

# **Forbidden Games**

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This book is a work of fiction and is intended only for adults over the age of 18.

All characters are 18 or over.

**THIS IS A SAMPLE AND IS NOT FOR SALE**

## ABOUT FORBIDDEN GAMES

*When the games you play involve lies and manipulation, the consequences can be more horrifying than you can imagine. Sometimes the only way out is to give in to your forbidden desires.*

**Evan:**

Zoe is like family to me.

I've practically raised her ever since her dad checked out with his gambling addiction.

Now he's dead, but still owes millions to some gangsters,  
and they want to take Zoe as a payoff.

Then they plan on selling her to recoup their losses.

She doesn't know anything about this deal.

I can't bear to tell her what her dad has done.

I've tried everything to pay them what they say they're owed.

But they're still after both of us and time is running out.

I'm terrified these men will catch up with her and I'll never see her again.

But more than that, I'm terrified of the feelings I have for her.

Of what might happen between the two of us if she stays with me.

**Zoe:**

I hate Evan.

He's always trying to run my life.

He humiliated me, practically dragging me off the street in front of my friends.

And now he's telling me I have to get on a plane and go with him.

But he won't tell me where.

He won't even tell me why.

I'm an adult now and I'm not going to let him treat me like this.

The only problem is ...

If I hate him so much, why can't I stop thinking about him?

As I'm crawling out a window, making my escape from him ...

Why am I so sad?

And why do I want so badly to feel his arms around me and his lips on mine?

**Evan and Zoe both know there are rules about falling in love.**

**Unfortunately, their hearts don't want to play by the rules.**

*Forbidden Love is a romantic suspense novella of 27k words and includes an extended epilogue that was not previously published.*

*It is intended for adults and includes some dark scenes that may not be suitable for all readers.*

## 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 reasons 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?

## Chapter 3

Evan

The feeling of falling through space jerks me awake and I realize that I'm halfway out of the hotel chair. It takes me a second to remember why I'm trying to sleep in the damned thing in the first place, but then I remember Zoe. I look over at the bed and shoot up out of the chair when I see that it's empty.

I cross over to the bathroom door and push it open. She isn't in there either. I look around the room and see her duffel bag and clothes in a pile in the corner, so I hope that maybe I'm wrong somehow; that the most obvious thing in the world isn't actually happening.

Then I see the heavy hotel room drapes moving back and forth, the way they would if there was someone behind them, and I breathe a sigh of relief. It's just like her to play a joke on me at a time like this.

"All right, Zoe, fun's fun," I say as I pull the drapes back. But she's not there. All that's in front of me is the narrow space of open window that Zoe crawled through to get away.

"Fuck!"

I kick the stupid chair over and throw an empty can across the room, but stop before I do any major damage. Calling attention to myself here in any way is the last thing I need right now.

I have no idea what I'm going to do. It was just dumb luck that I ran into Zoe yesterday on the street. I'd been looking for her for weeks and I'd almost given up on finding her. I was terrified that those men had found her and had taken her to some faraway place and I'd never see Zoe's face or hear her laugh again.

In sheer desperation, I'd taken to driving around in bad neighborhoods just on the slim chance that I'd spot her. I don't even know how I got so lucky.

But now my luck is over. She's gone again.

If I don't find Zoe and get her out of the country immediately, I'm going to be dead and she's going to wish she was.

For some reason, my first thought is of Kyle and Graham, my ex-business partners. Ex because I stole every last cent out of all of the accounts to pay back the insane debt Zoe's father owed the mobsters. They were demanding millions from him, with interest that was going up by gargantuan proportions every single day.

It still is.

When Griff died, his debt was immediately transferred to Zoe, although

she didn't know anything about it. I knew who these guys were. I'd been following Griff for months and was aware of the offer they'd made him. His debt would be paid in full if he handed his daughter over.

So when the accident happened, when Griff and his wife were found in their car at the bottom of a ravine, I figured it was them. The mobsters were coming to claim their part of the bargain.

Everything happened so fast. I arranged to meet with them to find out how much they say they're owed, which I'm pretty sure they inflated the hell out of just because, hey, they're mobsters. They can do whatever the hell they want.

Then I drained everything. Every cent in every account that Graham and Kyle and I had worked our asses off to make. I took it all.

And just as I was about to pay these fuckers millions of goddamned dollars to keep Zoe safe, she disappeared.

They claimed they hadn't touched her, but I wasn't giving them the money until I saw her with my own eyes.

Then I did. I saw Zoe online.

I'd gone back into the company server to make sure I'd erased any tracks of what I'd done with the money. I saw some kind of bizarre reality show that Kyle and Graham had streaming off a website they put up. I had no idea what the hell it was or how they got it up and running so fast. But there it was, some event with half-naked girls dancing around and a bunch of monetized links. It was a total freak show.

That's where I saw Zoe. Dancing around a goddamned stripper pole, of course.

I knew that if those mobsters saw her, it would be all over for both of us. I would be dead and no one would ever see her again. There would be no second chance to give them the payment. There would only be Zoe living the rest of her life out as some sick fuck's sex slave. Cause that's what these guys do. That's what they want her for.

Eventually I made an arrangement with my ex-partners. I gave them back half of the money I stole and they took Zoe out of the contest. Then I gave the damned mobsters half of what they now say they're owed, which has practically quadrupled overnight. I mean, it just keeps piling up. I swear to God they're adding on a thousand percent interest every single day at this point.

Of course they're not happy with what I gave them. It's not enough. They want Zoe, and I know they want me dead.

That's why I have to get us the hell out of here. My schitzed-out brain is grabbing at anything it can right now to find Zoe.

I text Kyle and he claims he hasn't seen her. I'm yelling at him in all caps

at first, but then when I calm down a bit, I realize that he's one of the only people who can help me right now. Even though I haven't wanted to involve anyone else in this bullshit up until this point, I know if I'm going to find Zoe, I really need his help. So I call him and hope to God I haven't totally fucked myself already.

"What the hell do you want, Peterson?"

I don't really have time to explain to the guy I'd just stolen hundreds of millions of dollars from why I took the money. I just pray that he'll give me a chance. "I really need a favor, Kyle."

"That's fucking hilarious!" Kyle says on the other end of the phone. "You're shitting me, right? Is someone gonna jump out from behind the couch and snap a pic of my confused face and turn it into an internet meme? Because that's the only thing that makes sense right now. Why the hell would I do you a fucking favor?"

"This isn't a joke. Look, I know you don't owe me anything —"

"Damn straight I don't owe you anything. You still owe us the other half of the money you stole from the company."

"Well, technically a third of it was mine."

"Uh, technically you can still go to prison for embezzlement, Professor Brainiac, but I'm not gonna dwell on a little piece of crucial information like that."

"Please, Kyle, will you just hear me out?"

There's a pause on the other end of the phone and I pray he hasn't hung up. "I'm listening."

"No. Not over the phone. I need you to come to where I am."

"Evan, I don't have time for this. I've got better things to do than get jerked around by you again."

"Please. I really need your help. I don't have anywhere else to turn."

I wait for what feels like an eternity while Kyle makes up his mind. "Okay, where?"

I tell him the hotel and room number and ask him to hurry.

"Okay, I'm leaving right now," he says. "I'll be there in a half hour."

"Thank you. And Kyle, bring your gun with you."

"What? What the hell for?"

"I'll explain when you get here."

"Dude, seriously? You're really in that much trouble?"

"Yeah, I am. In fact, I wish I had about ten guns right now."

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"So what's going on? I'm guessing this has something to do with the money you stole from the company."

I'm sitting in the ratty goddamned chair with my head in my hands while

Kyle stands in front of me. "Sit down," I say when I look up at him. "You're making me nervous."

Kyle walks over to the unmade bed and sits down. "Okay, what's this about?"

"So, you know Zoe, right?"

"Um, you mean the girl you ordered us to take out of our show a few weeks ago? The one who you say is your goddaughter? Except you never mentioned a thing about a goddaughter in all the years we've known each other. Through college and six years in business together and you never told your partners about this alleged goddaughter? Yeah, I think I know who you're talking about."

"Look, I never told you guys about her because she was part of my old life, from before I ever knew you guys. Griff and I grew up together, but that part of my life ... I don't know ... it just didn't mesh with my new life—college and the business and everything. I just didn't think any of it was important. But none of that matters right now. What matters is she's in trouble. We both are."

"No, what matters is I don't know if I can trust you at all anymore. I don't know if I can believe a word that comes out of your mouth, Evan. After all these years, I find out you've been stealing from the company, *our* company. The one the three of us worked our asses off to start from the ground up. I don't think Graham is ever going to speak to you again, man. I don't know if you understand how betrayed he feels."

"I know that. You think I don't know what I did to you guys? Jesus, it killed me to take that money, Kyle. You don't understand. I didn't want to do it. I *had* to."

Kyle's face softens a little. "Keep talking."

"So Griffin and I—"

"This is Zoe's dad?"

"Yeah, Zoe's dad. We grew up together. And as much as he pissed me off sometimes, I've always had a soft spot for him. As my life changed, I started spending less and less time with him, but then his daughter was born and he asked me to be her godfather, and I couldn't say no."

"But after that, the more time I spent with him, the more I realized what a piece of shit he'd become. His wife was no prize either. They both ran around all over the place and left Zoe alone. I didn't realize it at first, but eventually I saw it clear as day. And it made my skin crawl. He'd gone from being a good-natured kid that got into trouble to someone I didn't want to have anything to do with. And I couldn't stand that Zoe was stuck there with the two of them."

"Griff always liked to gamble, but by this point it had turned into a major problem. We're talking hundreds of thousands lost in a night. And when

you're playing games that big, you wind up playing with some pretty scary dudes.

"So one night, not long after she started high school, I get a call from Zoe. She's out walking around on the streets in the middle of the night because her dad left her in a car in a sketchy part of town. She doesn't have any money so she calls me to come get her. I take her back to her house and ask her what was going on, why her dad had taken her with him.

"She says she doesn't know. Just that her dad told her to wait out in the car and that it wouldn't be very long. I don't have a good feeling about it at all. When he gets back to the house, I ask him why he had her with him because I know he'd been at a poker game. That's all he ever did at this point. And I also know that from a really young age, the two of them would leave Zoe all alone at night. Even for a whole weekend. So there was no reason for her to be waiting for him in a dark parking lot."

"What did he take her there for?" Kyle asks like he doesn't actually want to know the answer. I can tell he's catching on. He's not stupid.

"He was going to bid with her when he ran out of money."

"Holy shit, man. No."

"Yeah. After that night I swore I was going to get Zoe the hell out of there, but it's never as easy as you think it's gonna be. Nothing like that ever is. I had him followed and trailed him myself just about every night to see if I could get something solid on him. Something I could take to the cops and have him put away. But he wasn't actually doing anything illegal."

"Jesus, Evan. How long has this been going on?"

"Years."

"Why didn't you ever tell us about any of it? We could have figured out some way to help you. You're like a brother to me—you and Graham—seriously, you're my family. How did it get so bad that your only option was stealing hundreds of millions of dollars from your best friends?"

"Well, they both died, Zoe's mom and dad. It was a car crash ... an accident, but I never bought that."

"You think they were killed? On purpose?"

"I'm pretty sure. Especially after I was visited by one of his big-time poker buddies."

"Oh shit."

"He informed me that Zoe's father's debts had passed on to his successor. I told him that I was her guardian now, even though that wasn't exactly the truth. But as far as I was concerned, it was. He told me that the debt would have to be paid one way or another. Either with cash or with Zoe."

"Get the fuck out of here. They were really going to just take her?"

"Yeah. I started asking around. I knew some of the guys from the old

neighborhood. The ones we used to play a friendly game of poker with. One guy told me he would never go to the big games that Griff would. He said getting mixed up with those guys was deadly. Playing even one game with them was like signing your own death warrant. They didn't mess around and when they wanted something, they took it. Those were his exact words."

"Why didn't you say something ... anything to us about this?"

"I didn't want to involve you guys. These men ... they're not just killers, Kyle. They do really dark shit. That friend of my dad's gave me the name of another guy. Someone who'd been involved with these people before. I met him at a truck stop way the hell out in the desert near Slabtown. He wouldn't even come within L.A. city limits. He said those men train and sell sex slaves. They're part of the mafia, which I pretty much figured, but they're on the outside of it somehow. What they do is lend money to high-level families, or guys with an expensive habit like Griff, and that's the way they recoup their loans. By selling off their daughters. It's some kind of sex slave racket.

"Apparently they're all over the place, in pretty much every country and every business imaginable. He said you never actually know if a person you're talking to is part of this whole ring. They're everywhere."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't believe it if it wasn't actually happening to me right now. I didn't think this sort of thing was real. So they either want Zoe to keep for themselves, or they want to sell her off so some rich mafia sleazeball so they can make their money back and he can use her as his goddamned slave for the rest of her life."

"No way, Evan. That's insane." Kyle's face is completely drained of all color now. "Whatever you need, you got it. I'll help you in any way I can."

"Thanks, Kyle. What I need right now is to find her. She took off a few hours ago. I fell asleep, and when I woke up, she was gone."

"Why?"

"I don't know. She said she wanted to go see some guy named Max."

"Doesn't she know what kind of danger she's in?"

I look down at my hands. As soon as the words come out of my mouth, I feel like an ass. But at the same time, I know how much the truth would hurt her. "I haven't told her."

"What? You're kidding? Why the hell not?"

"I just haven't."

"Okay," Kyle says, like he's talking to a crazy person, which he pretty much is at this point. "So do you have any idea who this Max guy is?"

"No. I haven't been around Zoe too much in the last month. She keeps disappearing on me. I was surprised as hell to see her on that reality show the two of you cooked up. What the hell was that, anyway?"

Kyle laughs. "It was our only way to make back some of the money you stole, dude. Girls stripping on camera and horny guys online paying to watch. It doesn't take a genius to figure it out. When you need money fast, sex is the thing that's gonna bring it to you. Every single time. You know, she was doing really well. I was bummed you had her pulled. She seemed pretty pissed too."

"Yeah, well, I wasn't going to wait around to see if any of those goons saw her on there. Then right after you dropped her off, she disappeared again. She's been texting me, but she wouldn't meet me anywhere. She said I was being mean to her."

"Well, were you?"

"Was I what?"

"Being mean to her? I mean, she didn't look too thrilled to see you after you ruined her chances of winning a half a mil."

"What the hell difference does that make if I was mean to her? I'm trying to protect her. I'm trying to get her away from these lunatics!"

"But does she know that?"

I sit there staring at my hands for another minute before I answer. Kyle was right. If I'd actually said something to her about all this, then maybe she wouldn't be running off after this Max guy right now. But I had no way of knowing that. I had no way of knowing anything when it came to Zoe. "No," I say. "I haven't told her anything."

"Well, then she probably does think you're just being mean and overprotective. Why haven't you told her what kind of danger she's in? Dude, you're freaking me out with how many secrets you're keeping."

"I didn't tell her because I didn't want her to know how big of a piece of shit her dad was. I mean, she doesn't deserve to know how little he valued her; that he would be willing to use her as a bet in a poker game or sell her over to these assholes to pay back his goddamned debt. She doesn't deserve that."

"Yeah, I see what you're saying. So right now she's out gallivanting around town and has no idea that she could be kidnapped at any second and her life would be over?"

"Nope."

"And you have no idea who this Max guy is?"

"Nope."

"Have you checked her bag? Or her pockets?" Kyle says, grabbing Zoe's purse from where it was lying next to him on the bed.

"Yeah, I already looked through there. I didn't find anything."

"Whoa, wait a minute," Kyle says as he pulls a piece of paper out of Zoe's wallet. "She's seeing Max Devereaux?"

"Max Devereaux? I looked through her wallet; I didn't see the name Max!"

"Well, it just says *Dr. Devereaux* on this piece of paper," Kyle says, reading off the paper in his hand. "But if this is who I'm thinking of, his name is Max. And if she's with him, she's no better off than if those sleazy mobsters caught up with her."

"What the hell? How do you know him?"

"I had a few sessions with this guy a couple years ago." Kyle looks up at me. "I'm telling you, man, he is no good."

"Let's see if I can find out where he lives." I grab my laptop and start doing some searches.

"I doubt you'll find this guy, Evan. He's pretty secretive. And he's got plenty of reasons to be."

"Does this address look familiar?" I ask.

Kyle looks at what I brought up online. "Yeah, I remember he had a house out in the country somewhere, but how the hell did you do that?"

"I'm the computer guy, remember?" I slam the laptop shut and stand up. "Let's go."

## Chapter 4

Zoe

I didn't have time to grab my purse when I left, and I have no money on me. I walk around for a while because I don't want to show up at Max's at the crack of dawn. After killing a few hours in a coffee shop that allows me to pay with an app on my phone, I Uber out to Max's house. I've actually been out to his country house one other time, so I kind of know where it is. I'm not sure about the exact address, but I know I can give the guy directions once we're on our way.

Usually, whenever I saw Max for my appointments, we met in his office downtown. I started seeing him when they threatened to expel me from school after I set off the fire alarm. Five weeks in a row. That, plus some other issues I'd had with teachers at school, led them to believe I was troubled and needed professional help. I was pissed at first. I couldn't believe they were making me see a psychiatrist, but after the first visit, I was more than fine with going back every week.

The sessions with him would always start out pretty normal, but the conversation would always wind up turning to sex about fifteen minutes in; what I had done with boys, what I fantasized about.

Once he even asked me to tell him what I wanted a man to do to me, word for word, and he wrote it all down. I actually glanced over a few times and watched him, and he didn't seem to care. When I would stop talking, he would look up and stare at me until I continued. It was a little weird, but it also turned me on big time. He always made me feel like an adult, when all any other man ever did was treat me like a kid.

This one time, Max invited me to his house out in the country. He told me it was for a special weekend session, a way we could really get at all my problems. I knew what he really wanted, and I was ready for it. But after we'd been there for about an hour, he got a call about an emergency and the entire weekend was canceled.

He drove me home that day and I haven't been back to his house since. I saw him at his office one more time, but when my parents died, the insurance was canceled, so I couldn't make appointments to see him anymore.

But I figure now's my chance. I'll go out there and see if he wants me to stay this time. And I'll finally get to have an experience with an older man. I've dreamt about Evan for so long. I've always thought he would know exactly how to touch me. I've wanted to know what it would feel like to come with a man for as long as I can remember.

None of the boys I've been with have had a clue what to do. They're all

idiots. I know what I need is a real man. And if Evan doesn't want me, I'm pretty sure Max will.

"Zoe," Max says when he opens the front door to his massive country estate. "What are you doing here?"

"I didn't know where else to go," I say to him while I look down and twist my foot into the ground. "I really need someone to talk to, and I was kind of hoping we could do that weekend session like we planned." I move my eyes up to meet his without moving my head. I know that kind of thing makes men crazy. My plan is to drive him to the brink of insanity with lust for me. I need to feel a man's arms around me. Right now. "But if you're busy ..."

"No ... no, Zoe," he says. He looks a bit startled, but his eyes say he's interested. "I happen to be free this weekend. This is quite a surprise, but I'd love to have you stay. Please, come in." Max steps back and gestures for me to enter.

"Is everything okay, Zoe?" Max asks as I drift past him into a vast entryway with hints of the antique décor that fills the rest of the house.

I turn and look at him. "Yes, why?"

He looks me up and down with a crooked smile on his face. "Well, you look like you're wearing your pajamas and you're not carrying a bag or a purse. Did you escape from somewhere?"

I can feel my face getting hot as I look down at my t-shirt and yoga pants and laugh nervously. "Oh, yeah, well, I guess I was in a little bit of a hurry. I was with a ... friend ... or whatever he is." At first I almost say his name. I've mentioned Evan to Max many times, so he knows how I feel about him. But right now I want Max's full attention. I want his mind to be on me alone.

"What friend is that?" he asks.

I guess I'm not getting out of it that easy. I should have known I couldn't get anything past Max.

"Well, actually ... I was with Evan. I didn't feel like being around him, though, so I took off."

"In a hurry, it looks like," he says with another crooked smile.

"Yeah, I guess."

Max closes the door and ushers me into a large sitting room. This is as far as I made it into his house the last time I was here, but this time around I'm going to do everything I can to make sure I wind up in his bed.

"And how was that? Seeing Evan again?"

I watch him pour two drinks out of some fancy glass bottles. I love the way Max is around me. I don't have to say a thing and he treats me like I'm any other adult. Evan, on the other hand ...

"The usual. He's always so controlling. He acts like I'm still in high school. Now he wants me to go somewhere with him, and he won't tell me where or

why."

Max crosses the room and hands me a drink. I take a sip and immediately love it. It's sweet and tangy and is the color of emeralds. "Mmmm, this is good."

"I thought you might like it. It's called a Midori Sour."

"There's alcohol in here?"

"There is. It's not very strong, but it's a nice brunch beverage," he says with a smile as he raises his glass. "I think we're safe having Midori Sours this early if we say it's for brunch."

I bring my glass up to his and get a little thrill when they clink together. I would never say this to him or anyone, but I feel so fancy sitting here with him, having a drink before noon. I doubt that Evan would ever be this liberal with letting me have a drink. I'm sure he'd wait until the minute I turned twenty-one before he handed me a glass with alcohol in it.

As I stare into Max's eyes, I can't stop thinking about him. About how much I wish it was Evan sitting in front of me. How much I wish it was Evan's eyes that I was staring into right now.

"You look sad, Zoe. Is there anything you want to tell me?"

I watch the green liquid slosh around and listen to the ice cubes that hit the sides of the glass as Max swirls his drink in his hand. Somehow the sounds around me seem to be getting further away. I feel a little sleepy, but I make an effort to focus. I remind myself that this is my chance. "I'm okay," I say, my eyes feeling heavy. "I just wish ..."

I pause for a moment, trying to collect my thoughts. I want to be a sexy vixen for Max, but all I can think about is how much I miss Evan. And the longer I sit there, the foggier my head becomes.

"What do you wish, Zoe?"

"I wish that Evan wanted to be around me as much as I want to be around him." I'm surprised by the words that come out of my mouth, but I don't seem to be able to stop them. I keep reminding myself that I came here to seduce Max. So why am I talking about Evan? "I just feel like he hates me or something."

"I doubt that very much. Maybe it's a lot for him to suddenly have someone to take care of."

"But that's the thing," I say, taking another drink of the sweet liquid. "He doesn't have to take care of me. I never asked him to do that. I'm an adult now and I don't need him to ..." Then right in the middle of my sentence I lose my train of thought. My entire body is starting to feel funny and my muscles have become weak. I can barely lift the glass to my mouth and I can't remember anything I wanted to say to Max.

All I can think of is how much I want to be with Evan right now. That I

wish I'd never left. I know I've been acting really childishly around him. I'm painfully aware of it. I've been throwing ridiculous tantrums and it seems like I'm constantly running away. And all just to get his attention.

But I haven't been getting the kind of attention I want from him at all. I'm making him hate me and feel like he has to deal with me, when really what I want is to feel his arms around me. I want Evan to take care of me, but not the way you'd take care of a kid. The way a man takes care of a woman that he's in love with.

I say all these things to Max, but only in my head. My lips feel numb and when I try to speak, nothing sounds right.

In that moment, as I'm going on and on in my head about how amazing Evan is, as I'm explaining in detail all the ways I know he would be perfect for me, I realize what a total idiot I've been and how badly I've treated him.

I want to get up and go back to him, but I'm having a really hard time keeping my eyes open.

"You look tired, Zoe. Let me help you into bed," Max says with his hand stretched out to me.

"Are you taking me to your bedroom?" I ask, my words sounding like they're coming from the other end of a tunnel. "I've been wanting to see it for a while now. But I don't know ... I think maybe I just want to go back to Evan." The words sound right in my head, but when they come out of my mouth they just sound like a string of noises that all blend together. As Max helps me stand up I wonder if he can understand what I'm saying better than I can.

"I'm not taking you to my bedroom, Zoe. I'm taking you to another room. I think you'll be very comfortable down there."

I stumble down a short set of stairs and lean up against a wall while Max unlocks a door. The cool stone feels nice on my forehead and I don't want to move. I slide down the wall and laugh when I hit the ground. I can feel how strong Max is when he grabs me around the waist.

"Come on, Zoe," Max says as he pulls me up and through a doorway. "Go ahead and lie down. I'll bring you some food a little later."

"Okay," I say, then sink into a soft bed. The last thing I remember as I'm drifting off is the hollow, far-away sound of a lock clicking in the pitch-black darkness.