



Reluctant Press presents:

And The Winner Is

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY MISTY MALVEAUX

A 'HER TV' E-BOOK

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AND THE WINNER IS ...

by Monica James

It wasn't easy moving down the interstate but Rachael managed with her mom's support. When her mom learned of Rachael's consuming interest in her longtime school friend, Annette, she opted to pack up and leave the gossip-mongers behind.

They went to a larger city where small town gossip wouldn't destroy them. Rachael's mom, a skilled paralegal, was able to find employment easily but the work load was demanding and the resulting hours were long. Rachael didn't mind her mom's absence as it gave her extra freedom. Rachael also escaped from under the firm and strict thumb of her dad who was in the Middle East, fighting the war on terrorism.

To Rachael and Annette, the scandal was just another issue to be dealt with. Both were seventeen at the time, ingénues of their own making; they were caught between acts of the school play kissing and fondling each other in the theater wings. The shock to the stern performing arts teacher was mild compared to the outcry as the liaison became known. There were teacher conferences, threats of mental health counseling, grounding for everything outside regular academics and a strict curfew so it was all but impossible for the two girls to meet. Finally, Rachael's mom decided to get out of town and, she hoped, disappear.

It was a long and boring summer for both girls. They were able to phone each other but meeting was a challenge. Annette went to scholastic camp and Rachael took remedial courses in History and English. Slowly the relationship became estranged and they drifted apart but the two swore friendship forever.

Being eighteen and in the senior class of a new school was trying enough. Rachael, as was her nature, immediately began secretly cruising for a new girlfriend. She had learned her lesson the year before and was wary of being discovered. But her drive to find a new relationship was already kindled by experience and defined in her own mind as simply a reasonable route to self-acceptance.

Rachael's stunning good looks didn't help her adjustment. The boys were all hitting on her, asking her out for coffee or coke, offering rides and school help. She soon learned she had to do more than be reclusive. Her best option, she decided, was to achieve scholastic standing by working hard, attending classes and doing assignments for extra credit. Being a nerd in the senior class dampened the ardor of some of the boys and, that in itself, was satisfying. All was working very well until she met Charlene; it was immediate lust. It required a plan.

It was more than luck that Rachael had the locker next to Char. She had followed the suave girl and learned her locker number. She also observed adjacent vacant lockers.

It was an easy matter to note the numbers, destroy her own locker with a hammer and chisel, and ask for a new one. The day she moved into her new locker, Char stood smiling at her.

"Hey, I'm Charlene; call me Char," the girl said and held out her hand. "Are you new here? I think I would have noticed you before."

Rachael gulped in embarrassment though secretly pleased her plan to meet Char had worked. "Yes, a transfer. My mom works at the Council Bank; she's a paralegal."

Char grinned. "Remind me not to do anything to bring on a lawsuit."

Warming up to the attractive girl, Rachael grinned. "Probably not her line but you can be careful anyhow. Ooo, there's the bell. Nice to meet you, Char."

"See ya," Char sang out and disappeared around the corner, headed for class.

"Annette, it's me, Rachael. How was your summer? New crush? Come on, you can tell me."

"You won't be jealous? I was assigned as assistant cabin leader. That put me in the same room with the girl who tended to the stables. The riding horses are fab."

"I get the picture. She good-good or just good?"

"Good; very muscular, masculine in a lot of ways. Guess you get that way on the pitchfork duty. That's not why you called, right?"

Rachel giggled. "Listen, her name is Char. You think the riding horses were super, you should see this girl. Her older brother manages the teen club here. She can get me in, she said, without paying. Maybe her brother does that so he can keep an eye on her."

“Sounds great. So, you’re in Brierton, right? My mom has an aunt there.”

“Now comes the good part,” Rachael said, words tumbling out, paying no notice of Annette’s chatter. “The club has a dance contest each month. It’s elimination where the judges keep tapping couples to stop. The couple that manages to stay until everyone else is gone wins.”

“So, you can get back to your dancing. But ‘ballroom’ was not your dance element, as I recall.”

“I can learn and you know where this is going. I will lead and hold Char at the same time. I can already imagine her body twisting next to me. Wow.”

“So glad you found her. Anything happen yet? She like girls?” She had decided not to mention that she had a cousin in Brierton named Charlene.

“That’s why I called you. She smiles at me a lot. She wets her lips and touches my arm, like that. More than once I’ve caught her looking at my mouth when we were talking. How do I get things moving without taking a risk? I don’t want to get run out of town again. My mom will kill me. But, she is so cute. Long curly blonde hair framing her face, pouting lips, firm breast line, athletic legs; she has it all.”

“I can only suggest what I did with the horse-girl. I waited and waited and waited. One night she came in late. She had had some sort of run-in with the camp council. She was distressed and turned to me for sympathy. Of course, I had plenty of that. She cried on my shoulder and I hugged her around the waist. Next thing was a surprise. She sat up, sniffled and took a tissue. Then she kissed me on the cheek. It was a wet kiss, from the crying, so I turned my head and nibbled at her lips. In a fraction, we were Frenching with our tongues. What I’m saying is that you should wait your turn. If it’s going to happen, it will be quick and you have to be alert. Make believe it is all new to you in case she freaks. It will be easy to say you were just being girl-friendly. OK?”

“Makes sense. Thanks. I have to think this over.”

“You have a date yet? If she likes being with you, then you’re ninety percent there.”

“We are helping at the booth selling football shirts and stuff like that. It’s to support the team. That can’t be complicated.”

“Let me know. I’m going to hang up. I love you.”

“Love you, too,” Rachael answered and closed the flip top of her cell phone.

The football crowd thinned when the game started. Rachel and Char sat on the short stools to wait for the halftime crowds. Both girls wore the short skirts and halter the cheerleaders wore. The blue-and-gray school colors blended with their makeup and the ribbons in their hair. Both had inch-wide stripes of blue and gray on their cheeks.

“We did well,” Char said. She sighed and smiled at Rachel.

“Maybe we should have had some extra help. It was busy for a while.”

Char shook her head and adjusted the hem of her skirt. "Maybe but this is the first time I've had you all to myself. Time we got acquainted."

Rachael grinned. "Tell me about the teen club. The one your brother manages."

"Well, I did say they had the dance competition. If we could get a couple guys, maybe we could enter next time."

Rachael's mind was racing. "That would be fun. But, won't they let two girls on the floor? Girls dance better than boys."

Char laughed. "That would be great but the rules don't allow it. Honest, I'm not too much into what guys around here do. I wouldn't know where to start. You know anybody?"

"No. Maybe we could advertise in the school paper."

"Let's think it over."

Of course, Rachael already had a plan. Since the brother had not met her, she decided to dress as a boy and enter the competition. "How long do we have before the next contest?"

"Couple weeks. They do all kinds of dancing; ballroom, hip hop, like that. Maybe we'd need to take some lessons somewhere."

Rachael was serious. "Before we get too involved, a question. What's the prize? If we win, what do we get?"

"The club is sponsored by the school and the church. Winners each get \$1000 plus there is a donation to the church that keeps the hall. Also, a trip to the Nationals in Las Vegas if there is enough money in the till. It's the prestige more than anything."

"Maybe for you," Rachael answered coyly. "I'll take the money."

Both laughed and busily straightened up the merchandise that had been pawed over by the fans. After the game, they put left over items in the proper boxes and stored them for the next week. Rachael noticed Char was particularly at ease handling the heavy items.

"You lift weights or something?" Rachael asked.

Char giggled. "No; maybe I should but who would like a girl with bulging muscles?"

"I would," Rachael answered in a whisper as she reached for the tie rack.

Later, in Char's VW Jetta, they waited for the parking lot to clear. Char turned to Rachael.

"We had fun tonight, Rach," she said shortening her friend's name to a guttural sound. "I like being with you."

"And I'm one of your steady admirers," Rachael said lightly. "I'm so glad we met and are friends." Char was quiet while she surveyed the traffic. She started her car and

they crept into line. She glanced at Rachael. "Anybody ever compliment you on your neat figure? Nice legs, I mean."

Rachael smiled fully. "Just you, just now. Thanks but I sure can't compete with you."

Char laughed. "We are turning into a mutual admiration society."

“With only two members that I know of. Or, are there some I don’t know of??”

Char was quiet as she maneuvered the car through the traffic. “Would it surprise you to know a girl at the teen club has asked me for a date?”

Rachael’s stomach turned into a knot. “Guess she likes the strong, silent type,” she answered lightly and forced a suppressed giggle.

Char turned off the main road and stopped in front of Rachael’s condo. “I was, hey, flattered, I guess. Then, when I thought about it, I was curious.”

“I’ve very little to offer being of so little experience. One thing seems logical. Do you like her? I mean, enough to trust her? Am I making sense?”

“More than you know. She is nice but somehow she just doesn’t strike me as particularly attractive. Yet, I know what she wants to do and that interests me. I’ve heard it is a secret adventure.”

Rachael reached over and touched Char on the shoulder. “You mean, to you, she isn’t hot? She doesn’t move you and, thinking of the intimacy the girl suggested, you wonder where it will take you. You don’t really know what demands she would put on you.”

Char smiled. “That’s it exactly. You sure can straight-think these social things. Has any girl ever approached you? You are certainly pretty enough; I might even say hot. Or am I being too personal?”

“Actually I’m flattered that you feel comfortable with me. Most girls would just drop it. I just don’t know what to say. I certainly have nothing in the way of advice. One issue stands out really strong: trust. It is super important.”

“Yes, if such an affair went public, I can see some problems.”

“That’s what I meant about trust.”

Char moved to get out of the car. “Thanks anyhow. But you really have helped me think about that girl. I appreciate your point of view.” She strode around to the passenger side and opened the door. “Here you are, home safe and before midnight, just like Cinderella.”

At that moment, Rachael’s mom turned on the porch light and opened the door. Rachael quickly introduced her friend and, after a token hug, Char was gone.

“You know what I’m going to ask you,” her mom said. “You after that girl? She’s prettier than Annette, too.”

“Oh, mom. No, I don’t think she is anything other than a straight friend. After the Annette affair, I’m not anxious to complicate our lives any further. Any news from Dad?”

After the daily third-degree, Rachael settled into bed to think over the day’s events.

There was no doubt in her mind that Char was disturbed by the girl at the club. Where that might lead was a mystery yet to be unraveled. On the plus side, she was pleased Char had confided in her. It made their relationship stronger. Char’s attitude toward the girl who had approached her remained an enigma. Still, she knew that, this time, no matter what, if Char led the way, she would follow with guarded enthusiasm. No more running away. Something had to give way to reason and, she considered, hiding and being ‘out’

were in conflict. When sleep claimed her, she was remembering Char's smile and, even more, Char's legs.

Rachael's cell phone tinkled Tchaikovsky and she answered it, hoping it was Char. It was and her heart skipped a beat.

"Rach," Char asked using the familiar that Rachael had yet to get accustomed to. "Can we get together this afternoon? Ask your mom if you can go with me to the club. I want to introduce you around."

"Char! I'm eighteen. I can go if I want to."

"Sorry. No offense intended. I live at home so I go by the house rules. Figured it was the same with you."

"You're right, of course. Mom went shopping so I'll leave a note and check in later. You coming to pick me up?"

"Yes. Don't dress up too fancy. Just kidding; wear whatever you like."

Rachael selected her white pantsuit with the crimson piping. The snug fit across her shoulders tended to emphasize her breast line but, she hoped, not too much. She caught her hair in a severe knot at the back of her head and snapped in a decorator hair clip. Slipping into her open-toed shoes, she saw her toenails needed attention. She was doing that when she heard Char pull up and honk the horn.

Char reached over to unlock the passenger door. "Why are you carrying your shoes and running around in bare feet?"

"Nature girl," she answered and settled into the car. "Toenail polish not dry yet."

They both laughed. Rachael was immediately aware that Char was looking at her. She turned to her to speak. "What?" she demanded.

"I love that outfit," Char replied. "Fits the real you, or something."

The club was not busy in the afternoon so they let the giant sofa cushions capture them. They could see the billiard tables, a ping-pong game in progress and the dance floor.

"Well, how do you like it?" Char asked. "It's a lot busier later but I like to come here during the day. They have the latest mags, books and, of course, the Victoria's Secret catalog."

Rachael laughed. "Neat, I think. Is she here, the girl you told me about?"

"No. I haven't seen her since that night last week."

"But you're thinking about her? You OK with that?"

Char frowned. "No but, you're right; I'm thinking, not about her, about *it*. What am I going to say to her when I see her again?"

Rachael took a deep breath. "I think the standard line is 'follow your heart,' or, so I've heard. Tell me; you're so cool, haven't you been close to some guy, maybe the local football hero? Did you want him to, uh, to, uh?"

Char laughed. "Oral sex," she said with emphasis. "If it was on his mind, I didn't get the message."

"Well, what did this girl say? Gee, Char, does she have a name?"

"Sorry. Her name is Breen Baker. She is very pretty, makes good grades, comes from an affluent family, seems clean and, well, like that."

"And what exactly did she say that has distressed you so much?"

"Just that we should make a date to go to the movies or a concert."

"And? That seems innocuous to me."

"I asked her what she had in mind and she moved so close to me I could smell her breath. The points of her breasts brushed my arm. It was a sexy moment. She whispered in my ear like in a foreign movie. She said I would like what pleasure she could give me with her mouth. That's all."

"And you backed off?"

"I all but ran out of the room. She scared hell out of me. It wasn't until what she said sank in to my feeble brain that I began thinking about it."

"And when you thought about it, was she in your thoughts also?"

"Wow, you're sure quick. No, not at first. I know what lesbians do but I never considered myself gay. When Breen suggested it, I was shocked at first. Later I was interested. Are you disappointed in me?"

Rachael pressed Char's arm. "Not at all. I'm so pleased we can talk about this like adults. You are so terrific; I'm crazy about you. I only want the very best for you. It bothers me you are so hung up on this lesbian girl, Breen."

Char sighed. "I have to make up my mind, don't I? It's the unknown that rags me. What if I like it? Why *wouldn't* I like it? What would people think? What would you think of me, of her? Suppose I might not be able to satisfy a guy I want for a husband? Maybe I'd get married, have kids and then get seduced by the girl next door. You can see where I'm going with this."

Rachael moved a few inches away to put some space between them. "Whatever you decide, you will still be my friend. I do think you have to question why you are so upset about this issue. Until you answer that, you'll be running scared. Now, one more thing.

Please let me know if you make a decision and, if it is in favor of Breen, I want to know how it went."

Char was very serious. "You're curious too?"

"How could I not be? We've discussed little else. Maybe someday a girl will come along that wants to go down on me. What I might do could well depend on what you and Breen do. I want to know."

"We have a deal, Rach. I promise. Now, let's get out of here. Enough! It's getting morbid. I have some new DVDs at home. Let's go there and forget about lesbians at least for one day."

Rachael stood up. "Fine, I'm ready."

They didn't meet again until the following Friday when they were once more in the sales booth at the football game. Rachael had been looking forward to working with Char. She felt very rejected when Char seemed distant while they tended the store.

"Aloof," Rachael said. "Char, are you OK?"

She lowered her voice as if to speak through her teeth. "Sure, something bugging you?"

Rachael shrugged and retreated. "No, nothing. Did I do something to offend you? If I did, maybe I can make it right."

Char snapped back, "No, just drop it. I don't want to talk any more."

Rachael felt the tension and was glad when the evening was over. They were both silent on the ride home; things were completely different than the week before.

The contest date for the elimination dance came and went without a word from Char. Rachael, gratefully bound to her academics, did not make any effort to contact her. But she did wonder what it was that Char was so obtuse about.

It wasn't long in coming.

"Rachael, this is Charlene," Char said on the telephone. "Can we talk?"

The turnaround took Rachael's breath away. "Sure, uh, Charlene. Anytime. You know that."

"This is homecoming and our last tour in the football sales booth. Maybe we can go somewhere? Or would you rather go to the dance? I can get tickets but I don't have a date."

Rachael held her tongue. She wanted so much to ask if Char was put out because Breen Baker hadn't asked her to the prom. "Whatever pleases you, Charlene," Rachael answered formally.

"I want to talk to you about entering the contest at the club. They don't have many couples and my brother is worried there won't be much of a showing."

"I don't know any boys. What do you want to talk about?"

There was a long silence that Rachel found difficult to interpret. "I want you to take me there and enter the contest with me."

"Sure, you know I'd like that but you told me it was against the rules, two girls."

"It is. One of us has to dress up as a boy. Could you do that? I'm too well-known and you've only been there that once."

Rachael laughed. "I'm intrigued but, wait, suppose we are found out? Won't it be really bad for the club and all? Your brother would be compromised, it seems to me."

Char took on the same distant demeanor Rachael remembered. "Let me worry about that. Can you do the tango?"

"I know the steps, yes. You?"

"We'll have to practice. The contest is in ten days. Can you handle it?"

Rachael paused, then forged ahead. "Is it so important to you?"

"We can talk about it Friday at the sales booth. Think it over." An abrupt dial tone finished the conversation.

Rachael shook her head in wonder. "Something's amiss," she thought to herself, "and I'm sure going to find out what it is. Maybe Breen Baker refused the offer and she thought I'm next in line. I can't wait to find out what happened."

The sales booth action was brisk and both girls hopped about, getting as many sales as they could. Leftover items would have to be packaged for the next season which meant extra work. Before the halftime crowd, Char sat down and looked at Rachael up and down.

"You look great in that outfit," she said of Rachael while appraising her. "Better than I remember, actually."

"I'm still the same girl," Rachael answered cautiously. "What do you see that's different?"

"Something I'm interested in."

Again, Rachael took the plunge. "Is it something you are curious about?"

Char blinked in recognition. The query didn't get past her without notice. "Maybe. But, tell me. What do you think about entering the contest together?"

Rachael ignored the question. "Can we start by you telling me why you have been so unfriendly toward me? I thought we were friends."

Char looked askance, then back to Rachael. "We still are, I hope. I'm sorry if you've felt otherwise."

"I'm not blind, Char. I'd feel a lot more comfortable if you'd tell me what it is that's made you so hostile toward me."

Char hesitated. "Remember when we first started talking about Breen Baker? You asked if I could trust her. I distinctly recall you using the word trust."

"Yes, I think trust between two people is important. Why?"

It was a bombshell. Char glared at Rachael. "Annette is my cousin. She knew you were in school here and called me to find out how you were adjusting, like that. We had a long chat about you."

Rachael was in shock. "I see. I'd hoped to put my rather sordid past behind me. If there exists a breach of trust between you and me, there is also one between Annette and

me. There is really nothing more I can say except I think you are over-reacting. If you want nothing more to do with me because of this lost of trust that bothers you so much,

then so be it. But, don't go grousing around, tripping over your lower lip because you think I wronged you. I did not. My past is my business, not yours."

They both fell silent and worked dutifully until the crowds were gone. Char seemed anxious to get Rachael into her car. She learned all too soon what cunning Char was capable of.

Char pulled her car into the shadows of the bleachers "Nobody will bother us here." She was quiet a long moment. "So, this is how I see it."

"I'm listening," Rachael said with a testy tone.

Like a chameleon, Char changed completely back to her former self. "I think you have a lot to offer me while we finish our last year of high school. To begin with, we can enter the contest at the club. That will satisfy my brother. Breen Baker is also cross-dressing as a guy so she can enter. I opted to be your partner, not hers. I want to stay on the floor long enough to see Breen and her girl eliminated. If I can best her, I'll be satisfied."

Rachael interrupted. "You seem to have a different attitude toward Breen than you did a month ago. You want to bring me up to date on that?"

Char laughed. "Nothing to concern you as far as Breen and I go. Now that I know who and what you are, maybe Breen will be glad to make your acquaintance. That should be interesting."

Rachael raised her hands in surrender. "Wait. I don't like any of this. I don't like you ordering me around. I don't want you to say anything to anybody about what you've found out."

Char burst out laughing again. "I know you don't. And that is precisely why you are going to do as you're told. Did you think this charade on the dance floor would be the end of it? No way."

"Why are we fighting? We don't need this. What possible satisfaction can you get by lording it over me? If nothing else, don't you think you owe me an explanation?"

"Easy, sweetie. You get what I decide to give you. Nothing more. How could I be more direct? One phone call from me to the newspaper and your name will be on everyone's list from now on. You already know what that's like."

"Yes, I do but there is one big difference. Annette and I enjoyed each other but very privately. When that was shattered, we went into hiding of sorts. My mom was mortified at first but she has mellowed a lot. It's called unconditional love. I will not hide any more. Anything you do to hurt me will be on your conscience, not mine. I know who I am and it isn't likely that will change."

"You should be in therapy. But I can see why Annette is in love with you; you're hot, no way around it. I also suspect your former lover does not want me to have you; a matter of lesbian jealousy I've yet to understand."

"Sounds like you have it all figured out. Shall I look up Breen and have a chat with her? How many others, like you, does Breen have on her wish list? Lesbians are not isolated happenings; there are more of us than you know. But what of it? I can't see why you are so worked up."