Creating some distance between them could help. It was time to step back and put things back into their proper place.

"So, what do you think? Are we good here?" Spencer asked with a cold tone.

"Almost," Molly stated as she finished marking a couple of spots on the last page. "Once you make these corrections, you can turn it in. I think Mr. Warner will be pleased with the work you did on this."

Molly handed the paper over to Spencer, who yanked it from her hands. "May I go now?"

"Geez, what's the matter with you? You've been short with me all afternoon. I

thought we were finally getting to a place where we could work together without things being weird.”

“Let’s make one thing clear, if anything is weird around here, it’s not me, which only leaves you.”

A hurt look crossed her face as she stated, “That was mean. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but you need to figure it out before our next tutoring session.”

“Ugh, could you be any more sensitive? I seriously can’t take it,” he said, standing up and slinging his backpack over his shoulder. “I’ll talk to you later.”

As he fled the library, he realized he already regretted being mean to Molly. She didn’t deserve it. It wasn’t her fault he was beginning to see her as more than just his tutor. The worst part was that his plan had backfired. He didn’t feel any distance at all, but rather, he wanted to march back in and tell her he was sorry he had behaved like an idiot because he liked her.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

He stopped on the steps, waffling between going back in and continuing home.

“There you are. I was hoping you were done with your stupid tutoring,” Tiffany, Bayfield High’s head cheerleader and Spencer’s on-and-off girlfriend, said with irritation. “I was hoping you would want to take me out to a movie tonight.”

“I thought you were done with me, Tiffany. I remember you saying this time it was for good.”

“Oh, you know how good we are together. It’s never really all the way done,” she said as she placed her hand on his arm and squeezed.

“Yea, but I’m thinking this time it should be. I’m tired of playing your games.”

“What are you talking about? We’re meant to be together Spencer. After all, you’re the star quarterback and I’m the head cheerleader. It doesn’t get any more obvious than that,” she stated with a roll of her eyes. “Stop punishing me for our last fight. Tell you what, we can skip the movie and just head straight up to the bluffs to make out.”

She leaned up on her tiptoes and tried to kiss him on the mouth. Before she could land her mark, he turned his head away.

“Stop it, Tiffany. I’m serious. It’s over this time.”

Stepping back, she narrowed her eyes and spat out, “Why? What’s changed? Is there someone else? Is it Amanda? I know she’s had her eyes on you for months. If she’s

made a move on you, I swear I'm going to rip her hair out at the roots. And if you let her, you're going to regret it, Spencer. You know better than to cross me. Remember the last time—"

"Excuse me," Molly said as she tried to squeeze past them as she exited the library.

"Ugh, can't you see you're in the way," Tiffany spat out at Molly. "You're so annoying."

"Believe me, I don't want to interrupt whatever this is," Molly stated, gesturing to them both.

"You're not interrupting anything important. It's just Tiffany being Tiffany," Spencer explained as he reached out and stopped Molly from continuing down the stairs.

"Why don't I walk you to your car?"

Molly glanced hesitantly at Tiffany, then back at Spencer. "No, I'm good, thanks. See you on Monday for our next session," she said before hurrying away.

"Good riddance," Tiffany shouted out after her.

As Spencer watched Molly walk away, he had to force himself not to chase after her. After a few moments, he turned his attention back to Tiffany, who was glaring at him.

"Now it all makes sense. You've fallen for that tutor girl," Tiffany accused. "Wait until everyone hears about this. You're going to be the laughing-stock of the school."

"What?" Spencer sputtered out. "You don't know what you're talking about. The school is making me meet with her."

"Maybe, but it seems like you rather enjoy her company. Never took you for the type

that would be interested in a nerd like that. I guess there's a first time for everything."

Spencer's stomach seized with fear. There was no way he could handle Tiffany blowing up his life. He needed to do damage control quick. Against his actual desires, he stretched out his arms and pulled Tiffany into them.

"Why don't I take you to that movie, Tiffany? Let's forget all about this misunderstanding."

"You sure?" she asked, looking up into his eyes. "Cuz you just said we're done."

"Yes, but you said it best; we're never really done."

Even as he said the words, his heart filled with regret. He didn't like misleading Tiffany when he knew deep down he didn't want to be with her anymore. He was certain of one thing now; his heart belonged to Molly Price. Yet, he was too scared of what Tiffany would do if he truly ended things once and for all.

"Here's your cup of coffee, Mr. Conrad," Jane interrupted his thoughts as she placed the mug beside him on his desk. "Is there anything else I can get you?"

"No, I'm good. Just shut the door behind you, please."

Spencer forced himself to focus on his caseload and not think about the past. It didn't matter how much he regretted his decisions when it came to Molly, he was never going to be able to make up for it anyway. The damage had been too severe. Spencer was keenly aware that sometimes there just weren't second chances.

Waves of unwanted feelings surged through Molly as she entered the Bayfield Public Library. The last time she was there, she had been with Spencer, tutoring him while they continued their secret relationship. She had no idea, a week later, her life would blow up because of it.

A group of children ranging from toddlers to preteens were gathered on the rug in front of a small cleared area with an empty chair in the middle. Behind the children, there were rows of chairs where parents, library staff, and reporters were sitting.

Not wanting to be noticed, Molly slipped into a chair at the back of the room.

A gray-haired woman with glasses took to the front of the stage. She smiled out at everyone assembled. “Good afternoon, everyone. We’re so glad you all could make it today. My name is Lucille Baldwin. I’ve been the head librarian here at the Bayfield Library for over twenty years, and I’m truly honored to introduce our guest reader today. I remember when he sat at these very tables to study while he was in high school, and then again as a college student. Now today, he returns as the senior public defender for Bayfield. Please give a warm welcome to Spencer Conrad.”

The crowd clapped as Spencer took to the stage. He waved to the children as he picked up the book and sat in the empty seat.

Despite her own resistance, Molly had to admit, Spencer still looked as handsome as ever. The past ten years had treated him well, and not only had his good looks not diminished, they seemed to be even more potent than before.

He started to read *The Giving Tree*, making sure to change his voice for each of the characters, and also pausing when appropriate for dramatic affect.

As he read to the kids, capturing their attention with his flawless acting skills, Molly wondered how much of what he was doing was a façade. He wouldn't be the first public official that was working an angle. He could very well have political ambitions. If that was the case, he could be using his time as a public defender to garner the townspeople's goodwill.

Her mind recalled the details her boss gave her accusing Spencer Conrad of making secret deals with the district attorney. Her boss was so certain there was enough validity to the rumor, he sent her to Bayfield to investigate further.

If Spencer was wanting to jump into a political career, it would explain why he would be willing to trade information for a high-win rate. It would give him the reputation he would want to make a formidable run in the future.

Spencer finished reading the first book. He closed it and placed it on the ground beside him.

"Can you read another one, mister," one of the little boys asked.

"Mr. Conrad is a busy man with an important job," Lucille explained. "It was kind of him to come and read to us, but we should let him get back to work."

"It's all right, Mrs. Baldwin, I can read the kids another book. What would you guys like me to read?" Spencer asked the children.

For the next several seconds, the group of kids shouted out popular children's book titles.

“I think I heard several requests for Dr. Seuss, so if Mrs. Baldwin would be kind enough to get me one,” he said looking at the older woman, “I’ll be happy to read it.”

As she listened to Spencer’s melodic reading voice recite the lines to Green Eggs and Ham, her mind drifted back to when they first formed a romantic connection.

“Are you sure this first paragraph makes sense?” Spencer asked as he pointed to the paper between them. “It’s important that it makes sense since the rest of the essay is based on the argument in it.”

Molly read the paragraph a third time. She looked up into Spencer’s expectant eyes. The intensity she saw in them made her heart flip-flop.

“You did a great job, Spencer. Each of your essays is getting better, which is exactly what we want. You’re smart; you just have to apply yourself.”

“Thanks,” he said with a grin. “No one’s ever cared about whether I was smart or not. My dad put my brother and me into sports ever since we could walk. Once they saw I had a natural ability for it, they never cared about anything else.”

“That’s a shame,” Molly stated with a disappointed look. “You’ve got a great brain. Your dad should be encouraging you to use it, rather than letting you get it smashed in during football every season.”

Spencer let out a chuckle. “I like how you put that, because when my right guard doesn’t do his job, that’s exactly how it feels when I get tackled—like my brain is being scrambled.”

“That’s awful. You really should think about doing something else with your life.”

“Everyone expects me to get a football scholarship at a minimum, but my dad is

hoping I will get drafted into the National Football League.”

“What do you want?” Molly inquired.

He tilted his head to the side as his face scrunched up the way it often did when he was thinking. “I don’t know. No one has ever asked me that before.”

“Well, they should have. It’s your life. You should be happy with the choices you make in it, not just settle for whatever everyone else tells you to want.”

“Thank you,” Spencer said as he reached out and placed his hand on top of hers, which was resting on the table. “No one has ever cared enough to talk to me this way.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

Molly's face flamed pink from the praise while her body felt a jolt of electricity from where his hand touched hers. She had no idea it would feel so good to have Spencer touch her.

Her eyes flickered up to meet his as she whispered, "You're welcome."

"Do you want to go for a drive after this?" he asked, as he leaned closer across the table.

Molly licked her lips as she contemplated her answer. Part of her wanted to go with him, but the other part was afraid of where they might end up, and what they would do once they got there. She wasn't sure if she was ready to let Spencer Conrad in.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. I have to get up early for choir practice tomorrow."

"That sounds like an excuse," he said, as he reached out and rubbed his thumb along the edge of her cheek. "But not a very good one. I can get you back before your curfew."

She wasn't sure what came over her, but as she looked deep into his mesmerizing blue eyes, she heard herself saying, "Sure, I guess it couldn't hurt to go for a little while."

As they gathered their belongings up and headed towards Spencer's Chevy Camaro, she could feel the anticipation building inside her. Once they were alone, would he try to kiss her? If he did, would she let him? And if they did kiss, would it be everything she secretly imagined since the first time she sat across from him in the

library?

Was tonight the night she was finally going to let herself admit she wanted to be with Spencer Conrad?

Loud clapping forced Molly to return to the present. Spencer was closing up the second book as he said, “Thanks for having me. I really enjoyed this. I can’t wait to come back and do it again sometime soon.”

He flashed his smile to the crowd as he stood up to leave. She could tell from the reaction of the women present, it still had the same affect it did ten years ago.

Molly was going to have to watch herself around him. If she had listened to her instincts back when she was young instead of giving into his charming smile and perfect dimples, she wouldn’t have gotten hurt. She wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice.

* * *

Just as Spencer was about to exit the reading area of the library, he stopped moving and froze in place. His pulse quickened as he locked eyes with Molly Price.

How long had she been there? He had been so focused on making sure the children had an enjoyable time, he hadn’t focused on any of the adults present.

Spencer walked towards her, hoping she wouldn’t disappear like a mirage. He had imagined this moment for years, praying he would get the opportunity to tell her how sorry he was for what happened between them a decade ago.

“Hi there, Molly,” he said as he came to a halt in front of her. Looking around, he asked with curiosity, “What are you doing here?”

“I had to do some research for a story I’m working on.”

“Well, it’s good to see you,” he said, trying to muster his most charming smile.

She stood up and crossed her arms. “Is it? I’m not sure I would say the same.”

“You have every right to feel that way,” Spencer conceded. “I’m sure I would if the roles were reversed.”

“But they aren’t. They never were, and you knew it. You used my naiveté to your advantage, but let me warn you, I’m not that same silly girl who was blinded by your good looks and charms. I know who you are—who you really are—Spencer Conrad.”

He nodded his head. “I can understand why you would think that, but honestly, Molly, I really did care for you. I was just too stupid and scared back then to put you first.”

“You were never stupid, Spencer, and I doubt you were ever scared.” She gestured towards his suit and tie, “And if what you are saying is true, I can see you managed to overcome both of your ‘shortcomings’.”

“That’s in large part due to you. If you hadn’t helped me get my grades up, I never would have gotten into college. I owe you so much.”

“Well, I’m glad it worked out for you,” she said, starting to turn away from him. Then she stopped and swiveled back around. “Actually, that’s not true. I’m not glad. What you did to me, what you let happen to me, was despicable. I deserved better, and it should have been you that was publically shamed for how you behaved. Instead, I ended up having to leave town disgraced while you got to stay the golden boy.”

“You’re right. What happened to you was horrible; I was horrible. I couldn’t see past my own selfishness to keep you from getting hurt.” He fought the urge to reach out and touch her as he added, “I’m truly sorry for everything I did back then.”

Molly pressed her lips together as she looked him. “I appreciate your apology, but it doesn’t change what happened.”

“It doesn’t. I can’t erase or undo the damage I caused, but I want you to know, I’m a different person now. I’ve changed, and a huge part of that was reconciling the poor choices I made back in high school.”

“Well, you’re not the only one who has changed. I’m not the same fragile girl you broke back in high school. I’ve healed, moved on, and managed to make something of myself.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

“I’m grateful for that,” Spencer stated with earnestness. “You deserve every happiness, Molly.”

“I have to be getting back to my parents’ house. They’re expecting me for dinner,” Molly stated as she picked up her purse and placed the strap over her shoulder.

“Before you go, I was hoping you might want to go get a cup of coffee to catch up; my treat,” Spencer offered.

She tilted her head to the side as she narrowed her eyes. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Why? It would just be two old friends catching up.”

“Don’t kid yourself, Spencer. We were never just friends.”

He shrugged, “Then we should try to be now. I want the chance to get to know you again, and maybe you’ll see for yourself how I’ve changed.”

Molly let out a heavy sigh before answering. “Look, I have a boyfriend. I probably should have brought that up a lot sooner. How about this; why don’t we go on a double date.”

Spencer didn’t love the idea of having an audience while he tried to prove Molly could trust him again. Even though he didn’t like her offer, he could tell it was the best he was going to get. It would be better than nothing.

“When were you thinking?”

“How about tomorrow night at Ruby’s Diner? I’m sure you’ll have no problem scrounging up someone to bring along,” she stated sarcastically.

“It’s a date then.”

“Correction,” Molly said as she raised her hand, “it’s a double date. Also, we should probably lay some ground rules. First, don’t be late. As I recall, punctuality was never your strong suit. Second, there will be no discussion of what happened between us in the past. Last, you’re paying.”

Spencer nodded his head, accepting her conditions. He didn’t care what it took to get Molly back in his life, but he was willing to do it. Up until he saw her again, he hadn’t realized how much he missed her. Once he did, he knew he couldn’t let her walk out of his life again without making an effort to fix what he had destroyed.

“We should probably exchange numbers just in case,” Spencer suggested.

Molly quirked an eyebrow at him, then shrugged. “I guess that can’t hurt anything,” she said, before reciting her number to him so he could enter it into his phone. He then texted his number to her.

As he watched her walk out of the library, Spencer’s mind drifted back to the moment he knew he was falling for Molly.

The music was blaring as Spencer drove on the outskirts of Bayfield. He had no destination in mind, but was simply enjoying sitting next to Molly while they meandered through the back-country roads.

Natasha Bedingfield’s ‘Pocketful of Sunshine’ came on the radio and Molly clasped

her hands together in excitement. “This is one of my favorite songs. I love her whole album so much.”

“Really? I haven’t ever listened to any of her other songs.”

“Oh, she’s really talented. You totally should. I can let you borrow my copy of her CD if you’d like.”

“Thanks, I might take you up on that.”

Hesitantly, he reached out across the space between them and took her hand. He wanted to feel her skin again. Ever since he did in the library, he was itching for another opportunity.

When she didn’t pull away, Spencer relaxed and let the combination of the music and hum of the motor lull him into a comfortable driving pattern. In what seemed like a blink of an eye, a half-hour had passed. Spencer wanted to stretch his legs. He had the perfect place in mind.

He headed north and then turned down a dirt road.

“Where are you taking us?”

“You’ll see. It’s one of my favorite places. My older brother, Bill, used to take me here all the time before he headed off for college.”

“Do you miss him?” Molly inquired.

Spencer nodded. “We’ve been close all our lives. We try to keep in contact through email and phone calls, but he’s pretty busy since it’s his first year.”

“I know how that is. Both of my older brothers have left for college already. With just me at home, my parents tend to watch me like a hawk. Lucky for them, I don’t have much of a life.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

“Hey, don’t slam yourself like that,” Spencer encouraged. “We’re spending time together now, and you told me yourself that you’re active at your church. Plus, don’t you do academic competitions or something?”

“I do, but I wouldn’t exactly say it’s something to keep my parents up at night. Mind you, that’s not what I want to do, I’m just saying they’re relieved to have me finish out their run of parenting. My brothers were a handful, so I make it easy on them.”

Spencer pulled up in front of large lake. The top of the water was shimmering underneath the moonlight as he parked the car.

“This place is beautiful,” Molly said in awe. “My family isn’t much into outdoor activities, so I’ve never been anywhere like this before.”

“Well, I’m glad I brought you here then.”

Spencer climbed out of the car. He came around and opened the door for Molly. He reached out and took her hand, pulling her from the car and onto her feet. As she emerged, she stumbled slightly and Spencer caught her, causing her body to press up against his. He looked down into her beautiful green eyes and couldn’t help but notice they looked like the forest in springtime.

Without thinking, his mouth slowly descended to hers. Their lips touched, hesitantly at first, until they both knew the other wanted it to happen. Molly leaned into Spencer as he pulled her closer. She fit perfectly in his arms, and her sweet, strawberry scent tickled his nose as he deepened the kiss.

After a few moments, Molly leaned back and quirked an eyebrow. “You’re really good at that. I’m guessing it’s from a lot of practice.”

Spencer let out a small, awkward laugh as he stepped back and ran his fingers through his hair. He shrugged, not liking the implications behind her statement. “Not as much as you’re probably thinking. I don’t go around just kissing anyone.”

“Still, you have way more experience than me.” She pressed her lips together as she looked down at the ground. “That’s only my second kiss ever.”

“What? Really? I would have never guessed that. You’re so pretty. Plus, you’re smart and nice. I’m honestly pretty surprised you don’t have a boyfriend.”

Molly shook her head. “My parents are way too protective. I can’t even date if they haven’t met the guy and approved.”

Spencer’s heart clenched. That didn’t bode well for him. “I’m guessing I don’t fit their boyfriend criteria.”

“Why, are you applying for the position?” Molly jested.

He reached out and pulled her towards him. “I’m seriously considering it.”

“My parents won’t be an easy sell,” Molly warned. “They didn’t even like Brad, and he was the pastor’s son.”

“Was Brad your first?”

Molly’s face scrunched up in confused mortification. “No, I’m still a virgin.”

Spencer suppressed the desire to laugh over her misunderstanding, knowing it would

only hurt Molly's feelings. Instead, he clarified, "That's not what I meant. I was asking if Brad was your first kiss."

Her cheeks tinged pink with further embarrassment as she slowly nodded. "Yes, he came over to the house a few times last year. Plus, we went on a couple of church trips together. They told me to end it though when they found us kissing on the sofa one night after youth group."

"They seem rather difficult. Maybe we should keep this just between us for now," Spencer suggested.

Molly tilted her head to the side as her eyebrows furrowed together in confusion. Then a look of suspicion crossed her face as she accused, "Don't try to put this on my parents. You want to keep this a secret because of your friends—correction, because of Tiffany."

Even as Spencer wanted to deny it, part of him knew it was true. He was afraid of how they would react if they found out how he felt about Molly.

"I just don't want to subject you to that. Tiffany can be awful. If she's threatened by someone, she'll turn vicious. I don't want that directed at you."

"Are you sure it's not because you want to date both of us?"

He shook his head. "I ended things with Tiffany once-and-for-all last week. After how she treated you and how demanding she always is, I just couldn't take it anymore." He reached out and placed his hand on the side of Molly's face. "Besides, I'm interested in someone else now."

"Are you?" Molly probed. "How much?"

“Enough to put myself out there and tell you how much I really like you, which is scary for me since I don’t know if you feel the same.”

She placed her hand on his chest as her eyes drifted up to meet his. “I thought the kiss made it pretty obvious; I really like you too.”

“Then I guess it’s okay if I do this again,” he said as his mouth came down and claimed hers for another kiss.

This time, there was no hesitancy. Spencer knew exactly what he wanted and let himself get lost in the kiss with the girl who had quickly stolen his heart.

Spencer’s cell phone rang, bringing his attention back to the present. He glanced down at the number. Jane was leaving him a voicemail. It probably had to do with Daryl Burke. Even though he had located Trixie, she had been reluctant to verify his client had been with her. He had told her he would look into helping her resolve a couple of outstanding fines if she was willing to go on the record for Mr. Burke.

As Spencer exited the library, his mind kept thinking about his upcoming double date with Molly. God must have brought her back into his life for a reason. He was going to do whatever it took to make her see how much he still cared.

After finishing up a phone call with her boss, Molly returned home to find Rick alone. Her mother was at the grocery store, and her father was helping out at the local Boys and Girls Club.

“Tell me why, again, do we have to go on this double date tomorrow night?” Rick asked with irritation as he sat on one end of the sofa with his cell phone in his hands. “I can barely stand the idea of one night with your old high school friends, let alone two.”

“I know it’s not ideal, but it’s for my job,” Molly stated as she finished typing up her notes on her laptop. She glanced over at Rick and further explained, “Spencer will let his guard down much easier if he thinks he’s casually talking to some friends over dinner rather than a reporter looking into his career as a public defender. If he finds out, he’ll shut down. I won’t be able to get anything out of him.”

“So, where’s this place we’re going to, anyway? Does it at least have good food?” Rick asked as he flicked his finger on the screen of his phone.

“We’re meeting up at Ruby’s Diner. It’s the oldest restaurant in town and the local favorite.”

“Just because it’s the oldest, doesn’t mean it’s the best. Most of the time, newer is better. I mean, I make a living because people believe that.”

Irritated by his dismissal of her town’s history, she stated adamantly, “I was raised to

believe there is value in traditions and wisdom came with age.”

He snorted. “That sounds like quotes from the Bible, and you know how I feel about religion.”

“I know, I know; it’s a crutch for the weak-minded,” she said as she crossed her arms in frustration.

Even though Molly hadn’t gone to church since she left Bayfield, she didn’t judge those who found comfort in having faith. She wished her faith could have done that for her after the events that drove her out of town; instead, she was left feeling isolated and alone. She decided, after that, if her faith couldn’t help her in her darkest time, there was no point in going to church anymore.

“Exactly, I don’t want you going and reverting back to your less enlightened ways. I’ve spent two days in this town, and all everyone seems to talk about is church and football. I would swear I was in Texas if I hadn’t driven here myself yesterday.”

“What can I say, Bayfield was settled by Texan transplants back in the mid-1800s.”

“You sure know a lot about this town’s history,” Rick observed.

“That’s because we have a Founder’s Day celebration every year in September. During it, the local children take turns reciting the story of how the town was established. My family went every year while I was growing up.”

“Man, this town is so weird. The more you tell me about it, the more it sounds like a cult.”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say. Why do you have to poke fun at where I grew up? Does it make you feel good; like you’re superior to me because of it?”

“I didn’t mean to upset you. Look, I’m trying. I even agreed to go on this double-date thing you cooked up.”

Reaching out, she patted Rick on the arm. “I promise you won’t regret it. The food is great. Ruby’s is famous for its chicken pot pie. The owner has won over a dozen awards for it.”

“Really? You’re taking me to a place that’s claim to fame is chicken pot pie?” He shook his head as he added, “It’s like you don’t even know me.”

“It’s only one night, and let me tell you, the food is way better at Ruby’s than anywhere else in town.”

Rick scooted closer to her on the couch. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders as he whispered in her ear, “You’re making it up to me when we get back to Seattle.” His hand started to move along the edge of her arm as his mouth moved closer to hers. “Although, with your parents gone, maybe you can start making it up to me now.”

Molly wasn’t in the mood. She tried to squirm away, but it only made Rick try harder. “Oh no you don’t. You owe me and I want to collect now.”

“I think that’s about enough of that,” she heard her father say from behind them. “I have some boxes in the car, Rick. You should go and grab them while I talk with my daughter.”

Ken waited until Rick was out of the room before he came and sat down next to Molly on the sofa.

He gave her a concerned look as he asked, “How much do you really know about this guy, Molly? I’m worried you’re being taken in by his good looks and money, but I

raised you to be smarter than that.”

“We’ve been dating for a couple of months now, Dad. Granted, he’s a little hard to get used to, and he can be obnoxious, but he really likes me. He pursued me for three months before I finally gave him a chance.”

“How did you meet him?”

“I interviewed him for a story about plastic surgery and its effects on women’s self-worth. He asked me out right after we were done, but I told him I don’t date sources. He continued to email and call me, which showed me he was serious.”

“Sounds like he wore you down rather than you decided you wanted to date him. I don’t know if I ever told you this before, but guys like him, more times than not, like the chase more than the relationship.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

“I know those types of guys, Dad. I learned that lesson all-to-well from my time with Spencer Conrad. He was the biggest user of all.”

Her father shook his head. “It was rotten what he did to you, Molly, but he was young. He’s changed over the years, for the better I might add. We work together at the Boys and Girls Club. He shows up every week and helps tutor the kids there.”

Molly couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Her father was defending the man who ruined her life and drove her from Bayfield. “Did you ever think he’s just really good at putting on a façade? After all, that’s what he did with me. He was great at pretending to get what he wants.”

“And what exactly does he get from volunteering to help those kids?”

“I’m sure the press loves it, not to mention it makes great conversation fodder for all the women he entertains. Add in the fact it looks great on his résumé, and it’s obvious why he does it.”

“I’ve never heard him brag about it. We go to church with him too. I also want to point out, he doesn’t go around town with women either. I’m telling you, Molly, Spencer Conrad is a different man from the boy who hurt you.”

Molly didn’t know what to think. Her father had wanted to throttle Spencer when he hurt Molly a decade ago. The fact that he was defending him now made her think there had to be some validity to what he was telling her. How did she reconcile that with what her job required her to do? Simple; if he was guilty of violating his duties as a public defender, it was her job to expose it. Over all of her years of digging for

the truth, one thing became clear. Everyone had secrets; the key was to find out what they were and decide if it was worth reporting.

* * *

Spencer thought about how he was going to find a date by tomorrow night. He didn't like the idea of cold-calling someone to ask them to go out with him, especially under the circumstances. He didn't want to give an unsuspecting woman the wrong impression.

Not that he had a chance with Molly since she had a boyfriend, but he at least wanted to show her he'd changed in hopes of building a friendship.

It had been hard not having her in his life. They had become close the few short months they spent together, and he had learned to rely on her as a sounding board. She had been the first person to see him as more than just a jock. She helped him to make the choice to do something else with his life, rather than just blindly follow the plan everyone else had for him. The least he could do was take her out to dinner after all she did for him when they were young.

If calling a random woman up was out of the question, what other options did he have? Work was definitely out of the question. He never mixed business with pleasure; he saw too many colleagues get into huge trouble over it. He did have Bible study tonight. Was there anyone there he could ask to go with him?

Sarah Martin came to mind. She had grown up with them in Bayfield, but she hadn't run in the popular crowd. She had been in band and had gone to church, so Molly would probably be comfortable around Sarah. The other good thing about Sarah was that they had worked on a couple of projects together at the church. They built sets together for the Christmas play, helped hand out candy at the annual trunk-or-treat event, and regularly passed out the communion elements together. The best part was

that she wasn't interested in dating anyone, because she was leaving to volunteer overseas in a month.

As he arrived at the church, he went over what he was going to say to Sarah. It was important he explain the situation to her so she would be discreet.

Several Bible study members greeted Spencer as he entered the church. He looked around, but couldn't find Sarah anywhere. Was she not coming tonight? If she wasn't, what would he do? He started running through the list of the other women in the group. None of them would do. Two had outright flirted with him, and the other had a boyfriend.

Silently, Spencer sent up a prayer, asking God to help him figure out what to do. If he couldn't find a date, he would end up having to cancel, and that would just prove to Molly he hadn't changed. That was the last thing he wanted to do.

He sat down in one of the seats behind a table and waited for everyone else to do the same. A few minutes later, the small group leader, Josh Benson, took his seat at the front of the group.

He was a short man with brown hair and eyes, and most people would move right over him in a crowd. A few years back, Spencer wouldn't have been any different.

The funny thing was, Josh was one of the nicest guys Spencer had ever met. Once he gave Josh a chance, they became fast friends. It was funny how life worked out sometimes. The people Spencer least expected to get along with became some of the most important.

"Good evening, everyone. I'm glad to see most of our regular members were able to make it tonight. We're missing a couple of people though, so let's pray they are all okay, as well as for tonight's study," Josh stated with a smile. "Dear Lord, thank You

for this day. We ask that You protect our brother, Paul, and sister, Sarah, since they can't be with us tonight. If anything is wrong with them, I pray that You help them and keep them safe. We also ask that You bless our study tonight. Open our hearts and ears to hear what You have to say to us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

Josh bent over and pulled out his Bible, along with a notepad, from his backpack. He placed the items on the table as he said, "Last week, we were talking about Moses' time in the desert before he came back and freed the Israelites. We discussed how the time apart from his people changed him and prepared him for when he went back. He was better equipped to listen to God and stand up for what was right in a Godly way." Gesturing towards another member of the group, Josh directed, "Why don't you read the next set of Scriptures for us, Jonathan."

Just as Jonathan finished reading the scripture, the door opened to the room and Sarah rushed in.

"Sorry, I'm late," she said with a sheepish look. "I got a flat tire and had to call a tow truck to help me out. It was a fiasco, but I made it."

"We're just glad you're okay, and that you were able to get here," Josh said with a friendly smile. "Go ahead and take a seat."

Sarah slid into a seat next to Spencer, giving him a smile as she pulled out her Bible.

Spencer leaned over and whispered, "I need to speak with you after Bible study."

She nodded her head. "Okay," she whispered back.

After the Bible study ended, Spencer and Sarah stepped off to the side.

"So, what's up?" Sarah asked, pushing her auburn hair behind her ear.

“I was wondering if you could do me a favor.”

“Sure, what is it?”

“Do you remember Molly Price?”

Sarah’s eyebrows shot up in shock. “I’m surprised you’re bringing her up. I’ve never heard you talk about her until now. But yes, I remember her. Everyone would after what happened. Of course, I was friends with her before all that went down. We lost track after she left town though.”

“Well, she’s back in town for the reunion. We bumped into each other and we ended up making plans to go on a double date.”

“That’s an interesting turn of events. I wouldn’t have thought she would want to have anything to do with you, considering what you and your friends did to her.”

“I know, and I feel really bad about all of that. I—”

Sarah raised her hand and stopped him. “I’m not the person you need to apologize to or explain what happened. It’s none of my business. I make it a point to judge someone based on my own interactions with them. Over the years, you’ve proven to be a good person.”

“Thanks, it’s nice of you to say that. And just so you know, I did apologize to her and that’s why I asked her to go out, so I could treat her to dinner. She suggested a double date, and that’s where you come in.”

She gave him a puzzled look. “You know I’m moving overseas in a few weeks, right,

Spencer? I mean, I'm flattered, but it's not a good idea. Plus, I don't really see you that way—more like a brother.”

“Oh, I didn't mean it that way,” Spencer said, shaking his head. “I was hoping you would go with me as a friend. I can't go alone, and I don't want to give another woman the wrong impression. I figured I could explain the situation, and you would understand.”

Sarah thought about it for a few seconds, then said, “Sure, I guess I can go along and help you out.” She gave him a skeptical look as she added, “But I'm betting it's going to be an awkward night.”

Spencer hoped Sarah was wrong, but part of him knew she was probably right. He wasn't looking forward to spending the night watching Molly dote on another man, let alone watch another man kiss the woman who still made his heart race every time he looked at her.

Molly couldn't keep her father's words from rolling around in her head. As she entered Ruby's Diner, she wondered if it could be true that Spencer had changed. If that was the case, could he truly be guilty of the unethical conduct her boss accused him of? She couldn't see how that would be possible, but it was her job to figure it out.

Across the room, Molly saw Spencer sitting next to a pretty redhead who looked vaguely familiar. She racked her brain to try to figure out how she knew her. Yes, it was geometry class. Sarah Martin sat directly behind Molly when they were both sophomores.

Sarah was one of the few people who was always nice to her, even after what happened to Molly during their senior year. She was grateful for that.

Even though she liked Sarah, the fact she was there with Spencer didn't sit well with Molly. Suddenly, she regretted her decision to suggest a double-date, and wished she had accepted his offer to go get coffee.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Rick. She was overcome by guilt. She shouldn't care who Spencer was spending time with. She had a boyfriend, which meant Spencer's dating activities were none of her concern.

As they approached the table, Sarah waved to her as she said, "Molly, it's so good to see you."

“Thanks, Sarah. It’s good to see you too.” Molly gestured to her boyfriend and added, “Everyone, this is Dr. Rick Colson. Rick, this is Spencer Conrad and his date, Sarah Martin.”

“Oh, we’re not dating. We’re just friends,” Sarah corrected. “Not that Spencer isn’t a great guy, but we’re more like brother and sister than anything else. Besides, I’m leaving the country for a year anyway.”

“Really? Where are you going?” Molly inquired.

“I’m working with the group, You with Purpose,” Sarah explained. “We’re headed to Uganda to help build an orphanage, along with a couple of houses and a church in an area that was destroyed by a mudslide last year.”

“That’s so great. Good for you,” Molly stated with a smile. “I did a series of stories about women’s rights on the African continent a couple of years ago. It was a challenging, but a rewarding experience.”

“We’ll have to trade notes when I get back from my trip.”

“I’d like that,” Molly stated as she took a seat across from Sarah and Spencer.

“That’s great you get to travel for work, and even better, in that case, you did it to write about such an important matter,” Spencer stated with an appreciative expression.

Rick sat down next to Molly as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “That’s my girl. Molly is always trying to break the next big story.”

“That’s not the only reason I do it,” Molly countered. “I write what I do because I think it’s important to inform the public about what is going on in the world, as well

as their local community.”

“Come on, honey. You don’t have to put on for them. After all, you said they were your friends.”

Molly looked across the table. She wanted to correct Rick and tell him that he was right about one of them being her friend, but she was uncertain about the other. She wasn’t sure why she had kept the exact nature of her relationship with Spencer a secret from Rick, but she knew for sure, right now wasn’t the time to correct the lack of full disclosure.

The server showed up with glasses of water for each of them, then she took their orders. Once the brunette was gone, Molly tried to relax. If she didn’t get comfortable, she was going to have a harder time questioning Spencer. Yet, even though she knew what she needed to do, she couldn’t seem to make herself calm down.

“So, what type of doctor are you?” Sarah asked with curiosity.

“I’m a plastic surgeon. I have my own practice in Seattle.”

Spencer leaned back in his chair as he gave Rick a look of disapproval. He quickly masked it, but not in time for Molly not to notice.

“He does reconstruction for birth defects, fire victims, and domestic violence survivors,” Molly stated defensively.

Rick either didn’t notice or didn’t care—Molly couldn’t be sure of which one it was—but instead of reacting negatively, he said with a smirk, “Don’t let her fool you. I’m not that noble. That’s like 5% of my patients. The rest of my time is filled with trophy wives wanting to go up a cup size, and rich teen girls getting nose jobs for

their sweet sixteen gift.”

Molly wanted to die right on the spot. Sometimes Rick could be so uncouth. What was wrong with him? For being educated and at the top of his field, he sure acted like an imbecile way too often.

As Molly watched Spencer, she could tell he was amused by Rick rather than offended. She wasn't sure if it bothered her more than if it had been the reverse.

Irritated, and wanting to put Spencer on the spot, Molly said, “Well, now that we have what my boyfriend does cleared up, let's move on to you Spencer. I know you're a public defender, but not much more than that.”

It wasn't exactly a lie. Though she did know he had an unusually high success rate, and was great at getting his clients off or pleaded down to a lesser crime, she wanted to hear his take on it. One of the first things she learned when interviewing people—especially when they didn't know it was happening—was to get them talking about themselves. Almost everyone liked to, and once they started going, they often would slip up and reveal more than they planned.

“I've been a public defender over four years now. I do my best to understand where my clients are coming from, and to help them the best way I can.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

“Okay, that sounds exactly like a prepared response, rather than an answer with substance,” Molly pointed out. “I want to know why you made the choice you did? There must be a reason you decided to use your law degree the way you have.”

Spencer shifted in his seat, then crossed his arms. He looked visibly uncomfortable with her question.

“Maybe you should just let it go,” Rick suggested. “Can’t you tell the guy doesn’t want to go into it?” Giving Spencer an apologetic look, he added, “She’s naturally curious. Sometimes she doesn’t realize she comes off pushy.”

Molly’s head snapped to her boyfriend as her eyes narrowed. Geez, Rick was on a roll and about to get a medal for being the biggest jerk in the room.

“It’s okay,” Spencer said with a shake of his head. “I’m just not used to people wanting the details of why I became a public defender. Usually, I just tell them that general info and they move on to something else.” He took a sip of water, then continued. “During my first year of law school, my older brother ended up getting hooked on heroine. No one in the family knew, so when he got arrested for possession, it came as a shock to all of us. My parents had just lost all their money in some bad real estate investments, and they didn’t have the finances to hire an attorney. He was assigned a veteran public defender. We thought he would be fine, but the guy completely botched the case. My brother should have done rehab and gotten probation. Instead, he ended up getting six months in jail.”

“That’s awful,” Molly said with shock. “I remember you telling me how important your brother was to you.”

Spencer nodded. “It doesn’t end there though. The worst part was that while he was halfway through his sentence, a fight broke out in the jail and my brother was stabbed to death. It destroyed my family. They moved away shortly after that.”

Both Molly and Sarah gasped at the shocking news.

“I never knew that,” Sarah stated with sympathy. “Why don’t you talk about it?”

“It’s too painful,” Spencer stated plainly. “The best way for me to honor my brother is to not let what happened to him, happen to anyone else. It’s why I moved back to Bayfield and took the position as a public defender here. I do my best every day, to keep other families from feeling the loss we did when that public defender failed my brother.”

Molly resisted the urge to reach across the table and take Spencer’s hand. All this time, she only thought about how hard the last ten years had been for her, but she never stopped to think about what Spencer might have gone through during that same time.

She could see from the tension in his body and face, he was fighting back the emotions raging just below the surface. Though she knew he was vulnerable right now, and asking follow-up questions would catch him off-guard, she couldn’t bring herself to dig any further.

What was going on with her? Her whole purpose for coming here was to find out the truth about Spencer’s dealings as a public defender. Yet, the first moment he revealed something personal, albeit tragic and devastating, she put her purpose on the back-burner. She felt bad for her target, and was surprised by it, because she was usually tougher than this.

Not liking her reaction to his story, Molly decided she needed to take a few moments

to clear her head. She jumped to her feet as she said, “Excuse me. I need to go to the restroom.” She glanced at Sarah and asked, “Is it still in the back?”

“Here, I can go with you,” Sarah offered as she joined her, and they moved towards the back of the diner.

“You really didn’t know any of that about his brother?” Molly asked.

Sarah shook her head. “I’ve been going to church with him for years and he never talked about it. I just always assumed his brother moved away.”

“I kind of feel bad, pushing him like that. If I had known it would result in him having to talk about that, I wouldn’t have.”

“I know that. You’ve always been a kind person, Molly.”

They entered the restroom. Molly glanced around and realized that just like the rest of the diner, it hadn’t changed much. There was a small area with two sinks and a mirror. Further back were two stalls with toilets inside.

“I can wait for you out here,” Sarah said.

“That’s okay. I don’t really have to use the restroom. I just needed to get away for a few minutes.”

“Why? It’s surprising you’re having such a reaction to Spencer’s story. Don’t get me wrong, it’s sad and all, but you two didn’t part on the best of terms. To be honest, I’m surprised you agreed to come here at all.”

“Believe me, you’re not the only one, but Spencer still has a way of getting me to agree to things I never thought I would.”

Molly's mind instantly recalled the fact that she agreed to carry on a secret relationship with him, despite all the warnings her head told her heart. Why couldn't she say 'no' to Spencer Conrad?

"You say that like it's a bad thing. You should know, Spencer isn't like he was when we were kids," Sarah stated. "He's really changed for the better. You don't have to worry about what he will do anymore."

"It doesn't matter. I'm only here for a few days. Once I'm back in Seattle, all of this won't matter anymore."

Even as she said the words, she realized she wasn't sure if they were true. The moment she first saw Spencer in the library the day before, something rekindled in Molly's heart that had been extinguished for over a decade.

* * *

Dr. Rick Colson was an ignoramus. As Spencer watched him flirt with the young, brunette server named Sandy, the anger built inside him. This idiot somehow convinced the most perfect woman in the world to be with him, and yet he wasn't content.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

Spencer hadn't gotten into a fight since he was a freshman in college, but he was seriously considering changing that tonight. It was taking all his self-control to not reach out and punch the smug doctor straight in the jaw.

"Wow, I can't believe you worked on all those famous people," Sandy said with awe. "And to think, they all fly in from New York and Los Angeles just so you can work on them."

"Well, shh, don't tell anyone. It has to be our little secret," he said with a wag of his eyebrows.

Rick was exactly like Spencer when he was in high school; self-absorbed and egotistical. Though Spencer had changed, it pointed to one obvious fact, Molly was attracted to jerks.

"I have to get back to work or my manager is going to flip out. Can I catch up with you later?" she said, handing him a folded piece of paper. "Here's my number. Feel free to call me anytime."

Rather than throw away the piece of paper, he kept it in his hand.

"Does that happen often?" Spencer probed, hoping Rick would try to deny it. Spencer wouldn't believe him, but at least it would show he cared enough to keep Molly from finding out.

Rick shrugged. "Eh, often enough that when I'm single, I don't get lonely. You never know when you might need some company, which is why I never get rid of these," he

said, shaking the piece of paper. “I mean, every relationship gets stale, so to keep from going crazy, a little extra on the side doesn’t hurt anything.”

Spencer had to choke back the bile that rose in his throat. What a disgusting person Dr. Rick Colson was turning out to be. Not only was he a hellacious flirt, he was straight-out admitting he had no regrets about cheating.

“We’re back,” Sarah said as they came up on the table.

Rick quickly pushed the piece of paper into his pocket before Molly could see. Oh, how Spencer wished she had arrived a few seconds sooner.

The women took their seats just in time for the food to arrive. As everyone ate their meals, the conversation centered around Sarah’s upcoming trip, Rick’s latest celebrity patient, and the writing award Molly won last month.

Spencer didn’t feel like sharing, and focused on eating his meal instead.

“You know, I keep telling this one,” Sarah said, lightly elbowing Spencer in the side, “he needs to stop focusing solely on work and get out on a date. He’s not getting any younger.”

“We’re the same age,” Spencer pointed out.

“Yes, but I already went on the relationship train, and it derailed right in the middle. It left me barely holding on,” Sarah said as a sad look crossed her face. “Now I need to take a break and refocus on what really matters. It’s why I’m volunteering overseas.”

“I’ve been hit by the same train before,” Molly stated, staring directly at Spencer. “It feels awful, but you’ll eventually heal. When you do, you’ll be ready to get back out

there.”

Spencer wanted to squirm in his seat. He could see from her face, she still felt the pain from his poor choices. He hated the fact he had hurt Molly so badly when they were young. She didn’t deserve what happened, and he should have done more to protect her.

Sarah’s phone rang, causing her to pull it out of her purse and look at the screen. “I have to go. It’s my roommate. There’s a problem at our apartment.”

“I can drive you home,” Spencer offered, coming to his feet.

“No, there’s no need for that,” Sarah said, shaking her head. “I can grab an Uber. Stay here and enjoy your time.”

Sarah made her way around the table to Molly, leaned down and gave her a hug. “It was so good seeing you. I’ll see you at the reunion Saturday night.”

“I look forward to it,” Molly stated as she returned the hug.

Once Sarah left, Spencer returned to his seat right before the server showed back up. She directed a flirtatious smile at Rick as she asked, “What can I get you for dessert?”

He returned the smile. “We’re all good here. No one needs the extra calories that come with it.”

Molly shot Rick a dirty look. “Speak for yourself. I can afford a few extra calories, and I’ve been dying for a piece of the peach pie.”

The server nodded as she jotted down the information. “Do you want anything?” she asked Spencer.

“I’d love a cup of coffee,” he said.

“Oh, that sounds great. I’ll take a cup to go with my pie,” Molly stated with a smile.

Rick looked irritated as he stood up and threw his napkin on the table. “I have to go to the restroom.” Without another word, he stormed off towards the back hall.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

“I guess he really didn’t want anyone to get dessert,” Spencer observed.

A laugh escaped Molly as her eyes grew round with mirth. She placed her hand over her mouth to try to muffle it. “Right? I can’t believe how he just decided for everyone.”

Spencer shook his head, disgusted by the bad behavior of the other man. “Is he always like that?”

Molly shrugged. “We’ve only been dating a couple of months. He can be assertive, and he tends to want things a certain way, but his attitude has been pretty awful on this trip. I’ve honestly been put off by it.”

“I guess you really get to know people when you travel with them.”

“It seems that way,” Molly agreed.

Spencer didn’t want to talk about Rick anymore. As he watched Molly, all he wanted to do was reach out and kiss her. He fought the urge, and instead said, “You look really beautiful tonight.”

“Don’t waste your charm on me,” Molly stated with a roll of her eyes. “I quit being susceptible to it ten years ago.”

“Nothing is wasted on you,” Spencer stated in a steely voice. He leaned across the table, and added, “You should be told your beautiful often, and thoroughly.”

Molly's cheeks turned red as she shifted in her seat. Her eyes met his as she whispered, "Why did you have to say that?"

"Because I meant it," he said as he reached out to touch her hand.

Rick came back at the exact moment. The irritation from earlier was gone and was replaced with fury. He reached out and pulled Molly up by her arm. "I think it's time for us to go."

Molly pulled away with a shocked expression as she asked, "What's wrong, Rick?"

"Why don't you ask him?" Rick accused as he gestured towards Spencer.

"I don't know what you're referring to," Spencer said, coming to his feet, "but you should calm down before you go anywhere."

"Don't tell me what I should do," Rick barked out, as he crossed his arms. "I'm not about to let that happen after I catch you putting the moves on my girlfriend."

Molly gasped. "Rick, what are you talking about?"

"I saw the two of you just now; not to mention how he has been looking at you all night. When we came here, you made it sound like he was just an old friend, but I'm beginning to think there's more to it than that."

"There's nothing going on between us," Molly denied as she reached out and touched Rick's arm.

He yanked free from her grasp and glared at her. "I won't be played for a fool."

"That's not what's happening," she said, "let's just get out of here."

Spencer watched as they turned to head towards the exit. Over her shoulder, Molly mouthed the words, 'I'm sorry.'

A few minutes later, the server arrived with the pie and two coffees. She glanced around, then asked, "Where did they go?"

"Can I just get the check, please?"

The server nodded, placing the items on the table before scurrying off.

Spencer realized that Rick wasn't as big a fool as he first thought. He had recognized correctly that there was something between Spencer and Molly. The question was, did Rick have a strong enough pull on Molly to keep her from seeing Spencer again. If that happened, if he never saw Molly again, could Spencer live with that?

As he headed to his car, the truth sank deep into his heart. He hated the idea of never spending time with Molly again.

5

The chirping of the birds outside Molly's window woke her up. Molly stretched her arms above her head as she yawned. She turned on her side, wanting to check the time. Her eyelashes fluttered for a few seconds before her eyes focused on the clock. 9:00 a.m.

Her need for coffee overtook her desire to stay in bed. She slung her legs over the side of her twin bed—still covered in hues of teals and black, her favorite colors from a decade ago.

She glanced around the room for a moment, and had to remind herself it wasn't the late 2000s. Posters of Katy Perry, Hannah Montana, and Maroon 5 lined her walls. She walked over and lightly touched the row of headbands—a huge trend when she was in high school—and picked up a big black-bowed one and popped it on her head. She moved her head back and forth.

She let out a small laugh, remembering how hard she had tried to fit in during high school, and how little good it did her.

Her phone buzzed from across the room and she rushed over to her nightstand and picked it up. She read the incoming text.

Can you join me for lunch?

I wanted to apologize for last night.

The text read from Spencer.

Though she didn't think Spencer needed to apologize for anything on his end, she did think she could continue to question him about his job. She hadn't gotten to all the questions she would have liked, and figured another chance would be beneficial.

Sure, I can meet you today at 11:30.

Do you want to meet at the restaurant at Meadows Inn?

There were three dots for a couple of seconds before his response showed up.

Sounds good. See you then.

Molly left her room and padded down the hallway to the guest room. She knocked on the door, and after a brief moment of silence, she heard Rick say in an irritated voice from the other side, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Molly," she replied, trying to keep her voice light. She didn't want to make things worse from last night.

After they got back to her parents' place, Rick immediately went to his room, claiming he had a headache. Molly suspected it had to do more with the fact that he was angry over what happened, and didn't want to be around her.

"May I come in?"

"I guess."

She turned the knob and pushed the door open. Rick was standing up and pulling on a t-shirt over his sweats.

Molly took a deep breath and brought up lunch. “I just got a text from Spencer Conrad. He invited me to lunch to apologize for what happened at dinner last night.”

“You’re not going, right?” Rick said as he picked up his reading glasses, and put them on before grabbing a surgical book off his nightstand.

“Actually, I was thinking I should.”

“Can’t you just investigate him via his friends and co-workers?” Rick asked. “He’s a bit of a jerk, so I don’t know why you would want to spend any more time with him.”

“It’s not about wanting to spend time with him,” Molly defended. “I really didn’t get a chance to ask all the questions I needed.”

“Look, I’m trying to be nice here, but I don’t want you to go. There, I said it.”

“I understand you don’t like him, and you don’t get along, but this affects my career.”

Rick set the book back down and crossed his arms. “I don’t see why you’re so worried about your job anyway. It’s not going to matter down the road since I make enough money that you won’t need to work. Besides, once we have kids, you’ll need to stay home anyway.”

“What are you talking about?” Molly asked in confusion. “My career is important to me, and since when have we decided we’re getting married and having kids?”

“I just assumed that was what you wanted. I’m getting older and am ready for the next step in my life—starting a family. I thought that was going to be with you.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

“I’m not saying I don’t want that, but it doesn’t mean I have to give up everything I’ve worked for to have it.”

“Really? What does it matter in the grand schemes of things? I mean, seriously, you only work for a small online news outlet.”

His jab at her job stung. She had no idea he thought so little of her career. Add it to the way he discussed marriage, and Molly realized they didn’t see eye-to-eye on some really important parts of life.

“I don’t have time to argue about this right now,” Molly stated as she turned around to leave. “I have to go get ready.”

“If you go, I won’t be here when you get back,” Rick threatened.

Molly stopped with her hand on the knob to the door. She took a deep breath and then turned back around. “Do what you have to do. With how you’ve behaved over the last couple of days, and what you’ve said this morning, I don’t see a future with you anyway. You should go.”

“Fine with me,” Rick stated as he narrowed his eyes. “I don’t want to compete with a guy from your past, anyway.”

Without responding, she slipped out the door and headed back to her room. Now that things ended with Rick, she thought she would be sad, but instead, she was relieved.

As she gathered her clothes up to take to the bathroom, her anger and frustration over

what happened came to the surface, reminding her of the time she felt exactly the same a decade ago.

“Why do we still have to keep us a secret?” Molly asked as she sat next to Spencer in his Camaro.

Turning to face her, Spencer explained, “I told you, it’s better this way. Your parents won’t approve, and everyone at school won’t understand.”

“Who cares if they don’t understand? I love you, Spencer, and I want everyone to know it.”

“I love you too, Molly, but I don’t think it’s a good idea. I like how things are right now.”

Molly’s lips pinched together, as she tried to figure out how to explain to him that keeping their relationship a secret was taking a toll on her. She didn’t sleep well, she had to always be on guard not to let it slip out when talking with people, and she hated pretending they barely knew each other at school.

In a strained voice, she asked, “Is it me? Are you ashamed of me?”

“No, of course not. I just know that right now, we don’t have to worry about anyone else, or what they think. All that matters is you and me.”

Molly wanted to argue with him, but she could see that it wouldn’t do any good. She had two choices at this point: stay with him and keep it a secret, or break up. She cared too much about Spencer to do the latter, which only left the former as an option.

Spencer leaned over and pulled her towards him, giving her a kiss. The moment their

lips touched, it pushed everything else out of her mind but the fact that she was undeniably in love with Spencer Conrad.

* * *

Spencer arrived at the Meadows Inn a little bit early. He wanted to spend a couple of minutes in silent prayer, asking God to help him to handle the situation the right way.

When Molly entered the restaurant at Meadows Inn, she looked good in her plum blouse and black slacks. Her hair was pinned half-back, revealing her slender neck and a pair of small, gold hoop earrings.

She approached the table at the back of the room with a tentative smile on her face.

“Hello, Molly,” Spencer greeted as she took a seat across from him.

“Hi, Spencer,” Molly said in return.

He glanced past her and observed, “I’m surprised Rick didn’t insist on coming along.”

“It wouldn’t make sense for him to do that, since we ended things earlier this morning.”

“I’m sorry,” Spencer said out of politeness. The truth was, he was glad to hear they weren’t together. Not just because it meant he had a better chance of convincing Molly to give him a second chance, but because he didn’t think Rick was a good guy. Molly deserved to be treated better, even if it wasn’t by Spencer, though he would do his best to show her it could be him.

“Are you though?” she asked skeptically as she arched an eyebrow. “Somehow I

doubt it.”

He let out a small chuckle. “You caught me. I am glad he’s out of the picture. Why did you break up?”

“Rick thought something was going on between us, which is crazy,” Molly protested. “We’ve both moved on.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

“Maybe you have, but not me,” Spencer said, shaking his head. “I’ve often thought about that day in the school hall. I should have told everyone right then and there, how much you meant to me; that you were the smartest, prettiest, kindest person I have ever known.

“I’m sure we both have long lists of regrets when it comes to that time in our life. I should have stood up for myself, not only to Tiffany and her friends, but to you when you made me keep our relationship a secret.”

“That was wrong of me. I was scared, and I acted out of fear the whole time we were together. It was a mistake not to tell everyone that I was deeply, madly in love with you. I’m truly sorry for everything.”

Molly smiled at Spencer as she reached out and patted his hand. “Thank you for saying that; however, we can’t dwell on the mistakes we made.”

“Just like I don’t want to give Rick another thought now that we’re finished.”

“That’s probably a good idea. He seemed horrid from the one time I met him.”

“I can’t believe I was blind to how he really was. I don’t know what I was thinking being with that guy.” Shaking her head, she added, “I must be attracted to jerks.”

“Ouch,” Spencer stated, flinching from the statement. “I guess you’re right to lump me in with him—well, at least when we dated. I hope you’re starting to see though, I’m not like I was back when we were in high school. I’ve changed.”

Molly tapped her fingers on the edge of her glass as she looked at him. Finally, after several moments, she said, “I’m beginning to believe it’s possible.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

The server arrived at their table with a notepad and pen in her hands. “Are you both ready to order?”

“I’ll take the turkey on rye, along with a half order of your Harvest Salad,” Spencer stated, handing her his menu.

“That was quick,” Molly stated. “You didn’t even open the menu.”

Spencer glanced over at Molly and grinned. “I don’t have to. I get the same thing every time.”

“Then I guess that’s what I’m getting too. Can’t argue with that recommendation.” She handed the menu over to the server, as she added, “I’d also like a glass of iced tea with lemon, please.”

“And I’ll stick with water,” Spencer said.

After the server left them alone, Molly asked, “So, we’ve completely exhausted discussing my dating status. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“I know you’re not dating Sarah, but is there someone else?”

Spencer wondered how he should answer her. He decided to be as bluntly honest as he could. “I’ve never been able to sustain a relationship past a few dates.”

“Why is that? Too busy with work?”

He shook his head. “No, whenever I started dating someone, you would come to mind. I would measure them against you, and I would decide it wouldn’t work. No one ever compared to you.”

Molly’s eyes grew round with surprise. “Wow, I can’t believe you just admitted that.”

“In ten years, I haven’t been able to get over you. I figure, I should make it clear how I feel,” he said as he reached out and took her hand. “I still care about you, Molly. I’ve never stopped. I was just too stupid and scared to do anything about it back when we were young.”

Instantly, a memory came floating back of when he had reacted out of fear.

Spencer couldn’t keep himself from showing Molly affection as they stood outside the library next to his Camaro. He knew it was risky, being in such a public place, but she was so cute with her hair braided and her overalls on.

He leaned forward and placed a kiss on her lips. The feel of her mouth under his own was wonderful. He couldn’t get enough.

“I have to go,” Molly stated with reluctance.

“Do you have to leave?”

“Believe me, I don’t want to, but my parents are expecting me.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

“Okay, I guess I’ll just have to wait until tomorrow afternoon when we can get together to ‘study’ again.”

She let out a laugh. “Lucky for you, my parents haven’t questioned my daily study sessions with a fellow student.”

He nodded. “For sure. I don’t need your dad coming after me with a shotgun.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” she said with a smirk. “So you better let me get going.”

Spencer walked Molly over to her Toyota Corolla. Once she was seated behind the wheel, he leaned down and kissed her one more time. He backed out of the way and watched her drive off.

He was fumbling with his car key when he heard Tiffany say behind him, “I saw you with that nerdy girl.”

Spencer froze for a moment, trying to process what Tiffany said. He spun around and folded his arms across his chest. “What of it? She’s my tutor.”

“Do you kiss all your tutors goodbye?” she accused.

Fear seized Spencer’s heart. He shouldn’t have been so careless to kiss Molly out in the open like that. Over the past couple of weeks, he had let his guard down. Now, if he couldn’t fix it, they would both pay the price.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Spencer said defensively.

“Don’t try to deny it,” Tiffany said as she glared at him. “I know what I saw.”

“You’re being silly, Tiffany. It was nothing,” Spencer said with a shrug, “you’re overreacting.”

“If that’s the case, prove it,” she said, placing her hands on her hips.

“And how do I do that exactly?”

“Kiss me,” she demanded. “If you do, I’ll know that she means nothing to you, and I won’t have to tell everyone about the two of you.”

Spencer hated the idea of giving into Tiffany’s blackmail. If he kissed her, it would be a betrayal to Molly and what they shared. If he didn’t do it, however, Tiffany would certainly follow through on her threat.

He braced himself, leaned down, and placed a quick peck on her lips.

“What are you doing?”

Spencer’s heart lurched at the sound of Molly’s voice. He swiveled around to find her getting out of her car. She had a hurt look on her face as she approached them.

He stepped back from Tiffany like she was fire and he was paper. What was he going to do?

“What does it look like?” Tiffany asked in a haughty voice. “He was kissing his girlfriend.”

Molly’s eyes teared up as she accused, “How could you? I trusted you. I believed you wanted to be with me, and this whole time you were with her too?”

“No, it’s not what it looks like,” Spencer said, rushing towards Molly. “I’m not with Tiffany. I haven’t been in months.”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. Whatever this is, it’s over. I can’t be with you anymore, Spencer,” she said, moving away from him and back towards her car.

“Don’t say that,” he said as he reached out to stop her. “You know how much I care about you.”

Molly averted her eyes as she whispered, “I thought I did, but apparently, I was wrong.” She glanced up and over at Tiffany, then back at Spencer. “I can’t stay here one more minute.” She got in her car and took off out of the parking lot.

“Good riddance. Now, you can focus on us again,” Tiffany said as she wrapped her hands around his arm.

“What are you talking about, Tiffany?” he accused as he pulled away from her. “There is no ‘us.’ We’ve been over and done with for a long time now, but you just can’t seem to stay out of my life.”

“That’s because you belong to me, Spencer. I’m not giving up on getting you back.”

“Well, you should. I will never, ever be with you again. I want to be with Molly, and I’m going to do whatever it takes to win her back.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

Spencer didn't wait to hear Tiffany's response. Instead, he jumped in his car and took off.

"Can I get you anything else?" the server asked, drawing Spencer's attention back to his lunch date with Molly. He noticed the food was already on the table as the server left them alone again.

Trying to push the past from his memory, he focused on the future. "I was wondering, would you like to go to the reunion with me tonight? We've already established we're both without dates. I think it could be fun going together."

"Since we both don't have dates, I guess we could go together," Molly agreed. "What time do you want to pick me up?"

"It starts at 6:00, so how about 5:30?" Spencer suggested.

She nodded as she bit into her sandwich. She chewed it and swallowed as a smile crossed her face. "You're right. This is delicious."

Spencer liked seeing Molly smile again. Perhaps, tonight, he could help keep it there. As they finished their meal, the excitement for the upcoming night began to build.

Molly finished powdering her face before taking one last look in the mirror. She inspected the black, knee-length dress for any wrinkles or layers out of place. Next, she moved on to her black heels, and finally, her necklace and earrings.

Once she was satisfied everything was in order, she headed to the living room to wait for Spencer. Her stomach did a somersault in anticipation of seeing him, and she had to remind herself not to get too attached. Her real purpose in being in Bayfield was not to reconnect with Spencer, or catch up with old friends. Instead, she was really investigating to determine if he was a corrupt public defender. She needed to spend the night talking to people about Spencer to get to the bottom of the truth. Developing romantic feelings for Spencer again would complicate everything. She didn't want to jeopardize her future for a man who had already hurt her and ruined her life once before.

She heard a knock at the door, but before she could get to it, her father made it there first. He opened the door, and she heard Spencer say from the other side, "Good evening, Mr. Price. I'm here to pick up Molly for our class reunion."

Her father didn't budge, his bulking frame taking up the doorframe. "Spencer, I want you to know, I've watched you over the years. I know you've changed; however, that doesn't change what you did to Molly ten years ago. I'm warning you; there won't be a repeat. If you do anything to hurt my daughter again, I'll make sure you regret it." He stepped back and let Spencer enter the hallway leading to the living room.

As her eyes finally settled on Spencer, she realized she was in trouble. It was going to

take all her efforts to keep from falling for him. He looked so handsome in his black suit with a white shirt and navy tie. His dark hair was styled to one side, and his eyes appeared to be a deep, ocean blue because of the shirt color he'd picked.

"You ready?" Spencer asked with a grin.

She nodded as she grabbed her jacket and purse. He helped her into the former, before they headed out the door.

A few minutes later, they arrived at the Red Lion Inn. They parked the car and headed into the ballroom where the reunion was being held.

The room was decorated with tables with white linens, accented with blue napkins and gold center pieces. The lights were dimmed. Popular songs from their youth softly hummed in the background. There was a wall of pictures from their high school days, along with another wall of memorial pictures of the three classmates who had passed away.

There was a table where everyone checked-in. Though they both had tags on with their names and senior photos in the corner, Molly recognized the two women behind the table. They were Regina Burke and Theresa Vasquez. Both had been on the student council as well as on the cheerleading squad.

When they saw Spencer, they gave him a warm smile and greeting, but as they turned their attention to Molly, their smiles vanished. It was replaced with a look of disdain.

"My, isn't this surprising, seeing the two of you coming here together," Regina stated with a disapproving tone.

"Will wonders never cease," Theresa added, handing them both their name tags as well as their meal preference card. "And here I thought tonight was going to be

boring.”

Molly didn’t like the sound of that. She had nothing but problems with those girls after Tiffany made it her job to ruin Molly’s life. The bullying had gotten so bad, she had to leave town permanently.

It had started out with small occurrences—dirty looks, snickering, and notes being passed around about her. Then it progressed to name calling in the halls and nasty emails. The final incident was the worst, which drove Molly away.

Molly was at her locker switching out her books, when she heard from behind, “Look who we have here. If it isn’t Spencer Conrad’s little side-piece,” Tiffany shouted loud enough for the dozens of students in the school hallway to hear.

Shocked and afraid, Molly spun around to find Tiffany glaring at her. She was wearing her cheerleading outfit with her red hair pulled back into a high ponytail. As she placed her hands on her hips, it was obvious Tiffany liked flaunting her status to everyone.

“We have a poll going,” Tiffany said as she handed Molly a flyer. “Everyone is voting on whether Spencer hooked up with you because you’re a sure thing—you know, since you’re easy and all—or because he felt bad for you since you’re a loser.”

Molly looked down at the flyer in her hand, and saw a horrible picture of her face added to a fake body dressed in a short skirt and tube top. Below it, there were big bold letters that read, ‘Molly Price—decide why Spencer went for the school’s biggest tramp.’ Sure enough, the two options were as Tiffany described.

Tears filled the corners of her eyes, but Molly forced herself not to let them fall. There was no way she would give Tiffany the satisfaction of reacting to her bullying.

She pushed the paper back towards the cheerleader, not wanting to look at it one more second. "Take it back. I don't want it."

Tiffany shook her head and moved closer, forcing Molly's hand to drop to her side. "No, you need a reminder of what really happened. You threw yourself at Spencer because you're desperate. You thought you found a way to become popular, but it doesn't work that way. Once a tramp, always a tramp," Tiffany teased.

A crowd had gathered around them. Everyone was pointing and jeering. Molly wanted to defend herself, but the chaos of the situation made her shrink back in embarrassment.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Spencer join the back of the group. She hoped he would come to her aid, but after several more seconds of ridicule, she realized he had no intention of rescuing her.

Unable to take the abuse anymore, Molly pushed through the crowd. The tears she tried to keep from falling fell fast and furious, stinging her eyes and blinding her path of escape. She rushed from the school, not caring where she went, except as far as way as possible.

"Hello, I asked you a question. It's impolite not to answer someone," Theresa whined, bringing Molly's attention back to the present. "Geez, you're just as weird as ever."

"I'm sorry. What did you ask me?" Molly inquired with confusion.

"I asked, why did you decide to come to the reunion? Considering why you left and all, I wondered what would make you think you're welcome."

"Despite what you and your friends think, I did have some friends at school," Molly

defended. “You weren’t the only ones who went there.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

Theresa rolled her eyes. "I highly doubt someone like you ever had friends."

"Stop it, Theresa," Spencer said with a protective tone. "Molly didn't deserve you're bullying back in high school, and she doesn't deserve it now."

Theresa's eyes grew round with shock as she flipped her curly brown hair over her shoulder. "Whatever you say, Spencer." She glanced past him and said dismissively, "There's a line growing and I need to help people that actually count."

As Molly and Spencer made their way further into the ballroom, he asked beside her, "Are you all right? You seemed to be somewhere else back there."

She glanced up at him and forced a smile. "I'm fine. This is all just so overwhelming. It's more than I anticipated."

"Just relax. It's going to be a nice night," Spencer coaxed.

"Easy for you to say; you were popular in high school. The golden boy coming home to rule over his graduating class. I didn't have that experience, as you well know."

"Yes, but people change. Plus, you must have had some friends on the debate team, right?"

Molly was shocked. "You remember what I did in high school?"

"I know I messed up at the end of our relationship, but it doesn't mean I didn't care. I remember everything we talked about."

Against her will, she felt her heart warm a tiny bit more towards Spencer. It felt good to know that not everything between them had been a lie.

“Why don’t we grab a set of seats for the dinner portion of the night?” Spencer suggested.

Molly nodded as Spencer guided her over to one of the center tables. If it had been up to her, she would have picked one more towards the back, but she decided not to fight it.

They sat down at the table, and one of the catering waiters brought them each a glass of iced tea. Several of Spencer’s football buddies came over and said ‘hello’ to him. They glanced skeptically at Molly and gave her a cold greeting before leaving the table. The other six seats remained empty and Molly wondered if they were going to be the social pariahs of the evening. If that was the case, she was going to have a much more difficult time than she had anticipated, getting people to talk about Spencer and his job.

Tired of being at an empty table, and deciding to focus on her work, Molly excused herself from the table. “I’m going to head to the restroom. I’ll be back in a bit.”

After she collected her thoughts, she could circulate in the room to talk with people and see who had useful information. Someone had to know something which could point her in the right direction.

As Molly turned down the hall to go to the restrooms outside the ballroom, she heard the familiar voices of Theresa and Regina talking. She stopped in her tracks, evaluating whether she should try to get past them, or turn back around to leave.

“I can’t believe she had the nerve to show up here,” Theresa said with indignation. “Why would Molly Price think anyone would want her here?”

“It sure looked like Spencer wanted her here,” Regina stated with disgust. “It makes me wonder if the rumor about her having his baby is true. It sure would explain why he was so protective over her, not to mention why her parents sent her away so quickly.”

Molly had to put her hand over her mouth to keep from making an audible gasp. She had no idea such a rumor had circulated about her when she left. She knew people would speculate why, but she had no idea they would think something so outrageous as that would be why.

Nausea formed in the pit of her stomach, causing Molly to want to throw up. She choked back the bile, and tried to remain calm as she continued to listen.

“Really? You believe that? I don’t,” Theresa countered. “I think it was because her stalking of Spencer got so bad, her parents had to hospitalize her in a psych ward. Tiffany told me that Molly was relentless going after Spencer. I mean, look at her now. She’s already back at it, showing up with him here.”

“He doesn’t seem to mind it though,” Regina pointed out, “which makes the secret baby more plausible. Her parents are probably watching the kid right now.”

Not wanting to deal with them or their lies, Molly turned around and headed back the way she came. As she weaved back through the small groups of people talking, several heads turned to look at her, and then turned back to whisper to one another, making it clear they were talking about her.

Though Molly knew she needed to talk to people about Spencer and his job, she couldn’t muster the energy with what was going on around her. Instead, she plopped down in the seat next to Spencer and leaned back in it.

“You look upset,” Spencer noted as he narrowed his eyes. “What happened while you

were away?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Tell me so I can go deal with it. Whoever upset you should—“

“There you two are,” Sarah said, interrupting them without realizing it. Next to her was a blond man who looked vaguely familiar. “I was hoping there would be empty seats at your table.”

Molly gestured to the unoccupied chairs around them. “Take your pick. I don’t think you’ll be fighting anyone to sit next to us tonight.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

“This is my brother, Greg. He was two grades lower than us, but knew a lot of our classmates, so I invited him to come with me.”

“Oh, I think I remember you, Greg,” Spencer said with recognition. “You played on the JV football team, right?”

“I did. I’m surprised you remember me though, considering how busy you were with the varsity team.”

“Hi, Greg. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Molly.”

His face changed from light and easy to rigid and somber. “I know who you are, Molly. I remember what happened to you in high school. I’m really sorry you had to go through all that. It wasn’t right.”

“Thank you. Besides my few friends, I didn’t think there was anyone who even cared what happened to me.”

“There was more of us than you know.” He glanced over at Spencer with a frown. “And we would have tried to stand up for you if we weren’t so afraid of what might happen to us.”

Spencer shifted in his seat as he averted his eyes. Molly could tell he was uncomfortable with what Greg was saying. A few days ago, she would have reveled in it, but getting to know the man he was now, she didn’t wish ill for Spencer anymore.

Over the next ten minutes, two members from the debate team and their spouses joined them, filling the table. The server brought their plates of food. Everyone ate and talked about their lives. By the end of the meal, Molly was enjoying herself, and able to mostly forget about the first part of the evening.

* * *

After dinner, Spencer and Molly took a look at the memory wall and also went over and took some photos in a picture area.

“I have to go to the restroom,” Spencer said, letting go of Molly’s arm. “I’ll be right back.”

Spencer headed out of the ballroom and made his way down the hall to the bathrooms. He thought about the night so far, and was grateful for Sarah and her brother, Greg, sitting with them. It had made it easier once some people she knew joined them.

He had expected his school friends to treat Molly coldly. Considering how much time had passed, he had hoped people had let it go. Instead, it seemed from all the gossiping and mean-treatment, people were still rehashing what happened between Molly, Spencer, and Tiffany.

After finishing up in the bathroom, he exited and started to make his way back to the reunion. From a distance, Spencer stiffened, recognizing Tiffany.

The years hadn’t been kind to Tiffany. Her hair was still dyed red, most likely in an effort to hide her aging—but it only made it obvious she wasn’t the knockout she’d been in high school. As she got closer, her wrinkles and extra weight added to her poor image. Part of him felt bad for her. She had been forced to move back to Bayfield to live with her parents several months ago after her Hollywood husband

cheated on her, then dumped her. A solid prenuptial agreement left her with nothing to show for the last ten years.

“Hey there, Spencer. I’ve been looking for you ever since I got here a little bit ago,” she slurred out as she placed her hand on his arm.

The smell of alcohol wafted off her, making it clear she was intoxicated. Her eyes were unfocused, and she stumbled a bit as she leaned against him.

“You’re not looking too good, Tiffany. Maybe you should have some coffee to help sober you up.”

She pulled back, giving him an angry look. “I don’t need you telling me what to do.” Then trying to give him a seductive smile, which ended up being a lopsided grin, she added, “Unless it’s in the bedroom. You can do that any time.”

Spencer had to force down the bile rising in his throat. The last thing he wanted was to do anything with Tiffany, let alone that.

“You’re drunk, and I’m not interested in...” he gestured towards her, “whatever this is. You need to sober up, and I need to get back to my date.”

Not waiting for a response, Spencer disentangled himself from Tiffany and headed back to the ballroom. He made a straight path to Molly, who was talking with Sarah at the table.

“Would you care to dance?” Spencer asked, reaching out his hand to her.

“I’d like that,” Molly said with a smile, putting her hand in his.

He led Molly to the dance floor, where he gathered her into arms. It felt great to have

her body snuggly tucked against his own. He grinned down at her and said, “You’re a great dancer, Molly.”

“Thanks. I didn’t get much practice while in school, missing prom and all, but I took dance classes for one of my stories when I worked for Elite Magazine.”

The pang of regret hit Spencer hard. He should have been the one to take Molly to the prom, but it never happened, because he was too stupid to fight for their relationship. He pushed the painful thoughts away, and focused on the last part of what she said. “That’s right. You worked for a fashion magazine for a couple of years.”

“It was a great learning experience, but I’m much happier writing for a news outlet.” Then her brows came together in a questioning look as she asked, “Wait, how did you know I worked for a fashion magazine?”

“I have a confession to make. I’ve been following your career for years. I’ve read all your articles. You’re really talented, Molly.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

Her face flushed pink as her eyes turned up to meet his. “Really? I can’t believe you did that.”

“I told you, I still care about you. That never changed. I just always thought the damage I did was too bad for me to be able to overcome. I was too scared to contact you, but when I saw you at the library the other day, I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to see if we could have a second chance, even if it was just as friends.”

Molly’s eyes grew wide with surprise. “I wasn’t sure I believed in second chances, but ever since I came home and saw you, I keep thinking maybe it’s possible.”

The song ended and Spencer asked, “Are you thirsty? I am thinking a glass of iced tea sounds great.”

Molly nodded as he led her from the dance floor. He guided her back over to the table where the glasses were sitting, refilled.

“I was wondering, how are your parents? I know your dad wanted you to play professional football. What happened when that didn’t pan out due to your injury during your first year of college?” Molly inquired.

“I didn’t know you were aware of that,” he said, his brows coming together in furrow.

“Oh, I heard it somewhere on social media,” Molly stated with a shrug.

“My dad was less than pleased when I couldn’t play anymore. Then when my brother died, he just stopped caring. With them living on the East Coast now, we don’t really

talk much anymore.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Molly said sympathetically. “It’s hard not being close to your parents. I know how that is. After mine sent me away, I barely saw them, and we grew apart.”

“But you’re back now, and they really seem to care about you. Maybe you can change that.”

“I’d like to,” Molly agreed. “My mom—”

Before Molly could finish her sentence, Tiffany appeared beside them. She looked exceptionally perturbed as she glared at them with her hands on her hips. “I can’t believe you’re still slinking around with that tramp.”

“Don’t call her that,” Spencer warned. “I made the mistake of letting you get away with it once. It won’t happen a second time.”

“I don’t care what you say, Spencer. You don’t belong with her. She’s damaged goods. I mean, she can’t even keep a boyfriend. The one she brought with her from Seattle didn’t even stick around.” She turned her attention to Molly, and added, “Sounds like the same old Molly—running off any guy who is stupid enough to get involved with you. I mean, I would think after all these years, you would have figured desperation looks horrible on you.”

“Tiffany, you should really shut up and get out of here. You’re making a fool of yourself,” Molly stated with irritation.

“You’re the one who’s a fool, still throwing yourself at Spencer. You should know—”

“Stop it right now,” Spencer demanded. “If anyone is desperate, it’s you, Tiffany. Stop trying so hard to destroy everyone else’s happiness because you’re so miserable.”

“Look at you, Spencer. Still chasing after a nerdy girl who clearly is beneath you.” Then letting out a cackling laugh, she slurred out, “Guess you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.”

Tiffany marched to the front of the ballroom, climbed the stairs of the stage, and grabbed the microphone from the podium. “I think everyone has a right to know why Molly Price left Bayfield ten years ago,” Tiffany slurred out. “She wants you to think it was all a misunderstanding, but it wasn’t. The truth is, she was a crazy stalker, throwing herself at Spencer while he was committed to me. She was a liar and a manipulator who didn’t stop until her parents had to intervene for her own good by sending her to a mental hospital.”

Several people gasped around the room, and Molly’s few friends came up and put their arms around her.

Greg marched up the stairs and said with aversion, “That’s about enough out of you.” He took the microphone from her hands and placed it back on the podium. “I’ll take you outside and get you an Uber ride. You’re in no condition to drive home.”

As they left the stage, Spencer turned to Molly and said, “I’m so sorry. You shouldn’t have to be subjected to all of this again, but I’m going to fix this right now, once-and-for-all.”

Spencer took Tiffany’s place at the center of the stage, then picked up the microphone. “None of what Tiffany said was true. Molly Price didn’t do anything wrong back when all of us were in high school. I was too scared to stand up for her back then, but I’m not weak like I once was. Molly was, and is, the most kind,

generous, and thoughtful person I have ever known. I didn't deserve for her to care about me, but she did, and I turned my back on her to save my own reputation. We never did anything more than kiss, so all those rumors you've been spreading for the past decade, they're false. Those of you who participated in making the situation worse, you should be ashamed of yourselves. I know I am. She left because she was bullied so bad, she couldn't stay here anymore. Molly is a good person, and didn't deserve what we did to her. I, for one, will be forever sorry for my part in what happened, and anyone who was involved should be too."

There were a few random claps around the room, which made the rest of the silence even more awkward. Spencer put the microphone down, and made his way back to Molly's side. He leaned towards her and whispered, "I should have done that a long time ago."

"Thank you," she whispered back, "for coming to my defense and telling everyone the truth."

Spencer reached out and took her hand. "I can't fix what I did in the past, but I can promise you, going forward, I will always have your back."

Over the next half hour, several of their classmates came over and apologized to Molly for believing the rumors. Two even apologized for not standing up to the mean girls who had bullied her.

With each one, Spencer watched as Molly relaxed more and her smile became more prominent on her face. The urge to kiss her surfaced, but before he could act on it, Molly blurted out, "Oh my goodness. This is my favorite song. We have to go dance."

Molly pulled him to his feet and then onto the dance floor. They spent the rest of the night dancing, laughing, and having fun with old friends.

The alarm sounded again, and this time, Molly didn't hit the snooze button. Though she had been out late with Spencer the night before, she wanted to get up and head to his church.

She hadn't gotten anyone to talk about Spencer's job, partially because most of his friends repeated the same mantra: "Spencer's a great public defender. He cares about his clients and works hard to help them." The other part was that she hadn't spent as much time as she should have digging into his career.

The voicemail from her boss demanding an update jolted Molly back to reality. She couldn't neglect her duties as a reporter just because she cared for the subject of her assignment. As a matter of fact, she needed to keep a clear head and not allow a bias to form.

Church was the next step, or rather, watching Spencer at church. She could also ask his friends from church a few questions, which would hopefully help guide her future choices for the investigation.

Molly arrived at Bayfield Fellowship, one of only three churches in the whole town. It was also the church Molly had gone to until she moved away her senior year, and the church her parents still attended. They had been surprised when she told them she would meet them there for the second service if they were willing to let her borrow one of the cars. She had conveniently left out the fact that it was simply to find out more about Spencer for her investigation.

As she stepped through the doors, she wasn't sure what to expect. She hadn't gotten a chance to say goodbye to anyone before she left, her parents insisting it would be easier that way. What would they think now that she had returned?

Molly didn't recognize the first several people she encountered, though she wasn't surprised. It had been ten years since the last time she had been there.

As she approached the doors to the sanctuary, she heard Sarah say, "Hey there, Molly."

She turned to find her friend approaching. Sarah greeted her with a warm smile. "I'm glad you came today."

"Thanks. It seems like this place hasn't changed much," Molly observed, glancing around the church, noting the only differences were a few modern pictures and new paint job.

"Not on the surface, but Pastor Joseph retired four years ago. A new pastor took over, Pastor Matt. He has really brought in a younger crowd, adding life into the church. I think you'll enjoy his sermon today."

Molly was surprised to hear there was a new pastor. Part of her hoped Sarah was right and she would enjoy the service. Nothing was worse than sitting through a scare-tactic lecture about hellfire and sin.

"I need to head in and find my parents," Molly explained. "I'll catch up with you later."

Sarah nodded as Molly pushed through the doors and headed into the sanctuary. On the other side, she not only found her parents, but Spencer as well. They were standing together talking as she approached them.

“Your dad was just telling me that you were coming today,” Spencer said with excitement. “I was glad to hear it.”

“I figured since I was in town, I could come check it out.”

“To be honest, we were surprised when you told us you were coming,” Beverly stated as she took a seat. “I know you stopped going to church after you moved. Every time I brought up you finding a church in Seattle, you shut me down.”

Molly shrugged. “That’s because I was angry.” She glanced at Spencer and then added, “Lately, that’s changed. I’ve come to realize things aren’t always what they seem.”

“I have to go out and help get everything ready for the offering, but I’ll be back to sit with you afterward,” Spencer said, as he patted her arm before taking off.

“Does he serve every week?” Molly asked with curiosity.

Her parents nodded. “Like clockwork,” her father confirmed.

The musicians took to the stage and the lights dimmed in the room. Everyone turned to face the stage as the worship music started. After the first song, the ushers came forward and they passed the offering baskets down the rows.

Molly watched Spencer, noting he was friendly to everyone. He genuinely seemed to be enjoying himself. It didn’t seem to be a façade.

By the end of the third song, Spencer had returned and took the empty seat next to Molly. Two songs followed that before the worship time ended. A man with brown-hair and a beard—Molly assumed it was Pastor Matt—took to the stage.

He smiled at the crowd as he took his position behind the wooden pulpit. He placed his Bible on it as he picked up the microphone.

“I want to thank all of you for joining us today. Over the past couple of weeks, I’ve been talking with you about letting go of the past. I know, it’s not as easy as it sounds, but the truth is, we don’t have to hold onto our past hurts. God wants us to give our pain to Him so that He can free us from it. He doesn’t want us to hold on to what we have lost, or what has hurt us. God doesn’t expect us to get it right the first time. His grace allows us infinite do-overs. In that same way, we have to forgive one another and realize, sometimes, God gives us a second chance because we’re not ready the first time.”

Molly was caught off guard by the sermon. She had no idea his message was about second chances. Did Spencer plan this? A quick glance in his direction confirmed from his expression, he was just as surprised by the message as she was.

Had she been so focused on proving Spencer wasn’t a good person, she’d overlooked the fact that he really had changed? If that was the case, if she wasn’t careful, she could lose out on trying to make it work with the only man she ever loved.

* * *

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

After the service ended, Spencer and Molly went back into the lobby of the church. He couldn't keep his eyes off of her. She looked gorgeous in her teal blouse and black jeans.

"I can't believe what Pastor Matt ended up talking about today," Spencer stated. "I had no idea it would be about second chances."

"Me either, but it reminds me of when I was young. I used to come to church, but after what happened with us back in high school, I quit. I was just so angry, and I didn't know where to put that anger, so I blamed God rather than ask Him to help me deal with it. I realize now, I handled it all wrong."

"It's not your fault. If I hadn't done what I did, or if I had done what I should have, you wouldn't have gotten hurt."

"That's true, but life doesn't always go the way you planned. Getting hurt is part of life, but how you choose to deal with it is what matters."

"You know, it's never too late to return to God. He's ready whenever you are," Spencer said with a smile.

"I know, and for the first time, I feel like I might be ready," Molly admitted.

Sarah and Greg came up to them, both grinning as Sarah asked, "You want to go out to lunch with us?"

Molly turned to Spencer, "What do you think?"

“I’m game if you are.”

“We’re in,” Molly stated. “Where are we going?”

“How about Ruby’s?” Sarah suggested.

“Not like there’s a lot of other options,” Greg said with a snicker.

“Great,” Spencer said. “How about we meet you there in a half hour. I need to finish up a few things around here before we head out.”

“And I need to let my parents know where I’m going,” Molly added.

The siblings took off, leaving Molly and Spencer to go take care of what they needed to. After about fifteen minutes, they both returned to the lobby.

“I can give you a ride if you want,” Spencer offered.

“Sure,” Molly said as he opened the door for her. They headed out of the church. “Let me just go run my mom’s keys to her.”

Once in the parking lot, Spencer pointed to a Honda Civic. “That’s my ride there.”

She let out a laugh as he helped her climb into the passenger side. “This is a way more sensible car than your Camaro.”

“Yes, I know. I decided to get a car that got better gas mileage,” he said, shutting the door behind her.

Spencer climbed in on the other side, started the engine, and put the car in drive.

“I never thought I would see the day that Spencer Conrad was rocking a sedan.”

“What can I say, I grew up.”

Molly looked over at him and said, “I can see that. It’s becoming more apparent every time I’m with you.”

He put on the local pop-rock station, and they both sang along to the songs that came on the radio. A few minutes later, they arrived at the diner.

The siblings were inside waiting for them, sitting at a table towards the back of the eatery. They waved, calling Molly and Spencer over.

“We know you both like iced tea, so we ordered you each one,” Sarah said, gesturing to their glasses, “but we waited to order food until you got here.”

“Thanks,” Molly said, taking a seat across from Sarah, who was sitting next to Greg.

Spencer sat next to Molly, then took a sip of his tea before picking up his menu.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

The meal passed by pleasantly as they talked about the reunion, church, and their jobs.

“My boss keeps holding out hope I was kidding about going on my volunteer trip. He’s really worried he won’t be able to find someone to replace me.”

“Where do you work?” Molly asked, with curiosity.

“Oh, I can’t believe I never told you that,” Sarah said with surprise. “I work for the high school. I got my teaching degree a few years back.”

“What subject?”

“She’s one of the English teachers, and she also teaches journalism and runs the newspaper,” Greg answered with pride.

“Really? That’s impressive,” Molly stated. “I’ve always admired people who want to teach. I even thought about it for a time myself, but ended up writing online instead.”

“I was wondering if you need any more help with the auction for the Boys and Girls Club dinner?” Greg asked Spencer.

“Sure, I can always use an extra set of hands,” Spencer said with gratitude. “You want to meet me at the restaurant at Meadows Inn tomorrow at 5? The rest of the volunteers will arrive there at that time.”

“I’ll be there,” Greg said. “Anything to help the kids out.”

“And I’ll be there for the dinner and auction,” Sarah stated. “I would come help out, but it’s end of the quarter and I have way too much on my plate as it is.”

“Don’t worry about it, Sarah,” Spencer excused her. “I know you would come early if you could. I’m just glad you will be there for the rest of the evening.”

They finished their meals and said their goodbyes before everyone exited the diner. As Spencer drove Molly home, he debated about how to broach inviting her as his date to the dinner.

Deciding just to go for it, Spencer asked, “I was wondering if you would go as my date to the dinner we were talking about earlier. It’s a great cause for the kids, and I think you would enjoy it.”

Molly seemed to think about it for a moment before she answered. “I think I can make it. What time should I get there?”

“The event starts at 6:30. I’d pick you up, but I have to be there early to set up the silent auction.”

“That’s okay. I totally understand. It’s great that you volunteer to help kids. I wouldn’t want to get in the way of that.”

Spencer turned off the engine to his car, and started to get out to walk her to the door. Before he managed to, Molly said, “Don’t worry about escorting me to my door. I got this.”

“All right,” Spencer said with disappointment.

He had hoped he would get a chance to kiss Molly, but this was the second time he was blocked from kissing her. Perhaps, it just wasn’t the right time.

Spencer watched as Molly sashayed up the sidewalk and steps to her parents' house. He didn't get to kiss her yet, but it didn't mean it couldn't happen tomorrow. Spencer had learned to be a patient man.

Molly dabbed on the last of her perfume, then pulled her hair forward around her neck to frame her face.

She turned sideways, glancing at the burgundy dress in the mirror. It wasn't exactly her style with the flower pattern and tiny rhinestones along the neckline, but beggars couldn't be choosers. She was just grateful her mother had a dress that fit her.

She slipped on her black heels and grabbed her matching clutch. Her phone buzzed on the vanity. With a glance at the screen, she knew she had to take the call.

"Hello, Bernie, I got your voicemail, but I didn't have a chance to call you back."

"Obviously," her boss said on the other end, "or I'm sure you would have called me back immediately."

Molly could tell from his tone that he was perturbed. It wasn't like her to stay dark while working an investigation, so he must have figured something was up. It explained the phone call and the attitude.

"What can I do for you, Bernie?" Molly asked, trying to keep her own tone casual.

"You can finish up this story and get yourself back here to Seattle," Bernie demanded. "I have another story brewing, and I want you on it."

"I'm moving as fast as I can. It's a delicate situation, and I don't want to mess it up."

There was a heavy sigh on the other end before her boss said, “You know, when I first decided to assign this story to you, I thought your connection to the town and the fact you went to high school with Conrad would prove useful. Now, I’m beginning to think sending you there was a mistake.”

“It’s not,” Molly stated defensively. “I’ll get the story, and it’ll be the best one I’ve ever written for you.”

“You better, and I want it in three days. If you end up botching this one, I won’t hesitate to can you. Reporters are a dime a dozen. There’s tons of bloggers and writers wanting to make a name for themselves,” he warned.

“I understand,” Molly said, forcing herself to keep the apprehension out of her voice.

The silence on the other end let Molly know her boss ended the call without saying goodbye. He wasn’t much for pleasantries. A holdout from the old days of printed news, Bernie Watts was tough but fair.

He had won his fair share of awards. It was the very reason Molly had taken the job as one of his field reporters. She had wanted to learn from the best. Unfortunately, he had a reputation of running through reporters like scissors through paper.

Molly was going to do whatever was necessary to get the story on Conrad. She didn’t want to be Bernie’s next causality.

Her phone buzzed again and she got ready to argue with Bernie. When she looked at the screen, Molly realized it was Spencer calling instead of her boss. She waffled on whether to answer, and decided there was no upside to spending more time with him. She hit the ignore button. For good measure, she quickly texted him that something came up and she wasn’t going to be able to accompany him to the dinner.

As soon as she sent the text, she regretted it. What was wrong with her? Part of her wanted a second chance with Spencer, but her heart kept throwing up roadblocks in an attempt to keep from getting hurt again.

Her mind drifted back to the aftermath from the last time she had let herself open up to someone.

“You ready to head out?” her Uncle Craig asked as he loaded her last box into the car.

Molly nodded her head as she took one last look at her house before climbing into the back of her aunt and uncle’s Ford Explorer. Her parents waved as they pulled out of the driveway.

She couldn’t believe her parents were making her move away. Her father said it was for her own good, but she wondered how good it could be to leave everything she loved and knew during the middle of her senior year. She had wanted to argue with them when they told her they had made the arrangements for her to move, but all the fight had been sucked out of her when Tiffany had attacked her in the hall two days prior.

“Are you all right, Molly?” her Aunt Susan asked with concern. “I know this is difficult, but you’ll like living in Seattle. There’s so much to do and see. I already have plans to take you to a couple of museums as well as some great hiking trails I looked up.”

Molly knew she should be grateful her aunt was trying to give her a pep talk, but it didn’t penetrate the thick wall of pain residing in her heart. Instead of responding, she turned her head to look out the window.

That was a mistake. As they pulled out of the driveway, she saw her mother crying

into her father's shoulder. He was patting her back, but lifted his hand to wave goodbye with a disappointed look on his face.

Molly couldn't muster the effort to wave in return. The last image she had as she left Bayfield was of inconsolable parents.

Her phone buzzed and she looked down to see several texts flowing in from Spencer, all of them asking her to respond or call him back.

No matter how much she wanted to let Spencer in, she couldn't help but remember how hard it had been to get over the pain of what he did to her. It took six months for her just to get comfortable living with her aunt and uncle, then another six months to work up the courage to sign up for college classes. She distrusted people so much, she never made friends. She even picked a major based on this distrust. She knew being an online reporter would mean she would have very little contact with people, and when she did, it would be strictly business.

Molly put the phone away and started to get out of her clothes. No point in staying in her mom's dress when she wasn't going anymore.

* * *

Spencer couldn't believe the text from Molly. As he stared at the screen, he wondered what he did wrong. He had thought they were making progress, and that she was finally starting to trust him again. Her dismissive words though, proved otherwise.

The Mariner's Club was bustling with commotion. The volunteers were adding the final touches for the fundraiser, but Spencer would have given anything to be alone at the moment.

He sat down in one of the chairs, wilting into it like a deflating balloon. Impulsively, he sent up a silent prayer, asking God to help him figure out what to do.

"A last-minute auction item came in. We wanted to know where you would like us to put it..." Greg stopped talking as he got closer to Spencer. A concerned look crossed his face as he asked, "Are you all right? You look like you just got some bad news."

"I did. Molly just texted me and told me she couldn't make it tonight."

"Did she say why?"

Spencer nodded. "Molly said she needed distance, that it was too hard being around me."

Greg sat down in the chair across from Spencer. "You want to pray about it?"

"Thanks, I already did, but it can't hurt to do it again."

Both men closed their eyes and Greg started to pray. “Dear Lord, please help my friend, Spencer. Show him what he should do. He cares about Molly, but He wants to be within Your will. Guide him towards it as Your way is always best. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.”

Greg stood up and said, “Don’t worry about the auction item. I’ll take care of it.” Gesturing towards the door, he added, “You have more important things to do.”

“Like what?” Spencer asked with confusion.

“Like going after your girl. Don’t let Molly’s fear keep you apart. It was awful what happened to her in high school—and yes, you were the cause of it—but you are a changed man. Everyone sees this, even Molly, but she’s just too afraid to admit it.”

Spencer jumped to his feet, saying, “You’re right. I’m going to go to her parents’ house and convince her it’s time she takes a chance on me.”

“There you go, friend,” Greg said, patting Spencer on the back. “Go get her.”

Spencer rushed out of the inn, into his waiting car, and drove the short distance over to Molly’s parents’ place. The whole time he prayed for God to give him the right words to say when he got there.

He parked in front of the house and looked at the door anxiously. “You got this, Spencer. You and Molly are meant to be. You just have to help her open her heart and take a chance again.”

He made his way up the path and rang the doorbell. A few seconds passed before the door opened to reveal Mrs. Price. She looked shocked to see him, but gave him a tentative smile anyway.

“What are you doing here, Spencer?” she asked with confusion. “Molly told us she wasn’t going tonight.”

“I know. She sent me a text. I was hoping I might be able to talk with her and convince her to change her decision.”

The older woman shrugged. “Good luck. Molly is pretty stubborn once she’s made up her mind.” She stepped aside and let him inside, as she added, “I’ll go get her.”

Spencer glanced around the entry hall of the Price home. There were collages of family portraits from when the kids were young, along with nature photos with Bible scriptures on them. “I have plans to prosper you and not to harm you,” one of them read. It warmed Spencer’s heart as the words drifted through his mind and settled in his spirit.

“What are you doing here?” Molly asked in an accusing tone. “I told you I wasn’t going tonight.”

“I know you did, but I let you walk out of my life once without fighting for you; I’m not doing that again.” He moved towards her and took her hands in his own. “I’m here to show you this is serious for me. I’m not giving up on the possibility of us. I won’t quit like I did last time. Just give me a second chance.”

Her face scrunched up as she stepped back a bit from him. “I don’t know how to do this, Spencer. I’m so scared. When things ended badly between us, I never fully recovered. I never let anyone get close again because I was too afraid.”

“Molly, you can’t live your life always waiting for the other shoe to drop. Sometimes, you have to trust that good things can happen too.”

“I want to believe that, Spencer, honestly I do. I’m just not sure how to make

myself.”

“You ask God to help you. Believe me, if He could help me, He can help anyone. Everyone keeps saying I’ve changed, but it’s not because of anything I did. It’s because of what I let God do in me.”

Molly bit her lip as she stared at Spencer for several moments. “I know you’re right. I’ve felt God calling me back to Him for some time now. I’ve just been too stubborn to admit I was wrong to walk away from my relationship with Him.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

“It’s okay,” Spencer assured her. “He doesn’t put a clock on our decision.”

“Do you mind praying with me?” Molly asked.

“I’d be honored too.” He closed his eyes and squeezed Molly’s hands. “Dear Lord, right now we come to You and ask You to help Molly. You can help us with our deepest hurts and darkest fears, all we need to do is give them over to You. She’s willing to do that now, God, so please take her burdens from her and give her peaceful assurance. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.”

“Thank you,” she said as tears formed in the corners of her eyes. “If you had told me last week that I would end up back in Bayfield praying with Spencer Conrad, I would have told you the possibility of lightning striking me would happen first.”

He chuckled with a shake of his head. “Life has an interesting way of working out, that’s for sure.” Releasing her hands, he looked at her sweats and t-shirt and asked, “You think you can get ready in twenty minutes?”

She glanced down at her outfit and smiled. “I’m a news reporter, getting ready in a flash is my specialty.” She started to turn away to head back down the hall.

Before she got too far though, Spencer reached out and grabbed her arm. “I need to tell you one last thing.”

She paused and arched an eyebrow at him. “What’s that?”

“I want you to know, I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you from getting hurt again.”

Molly nodded as she said, “I don’t know why—and I hope I don’t regret it someday—but I believe you.”

Spencer felt peace as he watched Molly head down the hall. It might be a long road to get to a place of trust with Molly, but he couldn’t ask for a better traveling companion.

Molly's inner child was bursting with joy as she walked beside Spencer down the pier. At the end, she could see the Mariner's Club twinkling an invitation to come closer.

"I can't believe you picked the one place I always wanted to go to as an adult. I daydreamed about eating lots of little appetizers and dancing the night away," Molly confessed.

"Then I'm glad I get to be the one to make that dream come true," Spencer said, as he reached out and took Molly's hand. "We're going to do plenty of both tonight."

Their hands fit together perfectly; just like they did when they were adolescents. The warmth from his touch moved up her arm and filled her heart.

As they walked into the club, the volunteers greeted them. A few rushed up to Spencer to ask about auction items and decorations, showing that he didn't just put his name on the fundraiser, but was involved with the details.

"Spencer, we have a huge problem," Greg said, coming up to them. He glanced at Molly, and said quickly, "Hey there, Molly. I'm glad you could make it, but do you mind if I steal Spencer for a few minutes?"

"Of course not," she said, gesturing for them to leave. "Go take care of whatever it is you need."

“You’re sure? You’ll be here when I get back, right?” Spencer asked skeptically, “because I’m sure whatever it is, I can probably just tell Greg—”

She shook her head. “Don’t worry about me. I’m not going anywhere.”

After Spencer disappeared, Molly glanced around the room, trying to figure out what she could do to pass the time until he returned. Most of the people didn’t look familiar to Molly until she laid eyes on Allison Pratt. They had gone to high school together. Though they hadn’t run in the same social circles, they didn’t have any problems either.

Not only did she know her from when they were young, but she also had come across the fact during her researching this story that Allison was Spencer’s paralegal. Maybe Molly could talk with Allison about Spencer and see if she had any pertinent information about his dealings at work. The closer she got to Spencer, the more she hoped her boss was wrong, and there was no evidence to support the allegations of corruption.

Molly made her way over and said, “Hello, Allison.”

As the other woman turned towards Molly, her smiling disposition turned to one of disdain once she realized who was greeting her.

“What do you want?” she asked with irritation.

Molly was shocked by the open hostility from the other woman. She had no idea there was a problem between them.

“I was wondering if I could talk with you for a few minutes.”

Allison’s face bunched up in disgust. “I don’t think that’s the best idea. I work with

Spencer.”

“I don’t know why that would be a problem. I came with him tonight,” Molly explained.

“Exactly, you being here with him is unacceptable. I can’t believe he’s stupid enough to start spending time with you again, let alone bring you to an event this important. I mean, it’s one thing to slum around in private, but to do it in such a public venue is beyond me. I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt when I heard you were first back in town, but then you flaunted yourself all over town and at the reunion. Tiffany warned me not to trust you, so you might as well save your breath.”

And now it all made sense. The reason Allison was treating her with such hostility stemmed from Tiffany. Not surprising, because she had a way of getting to everyone.

Molly tried to force down the anger rising inside her. Allison was turning out to be more difficult to question than she first anticipated, but Molly had dealt with her fair share of problematic sources. She decided to use a compliment to try to diffuse the other woman, knowing any friend of Tiffany’s would most likely be vain.

“I can understand how you feel, but I was only coming over here to tell you I love your dress. It compliments you so much,” Molly stated, glad she was able to tell the truth. Allison did have a good figure and had picked a dress to enhance the fact.

“And what’s your point? Do you think I care any little bit about your opinion?” Allison stated as she crossed her arms. “Why don’t you just run along,” she added dismissively, before turning away.

Realizing she wasn’t getting anywhere with Allison, she decided it was best to end the endeavor and look for someone else to question. She talked to three more people, and ended up hearing the exact same thing from all of them. Spencer was a great guy,

and an even better public defender.

Did that mean the information her boss gave her was invalid? There had been specific cases with data to back it up. Spencer had the highest acquittal rate in the state, which made Molly wonder how it was possible. He was either lucky, good at his job, or succeeded in doing so by cutting corners. She wasn't any closer to figuring out which one was the truth since she had returned to Bayfield.

Molly headed to the nearest table and took a seat. She felt like she had whiplash from the tongue lashing she just received from Allison. She needed a break before she ventured to talk with anyone else about Spencer tonight.

Over the next half hour, guests arrived for the event, including many prominent people from Bayfield. There was the mayor who held the position for the past twenty years, the local television news anchor, and the district attorney, as well as Pastor Matt and his wife.

People were meandering around, looking at the auction items and placing their silent bids. Molly decided to get up and take a look at the different offerings.

There were over twenty items, but the most impressive big ticket items were along the center wall.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

A ski trip to Clear Mountain Resort in Colorado

A gold bracelet and necklace from Star Jewelry

Horseback riding lessons in West Linn, Oregon

A Kindle Reader with a year of Kindle Unlimited Subscription

A couples' spa package at Meadows Inn

Dinner for two at Posh Steakhouse in Seattle

Molly hadn't expected such expensive items and trips to be up for grabs. Spencer must have a lot of connections to gather up such enticing offerings.

"You ready to grab a seat?" she heard Spencer say from behind her.

She swirled around to find him only inches away. His nearness made Molly uncomfortable, but in a good way.

"Sure, lead the way."

He guided Molly over to a table in the front of the room. He held out a chair for her, then pushed it in behind her.

"You're going to love the band I hired to play tonight," Spencer said with a grin.

One of her eyebrows quirked as she inquired, “Why? Who is it?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see. I have to get up and welcome everyone, but I’ll be right back.”

Spencer made his way into the center of the room. He looked out on the gathered group of people as he made a clearing noise in his throat. Everyone turned towards him, giving their undivided attention.

“Good evening, friends. I’m so glad you decided to come out tonight for our annual dinner to support the Boys and Girls Club here in Bayfield,” Spencer said into the microphone he was using. “This is the fifth year, and over that time, we have raised enough money to completely remodel the rec room, the gymnasium, and refurbish the pool. The kids have told me on countless visits how grateful they are for us investing in them. Your belief in and support of this organization will impact hundreds of at-risk youth. By being here tonight and participating in the silent auction, each of you are helping change Bayfield for the better. I want to thank you on behalf of every child that passes through the doors of the club. Enjoy your meal, and don’t take off before you have a chance to dance later this evening.”

There was clapping and cheers by the guests as Spencer took his seat again. The waiters came out and placed the steak and baked potato dinners in front of each person.

Everyone at their table dug in to their meals and staggered taking bites of food with conversing about work and family.

Sarah arrived a little late, but she had texted and asked Molly to make sure she was seated at their table.

“It’s good to see you.” Sarah leaned down and hugged Molly, before taking her seat

next to her.

“You too,” Molly said in return. “I’m glad you were able to make it.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it. The Boys and Girls Club is so important to the community of Bayfield. Spencer has really turned it around since he became the head of the board a couple of years back. Plus, he volunteers there a couple of times a week along with my brother.”

Molly had known his name was on the board, but she hadn’t been sure how involved he truly was. She was impressed to find out that he did more than just work on policies and procedures, but cared about the kids as people, not just numbers.

“Can you guys stop talking about me like I’m not here,” Spencer leaned over and whispered. “It’s pretty awkward to hear people talking about you.”

Both women’s eyes grew wide with shock. Sarah turned to Molly and laughed, causing Molly to join in.

They finished up the meal, and then Spencer got up and announced the auction winners. Each person who had the winning bid, stood up with excitement. After that, the raffle prizes were drawn and awarded.

“I want to thank all of you for coming out again tonight, but the night isn’t over. We still have a candy bar and dessert buffet for you to enjoy along with dancing and a live performance by our special guests, the local band,Blindside.”

Molly couldn’t believe her eyes as she watched her favorite band of all time come onto the stage. They shook hands with Spencer before they got into position and started to play.

The familiar melodic sound of Branded Hearts came through the speakers. Instantly, Molly found herself humming along to the beat. What a wonderful surprise.

* * *

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

Spencer moved towards Molly like a magnet being attracted to its partner. She was glowing with happiness as her eyes were fixed on the band. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and he couldn't wait to hold her in his arms.

He reached out his hand to her as he asked, "May I have this dance?"

Molly turned towards him, her eyelashes fluttering as she looked up at him. "Of course," she said, placing her hand in his, and allowing him to pull her to her feet.

He escorted her onto the dance floor just as the second verse of the slow song started.

"I haven't had a chance to tell you how beautiful you look tonight," Spencer whispered as he pulled her close. "It was all I could do to not stare at you the whole time I was speaking."

Her face tinged pink as she smiled. "You look pretty handsome yourself tonight. I'm still not used to you in suits though. When we were young, you either wore jeans and a t-shirt or your football uniform." She tilted her head and smirked, "I guess the suits are an improvement now that I think about it."

He chuckled with a smile. "You're one to judge. You always wore skinny jeans and shirts with ironic statements on them. If you think about it, you had way worse fashion sense than me."

Playfully, she slapped him on the side of the arm. "Hey now, you're supposed to be charming while you're trying to win me back."

The smile vanished from his face as he stared deep into her emerald eyes. “Is that what’s going on? Am I winning you back?”

Molly pressed her lips together and he could feel the tension in her body. “Yes,” she whispered barely loud enough for him to hear.

That one word made Spencer’s heart fill with joy. He had dreamed of this moment for years, but never thought it would actually come to be. Molly Price was in his arms telling him they had a second chance.

“You don’t know how happy hearing that makes me,” Spencer said, just as the song ended.

Everyone on the dance floor stopped and clapped as the lead singer of the band spoke between songs.

“I want to thank Spencer and the rest of the Boys and Girls Club board for inviting us here tonight to play a few songs for you. When I was a kid, there wasn’t a lot of safe things to do around Bayfield, so I appreciate the time and work of the dedicated volunteers who are making a place where kids can feel safe while having fun. This next song, Only You, is going out to Molly from Spencer.”

Molly’s eyes darted to Spencer as she gasped. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“It’s your favorite song, right? I still remember the first time you played it for me out by the lake. It’s one of my best memories.”

Tears formed in the corner of her eyes as he gathered her into his arms.

She shook her head and said with amazement, “Thank you so much. I feel so special.”

“Then all of this was worth it. The regular band will be playing the rest of the evening, but I’m friends with the drummer ofBlindsided, so I asked them to come do this for you.”

“I’m starting to see you’ve really changed. The old Spencer never would have gone to all this trouble, let alone make a public proclamation that he cared enough to dedicate a song to me.”

“I really have changed, Molly, and I’m glad you’re starting to see that.”

Spencer spun Molly around the floor, loving the feeling of her in his arms. Several times, he wanted to lean in and kiss her, but he wondered if she would be upset if he did it front of everyone.

The night was wrapping up and the last song was playing. Molly shifted her hand from his shoulder to the front of his chest. Her eyes locked with his, and the intensity pushed all rational thought out of his mind. He didn’t care who was watching or how anyone would react, he was going to kiss Molly Price.

His face started to move towards hers, but just as their lips were about to touch, Tiffany’s obnoxious voice said from behind them, “Oh gross, tell me you’re not about to kiss her, Spencer.”

Molly jerked back and the moment was ruined. He was halfway tempted to turn around and yell at Tiffany, but decided against it. He didn’t want to make a spectacle during the event.

Instead, he irritably faced her and asked, “What do you want, Tiffany?”

“I want you to dance with me, for old time’s sake,” she said, reaching out and placing her hand on his arm. “We used to dance really good together, don’t you remember

that Spencer?”

His stomach turned at the innuendo in Tiffany’s statement. Why couldn’t she take ‘no’ for an answer? “When are you going to realize I’m not interested in being with you, Tiffany?”

“Don’t say that,” she snapped. “I know you don’t mean it.”

Molly reached out and removed Tiffany’s hand from Spencer. “He said he isn’t interested, which means you’re wasting your time. Why don’t you do us all a favor, and leave us alone.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

Spencer was surprised to see Molly standing up to Tiffany for the first time. It appeared he wasn't the only one who had changed.

"What are you going to do? Make me?" Tiffany challenged Molly.

"No, I don't resort to childish tactics to get my way," Molly stated through narrowed eyes. "You should grow up and back off. Learn the lesson you don't always get your way."

Tiffany placed her hands on her hips as she glared at Molly. "You're just so smug, aren't you? Just remember, Spencer isn't great at being faithful. Good luck with that," she said, before turning around and storming off.

Spencer was worried Tiffany's words would cause Molly to put distance between them and undo all the progress they had made towards reconciling.

"Tell me she didn't get to you," Spencer pleaded.

"She didn't," Molly stated, shaking her head. "I know who you are, Spencer Conrad, and I don't care what anyone else thinks."

Her vote of confidence made Spencer's heart swell with pride. Wanting to be alone with her, Spencer asked, "You ready to get out of here?"

She nodded as he took her hand and guided her to the coat check to grab their jackets along with Spencer's umbrella. As they stepped outside, small drops of rain sprinkled down. Spencer pulled out his umbrella and put it over their heads. They rushed

towards his car, but before he opened the door, he turned to her and said, “I’m proud of you for what you did in there. You standing up to Tiffany has been a long time coming.”

“Agreed,” Molly said. “You did it last time at the reunion, but I don’t want to hide behind you. She needs to know she doesn’t scare me anymore.”

“It was really attractive when you took her hand and flicked it off me,” he said, moving even closer to her. “I like it when you’re possessive over me.”

“Good, I plan to be that way from now on.”

“You won’t hear me complain,” he whispered as he stared at her. “You know, when I look into your eyes, it’s like coming home.”

Unable to resist any longer, Spencer closed the remaining distance between them. Molly placed her hand on his chest, then he placed his own over hers. “Can I kiss you?” he asked hesitantly.

She whispered, “Yes,” just before his lips touched hers. The kiss was tender, and the sound of the raindrops hitting the umbrella and sliding down and around them made the moment perfect.

As Spencer helped Molly into the car, he realized he was done for. Molly Price was the only woman he had ever, and would ever, love.

10

After kissing Spencer the night before, Molly went to bed conflicted over how to handle her investigation into his career. A restless night of sleep didn't help anything.

As she ate breakfast, she made a decision she was going to change tactics. Rather than try to find out if the allegations were true, she was going to try to prove they were false.

Even if her boss got mad, she would rather know she fought for Spencer instead of letting him go down for something he didn't do.

Molly started to form a plan in her head. She could go to Spencer's office and poke around. If she noticed anyone there was acting odd or had a vendetta against Spencer, it could explain what was going on.

Molly rinsed off her plate and mug with soapy water in the sink, then set them in the drying rack.

"What are you doing today?" her mother asked from behind Molly.

"I thought I would go surprise Spencer with coffee this morning," Molly said as she dried her hands on the kitchen towel by the side of the sink.

Her mother frowned and shook her head.

"What is it?" Molly inquired. "I can tell you have something on your mind."

“I’m just worried about you.”

“What? Why?” Molly asked with confusion.

“It’s just all starting to happen again. I was excited when you first came home, thinking maybe we could reconnect and build a closer relationship,” Beverly said with concern as she reached out and placed her hand on the side of Molly’s arm. “Then you started spending time with Spencer Conrad again. I’m worried you’re going to get wrapped up in him again. I don’t want you to lose yourself. I made the mistake of ignoring the warning signs the first time, and didn’t say anything. I won’t do it again.”

Molly gave her mom an appreciative smile. “Mom, I understand your concern, but that’s not going to happen. Spencer and I are very different people than we were in high school.” She picked up her purse, and headed towards the front door. She stopped, turned around and added, “And for the record, I want us to build a closer relationship too. It’s one of the reasons I decided to stay longer than just the weekend.”

“And what is the other reasons?” her mother probed.

“You already know the answer to that,” Molly said with a smirk. “Spencer Conrad.”

Five minutes later, Molly pulled up in front of the coffee shop and grabbed six cups of coffee along with a half a dozen muffins. She figured it couldn’t hurt to show up with an offering of good will.

Ten minutes after that, she entered the Public Defenders Bayfield downtown office. She checked in at the front desk and asked for directions to Spencer’s office. She made her way through the cubicles until she reached the hallway that lead to his office.

A brown-haired woman with glasses was sitting behind a desk in front of Spencer's office. She glanced up and gave her a smile. "Well, if it isn't Molly Price. How are you doing?"

"I'm great," Molly stated, trying to mask her confused look.

"You probably don't remember me. I'm Jane Sternman. I was a class behind you and transferred in mid-year of my sophomore year. We only went to school together for a couple of months."

"Oh, then how do you recognize me?"

The other woman raised her eyebrows, then shrugged. "Everyone who went to Bayfield High knew who you were Molly, after what happened and all. I want you to know, I think it was rotten, and more should have been done to those who did it."

"Thank you," Molly said. "Not many people are of that same opinion. It's nice to know I had at least one person on my side."

"It was more than one," Jane corrected. "Most of the people I hung out with felt the same. Everyone was just too afraid to stand up to Tiffany and her followers."

"Again, that does make me feel better about the whole thing. I always felt so alone, like no one cared what happened to me."

"So, I'm guessing you're here to see Spencer." Before Molly could question her how she knew, Jane added, "Allison told me what happened at the dinner last night. He should be back by the end of the hour. He had to go to court on a case."

Molly offered a cup of coffee and muffin to Jane who gratefully took both. "Why don't I give out the rest of these, and I can place the last set in Spencer's office."

“Sure. You can wait for him inside his office after you’re done.”

As Molly made the rounds, passing out her goodies, she casually asked questions about Spencer. Nothing useful came up, and she didn’t notice anyone who seemed upset with him.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

The fact nothing came up relieved Molly, but then she reminded herself that he was really good at keeping secrets.

Molly made her way into Spencer's office and placed the last two items on his desk. She glanced up and noticed the blinds were drawn. Good, she could quietly inspect his desk.

She rummaged through the papers, making sure to put everything back in its place. Nothing. Where else could she look? His computer might have information, but she wasn't sure if it was password protected.

A quick touch of the mouse revealed it was indeed locked. She tried several passwords including his favorite band, his team name and number, and also the street he grew up on. None of them worked. Then a thought crossed her mind. She typed her name into the screen and the screen opened to his home page.

Just as she was getting familiar with the setup, she heard the door open and Spencer question, "What are you doing?"

* * *

Spencer could tell Molly was not doing something she was proud of. She froze, her eyes darting up to meet his with a shocked look on her face.

"I was just wanting to send an email. I thought I could use your computer really quick." She let go of the mouse, then added, "But it's locked."

“That’s because most of what is on there is confidential.” He glanced at her hand and asked, “Couldn’t you use your cell phone to send an email?”

Molly averted her eyes and came around the desk. She picked up the coffee and muffin and pushed them out towards him. “I brought you a treat.”

“You can’t dodge the question like that. I’m a lawyer, remember.” He reached out, took the items, and placed them back on the desk.

Spencer didn’t like how it made him feel to find Molly poking around in his office. “Just tell me what is going on,” he urged.

Molly sat down in the chair, leaned back in it and shook her head. “I can’t keep this up anymore.”

“What’s that?” he asked, sitting down in the chair next to her. “You know you can tell me anything.”

“Not in this case. Not this time,” Molly whispered. “You’re going to hate me if I tell you.”

“I’ve known for a while something was going on that you were keeping quiet about. The reunion has been over for a couple of days and you’re still in town. Plus, I’ve had a couple of people tell me you’ve been asking really weird questions about me and my job. I think you’re investigating me, but I’m not sure why.”

Molly’s face scrunched up as she fidgeted with her hands in her lap. “There’s been an allegation of corruption tied to your name.”

“What are you talking about?” Spencer asked, confused.

“My boss received an email stating that your high success rate of acquittals is due to you working in secret with the district attorney to cut deals on certain cases to gain wins on others. He assigned me the case because he knew I was from here, and hoped I could use my connections to validate the email.”

Spencer’s face turned white as a look of hurt settled on it. “I can’t believe someone would say that. I’ve never done anything that would cause someone to make false accusations like that.”

“I’ll be honest, when I first came here, I was set on proving you did it. I was coming from a place of revenge for what you did to me back in high school. Since I’ve gotten to know you and watched you with others, I know what you care about and stand for. I know the accusation isn’t true.”

“I’m grateful for that at least, but I hate that anyone else would think that of me.”

“What I’m worried about is if anyone else finds out about this, it could ruin your reputation, not to mention cause a criminal investigation to be opened. I can do my best to keep our news outlet from publishing, but I can’t say that others won’t find out and do it instead.”

“What are my options?”

“I’m not sure. I have my tech guy looking into the original email. If I can figure out who sent it, maybe their motivation will become clear.”

“I agree. Will you let me know when you hear back from your tech guy?”

“I will.” She reached out and placed her hand on his knee. “I need to say one more thing. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. It wasn’t right for me to keep it from you, but the longer it went, the more difficult it became to tell you.”

“That’s okay. I can understand why you did what you did. I forgive you. After all, you forgave me. The least I can do is return the favor.”

“Thank you,” she said, leaning forward and placing a peck on his cheek. “I’m glad this is finally all out in the open. I hated keeping the truth from you.”

“Well, you don’t have to anymore. We’re in this together,” Spencer said, squeezing her hand. “I think we should pray.” She nodded her head as he started. “Dear Lord, we come to You now and ask You to guide us through this difficult situation. We need Your wisdom to make the right decisions, Your strength to persevere, and Your peace to keep us calm. Show us how to handle this, and what we need to do to help the truth to come out. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.”

Spencer opened his eyes and looked at Molly. Though the situation was froth with obstacles, he couldn’t help but acknowledge it was going to bring Molly and him closer together.

Molly glanced at her cell phone as she entered Ruby's Diner. She was meeting Sarah for lunch, but knew she was running late. As she approached the table, she quickly said, "I'm so sorry I'm late, Sarah. I was up late finishing up a story I needed to turn in, and the time completely got away from me."

"That's ok, Molly. Don't worry about it," Sarah said with a friendly smile. "It gave me time to catch up on social media. I ordered you a glass of iced tea," she said, gesturing to the glass on the table.

Molly removed her jacket and purse, and placed them on the back of the chair as she took her seat.

"I'm glad you suggested Ruby's. I was craving a pot pie," Molly stated. "I swear I'm going to miss them when I return to Seattle."

"Are you?" Sarah asked, with a tilt of her head. "I mean, returning to Seattle, not missing the pot pies. That's a given."

"Of course I am," Molly stated automatically. "My life's there."

"It doesn't have to be," Sarah coaxed. "You could move back to Bayfield. I know a lot of people will be happy about it, especially a certain public defender."

"Even though Spencer and I are getting close again, it doesn't mean I'm going to uproot my whole life just to be with him. Contrary to popular belief, love isn't

everything.” As soon as the word slipped out of her mouth, Molly wished she could take it back. “Scratch the ‘L’ word. We’re going to pretend I never said it.”

“Why? Is it not true?” Sarah probed.

“It was a slip of the tongue; nothing more,” Molly stated emphatically, though she wondered if she was trying to convince herself or Sarah more.

“You don’t have to be afraid, you know. Spencer’s a good guy, and you can trust him.”

“Everyone keeps saying that, but it’s hard when you’ve been burnt once already. Don’t get me wrong, the more I get to know him again, the more I realize it’s true. I just don’t know if I will ever be able to completely let my walls down with him.”

“You’re right; you can’t. There is something you can do though.”

“What’s that?” Molly asked.

“You need to pray to God, and ask Him to help you let down your walls,” Sarah explained. “God can do anything, and He wants to help you. All you have to do is ask.”

“I haven’t really told anyone this, but ever since I went to church the other day, I’ve been praying and reading the Bible again. I haven’t done that since I left Bayfield ten years ago.”

“That’s so good,” Sarah said with a big grin. “Next time you pray, ask God. I promise, you won’t regret it.”

Molly knew Sarah was right. She had been trying to do it all on her own, but she

wasn't designed to navigate life that way. No person is an island; she needed to let other people, and most importantly, she needed to let God, be a real part of her life.

"Thanks, Sarah. I really needed to hear that. I have to go to the restroom," Molly said standing up. "I'll be right back."

She headed towards the back of the diner, and entered the restroom. Both stalls were in use, so she moved over to the sink to check her makeup. She placed her purse on the counter, and then leaned in towards the mirror.

Molly turned her head from side-to-side, inspecting her face. "I definitely need to powder my nose," she mumbled to herself, opening her purse to look for her compact.

A silver USB drive caught her attention. She pulled it out, and looked at it skeptically. "Where did you come from?" she asked herself in a perplexed tone. "You're not mine, so who put you in my purse."

She glanced back in her purse and noticed a folded piece of paper that was also unfamiliar. Molly unfolded it and read the contents.

Spencer Conrad is not what he seems. The information on this drive links him to underhanded dealings with the district attorney. He shouldn't get away with what he's been doing. It's your job to make him pay for his unethical behavior.

The note didn't have a signature and had been typed. What was going on?

Molly shoved both items into her purse, and instead of using the restroom, she exited the area and made a beeline to Sarah. She slipped into her seat, her arms folded across her chest in a protective manner.

“What’s wrong?” Sarah asked with trepidation. “You look like you’re going to pass out.”

She debated whether or not to confide in Sarah. On the one hand, she trusted her opinion, but on the other hand, Sarah was good friends with Spencer. What if she told him before Molly could figure out what was on the drive? If he found out before she got to the bottom of it, he would have the heads up to try to erase his tracks.

Stop it, she told herself. You know Spencer. He’s a good person and you’re jumping to the wrong conclusion.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

Molly opened her purse, pulled out the note, and handed it over to Sarah.

As soon as she was finished reading the contents, she looked up at Molly with rounded eyes. “Have you looked at the information on the drive?”

She shook her head. “No, it wasn’t in my purse this morning. Someone put it in since I’ve been here. Did you see anyone behind me acting odd?”

“I wish I could say, ‘yes,’ but I was so focused on our conversation, I didn’t pay attention to anyone else.” Sarah’s brows came together in a furrow as she asked, “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to take this drive back to my parents’ house and look at the information on my laptop. Then I’m going to take it to my tech guy to see if he can get to the bottom of it.”

“I have to tell you; I don’t think any of this is true. Something fishy is going on.”

“I think you’re right, but if I don’t do something about this, there’s a good chance whoever gave it to me will just find someone else to give it to. The next person might not look into it before publishing the content.”

“All right, I support whatever you think is best. I can tell you really care about Spencer, so I’ll let you be the one to tell him about it.”

“Considering the turn of events, I think I need to look into this immediately.”

Sarah nodded. "Please text me, and let me know what happens."

"Will do," Molly promised before standing up and exiting the diner.

Once she returned to her parents' house, she went into her room and popped the drive into the plug on her laptop.

A folder icon blinked, beckoning Molly to click it. When she did, a massive list of files appeared. They were listed by date and had either Conrad's or Jacks' names on it.

She clicked the first one and an email from Spencer Conrad to Jeremy Jacks, the district attorney, appeared. There was detailed information about a client; the type of information that if used by the district attorney, would convict the client with little effort.

Molly clicked the next one down. This one was reversed and was from the district attorney to Spencer. It had a defense strategy with an arrow next to one item. It showed that the police broke the chain of procedure when securing evidence, which meant Spencer could get the case thrown out because of it.

After working down the list of twenty emails, Molly's heart seized with dread. The evidence on the drive was overwhelming; Spencer Conrad was corrupt.

* * *

As Spencer finished his closing argument, he watched the jury members' faces to gauge their reactions. They seemed to respond positively to his evidence and emotional plea on Daryl Burke's behalf.

Even though he was unable to track down Trixie at the hotel, Spencer was able to put

together a strong case to defend his client. He just hoped the jury believed Daryl's story and the hotel clerk's testimony that he saw Daryl the night of the robbery.

Court was dismissed until the jury reached a verdict. With this type of case, the most it would take would be a couple of days, but it could be as quick as a few hours. Either way, he still had two other cases to wrap up along with a new case his boss had given him. He needed to get back to his office to make some calls.

As Spencer made his way down the aisle of the courtroom, he noticed Molly sitting in the back row of seats. She stood up as he approached.

"Here to see me slay a legal dragon?" Spencer joked with a grin. Her somber expression quickly caused him to turn serious. "What's the matter?"

"I need to speak with you," she glanced around at the lingering court personnel, "alone."

"Okay, but you're starting to worry me," he stated as they made their way out of the courtroom and out to his car. "Is everything all right?"

"Not really," she said with a shake of her head. "It has to do with the allegations against you."

"Did your tech guy find something out?"

"He's still working on it, but I'm going to have to take something to him right away."

"What's that?" Spencer asked with concern.

"Here, read for yourself," she said, handing him the note.

As soon as he was done reading the contents, he handed it back to her. “Did you take a look at the drive?”

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

She nodded. “It had a lot of evidence that makes you look guilty.”

“Well, you know it’s not true, right?” Spencer asked, hoping Molly still believed in him.

“Part of me does, but you need to see the evidence for yourself.” She swiveled her messenger bag around and pulled out her laptop. Molly switched it on, loaded the drive, and turned the screen so Spencer could see it.

He spent the next ten minutes reading through the first several emails. As he progressed down the list, he became more flabbergasted at the content and how it made him look.

“I never sent any of these emails, nor got any from the district attorney. I don’t know how, but these are forged.”

“Like I said, I’m going to take these to my tech guy, so we will know soon enough if that’s true.”

“I have a contact in the police department. It would save us from driving into Seattle,” Spencer offered.

Molly shook her head. “No way. We don’t want to involve cops. There’s a chance they could arrest and detain you based on the information.”

“Okay, we can do it your way. All I ask is that you don’t say anything to anyone about this until we get it all sorted out. I want to look into the matter myself.”

“I won’t—for now, as long as you let me help investigate. I do have to tell you Sarah knows since she was there when I got the information from the anonymous source.”

“That’s all right. I trust Sarah. I know she won’t tell anyone.”

“You ready to head to Seattle?” Molly inquired.

“Just as soon as this verdict comes back. Hopefully it will be soon, and we can head up there later tonight.”

Spencer reached out and took Molly’s hand. “In the meantime, you want to grab a cup of coffee while we wait?”

She nodded. “Only if you throw in a sandwich. I’m starving since I didn’t end up eating with Sarah at lunchtime.”

“You got yourself a deal,” Spencer said, leaning over and kissing Molly. “Thank you for believing in me.”

“We’re in this together,” Molly vowed. “We’re going to figure this out and get you exonerated.”

Spencer liked Molly’s optimism, but part of him worried what would happen if they couldn’t. Could he live under that shadow that someday the false allegations could come out? Or worse, what would happen if whoever made up the information, decided to give it to someone else besides Molly; someone who wouldn’t hesitate to publish it.

Silently, he sent up a prayer, and asked God to intervene and help him. Even though he was in the darkest part of the storm, he felt God’s presence calming the turbulence around him.

12

As they sped down the highway towards Seattle, Molly wondered what they were going to find out from her tech guy. Would he be able to prove it was all fake? For Spencer's sake, she hoped that was the case.

“Were you able to find out anything around the office?” Molly probed, hoping Spencer was able to figure out a couple of suspects.

He shook his head, his grip on the steering wheel visibly tightening. “No, there really isn't anyone that I can think of that would do this. I've never had a problem with anyone.”

“Could it be a client?”

“I guess that's possible. There's been a few that were unhappy and ended up doing more time in jail than they would have liked. It's possible after they got out, they wanted to get revenge. I just don't think any of them have the technical know-how to do it.”

“They could have hired someone,” Molly pointed out. “There's all sorts of hackers on the dark web. I did an exposé on the subject, and it's scary the type of trouble a well-versed hacker can cause with just the click of a few buttons.”

“I guess that's possible. Hopefully your tech guy can help us figure out if that's the case.”

“I’m surprised you were able to take time off to go with me. You didn’t have to, by the way. I could have done this on my own.”

“I took a personal day. I have a bunch saved up and never use them. I didn’t have any court hearings, so it was a safe day to do it.” He glanced over at her and smiled. “Besides, we agreed to do this together, remember?”

Molly nodded. “I know. I just don’t want to cause you more problems by taking you away from your job.”

“You’re not, so don’t worry about that. I’ve got it handled. We have a junior defender, Bob Perkins, who can cover anything while I’m gone.” Spencer slapped the side of the steering wheel as he added, “You might know him. We all went to high school together. He was on the football team with me.”

Molly racked her brains, but couldn’t recall him from her youth. She shook her head as she said, “Sorry, he doesn’t sound familiar. You have got to remember, the only football player I was familiar with was you. I didn’t exactly hang out with the same people as you.”

“I forget that sometimes, but it makes sense you wouldn’t know who he is. We weren’t even that close. He was the second-string quarterback and always a little envious of me.”

“Well, he had good reason to be. You’re handsome, talented, and apparently smarter than you let on when you had me tutoring you back in high school.”

Spencer chuckled. “I was lazy in school. Everything came easy for me, so when work got hard, I didn’t want to put in the effort. Since I was the star quarterback, no one wanted to press me—that is until you came along. You helped me overcome that by pushing me to do my own work. I hated it at the time, but looking back, it was

exactly what I needed.”

“It seems the change in attitude stuck with you too, since you managed to get your law degree,” Molly noted.

They continued the drive, listening to music, talking about their favorite movies, and church. The time passed quickly, and they arrived at the address programmed in the GPS before Molly knew it.

Molly climbed out of the car and came around to stand in front of a shabby, small house with peeling paint, a brown lawn, and a rusted chain-link fence.

“This is where your tech guy lives?” Spencer asked skeptically. “It looks like a location for a horror movie.”

Molly shrugged. “Hank doesn’t care much about anything that isn’t computer or internet related. It’s why he’s so good at what he does. He’s hyper-focused on it.”

They walked up the sidewalk that was covered in dirt, with weeds growing in the cracks. As they climbed the steps of the rickety porch, Molly worried Spencer was going to turn around and bolt right back to his car.

She glanced out of the corner of her eye, and was relieved to see he was standing firmly beside her. Before he could change his mind, Molly pushed the button to ring the doorbell. Nothing happened. It must have broken since the last time she was there, so Molly knocked on the door instead. When there was no response, she knocked a little harder.

Getting frustrated, and a little embarrassed about Hank’s behavior, she pulled out her phone from her purse and texted him that they were there. A few moments later, the door swung open to reveal a shaggy, blond-haired man with glasses. He was wearing

a dirty white t-shirt and sweatpants.

“Sorry I didn’t hear you knock. I had my headphones on while I was working.” He stepped back and gestured for them to enter. “Come on in.”

As they entered the house, the inside was no better than what was on the outside. There was a stack of paper plates, pizza boxes, and plastic cups all over the place. There was a thick layer of dust that coated almost everything, besides the large U-shaped desk that was in the main living room. It had four computer screens on it, each of them with different information changing and flashing across them.

Hank pulled up a couple of rolling office chairs, next to the one already there. He pushed off the books and magazines that were on them. “Go ahead and take a seat.”

Both Spencer and Molly did as he suggested. He took the seat directly in front of the screens. He turned to Molly and asked, “You got the USB drive?”

She nodded, and handed it to him. He inserted it into his computer tower, clicked away on a few buttons, and started reading the screen, which had converted from what Molly had seen originally to a black and green screen full of what appeared to her as random numbers and letters.

Hank made a couple of grunts under his breath. After a few minutes, he pointed to a line of numbers on the screen. “You see that? That’s some of the thickest security layers I’ve ever seen. Whoever put this together definitely didn’t want to be found.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

“Does that mean you can’t figure out who gave this to me?” Molly asked, discouraged.

“No, I didn’t say that. I’m saying it’s going to take some time. There’s a bunch of layers of security, along with some hacker traps and rabbit holes to mislead anyone looking for clues.”

“How much time?” Spencer inquired. “We really need to find out as quickly as possible.”

Hank gave Spencer a smug look. “Lucky for you, I’m really good at this. I can get it done in a couple of days.” He turned his attention to Molly and added, “I’ll text you once I have the information for you.”

Molly and Spencer stood up, and headed towards the door. Before they left, Molly turned to Hank and patted him on the arm. “Thanks for doing this, Hank. I owe you.”

“No problem, Molly. You’ve helped me out a few times with rent and such; you know I’m always willing to return the favor with tech support.”

As they got into the car, Spencer said, “I’m really grateful for your help. The fact you believe in me means more than you can ever know.”

“I want to figure this out, for both our sakes. I don’t want you to lose your career over lies, and I want to be able to go back to my boss and tell him that there’s no story. That it was all fabricated and a hoax.”

“You and me both,” Spencer agreed. “Here’s hoping Hank can get to the bottom of it.”

* * *

Spencer was running late—something he hated. It often happened because he didn’t know how long an appointment or court proceeding would go. Today was no exception; he was trying to make up time as he was coming from a bail hearing for one of his clients.

He had been able to get the man out, but the bail amount had been steep since it was his second offense. Twenty thousand dollars later, his client had been released into his wife’s custody until his court date.

After entering Morning Perk Coffee Shop on Main Street, he inspected the establishment for Molly. Had he gotten the time wrong? A glance at his cell phone revealed a text message telling him she was running late. She would be there in a half hour.

Spencer took a seat at the counter, figuring he could get a cup of coffee while he waited, and not take up a table in the meantime. He ordered an Americano coffee, and read his emails as he sipped the hot drink.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Molly enter the coffee shop. She was on her phone and she looked frustrated as well as distracted. He got ready to wave her over, but as she moved behind him, her conversation made his blood run cold.

“I know, Bernie. I’m doing my best. This assignment has more complications than I first suspected. You’ve got to give me a little more time.” There was a brief pause, then she continued, “No, it has nothing to do with Spencer Conrad’s good looks. I simply haven’t gotten to the bottom of the allegations, but I promise I’ll have a great

exposé for you as soon as I find out the truth. I'll get back to you with an update tomorrow."

She touched the screen to end the call, then placed the phone in her purse. As soon as she looked up and noticed Spencer, her face went white and her eyes grew round with surprise. "Have you been here the whole time?" she asked, with worry in her tone.

Slowly, he nodded his head. "I heard everything."

"It's not what you think. I haven't told my boss I'm working with you to prove your innocence because I was worried how he'll react," she said, defending herself.

"Right, and proving I'm innocent isn't nearly as juicy a story as proving I'm a corrupt public servant."

"That's not why," she stated adamantly. "I'm trying to protect you. Bernie is old school; he would pull me off the case and assign someone else if he knew I was involved with you."

Spencer was hurt, but he didn't want to let Molly know. He really thought she believed in him, but the fact she didn't tell her boss the truth made him wonder if she was feeding him what he wanted to hear to get him to trust her. Was it possible she was telling Spencer the truth about her motives for working with him, or was it all an elaborate web of lies? He couldn't figure out if she was trying to protect him or keep him close so she could manipulate him.

"Do you have feelings for me, or is this just part of your tactics when gathering information for a story?" Spencer probed, hoping she would confirm she cared about him.

"I can't believe you would ask me that. I've never kissed anyone I don't have feelings

for, let alone for a story.” She crossed her arms and added in an accusatory tone, “Besides, I’m not the one who has proven himself to be dishonest. You’re accusing me of having shady tactics, but you could be doing all of this to cover up the truth. Maybe you’re trying to keep me from finding out the allegations are valid.”

Spencer jumped to his feet, glaring at her. “How dare you. I think it’s best if I handle this on my own from here on out.”

“You’re more than welcome to do that, but I’m also going to continue on my own. It’s my duty as a journalist to report the truth,” she said firmly before turning around and leaving the coffee shop.

As he watched her walk away, he wondered if he was letting whoever set him up not only ruin his career, but his relationship with the love of his life.

The buzzing of Molly's phone woke her from her sleep. She was certain it wasn't morning, but maybe she was wrong. She fumbled around in the dark, trying to grab the glowing, vibrating nuisance. Her hand finally made contact, and she yanked the phone to her.

The clock read 1:15 AM and the name Hank flashed across the screen. Typical. He didn't think about time the way the rest of the world did, but she knew he was calling about Spencer—and despite how they ended things the day before—she needed to know the truth.

Molly answered the phone. "Hello," she croaked out, her voice scratchy from only a couple hours of sleep.

"Hey there, Molly. It's Hank."

"I know," she said, trying to keep the testiness out of her voice. "What's up? Did you get to the bottom of those files? Do you know who sent them?"

"I did. It turns out, the information is fake. It was never sent between the actual two people whose names appear on the email. It was just made to look like it had been with fake accounts and records."

"Do you know who did it?" Molly asked, sitting up in her bed.

"I think it's someone he knows. I don't have a name, but the IP address is registered

to a house in Bayfield.”

“Thanks, Hank. I’m going to get back to you in a bit, but I need to call Bernie first.”

“Okay, Molly. Just call me back if you need anything else.”

“Will do,” she said before ending the call.

She quickly clicked the icon for her boss. It rang twice and he picked up. “What is it, Molly?” he asked with a tone that made it clear he wasn’t happy. “This better be good, considering the hour.”

“It is,” she stated emphatically. “Hank was able to figure out the USB drive I was given was faked.”

“Really?” Bernie stated in shock. “I honestly thought the allegations were going to be true. There was so much evidence against Spencer Conrad.”

“It was an intricate ploy. I think someone wanted to frame Spencer to discredit his wins. How did you first get turned onto the allegations against Spencer?”

“I was sent an anonymous tip via email,” he confessed. “It looked legitimate, which is why I sent you to investigate. I figured with your connections to the town, you’d get further than any of my other reporters.”

“I need you to forward me that email, Bernie. I’m going to have Hank look into it. I think whoever sent the email, also put the USB drive in my purse. They were using us to try to get the false accusations published.”

“Be careful, Molly,” Bernie warned. “If that’s the case, this person is really set on burning Spencer Conrad to the ground. People like that are really dangerous.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. When I know more, I’ll get back to you,” she said before hanging up.

As soon as Molly received the email from Bernie, she forwarded it to Hank, asking him to look into it and see if it was connected to the files on the USB drive.

Molly tried to go back to sleep, but her mind wouldn’t rest. She couldn’t stop thinking about the fact she had destroyed her relationship with Spencer, and she had done it over a bunch of lies.

Guilt cascaded over her, and tears formed in her eyes. Why had she done that? She was scared. She had been scared since the moment she stepped foot back in Bayfield. She didn’t want to get hurt again, and it was easier to ruin their relationship before she could get hurt by it again.

The urge to pray flooded Molly. She folded her hands and spoke out loud to God. “Dear Lord, please help me. I’ve made such a mess of things. I should have trusted Spencer, and I should have trusted You. I’ve made a mess of everything, but You’re capable of fixing anything, God, so I ask You to intervene and make things right between Spencer and me.”

Her phone buzzed, causing Molly to jump slightly. She picked it up off her nightstand and looked at the screen. Hank was calling again.

“Hello,” she said with anxiousness. “So, was I right? Are they connected?”

“Your hunch was correct, Molly. The same person who sent the email, also made all the fake information on the USB drive.”

“Thanks, Hank. I owe you big for this one. You’re helping me save the man I love.” This time, she didn’t want to take back the words. She said them, and she meant

them. She loved Spencer Conrad, and she was going to do whatever it took to make things right.

She took in a deep breath, let her finger hover above the screen for a couple of seconds, then pressed the icon for Spencer. The phone rang three times before he answered.

“It’s rather late to be calling,” he said in a cold tone.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

“I know, Spencer, and I wouldn’t have done it if it wasn’t important.”

“Whyareyou calling? I thought we ended things yesterday.”

“We did, but I need to meet with you. I have some new information I need to share with you.”

There was a long pause on the other side, before he said, “Okay. How about we meet in the morning. Will 8 a.m. work over at the coffee shop?”

“Yes, I’ll see you then.”

* * *

Molly tossedand turned all night, unable to sleep with anticipation of the next day. Though she didn’t deserve it, she hoped Spencer would forgive her. Even if he didn’t, she still wanted to help him. He might not want to have a relationship with her anymore, but it didn’t change how she felt about him. Telling him the truth would be her last act of love if he never wanted to see her again.

Spencer was sitting at a table by the window. She made her way right over to him and sat down in the empty seat.

“Thanks for meeting me,” she said as she placed her purse in her lap.

“You said it was important,” Spencer stated matter-of-factly.

“It is. Hank finally got back to me late last night.”

Spencer finally seemed interested in what she was saying. He leaned forward and asked, “What did he find out?”

“That the information on the USB drive was all fake, and the same person who did it also sent the original email accusing you of unethical behavior.”

“That’s good. Is there any way you can get me copies of everything? I’m going to have to turn over the evidence to the police so they can figure out who did it.”

“Hank already knows that too, or rather, he got the address for whoever did it,” she said, pulling it out and handing it over to Spencer.

“Thanks for this,” Spencer said, standing up. “I’ll take care of it from here.”

Molly stood up and reached out to stop him from leaving. “There’s one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I need to apologize to you. I was wrong, not only in how I handled things, but by thinking the worst about you. I’ll understand if you can’t forgive me or trust me anymore.”

“I have to admit, you really hurt me yesterday, but the people you care for the deepest are able to hurt you the most. I’m not sure how all of this is going to work out between us, but I never want to live my life with a heart full of unforgiveness. I accept your apology, Molly.”

“Thank you,” she said with a smile. “I still want to help you clear your name. I think we should go to the address together.”

“Since you got me the information, I guess I owe you that much.” He gestured to the table, “Grab your purse. We can take my car.”

* * *

Spencer didn’t know what to say on the drive over to the location of the suspect. He wanted to tell Molly he still loved her, but he wondered if it just wasn’t in the cards for them to ever make it work.

They arrived at a small ranch-style house on the outskirts of Bayfield. Both of them got out of Spencer’s car and met in the center of the sidewalk.

“You ready for this?” Molly asked, pushing her blonde hair behind her ear.

“Yes, I’m ready to know who tried to ruin my career.”

They marched up the concrete path and knocked on the front door. A few moments later, the door swung open to reveal Bob Perkins—a tall man with a thick build, brown hair and eyes, and a beard. Spencer was taken aback that they were at the house of the junior public defender. Was he behind the email and files?

“What are you doing here?” Bob asked, his eyes darting from Spencer to Molly.

“We came here to talk to you about a situation,” Spencer explained.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

“You should let us in unless you want us to go to the authorities instead,” Molly warned.

Reluctantly, he stepped back and let them come inside. The house was modestly decorated. It was clean and orderly with little personal touches present. The space felt more like a hotel room than a home.

“Bill, we’re aware of what you tried to do. The question is, why did you do it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, crossing his arms defensively.

“You’re going to deny that you created fake documents to try to frame me for unethical dealings with the district attorney? I’d think long and hard before you pretend you don’t know again. What you say and do will determine my next actions,” Spencer informed his co-worker.

“I think you’ve lost your marbles, Spencer. We’ve known each other all our lives. We played football together since we were kids. Why would I do that to you?”

Spencer waffled for a moment. He had wondered the same thing. Though they hadn’t been close, there had never been any bad blood between them. It seemed odd he would go to such lengths to frame him, not to mention he wasn’t the brightest guy to come up with such an elaborate scheme.

“Honestly, I don’t know. I always got the feeling you resented me being the first-string quarterback, but I wouldn’t think that would motivate you to do something like this.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about,” Bob stated with confusion. “Why do you think I’m involved?”

Molly pulled out a set of folded papers and handed them to Bob. “Because these emails are made from fake accounts linked to the IP at this address. We had someone look into it who is an expert at deciphering electronic footprints.”

Bob looked down at the papers and shuffled through them. His face turned white as he shook his head. “I’m not saying another word without an attorney present. It’s time for both of you to leave.”

“If we leave without getting to the bottom of this, we’re going to the police,” Molly warned. “The next time someone brings this up, they will be putting handcuffs on you.”

“We’ll just see about that,” Spencer heard Tiffany’s familiar voice say from behind all of them.

The group spun around to find her standing by the hallway to the back of the house, holding a gun in her hands. She was pointing it at them with a look of anger on her face.

“What are you doing, Tiffany? Why do you have my gun? Why are you pointing it at all of us?” Bob asked in bewilderment.

“I’m not pointing it at you, sweetie, just them,” she said, gesturing towards Molly and Spencer.

“I don’t understand what’s going on,” Bob stated, looking back and forth between everyone.

“It wasn’t supposed to go down like this. The plan was to kill two birds with one stone. I knew the reunion was coming up, and that it would be the perfect time to spring into action,” she said, coming up to Bob and pulling him over to her side. “I was doing all of this to get you the position you deserve. Once you were the senior public defender, we could go public with our relationship and start setting the stage for you to run for political office. I had plans for you to be the governor and for me to be the first lady of Washington.”

“Wait, what are you talking about, Tiffany? Sure, we’ve been dating for six months now, but I had no idea you had any of that in mind.”

Her face scrunched up in irritation. “You don’t think I want to be with a low-level public defender for the rest of my life, do you? I mean, if you’re going to be my second husband, it has to be a step up, not a step down. I knew you couldn’t do it on your own, so I made a plan to remove your competition,” she explained, gesturing to Spencer with the gun. “I figured Molly was the perfect person to send the evidence to by way of her boss. I knew you wouldn’t mind me using your computer to do it. She had a score to settle with Spencer from when we were all in high school. I knew she would be an easy target to convince he was corrupt. Plus, it didn’t hurt that I would be able to stick it to Spencer since he’s treated me so badly over the years.”

“Your plan didn’t work though, Tiffany. I found out the truth,” Molly pointed out. “All you’ve managed to do is bring us closer together.”

“I know,” Tiffany spat out, narrowing her eyes into slits. “I didn’t account for the fact you two might actually reconcile. It derailed my plans, but I had no idea you were smart enough to figure out where the emails came from.”

“Tiffany, it’s time to put down the gun,” Bob said, trying to coax her to comply, “before anyone gets hurt.”

She stepped back and shook her head. “Don’t you get it, Bob? It’s too late for that. They’re going to turn me in, and no one is going to believe I worked alone. Even if they do, this scandal will ruin your career. Neither one of us are going to walk away without being ruined.”

“There’s nothing we can do about it,” Bob said. “You have to turn yourself in, and then we’ll deal with the consequences.”

“No, there’s still a way out,” she said, shaking the gun at Molly and Spencer. “We get rid of them.”

Molly gasped as Spencer stepped in front of her.

Bob looked shocked by her suggestion, then he looked like he was contemplating his options. Finally, a complacent look settled on his face as he said, “I think you’re right, Tiffany. I don’t see any other way. I’ve worked too hard to have my life destroyed.” He reached out and touched the side of her face, “Plus, I love you, so there’s no way I’m letting you go to jail for trying to help me.”

“Ah, I love you too, sweetie,” Tiffany cooed, leaning over and placing a kiss on his lips, “which is why we have to do this. We can still be the king and queen of Washington if we play our cards right.”

Tiffany handed the gun over to Bob, who took it and kept it leveled at Molly and Spencer. He was steady and on high-alert, making it clear to Spencer, now wasn’t the time to try to make a move to disarm him.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

“Head over to the far door. It’s time to go,” Bob barked at them. “We’ve got to go somewhere else to finish this. We’ll take my car.”

They both complied, too afraid to fight against Bob when he obviously knew what he was doing with the gun.

As the group stepped into the garage, he moved close to Molly and Spencer, pressing the gun into Spencer’s back.

“Tiffany, you’ll drive with Molly in the front next to you. I’ll sit in the back with Spencer, that way I can keep the gun on both of them.”

Everyone took their positions in Bob’s Ford Fiesta. As Tiffany pulled out of the garage, she asked, “Where are we going?”

“The lake,” Bob ordered. “It’s isolated, and we can dump the bodies in the water.”

“It’s never going to work, Bob. People will find out, and instead of going to jail for a couple of years, you’re going to spend the rest of your life behind bars.”

“Then we can make it look like a murder/suicide. Everyone will believe it since they know about your rocky past.”

A few minutes later, they arrived at the lake. Bob told them to get out of the car as he climbed out himself. Spencer knew if he didn’t do something soon, it would be too late. As he climbed out of the car, he watched for an opportunity to make his move. Silently, he sent up a prayer for God to help him.

“I really hate this, Spencer,” he said, keeping the gun pointed at him. “I’m not a bad guy, but I don’t see any other way out.”

“Stop apologizing to him, Bob. You’ve spent your whole life living in his shadow. Now it’s your turn to shine,” Tiffany coaxed. “We have this one little thing left to do, and then the world is our oyster.”

“You need to shut up, Tiffany,” Molly shouted, drawing everyone’s attention to her. “You’re the most scheming, despicable person I have ever known. What’s worse, is that you destroy everyone you’re with, including both of these men.”

“How dare you talk to me like that,” she screamed back at Molly. “Shoot her first, Bob, so I don’t have to hear another word out of her mouth.”

Bob moved the gun from Spencer to Molly, complying with Tiffany’s demands.

Spencer seized the moment, recognizing his chance to stop them. Like lightning, Spencer rushed towards Bob, tackling him to the ground. The gun went flying, landing in the dirt near the girls.

He knew he couldn’t get to the gun without letting Bob regain his composure, and if that happened, Spencer wouldn’t be able to best him, since he was taller and heavier. Subduing him would be the only way Molly and Spencer could survive this.

They wrestled on the ground for several moments, their positions changing constantly, both trying to get the upper hand. Spencer wildly threw punches, hoping any and all of them would land a crippling blow. He also felt several of Bob’s punches hit him in the ribs, the face, and chest. Spencer blocked out the pain, and focused on ending the fight.

A heartbeat later, Spencer’s fist connected with Bob’s nose. The cracking sound of

the bone made it clear that it was broken, but the blood that spurted from the wound confirmed it.

Bob grunted, then slumped over on the ground. The fight had literally been knocked out of him.

Spencer heard commotion beside him, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Tiffany and Molly pushing each other, trying to get control of the gun that was currently in Tiffany's hands.

Molly pulled back her arm, then let it fly towards Tiffany's face. Her fist made contact with the other woman's cheek, causing her to stumble backwards as she gripped the tender flesh with her hand.

"You hit me," Tiffany shouted in shock, dropping the gun and grabbing her face. "I can't believe you hit me."

"It's been a long time coming," Molly stated, rushing to pick up the gun from the ground. "I should have done it ten years ago."

Raising the gun at both Tiffany and Bob, Molly said, "This is over. Both of you, don't move."

Spencer stood up, moved over to the car, and leaned his back against it. He pulled out his phone and dialed 9-1-1. When the dispatcher picked up, he explained the situation. She informed him officers were in route.

Ten minutes later, two Bayfield police cars showed up. Four uniformed cops jumped out of the vehicles and made their way over to Molly and Spencer.

They handed the cops the gun, explained the situation, and handed over the evidence.

The cops told them they would also send over forensics to collect any evidence at Bob's house.

"Can we call anyone to come get you?" one of the officers offered.

"No, I can call my parents," Molly stated, pulling out her phone and placing the call.

As Spencer watched one of the cars haul off Tiffany and Bob, he silently thanked God for protecting Molly and him. If anything had happened to her, he wouldn't ever have recovered.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

Spencer turned to Molly and gave her a relieved grin. “Can you believe it’s all over?”

Molly shook her head. “And to think, this whole time it was Tiffany who was behind the false allegations. I have to give her credit. She’s smarter than I thought.”

“Wickedly smart, and diabolical you mean,” Spencer corrected. “She’s a complete sociopath.”

“I think it’s years of never having any consequences. She got away with so many awful things while I knew her, I doubt it changed over the past ten. That kind of unchecked crazy only gets worse over time.”

“So true. I can’t believe she was seeing Bob this whole time, and no one knew. Not to mention, she got him wrapped around her little finger enough to get him to be okay with murdering two people.”

“Yes, what’s up with that?” Molly asked, with shock. “I mean, just so we’re clear, I’m not killing anyone for you.”

They both chuckled. Spencer wanted to tell Molly how much he cared, and how grateful he was for her help. Before he could get the words out though, Molly’s parents showed up.

“Are you all right?” her mother asked, rushing up to her and placing her hands on either side of her daughter’s arms. “I couldn’t believe what you told me over the phone. I always knew Tiffany was a horrible person because of what she did to you, but this is beyond anything I could ever imagine.”

“I know, Mom, but I’m okay,” she glanced over at Spencer, and added, “We both are.”

“And she didn’t get away with hurting you this time,” Molly’s father said as he came up to join them after talking to the cops. “She will finally get what’s coming to her for all the years of being an abusive bully to everyone around her.” Ken patted Spencer on the back as he added, “Thanks for protecting my little girl this time.”

Spencer shook his head. “It wasn’t me. Your daughter was the one who saved me. Not only out here on the lake, but also by finding out the truth of what Tiffany had been doing.”

“She’s fiercely loyal when she cares about someone,” her mother observed. “You should count yourself lucky she fought so hard for you.”

Molly glanced over at Spencer and a look of sadness crossed her face. “Can you guys take me home now? I’m really tired, and just want to rest.”

Her parents nodded.

“Can we give you a ride home, Spencer?” Molly’s mother offered.

He shook his head. “I texted my friend, Greg. He’s coming to pick me up.”

As Spencer watched Molly walk away, he realized they still had unresolved issues between them. He cared about her, but with everything going on, he hadn’t told her he still wanted to try to make a relationship work between them.

Considering how tired they were, it might be best to have that conversation tomorrow once they both rested. He didn’t want to accidentally do anymore damage by pushing a decision when they both had gone through such a trying ordeal. He would have

plenty of time to tell Molly he was still in love with her.

As the adrenaline left Molly's body, the reality of the situation hit hard. Either or both of them could have died. What would she have done if it had been Spencer? The thought made her blood run cold. She would have been devastated, because she was in love with him.

Even though she felt that way about him, it didn't mean it was reciprocated after what had happened between them. After all, he had plenty of opportunities to tell her he cared before she went home with her parents, but he never broached the subject.

Perhaps he was simply grateful for the help, but the romantic feelings for her were gone. If that was the case, there was no point in sticking around Bayfield. She had promised her boss a great story, and now she had one. It was time to get back to Seattle and make good on her promise.

Molly packed up her bags with her mother's help.

"Promise me you won't stay away so long this time," her mother begged, tears pooling in the corners of her eyes.

"I won't, Mom. There's no reason to stay away now. With Tiffany locked up, and Spencer and me on friendly terms, it's not hard coming home anymore."

"What do you mean by 'friendly' terms?" her mother probed. "I thought you guys were back together."

“I messed things up this time. I ruined our second chance,” Molly stated with regret.

“I think you’ve got it all wrong,” her father stated from the hall. “That boy has always been crazy about you. Some things never change.”

“It can if you make a big enough mistake, which I did,” Molly corrected. “He forgave me, but I can tell he only wants to be friends now.”

Her father adamantly shook his head. “You’re wrong this time, Molly. You get your stubbornness from me, and sometimes it’s a good thing because it makes you work hard and not give up, but it can also cause you to be blind to the truth.”

“I appreciate both of your concerns, but I don’t want to talk about this anymore. I need to finish getting ready to ride the train back to Seattle.”

Her parents left and Molly continued to pack the last of her clothes. Though she didn’t like to admit it, she had enjoyed being home. Enough that if things had ended differently with Spencer, she might have considered moving home.

She shook her head, trying to push the what-could-have-been thoughts out of her mind. It just didn’t work out the way she wanted, and she needed to find a way to make peace with it.

Molly placed her laptop and cable into her bag, then glanced around the room a final time before switching the light off. She closed the door to her old bedroom and padded down the hallway.

She glanced at her phone and realized she still had two hours before her train left. Should she pull out her laptop and work? If she did, and got into a flow, it would be difficult to quit. Better to wait until she was settled back in at her home office in Seattle. She considered watching a bit of a movie, but she hated starting one she

couldn't finish, so that didn't appeal to her either.

Her phone buzzed and she glanced down. A text from Spencer appeared.

Can we meet?

I need to talk with you.

Molly contemplated her response. Part of her was thrilled at the fact he had reached out to her, but the other part was scared of being disappointed again. Maybe he just wanted to say goodbye. Could she gracefully handle that in person? She didn't think so, as images of her crying her eyes out and running from Ruby's Diner flashed through her mind.

It was better to walk away with a clean break rather than ending up hurt again. She ignored the text and decided watching a movie was her best bet.

She sat down on the couch, and flipped on the television. She scrolled down the guide, hoping to come across something she had already seen. Most of the movies were sci-fi, which she didn't care for, or action films which often gave her a headache. She wanted to watch a comedy, hoping a few laughs would lighten her melancholy mood.

Her eyes caught a familiar title. Fool's Gold. The Kate Hudson and Matthew McConaughey romantic comedy made Molly think back to the first time she watched that movie.

It had been one of the few times that Molly and Spencer had gone on a real date while they were secretly together. They had snuck over to Jonesville, a neighboring town, and watched the flick at their movie theater.

Her fingers couldn't click to the next channel. Soon, an hour had passed and her alarm on her phone buzzed, reminding her it was time to go.

"You ready to head out," her mother asked, picking up her keys and purse.

Molly stood up and grabbed her belongings. "Yes, I'm ready."

The short drive to the train station passed with her mother talking about Molly coming home for Thanksgiving. Molly was polite, answering when there was a question, and agreeing with whatever her mother said, but her mind wouldn't stop thinking about Spencer.

Molly kept wondering if she was going to regret not agreeing to meet with him. She would never know what it was he wanted to talk to her about, and more importantly, she was walking away without telling him she was in love with him.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

She flip-flopped between telling her mom to turn around, and to continue to the train station. Not knowing what to do, Molly sent up a silent prayer to God, asking Him to give her guidance.

When they arrived at the train station, Molly thought she had her answer. Nothing had stopped her or made her change her mind. She climbed out of the car and hugged her mother goodbye, before grabbing her bags.

“Thanks, Mom, for everything. I love you. Tell Dad I love him too.”

Her mother nodded, trying to hold back the tears.

Molly repressed a smile, still amused that her whole life, her mother cried at a drop of the hat when it came to events in her life. Today was no exception. Trying to comfort her, she said, “Don’t be upset, Mom. I’ll be back in a couple of months.”

“I know. I’m just going to miss you,” she stated through tears.

“You’re not the only one,” Spencer’s familiar voice said from behind her.

Molly spun around to find Spencer standing a few feet away. “Your dad texted me, and told me you were leaving.”

“I’ll let you two talk alone,” her mother stated. “I’ll go see about getting a refund for your ticket, Molly, since it looks like you’re going to be staying now.”

Molly didn’t argue with her mother, but instead continued to stare at Spencer. “What

are you doing here?”

“I was stupid once for letting you walk out of my life, I’m not going to do it twice.”

“I get it, you want to be friends. You don’t want there to be bad blood between us, but you don’t have to worry about that. We both forgave each other, and now we can move on with our lives.”

“That’s just it, Molly. I can’t move on with my life if you’re not in it. I couldn’t let you leave without telling you how I feel, so much so I want to beg you to not give up on us.” He reached out and took her hands, looking deep into her eyes. “I should have said this yesterday. I was stupid not to, but I thought it could wait. I was wrong. I love you, Molly. I’ve loved you for over ten years now, and I’ve never stopped. You were and are the best thing that has ever happened to me. Tell me you’ll be my girl so we can start our lives together,” he begged. “I want to be able to shout it to the whole world.”

Molly couldn’t believe she was finally hearing the words she had wanted to hear for over ten years. Spencer Conrad loved her, wanted to be with her, and wanted the whole world to know his feelings.

“Okay, I’ll be your girl,” she whispered. “How can I refuse the man I love?”

“You love me too?”

She nodded. “I have since we were kids, but I pushed it away because you hurt me so bad. When I saw you again, the love came bubbling right back to the surface, scaring me half to death.”

“You don’t have to be afraid anymore. This was always meant to be.”

Spencer reached out and pulled Molly towards him. He cupped the side of her face with his hand, as he leaned in and claimed her mouth with his own.

Molly's heart raced, beating wildly like thundering horses galloping towards a cliff. She couldn't help but wrap her arms around his neck and melt into his embrace. In that moment, she knew she was right where she was supposed to be.

* * *

Spencer looked at the blue velvet box in his hand and imagined Molly's reaction as he popped the question. The design of the engagement ring was like her, classic and beautiful, with a single flawless diamond in the center and a gold band. He added one extra touch by engraving it. The inside of the band simply read: our second chance.

As he waited just inside Molly's new apartment, he could feel the anticipation rising in him. They had been dating long distance for the past three months while Molly sold her condo in Seattle. She finally moved everything into her new place in Bayfield this past weekend.

He was glad the situation with Tiffany and Bob was finally behind them. Both of them had pled guilty in order to get a shorter sentence. Spencer was relieved they wouldn't have to go through a lengthy trial to see justice met. Molly and Spencer could move on with their lives without all of that worry and stress hanging over them.

Tonight, Molly thought they were going on a regular date like any other Saturday, not knowing that it was going to change both their lives forever. He couldn't wait to put the ring on Molly's finger after she said 'yes.'

Molly entered the room wearing a blue spaghetti-strapped dress with lace along the neckline and bodice. It flared out and ended just above the knee, revealing her gorgeous legs and black heels.

“You look amazing,” Spencer said with a smile.

“Thanks,” she said, grabbing her coat and purse.

“Here, let me help you with that,” he offered, taking her coat and helping her into it.

“Do you have an umbrella?” she asked, “or do I need to take one?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

“I have one in the car. We’re good.”

She nodded as she they made their way outside and took off in his car for their date. As they drove over, Molly was texting on her phone.

“Who are you texting?” Spencer asked out of curiosity.

“Oh, just my mom. She wanted to know what I was doing tonight since I was in town.”

“Was she disappointed you couldn’t hang out? Did she say anything else?” Spencer asked with apprehension. He had asked Molly’s father last week for his blessing, and he was worried her mother might let it slip.

“No, she understands we have plans. She told us to have a good time.”

Spencer relaxed, grateful the surprise engagement wasn’t ruined. He should have known they wouldn’t say anything, since they helped him plan the whole evening.

They arrived at the Mariner’s Club, and Molly turned to Spencer with a giant smile on her face. “We’re having dinner here? We haven’t been back since our first kiss.” Her face scrunched up as she laughed, “Well, our second first kiss that is.”

“I thought we could celebrate you finally being a permanent Bayfield resident again.”

“I like the sound of that. It’s nice being home,” she said as Spencer helped her out of the car.

They made their way down the pier and into the swanky establishment. The same twinkling lights were glowing around the property, but this time there were extra strands on the wooden wall, arranged to spell out, “Will you marry me?”

Molly stopped moving, and turned to Spencer with disbelief. “Is that for me?”

Spencer nodded, getting down on one knee in front of her. He pulled out the ring box and opened it to reveal the engagement ring. “Will you marry me, that is?”

Her hands flew to her mouth as her body shook. She jumped up and down as she shouted, “Yes, yes, I will marry you.”

He placed the ring on her finger, then stood up and pulled her into a hug. “You’ve just made me the happiest man in the world.”

“Why don’t we go inside and enjoy dinner. I still have a couple more surprises for you.”

“There’s more?” Molly asked with awe. “What is it?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” Spencer said with a wink, as he pushed open the doors to the club, revealing tons of twinkling lights and candles, making the room glow with warmth. The back doors started to open, and in filed all of their friends and Molly’s family.

They surrounded the newly engaged couple, as Spencer yelled, “She said, ‘yes,’” as he took her hand and raised it in the air for all to see.

There was deafening applause and cheers that filled the massive room. Spencer turned around.

“Is this a loud enough shout that I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you?”

“Yes, of course it is.”

“I’m glad to hear it, but there’s still more,” he told her.

The familiar sound of Only You started, causing Molly to jerk her head towards the stage. “You had Blindsided come perform for us again?”

“You bet I did. I want to make you happy every day of your life, Molly.” He leaned towards her and kissed her before adding, “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” she said, letting him gather her into his arms.

They swayed to the music together, enjoying their song, with all their friends and family around them. When the music ended, Spencer turned to the crowd and said, “I’m so glad all of you could be here with us tonight. Pastor Matt said a few months back that sometimes God gives you a second chance because you’re not ready the first time. That’s exactly how I feel about Molly and me ending up together all these years later. I wasn’t ready back when we were kids—actually it was worse than that, I messed it up completely, but our God is a God of second chances. Fortunately, Molly and I both believe in love and forgiveness. We’ve realized that this time we can get it right.”

He turned to Molly, his heart full with joy at the thought of marrying her, and said, “We were meant to be, Molly. I’m so glad you decided to take another chance on me. I didn’t deserve it, but you gave it to me anyway, and I’m going to spend the rest of my life showing you that you made the right decision.”

Over the course of the next two hours everyone came up and congratulated the

happily engaged couple. Towards the end of the evening, Molly's parents came up to them and handed them an envelope.

“What's this?” Molly asked with puzzlement.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:37 am

“It’s a check with the amount of money we saved up for your wedding,” her mother explained. “We always hoped you would find the right guy to settle down with, and now you have.”

“I know you’re going to treat my daughter right. You’re a good man, Spencer, and I’m going to be proud to call you my son.”

Ken Price’s affirmation made Spencer proud. He had said as much when Spencer asked for the man’s blessing on their marriage, but it never got old hearing that he approved.

A few minutes later, Greg came up to them and was grinning ear-to-ear. “I’m so happy for you guys. God worked it all out the way it’s supposed to be. Before I go, I have something to share with both of you.” He pulled out a phone from his back pocket and punched a button.

Suddenly, the familiar voice of Sarah came from the phone as Greg turned the phone towards them. “Hey, you guys. Sorry I can’t be there, but I wanted to tell you both how happy I am for you. Everything is great over here in Uganda. I love my English classes I’m teaching. God is really doing amazing things here, and what started out as just a year trip, looks like it’s going to be permanent. I plan to make a trip back for your wedding though, so make sure to send me an invite,” she finished, blowing them a farewell kiss in the video.

“Thanks for that, Greg. We appreciate you delivering the message,” Spencer said, patting his friend on the back.

Next to talk with them was Pastor Matt, and his wife, Sandra. They came up to the couple with giant smiles on their faces.

“Congratulations you two,” Sandra beamed at them. “You two make the cutest couple.”

“Thank you,” Molly said.

“I’m excited to preside over your wedding. Just let us know when you’ve set a date, and we can schedule your pre-marital counseling.”

“Thanks, Pastor Matt. We’ll do that,” Spencer said with a nod.

Once they were alone again, Molly turned to Spencer and said, “All of this has been the most wonderful surprise. I’m so touched by all the work you put into this.”

“You’re worth it, Molly. I love you so much, and I wanted our engagement to be a night you would never forget.”

“Well, you succeeded. It will be a night I plan to tell our children about for the rest of our lives.”

He pulled her into his arms, and whispered against her ear, “I like the sound of that. Our children. Our lives. We’re going to be incredibly happy, Molly Price.”

“I agree, Spencer Conrad.”

Epilogue

One Year Later

Molly couldn't wait to tell Spencer the great news. All day she watched the clock, waiting for it to read 2:35 PM, so she could get in her car and head home.

Normally, she was sad when the school day ended. She loved teaching the high school students about Shakespeare and journalistic ethics, but today was different. Today, she wanted to get home and tell Spencer the good news.

When Molly moved back to Bayfield, Sarah encouraged her to apply for the spot she vacated. A couple of weeks later, she had the position.

Her gold wedding band and engagement ring glistened side-by-side as she gripped the steering wheel of her car. The set of rings served as a reminder that she was married to the man of her dreams, and she was about to tell him she was carrying his child.

She couldn't believe it had been six months since their wedding day. They had gotten married at the local Bayfield church, then had the reception at the Mariner's Club. Everything had been beautiful, and it was the perfect day.

As she pulled into the driveway of their new ranch-style home, she got out of her car and headed inside. She glanced at her watch and noted she had exactly two hours before Spencer got home from work today.

She entered the kitchen and went about making dinner. She prepped the chicken and potatoes and placed them in the oven to bake. Next, she sautéed the mixed vegetables and placed them in a dish.

While the main course finished baking, she set the table with their new dishes, utensils, and glasses from the wedding guests. Just as she placed the final glass down, the timer dinged. She returned to the kitchen to take out the food.

From the living room, she heard Spencer say, "I'm home."

"I'm in here," Molly yelled back.

Spencer came into the kitchen and moved over to where she was. He leaned over and gave her a kiss, before taking a piece of sliced potato and popping it into his mouth. After he swallowed, he said, "Delicious."

"Glad you like it. You want to go pour us a couple of teas before you take a seat at the table?"

"Sure, I can do that," he said, giving her another kiss on the cheek before heading into the dining room next to the kitchen.

Molly put the food on a tray with the baby's sonogram picture, then covered it up. She carefully carried it into the dining room, then placed it front of her husband.

"Wow, aren't we fancy tonight," Spencer said with surprise. "I didn't even know we had a tray like this."

"Oh, I borrowed it from a friend," Molly explained. "Open it and see what's inside."

Spencer pulled off the lid and his eyes grew wide with shock as they settled on the sonogram photo. He stared at it for several seconds before his eyes darted to her and

asked, “Really? We’re having a baby?”

Molly nodded “I’m about two months along.”

He jumped to his feet and pulled her into an embrace. “This is the best news ever. I’m so happy.”

“I’m glad you feel that way, because it’s kind of a done deal now. I know we didn’t really discuss a time frame or anything, but I guess God decided that for us.”

“God’s timing is perfect. I love the idea of having a mini-Molly running around,” Spencer confessed.

“Hey now, it could be a mini-Spencer. We won’t know for a while, which reminds me, do you want to have a gender reveal party?”

“Of course I do. I want to celebrate with all our friends and family that our life together is perfect.”

Molly smiled at her husband as tears of joy fell down her cheeks. She never used to believe in second chances, but now, not only did she know it was possible, she was a firm believer.

As Spencer leaned in and kissed her, she could feel the love and joy the news had brought her husband. She was grateful for all that they had together.

THE END