

Winners

One upside to the worst weekend of her 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 near 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 house for their farewell sleepover. Tiffany had run outside to hug them goodbye with tears in her eyes. Before the weekend was out, she'd helped attempt 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.

She chided herself. It wasn't fair. 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.

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. At the same time, however, it had brought to light the raw pleasure a loser could provide. She'd drunk from the poisoned well, and she'd loved it. Then hated herself for it after. By the time her parents were home from work and withheld her grounding, she'd 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.

Another self scolding followed. *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, where she'd first wondered if she'd been compromised, but she'd ignored them. How did you ask someone if they might have enslaved you? What would be the point, anyway? If he had, he'd 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, 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 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 texting her, and then fastidiously ignored him. There were other texts and calls, too. Krystal, wondering if she wanted to hang out or have a play date, maybe an exchange. Mimi asking for the same, but with more emojis, more lols, 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 of her company to Aaron in exchange for an hour for himself with Chanda.

Krystal didn't hide that she was offended by the ratio, but was nevertheless vicariously disappointed by "Aaron's" refusal.

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 parents. Grounded, only not by her parents, but by this monstrous Lottery.

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 level of trauma should prohibit such winnings.

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 BJs to kiddies."

The boy frowned, but still slapped her on the ass as he walked by. Nina didn't yelp. Didn't even register the surprise on her face. She looked like it was all familiar 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, getting to know the lay of the terrain. 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 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. 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 – disqualified her permanently from future enrollment. Her little sister, a sophomore, watched from a short ways down the hallway. Her 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 plain white t-shirt and 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 freshman about the fact that simply because Lesley Wang consented to them slapping 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 motor-boated her in front of his friends.

Chanda almost didn't recognize Gretchen Falconer after an amazingly transformative trip to the salon and the ten-day commencement of her winner-imposed bout of 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. The rest would take longer, but she'd get there. She had no choice.

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 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.

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 promotions) 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. 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 learning 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, 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 cry.

All this was what 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 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 and not human beings. PowerBall or no, part of Chanda marveled that anyone thought that whatever she might do for them in an hour was worth that much. Part of her was repulsed. Part of her wondered if Kelsey's personal rate was above or below that average. Above, she hoped. For some reason.

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 on her own race to expulsion. Those smiles didn't count. For now, they weren't getting much. 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 slender profile of her hero and/or slaver. He was squeezing 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 her 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 boy, 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 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 they could have ever imagined.

Once somebody started playing Show & 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 and twitch. (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 laughed at pretty much anything. It was yet another when Mikaela realized her winner wasn't there and threw a bawling hissy fit, pounding fists and feet on the floor and once shrieking for him. The girl was inconsolable. The SRO had to come and carry her out of class. Chanda couldn't even understand 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.

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 assigned a detention.

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. 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 extensive makeover. She looked pretty good, really, though no amount of diet or exercise

would correct that bone structure. She'd ditched those thick glasses of hers. Chanda wondered for a moment if they 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. Chanda was mindful to keep her lies believable, so that if she did 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.

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 smiles 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 disgusting to, um, make him..."

Chanda squeezed Kristin's hand sympathetically. "You're not disgusting, Kristin."

"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 just 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 was finally outed for her painted clothes. (The boys whispering behind her said she'd had old Mrs. Strother first period and Mr. Geer second; 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. 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 third 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 the power, this casual termination of a girl's 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 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. 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.

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 free – 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. She'd 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 called 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. So if Chanda's several hundred male classmates voted the same way Chanada's had, the odds of nobody using a single ticket on 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 that Friday.) 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 wouldn't he simply have her unable to doubt her feelings? The only reason she hadn't been curled up happily at his side all last week was because of her doubts. Beyond that, he was cute enough, if not exactly dreamy, 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. Winner or not, he'd done right by her.

Chanda didn't write down anything new 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. Most girls didn't need to plan for anything of the sort.

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 touchups that are 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 few days would be one-on-one meetings to start work on the 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. Business would probably be good for her today. Despite wanting to howl at her friend's absence, Chanda managed to shed only a single tear, 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 amazing tits 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. “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 at the park. “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, acting like this 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, but likewise 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 her friend 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 loose national organization of political protesters against the Lottery. She’d been surprised to learn on Drawing Day that Aaron was a member.

“Maria–”

“You’re disgusting.” She turned to look at Chanda with deep pity. It was the sort of expression Tiffany might have directed at Maria once. Now Tiffany was a slave who searched for new slaves for her winner. “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. She wouldn't have thought it of a middle-aged married man, 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?" He smiled indulgently, 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? I tried and tried to get ahold of you all last week, but you never responded. Are you OK?"

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 – 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 she'd left her jacket in her locker on 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. Then I didn't see you – don't know why but I always forget this is back here."

"I would've just 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, at the end of sex ed week. 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 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.

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 just 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. 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 their 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 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.”

“They’re gonna 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.” She shook her head. “And if they ended this tomorrow, it wouldn’t undo the damage they’ve already done.”

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.

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 you, but I’m not sure I understand. Walk me through what you’re saying, because I want to make sure there’s no misunderstanding.”

Her eyes narrowed. It wasn’t fair to be angry with him, not until she was sure, but still, if he was still playing games...

“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?”

“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 shrieked. I’m talking apoplectic.”

“Mikaela, yeah. I heard. What’s the 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?”

“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.”

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? What do I stand to gain from any of it?”

“Seriously? You’re a sweet guy, Aaron. Maybe you wanted to settle down, have a family and all that, but you didn’t want to dirty yourself with the Lottery. What’s the solution? You fill out your tickets, but instead of turning me 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.

“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.”

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. “Just 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 on the swing. A romantic notion, 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.

“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 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. “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 her old number, leave a three-minute voicemail or something and have it show up like a call. 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 guys. 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. 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.”

“Yeah. You’re pretty much caught up now.” She dropped her heads 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 last letter had some kind of stain over it, some food spillage that was now part of the table.

“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.”

“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 just try it? 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. 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 watch 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, she recognized the two of them. 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," she interrupted like they'd 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.

"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 more confused why she was talking to him. That was certainly something new.

Aaron kept his eyes anywhere but on the rutting duo, though Craig tapped Britt's hips to bring her to a stop. The girl looked sulky to be forced to stop. "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 his pathetic homophobia. "Nope. He'll just hang out way back there. Maybe watch, but if you minded being watched you wouldn't be fucking 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 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, not like 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 middle school, 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 a 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.

“Do you remember, we had the same gym class freshman year? And we were doing flag football and you were really bad and all – 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 stall in the locker room 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."

She 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. Cool.

"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."

"Bullshit 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?"

"That is not what I meant and you 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 that's 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, wedged in between her parents on the couch. 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 her mom's lap, because she'd feel guilty if she didn't.

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 lead 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 and sweat, tossed and turned most of the night. By the time the sun crept through the slats in the blinds, she wasn't any closer to any 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.

"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.

And minutes after that, Chanda pulled her bike off the sidewalk and 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. 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, 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. Her dad had hated it, but Mom had gone to bat for her. Just once, she’d wanted to look sexy, while she still had a say in it.

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 sure 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 people were) they could see where the V began 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. 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 she had ever worn to school,

ever, and on the hottest girl to ever attend that school, 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 nothing.

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 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. "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, had always grated on her.

"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... 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."

"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 whose offer mandated a mere eight years of unpaid servitude, 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 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. A winner that was a corporation didn't reverse their losers' sterilization, after all.

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.

For instance, 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. Besides, 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 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 for the whole 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, 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 week 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.

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 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.

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 saying too much. 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 silk panties. 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," commanded the tired 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 Jessi 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," droned Mr. Corley reflexively. Then he glanced up from his laptop, and his casual surveyal 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.”

“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, suggesting Aaron had cut ties with her since yesterday. 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. Her fellow 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. Just once.”

“You’re getting a D in here dude. Let *me* do your portfolio, 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.

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 just stalking her – 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!” 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.”

“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 a 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!” He punched the dashboard, then 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 your father 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.”

“Then you admit it’s perfectly fine for me to show myself 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 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 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 rich 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.”