

This Heart of Mine

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Extract

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Chapter 1



Daphne the Bunny was admiring her sparkly violet nail polish when Benny the Badger zoomed past on his red mountain bike and knocked her off her paws.

"Oh, you pesky badger!" she exclaimed. "Somebody needs to squeeze the air out of your tires."

Daphne Takes a Tumble

THE DAY KEVIN TUCKER NEARLY KILLED HER, MOLLY SOMERVILLE swore off unrequited love forever.

She was dodging the icy places in the Chicago Stars headquarters parking lot when Kevin came roaring out of nowhere in his brand-new \$140,000 fire-engine-red Ferrari 355 Spider. With tires shrieking and engine snarling, the low-slung car sprang around the corner, spewing slush. As the rear end flew toward her, she flung herself backward, hit the bumper of her brother-in-law's Lexus, lost her footing, and fell in a cloud of angry exhaust.

Kevin Tucker didn't even slow.

Molly gazed at the fading taillights, gritted her teeth, and picked herself up. Dirty snow and muck clung to one leg of her excruciatingly expensive Comme des Garçons pants, her Prada tote was a mess, and her Italian boots had a scratch. "Oh, you pesky quarterback," she muttered under her breath. "Somebody needs to castrate you."

He hadn't even *seen* her, let alone noticed that he'd nearly killed her! Of course, that was nothing new. Kevin Tucker

had spent his entire career with the Chicago Stars football team not noticing her.

Daphne dusted off her fluffy white cottontail, rubbed the dirt from her shimmery blue pumps, and decided to buy herself the fastest pair of Rollerblades in the whole world. So fast she could catch up with Benny and his mountain bike . . .

Molly spent a few moments contemplating chasing Kevin in the chartreuse Volkswagen Beetle she'd bought used after she'd sold her Mercedes, but even her fertile imagination couldn't conjure up a satisfactory conclusion to that scene. As she headed toward the front entrance of Stars headquarters, she shook her head in self-disgust. The man was reckless and shallow, and he only cared about football. Enough was enough. She was finished with unrequited love.

Not that it was really love. Instead, she had a pathetic crush on the jerk, which might be excusable if she were sixteen, but was ludicrous for a twenty-seven-year-old woman with a near-genius IQ.

Some genius.

A blast of warm air hit her as she entered the lobby through a set of glass doors emblazoned with the team logo, consisting of three interlocking gold stars in a sky blue oval. She no longer spent much time at the Chicago Stars headquarters as she'd done when she was still in high school. Even then she'd felt like a stranger. As a dyed-in-the-wool romantic, she preferred reading a really good novel or losing herself in a museum to watching contact sports. Of course she was a dedicated Stars fan, but her loyalty was more a product of family background than natural inclination. Sweat, blood, and the violent clashing of shoulder pads were as foreign to her nature as . . . well . . . Kevin Tucker.

"Aunt Molly!"

"We've been waiting for you!"

"You'll never ever guess what happened!"

She smiled as her beautiful eleven-year-old nieces came flying into the lobby, blond hair streaming behind them.

Tess and Julie looked like miniature versions of their mother, Molly's older sister, Phoebe. The girls were identical twins, but Tess was enveloped in jeans and a baggy Stars sweatshirt, while Julie wore black capris and a pink sweater. Both were athletic but Julie loved ballet, and Tess triumphed at team sports. Their sunny, optimistic natures made the Calebow twins popular with their classmates but a trial to their parents, since it never occurred to either girl to turn down a challenge.

The twins screeched to a stop. Whatever they'd been about to tell Molly vanished as they stared at her hair.

"Omigod, it's red!"

"Really red!"

"That's so cool! Why didn't you tell us?"

"It was sort of an impulse," Molly replied.

"I'm gonna dye my hair just like it!" Julie announced.

"Not your best idea," Molly said quickly. "Now, what were you going to tell me?"

"Dad is like so mad," Tess declared, eyes wide.

Julie's eyes grew even larger. "Him and Uncle Ron have been fighting with Kevin again."

Molly's ears perked up, even though she'd turned her back forever on unrequited love. "What did he do? Other than nearly run me over."

"He did?"

"Never mind. Tell me."

Julie took a gulp of air. "He went skydiving in Denver the day before the Broncos game."

"Oh, boy . . ." Molly's heart sank.

"Dad just found out about it, and he fined him ten thousand dollars!"

"Wow." As far as Molly knew, this was the first time Kevin had ever been fined.

The quarterback's uncharacteristic recklessness had started just before training camp in July, when an amateur motorcycle dirt track racing event had left him with a sprained wrist. It was unlike him to do anything that could jeopardize his performance on the field, so everyone had been sympathetic, especially Dan, who considered Kevin the consummate professional.

Dan's attitude had begun to shift, however, after word reached him that during the regular season Kevin had gone paragliding in Monument Valley. Not long after, the quarterback bought the high-performance Ferrari Spider that had knocked Molly over in the parking lot. Then last month the *Sun-Times* reported that Kevin had left Chicago after the Monday postgame meetings to fly out to Idaho for a day of heli-skiing in a secluded back bowl at Sun Valley. Since Kevin hadn't been injured, Dan had only given him a warning. But the recent skydiving incident had obviously pushed her brother-in-law over the edge.

"Dad yells all the time, but I never heard him yell at Kevin until today," Tess reported. "And Kevin yelled back. He said he knew what he was doing and he wasn't hurt and Dad should stay out of his private business."

Molly winced. "I'll bet your dad didn't like that."

"He really yelled then," Julie said. "Uncle Ron tried to calm them down, but Coach came in, and then he started yelling, too."

Molly knew that her sister Phoebe had an aversion to yelling. "What did your mom do?"

"She went to her office and turned up Alanis Morissette."

Probably a good thing.

They were interrupted by the pounding of sneakers as her five-year-old nephew, Andrew, came flying around the corner, much like Kevin's Ferrari. "Aunt Molly! Guess what?" He

hurled himself against her knees. "Everybody yelled, and my ears hurt."

Since Andrew was blessed with not only his father's good looks but also Dan Calebaw's booming voice, Molly sincerely doubted that. Still, she stroked his head. "I'm sorry."

He looked up at her with stricken eyes. "And Kevin was soooo mad at Daddy and Uncle Ron and Coach that he said the F word."

"He shouldn't have done that."

"Twice!"

"Oh, dear." Molly resisted a smile. Spending so much time inside the headquarters of a National Football League team office made it inevitable that the Calebaw children heard more than their share of obscenities, but the family rules were clear. Inappropriate language in the Calebaw household meant heavy fines, although not as heavy as Kevin's ten thousand dollars.

She couldn't understand it. One of the things she most hated about her crush—her *ex*-crush—on Kevin was the fact that her crush was on *Kevin*, the shallowest man on earth. Football was all that mattered to him. Football and an endless parade of blank-faced international models. Where did he find them? NoPersonality.com?

"Hi, Aunt Molly."

Unlike her siblings, eight-year-old Hannah walked toward Molly instead of running. Although Molly loved all four children equally, her heart held a special place for this vulnerable middle child who didn't share either her siblings' athletic prowess or their bottomless self-confidence. Instead, she was a dreamy romantic, a too-sensitive, overly imaginative bookworm with a talent for drawing, just like her aunt.

"I like your hair."

"Thank you."

Her perceptive gray eyes spotted what her sisters had missed, the grime on Molly's pants.

"What happened?"

"I slipped in the parking lot. Nothing serious."

Hannah took a nibble from her bottom lip. "Did they tell you about the fight Kevin and Dad had?"

She looked upset, and Molly had a pretty good idea why. Kevin showed up at the Calebow house from time to time, and like her foolish aunt, the eight-year-old had a crush on him. But unlike Molly, Hannah's love was pure.

Since Andrew was still wrapped around her knees, Molly held her arm out toward Hannah, who cuddled against her. "People have to take the consequences of their actions, sweetheart, and that includes Kevin."

"What do you think he'll do?" Hannah whispered.

Molly was fairly certain he'd console himself with another model who had a minimal mastery of the English language but maximum mastery of the erotic arts. "I'm sure he'll be fine once he gets over being angry."

"I'm afraid he'll do something foolish."

Molly brushed back a lock of Hannah's light brown hair. "Like skydiving the day before the Broncos game?"

"He prob'ly wasn't thinking."

She doubted that Kevin's small brain had the capacity to think about anything except football, but she didn't share that observation with Hannah. "I need to talk to your mom for a few minutes, and then you and I can leave."

"It's my turn after Hannah," Andrew reminded her as he finally released her legs.

"I haven't forgotten." The children took turns having overnights at her tiny North Shore condo. Usually they stayed with her on weekends instead of a Tuesday night, but the teachers had an in-service education day tomorrow, and Molly thought Hannah needed a little extra attention.

"Get your backpack. I won't be long."

She left them behind and headed down a corridor lined with photographs that marked the history of the Chicago

Stars. Her father's portrait came first, and she saw that her sister had freshened up the black horns she'd long ago painted on his head. Bert Somerville, the founder of the Chicago Stars, had been dead for years, but his cruelties lived on in both his daughters' memories.

A formal portrait of Phoebe Somerville Calebow, the Stars' current owner, followed, and then a photograph of her husband, Dan Calebow, from the days when he'd been the Stars' head coach instead of the team's president. Molly regarded her temperamental brother-in-law with a fond smile. Dan and Phoebe had raised her from the time she was fifteen, and both of them had been better parents on their worst day than Bert Somerville on his best.

There was also a photo of Ron McDermitt, the Stars' longtime general manager and Uncle Ron to the kids. Phoebe, Dan, and Ron had worked hard to balance the all-consuming job of running an NFL team with family life. Over the years it had involved several reorganizations, one of which had brought Dan back to the Stars after being away for a while.

Molly made a quick detour into the restroom. As she draped her coat over the sink, she gazed critically at her hair. Although the jagged little cut complimented her eyes, she hadn't left well enough alone. Instead, she'd dyed her dark brown hair a particularly bright shade of red. She looked like a cardinal.

At least the hair color added some flash to her rather ordinary features. Not that she was complaining about her looks. She had an all-right nose and an all-right mouth. They went along with an all-right body, which was neither too thin nor too heavy, but healthy and functional, for which she was grateful. A glance at her bustline confirmed what she'd accepted long ago—as the daughter of a showgirl, she'd been shortchanged.

Her eyes were nice, though, and she liked to believe their

slight tilt gave her a mysterious look. As a child she used to wear a half-slip over the bottom half of her face as a veil and pretend she was a beautiful Arabian spy.

With a sigh she swiped at the muck on her ancient *Comme des Garçons* pants, then wiped off her beloved but battered Prada tote. When she'd done her best, she picked up the quilted brown coat she'd bought on sale at Target and headed for her sister's office.

It was the first week of December, and some of the staff had begun to put up a few Christmas decorations. Phoebe's office door displayed a cartoon Molly had drawn of Santa dressed in a Stars uniform. She poked her head inside. "Aunt Molly's here."

Gold bangles clinked as her blond bombshell of an older sister threw down her pen. "Thank God. A voice of sanity is just what I— Oh, my God! What did you do to your hair?"

With her own cloud of pale blond hair, amber eyes, and drop-dead figure, Phoebe looked rather like Marilyn Monroe might have looked if she'd made it into her forties, although Molly couldn't imagine Marilyn with a smear of grape jelly on the front of her silk blouse. No matter what Molly did to herself, she'd never be as beautiful as her sister, but she didn't mind. Few people knew the misery Phoebe's lush body and vamp's beauty had once caused her.

"Oh, Molly . . . not again." The consternation in her sister's eyes made Molly wish she'd worn a hat.

"Relax, will you? Nothing's going to happen."

"How can I relax? Every time you do something drastic to your hair, we have another *incident*."

"I outgrew *incidents* a long time ago." Molly sniffed. "This was purely cosmetic."

"I don't believe you. You're getting ready to do something crazy again, aren't you?"

"I am not!" If she said it frequently enough, maybe she'd convince herself.

"Only ten years old," Phoebe muttered to herself. "The brightest and best-behaved student at the boarding school. Then, out of nowhere, you hack off your bangs and plant a stink bomb in the dining hall."

"Nothing more than a gifted child's chemistry experiment."

"Thirteen years old. Quiet. Studious. Not a single misstep since the stink-bomb incident. Until you started combing grape Jell-O powder through your hair. Then presto change-o! You pack up Bert's college trophies, call a garbage company, and have them hauled away."

"You liked that one when I told you about it. Admit it."

But Phoebe was on a roll, and she wasn't admitting anything. "Four years go by. Four years of model behavior and high scholastic achievement. Dan and I have taken you into our home, into our *hearts*. You're a senior, on your way to being valedictorian. You have a stable home, people who love you . . . You're vice-president of the Student Council, so why should I worry when you put blue and orange stripes in your hair?"

"They were the school colors," Molly said weakly.

"I get the call from the police telling me that my sister—my studious, brainy, Citizen of the Month sister!—deliberately set off a fire alarm during fifth-period lunch! No more *little* mischief for our Molly! Oh, no . . . She's gone straight to a class-two *felony*!"

It had been the most miserable thing Molly had ever done. She'd betrayed the people who loved her, and even after a year of court supervision and many hours of community service, she hadn't been able to explain why. That understanding had come later, during her sophomore year at Northwestern.

It had been in the spring, right before finals. Molly had found herself restless and unable to concentrate. Instead of studying, she read stacks of romance novels, drew, or stared

at her hair in the mirror and yearned for something pre-Raphaelite. Even using up her allowance on hair extensions hadn't made the restlessness go away. Then one day she'd walked out of the college bookstore and discovered a calculator that she hadn't paid for tucked in her purse.

Wiser than she'd been in high school, she'd rushed back inside to return it and headed for Northwestern's counseling office.

Phoebe interrupted Molly's thoughts by jumping to her feet. "And the last time . . ."

Molly winced, even though she'd known this was where Phoebe would end up.

" . . . the *last* time you did something this drastic to your hair—that awful crew cut two years ago . . ."

"It was trendy, not awful."

Phoebe set her teeth. "The last time you did something this drastic, you gave away *fifteen million dollars!*"

"Yes, well . . . Getting the crew cut was purely coincidental."

"Ha!"

For the fifteen millionth time, Molly explained why she'd done it. "Bert's money was strangling me. I needed to make a final break from the past so I could be my own person."

"A poor person!"

Molly smiled. Although Phoebe would never admit it, she understood exactly why Molly had given up her inheritance. "Look on the bright side. Hardly anybody knows I gave away my money. They just think that I'm eccentric for driving a used Beetle and living in a place the size of a closet."

"You adore that place."

Molly didn't even try to deny it. Her loft was her most precious possession, and she loved knowing she earned the money that paid her mortgage each month. Only someone who'd grown up without a home that was truly her own could understand what it meant to her.

She decided to change the subject before Phoebe could

start in on her again. "The munchkins told me Dan hit Mr. Shallow with a ten-thousand-dollar fine."

"I wish you wouldn't call him that. Kevin's not shallow, he's just—"

"Interest-impaired?"

"Honestly, Molly, I don't know why you dislike him so much. The two of you couldn't have exchanged even a dozen words over the years."

"By design. I avoid people who speak only Gridiron."

"If you knew him better, you'd adore him as much as I do."

"Isn't it fascinating that he mainly dates women with limited English? But I guess it prevents a silly thing like conversation from interfering with sex."

Phoebe laughed in spite of herself.

Although Molly shared almost everything with her sister, she hadn't shared her own infatuation with the Stars' quarterback. Not only would it be humiliating, but Phoebe would confide in Dan, who'd go ballistic. Her brother-in-law was more than a little protective where Molly was concerned, and unless an athlete was happily married or gay, he didn't want Molly anywhere near him.

At that moment the subject of her thoughts burst into the room. Dan Calebow was big, blond, and handsome. Age had treated him kindly, and in the twelve years since Molly had known him, the added lines in that virile face had only given him character. His was the kind of presence that filled a room by reflecting the perfect self-confidence of someone who knew what he stood for.

Dan had been head coach when Phoebe had inherited the Stars. Unfortunately, she hadn't known anything about football, and he'd immediately declared war. Their early battles had been so fierce that Ron McDermitt had once suspended Dan for insulting her, but it wasn't long before their anger turned into something else entirely.

Molly considered Phoebe and Dan's love story the stuff of

legend, and she'd long ago decided that if she couldn't have what her sister and brother-in-law had together, she didn't want anything. Only a Great Love Story would satisfy Molly, and that was as likely as Dan rescinding Kevin's fine.

Her brother-in-law automatically wrapped an arm around Molly's shoulders. When Dan was with his family, he always had an arm around someone. A pang shot through her heart. Over the years she'd dated a lot of decent guys and even tried to convince herself she was in love with one or two of them, but she'd fallen out of love the moment she realized they couldn't come close to filling the giant shadow cast by her brother-in-law. She was beginning to suspect no one ever would.

"Phoebe, I know you like Kevin, but this time he's gone too far." His Alabama drawl always grew broader when he was upset, and now he was dripping molasses.

"That's what you said last time," Phoebe replied. "And you like him, too."

"I don't understand it! Playing for the Stars is the most important thing in his life. Why is he working so hard to screw that up?"

Phoebe smiled sweetly. "You could probably answer that better than either one of us, since you were a pretty big screwup until I came along."

"You must have me confused with someone else."

Phoebe laughed, and Dan's glower gave way to the intimate smile Molly had witnessed a thousand times and envied just as many. Then his smile faded. "If I didn't know him better, I'd think the devil was chasing him."

"Devils," Molly interjected. "All with foreign accents and big breasts."

"It goes along with being a football player, which is something I don't ever want you to forget."

She didn't want to hear any more about Kevin, so she gave Dan a quick peck on the cheek. "Hannah's waiting. I'll have her back late tomorrow afternoon."