

A Sneak Peek from
The Forbidden Game
A Chat with Julian

The hallway seemed to stretch forever in both directions. The stairway had disappeared.

"It's changed," Jenny said. "It keeps changing—why?"

Dee shook her head. "And who knows which way to go? We'd better separate."

Jenny nearly objected to this, but after what they'd been through—well, she should be able to handle a hallway alone. She started down it and immediately lost sight of Dee.

It seemed almost normal to be walking down an impossible black-carpeted hall like something out of a horror movie. I guess you can get used to anything, Jenny thought.

There were no doors. Even the monster one, which should have been somewhere back this way, had disappeared. The tiny flames of the

candles went on endlessly ahead. As Jenny stopped under one to rest, she thought suddenly of Julian's riddle that she'd pushed to the back of her mind earlier. If it would get one of them out of here, she ought to try to solve it.

*I am just two and two. I am hot. I am cold.
I'm the parent of numbers that cannot be told.
I'm a gift beyond measure, a matter of course,
And I'm yielded with pleasure--when taken by force.*

What could it possibly mean? Two and two, hot and cold—it was probably something childishly simple.

"How do you like the Game so far?" The voice was like silk-wrapped steel.

Jenny turned fast. Julian was leaning against the wall. He'd changed clothes again; he was wearing ordinary black jeans and a black T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

Seeing him suddenly was like the first moment in the morning when the shower flicks on, a shock of cold awareness. Abruptly, Jenny felt much more awake than she had a minute ago.

"Was it you?" she said. "In Dee's nightmare? Hurting her?"

"That would be telling," he said, but for an instant his eyelids drooped, heavy lashes coming down.

"Why didn't you let me fall flat on my face?"

"Did you know your eyes are dark as cypress trees? That means you're unhappy. When you're happy they get lighter; they go all golden-green."

"How would you know? You've never *seen* me happy."

He gave her a laughing glance. "Is that what you think? I'm a Shadow Man, Jenny." While Jenny was trying to figure this out, he went right on. "Cypress eyes and sun-glowing skin . . . and your hair's like liquid amber. Why do you wear it back like that?"

"Because Tom likes it," Jenny said reflexively, her standard response. "Look, what did you mean--"

He shook his head, clicking his tongue. "May I?" he said politely, straightening up. His tone was so normal, so solicitous, that Jenny nodded automatically. She was still intent on her question.

"What did you--no, *don't*."

He had pulled the elastic band out of her ponytail. Jenny felt her hair fall about her neck, and then his fingers were in it.

An almost imperceptible shudder went through Jenny. "*Don't*," she said again. She didn't know how to deal with this situation. He wasn't being rough. He still looked solicitous and friendly. It didn't seem appropriate to hit him in the gut as Dee had taught her to do with guys that annoyed her.

"Beautiful," he murmured. His touch was as light as the soft pat of a cat's paw and his voice was like black velvet. "Don't you like it?"

"No," Jenny said, but she could feel the heat in her face. She was backed against the wall now. She didn't know how to get away from him—and the worst thing was that her body didn't seem sure it wanted to. His cool fingers moved against her warm hair-roots and she felt a trembling thrill.

"Have I told you about your mouth?" he said. "No? It's soft. Short upper lip, full lower. Just about perfect, except that it's usually a little wistful. There's something you want, Jenny, that you're not getting."

"I have to go now," Jenny said in a rush. Her standard stuck-with-a-jerk-at-a-party response. She was so confused she didn't care if it didn't make sense here.

"You don't have to go anywhere." He seemed unable to take his eyes away from her face for a second. Jenny had never held anyone's gaze for this long—and she had never even dreamed of electric blue eyes like his.

"I could show you what it is you've been wanting," he said. "Will you let me? Let me show you, Jenny."

His voice seemed to steal the bones from her body. She was aware of shaking her head slightly, as much in response to the new feelings as to

his question. She didn't know what was happening to her. Tom's touch made her feel safe, but this—this made her feel weak inside, as if her stomach were falling.

"Let me show you," he said again, so softly she could barely hear him. His fingers were so gentle as they laced in her hair, urging her to tilt her face up toward him. His lips were bare inches from hers. Jenny felt herself flowing toward him.

"Oh, stop," she said. "Stop."

"Do you really want me to?"

"Yes."

"All right." To her astonishment, he stepped back, fingers trailing out of her hair.

Jenny could still feel them. I almost kissed him, she thought. Not the other way around. In another minute I would have.

Tom. Oh, Tom, forgive me.

"Why are you *doing* this?" she said, her eyes filling again.

He sighed. "I told you. I fell in love with you. I didn't fall in love on purpose."

"But we're so different," Jenny whispered. She was still feeling weak at the knees. "Why should you—want me? Why?"

He looked at her, head tilted slightly, quizzically. "Don't you know?"

His eyes moved to her lips. "Light to darkness, Jenny. Darkness to light. It's always been that way."

"I don't know what you're talking about." And she didn't. She wouldn't let herself understand it.

"Suppose the devil was quietly minding his own business—when he saw a girl. A girl who made him forget everything. There've been other girls more beautiful, of course--but this girl had *something*. A goodness, a sweetness about her. An innocence. Something simple he wanted."

"To destroy it."

"No, no. To cherish it. To warm his cold heart. Even a poor devil can dream, can't he?"

"You're trying to trick me."

"Am I?" There was something oddly serious in his blue eyes.

"I won't listen to you. You can't make me listen."

"True." For just an instant Julian looked tired. Then he gave his strange half smile. "Then there's no choice but to keep playing the Game, is there? No choice for either of us."

"Julian--"

"What?"

Jenny caught herself up short, shaking her head.

He was crazy. But one thing she believed, he really was in love with

her. She knew, somehow, that it was true. She also knew something else about him—she'd known it since that instant when she'd looked into his eyes and seen the ancient shadows there. She'd known it when he'd humiliated Tom and terrorized Dee.

He was evil. Cruel, capricious, and dangerous as a cobra. A prince of darkness.

Completely evil—and completely in love with her.

How was she supposed to reconcile that?

"If you want me so much," she said, "why don't you just *take* me, then? Why go through all this with the Game? You could grab me anytime--why don't you just do it?"

His heavy lashes drooped again. In that instant he looked exactly like the boy in the More Games store. Almost vulnerable—almost human.

Realization came to Jenny. "Because you can't," she breathed. "You can't, can you? There are some things even you can't do."

His eyes flashed up, glittering like a snake's. Jenny saw pure violence there. "This is *my* world. I make the rules here—"

"No." Giddy triumph was swelling through Jenny, an effervescent rush. "Not this one. That's why you asked if you could touch my hair. That's why you tried to make *me* kiss *you*. You can't do it without my permission."

"Be careful, Jenny," he said. His face was cold and cruel.

Jenny just laughed excitedly. "If you can kiss me against my will, then prove it," she said. "Show me, do it now." And then she added an Italian phrase she'd picked up from Audrey. "*Come osi!*"

It meant *I dare you*.

He didn't move.

Jenny laughed again.

"I don't think you understand," he said. "I'm going to have you, at any cost. *Any* cost, Jenny, even if you have to suffer on the way. If I can't force you, I'll persuade you--and I can be very persuasive."

Jenny felt some of the triumph fold up inside her.

"Remember where you are, Jenny. Whose territory you're on. Remember what I can do in the Game."

Jenny was completely sober now.

"You challenged me—now I suppose I'll have to show you what I *am* capable of."

"I don't care what you do to me."

"Maybe it won't be to you. See your friend there? She's playing the Game, too."

He was looking down the hallway, in the same direction Jenny had been going. Barely visible under a far candle was the copper glint of someone's hair. Jenny drew in her breath.

"Don't you dare—" Turning back to speak to him, Jenny broke off.

Julian was gone.

She was alone.

Jenny has never had to fight before. But when it comes to

*protecting her friends, she discovers hidden depths inside herself. Still—can she stand up to Julian and his hypnotic, deadly Games? Find out in **The Forbidden Game**, which, due to public interest, may give birth to a sequel.*

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