

**Forbidden Games**  
By JB Duvane

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## Chapter 1

Evan

I don't understand how the hell things got so fucked up, how I went from owning a multi-million-dollar consulting business with my two best friends from college to harassing my friend's daughter on the street and practically kidnapping her.

But if I don't do something to protect Zoe, those bastards will get to her. And if they get to her, I know for a fact we're both as good as dead.

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I'm sitting on the hotel room bed with my head in my hands. I'm glad that I finally got Zoe back. Actually, I'm ecstatic, but I sure as hell am not capable of showing it right now. Mostly because I'm pissed.

I've been taking care of Zoe since her parents died a few months back. I'm not her legal guardian, but I might as well be for all the times I've bailed her out of one jam after another.

She had the luck of being the daughter of one of my oldest friends, Griffin. He was a good person, don't get me wrong. But he never took responsibility for a thing in his life. Not even his own daughter.

We've been best friends since before school even started. He and his mom lived in the single-wide next door and we spent our early days playing with plastic farm animals and soldiers on the small patch of grass in between the two trailers.

I made it out of that rat hole, and eventually Griffin did too, but the old neighborhood never really left him. He made plenty of money, but somehow always managed to spend every last cent, mostly on gambling and women. He didn't get married until pretty late in life, and she spent money even faster than he did. Then, of course, they had a kid—Zoe. Neither one of them paid two seconds of attention to her most days of her life.

How do I know all of this? Like any sentimental idiot, I let myself get inextricably sucked into his life. By the time I realized what a mistake I'd made, I was so involved with practically raising his daughter for him that I couldn't get out.

After everything we went through growing up—two dirt-poor kids facing a shitty world in an even shittier part of town, all the times we had each other's backs in high school, then him making me godfather to his only child out of the blue—I was just not capable of saying no to him. It was my own fault, I know.

But when you look in the pleading eyes of someone you've cared about your whole goddamned life, no matter how shitty and irresponsible they've been at times, it's hard to think rationally.

Watching the way his daughter struggled to find her way with a dad who used every vice in the book to feel good about himself and a mother who didn't seem to give a shit—it was heartbreaking. And in the end it was really Zoe I couldn't say no to. When I looked into those sad little eyes, I wanted to be everything Griffin couldn't. I wanted to take her tears away and make Zoe smile again.

I understood what was happening every time she acted up and yelled at me. It would usually happen after Griff had promised her something—a bike or a dress or just his time—and then, once again, would act like she didn't even exist when it came time to come through.

So it was natural that the more selfish he became, and the more her mom checked out, the more Zoe and I came to rely on each other. She relied on me to be the only rational adult around. The one who would not only give her things she wanted and needed, but would also tell her when she was fucking up.

I knew Griff could see what was happening, how close Zoe and I had become, but I'm pretty sure, more than anything, he felt relief that she wasn't his responsibility any more. Relief that it was me she came to when she needed anything, even when what she really needed was her dad.

I was more than happy to be there for her through those years, but over time I started relying on her too. In the beginning, it was a completely innocent bond we shared, one I didn't have with anyone else in my life. I'd never had kids of my own, and with everything involved in getting a new business off the ground for the last five years, the romantic part of my life had mostly been devoted to one-night stands.

Eventually I started to secretly rely on Zoe for something that I could never, ever ask from her. A need that grows stronger in me every day, but I could never say out loud to her or anyone else. Because if those words ever come out of my mouth, if I even whisper to myself in the middle of the night how I really feel about Zoe, I know I won't be able to go back. I can't afford to lose control of my emotions when it comes to her.

After a while, years of standing on the sidelines and watching Zoe get crushed time and again by the man who was supposed to be there for her, I slowly stopped trusting a single word that came out of Griff's mouth. I was still there, still listening to his stories about how he was the victim and how the world was against him, but I didn't trust him for myself or for Zoe. Even though she

still fell for his promises every single time.

Honestly, I thank God every day that I allowed myself to become suspicious of him, because if I hadn't been following him that day, I never would've found out about the massive debt he owed some jacked-up, Italian mobster, or how he planned to pay it off.

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She's sitting across the room on one of those ratty, cheap hotel room chairs. Zoe's arms are folded and she's slouched so far down in the chair that she's practically lying on her back.

"This place is a shit hole," she says as she picks at a patch of worn threads on the arm of the chair. "It's disgusting. I'm not staying here."

"Don't give me any grief over this, Zoe. Just one more night and then we're getting a flight out of here."

"I don't want to go anywhere with you, Evan. I want to stay with my friends."

"Do you even know those people? I don't remember you ever mentioning them before."

"You don't know everything about me! I met them at the contest. They're cool girls. People I want to hang out with."

"Zoe, you were standing around on a street corner when I happened to drive by. I've been looking for you for weeks. I've been worried sick."

"If you hadn't made me quit *The Daddy Games* you wouldn't have had a thing to worry about. I was going to win that contest, Evan! Then I would have been set up. The grand prize was five hundred thousand dollars. Do you realize what that kind of money would have meant for me? I would have been out of your hair for good. You wouldn't have someone to take care of that you never asked for in the first place. That's what you want, isn't it? To get rid of me?"

I look into Zoe's hurt expression and for the life of me, I don't know what to say. I would do anything to take her hurt away, but I know that if I tell her the truth about everything it will just make things worse. "No, that's not what I want. I want you to come with me."

"Go with you where? What's up with all of the secrecy and practically kidnapping me off the street right in front of my friends? You're acting weird, Evan. What are you even doing in this crappy hotel? You live in a freaking mansion!"

"I don't want to talk about it right now. I just need you to trust me, Zoe."

"No adult has ever given me a reason to trust them. Why should I trust you?"

"Because, believe it or not, I care about you, Zoe, and I know what's best for

you, even though you can't see it right now."

"You know what I think? I think you just want someone to control. You've got some power trip going on because Dad made you my godfather." Zoe sits up on the edge of the chair and starts yelling at me. "You're not even my legal guardian, Evan. You're not anything to me!"

I sit there on the edge of the bed and stare at Zoe for a long time. Part of me wants to kick her the hell out. She's acting like such a little brat and I'm starting to wonder if I'm even doing the right thing. But when I get past that flash of anger, I know I can't let her go. No matter what she says to me or how she acts, she needs me. More than she'll probably ever be aware of, and definitely more than I want her to know.

Somehow she's evaded the men who have been after her while she was out slumming with her "friends," but eventually they're going to catch up with her. And there is no way I'll be able to live with myself if I let that happen.

"Zoe," I say, keeping my voice as calm as possible. "I'm not trying to control you. You don't understand what's going on. But I'll tell you one thing; you are in a lot of trouble if you don't get the hell out of this country, *with me*, as soon as possible."

"What are you talking about?" Zoe jumps up and starts pacing around the room, her arms still folded in front of her in a defiant stance. "What kind of trouble am I in? I haven't done anything wrong."

"I told you, I don't want to talk about it here. Can't you just trust me this once, Zoe?"

I realize with each word I say to her that my voice is getting louder and louder. I've already lost my entire life over this whole mess and I'm really starting to lose my patience with Zoe.

After everything I've done, after all I've been through in the last few weeks to find her and get her back, not to mention my failed attempt to pay off that damned debt of her father's, there's no way I'm going to let her leave this hotel room. If I could get a flight out right this minute, I would drag her ass down to the goddamn terminal and get both of us on a plane. I just want to get her far away from those Italian goons as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, the only flight I could get on such short notice isn't until tomorrow morning. But I swear to God, she's going to be on that plane with me if I have to stay up all night and patrol the damned room.

"Why should I? All you've ever done is tell me what I can and can't do. I'm an adult now, Evan. Your job is over. It was never your job anyway. You need to back off and let me live my own life."

I want to tell her that isn't true. I want to tell her that everything I've ever done has been to make things better for her. But I'm not sure if she believes anything that's coming out of my mouth at this point, so I wind up saying a bunch of stuff that isn't even true. "Believe me; with the way you're acting, I don't want to have anything to do with you right now either. If it was even a remote possibility, I would just leave you on the streets with your *friends*. But I can't. There are things going on that you just don't understand, and for right now you're better off with me."

"Max doesn't treat me like a kid," I hear her mumble to the wall.

"Who's Max?"

"None of your fucking business!" she yells to the wall, then turns around and looks directly at me, her face streaked with tears. "But if you really want to know, he's someone who cares about me. He doesn't try to control me like you do! He lets me do what I want and ..." Zoe puts both hands over her face and sobs. "And he says he wants to take care of me."

I can barely stand to see her like this. One minute she's yelling and the next she's crying, but the bottom line is she's in a lot of pain. I'm sure she doesn't trust any man to stick around for long or find value in her as anything other than a commodity. And I don't blame her one bit. Not with a dad like Griff to show her what men are like.

I get up off the bed and walk over to her. I want to comfort her but I don't know how. I don't know what she needs from me, and I'm afraid of crossing over into territory that's too intimate. Not for her. For me. "Look," I say, trying to sound optimistic. "When we get where we're going, you can email this Max guy and tell him all the fun stuff you're doing. But for now, you need to do what I say, sweetie."

I realize I've reduced myself to talking to her like a child now, not to mention treating her like one. I actually have no intention of letting her email anyone when we get to where we're going, let alone some schmuck who is probably only interested in one thing.

But I'm not going to let her know that. I'm still not exactly sure how I'm going to keep her with me once we get to Mexico, or wherever the hell we wind up. I don't exactly know when we'll be able to stop running from these guys. I'm pretty sure mobsters aren't in the habit of walking away from millions of dollars that they believe they're owed.

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, Evan. This is where it all ends. You're not telling me what to do

anymore." She picks up her duffel bag and throws it over her shoulder, then marches over to the door.

I don't think I've ever moved as fast as I did right then, not in my entire life. Before I know it, I'm all the way across the room and I'm slamming the hotel room door shut and Zoe's small body is dwarfed underneath mine. She drops her bag on the ground and turns around so that she's facing me, then looks up.

"What the fuck, Evan?"

"I told you, you're not going anywhere. I'm serious as hell, Zoe."

"I'm going to Max's and you can't stop me," she says through gritted teeth as she pokes my chest.

I stand there with my hands braced against the door on either side of her head, my face just inches from hers. My heart is racing like crazy and I'm having a hard time catching my breath. Part of me wants to believe that it's because I just darted across the room like a maniac, but I know better than that. Every single time I get this close to Zoe—and I've made damned sure it isn't very often—I can feel a surge inside me that I know is very wrong. "You're not going anywhere."

She stares up at me for a long time, not blinking once. I've seen this look before. It's the same one she's given me every time she's tried to get out of a sticky situation; one that she got herself into when she's tried to assert her independence. The thing is, ever since her parents died, it seems like getting into trouble is all she wants to do. And I wind up spending the majority of my time bailing her out.

I swear to God there's more than a sad, puppy-dog look in those eyes of hers. I'm not fucking crazy. I can see the way she looks at me. Sometimes, when we're close like this, I can see the look; the one I usually only see in my dreams. But now it's right in front of me and it's terrifying. I'm scared to death of the way she's looking at me because it's making it almost impossible to push back these feelings I have for her.

There's no way this can happen. There is no way I can let anything like this happen between us. Ever.

"Jesus Christ," I say, lowering one of my hands. I'm still way too close to her. Dangerously close.

"What?"

I step back and turn around, rubbing my chin in total frustration. "I swear to God, you just love playing games with me." I keep my back to her, trying to get my shit together and calm the fuck down. "I'm serious, Zoe. None of this is a game."

"Well, what about you?"

"What *about* me?" I say, turning back around and looking into those big eyes again. Eyes that are so beautiful they're practically killing me.

"You're always so mean to me, Evan. Like right now. You won't even tell me what's going on. I deserve to know."

I shake my head and run my hand through my hair. I haven't taken a shower in at least a day and I'm exhausted. I just want this to be over. "I'm doing what I think is best. That's all you need to know."

Zoe stands there and stares at me like she's studying me. "What's the matter with you, Evan? Every time I'm anywhere near you, you tense up. What are you so afraid of?"

I don't have the vaguest idea what to say. Zoe has never talked to me like this. "I have no idea what you're talking about—"

"Yes, you do. You can barely even look at me right now."

She's right, but I can't let her know. I'm not going to stand here and talk to her about this thing that's developed between us, especially since I don't even know what it is. But it seems like we're both acutely aware that this relationship has gone far beyond the bounds of a guardian and a ward.

"I'm an adult now, Evan." I'm listening to the words come out of her mouth, but she's right, I can't look at her. "I'm nineteen," she says quietly. Almost at a whisper.

"I don't ... why are you saying that?"

She doesn't say anything right away and the silence in the air is deafening. "Don't you know why?" I can hear the sadness in her voice.

I can barely breathe. I can't let this happen. This is not going to happen. I finally look her directly in the eyes. "If you're an adult, then act like one, Zoe. Listen to what I'm telling you. Don't go anywhere. Don't leave this hotel room. Don't talk to anyone. Just do what I ask for now ... please."

She stares up at me for another excruciatingly long moment, then drops her glance to the floor. "Fine. I'll just go take a shower." She makes an exaggerated gesture with her hands like she's exasperated. "Can you let me by, please?"

I step to the side and watch Zoe scoop up her duffel bag and cross over to the bathroom.

"You can take the bed," I say, raising my voice so she'll hear me in the other room. "I'll sleep in the chair."

"Suit yourself," she yells before slamming the bathroom door shut.

As much as I want to, I don't trust her one bit. I have no plans of sleeping at all. Probably not for the entire next week. But just in case I do happen to nod

off, I'm planning on planting myself squarely in front of the door. If she wants to leave this hotel room, she's going to have to crawl over me to get out.

## Chapter 2

Zoe

Once I'm alone in the bathroom, I slam my shampoo and conditioner bottles around as loud as I can. I want Evan to know that I'm pissed. I want him to know that he can't treat me like a little kid anymore. What the hell was all that shit? Telling me I'm playing games with him. Jesus Christ, all he ever does is give me those looks like he wants me, then turns around and yells at me. He's got some major problems.

The thing is, even though I want him to think I'm pissed, really I'm incredibly sad. I don't understand him at all. But maybe it's that I don't understand anything anyone does. I've never known a single person that didn't confuse the hell out of me.

I swear to God, I'm not crazy. The way he looks at me sometimes ... I mean, a person doesn't have to have a ton of experience in life to know what those looks mean. He does that crap, gives me those damned bedroom eyes where he makes me feel like he really wants me, wants me in ways that I've only ever dreamed about. Then he turns around and pretends like he doesn't know what I'm talking about. He's acting so much like my dad it makes me want to scream.

But Evan's not really like my dad at all. He may act like him sometimes, but he's never treated me like I mean less to him than a bottle of vodka or night out with his friends.

After I get done with my shower, I decide to head out into the hotel room with just a towel around me. I just want to see what Evan does. I want to see that stupid look on his face when he pretends that he doesn't want to touch my half-naked body.

I wish I had the guts to jump his bones, because what I really want to do is go out there and straddle his lap. I want to grind my wet pussy into him and drop my towel and watch his reaction. I want to see it in his face when he can't deny how he feels about me. I want to make him admit it.

*Say it out loud, Evan. Tell me to my face that you don't want me.*

The thing is, I don't actually know how he feels about me. Sometimes he has that look in his eyes and I swear I can practically see the testosterone oozing out of his pores. But a lot of the time he just seems mad. Almost like he can't stand to be around me. I want to believe that he feels the way I do. But I'm terrified that if I tell him how I feel, he'll just laugh and tell me to grow up. Or worse, tell me he never wants to see me again. And no matter how much I bitch about him

making me go away with him, if Evan did tell me he didn't want to see me again, I'd die.

I mean, I know I'm not always the most mature person in the world when I'm around Evan. Sometimes I feel like everything I do is to get his attention and approval. But no matter what I do, my actions always seem to have the opposite effect on him. It's like I'm doomed to disappoint every man who's even remotely important to me.

The only time I ever felt close to Evan was the night he came and rescued me.

My dad said he had a meeting with some business partners and told me he had to take me with him. My mom was off somewhere, probably spending his money on one of her shopping trips. I don't know where she used to go. She never asked me to go with her.

So my dad drove to this creepy warehouse in a part of town I'd never been to, and wound up leaving the car in a dark parking lot. He told me to stay in the car and wait for him. He said he was only going to be a half hour and that he really needed me to stay there until he came back out. I waited for three hours. I was cold and starving and tired and I just wanted to go home. I was old enough to know that my dad was being a total dick, as usual, but I wasn't quite old enough to have money in my purse for a cab.

So I called Evan.

By that point I'd been around him quite a bit. He didn't come to the house much, but I always saw him for birthdays and holidays. I trusted him. He was one of the only adults I always felt I could count on.

Evan came and picked me up and stayed with me at the house until Dad got home. The minute my dad walked in the door, Evan started in on him. And even though he was making excuses all over the place, I could tell my dad knew he'd really screwed up.

There was something going on between the two of them that I didn't understand. Evan kept telling my dad that there was no way he was going to let me be part of any of this; that it was sick and he couldn't fathom what was going through my dad's head.

I had no idea what he meant and still don't. I asked him about it once, and he did what he always does. He tells me it's not something for me to worry about, then acts like I'm in his way. Like he's mad at me for asking ... for even existing.

One of the reason that night sticks out so much in my mind is it was the first time I really saw Evan. Saw him the way I do now, I mean. It was the first time I

noticed his insanely sexy, serious eyes and chiseled jawline. Before, I'd always thought of him as some man my dad knew. But of all the men that had ever come over to our house, Evan was different, and something inside me knew it.

After that night, I would dream about lying in bed with him, his arms wrapped around me tight. I would picture him looking down at me and smiling at me, wanting me to be there with him. Wanting to take care of me.

That never happened.

Something in Evan changed that night too. Ever since then, I've had the feeling that he almost can't stand to have me around him. No matter what I try to do to get him to pay attention to me, all it ever does is push him further away.

I know I should be happy that he wants to take me with him, wherever the hell he's going. But for some reason, I'm scared. I just can't stop pushing him away. Even what I'm doing right now, walking out there to try to get him to notice my body, I know that this is going to make things even harder between us. But I can't stop myself. I never seem to be able to stop myself from ruining everything.

I guess ruining this confusing relationship is better than finding out the truth, though. Because the thing I'm most afraid of in the world is that he really does hate me; that we'll get to wherever we're going and he'll never look at me like he wants me again, because he'll know that he's stuck with me.

I wrap a towel around me and open the bathroom door, then walk out into the room like I couldn't care less where Evan is. But I know exactly where he's sitting. I can feel his eyes follow me across the room, even though he has some CSI show playing on the TV.

I sit down on the edge of the bed and start filing my nails.

"Put some clothes on."

I glance up and Evan isn't even looking at me. He's just sitting in that gross chair, staring at the TV.

"Seriously?" I ask. "This bothers you? You never even look at me, so what's the big deal?"

He still won't look over at me, but I know he has; otherwise he wouldn't know I was only in a towel.

"I said get dressed. We have to be at the airport early so you better hit the sack."

I sit there and stare at him with my mouth hanging open. I can't believe what a dick he's being. "Why do you even want me to go with you?" I ask, almost yelling at him again. "You obviously don't want me anywhere near you! You can't even stand to look at me! Why do you hate me so much?"

I jump up and run back into the bathroom, slamming the door again. I sit on the toilet and cry for a long time. When I open the door again, almost all of the lights are off.

The glow of the TV lights up the corner of the room where Evan is sitting, and I can see his eyes darting quickly back to the screen as I look over.

"I don't hate you, Zoe. I care about you. A lot. I just ... things have been going really badly for me lately and I need to get both of us the hell out of here."

"But where? Where are we going? I don't understand, Evan. Maybe if you told me —"

"I already told you. Don't ask me that. I'm not going to talk about this again until we get to where we're going. It's for your own good, Zoe. Now drop it!"

"Fine," I say as I slip under the covers. I'm not even remotely tired, so I wind up lying there staring at the ceiling and thinking about what I'm going to do. I don't want to be here with him if he's going to be mad at me all the time.

At some point, Evan turns the volume on the TV way down, but he keeps it going and the constantly changing, silent glow lights up the room in unsettling ways. It creates strange, moving shadows in every corner and I'm almost afraid that there are other people in the room.

Evan has made me totally paranoid.

I turn on my side with my back to him, and I suck in my breath when I hear him snoring. It's not loud, but it's obvious that he's fallen asleep.

I get out of bed as quietly as I can and sneak over to where he's sitting. He has that crappy chair planted right in front of the door and his legs are spread wide, taking up the whole path to get out of the room. I guess he wanted to be sure I didn't make my great escape out the door, but he conveniently forgot about the windows. They're that kind that slide to the side and I'm pretty sure I should be able to squeeze myself through the gap.

I leave my bag behind because I don't want to make any more noise than necessary. I grab my phone off the table and stick it in the pocket of my yoga pants, slip on my sneakers, then make my way to the window. I push the heavy, insanely dusty drapes to the side and am totally surprised to see the sun is coming up already. I pull back on a metal bar on the window frame. I have to yank it a couple times and am terrified I'm going to wake Evan up, but eventually the window pops loose and slides along the track. I move it sideways about a foot and a half, then step halfway out onto the concrete walkway.

The last thing I do is look back at Evan. I wish so badly that I could feel his arms around me right now. I want to be held and comforted, because I'm really scared. I don't actually know what I'm doing. I'm heading to Max's house

because that's the only place I can think to go.

He never really said he was going to take care of me; that's just what I wanted him to say. In every one of our sessions, I hoped he would tell me that he'd decided that the best course of treatment for me would be for me to move in with him, but that never happened.

Max is older and incredibly sexy, with dark hair and a chiseled jaw that reminds me so much of Evan. And truthfully, that's the only reason I'm going there right now.

I step my other foot out the window and I'm free. I can go anywhere I want and do anything I want. I don't have to listen to what Evan says. I don't have to worry about disappointing him. This is better. Leaving is the best thing to do.

But if that's the case, if leaving Evan behind is best for both of us, then why do I feel so sad?