

Nothing Poker  
By: CBtheSurvivor  
TW: light gore

"Hey, you wanna watch a movie tonight?" Izzy asks. She's already changed into her comfy sweats as she plops down on the couch next to her boyfriend.

"It's poker night, babe," Mitch responds casually. He places a hand on her knee and pats it gently. He has his phone in his other hand, double-checking that his two poker buddies were still interested in playing. Max said he'd be a little late, but Parker had sent a thumbs up emoji. Mitch figures that means he'll be on time.

Izzy groans and goes limp, letting her body slowly slide down the couch until she's sitting on the floor.

"Why do you guys always play poker like that, anyway? It's not like you're actually betting anything," Izzy points out, having seen glimpses of their games in the past. They never put real money in the pot, opting to make nonsensical bets that were never followed through on. She didn't get it.

Mitch laughs, patting Izzy's head and running his fingers through her long chestnut hair. He waits until she looks up at him to respond.

"We call it Nothing Poker, and it's just a way to hang out and relax. As long as there are no stakes, it's just a chill time with the boys," he explains, helping Izzy back up and into his lap. He wraps his arms around her possessively and nuzzles his cheek against her shoulder. "You can join us if you'd like."

"It just sounds so laaaaaame," Izzy whines, going limp in his grasp now, but strategically making sure she doesn't slip out of his arms.

Struggling to keep Izzy from falling, Mitch reaches over the couch's armrest and grabs a deck of cards. It's a stylistic deck with different video game characters on each card. He holds a few cards up so Izzy can see.

"It's not lame. We take turns providing the decks we play with, and whoever wins the most hands gets to keep the deck that week. See? There's a reason to play still."

Izzy grabs the cards from his hands and inspects them closely, bringing them up to her face as if she's a blind old lady. Mitch begins pulling more and more cards from the deck, handing each one to Izzy who grabs them eagerly until she has almost half the deck.

Mitch chuckles and raises an eyebrow at her.

"Hm. I recognize some of these characters," Izzy says finally, squinting at the cards and sticking out her lips.

"Alright, alright. Give em back," Mitch tells her, taking the cards from her and putting them back in the box. He gently pushes her off his lap as he stands and starts setting up the card table. He puts three chairs at the table and then heads to the kitchen to grab a few snacks. By the time he returns, Izzy has pulled up a fourth chair and is sitting at the table, looking through the cards again.

Mitch sets down a bag of pretzels, a six-pack, and some sour candies. Izzy mindlessly grabs a handful of pretzels and shoves them in her mouth, chewing like a cavewoman.

"Some of these cards are pretty cool, actually," she says, pretzel crumbs flying across the table.

Before Mitch can respond, there's a knock at the door. He checks the time and sees that it's exactly eight o'clock. Parker was nothing if not punctual. He strides over and opens the door to find his shorter, accountant friend standing there holding a six-pack of his own.

"Sup, dude," Parker greets him, walking in and stopping in his tracks as he sees Izzy sitting at their card table.

"Hey, man. Don't mind her, she's just looking at the cards," Mitch says with a wave of his hand.

"No! I wanna play!" Izzy shouts, turning around in her chair to glare at her boyfriend.

"Alright, alright. I guess she's playing," Mitch turns back to Parker with a shrug.

"No worries. Hi Izzy," Parker says as he takes the seat across from her.

"Hi Parky," she responds, her nose buried in the deck of cards.

"Max said-

"He'll be late? Figures," Parker finishes for Mitch. He grins at his bud, showing no malice, but rather a mutual understanding that Max had never been good at keeping track of time.

The three of them sit at the table and begin drinking and snacking as they wait for the final player. Izzy keeps her nose in the cards, going through each one to admire the artwork. Meanwhile, Parker and Mitch discuss how their weeks have been. Mitch has started a new job and Parker went on a bad date, but otherwise there isn't much to speak of.

After another fifteen minutes, Max arrives and lets himself in.

"What's up, party people!" he shouts as he walks in the door. He takes one look at Izzy, shrugs, and sits down in the final seat. "Get ready to eat my dust, kiddos, I've been on a lucky streak."

"Oh yeah? Is that why you're late?" Mitch asks, half joking and half accusing.

"Actually, yes. I was downtown winning blackjack," he replies, beaming as he pulls out a few hundred dollars from his leather jacket pocket.

Parker rolls his eyes. Izzy looks up finally and frowns.

"Wait, you gamble for real, and then come here to...pretend?" she asks, confused.

"Nah. I come here to hang out with these idiots and to eat snacks. The poker game is just something to keep our hands busy," Max says, laughing loudly as he takes his jacket off and drapes it over his chair. He stands a full head taller than Parker and has sandy blonde, surfer hair that almost reaches his shoulders. He shakes his hair out and Mitch winces as he sees a bit of dandruff rain down on his table.

Mitch slowly pulls the cards away from his girlfriend and begins to shuffle. She pouts for a moment, but then decides it'd be better to stuff her mouth with more snacks.

The cards are dealt, and to Izzy's surprise, she's given six cards.

"Baby, you gave me an extra," she says, trying to hand back the useless two of spades in her hand.

"No, you want six cards. We play it a little differently since there are no real stakes. We each get six cards, put down the card we don't want, and as we place the card down, we say what we're betting. There's no folding, and usually you bet something in correspondence with how confident you are in your hand. So, for instance, if I had a royal flush, I'd put down the card with a different suit and bet my life on it," Parker explains patiently.

Izzy frowns as he explains the rules, but slowly starts nodding.

"So, I can't fold, but if my hand is really bad, I can just bet a piece of lint, right?" she asks, looking at Mitch for clarification.

"Nailed it," he says with a smile, "Though, a piece of lint is probably worse than any other bet we've made."

"Maybe my hand is just that bad," she says, quickly turning her head away and shutting her eyes. She didn't want anyone to know that she actually had three jacks in her hand on the very first deal.

They take their turns and place their bets. Max goes first to allow Izzy to see how it's played and so she can go last. He places down the four of clubs and bets his blackjack winnings from the day, showing confidence in his hand. Parker tosses in the three of hearts and bets his half-drunk beer. Mitch adds the seven of hearts to the fake pot and bets his old video game console. The young men all turn to look at Izzy who can no longer contain her grin.

"I bet the whole farm!" she shouts, tossing in the two of spades.

"Izzy..." Mitch chides as Max laughs and Parker sighs, "You have to bet something you actually have. Otherwise, it would be nonsense."

"It is nonsense! Oh, whatever. I bet all my savings, I guess. Is that better?" She glares at Mitch for a moment, looking him up and down and noting how good his short black hair is looking today. He was lucky he was handsome and had a nice jawline, because he could be a real control freak sometimes.

Mitch nods approvingly and then fixes the four cards in the middle of the table into a neat stack.

"Wow, you either really don't understand how to play, or you've got a killer hand," Parker comments, squinting at Izzy as he tries to figure out which is the case.

She just smiles at him and pulls her cards closer to her face, stifling a giggle.

"I have a feeling I know which one it is," Max says as he reveals his two pair. Parker has a queen high and Mitch shows his pair of aces, then all eyes fall on Izzy as she kicks her feet and giggles maniacally.

"Read em and weep, boys," she declares, tossing her cards on the table and pumping both fists in the air.

"Beginner's luck," Parker says under his breath as Izzy whoops towards the ceiling.

Mitch laughs as he reaches out to fix the cards again so he can deal the next hand.

"Congrats, babe. You're a natural," he says as he leans over and kisses her cheek.

"We should play for real at some point," she suggests, a twinkle in her eye.

All three men glare at her. Mitch shakes his head slightly as she shrinks down in her seat. She remains quieter for the next couple of hands until she runs into a nice straight, and then returns to her normal, giddy self. The game goes on, and it's clear that Parker was right: Izzy is having some impressive beginner's luck. She wins the most hands, and all three men congratulate her on winning as she gathers up the cards and grins at her fortune.

As the game and snacks are packed up, Izzy thanks Mitch for letting her play, and Parker realizes she doesn't know the other rule they have.

"Oh, by the way, Izzy, since you won tonight, you have to provide the deck of cards next week. That is, if you want to play with us again," he offers.

"I'd love to! I'll get a great deck! You'll see!"

The week moves slowly for the four of them, but finally the night for Nothing Poker returns, and Izzy excitedly helps Mitch prepare.

"Did you get a deck for tonight?" Mitch asks casually, filling a bowl with carrots. He knows Max won't eat them, but Parker has been talking about how he wants to lose some weight, so Mitch wants to help if possible.

"Duh! I found a really good one, just like I said I would. You're going to be mystified by it," Izzy tells him.

"Oh, mystified, huh? I'm excited to see it." He finishes setting up the snacks just in time as Parker knocks on the door.

"Oh man, I can't wait to take a load off and forget my worries," Parker says with a sigh. He kicks his shoes into the corner and plops down at the table. He smiles softly at the bowl of carrots and grabs a handful to munch on as they wait for Max.

Izzy and Mitch join him and make small talk for a few minutes until Max arrives, only a few minutes late this time around.

"Good evening, boys! Oh, and lady," Max greets them boisterously as he walks in, tosses his backpack to the side, and lands heavily in the last chair next to Izzy. He explains how he was now back in a couple college courses, and the lecture let out a bit late today. Too distracted to even grab a beer as he usually does, he begins to explain how his classes are going.

As the men catch up, Izzy sits there bouncing in anticipation. She can't wait to show off the deck of cards she procured for the night's game, knowing they'll be impressed. Finally, Mitch turns to her and chuckles.

"Are you ready to bring out the cards?" he asks.

"Yes!" Izzy squeals, pulling them out of her pocket where she'd had them hidden away. She places the deck on the table, and they all lean in as she spreads the cards out. They're purple and glittery, and it takes the men a moment to realize that they have a cosmic aesthetic to them. It looks like they're snapshots of the night sky with stars, comets, clouds, and the moon in various designs.

"Whoa, Izzy, these are cool," Max breathes as he picks one up and looks at it. It feels heavier than he expected, and with how many playing cards he's held in his life, he can't help but frown slightly.

"You good, Max?" Parker asks.

"Are these coated with metal or something? They feel kind of strange," he asks Izzy.

"Oh, I don't know. I got them at a cool shop in that plaza by the library. They might be!" Izzy beams with pride as the others clearly approve of her selection.

With that, Mitch shuffles the deck and begins to deal. Six cards to each of them. His hand is pretty bad, but luckily Parker is going first.

"I bet my left shoe," Parker says, clearly annoyed at his poor luck.

Then, it's Mitch's turn. "I'll bet a single can of beer."

"Hmm, I bet the leftover pizza in our fridge," Izzy says, scrunching up her face.

"Hey, now, half of that is mine," Mitch reminds her.

"Oh my god, fine. I bet half the leftover pizza in our fridge," she clarifies. Mitch nods happily as she rolls her eyes.

"Low rollers tonight! I'm putting up my autographed Beatles album, then. Clearly this is no competition," Max laughs as he places his extra card in the pile and reveals the winning flush in his hand. He grins widely as the others groan, and Mitch starts to clean up the cards to deal the next hand. Max grabs the unopened beer in front of him, pops the tab, and takes a long swig.

"Save all your gambling luck for Nothing Poker, did you?" Parker jeers at his friend as Max puts the beer down hard on the table and belches.

"Hah! Maybe! I didn't hit the casino this week, so I guess you're all stuck with my fortuitousness!" Max announces loudly.

"That's not even the proper use of that word. It's a good thing you're not going for an English degree," Parker banters.

"Oh, what do you know?" Max shoots back.

"English, at least," Parker answers.

They're laughing as Mitch deals the next hand. He's first this time, but his luck is still elsewhere.

"Ugh, I bet a piece of lint," he groans, getting a quick glare from Izzy as he uses her idea from the previous week.

"Fine. I bet my entire wardrobe," Izzy counters decisively.

"Whoa," Mitch responds, shocked, "You guys have no idea how much that means to her."

"Oh yeah? Well, then I bet my left kidney!" Max shouts back. He's smiling wildly. The imaginative stakes to the game they played always made it much more fun. He could bet anything and everything for the excitement, but in case he got carried away, he wouldn't actually have to pay his debts.

"Jeez, you two. I just want everyone to know that if I could fold, I would. Instead, I guess I'll bet a high five," Parker says dejectedly.

"Alright! Full house, baby!" Max shouts, tossing his cards onto the table.

"Oh, oh, oh! Four of a kind, I win!" Izzy squeals, revealing her own cards.

"Hahaha, way to go, Izzy," Parker laughs, happy that someone put Max in his place as he stands up to give Izzy a high five across the table.

"Thanks, Parky," Izzy grins.

Mitch shrugs as he collects the cards. He glances at Max who is sitting there, silent and pale in the face as the weight of his loss hits him. He's a little surprised to see just how pained Max looks at losing. No one likes to lose, Max especially, but he never harbored bad feelings over it, at least not with Nothing Poker. Yet, at this moment, he looks so shocked that it seems like he's struggling to breathe. Mitch shakes his head and begins to shuffle again.

Izzy pulls her chair back in, sitting down. As she does, her eyeline drops to the point on the table where her cards were laying a moment before.

She screams.

The cards go flying as Mitch jumps at her bloodcurdling scream. Parker exclaims in response, accidentally pushing himself a bit away from the table as he looks over at Izzy who is standing back from the table now.

That's when all three men see it at the same time.

Lying on the table in front of her, a dark red, fist-sized bean is sitting in a shallow pool of sticky crimson.

Mitch retches as Parker shouts incoherently again. For once, Max is the only one to find his words.

"That's my kidney," he whimpers, eyes wide as he down at his torso.

"Eww! Get it off, what is this, some kind of sick joke?" Izzy asks, disgusted as she takes two steps backwards.

Max shakes his head, unable to take his eyes off his internal organ now sitting on the table in front of him.

"Max, there's no way that's your actual kidney. Come on. What are you up to?" Mitch accuses, trying to decide whether to touch it or not. There's a bit of doubt in his mind, but the impossibility of it actually being Max's kidney makes him think it's just an elaborate prank.

"I don't know, that looks suspiciously like a real kidney to me," Parker says, standing behind his chair as his own mind goes through the possibilities of this being one of Max's jokes.

"Guys, I'm being completely serious right now. That's my kidney! I...I bet it, and now it's Izzy's," Max claims, clutching his side now as he feels the emptiness inside him.

"No, no, no. Shut up, Max, that's impossible. Take that freaky thing off the table and stop fooling around," Izzy demands, pointing at it without looking.

The kidney pulses, discharging blood and a second, clear liquid onto the table. The pool beneath it begins to creep towards the cards scattered on the table. Still unsure if this is a prank or real, Mitch reaches out and collects the deck, then looks carefully at Max.

He's terrified.

"This isn't possible. It was inside you. How did it get out here?" Mitch blurts.

"I bet it! Don't you see? It was a real bet. I don't know why...but...ugh," Max groans as he feels the sudden loss of blood and one of his kidneys.

"Max! Hey, come on. Drink something," Mitch tells him. Max reaches for the beer in front of him. "Not that. Parker, grab him some water." Mitch snatches the beer can away from him, looks down at it and frowns.

"Where are your glasses?" Parker asks as he rushes into the kitchen.

"Second cupboard on the right," Mitch says. He looks back down at his hand to find it empty. He frowns and looks at Max again, the beer sitting in front of him as if Mitch had never grabbed it in the first place.

"Just get it off the table," Izzy whines, still trying to avoid looking at the oozing organ.

"Shut up, Izzy!" Mitch shouts, panicking. He grabs the beer again to keep it away from his pained friend, but as soon as he blinks, it's back where it was. "What is happening?"

Parker returns and helps Max drink some water from a glass. As Max swallows, he sees Mitch looking completely befuddled, staring at the beer can.

"Wait. Wait, I never grabbed a beer," he realizes.

"No, you didn't," Mitch says as his blood runs cold, "But I bet one."

Izzy screams again. Parker's hand starts to shake as he tries to keep a hold of the glass of water.

"What else was bet? Parker's left shoe?" Mitch looks to the corner where Parker kicked his shoes upon arrival. Only one remains. He looks under the table to find the second one next to Max's feet.

"Oh, come on," Parker whispers.

"I bet, um, the leftover, no, half the leftover pizza," Izzy says through her hands as she covers her mouth, trying not to vomit at the still pulsing kidney.

Mitch rushes to the fridge and throws the door open. He pulls out the pizza box and flips the lid up. Of the four slices that were left over from the previous night, only two are still in the box.

"Guys, this can't be happening. How is this happening? Hold on, Izzy, you won last round. And...oh, I only bet a piece of lint," Mitch grimaces, trying to make sense of things.

"Yeah, great job," Izzy snaps.

"And all I bet was..." Parker's face drops as his and Izzy's eyes meet.

"A high five," they say together.

Mitch gasps, "Oh god. It's real."

"Then how do we get my kidney back inside me?" Max asks in a panic. He's now staring at the organ on the table. His organ.

"Okay, okay. It's like magic, or something. So, you just have to win your kidney back," Mitch says shakily, sitting back down at the table.

"Are you kidding me? We're going to play with my organ?" Max asks, incredulous.

"You're the one who bet it in the first place!" Izzy shouts at him, still keeping her distance from the table where Max's blood is now dripping off.

"That was supposed to be a fake bet!" Max returns the shout, then winces and grabs his side.

"Um, guys, I don't think we have a lot of time here. Max just lost an organ and a lot of blood. We have to be quick. Just...just play another round, come on," Parker speaks quickly, sitting back down himself.

"Easy for you to say. You don't have to sit with a kidney dripping on you," Izzy complains, gingerly reapproaching the table. She angles her chair to hopefully avoid the blood, and sits down, doing everything she can to ignore Max's kidney inches away from her.

"Alright, here's the plan. Max, just play your best hand. The rest of us will throw the round. Izzy, you bet Max's kidney so he can get it back, and Parker and I will bet nothing. Then, we reveal our cards, Max gets his kidney back, and we all go home and never play this dumb game again," Mitch explains as he starts to shuffle the mystifying cards once again.

Parker nods, Izzy retches, then shuts her eyes and nods slowly. Mitch looks to Max, but he's too out of it to acknowledge the plan. He can only hope that his friend will cooperate.

He deals the cards, being careful not to toss any into the growing pool of Max's bodily fluids dripping off his kidney. Looking down at his cards, he silently regrets that he has to throw the hand. He finally got something good, but at the wrong time.

"Okay. Um, I bet Max's kidney," Izzy begins, placing the ten of spades onto the table. Mitch nodded in approval as they all turned to Max.

There was a dumb grin on his face as he looked at his cards with one hand and clutched his side with the other.

"Max. It's your turn. You have to play," Parker said gently as they awaited his move.

"Oh. Right. I got something good. You guys have no clue how good my luck has been lately," he chuckles. He adds the six of diamonds to the pot and nods contentedly.

"You still have to bet," Mitch reminds him.

As they all look back down to the two cards in the pot, they're shocked to find only Izzy's ten of spades there. Max gasps.

"What the-" he mutters, putting the six of diamonds down from his hand again, "Sorry. I'll bet my car!" He grins wildly, his eyes unfocused.

"What? Max! Stop betting valuable stuff!" Parker shouts at him.

"It's fine. He's going to win anyway. It doesn't matter what he bets. Hurry Parker, he's losing it," Mitch says, gesturing at the table.

"Sorry. Here, I bet nothing," Parker says as he tosses the jack of clubs into the pile. He glances at the morbid pool of blood, then back down to his hand.

"Great. Okay, I bet-" Mitch starts.

"Wait!" Parker interrupts, holding up his hand of six cards. Mitch looks at Parker's hand, then back down at the table where the jack of clubs has disappeared.

"What is happening?!" Izzy cries out, desperate and terrified as tears start to stream down her cheeks.

"I don't understand the rules of this," Parker bemoans, looking towards Mitch.

"The rules haven't changed. They're just now being enforced and followed through on for once," Mitch realizes aloud. He stares down at the six cards in his hand, getting lost in their cosmic designs. Suddenly, his heart sinks. "Izzy, where exactly did you say you got this deck from again?"

"Wicks N Things, down at the plaza. Remember, we went there to get your weird cousin a present for her birthday that one time," she says defensively, wiping her tears away.

Parker's jaw drops. Mitch's heart races. Max continues to stare straight ahead.

"Izzy, that shop isn't called Wicks N Things. It's Wiccan Things!"

"What?! But there's so many candles!" Izzy protests.

"Yeah! What do you think they use in their rituals?" Mitch shouts at her.

"I don't know what a Wiccan is!" she screams back.

"Guys! Max is dying! What do I do?" Parker asks desperately.

"Well, considering we're probably playing with a cursed deck, you must have to follow the rules to a T. You'll have to bet something equal to how good your hand is," Mitch explains steadily, staring at his own cards and thinking through his options.

"Got it. I bet...my toaster," Parker tries, placing the jack of clubs down once again.

Everyone waits for several moments, seeing if the card will return to Parker's hand.

"I think...I think we're good," Parker says hesitantly. All eyes turn towards Mitch.

"Okay, let me just try this. I bet a piece of lint," he says, putting the two of hearts down.

Parker frowns at him. Putting a two down didn't seem like throwing his hand, but then again, maybe he had three more twos tucked in there. He tries not to think too hard about it as they all look back and forth between Mitch's hand and the four cards-no, three cards.

"Figures. Alright. Let me try one more thing," Mitch says, holding the two of hearts up again.

"Stop trying stuff! Get this man's kidney away from me," Izzy pleads, crying again.

"Hold on! I bet the whole farm," Mitch attempts, slamming the two down again. In a flash, it's back in his grasp.

"It has to be something you actually have, idiot! You explained that to Izzy just last week," Parker yells.

Mitch clenches his jaw in anger. He didn't appreciate Parker explaining the rules of his own game to him. Not to mention the rage he was feeling towards Izzy for bringing them a cursed deck to ruin their whole night. And on top of that, who bets their own kidney? Even jokingly! Mitch's breath quickens as he realizes just how furious he is with these people. They were supposed to be his friends, and now he was going to have to give something of his own up to Max, the careless gambler, just because they had been foolish.

Mitch sneers, subtly shifting his fingers so the two of hearts is no longer between them. He places down a different card. Parker opens his mouth to question him, but it's too late.

"I bet my friends at this table," Mitch hisses as the king of spades is added to the stack. Before anyone can stop him, he turns his hand around to reveal a straight flush. Two to six, all hearts.

"Mitch!" Izzy screams.

Then, the room goes silent.

Mitch blinks.

The other chairs at the table are now empty. Max's kidney is on the table in front of him now, along with Max's car keys and a nice-looking toaster. The other players' hands of cards are resting on the table face up. Izzy and Parker did what they said they would, each having nothing but a high card. Max had three twos, but he was missing that vital two of hearts to complete the set.

Mitch won the hand. So where are the others?

A strange rattling sound emerges from his bedroom down the hall, and he frowns. He gets up from the table and stalks to his room. As he approaches, he hears more metallic rattling along with whimpering and moaning.

He steps into the room and can't believe what he finds.

Izzy, Max, and Parker are each in separate dog cages. They each wear a muzzle, keeping them quiet, and a shock collar with their names on them. A remote for each of the collars rests on his bedside table.

Izzy looks up at him, desperation streaming from her eyes as she tries to speak around the muzzle. Mitch can't quite tell what she's saying, but it's some sort of plea to let them out. Max is on his side, eyes shut, but breathing. Parker is on his knees, trying to get his hands through the bars of the cage to get to the lock on the outside.

"Hey! Stop that," Mitch barks, swatting Parker's hands away.

Izzy yelps and whimpers. A sickening grin is slowly creeping across Mitch's face.

"Well, would you look at that? Now you have to follow my rules," he chuckles, reaching for the shock collar remotes.