

Winners preview part 3 (conclusion)

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. It distracted her from everything else, if only temporarily. 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, Layla, who she'd seen for a while a few years earlier when 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 the whole thing.

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 wishes 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 drugs at the Frostop, but even once she found a guy who purportedly dealt, he refused to sell to her without Aaron's permission. Some hours later 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.

She felt like someone had reached inside her and scooped out everything inside 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.

She 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. So long as she looked out, 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*, about a boy whose name escaped her, some bland stand-in for the author's political messaging. He had grudgingly played the Lottery to satisfy his parents' desire for grandchildren, leaving his loser almost entirely intact, but over time, the couple fell in love. Kelsey 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. 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. 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. 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 half-concealed behind some gaming equipment in his TV stand. Chanda rolled her eyes and confirmed it had been recording them, flipped off the lens, and stormed out for good.

Krystal called after her that 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, even that wisp of friendship curbed by even the lightest of hands on their respective leashes.

So one afternoon, Chanda picked up 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, she 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. The greeter was a woman Chanda thought she remembered as a senior when she had been a freshman. Her little brother had won one of the formerly heavysset girls in Chanda's second period.

"Well hi there! Aren't you just a sweet drink of tea?" Her southern accent was new, Chanda was pretty sure, 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 what purported to be the 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 few dollars off you, you just come on back and ask for Sadie Mae, hear?" Chanda was certain that was not this woman's real name. Though maybe this was more real than the other, whatever it had been. "So then you say you're here to see somebody? Now mind you, our ladies are restricted to the premises, so iffins your winner wants to partake, he'll need to come in his own self."

"I thought you did, you know, call girls or whatever. Dates."

"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, 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 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 right 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, all right? 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. 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 you get your share of sincerity, don’t you.” The woman patted her wrist and went on in a more formal tone; weirdly, it even briefly shed her 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 scored 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.”

“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 free all afternoon – not that she’ll take that long to see to you, sweetheart, don’t you fret none. 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 awful 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 thing, poof! Gone. But my smile, my laughter, my nurturin’ side... 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 balance could cover the fee no doubt. “So... I take it you know Miss Kelsey? From before? I know she’s one of our new girls, 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 lead her up the stairs – was on the third floor. Someone else had come in to cover the reception area, a bright-eyed girl with tits 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 frosting, you do.”

Chanda looked her over again. No question, the woman was hot. A PowerBall herself in her drawing year. 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.

Sadie Mae led Chanda into the floor with Kelsey’s room, the corridor dimly lit in fluorescent lights strained 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 real 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. She supposed 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 red silk pajamas, almost surprisingly non-sexualized. 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 room, though at the site of her old friend, she tilted her head to the side.

"Shunduh?" she asked around her toothbrush.

"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. Forewarned, 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 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

would 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 her spot in a whorehouse.

“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 prefer.” 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.”

“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. 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. The resemblance was there all right, though neither of them liked being reminded of the disparity.

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... Kelsey, is that really you in there?”

“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.”

“I remember, yeah.” Kelsey 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.”

Her friend nodded. “All right. Then no. I remember my old personality. I can slip into it pretty easily, I think. 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 really.

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

“Yeah. If you think you could.”

Kelsey’s smile broadened. “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! 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 mirror by her friend.

“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 the others?”

Like that, the gossip floodgates were open. Chanda told her everything, about Eve's attack at the movies, her marrying 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.

"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.

"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 whatever, they leave, I chill until the next one comes. It's actually pretty boring. Or it would be if they let me get bored."

"So what do you do in between...?"

"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. Other than that, look myself over and make sure I'm presentable, and... yeah."

Chanda shuddered at the girl's frankness. Cooped up in this room, 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. "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."

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.

“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.”

“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? – but yeah, then I just sit here drumming my fingers. I mean, if you wanna pretend you’re totally straight like you always used to, fine. 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. “I’m straight. Or at least, I’m... Whatever. It doesn’t matter. 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 her orbit not to be keenly aware of their 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. Oh god, how upset 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 agreed as Kelsey inched closer. She'd 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 she'd mentioned. 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 she 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 gasps 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. Chanda started working on her top. 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, ungh, over at that d-bag Rudy’s house. Ugh, 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 you must’ve liked making them 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. “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 in 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.” Chanda nodded. She’d forgiven any such offenses her 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 unfair to be next to.” Chanda blushed, but Kelsey didn’t look upset over it at the moment. In fact, she was slowly undoing the front clasp on her 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, ya perv. I put a guy in there to watch 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 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 them. 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 only looked for now. 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. “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.

“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.”

Chanda touched her friend's cheek. "So... suck on them."

"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, never mind that it was one invented for Chanda's titillation. 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 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. 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."

"Yeah, I like it."

That was that. Kelsey turned back around, kneeling before Chanda and getting at her own shorts. She hadn't done a damn thing with her own pubic hair to spite Aaron, in case he came to claim her one of these days. 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. "They made sure I know what every stupid sex thing is in here. It's mah job."

"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 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. 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. There wasn’t enough Kelsey in there to tell the truth. Not enough Kelsey to object when Chanda asked if she would go down on her either.

“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.”

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 see 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.”

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.

“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. 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 would only long 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.

“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 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.

“Dad...?”

“Chanda?!”

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. She didn't know what her dad was doing to prepare. Neither of them asked. Once the three of them sat down and Chanda explained what she'd seen, her mother simply told him she never wanted to see him again, and neither spoke to him again thereafter.

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. The rest of her, however, was quite insistent in telling that part to shut the fuck up.

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.

"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 look at Chanda warily. He looked pain. 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. Like it was Aaron's dad who was out using the Lottery to stick his dick in his kid's friends. "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. Pervert 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 he 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.

"Is it true? Did your parents split up?" he asked softly.

"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?"

"Chanda..."

"Right. Gladly, darling. 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." 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 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. Anyway, so 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? 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. He was on his way up to fuck my friend Kelsey, see. 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 figured 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 I 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 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 did it. 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? Or is she going to bring him back in, 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. DID NOT. WIN YOU!*" Aaron's fist slammed down on the center panel. "It's not my fault you're a loser!"

Chanda only laughed. "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. Then shook his hand. He'd hit that panel hard. "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. "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. And... 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. 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, 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.”

“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. If his jerk parents hadn’t kicked her out, she might have gotten herself a little more dick. Jerks. 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?”

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. 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 nobody else had even seemed to notice. She was afraid to try again. When she could move again, 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?)

It was a bad place. She knew that. Still, if Kelsey could endure prostitution, Brandy erverting 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 the world away?

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. 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? 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 girl to prisoner would offer no take-backsies.

So she told them what she'd heard plenty of other losers say when someone was being a little too free with their winner's charity. "Um, you guys? I don't want to get you guys in 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. They didn't want a Lottery Bureau recovery team kicking their door in, after all. After some sheepish looks and sullen curses, they relented and let her go. She was shoved in the back of a car, then dumped on the side of the road. Naked. Mercifully, perhaps by their intent (though she doubted it), there was a gas station in sight. 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.

The elderly man working the counter told her she couldn't leave until she'd paid for them. There was no consideration of generosity to a woman clearly down on her luck. 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. If she wasn't, then... she didn't know. Surviving wasn't something she'd ever contemplated. Maybe she wasn't cut out for it. Maybe they could toss her in a cell and 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 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. 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 to see if they could get 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 lifted like she'd bestowed some civic award on 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? I know I look like shit, but somebody would've taken me. I could've waited and auctioned my ass off to the highest bidder. 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. 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 do something, 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, just 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 tried.”

Aaron’s grip tightened on the steering wheel. She heard a knuckle creak. “I’m sorry it’s so frustrating for you. For what it’s worth.”

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. 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. 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 didn’t make for good balance. “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 blind. I knew I’d probably bring in a lot 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 he 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. 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 it. 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 burn 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? 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. The door was open, and he was standing outside, fanning her with his shirt.

Groggily, she reached out and poked his tummy. "You lost weight."

"Thanks for noticing," he answered wryly. "Are you OK?"

"I don't think there is any possible way that I am OK. Seriously though, nice work."

He lowered his shirt, color blossoming in his cheeks. "Not joining the family for meals will do that. Doesn't hurt being told you've been forced into something with the most insanely hot girl alive."

He held out a jug of water. Must've gotten it from the trunk or something. She took a sip, then a longer sip. "All that for me?"

"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 sports.

"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 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. “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 was a couple 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 her seat and closed her eyes. She felt him tucking his windbreaker over the top of her. The game played on, teams tied at zero, as sleep stole over her while the car drove on into the night.