
**CONFESSIONS OF A BAD BOY
MILLIONAIRE**

CATHRYN FOX

Cathryn
FOX
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

COPYRIGHT

Copyright 2018 by Cathryn Fox
Published by Cathryn Fox

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only.

This e-book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to your favorite e-book retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Discover other titles by Cathryn Fox at www.cathrynfox.com.

Please sign up for Cathryn's Newsletter for freebies, ebooks,

news and contests:

<https://app.mailerlite.com/webforms/landing/c1f8n1>

ISBN: 978-1-928056-94-2

“**N**o. No way. Absolutely not. Not in a million fucking years.”

I glare at sweet little Eliza Banks as she plants one hand on her hips and blinks up at me with big brown doe-eyes that could melt the paint off my Tesla. Flashing those long lashes might have other guys scrambling to give her anything she wants, but the approach is useless with me. It didn't work when we were kids, and it sure as hell isn't going to work now.

It's probably going to work.

“Come on, Braxton. Help a girl out, already.”

I stare at my best friend's kid sister as we stand in the near empty parking lot, halfway between my office complex and my car. I can hardly believe what she's asking me to do, or how tempted I am to say yes. I'd left work tonight, beyond ready to relax this long weekend. The only things on my agenda are a few games of basketball with the guys, a midnight sail in the San Francisco Bay and a drink at my favorite Irish pub with my best bud, Derek—aka Eliza's brother—when he gets home Sunday. The last thing I

expected was getting accosted by Eliza before I could reach my car. What she's asking me to do is so ludicrous, so asinine I'd have to be insane to agree. Which begs the question: why am I so goddamn close to saying yes. I must be out of my fucking mind.

Keep it together, Braxton.

Summoning all my willpower, a tactic born out of necessity after setting eyes on Eliza when we were teens and being warned to steer clear of her by her brother, I ask, "What part of *no* didn't you get, Lizard?"

She swats at a mosquito, annoyance flashing in her gorgeous eyes as she looks up at me. "Will you for God's sake stop calling me that? I'm not sixteen anymore."

I'm well aware of that. At sixteen she was a cute girl with freckles spilling from her nose to her cheeks, and I had a huge crush on her. But now, at twenty-six, she's all grown up, and sporting a sexy body full of lush curves and sweet valleys that I'd love to get my hands on...my mouth all over.

Fuck me.

But she was hands off when we were young, and she's hands off now. I made a vow to her brother—my goddamn best friend—never to touch her, and I don't break my promises. I can't blame Derek for not wanting a guy with a reputation like mine touching his kid sister. If I had a little sister, I wouldn't let Derek touch her either. That guy has reached out and touched more women than Hallmark. Yet I'm the one making the headlines. *San Francisco's Most Eligible Bachelor*. But fuck, how am I to say no to those seductive lips and pleading eyes. And when her fucking chest heaves from frustration...Christ.

"No," I say flatly, and grab a fistful of hair as I plot the fastest path to my car. The sooner I get away from her the better. I make a move to go, but she steps in front of me and digs her heels in.

“Braxxxx...” she pleads. The space between us sparks with tension, warning me to get the hell out of there before I do all the dirty things racing around inside my brain, things that would shock a nice girl like Eliza.

“Ask someone else.” Fuck, my voice sounds like I’ve just eaten a bucket of gravel.

“It can’t be anyone else.” She moves closer and tugs on my lapels, clinging to me like I’m her lifeline. I watch the early evening sun light up the golden flecks in her eyes. Bad move. “It has to be you.”

Shit, damn and hell! I’m this close to caving and being *one of those guys*.

Her knuckles brush my chest, and it takes every bit of strength I possess not to back her up, press her against the wall of my office tower and kiss the living fuck out of her. “Why, Eliza?” I grumble, losing patience, mostly with myself, as her scent fills my head. I take advantage of the situation and pull in a deep breath of her. Bad move number two. “Why does it have to be me?”

“Because you’re smart, successful, a self-made millionaire and one of the hottest...” She freezes for a second, like she said too much, then continues with, “I mean you’re not bad to look at.”

I arch a brow. “Hottest?”

Her cheeks turn the prettiest shade of pink. I don’t think I’ve seen her blush before. “Uh...hottest jobs,” she explains.

Is that what she was really going to say? I don’t think so, and let’s be honest—it makes me feel way better than it should that she thinks I’m hot, but no way in hell will I let her know that—or take advantage of it. Instead, I say, “You think being CEO of New Tech Industries is a hot job?”

“Yeah, starting a tech company from your dorm room and turning into one of the world’s most successful project management businesses is hot.”

“Was that a compliment, Lizard?” I ask, purposely using her nickname to remind me this is my best friend’s sister, and that she’s never once complimented me over the years. She doesn’t even like me, and I can’t say as I blame her for that. “Trying to soften me up so I’ll agree.”

She lifts her chin. “No. Just stating a true fact.”

“You’ve done all right too, you know,” I step back a bit, putting enough space between us to get her scent out of my head. “Snatched up by Exact Inc. straight out of Stanford and now, as QA Engineer, you’re advancing the ‘art and science’ of hiring for other businesses. I’m just sorry they got to you first.” Her mouth drops open as she blinks up at me. “You might want to close your mouth, Eliza. Before you eat that fly buzzing around us.”

“But...wait, what did you just say?”

“I’m always looking for top talent.”

“You think...” She goes quiet for a second, glancing away. I can almost see the wheels turning behind her eyes, and then she frowns and shakes her head. “Wait, we’re getting off track here. Will you do it, Brax?” she asks, steering us back onto the topic at hand. “Will you help your best friend’s sister out?”

“Jesus, Eliza.” I clench down on my jaw as a gust of wind whips through the parking lot, sending loose strands of chestnut hair across her face. I curl my fingers and resist the urge to tug them away. Or better yet, drag her to me.

She huffs out her annoyance. “For crying out loud, Brax, I’m not asking to marry you, or anything ridiculous like that.”

Marrying me would be ridiculous?

“I just need you to pretend to be my...” she makes a frustrated gesture with her hands. “...significant other for a couple days. How hard could that be?”

Hard. Really fucking hard.

She glances upward and almost—not quite, but almost—rolls her eyes. “Just pretend you’re really into me.”

“Yeah, to get another guy to notice you.” I shove my hands into my pockets, click my molars together. I don’t think I like that. In fact, I know I don’t. I’ll worry about why that is later, but for now...“Do you have any idea how insane that sounds?”

She shrugs, and averts her eyes, but I catch that familiar sadness before she looks away. That sorrow takes me back in time, to when we were teens and she was always overlooked by all the guys. Jesus fucking Christ. Does she not have any idea that she was a swan then, and is a swan today? Any asshole who can’t see that doesn’t deserve her attention. No, she needs to be with a guy who will worship her, show her how beautiful she is, inside and out.

Of course, back in the day, I didn’t help matters either. I was nice to her at first, worshiped the fucking ground she walked on really, and she took that as interest—rightfully so. One night, I was hanging at her place waiting for Derek to get home from soccer practice. She was at the table struggling with a math problem. Since I was always good in math, I sat down to help her. Our legs touched beneath the table, sparking enough electricity to light up the neighborhood in a blackout...for a week straight. She felt it every bit as much as I did, which was why she acted on impulse and leaned in and kissed me.

I laughed at her. The courage that must have taken for her to do that, and I fucking laughed at her, feeding into her belief that she was an ugly duckling. I was a stupid fucking kid, and I was crazy about her, yet I couldn’t let anyone know it, especially her. So after that, I started calling her Lizard, and teasing her relentlessly. I needed her to hate me, otherwise I would have taken her to my bed and shown her just how much I wanted her.

“Brax,” she says again, quietly. “This is important to me.”

Every fucking bone inside my body softens. Yeah, okay, okay. I get it. I owe her one, but pretending to be her boyfriend, and not being able to exercise those boyfriend privileges is a special kind of torture reserved for Hell—exactly where I’ll be going I agree to this ask for boyfriend privileges.

“Shouldn’t you ask someone you don’t hate?” I shoot back, a last-ditch effort.

“Probably, but you’re perfect for the role.”

I exhale a heavy breath. “What exactly is it that you want me to do?” I hold up a hand when her face lights up. “And that doesn’t mean I’m agreeing to this.”

Who the fuck am I kidding? It means I’m agreeing.

She folds her hands in front of herself, a smile turning up the corners of her perfect mouth, because yeah, she knows it means I’m agreeing, too. The pleasure on her face, the triumph dancing in her eyes, fucks me over. Goddammit, I love that look on her, can think of another, more pleasurable way, of putting it there.

“We just have to pretend. Maybe a few touches here and there. A kiss too, possibly.” She crinkles her nose. “Although I’m not really sure it will come to that. At least I hope not.”

“Me too.”

Liar.

“We’ll set rules and boundaries. You won’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. Hey, we can even write up a contract, to keep this deal professional.”

“Professional boyfriend? You make it sound sordid.”

“No, no. I didn’t mean that.”

Too bad.

“What did you mean?”

“Look, I just mean behind closed doors we can go back to hating each other. In front of everyone we pretend we’re

lovers. Then, after we get Jason to notice me, we can have a fight about something, and I'll break it off."

We stand there looking at each other for a long moment, a staring contest like when we were kids. She always won those, too. I used to cave just to get a grin from her. "Fine, Eliza, I'll do it, but that doesn't mean I'm going to be happy about it."

She crinkles her nose. "You have to at least pretend to be happy about it if we want this to work."

"Is this guy worth it?" I ask. I'd actually like to punch him in the face for not noticing the amazing woman standing before me. Then again, there's a good chance I'll punch him in the face if he does.

Oh, yeah, this ruse is going to work out just fine.

"He is. I really like him."

"Does he know that?"

"No, we work on the same floor, but I'm not on his radar. He's a software engineer," she says, like that explains everything. "You know how those guys are?" she adds with a laugh.

"No, I don't."

"Always have their head down, lost is some code."

I arch one brow. "You do know I'm a software engineer too, right?"

"Yeah, right...I...uh, didn't mean that in a bad way."

"Is that another compliment?"

"Just stating a fact."

"You seem to be stating a lot of facts today." The sound of footsteps approaching gains my attention, and I nod to two employees headed to their cars. I wait until they're out of earshot before saying, "And you think if he sees you with me, he'll finally notice you?"

"What I think is, if I show up at my boss's estate for our annual team building weekend..." She pokes me in the chest and waggles her brows. Jesus, I wish she'd quit touching me

all ready. "...with *San Francisco's Most Eligible Bachelor* at my side, and he's acting like he's totally into me, well, that's going to get a lot of heads bobbing."

Especially the one between my legs.

"I'll make it worth your while," she says, and my cock stands up to hear more. The little bastard has his own ideas on what he'd like her to do. "I don't expect you to do this without getting something in return."

"Tit for tat, huh?" She has one hundred percent of my attention now. "And what exactly do you plan to give me in return?"

"What do you give a millionaire who has everything?" She taps her chin, and purses her lips.

My head spins with possible scenarios.

"Wait, I know." Her eyes go wide. "How about I get you a date with Valerie? You remember Valerie, don't you?"

Que the screeching breaks as my lecherous imagination skids to a halt. "Your best friend, Valerie?" I say dryly. Why wouldn't I remember her? The two were practically joined at the hip growing up, and now both work in different departments at Exact Inc.

"You two seem to really hit it off at Becca's wedding last month." She nudges me. Enough with the touches, for Christ's sake. "You couldn't keep your eyes off her."

A sound catches in my throat, and I feign a cough. It wasn't Valerie I was staring at, it was Eliza, looking gorgeous, elegant and poised as she stood up for her friend in a curve-hugging, bridesmaid dress. I'd never seen her look more stunning.

"I can get my own dates."

"Well that's true." She crinkles her nose again. "What do you want then?" Before I can answer, and possibly get slapped, her phone pings. "How about you think about it, and let me know later." She fishes her phone from her purse. "It's

Valerie. You sure you don't want that date? She'll be at the retreat this weekend. I can talk to her about it."

"I'm sure."

"Okay, I have to take this." She slides her fingers across the phone, and says, "I'll text you the directions to my boss's place. We can meet there later tonight. He's expecting everyone around nine."

I step into her, and her breath catches as my eyes lock on hers, holding her captive. "I'll pick you up, Eliza. What kind of boyfriend do you think I am, anyway?"

"I...uh...just didn't want to put you out."

I cup her elbow, drag her to me. "Oh, you're putting me out. Let's make that perfectly clear. You're putting me out big time. But if I'm going to pretend that we're a couple for the weekend, you can't expect me to treat you any differently than I would a real girlfriend."

She laughs, but it has a nervous undertone. "I know what you do with your girlfriends. The whole world does. Your antics make newspaper headlines."

I dip my head, lock eyes with her. "Good, then we're on the same page."

“**T**his was a mistake. A huge mistake, Valerie,” I say into my phone as I pace inside my condo. I grab the TV remote and flick on the news to drown out the quiet of the place. After growing up in a house with a noisy, rambunctious brother, then living in a Stanford dorm with two other roommates, I thought I’d enjoy the solitude more than I actually do. Sometimes though, it’s kind of lonely living here by myself. I can’t imagine what it’s like for Braxton to be in that big mansion all alone. Then again, he does have a different girl every night to keep him company. Not that I care. He can do whatever he wants.

“Why are you so nervous, anyway?” Valerie asks. “It’s just Braxton. You’ve known him forever.”

“I shouldn’t have asked him.” Of all people, I shouldn’t have asked *him*. “I didn’t think this through. You should have stopped me.”

“Stopped you?” Her snort comes through the phone. “Come on, Eliza. No one can stop you when you put your mind to something.”

I toy with the gold hoop in my ear. “Well, you could have at least tried.”

She laughs and it reverberates through me. “I didn’t even know what you were up to. I’m not a mind reader, you know.”

I shake my head. Truthfully, my best friend isn’t to blame for this. Two hours ago, I single-handedly lit a fuse that could only blow up in my face. Goddammit, you’d think I’d have learned that impulsive decisions based on gut feelings only lead to trouble—and a whole lot of embarrassment.

“I know,” I say and pinch the bridge of my nose. “I’m sorry. Of course, this isn’t your fault. It’s just another one of my stupid spontaneous decisions.”

“What brought it on, anyway?”

“I was driving past Braxton’s office complex earlier tonight, saw him in the parking lot, and the idea hit like a bolt of lightning.” If only that bolt had killed me! “At the moment, it seemed brilliant, and it actually was, right up until he said he was going to treat me the way he treats his real girlfriends.”

“Ummm, lucky you,” Valerie whispers, her voice all breathy, her words dreamlike.

I nearly swallow my tongue. “Lucky me? Are you serious?” I pace to my bedroom, grab my bathing suit from my dresser and toss it into my overnight bag. It’s a cute pink bikini with a frilly edge. Valerie said it looked great on me but I’m not so sure. I’m used to one-piece suits that don’t show a lot of skin. It’s not that I’m self-conscious...well, okay maybe I am a little—a hold-over from my youth. I used to be heavier when I was younger, and wasn’t comfortable wearing a two-piece except to lay out in the sun on my back deck, alone. Then again, I was never really *alone*. My brother and his best friend were always around. Not that they paid me a lick of attention.

I turn, catch my reflection in my floor to ceiling mirror, and examine my body. I’d shed my work clothes the second I

gotten home, and now I'm wearing my comfortable frayed shorts and a T-shirt. Thanks to eating healthier and regular work-outs, I've lost several pounds and like what I see when I look at myself. My legs are long and lean and my breasts appear heavier, a little larger than they actually are, in my Victoria's Secret push up bra. The truth is, even though I've lost the weight and grown curves, I still can't get Jason's attention—or any other guy's, for that matter. Hence my stupid plan.

"Yeah, I'm serious," Valerie says, pulling my thoughts back. "You're one lucky woman and I wouldn't mind being in your shoes. I'd take full advantage of it." She makes some kind of sound, a pleasurable moan, if I had to guess.

"You know his reputation, Valerie. His bedroom has a revolving door." I hold my finger up and swirl it, even though she can't see me.

"Which is why I'm jealous. Imagine having that man's undivided attention for one night, or better yet, the whole long weekend. Ummm, just think about it...three sexy days with those capable, controlling hands touching you, bending you to his will...or over the kitchen counter."

Do not think about it. Do not think about it.

Oh, God, I'm thinking about it.

"That is so not happening. I don't even like the guy," I counter.

Then why are you tingling all over at the thought of "getting bent" by Brax?

"Hey, you don't have to like him to sleep with him. Take advantage of his revolving door, Eliza. Get in, get a little—or a lot—of sex, and then move on. How long has it been, anyway?" she asks.

"Low blow, Valerie."

Great now I'm thinking about Brax and blow in the same sentence. I'm going to kill my best friends.

“I’m asking a serious question, Eliza. How long has it been?”

Too long.

I take a deep breath, and shut down my inner voice—the one loving Valerie’s plan. “Remember, I’m using him to get another man’s attention. It’s Jason I want, not Brax.”

“Yeah, I know, but come on, you two will be sharing a room and—”

“Oh, shit...”

“What?”

I stop pacing, and my heart crashes against my ribcage harder. “I never thought that far ahead.”

“Ah, you didn’t stop to think if you were bringing your significant other, that boss man would put you in the same room? You’re consenting adults, Eliza, and it would look odd if you brought your boyfriend to the retreat and asked for two rooms.”

As a new kind of panic grips my throat, I slap my hand to my forehead. “I need to call this off.” I leave my bedroom and hurry to my front window to make sure Braxton’s not here yet. It’s been over two hours since I ran into him, and he went home to get changed and packed for a beachside getaway. It’s almost eight. He’s likely to be here any minute. “Yeah, I’ll text him and call it off. He’ll be happy about that, actually.”

“If you ask me you’re making a mistake.”

“Which is why I’m calling it off,” I blurt out.

“No, Eliza,” she says, her voice low and even. “Your mistake would be in calling it off.”

I shake my head. Valerie is so wrong about this. “I have to go. I need to text him right now before he leaves his house.” I’m about to hang up, but stop when she continues to speak in that low even tone that means she has something serious to say.

“Don’t do it. Let him take you to the retreat. Force him to play the doting boyfriend. Don’t you think he deserves to be put in that uncomfortable situation as payback for all the times he called you lizard, pulled your hair, or teased you? He deserves this,” she says. “If I were you, I’d make him pay, torture him in return.”

Why the hell is she trying so hard to talk me in to this?

Surely to God she doesn’t think I *like* him.

“I don’t *want* him, Valerie,” I blatantly point out, in case she’s mistaking the reason for me asking *him*, specifically.

You have a lot of guy friends, Eliza, so why exactly did it have to be Brax?

“I know, but think of how you could torture him in the bedroom,” she says.

“What are you talking about?”

“Have fun with this situation you got yourself into. Make it work for you and kill two birds, so to speak. While you use him to make Jason stand up and notice, you can get back at Brax for everything he’s done to you over the years. Say you do have to share the same room, the same bed—wear something sexy and torture him. Like you said, you don’t want him, but you can make him want you, then walk away. Or better yet, use him in other ways while you have him there for the weekend.” She coughs out the words, “Dry spell.”

“I am not doing any of that.” I blurt out, even as my mind goes straight to the hot little nightie I’d bought but never had a reason to wear. I’ve been so focused on school, and my career, I haven’t been with a guy in a long time. Which must be why I’m visualizing Braxton on the bed, and me walking around the room in something suggestive. Yeah, that has to be the reason because I don’t want him. Not one little bit.

“Why not?” she asks.

“He doesn’t think of me that way.”

“How do you know?”

“Because...because he doesn’t.”

“Weak, Eliza, really weak.”

“Okay, fine,” I shoot back, changing tactics. “What if I do wear something sexy, and he doesn’t even notice. I can’t handle that kind of rejection.”

Not again.

“You’re not sixteen anymore, my friend,” she says softly, her tone sympathetic.

I pinch my eyes shut and will the unwanted, hurtful images away. I can’t—won’t be that girl again. “I’m calling this off.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, my doorbell chimes. Damn, I wanted to catch him before he left his house. I feel bad for dragging him across town, just to break it off, but I guess the proper thing to do would be to tell him in person. I owe him that much respect, right?

“He’s here. I have to go.”

“I’m on my way too. I guess I’ll see you *both* soon,” she says. “And remember—get your vamp on and bask in the takedown of Braxton Freeman.”

“No, you’ll see *me* soon.” I slide my finger across the phone to end the call, take a deep fueling breath and walk to my door. I grip the handle, swing it open and when I come face to face with the hottest guy on the planet, every reason I have for ending this stupid ruse slips from my mind.

With one arm behind his back, his dark gaze roams over me, lingers on my breasts, my bare legs, scorching me from the inside out. His eyes close for a brief second, then he’s once again there, taking me in, a stare so dark and penetrating air leaves my lungs in a whoosh. I take a faltering step backward, needing the distance to break from his spell.

What the hell? He’s looking at me like he wants to eat me alive. Since he’s never looked at me like that before, it has to be all part of the act, getting himself in the role of my lover?

A small smile tugs at the corners of his mouth, and I brace myself, expecting some smart-ass comment, something insulting about my clothes, or my hair, but instead he gives an appreciative nod, blazing heat still in his eyes as they leisurely travel back to mine.

“I...uh. About this weekend...” I begin, needing to get my head on straight. He’s acting, nothing more, and I’d be wise to remember that.

“For you,” he says and pulls his arm from behind his back to hand me a beautiful bouquet of flowers.

I stare dumbly at the stunning arrangement of wildflowers clutched in his fist. He could have produced anything from behind there—the evening newspaper, carry-out pizza, a water gun to squirt me between the eyes, but...he brought me flowers? Not once in my life has anyone brought me flowers. I reach out and touch the velvety petal of a daisy with the tips of my fingers.

“Are you going to let them wilt?”

The softness of Brax’s voice brings my gaze up and if I’m not mistaken, he looks almost as uncertain as I am surprised. My hands shake a little when I take the bouquet from his. I hope he doesn’t notice. It would give him one more thing to tease me about.

“I’ll put them in some water,” I say, and hurry to my kitchen. I take one quick glance at the man in my doorway, then grab a vase from my cupboard and fill it with water. My brother’s best friend had grown up wealthy, and was always very generous with his money, so the flowers might mean nothing to him, but they mean a lot to me. More than they should, probably. Then again, maybe they do mean something to him. I mean, how many times did he want to pay Derek’s way in life? My dad was a powerhouse attorney, and he left us when we were young. He provided Mom with enough money for us to get a good education at a private school—where my

brother met Brax—but mom taught us the value of money, and both Derek and I held down jobs through high school and college. There were times though, I had a feeling Brax was embarrassed by his wealth, always wanting to do more for us. But he worked hard to get where he is today, and he should be proud of that.

I step back into the front entrance way, and find him exactly where I left him. “You didn’t have to do this,” I say quietly, my mind taking another trip down memory lane, to the Christmas when I was sixteen and wanted a gift certificate for the spa to get a mani/pedi. All my friends from school were getting one. Mom told me straight up we couldn’t afford to spend money on frivolous things, but miraculously, on Christmas morning, the gift certificate was under the tree. It was a surprise to all of us, and to this day—even though he vehemently denies it—I had a feeling Brax had everything to do with it.

Exuding a cool control, he tilts his head, and arches a brow. The uncertainty I thought I’d seen before was gone. Brax was back to his old, cocksure self. “Didn’t we already establish that I’d be treating you the same way I treat every other woman I take out?”

“About that...” I begin, when he takes a measured step toward me, his clean soapy smell messing with my ability to form a coherent sentence. My gaze drops, takes in his t-shirt, the way it clings to hewn muscles my hands suddenly want to touch.

End this now, Eliza. Before you do something stupid, like actually try to kiss him again, only to get laughed at.

He shoves one hand into the pocket of his khaki shorts, and I take pleasure in the way they ride lower on his hips. Brax in a suit is one thing, but this relaxed version...it’s totally messing with my ovaries. Truthfully, I don’t understand it. Braxton is rich, successful, gives to charities, and is, by far,

the hottest guy I've ever set eyes on. He grew up in a loving family, with two parents, never having been abandoned by one—like Derek and me. He's never been subjected to the pain behind divorce, or what it does to the kids. So why again is he single, leaving one girl for the next, with no hints of settling down in the foreseeable future? I mean, I get why I'm not interested in marriage. I watched my rich father get bored with his wife and two small kids, only to move on to the next pretty, young thing. It's a pattern he still perpetuates—the pattern of the rich, I guess. Brax might not be married, but his rotating door is a sure sign he's a carbon copy of my father.

"We should get going." Brax says, pulling me back to the moment at hand.

"...use him in other ways while you have him there for the weekend."

As Valerie's words ping around in my brain, a bolt of lust curls through my blood. But what if I did seduce him and he laughed at me again? I could never, ever live through that humiliation again.

You're not a chunky sixteen-year-old anymore, Eliza.

I bend down to pick up my purse, needing something to occupy my hands as I think about how to tell him the weekend is off, without coming across as crazy, after begging him to do this for me. When I stand and turn back to Braxton, I don't miss the blast of heat sizzling in his eyes as they slide down my body. My pulse jumps in my throat. Would he look at me like that if he weren't interested in a little bedroom fun? Then again, I am his best friend's kid sister. Would that stop him?

No. No. No. Don't go there, Eliza. He's acting, and you need to end this now.

"I...my..."

"Your overnight bag?" he asks.

“Uh, it’s in my bedroom.”

He moves past me, his hard body brushing mine as he walks down the hall and disappears into my bedroom.

“What are you doing?” I ask and hurry after him.

“Getting your bag.”

“I’m quite capable of getting my own bag.” I plant my hands on my hips and follow him to the door of my room. I don’t dare go in. The less time I spend in a bedroom with him the better. I find him staring into the bag I had left open on my bed, and at the little bikini I’d tossed into it earlier.

He clears his throat. “Do you have everything you need?”

End this now!

I open my mouth to do just that, and instead find myself saying, “Yes.”

“Good.”

He’s about to zip up the bag up, but I say, “Wait.” I walk to my dresser, and pull out my sexy black negligee. I drop it into the bag, and Brax goes perfectly still, the air in the room charging, taking up space between us.

He thumbs the material. “Black lace,” he murmurs, his voice so low I have to strain to hear it.

“In case our ruse works, and Jason finally takes notice,” I say, a reminder to him—okay, to myself—that we’re not enjoying a lovers’ weekend away. This is about him helping me, nothing else, and I am going to kill my best friend for putting such crazy thoughts into my head. Brax doesn’t want me and I don’t want him. We don’t even freaking like each other.

His head lifts, and dark eyes meet mine. “Is that everything?” he asks through clenched teeth, his eyes a shade darker, piercing...almost angry.

“I think so.” He shoulders the bag, and I shake my head. “I can carry my own bag.”

“Yes, but you’re with me now, and things will be done differently.”

“Are you always this bossy with your dates?” I ask. He’s always had a bossy, controlling side to him. I’ve just never been subjected to it before. Well, maybe that’s not entirely true. There was that time he tossed me over his shoulder and hauled my ass out of the party Valerie and I snuck off to. Everyone was drinking, things started to get rowdy and a fight broke out. He showed up out of nowhere, and removed both Valerie and me from a bad situation. I had no idea how he found out where we were, and we never talked about it again.

“Depends on the date.” He walks past me and I follow him out the door. I lock up and he’s standing on the passenger side of his Tesla when I reach the driveway. He opens the door for me, and I slide in.

“I had no idea you were such a gentleman,” I say.

“You’re my girlfriend, Eliza. There are a lot of things you’re going to find out about me this weekend.”

“Technically I’m not your girlfriend.”

“There will be no technicalities this weekend. It’s all in, or nothing. As soon as you agree to that, we’ll get going.”

He stands over me, hovering close, and my heart leaps. “You’re saying it’s your way or the highway?”

He bends, and his handsome face is close to mine. There isn’t an ounce of humor in his eyes when they lock on mine. “Yes.”

Nervousness bubbles up inside me, as I mull that over. “You mean when we have an audience, right? We go all in for the audience? But behind closed doors—”

“What will it be, Eliza?”

This is your chance to end it, Eliza. He’s giving you an out.

I should climb out of the car right now. I really should. So what the hell is stopping me? Could it be because I really

want a chance with Jason? Or could it be something else entirely.

“Just so you know,” he begins, his voice softer. “I’d never put you in a situation or ask you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

“Oh,” I say. Is that why he thought I hesitated? “Actually, I never thought you would.”

His jaw unclenches, a new softness about him. “Then you trust me?”

I toy with the handle of my purse. Trust him? Yeah, I trust him. The question is, can I trust myself around him? “Yes,” I say. “To both your questions. It’s all in, or nothing and I trust you.”

“Good.”

He closes my door, and I shift restlessly in my seat as he climbs into the car. I try to settle myself as I pull up Google maps and give him directions. We drive mainly in silence, my thoughts going too fast to remain on any one topic. Half an hour later, we reach my boss’s beachside mansion.

“Nice place,” he says.

“Not as nice as yours,” I blurt out without thinking.

“You like my house, Eliza?”

I shrug and examine the cars in the lot, searching for Jason’s. “Sure.”

He taps his thumb on the steering wheel. “I was actually thinking about selling it.”

My head jerks around. “You’re kidding me.”

His brow furrows as he angles his head my way. “No, why?”

“It’s beautiful, with a great infinity pool, overlooking the bay. Why would you ever want to sell it?”

With his concentration back on the road, he slows the vehicle and puts on his signal light. “It’s kind of obnoxious, don’t you think?”

“Obnoxious?”

The muscles in his jaw bunch as I glance at him, but he turns his face from me. Not before I catch the embarrassment in his eyes. Others might not see it, but there are things this man can't hide from me—never could.

“I think...it's just...a house like that for one person. All those rooms and space. It's kind of much.” I frown, hating that he feels guilty for his wealth. He shrugs one shoulder, and goes on to justify his decisions. “I bought it on a whim, you know. Interest rates were down, right time for an investment property.” He casts me a quick glance, and I hate how he cares so much about what others think.

“It's a beautiful property and you deserve it,” I say.

A smile touches his mouth. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, and believe me, I know all about spontaneous decisions. Sometimes they aren't always the best choice, but you never know. Maybe someday you'll have a big family with lots of kids and fill all those rooms.” Without thinking, I slide my hand across the seats, close it over his and give a reassuring squeeze. But the second I do, his gaze lifts to mine—a gaze so hot and so intense it fires every nerve in my body.

Okeydokey...

I reach for the door handle, needing a reprieve from the storm inside my body. I'm about to flee when he leans into me. “Eliza,” he whispers, and I practically jump out of my shoes, when he captures my hand, and holds me in place.

“Yeah?” I ask, trying my best to pull off casual.

“Listen, Eliza. If you want to pull this off, you're going to have to stop jumping every time I touch you. I get it, you don't like me, but you're going to have to pretend you do in front of co-workers.”

“I know,” I say, feeling far too breathless and ridiculous for my stupid body's reactions to this man's *innocent* touch.

He touches my hair, coils it around my finger, and I swear to God, the muscles between my legs clench.

“Take a deep breath,” he says softly. I do as he says, then let the air out slowly. When I glance back at him, he’s smiling. “Better?”

“Better,” I say.

“One more thing.” His hand slides to my neck, and his fingers clasp gently as he slowly caresses my flesh with his thumb.

“What’s that?”

“I’m going to have to kiss you.”

Holy shit!

“I don’t think that’s necessary, Brax.” Jesus, why do I have to sound like I just ran up eight flights of stairs.

The muscles in his jaw clench, and air gusts from his flaring nostrils. “Oh, I think it’s very necessary if you want us to look like lovers. We should at least have the kiss nailed, right?”

“Yeah, but...”

“When I sign on to do something, Eliza, whether I want to or not, I give it my full, one-hundred percent. Anything worth doing is worth doing right. I’m not going to make a fool of myself by doing this half-assed, and getting called out. I thought you would have known that about me by now.”

I do.

Cripes, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Brax so intense before. I get he’s trying to help me and this all part of the act, but holy hell, the man deserves an academy award.

“I...well, I suppose. If you—”

He leans into me and his mouth steals my words. My body ignites. My eyes slide shut but I quickly open them again. Forget all the angst between us in the past; I have to see Brax’s face as he kisses me. My chest rises and falls with shallow breaths and his clean soapy scent swirls around me.

His fingers delve into my hair, tugging, controlling, confident in his touch as our mouths move, and tongues tangle.

He slides his tongue in farther, a slow exploration, testing, tasting, discovering with a deeper curiosity. A moan I have no control over catches in my throat, and his kisses deepen, expand, our tongues tangling as curiosity changes to a single-minded hunger that I've only ever read about.

This is what I've been missing?

He inches back, severs the intimate moment and not only am I breathless, I'm speechless—dying from need I never even knew existed, until this second...this man.

Oh this is so not good.

"Well?" he asks. "Do you think we'll be able to pull it off?"

I take more breaths, praying my brain starts working and I can form a coherent sentence. "That was..." How do I put in to words that the man kisses like a freaking God? If I didn't know better, I'd think he was kissing me like he meant it? But of course, I do know better. Right?

"Awful?" he asks.

What? I was awful?

How mortifying!

I swallow down the pain and remind myself it shouldn't matter that he thinks I'm an awful kisser. It's Jason I want. Not him. I repeat that to myself until it sinks back in. "Yeah, awful." I make a face like I'd just eaten a bucket of worms. "Horrible."

"I think tonight, behind closed doors, we're going to have to give that a whole lot more practice if we have any chance in hell of making this work."

OMFG.

I am so in over my head here.

It took everything in me, and I mean every fucking ounce of willpower I possessed, to break that kiss, when all I wanted to do was drag her into the back seat and fulfill all my teenage fantasies—with the one girl who always starred in them.

Seriously though, what the fuck was I thinking? Kissing her was a dick move, and I'm old enough to know better. I might have been lying when I said it was awful, but I wasn't lying when I said anything worth doing was worth doing right. But did I really have to kiss her? Fuck no. I *wanted* to kiss her—wanted to kiss her long before she ever pressed her lips to mine when we were teens. Today, I simply took advantage of the situation. Selfish bastard that I am.

A tortured sound, a half laugh, half moan catches in my throat as she hurries from the car, like she's being chased by monsters. Perhaps she is. It's dark, but the floodlight spilling over the huge stone driveway gives sufficient light for me to stare at her sweet ass, so round and firm in those daisy dukes, just begging to be squeezed by my hands, kissed by my lips. I shake my head to get my shit together. Good thing Derek is

in New York, consulting with an architect firm for the big project he'd been hired to oversee. Because one look at me, and he'd know what was going through my dirty mind. I scrub my hand over my chin. My best friend has one hell of a punch and I'd hate to be on the receiving end of it.

But kissing Eliza again would be so worth it.

Then again, I can't risk losing the best friend I've ever had, the one guy one who always cared about the real me and not what I had in my bank account. People treat me differently when they find out who I am, that I'm the son of real estate mogul Phillip Freeman, and made it big in the tech world. But neither Derek, nor his sweet sister, ever let my wealth stand between us, or ever judged me for it, and believe me, I'm always being judged.

Eliza hurries to the back of the car, and I catch her reflection in the rear-view mirror as she waits for me to get our bags from the trunk. I slide my tongue over my bottom lip, and still taste her there. Cotton candy and all things sweet. Great. How the fuck am I going to get that kiss out of my head, especially when we're in the same bedroom tonight, with her using me to catch another guy?

Motherfucker.

My nostrils flare as I think about the douchebag who's too stupid to see what's right in front of him. He'd better be worth all this shit. I climb from the car, press the fob to lock it, and pop the trunk. Eliza glances around, quick, jerky flashes of her lashes as she takes in the empty vehicles lit up under the lights. If I had to guess, I'd say that kiss fucked her up as much as it did me.

"It looks like everyone is here," she says, her chest rising and falling quickly, her expression a mix of nervousness and excitement.

Ah, okay, so now I get it. Jason is here, and that's why she's on edge. It wasn't the kiss after all. Which is a good

thing. I am doing her a favor—she doesn't even like me—and I shouldn't be thinking about sex.

What do you want in return?

Don't go there, dude.

I grab her bag and she holds her hand out for it. I snarl at her and toss it over my shoulder. "Lead the way," I say as I grab my duffel and shut the trunk.

She turns and I follow her along the stone pathway leading to the backyard. Noises and splashes reach our ears as we round the corner. I do a quick scan, take in the people swimming, lounging near the edge of the pool or sitting at one of the many tables with a view of the ocean, sipping champagne. I'd say outside of us there are about twenty people gathered.

Eliza opens the gate and I hold it for her to enter. I step through and when it bangs and clicks shut behind us, a few eyes turn our way. I take in her co-workers. Most are male, which isn't unusual in the tech industry

"Eliza," a man in his fifties says as he hurries toward us. Water drips from his board shorts, and he slows when he sees me. The joy in his eyes at seeing Eliza turns to shock when they glance my way.

"Braxton, this is my boss, Richard. Richard, this is—"

Richard holds his hand up to stop her. "No introduction needed, Eliza. I know exactly who this young man is."

"Nice to meet you, Richard," I say and he gives me a power shake.

I return it and he winks. "I had no idea you two were..." He pauses, like he's not sure what to say.

"Dating," I say and step into the role Eliza asked me to play. I put my arm around her and tug her against me. She stiffens at first, but then I gaze at her, a smile on my mouth. "You might have snagged her straight out of Stanford, utilizing this beautiful brain of hers for the better part of the

day, which I'm not too happy about, by the way," I say and we both laugh. I let my chuckle die down, and put my hand on the side of her cheek. "But I get her the rest of the time." A pause to let that sink in, and then, "I guess we both know a good thing when we see it."

A warm blush crawls into Eliza's cheek, and I bend down, press a soft, barely there kiss to her open mouth. It takes her by surprise, so I linger there for a moment, wait for her to pull herself together.

"Good?" I whisper. She nods and I straighten.

"I think I'd better show you to your room," Richard says with a chuckle. "Eliza, I put you in the same one as last year. You loved the view so much."

"Thanks, Richard. I really appreciate it." She jerks her thumb toward me. "And I hope you don't mind that I just sprung Braxton on you like this."

"Are you kidding me? Partners and spouses are always welcome, and I am so looking forward to getting to know him, maybe even learning about his business practices. As long as he's not here to scope out any of my team," he says teasingly, but with a hint of seriousness. I can't blame him. Competition is fierce in Palo Alto, but I would never poach from his company. He's been good to Eliza, which makes him A-Okay in my books.

"Wouldn't dream of it," I say and he relaxes a bit. "Eliza tells me you have annual bonding retreats for your top-level management. I think it's a great idea."

His face lights up. "Coming from you, that's a huge compliment."

As he leads us through the crowd, he stops to do a few introductions. Beside me, Eliza shifts from one foot to the other. I follow her gaze, and spot her best friend Valerie talking to some guy who has his face buried in his phone. Jesus, that had better not be Jason. There is nothing I hate

more than a guy who pays more attention to his phone than a woman making conversation with him—and that’s coming from a guy who built his own tech company from the ground up. It’s just plain fucking rude.

Richard stops to introduce us to his wife, a very motherly woman with blond hair and inquisitive eyes. “This is my lovely wife, Michelle.”

Richard is about to tell her exactly who I am, when I hold my hand out and say, “It’s just Braxton.”

Richard nods, like he totally gets where I’m coming from and I suppose he does. “My goodness, Eliza,” she says and nudges her. “Where have you been hiding this one?”

Eliza laughs. “Brax and I go way back, actually. It just took the right situation for us to realize how much we liked each other.” She smiles up at me and for a brief moment I almost believe she might actually like me, but I’m sure I’m wrong.

“I can tell how much you do.” She puts her hands up, like she’s warming them near a fire. “I can feel the sparks from here.” She gives a sigh of longing. “There is nothing like young love.”

Richard laughs. “Come on then, let’s get you settled. It’s a warm night. I’m sure you’ll want to go for a swim and have a drink before lights out.”

“Lights out?” I say. “Sounds like you run a pretty tight ship.”

“Busy day tomorrow,” he explains. “Very competitive group here, and we all need a little shut-eye.”

He leads us into his house and I study his mansion. Unlike mine, his has a woman’s touch. There are paintings, and flowers, and floral sofas. Mine, well, it’s decorated in every shade of gray you could think of. Despite what Eliza thinks, I really should sell it. The house would be better utilized by a big family—one I never plan on having.

I might have grown up with two parents, but they were

never there for me. Dad was always working and Mom was busy with her charities. From the outside it might have looked like the perfect family, but it was a very different story behind closed doors. I'd been in private schools since I was a child and had a no-nonsense nanny at home before I was shipped off to a boarding school in my teens. I was given opportunities others weren't, and I'm truly grateful for that. But there is a part of me that missed out on being a kid, missed out on quality time with my parents. How could I ever get married, or bring a child into this world when I have no idea how to be a husband, or a father? Jake and Eliza might have grown up with only a mother, but she gave them—and me—the love of two parents. I'm so grateful for that. And of course, that's another reason to keep my hands off Eliza. They all deserve that much from me.

We head up the wide stairs, and when we reach the top, Richard points the way, then leaves us to get settled.

"I like him," I say to Eliza and that seems to make her happy.

"I really like the culture at Exact. It's a great place to work."

"Doesn't sound like I'll be stealing you away anytime soon," I say, and give her a little nudge. Okay, now who's the one doing all the touching?

"You weren't serious about that anyway," she says, as she opens the door.

"Hell yeah, I was. I won't poach, but I would have hired you in a minute." I snap my fingers and follow her into the room. She glances at me over her shoulders. "You're brilliant," I add, and mean every word of it.

"Is that a compliment?"

"Just stating a fact," I say and that brings on a grin, but her grin fades as she glances around the room.

"One bed," she murmurs under her breath. I'm about to

tell her I'll take the floor when someone screeches from outside. We both walk to the window to see Valerie break through the water, coughing and sputtering and shoving her wet hair from her face. Her eyes are murderous when she glances at some guy standing on the edge of the pool laughing.

"I think someone just dunked her," Eliza says. Her head jerks my way. "Promise me you won't do that?"

I take in her big brown eyes, the panic backlighting them. I step closer to her, and my knuckles brush hers. "Eliza..." I begin, as her chest rises and falls rapidly. "You know I wouldn't."

She looks back out the window again. "I don't like..."

"I know." I still feel like shit for the time I tossed her into my pool when we were kids. We were going through a heat wave, and Derek brought her to my house one Saturday afternoon, after they'd both gotten off work. She was wearing a cover-up over her bathing suit and for a long time she just watched us in the pool. I was in the house grabbing us all drinks when she finally took it off and decided to have a swim. She was testing the water, when I spotted her in this cute one-piece that showed a curvy body. Fuck, she was hot. My dick grew as I watched her, and I knew if I didn't do something soon, get Derek's attention off me as I handed him his drink, he'd see my erection. So in a dumb, juvenile stunt, I picked her up and tossed her in.

Bad move.

She didn't come up right away, and I jumped in after her. Little did I know she hit her foot on the side of the pool going down. Fuck, I still hate myself for that. She spent the rest of the summer in a boot, all because I was trying to hide a fucking boner. Now she has a fear of the water.

Well done, dude. Well done.

“Come on, let’s get changed and get out there before we give everyone the wrong idea,” she says, breaking the quiet.

“Or the right idea,” I say and put our bags on the bed. She stands there for a moment, hands on her hips, lips puckered.

“I’ll get changed in the bathroom.” She points to the closed door.

“Okay, but knock before you come out, I might not be decent.”

What the hell are you doing, dude?

“I will,” she says quickly and unzips her bag. She pulls out her suit and a cover-up and darts into the bathroom.

I tug off my t-shirt, and pull on a pair of board shorts. Eliza might not be planning a swim, but I sure as hell need something to cool me off. I sit on the bed and wait for her. I bounce a little on the comfy mattress to test it. Nice. Not that I’ll be experiencing a good night’s sleep tonight. No, the only place I’ll be sleeping is on the floor. If I have to share a bed with her, it’s game over for me. A guy only has so much willpower.

“Brax,” Eliza says, followed by a knock, through the closed bathroom door. “You decent?”

My body is but my mind is far from it.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

The door creaks open, and Eliza comes into the bedroom dressed in a knee-length bathing suit cover-up. It hugs her curves and hides her gorgeous body. Goddammit, who’d have thought that I’d be jealous of a cover-up. Needing a distraction before I grab her, toss her onto the bed and climb on top, I clear my throat and walk back to the window. I stand there for a moment, let my gaze rake over her co-workers.

“Which one is Jason?” I ask.

She pads quietly across the room, and I listen to the way her breathing has changed at the mention of Jason. Her body brushes mine as she stands at the window, and I swallow

down the moan rising in my throat. She scans the pool area, lit by a dozen lights, and then she points.

Son. Of. A. Fucking. Bitch.

“Right there. He’s doing something on his phone.” She gives a strange little laugh. “Always working. I guess that’s why I can’t get his attention.”

Her eyes dart to mine, and that’s when I get it. Little Eliza—Lizard—still feels like that overlooked girl from our youth. Jesus fucking Christ, she doesn’t get it. Doesn’t get that she’s the most beautiful woman at this party and a guy like Jason isn’t worthy of her. I said it before and I’ll say it again, she needs a guy who’s going to worship the ground she walks on.

A guy like me.

Whoa, don’t go there.

“We’d better get down there and see what we can do then,” I say, and try not to sound as pissed off as I feel.

“Game on,” she responds, her eyes wide.

I follow her out of the bedroom and we retrace our steps until we’re outside. More introductions are made and when we reach Jason, who still has his nose in his phone, it’s all I can do not to knock his teeth out. Eliza is speaking and he’s completely fucking ignoring her.

“Jason,” she says again, and I slide my arm around her waist, pull her against me, mainly to occupy my hands before I do something I can only regret later.

“What?” he finally asks and looks up at us. He runs his hand through his mess of hair. When was the last time he used a comb? Then again, with a scrubby beard and baggy clothes, he has that shabby look going for him that the girls seem to love. Personally, I prefer to keep my hair short and wear clothes that fit. Still, even I know a good looking guy when I see one. I’m just finding flaws because I don’t like him.

“I’d like you to meet Braxton, he’s my—”

Before she can finish the sentence, Jason is on his feet. “Everyone knows who Braxton is,” he says, cutting her off, and it pisses me off a bit. I know her boss interrupted her, and not in a mean way, but I would have liked for Jason to at least let her finish speaking. She is, after all, here to get him to notice her.

He holds his hand out, and his impressive height allows us to stand eye to eye—his are the same color of blue as mine—and I take that moment to size him up. He obviously works out, and under those loose clothes, he’s probably cut. I suppose I can understand Eliza’s attraction to him. Truthfully, if he shaved his beard, and dressed properly, we could easily pass as relatives.

“Braxton Freeman. In the flesh,” he says, a huge smile on his face as I shake his hand. “I can’t believe I’m breathing the same air as you.” He shakes his head. “What are you doing here?”

As we shake, I lecture myself on playing nice. I don’t want to mess this up for Eliza. Right? “I’m here with, Eliza,” I say. “She invited me for a weekend getaway.”

For one shocked moment he stares at me, disbelief written all over his face. Then he shakes his head, and turns to Eliza. He gazes at her, giving her the once over, looking at her in a whole new light. Shit.

“Eliza, I had no idea you knew Braxton. What other connections have you been keeping from me?”

“I’m not keeping anything from you,” she says.

“Do you know how long I’ve been wanting to meet *the* Braxton Freeman?” He turns to me. “You’re a legend in this industry. Started your own business from the ground up. Forbes Top 30 Under 30.” He wags his brow. “San Francisco’s Most Eligible Bachelor.”

I hug Eliza tight. A possessive move, I know. If I keep

that up, no one will believe the breakup. “Brax and I go way back,” she says and puts her hand on my chest. Her fingers splay, and I place my hand over hers and hold it there.

It takes Jason a second to put it together. “Oh, wait you two are a—”

“Couple,” I say, and lean in and give her a kiss right on her open mouth.

Jason clears her throat. “Wow, I had no idea.”

“How about a swim?” I ask Eliza.

She smiles up at me, and I keep one eye on her and one on Jason. “Love to.”

“Talk to you later, Jason,” I say and lead her away.

“Yeah, I’d love to talk to you,” he says eagerly. “Let’s get a drink later.”

I lower my voice and put my mouth near Eliza’s ear. “So that’s him, huh?”

She nods. “He seems to really like you.”

“And his phone,” I say. Shit. I’m here to help Eliza win the attention of this douchebag, not point out all his flaws, or come right out and tell her he’s not good enough for her. She’s a grown woman who can make her own choices and that would be a dick move on my part.

At the edge of the pool, Eliza peels off her cover-up and I nearly bite off my fucking tongue. I glance around, take note of the eyes on her. Jason’s gaze slowly lifts from his phone, and they move over Eliza appreciatively. Anger flares through me. What? She wasn’t good enough for him until he saw her with me.

Cool it, Brax, that was the whole of idea of the ruse.

Yeah, but that still doesn’t mean I have to like it. I dive straight into the deep end as Eliza finds the stairs and wades in. I swim the length of the pool under water and when I come up, I find her talking to Valerie. I have no idea what

they're saying, but from their glances I'm guessing it's something about me.

I swim over to them, catch the last of Valerie's words. "Use him."

"Hey, Valerie," I say. "Nice to see you again."

"It's been a long time. I'm so glad Eliza invited you."

"Yeah, me too," I say and step behind Eliza. I slide my hands around her body and clasp my fingers around her stomach.

Eliza cranes her neck and whispers, "She knows."

I still don't let go of her. "It's almost like you two really are lovers," she says with a wink.

Eliza breaks from my arms. "We're not."

"I know that." She splashes water at Eliza, then turns to me. "Hey, Brax, I have to go to my cousins' wedding next month. My parents are driving me crazy about getting a guy and settling down. Maybe you could do me a solid and step into the role of loving boyfriend to get them off my back. I mean, you two will be staging a breakup at the end of the weekend and you'll be single again."

My gaze slides to Eliza, who is staring at her best friend. Her eyes are wide, her mouth dropped open. "Valerie, you can't be serious?"

"It'll cost you," I say.

"Oh, and what is this costing Eliza?"

I step back into Eliza. "We haven't negotiated that yet."

"Oooh, Eliza. You should have gotten those terms settled before you started this." She puts her finger on my chest and give a little push, but I don't budge. "Don't you know he's a skilled negotiator?" She grins at Eliza. "Brax always gets what he wants."

My gaze moves over Valerie's face, examining the small smirk turning up the corners of her mouth. She's right, of course. I'm an expert negotiator and always get my way. I'm

also able to read my opponents, which gives me the edge up. As I read Valerie's body language and expressions, I can't help but wonder what kind of game she's playing. She doesn't want me at that wedding any more than I want to be there. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was trying to get a rise out of her best friend, a reaction of sorts. But Valerie and Eliza go way back and she of all people should hate me as much as Eliza. Should want me as far away as possible—from both of them.

A splash sounds and Jason surfaces close to us. I move close to Eliza, and she brushes a wet strand of hair from her face as Jason zeroes in on her.

"Brax, come on out and have a drink with me," Richard says, from the outdoor bar area.

My fingers curl under the water when Jason says something stupid to Eliza and she laughs in return. Fuck, I hate that guy. And why the hell is she so nervous around him? I've never seen this side of her before. She's a confident woman with a beautiful brain and body, a girl who can hold her own in an organization filled with men. She must really fucking like him if she's acting all weird and out of sorts. Wait, has she never been intimate with a guy before—is she completely inexperienced when it comes to dating? Has she never been touched? The vision of another man putting his hands on my sweet Eliza sends rage through me.

My Eliza.

Jesus, get it the fuck together, all ready.

"Coming?" I ask Eliza.

"I..." she begins, but Valerie waves me away.

"Why don't you go ahead. Eliza is in good hands here," she says with a grin.

And therein lies the problem, because the only hands I want on Eliza are mine.