
THE PLAYMAKER

CATHRYN FOX



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Fat drops of spring rain pummel my head, wilting my curls as I dart through Seattle's busy traffic to the café on the other side of the street. My best friend, Jess, is inside waiting for me, undoubtedly hyped up on her third latté by now.

I step over a pothole and search for an opening in the traffic. I hate being late, I really do. I totally value other people's time, but when the email came through from my editor, asking me to write a hot hockey series, my priorities took a curve. I've worked with Tara for a couple years now, and I know her like—pardon the pun—a well-worn book. To her, hesitation equals disinterest. She's a mover, a tree-shaker, and it wouldn't have taken long for her to offer the opportunity to another author. She wanted a quick reply and I had to give it to her.

I got this!

Yeah, that was my response, but what did I have to lose? I've been in such a rut lately, thanks to my fickle muse, deserting me when I needed her most. I swear to God, sometimes she acts like a hormonal teenager. I need to whip her

into shape so I don't lose this gig. The royalties from a series will help make a sizeable dent in the bills that are piling up high and deep.

High and deep.

I laugh. One of those self-derisive snorts that crawls out when you'd really rather cry. Yeah, that pretty much sums up the *I got this* response I emailed back. High and deep, like a big steaming pile of—

A car horn blares, jolting me from my pity party. With my heart pounding in my chest, I step in front of the Tesla and flip the guy off. I safely reach the sidewalk and once again my mind is back on my job, and off the impatient jerk in the overpriced car.

I step up on the sidewalk and lift my face to the rain, the cool water a pleasant break from this unusual spring heat wave we're having. Pressure fills my throat. The hum of traffic behind me dulls, leaving only the sound of my pulse pounding in my ears. Panic.

Why the hell did my editor think I, former figure skater turned romance novelist, would want to write a series about hot hockey players? Yeah, sure my brother is an NHL player, but that doesn't mean I'm into the game. I hate hockey. No, hate is too mild a word for what I feel. I loathe it entirely. But you know what I don't loathe? Eating. Yeah, I like eating. Oh, and a roof over my head. I really like that, too.

I draw in a semi self-satisfied breath at having rationalized my fast response.

Except my reply was total and utter bullshit. I don't *got this*. In fact, I...wait, what's the antonym of *got this*? All that comes to mind is, *you're screwed*. Yep, that pretty much describes my predicament.

Why didn't I just stick to figure skating?

Because you took a bad spill that ended your career.

Oh right. But seriously, a hockey series... Ugh. Kill me. Freaking. Now.

I reach the café, pull the glass door open and slick my rain-soaked hair from my face. I quickly catalogue the place to find Jess hitting on the barista. Ahh, now I get why she picked a place so far from home. I take in the guy behind the counter. Damn, he's hotter than the steaming latté in Jess's hand, and from the way she's flirting, it's clear he'll be in her bed later today.

I sigh inwardly. It's always so easy for her. Me? Not so much. Men rarely pay me attention. Unlike Jess, I'm plain, have the body of a twelve-year-old boy, and most times I blend into the woodwork.

I pick up a napkin from the side counter and mop the rain off my face. Doesn't matter. I'm not interested anyway. From my puck-bunny-chasing brother to all his cocky friends, I know what guys are really like, and when it comes to women, they're only after one thing, and it isn't scoring the slot. I roll my eyes. Then again, maybe it is.

And of course, I can't forget the last guy I was set up with. What he did to me was totally abusive, but I don't want to dredge up those painful memories right now.

I shake, and water beads fall right off my brand-new rain-resistance coat. At least something is going right for me today. Semi-dry, I cross the room and stand beside Jess.

"Hey, sorry I'm late."

Jess turns to me, smiles, and holds a finger up. "I'll forgive you only if you're late because you were knees deep into some nasty sex, 'cause girlfriend, it's been far too long since you've been laid."

Jesus, what ever happened to this girl's filters?

Thoroughly embarrassed, my gaze darts to the barista, who is grinning, his eyes still locked on my friend, looking at

her like she's today's hot lunch special and ignoring me like I'm yesterday's cold, lumpy oatmeal.

Ugh, really?

"Non-fat latté," I say, and scowl at him until he puts his eyes back in his head. I might be an English major but I have a PhD in the death glare. Truthfully, I'm so sick of guys like him, one thing on their minds. Then again, Jess only wants one thing from him, so I really shouldn't have a problem with it. Why do I? Oh, maybe because Mr. Right, my battery-operated companion, isn't quite cutting it anymore, and it's left me a little jittery and a whole lot cranky.

Jess is right. I *do* need to get laid.

Jess's lips flatline when she takes me in, her gaze carefully accessing me. "What?" she asks, her mocha eyes narrowing.

God, sometimes I really hate how well she can read me. "Nothing."

She straightens to her full height, and I try to do the same, but she dwarfs me, even without her beloved two-inch heels. I square my shoulders, but it's always hard to pull off a high-power pose when you're only five foot two, and teased relentlessly about it.

"Come on," she says, and guides me to a corner table. I peel off my coat and plunk down. Jess sits across from me. "Spill."

I point to my forehead. "Do I have 'idiot' written here?"

She looks me over, and cautiously asks, "No, why?"

My phone chirps in my purse, and I reach for it. Great, it's my editor wanting to set turn-in dates. "How about never?" I say under my breath.

"Uh, Nina. You're talking to your phone. You better tell me what's going on."

"You're not going to believe what I just agreed to."

"Do tell," she says and leans forward, like I'm about to spill some dirty little sex secret. If only that were the case.

I grab my phone and hold it up, showing her Tara's message. "I just agreed to write a hockey series," I say, and toss my phone back into my purse, mic-drop style—without the bold confidence.

Jess pushes back in her chair, clearly disappointed. She lifts her cup, and over the rim, asks, "I don't see how that makes you an idiot."

My mouth drops open. Jess and I have been friends since childhood. She of all people knows how much I hate hockey. "Are you serious?"

She shrugs. "You're a writer."

Mr. Sexy Barista brings me my coffee and he shares a secret, let's-hook-up-later smile with Jess. "And...?" I ask when he leaves.

"Writer's write and make things up. I know you hate hockey, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"I can't come up with a plot, or write about the game, if I don't know anything about it."

She shakes her head. "And I can't believe your brother is a professional player and you never once paid attention to the game."

"I was busy pursuing a professional skating career, remember?"

She reaches across the table and gives my hand a little squeeze. "I know. I'm sorry."

My tailbone and neck take that moment to throb, a constant reminder of a career lost.

I didn't just lose my dream of skating professionally the day my feet went out from underneath me, I lost my confidence, too. A concussion will do that to you.

Good thing I majored in English in college. Once I hung up my skates, I began to blog about the sport and sold a few articles. I joined a local writers group, and after talking to a group of romance writers, I tried my hand at one. Much to

my surprise, it actually sold. I went from non-fiction to fiction, in every sense of the word. Happily ever after might exist between the pages, but it certainly doesn't in real life. At least not for me.

I take a sip of my latté, and give an exaggerated huff as I set it down. Jess instantly goes into problem-solving mode when she sees that I'm really stressed about this. As a brand-new high school guidance counselor, she can't help but want to fix me.

"Okay, it's simple," she begins. "You have to learn the game."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Turn on the TV and watch."

"I can watch a bunch of guys chase a stupid puck around a rink all I want, I still won't be able to understand the rules."

"How dare you call my favorite sport stupid."

"Jessss..." I plead. "What am I going to do?"

She crinkles her nose. Then her eyes go wide. "I've got it. Shadow your brother."

I give a quick shake of my head. "No, he's on the road, and he won't want me hanging around."

Jess goes quiet again, and that hollowed-out spot inside me aches as I think about Cason. I miss my brother so much and wish we were closer. Cason and I grew up in a family where there were no hugs or words of affirmation. I know Mom and Dad loved us, but as busy investment bankers, work consumed their lives. Sure, they put me in figure skating, and Cason in hockey when we were young, but they never shared in our passions, or really supported our pursuits.

I guess I can't expect my brother to display love, when none was ever displayed to him.

"Why don't you teach me?"

"It might be my favorite sport to watch, but I don't really know all the rules. I think you'd be better off getting your

brother or..." She straightens. "Wait. I got this," she says, and I cringe when she tosses my three-word email response back at me. A warning shiver skips along my spine, and I get the sense that whatever she's about suggest, is going to take me right down the rabbit hole.

"What about Cole Cannon?"

I groan, plant my elbows on the table, and cover my face with my hands. "Never," I mumble through my fingers. "Not in a million freaking years."

Jess removes my hands from my face. "Why not? He's your brother's best friend. I'm sure he'll help you."

"Cocky Cole Cannon, aka, The Playmaker. Do I need to say any more?" I reach for my latté and take a huge gulp, burning the roof of my mouth. Damn.

"I know you hate him, Nina, but—"

"Of course I hate him. You remember the nickname he used to use when we were kids—Pretty BallerNina. I was a figure skater, not a ballerina," I could only assume he was mocking me about being pretty too, but I keep that to myself.

"At least he worked your name into the moniker, and hey, it could have been worse. He could have called you Neaner Neaner, like Cason did."

I glare at her and she holds her hands up. "Okay, okay. I get it. But Cole's been home for a month, recovering from a concussion, and his team—the Seattle Shooters, in case you don't know the league's name," she adds with a wink, "are probably going to make it to the playoffs, so you know he's watching all the games. You don't have to like him to ask him to explain a few of the plays, right?"

"I suppose."

Wait! What? Am I really thinking about asking The Playmaker to help me? I reach for my latté and blow on it before I take another big gulp.

“And if you ask me, while he’s helping you learn the plays, I think you two should hate fuck.”

I choke on my drink, spitting most of it on my friend as the rest dribbles down my chin.

OMFG, how embarrassing. All eyes turn to me. Mortified, I grab a napkin and start wiping my face, but Jess is laughing so hard, I start laughing with her.

“Couldn’t you have waited until I swallowed?” I ask.

“That’s what she said.”

“Ohmigod, Jess. How are we friends?”

She waves a dismissive hand. “You know you love me because I’m hellacioulsy funny.”

“I do, just stop cracking jokes when I’m drinking.”

She leans towards me conspiratorially, and I brace myself. “I wasn’t joking. You and Cocky Cole Cannon should hate fuck. He’s as sexy today as he was when he used to hang out with Cason at your house when we were teens.” I give her a look that suggests she’s insane. She ignores it and wags her brows. “He’s explosive on the ice, but do you know why they really call him the Cannon?”

“Because it’s his last name.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the only reason.”

Don’t ask. Don’t ask.

“Okay, then why?” I ask.

“Cause he’s loaded between his legs.”

Yeah, okay, I totally set myself up for that.

“You don’t know that,” I shoot back. My mind races to my brother’s best friend, and I mentally go over his form. He’s athletic, tall and—as much as I hate to admit it—hot as hell. The perfect trifecta. Could he be packing too? Working with some top-notch equipment?

Jesus, what am I doing? The last thing I should be thinking about is Cole’s ‘cannon’.

“Come on.” Jess grabs her purse. “I’ll drive you there.”

I flatten my hands on the table. “I’m not going to his house, especially not unannounced.”

“Give him a call then.”

“No.”

She sits back in her chair and folds her arms, a sign she’s changing tactics. “And here I thought you liked your condo and food in your cupboards.”

I groan at the direct hit.

Her voice softens and she touches my hand. “But you know you always have—”

“Fine.” I stop her before she brings up my trust fund. Yeah, sure, Mom and Dad set money aside for me, but I don’t want to use it. I want to live by my own means, make it on my own merit. Besides it wasn’t their money I wanted, then or now, it was their attention, their love. I moved out years ago and only ever hear from them on my birthday or at Christmas.

I pull my phone from my purse. “I’ll text him. If he doesn’t answer, we don’t talk about this again.” I go through my contacts and find his number, having stored it years ago when he called to check on me after my injury. The call had taken me by surprise; so did his concern. Maybe my brother put him up to it. I don’t know. Nor do I know why I kept his number.

My fingers fly across the screen, but in no way do I expect him to respond. At least I hope he doesn’t. I read over the text. *Sorry to hear about your concussion. I was wondering if you could help me with something.* Then hit send.

I set my phone down and look at Jess. “Happy?”

“Hey, I’m not the one who’s going to be homeless.”

Point taken. Maybe I should be hoping he *does* text back.

My phone pings, and we both reach for it. Jess gets it first, and from her smirk, I guess my wish just came true—Cole responded.

Careful what you wish for.

“What does it say?” I ask, afraid of the answer.

“It says, sure what’s up?” Jess’s fingers dance over the screen as she responds for me.

“What are you saying?” I ask, panic welling up inside me. “So help me, if you’re telling him I need to get laid...”

The phone pings again and she holds it out for me to read.

“I asked—I mean *you* asked if you could stop by his place, and he said sure.”

“I don’t know whether to kiss you or choke you,” I say.

Jess laughs. “I think you’ll be thanking me.” She stands. “Come on.”

We make our way outside, and the rain has slowed to a light mist as I follow her down the street to her parked car. I hop in and question my sanity. Am I really going to ask Cocky Cannon to teach me the game?

Jess starts the car and the locks click as she pulls into traffic. Guess so.

“You remember where he lives?” I ask. I think back to when he bought the house. He had a big party to celebrate. I was invited but didn’t go. Why would I? Watching the hockey players with their bunnies was not my idea of a good time.

“Of course.” She jacks the tunes and sings along off-key as she drives. Twenty minutes later, she pulls up in front of his mansion. It’s a ridiculously big house for one person. I stare at it, and once again question my sanity.

“Go,” Jess says.

“I’m going,” I shoot back. I open the door, and smooth my hand over my mess of curls. Why the hell did I do that? It’s not like I’m trying to make myself presentable or impress him. We don’t even like each other.

I force my legs to carry me to his door, and I’m about to knock when it opens. My breath catches as I take in Cole,

standing before me shirtless and barefoot, dressed only in a pair of faded jeans that hug him so nicely.

God, he is so freaking hot—and I never, ever should have come here.

As we stare at each other, like we're in some goddamn Mexican standoff, I can't stop thinking about his 'cannon'. My gaze drops to the lovely bulge between his legs, and a moan I have no control over catches in my throat as Jess's words come back to haunt me.

You two should hate fuck.

Thank you, Jess, for planting that idea in my brain. Christ, I should have choked her when I had the chance.

I can't believe sweet little Nina Callaghan is standing on my doorstep staring at my package. *She's fucking checking me out—like it's her job.* Should I call her on that?

Nah that would probably just scare her off, then I'd never find out what she wanted from me. I have to say, I *am* curious. She hasn't talked to me in a long time, and I'm a little surprised she even knew my number. We don't like each other much, but I'm man enough to admit that I like having her eyes on me. Still, she can't think for one minute that she's going to get an eyeful and I'm not.

My gaze races over her, and I take in her long damp hair, a raincoat that hides her sensual body—I'd never forget her barely there curves—and a pair of jeans that are rolled up at the ankle. Her slim frame might be well hidden, but her sandals showcase sexy toes and pink-painted nails that tease and torment my thickening cock.

Hate each other or not, she's as hot today as she was all those years ago. But she's still my best friend's kid sister, and that makes her completely hands-off.

"What's up?" I ask, and her big blue eyes dart to mine. I

can't help but grin, a telltale way of letting her know she's busted, and that I don't mind at all. Hell, she can stare all she likes, as long as I get to do the same.

"I...uh..." She swallows and glances over her shoulder. I follow her gaze to see her friend Jess in the car, waving at us from the driver's seat. I remember Jess. She was always hanging around Cason's place when we were kids. I wave back to her, and Nina refocuses on me. She angles her head and clears her throat. "How are you feeling?"

"Is that why you're here?" I ask. "Worried about me?"

"No," she blurts out quickly. "I mean yes...I mean...I just..."

She's definitely uncomfortable, and I'm not sure why. I practically lived at her house growing up. People used to think I was her brother, although my thoughts toward her were anything but brotherly, especially when I teased her and she got so spitting mad in response her cheeks would turn pink. My favorite color.

"What can I do for you, Nina?"

She bites on her bottom lip, and damn it, I like that, too. "I was going to ask..." Her breath comes out with a hint of frustration. She gives her head a little shake and takes a step back. "Maybe this was a mistake."

Nina leaving is not an option, at least not before she's said what she'd come to say. The fact that she'd come to me in the first place, considering how she doesn't particularly like me, well... "You can ask me anything," I say, more curious than ever, and wanting to help her out.

"It's just...I could use your help with a little problem."

And I could use hers with a big one.

I angle my body and lean against the doorjamb, anything to hide my thickening boner. "Yeah, how can I help you?"

"You see, my editor asked me to write about hot hockey players, and I thought maybe you—"

“You think I’m a hot hockey player?” I ask, purposely teasing her.

She opens her mouth and closes it again, clearly flustered. I’m not sure why I keep provoking her. Then again, maybe I am. Back in the day, I called her Pretty BallerNina. She was pretty, still is, and I meant it as a compliment. She never took it that way though, and always gave me the death glare. I could have stopped calling her that, just like I could stop teasing her now, but the only time she ever paid me any attention was when I was playing around, and yeah, I kind of like her attention.

“No, it’s not that.”

“So, you’re not here because you need me to teach you some hot moves for the sex scenes?”

Her eyes go round and her cheeks turn a bright shade of pink. “No,” she blurts out. “That’s not it at all.”

I lean toward her, catch her sweet scent, and she visibly quivers as I crowd her. “Then what is it?”

“I’m here to see if you’ll help me learn the game, teach me the rules.”

I grin at her. “Hard to believe you don’t know the rules, considering your brother is an NHL player.”

She shrugs. “I was busy figure skating.”

“I know.” I remember watching her. She was fucking amazing on the ice, had so much talent. Goddamn crime that a spill took her out. Broke my fucking heart, really. A concussion laid her up for six months—I know all about *that*, but unlike her, I plan to get back on the ice. Hockey is my life, the breath that fills my lungs.

Jess starts her car, and Nina quickly looks in that direction. Her phone pings and she grabs it from her purse.

“Shit,” she says. “I’m going to kill her.”

“Problem?”

She jerks her thumb over her shoulder. “Jess says she has

some errands to run and she'll come back for me."

I push off the doorframe and we watch as Jess drives away. "I guess you should come in then."

I step to the side and wave my hand for her to enter. She hesitates for a second, then breezes past me. I close the door and turn to see her glancing around the big entranceway.

"You have a beautiful home."

"Thanks." I look around, too. See what she sees, but from my perspective. This house is my sanctuary—no one other than my sister and a few select friends allowed. It's the one place I can hide out, be myself, and let go of the fucking act. "Something to drink?"

"Water, please."

My bare feet slap the tile as I walk past her, and she follows me into the kitchen. I grab the old pizza boxes from the counter and stuff them in the garbage.

"Wow, I love your kitchen. My whole condo would fit in here."

"I don't really cook."

"Then why do you have such great equipment?" As soon as the words leave her mouth, her gaze drops to my crotch again, and then she quickly turns away, but not before I catch her blush. "I mean, this stove. It's a chef's dream come true."

"My decorator insisted I buy it." Five thousand bucks for a stove seemed steep to me, but she assured me someday my wife would love it.

I scoff at that. Wife? Nope, not going to happen. My whole life, I was forced to live by the 'nothing but hockey' rule, thanks to my hard-ass prick of a father who told me I was nothing but garbage, soft like my mother.

He might be right, which is why I don't let anyone know the real me, a guy who wasn't even good enough for his own mother to stick around. It's Cocky Cannon, The Playmaker, who women want to bed and the crowd goes crazy for.

Nina runs her hand over the stainless-steel appliance. “I would kill to have a stove like this,” she says.

I have a sudden flash of her standing at the stove, cooking for us, and before I can think better of it, I say, “You can cook on it anytime you like.”

Shit, what did I say that for? I turn from her and busy my hands getting two tumblers from the cupboard.

“Really?”

“I know you love to cook,” I say, making light of it. “I know you like to watch TV while doing it, too.” I gesture to the television built into the wall. I pretty much have one in every room. Another suggestion from my decorator, and one I actually liked. I can go from room to room, and never miss a play if a game is on.

“How do you know that?”

“I practically lived at your house, remember? You always made the meals.”

She frowns, and that’s when it hits me. She made the meals because her parents were always preoccupied with something else.

Hating that I brought back a hard memory for her, I open the fridge and change the subject. “Would you prefer lemonade?”

“Sure.”

I take the jug out and pour us each a glass. Her lips part as she takes a drink. Jesus those lips, soft, lush, so fucking kissable. How would they feel on my body, wrapped around my cock? I stifle a groan as that appendage begins to appreciate the thought as well.

Fuck. Three boners within minutes of opening the door to her might not be the best way to start things off after all this time, even for me. I open the patio door leading to the pool.

“Let’s sit out. The rain stopped.” I walk outside. “Only in

Seattle can you go from a downpour to hot and sunny in five minutes, right?”

“It’s this damn heat wave,” she says, and follows me out. As the sun beats down on us, her eyes drop. “You, ah, you should probably put on a shirt.”

Her gaze roams over my bare chest, lingering on the scars marring my body. Most think the wounds are from hockey. They’re not. I can’t remember a day when I hadn’t felt the sting of the jump rope my father forced me to train with. *You need to toughen up if you want to play in the NHL.*

The NHL was my father’s dream, not mine. Not that I don’t love the game. I do. It’s my entire life now. But as a pro player who never made it to the big leagues, my father was determined his son was going to play in the NHL.

Bastard got what he wanted, and I learned early on to shut down my emotions and present cocky to the world. It was the only way to get through the day. If I don’t feel, I can’t get hurt, right? That motto carries me through life, and into each game, and it’s that guy the crowd loves.

I rub my hand over one ugly scar and ask, “Why should I put a shirt on? It’s hot out.”

“You might...ah, burn.”

“I’m good.” I grab a bottle of sunscreen off my patio table and hold it up. “Want me to lotion you?”

“No,” she responds quickly as she peels her coat off. I grin as my gaze rakes over her thin T-shirt, Aerosmith emblazoned across the front.

“What’s so funny?” she asks.

“Aerosmith,” I say. “That was a fun night, and I remember you buying that. You were fourteen. I can’t believe it still fits you.”

“You remember that?”

“Yeah.” I open the lotion and pour a generous amount on

my chest, keeping to myself just how much I remember about her.

Nina drops into a chair, her eyes darting around the patio, looking everywhere but at me. What is going on with her? Is my near nakedness bothering her? Doing hot things to her? Damned if I don't hope it's the latter.

She's hands-off, dude.

"So how exactly can I help you?" I ask.

She finally turns to me, and her gaze latches onto my hands as I finish rubbing the lotion in. She clears her throat and says, "I know you're out with a concussion, and I don't want to take up too much of your time, but if I could watch a couple games with you, and you could explain the plays and calls, some of the slang, it would really help."

I shrug. "Sounds easy enough."

Her eyes light up, and I don't even want to think about how good that makes me feel. "Yeah?"

"Sure." I reach for the button on my jeans. "Damn, it's hot out here."

Panic flashes across her pretty face as she points to my pants. "What...what are you doing?"

I gesture with a nod toward the pool. "Going for a swim. Why don't you join me? Cool off a bit."

"I don't have a bathing suit."

I do a mental search of the dresser drawers in the spare room. "I have one that might fit you."

She folds her arms across her chest. "I am *not* wearing some puck bunny's bathing suit."

I grin, and she gives me the death glare. "Naked it is then."

I unzip my pants and kick them off. A gasp catches in her throat.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to get completely naked. I'll keep my boxers on."

“How is that any better?” she asks.

“You’ve seen me in my boxers many times, Nina.”

“Yeah, well, I never said I liked it.”

“If you don’t like it, then why are you staring so hard?” I might be teasing her, but the truth is, her eyes *are* latched onto my package, and the hard part...yeah, that’s my current condition. What this girl can do to me without even trying is fucking crazy.

“I’m not staring.” She pushes to her feet and looks away. “This was a bad idea. I should go. Is there a bus route around here?”

“It’s not a bad idea,” I say softly, seriously, anything to stop her from leaving, and if she does, no way is she taking a bus home. She can borrow one of my cars. “Anything you need, Nina.”

She looks at me, her eyes cautious. “Anything?”

“Sure, but what’s in it for me?” I ask, calling on my alter ego, Cocky Cole Cannon, before things get too fucking serious. Nothing good can come from her seeing the real me.

She rolls her eyes. “I should have known you’d want *quid pro quo*.”

“I call it tit for tat.”

“Of course you do.”

“I like the sound of it better.” I turn and dive into the cool water because I *really* like the ‘tit’ part, and boner number four is about to make it obvious. Staying under, I swim to the shallow end of the pool and surface when I reach the wall. I brush my wet hair back and blink the water from my eyes. Nina is standing at the deep end, watching me. “Come on in, it’s beautiful. Just wear your underwear.”

“I’m not undressing in front of you.”

“I’ll turn around,” I offer.

“What do you want, Cole?” she huffs out.

“I want you to come in.”

“That’s not what I mean. What do you want for helping me? What are your conditions?”

I dive under and swim back to her. I surface and put my hands on her ankles. I give them a little teasing tug, threatening to pull her in clothes and all as I bounce in the water.

“Don’t you dare,” she says, and tries to back away, but I’ve got a good hold on her and she’s not going anywhere soon.

“You, on the ice with me,” I say.

She stops struggling, and her eyes go wide. For the briefest of seconds, I see fear backlighting her baby blues, but then she quickly blinks it away. “You have a concussion. You can’t skate.”

“When I get the all clear, I’m going to need a skating partner to help me out.”

She goes quiet for a minute, and I can almost hear the wheels turning in her pretty head. I know her well enough to understand she’s figuring she can get the game information she needs, then bail before I ever get back on the ice.

“Like someone to spot you?” she asks.

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Okay,” she agrees.

“But until that time, there is something else I’m going to want.” I let go of her legs, brace my hands on the edge of the pool and lift myself out. I stand over her, invade her personal space. Water from my hair drips onto her thin shirt, wetting it enough that I can see a hint of her lacey bra. Fuck, she’s hot—and if her brother knew what was going through my head, a concussion would be the last thing I needed to worry about. He’d rip my left nut right out of the sac. He’s not called Crazy Callaghan for nothing.

She lifts her chin an inch. “What?”

I cup her face, and I swipe my thumb over her plump bottom lip. Are having two balls really that important? “I get to kiss you whenever I want.”