

SURVIVORS

BY ISAAC BYRNE



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By Isaac Byrne

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One upside to the worst weekend of Chanda's life was that her parents didn't ground her for staying the night at Mya's without permission. Reminding them that it was spring break hadn't moved them, but fessing up to the attempted kidnapping by Tiffany's winner engendered enough sympathy that they got off her case. They hardly knew what to make of it. The Thursday before, her parents had dropped her off at Tiffany's family's house for their farewell sleepover. Tiffany had dashed outside to hug Chanda's parents goodbye with tears running down her face. Before the weekend was out, she'd attempted to deliver Chanda to slavers, the old-fashioned sort who didn't have the courtesy to make you enjoy it.

Or, in Aaron's case, kept you from even knowing it.

Her anger wasn't fair to him. Innocent until proven guilty, after all. The cornerstone of the judicial system, as she'd learned in her government class. Of course, this was the same government whose constitution guaranteed the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness while endorsing slavery, then abolishing it after most of a century, then reinstating it after a one and a half more. Still, Chanda could be better than those asswipe founding fathers. Not that it was a high bar in her book.

That insane, Sapphic orgy with Mya and Jessie had been no remedy for her rising dread. If anything, it had made it worse. Yes, the sex had been incredible. The Barrios sisters were so beautiful. So unrestrained. At the same time, however, it had brought to light the raw pleasure a loser could provide. She'd eaten fruit from the poisonous tree, and she'd loved it. Then hated herself for it after. By the time her parents were home from work and withheld her grounding, Chanda had mostly forgiven herself for it. Not like it had hurt anyone. Not like there was really anyone rattling around upstairs in Mya's head to hurt. By the time they'd woken up that morning, Chanda had given up thinking of her friend by her real name and embraced her new identity as Mimi.

At least Aaron hadn't renamed her.

Also unfair. Maybe. *Just text him back, you wimp.* He'd messaged her three times the day after she'd gone home with Mimi to check in on her, when she'd first wondered if she'd been compromised, yet she'd ignored all three. How exactly did you ask someone if they might have enslaved you? What would be the point, anyway? If he had, Aaron obviously wanted to play this stupid game where she slowly fell for him, and she had no choice in the matter. If he hadn't, then he had legitimately rescued her from Brandy's perverse assault in the theater (*Eve's*, she corrected herself; *Brandy was Eve now*), comforted her after the abduction attempt, and volunteered himself to be her fake master to fend off the rest of his gender. It was borderline heroic by the lesser standards of modern men. If he really hadn't forced her to fall in love with him, she ought to for how amazing he'd been these past tumultuous days.

So Chanda did what she'd always done when there was a boy taking interest in her. She gave him one-word answers until he stopped reaching out to her. There were

other texts and calls, too. Krystal, wondering if she wanted to hang out or have a play date, maybe a trade. Mimi asking for the same, but with more emojis, more lols, more misspellings even with fewer multisyllabic words. Her doctor's office making a routine check to see if her winner wanted her to start birth control, or if not, to offer family planning information. Her grandmother, gushing with relief about her Lottery evasion, then following it with concern about what this meant for her prospects at becoming a mother herself someday. Krystal again, conveying that her winner Bart was willing to trade three days and nights of her company to Aaron in exchange for an hour for himself with Chanda.

Bart had left his loser's mind mostly intact, and as such Krystal didn't hide that she was offended by the ratio. Nevertheless, she remained vicariously disappointed by "Aaron's" refusal. Chanda even roleplayed the request with an Aaron she invented in her head.

Want to give me up for an hour for three days with Krystal? You know her, right? Blonde cheerleader homecoming queen Krystal?

Tell him no thanks. You need time to ripen yet, my little kumquat.

Chanda's dad arched an eyebrow at his daughter's addition of a kumquat to the family grocery list, but he hunted one down for her. The man never could say no to her, which she was careful not to abuse. Kumquat in hand, she took one bite, wrinkled her nose, and threw the rest away.

For the remainder of spring break, that was her life. Ignoring Aaron, staying in her room hiding from the world that had destroyed every single one of her friends. She didn't leave the house, didn't talk to anyone, hardly even saw her own mom. Her dad knew how to come at her, helping her channel her anxiety into something more useful, but when they weren't working on her new project, her bedroom door was closed to the world. So although she hadn't been grounded by her parents, the Lottery managed to ground her in effect anyway. It was a monster that had her locked in a tower, holding the only key.

Finally, however, Monday morning came, and there could be no more hiding. That was the thing that made this monster so terrifying. When you opened your eyes, it was still there.

I'LL SAY YES. At first, Chanda mistook it for a tattoo, but no, it was only marker, thank goodness. Sort of. That was what was written on Nina Wadsell's forehead. It was the first thing Chanda saw when her mom dropped her off at school. The first thing most people saw. Nina's expression was pure defeat. It was the face of a loser whose resentment had been left intact, generally agreed to be one of the worst fates. Mental health experts roundly agreed that such a level of trauma should prohibit such winnings, but all the Lottery Bureau had to do to rebut it was wave the 0% suicide statistic in their face, and that was that. The advice of mental health experts didn't count for what it used to now that there were machines that could rewire the human brain.

As Chanda walked past Nina, an underclassmen stopped in front of the girl. "Can I have a blowjob?"

"Yes," said Nina. Then she looked him over. "If you're eighteen, anyway. Can't send my winner to jail for giving out BJ's to kiddies."

The boy frowned, but still slapped her on the ass as he walked by. Nina didn't yelp. Didn't even register surprise on her face. One week in and it was all familiar terrain to her by now.

It was so much to take in. Those first couple days after the Lottery, at the Grand River movie theater, the Frostop... there, people had been showing off, coming to terms with the impossible but nonetheless realized. Now, winners had been treated to a week and a half of nonstop sex and power tripping over their losers. Social media had given up most of the details of these new arrangements. Now, it was status quo. Marginally more novel for the underclassmen, but marginally.

Still, school was school, and it brought out the worst in people as it always had. Chanda clutched her purse to her ample chest, shoulders slumped, trying to make herself as small as possible.

The principal and two of the four vice principals manned the main entryway, stopping the most egregious offenders at the gates. On her left, Mr. Esposito was explaining to Aya Hecht and her winner that she couldn't be permitted in the building in her fishnet stockings, at least not without a skirt on over them. On her right, Jessica Dunham was sobbing in confusion, on the verge of a childish tantrum, as Mrs. Starr tried to help her understand that the tattoo of a dick on her cheek, pointing at her mouth – and spraying barely visible cum droplets, Chanda noticed after a moment's squint – disqualified her permanently from future enrollment. Her little sister, a sophomore, watched from a short ways down the hallway. The girl's phone was in hand; she was probably texting their parents to update them. Jessica wasn't their problem any more, but many parents still tried to hold onto those ties for a while.

Katie Crovetti had managed to slip past the guardians in an outfit that on any normal day would have meant a trip straight to the office, her breasts bulging out the expansive neckline, most of her stomach revealed, her skimpy shorts painted on. Her

chin was on her chest, sense of shame obviously intact. Good god, Connie Massaro's clothes actually *were* painted on. Literal paint. Having made it past the principals in what appeared to be a tight white t-shirt and skinny jeans, she was now strutting her stuff, luxuriating in the hoots and cheers of her soon-to-be-former classmates. There was so much ruckus, however, that Chanda expected Connie might well make it to first period.

Dawn Andrews was attending in a choker, trotting in towering black heels to keep up with her winner at the end of a short leash. Maria Morgan was making out with her winner in front of a row of lockers, her shirt raised over her breasts so he could fondle her braless bounty. One of the math teachers was busy talking to two freshmen about the fact that simply because Lesley Wang consented to them pinching her ass didn't change the school's PDA policy, though he took a moment to bark a cease and desist to Maria. She ignored him, groaning in authentic bliss as her winner motorboated her in front of his friends with a thumbs up for the cameras.

Chanda almost didn't recognize Gretchen Falconer after an amazingly transformative trip to the salon and ten days (and counting) of winner-imposed anorexia. Gretchen had never been a looker, but there was no shortage of boys happy to bid on the less attractive girls to treat them as fixer-uppers. With the iron discipline of the Lottery's brainwashing, any girl could become her hottest possible version of herself. Gretchen was already well on her way, probably up from a 2 to a 5 in only a week's time. Makeovers, water weight and skin care made for rapid improvements. The rest would take longer, but she'd get there. There was no choice in the matter.

Kelsey, Chanda's good friend – former good friend – was there, looking comely but not doing anything to violate the dress code. She was handing out fliers. When she passed Chanda, she handed one over. "For your winner," she said, then walked on without so much as a flicker of recognition. The flier was a picture of Kelsey, naked, but with the letters arranged to narrowly keep it from being X-rated. It advertised Minor Indiscretions, the callgirl service her winner had assigned her to, and promised the three D's: deference, discretion, and, thanks to clever placement, an implied reference to her boobs. They were actually C's, not D's, Chanda knew, but she supposed the pun played better than the truth. The name of the establishment was written in big bubbly letters at the top, practically oozing promises of the closest thing to pedophilia the law allowed. Even in this day and age, Chanda could hardly believe that name hadn't fomented a rebellion from... well, from whoever it was who still objected to allusions to barely legal teen sex in advertisements.

Jackie Bisson had her hair up in pigtails, a blandly cliché schoolgirl uniform complementing the look as she skipped down the hall. There had to be a pound of blush on her round cheeks. Deidre Rinzler, one of the cheerleaders (head cheerleader? Chanda didn't track such nuances of the Clark High hierarchies) was in uniform, though she

seemed unable to restrain herself from reaching under her skirt to play with her pussy as she stared needfully at some fat greaseball of a winner Chanda didn't even recognize. Christy Coombes was clad in tight pink leather, or maybe vinyl. It covered her from the neck down, but was so tight that her nipple piercings and camel toe were impossible to miss. Chanda genuinely didn't know if it violated the dress code. They'd likely decide it did; it was certainly more distracting than any short skirt or low neckline.

The first day or two after Drawing Day was basically a purge, expunging all those girls whose new personas rendered either learning or a presence in civilized company impossible. A few boys would be dismissed, those who lost any ambition to graduate, anticipating living off their losers, but they were always a scant handful. By this time next week, the senior class would go from a 50/50 gender ratio to an 80/20. Her freshman year, Chanda recalled hearing a rumor that the graduating class contained barely two dozen girls. Two dozen women, out of what would otherwise have been over five hundred graduates. Bimbos and exhibitionists had been in vogue that year.

Chanda nearly tripped over Tara Holmes, who had been walking in front of her but spontaneously dropped to the floor and asked the smirking winner at her side if he would please, *please* let her drink his cum. The boy rebuked her with a reminder that she'd already had her breakfast, and if she were going to throw fits, there would be no dessert tonight. Tara began to bawl.

All this Chanda saw before reaching her locker. Inside were stuffed two handwritten notes, each directing her to ask her winner for some time with her. One offered five hundred dollars for an unchaperoned hour; the other simply ended with "\$\$\$" and the author's phone number.

Five hundred bucks. Kelsey's flier advertised rates a tenth that for her brothel. Competition had driven prices down for commercialized sex, even with the hot girls. Still, it wasn't hubris that Chanda recognized she was a cut above. Special. PowerBall, they called it, some sort of dated reference to when lotteries had been about money rather than pussy. PowerBall or no, part of Chanda marveled that anyone thought that whatever she might do for them in an hour was worth that much. Another part of her was repulsed. Still another wondered if Kelsey's personal rate was above or below that average. Above, she hoped. For some reason. Chanda doubted it, though.

She tucked away the flier along with the notes and the other two sex ads she'd been handed since arriving in her locker and grabbed her things for first period. She'd be twenty minutes early, but hopefully, a classroom would be a less jarring place than the halls, a Wild West of teen depravity.

Almost as strange as all that, however, was that for the first time since she could remember, Chanda had arrived at school alone. No friends to ride to school with, no one meeting her at her locker, no one greeting her with a smile. Some smiles, technically, but only from horny boys hoping her winner would command her to give them a show

during her own race to expulsion. Those smiles didn't count. For now, they weren't getting much to smile about. A pair of red pants and a nice t-shirt. Both were a bit snug, but only because that was her preference.

Or Aaron's.

"Speak of the devil..."

Out of the corner of her eye, she made out the bulky profile of her hero and/or slaver. (Had he, too, lost weight this past week? Or was that her programming?) He was wending his way through the heedless throng, trying but physically and mentally unable to ignore all that was going on around him. Chanda couldn't blame the guy for gawking a bit. Hell, she'd hated the Lottery since the day her mother had explained it to her, and she was still a little turned on in spite of it.

She turned quickly before he could make eye contact and darted toward her first period. Sleep had been hard to come by with long nights spent pondering her connection to this veritable stranger, but still she had no idea what she wanted to say. They had last period together. It had been there he'd first come to her rescue, ushering her to the nurse's office after her fainting before spring break. Until then, she had a few more hours to wallow in her dread.

The day passed glacially. Classes were barely in session, with teachers doggedly swatting down distraction after distraction in an effort to maintain or reestablish norms. A long-winded lecture over the PA system from the principal ate almost ten minutes of first period, the same pointless behavioral reminders he'd given before break and the same ones she'd heard him give last year, and the year before, and the year before. There were simply no magic words to curb the egos of eighteen-year-old boys who'd been given the most incredible toys ever conceived of since the dawn of man.

Once somebody started playing show and tell, it was inevitable others would follow suit. Their losers would be disciplined, usually fast-tracked for expulsion unless it was minor and possible to avoid repeating. It was one thing, after all, for Mikaela Blackehart to wear a diaper under her clothes, crinkling with every little shift in her hard plastic desk seat. (Mikaela sat right behind Chanda first period; it was distracting as hell.) It was one thing for her to suck her thumb, talk in a baby voice, and giggle whenever anyone else laughed at pretty much anything. It was yet another when Mikaela realized her winner wasn't there and threw a mewling hissy fit, pounding fists and feet on the floor and shrieking for his return. The girl was inconsolable. The SRO had to come and carry her out of class. Chanda couldn't even make out the name of the boy she was calling for, Mikaela was so distraught. Like that, she was sent to the office for permanent removal. Her education, like so much of her life, was over. Perhaps one day soon, that baby would be having babies of her own. Maybe they would make good company for her, for a time.

Second period, Michelle Agee – no, make that Mrs. Michelle Rubin, now – stood up in the middle of note-taking, stripped off her clothes, bent over, and invited Mr. Jimenez to eat her ass. She was summarily expelled; teachers had been granted authority in such flagrant cases. Parents didn't even try to appeal such things any more. Chanda doubted they had the right, in any case. Mr. Rubin, smirking broadly, was banished to ISS for the day.

Third period, Chanda was cornered by her new lab partner, Kristin Bailey, and forced into dialogue. It began with what passed for superficial chit-chat: who their winners were, how their break had gone. Kristin had always been a little weird, but Chanda hadn't minded her. It was better than partnering with a boy any day. The new Kristin had, like so many of the losers who weren't conventionally pretty, undergone an extensive reinvention. She looked pretty good, really, though no amount of diet or exercise would correct such unfortunate bone structure. She'd ditched those thick glasses of hers. Chanda wondered for a moment if they even made contacts in such an intense prescription, but quickly realized the girl was simply stumbling around blind now.

As Chanda was swallowing down the pity she somehow still hadn't exhausted, the conversation grew more direct. "So how's things with you and Aaron, then? What kind of winner is he? Gracious? Sore?"

"Gracious," she said immediately. Already, only three hours in, she had been forced to invent a version of Aaron in her head, one who governed her and spoke through her at need. He aligned neatly with her impression of the sort of son of a bitch who would torture a woman with this kind of existential uncertainty. Chanda was mindful to keep her lies – his lies – believable, so that if she did decide to keep living this charade, it wouldn't fall apart the first time someone probed. An Aaron who'd left her closer to intact would make the deception easier, especially since it was true. Maybe.

"That's nice of him. Is he, um, generous with you?"

"What, you mean giving me space, free time and stuff?"

"No. I... I meant it like, does Aaron, you know, give you to people. For favors, or money, or whatever. Or to be nice. To them I mean. Not to you, obviously."

"Oh. Um, not yet? We haven't really talked about it, I guess. How about Preston?"

"Nobody wants to borrow me. Preston has barely... you know."

"Really?" That was surprising. Ugly girl or no, a pussy was a pussy. Even if Preston absolutely hated the sight of her face, it wasn't like the view from behind was all that bad. Heck, he could always turn the lights off and use his imagination.

"Yeah. His big brother won Angie Etcheverry."

Chanda nodded. The name alone made it all make sense, the information filtered through the way the Lottery made people look at the world. Angie was basically an older version of Krystal, a little shorter and with strawberry blonde hair. She was a PowerBall

in her own right, or the closest thing to it. If Preston's brother had won *that* (no, won *her*, she corrected), then winning a homely girl like Kristin would be cause for shame. Preston had probably only seeded Kristin's pot to hedge his bets.

"Oh man. That's a rough place to be. Sorry, Kristin."

Kristin nodded, feigning concentration on the project until their teacher walked by, nodding in satisfaction. Watching for it, Chanda also noticed the way he checked out her ass after he walked past. Mr. Quinn smiled sheepishly at being caught and shrugged it off.

"Preston says I'm even worse than he'd thought I'd be. He thought if I got a makeover, wore better clothes, got rid of my glasses, that I'd be pretty enough. It's not enough though. I'm too ugly to, um, make him..."

Chanda squeezed Kristin's hand sympathetically. "There's nothing wrong with the way you look, Kristin. There wasn't before, either."

"You're sweet, Chanda. Um, actually, I was sort of wondering if... maybe..." She took a nervous breath. "If you would talk to Aaron about maybe loaning yourself to Preston? His birthday is this weekend, and I want it to be special for him, only... I'm not like you."

Before Chanda could either offer further reassurances or the necessary rejection, Kristin leaned in, voice lowered but too intense to interrupt. "Preston would go insane if I could get him a PowerBall. *Please* Chanda. Talk to Aaron for me. I'm tired of feeling like I wanna kill myself. He didn't even stop me from doing it, you know? And I'm freaking out like I won't be able to stop myself because I hate myself *all the time* and I have to figure out a way to make Preston happy, or... not that I'm trying to pressure you. Just please tell me you'll talk to him? We can exchange or something – not that Aaron would ever want me instead of you, obviously – but like maybe he has some dark stuff he doesn't want to do to someone like you that he could do to me? Like he could hit me or something. Whatever he wants. Just—"

"I'll talk to him, Kristin," Chanda said quickly. "But, you know, just in case, you may want to ask some other losers."

Kristin nodded. "Yeah, I know. I figured I'd start with you, since you've always been so nice to me."

"Thanks, Kristin."

"Just talk to him, please," she mumbled as she began to do the classwork in earnest.

There were three expulsions in fourth period. Connie's painted clothes were finally discovered. (The boys whispering behind her said she'd had squinty old Mrs. Strother first period and Mr. Geer in a block class second and third; she found neither blind eyes nor a blind eye in Ms. LaBanca.) Winnie Beasley was removed when she was caught playing with herself, her resolve to behave finally broken by her Lottery

programming. To her credit, Cate Bloome was removed for yelling at the teacher for being, in her words, “a smug cunt who should count herself lucky she’d been too old when the Lottery started or she’d have been diddling herself retarded, too.”

Unfortunately, some sort of trigger occurred in Ms. LaBanca’s rebuke that made Cate come violently, falling to her hands and knees and moaning with the theatrics of a top notch porn star as she pawed at her breasts and her crotch. Then she was gone, too.

Aaron had a different lunch period from Chanda, so for the first time since kindergarten, she sat alone at a table. There was plenty of extra space now that a quarter of the senior class was gone. More propositions, more insulting offers. Meatloaf with ketchup on top. With the more flagrant violators already dismissed, the principals roamed the cafeteria coming down on the less egregious. The abundance of proudly displayed cleavage was a primary target, along with the PDA’s. Harsh examples were made, and winners were reminded that if their losers couldn’t adhere to expectations, the boys would be the ones who were punished. Chanda supposed that, to their minds, the girls were beyond their ability to punish now. Many wisely relented and withdrew their losers’ enrollment. Not only was it the path of least resistance, but it was obvious to anyone that wielding their power, to casually terminate a girl’s entire future, was as much an aphrodisiac as the girls themselves.

In months past, her fifth period teacher Miss Smith had spoken of the Lottery with veiled criticism. Teachers weren’t allowed to talk about it except as it pertained to processes and procedures in school, but it came up too often for them to not at least acknowledge it. It had been obvious she bitterly resented the whole program and that her heart broke for her female students. Their previous meeting of her fifth period, the class had consisted of seventeen girls and nine boys. There were now four more boys than girls, and that was with Dominic absent.

Today, Miss Smith had called in a substitute. There were no lesson plans. The sub said she’d be there all week.

Earlier in high school, Chanda had wondered how it was possible that they had a teacher in her twenties, how a decent-looking woman like Miss Smith could be a survivor. Then she’d learned about the exceptions. Transgendered women were exempted. Around the halls of her school, that was the most frequent accusation hurled at such women, since it always got a dullard’s chuckle from the bros. HIV positivity, and a smattering of other ailments netted exemptions, as did severe disabilities like muscular dystrophy or Down’s syndrome.

Some women’s fates were adjudicated case by case, for instance in regards to how disabling their autism could be. Most cases were obvious, either women who were fully functional and thus eligible or those prone to severe behaviors who clearly weren’t. For the ones in the middle, the board met with the young woman and interviewed her. Chanda’s junior English teacher had used it as an example of a catch-22; either the

women were too disabled to competently fake their way out of eligibility, or with it enough to be able to feign otherwise.

Chanda had read a story once about a girl in Iceland who'd amputated her leg to dodge the Drawing, except her government then nullified her exemption. It was claimed that she'd been put to work in fetish porn. Chanda doubted if any of it were true, but that she had doubts at all was enough to unsettle her. That was probably why the story had gone viral, to make sure nobody developed plans of martyrdom.

In any case, nobody was sure what had disqualified Miss Smith.

Chanda took advantage of the free period to continue reviewing her list of arguments as to why she was or was not a sex slave, but it didn't add anything new. As it stood, her best case for loser status – the possibility that Aaron had won her and programmed her to think she was a survivor – was from a weird research project she'd assigned herself over the past few days. Her dad had helped.

The Canadian government released substantially more public data about their Lottery proceedings. Their reasoning, Chanda thought irritably, was to bolster confidence in the Lottery's basic fairness. So she'd run a search on a photo of herself with some advanced options to also search for similar images tagged from Canada, then combed through results until she found a girl who looked as similar to her as she could. Chanda and her father had taken hours and hours scrolling through pics before settling on one, a girl who'd lost two years earlier. With some sleuthing, she was able to get a positive ID on her Canadian doppelganger – they jokingly dubbed her Chanada – and even some data about the girl's high school. She and her dad dug up what share of the available tickets Chanada had won, 12%, a fairly high mark, meaning roughly a third of her classmates had seeded her pot with one of their three tickets. It had taken some math to convert the rate from the Canadian three-ticket system to the American five, but they derived a stable number for the odds of a given individual ticket winding up in Chanda's pot assuming equivalent desirability. The end result was that if Chanda's several hundred male classmates voted the same way Chanada's had, the odds of nobody using a single ticket on a prize like Chanda Brighton were absurd. Infinitesimal. Practically zero. And while neither Brighton said as much aloud, they both knew she was hotter than her Quebecois counterpart, a stranger whose real name had been Audry Price, and who auctioned herself off for a paltry \$35,000.

On the survivor column, however, were some similarly compelling arguments. Number one, that bureaucracies were imperfect, and mistakes could be made. While there weren't many stories of such errors, there wouldn't be, naturally. Nobody who slipped through the cracks would be stupid enough to ask someone to double check. (Chanda wanted to kick herself for having Aaron walk her to the gym on Drawing Day.) More puzzling still was that if Aaron's "fetish" really was to have a loser who genuinely thought she'd fallen in love on her own, why have her able to doubt her feelings? The

only reason she hadn't been curled up happily at his side all last week was because of her suspicions. Beyond that, he was cute enough, a little doughy but with soft, almost pretty features. And oh yeah, he was a full-on knight in shining armor.

Unless it was staged. Though that would be some very elaborate staging.

No, that was real. Ezekiel, Tiffany... there was no way for him to fake that. Winner or not, he'd done right by her.

Chanda didn't write down anything new on the list that period, nor in sixth period, where they were given a catchup day while the teacher met one on one with the remaining girls to assess whether or not they were still capable of addition and subtraction. Chanda assured Mrs. Beeker that she intended to finish high school, though she felt incredibly foolish not to have an answer for what she intended in her life over the next few years. She'd never seen any need to plan for life after high school before. Her teacher saw nothing amiss in her non-answer, however. Life dead-ending at Drawing Day was the norm.

At last, it was time for her final class of the day, Mr. Corley's English 12. Chanda took an extra minute at her locker looking herself over, the sort of teensy last-minute touch ups that were imperceptible to the eye but a balm in the heart, and set out for class. She arrived before Aaron. A message projected on the front board proclaimed that there was no seating chart; the next couple days would be one-on-one meetings to start work on end-of-year portfolios. Everyone knew it was mostly Mr. Corley seeing if his girls could still read and write, but it was considerate of him to not proclaim it on the board.

Kelsey didn't show up. Evidently she'd distributed her fliers for her brothel and either been expelled or simply slunk out to get to work. Probably the former; business would be good for her today. Despite looming tears at her friend's absence, Chanda managed to shed only one, and wiped it away before anyone noticed.

Chanda took a seat at the window side of the room. It wasn't two minutes before someone addressed her. "Hey Chanda. Just wanted to tell you what rocking titties you have."

She didn't look, didn't acknowledge. It was probably the tenth time that day someone had said something like that to her. Bitter boys who hadn't won but still shared the arrogance of their sex, venting their frustrations on a captive audience. *Don't feed the trolls*, as her mother had taught her.

"Look at that ass, dude. I swear, it is criminal that only one guy gets to win all that. Don't know how we're supposed to keep the population down when that bitch is making all kinds of babies in my pants just looking at her."

"What the hell does that even mean, man?" asked his comrade.

"It means... dat ass, man, that's what it means!" The boy couldn't handle her indifference any longer, moving up to the desk in front of her. Eddie Morton. She'd

thought she recognized the voice. Which meant his buddy could only be Rob Merkerson. She refused to turn around and acknowledge them, but then they got up in her face anyway. “How’s it going, hot stuff?”

“Go away, Eddie.”

He grinned, not in the least bit put off. A demand to leave her alone only counted if it came from her winner. Without Aaron, she was only a stray dog, a thought he seemed to be having at that same moment. “How can a bitch so hot be so cold? C’mon, give us a smile. Tell us how much you like being somebody’s pet.”

“I’m not, and I don’t. Now go away, or I swear I’ll make sure Aaron never lets you get so much as eye contact from me. I mean it.”

Eddie only laughed. “Ain’t your eyes I’m interested in.”

“Duh, Eddie, that’s what she was saying,” Rob pointed out from behind her.

Eddie was undeterred. “Whatever. Shit, since elementary school this bitch has been looking down on us, cock-teasing everybody, a little ice queen who’s too good for us lowlifes. How’s it feel being down in the mud, ya little PowerBall Princess? How’s it feel sucking dick when your man snaps his fingers? Wear out your knees yet? He put a baby in you yet? Shame, stretching out that body, but I can’t say as I’d blame Eichhorn if he did. Man, I’d still be at home riding your pussy if it’d been me. You wouldn’t be walking straight if I’d won you.”

Rob guffawed. “Hell, she wouldn’t be *seeing* straight if she were mine, bro.”

Another cold retort stopped in her throat. She paused, looking between the two shit-eating grins. “So you guys seeded me, did you?”

“Pff. And waste a ticket?” Eddie snickered.

Rob nodded. “Yeah, I suck at math, but I’m not retarded.”

“Do you guys know anyone who seeded my pot? Besides Aaron, of course.”

“Only half the senior class, probably,” Eddie replied. Rob seemed to agree, said he’d heard Ezekiel had seeded all five tickets in Brandy’s pot to win her, and “that bitch ain’t nothin’ but knockoff Chanda.” As for Chanda’s pot, he offered nothing more specific. Damn. Chanda wasn’t sure she believed these idiots either way, but if she could find one honest source who claimed to have seeded her, that would be it. It would mean she’d been won. Maybe tomorrow she could ask around, or put something online? Could she trust what guys said on the internet?

“Why don’t you leave her alone, Eddie,” came a sharp voice from the next row over.

“Eichhorn, hey buddy. Was just saying hey to your girl. Nice fucking work, bro. Never would’ve figured a pussy like you could pull a pussy like that.”

Rob gave his friend a look like he’d lost his mind. “Dude, he’s a PowerBall winner! You really wanna bust his chops like that?”

“Whatever, man. Been hearing all day how he ain’t leasing out his bitch. I’m not gonna lick his boots hoping for a handjob or some bullshit.” Eddie’s resentment would have been obvious from his face alone if he hadn’t said a word.

“Just as well I’m not leasing her,” Aaron said evenly, then sat down in the desk next to Chanda’s. “How are you doing? You look great, by the way.”

In spite of everything – of the pigs harassing her, of the day she’d been having, of the uncertainty worming deep inside her soul, of the whole damn Lottery itself – Chanda found herself smiling. “Thanks. I didn’t want to overdo it, risk getting me kicked out and making you go to school all by your lonesome.”

Aaron chuckled, though even as Eddie slunk back to his seat, another voice cut in. It was Maria Schrum, a studious but rather hirsute classmate. She’d won some kind of award for playing the cello, she thought she recalled. Chanda vaguely remembered the last time they’d been in this room together. Maria had sat huddled at her desk watching Chanda and Kelsey with thinly veiled horror, like they were a pair of grenades about to explode.

“Aaron? So I guess the rumors are true.” Her voice was cold.

“Oh. Hi, Maria. It’s... Look, I know...”

“Save it. Nobody’s surprised. I told them we shouldn’t allow men in the WAL.” We’re All Losers, a national organization of political protesters against the Lottery. She’d been surprised to learn on Drawing Day that Aaron was a member. That fact had gone in the Survivor column.

“Maria—”

“You’re disgusting.” She turned to look at Chanda with deep pity. It was the sort of expression Tiffany or Mya might have directed at Maria once. Now Tiffany was a slave who searched for new slaves for her winner and Mya was Mimi, giggling at the whole world with confused acceptance. “I’m so sorry, Chanda. If you’re still in there. The rest of us will keep fighting for you.”

Someone threw a wad of paper at Maria. Probably Eddie or Rob, from the trajectory. Maria ignored it with impressive equanimity, then after a final frigid glare at Aaron, she took her seat on the far side of the room.

“I’m sorry for that,” she said softly. Aaron sighed, but then Mr. Corley opened class, spelling out the plan. One-on-ones would proceed while the rest of the class got to work reading one of the novellas from their reading list in groups or individually. Students would be called up alphabetically, which meant Chanda was first. She didn’t used to be.

“Hi, Chanda. Still Chanda, right?”

She blinked. Right, some losers were made to change their names. “Yeah, still Chanda.”

“Good. What can you tell me about what your winner has planned out for you in terms of academics?”

“Meaning what, am I still going to school?”

“Basically. And, you know, any cognitive adjustments you think I should be aware of.” His eyes flicked downwards casually, as if a teacher examining his student’s breasts were par for the course. There were always rumors about teachers who exchanged grades for sexual favors with winners. She wouldn’t have thought it of a married man in his forties, but who could say.

“I’m still all there. I’m going to... I mean, Aaron wants me to graduate. Maybe even college.”

“Our Chanda off to college next year, huh?” Chanda had always liked Mr. Corley’s smile. It bespoke a man who liked what he did, and was inviting her to like it, too. She liked it less in that moment. It was an indulgent thing, like she were a five-year-old making the same claim. “Wouldn’t that be something.”

“Right. So, the portfolio...?”

“Right, right.” He produced a worksheet, and went on with the explanation. His eyes were far too distracted, but she managed to ignore it. Once he’d gone over it, he sent her back to her desk and called up the next student. She plopped down next to Aaron with a weary sigh.

“How’d it go?”

“He gave my boobs a thorough run-down of the portfolio,” she said dryly.

“I saw. I’m sorry. I wanted to say something, but...”

“It’s fine. You can’t pick a fight with every jerk who ogles me. Especially teachers.”

“I know.” He scooted his desk closer, then handed her a copy of an open book. She didn’t even get to see the title, but he had the same open on his desk. “In case Corley gets nosy.”

“Smart.”

He dropped his voice to a near whisper. “So how are you? Are you OK?” If there was frustration over being ignored, he didn’t let it show.

Chanda took a deep breath. All this time stewing in this conundrum and she still didn’t know what she wanted to say. So she just said it. “Did you win me?”

She was watching him like a hawk, searching his face for any clues. His head snapped back, then he leaned in even closer. “Did I *what*? What are you even talking about?”

Did the volume in the room drop suddenly, or was she being paranoid? Right now, Aaron was her cover story. If people found out she’d survived, not only would she have to chase off every player in school – that is, guys who didn’t win anyone, a term set aside for them since “loser” was already taken – but she’d also risk having people

contact the Lottery Bureau and get them double-checking. With human error still a very real possibility, she wasn't about to court that kind of disaster.

"We probably shouldn't talk about this here. That is, I mean, if you want to keep up the story."

Aaron studied her a moment, but conceded. "Sure. After class?"

"Over at Ramsey Park."

He nodded. Class went on.

The swings were being blown about by the wind when she arrived at Ramsey Park, twisting and untwisting themselves. It was a brisk day. Luckily Chanda's jacket remained in her locker from the Friday before spring break in her rush out of the building after learning she hadn't been won.

If that had really happened. If that wasn't the sort of detail the Lottery's brainwashing tech fabricated for its ends.

It was almost twenty minutes before Aaron came along. She saw him peering around the playground, even checking the plastic tube slide, before finally heading through the wooded area and checking the pavilion. She returned his wave, and her smile was probably every bit as tepid as his.

"Hey. Sorry it took me so long. Had, um, some more drama at my locker. Didn't see you at first. I don't know why but I always forget this area is back here."

"I would've taken one of the benches by the playground, but... I dunno. Figured the elementaries would let out soon, and I didn't wanna talk when a bunch of little kids showed up."

They taught kids about the Lottery during fifth grade. Most schools did it at the end of sex ed. When the kids finished learning about what penises and vaginas were, how babies were made, they capped it off by letting them know that on account of the over-breeding of their ancestors, there was now an added step in the process. She remembered the Memorial Day picnic year before last, right after her ten-year-old cousin Annie had found out. The look she'd given Chanda when she asked how she was doing. Like she'd been betrayed by every woman who preceded her.

Religious schools who didn't teach birds and bees stuff taught the Lottery as part of their environmental unit as a capstone to what mankind's sins against God's earth had wrought. Chanda actually thought that might be the more appropriate method.

Aaron settled down on the opposite side of the picnic table, its lime green paint faded and chipped. "God. I hate that I can't start out by asking you how you're holding up. Today must have been awful for you."

Her eyes closed for a moment. Sights and utterances of the day echoed back to her in a cacophony. Loudest was an after-school encounter with Eve, the new personality in the body of her former best friend Brandy. She'd approached Chanda at her locker after school, apologizing half-heartedly for the incident at the theater on Drawing Day. That night, with her winner Ezekiel Boecher watching, Eve had pinned her to the ground and more or less sexually assaulted her in front of a crowd of cheering admirers. Aaron had stepped in to break it up.

At any rate, then Eve had invited her, on Ezekiel's behalf, to a Bible study at her house, offering to rekindle the old friendship in their new lives. Her winner's leer from down the hall left no doubt as to what he hoped to achieve from such a meeting. Chanda

had flipped Ezekiel off and stormed away without a word. She'd had to stop and let herself quake with rage and grief once she rounded a corner.

The other thing she felt in that moment was a fervent hope that all her paranoia was wrong and Aaron was only what he appeared to be. A kind-hearted young man who had bent over backwards to help her through this nightmare.

"It wasn't great."

"Yeah. That was... yeah. This guy I game with online says at his school, the first day after Drawing Day is always seniors only. Guess they don't want to expose the underclassmen to all of it."

"Not like they won't see it all eventually. May as well get braced for it."

"I read that there's some bipartisan commission being formed to study the Lottery, to see if it's doing enough, or if there's ways we could improve it. Some of them are even saying it might be time to end it already."

"Yeah, well I got an A in government, so update me when 'some' becomes the minimum threshold to pass a law. Besides, if they ended this tomorrow, it wouldn't undo the damage they've already done." Indeed, she followed current events, at least as it pertained to something as monolithic in her life as the Lottery. There were already politicians arguing that that trauma, ending the Lottery early and having winners and losers cope with their circumstances, was reason *not* to end it.

She could see he had more to say to that. Aaron was a member of WAL, after all – or had been, anyway – so it was obviously an issue he cared about. Even if he'd let his hair down and seeded her pot anyway. If.

Instead, though, he turned his attention to the reason she'd asked him to meet her. "So, about what you said in class. I heard the words, but I'm not sure I get them. Walk me through what you're saying, because I want to make sure there's no misunderstanding."

"I pretty much said it all in class, Aaron."

"Say it again."

"It's not complicated, is it? How can I believe I really survived the Drawing? That out of nowhere, this guy I barely know carries me to the nurse's office, rescues me from my crazy ex-friend, offers to 'pretend' to be my winner to keep guys at bay, comes to my rescue in that insane thing with Tiffany... Do you not see how that's a lot to believe?"

"Believe? Chanda, you saw it all with your own eyes!" He held his hands up apologetically and lowered his voice. "Sorry. But seriously, how the heck would that even work? Me winning you? I was with you when you went to the gym and they told you to your face you were a free woman!"

"I sat right next to a girl in a diaper this morning. She threw a full-on temper tantrum because her winner wasn't there to shove his 'pacifier' in her mouth. Literally

threw herself on the floor in front of her teacher and her friends and a whole bunch of strangers and bawled. Like a toddler. I'm talking apoplectic."

"Mikaela, yeah. I heard. What's that got to do with you?"

"You don't think that a process that turns an honor roll student into *that* could make me imagine some guy came to my rescue? Like they can shave a hundred points off our IQ but not make us imagine we fainted during their little procedure?"

Aaron considered. "OK. I guess... That is, I think I see why you're paranoid."

"Don't call me paranoid." She folded her arms imperiously.

"OK, sorry. I meant, you know... anxious. Mistrustful."

"Better."

He stroked his chin. "Chanda, I didn't win you. I didn't seed anybody. Ask any of my friends! Do you have any idea how much shit they gave me for burning my tickets? Heck, I could have bought a new car pawning those things off!"

"I'm sorry, it sounds like you're saying that deciding not to enslave someone is somehow a sacrifice on *your* end. Besides, even if I was willing to take your friends' word as alibi, I go to your school, Aaron. I hear the same morning announcements you do. For like a week they had reminders about what boys were supposed to do if they needed replacement tickets. You could have burned them and then gone right down and requested replacements and nobody would know but you."

His nostrils flared, but he didn't issue an immediate rebuttal. "All right. So say I did. I didn't, but whatever. Why would I bother with all that theater? What do I stand to gain from any of it?"

"Seriously? You're a sweet guy, Aaron. Sure, let me take a crack. Maybe you wanted to settle down, make your folks happy and crank out some grandkids for 'em. Only you don't want to deal with the guilt. What's the solution? You fill out your tickets, but instead of turning your loser into some nympho or whatever, you arrange for me to have a few hallucinations that make me fall in love with you."

"You fell in love with me?!" His voice broke, and it was so endearing, she almost forgot that it too might be a hallucination. She could be imagining his sweetness even now, as much as Mikaela imagined her winner's cock was her baby binky.

"Relax. If falling in love were a hundred-step process, I'd be on step three. Try to stay focused." Still, it took him a moment to wipe the smile off his face.

"Sure. OK. So I can tell you I didn't do it until I'm blue in the face, but I guess that's not going to cut it, is it." Suddenly his head jerked back. "Oh my god. That's why you ducked all my calls. You've been thinking about this all week, haven't you?"

Chanda nodded slowly. "Yeah. Since the night I went home with Mimi."

"Mimi? Oh right, Mya. Sorry. God, the name changes are the worst. I mean, not literally the worst," he amended hastily. "But frustrating is all."

In the distance, a couple – she couldn't recognize them from here – arrived at the park. They didn't share her sentiment for protecting the children, and sat with the boy on the swing and his loser in his lap. Her dress fluttered as the swing lurched into motion.

Aaron continued, "So let's look at this. I'll try to see it from your perspective. I hate that you've had to feel like this. I get why you didn't come to me, but still. Ugh. I wish..." He shook his head. "So. Why I couldn't have won you."

"I'm all ears."

She gave him a moment to think in peace and quiet. In the meantime, she watched the couple sharing the swing. A romantic attempt, perhaps, but it was obviously too awkward, as they soon realized when the girl proved herself unable to steady the swing while he was busy squeezing her boobs. They moved over toward the merry-go-round next. The boy flopped down on his back and his loser gleefully straddled him at the waist as he began spinning it slowly with dangling feet. Either they couldn't see Aaron and Chanda in the dim light under the canopy, or they didn't care who saw.

"OK, here's something. So Friday afternoon, the fainting, the nurse's office, the trip to the gym... I don't really have anything for that. I guess, objectively, it could be like you said. But what about the theater that night? I couldn't possibly have written my tickets to make you imagine *that*."

"Yeah? Why not?"

"Think about it. You saw Brandy – Eve – today, right?"

She nodded. "Yeah, briefly."

"OK. And she was like you remembered her from the Grand River, right? Ezekiel's weird little church lady slut. Sorry, not to be—"

"It's fine. And yeah. So what?"

"So how could I have made you imagine an encounter with a version of your friend that I didn't know would exist when I wrote the ticket?" He gave her a look, quite impressed with his deductive skills.

"OK, I think I see what you're saying." That was indeed a good point. "I suppose the same goes for the incident with Tiffany, and... you know." It was hard to say the word "kidnapping" aloud.

"Not necessarily," he countered. "You said Tiffany was auctioned, not won, which I could have known about. I didn't, but whatever, we're playing detective. So I could have banked on the likely case that she'd more or less disappear to wherever the auction winner happened to be and planned that whole encounter. If I recall, you said there weren't any other witnesses, right?"

Chanda frowned. He was a little too good at this. And not in advocating for the side she desperately wanted to win. "Right..."

“Although,” Aaron went on pensively, talking more to himself than to her, “there would still be the phone record. Hmm. Not sure if I – or anyone, that is – could have faked that. Like, if you could call Tiffany’s old phone number, leave a three-minute voicemail or something and have it show up like a call if we checked her phone bill? If her parents would let us, that is. I dunno. So we’ll leave that as a maybe.”

“Do you do this sort of thing often?” she asked with a thin smile.

“Look, either I want you to relax and be able to trust your own eyes and ears, or I’m playing some mind game to make you go back to trusting me so we can move on to step four of falling in love. Either way, I’m committed.” He smiled, and to her surprise, even reached out and gave her hand a squeeze.

Chanda shivered, but told herself it was only the breeze. “You know, part of what makes it all so hard to believe is that I’ve never fallen for a guy like this before. Like, not ever. I’ve always been afraid of boys. Or hated them. Maybe both.”

“We’ve certainly given you ample cause.” Aaron sighed. “I don’t really know what else to say. I guess it’s all sort of flimsy one way or the other. My stupid brain is already rushing into more analysis and now I’m considering if I could have made an arrangement with that jerk Ezekiel to stage the night at Grand River, as you were probably about to point out.”

She had not been about to say that. Really, sitting here with him again, listening to him selflessly attempt to empathize his way through this, she wanted to be wrong more than ever. The couple on the merry-go-round were unsubtly having sex now. It was audacious and stupid, but they looked to be enjoying it anyway. As for Chanda, she might not be ready to take her pants off and fuck him, but it would feel good to at least see how his lips felt for a while.

Unless that was only because... *Augh!*

He took his hand away from hers; she’d forgotten he’d had it there, but missed it immediately. “So I guess I see where you’re coming from now. Man, this sucks. So like, what do we do? I like you, Chanda. I do. I know we’ve both just lost a lot, and I hate for us to lose each other if that’s going to make this whole god awful mess easier. But obviously this won’t work if you can’t trust me.”

“Sounds like you’re pretty much caught up now.” She dropped her head into her hands. There, in front of her on the table, someone had scratched a heart and a pair of initials. A.S. + J something. The scratches looked old, with layers of paint nearly making them invisible, filling in the last letter altogether. She wondered if they were a couple, like a normal couple from old books and movies, and found herself hating them for it.

“So... do we agree we both want this to work? You and me? Not saying til death do us part or anything, but I mean... to give it a try. If you do.”

“You tell me. Do I?”

He grit his teeth, looking around in exasperation like he wanted to throw something. “All right, so for whatever reason, artificial or real, we do. *I* do. So why not give it a go? If you’re unhappy, walk away. If you are happy, then what difference does it make where it comes from?”

Chanda’s mouth opened, then snapped shut. Without so much as a backward glance, she ripped herself away from the table and flounced over toward the couple fucking on the merry-go-round. Some underclassmen were hanging out, too, three boys with skateboards in hand. In hand, because it was hard to skateboard and creep on some guy fuck his loser at the same time. They kept their distance, though, three heads poking over the top of the slide.

As Aaron picked himself up to follow, the distance closed to the point that their identities became clear. Britt Harris and Craig... Craig Somebody. She didn’t know them well. Britt was in one of her classes, though. They’d done a group project together in eighth grade on *Jane Eyre*. Britt was no PowerBall, but Craig Somebody didn’t seem to mind as she rocked her hips atop him.

“Hi, Britt. Craig.” Chanda interrupted like the two had been in the middle of a conversation, not approaching orgasm. Britt turned her head, but didn’t stop. Craig’s eyes shot open in surprise, his feet ceasing their revolution so the ride came to a jerky stop. His loser had to flatten herself to keep from rolling off.

“Um, hi. Chanda?” He said her name like a question. She knew he knew who she was. Everybody knew who she was. There was no counting how many times she’d protested someone telling her she was the hottest girl in school, the hottest girl in a hundred schools. Since Drawing Day, Chanda was beyond tired of being humble. Right then, Craig seemed less confused about her identity than why she was standing over him.

Aaron kept his eyes anywhere but on the rutting duo, though Craig tapped Britt’s hips to bring her to a stop. The girl sulked. “Hi. Sorry to interrupt, but Aaron asked me to come over here and see if I could give your girl a hand.”

“I what?!” Aaron squeaked.

“He’s so modest with his generosity. So what do you say, mind if I join your happy couple?”

Craig looked between the two of them in disbelief. “Uh, is *he* going to join in, too?”

Chanda smiled through pathetic homophobia. “Nope. He’ll just hang out way back there. Maybe watch, but if you minded being watched you wouldn’t be fucking on a merry-go-round in a public park, right?”

Craig’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What’s the catch? I don’t have any money, dude.”

Good lord, never had a boy tried so hard *not* to hook up with her. “No catch, no money. Just sit back and enjoy.”

“Um, all right, sure. Do you wanna...?” He looked to his cock.

She sat down beside the two of them. Britt’s arousal was perceptible even in the open air. Rewired for maximum lubrication, or naturally that way? Who knew any more. Chanda gave Britt’s behind a slap. “Go on, hon. Do your job.”

She looked to Craig for confirmation, and at his nod resumed her gyrations. “Oh, thank you!”

Chanda fought to maintain her smile. She still remembered going over to Britt’s house for that project. It had been over winter break; their shrew of an English teacher had given them vacation homework. It had been snowing outside, the two of them making construction paper figurines and trying to ignore how badly they wanted to be outside playing in it. They hadn’t been friends or anything, but fresh snow was fresh snow.

“Chanda...” Aaron said softly.

“I got this, baby,” she said without looking back. “Go on, shoo. I’ll be back in a while. Once I’ve made Craig nice and happy.” Her heavy emphasis on the last word wasn’t subtle, but the guy getting fucked right beside her didn’t seem to care if there was some weird game going on. If he even noticed. Aaron snorted, then stalked off to the pavilion.

“So, what did you – or, you know, did he – have in mind?” Craig asked. Chanda didn’t have much experience with guys and sex – none, really – but he looked like he was trying to ignore what Britt was doing. Savoring, probably.

Chanda hadn’t thought it through, but really, there was no way it would take much. After a moment’s hesitation, she untucked her shirt, then eased it up over her breasts. Craig’s eyes widened in appreciation bordering on greed, like she was opening a treasure vault. A couple more tugs and her boobs popped out of her bra.

“How’s that?” she asked.

“Oh my god, your tits... Like, Britt’s are nice and all, but fuck. I’ve been jerking it thinking about those things since forever, and they’re even better than I’d imagined. Fuck.”

He reached up to grab one, and by reflex she deflected his hand. “Aaron said no touching. But you can look all you like. OK?”

“Fuck. Well, fair enough. A gift’s a gift, and those titties are nothing if not a gift.” He licked his lips. Britt still looked to be immensely enjoying herself, heedless of her lover’s fixation on the other woman.

“Thanks.” She didn’t know what else to say. Her back was to the boys by the slide; all they could see was one girl in a dress rocking her hips and the lower back of another.

Still, it'd be something they'd no doubt remember until they became winners themselves. Especially if they recognized Chanda.

“Do you remember, we had the same gym class freshman year? And we were doing flag football and you were really sucky – like, even for a girl – but you got the ball one time, and I went to pull your flag off but the velcro caught and it tugged your shorts down?”

“Um, no?” She sure didn't. She remembered hating football, and remembered how annoying guy sports were in general. As for Craig Somebody pantsing her... not a whit.

“Oh man. It was only for like a second, but you were wearing these pink panties, and your ass, even though I barely saw it, and only like half of it... fuck. Almost rubbed my dick raw that night. I actually jacked it in a bathroom stall right after class. You're so insanely hot.”

“Well, I'm glad you enjoyed it,” she answered. Was she really doing this? And why? She barely knew what she was doing. Or was Aaron doing it? Regardless, it was his fault.

Chanda lay down on her side, head propped up on one arm. The merry-go-round was freezing cold for a moment when her skin first made contact, but after a few seconds it absorbed enough of her body heat. Whatever. The way he was panting, this wouldn't take long. She idly teased at one nipple; it was already crazy hard on account of the cold. And maybe the situation. This was pretty wild for her. For any survivor, really. It was sort of hot, letting go, even if it was with this unremarkable boy and his unremarkable loser.

Craig came all too soon, right as her nipple was beginning to forge a proper connection to her pussy. Not that she'd figured she'd be able to get herself off from it or anything, but it had been starting to feel good. Ah well. She still had her toys at home.

Had she actually had those before last week, or was that something Aaron had given her to tide herself over until she submitted to him? With the red-faced boy emptying his balls into her classmate beside her, it felt like reality was becoming hazier by the second.

Britt rolled off of him, promptly squatting beside the merry-go-round to suck him clean with an O-shaped grin. Meanwhile, Chanda sat up and lowered her shirt again. “Happy?” she asked.

“So happy. Man, I dunno what kink Eichhorn's got with you, but I'm happy to help out any freaking time. Seriously.”

“I'll let him know. You two have fun now.”

Chanda stood up and walked back toward the pavilion, pausing when she was close to blow a kiss back toward the boy. He caught it, shoved Britt's face aside, and planted it on his dick. Classy.

“All right, so you mind telling me what the hell that was about?”

“What’s wrong? Jealous?” she asked evenly.

“Sort of, yeah, but mostly just confused. What on earth were you doing? Do you even know Craig?”

“Sure, we’re besties.”

“Chanda…”

“What? It made us happy. Craig was happy, Britt was happy. I was happy.”

“B.S. you were.”

“You’re the only one not happy. And what’s it matter where the happiness comes from? Just because she’s his love slave and I might be in the process of being groomed to be yours, who cares? Right?”

The light of comprehension at last shone behind his eyes. “That is not what I meant and you darn well know it!”

“It is what you meant!” she shouted back. “You said I should shrug it off and be your girlfriend and not worry about whether or not I ever had any choice in the matter! Do you even know what this is like? No, you can’t!”

“What what’s like?”

“Not knowing whether you’re you or you’re somebody’s pet! Needing a man to own you for protection from all the other men! Acting like it’s normal to be ejected from reality!”

“You’re talking about the Lottery. *I’m* not the Lottery. I get that it’s not fair, but you can’t blame me for the world being broken! I didn’t ask for this.”

“I didn’t ask for *this!*” Without quite knowing why, she raised her shirt again. Her boobs were still out, on display. Aaron gaped, and whatever his mindset in that moment, she didn’t miss the gleam in his eye.

“Chanda, stop that.”

“Why? I can tell you like it.”

“Because I asked you to. Because this isn’t you.”

“You don’t know me. Maybe this is exactly like me. Maybe I’ve been waiting my whole life to become somebody’s wanton little slut. A shameless piece of eye candy. Little Miss Suck-and-Fuck. How exactly would *you* know who I am?”

Aaron glared, and after a moment, even managed to glare at something other than her tits. “You know what? I’m done here. Believe what you want. I’m going home.”

“Oh, can I come, Daddy?” She pinched her nipples, injecting sarcastic eagerness in her voice.

“Grow up, Chanda. Seriously.” Instead, she twisted harder, squeezing her thighs together in feigned bliss. Aaron threw his hands in the air in exasperation. “I tried to be nice to you, but if this is how you want it to be, then fine. I can play hardball if that’s what you want. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Aaron was stalking away, shouting the last over his shoulder. Chanda watched him, only belatedly remembering to lower her shirt. Craig nodded, grinned at her for the very distant second show. Her eyes were locked on Aaron, though.

What the hell had he meant by that?

Since surviving Drawing Day, Chanda had spent a fair amount of time watching TV, curled up on the couch between her dad and Bumper. At first, she'd been relieved beyond comprehension to still get to be with them at all. Then she'd nestled in trying to recapture that feeling, that primal sense of safety.

That night, she slumped down next to her dad, her feet across his lap, because she'd feel guilty if she didn't. Her mother was in her office tending to some late-night work, as often happened, though it was right in the next room and she'd left the door open, indicating they were welcome to intrude.

Did they feel the same way? They'd obviously been elated to have her back at first, she knew that. Was it already old hat to them, too?

Bumper hopped up on her lap and fell asleep. Little jerk farted a little while before the news started, which she took as her cue to hit the hay. He moved over to her dad's lap and was asleep again in seconds. Bumper, at least, wasn't letting the Lottery upend his life. Though every time she envied him, she remembered that if she wanted to be a drooly, cuddly idiot who spent her life on the floor and was led around on a leash, the Lottery was the perfect thing for it.

I can play hardball, he'd said. Was that an admission of guilt? She stewed over it, sweaty, tossing and turning most of the night. By the time the sun crept through the slats in the blinds, she wasn't any closer to the answers to her questions.

She did, however, have a plan.

At breakfast, her mother was surprised to hear she was riding her bike to school. That was something she hadn't done since Tiffany had gotten her license sophomore year. It wasn't far, only a mile and change, but she told her she wanted some exercise and that was that.

"You look really nice today, honey," her dad said as he strolled into the kitchen.

"Tell that to mom," she replied dryly. "She said I looked like a hobo."

Her dad frowned, then looked her over. Only then did he notice that beneath a face that bespoke hours in front of the mirror – since a little before 5 AM in fact – she was wearing a baggy, shapeless hoodie and matching sweatpants. They were Brandy's, actually, but they fit OK aside from being a bit snug. (If Eve wanted them, she could come try to take them.)

"Right. Well hey, I bet you'll be the prettiest hobo at the soup kitchen." He leaned in and kissed her cheek. Minutes later, the three were off. Chanda to school, her mother to the office, and her dad to prep for what she half-listened to as a big lunch meeting. She wished him luck and waved to him as he pulled out of the driveway, her bike keeping up for a block or two until he turned off towards the city.

Minutes after that, Chanda pulled her bike off the sidewalk and walked it behind an electric box. Using it for cover, she took off the sweat suit and tossed it aside in the grass. She doubted Brandy would come asking for her pants back in three decades when

her Lottery term was over any more than Eve would come for them in the years between. She chained her bike there, too. Once she changed up her footwear, there would be no more biking.

Two blocks later, she nearly caused her first accident. A car with three people from school, a boy driving, and as his head whipped to the side he careened right through a stop sign and would have T-boned another car if the woman driving hadn't been paying closer attention.

Their window was down. "Is that Chanda Brighton?!" she heard a voice ask incredulously.

She turned, gave a wink, and strutted on.

By the time she arrived at school almost a mile further, she'd inured herself to the whistles, cat calls, crude comments. The stares and leers faded into and past her peripheral vision as she passed. For once in her life, she couldn't blame them.

It was probably the boots. They came up to her lower thighs, stark white leather with yellow and red flames stitched up the sides from where they started at the base of the towering heels. They were tricky to walk in, but when she'd bought them last fall for a concert she'd gone to with Brandy, Tiffany, Mya and Kelsey, she'd practiced it for hours. Dad had hated it, but her mother had gone to bat for her. Just once, she'd wanted to look sexy, while she still had a say in it. The ridiculous things had barely fit in her backpack.

It could be the stockings, she supposed. Only a few inches longer than the boots, enough to show a strip of translucent white nylon below the solid white band. It was all white enough that the scant amount of bare thigh above it looked rosy by comparison. They were almost too long. The thigh was important. She knew that. Four years of watching her classmates turn into sex ornaments overnight had taught her that those thin strips of bare flesh were important to the overall effect.

She'd repeated that trick between the skirt and the top. It was surgically done, making certain the skirt was exactly long enough to pass muster – past the ends of her fingertips with her arms fully extended, as long as she kept her shoulders slightly raised – while still revealing thighs below and her belly button above. In fact, if one looked closely (and one was, along with all one's friends) they could see the beginnings of her V, where the lines of her hips flowed down between her legs. But only the beginning.

The white skirt sported enough spandex in the fabric to more than hint at the shape of her and confirm that any underwear beneath it was a thong or none at all. (There was a thong, of course, in case it crept down a little in the back.) The top was nothing more than an old shirt, and it fit like it. Cleavage was always cause for concern for nosy administrators, so she'd had to settle for tight rather than low-cut. And tight it was. Freshman year, it had been tight enough to be cute. Now, several cup sizes and some miscellaneous growth later, it wasn't simply skin tight. Her skin had some wiggle

room. This was so tight it dug into her skin. The buttons across the front of the pale pink garment strained to contain her breasts, the fabric distended into rows of sumptuous wrinkles. If she breathed deeply, narrow diamonds of skin appears across the front of her, enough to show that her bra was as red as the flames on her boots.

If she breathed *too* deeply, she was worried the buttons would fly right off.

That wouldn't be so bad either.

All in all, it wasn't the most daring thing a loser had worn to school that week, not by a long shot. It was, however, the most daring thing that Chanda Brighton had worn to school, ever, and on the hottest girl to ever attend Clark High, it was an instant phenomenon. Besides, most of the girls trampling the dress code had been weeded out on day one. Where yesterday they'd had layers of monitors, scrutinizing every girl who walked in the doors, today, there was only Vice Principal Remsberg, casually glaring at the lot of them but mostly saying little.

At Chanda, however, he moved to block her path. "Hold up there, Ms. Brighton."

She stopped, though a bit closer than was strictly appropriate. His nostrils twitched above his mustache as her thick, cheap perfume seeped into them. "Good morning, Mr. Remsberg," she said cheerfully.

"What is it you think you're wearing there?" His hands went to his hips.

She looked down, plucking at bits of her clothes as if to make sure they were still on. The thin fabric of her top snapped audibly against her skin upon release. "Is something wrong?"

"You look like a baby hooker," he said. Her smile almost slipped. The way men felt like they could talk to losers, like they were subhuman, always grated.

"Really? Because I checked, and the dress code doesn't say anything about this. See?" She put down her arms, then spun in place. If there was an extra wiggle in her hips as she pivoted, no matter. "Past my fingertips. And you can't see any of my boobs at all, right?"

He stared as she thrust out her chest for inspection. Indeed, she held her breath, just in case he was still looking for cause to criticize rather than merely ogling her.

"Sorry," she giggled. "I meant breasts. Still adjusting and all. You know how it is for us, huh?"

"Um, yes, they are. Err, I mean, I do." He cleared his throat. "Tell your winner to be careful. We're not only enforcing the letter of the law, but the spirit. Can't come in here wearing an outfit made of plastic wrap that covers all your bits and act like it's decent, understand?"

"Right. Plastic wrap outfits outside of school only." She nodded seriously. "Thank you."

He favored her with an amused chuckle. "All right. Get to class, Ms. Brighton."

Her smile regained full cheeriness. She paused, however, before passing him by, leaning in close enough that her heavy breasts pressed against his arm. His whole body stiffened. “And by the way, my winner and I are *very* appreciative of your discretion. It won’t be forgotten. We promise.”

She lingered a moment, then abruptly separated herself and heel-toed her way to her locker.

Over spring break, hiding from Aaron specifically and the whole world generally, Chanda had binged the entirety of *Surviving*. It was terrible television by any metric, but somehow it sucked her into its banal drama nevertheless. It had been a useful distraction, redirecting her anxiety to the protagonist Lexi’s difficulties with a world of sex and mind-warping and betrayals and compromises.

Any more, Chanda felt like she had more in common with Jennica Benoit, the young starlet who played Lexi, than she did with her own friends these days. The actress and her family had auctioned herself, and the winning bid had been a production studio. Her fee was a mere eight years of unpaid servitude on set, after which she regained her autonomy. (These days, nobody got a sweetheart deal like that, but at the time, the studios had been desperate to snare the sort of look and talent that would land them the first big post-Lottery hit.) While thus far even the first year of losers hadn’t yet come close to aging out of their Lottery terms, some considered Jennica Benoit to be the youngest woman to be released from the terms of her losing. Even in the occasional case where a winner died, it was illegal for their losers to be restored to their prior mental state early since the whole point, at least nominally, was to prevent them from reproducing. In Jennica Benoit’s case, the winner was a corporation, and so the loser’s sterilization remained intact and therefore posed no threat. Inasmuch as any uterus did.

That day, *Surviving* was Chanda’s handbook. To lure in young viewers, the show was chock-full of gorgeous young actresses in the most revealing outfits the network permitted without earning an MA rating. (Not counting their occasional late-night film release, of course.) During the first and second seasons, the cast went through the Drawing and the remaining months of the school year. Eureka Canyon High School, where they all attended, radically altered their dress code. Defiance against loser-shaming was a major theme of some early episodes, as parents, siblings, teachers and administrators all adjusted their world view to embrace a more sex-positive mindset. *Treating Bianca like she’s a vapid, desperate slut just because it’s tattooed up and down her arms says nothing about her, and says everything about you, Joseph.*

In the episode where Amber started sitting with her legs spread wide in all her classes – in miniskirts, or in one case a bikini – Mr. Keach took her aside to lecture her about how distracting it was, and inappropriate besides, to expose herself to a member of the faculty. With tears welling up in her eyes, Amber explained how the constant, inescapable wetness made sitting through a whole class without being able to

masturbate incredibly uncomfortable. Plus, she added soulfully, she remembered from before the Drawing that Mr. Keach was a compassionate and dedicated teacher, so her exposure was her way of demonstrating her respect for him. She was different now, but her caring for him remained the same. Besides, Amber explained, if he became too tempted, her winner would understand, and she'd make up for any distress she'd given him. They'd hugged, he'd snuck a squeeze of her butt under her skirt, and from then her spread-eagle stance had been a trope of the show.

Chanda's teachers weren't exactly Mr. Keach, but she went to work on them all the same.

She began small. Raising her hand, for instance, was enough to really draw attention to her chest – especially if she were “eager” to answer and wave her arm a bit. Flashing her panties to everyone was a fast track to expulsion, but there was no rule that said she couldn't cross and uncross her legs at frequent intervals, nor that she leave them uncrossed and direct that thin triangle of thighs and fabric at the man in the front of the room. Even changing the way she spoke.

In *Surviving*, Akshi's voice shot up two octaves after she was won. It was jarring hearing those first episodes where she spoke in the actress's natural alto instead of her trademark breathy, submissive soprano. Chanda didn't reach as high as all that, but a little extra volume with a little less diaphragm and she could see guys fidgeting in their seats. Mr. Jimenez invited her to practice her Spanish with him in front of the class. It wasn't unusual, the teacher singling out a student, especially an A student like Chanda, for such a dialogue. It was, however, not the norm to invite her to take a seat on his desk at the front of his room, nor for his mouth to slowly droop open when she momentarily parted her legs to scratch an feigned itch on her inner thigh.

“Estas bien señor Jimenez? Estás babeando en tu regazo.”

The stronger students in the class laughed. Mr. Jimenez only grinned as if that had been some sort of witty flirtation. “Soy gran señorita Brighton. Gracias.”

The cafeteria, unlike Monday, featured a good deal less scrutiny. Chanda plunked herself down with a group of loserless guys. She smiled toothily, and twisted her fingers in her hair, and made sure her breasts rested on the tabletop like they were part of the meal. When Michael grew flustered at being caught leering (a reflex that was so two weeks ago), she only squeezed his hand and promised him it was fine. After that, half of what anyone said at the table was aimed at her tits, a testament to what a pretty face she had.

The second time Calvin “accidentally” dropped something under the table as a pretense to look up her skirt, she finally drew the line, fixing him with a bemusedly reproachful look. “Come on, Calvin, if you keep peeping at my pussy I won't be allowed to sit with you guys any more!”

That was more than enough. A rain of blows from anxious boys rained down on him, and his case of butterfingers cured itself on the spot. Chanda blew them a kiss as she sauntered away from the table.

Miss Smith's sub, so bored by her lesson-planless tenure that she hadn't even bothered to write her name on the board, was an open invitation for mischief. Subs didn't have the expulsion authority enjoyed by real teachers, and the way the woman's face was buried in her phone, Chanda didn't peg her for the sort looking for extra paperwork. So she played.

Games included: bending over to brush vigorously at some invisible speck on her left boot; "someone told me I have a stain under my boob, like it fell in my lunch or something, can you check? Seriously, or are you just messing with me? Hey, can *you* check?"; absentmindedly sucking on the tip of her ring finger whenever she was reading something or looking at her phone; muttering "ugh, this bra does nothing to keep my nipples from sticking out" almost under her breath; and asking the sub if it was OK if she doodled on the board, then griping that her drawings kept rubbing off on her chest as she moved around.

Her mightiest stroke came near the end of class when she approached Bailey Weber, eyes darting around anxiously. Bailey had been won by Juan Alejandro, her former boyfriend. From what little Chanda had seen and heard, Juan had left her mostly intact. Romantic, by the standards of the day. Her hair was up in pigtails now, and it was obvious she was one of the many losers who'd been put on a major diet and exercise regime. She looked good. For a normal girl, anyway. Chanda crouched beside her desk, lower lip sucked between her teeth, eyes downcast.

"Chanda? Hey, what are you... I mean, what's up?" She looked like she was afraid of being burned away by the supernova of sexuality at her side.

"Hey, Bailey. I just wanted to say, you look really great. Seriously. You and Juan must feel so proud."

It eased the girl to a nervous smile. "Oh. Um, thanks. You look... good, too. Not that you don't always, you know, look good. But not like... Whatever. Anyway, I bet Aaron's really stoked."

"I sure hope so. We only have one class together and I've barely seen him all day. Doesn't it just drive you up the wall, not being able to...?" She let the question hang. All around them, eavesdropping senior boys were filling in that blank with their most depraved fantasies.

Bailey blushed. "Oh. I mean... sometimes. I guess. Juan didn't, like, make me... like that. Not too much, anyway. At least I don't think. You know how it's hard to remember things right."

The girls giggled together. "Right? I can barely remember what it was like not wanting to just tear my clothes—" Suddenly she looked around as if realizing she was

being too frank. It wasn't hard to blush. That valve had been strained near to bursting all day. "Anyway, I wondered if... gosh, this is awkward. Can I ask you something... personal?"

"Um, we're sort of in class," the girl mumbled, fidgeting uneasily. Half the boys in the room were openly watching the two; the other half were only pretending they weren't.

"Oh! Right, duh," Chanda muttered, hitting herself in the head with her palm. She went right ahead anyway. "But yeah, so like, I wondered if you had... Like, could I borrow..." She shook her head. "Get the words out, Chanda. Do you happen to have, you know, a thingy, for when you, ya know, need to...?"

After a moment, Bailey nodded. She pulled up her purse and opened it, digging until she found a little white paper pouch. Chanda had to stare for a moment before she recognized it. A pad. They talked about those in health class, to prepare the girls for when their winners wanted to reverse the couple's sterilization. It sounded gross. Bleeding, out of your...? Nasty. Chanda hoped Aaron never made her do that.

"Oh! No, I'm all set there. I mean, um..." Chanda took a deep breath, then rose up to whisper in Bailey's ear. The half of the class who'd been wishing they were on the side where they could see up the squatting girl's skirt were suddenly compensated by the sight of the bottoms of her cherry red thong. Regulation length or no, the dress code couldn't do much to counteract an ass with her kind of curves. It was just going to ride up.

"A *vibrator*," she whispered.

Only the nearest handful could make out what she'd said, but the word rippled across the room like a stone thrown in a pond. Bailey tensed. "What?! No!"

"Or just a dildo, even, if that's all you have. I'm desperate here!" Her words may not have reached far, save for the slight emphasis she put on *dildo* and *desperate*.

"That's really gross. I wouldn't share that even if I..." Bailey shrugged Chanda's hand off her shoulder. Apathetic to the girl's discomfort, Chanda stamped a foot in frustration. The middle button on her top flew open in retaliation for the titquake it set off. She grumbled under her breath as she fixed it, twisting in place for modesty, which really only made sure everybody got an eyeful.

"Take your seat, or I'll have to leave a note for Miss Smith," droned the apathetic voice of their sub.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

The bell rang moments later. She didn't think there was a soft penis in the crowd. Even the winners walked out with their imaginations and envy competing for brainwaves.

Mrs. Beeker made such overt action difficult in sixth period, so Chanda contented herself with ignoring the lecture and drawing page after page of penises in her notebook,

staring at them as longingly as she could make herself. It wasn't actually all that hard. Ever since she'd been with Mimi and Jessie her libido had been amped up, and today had only poured gas on the flames.

At last it was time for seventh period.

The hand mirror in her purse confirmed her lipstick was looking top notch before she entered the room. On the whole, her makeup had the volume of a seventh grader but with a good many years more sophistication. So she hoped. As Lexi had taught her, a sexy face was only the permission slip a boy needed to appreciate a sexy body. There was permission to spare as she entered Mr. Corley's class, right as the bell to begin class rang.

"Ms. Brighton, that's a warning. In your seat by the bell," said Mr. Corley reflexively. Then he glanced up from his laptop, and his casual survey for taking attendance momentarily gave way to a more manly scrutiny, drinking in the clearly defined curves of the goddess in his midst.

"Sorry, Mr. Corley." She hustled to a desk on the far side of the room from a gaping Aaron. The heeled boots meant each hurried step made for a cascade of jiggling ass and tits alike. Someone whistled; Mr. Corley's head snapped away from her to look for the source, but he settled for a warning in its general direction.

Today, the class was back to normal, and for the rest of the period, so was Chanda. She could feel Aaron's eyes on her, even distinct from all the others, but she never favored him with so much as a glance. There were whispers, too, boys filling in classmates on what they'd seen in previous periods, speculation about what had made for such an overnight shift.

"I heard she's making the rounds after school, going down on all his male teachers. A mother-fucking pluses. And some have to pay cash, too."

"I heard he can turn her IQ on or off like a light switch."

"I heard she asked a girl for a vibrator, then ran to the bathroom and got off so loud they sent her to the principal."

"I heard he spanked her ass red. She's got a free pass to slut it up for the rest of the year."

"I heard Eichhorn didn't even win her, that her winner's playing some weird game loaning her out to people."

That last one was interesting. Had Aaron had cut ties with her since yesterday? Was this his "hardball?" She tried not to give it any more credence than the rest.

In a rare act of charity, Mr. Corley ended class almost ninety seconds early. Chanda had given him credit for leering less than her other male teachers, though she couldn't help noticing his gaze darting toward her, pulled by her sexual magnetism, as the final seconds ticked down.

During those seconds, the usual scramble to crowd the door became instead three crowds. The survivors and one boy at the room's exit; a group around Chanda chatting her up, making crude comments as boldly as if she were someone's dog rather than a person; and the biggest crowd around a visibly agitated Aaron.

"Come on, you have to give us a show. You've hoarded that shit all week, bro. Just a taste, 'sall I'm asking," pleaded Marshall.

"I told you, I don't have any say in how she dresses. I'm not—"

"Yeah, we heard that bullshit, so save it. Craig told us you had her rubbing her tits in his face yesterday at Ramsey Park."

"That was *her* decision, not mine. Even if I could, I would never—"

"Never say never, man! I'll do your whole portfolio for you, just let me fuck her, man! Just once."

"You're getting a D in here, Kris. Let *me* do your portfolio, Eichhorn, and I'll settle for a BJ. As long as she's naked."

"If we're bidding, I'll do it just to look, not even touch."

"I'm not pimping her out!" Aaron yelled.

Plausible deniability was always an option when students were having side chatter, but with that outburst, Mr. Corley's hands were tied. He beckoned Aaron to his desk. Moments later, the bell rang, and out went the class. Chanda blew Aaron a kiss on her way out the door. "See you tonight, babe!"

Two underclassmen raced past her on her way back to her locker; a moment later, she found them waiting at the bottom of the stairs, cameras pointed upwards as she made her descent. She grit her teeth and stayed in character. Honestly, what was the big deal? There was so much porn circulating of her classmates that even an upskirt of the local legend Chanda Brighton couldn't possibly make many waves.

After a full day of practice, her saunter was reaching lethal proportions. When she paused to hold the door open for those behind her on her way out of the building, she laughed to herself at finding literally dozens of horny boys trailing along in her wake. Some were still following as she started home. What she'd do when she reached her bike, she had no idea. No way she could ride it in this outfit, and changing behind cover had been scary enough that morning without a throng of admirers chasing after her.

About three blocks away, as was becoming predictable, Aaron came to her rescue. He pulled over a short ways ahead of her, leaning over to open the passenger side door. "Would you get in here, please?" he barked. There was nothing of his usual warmth in it.

She flashed a sultry grin at the handful walking in her direction – or maybe this was stalking? – and with a shrug, settled into his car. With a lurch, the car began moving even before she shut the door.

"Hey there, handsome," she said breathily.

“Knock that off, right now,” he snapped. “Do you mind telling me what in the hell got into you today?”

“Why, jealous that you haven’t been into me yet?” She twisted in her seat; her panties were a veritable beacon for his eyes, though he heroically resisted.

“Is this about yesterday? I don’t even get it. I thought you were worried that I was controlling you somehow, treating you like a loser, so what do you do? Become the loseriest girl at Clark overnight.”

“A PowerBall winner like yourself deserves no less, right?”

“I didn’t win you! God knows it’d be easier if I did, get my stupid dad off my back about... oh shit!” He caught the stop sign almost too late, slamming on the brakes. Chanda’s seatbelt sunk between her breasts as it did its job. This time, the button had finally had enough and simply tore off altogether. A gaping hole invited him right in.

“That one’s your fault,” she said to his accusatory glare.

“Why are you being like this? Haven’t I been nice to you? I thought I was doing right by you. Sticking up for you, trying to comfort you. The way you’re acting, it’s like I called your mother a bad name or something. I don’t get it.”

“Why are you worried about it? If you didn’t win me, what difference does it make to you how I dress? How I act?”

“Because, stupid me, I started to actually like you, and you’re acting like a crazy person!”

“You like me?”

Aaron was watching the road more closely now, but he fixed her with an even look for a moment. “I said I did.”

“So kiss me.”

His stop was only slightly less sudden this time, but she was braced for it now. “You don’t mean it.”

“Hell if I don’t. You like me? You want me? Kiss me. If you decide you like kissing me, then do more. Touch me. Pull my head into your lap. Take me in the backseat and win me already!”

“I’m not going to take advantage of... whatever this is. No way. I don’t know what got into you, but I’m worried, and I’m frazzled, and since oh yeah, the whole school thinks I won you, they all think *I’m* making you do all this!”

“I thought you were telling people you didn’t actually win me,” she countered. “That’s what I heard you telling those guys in class.”

“What was I supposed to say? Pretend like I’m some pig, turning you into some vapid skank? If even half the stuff people told me about you today is true, I’m never going to be able to show my face at a WAL event again.”

She sneered coldly. “Is that what you’re so afraid of? That your wallflower buddies will think less of you? No offense, but so the fuck what.”

“Right, because you lost all your friends, I should have to lose all mine or else I’m some kind of hypocrite or something. That’s perfectly reasonable.”

Chanda frowned. It wasn’t fair when he was actually right about something. She shifted angles. “I thought you were gonna be my protector. My alibi. Guess it got hard, though. Guess it was too much to ask if it wasn’t going to be just admirers and favor-seekers.”

“I was telling people that last night before I even knew about your little stunt today, as it so happens.”

“What? Because of yesterday?”

“Yes, because of yesterday! Do you not remember you accusing me of manipulating you like you were some sexual toy? Flashing Craig and Britt on the playground? Any of that ring a bell?”

“So? If you really didn’t win me, then seeing me showing off to other people, flirting with other people, shouldn’t bother you, right?”

Aaron gaped. A car horn sounded behind him after a moment as the light had turned green. “So *that’s* it, is it? Acting like another little slut to test how I’ll respond? Was I supposed to show you I’m the asshole you think I am? Put a leash around your neck, drag you to my bedroom and just...”

“Go on, you can say it. If you’re gonna drag me to your bedroom, you better be able to say what you want me to do if you want me to be able to do it.”

“This is insane. Chanda, I don’t know how many other ways there are to say it, but I. Did. Not. Win you!” His fist slammed down hard on the dashboard, but then he winced and shook his hand with a curse.

“Yeah? Because you sure seem to feel like you have a say in how I present myself, how I conduct my affairs. Shit, Aaron, my own father doesn’t try to boss me around like you’re doing!”

“I seriously doubt the man knew you were leaving the house this morning in *that*. Unless you’re telling me the million and one gaps in your outfit were his idea.”

She was undeterred. “So tell me to knock it off. Tell me to go back to how I was. Tell me to dress like a normal girl, to act like normal. Tell me how you want me to be, Aaron.”

His eyes narrowed. He couldn’t tell what the trap was here, only that he was dangerously close to stepping in it. “I’m not telling you what to do. I can’t. Because I didn’t win you.”

She folded her arms. “Then you admit it’s perfectly fine for me to show my body and give myself to whomever I want.”

“If it’s what and who you actually want, sure. If you’re doing it just to prove some weird point, then... then fuck you.” He had trouble getting those words out.

Chanda, however, did not. “Fuck me? Is that a command, master? You say the word, and I’ll fuck you so good you’ll get that leash for real. You won’t be able to quit me. These tits you like so much? They’re yours. You can suck on them for a day if you want. My pussy? It’s a fucking volcano, Aaron. Wanna feel? Gimme your hand and I’ll show you.”

His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel.

“Your loss. Because you could have all of this, on tap, any time. All you gotta do is tell me you want it. Tell me I’m your loser, and I’ll go right back to playing your little game.”

“I’m—”

She cut him off, not by talking over him, but by talking under. Suddenly her voice went soft, syrupy sweet. “I’m really sorry about today. I just got scared, Aaron. I got in my own head. Thank god for you to bail me out again. I can’t stay out of my own way. I don’t know what I’d do without you these past couple weeks.”

“Stop it.”

“I lost almost everyone I cared about, but then along comes this sweet, kind, selfless guy. Sticking his nose out for me, coming to my rescue.” She leaned out so far he couldn’t help but see her plaintive smile in his peripheral vision. “He even let me throw a little tantrum and still kept rooting for me.”

“I said, stop it.”

“He’s the kind of guy I’d always wished I’d have the chance to fall in love with. For real love, like in old movies. Growing old, having babies, for richer for poorer in sickness and in health, love.”

This time, the honking went unheeded. His eyes fixed on her, as cold as her outfit was hot.

“So what do you say? Love me, Aaron? Tell me you won me, so we can start with the rest of our lives together.”

Aaron glowered, his chin trembling. With rage, with longing, something else? She couldn’t say. “I’ll take you home,” he said at last. “And then I don’t ever want to speak to you again.”

He was near his breaking point. As someone who’d seen her share of people reaching it the past few weeks, she could tell. The rest of the ride was in silence. He pulled up in her driveway, shifting into reverse rather than park. He didn’t mean to linger, clearly.

Chanda opened the door, unbuckled herself. She got one boot on the ground before looking over her shoulder. “I guess you have thirty years to change your mind.”

For weeks things went on in that fashion. It soon became habit to stop by the YMCA to change on the way to school into something far more daring, her ear ever to the ground for news of what did and did not pass muster for behavior and dress. She wasn't quite at the vanguard of baring her body or behaving like a complete skank; there was still the occasional expulsion, sometimes over incidents that even before the Lottery might have merited merely a rebuke.

None of the teachers or administrators lost any sleep over it. These girls were only losers. Educating them was every bit the pressing need as teaching a labradoodle how to play dead. Humoring their presence was a nod to a bygone institution, easily discarded. There was talk already of rearranging the school year to end with Drawing Day to dispense with these awkward final months. Activists pushed back, insisting that people needed to become *more* uncomfortable with the Lottery, not less, but for once Chanda would have opted for the path of appeasement. Every day of this charade was like a year.

Still, much was tolerated, and it was soon apparent that for Chanda in particular, the line was even farther away. Less so with her female teachers, for whom the mere presence of the losers seemed to grate. A reminder of the bullet they'd dodged? A new trend they could look down upon? It varied. Still, the men were much readier to watch her toe the line. So long as they got to see the occasional flash of underwear, partake in the frequent displays of jiggling, or eavesdrop on murmured conversations that really ought to have been whispered if indeed they were to be uttered at all... She came to realize what PowerBall really represented.

For instance, one afternoon two weeks after the return from spring break, Jocelyn Kesy took her bra off during Spanish. She managed it without removing any other clothes, without even showing much skin really, but the wages of her contortions were expulsion. Jocelyn was a pretty enough girl, and like the rest was working harder at her prettiness since Drawing Day, but Mr. Jimenez simply shook his head, pointed at the door, and wished her a nice life. That was it.

Jocelyn was in a different period, but the story spread, boys snickering over another loser's random misfortune, losers stiffening in fear that they could be stripped from their winners for hours a day over so minor an act. A few days later, however, Chanda made sure she was overheard grumbling to a classmate about her own choice of bra. "It makes my boobs look weird. Stop laughing! Look, they get all smushed out to the sides, and they're trying to crawl out my neck hole and fall in my lap. It's awful. I wish I could take this stupid thing off and burn it."

Mr. Jimenez took the bait. "No burning anything in school, señorita. You need to ditch that thing, we got a nice big trash can for you right up here."

She looked up hesitantly, as if she were bashful about being overheard. "Oh. Um, no, I don't wanna get in trouble. I'll just take it off between periods."

“Suit yourself, chica. Trash can’s not going anywhere if you change your mind.”

Not one soul in class doubted for an instant that his invitation was sincere. No, she was as sure as she’d ever been about any lesson he’d ever taught that she was welcome to take her bra off and unsmush her boobs – so long as he got a front row seat to the show.

The whole class watching to see what she’d do, and to a far, far lesser degree how he would react, Chanda rose to her feet. Rather than casually work it out through a sleeve, however, she walked to the back of the room and lifted her shirt. The bra was strapless, selected for that precise reason, for her precise action in that moment. She unclasped it, caught it in one hand as it fell to the floor, and spun to face the front of the room still in the midst of pulling her shirt back down. She’d rehearsed the gesture in the mirror ad nauseam until she could time it exactly so that the underside of her tits were observable for a tantalizing fraction of a second before the curtain fell.

Calmly, she made her way to the front of the room, her eyes locked on Mr. Jimenez’ the whole way. There was hunger in his eyes. Manly hunger. And the reflection of the gratitude she radiated from her own. She dropped the bra in his trash can.

“Gracias, señor Jimenez. Mis tetas están mucho más cómodos ahora.”

For a moment, she thought he actually might expel her. Or give them a squeeze. She was close enough. She’d stopped right next to him as if to invite it.

“De nada,” he said hoarsely.

That was that.

Third quarter grades came out. Her parents offered to take her out to dinner to celebrate another term on the honor roll, but she negotiated it into a shopping trip instead. Her mother commented only mildly on her shift in apparent taste, though she also didn’t realize the clothes she saw Chanda try on were in most cases a size or two bigger than what she brought to the counter. Beyond that, she borrowed outfits from other losers. Their winners were usually only too eager to oblige, any opportunity to have *the* Chanda Brighton in their homes, if only fleetingly.

Though lacking the receipts to prove it, she suspected some of them were buying clothes in what they guessed her size to be simply to lure her in. Some of them – almost all of them, really – offered her other things to reel her in. Money, though that always came with strings attached. Gifts. Perfume, outfits, lingerie, things they could buy her to feel like they owned some part of her tour de force presentation. Sometimes she was offered drugs, weed or ecstasy or pills swiped from parents’ medicine cabinets. Here and there she accepted, but she never went back. Being high was good, made it easier to believe she really wasn’t her tawdry self for a while, but the kinds of people who gave a woman drugs so they could fuck her were probably not the best to be around. She wasn’t *that* reckless.

What began as a tantrum against an enemy Chanda couldn't herself have named gradually coalesced into a more cohesive, though no less petulant, vendetta against Aaron and his position in the Lottery system specifically. It didn't matter that she was being unfair. What did fairness have to do with anything? All she knew was that he hated the way she dressed, the way she put herself out there for attention. She was a walking advertisement for the glories of the lottery, the gorgeous but under-dressed teen suddenly radiating sex appeal from her pores. That was enough to keep her going strong through all those times where she saw herself from the outside, how depraved and pathetic it all was.

As to Aaron's efforts to correct their lie (or "lie") about him winning her, she pushed back by implying to a few people that it was simply his kink. That was how he'd remade her, desperate for him, horny for him, and the longer he denied her, the more desperate and horny she got. Ignoring her, rebuffing her, acting like he didn't even know her, it was all part of it. He got off watching his PowerBall loser helplessly turn herself into a shameless slut even more than he got off from actually using her. So she told people. She honestly didn't know how hard he was peddling his version. The truth, that is. Maybe. Amidst all the bizarre and perverse things people put their losers through, it was as believable as any, and anyone who cared to listen to his version weighed it against hers. One of them had to be lying, and hers was the lie boys enjoyed believing, and the lie the scant survivor population found most plausible.

If he had any thoughts on how to one-up her, he didn't act on them. Chanda found herself glaring at the back of his head sometimes in class while Mr. Corley droned on. Even in the face of open rebellion, he had to find a way to try to be *nice*.

Once in a while she paused to reflect how easy it was. Normally, a simple haircut would be change enough that she'd have to pass the gauntlet of friend approval. Now, Tiffany, Kelsey and Mimi were off serving in their respective harems; Eve glowered with disapproval at basically everything, Chanda's antics being no exception. (Not that she didn't occasionally murmur a reminder that Ezekiel would be happy to have her over and try to convert her, whenever Aaron liked.)

By the time spring was readying itself for summer, Chanda sometimes went days at a time without reflecting on how little the old her would have approved of the new her. Old her, though, had been a creature of the system. She was afraid, and lonely, and hopeless. New her... well, she was still lonely, but as college applications went out before Lottery-adjusted deadlines, she had some hope. Assuming Aaron didn't snatch her away from it. No idea what she wanted to do with her life, but she wasn't afraid of it. She would be leered at and groped and propositioned whatever she did, but that was what life was. New her was learning that she could close her eyes, grit her teeth, and endure far more than she'd ever thought she could.

Then, one day in late April, she was asked to endure more.

“Aaron, can you come with me to my office? Just need to clear up a couple things. Also Chanda.” Her name came as a mere afterthought attached to Aaron’s. She’d gotten used to that. Just about anything anyone but her parents asked her for was framed as a request for her presumed winner. By then there was a whole phantom Aaron who existed solely in her head by now, pulling her strings whenever she needed to consult him over something.

She knew the phantom better than the real one. As to which one she preferred, she wasn’t sure. The real Aaron had always been courteous, concerned, even valiant. Phantom Aaron was pushy, domineering, possessive. She knew where she stood with the phantom, though. There was certainty to it. Whatever happened, he would treat her as his prized possession, his favorite toy. Real Aaron... there was no telling what he really wanted.

Mr. Corley nodded for them to go ahead. “Sure, Mr. Bowers,” Aaron said, rising to his feet. He spared a dark glance at Chanda. It was the first time he’d looked at her in days, since Eddie had elbowed him and pointed her way during an expression of gratitude for the several inches of ass creeping out of the top of her skinny jeans. She’d given him a wink over her shoulder and kissed him from across the room.

Chanda followed close behind. Somebody pinched her ass on her way by. Jeff, probably. He seemed to prefer pinches to the more common slaps or gropes. Maria’s audible chastisement confirmed it. “Stop touching her like that. Just because she’s a loser doesn’t mean you won her, Jeff. She and Aaron have the right to decide who gets to...” The rest of it was lost as the two entered the hallway. She thought she could hear Mr. Corley giving a tired-sounding rebuke to Maria to quiet down.

Mr. Bowers was one of the school’s guidance counselors. Students were assigned to counselors alphabetically, so Eichhorn and Brighton were lumped in together even before the Lottery had forced them so. Chanda had always liked Mr. Bowers. A lot of Clark staff, men and women alike, made only token effort with the girls. Mr. Bowers, however, had always at least acted like she had a future, reminding her that when the Lottery was over, she’d be glad her smarts would give her a leg up. He had a reassuring smile, a patient ear for whining and foot-dragging, and he’d never been sparing with praise for her achievements.

That phase of their relationship seemed to be over. Ahead of her, the two men made small talk about how the baseball team was doing. Apparently Aaron used to be on the team? He was a little heavysset for a jock, though she thought he might be losing weight. Or the Lottery was telling her to be more attracted to him. It didn’t really matter much to her, really.

In his office, Mr. Bowers gestured for the two to sit down. Chanda selected the middle of the three chairs so Aaron wouldn’t be able to distance himself. If he tried to

touch her, though, she might just punch him, witnesses be damned. Instead, however, he scooted his chair a few inches away from hers as if he were afraid of the same.

“Can I ask what’s going on, Mr. Bowers?” Aaron started anxiously.

“Aaron’s not in trouble, is he?” she added. Guidance counselors didn’t do trouble. Still, it established character. Phantom Aaron would want her to fawn over him.

“Trouble?” Mr. Bowers laughed. “No, Aaron’s doing fine. Relax, Ms. Brighton. But we are starting to come down to the wire, so I wanted to touch base with you two.”

She let relief flood her voice. “Sure, Mr. B. What’s up?” There it was, that high-octave chirp her voice was when talking with male authority figures. She’d found reducing their name to an initial could be endearing, too, a trick she’d stolen from *Surviving*. There was an intimacy to it.

Mr. Bowers steepled his fingers. “It’s about your grades actually.”

Aaron frowned. “Mine? I know I was slipping a little bit, but I already got accepted to two schools, so I was kinda—”

Mr. Bowers held up a hand, keeping that smile she’d always liked plastered on his face. “Relax, big guy. You’re doing fine. Yeah, it’s not your best semester, but as long as you keep going like you are you’re going to be fine. Don’t panic.”

“Oh. So then... what’s up?”

“It’s about Chanda’s, actually.”

“Mine? Did I do bad on something?” She frowned, though even caught off guard as she was, she remembered to water down her word choices. It clashed hard with her reality, though. While her classmates thought she was out begging this boy to grant her the privilege of allowing her to blow him, she was actually curled up with her tablet doing the supplemental readings. It wasn’t the impression she’d been giving people, but as far as her teachers were concerned Aaron had demanded she maintain her GPA. His phantom kept his trophy slut diligently at work.

Mr. Bowers, however, ignored the question and continued to address Aaron. “Aaron, buddy, I’m going to level with you. I’m sure you can appreciate that the Lottery creates some weird stresses on the system in these final months. Energy is a precious resource around here, and frankly, I need to make sure it’s being spent where it’s going to do some good.”

“I don’t know what she’s doing in her classes, and to be honest, I don’t care,” Aaron said tersely. “Whatever’s going on with her grades is between her and her teachers.”

Mr. Bowers nodded, his eyes still not even glancing at Chanda. Aaron’s did. What he saw there, she couldn’t say. They hadn’t spoken in so long that his absence spoke louder than she’d anticipated. The phantom, the Aaron she controlled, the one who controlled her, he was much more invested. The real Aaron’s apathy stung.

“Sure, that’s the letter of the law all right, but still, I wanted to consult with you. To cut to the chase, right now, she’s on track to flunk the final quarter. Hard. Hard enough it’s gonna hurt when she hits bottom no matter how well-padded her butt may be.”

Aaron wrinkled his nose at the crude insinuation, but let the man go on. “Some of the classes she’s fallen behind in are required to graduate. Now I know she’s got some brains in there somewhere. With some elbow grease, I’m hoping I can still drag her across the finish line for you.”

Chanda straightened in her seat. “What? Mr. Bowers, I don’t know if some assignments haven’t been entered or what, but I’ve been doing everything right on time! I was—”

He held up a hand though, and long weeks of training herself to humor bossy jerks kicked in. “My question to you, Aaron, is whether or not you care if she graduates. Look, I know how it is, wanting to keep your loser with you through the day. I was two years out of high school when the first Lottery took place, but I can imagine.”

Chanda knew her mouth was open, but she couldn’t find the words. Were her teachers flunking her out of spite? Had they stopped bothering to grade the losers?

“Still, we’re not here for fun and games, right? I have to know whether she’s here for your sake, or for hers. I can reach out to her teachers, and maybe even arrange some tutoring. Resources are stretched thin, however, so I’m not going to bend over backwards to secure a diploma for your...”

Jizz rag. Fuck toy. Whore. Those were the words his pause implied. They hit her straight in her half-exposed chest.

“Loser.” he finished.

“Mr. Bowers, really, she’s not...” He glanced at Chanda. His eyes rested on her for a long moment, studying her. “Look, I don’t care, but if she says she wants to graduate, then fine.”

Chanda was remembering herself, though. She didn’t need Aaron or Mr. Bowers to do favors for her. “Can you tell me which class is a problem? I thought I’d been keeping up, but I save all my work so I can make sure that—”

The guidance counselor clucked his tongue at her. “It’s not only one class, Ms. Brighton, and I think you know that.”

“What? No! I’m doing my work! Here, let me...” Her fingers were racing at her phone, bringing up her cloud full of school-related files. She was a stickler for organization, folders within folders for every class, quarter, and project. “Wait, hang on... It says my login isn’t... But...”

“Thank you, Aaron. You can head back to class while she and I sort this out. Poor thing hasn’t logged in for so long she’s forgotten how.”

Aaron sat up straighter. “She’s a good student. If she says she did her work, then she must have,”

Mr. Bowers shook his head ruefully. “Oh, Aaron. I know, you write your ticket and seed their pot and think they’re in your hand, but you’d be amazed what can slip through the cracks. Now if you’re changing your mind, or if it’s some... I dunno, some game between you two, then say the word and you two can be on your way and I’ll still cheer for you at graduation. But if you really want her to pull this off, I’m not looking to sprout gray hairs early for no reason.”

Chanda’s retort was a whimper. “I’m *not* lying, Mr. Bowers. I did the work.”

He only answered Aaron, though. “You’re a good student, Aaron, and you have a lot of good things ahead of you in life. So you tell me what you want for her, and I’ll help you make it happen. Your call.”

Aaron’s reply came slowly. “She says she was keeping up...”

“Yeah, in my experience they’ll say the darnedest things to appease their winners. Even the Lottery isn’t always a cure for plain old laziness and dishonesty.”

Chanda stood up. “I am *not*—”

Again the hand. Again her silence. She even sat back down. Chanda looked to Aaron pleadingly. What was even happening? She didn’t know, but it was obvious that once again, she wasn’t in the driver’s seat of her life. It was really only surprising that she wasn’t used to it by now.

“I...” Aaron frowned. Some of it, she could tell, was still for her. For how she’d hurt him, how she’d sullied his good name for sport. Some of it, however, wasn’t. “She wants to graduate, I think. Right, Chanda?”

Chanda nodded vigorously.

“So then, yes. If you can, you know, help her catch up, or maybe help her log in and get at her files... Then yeah. I want her to graduate.”

Mr. Bowers’s smile broadened. “Good on you. Nice to see a young man who values education. All right. So it looks like she and I have work to do, so why don’t you head on back to class and let the two of us get this passing party started.”

Aaron hesitated. “I don’t mind, you know, sticking around and helping...”

Their counselor’s head cocked to the side. “Whoa now, I’ll pretend like I didn’t hear that. Winner or no, it’ll be her name on the diploma, which means it needs to be *her* work. Maybe next time you win the PowerBall, you won’t dumb ‘em down so much, eh?” He laughed and offered Aaron a hand up, clapping him affectionately on the shoulder to propel him toward the office door.

Chanda finally realized what was about to happen, what had already sunk in for Aaron, a few seconds before the door closed behind him. He turned, peering through the narrowing crack at her. She regarded him imploringly. It was the Grand River, the limo ride, all over again.

Aaron shook his head slowly, sadly, and turned away. The door shut tightly behind him.

Mr. Bowers returned, a bit of a swagger in his step this time. Chanda was already throwing up obstacles. “Mr. C, I swear to you, I swear to god – to Aaron! – that I have been doing my work. I *swear*.”

“But you don’t seem to have any proof,” he answered, settling down on the side of his desk closer to her. He was tall. “You appreciate that I can’t certify grades based on promises, don’t you?”

“OK. So I can redo it. I’ll work really hard–”

“Chanda, please. You’ve already missed all these deadlines. Even if you redid it all from scratch, you can’t reverse time, can you? Even a face as pretty as yours has *some* limits.”

“Can I get partial credit, at least? If I could get partial credit, and do everything else on time from now on...” It was clearer by the moment where this was going, of course, yet if she acknowledged it, *then* would be here *now*. For the moment it was still then. A looming, darkening then, but not a now.

“Sweetie, even if I broke all precedent and allowed it – which, believe me, would be very unethical of me to make an exception – how could we know you wouldn’t ‘lose’ the files again? After all, you’re pretty much a professional loser, aren’t you?”

He was the only one to chuckle at his joke. “So... what am I... what do you want me to... do? You said, um, tutors?”

“Look, sweetie, you know I want you to graduate. And more importantly, you just heard Aaron say he wants you to graduate. So if you couldn’t do the work the way you were supposed to...” He made a face, the face of someone scolding a toddler who’d lost their toy.

“Please, I... I can...”

“Deep breaths, Chanda. You look like you’re about to faint.” He fanned her with his hand, which only brought him closer, which only made it worse. “Look, I’m not trying to suggest anything... inappropriate. After all, I’ve heard Aaron’s policy is not to loan you out for favors. Is that right?”

She nodded. The Aaron in her head agreed. He owned her. She was his, his alone, no one else’s. It was practically his – her – first commandment. “Right. Yes. I’m never allowed to do things with other boys.” Oh thank god. He couldn’t expect her to do anything if he knew Aaron had told her not to. The real Aaron hated the slutty way she’d been behaving, but he wasn’t about to pimp her out any more than phantom Aaron was.

“Of course, of course. Now, I won’t pry into your personal business. I’m sure you know what he said you can and cannot do. But like I said, it’s not fair to expect me to help you for nothing, is it? So call it a brainstorm. Can you think of anything that he didn’t explicitly say was off limits?”

“I... I can’t...” She willed herself not to cry. Lexi never cried on that stupid fucking show. Her character couldn’t cry either.

He leaned down and put a hand on her shoulder. How could she have ever liked that smile? “After all, we know how girls like you tend to lose things, right? First your homework, then your login.” His eyes narrowed meaningfully. “Heck, loser like you, I’m worried you’ll get ahold of Aaron’s work and lose it, too.”

Her chin trembled as his meaning slammed home. No. No, she couldn’t. It was abhorrent, the mere idea that she might do what he was suggesting to save Aaron’s grades! She was *not* a loser! Playing the part was a game, a statement, her way of pushing back on the system that had ruined her world. She was not about to let this creep... Not to save Aaron.

For herself? Maybe. Could he really change her grades? She could go to her teachers, but what if he could overrule them? Or change them in the eleventh hour after finals but before graduation? Hell, if Mr. Jimenez got wind that she could be manipulated in such a way, he might just hop on board, too.

So there it was. Muddle through life with no high school diploma, or submit to a little extortion. Even if it was, in part, for Aaron’s sake. Damn him.

For a moment, she toyed with the idea of telling him to flunk Aaron and save her. Just to be sure, so she would never look back on this and wonder if it had been fear of hurting Aaron that broke her. There was no way, though, and it was too shitty even for the person she was pretending to be.

Mr. Bowers was snapping his fingers in her face. “How’s that brainstorm coming, Chanda?”

She looked up, heart pounding. Her counselor loomed over her. Smiling. “I... I could show you my boobs, I think. He’d be OK with that.”

“That’s our girl! Not sure how much that’s worth to your GPA, but I’ll bet they’re worth more than zero.” She was still steeling herself to make good on her offer when he went on. “What else?”

Somehow, it wasn’t the lies, the manipulation, the disgusting creepery that sparked her anger. No, it was that greedy twinkle in his eye when he implied that her tits weren’t worth an A all by themselves.

Chanda rose to her feet, employing a smirk at her own sex appeal that she’d suppressed for so long. “Why don’t you let me do one assignment and grade me on that before we move on to the next?”

Suddenly, she was channeling new Chanda. New Chanda was sexy, radiant as the sun and wanted the whole world to know it. This son of a bitch thought her breasts were some kind of teaser? Well fuck him. If not for the Lottery, flashing these babies to this jerk ought to be a 4.0 by itself. Only the cheapening of the female form diminished them, but she wasn’t about to let this son of a bitch dare to slight her glory.

Chanda turned away from him and crossed her arms, grasping her blouse at the bottom. She calmly pulled it off over her head, letting a river of jet black hair cascade across bare shoulders in its wake. There was no bra impeding him, only the veil of her hair. His eyes were wide as dinner plates as she turned to face him, fixed on her hair like he might see through it if he stared hard enough.

Why make him wait? She'd committed. Make this mother fucker choke on his bullshit suggestion that her tits weren't enough. She swept her hair over her shoulders and planted her hands on her hips. Elbows back, tits forward.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph..." he murmured. The man stared for some time before deciding to inspect them from other angles, sides and even from the back. "They're so..."

"Perfect," she finished for him.

He only nodded. She was surprised he hadn't tried to touch her, but evidently Mr. Bowers liked to savor. Weirdly, the longer it went on, the more relaxed she became. She felt strangely powerful, transfixing her extortionist with so little effort. The bell rang, ending the school day, but for all Mr. Bowers reacted, they may as well have been alone in the building.

"What was her name?"

Mr. Bowers looked up, surprised to hear words. He didn't look up long, though. "Whose name?"

"You said you wished you could have played the Lottery. That you just missed out by a couple years, right? Who was she?"

Slowly, a fond smile stole onto his lightly bearded face. He really wasn't bad-looking, in a scholarly sort of way. Well-groomed, with thin round glasses on a narrow face. "Michelle Walsh."

"Was she pretty?"

"Brown hair," he said. "Legs for miles. Tits, too." For a moment, he glanced up like he might get in trouble for naughty language from the loser stripped to the waist in his office. Only for a moment, though.

A thin smile, proud but not quite smug, crept onto her lips. "Was she as pretty as me?"

Unblinking, he let out a long sigh so heavy she could feel the warm air on her chest. "Chanda, honey, I'm not sure anybody's as pretty as you."

She laughed, breasts bouncing enchantingly. Seeing the awe he had for her was strangely heady. "Mr. Bowers, I didn't know you were such a sweet talker."

"Aaron... God damn that kid's a lucky fuck. You have to be the hottest piece of ass I've ever seen." He did her the courtesy of making eye contact, if momentarily. "I was worried, a little, that if I got to see you naked, it'd disappoint. Like it'd turn out it was padding, or they were lopsided, or those funky flap-jacky titties, you know?"

"I'm not funky?" she asked dryly.

“You are not.” He shook his head in apparent disbelief. “Fucking perfect. And I’ll be damned, are they perking up for me?”

She wanted to tell him it was cold in there, but truth was, she wasn’t cold. It wasn’t anything in particular about Mr. Bowers, either, but it wasn’t the temperature. She adjusted her arms, wrapping them underneath her breasts like a little shelf. He groaned audibly, though she wasn’t even sure why it seemed to be such an improvement. Perhaps it was nothing more than the sheer joy of variety, a second pose to enshrine in his spank bank for the rest of his lonely life.

Then, after a long moment of pure admiration, he was reaching for them. In a flash, she reached out and slapped his hand by reflex.

Mr. Bowers winced, but soon gave a self-conscious chuckle. “Guess Aaron’s little PowerBall is looky no touchy, huh. That figures.”

Phantom Aaron had just instructed her to give that very excuse. “Sorry, Mr. B. No pics, either. But you can keep looking. Look all you want.”

Her offer was accepted. Rather than help molding her for life after high school, he told her how he wanted her to pose and watched her do it. Curiously, he never even asked about her shorts. She played along, bending over one of the chairs and letting her tits hang free. Hands behind her head, hair fanned out broadly. Crouching near his feet, tits overflowing her hands. He even dragged the monitor off his desk and had her lie down on her side.

Had she known he was going to take down his pants and start to stroke it right in front of her, she might have asked Phantom Aaron to throw up a few more barriers. Still, she decided, it wasn’t a bad cock. She didn’t know why she’d assumed an older guy would have weird gear, but it looked about like the ones in the fantasies that were basically always on the backs of her eyelids these days. Being so focused on her own sexuality made her horny almost all the time. With male to female ratio in her classes now easily two to one, it was probably only natural they’d gravitated towards the boys of late. Her dildo had been put through its paces. Even if her vibrator was objectively more pleasurable, her fantasies demanded penetration.

Not that she could say that to Mr. Bowers. She was so horny right then that she would have let him... Actually, she wasn’t even sure how far she might have let him go. But when she looked over her shoulder and saw him lick his palm and go right back to stroking his thick red shaft, she let herself smile.

And then, she slipped a hand through the elastic waistband of her shorts and joined him.

“Is this OK, Mr. Bowers?” she asked, batting eyelashes she’d refreshed at lunch. A sophomore girl whose name she didn’t know had shaken her head and told her that it made her eyes look so big, she was practically an anime character. Chanda didn’t know

what to make of that, but from the way her guidance counselor's pace accelerated, it had to mean something good.

"I don't want to make a mess on your nice desk," she added breathily when he didn't verbally respond. It was wild how much easier it was to pull off that slutty voice with a couple fingers rubbing at her clit through her panties.

He took a step closer, face red, almost angry-looking, but in a male way that she found somewhat appealing. At least in that moment. "Make a mess. Make all the mess you want, baby girl."

Chanda rolled onto her back, thighs spread wide. As ever, the sheer weight of her tits was extremely inconvenient for masturbating – another perk of her little egg vibrator, hands-free – but he didn't seem to mind the way they flattened, spread, jiggled in time with her jilling.

Suddenly, weirdly, she noticed a spitball sticking to the ceiling above her, and couldn't help but giggle. *Holy shit. I'm masturbating in my counselor's office.* It only made her giggle harder though.

Mr. Bowers came, rope after sticky rope arcing across her chest and arms. It was the first time she'd ever been touched by male ejaculate. Her laughter didn't abate as she came, too. A gush of warm wetness surged into her panties, coating her fingers right through the thin cotton fabric. She laughed right through her orgasm, and moments later, into another, getting higher and gaspier the longer she rode it.

When her eyes opened, a dizzy grin still smeared across her face, it was to the sight of a similarly grinning Mr. Bowers standing over her, admiring his handiwork. "Sorry if I got carried away, Mr. B."

"Forgiven, Ms. Brighton. Sorry I came on those magnificent tits of yours. Thought I still had some time, but when you..." He shook his head.

"It's OK. Not exactly the first time a guy came on my tits," she lied in a conspiratorial murmur. Chanda winked. She extended her arm, then accepted his help sitting up. "Say, you mind helping me clean up?"

"Um, I thought I wasn't allowed to, ah..." He arched an eyebrow.

She gestured to the box of tissues he'd swept to the floor to make space for her. "Then be careful not to touch me."

The man couldn't help but have his jaw hang down in open lust as he sponged his seed off of her. When he missed a spot, Chanda pointed it out to him helpfully. Selfishly, even. Being with Mimi and Jessie had been incredible, but it had almost been a dream, a hedonistic blur of power fantasies and orgasms. Perversely, masturbating with her guidance counselor had felt more *normal* somehow, and she was surprised to find how good it felt to simply be *touched*, even through the barrier of damp tissue paper. If his thumb occasionally "slipped" and brushed her bare skin – oh *fuck* and that one time right across her nipple – she winked and promised him she wouldn't tell on him.

Phantom Aaron wouldn't let her offer him more, though, the bastard. As Mr. Bowers saw to making sure his shirt looked properly tucked, she put hers back on and made for the door, giving him a little wave behind her.

"Oh and Chanda?" he said as she opened it.

"Yes, Mr. B?"

"Don't worry about those grades. I'll... look into it."

She'd forgotten all about her grades. God. In the reassuring smile he gave her, she knew she didn't need to lift a finger from now on. Not if she didn't feel like it.

But maybe if she tanked her portfolio, Mr. Corley would give her a chance to earn some extra credit, too.

“So how was school today, sweetie?”

“Fine, Mom.”

Her mother rolled her eyes, but with a patient smile. “Right, because we’re acting like middle school again. Let me try again. What happened in school today, sweetie?”

Chanda shoved a pile of noodles to the other side of her plate. “Nothing much. Had a group project in econ. Writing a business plan.”

Her dad looked impressed. “Really? Man, when I was in school, all we did was make mock investments with newspapers and monopoly money.”

Chanda didn’t bother pointing out that when he was in school, half his classmates hadn’t expected to be parceled out as sex toys before they graduated. “Things are different now.” She shrugged.

“So you’re the CEO, I assume? I mean, who else?” Her dad smiled, desperate to penetrate her gloom.

“They told me they didn’t want me to do anything.”

Her mother set down her glass of wine, frowned. “What? Usually you complain you have to do three people’s jobs.”

“Maybe she was grouped with the rare over-achieving idiot, who works hard without realizing the inferior quality of their product,” her dad suggested sagely.

“They said they don’t want a loser to fuck up their grade.”

“Watch your language at the table, dear,” her mother admonished curtly. They’d mostly given up policing her tongue, foul as it had gotten of late, but apparently the dinner table was sacrosanct.

Her father, however, focused on the message rather than the delivery. “What? But you’re not... What were they thinking? You’re one of the smartest girls in school, Chanda.”

“I’m fortieth in my class, Dad.” Or she was, before she’d diddled herself on Mr. Bowers’ desk to save her grades. And Aaron’s grades. Maybe that would propel her into the thirties.

“Out of seven hundred!”

“Four hundred seventy-two, presently,” she corrected, though she didn’t bother pointing out that her rank didn’t take that into account. Heck, now she probably was in the thirties. Girls were less represented at the higher tiers, though. Too many of them gave up on themselves early, knowing they’d likely not graduate anyway.

“Still, it’s not right. Maybe we should call your teacher.”

“Maybe try my guidance counselor,” she grumbled as she skewered her noodles, rolling up what she could.

“Mr. Bauer?”

“Bowers. Never mind.”

Her father pushed in his own half-finished plate. “That’s it. I hate seeing you like this, sweetheart. It’s not right, them treating you like... like you’re...”

“You can say it, Dad. The Lottery Bureau won’t appear and sluttify me if you say the word three times.”

“Like you’re a loser.” The word took effort for him to say. It always had. Her apparent survival hadn’t changed anything about that.

“Well maybe I am a loser. Huh? Maybe they’re right. Maybe I’m just some hot horny moron who can’t keep her legs closed—”

“Chanda!” her mother gasped.

“— and I’ll only screw everything up if they let me participate.”

“You are not a loser, honey!” her father exclaimed.

She shoved her chair back and rose to her feet, palms on the table, glowering. “Well I sure as shit can’t win!”

Her parents sputtered in her wake as she left the table, thundering up the stairs, into her room. Her bed springs creaked as she threw herself down, sobbing. Not long after, there was a soft knock at her door. Her dad’s knock.

“Sweetie?”

“What do you want, Dad?” she blubbered.

Of all moments, her phone chose that one to buzz in her pocket. As her dad tried to talk his way into the room, she fished it out. Aaron E. E, because when she’d entered his number, she hadn’t even remembered how to spell his last name.

Sniffing, she swiped to answer the call. “Hey, Chanda, it’s—”

“*WHY WON’T YOU LEAVE ME ALONE?!*” she howled. She threw the phone across the room. It clattered against her bookshelf and to the floor. Something had definitely broken.

“All right, honey. But if you change your mind, I’ll be downstairs. If it’s 3 AM and you wanna talk, wake me up. I love you.” There was a hesitation, no doubt hoping she’d reciprocate, but then his footsteps thumped down the stairs. The muffled sounds of her parents’ voices were faintly audible through the floor. Then, she heard another sound.

“Chanda, please. Talk to me. *Please*. Are you there?”

Her phone evidently still worked. Numbly, she crawled over and picked it up. The screen was cracked in two places, rendering its contents scarcely legible. No repair plan on it, either; there hadn’t seemed to be any logic in insuring her winner’s property when her parents had last updated their cell phone plan.

She sat back on her bed. He still hadn’t hung up.

“I can hear you breathing,” said Aaron’s voice.

She didn’t answer.

“Well, if you’re listening, I guess I can talk. About earlier today... I hope nothing happened with Mr. Bowers. I believed you. If you’ll let me help, I want to. What he was trying to do was not OK.”

He waited. Still silence.

“I wish you’d talk to me. I know you’re scared, and you’re hurting. I don’t understand why you’ve been acting the way you have been but I guess you’re processing everything, and that’s fine. I hate that you lost everyone. It doesn’t have to stay that way, though. Maybe you don’t trust me, but god, just give me a chance, Chanda. Give me time to earn it. You don’t have to be alone.”

Aaron sighed into the phone. “It’s a standing offer. And whatever happens, even if you decide to... to keep being like you’ve been since we came back from break, I’ll keep your secret. I know it’s not much, but maybe one less thing to be afraid of. God, I’m probably talking to your dog right now or something. Be nice to Chanda, little guy. I wish I remembered your name.”

The line went dead.

Chanda didn’t leave her room that night, and left the house before her parents came down for breakfast. She arrived early to seventh period and asked Mr. Corley if he could get someone to cover class. Without even asking more, he made a call, told some lies, and followed her to the parking lot.

She fucked Mr. Corley in the back seat of his car and went home early. Bumper was waiting for her in her bed.

She'd had a B+ in English when she slept with Mr. Corley. When she checked again that night, she was up to 100%. It felt dirty, but almost everything she did felt dirty these days. The sex had been good. To think, she'd always assumed she'd lose her virginity to her winner, but instead it was some random, sweaty hookup with a man twice her age, and for reasons she herself didn't understand. She wanted it to hurt Aaron for confusing her so, except he didn't know it had happened.

After the weekend she overheard him asking Mr. Corley why his grade had been changed. Mr. Corley told him it was for his outstanding contributions to class. He gave Chanda a long, inscrutable look. She was torn between sneering at having cheated on their non-relationship; nodding to acknowledge she'd appreciated and repaid his kindness; and burying her head because fucking a teacher felt a lot worse now that he *knew* she'd fucked a teacher.

Instead, she blew him a kiss. The staredown came to an immediate conclusion.

Neither Mr. Corley nor Mr. Bowers propositioned her for another go. Each seemed to regard their experience as a one-time payment for services rendered. She wasn't sure what she would have done. Probably do it again. Sex was good. Orgasms were good. They distracted her from everything else, if only for a short while. As much as she'd told herself that such behavior elevated the risk of exposing her lie, it was hard to really internalize it. Except for her parents, everybody had treated her like Aaron's pet for months. If they found out she was sleeping around, they'd assume Aaron was finally cashing in his ticket. She still didn't believe she was a survivor herself; how could they?

Her parents had noticed her growing depression. That made it worse, though, not better. They sat her down one night and told her they'd made an appointment for her to see her old therapist, the one she'd seen a few years earlier when the looming reality of the Lottery had first started to seem real.

She refused. It turned into a big fight before it was over. Her parents revealed that they'd found out about how she'd been dressing at school, that she wasn't eating well, wasn't sleeping. Didn't smile. She'd accused them of snooping around in her affairs and shouted that she was an adult and could spend time with whoever she wanted. If they knew the full extent of things, they would have pushed back harder, but for the time being she was the victor, and the suggestion died.

They were right, she knew, a fact which only added to her malcontent. Flirty games and attention-seeking tricks were becoming ingrained now, no longer choices but habits. The voice of shame in her ear, a cousin to Phantom Aaron's guiding voice, had grown quieter every day until basically silencing itself altogether. Her behavior was slutty, needy, pathetic, but so what? For the first time in her life, she was accepting that she was insanely hot and that maybe that was enough that she didn't need to be anything else. Her grades were slipping, on track to make for her lowest quarterly GPA

ever. Unless Mr. Bowers decided to boost her grades for showing him her tits, which only validated this whole sordid lifestyle.

Chanda hated the woman she was becoming. She simply didn't know who or what else she could be, if she even cared enough to find out. Her friends had always been there to help recharge her batteries when she'd gotten low. The company of people who shared her fate meant she always had an empathetic ear to turn to. Now, those ears were slaves and hookers. Eve had married Ezekiel two weeks ago; Chanda had attended the wedding, a very traditional church ceremony. Phantom Aaron had given her excuses to skip the reception after.

She wished Phantom Aaron had real needs to see to. The fact that she was this damn sexy all day and had no one to have sex with sure wasn't helping her mood. It would be at least nice to have the distraction of a fuck buddy. Any distraction at all. One desperate evening she tried to score some real drugs, not the lightweight party drugs she'd scored from her growing army of simps. The Frostop was purportedly where such things went down, but even once she found a dealer, he refused to sell to her without Aaron's permission. The next morning, with her mind a little less bleak, she was glad he had – one less unfillable hole in her and all that – but it still stung to know she couldn't even ruin her life without permission.

Maybe she could find another dealer who was a bit more of a feminist to help her out.

It felt like someone had reached in and scooped out everything inside of her. All that was left was a hole that nothing seemed to fill, no matter what she put in, and with no way of accessing any of the stuff that had been dredged out of her.

So when Krystal sent her a text, in spite of how it had all gone last time – showing her body to her winner Bart to make him stop Krystal from spanking the hell out of her own ass – she replied. Before she knew it, they had made plans.

Chanda hadn't seen Krystal since they'd met shortly after Drawing Day; she'd been among those who had dropped out right off the bat. Bart may have left Krystal's memory and personality mostly intact, but there was almost a laziness to it, as if something more involved would have taken too much effort to write out on his ticket. So long as she looked hot, put out, and obeyed unhesitatingly, the rest didn't really matter to him.

The pair almost reminded her of a book they'd had to read as freshmen, *The More Things Change*. It was about a boy whose name escaped her, some bland stand-in for the author's political messaging, who grudgingly played the Lottery to satisfy his parents' desire for grandchildren. The boy left his loser almost entirely intact, but over time, the couple fell in love despite – nay, *because of* – the nature of their meeting. Kelsey (the same Kelsey whose pussy could now be rented by the hour) had been so angry over the novel's blatant apologism that she'd had her parents force the teacher to

offer an alternative to everyone in the class. Chanda had stuck with the Lottery book, though. The dread it inspired had seemed like useful preparation for her anticipated future.

At any rate, Bart seemed not to care if Krystal loved him or not, and Krystal only cared insofar as she'd been made to. Their dynamic was almost more like siblings than a couple, except the sister could be dressed up like a whore and fucked on command. They tolerated one another and mostly enjoyed themselves when they had to interact. It seemed better than many arrangements. Chanda could attest in her own right that the experience of falling in love with one's winner was an overrated phenomenon.

Even with her expectations low, she had still been underwhelmed. Bart's nonintervention had been a condition of her presence; she had conferred with Phantom Aaron, who agreed that Bart had to prove he could be civil before he could be trusted alone with another man's PowerBall. After her visit right after Drawing Day, when she'd been bullied into exposing herself to spare Krystal from some twisted self-harm, she wasn't going to let that crap fly again. This time, if he wanted Krystal to twist her nipples off or beat her own ass black and blue, Chanda would walk out and never look back.

Her first visit went... fine. Bart kept to his room, even had Krystal dress like a normal person. They sat and talked – Chanda lied about all the sex she'd been having, using what little she'd learned while fucking Mr. Corley to supply details. She left feeling as bad as she had before she arrived, but the time passed faster with company. It was less lonely. She and Krystal had only been friends through Tiffany before the Lottery; they occupied similar niches in the social spectrum, but now they lacked even that.

It was downhill from there. Her second trip, Krystal greeted her in her underwear; her flirtation wasn't subtle. Chanda regretted confiding her bisexuality, even if she'd been able to blame it on Aaron's specifications on his ticket. Bart made the excuse of popping in on them, without knocking, as trying to escape from his nagging parents. Chanda left almost immediately thereafter. The next, Krystal let her in through the back door, naked. She offered to go down on her guest within minutes, but she was so guileless that she may as well have announced the presence of Bart's cell phone, camera recording, half-concealed behind some gaming equipment in his TV stand. Chanda rolled her eyes and flipped off the lens, then stormed out to her car.

Krystal yelled after her to offer an apology that was insincere even by the standards of it being secondhand, then assured her she was still welcome any time. Bart, who had evidently been watching it unfold live, was waiting for her in front of her car. He grabbed one of Chanda's tits in each hand with a wild, frightful gleam in his eye. She wrestled past him and sped away.

The next day during third period, she observed him whispering something to another boy and pointing at her with a lewd grin. Staying in character, she smiled brightly, blew him a kiss, and ignored the awed high five Bart's buddy gave him. And

that was that. She never spoke to Krystal again, that wisp of friendship curbed by even the lightest of hands on their respective leashes.

She was alone. Again. Still.

So one afternoon, Chanda unfolded the flier she had stuffed in her purse that first day back from break, and dialed the number.

Whorehouses weren't supposed to look so... cheerful, Chanda thought as she walked in. It did though. It was the same color palate she would normally expect to see at an IHOP, with all the flare and dignity of a spring sale at a home improvement warehouse. There were rows of posters advertising their losers and the services they provided. Bachelor parties, dates, something called a "premium date," plus a host of unambiguous sex acts, some of which she didn't even recognize by name.

Perched on a stool near the stairs presumably leading into the working area of the brothel was a greeter, as if this were an Applebee's and not a house of prostitution. The young woman taking to her feet with a broad smile Chanda thought she remembered as a senior when she had been a freshman. The name wasn't there, if it ever had been, but the woman's little brother had won one of the formerly heavysset girls in Chanda's second period, she was pretty sure.

"Well howdy, sweetheart! My, aren't you a sweet drink of tea?" Her southern accent was new, Chanda had no doubt, as was the gracious affect. Her outfit was confusing, a sky blue halter top with white shorts that were basically underwear. Both had numerous tassles hanging down for some reason. She didn't understand why they'd obscure what they were selling, but she conceded that she had never run a whorehouse and figured the pros who had won these girls must know what they were doing.

"Thanks. I think."

"Well you're plum welcome, darlin'. Glad to have you here at Minor Indiscretions! What can I do ya for, sugar?"

They were outside city limits, she had learned. That was why city council hadn't blocked the name. "Um, I'm here to... see... someone," she mumbled. There was no cause for it, though; the lobby was entirely vacant save for the two women. With the dozens of posters of available young women, though, it felt like being in a crowd. She could imagine standing here, old men leering at her like she was one of those poster girls, asking her how much for a fuck. This was not their busy time, though, noon on a Wednesday. Chanda was supposed to be eating lunch right now. It was beef stroganoff day.

"Purty little thing like you? Heck, and here I was hoping you was looking to fill out an application!" The woman winked.

"Sorry. Spoken for."

"Course you are. Still, that lucky man of yours ever decides he'd like to make a tidy stack of bills off you, you just come on back and ask for Sadie Mae, hear?" Chanda was certain that was not this woman's real name. Some dim memory told her it was some kind of word name. Melody? Harmony? Whatever it was, the name was as forgotten as the identity. "So then you say you're here to see somebody? Now mind you, most of our ladies are restricted to the premises, so iffin's your winner wants to partake,

he'll need to come in his own self or take a gander at what I call the take-out menu." She chuckled at the joke, one she'd probably made hundreds of times.

"I thought you did, you know, call girls or whatever. Dates." She pointed to one of the nearby notices.

"Oh! Our owner does provide that service, though only over the phone or through our website. Here at Minor Indiscretions, though, we're a little more..." The woman tapped her lip, considering. "To speak the lord's plain truth at you, most of our ladies are a little too precious to put 'em out to pasture."

She arched an eyebrow. "Your girls are too hot to let people take them out. Because people kidnap them. That's what you're saying?"

"That's a right fine way of putting it." Chanda thought it was a horrifying way of putting it. "Plus there's folks what have... less conventional appetites, so we like to keep 'em right here where our trained medical staff can see to any needs as may arise."

Chanda suppressed a shudder at all that her words implied. "Here is fine, then. And it's just me. No winner."

"Oh. All righty then! Now I can usually spot the first timers at a hundred paces. Do I have the right of it?"

"Yeah. Don't really hang out in whorehouses often."

The woman only laughed off her mildly derisive tone. "I can imagine, sugar. So how about I walk you through it? You start by telling us what you're looking for. What kind of lady, what kind of fun. Don't feel bashful, now – only ways I can show you the good time you're after is if you help me help you. No judgin' or nothin' of the kind. Then I'll bring down some girls as I think might suit your fancy, you tell me which one you'd like, we take your payment information and when you come down, your lady'll tell me what you owe."

It was a lot more information than she needed, but even so the process struck her harder than she had anticipated. It was one thing to see men lording their power over women every day; it was another to see the Lottery as it was tainted by the cold, greased wheels of capitalism. "But like, how do I know I won't be overcharged? Wouldn't your, um, staff tell you we did the most expensive stuff?"

"Oh honey, our girls don't have no lies in 'em except the sweet ones they'll whisper in a fella's ear, and that's what you come for, ain't it? Or at least, what fellas come for. I reckon a soft bundle of curves like you gets your share of sincerity, don't it." The woman patted her wrist and went on in a more formal tone; weirdly, she even briefly shed the accent. "We have a 4.8 star rating with the Better Business Bureau. If you'd like, I can refer you to our anonymous online customer feedback database."

Chanda shook her head. "No, never mind. Anyway, I already know who I wanted to see. If she's available. A girl named Kelsey. Kelsey Roach?"

Sadie Mae frowned. “Kelsey... Roach? Now that’s an earful of vinegar if I ever heard one.”

“They might have changed it. I think it’s still Kelsey though. Your site said Kelsey.”

Sadie Mae nodded. “We do have us a Kelsey, for sure. ‘Bout yea high, long dark hair, cutest little dimples you ever saw?”

Chanda shrugged. The hair and height, at least, sounded right enough. “I think so.”

“If you’re looking for a girl a bit after your own image, we could scare up some that might be a bit closer. Not that we was kissed by fortune so much as to net many PowerBalls like your sweet little self, but if it’s a mirror match you’re after, I can think of a few—”

“I want Kelsey. That’s it.” Sometimes when they’d gone out in public, they’d pretended to be sisters. They did bear enough resemblance for it, though Chanda’s more developed curves always suggested her as the older despite Kelsey’s two-month edge. The Lottery made her glad to be an only child, but they’d had fun pretending.

“Oh. Well let me just make sure she’s available.” For once, the woman’s cloying smile faltered at Chanda’s apparent lack of imagination. She consulted a tablet, and quickly nodded. “Looks like she’s got herself an appointment coming up in a bit, but don’t you fret none, she ought to have plenty of time to see to your every need aforehand. Now, if you’ll just show me the card you plan on paying with, and tell me what kind of time you’re after so she can get herself readied for you while we do tedious business stuff...”

Chanda fished her credit card out of her purse and handed it over. It was only supposed to be for emergencies. Whatever. As far as she was concerned, every fucking day was an emergency. “So, I wondered. I know you’re – I mean they’re – reprogrammed and all, so they can... yeah. But do they still, like, remember? Before?”

Sadie Mae chuckled. “Oh sure, we don’t do like some of those places and hollow ‘em out, turn sweet young misses into some sort of dreadful sex robots. No, our girls know how to be as personable as you like, so we leave in whatever we can that don’t interfere none.” Seeing Chanda’s confusion, she explained patiently. “Myself, see, I used to be a smoker, and had all sorts of un-Christian attitudes about the whole Lottery system. Maybe you remember that sort of thing yourself. Those things, poof! Gone. But my smile, my laughter, my nurturin’ side... Heck, even enough math so’s I can run the register. All that’s still right here, for anybody with the inclination.”

Chanda brightened, if slightly. “Oh. That’s... good.”

Sadie Mae tapped a few buttons, making sure the card could cover the usual fee no doubt. “So... I take it you know Miss Kelsey? From before? She’s one of our fresher faces, and you don’t look a day over sixteen yourself.”

“I’m eighteen. But yeah. We were...” She shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about it, if that’s OK.”

“I understand better than you might expect, sugar.” Sadie Mae handed back Chanda’s card, then gave her shoulder a firm squeeze as she stashed it away. “Now come on, let’s go see your friend.”

Kelsey’s room – her “chamber,” Sadie Mae called it as she led her up the stairs – was on the third floor. Someone else had come in to cover the reception area, a bright-eyed girl with boobs as big as her head. Chanda wondered if they’d been that big before *Minor Indiscretions*, or if they were part of her job. Or a reward for doing it well.

As the two neared the second floor landing, Sadie Mae turned, hesitating. Chanda was so anxious she nearly ran into her from behind. “Say, sugar. I don’t suppose you’d like a little warm-up? I’m only just now starting my shift, and I sure wouldn’t say no to a few minutes on a gal like you. No extra charge, mind. You’ve got on the house written all over you in pretty pink frosting, you do.”

Chanda looked her over again. No question, the woman was hot. Maybe even a PowerBall herself in her drawing year, or close to it. A school like Clark only produced a few in a generation, but if Sadie Mae hadn’t been before her Drawing Day, she’d done a heck of a job on her looks since. Maybe Chanda could...? Not like Kelsey knew she was coming, or would care if Chanda let her co-loser go down on her down the hall before stopping by.

“No thanks.” There could be no doubt she’d entertained the thought given her delay, as the woman’s smug smile attested. Her sigh as she turned to the stairs did resonate disappointment, though.

Sadie Mae led Chanda into the floor with Kelsey’s chamber, the corridor dimly lit in fluorescent lights filtered through red and pink plastic. The doors weren’t numbered; the only identifying mark seemed to be a different sticker on each. A heart with a knife in it, a cow with a unicorn’s horn, a bare-chested blonde mermaid. No pattern she could discern. At a sticker depicting a little girl on a tricycle, her guide paused and gave a sharp knock. Without waiting for a response, she twisted the knob and the door swung open.

Inside was a bedroom with a broad king size bed cloaked in a white quilt with red hearts, deep red carpet and red drapes completely blocking sunlight, if it was indeed a window to the outdoors. The light in the room came from a set of candles lit on a shelf over the bed, though as she inspected them she realized they were fake. It was really splitting the difference between bedroom and studio apartment, with a bathroom open to one side and a deep closet on the far wall. There was a sofa, but no TV or other entertainment to point it at. No books either, nor any sign of leisure activity of any kind. Kelsey was here not to be entertained, after all, but to provide entertainment.

Speaking of, the girl herself emerged from the bathroom in silk pajamas, their crimson coloring the only sexualizing aspect of them. That was a surprise. More so since she was in the midst of brushing her teeth, white foam leaking out the corner of her mouth. She didn't seem surprised to have someone letting herself into her chamber, though at the site of her old friend, she tilted her head to the side.

"Shunduh?" she asked around her toothbrush.

She managed an awkward smile. "Heya, Kels."

Sadie Mae invited her in with a gesture. "Your guest here was non-specific about what she was after," she explained in pointed tones. Kelsey immediately ignored her friend and focused completely on the woman. "So you do as she says and we'll square up after. Be good to her now, understand? She's a first-timer, and we want to make a good impression. Go on and get ready for her now, and be quick about it, girl."

Kelsey nodded, but didn't try more words before returning to the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

"She'll be ready shortly. Dear was probably up all hours having a good time and sleeping through the morning. Feel free to pick an outfit for her if you like, or shoot, you can walk right in there and get started without waiting if you're of a mind. Like I says before, Miss Kelsey has herself a 1:30, but that still gives you a good while to enjoy yourselves."

Chanda frowned. It was shortly after noon now; she hadn't meant to be so brief. Nothing for it though, and maybe for the best. This could wind up being too much to bear all too quickly. "All right. Thanks, Sadie Mae."

"You want to thank me proper, you know where to find me, sugar." With a saucy wink, the woman closed the door behind her.

If this had been Kelsey's home, or Chanda's, she would have walked right into the bathroom. Here, in this place, she didn't feel right about it. So instead she contented herself to look around the room, inspecting the place as if there were anything there to see. The only thing on the walls were a couple of generic landscape paintings, like one might expect to see in a hotel room. There was a desk, but nothing on it. Hearing water still running in the bathroom, she ventured to open the drawers. Most of them were empty, save for one with some professional aids – condoms, lubricant, and a few commonplace props like a pair of handcuffs, a ball gag, and so on.

"Hey, if you wanna pick out an outfit for me, go for it. Closet's right there," called Kelsey from the bathroom. Her voice sounded weirdly casual. Kelsey's voice. Coming from the bathroom of a whorehouse. Inviting her to pick out her clothes.

"Oh, no, you can wear whatever. I don't care," Chanda answered, settling onto the couch.

A moment later the bathroom swung open. How had the girl put on makeup so fast? Had her hair been brushed before? “No preference? I can go naked, if you want.” She said it like she was asking whether she wanted ketchup on her burger.

“No!” she shouted far too insistently. “I mean, um, no. Just wear something... normal. If you have anything normal, that is.”

“Sure thing.” Kelsey disappeared into her closet. The door was wide open behind her as she sifted through scores of outfits, discarding her pajamas absent-mindedly while she searched. Chanda made herself not look. Mostly not look. It hadn’t always been easy, being bisexual around friends like Kelsey who decidedly weren’t. Or hadn’t been. Obviously that had changed if Sadie Mae had unhesitatingly booked her a session.

The girl’s own hotness didn’t help. Straight black hair halfway down her back, not unlike Chanda’s own, framing a very pretty face. An hourglass figure with all the sexy sand in both top and bottom. Chanda hadn’t ever seen her friend naked, but had seen her in her underwear a few times. It was a bit narcissistic, maybe, but Chanda had always been attracted to her in spite of how often people somewhat uncharitably referred to Kelsey as an off-brand Chanda. Sisters was a more acceptable comparison for both.

A few minutes later Kelsey emerged wearing a pair of comfortable-looking jeans and a loose-fitting navy blue top. In fact, the top was familiar. “Holy... is that mine?!” she snapped, giggling in spite of herself. Too surreal.

“Is it? Yeah, I guess it is. Oh man. Here, you can have it.” She started to unbutton it in the middle of the room.

“No no, it’s fine!” Chanda corrected hastily. “Come on, sit down. I, um, want to talk. And it’s way less weird if you’re at least dressed.”

“No prob.” Kelsey smiled, and it was *her* smile. She plopped down on the other end of the couch. No bra, Chanda realized. Ah, well. Dressed enough.

“So... OK. Before we do anything else, I guess...” She took a deep breath. This was the real question, the one that would determine whether or not she had any reason to be here. Sadie Mae’s answers hadn’t done much for her.

“Kelsey, is that really you in there?”

Kelsey snorted. “Of course. Who else would it be?”

Chanda sighed. “No, I mean I know it’s you. But is your brain still... you, at all?”

“If you’re asking if I still have my memories of my old life, then yes. If you’re asking if I’m still nervous about my portfolio in Mr. Corley’s class... not so much.” She gave a little laugh.

“So you remember... us? Being friends? And Eve, and Tiffany, and Mimi? Err, Mya. Sorry, her winner changed her name.”

“Is Eve Brandy?”

“Oh. Yeah, she changed hers too. She was won by Ezekiel freaking Boecher. Blech. They got married a few weeks ago.”

“Oh, ew. Ezekiel is such a creep. That might actually be something I would have wanted less than this place.” Kelsey wrinkled her nose as she crossed her legs patiently.

“Are you... Ugh, this is so weird. Is your old personality, like, your default? I’m sure you switch it up for, you know, the guys who... you know. But are you your old self otherwise?”

Kelsey hesitated. “Um... So do you want the honest answer, or do you want the answer I think you want?”

“Honesty. Oh god, please honesty. Had about all the bullshit I can stomach already this lifetime.”

Her friend nodded. “All right. Then no. I remember my old personality. I can slip into it pretty easily, I think.” She chuckled awkwardly. “Maybe you’re a better judge of how I’m doing, but at least it feels normal. Like old shoes, kinda? That’s something they remade me for, changing things up, reading the client and figuring out who they want to be with. Am I right that you’re looking for me to be, you know, old me?”

There was no real reason for her hesitation. It was that exact hope that had brought her here. Still, having to order it so, command it, was a stark reminder that whatever she might be about to pretend, this girl was not her Kelsey. Not quite. Not really.

Then again, she wasn’t Kelsey’s Chanda any more either.

“Yeah. If you think you could.”

Kelsey’s smile broadened until it nearly split her face in two. “Damn right I could. Oh my god, thank you, finally! I haven’t seen any of you guys in... man, I don’t even know what day it is. I’m not a hundred percent what month. But god, it’s *so* good to see you, Panda! I’d hug you, but I don’t want to freak you out, considering...” She gestured vaguely to the brothel around them.

God. It was *Kelsey*. Without skipping a beat, Chanda launched herself into that hug. Kelsey met her halfway, the two of them embracing one another in silence. From the soft shaking of the chest pressed to her own, Chanda’s tears were mirrored by her friend. She didn’t care if it was an act. It was what the real Kelsey would have done. That was good enough.

“I don’t care how much they charge me. I missed you *so* much,” Chanda whispered into her ear.

“I missed you too. I never thought I could be so lonely, even getting to see all these people every day,” came the whispered reply.

Chanda released her, reminding herself that they could hug again at any moment. “You’re telling me. I still have to go to school. It’s even worse than you remember from

junior year. These winners, they're so..." She shuddered. "I hate it. Having to go there every day, not being able to see you guys..."

"None of us?" Kelsey frowned. "Man, I figured maybe a couple of us might still be fit for polite society. Have you heard what happened to anybody else? Brandy, or Eve or whatever, but the rest? I am dying for some gossip in here."

Like that, the floodgates were open. Chanda told her everything, about Eve's attack at the movies, her wedding with Ezekiel, about Mimi becoming a stupid little slut, about Tiffany and the kidnapping. All of it. Through it all, Kelsey gobbled up the details like sand drinking down water. It was so easy to believe she really meant it all. Perhaps she did? Maybe they let her stay curious so long as she didn't bug any of her customers with it. Maybe. Chanda disregarded her curiosity. She had enough existential doubt with Aaron.

"What about you? What lucky son of a gun locked down the living legend, PowerBall among PowerBalls, Chanda Brighton?" Kelsey asked at last.

"I, um..." She shook her head. No. No, she wasn't bringing that here. No. "I'd rather not talk about it, if that's OK."

"I mean, you're the one paying the bill, I guess," Kelsey replied, obviously dissatisfied with the non-answer. Did she actually want to know? No, it had to be an act, playing the role of Chanda's gossip-loving buddy. Didn't it? "Man. Well whoever it is, I'm happier than I can tell you that they gave you some time away. It's so amazing to see you. I wasn't sure I'd ever see any of you again. Not until after, anyway, and then..."

Chanda nodded. No telling what would happen when their autonomy was restored to them. So far, the first losers were still nowhere near that point. Some critics of the Lottery – those few who could find a forum – feared the day would never come. Taking a bunch of nearly fifty-year-old women who've been used and humiliated, tortured, bred like farm animals, and giving back their free will? Even Chanda worried what might come of it.

"So what about you? How's life... here? As bad as we always thought it would be?"

Kelsey shrugged. "I guess objectively, probably? I don't know. You know how it is, how your brain doesn't react right. Guys come in, we fuck or play sex games or role play or whatever, they leave, I chill until the next one comes. It's actually surprisingly boring. Or it would be if they let me get bored."

"So what do you do in between...? I didn't see a TV or anything. Is there like a rec room somewhere, something like that?"

"Rec room? Nice one. Yeah, we lobbied for it at the teen sex slave union meeting, but no dice yet." Kelsey laughed. "But what do I do? Nothing, really. Exercise some, but that's usually just first thing in the morning. I try not to be gross and sweaty when someone might show up. You're probably the earliest I've had anybody, honestly, ya dirty ditcher. Other than that, look myself over and make sure I'm presentable, and..."

yeah. Fucked up, but I can basically stare at a wall for hours at a time and not even get tired. You'd think it'd be easier just to give me a laptop and some wifi or something, right?"

Chanda shuddered at the girl's frankness. Cooped up in this room, literally staring at the walls contentedly until someone paid for the use of one of her holes. The customers were almost doing her a favor from the sound of it. At least sex was something to do.

"Any good ones?" Chanda asked.

A sly grin stole over Kelsey's red lips. "You really wanna know? All right. So no lie... They're *all* good ones. Obviously it's how they rewired me and all, but it could be way worse. One of the girls here, Celeste, she was won by this other agency and she's basically a living doll. It's so creepy. Like, when a customer tells her to do something, act a certain way, she jumps right in and does it, but she doesn't *feel* anything. She's pretty much a self-lubing fleshlight with tits. And not even great ones, got these weird salami nipples going on."

For a moment, Chanda wondered if Kelsey was also self-describing – aside from tits, of which she possessed quite a pair. There was no way of knowing whether Kelsey was engaged in some weird meta roleplay right now, or if she was for a moment liberated to self-express in the company of someone who actually wanted her to. Chanda elected to believe the latter.

"Anybody I know?" That was a question she'd pondered once or twice. Not in the playful spirit she asked it here, but it had crossed her mind.

"Yes," Kelsey said, but very guardedly. "But I can't say any more than that. Shit, Chanda, I'm not allowed to talk about any of it. I probably shouldn't have even said what I said, but I've fucked so many people in the past couple months that I've probably done it with half a dozen guys I didn't even know you knew, ya know? Fricking confidentiality! Man, the stuff I could tell you, if I could... would light your hair on fire. Seriously. Ugh, I wish I could fast forward another thirty years so I could tell you!"

"And so you wouldn't be stuck in a whorehouse."

"Eh," Kelsey replied, but giggled after a moment. Chanda did, too. God, it felt good. Talking to a friend. She didn't care what they decided to charge her for this. It was better therapy than anything her parents might have arranged for her. She tried not to think what they were going to say when they saw the charge. That was tomorrow's problem, though. For now, she was sitting across a couch from her lovely, wonderful friend, and no lecture from her parents could take that away.

Besides, how much could they really bill her? They were only talking. If she... If they... Well, she could imagine all manner of things she wouldn't mind doing that would run up that bill, but this couldn't possibly cost *that* much. (Although, how much would it

actually cost to...? No. No, that wasn't cool. OK, so if her day with Mimi and Jessie was any standard to go by then it would be awesome, actually, but not *cool* cool.)

The two sat in silence a moment. "So..." Kelsey said.

Chanda fanned her face, trying to coax the red out of her cheeks. "Yeah."

Kelsey grinned. "Look, I don't want to break character or whatever," she began, somehow without breaking character, "but I've developed some pretty decent instincts for when somebody's checking me out. If you wanna, you know, do stuff..." She shrugged, breasts bouncing freely. "That's cool. Really."

"What? No, I don't want to... I mean, I don't know why you would..."

The girl rolled her eyes. "Puh-lease, Panda. I'm not an idiot. It's seriously OK. Remember, I told you how if I'm not doing stuff with customers – not that you're just some random customer to me; you know that, right?"

"I bet you say that to all the boys," Chanda said, but Kelsey was saying it in unison, a perfect rendition of one of their old inside jokes. She really was still in there.

"Anyways, yeah, if you bug out on me then I just sit here drumming my fingers. I mean, if you wanna pretend you're totally straight like you always used to, fine. You sucked at it, by the way. You're lucky I love you. But if you don't..."

Chanda adjusted herself, shrinking back into her side of the sofa even as Kelsey inched forward. It wasn't far enough away. She stood up and took a few more steps back. "You're not yourself. It wouldn't be right."

Kelsey arched an impressively neatly tweezed brow. "Not right? We're losers, hon. 'Right' is so last semester. Besides, me personally? I'd rather use all this sex guru knowledge they stuffed in my head to show my awesome friend a good time than keep squandering it on all these other random slobbering dickheads. At least for once I'd get to actually do something nice for somebody I care about. To feel good about myself." She fixed her soft blue eyes on Chanda's. "At least, I'd feel good if you'd feel good. Maybe your winner put a stop to it and I'm just seeing things."

Bullshit, Chanda thought. The moment she heard the words, she recognized it for what it had to be – a sales pitch. Kelsey was there to make money for the bidder who'd won her, whatever anonymous prick owned this brothel. She'd say what she had to say to make them money, plain and simple. Too many losers in Chanda's orbit not to be keenly aware of losers' propensity to convince their winners of their usefulness. Their eagerness to be used.

Except now *she* was the winner. For a few dollars more, she could have Kelsey. Kelsey's body, at least, that curvy little bombshell of a body that she'd secretly lusted after since puberty had begun its inexorable march towards PowerBall status. Chanda could own her like she was a boy herself. Plus, it was as good an approximation of Kelsey's mind as could be hoped for. This could be like Chanda had always quietly fantasized, the two of them, together. Oh god, how upset her parents would say when

they got the bill. They were going to get a bill anyway, though. Would it really be all that different if she went a little further?

Fuck the morality of it, she consented as Kelsey inched closer. Chanda had already trampled that line with Mimi. If she said no, left, Kelsey would go back to sitting alone in her room like that doll girl. If she somehow remembered this day on the far side of losing, surely she would understand. Even be grateful, probably.

“H-how much are your lips worth?” she asked, her throat suddenly dry, mouth suddenly flooding.

Kelsey bore her down onto her back, their breasts pressed together as they kissed for the first time. “Every fucking penny.”

They kissed. Dollar signs went completely out of Chanda’s head. Kelsey was practically holding her down, forcing herself on her, but at the same time Chanda was holding her down so she couldn’t escape if she tried.

(She did not try.)

“Can I... see you?” Chanda asked between gulps of air when they were finally forced to breathe.

Kelsey, now straddling her waist, sat up. “Only if I get to see you, Panda PowerBall.”

“Um, do you want me to go first?”

Kelsey nodded, eyes sparkling excitedly. This Kelsey, this loser Kelsey, was eager indeed to get an intimate look at her friend. She wanted Chanda the way Chanda had always wished she had. Chanda started working on her top. Was it irony, that for once she was wearing her normal old clothes and yet instead of teasing and mind games she was about to take them off to fool around with a prostitute? Maybe she could put that in her portfolio, if she decided she felt like doing it.

With a person on top of her it wasn’t easy, but Kelsey didn’t do anything to make it easier. There was no rush as far as she was concerned.

“Do you remember that day last summer when we went to the beach?”

Chanda arched an eyebrow as she squirmed to get her shirt up past her stomach. “Which time? We went to the beach like twice a week.”

“True. It was just you, me, Tiffany, and Brandy. I forget why Mya wasn’t there—”

“Probably, mmf, over at that d-bag Rudy’s house. She was already halfway lost.”

Kelsey laughed. “Good practice, I guess. Anyway, usually you wore a shirt and shorts over your suit, and usually you never took it off. Most girls I’d think it was shyness, but I think you must’ve liked making the boys wait and stare. Anyway, there was this one time Brandy was giving you crap for being the only one not in her suit and it looked weird in all the pictures, and so you finally...”

Chanda dropped her discarded top on the floor, enjoying the way Kelsey trailed off, entranced by the sight of her breasts heaving with each breath in her thoroughly filled bra. "I finally...?"

The girl shook herself. "Right. You finally strutted your stuff, and you had this, like, shockingly skimpy little red bikini on. I remember Brandy's jaw practically hit her boobs when she saw it. From nun to slut in three seconds flat."

"Oh gosh, that thing? It was from middle school or something I think. Nobody was ever supposed to see it!"

"Bullshit. You knew what you were doing."

When Kelsey hesitated, Chanda guided her friend's hands from her stomach to her breasts. Her fingers sunk into the fabric and the tender flesh beneath immediately, and Chanda allowed her a moment's quiet enjoyment. "Yeah? Why did you bring it up?"

"Right." Kelsey made eye contact, but only with effort. "So you know I wasn't into girls. Probably a little *too* not into girls. I hope I wasn't a bitch about it or anything."

"You were fine. Or if you want, I can say you were horrible and let you make it up to me." Chanda grinned. She'd forgiven any such offenses the moment her nipples had hardened in the girl's hands.

"Yeah. So that day, when I saw you in your bikini, at first I thought I was just jealous, because of course I was, because your body is goddamn rough to be alongside. You have no idea how unfair it is to be this hot and still never be the hottest girl in the room." Chanda blushed, but Kelsey didn't look upset over it at the moment. In fact, she was slowly undoing the front clasp on Chanda's bra. "But no. You were so hot you actually turned me a little gay for a few hours. Like no kidding. You looked so hot, you almost won me yourself. I went home that night, and I totally... you know."

Chanda shook her head. "No I don't." She had a pretty good idea, but she wanted to hear her say it.

"I masturbated, Panda Perv. I put a guy in there to watch us or something, I think so I didn't get nervous or weird myself out? But I forgot about him pretty quick. After that it was so much of you and quite a lot of me."

She couldn't help grinning. Compliments about her looks were a dime a dozen, less, but coming from Kelsey... "Yeah? What'd so much of me and quite a lot of you do? And it's your turn, by the way, staller."

Kelsey's lips twisted bashfully as she slipped off her t-shirt. There was no art to it, simply a girl getting naked in her own room. There was a delicious dissonance to it, like stripping was perfectly natural but talking about a daydream was embarrassing. "It was stupid. You'll make fun of me."

Chanda reached up and squeezed Kelsey's breasts, encased in a sheathe of blue cotton. God, they felt good. No front clasp though, regrettably. "Try me."

“I was a total novice, Panda. It is totally not fair to judge someone by their first stray gay thoughts. I’d never even seen lezzies in porn.”

“You so did! Remember that time in middle school, we all told ourselves we were just curious what it’d be like without a winner in it, and—”

Kelsey snatched the pillow from behind her and thwapped Chanda in the face. “I closed my eyes! I thought everybody closed their eyes!”

“Your loss. Now c’mon. Tell me what we did.”

“All right, all right! Good grief you’re bossy when you’re in charge.” Kelsey arched her back, removing her bra. Her nipples, dark red circles punctuated by two plump red areolae, rose and fell with each slow breath. Chanda withdrew her hands to simply gaze at them. She had a feeling.

“So, first, we kissed,” she said. Then Kelsey bent down, and their lips met once more. Chanda’s tongue was just leaving her mouth when her friend pulled back. She tried to follow, but two hands on her shoulders fixed her in place. “Except that was sorta weird for me, because, you know, I was straight. Except for you. So instead – and I swear if you laugh I will get that pillow again! – we sort of... Ugh. I’ll just show you.”

Her friend’s arms slid down her shoulders and onto the cushion beneath them, a slender wrist grazing either side of Chanda’s neck. Kelsey slowly lowered herself, the black curtain of her hair hanging down until it merged with Chanda’s own. For a moment she expected another kiss, but then their breasts met, and instead...

“We rubbed them together,” Kelsey muttered sheepishly.

Chanda couldn’t help but grin – but she stopped herself short of laughing. Barely “We rubbed our tits together?”

“What’d I say?” Kelsey snapped, but feisty tone or no, she started moving her shoulders side to side, dragging her breasts against Chanda’s. Her nipples were like two tiny fingertips dragging across her skin, sometimes right against her own. It felt nice, and if it wasn’t as pleasurable as a lot of the things she’d done with Mimi, there was something hot about the oddity of it, of knowing – or at least, being told – that it was her old friend’s secret shameful amateur lesbian fantasy.

“So you masturbated while thinking about tit-nuzzling?” Chanda prompted. “Did you, you know... get off?”

“Well it’s not *all* we did.”

“Yeah? What else did we do?”

Kelsey tapped Chanda’s nose. “You are having way too much fun making me talk about this. You better hope I never get at your winner and get him to make you tell me about your fantasies about me.”

“Play your cards right and I may just show you myself. Now come on. You’re playing awfully hard to get for a loser hooker.”

Kelsey giggled. “Fine. So, I was sorta getting into your boobs. Like, kind of a lot. So then you told me to suck on them.” She giggled again, louder. “Oh god, I remember I was still trying to keep the guy in it, and you were like ‘it’s OK, go ahead, Kels’ and then he was like ‘yeah, bitch, suck her big round titties for me’ and I remember that was the exact moment I decided he needed to go.”

It had to be real. It was too stupid a detail to be made up. Chanda touched her friend’s cheek. “So... suck on my big round titties.”

Kelsey hesitated. “Um, in my fantasy, we were, kinda, naked. At that point.”

“So get us naked already, Kels.”

Kelsey nodded, her face a bit flushed. Chanda had to hand it to her, she was the portrait of a girl beside herself with the anxious elation of living out her fantasy. Kelsey rose to her feet and undid her shorts, lowering them along with her panties and kicking them aside. Her pussy was shaven to a black strip of hair no wider than her thumb, and that trimmed short.

“Do I get to see the ass, or was the fantasy all tits?”

“Are you a PowerBall or a pervball?” Kelsey rolled her eyes but humored the request. There was a tattoo of a red heart with some artsy lines around it on her left ass cheek. There was some smudge on it – a keyhole, she realized after a moment. Was that new? The thigh gap surely was. Not that Kelsey had ever been a big girl, but her loser diet had obviously been good to her.

“Is that tattoo new?” Chanda helped herself, running her fingers over it. Kelsey didn’t seem to mind.

“Actually, pre-Lottery. A ‘you can have my body but my heart is mine’ kind of a thing. Kinda cheesy and all, so I never told anybody. Pretty dumb in hindsight, because they really could give two shits about my heart in here, but at least it looks good for what it is.”

Chanda rubbed her thumb across it fondly. “Yeah, I like it.”

That was that. Kelsey turned back around, kneeling before Chanda and getting at her friend’s shorts. She hadn’t done a damn thing with her own pubic hair, mostly to spite Aaron in case he came to claim her. She didn’t miss the way Kelsey inhaled deeply as her panties came down, the little slut.

“You are... god damnit, it’s not fair. You’re like if someone turned hentai into a real person, but you turned out American instead of Japanese.”

“You know what hentai is?” Chanda only knew it because it had come up in *Surviving* and she’d done some online research to get the reference.

Kelsey rolled her eyes at how dense her friend was. It was too familiar a sight. “I know what every stupid sex thing is now. It’s mah job, Panda.”

“Well you’re doing great at it so far.”

“Keep teasing me and see if I don’t do a so-so job of sucking on your nipples.”

“Are you allowed to do a so-so job?”

“If the customer wants a so-so job.”

There was a faint note of inquisitiveness there. “The customer wants you to do a good job.”

Kelsey grinned. “Well the customer is always right, don’t you know.”

It wasn’t the first time a woman had played with her boobs. Jessie had used a firm, deliberate touch. Mimi played like they were toys, giggling insipidly and exclaiming all the while. Kelsey...

Kelsey was a professional.

“You are way too good at this,” she murmured between delirious moans. Her tongue was as nimble as a finger, as tit-hungry as a cock. That mouth *wanted* her. It wanted her bad. It wanted to taste her, to feel her, to hold as much of her inside it as would fit and hold it there until she could hardly breathe. Chanda started playing with herself, as did Kelsey. As before there was no urgency beyond the lust of it, no rush except to suck harder, lick elsewhere.

Kelsey came first, but Chanda wasn’t far behind.

“What... what else did we do?” Chanda asked in a dusky voice.

“When?” Kelsey shook herself back into the present. “Oh, right, the fantasy. I dunno. I came while I was sucking on your tits, so I never got to contemplate anything better. Then we went back to the beach the next day and you were back into your turtleneck and hoop skirt and the dream died.”

“Oh, honey, all you had to do was tell me you wanted to see them again.” Chanda pulled her in close, kissed her. “I would have been nice.”

“I would have turned so red from embarrassment I would have passed out,” Kelsey retorted. “I was honestly really lucky you didn’t slam me again with that bod because no way I could’ve hid what I was thinking after getting off to it.”

Chanda smiled. Kissed her again. “Was any of that true?” she asked after a long pause.

Kelsey nodded. “If I was gonna make something up to flatter you, Panda, it would have been something way hotter than tit-rubbing in a daydream.”

Which might only mean she’d made up a believable lie. Oh well. If these were lies, they were sweet lies. The closest thing to deceit in them was to trick Chanda into having a better time.

“OK, but it’s gonna cost extra...” Kelsey teased as she lowered herself to her knees.

“I was told you were worth every penny.”

“Babe, hand to god I wish I’d been smart enough to do this for free.”

At 1:20, a bell rang from some speaker Chanda couldn’t see. Kelsey had been lying down with her head in Chanda’s lap, letting her play with her own mouth-watering

pair while her head came down out of the clouds. She sat upright instantly, though, and all the pretending was over in a flash.

“Shoot! I have to get ready. I have a major case of cunt-breath,” Kelsey grumbled. “You’d think guys would think it was hot, but believe me, they all want it minty-fresh. One more reason you’re the best – you came in here expecting me to be what I am. No bullshit”

Chanda sighed. “Right. Yeah, go ahead. Do I just head down, or...?”

“We ran over, so Sadie should be here any–”

The door swung open. Chanda hastily grabbed a throw pillow to cover herself, but the woman on the other side only laughed. “Don’t you be shy, sugar. You ain’t got nothing I ain’t seen before. Although my, my do you have plenty of it.” She clicked her tongue.

Chanda ignored it, grabbing her clothes off the floor and hurrying back into them. Kelsey was already in the bathroom, gargling something. “So y’all have a good time, I hope?”

“Yeah. Um, so how do we...?”

“Don’t you worry. Miss Kelsey, what’s our new friend here into us for?”

“Nothing weird. Oral, some cuddling. No extras. Friends and family discount.”

Chanda tried not to think about what “extras” might entail even as she blushed head to toe at having their whole experience condensed into a few coldly delivered words. At least she was still considered a friend, if only for the metrics of the whorehouse’s pricing.

“All right then. Let’s see, that’s–”

“Just charge it,” Chanda said. “I don’t care how much it is.”

Sadie nodded. “Now, we do allow guests to tip, if you want to leave Miss Kelsey something for when she’s back out there on her own. Hundred percent saved for her, none of it to the house. Not an expectation, and Miss Kelsey won’t care either way. Only allowing the option.”

“Don’t bother,” Kelsey called from the walk-in closet, already in the midst of selecting an outfit for her appointment. From what Chanda could see of the clothes she was flipping through, they were skimpy, and tight. “When I get out of here, we’ll see which one of us is gonna take care of the other. Right, Panda?”

Her first thought had been that the “tip” was simply another grift, some fund that would never touch the losers’ hands. That Kelsey had the freedom to refuse it, and that she chose to... Chanda couldn’t help but smile. “We’ll see, Kels.”

Her friend flashed a grin over her shoulder, but didn’t really slow her perusal. She’d selected a pastel pink dress that looked like it hung only low enough to cover her panties by a few inches. The panties themselves were frilly pink, nearly white, things that looked like they’d been taken from a child’s doll and enlarged. Slightly.

“So will I see you again, you think?” Kelsey called as she tugged the underwear on. “And don’t you dare make fun of me. It’s just a job.”

“You should see the stuff I wear, Kels. And I hope so.”

“I sure hope so, too,” Sadie Mae echoed, smiling her lovely, annoying smile. She finished what she was doing on her tablet and offered a receipt. Chanda declined.

That was that. The girls said a swift farewell as Chanda was led, nearly dragged back into the lobby. She checked her phone. 1:26. Sadie didn’t object when she asked if she could look around the lobby, purportedly to check out the posters of the other girls. Really, it was only morbid curiosity to see who had booked her friend for the early afternoon appointment. Inwardly she kicked herself for being nosy, as if seeing him could make her anything but less happy. Still, she wondered.

When the lobby door swung open at 1:29, Chanda wished she hadn’t waited.

“Dad...?” She felt the blood draining from her face. Oh god, she was in so much trouble being caught here. How had he gotten here so fast?! And in the middle of a work day! “Look, I can explain, OK? Don’t be mad.”

“Chanda?! What on earth are you doing here?”

She caught herself. “What? You mean... You didn’t know I was...? Then why are you...?”

Her beloved father’s eyes closed resignedly, and he said nothing.

He was out of the house by the weekend. The divorce would take time to finalize, but her mom already had a lawyer and was preparing her financials that very night. She didn't know what her dad was doing to prepare. Neither of them asked. Once the three of them sat down and, Chanda watching in horror as she was forced to relive the realization she'd had in that lobby, he recounted what had happened. Her mother simply told him she never wanted to see him again, and neither spoke to him again.

He tried. Ambushed Chanda at breakfast the next morning. "Hey, sweetheart. Can we talk about yesterday? I just want you to know, I never—"

The door closed behind her.

A small part of her wondered if she was being unfair. After all, she'd gone there to see Kelsey. Paid her for sex. Was it really so different?

Except that only made her feel more ashamed, and as disgusted and angry and sad as she was, it only generated more of those feelings so she'd have some to spare for herself. It did nothing to diminish how she felt toward what he had done, though.

Mr. Corley took Aaron aside near the end of class a few days later. "Does she know? I mean, it certainly *looks* like she knows, but..."

Her mother must have informed the school. Why, she didn't know. The office staff had probably been confused, too. Most losers' parents didn't bother to notify the school about much of anything any more. As to why Mr. Corley thought she looked the part, she got that. Ever since that day at Kelsey's whorehouse, she'd all but given up on the dress code. Today, she was wearing a top that was practically a bustier and a pair of shorts that, six months ago, would have revealed more than almost any of her underwear. Some of her female teachers had given her wary looks, but apparently they'd gotten the same notification as Mr. Corley and had let it slide. After all, whatever Mr. Bowers had claimed, she was one of their best students, and she was having a rough spell. To say the least.

"Like she knows what?" asked her confused winner. Or whatever he was. Who knew any more.

"About her parents? The divorce, I mean. Did she not tell you?" It was their teacher's turn to look confused. Chanda wanted to knee him in the dick for discussing her private business openly, but the rest of the class was readying to leave for the day and couldn't care less what the man at the front of the room was saying. They were paying more attention to the half-naked girl in their midst than to their teacher. For once, Chanda's reflexive smile was slipping, though the straps of her thong riding high on her exposed hips were holding just fine.

Aaron looked at Chanda warily, his eyes swollen with pity. She had a knee for that, too. "No. She didn't."

“Oh. Sorry you had to hear it from me.” He patted the boy on the shoulder. Sure, show him sympathy like it was *his* dad who’d ruined someone’s life. “Give her my best, all right?”

“You could give it to her yourself,” Aaron muttered. He missed the sudden bloom of color in Mr. Corley’s cheeks. He remembered giving it to her all too well. Lecher would still be jerking off to that in the old folks home someday.

The bell rang. Time to go home and tell her mother to stop telling everybody her business.

Chanda was doing a solid job outpacing him in the halls, but soon Aaron stopped and yelled her name. No pretending she hadn’t heard it; the whole hallway turned to look at the two of them. It was a ballsy move. It was either blow her story by ignoring him, or acquiesce.

She turned, donning an affectionate smile. “There you are! I was trying to catch up with you. No wonder I couldn’t find you. Duh, Chanda!” She konked herself on the side of the head as she sauntered over to him. He flinched when she kissed him, but the appearance of mundanity released the lookers-on from their curiosity.

He asked softly, “Is it true? Did your parents split up?”

“Is it your fucking business?” she responded sweetly.

“Chanda, come on. Don’t be like that.”

“Oh, right. I’m supposed to be miserable and depressed, so you can swoop in and sweep me off my feet. Sorry.” She put the back of her hand to her forehead. “Oh, Aaron, what would I do without you? My hero!”

His face darkened, though his resolve held for the time being. “Do you want to talk about it? You can yell, vent, say whatever you want. I know you don’t really have anybody. Not that I’m somebody, but... Whatever.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What? You want to hear about it? OK, let’s rock. Come on. Let’s go have a nice chat, and you tell me how you’re going to save me this time. Sound good?”

“Damn, buddy, your bitch is off the chain! Somebody’s being a bad little girl,” called a boy from her second period in passing. He gave her a swat on the ass that was clearly a spank. “Rein that bitch in, Eichhorn!”

“She’s not...” He shook his head. Terry was already gone, and Chanda had only giggled reflexively at a man’s touch. Safer than sticking up for herself. More comfortable any more, too. “Fine. Let’s just go.”

She entwined her arm in his. When he tried to squirm loose, she only redoubled her grip. She didn’t say a word, though, until they were sitting in his car. He was plainly more than a little irritated with her, but of course he made that Aaron Eichhorn effort to go the extra mile and put her needs first.

“So what’s going on?” he asked.

“Oh, right. Catching up on family news. How’s yours? Or did you want me to start?”

“Honestly? Shitty. More than shitty. You don’t even want to know, and I sure as hell don’t want to talk about it. Now come on. Pretend like we’re friends for five freaking minutes and talk to me.”

“Sorry to hear that, darling. As for me? Sure. So the other day, I was visiting my old friend Kelsey. You remember Kelsey, right? She used to be in our class with Mr. Corley? I had to look up her address on a flier for a whorehouse, because that’s where she lives now, you know? At a whorehouse. Because that’s how things are going for her.” She began in a parody of a gossip, but by the end she was as angry as she’d been back in the building.

“Yeah. I know.” He folded his arms across his chest impatiently, though she knew full well he wasn’t going to let himself break until he’d performed his noble charity for the losers.

“That’s right, it does seem to be common mother fucking knowledge these days,” she snarled. “So I ditched school to go visit her, not that it matters since I diddled myself in front of Mr. Bowers. Grade secured, right?”

“You did what?! Was this after that day when he pulled us in and...”

“Sure was, that same day. I think he would have settled for getting to look at my tits, but what can I say, I was horny since my winner won’t man up and fuck me.” His jaw clenched so hard she could almost hear it. “Anyway, I was catching up with Kelsey, filling her in on how everyone we know is some sort of freak or another, myself included, and she was telling me about all the whoring she’s been doing. Did you know some whorehouses let you tip the losers? They get all their tip money when they’re released, so at least while they may be forty-eight-year-old ex-whores, they won’t be totally penniless. Isn’t that nice?”

She paused, making him answer. “No. No, I didn’t know that. But what’s this got to do with—”

“So then on my way out, who do I bump into but my dad! Right there in the lobby. Stupid me, I thought he’d somehow found out and tracked me down. But nope! He was on his way up to fuck my friend Kelsey, see. I actually got tossed out of her room so she could dress up like a teeny bopper slut for my creepy horny dad. And for the rates they charge for her, who could blame him, right? She broke right the fuck through my willpower. I bet it made his fucking year when he heard she was on the market. To think, he might never have gotten to fuck any of my friends if they’d all been won by guys from school. What luck, you know?”

“Oh god. Chanda, I’m so... Jesus. That’s awful. I am so, so sorry.”

“Why should you be sorry? What the hell does any of this have to do with you?” she snapped. He visibly recoiled. “But it’s fine. He swore it was the first time, though

Mom started digging through his bank records before he could change his password and found he'd been having all sorts of fun out that way. Big tipper, my dad. At least he didn't try to pretend he was there to see some other loser."

"Wow. God, no wonder. That must feel horrible."

"You know, it's funny. Not that I ever really thought they'd split up, but when I wondered, I always knew if I'd had to choose I'd go with my dad. Feels fucking stupid now, but we were always closer. My mom traveled a lot for her job when I was younger, and I was always kind of a daddy's girl." Aaron grimaced. "He made me feel safe. Like when I got won someday, he'd come bail me out or something. God, I was so stupid."

"It's not stupid. My dad, he..." Aaron shook his head, though she would have been glad to let him elaborate. Anything to stop her word vomit from getting worse.

"It is stupid. Because now my mom threw him out of the house and I don't think I can ever make myself talk to him again. That's what I told him when he was on his way out with his luggage. Except I can't talk to my mom, either. I mean, how did she not know about this? Why was I the one who had to find out? And then when we went home, and we told her what he'd..." She shuddered. "She didn't even ask him anything. Like she didn't even care. Like she was throwing him out for me, and not for being a cheating, disgusting, child molesting pig. It's all my fault somehow. All of our lives are fucking ruined and all of it because of me."

"What? Chanda, no. None of this is your fault. None of it. Your dad brought this on himself. I can't believe he would..." He put a hand on her arm, but she jerked back.

"Why not? I mean, I fucked her. Why shouldn't he? Like it's OK for me to buy my whore friend, but not somebody else? What makes me any better? When my mom finds out, is she gonna throw me out, too? If she forgives me, is she going to bring him back home like it's all fine?"

"You... you fooled around with...?" Aaron's frown became curious. "Are you, um, a lesbian?"

"Seriously? I tell you all that, unload my whole stupid awful world on you, and you wanna know if I'm gay? That's your answer?"

"No, it's just... I thought..."

"I'm bi, so don't worry, I'll still get wet when you fuck me. God, Aaron!"

"That was *not* what I—"

"You might be wondering how I even know. I mean, if I've only been with my loser friends, maybe I don't know. Fair. Don't worry, I confirmed it for myself when I fucked Mr. Corley a while back. Right here in the lot. Hot, right? Could've charged admission. Put the money right there in your account, huh."

"God dammit, Chanda, how many times do I have to say it?! I never played the mother fucking Lottery!" Aaron's fist slammed down on the center panel. Unlike the last

time, he didn't flinch after. Maybe Aaron's hand was getting as numb as Chanda felt. "It's not my fault you're a loser!"

Chanda only laughed ruefully. "I sure hope you're full of it, because otherwise I got nobody to blame but myself, and I so can't handle that."

Aaron shook his head. "Fine. Blame me if it helps. Whatever. I just... God, I wish I knew what I could say to help you. Because just being around you is..." But he only shook his head again.

Chanda gave herself a moment so she didn't start crying again. Far, far too much of that the past few days. A wolf whistle greeted her as she opened the passenger side door. She hadn't even realized they'd never left his parking spot. Phantom Aaron reminded her to smile, look grateful to have been allowed in his presence. "Sorry you couldn't save me this time."

“It’s been over a week, Chanda. We can’t keep pretending I don’t know about you visiting Kelsey.”

It was days later. The two of them still sat in their usual places at the dinner table, ninety degrees apart, making the empty seat all the more impossible to ignore. Bumper, who usually made it a point to lurk near the table in the event of scraps, was still waiting at the front door, where he’d been posted since her dad left. Every now and then he whimpered, and days of this had worn her mother down to the point of snapping at him when she heard it.

“So what? There’s nothing to talk about.”

Her mother set her fork down firmly, perfectly tangential to her plate. “My daughter visits a house of prostitution while living under my roof and think it’s not up for discussion? Guess again.”

“It’s not like I made it a habit! Not like your husband,” Chanda snapped, taking another bite of peas.

“Don’t you dare put that on me.” Her mother smoothed her dress in her lap to calm herself. “Look. I’m not mad, sweetheart. I’m only concerned. Places like that aren’t safe for a young woman. Your surviving was a miracle. You can’t put yourself in an environment like that and throw that miracle away!”

“It’s not a miracle, Mother. It’s just stupid luck. A fluke.”

“Be that as it may. But... Well, Chanda, there’s no delicate way to put this, but there’s the matter of the bill.”

“I can pay you back. I’m getting a job once I’m done with school.”

“Once you graduate, you mean,” her mother amended firmly. “And you know that’s not that I meant. I don’t care about the money. Or at least it’s ten items down my list of concerns. Whether you only talked to Kelsey, or you...” She cleared her throat uncomfortably. “Either way, I need to make certain you understand that that cannot go on. That girl in there, that’s not your friend any more.”

“Kelsey is still in there, Mom. Just because she’s a loser doesn’t mean she’s not still a person!”

“Chanda, calm down, OK? Yes, she *was* your friend, but now she’s the property of the establishment. Her only thought is how she can get more money out of you. Whatever she said, it’s all theater, understand?”

“You weren’t there. You don’t know anything. She was like she was before. Mostly. She remembered me, remembered our inside jokes and stuff we’ve done together, and we talked just like we used to. And if she had to charge me, that’s not her fault!”

“I didn’t say it was her—”

“You know they invited me to tip her? They save up her tips in an account, and she gets the money when her time is up. But she told me not to do it. She said when we

were done, we'd see who needed to take care of who. Does that sound like someone trying to fleece me?"

"That's... very sweet. But you don't think she might have said that to make you feel like she was still the old Kelsey, so you'd keep coming back?"

Chanda had thought that very thing, if only briefly, during that window between walking out of the room and discovering her father in the lobby, credit card in hand. "You know, for somebody who knows so much about how to sweet talk someone into coming back, you sure didn't use any of your know-how on Dad."

Her mother leapt to her feet. "Chanda Brighton! That is absolutely uncalled for. I am only trying to look out for you. There is no cause to be so ugly with me. I know you miss him, but I will not be talked to like that!"

"So stop talking to me!" Chanda shrieked. There was an icy silence between the two of them for a prolonged moment. "You know, Kelsey's a good listener. Maybe you should try her!"

"Maybe I should try Tiffany! At least she was capable of thinking of someone other than herself!" She winced immediately at her own words, but they were out and there was no taking them back. Head low, she strode away from the room.

"Yeah, well sorry you raised a fucking loser!" she howled back. With her mother gone, Chanda snatched the glass of wine she'd abandoned and down it. Then the bottle it had come from. Then another for good measure.

Two hours later she left Bart and Krystal's house after his parents asked her to leave. She was a loud screamer, apparently, when she was drunk. She could almost see what Krystal had been made to see in him. He'd stolen a six-pack of beer from the fridge, too, four of which had been down by the hundred-and-thirty-pound teenage girl tag-teaming him with his loser. If his jerk parents hadn't kicked her out, she might have gotten herself a little more dick, and another beer or two, too. Assholes.

Instead, she was out on the sidewalk in one of her sluttiest outfits, more revealing by far than the pink jailbait outfit Kelsey had donned in preparation for her father. She looked like a whore. That's what the guy who pulled over to offer her a ride said, once he'd gotten comfortable talking dirty to her. She didn't care what he said, so long as she didn't have to walk.

"Where you going anyway, baby?" he asked after a while.

"Know somewhere I can get another drink? Or something better?"

The man's hand drifted down to her bare thigh. "I know a place."

It was Aaron who saved her. Phantom Aaron, that is. Trapped in a stranger's basement (or maybe she was under a bar?) and given a regular supply of drinks and pills. What kind of pills, she didn't know. All she knew was that for a long while she hadn't really known what day it was. After making herself regurgitate the last round, she still wasn't sure how long she'd been down there. A day? Two days? Probably not more than three. She'd slept for a lot of it. Not that her conscious or unconscious state meant anything to them. When she was awake, she was happy – or at least willing – to participate in their debauchery. A cock in her felt better than no cock in her. She was too bombed to think of it in any deeper terms than that. Eventually, though, she began to realize that they didn't mean to let her leave.

She hadn't been able to make it up the stairs, at first. One of the times she tried, she fell down and knocked her head onto the concrete floor good and hard. The stairs were uneven, and neither her gait nor her vision were anything close to straight. One of the men sitting at the card table had laughed, but none of them seemed worried she might have hurt herself. If she'd looked like she might actually be able to walk, she had a vague sense that they would be more vigilant. Until then, she was afraid to try again. When she could move, she heeded a snap of the fingers and crawled back under the table. The clothes she'd arrived in were long gone. (Had she even had them on still when she got down here?)

This was a bad place. She knew that. It reeked of sex and booze and vomit and mildew, and she was pretty sure that was all masking something fouler still. There was no sunlight, no light at all except a few lightbulbs dangling from chains. As many of them were burned out as not. This was the kind of place she could overdose or be choked to death or simply hit her head again and die in a dark corner and not have anyone notice for hours. It was a very bad place.

Still, if Kelsey could endure prostitution, Brandy perverting herself for Ezekiel, Mimi giggling herself stupid, and Tiffany betraying everyone and everything she'd loved, maybe it was only right Chanda end up on the bottom with them. Besides, what good place was there? Curled up at the foot of Aaron's bed? Whoring her way through school? Her pervert dad's hotel room? Or back with her mother, eyes closed and pretending everything was A-OK?

Still, these men didn't mean to let her leave. Why would they? They were men, and she was a loser. Unchaperoned, which meant someone had left their property lying around, which meant they must not mind someone else snatching it up. Back in the day, her parents had told her about how "winning the lottery" meant getting a lot of money. Her dad had told her he'd seen the PowerBall over a billion dollars once. A billion. With a b. She'd run the math on that, once. A billion dollars, even in hundred dollar bills, would weigh around ten tons. Though it was weird thinking of "PowerBall" as referring to money instead of pussy, the calculation had given her a concept of her worth. If

somebody found a truckload of cash abandoned on the side of the road, they sure weren't going to give it back. Maybe eventually, once they'd glutted themselves to their fullest. But probably not even then. If men weren't basically hedonistic pieces of shit, there would be no Lottery.

So she had to fend for herself. Except what could she say to them? Please? There was no messing this up. Once they realized she wasn't content (or at least too doped up to act content), there would be scrutiny. Security. The transition from party favor to prisoner would offer no take-backsies.

There was a plotline in the second-to-last season of *Surviving* where Lexi contracted herself to a resort on a made-up island and subsequently finds jobs for most of her friends so the cast can follow. It was mostly a thinly veiled excuse to put the cast in bikinis all season long. At one point Lexi was being romanced by this hot European nobleman who was beside himself to find the one beautiful young survivor in all the world. Though Lexi's winner had actually died on her Drawing Day, she led Baron Kiersen to believe she was simply being loaned to the resort to make money. The baron was aghast that such a stunning creature would be allowed away from her winner's side and pursued her as though she were a free woman. Although her friends all told her Baron Kiersen was only trying to use her to sire his heir, but she refused to believe them. Only when she had accepted a ride on his private yacht did she discover that he meant to take her back with him to his own made-up country and force her to marry him and bear his children. With her back to the wall and her fate all but sealed, Lexi hadn't given up on herself.

Chanda wasn't about to now, and she summoned the very lie Lexi had used on Baron Kiersen and prayed they had better taste in TV shows than she did.

Making sure to appear off-balance, still groggy, still pliable, she made her way towards the edge of the circle of light around the table where they were playing cards, a big pile of money pooled in the middle.

"She lives," commented one dryly.

"You owe me fifty bucks," said another, snatching a bill from his friend's pile. The man who'd lost the bet only had eyes for the naked teen girl, though.

"Um, you guys? Sorry to interrupt, but I don't want to get you in any trouble. See, my winner had me chipped, and I can feel it tingling. He must be looking for me."

Phantom Aaron came through for her. Microchipping one's loser was expensive, but for a girl like Chanda it was more than plausible. Chanda had considered it, actually, after the incident with Tiffany's kidnapping squad. In the first years of the Lottery, poorly written and poorly implemented tickets had led to an unseemly number of losers left with enough free will to attempt escape. Although the loopholes had since been all but sealed, the recovery plan was still in place for those with the means.

The men looked between each other. It didn't take long for them to decide. Nobody wanted a Lottery Bureau recovery team kicking their door in. Theft of a loser was a federal crime. After some sheepish looks and sullen curses, they relented. Chanda was shoved in the trunk of a car, bent double. She thanked god she wasn't claustrophobic, but the remaining drugs in her system sure didn't make it easy not to sick up. A while later the car stopped, the trunk opened, and she was unceremoniously dumped on the side of the road. Naked, but free. It had all happened so fast, then blurred into a hazy string of drugs and sex. Only as the car sped away and her sight slowly adjusted to full daylight did it begin to sink in how close she had come to irreversible catastrophe. Death, even, maybe.

There was no time to cry over it just then. She was, after all, naked and alone and far from anywhere she recognized. Mercifully, perhaps by their intent (though she doubted it), there was a gas station in sight, about half a mile away down the highway, off the road and up a hill. Every other direction was countryside, empty fields; wary of being picked up by yet another stranger, she selected an offroad path and made her way to the gas station. It gave her plenty of time to dwell on her bad choices, good fortune, and impending humiliation.

With her feet bruised and scraped from the rocks and pebbles along the way, legs wet to the hips with dew off the blades of high grass, Chanda soon emerged into the clearing and stumbled toward the gas station. She didn't bother to cover herself; she was too tired, too defeated, too acclimated to her own objectification. As people stared and snapped pictures on their phones, she stumbled inside and grabbed some clothes from the convenience store, a Johnny Cash t-shirt and some sweatpants that said "luv me" across the butt. Even some cheap flip-flops for truckers to use as shower shoes.

The elderly man working the counter had simply gaped at her while she dressed, but once she was, told her flatly that she couldn't leave until she'd paid for the clothes. There was no consideration of generosity to a woman clearly as down on her luck as one could be. Whatever her problem was, it was a loser's problem, which meant somewhere there was a winner who could be expected to take care of it.

She could leave. The flip-flops would make running away difficult, but if the police caught her, she could always suck them off or whatever. And if that didn't work, so what? If she really was a loser – and she had never felt more lost – then when they contacted the Lottery Bureau, they would confirm that Aaron was her winner. He'd have to pay her fine, and then she would go home with him and... be a loser. Have his babies, she supposed. Finally get some decent fucking sleep knowing where she belonged.

If she wasn't, then... she didn't know. Surviving wasn't something she'd ever seriously contemplated. Maybe she wasn't cut out for it. Maybe they could toss her in a cell and the world could forget about her for a while. Fine by her. Maybe she could wait

here until some trucker stopped in and offer to let him give her a ride in exchange for the clothes. Then let him take her... wherever.

Why not? What more could she possibly lose?

But she didn't do those things. Instead, she did what she'd been doing ever since Drawing Day.

A group of teenage boys who'd been hanging out in the parking lot, recording one another's attempts at skateboarding until following her into the store, volunteered a phone. She dialed a familiar number. More familiar than it ought to be considering how little she'd used it.

"Hello...?"

"Aaron? It's Chanda."

"Chanda! Oh my god. Are you all right? Where are you? Everyone's been—"

"Can you come get me?"

"Absolutely. Where are you?"

"I don't know. I think I'm... I don't know. A gas station, on a highway. I don't know."

"Stay put. I'm coming for you."

"And I need some money. I had to get clothes. I was naked."

"Don't worry about that. It's going to be OK."

It took him almost two hours before he found her. The boys let her use their phone's GPS for location – she didn't recognize the name of the nearest town – and one of them volunteered their services to keep an eye on her while she waited. Numb, she accepted and sat down at a table in the abandoned fast food place adjoined to the gas station, making sure the clerk could see she wasn't trying to leave. It was a pleasant surprise when she realized they meant to honor their offer in the spirit it had been given. The three of them sat down in the other seats and waited with her. None of them tried to touch her. They didn't even try to talk to her except one, who apologized they couldn't help her pay for her clothes. They'd only been hanging out, killing time and hoping they could find someone to buy them beer. Chanda reflected that they'd be old enough to win the Lottery before they'd be old enough to buy alcohol, but she didn't say anything.

Aaron arrived and rushed into the station. The boys leapt to their feet at seeing someone move on her, but she nodded that this was the one, and they backed down.

"Oh thank god, you're all right." Aaron looked like he meant to hug her, but either her pack of self-appointed guardians, her disheveled state, or her long-standing hostility kept him at bay. "Come on. Let's get you out of here."

He paid for her clothes. The old man behind the register didn't say a word, eyeballing her like she'd wronged him somehow. Chanda waved goodbye to the boys as their car pulled away; their faces lit up like she'd knighted them.

“What happened?” he asked a few miles down the road. He waited longer than she’d expected him to.

“I don’t know.”

“Chanda, you’ve been missing for almost a week. Did someone kidnap you or something? Did Tiffany—”

“I just left. That’s all.”

“You... Chanda, you scared the shit out of me. Out of everybody. And that’s all you have to say for it? You left?”

“I stayed with some people.”

“What people?”

“I don’t know. John. Wally.” She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Chanda...”

“Would you stop saying my name?” She finally looked away from the plains rolling by out the window. “I get it. You were worried. I fucked up. I’m a loser. You’re a hero. You win again. Do I have to apologize for it, too?”

“Do I have to say it again? I didn’t—”

“Bullshit.” There was no fire in it this time, though. Only resignation. “I know you did. I don’t *think* you did. I *know* it. You know how I know it?”

“You don’t know it, because there’s nothing to know.”

She went on anyway. “I was going to keep running. Back there, at the gas station? These clothes cost, what, forty bucks? I know I look like shit, but still, you don’t think someone would’ve shelled out forty bucks for my company? But I didn’t. You know why?”

“Because that’s fucking insane?”

“Because that goddamn voice in my head told me I had to call you instead. I think that’s why I left, too.”

“Why you ran away? That makes no sense.”

“No, why I left that place, wherever it was. This basement. These guys were... I dunno. Giving me drugs, using me. But I couldn’t stay, because I knew I had to get back to you before I ODeD, or they killed me, or trafficked me or whatever. I had to get back to you. Like, I *had* to.”

The gray day was coming to an end. Aaron flicked his headlights on, though there were no other cars in sight. “So it was like a compulsion, huh. Or was it a literal voice?”

“I don’t know. Like, I wanted to go somewhere else, or maybe just give up? But I knew I couldn’t. It was like...” She laughed bitterly. “When I was a kid, I used to love going on the swings. I’d throw my head back and lean as far back as I could. Scared the hell out of my dad. But I liked going up and only seeing the blue. Like I wasn’t on earth, flying up and up and seeing how far the blue went. But then it always pulled me back

down. No joke, I actually got made at the swings. I made my parents take our swing set down because I got so angry I couldn't use them to fly off."

"You're not making any sense. Are you on something? Your eyes are kinda weird." He sounded concerned, not judgmental. Of course he did.

She ignored him. "It was like that. Like I was trying to fly away but this... tether. It held me in place. Kept me from leaving. I'm not hearing voices or anything, but I know I couldn't have left that gas station without you if my life depended on it. Believe me. I wanted to."

Aaron's grip tightened on the steering wheel. She heard a knuckle crack. "I'm sorry it's so frustrating for you. For what it's worth. It wasn't supposed to be."

Her breath caught in her chest. "So... it's true." She knew it was. She'd just said it was seconds before. Still, to have him accept the condemnation... was he finally admitting it?

"What's true?"

"Don't bullshit me, Aaron!" she snapped, voice low. "For once would you please, *please* just level with me. Tell me what you did to me, and I swear, I'll quit fighting it, I'll be whatever you want me to be. I'll behave again, I'll dress like a normal person, or however you want me to. I don't care. Just *tell me*. Tell me what's happening to me!"

Aaron's eyes bore into the road like two warm brown drills. "I told you, I didn't win you."

She waited, but he didn't elaborate. "Aaron, talk to me. If you care about me at all, if I mean more to you than... shit, than the leftover popcorn you sweep off the floor after a movie at the Grand River 16. Tell me."

"I told you, I got fired. Months ago. For stopping Eve and Ezekiel."

"Tell me!"

The lines of his jaw flexed and unflexed visibly. His knuckles whitened on the wheel. Chanda shook her head and looked back at the darkening landscape out the window, leaning her head against the glass. Right as she began to accept he didn't mean to respond, he spoke.

"I never lied to you," he said softly. She turned back to him. "Lied *for* you, plenty, and thanks for that by the way. You know what it's like having everyone think you turned a person into a..."

"A stupid slut?"

"Since it's not true, I suppose I can say it. Yeah. A stupid slut. Having all the people who respected me think I was a run of the mill asshole winner, and all the people I have no respect for think I'm a goddamn hero because they sit behind you in a class and can't get over how amazing your ass looked in whatever slutty thing you wore that day. Thanks loads."

Chanda said nothing. Let him vent, if it meant she finally got some peace of mind.

“Anyway, I never lied. I didn’t even know for a good while. Definitely not until after well after spring break. A week or two, I think. I don’t think it was the first week after, because that’s when you started acting out and I remember I was kind of upset for a while before they told me. Must have been—”

“Before who told you what, Aaron,” Chanda interjected thinly.

“Do you hate your dad?”

She blinked, shook her head. Then she had to steady herself; dehydration and whatever chemicals were still bouncing around her system still left her dizzy from the slightest movement. “Do I hate my dad? What’s that got to do with anything? Yeah, of course I do. He was fucking one of my best friends. My whole life telling me he hated the Lottery and couldn’t stand to lose his baby girl. I wanted to auction myself. Did you know that?”

Aaron shook his head.

“Yeah. I’m not an idiot. I knew I’d probably bring in a ton of money. Plus it’d probably get me way away from home, so they wouldn’t have to see it. And they could retire early, move somewhere nice. Have security. My dad wouldn’t let me though. He told me that every time he spent any of the money I’d bring in, he’d remember where it came from and feel it all over again. I loved him so much for that.

“Of course, he didn’t hate the Lottery so much it kept him from fucking my friend, though. God, I haven’t been able to sleep, thinking about it. Did he fantasize about it before Drawing Day? Hoping one of us would wind up where he could...? And how long did he wait before he did it? How much money did it cost for him to get what he wanted out of her? Did he tip her? Tip her well? Did he do it because she looks like me?”

She was crying by then. Aaron flipped open the center compartment and offered her a tissue. She ignored it. The tears were honest, and it wasn’t like she had makeup to ruin. “So yeah, I hate him. Are you happy now? What the hell does that have to do with anything? Or were you just seeing if you could make me feel even freaking worse?” She punched him in the arm, but there was no force behind it. He barely reacted.

“I hate my dad, too. I told him the day I can afford to get out of there, I’ll do it. I actually lived in my car for a couple weeks, just so I didn’t have to see him. My mom finally tracked me down, begged me to come back. I did, eventually. I mean, it’s freezing in here at night. Killed my back, too.”

“You slept in your car? Why? What did your dad do?”

Aaron sighed. “I told you, back right after we first met, how bad my mom wanted grandkids. Didn’t I? She was crushed when I joined WAL. My dad was pissed, too, but he never said anything. Not like everybody who plays the Lottery actually wins anyway, but that I wasn’t even going to try... it was like I told him I wanted to chop my dick off or

something. That's basically how he said it when he told me. Like I was a loser – not *loser*, but... you know. Like I was a loser for not trying to win.”

“When he told you what?” she asked quietly.

“My entire college savings. Almost sixty thousand dollars. I didn't even know they had anything saved. Like, they'd said here and there they were saving something for college, but I thought it'd be, like, books. Maybe housing. Could've paid for my whole education with that, even at a decent school. Definitely any school I'd applied to. But now there's nothing left. Less than, actually. Son of a bitch burned through the whole thing, buying up tickets from the community chest, and then kept going through savings. My mom didn't even try to stop him.”

“Your dad...?”

He chuckled ruefully. “Stupid jerk could have stopped at three. He showed me the stub, the one that won you. His third one. But nope, he had to keep going. In for a penny, right?”

“Wait, so you're saying... your *dad* won me?”

Aaron's grim expression, his lack of rebuttal, was her only answer.

“Then why haven't I ever even thought about him? I don't even remember what he looks like, if I ever saw him.”

“Chanda, no. He won you for *me*.” He gave her a moment for it to sink in. “He knew how I felt, so he didn't go full asshole about it and make you... like them. No copies of what he wrote or anything, but the way he explained it, it was like you'd stay close, keep giving me chances until I 'won' you myself. So you'd be free,” he said scornfully, “until I lived up to my end.”

Her muddled brain was still making sense of it. “But wait. You were there when I fainted on Drawing Day. Oh god, did I faint? Or was that when they...?”

He shook his head. “They must have gotten you earlier in the day and just wiped your memory of it. I remember somebody specifically asked during the big convocation they do for all the boys if they could do something like that. I remember thinking it sounded like a jerk thing to do. Guess great jerks think alike. No, you fainted all on your own. Not that I blame you. You pretty much fell on me. I guess that's why Mr. Corley had me help get you down there.”

“OK, but what about the theater? And the... thing, with Tiffany?”

“I don't know. I didn't do anything. Maybe, like subconsciously, you were...” He shook his head. “I don't know.”

She leaned her head back in her chair. It felt like she was falling. The sensation didn't stop. How far down did...

Her eyes opened slowly. For some reason she expected the nurse's office, but no, still Aaron's car. It was almost dark now, the horizon glowing a soft red orange. Her door was open, and he was standing outside, fanning her with his shirt.

Groggily, she reached out and poked his tummy. "You lost weight."

"Hard to be in a school where half the girls are starving themselves to impress a pack of assholes and not feel obligated to trim up for the hottest girl on the planet," he answered wryly.

He lowered his shirt, color blossoming in his cheeks, then held out a jug of water. Must've gotten it from the trunk or something, she supposed. She took a sip, then a longer sip. "All that for me, huh?"

"Compared to what a lot of the losers at school are going through, it's nothing." She smiled, briefly. "We gotta stop hanging out like this."

"You're going to the hospital this time. No arguments. We'll get you taken care of."

"Am I even allowed to argue?"

"Of course you are. Look, I know I just told you... Ugh, I can't even say it."

"You won me. It won't be less true if you don't say it."

"I didn't... well whatever. Anyway, I'm never going to force you to do anything, OK? I'm not even sure I could if I tried. Maybe the Lottery won't let you, I don't know, run off or whatever. But you can do whatever you want with your life. Keep going like you have been, if you want. Or don't. Do whatever you want."

"I thought you said I had to go to the hospital."

"All right, so this one thing. But seriously. You're a freaking mess."

"I'll be fine. The water's helping. I took some pills, but they're wearing off. I just need a hot shower and some food and I'll be fine. Clothes that actually fit would be nice."

"The way you've been dressing lately, I didn't think you still owned any clothes that fit."

"I thought you weren't paying attention to what I did."

"Like it's possible to ignore all *that*."

"Could have fooled me."

Aaron went back around the car and slid into the driver's seat. The car roared to life, and down the highway they went. He turned on the radio after a few minutes, but it was playing some saxophone-heavy oldie, and he quickly switched the station to a sports broadcast.

"So why didn't you tell me before now?"

"And tell you what? You seemed to be... enjoying your autonomy. Was I supposed to stop by your locker and go, 'by the way, my dad turned you into my love slave, thought you should know?'"

"I mean... yeah! You don't think I deserved to know?"

“I think you deserve better than I could ever give you,” he grumbled, and turned the radio volume up.

Chanda suppressed a smile. Her smile? Mr. Eichhorn’s? She didn’t know. She twisted the knob the other way. “It could be a lot worse, you know. If your dad hadn’t seeded my pot and all. I could have wound up like Mimi. God, or Eve. I think that would be even worse.”

Aaron sighed. “Yeah, I guess it could be worse. Feels good, knowing I’m among the least of the possible evils.”

“I read about a loser in France whose winner made her think she was his dog.”

“Shit. I thought that kind of thing was out of bounds?”

“In this country. Though here the same guy can win sisters, as long as they aren’t won in the same drawing. Said it caused too many logistical problems – i.e. they didn’t want to waste money monitoring for incest.”

“Murica.”

“At least I’m not your beagle.”

Aaron smiled reluctantly. “Come on, you’d be a Pomeranian, easy. Maybe even a Bichon Frise.”

“You calling me a lap dog?”

But they only smiled, albeit awkwardly.

“You can use my phone to call your parents if you want. Let them know you’re alive.”

Chanda said nothing, and didn’t reach for his phone. She let the soft play by play of the ballgame calm her. After an inning, she finally spoke up. “So where are we going? Back to your place? Won’t your parents be thrilled. At least once we pop by the Lottery Bureau and make me nice and fertile.” She made a face.

“I’m not going back there. Where do you want to go?”

They drove on for another mile to the sound of a commentator reading off the batter’s seasonal and lifetime statistics. Chanda spotted an exit up ahead. It listed two towns, one she knew that the sign said was only three miles off, and another she’d only heard of. Beside it, the number 341 glowed in the headlights.

“How about that there?” she suggested, pointing.

Aaron looked over and measured her seriousness. “OK,” he said at last. He shifted into the right lane, and when the exit appeared, he took it. Chanda leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. She felt him tucking his windbreaker over the top of her and her lips twisted upwards unconsciously. The game played on, teams tied at zero, as sleep stole over her while the car drove off into the night.