

6. THE FINAL FOUR

“Are you playing the game?”

“None of the girls are actually playing.”

“I heard that Christy Gaines is actually campaigning to win. She even has buttons that she had printed up.”

“Someone needs to pull the plug on that girl.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s this game among all the guys at school? Like the final four basketball tournament. They took the names of the thirty-two hottest girls.”

“That is sick!”

“Who did this?”

“Warren.”

“Of course, what a little prick.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m not even on the list. I think Warren hates me because I wouldn’t go out with him.” Maisie shakes her shoulder length auburn hair as an act of defiance.

Sherry has just listened up to that point. “It’s just a game. You shouldn’t get so angry about it.”

Angie seems visibly upset, “This is just sick.”

“Angie, what do you have to complain about? You’ve already won two rounds.”

Jill looked confused, “I don’t get it. Girls in a contest.”

Sandy explains, “The girls really aren’t in a contest at all. It’s just about how the guys are acting according to this game. Let’s say that you and I are pitted against each other in the competition. The guys vote which one of us is the hottest.”

“Obviously, I am!” Jill asserts defiantly.

Sandy is amused, “That’s what’s so stupid about the game. It makes the guys think that they’re somehow more advanced than we are.”

Sherry jumps back in the game, “It’s all in good fun.”

Jill concurs, “It’s not like it’s so wrong. It’s just like brains. Some girls might be more blessed than others.”

Angie isn’t taking it so easily, “It creates this false sense of competition. It’s not like they’re aren’t a lot of pressures on girls.”

Masie is even more assertive, “It’s sexist. We should complain to the principal about this. We shouldn’t let them get away with it.”

Sherry challenges her, “The guys are doing this on their time. It’s not part of a class. You can’t get upset about every silly thing. Guys are jerks. Deal with it!”

“They’re talking about it at school. They are the ones who are making a big deal about this.”

Angie is just as vocal, “This is another male power trip. We should let them get away with it. In fact, they’re the ones who are acting as if this is some official thing.”

“There are a lot of things in life that aren’t fair.”

“I don’t want to come off as a bitch.”

Ann is trying not to let it get to her. Sherry and Jill have just been too compliant up to this point. “Warren wants to announce to winner at assembly. This has gone too far.”

Jill continues to defend the guys, “This is part of life. This happens all the time. Even if there’s not a contest.”

“It’s a mob mentality. The weaker-willed guys join in because it makes them seem as they can get one over on someone. Us girls.”

“And no matter how hard we work in school, it just brings us down to the level of a swim-suit model.”

“That’s a job. You shouldn’t take it away from the girls that do it. If you have a talent, you’ve got to use it.”

“Jill, you’re just used to going along with things. You need to think on your own.”

“Angie, now who’s being the bitch?”

Masie defends Angie, “This is not OK. We can’t excuse it as something that guys do. See what the effect of the contest is. It’s getting girls to think about each other competitively. We have to be independent of this shit!”

Ann is equally riled up, “Swim suit models just set up a bad image for women. As if we don’t exist if we don’t fit some preconceived idea. It’s not just about looks. It’s about a whole way of acting. Acting just to impress guys.”

“I know that I look good in a bathing suit. And guys like to look at me.”

Jill is too far gone for the rest of them to deal with. And Sherry is just her partner in crime. Both the girls think that envy fuels the others’ objection to the contest. But they don’t want to come right out and say it. Each of the two of them would like to win in her own way.

Ann walks out with Linda. Linda has just been listening.

“I’m not even on the list. Is there something wrong with me.”

“You heard Masie. It’s Warren’s revenge thing. Masie is the coolest girl in school.”

“That’s because she doesn’t put up with high school boys.”

“Is she going out with some guy in college?”

“I don’t know what she’s doing. She’s just more serious than these pranks.”

“I hate to say it. But I do feel left out.”

“There’s nothing to feel left out about.”

“You have nothing to worry about. Look at you.”

“You had it right at first. I have nothing to worry about. But either do you. This is a game for guys who can’t deal with reality. They resent women having intelligence. So they’ll do anything to put them down. We’re not calendar models.”

“But you see it all the time. A woman makes a name in the new. And then she does a Playboy centerfold to prove that she’s confident about herself.”

“Only has-beens fall for that bull shit. A real woman doesn’t get taken in by that.”

“You just feel it all around. Like guys really care about stuff like that. And we can feel it inside.”

“You just have to take a good look at the guys who believe this shit.”

“A lot of times it’s nice guys who are too shy to say what they really feel. So they make up for it by looking at girls like this.”

“You want to tell me that’s it’s biology. But it isn’t. It’s just a way to herd us girls

together like cattle. And brand us the way that the guys feel are OK.”

“We all give into it. We look at fashion magazines. We spend our time buying clothes.”

“It’s a way of working things out. Getting over a blue spell. We buy a new outfit, and we all of a sudden feel better. But that’s all it is. An entertainment. And if we take it for more than it is, it will only make us fucked up.”

“But it is more than that. It’s like something that I feel in the pit of my stomach. I feel that Jill has point.”

“For Jill, it’s a religion. She thinks her looks are a blessing from God because she is a better person than the rest of us.”

“Jill is hot.”

“Jill just wants us to see her through the mirror that she uses to admire herself. But she is just a witch. Look at her closely.”

“Aren’t you playing the same game as the guys? You’re trying to see the witch in her.”

“It’s not her looks. It’s not a matter of fate. But what she says is ugly.”

“Would you say the same thing about a guy?”

“More so! Otherwise, I’d just get snowed over by all the guys here.”

“You don’t seem to like many of them.”

“It’s not that. This place has a way of bringing out the worst in us. It’s not as if all this bad blood started with Warren. He’s just trying to deal with the shit from the school and from his parents. He’s trying to tell everyone that it’s not getting him down.”

For his part, Warren continues to act the jerk that has been known as.

“I’m thinking about joining the Air Force!”

“Are you really?”

“Jim was in ROTC. And now he’s doing his time.”

“Wow! I thought that he was supposed to go to college first.”

“He was eager to get over there.”

“Are you really going to go in the Air Force?”

Warren looked down, “I want to be a pilot.”

Steve smiled back, “What was that game that you were telling us about?”

Warren stood up proudly, “Beat the queer!”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s called *Beating the Queer* out of some guy. It’s like football. We just tackle some guy. Then we all jump on him and hit him and kick him. It’s all in good fun.”

“Warren, I think that you’re certifiable.”

“That’s why he wants to go in the Air Force. He’s just a psycho to begin with. It’ll give him an excuse.”

“Tim, you are a dick. I want to serve my country!”

“Doing what?”

“Warren, does anything that you say make sense?”

Warren takes a special delight that all the guys are involved in his contest.”

“Do you think that Christy is going to win this.”

“She really wants to win.”

“Hasn’t she slept with enough guys already.”

“That isn’t how it works.”

“Besides, didn’t she take the pledge?”

“What pledge?”

“No sex while still in high school.”

“Christy Gaines? Who are you kidding?”

“I hear that she’s a real screamer.”

“How would you know, Eddie? You’ve never been with a girl.”

“Except your Mom.”

Eddie gives Warren a friendly push, “No, I think it was your Mom. And she told me to tell Warren to brush his teeth after every meal. Because he eats so much shit.”

“Are you bad-mouthing the Tournament?”

“I think it’s cool.”

“That’s because you have a crush on Angie. And you think that she’s going to win.”

“I hear that some of the girls want to go to the principal.”

“You know what I say to those girls.”

Sam just stares at Warren, “What do you say?”

“All ‘dem bitches just want my money!”

Warren pulls on his skinny black jeans.

“Warren, you’re just a little punk.”

“Warren is gay. That’s why he started this contest.”

“I’ll tell you who’s gay.”

“Warren, you are all bluster. All bark and no bite.”

Warren shakes off the taunting. “So who is going to win?”

“Not Angie if I have my say.”

“What about Masie? She’s the hottest girl in school. And she ain’t even on the list.”

“Masie’s got a big mouth. She’s probably the one who went to the principal.”

“No one’s gone to the principal yet. That’s just a rumor. But if anyone went, it would probably be Masie.”

“Warren, you’re just pissed because she wouldn’t go out with you.”

“She’s not all that hot.”

“Resentment.”

Linda is getting ready for bed. While she was doing her homework, she had put the silly tournament out of her mind. But now she is starting to think about it again. What kind of guy is Warren Butterfield that makes him think up stuff like this? As is there aren’t enough pressures everyday. It’s sort of like a coal miner who smokes. He just wants to chose his own punishment. She wonders about Christy Gaines. She is only encouraging this nonsense. Maybe someone is going to tell their parents. She bets that Christy’s parents are proud of her. Like a parent who encourages her daughter to tease as many boys as possible so that she can get back at the world for her own failures as a teen.

She hasn’t actually seen the list. But she knows that she’s not on it. She doesn’t really feel a part of the craziness of high school life. She can’t let it get to her. She knows there are guys at school who like her. And some of them probably dream about her when they are at home. For some girls that isn’t enough. If there’s a spark, they feels that they have to stoke the

fire. Linda knows that flames can just get scary and rear up and burn you!

She likes the safety of her vantage point. She doesn't want to give in to her curiosity about the contest. She just wants it to go away. If she isn't one of the players, it's nothing to worry about. When she goes away to college in a year, all this will be a vague memory. And over the years, it will all fade.

What about Christy? Will she let this be the driving moment in her life. Like the beginning of a career. Maybe she wants to be a model. Or be in beauty contests. This is nothing. Only a minor test.

What does Christy see when she looks in a mirror. Does she ever have those dark days? How deep is Christy Gaines? Linda remembers her from English class in the tenth grade. She'd always be messing with her hair. Or trying to get a glimpse of herself in the reflection in the outdoor window. It seemed like a real Physics problem that the girl ever succeeded. But when it came to discussion of the stories, she always told everyone that she hated to think about depressing thing.

Maybe that was why she was so afraid of looking inside. Now, Christy feels that she is getting her revenge for all those dilemmas of her past.

Christy and Warren and all of them are just trying to let off steam. Everyone spends all their time wondering about grades and exams and where they are going to college. This just gives them the confidence to believe that they will succeed at the bigger challenges down the line.

Linda hates the fact that she is thinking about this so much. She wants to believe that the important things in life she has some control over. She feels this force that seems to have nothing to do with her. But it has a direction for her. And she can feel it taking her over. She wants the fluency of Warren and Christy. But in this world, she just feels tongue-tied.

She usually doesn't have trouble sleeping. Tonight doesn't seem all that different.

"I hear that it's gone to the second round."

"The sweet sixteen!"

"I thought that they start with sixty-four teams."

"Warren said that there weren't enough cute girls for sixty-four. So he started with thirty-two."

"Warren is such a dick!"

"Warren tells everyone that he has to go out with the Final Four just to see if they are road-worthy."

"You know what that means."

"I hear that Warren doesn't have a dick!"

"I've seen it in swim practice. But he does like to hide it."

"Are you queer too?"

Ann catches up with Linda in the hall. She has been overhearing the guys talk about the Tournament.

"They're actually betting money on the rounds. Just like in basketball."

"I don't believe it."

"Shep Douglas is putting up his Lexis in the hopes that Christy will win. He'll be a millionaire if she does."

“He’s crazy.”

“His parents are supposed to buy him a new one anyway. And they told him that he could sell his for his college fund.”

“Must be nice. So Christy is his college fund now.”

“Seems like it.”

“Maybe we should try to convince Christy to quit.”

“You think that she is going to listen to any of us. Have you ever talked to her?”

“Not recently!”

“Either have I.”

“A win for Christy could be a good thing. Sort of a payback to all the guys who think that they have one over on her. It’s not as if she’s going to sleep with anyone who votes for her.”

“But there seems a lot riding on the tournament now. Who knows what anyone will do to win?”

“I never thought of it that way.”

Linda didn’t want to spend her time thinking about this. Now it’s preoccupying her even more. Sometimes she just feels out of touch with the other kids. Even Ann seems excited by it all. Angie is not so tolerant.

“This has gone far enough.”

“You’re just pissed that you almost lost your match.”

“I’m not paying that kind of attention to what’s going on.”

“Warren knew that you were going to make a ruckus. But his friends would have gone crazy so he put you against Blaze Gerrard. Everyone the guys want to get to her. And ,Angie, you still won.”

“I told you that I don’t care about this shit. You think that word isn’t going to get back to the administration. Some parent is going to complain. And then we’re all going to get punished for Warren’s idea.”

“Why don’t you beat up the little shit? You can take him.”

All the girls at the table laugh.

Linda asks Ann, “What are they laughing about over there?”

“I have no idea.”

But the laughter seems to explode over the entire room.

“Angie is just lobbying to win. She’s not the sort to go to the principal.”

“It could be time to shut down the contest.”

“Not the way that I see it. This is getting too good.”

“All the girls are at each other’s throats. It just makes it easier for us guys.”

“I think that was Warren’s idea.”

“I could talk to him. Shake him up a bit.”

“It’s not about Warren anymore. It’s much bigger than him.”

The girls still in the contest seem to radiate a perfection that they could never contemplate. Some believe the new celebrity. More than Christy Gaines, they are absorbed by all the attention and believe that they can somehow cash in their new renown.

“Angie, you are the best. Use it for what it is.”

“I don’t want to give them credit.”

“Are you angry because of the contest, or because it’s the guys who are doing it?”

“I just hate it all around.”

She makes a motion to her mouth. The other girls follow suit and laugh.

“But if you beat Christy Gaines, it will really show them.”

“You can’t show these guys.”

Angie doesn’t want to imagine that she has achieved some new kind of power. If she has something special, it existed long before this contest. And playing along wasn’t going to enhance that spirit.

Samantha wants to start her own contest about the guys. She believes that it will put everyone on an equal footing.

“It will only make the guys think that they were OK in doing this in the first place.”

“We could do it for charity.”

“Anyone who gets taken in by these silly contests is the one who needs the charity.”

Angie is becoming more vocal in her opposition. Some think that it is only fitting that she breezes into the next round. But this is hardly the result that she has been courting.

“I can’t even quit like in a beauty contest.”

“We could create a web-site against the contest. Show pictures of Warren in an unflattering light.”

“That only validates his efforts. We have to ignore him.”

“But you want to shut down the game.”

“It’s all becoming such a distraction.”

Ann and Linda watch comfortably from the sidelines. Angie can’t attain that same distance And it really is a shame. She just wanted nothing to do with Warren’s silly little game. And now she is in the center of it all. It is starting to look as if this is just a stunt on her part to increase her own numbers.

“If they stop it now, it will be like that thing in Florida where they stopped the voting.”

“That was a recount.”

“But they were afraid of the result. What is Angie afraid of?”

“She is looking like a winner because she has brains and looks.”

“I still think that she’s a skank!”

“Has Warren been getting to you too?”

“Does Warren really want Christy Gaines.”

“All he does is make fun of Christy. Warren has his own agenda.”

“What is that?”

“He’s a total fuck up. And now he’s starting to look like some kind of superstud!”

“What about Shep? If Christy doesn’t win, he is fucked.”

“He never bet his car on her. That was a stupid rumor.”

“He still put up money that she will win.”

“Ever since they broke up, he has been wishing that they will get back together.”

The Tournament is entering its final phases. And it is only becoming more of a distraction for all the students. Warren is basking in his new found celebrity. He seems like a genius and mulls over other schemes so that he might earn even more money.

“So Warren gets money from every round.”

“That’s how it works. You have to pay to vote. Not that much. But with all the guys playing, he is really taking a cut.”

“Don’t some people object that the winner should get the whole pot?”

“It was Warren’s idea.”

Linda is trying to ignore all the silliness with midterms coming up. But whenever she turns around, someone is talking about the contest. It is a mystery to her why no one has been able to end the madness.

“You heard what happened.”

“No, what?”

“Angie, knocked Warren down in the hallway. He really looked like a fool. She pushed him really hard. And he couldn’t even get up. Everyone was laughing.”

“Did she get in trouble?”

“Everyone cleared out before the teachers saw a thing. But the word is out.”

“So is Walter going to disqualify her.”

“No way. She’s bigger than the contest.”

“That is just crazy.”

“It’s so ironic.”

“Does she really want to win?”

“Not in the least. But a lot of the guys are pissed off at Christy. So they’re taking it out on her.”

“So it’s Christy against Angie in the final round.”

“No, it’s the Final Four. Brittany and Leslie are still playing. But no one gives them a chance.”

“Ann, you sound like an expert.”

“I talk to Phil in math class. And he has all these charts and graphs. He wants to predict who’s going to win. Like a science project.”

“I thought that Angie was going to report it to the principal.”

“She didn’t want to be the rat. Beside, they’ve got to know. Principal Jenkins is treating this like harmless fun.”

“If he was a woman, he wouldn’t be so sanguine about it all.”

“He had all those problems with that teacher and a student last year. This is the least of his worries.”

“It’s all about being oversexed!”

“You should talk!”

They both laugh.

That night Linda keeps thinking about the contest. As she settles off the sleep, Linda starts to review the details of the Tournament. She imagines herself doing a statistics problem. She has pages of notes and is sitting at her computer. A spreadsheet helps to bring all the information together. Maybe she can’t play the game. But she is going to figure out the puzzle behind the game.

In her dream, she is getting ready for a soccer game. She used to play soccer in ninth grade. And she was better than a lot of the boys. This time, she is going to show them how good she is. It is the finals. And she is going to show them all up. The only problem is that she

can't find her cleats. She just wants to get on the field and play. The game is starting without her. She feels that she can never catch up.

When she wakes up, she feels that it is all so silly. Even more so than she thought it to be before. She doesn't want to talk about it anymore.

"Ann, I have important things to worry about. I have to plan my life. I have early admission to college."

"Linda, just don't be so serious!"

"I'm not. It's just that I'm almost eighteen. I can't let myself be spun around by jerks."

"You're not even part of the contest. What are you really fretting about?"

"I'm not. There are things that are important in my life. I used to take piano lessons. Maybe I should start doing that again."

"That sounds good."

"Or I could take another language."

"That sounds good too."

Ann is trying to encourage her. She starts to think about her own misgivings about this escapade. She just can't muster the same kind of confidence that Linda is able to. She's better at giving advice. But she realizes that she isn't taking it.

When they finally decide to have an assembly on the Tournament, it hardly seems like a surprise. It's just that the administration has tolerated the game for so long that their decision really is an imposition. At this point, there is nothing that the kids can do. The momentum has been stolen from them.

The principal is the first to speak. And he says something vague about the detriments of such activity. Vice Principal Andrews is more specific.

"These kinds of activities provide a terrible image for women. We should never encourage such demeaning depictions. We are here to offer opportunities for everyone. These so-called games are just an affront. This is not the sort of behavior that we expect of gentleman. What makes it worse is that some of the girls have taken joy in the competition. For that reason, I thought it would be a good idea to bring in a psychologist to talk to all of you."

"What a bummer!"

The psychologist hardly minces words. She claims that the Tournament advances a stereotype. As such, it is little different from the effects of pornography.

"It's like trying to hard wire the brain to react in an automatic fashion. It's no different than any other type of addictive behavior."

Her soporific tone only sent the student body to sleep.

"You do know where this is all headed. Warren is just going to convince a bunch of girls to pose naked for him."

"And he's going to put their picture on a website."

"Can't he get arrested for that?"

"Not if they're over eighteen."

"He sound like officer material."

"A few good men."

"I hear that they're going to make him have a private session with the psychologist."

"Who told them that he was behind the Tournament?"

“I think that everyone knew.”

“I heard that Christy Gaines complained.”

“But she was the one who wanted to win most of all.”

“She did. That was until the backlash. Everyone started to support Angie. She couldn’t take it. So she tossed in the towel.”

“What a spoiled brat!”

“Are you sure that’s what happened?”

“I heard that Angie was behind it.”

“So why did she wait for so long?”

“She realized that she was going to win. And that would have really embarrassed her since she was so against the game in the first place.”

“I hate girls like Angie. They use it to get ahead. And they turn over the board when they don’t get their way.”

“You can’t blame Angie. This was all a revenge plot of Warren’s.”

“I bet Masie was really behind it all. After all, she was the one who got shafted by the whole game.”

“Masie kind have liked it. She realized that Warren was getting comeuppance.”

“Yeah, Angie really comes out of this smelling like a rose.”

“All the more reason that she didn’t do a thing.”

“We’re still going to wonder who was going to win.”

“It was obvious.”

“Why doesn’t Warren hold his own contest outside of school?”

“That was his intention all along. He did a lot of this on the internet. Sure they talked about it at school. But he never actually conducted the Tournament on school property.”

“They told his parents that they’d kick him out of school for good if Warren kept on with it.”

“He’s going into the Air Force. Why should he care?”

“He’s going to need letters of recommendation. He doesn’t want to fuck that up.”

“You’re telling me that there’s finally something that Warren doesn’t want to fuck up. Who are you kidding?”

Warren is sitting in his room and he is dismantling his infamous web site. He wonders how he can use all this information for his benefit. Blackmail is hardly beneath him. And it has its own rewards. No one wants their dirty laundry aired in public. With all that he already has on everyone, he wonder how the Tournament got so out of control. He could have easily have determined a winner. Angie just got to him.

He sits back in his chair and contemplates his revenge against her.

Angie could take delight in the fact that she was the presumptive winner. She never wanted the game to progress to its end. But after she knocked Warren down, she had made her point. Down deep, he realizes that there isn’t anything that she wouldn’t do to protect her integrity. And she isn’t going to let a twirp like Warren get in her way.

In the succeeding weeks, the Tournament seems like a distant memory. For all his huffing and puffing, Warren can’t do much of anything to Angie.

Christy Gaines takes it a little more severely. It's not as if she is mired in a dark depression. But she had so wanted a sweet victory. Too bad that it would have eluded her grasp no matter what. As the truth starts to settle in, Christy becomes more bitter. She rifles through her credit cards to incite her into a buying spree. But none of this is enough to cure her doldrums.

"We need to feel sorry for Christy Gaines."

"Linda, this is not an Austen novel. Her fate is entirely her own doing."

"Warren and his Tournament made her feel that she was worth so much more."

"If she feels that way, she needs to make a little more of herself."

"Easier said than done. You sound like a preacher for the Moral Majority!"

"Someone has to stand up for honest value."

"Christy just needed that boost more than the rest of us. I feel bad for her."

"She's not a puppy. She was pretty ruthless along the way."

"Hate the game not the playa"

"That is rich coming from you. Linda."

Angie realizes that she has only become more self-assertive due to the actions of the boys. She could have easily wilted. And she could have also have been tagged for her opposition to the Tournament. Instead, she ended up rising above the pettiness. Even her confrontation with Warren only added to her nobility. She wielded a sword for all the girls who had been excluded by the contest. She really turned the table on the guys.

Afterwards, some of the guys try to approach her. They work to flatter her based on her success. She doesn't let any of them phase her. She trusts their approaches no more than she had trusted Warren. She has bigger fish to fry.