

The Game



Nick Lorance



A "New Woman" Novel



The Game

By Nick Lorance

I am writing this down so perhaps, if I can find a way to go back to what I was, I will not have forgotten what I lost.

I know that sounds silly. Forget what I lost. But the truth is stranger than you might believe, and every day I lose a little more of what I once was. If I don't find a way to fix it soon, I will be just what I am now, and won't care.

It all began with that board game...

A rare find

I was headed home in a funk. I was looking at graduating next week and while technically an adult now, I had no real plans for my life. I was good at some things, like photography, but does that really have a place in this world as a career? Sure I could go to work at a K-Mart and stand there like an idiot, trying to get some newborn or young toddler to smile and making a bit over minimum wage, but they call it minimum wage for a reason. A starting job to make you ready to go on to something better. Its a way to get used to the idea of having to work for a living when you still have your parents to fall back on.

Well, fat chance for me. I was the middle kid of three. My parents had died in an auto wreck three months ago, and my sister Kathi Stark, who had just started her junior year in college, suddenly had to come home to take care of my younger sister and I. She had already told me that the instant I graduated, I had better get a job so she had some help with paying the bills. Either that or shed kick me to the curb. No more college for her and she wouldnt be able to help me with doing that either. So it was a scholarship I wasnt going to get, or flipping burgers.

I know I make her sound like a bitch, but she's not. It's just that

she suddenly had all of our parents debts to deal with. As much as they make it seem a seamless transition when someone dies, it's not. My father had bought a new car a few months before, and it was the one wrecked. When the auto insurance paid off, they didn't buy a new one, they handed Kathi a check for the Blue Book price. If you don't understand, go by a car lot and check out a car. Find out what the dealer is selling it for. Then go to the library and look at the Kelly Blue Book price for the same car. The difference is sometimes several thousand dollars, and the lower number is what you would get if you bought it on one lot, and sold it to another dealer the same day. A car depreciates several hundred dollars the instant the tires hit the street. But the auto loan is for the price brand new, so the difference comes out of your pocket, even as you are looking for a new one. Lucky for her, Dad had given her the old one instead of trading it in, but it still meant thousands of dollars she was now responsible for.

The mortgage on the house; there was eight years of that remaining. Then property taxes, and just to add insult to injury, the government hit her with inheritance taxes on the house and what little money she had gotten from the bank accounts.

Worse yet, she had only begun to build her credit when our parents died, so if she tried to refinance, the bankers would laugh themselves silly.

So I knew what she was dealing with, and even a job flipping burgers would help. In this economy, that was pretty much the best I could hope for.

I was walking from the bus stop and cut through the alley three blocks over to make it home faster. Once I dropped my books, I'd check out the paper and net for openings so I could spend my weekend filling out applications. I was working on a plan for hitting the local mall when I noticed the box lying in the alley. I stopped, confused. It wasn't near one of the standing trash cans. It was almost as if someone had just come down the alley, set it down, and

walked away.

I picked it up. The label said. Relationship Game: How to deal with those around you emotionally. Great, one of those touchy-feely games. I looked at the corner of the box and the designer's logo struck me as odd. A bearded Gandalf wannabe with a staff in hand. Wizard's Staff; with the slogan Making fantasy real since 1320. Wait that was four and a half centuries before America was born! It didn't match what the game was about. I sighed, stuck it in my backpack, and headed home. Maybe I could trade it in for something good.

Kathi had left a note as she always did. This one was attached to a recipe for baked Mac and Cheese. The noodles had already been boiled the evening before, and by adding a bit of olive oil, they were still loose instead of a block of starch in the pan. Boy had I caught hell when I forgot the olive oil the first time! I poured off the water, dumped the macaroni into a pan, made the cheese sauce, poured it over the noodles, stirred them up, then covered it with slices of cheddar from the Oh My God-sized block of slices she always bought.

I felt my throat tighten as I slipped it in the microwave. Dad was always one for liking gadgets, and that microwave was a perfect example. Instead of a mere timer for a quick meal or heating a cup of coffee, it had a delay timer so you could put the dish in, set it to begin as much as eight hours later, and it would automatically start. So I set the delay timer for two hours before she got home. Kathi would be home in an hour, she would be studying until dinner, and she would steam the vegetables, so no problem. Set the cooking time and temperature, both on the recipe card, and I was done.

I was considering going to the living room and the newspaper when the doorbell rang. I knew who it was. Who else would it be? Just about every day *they* would come over, and I'd end up spending time when I should be sleeping finishing my homework. I sighed

and went to the door, checking through the peephole before opening it.

Mark Keith was a typical super jock. He was the quarterback of our football team and had already gotten offers to go pro, or college; his choice. He had so many colleges and pro teams scouting him, he could pick and choose for the rest of his life when we graduated. He even looked the part. Well-built, sandy brown hair, bright blue eyes. You could picture him doing commercials for whatever sells if a Jock is doing the talking.

Duane Kellogg, however, wasn't as good. He was a defensive lineman on the team, but not bright enough to get into college on his own, and not big enough to be scouted. He'd have to gain at least fifty pounds of muscle in the next few weeks, and that wasn't happening. So he'd be my primary competition for a job flipping burgers. If they hired by any strength beyond picking up boxes or a cheerful outlook, he was outclassed, even by me.

Yo, Mah Man! Duane said. I sighed again. He wanted to be rough and tough off the gridiron; anyone who saw him would know after hearing him talk for thirty seconds that he was putting on a rather bad act. Bambi at the start of the movie was tougher than he was.

Duane. Mark.

"You going to invite us in, Kelly?"

Sure. I motioned. Mark and I had become friends in junior high when I kicked him in the balls, though I had known him forever. Back then, he'd just hit his growth spurt and had used his new size to become a bully. I hadn't had mine yet; he thought the nerd with great grades in math and social studies should be his give me the answers bitch.

After I kicked him, he decided someone as small as I was who did that either had a death wish, or an attitude you'd expect from a wolverine. So we became friends. I never gave him any answers, but I taught him how to study, and tutored him off and on. Duane was

just part of the package.

Mark held up his book bag. "Just need some help with finals."

"I'll get my bag. Cokes? Cookies?"

Yeah. They both handed me a dollar. Kathi had gone ballistic when she had to take over, because they had always come by and chugged all the sodas and devoured every cookie in the house. It took less than a week of getting water when they wanted real drinks for Mark to catch on, and we explained it to Duane.

I got the snacks and met them in my room. They opened and chugged them as I was opening my bag. "What's this?" Duane asked, holding up the game.

"I found it on the way home." I shrugged. "As you can see, it's still shrink wrapped. I was thinking..." I turned around as he ripped off the plastic. "As I was saying, I was hoping to sell the unopened game down at the store for some video games we could play later."

"Sorry, man." Duane lifted the lid of the box. It was a board game rather than a video game. He flipped out the board, revealing a series of red and blue figurines in a molded plastic form, along with a single die and cup, and a small plastic box with a slot in one end. "Coolness." He laid the board on the floor and picked up a couple of the red figurines. "Way cool. Look at this." He handed one off to Mark. I leaned closer. It was a stylized male figure; think of the statue David without the naughty bits. Duane's was different; in fact each of the red pieces looked like miniature works of fine art.

I picked up one of the blue ones. They were all female, each different. I later found out this one had been modeled on Lena Headey; the woman who played Queen Gorgo, the wife of Leonidas in the movie 300. "Hey, check this one out." Duane tried to snatch it from me. It fell on the board, then suddenly snapped upright on the first square. I tried to pick it up, but it was as if it was welded to the board and the board was welded to the floor.

"Smooth move, butterfingers," I snarled. He just gave me that what

did I do? look, then he set his own piece on the board, where it also locked down tight.

“What the fuck?” Marks open hand dropped toward the board and the piece in it leaped across to join the other two.

“This reminds me of Jumanji.” I commented. Mark nodded. Duane just looked clueless. “The movie? Robin Williams is a kid stuck in the jungle for years because he has to wait for a specific roll of the dice?” Still he looked blank. “Duane, you have got to watch movies that don’t have explosions, guns, and nonstop profanity. The pieces acted like that.” I motioned to the board, “They stuck to the board and wouldn’t come loose until the game was over.” I found the rule book, which was only about four pages long, as in both sides of a single sheet and folded.

Welcome to the Relationship Game. People are always having problems with interpersonal relationships. This game is to help you learn how to deal with others on the personal, emotional, and sexual levels. This game is for up to six players.

First, choose your tokens and place them on the board. You cannot change out the tokens once the game has started, so choose carefully! If there is not an equal number of colored tokens (As in when there are fewer female or male), the side with the smallest number always moves first.

Every time a token lands on a red square, the card holder will dispense a card. That player must perform the action described on the card before play can continue. It is not recommended for players all of the same sex, as the cards have specific actions the player must perform. While the game can and will make changes needed, if there are more than one change made to the same person, they can become permanent.

The purpose of the game is to achieve the goal. Once the game has begun it must be completed and no additional players can be added.

I looked at the page, confused. The game would make changes?

They can become permanent? What the hell were we in for?

Mark was holding the dice cup and he handed it to me. "You're the only one with a blue piece, so you have to go first."

"I am the only one with a blue piece because Dorkmeister there dropped the damn thing on the board." I stood up, going to the door. "I'm outta here." I grabbed the handle, turned it and pulled. The door wouldn't open. I tossed the cup toward them and used both hands, setting my foot against the wall and pulled as hard as I could. It still wouldn't budge.

"Would one of you help me?" I growled. There was silence behind me. I turned and they were looking at the board. The cup had fallen over and the die had rolled out of it, with the number three up. The blue piece moved by itself, and stopped... on a red square. There was a click and a card slid out of the slot in the box. Mark started to grab it out, then looked at me.

"It's your card," he said, motioning toward it. I hissed in fury and stormed over, snatching the card.

While none of us knew it yet, we were now trapped in the game.

First moves and cards

I lifted the card. All it had written on it was one word:

HUG

This is bullshit. I tried to throw the card down but I found myself setting it in a small box marked Discard on the board. I looked at them both.

"What does it say?" Duane tried to pick up the card but it was as stuck to the board as the pieces were.

"It said hug." I growled. I moved around the board; before Mark could stop me, I hugged him. It wasn't my intent; I had intended to punch Duane in the nose but as I came near Mark, it was like suddenly I just had to hug him. He sputtered in disgust but I

merely curled up against him. For some reason it felt good, so I let go only when I felt I had gone too far.

Mark was flushing as if he was furious. “Why did you hug me, you fag?” he growled.

“The card said hug and I’d be damned if I was going to hug that dork.” I jerked a thumb at Duane. “It was... it was like the instant I got close to you, I *had* to hug you. I can’t explain it any better. I looked at the board.” If we were stuck, we had better finish the damn game fast. Who’s next?

They both looked at me, then at each other, and both reached for the cup at the same time. “No!” They jumped at my exclamation. “You can’t go for high roll because whoever rolls first is automatically going to move first. Do rock paper scissors.” The instant the words were out of my mouth, I wanted to bitch-slap myself.

They did. I had a sick feeling because I knew who’d win. Duane never got a clue and he’d automatically go for rock. Mark and I had laughed for years about who would end up buying munchies or drinks, because if Duane was playing, all you had to do was do paper to win. So of course Mark won it.

He rolled a five, white square. Duane rolled six, also white. I rolled a two, so I was on the same white square with Marks piece. Mark rolled a five again and landed on another red square. There was a click, and another card stuck out of the box. Mark stared at it for a long time, then drew it. He looked at it for a long moment, and then turned it so we would see it.

Kiss

Oh shit. Duane looked scared. I *felt* scared. Mark looked as if he had been hit in the head with a hammer. He was looking back and forth as if trying to decide, and I was both irritated and worried.

“Just give one of us a peck on the cheek.” I tapped my cheek, turning my head, and closed my eyes. I did *not* want to see if he was

going to do that with me! I sat there in the darkness with closed eyes, waiting for someone to tell me it was over. That was when I felt a hand touch my opposite cheek, pressing insistently, forcing my head to turn. Then I felt lips hit my own at the same moment that the other hand trapped my face.

I tried to pull back, to stop him. I wanted to rip his balls off, but I simply sat there with his lips questing gently over mine. I remembered the old George Carlin stand-up bit where he talked about homophobia. Two people kissing and necking in the dark. Then the lights come up and they see they're the same sex, so they're supposed to panic and fight their way free. But as he commented, *it felt good until you saw the other one*.

I understood his point when it happened. I knew it was Mark and we were both guys, but it felt good. His tongue was running across my lips and they opened of their own accord. I was French kissing my best male friend in my room in front of a witness! But neither of us wanted to stop. Something was compelling us to go on, deepen the kiss, tongues dueling, both of us breathing more and more heavily.

If it hadn't been for the situation, it would have been the best kiss I had ever gotten. Hell, except for my mom, it was the *only* kiss I had gotten! But she wasn't swapping spit with me when it happened.

He finally pulled back but I didn't open my eyes yet. Part of me was glorying in the sensation. You know how it is if you give a girl a really good kiss. She just sits there for a moment before she opens her eyes.

Finally, I opened my eyes; both of them were looking at me as if they had never seen me before. I shook myself like a wet dog. "Come on, Duane, lets finish this damn thing."

He looked scared, but he rolled. White square. Me, white again. Mark, white this time, then Duane rolled. He landed on a red square. Again a card popped out and he pulled it as if it were the

pin on a grenade. He lifted it up, then screamed, leaping toward the window like he was going to throw himself out of it. But he bounced off the glass as if it were a brick wall. The card fluttered down, landing face up, and both Mark and I could see what it said before it leaped to the discard space. Wait, this was the third card, but the others seemed to have vanished somehow, so it was the only card there. But both of us remembered what it said.

Strip

Duane was pounding on the glass, then he picked up the chair from my desk and slammed it into the pane with as much effect as if he'd use a pillow to pound on a steel plate. Then the chair dropped like he'd been hit with a Taser, and he began to pull up his T-shirt. I found my hands pulling at my own, wondering why I was undressing. I wanted to ask Mark, but his shirt was already on the floor and he had unzipped his pants.

I looked away, blushing. It was mainly because while I had been in gym class umpteen times with one or the other of them over the years, you don't watch someone strip, you're too busy doing it yourself. Plus if you noticed someone was watching you, you'd stay away from them.

Mark's hands had caught on his underwear and he asked plaintively, "Why am I being forced to strip?" before he jerked them down and kicked them away.

"You and me both, I muttered." I was sitting with my knees up, clutching them to hide my crotch. This has gone beyond fucking weird.

Yeah. Duane was sitting there, his hands over his crotch. Mark was taking it the best, I think, because while he was covering his groin, he was sitting cross-legged and his hands were just laying over it like he'd meant to do it.

Dress for Success

I looked at the others, then at my almost fetal position. I grinned. “I don’t think we can continue. I don’t have a free hand to roll the die.” They had just gotten what I said, when we heard a sound. It seemed the game had its own idea of what was going to stop it. The die had leaped, spinning into the air, and came down. My piece moved and came down on the red square between the white one Mark was on and the red one Duane was on. A card popped out. There was no way in hell I was going to-

Duane snatched it out, then looked confused, which he does so damn well. “Pick something nice to wear and make yourself beautiful? What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.” I found myself standing, then turning toward my dresser. When I saw it, for a moment I was free of whatever was happening. What the fuck?

“What’s wrong?” I looked over my shoulder. Both of them were looking at me, which I wasn’t sure was good or bad.

“Close your eyes.”

“What?” Duane started to say.

“Close your fucking eyes!” They were shocked by my tone but did what I had told them to do. “Now you’ve both been in this room just about every day for the last four years. You’ve seen my dresser, even dug into it for something. Don’t open your eyes! Now, describe it for me.”

“What?”

“Tell me what it looks like!”

Mark’s head cocked. “Three even-sized drawers, about waist level at the top with your Anime figure collection on top of it.”

“Is that what you remember, Duane?”

“Yeah. You keep long pants in the bottom, shorts, socks, and underwear in the second, and T-shirts in the top.” Duane would remember that. The shirt he had thrown down was one of mine he

snaked about a year ago, which fit as if it had been painted on while it was loose on me.

“Now open your eyes and look at it!” They did. I don’t know which of us was more surprised. It now had four drawers, with the top one split into two. My figure collection was still there but now there was a vanity mirror behind it. Under it was a collection of what looked like my sisters makeup selection; nail polish, lipstick, the whole nine yards. Whatever was controlling me kicked back in and I walked to the dresser. I knelt, opening the bottom drawer. Skirts, skorts, shorts, including some hot pants and cutoff Daisy Dukes. I wanted to grab something, anything to cover my dork, but I closed the drawer again.

With trepidation I opened the second full drawer. It was filled with T-shirts with girly slogans on them on one side, and on the other... Nighties, negligees, teddies, bustiers. Holy Victoria Secrets! I rifled through them and chose one, a white teddy, with clips to hold up stockings. I was wondering why I chose it. *The black one on top would have been something both of them liked, though Duane had a particular thing for girls in black. The burgundy red one was something that would trip Marks trigger quite nicely. The white was at least more generic for a virgin...* Jesus Christ, why was I thinking of what *they* would like? And dressing in white because Im a *virgin*?

I stood, opening the right hand drawer. Stockings. I pulled out a pair of flesh-colored ones with white flowers patterned on them; Roses, Edelweiss, Cherry blossoms with just a hint of pink. Then the left drawer. Panties, of course. I tried to grab the top pair that looked like something your grandma would want a respectable girl to wear but my fingers only brushed them aside. Beneath were things we guys would imagine seeing some girl in, flashing us accidentally when they wear short skirts. My hand closed; a pair of French-cut panties that were white with the same kind of floral pattern, this time knitted into them, came to rest on the dresser. Finally, a pair of lace fingerless gloves with the same pattern. Great,

I'll be in drag, but hey, my outfit matches! Hoo-fucking-ray.

In the mirror I could see them just sitting there, watching. No, I could see their arms bunching, trying to push them to their feet, exposure be damned. But they were locked to the floor, just like the pieces were locked onto the board.

I put on the teddy as if I had done it a dozen times. Where the cups would cover the breasts, if I had them, looked odd, and I couldn't figure out why. The panties slid up my legs. Wait a minute, I'm not the kind of guy who is hairy, but didn't I have some hair on my legs just a few minutes ago? I slid on the gloves, then I sat in the chair that had somehow returned to my deck, and slid on the stockings. Again I was showing skills I had never had before, rolling the stockings into donuts, then sliding them up my legs, My hands automatically smoothed them out as they passed my knees. While I wanted to close my eyes, (and I could tell Mark and Duane wanted to as well), I found myself watching them and them watching me as I clipped the first one and repeated the actions with the other using the hanging garter straps.