

Naked Games

Prologue

Three years earlier...

Dean walked into the small apartment he shared with Linda, his girlfriend for the past year and a half, with a sense of excitement turning his stomach into knots. His hands shook a little when he thought of what he was about to do. As he looked down at the box in the palm of his right hand, he grinned. This was it. He was about to ask the woman of his heart to marry him. They'd dated long enough, damn it; it was time to put a ring on the woman's finger. To show everyone that she was taken. That she was loved. He wanted to hear her call him husband. Hell, he even wanted her to have his children. How crazy was that?

Sounds coming from the bedroom caught Dean's attention, and he frowned. He looked at the clock on the wall next to the bookcase. At three o'clock in the afternoon, Linda was supposed to be at work still. The waitressing job sucked and he wanted her to quit, but she'd refused, saying they needed the money. His construction business wasn't doing too badly though. Soon, she'd be able to ditch the crappy job and be a stay-at-home mom, the way she'd always talked about.

When another sound caught his attention, Dean tucked the ring in his coat pocket and headed down the short hallway. She was home and in bed; it wasn't the way he'd wanted to propose, but he could make it work. The closer he got to the closed bedroom door the more the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Laughter spilled out from the small space between the door and the threshold. Not all of it feminine laughter, he realized. Dean's gut clenched as he took hold of the handle and turned. The sight on the bed had him frozen in place. Linda, the woman he was seconds away from asking to marry him, had her mouth wrapped another man's cock. Dean couldn't speak, could barely breathe. He shifted on his feet, and the movement was all it took to get the attention of the pair of lovers. Legs and arms flailed about as Linda and her nooner attempted to move apart and cover themselves. As Linda tried and tried to get the blanket wrapped around her nude body, Dean looked over at the blond-haired man sitting on the side of the bed—the same bed Dean had slept in not too many hours earlier—and frowned as he recognized him as the cook at the restaurant Linda worked at. Ah, so that's why she didn't want to quit. Christ, he'd been such a fool. A stupid, lovesick chump.

“Apparently you don't just serve greasy burgers and bad coffee at that shitty restaurant, huh, babe?”

Jimmy stood, his face bleached of color. “Uh, I—”

Dean held up a hand. “Save it. Just take your trash and go.”

Linda's startled cry caught his attention. He pointed to her. “You might want to wipe the come off your chin before you leave,” Dean bit out. “Could prove embarrassing.”

“This was a mistake,” Linda said as her eyes filled with tears. “A one-time thing, I swear, babe. I've never cheated on you before. Never!”

The look of disbelief that Jimmy shot her way said it all. One time thing, my ass. Dean knew he'd been a blind fool, but his eyes were wide open now. He strode across the room and took hold of her chin in a firm grip. "Do us both a favor and don't speak. Just get the fuck out of my sight."

Dean released her and went to the door. "You have two hours to get your shit and go. You really don't want to be here when I return, trust me."

She shouted his name as he left. Dean could hear her all the way out the front door. When he reached the elevator and pushed the down button his hand was as steady as a rock. Every bit of emotion seemed to have dried up. He felt completely numb clear to his bones. He'd loved her. She'd been sweet and loving. They'd been perfect for each other, everyone had said. Now the only thing Dean could see was her mouth giving another man a blow job. It would be forever branded into his brain.

As the elevator doors opened, Dean stepped forward. Once he was sure he was alone, he reached into his coat pocket and found the box with the pretty diamond ring nestled safely inside. "Never again," he said as he stared at it. Yeah, he'd been a fool, but he was a quick learner. Hell, he couldn't even claim it was the first time a woman had burned him. It'd happened twice before. The only difference this time around was the fact that Dean had been ready to marry Linda. To hell with it. It'd be a cold day before he let a woman get so close again.

When the elevator stopped and the doors slid open, Dean saw an older woman waiting to enter. They traded places, but before the doors could close again, he handed her the box. At the confused look she sent him, he explained, "As it turns out, I don't need it."

She opened the box and gasped. "It's a diamond ring!"

"Yep. Keep it. Sell it. Makes no difference."

The doors slid shut on her next words. Dean pulled out his cell phone and dialed his brother. Wade answered on the first ring. "What's up, bro?"

"Linda and I...broke up." He couldn't bring himself to say how that came about. Seeing it was enough. He sure as shit didn't want to talk about it.

"Damn, that sucks. I thought for sure you two were going to be heading down the aisle soon."

"Yeah," he choked out. "Got any beer?"

"Better, I have whiskey."

"My hero. See you in a few."

"Hey, you okay?"

Dean rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to wrap myself around a tree, if that's what you mean."

"That's not quite what I meant."

"I know," he said, realizing Wade was worried about him. Wade was the oldest and as such he always worried. "Look, man, I'll be fine. This is nothing a good drunken stupor can't fix."

"Fine, but drive careful," Wade warned.

"Seat belt and all, Dad," he tossed back.

They hung up and Dean was once again alone with his thoughts as he headed out of the apartment building to his car.

The image of Linda, naked and loving another man, sprang right back into his mind.

He wondered how many years it would take before he stopped seeing it.

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