Summary

Andy doesn't leave Miranda in Paris, and learns that a single decision can change your life. But the main thing about decisions? You don't get to stop with one.

Notes

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"For above all things Love means sweetness, and truth, and measure; yea, loyalty to the loved one and to your word." - Marie de France
How To Save a Life

*I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.*
- Stevie Smith

*Ground Zero: October.*

Personally, Andy thought Miranda Priestly had nobody to blame but herself.

She couldn't forget the look Miranda'd had on her face that night in her hotel room--both shocked and all-too-accepting, as if she'd known the divorce was coming but hadn't quite been ready for it yet. Probably true. The fight Andy had interrupted in the townhouse couldn't have been the first one by a long shot. Miranda had known her marriage was in trouble.

So why hadn't she been able to bend? Why hadn't she compromised with Stephen, tried to be more available to him? In the townhouse, in that one moment before they'd realized she was there, Andy had seen that Stephen was pretty clear about what he wanted: for Miranda to honor her commitments, for her to spend some time with her family, for God's sake. No, this hadn't been sprung on Miranda out of nowhere. So why hadn't she acted to prevent it? Or at least been on time for dinner once in a while?

It was a damned shame. But for Andy, the really alarming thing was what Miranda had said to her in Paris: *I see a great deal of myself in you.*

It could have been a compliment. It could have been a warning. Either way, it had freaked Andy the heck out, and she was still thinking about it. Her first instinct had been to leap out of the car and run for it, and never look back, because, no. No, she wasn't like Miranda. She wasn't going to be that person, that woman who was so willing to run everybody else into the ground for the tiniest of infractions, but who was incapable of seeing how she was wrecking her own life.

*Everybody wants to be us.*

Yeah. Not so much. Andy was going to get ahead. She was going to live her dream life while staying a halfway-decent person the whole time. She was going to be both successful and happy. It could be done. It wasn't impossible.

And if it killed her to prove it to Miranda, well, so be it.

She didn't walk away.

It didn't help that, by the time Andy got back to New York, Nate had already moved out of the apartment. A long-suffering Lily told Andy that Nate was staying with Doug. And that he'd gotten work in Boston. And that it was pretty much all Andy's fault and she didn't deserve him anyway.
Andy told herself that it wouldn't be a good start to her new life if she began it by alienating all her old friends, so she didn't tell Lily to go to hell. Instead she said, nicely, that she was willing to compromise. That Nate was the one who'd left, not her; that she still wanted to make it work. She was going to do what Miranda hadn't been able to, and reach out, and try to save her relationship.

But she decided she also wanted to be an honest person, and when they met for lunch, Andy told Nate about Christian.

So that was the end of that. He moved to Boston. Lily stopped taking her calls, and so did Doug, and eventually--quickly--Andy stopped making them. Sixteen years of friendship, erased by eight months of metamorphosis. It hardly seemed reasonable, or right, or fair. But if Andy had learned anything in those last eight months, it was that life was hardly ever any of those things, and that people were as changeable as the wind, even the ones you thought you knew. She supposed Nate, Lily, and Doug all thought the same of her.

So her new life was happening without her old friends. Maybe it wasn't such a surprise. But she cried, all the same.

"You're such an adorable little moron," Nigel said as he gave Andy an envelope of proofs.

"But everybody always says honesty is a good thing in a relationship," Andy whined, and knew she was whining. "And I mean, what if he found out some other way? From somebody else?"

"Like who?" Nigel asked. "Who else knew, besides you and Christian Thompson? I didn't know, and I was there."

"Miranda, maybe?" Andy said. "I mean--well, she knew I talked to Christian about the Jacqueline Follet thing--"

Nigel stared at her in disbelief. "You think Miranda would have called your ex-boyfriend and spilled the beans?" he said. Andy hunched her shoulders. "Stop that and straighten up. Slouching makes you less adorable, not less of a moron."

"I just didn't want to lie," Andy mumbled, but she straightened up. "I thought if I explained...I mean, you know, I was drunk and lonely, and Nate and I weren't officially together at the time--"

"And if he'd done the same thing?"

"I don't know!" Andy said. She'd been asking herself that same question, and didn't have a satisfactory answer yet. "I mean, I like to think I'd be okay with it--well, maybe not okay, but I said I was sorry, it's not like I--"

"Well, I'm sure you did your best," Nigel said, and pointed to the door. "But my five minutes of being the Supportive Gay Friend are up, thank God, and you're late."

Andy looked at the clock. Miranda had told Andy to get the proofs to her at nine. It was now 8:55, which meant, on Miranda Time, that Andy was five minutes late already. "Shit!"

"At least I like your shoes," Nigel called after her as she fled.
Late. Great. And she'd been doing so well this week. Since getting back from Paris, Andy had been taking and making the calls, and Emily had been putting away the coats and bags. Andy had the feeling that if Emily hadn't been on crutches, Miranda would have been sending her out to get coffee, too. But so far Andy hadn't screwed anything up. Until now.

But to Andy's surprise, Miranda didn't seem to notice that the proofs didn't arrive at her desk until 8:57. She didn't look well today: kind of wan and tired. Understandable, Andy supposed, and she fought down a pang of pity. She was not going to feel sorry for Miranda, who'd made her bed and had to lie in it. She was an employee, Miranda was her boss, and they were not alike, and that was all.

Miranda, sitting at her desk, opened the envelope and took out the proofs, looking over them with raised eyebrows. "Confirm lunch with Glenda," she said.

"Her assistant said she'll be at Nello's at one-thirty," Andy said.

"And when I get back I'll want to see René about the Sienna article."

"I called him last night, so he should have all the copy ready today."

"Mmm. Thank you," Miranda said absently. Andy froze. Miranda had actually said--

"That's all," Miranda said, and Andy hurried out of the office before she could really push her luck.

'Thank you.' Miranda had said that to her once before, when Andy had saved her bacon at the benefit by distracting Irv from Stephen's drunken insults. It had been a deliberate move on Miranda's part. It hadn't seemed like that today--more of an afterthought. As if she was distracted, and common courtesies just slipped out without her noticing. She probably hadn't even realized she'd said it.

She must really be in bad shape, then.

Emily glared as Andy sat down across from her. "That skirt looks great on you," Andy tried. Emily's expression only became more poisonous, and Andy sighed and looked at her monitor. She'd tried to make Emily feel better, she really had. She'd given her at least half of her Paris clothes, probably more, including the great-looking skirt Emily had on right now. She should have known it wouldn't be enough. But what the hell had Emily expected, anyway? Even if Andy hadn't suddenly become the new favorite, Emily couldn't have gone to Paris on crutches.

She tried to explain this to Emily that afternoon. Emily went as red as a tomato, growled "Fuck off and die," and hobbled to the restroom in tears. Andy ignored Nigel's advice and hunched her shoulders for the next fifteen minutes.

That night, as she sorted through the invitations for next month's brunch at the Ritz, Andy caught herself being glad that Nate wasn't around. It was much easier to get work done when she was by herself.

Another week passed. Miranda took to sending Emily home and keeping Andy late at night, as if she'd decided she didn't need two assistants dancing attendance on her at one in the morning. Andy watched jealously as Emily went home at nine o'clock sharp, while Emily looked hatefully at Andy for being so much in Miranda's good graces. Nobody won. Except Miranda, of course.
Andy was used to waiting around for the book anyway, so this wasn't such a big deal, but it was odd to have Miranda there too, every single night. When Miranda kept hanging around for the fourth night in a row—and wouldn't let Andy go home, even after the book had arrived—Andy started to suspect that Miranda wasn't so much busy as she was lonely. Well, no, Miranda was always busy, but no busier than usual, and nothing was going on that would require her to remain in the nearly-empty offices with her exhausted second assistant.

Andy wasn't sure that Miranda was getting all that much out of her company, either. Miranda never talked to her, except to issue orders. There was no conversation, no chit-chat. Andy hadn't expected anything else, of course. They weren't friends.

In fact, as far as Andy could tell, Miranda didn't really have friends. She had colleagues, like Nigel; she had business acquaintances, like Irv and Glenda; she had her social circle, like all the people she hung out with at parties and fundraisers. But Andy'd had a pretty good look into Miranda's social life by now (it was hard not to, considering), and as far as she could tell, Miranda didn't have anything like a real buddy. Fair enough: Andy couldn't imagine anybody wanting to be Miranda's buddy, either. Nigel was the closest thing to it, and look how he'd gotten burned.

She glanced over at Miranda, just in time to see her remove her glasses and rub her hands over her eyes. Her shoulders had a slump that put Andy's best efforts to shame. She looked utterly miserable, in a Miranda-ish way.

Andy cleared her throat. Miranda started and looked up. "Um," Andy said, wondering why the hell she'd even opened her mouth, "d-do you want me to get you some coffee?"

Great. No, stupid. Stupid. If Miranda wanted coffee, she'd ask for it. You never offered to do things for Miranda. She didn't want to hear the sound of your voice when she was trying to--

"Decaf," Miranda said, and looked back down at the photos on her desk as if Andy hadn't spoken at all.

Andy made it back to the office in record time. New York sucked in a lot of ways, but you could always find something that was open for twenty-four hours, including Starbucks. When she got back, Miranda didn't look at her, but reached up and took the coffee directly from her hand. Her fingers brushed against Andy's, but she didn't appear to notice.

Andy's own fingers tingled as she quickly returned to her desk. Her stomach squirmed uncomfortably, because she couldn't help wondering how long it had been since Miranda had actually touched somebody, and if she'd done it on purpose or not.

They were in the car when Miranda said, "I'm going to need you to set up that appointment with Karl."

"I set it up for Tuesday at ten-thirty," Andy said. "Is, is that okay?"

"If that's when he's available," Miranda said, and Andy sagged with relief. Miranda didn't accept excuses from many people, but even she attempted to accommodate Karl Lagerfeld's schedule. "Juggle whatever you have to."

"I think I've got it all straightened out," Andy said, trying to sound confident.
"Mmm." Miranda glanced out the window. "Did you run into trouble with his assistants?"

Andy blinked. "Um, no," she said. "They were pretty nice. Definitely willing to, uh, juggle too."

"Good," Miranda said, and sighed as she smoothed out a wrinkle in her skirt. "He's hired some extremely disagreeable people in the past. I've spoken to him about it many times. I hope he's finally listened."

"Oh," was all Andy could think to say, because this was starting to sound a hell of a lot like actual conversation--small talk, even--and while she might be prepared to deal with any command Miranda threw at her, Andy wasn't equipped for this. "Well...yeah...they were nice," she repeated, feeling like a moron, and not a particularly adorable one.

Miranda looked at her with a raised eyebrow. The 'you can do better than that, surely' look. Crap.

"Especially when they heard I worked for you," Andy added, and attempted to smile. "So, um, I didn't have any problems."

"I'm glad to hear it," Miranda replied, and looked out the window again. She didn't say anything else.

That night, Andy got the weekly phone call from her parents, complete with the usual questions. They naturally wanted to know why she'd broken up with Nate. Or why Nate had broken up with her. Andy hadn't been able to answer that to their satisfaction yet; they'd liked him a lot, and although they'd never really accepted the idea of their daughter living with a man she wasn't married to, they'd kept their feelings mostly to themselves on the subject. Andy had been grateful for that. She wished they were showing similar restraint now. At least she'd never told them about Christian.

"But remember when you graduated college?" her mother said pleadingly. "You, the two of you, were saying hopefully, within the next few years--"

"'Hopefully' was the key word there, Mom," Andy said. "It didn't work out. He's in Boston now. That's all there is to it."

"Honey," her mom said, "we just want you to be happy."

"I'm happy," Andy said, and as she thought about Nate, her voice wobbled. She cursed herself.

"Oh, baby," her mom said, and Andy gave in and started bawling on the phone.

"I've never cared for yellow," Miranda said absently as she looked over a spread. "So garish. Even in pastels."

Andy looked around the office for Nigel, which was when she realized that he wasn't there, which was when she realized that Miranda was, in fact, speaking to her. Miranda was also looking at her now, which meant that a response was required. Andy thought fast. She didn't wear a lot of yellow, and she wasn't wearing any today, and there was yellow in the spread, so Miranda wasn't critiquing Andy personally. At least, not yet. She would if Andy didn't say something fast.

"They've done studies," Andy heard herself saying inanely. "Yellow's the color that makes people
feel most anxious. Pink makes them feel calm."

Miranda raised an eyebrow, but didn't call Andy an idiot or tell her to shut up. Instead she just looked back down at the spread. Andy suppressed the urge to regale Miranda with information that sometimes prison cells were painted pink to keep the prisoners happy. It might be taken the wrong way, considering.

"Emily," Miranda called.

Andy winced as she heard the sound of Emily's desk chair rolling backwards, followed by the grunting noise Emily made as she laboriously hoisted herself up on her crutches. And she hadn't been dismissed, so she had to stand there as Emily hauled herself into the room, attempting to ignore Andy's presence the while.

"Emily," Miranda said again, still looking down at the spread, "studies have been done showing that yellow is a color that causes anxiety. Isn't that right, Andrea?"

Andy felt all the blood drain out of her face. She didn't know where this was going, but it couldn't be anyplace good. "Uh," she said feebly, "that's what I…I mean, somewhere, I read…"

"Therefore, Emily," Miranda said, continuing as if Andy hadn't spoken, "you will find information on these studies and bring it to me by tomorrow."

Andy and Emily stood before the desk in stunned silence.

"That's all," Miranda said. Emily turned and hobbled off without a word. Andy waited another second, which was just long enough for Miranda to glance up at her with a gleam of malicious pleasure in her eyes.

Andy knew that gleam. Miranda had worn it when she'd ordered Andy to tell Emily that she was being replaced in Paris. She'd practically snickered, as if she and Andy were co-conspirators in a delightful plot to make somebody else feel like shit. How fun.

Andy turned around and walked out of the office, feeling shaky. She didn't know what Miranda was up to, or why she felt like playing mind games today, but she resented being a made a part of them. God damn it, she was trying to be a good person. Successful. Happy. No mind games allowed.

Emily wouldn't look at her as Andy stopped in front of her desk. "Um," Andy said wretchedly, "I know some online journals--I'm, I'll help you look--"

Emily's lips tightened into a thin white line. Before she could reply, Miranda called out, "Andrea. Starbucks."

Andy winced, closed her eyes, and headed for the elevator.

Emily refused to speak to Andy for the rest of the day, unless strictly necessary.

First: November.

Miranda, on the other hand, was speaking to Andy more than ever. In fact, she appeared to be speaking to Andy more than she did to anybody else in the office, except maybe Nigel. Granted, it was mostly the usual stuff--Starbucks, phone calls, errands, whatever--but every once in a while some random observation would slip in, some personal remark, some offhand comment, and
Miranda never made those with anybody else.

She still wasn't looking well, and Andy knew, from working with her schedule, that she had several meetings with her attorneys planned. All things considered, Stephen was being pretty helpful with speeding the process along. He didn't seem to want anything, wasn't demanding half of Miranda's assets or anything ludicrous like that.

In fact, he'd abandoned Miranda's swanky townhouse on 73rd Street before she'd even gotten off the plane from Paris, and seemed to have no problem with the "separated" part of the one-year trial separation that New York state law demanded. He'd already taken an apartment somewhere else. Rumor was that he'd had it leased for two months before he'd even served her the papers. He wanted out, plain and simple. Which might have humiliated Miranda more than anything else possibly could, but nobody dared to ask. Miranda's drawn face told the story well enough.

A few days after the debacle with Emily, Andy was staying late again. So was Miranda. It was nearly midnight, and a harried-looking copy editor hurried in with the book. Andy took it, and carried it into Miranda's dimly-lit office with little hope that it would actually mean the end of her working day.

Miranda was partly hidden by her laptop. The harsh lighting from the screen did not flatter her: it showed every crease and wrinkle and hollow in sharp relief, and made her appear even more exhausted than she probably was. Andy wondered how long it had been since she'd spent more than seven hours at her house at a time, or if she even saw her kids anymore--the kids she'd worried so much about disappointing. Heck, maybe she was hiding from them. It seemed like she practically lived at the office now, and when she didn't, she was out and about on business. Even the 'fun' stuff, like lunches or parties, was business for Miranda.

"Here's the book, Miranda," Andy said softly, and laid it down on the desk.

"Mmm," Miranda said. "I wish Donatella would stop sending me emails."

Andy's mind raced. They were using a few Versace pieces in the shoot next month. Something must have gone wrong. "I'm sorry," she said. "Let me get in touch with Vincenzo, I'm sure I can get everything straightened out--" Miranda looked up at Andy, puckering her brow. "Um," Andy added, "it's about the San Francisco shoot, right?"

Miranda's lips actually quirked before she got herself under control and looked back at the screen.
"It's about Vera and Carolina," she said dryly. "Apparently they snubbed her last weekend in Milan and would persist in talking about her behind her back." She snorted. "It's like being in junior high."

"…oh," was all Andy could think to say.

Miranda closed her laptop without further ado. "Bring me my coat and bag and call for my car. Then you can go home."

"Okay," Andy said, and, her head spinning, she headed for her phone. She tried to be relieved about going home. It was less stressful than being as confused as all-get-out.

Still, even though she was as tired as usual, Andy had a hard time falling asleep that night. For no real reason. It wasn't because she was worried about Miranda, because she wasn't. That wasn't her job. Getting the Starbucks and confirming Karl, that was Andy's job. That was it. Miranda wouldn't thank her for her concern, anyway, which was good because Andy wasn't concerned.

She rolled over and thumped the pillow in irritation.
"She's talking to me," Andy said.

"Do tell," Nigel replied.

"No, I mean, she's talking to me. For no reason. Instead of just telling me to, to do stuff."

Nigel looked at her, then, while Andy tried not to appear panicked.

"She likes you," he said.

Andy opened her mouth, and heard herself say, "Oh, fuck."

"Indeed. Join the club," Nigel said, and gave Andy an ironic tip of his pen.

The next five days at Runway were frenetically busy. Two of the models for the San Francisco shoot had backed out and one had been fired. And Miranda was difficult to please, so the agencies were all offering dozens of potential replacements that had to be carefully screened by different layers of staff before the glossy 8 x 10s finally made it to Miranda's desk. The weather out there was acting up and everyone was worried that the shoot would have to be put off. Insurance might or might not come through. Irv was starting to make growling sounds about costs, and after her narrow escape in Paris, Andy suspected that Miranda might be forced to listen to them.

She was forced to do a lot of things. Most of them involved moving around a lot. Meetings, lunches, attorneys, late nights, and one afternoon sacrificed to Caroline and Cassidy's latest recital all meant that Miranda didn't have a single quiet moment, and therefore, neither did Andy. Even Emily had it easier than Andy did these days, since Miranda practically kept Andy in her back pocket. They often didn't leave the office until three a.m., only to stagger back inside at eight. And Miranda, who usually operated as well on two hours of sleep as she would on ten, looked to be on the verge of total collapse.

Everyone was worried. Emily even managed to put aside her anger while she and Andy worked together to keep things running as smoothly for Miranda as possible. Andy caught herself exchanging nervous looks with Nigel more than once as they watched Miranda struggle to remember a name or an appointment. Andy tried to be more vigilant than ever, doing her best to anticipate Miranda's every need or wish. This wasn't any easier than it usually was, and she was afraid she was going to give herself an ulcer.

By the end of the week, it was obvious—to Andy, at least—that Miranda wasn't just stressed out or unhappy. Something was really, really wrong. It was Sunday night, and she'd canceled her brief appearance at Marc Jacobs's party that evening in favor of staying in and working, which meant, of course, that Andy was working on a Sunday night as well instead of enjoying her weekend. Miranda had canceled lunch with Irv that afternoon too. She rarely did anything like that. But that wasn't all: more than once, Andy caught her staring off into space and appearing completely unaware of her own surroundings. Was she cracking up? No wonder, with the way her life was falling down around her and she wasn't even giving herself a moment of peace and quiet. Or anybody else, for that matter.
It was twelve-thirty now, and even Nigel had gone home. Andy and Miranda were the only ones left in the office, and Andy had nothing to do. She couldn't call anyone, and Miranda had had the book on her desk for nearly two hours. To be fair, she wasn't just killing time tonight--Andy knew she was inundated with emails, with copy, with decisions she had to make. The San Francisco shoot was in a week, and everyone was panicking. But Miranda didn't actually need Andy for anything except, apparently, silent company.

Andy had a novel hidden in her desk drawer, though, and with a little luck, she could hide it in her lap and read it without Miranda noticing. She'd just gotten to the middle of the second chapter when Miranda called out, her voice hoarse (though she hadn't been talking to anyone), "Water!"

Andy sighed silently, tucked the book back inside the drawer, and hurried to pour the San Pellegrino. When she headed into Miranda's office, she froze inside the doorway.

Miranda was staring off into space, as white as a sheet of paper. She was biting the knuckle of her right index finger, her eyes wide. She looked petrified. Andy's stomach twisted just at the sight of it. She cleared her throat; Miranda actually jumped at the sound, and she stared at Andy as if she'd forgotten Andy was even in the office, let alone bringing her water.

Andy managed a little smile as she set the glass down on Miranda's desk, trying not to let her hand shake too visibly. Miranda looked at the glass as if she'd never seen anything like it before. "Here you go," Andy said brightly.

Miranda looked up at her blankly. It took every ounce of self-control for Andy not to ask, 'Are you okay?' For one thing, you never asked Miranda anything. For another, if you did, you didn't ask stupid questions when the answers were so patently obvious. Miranda was not okay.

Then Miranda spoke. "I..." she said, and dragged one shaking hand across her forehead, pushing her hair off it. "Thank you." Oh wow, that again? She took a careful sip of water. And then she set it back down, swallowed hard, and hid her face in her hands, breathing deeply.

"Miranda!" Andy said, but Miranda held up one hand for silence. Andy realized that she was trying not to be sick. How long had this been going on? For that matter, had Miranda even eaten dinner tonight? Andy realized that she hadn't been dispatched to get any food that evening, and Miranda had canceled her lunch, which meant she hadn't eaten since breakfast. If she'd had breakfast.

Then Miranda lowered her hands and raised her face, taking another deep breath. "Do you want me to call a doctor?" Andy asked timidly.

"No, not yet," Miranda said, and the 'not yet' made Andy's heart start racing in panic. She rubbed her hands over her face. "I...my God. I haven't even had a moment to myself in--I haven't been able to--"

Andy waited. When nothing else seemed forthcoming, she blurted, "Is there something I can do?" Miranda glanced at her. "I mean--get you something to eat, or--"

Miranda tapped her fingers on her desk and stared off into space again. She bit her lip. The haunted look was back in her eyes. Andy felt her insides start to squirm like snakes.

"I need you to go to the store for me," Miranda said quietly after a moment. Andy was trying to work out whether she meant Hermès, Blahnik, or Tiffany's--and how to tell Miranda that all three were
closed for the night—when she realized Miranda had paused.

"Okay," Andy prompted, after Miranda hadn't spoken in nearly a minute.

Miranda drummed her fingers against the desk again, and appeared, finally, to come to a decision. "Bring me back a pregnancy test," she said.

The room seemed to dip and sway around Andy for a second. Miranda darted her a quick, very sharp glance, and Andy was operating purely on instinct as she nodded and said, "All right, be right back," her voice devoid of anything other than its usual helpful inflection. Then she was walking past her own desk, grabbing her purse as if in a dream, and then standing in one of the gleaming elevators.

Oh. Holy. Shit.

It made sense, Andy guessed, even if Miranda was kind of…old. The exhaustion, the nausea, the—whatever else. Andy didn't know much about being pregnant, all things considered. But Miranda had had children before. Surely she knew the signs.

Well, Andy'd had a pregnancy scare herself, in her senior year of high school. It had been the worst forty-eight hours of her life before her period had finally shown up. Was Miranda feeling anything like that? Surely not, she was a grown woman, right? Oh God, who was the father? Was it Stephen's? It had to be Stephen's. Because wouldn't Andy have noticed by now if Miranda was sneaking around? So it must have happened right before Paris, which had been over a month ago now. Apparently he'd loved her and left her.

There was an all-night pharmacy half a block away. Andy frantically scanned the aisle of women's products. There were several tests available, each one claiming to be the best on the market. Andy had a feeling that Miranda would be even less patient about this than she was about everything else, which meant Andy had to make a decision fast. So she grabbed two boxes: one promising "99.9% accuracy!", and another proclaiming, "Doctor-Recommended!" Because Miranda liked having backups and alternatives. Christ.

The cashier gave Andy a stern look as she checked out. The place was family-run, and Andy guessed he didn't approve of young unmarried women buying pregnancy tests. She wondered if he'd approve of older, soon-to-be-unmarried women using them instead. God. If Miranda was pregnant, if the kid was Stephen's, what would that mean for the divorce? Surely they'd halt it, or at least delay it, or--

It wasn't her problem, Andy tried to tell herself as she hurried back down the street, waving her pass at the night security guard when she passed back through Elias-Clarke's revolving door. Miranda's private life wasn't her problem, she had nothing to do with it, and she totally wasn't going to concern herself with anything about it.

She kept telling herself this until she arrived back at Runway and saw Miranda whirl around from the window to face her as she trotted inside. Trembling, Andy set the plastic bag down on the desk.

Miranda glanced at it, sat down, and began working at her laptop again without another word. Andy gulped and headed back to her desk. She'd never be able to concentrate on her novel now, and she hoped Miranda would send her home soon. Surely she would, because of course she'd want to go home herself and--

All of a sudden, there was a flurry of movement and the crinkle of plastic, and Andy watched in speechless horror as Miranda stormed past Andy's desk and into her executive washroom, the
pharmacy bag clutched in one white-knuckled hand.

Here? She was going to do it here? Now? With Andy right in the reception area? Fuck. Oh, fuck. Andy did not want to be here when Miranda came out of that bathroom. Miranda probably wouldn't want her to be, either. She'd probably kill Andy when she emerged, to ensure her silence, or--should Andy just pack up and leave? Would that be the best thing to do, and tomorrow she could come in and pretend like nothing had ever happened? That might be a good idea, actually, because with Miranda, you never referred to personal things, ever…

Even as she thought about it, Andy knew she wasn't going anywhere. And so the minutes crawled by. Andy thought for sure that she had to be hallucinating the amount of time Miranda was taking, until she looked at her watch and realized that yes, Miranda had been in the bathroom for nearly twenty minutes. What the hell was going on in there? Had Miranda fallen and hit her head? Had she forgotten how to pee? Was she trying to drown herself in the sink?

Just as Andy was wondering if it would be a really bad idea to check on her, the door opened, and Miranda emerged. One look at her face told Andy everything, but before Miranda could meet her eyes, Andy bent down and pretended to study the surface of her desk. If Miranda caught her staring--

Miranda returned to her own desk. Andy still didn't look up. Eventually, Miranda said, her voice thick, "Andrea."

Andy got up and headed on unsteady legs to the door of Miranda's office. "Yes?" she whispered.

"Tomorrow," Miranda said, staring vacantly into the distance, much as she had that night in her Paris hotel room, "arrange an immediate appointment with my physician. And contact my attorney as soon as his office opens. Eight a.m. Sharp."

"O-of course," Andy said.

"Call my driver," Miranda said, and rubbed her forehead again. "Let's go home."

'Let's go home'? But Andy didn't ask questions, and dialed Roy right away. Then she helped Miranda put on her coat, gave her her bag, and walked her to the elevator, fully prepared to wait for the next car, as usual. But Miranda muttered, "Get in," and so Andy found herself sharing an elevator with her boss for the second time in their acquaintance.

Andy had learned her lesson now, and stood stock-still in the elevator next to Miranda, trying to be invisible, not speaking a word. She wouldn't have any idea what to say anyway. Not now, for sure. What the hell did you even say to someone at a time like this? Congratulations, condolences, what? She didn't even dare glance over at Miranda.

"I don't believe this," Miranda said.

Andy froze.

"I don't--" Miranda repeated, and Andy finally turned to look at her, just in time to see Miranda close her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Andy whispered. Then she heard herself blurt, like a total idiot, "You know, whatever I can do--of course I'll..." Her voice trailed off.

Miranda ignored her completely. "Page Six," she muttered, and laughed bitterly. "They think they're having a good time now? Wait until they hear about this."
Andy bit her lip. Miranda looked at her, and her eyes narrowed. "What?" she asked.

"Nothing," Andy said quickly, shaking her head.

"Say it," Miranda said.

Andy gulped. Okay, then. Okay. "So...you're going to keep it?"

Miranda was silent for so long that Andy wondered if she'd heard. Then, just before the elevator doors opened at the lobby, she said, sounding bewildered, "I don't know."

They stepped into the lobby. Miranda headed for the doors, apparently without noticing that she'd just become utterly and irrevocably human to Andy at last. Andy followed her out onto the sidewalk and, once they'd reached the car, held the door open. "I'll make all those calls as soon as I get here tomorrow," she promised.

"Get in the car," Miranda said without looking at her, and slid in herself.

Andy stood on the sidewalk, stunned, for a moment. Even as she walked around the car and reached for the door handle, she considered sprinting down the sidewalk. Miranda had decided that she must be silenced; Miranda was going to have Roy drive them down to the docks, kill Andy, and then dump her body in the river. Or, worse, Miranda was going to think of something else Andy had to do before going to bed at long last and trying to process this crazy day.

But all Miranda did, as Andy buckled her seatbelt, was lean back against the headrest, close her eyes, and say, "Take me home, and then drop Andrea off at her apartment."

"Yes, ma'am," Roy said as he smoothly pulled into the street.

Huh? Andy was getting personal chauffeur service? "What about your dry cleaning?" she asked timidly.

"Tomorrow," Miranda said without opening her eyes.

"Okay," Andy mumbled. No more questions. Just ride in silence; just let Miranda rest. She needed the rest. She needed a lot of things, most of which Andy couldn't give her, but surely Andy could manage a quiet, peaceful car ride.

When they'd gone about four blocks, Andy dared to look at Miranda out of the corner of her eye. Then she blinked in astonishment. Miranda had slumped against the window. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing deeply. She'd fallen asleep.

Well...good, Andy thought, and she watched Miranda sleep, hypnotized by it. Miranda didn't look peaceful, exactly, but she was...still. Miranda never held still, not for a minute. Even during the long flights to and from Paris, she hadn't slept, but had kept everyone busy with last-minute commands and instructions to be fulfilled mid-flight, or upon landing.

Andy looked up and met Roy's eyes in the rear-view mirror. She blushed without knowing why. But Roy's own eyes were wide, and she realized he was just as astonished as she was. Almost ten years of driving Miranda, and apparently he'd never seen her go to sleep in the car before.

When they got to the townhouse, Miranda was still sound asleep, and Andy realized it was up to her to wake her. She reached out timidly, and realized that she didn't have the courage to touch her. You didn't just touch Miranda, water glasses notwithstanding. So instead she cleared her throat loudly and watched Miranda twitch into wakefulness, inhaling sharply through her nose. Then Andy looked out
her window so that Miranda could pretend that Andy hadn't noticed her sleeping. Pretense. Andy had gotten pretty damn good at that, too. It was a skill she'd never wanted to acquire, but she hadn't been able to help herself. She wanted to survive, after all.

When she heard Miranda unbuckling her seatbelt, Andy turned her head, and managed a weak smile as she said, "Thanks for the ride." Miranda might have changed her in a lot of ways, but Andy would be damned if she had to forego the basic courtesy her mother had taught her.

Miranda looked at her with her brow furrowed. Her hand fumbled a little as she unbuckled and she blinked sleepily. It would have been cute, if it had been anybody else; as it was, it was a little bit scary. Without a word, Andy unbuckled her own seat belt, got out of the car, and hurried around to open the door for Miranda, wishing that Roy had thought of it first. It was cold tonight.

By the time Miranda was on her feet and on the sidewalk, she appeared a little revived, perhaps because of the cool air. She gave Andy a quick glance, as if waiting for something. Andy had no idea what, but she blurted, before she could stop herself, "Um...they could be wrong. The tests." Miranda narrowed her eyes. Andy winced and hunched her shoulders. Yeah. Okay. Shut up.

Miranda turned and mounted the steps to her townhouse without a word. Andy, still cringing, got back in the car, but Roy didn't drive away until they'd both seen Miranda get safely through the door.

"What's going on?" Roy asked as he pulled away from the curb.

Andy didn't consider telling him the truth even for a moment. Instead, all she said was, "She had a really long day."

"She's had lots of them lately," Roy said. "I've practically taken to sleeping in my uniform, just so I can be ready to go whenever you call me."

"At least you get to sleep," Andy said snidely, but Roy only chuckled, not taking offense.

"True enough," he said. "Try and get some sleep tonight, okay? You look like you're dead on your feet lately, too."

"What else is new?" Andy asked, and Roy chuckled again.

But Andy had a hard time following Roy's instructions that night. She should have been tired, but instead she felt worked up, practically trembling with nervous energy, and she prowled her apartment, unable to lie still in bed. What was Miranda going to do? What would happen now?

Andy finally made it to bed at three, but it was even longer until she actually went to sleep.

She stumbled into the office at seven-forty-five in the morning. She'd had a couple of weird dreams, and when she'd woken up again at six-thirty, she'd given sleep up for the night and just rolled out of bed. She wasn't surprised to see that Emily was already there, and that Miranda wasn't. She hoped Miranda wouldn't show up at all, that she'd take the day off, for once. If there was ever a good reason…

But Miranda called Andy at eight-thirty and said, "I'll be there in an hour. Have you scheduled those appointments?"
Andy nodded, before realizing that duh, Miranda couldn't see her over the phone. "I got your doctor to fit you in at four this afternoon, and your attorney will see you tomorrow at ten."

"Fine." Miranda hung up.

Andy looked up to see Emily watching her curiously. Of course Emily was aware of every minute change to Miranda's schedule, just like Andy was. And apparently she was trying to overcome her antipathy for just long enough to ask what was going on.

"Well, you know she hasn't been feeling well," Andy said feebly, and shrugged, as if that was all she knew.

Emily sniffed, but seemed to accept the flimsy explanation. She probably didn't think that Miranda would confide anything more substantial to Andy, anyway. What would she do if she knew the truth? Expire from jealousy, most likely.

It was weird, really. Miranda seemed to want Andy to be--well, someone to talk to, even as Andy was trying desperately not to care about her. And Emily, who'd lie down in New York traffic for Miranda…well, Miranda had called her stupid, and that said it all. Life was pretty fucked up sometimes.

"It's about bloody time, isn't it," Emily muttered, looking as if it cost her quite a lot to speak to Andy civilly. Mostly civilly. "Well--I'm sure it's nothing."

"Right," Andy said, trying not to smirk, because that would be really inappropriate, no matter how funny it was to imagine Emily's face if she knew the truth. Then again, if Miranda decided to keep the baby, everybody would know soon enough.

At nine o'clock, Andy left Runway and hurried down to the corner market in search of Miranda's breakfast. Last night, after pacing until she was ready to drop, she'd sat down at her laptop and Googled "pregnant women diet." From there, she'd wandered through the mazes of the internet until she'd learned that pregnant women should increase their food intake by 150 calories a day, and should expect to gain about twenty-five pounds before giving birth. Andy tried to imagine Miranda carrying around an extra twenty-five pounds. Then she tried to imagine Miranda being pregnant at all, which led to the idea of Miranda actually having sex to get pregnant, and her brain promptly screeched to a halt while she got the willies.

She looked over her list. Fruit, toast, milk, eggs, melon—all that stuff was supposed to be good for you. But if Miranda was gagging on mineral water, it'd be better to stick to something she could tolerate. It had been a while since Andy had been dispatched to get her scrambled eggs, so those were probably a bust, but maybe Miranda could keep fruit down. So Andy bought a banana, a couple of good-looking plums, and a pear. Miranda didn't like apples, and the strawberries looked gross, so Andy avoided those.

On the way back, she made the usual stop at Starbucks. She'd also learned that pregnant women weren't supposed to drink more than two cups of coffee a day. There was no way she was going to try to tell Miranda that.

By the time Andy had finished her shopping, and returned to Elias-Clarke, there were only five minutes until Miranda was supposed to show up. In fact, as Andy entered the revolving door, she thought she saw Miranda's Mercedes rounding the corner, and quickened her steps. When she reached the Runway offices, she hurried into the kitchen and washed and arranged the fruit as nicely as she could on one of the plates. She placed it on Miranda's desk with the coffee just as Miranda was walking through the door, already talking a mile a minute on her cell phone.
"...no, I've told him I'm not going to budge. Well, you'll just have to arrange it, won't you? I'm not dealing with it." She tossed her coat and bag on Emily's desk, and Emily gave Andy the usual look of hatred. This time, Andy didn't even try to disguise her eyeroll, and watched Emily's face go bright red as a result. "What else am I paying you for?" Miranda continued as she swept into her office without looking at either of her assistants. "This is your job--" She stopped as she saw the plate of fruit. Andy held her breath for a moment. Then Miranda continued, almost without missing a beat, "Call me when you've resolved this. Which will hopefully be before ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

Oh. The attorney. Andy did not envy him having Miranda as a client. "Goodbye," Miranda said, snapped the phone shut, and in the same breath, said, "Andrea."

Andy swallowed hard and entered the office. Miranda held up her Starbucks. "Is this a regular coffee?" she demanded.

Andy blinked. "It's--yeah," she said. "I mean, it's your usual--"

"Decaf," Miranda snapped, scowling at Andy and giving her the worst ever how-could-you-be-so-stupid look.

Andy's jaw dropped. Then she looked around to make sure they were alone, lowered her voice, and said, "But I looked it up, and you're supposed to be able to have two cups of regular coffee a day if you w--"

Miranda looked at her.

Andy swallowed. "Okay," she said, and pointed at the fruit. "Is, is that okay, or do you want something else?"

Miranda glanced at the fruit again. "Acceptable," she said, and at that moment her stomach growled. Her cheeks went red. Andy quickly turned around before Miranda could see her smirk, and raced out to Starbucks. When she returned with a decaf latte, Miranda had already worked her way through the banana, one of the plums, and half the pear.

"Steak at noon," Miranda said without looking up from her laptop screen. "Call Nanette and arrange a pedicure for me on Thursday morning. Tell Paul I need to see the photos for the Native American jewelry feature. Make sure we have McQueen tomorrow at eleven--confirm with Marcia, Kelly's useless. Then call my ex-husband--" Miranda stopped, winced, and growled, "Greg, and remind him that he's picking up the girls tonight." She glanced at Andy. "That's all."

For the rest of the day, Andy kept an eye on Miranda while trying to look like she wasn't keeping an eye on Miranda, because for one thing, if Miranda figured out what she was doing she'd rip her a new one. For another, it wasn't her problem, really, and she didn't care, really. But she kept trying to see if Miranda looked different--thicker waist, stuff like that. She couldn't find anything really obvious.

At three o'clock, Miranda called, "Coat. Bag. I'll probably be out for the rest of the afternoon. Andrea, come with me."

Andy couldn't stop herself, and shared a surprised look with Emily. Then Emily hobbled to the closet to get Miranda's things, while Andy called for Roy and quickly packed up her own bag.

When the car pulled up and they got inside, Andy expected Miranda to give her some kind of errand-like, go to Alaia after Roy dropped Miranda off, or something--but all Miranda said was, "To Dr. Latchley's office. Andrea, I trust you brought something to take notes."
Andy stared at Miranda, before she managed, "Um. Yes. Sure." Then she fumbled in her bag for her pad and pencil.

"You won't need them until we get there," Miranda pointed out acidly, and turned to gaze out the window.

"Right," Andy said, and snapped her bag shut, blushing. So…okay. Miranda wanted Andy to sit in on her doctor’s visit. Wanted her to take notes. All right. Andy could do that. No matter how incredibly weird it seemed, Andy could do that.

"So," Miranda said, without turning to look at Andy, "you 'looked it up.'"

"Um," Andy said. "Yeah. I found a lot of websites. But, um--maybe I should get a book?"

"Maybe you should," Miranda said. Andy gulped.

Sandra Latchley had a very nice office, especially for a GP--the kind that bespoke rich patients. As Andy suspected, Miranda was there chiefly to have her suspicions confirmed, and then to get a referral since her former obstetrician had recently retired.

Andy was not actually expected to follow Miranda into an examining room, so she just lingered in the waiting room. Thank goodness. The thought of Miranda Priestly in one of those paper gowns was actually embarrassing. In the meantime, she fidgeted.

After she'd waited for about an hour, a nurse came down the hall. "Andrea?" she called, and Andy stood up. The nurse gave Andy a polite smile. "This way, please."

A fully-dressed Miranda was sitting in Dr. Latchley's office across the desk. Dr. Latchley had various papers and charts in front of her. She smiled welcomingly at Andy. Her brown eyes were warm and kind, and Andy hoped against hope that she'd had a soothing effect on Miranda. "Have a seat," she said.

Andy managed a smile of her own as she lowered herself into a hard leather chair. She'd had her notebook and pen at the ready ever since she'd sat down in the waiting room, just so she could be available at a moment's notice, and Dr. Latchley looked amused as she sat alert and attentive. "All right," she said. "Miranda has said that she doesn't mind you hearing whatever I have to say, so now that we're here, shall we begin?"

"Please," Miranda said. "I'm on a very tight schedule."

"Well, so am I," Dr. Latchley said calmly. "So let's get down to it. Miranda, you are indeed pregnant. We can't conclusively prove it until you're about ten weeks along and we can actually hear the baby's heartbeat, but our lab tests are pretty close to infallible. And given that the tests you've already done were…"

"I know I'm pregnant," Miranda said, sounding irritated. "What next?"

"Next I refer you to an obstetrician. This is difficult--with insurance costs, there aren't very many around these days. I recommend Dr. Viswanathan. She's very good, and well-known. I can get you in the door, but you'll need to make all your appointments well in advance." She gave Miranda a knowing look. "And keep them." Miranda glared.

"What's her first name, please?" Andy asked, ready to write it down. Dr. Latchley smiled again at her, and gave her a business card, which Andy carefully filed in her bag. "And--how's that going to work? You'll make the initial call, or--"
"I will tell her to expect your call," Dr. Latchley said. "We're old friends. Call her office tomorrow morning, and you should be able to set something up."

"Thanks," Andy said, scribbling away. "Any receptionist in particular I should try to talk to?"

"They're all very nice, but if you get ahold of Mary, tell her I want to know how her dogs are doing these days."

"Dogs…are…doing," Andy muttered, writing it down. "Mary. Okay." She looked up to see Dr. Latchley grinning at her, and Miranda looking at her like she was an idiot. Andy flinched.

"In the meantime," Dr. Latchley said, turning back to Miranda, "I've got a basic caresheet here." She pulled a pale pink sheet of paper from a folder. "This lists dietary and exercise recommendations, as well as typical symptoms you should expect. Of course, you've gone through all this before." She glanced at Andy and smiled again, taking out another sheet. "Would you like a copy?"

"Yes, please," Andy mumbled, face still on fire, not looking at Miranda. She looked especially at the dietary information, which was pretty much the same stuff, she was relieved to see, that she'd found online.

"You'll want to pay careful attention to your diet; older pregnant women are much more likely to develop gestational diabetes, along with other complications. How have you been eating?" Dr. Latchley asked Miranda.

"Quite normally," said Miranda, the great big fibber. Andy gave Miranda a look of outrage, which Dr. Latchley saw before Andy could hide it. Fortunately, Miranda did not appear to notice.

"And what's 'normal'? What did you have for lunch today?" Dr. Latchley asked.


"You'll want to cut back on that," Dr. Latchley said firmly. Miranda glared, but did not look surprised. "Protein's good, but red meat isn't the greatest. What about breakfast?"

Miranda darted Andy a quick look. "Fruit," she said.

"Bananas and pears and stuff," Andy added. "And plums."

"All right," Dr. Latchley said. "But you need more variety. I suggest melons, too. Eggs are great--"

"No eggs," Miranda said flatly. Her cheeks went a little green.

"--and milk. Lots of dairy," Dr. Latchley finished. "Caloric requirements are on the sheet, although Dr. Viswanathan will be able to go into more detail with you. You might also want to consult a nutritionist, or a personal trainer if you have concerns about exercise."

Miranda already had a nutritionist and trainer, of course. Andy made a note to call them and set up appointments as soon as possible.

"And above all else," Dr. Latchley added, sounding stern for the first time, "get adequate rest. I know you're a busy woman, but you have to be prepared to take it easier than you normally would." She tilted her head at Andy. "She's young and chipper. Put her to use. Get her to do things for you."

Andy's jaw dropped, but all Miranda said was, "An excellent idea." She smiled thinly. "Surely she must be good for something."
"Do you have any other questions?" Dr. Latchley asked.

"Can she have coffee?" Andy blurted before she could stop herself. Maybe it was payback. 'Good for something,' indeed. "Regular coffee? Because I read two cups were okay--"

"Two cups are okay," Dr. Latchley said absently, looking down at her paperwork while Miranda sent Andy a Glare of Death. Andy squirmed. "But try to limit your caffeine intake as much as possible."

"Thank you," Miranda said sweetly, and stood up. "We really must be getting back."

"Of course," Dr. Latchley said, and stood up too. She extended her hand to Miranda, who took it rather gingerly before letting go again. "Please call me if there are any problems. Oh--and congratulations."

Miranda didn't even manage a thin smile this time. Instead she nodded curtly and left the office without another word. Andy quickly turned to the doctor. "So," she said urgently, "this sheet--this is all the stuff I should know? Or, you know, should I look out for anything else…?"

Dr. Latchley gave Andy a really amused smile. "Your first child, I take it?" she asked.

Before Andy had time to splutter a response, Miranda called, "Andrea," impatiently from the hallway.

'Good luck,' Dr. Latchley mouthed, as Andy hurried out the door. She'd need more than that, Andy reflected gloomily as she caught up with a scowling Miranda. But Miranda did not berate her as she led the way out to the car.

"Roy, you will take me home and then return Andrea to Runway. Andrea, you're in charge of Dr. Vis-whatever," Miranda said as Andy opened the door for her. Miranda slid inside and Andy shut the door. Then she hurried around to her own door, knowing that Miranda hated even the five-second delay between bullet-rapid instructions.

"Remember that the girls and I are going to London for Christmas, and work with that," Miranda said the moment Andy opened her own door. "I've been promising them this trip for ages."

"Right," Andy said. "Right." She buckled her seatbelt and whipped out her pad and pencil again.

"God. London," Miranda muttered. "Get in touch with Joseph Finch--he's our family physician there. Then call Cara. I told her she could have Christmas off, but obviously I'm going to need her now. She will simply have to 'see her family' some other time." Feeling very, very sorry for Cara, the twins' long-suffering nanny, Andy wrote that down, too. "Confirm that we have Praeger, Lawson & Day tomorrow at ten."

"I called them at two," Andy said. "You should be good to go."

"I?" Miranda asked.

Andy blinked, swallowed, and said, "We."

"Arrive at their offices at nine-thirty," Miranda said. "Don't bother stopping by Runway first. And don't be late."

"Right," Andy said, already anticipating sleeping in.
"Then get in touch with my personal trainer and arrange for her to come to my home this weekend. Early Saturday morning will work, and I mean early. Make sure that Emily's made the arrangements for my Christmas presents; she's had the job for months, but these days I don't trust her to breathe without her mouth open. And tomorrow afternoon I want you to go to Dior with Lucia. Bring me back a full report--hers are quite unsatisfactory, lately." The unpleasant gleam in Miranda's eyes suggested that Lucia's reports wouldn't be unsatisfactory for much longer, and neither would Lucia.

"Got it," Andy said, her pen flying across the paper. Her wrist was cramping again. She was going to have a repetitive stress injury by the time she finished at Runway, she just knew it.

"Good. That's all." Miranda turned and looked out the window, her hands folded in her lap. She didn't look appreciably calmer after her doctor's visit--maybe, in spite of everything, she'd been hoping she was wrong, that she wasn't pregnant after all. Andy looked out her own window, remembered her own scare, and decided for the fiftieth time that she wouldn't trade places with Miranda for all the Birkin bags in the world.

When the car pulled up at Miranda's home, Andy made to get out of the car, as she had the last time. Miranda waved her off impatiently and unbuckled her seatbelt. Before she got out of the car, she gave Andy an intent, penetrating look; against her will, Andy shivered.

"Be discreet," was all Miranda said, and then she was gone, climbing the stairs to her townhouse.

"What's going on?" Roy asked as he pulled away from the curb.

Andy decided that telling Roy everything wouldn't be a good start to 'being discreet.' "Er. Stuff," she said weakly. Roy rolled his eyes in the rear view mirror. "Look, you heard what she just said. It's my job if I don't keep my mouth shut." And probably any job Andy might contemplate in the future, too.

"Right," Roy sighed. "Guess I'll find out eventually."

Everybody would, soon enough, Andy thought. Unless Miranda decided to end the pregnancy. Andy supposed Miranda would talk to Stephen about that first, though. After talking to her attorney. God, telling her attorney about her pregnancy before telling the baby's father…it was a weird world. Assuming Stephen was the father. Andy hid her face in her hands and whimpered.

"You okay back there?" Roy asked, sounding alarmed.

"Fine," Andy mumbled. "It's just Miranda."

"I hear you," Roy said. Their eyes met in the mirror again, and against her will, Andy shared a laugh with him.

Playing it safe, Andy arrived at Praeger, Lawson & Day the next morning at nine-fifteen. Good thing too, because Miranda swept through the door not five minutes later and gave her a look that was almost approving. Andy immediately jumped to her feet and hurried to the reception desk, telling the harassed-looking secretary, "Hi. Miranda Priestly's arrived for her meeting with Mr. Praeger."

"That meeting isn't until ten o'clock, ma'am," the secretary said, giving her the barest glance before returning her attention to her frantic typing. She clicked her mouse, and the printer behind her began spewing out paper.
"Well, yes, I know," Andy said, "but she's here now."

"That's fine," the secretary, whose nameplate read 'Betsy,' said, still not looking at Andy. "Please help yourselves to bottled water, juice, or coffee. We also have a cafeteria on the third floor if you haven't had break--"

"No, no," Andy said quickly. "I mean, she's here now, and she wants to start the meeting. Right now. I'm her assistant," she added, like that was supposed to make a difference.

Betsy gave Andy the kind of look that said she hated her job, not just this morning, but every morning, and every afternoon and evening too. "Mr. Praeger is not available," she said flatly. Then she turned her back on Andy and began gathering the printouts. The body language was pretty final.

Already cringing, Andy headed over to Miranda, who was tapping her foot impatiently by a large potted plant. As soon as Andy was near enough, Miranda saddled her with her purse and coat. "Well?" she said.

"Um, the secretary said we can't go in yet," Andy said. Miranda's eyes darkened. "But there's a cafeteria," Andy added quickly. "Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes," Miranda said, and stalked over to the reception desk. Andy followed her, hampered by her new burden, and arrived in time to see the secretary give Miranda a look of pure hatred. She also looked frightened, though, and picked up her phone. "Mr. Praeger," she said, "Miranda Priestly has arrived, but I know your meeting with her isn't--" She stopped, and scowled. "Yes, sir. I'll tell her." She glared at Miranda. "You can go on up. Eighth floor."

Miranda kept looking at her.

"...Ma'am," the secretary mumbled.

Now satisfied, Miranda turned on her heel and strode towards the elevator. Apparently, getting knocked up hadn't robbed her of the ability to scare the crap out of random strangers. Andy staggered after her, doing a tricky balancing act by carrying two heavy coats and bags on four-inch heels over slippery marble floors. By the time she caught up with Miranda, Miranda had already pressed the call button and the elevator's doors were sliding open. She jerked her head, and Andy followed her inside.

Miranda mashed the button for the eighth floor. "You let her say 'no' to you," she said.

"Oh," Andy said, "um--"

"I am disappointed in you, Andrea."

Andy gaped at her. "Wh-what?"

"When you are dealing with anybody, especially a secretary," Miranda practically spat the word, "you do what it takes to get what you want. You do not decide to curl up and die."

"But--I mean, I did ask her, more than once, and she just--"

"You never 'ask.' And you never say anything more than once. We dictate the terms, Andrea, not them. Always. I hope I never have to remind you of this again."

"No, Miranda," Andy mumbled, wishing she could hide her face in the pile of coats in her arms. "Sorry."
Thankfully, at that moment, the elevator stopped at the eighth floor. The door opened to reveal a slim, suited man waiting in the corridor, smiling at them. He was of middle age, with salt-and-pepper hair, and was obviously accomplished, wealthy, and distinguished. This did not stop him from looking at Miranda with something like fear in his eyes.

"Miranda," he said as Miranda and Andy exited the elevator, and bent forward to kiss the air to either side of Miranda's cheeks.

"Preston," Miranda said without preamble, "your secretary's conduct is appalling. She was deliberately unhelpful and rude to my assistant who, for reasons known only to her, was attempting to be polite. Isn't that right, Andrea?" Andy gaped at her again, and Miranda waved her hand at her. "Find somewhere to put those things."

"Allow me," the man said, and before Andy could protest, took Miranda's coat and bag, leaving Andy with her own. They smiled at each other, sharing the instant camaraderie of two trauma victims. "I'm Preston Praeger. And you?"

"Andy Sachs," Andy said.

"A pleasure. Miranda, I'm so sorry about Betsy. I'll speak to her later today. Ladies, this way?" He led them down the hallway. Andy couldn't help but notice the stark contrast between this place and Runway. The Runway office walls were either made of glass or painted in cream, the floors either pale marble or carpet. Everything had the feeling of being transparent, like gossamer, like you were floating in air. This place was like something out of a Victorian novel, with red carpets and heavy wooden doors and black marble walls. Andy half-expected a butler with a British accent to step out of nowhere.

"I've spoken to Sam Johnson," Mr. Praeger was saying as he led them down a side corridor, to an open doorway at the end. Shiny leather chairs sat to either side of the door. "Looks like everything is in place. And so far Stephen's been willing to compromise--"

"Oh, yes," Miranda said bitterly.

"--and to be punctual." Mr. Praeger looked over at Miranda with an attempt at a smile. "I'm willing to bet that three hours from now, we'll be fairly close to a resolution of terms."

"I'm not so certain of that," Miranda said. "I'll need to speak to Stephen alone."

It took some effort for Andy not to stop dead in the hallway. Stephen was going to be here today? This wasn't just Miranda and her lawyer? Which meant...shit. Shit. It meant Miranda was going to tell Stephen today, with Andy in the same building, which would be about a million times worse than waiting for Miranda to finish taking a pregnancy test in the bathroom. Law school. Why hadn't Andy gone to law school?

Then again, law school hadn't done Mr. Praeger any favors, considering. He was frowning at Miranda. "I'm--are you sure that's a good idea?" he asked carefully, leading them through the open door. It was a conference room, with an enormous oaken table surrounded by several plush chairs. "So far he's been, um, resistant to--" He glanced over his shoulder at Andy.

"I know what he's been," Miranda said, and seated herself in a chair precisely at the middle of the table. She folded her hands on the wooden surface, and drummed her fingers. "This is important, Preston."

"If you're sure," Mr. Praeger said, and hung Miranda's coat on a coat rack by the door, setting her
"Where would you like me to sit?" Andy asked.

She'd addressed the question to Mr. Praeger, but Miranda tapped the table with her right hand and said, "Here."

Mr. Praeger raised his eyebrows, and said to Andy, "I see my position has been usurped." Then he smiled to show there were no hard feelings. "Miranda, I've a few matters to take care of in my office before our meeting starts. Did you have any particular questions for me before I go?"

"No, thank you, Preston," Miranda said, and turned to Andy. "Bring me my bag."

Mr. Praeger and Andy grimaced at each other behind Miranda's back, as Mr. Praeger picked the bag up from the floor and passed it over to Andy. Then, with the air of a man who had received a brief reprieve, he left.

Andy handed Miranda her bag: a python drawstring from Michael Kors. Andy wasn't sure that today was a good day for Miranda to appear snakelike, all things considered, but she'd be damned if she opened her mouth on the subject. Miranda opened the bag and rummaged inside until she came up with a bottle of Tylenol. She shook the bottle, which gave a hollow rattle. "Almost out," she muttered. "Get me some more when we're done here."

"Okay. There's also some in your car," Andy offered timidly. "In the, um, box below the driver's seat. You know, just...for future reference."

The box had been Andy's own idea, which she'd come up with on the very day after they'd returned from Paris. She privately called it the Miranda Care Kit. More than painkillers, it also had travel-sized hairspray, hand lotion, and sample sizes of Miranda's favorite makeup products, all nicked from the beauty department with Nigel's rather impressed permission. There were also Band-Aids, a tiny bottle of hand sanitizer, and a couple of those little foam pads you could stick in your shoes to make them more comfortable. Whenever they were out, Andy had all these things at hand since Miranda invariably needed at least one of them, and Miranda never appeared to question where they came from. Andy made a quick mental note to add some anti-nausea medication at the first possible opportunity. She might need a second box.

"We are not in my car," Miranda said, and glanced at the sideboard, where there sat a pitcher of ice water and some glasses. Andy hurried over and poured Miranda a glass of water, before sitting down herself, wondering if she could get away with slipping off her shoes underneath the table. Maybe. She'd give it a few minutes. Miranda took two tablets from the bottle, chased them down with water, and then rubbed her forehead.

"I am not looking forward to this," she muttered.

Neither was Andy, but she tried to appear sympathetic. Not that Miranda was looking at her. Then it occurred to her that she ought to know something, and she cleared her throat. Miranda glanced at her. "Uh," Andy said, "does Mr. Praeger know? I mean, have you told him about, you know, on the phone..." She waved her hand vaguely. Miranda raised her eyebrows, as if she had no idea what Andy was talking about when she totally did. Fine. If she wanted to play it that way: "You know, the baby," Andy said daringly.

Miranda's eyes narrowed, and Andy wondered if she had, in fact, gone too far. "It is not a baby, Andrea," she said quietly, dangerously. "It is an embryo. A thing. And until I decide otherwise, that is what it will remain." Andy nodded wordlessly. "And no. Preston does not know. Yet." Miranda
drummed her fingers on the table, and looked away again, staring at the wall. "No one does."

Except the doctor, of course, who didn't really count, and…Andy. Andy felt the knowledge like a blow to the stomach. Jesus. She didn't know why that was so shocking—it made sense, considering how little time had passed since Miranda's discovery. But the idea that Andy was in on this before Miranda's husband, or her other kids, or hell, even her lawyer…that was weird. And wrong. And weird.

Then again, Miranda probably didn't even regard Andy as a person. Maybe in Miranda's mind, nobody did know, because Andy didn't count any more than the doctor did. That'd make more sense, even as the thought made Andy feel oddly miserable.

She looked at a clock on the wall: nine thirty-five. She had time to make a few calls, check in with Emily and see how things were going at the office. Emily had been less than happy to learn that Andy would be out of the office this morning, but Emily was never happy these days, so whatever. She took out her phone.

"What are you doing?" Miranda asked. Andy nearly jumped.

"I was just going to call the office," she said feebly. "You know, see if—if things are okay, or—and then I was going to call Kate Spade's and make sure that those satchels for Tuesday are ready to g—"

"Kate Spade," Miranda said, and snorted. "Did you see what she was wearing at the benefit?" Andy winced and nodded. Unfortunately, she had. It had been—"Some sort of bizarre caftan with fuchsia tights. One more public appearance like that and I think I'll have to decide that her bags and shoes are no longer 'charming.'" Andy winced again. Kate Spade was a well-known designer. It was scary to think that Miranda could destroy even an established person's career without a second thought.

Then Miranda glanced at Andy. "You looked acceptable," she said, her voice neutral.

Andy's jaw dropped, before she recovered herself and managed a smile. "Thanks," she said. "Nigel found the dress in the Closet. I really liked it." She bit her lip and dared to add, "I asked if it would fit, and he said we'd be in business with a little Crisco and fishing line."

"Mmm." Miranda continued to regard her with that same intent, contemplative gaze that made Andy squirm. Then she turned to look back at the wall with a sigh. "Well, you've lost weight. That's something."

Thanks a lot. Like Andy had been a total whale to begin with. But what now? Should she actually make those calls, or did Miranda want to keep talking? Did she just want to stay distracted until Stephen showed up? Andy couldn't blame her.

Time to take a chance. Andy said, "Well, I've been doing this low-carb thing. Seems to be worki—"

"Stop talking about food," Miranda said through gritted teeth.

Whoops, miscalculation. Andy looked carefully at Miranda. Morning sickness? Miranda didn't look green, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. Without a word, Andy got to her feet, and refilled Miranda's water glass from the pitcher. Miranda glanced up at her as Andy put the glass down in front of her, and Andy did her very best to look helpful.

"Bring me something from the cafeteria," Miranda said. "Yogurt. Plain."

"Right," Andy said, and hurried out, remembering how grateful Mr. Praeger had also been to escape. It took her fifteen minutes to complete the errand, and by the time she got back, the meeting was due
to start in ten. Miranda took the yogurt without a word of thanks and devoured it almost resentfully while Andy looked off into space and pretended not to be there.

"I already had breakfast," Miranda said, and tossed the empty plastic cup into a nearby trashcan with unerring aim.

"Well, the doctor said that dairy is good," Andy said timidly. "Calcium and stuff."

"I hate this," Miranda said. "Oh, my God. If it's twins again…" She shuddered. Andy winced and tried to imagine Miranda, not just pregnant, but pregnant with twins. She'd have been as big as a house. "Don't get pregnant, Andrea."

"N-not planning on it anytime soon," Andy said.

"Planning does not always enter into it," Miranda said darkly, and sipped her water again. Andy had the sudden, horrible feeling that Miranda might actually start talking about her birth control when, mercifully, voices sounded down the hallway. Stephen and his attorney had arrived early, and Mr. Praeger was coming with them.

"…no interest in anything 'private,'" Stephen was saying. Next to Andy, Miranda stiffened. Andy's desire to vanish into thin air redoubled.

"Well, we can talk about that," Praeger said jovially as he led the way into the conference room.

"My client said no, Preston," Stephen's lawyer--must be Sam Johnson--said. He nodded at Miranda as he and Stephen seated themselves across the table. "Ms. Priestly." Miranda pinched her lips and did not return the nod.

"Stephen," she said neutrally.

"Miranda," he replied, just the same. Then he glanced at Andy, and raised his eyebrows. "You again?" he said with a small, mocking smile. "Just can't get enough of listening in on our squabbles, can you, young lady?"

Andy felt as if all the blood in her body had just rushed to her face. Humiliated, she stared down at the table. Great. Just what she needed--for Stephen to remind Miranda of--

"I asked her to be here," Miranda said coldly.

"I figured that much," Stephen replied. He glanced over at his attorney. "Sam?"

"I see no reason not to begin," Mr. Johnson said, opening his briefcase.

"Stephen," Miranda said, "I'm sorry, but we really do have to speak alone. For just a moment."

Andy wondered if anybody else heard the nearly-hidden urgency in her voice, the note that was almost pleading. Stephen didn't seem to. "Miranda," he said, sounding tired, "we've been through this before. I just want--"

"Not this, we haven't," Miranda said. "We need to--"

"No," Stephen said. "Now, Sam--"

"There has been a new development," Miranda growled, narrowing her eyes. Finally something seemed to get through to Stephen, who blinked and frowned at her. "Just a few minutes, Stephen," she added, and now everybody could hear her plea. Something deep inside Andy twinged with
"Okay," Stephen sighed after a moment. "Let's give it ten minutes, Sam."

"Stephen," Mr. Johnson said waringly.

Stephen held up a hand. "Ten minutes. Okay? And then we'll move on."

Andy was on her feet practically before he'd finished speaking, gathering her coat and bag with shaking hands, feeling absurdly as if she didn't want to leave a single trace of her presence behind that might intrude on Miranda's privacy. An astonished Mr. Praeger held the door open for her. He and Mr. Johnson followed her out of the room.

"What's going on?" Mr. Johnson demanded of her as soon as the door shut behind them.

"Don't answer that," Mr. Praeger said at once, like Andy needed the instruction. Instead, she shook her head mutely, and plopped down in one of the shiny leather chairs beside the door. She could just barely hear the low murmur of voices speaking in normal tones, but couldn't make out any words.

"Come on, Sam," Mr. Praeger said, and sighed. "Ten minutes. There's coffee in my office."

"I'd prefer Scotch," Mr. Johnson said ruefully. Mr. Praeger chuckled.

"Wouldn't we all," he said. He glanced at Andy. "Would you like to come along?"

Andy shook her head. She didn't trust either of them not to try to pry information out of her. Besides, she wasn't sure her knees would support her right now. And…and privacy aside, she didn't like the idea of leaving Miranda all alone in there. Even if Andy wasn't actually in the room.

Mr. Praeger and Mr. Johnson had barely rounded the corner when Andy heard the voices inside the room rising in volume, climbing towards shouts. Her stomach squirmed even more. Maybe she should have gone with the lawyers. Maybe she should get up right now, run for the elevator, and catch the first flight back to Cincinnati.

Stephen seemed to be doing most of the yelling. Even through the heavy door, Andy could catch tiny snatches and phrases. The one that stuck with her the most was Stephen shouting, "…on purpose!" Miranda's voice said something in reply that Andy couldn't catch. Probably just as well.

On purpose. Andy could understand why he'd feel that way. Miranda Priestly was the most cunning, conniving person she had ever met, bar none. Stephen might well believe she'd done this just to trap him in a failing marriage. Andy half-believed it herself, now that she thought about it.

But then she remembered the look on Miranda's face when she'd come out of that bathroom, and knew that Stephen was wrong. Sure, Miranda was trying to use the pregnancy to her advantage now. That was her nature. She couldn't do otherwise. But there was no way Miranda had wanted this, had planned this.

Ten minutes seemed to take forever. The voices were still raised when Mr. Johnson and Mr. Praeger returned, and when the two men heard them through the door, they looked apprehensively at each other, and at Andy.

"Little talk's not going well, huh?" Mr. Johnston asked Andy. She shook her head again. "Not much of a conversationalist, are you?"

"That's enough," Mr. Praeger said, to Andy's relief, and he rapped sharply on the door.
Then, without waiting for an invitation, he opened it, just in time for Stephen to yell, "--doesn't make any difference, you hear, I don't care, I didn't ask for this--"

"Neither did I!" Miranda cried. Andy realized she'd never heard Miranda raise her voice until today. She felt frozen to her chair. "For God's sake, you can't honestly think I wanted--"

"All right," Mr. Johnson said, stepping into the room and out of Andy's sight, "what's going on here?"

"Is it even mine?" Stephen demanded.

"What?" Miranda said.

Andy saw Mr. Praeger's eyes go very, very wide as he entered the room behind Mr. Johnson. She rose to her own feet, not sure if she should follow them inside or not.

"Stephen," Andy heard Mr. Johnson saying urgently, "if this is what I think it is, then you and I need to consult priv--"

"No, you know what? It doesn't matter. It's over, okay? I don't care if you've got goddamned quintuplets in there, you make the call, you do whatever you have to do, but we're through. We're done. Okay?"

"Stephen," Miranda said, and Andy could hear how hard she was straining for control, "I only wanted to tell you. We can't decide anything right now--all I ask is that we both take some time to think and consider, now that we know--"

"There's someone else," Stephen said.

"Stephen, please," Mr. Johnson said.

"No," Miranda said. Her voice actually trembled. "There isn't. What do you want, a paternity test? I'll--"

"I meant for me," Stephen said. "I have someone else."

Andy stopped breathing. The room went deadly silent. Then Mr. Johnson groaned, "Stephen," right before Mr. Praeger shut the door, leaving Andy alone in the corridor. Andy collapsed back into her chair, going boneless, her heart racing at a zillion miles an hour.

Nobody shouted after that. Andy guessed that Mr. Johnson had calmed Stephen down, and Miranda was probably in shock. Oh, Jesus. Stephen had been cheating on her. And there was a lot about Miranda that Andy didn't understand, but she knew that Miranda didn't forgive easily. Or at all.

Andy's head spun. God. It certainly explained the apartment Stephen had kept rented. Had he turned to another lover because Miranda wasn't around? But the way he'd just talked to her--like he hated her, like he hadn't just been looking for a substitute. For whatever reason, that was what their relationship had become.

Andy shuddered. Nope. She was never getting married, she was never having kids, she was going to move to Tibet and become a nun and dedicate the rest of her life to serving the poor or something--

The door slammed open, and Andy jumped about two feet in the air. Miranda bolted through it, wearing her coat and clutching her python bag. Her face was bone-white, and she didn't even seem to see Andy as she practically ran down the hall. Andy gasped, grabbed her own coat and bag, and
followed her at top speed.

Footsteps followed them both. Andy looked over her shoulder, half-terrified that an enraged Stephen was pursing Miranda down the corridor. But it was Mr. Praeger, and he called out, "Miranda!"

Miranda whirled on her heel. The snarl on her face made her look like an animal. A wounded one, caught in a trap. "Everything," she whispered, her voice shaking. "We will take him for everything he's got. Do you understand?"

Mr. Praeger pulled his handkerchief out of his breast pocket and mopped his forehead with it. "The pre-nup--" he began.

"And fire that fucking secretary," Miranda said, turned again, and headed off without another word.

Mr. Praeger opened his mouth again. Before she could stop herself, Andy pressed her hand to his elbow and said urgently, "Not now!" Then she followed Miranda, who was already at the elevators. One look at her face told Andy that they would definitely not be sharing an elevator for the trip down, and she stared down at the marble tiles as the brass door slid shut between them.

She caught the next elevator and called Roy. "Please hurry," she begged. "Oh my God, she is not going to want to wait." "Andy, are you okay?" Roy asked, sounding alarmed.

"No," Andy wailed, and hung up at once. By the time she reached the lobby, Miranda was waiting by the glass revolving door, staring through the floor-to-ceiling windows and obviously seeing nothing. Andy took a deep breath, prayed for courage, and went to stand next to Miranda, not looking at her, not daring to speak.

Miranda didn't move until her Mercedes pulled up at the sidewalk. When she saw the glint of the silver paint in the sunlight, she twitched and broke out of her reverie, just long enough to tell Andy: "Find a clinic. A decent one. By tomorrow."

It took Andy a second to figure out what she meant, and then she swallowed hard. "Okay," she said.

"Not a word to anyone. Not one word."

"I won't. I haven't. To anybody."

Miranda went through the revolving doors towards the waiting car. To Andy's surprise, Miranda held the car door open for her, but did not get inside herself. "Go back to Runway. I'm walking."

Andy stared at her. Where was she 'walking' to? Home? Well, they were already in the Upper East Side, so she could manage it if she really wanted to--though Andy didn't envy her the task in those shoes. Or maybe she was going somewhere else. Or maybe she just wanted to keep moving, without any destination in mind. It wasn't Andy's business. Andy wasn't supposed to care.

"Okay," Andy said. "I'm--I'll be at Dior with Lucia if you need--"

"I know," Miranda said, and walked away. Andy watched her for a few moments, and then quickly got in the car. Roy pulled away from the curb, and Andy looked back through the rear window, watching Miranda until she vanished completely into the crowd.
For once, Emily didn't needle Andy when Andy returned to the office. Instead, she took one look at Andy's face and then looked back at her computer screen. Andy sat at her desk, opened her email, and tried to collect herself.

After a few minutes, Emily asked, "Lawyers' meeting went poorly, I take it?"

"You could say that," Andy said weakly.

"Where is she?"

"I have no idea."

"What? What hap--"

"I can't tell you," Andy said, meeting her eyes, and deciding that if Emily tried to be a bitch about this, Andy would make her regret she'd ever been born. Emily opened her mouth, and then shut it, as if she'd read Andy's mind. "It's the apocalypse, Em," Andy said after a second, throwing her a bone. "Just take it from me, okay? It's bad."

Emily turned a little pale. As well she might. But she had enough sense not to press, and Andy turned back to her own computer. She had no urgent email messages, and so she took a deep breath and started poking around on the internet for reputable abortion clinics in Manhattan. Miranda wasn't going to wait to get into Dr. Viswanathan's office for this, Andy knew.

After a few minutes, she found a clinic that offered what it called "VIP treatment," where, for a price, you could get the whole office to yourself during your appointment. No other patients: just you, your doctor, and a nurse. Miranda would want that. Andy made a quick mental note of the number, cleared the browser cache, and hurried out of the receiving area with her cell phone. No need to be overheard. Emily watched her go curiously, but didn't say anything, for once.

The clinic receptionist was pleasant, soft-voiced, and helpful: the opposite of Betsy. Andy found herself almost wanting to burst into tears as she spoke to her, which was just ridiculous, because it wasn't her problem, wasn't her embryo or her marriage or anything other than her job. The woman seemed to sense her distress, and Andy had to reassure her a few times that no, the appointment wasn't for her, but for her boss.

"Okay," the woman said, her voice still soothing and patient. "And you wanted the VIP arrangement?"

"Definitely," Andy said.

"We can take y--excuse me, her, tomorrow."

'By tomorrow,' Miranda's husky voice said in Andy's head.

"Actually," Andy said, hearing her own voice as if from a long way off, "tomorrow isn't so...what about the day after, can you do that?"

"We can," the woman affirmed. "It'll take one hour. We have an opening at eight-thirty in the morning."

"We've got you in the schedule. Let me stress: please be on time."

"We will. Um, she will. Whichever." Andy wondered if Miranda would want her along for this, too, and realized she had no idea how to feel about that.

"One more thing: no children are allowed in the clinic. For obvious reasons."

"No kids," Andy said. "Gotcha."

"We'll see you on Thursday morning."

"Thanks," Andy said again, and hung up. Thursday morning. She canceled Miranda's pedicure with Nanette before she could forget about it.

Fuck. What was she doing? When Miranda said tomorrow, she meant tomorrow. Not the day after. Andy's job was to do whatever Miranda said. Even if Andy thought this wasn't the kind of decision you should make in the heat of anger--even if Andy thought just twenty-four extra hours wouldn't go amiss--it wasn't her decision to make. It wasn't her call. And if Miranda found out...if she learned that Andy had presumed to...

Andy remembered the look on Miranda's face and decided, screw it, if she got fired then she got fired, but Miranda was going to have an extra day to get herself together whether she wanted it or not. And maybe she wouldn't thank Andy for it, but Andy'd be able to sleep at night and that's what mattered. Miranda had brought Andy into this, and now she had to put up with Andy being involved. One extra day. If Miranda didn't change her mind, well then, it wouldn't make any difference in the long run, would it?

Andy left Runway at one-thirty to go to Dior with Lucia. Lucia plainly had no idea why Andy was coming along, but she knew Miranda well enough to be wary of any change in plans or routine. So while she wasn't rude to Andy, exactly, she wasn't chatty either.

That was fine with Andy. She tried as hard as she could to concentrate on the meeting with Alicia, one of Galliano's subordinates, because that's why Miranda had wanted her to go in the first place, for crying out loud. She just had a hard time concentrating, and it was all she could do to scribble down the notes Miranda would need.

Andy's phone bleeped just before the end of the meeting. It was Miranda, and Andy gave everybody in the room an apologetic smile before hurrying out into the lobby, to a quiet corner where nobody would be listening in. "Hello, Miranda?" she said.

"How many rings does it take before you decide to pick up?" Miranda asked.

"Sorry," Andy said, trying not to sound breathless from her little sprint into the lobby. "I'm at Dior and I wanted to find someplace quiet--"

"Have you made the appointment?"

Andy took a deep breath. "Yes. For, uh, Thursday morning." She heard Miranda take a deep breath of her own on the other end of the line, and blurted quickly, "I found this clinic where you can reserve the whole place to yourself, no other patients, and they had an opening on Thursday morning. I thought you might prefer that." It wasn't a lie, not exactly. They did have an opening on Thursday. That they'd had one on Wednesday as well didn't bear mentioning, that was all.

"...oh," Miranda said, sounding almost disappointed, like she'd been looking forward to tearing Andy apart. She probably had been. Andy wondered where she was.
"Tomorrow," Andy said, her mind racing, "if you want, I can stop by and take a look at it, you know, make sure it's okay. I mean, of course it should be okay--"

"Fine." Miranda suddenly sounded very, very tired. "That's all." Then she hung up.

Andy bit her lip and looked at her phone, her heart aching inexplicably. The girls were with their dad tonight. Miranda would be all alone. And that so, so wasn't Andy's problem.

She hoped Miranda got some sleep tonight. She needed it. And Andy doubted she was going to get much, herself.

As it happened, though, Andy got to bed by midnight for once. Miranda hadn't returned to the office, and when Andy dropped the book off at the townhouse that night, she didn't heard a peep out of her. Andy went straight home and, to her surprise, fell asleep with almost no trouble at all.

So of course it made sense that her phone would go off in the middle of the night. And of course it would be Miranda. Struggling into wakefulness, Andy squinted at the display, wondering in a panic if she'd missed her alarm and was late for work or something, when she realized it was three-thirty in the morning. Was there an emergency? Her fingers fumbled for the 'Talk' button. "Hello?" she croaked.

"Cancel the clinic appointment," Miranda said.

"Huh?" Andy shook her head and pushed her hair out of her eyes. Lack of sleep made her imprudent enough to say, "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Many things, and no," Miranda said. "Obviously. Nevertheless, I want you to cancel the appointment, at least for now."

"Oh," Andy said, her head spinning, her eyelids still heavy. "O-okay--"

"That's all." Miranda hung up.

Andy dropped the phone on the bed, and let her head fall back down onto the pillow with a thump and a groan. She was awake now, and her heart had started pounding again, which was normal when you got yanked out of deep sleep and thought something was really badly wrong and then somebody decided to confuse you just for the hell of it.

So Miranda had put a hold on the abortion for now. Fine, great, whatever, but of fucking course she hadn't been able to wait until, say, eight a.m. to tell Andy. God.

Staring up at her ceiling, Andy, for the first time since returning from Paris, considered quitting her job. It had never been a real possibility to her before: when her family, her friends, had urged her to leave Runway and Miranda behind, she'd stubbornly refused. She remember when Nigel had put the suggestion to her as well, before he'd given her a makeover. "I'm not going to quit!" she'd protested. "That's not fair!"

Then, in Paris--yeah, okay, she'd thought about it. She'd almost done it. But she hadn't, and these days she appeared to be in the very best of Miranda's good graces. Why was she thinking about leaving now?
Because it was getting to be too scary and intense, that was why. Getting the dry cleaning was one thing, but this felt like "assistance" on a different level, in a different league. And it wasn't right, either. Andy wasn't Miranda's family, wasn't her friend, shouldn't be involved in her personal life to this degree. She shouldn't have an emotional stake in this, especially when, God knew, she'd never be thanked for her efforts.

She was wearing herself out for someone who'd give her nothing in return. That was how it worked. Caring about Miranda Priestly only got people hurt in the end: just look at Emily, and Nigel, and Stephen too, and probably anybody else Miranda had ever met. The woman was a menace. Keeping a career afloat was no longer a good enough reason for Andy to stick around.

Even as she thought this, though, Andy knew she still wouldn't leave. Wouldn't quit. She was in too deep to stop now. Whether as a spectator or participant, she wanted to see this thing through to the end. Whenever that was. Wherever that was.

Andy squeezed her eyes shut, determined to recoup what she could of the night's sleep. She succeeded, but her dreams were restless, and when she woke up again at six-fifteen, she still felt tired in spite of having slept more than she'd managed in days. The clinic opened at six, so Andy called them right away and canceled the appointment. Good thing too, because Miranda called her again at six-forty-five, just as Andy was on her way out the door.

"Miranda! Hi. I've just canceled--"


"Oh," Andy said, looking both ways as she crossed the street. "I mean, sure."

"You have the Dior notes?"

"Yes--they're in my bag right h--"

"Good. I'll see you in--"

"Wait," Andy said quickly, forestalling the inevitable disconnect. "Do you want breakfast, too?"

"Did I ask for breakfast?" Then Miranda hung up. Andy stopped as she reached the sidewalk on the other side of the street, and stuck her tongue out at her phone. And spent a rather satisfying twenty minutes on the subway cursing Miranda out and calling her nasty names under her breath. The other commuters looked at her funny--people who muttered to themselves in subway cars usually didn't wear Chanel--but nobody said anything.

She was late, of course. The subway was crammed full, she had to wait to get in and out, switch cars, and then, on top of everything else, wait in line at a crowded Starbucks near the law office. For once, she didn't care. She was in a foul mood and Miranda could fucking well wait, today. It was funny: now that Andy had made the conscious decision, yet again, to keep her job, she felt a little more in control of herself. Of her destiny.

She could walk away if she wanted to. If she felt she had to. She could. That was important. It was up to her and nobody else. Sure, Miranda could fire her, and maybe she would. Andy'd get along somehow. She wasn't Miranda, wasn't like Miranda, and Miranda could go to--

"There you are," Miranda snapped as Andy hurried through the revolving door, and Andy jumped in spite of herself. Andy had thought Miranda would be in Mr. Praeger's office, but she'd been waiting by the door, evidently in a fever of impatience. She all but snatched the latte from Andy's hands.
"Come along."

Andy glanced over at the reception desk. Betsy wasn't there today. Andy's newfound feeling of independence shriveled up a little bit, and then she followed Miranda into the elevator. To her surprise, Miranda pressed the button for the third floor instead of the eighth, and they exited into the cafeteria.

Miranda seated herself at a table, and rubbed her forehead with her fingertips before sipping at her coffee. Andy squirmed. "Yogurt?" she asked.

Miranda nodded. "Get yourself something and put it on our expense account."

Andy blinked. Miranda had never invited Andy to eat in front of her before. Miranda preferred to think that nobody who worked for her ate anything at all—you weren't even allowed to have food on your desk at Runway. As she bought yogurt for Miranda, and coffee and a fruit cup for herself, Andy realized that this was Miranda's way of saying—what, sorry? Thank you? Something, anyway.

Miranda took the yogurt without a word, and pretended not to pay attention while Andy pretended not to eat. When she was done, Andy dabbed at her mouth with a napkin, sipped her coffee, and said, "So, er, when are we supposed to see Mr. Praeger?"

Miranda looked at her watch. "In ten minutes." It was seven thirty-five. God. Some people Andy knew wouldn't even be out of bed yet. She tried to cover a yawn. Maybe she still had some sleep debt. One night wasn't enough to make up for weeks of deprivation.

She blinked, and realized that Miranda was regarding her from beneath hooded eyes. Something about her gaze unnerved Andy. More than usual, anyway. Andy cleared her throat. "S-so," she said. "How are you feeling tod--"

"I haven't told the girls yet, of course," Miranda said, and looked away, staring contemplatively off into space. "I don't know how."

Andy stopped and just stared at her. "I, um," she said, and cleared her throat. "Yeah. That would be…weird. 'Girls, your stepfather and I are still separating, but you've got a new brother or sister on the way!'"

Miranda gave her a humorless smile. "Maybe I'll have Cara do it." Andy blinked and hoped she wasn't serious. She didn't think so, but you never could tell, with Miranda. She excelled at delegating.

"At any rate, I should wait," Miranda added. "In the first couple of months, things are always… uncertain." Apprehension fledged across her face for just a moment. Andy wondered if Miranda was hoping for something 'uncertain' to happen or not. If Miranda even knew what she wanted. Other than, apparently, taking Stephen for everything he had, which was probably why they were here today. Andy hated to admit it, but she was kind of looking forward to seeing that in action.

Putting that out of her mind for now, she said, "You look, er, well today." Miranda did, and shockingly so, considering what she'd gone through yesterday, plus the fact that she probably hadn't slept at all last night. Then Miranda looked at her, and Andy realized she'd just made an uninvited personal comment. She gulped, and said, "Oh! I need to reschedule you with Nanette. Tomorrow morning should still be…"

"I'll be in the ladies' room," Miranda said, and left without further fanfare. Andy watched her leave, wondering if she was feeling sick or something, before shaking herself out of her reverie and calling
the pedicurist. Then she rang Emily.

"And where are you today?" Emily snapped. "On holiday with her in Ibiza?"

Oh, for God's sake. "You should see the beach," Andy said. "And the bungalow is gorgeous." After a moment of silence, she felt kind of bad, and added, "She called me at like six-forty-five or something and told me to meet her at her lawyer's office. So that's where we are."

" Lovely. And when will you be here?" Emily asked.

"I have no idea," Andy admitted. "Whenever she gets done, I guess."

"Is she…how is she today?" Emily asked, sounding cautious.

"Better than yesterday, I think," Andy said. "Dunno how she'll be when we're done here, though." She saw Miranda coming through the door, and added, "Gotta go. Is there anything I need to know before I get in today? Whenever that is?"

"Oh, you tell me," Emily said sweetly. "You're the one in charge now, aren't you?" Then she hung up. Andy glared at her phone, but didn't stick her tongue out at it since Miranda was watching. Instead she smiled brightly up at Miranda and rose to her feet.

Miranda did not return her smile--of course--but instead looked at her again with that level, considering stare. Then she said, "Let's go," and headed back out of the cafeteria. Andy quickly gathered up their garbage and tossed it in the trashcan on the way.

This meeting was in Mr. Praeger's office. He looked a little sleepy, too. Given that the office didn't officially open until eight, and didn't begin consultations until nine, he'd undoubtedly come in early to meet specially with Miranda. He saw that Miranda and Andy both had coffee, and poured some for himself as well. "Good morning, ladies," he said, and added more seriously, "How are you doing today, Miranda?"

"Stephen has admitted to infidelity," Miranda said. "Surely that means we can bypass this ridiculous waiting period and pit fault on him?"

Right to the point, then. Andy had expected no less. Miranda sounded remarkably unemotional, but then, she'd probably spent the last several hours getting herself under control.

"Well…we can try," Mr. Praeger allowed hesitantly. "But he can contest fault under any number of…” Miranda's eyes flashed, and Mr. Praeger added, "The court will grant you a divorce, Miranda, whether you have to wait for the whole year or not. There's no question of that. I don't think we should make it any messier or more costly than it has to be."

"Oh, it's going to be messy," Miranda said. "And costly. For him, I mean."

Mr. Praeger took a deep breath. "I understand you're upset," he said. "Especially taking…everything…into consideration." Andy had to give him points for not looking directly at Miranda's abdomen. "But may I ask what you are hoping to achieve, beyond simple revenge?"

"There has to be something beyond that?" Miranda asked. Yikes.

"Look, Miranda," Mr. Praeger said, sounding very firm and no-nonsense for the first time. Andy bit her lip. He should know that wasn't going to fly. "I know you want to do this in the heat of the moment. But I am telling you that this can get very long, and very ugly, and you have other things you probably want to be worrying about instead. You don't need Stephen's money--you've got more
than he does, for crying out loud--"

"No," Miranda said. "I don't want his money."

Andy stared at Miranda in surprise. So did Mr. Praeger. Hadn't Miranda said, only yesterday, that she wanted to take Stephen for 'everything'?

"All right," Mr. Praeger said cautiously. "His, his property, then?"

"Oh, no, Preston," Miranda said, and smiled sweetly. "I had all night to think about this, you see, and I've decided that there are really only two things I want from Stephen. And I fully intend to get them both."

Mr. Praeger looked more apprehensive than ever. Andy didn't blame him a bit. "And they are?" he prompted.

Miranda held up one finger. "One: should I decide to have this child, he'll pay child support."

"That sounds reasonable," Mr. Praeger said, looking surprised.

"Two," Miranda said, and held up another finger. "He has nothing to do with it. He is not a part of its life. He gives up all his legal rights; he never looks upon the child's face unless I say so."

Andy swallowed hard and looked at Mr. Praeger. Mr. Praeger took a deep breath. "That will entail considerably more complications," he said.

"Will it?" Miranda asked, and for the first time, Andy heard a note of anger in her voice. Oh, shit.

"Well, yes," Mr. Praeger said.

"He said he wanted nothing to do with it," Miranda said. "Yesterday. Very loudly. I'm sure you remember."

"He was angry, too," Mr. Praeger said. "He probably didn't mean everything he said. And even if he did, he might well change his mind later. Does he have children?"

"A son, by his first marriage," Miranda said. "He's seventeen and lives with his mother. I know Stephen, Preston. He's done with that part of his life. He's certainly ready for his second childhood, with that infant he's apparently been carrying on with." Her voice cracked with bitterness. Andy quickly looked away.

"Be that as it may," Mr. Praeger said, obviously trying to be patient, "we can set those terms for you, Miranda. If he agrees, well, then we'll talk more about how to make it happen. If he doesn't, then we could have a long fight ahead of us." He took another, even deeper breath. "And I'd urge you to consider the child. Wouldn't it have the right to know its father?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Andy saw Miranda swell up with rage. But she didn't explode. Instead, she said, "Preston, those are my terms. You are my lawyer. Make them work." She stood up, clutching at her handbag, and Andy quickly stood up too.

Mr. Praeger sighed. "I'll do my best, Miranda, but surely you understand that this is very unusual…"

"I understand everything perfectly well," Miranda said. "Good morning." She turned and left. Mr. Praeger and Andy shared looks of commiseration before Andy followed her.

In the elevator, Miranda said, "When we're in the car, give me the Dior notes. How did Lucia handle
herself at the meeting?"

Andy tried hard to remember. She'd been distracted by worrying about the woman standing next to her, who would accept no such excuse. "Fine, I guess," she said. "I mean, I've never sat in on a meeting like that before, so I don't know how it's really supposed to…"

Miranda sounded remarkably patient when she said, "Who did most of the talking?"

"Alicia," Andy said, relieved to know that much at least. "Uh, she was mainly talking about the transitional summer stuff, you know, pieces she'd like to see featured in the May or June issue."

"I see," Miranda said. "And how did Lucia respond?"

"She said most of them were okay, I think," Andy said. "Alicia gave her some photos and a couple of sample pieces. She said she'd show them to you."

"How many photos?"

"Er…" Now that Andy thought about it, there hadn't been that many. "Maybe seven? Ten, tops."

"So," Miranda said, as the elevator opened onto the ground floor, "my associate accessories editor meets, not with John Galliano, but with one of his lesser lieutenants, lets this lieutenant run the meeting, allows photos and sample pieces to be selected for her, and a pitifully small number at that, based on what the lieutenant--possibly not even John himself--would 'like to see' featured in Runway."

"Um--"

"You have a very interesting definition of 'fine,' Andrea," Miranda said as they crossed the lobby. Andy almost collapsed with relief to see that Roy was waiting outside, since she hadn't had a free moment to call him yet.

"I, I thought she already knew what you wanted," Andy faltered. "I mean, she's been doing this for--"

"Too long," Miranda said briskly, and held still just long enough for Andy to open the car door for her. When Andy slid in beside her, she held out her hand impatiently, and Andy wasted no time in handing over her notes.

Miranda immediately became absorbed in them, which gave Andy an opportunity to take care of one important detail. She fished around in her bag, pulled out the card Dr. Latchley had given her a couple of days before, and dialed the number.

"Dr. Sita Viswanathan's office," a pleasant female voice said.

"Hi," Andy said. "My name is Andy Sachs. I work for Miranda Priestly. I believe your office was told to expect our call--"

"Oh, that's right," the woman said, her voice warming at once. "Sandra Latchley said you'd be calling soon. I'm Mary."

Andy grinned. "And I'm supposed to ask how your dogs are doing." At this, Miranda raised her head, and looked over at Andy sharply. Andy swallowed, and said, "So, do you have any openings available?"
"My dogs are great," Mary said, "and we can clear a space for you tomorrow evening, after our office normally closes--say, seven?"

"Let me check," Andy said, and covered the receiver. "Seven p.m. tomorrow?" she asked Miranda. Miranda currently had nothing on her schedule between five-thirty and nine, when she was going to a party. Miranda frowned, obviously running through her own mental checklist, and nodded. "That's fine," Andy said with relief into the phone. "How long will it take?"

"No more than one hour. I've got her in the system. We'll see you then!" Mary chirped, sounding so downright perky that Andy was thankful Miranda wasn't dealing with her directly. Perky people never came off well in encounters with Miranda. It was like watching a hawk swoop down on an adorable little field mouse.

Andy quickly texted Emily, telling her that Miranda had a "meeting" tomorrow from seven to eight so she wouldn't get double-booked. Then she turned to Miranda, and tried to look competent as she said, "Shouldn't take longer than an hour. So there's plenty of time to get you to the party afterward."

"Nobody dictates what goes in the magazine, Andrea," Miranda said. "Nobody but me."

Andy could almost hear the screech as her brain applied the brakes and then tried to take off in a different direction. "Oh," she said. "I mean, of course."

"Not Alicia, not John Galliano, nor even God himself," Miranda continued, as if Andy hadn't spoken. "I asked Lucia to bring me a representative sample of what is on offer at Dior. A great deal is on offer at Dior. And yet, when I return, I fully expect to see five photographs laid out on my desk, all of which will have been at the behest of Alicia because they are what she would 'like to see' in our magazine."

Andy was starting to feel like a total failure. Nothing new, there. "Uh," she said, and gestured at her notes in Miranda's lap. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. But, but those…I mean, are they helpful at all? Like--if you sent me out again--what's the sort of thing you'd want me to write about?"

Miranda flipped through the notes again. "They're not hopeless," she said after a moment, and Andy trembled with relief. "At any rate, now you know."

What? Know what? Was that supposed to have been helpful advice? But Andy didn't dare ask. If Miranda did send her out again to spy on people, she'd just try to…read Miranda's mind, she guessed, and do what she secretly wanted. Like always.

They arrived at the office. "Finally," Miranda said, looking up at Elias-Clarke like a traveler might regard his home after a long absence. "I can actually get some real work done today. Andrea, I want you to sit in on the copy meeting at two."

"And take notes?" Andy asked. Miranda gave her the what-do-you-think-you-idiot look, and got out of the car.

The morning passed in the usual flurry. Thankfully, Miranda had a lunch meeting with her philanthropy committee, so she was gone for two hours. Andy tried to use the time to calm down. When the copy meeting was over at four-thirty, she left it feeling almost marginally confident in the notes she'd taken: not skimpy, not voluminous, and she'd definitely attached names to decisions. She sort of felt like she should be in the Runway version of the CIA. Except that everybody else at the meeting obviously knew she was there to be Miranda's eyes and ears, so she didn't really have a cover. Too bad.
When she trotted into Miranda's office, her stomach clenched to see Miranda and Lucia poised over the glass table, looking over large glossy photographs from Dior. Miranda had been right: there were only six photos. Did Lucia really think she could slip anything by Miranda? Why would she even want to try?

Andy put her notes on Miranda’s desk, hoping to sneak out without being noticed. No such luck. Without even looking around, Miranda said, "Andrea, come here."

Rats. Andy bit her lip and approached the table. But once she stood there, Miranda didn't even look at her. Instead she said to Lucia, "This is a very interesting selection." She picked up one glossy photo of a large enamel ring.

"John is into fuchsia right now," Lucia said, sounding properly cautious. "And gold highlights."

"Are you sure that's John, and not Alicia?" Miranda asked mildly. Lucia went pale. Miranda continued sorting through the six photos, still speaking softly, casually. "Did you really think I wouldn't notice this pitiful little selection?"

"Um," Lucia said, looking wretched, "it's--well, she thought, I mean I thought, if we could use--"

"You're fired," Miranda said without looking up. Lucia went very still. "Clean out your desk."

For long, endless seconds, Lucia stared at Miranda without moving. Miranda kept looking at the glossies. Andy couldn't bear the scene, and lowered her eyes to the floor.

"You horrible bitch," Lucia said suddenly, her voice cracking. "You awful--stupid--I hope you get what's coming to you." She stalked out of the office.

"I'm sure you do," Miranda murmured. Then she called, "Emily."

Andy, wondering how long it had been since the carpet had been steam-cleaned, heard the thump of Emily's cane. She'd gotten off the crutches last week. "Have Security escort Lucia out of the building at once," Miranda said.

"Of course," Emily said, her voice only shaking a little bit. Andy finally managed to raise her eyes and look out the window when she heard Emily thumping out again.

"Andrea," Miranda said.

"Yes?" Andy whispered.

"I'm going to need a new person in Accessories. Tell Nigel after you get back."

"G-get back?" Andy looked at Miranda in alarm. She didn't have anything left on her schedule this afternoon. Had Miranda told her to do something, and she'd forgotten about it?

"From Dior," Miranda said, and handed Andy the photos. "Quite unsatisfactory, as I thought."

"Oh. Okay," Andy said, and took the photos, nodding hard as if that would somehow convey comprehension. "Who am I going with this time?"

"Nobody," Miranda said.

Andy stared at her in shock.

"Don't let me down, Andrea," Miranda said. "That's all."
Alicia had not been pleased by being summoned at a moment's notice. But since the summons was from Miranda Priestly, she greeted Andy graciously enough. "Fancy seeing you here again," she said. "But where's Lucia?"

"Um, Lucia won't be coming today," Andy said. "It's just me. Miranda wanted kind of a do-over of the last meeting."

"A do-over?" Alicia asked. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well--she wants a wider selection," Andy said. "She wants to see more of your accessories line. You have so many beautiful things," she added with what she hoped was a charming smile.

But Alicia wasn't going for it. "I sent her the very best of our new line," she said. "They're all sure to be top sellers. Didn't she like them?"

"Well, like I said, she wants to see more," Andy said, praying that Alicia wasn't going to make this harder than it had to be. "So if you could just give me, you know, more photos or samples--a wider range of--"

"Aren't you her assistant?" Alicia asked, narrowing her eyes. "Her second assistant?"

Andy squared her shoulders. "Yes," she said.

"Well," Alicia said, with a little smirk lingering on her mouth, "hold on just a second while I help you out, okay? Wait right here."

She turned and sashayed out of the room. Andy got a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach. It couldn't possibly be this easy.

Sure enough, when Alicia returned, she had only two glossies in her hand. The accessories in the photos--a ring and a bracelet--looked almost exactly like the ones in the photos Miranda already had. "Here you go," Alicia said sweetly, and thrust the photos at Andy. "You can show yourself out."

"No, I can't," Andy snapped, and didn't move to take the photos. Alicia raised one disdainful eyebrow at Andy. Like that was going to work after nearly a year of being scorned by the best. A 'lesser lieutenant,' Miranda had called Alicia. Why was she being so stubborn, especially given that it was Miranda Priestly's ire she was risking? Why not just fork over a few more photos of some stuff that didn't look just like--

Oh.

"So," Andy said casually, gesturing at the two photos Alicia still held, "that's the new line? Going to be top sellers?"

"Yes," Alicia said, narrowing her eyes. "And this is all the time I have for you right now."

"You designed these, didn't you?" Andy asked. Alicia started. Andy tried not to smirk. "That's why you only want these to go in Runway. Does Mr. Galliano even know you're doing this? Or were you going to tell him that we just happened to pick your designs?"
"Look," Alicia said, recovering quickly and giving Andy a nasty glare. "I have no idea what you're talking about, but you are wasting my time. And I don't--"

"Okay," Andy said. "So I can just tell Miranda that you don't have anything else to show us, and Runway can just feature absolutely nothing by Dior, and when Mr. Galliano calls us to ask why--"

"Wow. You're pretty impressed with yourself, aren't you?" Alicia said. "Especially for being the next person Miranda Priestly's going to chew up and spit out. And when that happens, and you're looking for your next job, I'll still be here and I'll remember--"

"Are you sure? Lucia won't," Andy said. "She got fired this afternoon." Alicia stopped with her mouth still open, and went pale. "Miranda is about two seconds away from calling Mr. Galliano herself, and demanding the same for you," Andy added, bluffing like hell. "Look, I'm trying to help you save your skin here, okay? Why not just let me look at the other photos, and I'll bring Miranda what she wants, and we can just, you know, put the other thing down to Lucia's bad judgment."

She smiled at Alicia, her heart racing, wondering if this was actually going to work. She'd had to finesse a few situations before, especially once she'd started working at Runway. But she'd never had to lean on anybody like some kind of mob goon. Maybe the CIA metaphor wasn't such a stretch.

"She fired Luce?" Alicia asked faintly.

Andy nodded, trying to look appropriately sympathetic. Good cop, be the good cop. "It was kind of scary," she said.

"Fuck," Alicia snapped, and ran one hand through her perfectly-styled hair. "I told her it was a bad idea."

It had been Lucia's idea? Andy tried not to shake her head in disgust. Lucia had worked at Runway for four years now. Didn't she know better than to pull this stuff? "Well, nobody says you have to go down with her," Andy said. "Just give me what Miranda's asking for."

"Which is what?" Alicia asked, sounding almost frantic now. "We have tons of things. Does she want something specific? I mean, Jesus, if I send her the wrong thing now--" She gave Andy a scared look. "What should I send back with you?"

Andy looked at Alicia. Alicia looked back at Andy.

Andy heard Nigel before she saw him. "…interesting to see how she handles herself, anyway," he was saying. "Miranda seems to think she's all-capable."

"Don't you start," Emily snapped. "I don't bloody well want to hear it. Anyway, everyone knows Alicia's an utter harpy."

Andy stopped dead in her tracks at the corner into reception. Oh. It was about her. And…‘all-capable,’ huh? Like she was a Range Rover or something. Andy couldn't help preening a little, though.

"I've certainly never had a pleasant moment with her," Nigel said. "Anyway, like I said, interesting… I wonder how much she'll be able to squeeze out of her."
She'd never get a more perfect opening. Andy took a deep breath and rounded the corner. Emily saw her first, and her eyes got gratifyingly huge. Nigel turned, and blinked.

"Can I get a hand with these?" Andy asked. She was carrying a thick, leather-bound binder full of at least two hundred photos under one arm, and her other hand carried--dragged, really--two huge, heavy Dior bags full of samples. Nigel shook his head quickly, hurried forward, and took the shopping bags. "Thanks," she said.

"What the hell is this?" he grunted.

"Everything Dior is doing this year," Andy said, continuing towards Miranda's office. "For accessories, I mean. Summer, fall, and sketches for next spring." Andy glanced at Nigel. "Oh. Miranda told me to tell you after I got back that she wants somebody new in Accessories."

"You don't say," Nigel said as they lugged Andy's loot into Miranda's office past Emily's disbelieving eyes.

Miranda, hidden behind her laptop, looked up as they entered, and raised her eyebrows from behind her reading glasses. Andy and Nigel paused in the doorway like soldiers reporting back from a campaign, awaiting their instructions.

"Leave them in the corner," Miranda said, and turned back to her computer. "That's all."

Andy tried not to sigh heavily as she and Nigel obeyed. Nigel put the bags on the floor, and Andy put the binder on the table. Well, she didn't know what she'd expected. A 'good job, Andrea' would probably have killed Miranda, after all. But to her surprise, Andy realized she'd kind of looked forward to telling Miranda about what had happened: that Miranda's instincts had been dead-on (of course), that Alicia and Lucia had been plotting together, that Miranda hadn't made a mistake in sending Andy to fix things, that maybe they could--what? Do this again sometime?

"Nigel," Miranda said, not looking at either of them, "please get in touch with Human Resources as soon as possible." It was a remarkably civil request, for her, and Nigel nodded as he left her office.

Andy followed him, and glanced over at Miranda as she passed by her desk.

Miranda was watching her. The look on her face was unreadable. Well…nearly. Andy straightened her shoulders and hurried out of the office, realizing that the non-expression on Miranda's face had, in fact, been almost impressed.

Second: December.

By December third, everyone who was supposed to be in San Francisco had left for San Francisco. Miranda had gone off to the Hamptons for a three-day weekend with her daughters. Her initial consultation with Dr. Viswanathan had been as informative and helpful as could be expected, and Andy had wasted no time in scheduling more appointments for the next six months, vowing that Miranda would attend every single one of them if Andy had to bind her, gag her, and throw her in the trunk of the Mercedes. Only because the appointments had been so difficult to schedule, of course. Not because she cared about Miranda's well-being. Much.

It was amazing how much the office atmosphere changed in Miranda's absence. Nigel was in San Francisco too, and although he was nicer than Miranda, he was still second-in-command. With both bosses gone, the Runway crew turned into the proverbial playing mice. Clackers came in wearing comfy shoes with square toes and short, chunky heels instead of the usual stilettos. Everyone
forewent wearing expensive perfumes and colognes, and they kept food on their desks whenever they damn well felt like it.

The only one who didn't enjoy herself was Andy. Without Miranda and Nigel around, the "teachers' pet" found herself largely snubbed by the rest of the office, and more than once Andy overheard some snide remark about how she'd probably give Miranda a full report of everyone's exploits when Miranda returned. Andy longed to speak up, to defend herself, but the truth was, Miranda would probably demand that she do just that. Emily, for her part, seemed positively delighted to learn that everyone else hated Andy as much as she did.

It wasn't fair. Andy hadn't asked for Miranda's favor, which was certainly ephemeral and fleeting, in any case. She was just trying to do her job, like everybody else. And unlike the clackers, she didn't want to work in fashion forever. She didn't. She wanted to do important, serious work, so she should just stop caring what all those clothes horses said about her and concentrate on getting ahead. She had to focus on what mattered.

In the meantime, Miranda was getting back tomorrow. So Andy spent most of that last evening making sure that Miranda's first-class train reservation was still in place, that Roy would be ready and waiting to pick her and her daughters up at the station, that the cleaning crew would stop by the townhouse tonight to make sure everything was sparkling, and that, above all else, everything Andy was supposed to do over the weekend was absolutely in order and perfect. She needed to make sure everything was easy for Miranda, that she wouldn't need to stress or worry or even think about things that other people were supposed to take care of for her. Because...that was Andy's job. Just a job, that was all. Of course.

Before she went home that night, Andy made sure that the office refrigerator was well-stocked with plain yogurt and bananas that had no spots.

Miranda called at seven-thirty on Tuesday morning. Her train was arriving at Penn Station in forty-five minutes, and she said, simply, "Be there," before hanging up. Andy, who was already halfway to Elias-Clarke on the subway, groaned and hopped out at the next stop, deciding that it would be faster to hurry to the station on foot from there. She called Roy right away, who said he'd keep an eye out for her.

When she arrived at Penn Station twenty minutes later, she was out of breath, sweaty (even though the day was bitterly cold), and her feet hurt so much she was actually praying they'd fall off. She had to look terrible. She called Roy again, gave him her position, and hurried inside the station in search of the nearest restroom so she could make herself presentable. Ten minutes later, her hair was fixed, she'd gotten her lipstick looking just about perfect, and she'd straightened out her blouse. Nothing she could do about her feet, of course. Too bad. There was a Starbucks in the train station, so when Miranda and the twins got off the train, Andy was ready and waiting on the platform with a decaf latte and what she hoped was a welcoming smile.

To Andy's dismay, the time away didn't appear to have done Miranda much good: she looked drawn and tense, and there were still dark circles under her eyes. The twins looked extremely sleepy. No wonder--they'd had to get up at the crack of dawn to catch their mother's idea of "a timely train."

Miranda swept her eyes up and down Andy, as she always did, and Andy waited for the verdict with bated breath, as she always did. Today, thankfully, Miranda didn't seem to disapprove. Instead, after
that one glance, she turned back to the girls and said, "All ready to go?" They yawned and nodded. Miranda turned back to Andy. "Where is the porter?"

"Um--" How the heck was Andy supposed to know? She could do a lot for Miranda, but controlling Long Island Rail was a little out of her purview. Fortunately, at that moment, she saw two tall porters approaching them, loaded down with designer luggage that would have gotten six ordinary people through an entire week. "Right there," she said in relief.

Miranda turned again, and jerked her head irritably at the men before leading the way out of the station, to the curb where Roy waited with the car. She took the latte from Andy as they walked; their gloved fingers brushed. Andy blushed and had no idea why, because that was just stupid.

"Have you heard from Nigel?" Miranda asked.

"He sent me an e-mail last night," Andy said. "Sounds like everything's going fine. He'll be back in two days, right on schedule, he says."

"Good. I'd hate to think what the office has become in our mutual absence." Miranda gave Andy a very intent glance.

Well, she'd been expecting it, hadn't she? As they arrived at the car, and the porters and Roy loaded the luggage in the trunk, Andy opened the door for Miranda and the girls. She got in the front passenger seat, glanced back at Miranda, and said, "I think everything went okay. I mean, from what I could see."

"I seem to remember the last time you told me everything 'went okay,'" Miranda said.

Andy winced. "Yes," she admitted. "But, um, this time, I think everybody pretty much was just doing their jobs." At least, as far as she could tell. They'd tended to stop talking whenever they saw her nearby, after all. And she'd cut her own throat before she'd tell Miranda that.

"If you say so," Miranda said. "I'll soon find out one way or another." Andy's stomach twisted unpleasantly as she remembered, yet again, that this was the woman she was falling all over herself to help. Because it was her job, though. That was why.

Then Miranda, thankfully, turned her attention to her daughters, who had practically fallen asleep in the back seat. Andy couldn't help remembering the night when their mother had done the same. "Do you both have your homework finished?" Miranda asked.

"Yes," a twin--was this one Caroline?--said sullenly. She was as good at conveying scorn as her mother. Andy's parents would have kicked her ass for talking to them in that tone of voice. Come to think of it, during her teenage years, they had. But Miranda didn't call her own kid on it; in fact, she almost seemed to cringe, as if she'd been rebuked.

Andy quickly turned away and looked straight ahead through the windshield, just like Roy was doing. For the first time, she wondered what family scenes he must have witnessed over the years. She didn't envy him. It was bad enough sitting in a doctor's waiting room.

"Mom, my elbow hurts from where I banged it," possibly-Cassidy said.

"Give Cassidy some Tylenol, Andrea," Miranda said.

Andy, absurdly proud that she'd gotten the twins straight with a random guess, said, "It's--oh. I can't reach it from here." She turned around so she could see Miranda, and gestured at Roy. "There's a box under the driver's seat."
Miranda reached down and pulled out the box. Then she raised her eyebrows. Andy tried not to smile. It was silly, but she'd put a lot of effort into the Miranda Care Kit, during one of her many late nights when she'd had nothing better to do than wait for the book. The box, a leftover from one of the Paris shows, was covered in burgundy velvet and lined in satin; it had formerly held perfume samples, so it still smelled nice. All of the contents were painstakingly arranged inside so they wouldn't rattle around or spill open.

"Hey, there's makeup in there," Cassidy said excitedly. "In little tiny sizes. Can I have that red lipstick, Mom?"

"You're too young for red," Miranda said, and added, "and we don't wear it this early in the morning, anyway." She took out the bottle of Tylenol, and then a tube of pale pink Chanel lipgloss. "Here. You can have this instead."

"Does it taste like anything?" Cassidy asked as she took the tube, unscrewed the cap, and sniffed.

Miranda shrugged as she popped open the bottle, and then reached for one of the chilled San Pellegrino bottles that Roy always put in the car before he picked Miranda up from anywhere. "I don't know. Here. Take these before you put it on, sweetheart." The word 'sweetheart' seemed to stumble out of her mouth; she had almost muttered it.

Cassidy took the tablets, just as Miranda glanced up and saw Andy looking at them both. Andy's eyes widened. She'd forgotten that she was watching, and that she wasn't supposed to be watching. She turned away quickly, and looked out her window until Roy pulled up at the Dalton School.

As he drew the car up to the curb, and put it in park, he made to unbuckle his seat belt. Andy quickly waved him off, and then hopped out to open the door for the twins. Roy gave her a grateful look, and the twins ignored her completely.

"Have a good day, girls," Miranda said from within the car as Caroline and Cassidy got out. Neither of them said anything in reply; Caroline, the sullen one, rolled her eyes. They hurried into school together. Andy watched them go, biting her lip. Great. In seven months Miranda was going to be in charge of another one.

"Andrea," Miranda said. Andy jumped, shut the front passenger door, and quickly slid into the back seat next to her.

Miranda looked out the window at her daughters entering the school, and then, when they'd both disappeared inside, nodded at Roy, who was watching her in the rear-view mirror. Roy pulled away from curb and into the flow of traffic. Only then did Miranda look at Andy, and that only briefly, before returning her gaze to the window. Andy wondered if she actually saw anything she was looking at: the pedestrians, the buildings, the general hustle and bustle of life in the city. Or if she was completely absorbed in her own thoughts.

"They didn't take it well," Miranda said, still not looking at Andy.

Andy blinked, then caught up. She grimaced. That'd explain a few things, especially the surly attitude. "I'm sorry," she said.

"I wasn't surprised, of course," Miranda said. Andy wondered if that was true. "How else should they react? But…well." She swallowed, and Andy watched her throat work.

Andy cleared her own throat. "They probably just need time. I mean, it's…it must have been a big--surprise." She glanced uneasily at the back of Roy's head, knowing that he was absorbing every
word, and wondered how explicit this conversation, if it was a conversation, was about to get.

"Well. They've got time, I suppose," Miranda said sourly. "Unless something happens."

This was the second time she'd brought up 'something.' Again, Andy wondered if Miranda was hoping for the whole mess to be taken out of her hands, just like it had started: by some random biological chance, something out of her control. That didn't seem like Miranda, certainly, but Andy supposed extreme circumstances could push people in strange directions.

Putting that thought aside, Andy just said, "Well--maybe London'll help. You know. Change of scene, seeing their friends." She tried to sound optimistic, and hoped it worked. "Kids can bounce back pretty fast."

Miranda pursed her lips. "Perhaps." She settled back in the seat with a slight 'oof' noise. Andy, who had been doing as much reading as she could on the subject, knew that Miranda was likely to become extremely uncomfortable during the next several months, even if everything went well. She made a mental note to tell Roy to get some kind of cushion or pillow for the back seat, just in case they ever needed it.

"Where are you going for the holidays?" Miranda asked.

Andy stared at her blankly for a minute, before realizing that Miranda had asked her a personal question for no reason. "J-just back to Cincinnati," she said, trying not to sound as astonished as she felt. "Going to see my family."


"New York's not exactly clean," Andy said, before she could stop herself. Crap. But what did Miranda expect when she went around dissing people's home towns? And Andy rather liked where she'd grown up. Things were a hell of a lot less complicated and intense in Cincinnati. At least, that was how she remembered it.

Miranda turned to look at her, one eyebrow raised. To Andy's surprised relief, she only said, "I suppose that's even worse," Miranda added with a faint, derisive little chuckle.

"Do--do you ever go back?" Andy asked.

"No," Miranda said, with such finality in her tone that Andy knew the subject was closed now and forever. Still…it was more than she'd ever expected to get out of Miranda. About anything.

So Miranda, high-and-mighty queen of New York, had started out as an Ohio girl, just like Andy. ("I see a great deal of myself in you." No. Still not true.) And Nigel had grown up with six brothers in Rhode Island, reading Runway under the covers and skipping soccer practice.

Two of the greatest tastemakers in fashion had risen from the grubby, pedestrian ground of Middle America. Judging from the look of it, they were both overcompensating like hell, too. If you thought about it for a little bit, it was funny; if you thought about it for longer, it was sad; if you thought about it for too long, your head hurt, so Andy stopped thinking right away. Thinking didn't do her many
favors in this job.

Taking a risk, she ventured, "I've never been to London." There. Conversational gambit. She'd made one before, during the first time she'd ridden in an elevator with Miranda. It hadn't gone well. But if Miranda wanted to talk today--

"You will," Miranda said, still looking out her window.

Andy managed a smile. That had been a pretty nice response, actually. "Yeah. Someday."

"I mean, you will," Miranda said, and even in profile, Andy could see her rolling her eyes. "For Spring Fashion Week." She'd used the you-idiot voice, too.

"Oh," Andy said, "right, of course," and indeed, she felt pretty idiotic. How could she possibly have forgotten?

Then she did some quick mental math. Spring Fashion Week in London was at the end of February this year. The Runway hotel accommodations were already booked, of course, and there wasn't much else Andy could do until it got closer to the actual trip. So she hadn't fucked up on that score, yet.

The end of February. Miranda would be almost five months along. She'd have started to show by then. What the heck was she going to wear? Did Jil Sanders even make a maternity line?

Well, that part, thank goodness, was entirely out of Andy's hands. Miranda might expect the world to do almost everything for her, might expect everyone to bend over backwards for her comfort, but nobody--nobody--ever told her what to wear.

Nigel got back to Runway two days later, on the seventh. Andy had never been so happy to see him. She'd never been in the office when he wasn't there and Miranda was. She never wanted to do it again, either. Without Nigel, Miranda was even more impatient and brusque, as if the absence of her right-hand man only made it more obvious to her how incompetent everybody else was.

Emily still tried not to speak to Andy, but Andy had gathered, from little things she let slip, that this always happened when Nigel was gone. Every time. God. No wonder Miranda had pulled her little stunt back in Paris; surely, after all, she could have found some other distraction for Jacqueline Follet? But only giving her the Holt job would have allowed Miranda to keep Nigel close. Well, that was Andy's latest theory, anyway. She suspected she'd never really be able to figure out how Miranda's mind worked.

So, when Nigel breezed through the door at eight a.m., Andy had to restrain herself from giving him a huge, welcome-back hug. She settled for her widest smile and a hot cup of his favorite coffee: the whole-milk mocha that he only allowed himself as an occasional indulgence.

"It's so nice to be missed," he said as he sipped at it.

"You were," Andy said fervently. "Oh my God, do you know what she's like without you?"

"I'll let you work that logic puzzle out on your own," Nigel said, and gave Andy a thick manila envelope. "Do me a favor and file these with Jocelyn." Then he headed on in to Miranda's office
with his silver laptop beneath his arm. "Good morning," he said as he disappeared from sight.

"Thank God," Andy heard Miranda say as she headed towards Jocelyn's office. She bit her lip to repress her smile, and then realized that Miranda couldn't see it, so she didn't have to.

Four days after his return, Nigel cornered Andy at her desk at ten p.m. Emily had gone home, of course, and Miranda was still keeping Andy around for no reason, of course. "No book yet?" Nigel asked with a little smile.

Andy glared at him. He, of all people, knew by now that didn't make any difference--Andy didn't go home until Miranda said she could, book or no book. "Very perceptive," she said.

"That's me," Nigel said. "Mr. Perceptive." Then he leaned backwards until he could see Miranda at her desk and called, "Miranda? Can I steal Andy from you for about half an hour? I promise to have her back before bedtime."

Andy expected Miranda to give her rather disinterested permission. Instead, she sounded remarkably suspicious when she asked, "Why? What do you need her for?"

"Things," Nigel said blandly. Andy grinned and hoped he got away with it.

He did. "Fine," Miranda said, sounding huffy but not really irritated. Probably because, at ten o'clock, they weren't likely to get that many calls.

Andy, relieved at even a temporary escape, gamely followed Nigel out of the receiving area. "Where are we going?" she asked. "And can I please, please make a bathroom stop first?"

"Be my guest," Nigel said. "But make it quick."

After Andy's bathroom stop, to her surprise, Nigel led her to the elevators. "Where are we going?" she repeated.

"Federico's," he said.

"Fed--" Federico's was a small, stylish bar across the street. Andy was pretty sure that Miranda wouldn't have let her leave if she'd known Nigel was going to take her to a bar. She felt like a naughty ten-year-old, and it was fun. "Why are we going there?" she asked, grinning.

"Well, when one is celebrating, one should have a drink," Nigel said.

"Celebrating?" Andy asked.

"All in good time, my dear," Nigel said.

Andy kept her silence until they reached the bar and took a table, but she had to admit she was a little uneasy. The last time she and Nigel had "celebrated" something over drinks...she'd probably better not remind him of that, though.

So, when the waiter delivered the two blue-colored cocktails Nigel had ordered, Andy said, "Okay. Now: what are we celebrating?"

"Cheers," Nigel said, and Andy sighed, dutifully raising her glass, clinking it with his. She'd just raised it to her lips and taken a sip when Nigel said, "Miranda's pregnancy, of course. New life is so exciting, isn't it?"

Andy's mouthful of blue cocktail went everywhere. Nigel raised an eyebrow as he dabbed at his
cashmere sweater with a napkin. "I have to admit, I was waiting for precisely that moment," he said. "I've always wondered if people actually did that spitting thing. Now I know."

"What--what are you talking about," Andy croaked, fumbling for her own napkin, and trying to ignore the stares she was getting from the other patrons. Play dumb, play dumb. "Miranda's what?"

"Don't even try it," Nigel said, sounding very stern. He rarely did 'stern' these days, but when he did, he meant business. "You've already shown me everything I need to know."

Andy whimpered, and closed her eyes. She was dead. Worse than dead.

"True, it was a long shot," Nigel mused. "I mean, at her age…well, it is Miranda. I guess it makes sense that her ovaries would still be kicking ass after everybody else's have thrown in the towel."

"She'll kill me," Andy moaned. "Nigel…I didn't tell you. I didn't--"

"Yes, yes," Nigel said impatiently. Andy opened her eyes to see him regarding her intently. She swallowed hard.

"And you've been holding her hand the whole way, haven't you?" he asked. "That doctor's visit--it was about this, wasn't it? And she took you along." Andy nodded mutely. "And to the lawyers too. You were there for that." Another nod. "My God," he chuckled. "Were you even there when Stephen got the big news?"

Andy bit her lip and nodded one more time. Nigel's eyes widened. "I was kidding," he said. "Really? Jesus."

"It was awful," Andy whispered. She felt like she was betraying Miranda's trust. She wouldn't, she couldn't give Nigel any more details, but…but at the same time, it was so nice not to be the only one who was in on this.

"What does this mean for the divorce?" Nigel asked. "Will he--"

"I can't talk about it," Andy said, and then begged, "Nigel, please, don't ask me to talk about it. She'd kill me."

"Is she going to have an abortion?"

"No. Not now. I mean, I don't think…I don't know!" Andy looked helplessly at the door. This was weird. She'd often found herself longing to flee Runway and head straight for a bar. She'd never expected it to work the other way around. "I mean, Nigel, I think--she'll tell everybody when she's ready, right?"

Nigel snorted. "Get real. Until the twins were actually in their bassinets, she never said one word out loud about being pregnant. We all just watched her get huge and pretended not to notice anything."

"Huge? How huge?" Andy asked, before she could stop herself.

"Enormous. Size six, I'd say," Nigel said. Andy made a face at him, and for the first time, a glint of real humor shone in his eyes. He glanced at his watch. "We still have fifteen minutes. I'd say you've more than earned it. Finish up your drink, but take your time."

Andy took another sip, and then a horrible thought occurred to her. "She's not going to tell anyone at the office?" she asked. "I--I'm going to be the only person who 'officially' knows?"
"Quite possibly," Nigel said.

"Then…then I'm going to keep doing everything myself?" Andy hadn't planned on that. She'd planned on keeping Miranda's secret until Miranda chose for it to be not a secret anymore. Or, at the very least, when it became obvious that Miranda was pregnant, that other people would naturally step forward and help Andy do whatever needed to be done. That she wouldn't be some kind of lone ranger, that instead she'd become part of some kind of fetching-and-carrying network with other peons. She couldn't be the only peon.

"What's 'everything'?' Nigel inquired, looking genuinely interested. "What have you been doing for her?"

"H-her food," Andy whimpered. "And the doctors, and the lawyers, and I've been reading books about babies, and she sent me to Dior, and she made me be there when she got back from the Hamptons but she didn't even have anything for me to do, and she told me she's from Ohio, too--"

Nigel stared at her. "She is?"

Andy stared right back. "You didn't know?"

Nigel grinned. "She told me she was from North Stamford."

"Fuck," Andy said, and hid her face in her hands. "Nigel--"

"Relax," Nigel said. "It's not like I ever bought it. 'Miranda Priestly.' You think that's her real name?"

Andy looked up from her hands and glared at him. "I never thought 'Nigel Kipling' was yours, I'll tell you that."

Nigel pursed his lips. "Ouch. Okay. What about 'Emily Charleton'?"

"Am I the only person who works here using the name that's actually on my birth certificate?" Andy asked.

"And you should do something about that," Nigel said. "'Sachs' is so drab. Might I suggest 'Sackville-West'? It has a certain ring to it."

"Ha ha," Andy snapped, and took another big swallow of her stupid blue drink that she didn't like anyway. "Don't change the subject. What am I supposed to do? She--" Andy gulped. "She doesn't have anyone but me."

Nigel just looked at her in silence.

"No, really," Andy said softly. "She--she won't, she doesn't--"

"I guess that answers my question about Stephen," Nigel said.

This time, Andy let her head fall all the way down until it hit the table.

Nigel reached across and patted her shoulder. "Don't take it so hard," he said. "I'm sure with some practice you'll develop that thing called 'caution.'"

Right at that moment, Andy's phone rang. Miranda. Andy gulped, and tried to keep her voice steady as she said, "Hello?"

"Where are you?" Miranda asked.
"Um. With Nigel. Um--"

"Come back now," Miranda said, and hung up.

Andy bit her lip. "We're being summoned. Or I am, anyway."

"Really," Nigel said.

"Maybe the phones started ringing again," Andy said glumly. Then she glared at Nigel. "Or maybe she realized you were going to try to worm stuff out of me."

"Or maybe she panics when she realizes you're more than ten feet away," Nigel said. Andy blushed, and then felt embarrassed for blushing because Nigel might take it the wrong way or something, which only made her blush harder. "You know what?" Nigel continued. "You're not the 'new Emily.' You're not even close."

"So what am I?" Andy asked sourly as she stood up from the table. "The new nanny? The new…I don't know, you?"

"No," Nigel said, and tossed some bills on the table. "You're just new. Period. We haven't seen anything like you, yet."

Andy blinked. Nigel looked at her.

"Good luck," he said.

When they returned to Runway, Nigel declined to go anywhere near Miranda's office, saying he'd take a few things home with him for the night instead. This left Andy to totter back to the reception area alone, and to stand in the doorway, wringing her hands. "I'm back," she said.

"Obviously," Miranda said, never looking up from the documents in front of her. "Where's Nigel?"

"He's gone home for the night."

"And where did you two go?"

Might as well 'fess up, Andy thought gloomily. "He took me to Federico's."

"Sit down," Miranda said, still not looking up.

This could not be good. Andy tried not to shake as she sat down across Miranda's desk.

"Well?" Miranda said.


"Mmm," Miranda said, and leaned back in her chair. Thankfully, she didn't seem angry at Andy. Actually, she didn't seem angry at all. Instead, she just looked over Andy's head at the ceiling, and drummed her fingers on the desk, appearing very thoughtful.
"I am disappointed," Miranda said.

Andy's heart started racing in panic. "I--I'm sorry," she said. "But, but I really didn't tell him. I promise. He--"

"I meant in Nigel," Miranda said, her voice almost gentle. Andy had never heard her use that tone before. "Not in you."

"...oh," Andy said, after a moment of very surprised silence.

"He asked you, and not me," Miranda said. "Why do you suppose that is?"

Huh? Nigel had told Andy that, the last time she was pregnant, nobody had dared to ask Miranda anything. "I don't know," she said.

Miranda looked down from the ceiling, into Andy's eyes. Her gaze hardened considerably. "Yes, you do," she said. "We both do."

Andy looked helplessly at her, until she figured out what Miranda was talking about. Then she felt her face going red, and she swallowed hard. "Oh," she said. "Right."

"Right," Miranda said, her lips curling up on one side.

"He said you'd pay him back," Andy said hesitantly. "When the time was right." Even though a moment later he'd admitted that he wasn't sure of that at all. Miranda said nothing, and Andy added, "You think he's still angry?" This time Miranda rolled her eyes. Right, indeed.

"Will you?" Andy dared to ask. "Pay him back?"

Miranda raised her eyebrows. "Would you?" she asked.

Andy gaped at her. "Of course!" she said. "If--if the right opportunity presented itself, of course I'd…" Then her eyes widened. "When. Not if. I meant when--"

Miranda's lips curled on both sides this time, and Andy could almost hear her purr. Andy sat frozen, feeling vaguely sick. Which was silly because it had just been a stupid slip of the tongue--of course she'd have paid Nigel back if she was in Miranda's shoes, she wasn't the same as Miranda at all--

There was a noise behind her. Miranda looked up, and Andy turned around to see Matthias from printing hurrying in with the book. He saw Andy and Miranda sitting at Miranda's desk, apparently having a friendly evening chat, and his eyes widened. Andy quickly stood up and hurried to take the book from him. "Thanks," she mumbled, and gave him a tight smile. He gave her an even tighter one back, and left right away, no doubt about to go home like everybody else did except for Andy and Miranda.

Sighing, Andy took the book and brought it back to Miranda, handing it to her. At least their fingers didn't brush this time. Then she turned to go back to her desk, ready for another long night of sitting and doing nothing while Miranda took her sweet-ass time reading the book, which she could do just as well at home without Andy hovering around.

"Coat and bag," Miranda said. Andy blinked. "And call my driver." Andy closed her eyes in utter gratitude. "Let's go home." Excellent. Ten-thirty-five and they were on their way out the door? That hadn't happened in ages.

Andy called Roy, who seemed amused by the obvious relief in her voice. Then she happily helped
Miranda don her coat, gave her the bag, followed her to the elevators, and received permission to ride down with her.

But when they got outside, Miranda--yet again--told Andy to get in the car. Andy looked at her, startled, before obeying. She'd thought that getting a ride home with Miranda had been a fluke, a one-time thing after Miranda's shocking discovery; that maybe Miranda hadn't even realized what she was doing. But tonight it was almost business as usual as Miranda rattled off a litany of instructions to be fulfilled tomorrow when they arrived at work. Andy wrote them all down as fast as she could.

Tonight, when they pulled up to the townhouse, Miranda didn't wait for either Andy or Roy to open the door for her. Instead, she did it herself, and told Andy, "Roy will be at your door at seven o'clock tomorrow morning. Make sure you are ready to go."

"What?" Andy said, but Miranda had already shut the door behind her and was heading up the steps.

"Runway," Roy said patiently as he pulled away from the curb. "Where else? Well," he added, "we stop and pick her up first, of course."

"Looks like you're the first stop on my route now," he said.

"Well, it's not up to us, is it?" he asked, but she detected annoyance in his voice anyway. She closed her eyes. Out of everybody else who worked for Miranda, Nigel and Roy were the only ones who were nice to her now. And she really liked Roy. He'd always been friendly and helpful, and they'd shared a good laugh together once or twice about Miranda's eccentricities. She didn't want him to start hating her, too.

Plus, while the subway was a pain, it gave her time to wake up and get herself together before she had to face Miranda and Runway, and time to decompress when she went home. Now she'd be at Runway from the moment she stepped out of the door in the morning to the moment she returned at night. Unless tomorrow morning was some kind of weird one-time thing. Which Andy already doubted.

"Maybe she panics when she realizes you're more than ten feet away."

Andy stared at the insides of her eyelids, and decided that she what she really wanted was to go to sleep, and then wake up to find that nothing was weird anymore. That'd be great.

"She was talking about you yesterday morning," Roy said, and Andy opened her eyes again. "About your trip to Dior. The second one." Andy's mouth opened. "Said the way you handled yourself was 'quite impressive.'" Andy's mouth snapped shut. This time, Roy's voice was genuinely good-natured when he said, "Keep this up and she'll make you editor of The New Yorker by the time you're through."

"Yeah," Andy said softly. She remembered how she'd behaved at Dior; how she'd had to be ruthless and in-your-face, how she'd kind of enjoyed it, even, and how Miranda thought that was 'quite impressive.' How Miranda had smirked at her tonight when Andy had answered her question about
Nigel.

Andy realized that she’d passed Miranda's test. And failed her own.
Having personal chauffeur service wasn't that bad for the first twenty minutes of every day, which was how long it took for Roy to get from Andy's apartment to Miranda's house. Roy and Andy were both just waking up, both still unscarred by the day to come. Andy always made sure to have some kind of treat for Roy to make up for his earlier hours, even if it was something as pathetic as a soda (coffee wouldn't do--Miranda would smell it), or a bag of potato chips he could save for later in the day, in case Miranda kept him too busy to eat lunch. It won him over pretty quickly, and the first twenty minutes of Andy's working day passed pleasantly enough for the next week.

It all went to hell the moment Miranda got in the car, of course. By then Roy had gulped down his soda, or stashed the bag of chips in the glove box, or whatever, and Andy had gotten all the yawns out of her system so she could look alert and prepared to take down notes for the instructions Miranda was sure to begin spouting before she even buckled her seatbelt.

Still, there was no need to make it more painful than it had to be, so Andy always greeted Miranda with the brightest smile and politest "Good morning, Miranda," she could manage every day. On the third day, Miranda actually murmured a distracted "Morning" as she rummaged around in her purse for something, but it didn't happen again, so it had probably been an accident.

By the fourth day, Andy had learned the trick of the Pause: after about five solid minutes of orders, Miranda fell silent and stared out the window. Andy immediately used this time to call in the usual order to Starbucks. Sometimes, when she was done, Miranda would start talking again; sometimes she remained silent until Roy pulled up to Elias-Clarke, where Miranda went inside and Andy scurried across the street to pick up the waiting coffee. This had the added benefit of not actually arriving at work with Miranda, and Andy didn't think anyone else even knew about their little carpooling arrangement. Thank goodness. That was all she needed.

After a week, Andy had started to enjoy her job's latest…perk? Responsibility? Whatever it was, she was enjoying it. Sure, she had to get up a little earlier, and had to spend a little more time with Miranda than she had before, but New York in December wasn't exactly a fun place to frolic around on the subway and the sidewalks. It was kind of nice to sit in a warm car with leather seats and watch the world go by during the free, quiet moments.

At some point, Andy realized that it had suddenly become very easy to be quiet with Miranda. Before, being quiet with Miranda had meant Andy was always staying on her toes: awaiting the next instruction, or holding her tongue, or praying that a scolding wasn't on the way, or just trying very, very hard not to be noticed while Miranda thought about other things. Now it just meant…being quiet with Miranda, whether in a car or an elevator or the office at night. Just being there. Hanging out, almost.

The talking part was still hard, though.

On December twentieth, when the twins and Cara were due to fly out to London (Miranda would follow them two days later), Miranda said to Andy in the car, "I hope they'll be…settled by the time I
arrive."

Andy glanced over at her apprehensively. By 'settled,' Miranda probably didn't just mean 'unpacked.' She didn't say anything, and Miranda continued, "The girls love London, of course. We go at least twice a year. They have many friends there."

"Oh, good," Andy said, trying to sound cheerful without being too obnoxious. It was a fine balance. "I'm sure they'll have plenty to do, catching up with them." Miranda nodded. "I, uh, got in touch with your cleaning service over there," Andy added, "so, you know, everything should be ready when they arrive."

Miranda had a townhouse in London, too. It wasn't quite as big as the one in Manhattan, but Andy was pretty impressed, anyway. She supposed she'd get a few glimpses of it in February at least. She wondered why Miranda didn't have another one in Paris, and then decided that purchasing prime property in three ridiculously expensive cities might be beyond even Miranda's purview. She was a magazine editor, not an oil baron. Still... there was that nice house in the Hamptons. And the Aspen cabin. And, seriously, fuck Miranda Priestly, it really wasn't fair.

"Good," Miranda said, interrupting Andy's increasingly bitter train of thought. "I hope this time they remember to--"

Her stomach growled. Loudly. Really loudly.

Miranda went red and pinched her lips. Andy kept her face as straight as possible. This happened from time to time, and besides, it was about two in the afternoon. Miranda'd had lunch at eleven-thirty. They were on their way back to the office, so Andy thought fast: the kitchen had yogurt (of course), but maybe something with more protein--a walnut salad, the bistro down the street did those--

"Pizza," Miranda mumbled.

Andy glanced over at her, not sure she'd heard right. Then her brow cleared. Oh, of course. She whipped out her phone (she was pretty sure she was the fastest draw in New York City by now) and said, "I'll call La Borghese." La Borghese was a tiny, ridiculously expensive pizzeria that had opened four months ago. They only made pies with fresh, organic stuff from local farmer's markets, and they put weird toppings on them, which meant it was okay for rich people to eat there and act like they weren't at a pizzeria. Miranda liked their pizzas plain and simple, just fresh cheese and tomatoes and whole wheat crust, of course--

"Not La Borghese." Miranda had spoken so low that Andy could barely hear her. Her face was even redder. Andy wondered with rising panic if she was going to have a stroke or something.

"Okay," she said helplessly, "so, um, what--"

Then she figured it out. Oh. Wow.

Andy sat up straight, cleared her throat, and said, "Uh. Roy, from here--what do you think the nearest chain would--"
His fingers were already flying over the GPS display. "There's a Domino's a few blocks down," he said. Andy glanced at Miranda, who refused to make eye contact, even as she nodded. Andy leaned forward, squinted at the display so she could read the phone number, and dialed it right away.

"Hi," she said, when they picked up on the third ring. "I'd like to order a small pizza with, with--" She glanced at Miranda again.

"Pineapple," Miranda muttered.

"Pineapple," Andy said.

"You want the Hawaiian?" the bored-sounding guy on the line said.

"The--is that the one that has ham on it?"

"No ham," Miranda snarled at once.

"No, no thanks," Andy said quickly. "No Hawaiian for us."

"Black olives," Miranda said.


"Kinda crust? Hand-tossed, deep-dished, Brooklyn style, thin--"

Andy looked at Miranda one more time, and judged that it was as much as her life was worth to ask another question. She remembered how Miranda liked her stupid organic pizzas, and said, "Thin."

"It'll be ready in twenty."

It wouldn't take them that long to get there. "Oh, uh, is there any way you can do it in fifteen--"

"No," the guy said flatly. "This a delivery or a pick-up?"

Andy gritted her teeth and looked at the address on the display again. "We'll come pick it up in a few minutes."

"Okay. Name?"

"Andy. Andy Sa--"

"Okay. See you in twenty minutes, Andy. " The guy hung up.

"Assho--" Andy blurted before she could stop herself, and then squeezed her eyes shut, not even daring to look at Miranda. "It'll be ready in twenty minutes," she muttered. When she opened her eyes again, she saw that Roy's shoulders were practically quivering from his efforts not to laugh. At both of them, probably.

Twenty minutes later, though, Miranda had her revenge. Of course she wasn't going to eat some nasty greasy commercial pizza in front of anybody else, so Roy and Andy had to stand outside on the sidewalk, stamping their feet in the freezing cold and watching their breath turn into ice crystals while Miranda ate her food in the comfort of the car.

"London can't come soon enough," Roy muttered.
"God, yes," Andy agreed fervently. "Roll on Christmas. I mean, it's not going to be much warmer in Ohio…"

"But it's not here," Roy said. "Lucky you. I'm stuck in town. How long will you be with your family?"

"I'm coming back to New York on the 28th," Andy said.

"Any big plans for New Year's?"

"Not a one," Andy said, not even pretending to sound disappointed. After the year-round whirl of standing two paces behind Miranda at social functions, Andy couldn't think of anything more heavenly than sitting on her tatty sofa in her sweatpants, watching the glittery ball drop down to Times Square on TV. She'd rather cut her hand off than actually go to Times Square, of course. "What about you? You and Shelley going to have a night out?"

"Actually," Roy said, "Shelley and I broke up. Last week."

"Oh, no!" Andy said, genuinely sympathetic. "I'm sorry, Roy."

"Yeah, well, it was the same old thing. Long hours, she never saw me, I was never home…you know."

"Do I ever," Andy agreed.

"Yeah," Roy said, and added casually, "so, you know…actually, I was thinking--maybe--"

At that moment, Miranda rapped sharply on the window of her car door. Andy and Roy both jumped; Roy hopped immediately back into his seat, while Andy opened the door, took the pizza box from Miranda's hands (she'd eaten half the slices), and tossed it in the nearest trash can.

"We are late," Miranda said, glowering at the back of Roy's head like it was his fault. Her face was a little flushed, though, and her eyes actually seemed to glow with satisfaction. Andy'd seen herself looking like that a couple of times in the mirror. Usually after she'd just had really good sex. She bit her lip and looked out the window before Miranda could catch her staring. Well…heck, if Miranda could get some post-coital bliss from eating a pizza every once in a while, good for her. And it'd probably be good for everybody else around her, too.

But the memory of Miranda's glow, and the slight huskiness of her voice, kept bothering Andy all day long. For some damn reason.

Andy had the sinking feeling--certainty, really--that Roy had been leading up to asking her out before Miranda had interrupted him. And, well, that didn't have to be a bad thing, she guessed. He was a really nice guy, and not insanely older than she was. Practically the only guy she ever talked to these days, in fact. He'd never be able to bitch about her long work hours. And she had a feeling he'd actually be a lot of fun to hang out with outside of work. He'd be the kind of guy you could get a beer with, and talk about football, and not even think about the latest trend in pointy-toed shoes for an hour or so.

But she worked with him. Andy had made some pretty big goofs in this job already; she didn't want
to add "dipping into company ink" to the list. Truth to tell, he ought to know that too, and she was kind of pissed he'd put her into the position of having to turn him down, if he did ask her. Which he hadn't. And might not. So she really ought to get over herself, all things considered.

In any case, they were both so busy for the next two days that they didn't really get a chance to talk, even when they were alone--they were both still sleepy when Roy picked Andy up in the mornings, and both half-dead when he dropped her off at night. It probably wasn't good to have that much in common with somebody you dated.

Miranda left for London on the twenty-second. Andy had to accompany her to the airport, of course, to take care of last-minute details and instructions right up to the moment Miranda vanished through the security checkpoint.

"You've contacted Dr. Finch?" Miranda asked as Andy helped her remove her coat.

Andy nodded. "He knows you'll be in town, and he knows the, um, situation, so he says he can clear a space for you right away if necessary."

"Mmm. And the Christmas presents?"

"Emily says everything went fine," Andy said, praying that was true, since Emily hadn't said anything of the kind. Emily wasn't speaking to her at all if she could help it.

Which was dumb, really, and Andy was over it. If she'd been in Emily's shoes--if she'd been that desperate for Miranda's attention and approval--well, she wouldn't have alienated somebody Miranda actually seemed to like, for starters. Andy was more than willing to be friends with Emily, to make nice. It would make both their jobs so much easier. But she wasn't about to grovel for it. Not from Emily. What had Miranda said? 'We dictate the terms, not them.'

We. Them. Oh, no. Andy was doing it again. Fuck.

"--these ridiculous extremes," Miranda was saying, and Andy quickly dragged her attention back down to Earth. Miranda was glaring at the metal detectors, the long lines, and the miserable security guards. Andy didn't know what she was complaining about, though--first-class passengers had their own security entrances that tended to be a lot shorter and quicker. "For God's sake, a handful of terrorists get lucky and we've all got to upend our lives and make things as inconvenient as possible?"

Part of Miranda's ire, Andy knew, was that she usually traveled by private jet during crowded times like Thanksgiving and Christmas. Specifically, she used Irv's private jet. But after what had happened in Paris, Miranda and Irv were still barely on civil terms, and now Miranda was stuck flying on Christmas with the rest of the herd. Andy looked deep within herself, and failed to detect even trace amounts of sympathy. She was flying out to Cincinnati tonight, coach class, and it was going to suck. But all she said was, "Yes, it's awful."

Miranda barreled on, as always. "And when I spoke to Cara this morning I could barely understand what she was saying. Utterly terrible phone reception. And I gather the weather's dismal."

"I'm sorry," Andy said.

"And of course I'm going to have to check in with Preston almost every day," Miranda spat, "now that Stephen--" She suddenly seemed to realize where they were, and how angry she sounded, because she cut herself off. Andy stayed quiet, this time. Stephen had been remarkably amenable, so far, to Miranda's demand that he sign himself right out of his own kid's life. Mr. Praeger was still
drawing up the paperwork, trying to make sure there were no loopholes.

It was pissing Miranda off like nothing else could have done. She probably hadn't really expected Stephen to put up no resistance. She'd been anticipating battle, victory, revenge. Instant surrender wasn't nearly as satisfying, and seemed to have left her nonplussed.

Miranda glanced towards the security lines, and sighed, as if she was about to be led off by a firing squad. "Well. Here we go, I suppose."

Andy cleared her throat. Miranda glanced over at her, and Andy gave her a smile that she hoped didn't look too timid or weird. "Have a good trip," she said. "Oh, and, um, Merry Christmas. Or Happy Holidays, whichever," she added quickly.

Miranda's lips quirked up in something very smile-like, but it disappeared almost immediately. Then, to Andy's shock, she said, "You as well," before turning around and heading for the first-class security line. Andy understood that she'd been dismissed, and left right away, already thinking about whether she'd packed everything yet, and what time she'd have to leave her apartment to get to the airport.

Before she turned the corner, Andy glanced back over her shoulder just in time to see Miranda taking off her Christian Louboutins with an expression of profound irritation on her face. Andy laughed softly to herself and hurried for the door. When she made it through the throng of people, to her surprise, Roy was still waiting at the curb.

Andy bit her lip, dithered for a second, and then got in the back seat. Getting in the front would definitely have given him the wrong idea. "You didn't have to wait," she said. "I was going to take the subway home."

"Yeah, well, my afternoon's kind of open now," Roy said, sounding downright chipper. Andy couldn't blame him, and she closed her eyes, luxuriating in the realization of her own freedom for the next week.

"What time's your flight out?" Roy asked.

"Seven-thirty," Andy said, opening her eyes and checking her watch. It was two-forty-five now. She was pretty sure she'd be all ready go to when she got back to her place, but she'd still need to haul ass. She'd need to be at the airport at least two hours before her flight took off, with the way that security line had looked, and the subway was going to be absolutely nuts--

"Want a lift?" Roy said.

Andy stared at him in astonishment, and then managed a weak little smile. Crap. "Oh, no, Roy," she said. "I'll be fine. Thanks, though."

"I mean, I wouldn't mind," Roy said.

"I know you wouldn't," Andy said. Then she tilted her head towards the window, towards the insane traffic outside. "But I'm not going to make you get out in this again when you don't have to. I'll be fine. Thanks," she added, hoping the tone in her voice was final enough, without sounding mean.

"Well, if you're sure," Roy said, and to her relief, didn't press.

Andy, looking for an excuse not to have to speak for the next half-hour, said, "Hey. You mind if I catch a little shut-eye? I hardly slept at all last night, and tonight's going to be hell."
"Well, I guess I can hold off on playing my Guns and Roses," Roy said, and Andy couldn't stop a smile. He really was a nice guy. But…no. Bad, bad idea. "You get some rest."

Andy hadn't planned on actually falling asleep, but she did. It was a nice surprise.

Being back in her parents' house was like being on a different planet. Her dad had given her a bear hug at the airport, her mom had kissed both her cheeks when she'd walked through the door, and her older sister Rachel had squeezed her tight. Andy realized how much she'd missed just plain, affectionate physical contact since Nate left. She remembered Miranda touching her hand over a cup of Starbucks, and hoped that Miranda got at least a hug from her daughters when she arrived in London. Then Andy decided, deliberately and consciously, that Miranda Priestly was not going to cross her mind again until she had to return to New York.

Easier said than done, of course. Everyone wanted to know about her fancy, exciting job working for a fashion magazine in Manhattan. When she went out for a few drinks with old friends from high school, when she helped her sister set the table, even when she was sitting with her grandparents after dinner, Andy found herself trotting out the same old stories about busy days, late nights, parties, designers, and celebrities. And Paris. Everybody wanted to hear about Paris. From the way people talked, you'd think none of them had been to Paris before, when Andy knew for a fact that her grandparents had spent their honeymoon there.

"No, I didn't see the Eiffel Tower," she had to say, more than once. "I didn't have time."

On the morning before Christmas, Andy and her mother were drinking coffee together at the kitchen table. Her parents' coffeemaker always produced lukewarm coffee, and Andy tried not to compare it to the piping-hot Starbucks she'd gotten used to.


Andy sighed. She was lucky her mom had waited two whole days, really. "Not unless you count Miranda's driver," she said gloomily. "I think he wants to ask me out."

"Is he nice?" her mother asked.

Andy glared at her. "You're the one who told me never to get involved with anybody I work with," she reminded her. "You always said it was bad news."

"Well, yes," her mother said, "but is he nice?" Andy groaned, took another sip of coffee, and changed the subject.

Christmas Eve was the usual good time. All the Sachses stayed up late drinking eggnog and singing Christmas carols, the quality of which decreased correspondingly with the eggnog intake. Rachel's boyfriend Mark was the worst, singing in a loud basso profundo completely off-key. By midnight, they were all laughing more than they were singing, and when they'd finished massacring "Here We Come A-Wassailing," they burst into applause for themselves.

"What's next?" Andy's grandfather roared, but before anybody could suggest anything, Mark held up his hand.

"If I could have everyone's attention!" he said. "If I could…"
"Are we gonna?" Rachel asked, leaning against him and giggling. He slid his arm around her waist.

"Rachel, do you have something in your pocket?" he asked loudly. She nodded, still giggling. "Hey, you wanna show everybody what you've got in your pocket?"

Rachel stuck her left hand in her pants pocket and wriggled it around; when she pulled it out again, a diamond ring sparkled on her finger.

"We're engaged!" she said. "Mark proposed this afternoon."

Andy's mom clapped her hands over her mouth and cried out as her eyes filled with tears. Andy's dad, who'd obviously known this was coming, stood up and shook Mark's hand with a mix of solemnity and delight, while Rachel kissed both her grandparents before going over to her mother. For her part, Andy felt kind of frozen in place--happy for Rachel, happy for Mark, and sad for a reason she couldn't really pin a name on at the moment.

She and Nate had talked about getting married a few times. After they'd graduated college and had a chance to establish their careers. They'd told all their friends as much, even though they were never officially engaged. Even if things had worked out, Andy knew there wouldn't have been a ring on her finger this Christmas. But maybe next year there would have been. Maybe a lot of things would have been different.

Then suddenly Rachel was kneeling in front of her chair, her eyes shining with happy tears. Andy felt a smile breaking apart her own face, and she vowed to forget about herself for a little while. "Oh, Rach," she said, and threw her arms around her sister's neck, "I'm so happy for you."

"Thank you," Rachel said, and then gave a laughing little sob. "You're maid of honor. I hope you know that."

"I better be," Andy said, and laughed with her, wiping her own eyes as she felt herself tearing up. "Have you set a date?"

"Next spring," Rachel said. "Sometime in April or May, depending on when we can get the church. Sounds like you better put in your request for time off right away, huh?"

Andy laughed, but her mind was zooming on ahead before she could stop it. Next spring, Miranda was due in July. The kid would be at least nine months old by the time her sister got married. What a weird--

"Andy?" Rachel said, looking concerned.

"What? Oh, sorry," Andy said quickly. "I was just wondering if it would be, um, on Memorial Day weekend."

"Well, we'd like that," Rachel said, "but of course everyone who's getting married in May will want that weekend and…"

Andy tuned out her sister's voice as she went on automatic and said "yeah" and "uh-huh" in all the right places. Soon enough, Rachel gave her one last squeeze, and went back to Mark's side so they could regale everyone with the tale of how Mark had proposed, which appeared, somehow, to have involved a water balloon and a stuffed animal.

It was one-thirty in the morning by the time the party broke up. In the kitchen, Andy and her mom loaded the dishwasher with the eggnog glasses and the plates covered with cookie crumbs. By the time she got back to New York, Andy knew she'd be at least a few pounds heavier, and the diet
would have to start immediately. She was going to enjoy the home cooking while it lasted, though.

Andy's mom gently laid a hand on Andy's shoulder. Already feeling dread, Andy looked up. "Are you okay, baby?" her mom asked.

Andy smiled and put a hand over her mother's. "I'm fine, Mom. I'm happy for Rachel. Really."

"You know," her mom said, "it's okay if--"

"I'm fine," Andy said, letting a little edge into her voice. Her mom looked surprised by it, but it worked, and she dropped her hand from Andy's shoulder. "Look," Andy said, trying to sound nicer, "you go on to bed. I'll finish up here. It's almost all done."

Her mom regarded her for a long, silent moment; then she kissed her on the cheek, and went upstairs. Andy remained in the dark, quiet kitchen for much longer than she'd intended to.

Everybody slept in the next day, which meant that Christmas morning didn't officially start until almost eleven. Andy remembered the frenzy that had overtaken Rachel and her when they were children, how they'd thundered down the stairs towards the tree at seven in the morning, their parents following them groggily as they'd headed straight for the gift-pile. Good times.

Presents first, then food, and lots of it. They didn't put breakfast away until it was time to get lunch ready, and by two-thirty in the afternoon, everyone was stuffed to the gills and ready for a long snooze. Andy was ensconced in the Barcalounger in the den, sleepily contemplating the climb upstairs to her bedroom, when she heard her phone ringing. She'd left it in the kitchen. Groaning, Andy lumbered to her feet.

She idly checked the screen, and then gasped, her eyes widening in disbelief. Miranda was calling. Miranda was calling. And it seemed highly unlikely that she just wanted to wish Andy a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Her father, who was sitting at the kitchen table, looked up from his newspaper. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," Andy lied, fumbling for the 'answer' button. "It's just--hello? Hello, Miranda?"

Her father sat up ramrod-straight. "You're kidding. Isn't she in Lon--"

Andy held up a quick hand for silence as Miranda barked, "Cara has pneumonia."

"I--uh--" Still stuffed and sleepy, Andy couldn't think of anything to say but, "I'm sorry." Then she grimaced: she had to do better than that. "I mean, is she--"

"I put her on the first plane home, of course. I can't have her around here to infect my girls. Or me, for that matter."

"Oh," Andy said, shaking her head as if that would help to clear it. "Okay. Did--I mean, do you want me to call Roy to pick her up at the airport, or--"

"Be here by tomorrow," Miranda said.
Andy's voice died in her throat, and she stood stock-still at her parents' kitchen counter, looking out the familiar window, watching traffic go by on the street where she'd grown up. She could still smell that morning's coffee. The kitchen was toasty warm.

"Andrea?" Miranda snapped, and Andy jumped. Her father had risen to his feet and was looking at her with concern.

"I--tomorrow?" Andy gasped. "I, Miranda--I can't. I'm, I'm at home with my family…"

"If I remember correctly," Miranda said, "Cincinnati has an airport. A big one."

"Well--yes--but, but my passport is back in New York, I didn't bring it home with me--"

"What?" her dad said, his eyes widening. "She can't possibly want you to…"

Andy flapped her hand frantically at him again. "Listen," she said, suddenly inspired, "I'm positive London has tons of nanny services, I'll get online right now and you won't have the hassle of waiting for me to--or Emily! Didn't Emily say she was going home to Bristol?" Andy felt no shame about throwing Emily to the wolves. Wolf. Heck, she'd probably be delighted to spend even more time beneath Miranda's heel. "She'd practically just have to hop in a car and--"

"Is there some part of 'be here by tomorrow' that you did not understand?" Miranda said, her voice a very dangerous murmur.

Andy dug her free hand into her hair and bounced on the balls of her feet. "No--no, but--"

"Let me repeat myself, just in case," Miranda said. "I. Want. You. Here." Andy couldn't believe this was happening. "Use the company expense account. Fly first class, there should be some available seats in there."

"But--"

"Of course, the fact that you have to stop by New York first will slow you down," Miranda said, her voice dripping with scorn for Andy's thoughtlessness in neglecting to bring her passport to Ohio. "Get the first flight out that you can."

"Miranda--!"

"That's all." Miranda hung up.

Andy stared at the phone in her hand, her head whirling, wondering if she was about to pass out. Or if maybe she could just go upstairs, take that nap she'd wanted, and pretend she'd never gotten a phone call at all. No, that was no good. Her heart was pounding so hard she'd never get to sleep.

"Andy?" her dad asked, looking at her with wide eyes.

Andy blinked, bit her lower lip, and met his eyes with a flinch. "Um," she said miserably, "can you drive me to the airport?"

Her family put up a fuss, of course, but in the end, there wasn't much they could do. It wasn't until a tearful Andy was on the verge of calling a taxi that her father relented and consented to give her a lift.
to the airport. During the car ride, Andy realized that she hadn't told anybody in her family about Miranda's pregnancy. Figuring that wouldn't exactly be a violation of her unspoken confidentiality agreement--none of the Sachses were, after all, likely to tip off the *New York Post* --she told her father. She made sure to include Stephen's abandonment of Miranda for another woman, and his eagerness to avoid all responsibility for the child.

Her father wasn't entirely unsympathetic. "Well, that's a lousy thing to go through, no matter how rich and famous you are," he said. "And I'm sorry it's happening to her. But honey, this is ridiculous. I heard you say that Emily's already over there. It's ludicrous that she's calling you, and threatening you, and…" His voice dropped into a growl. "People aren't things, Andy."

"I know that, Dad," Andy pleaded. "But…I don't know. I mean…" She looked down at her lap, at her hands, and then back at him. "She needs me." Her father rolled his eyes. "No," Andy said, suddenly feeling an intense urge to make him understand. Though she wasn't sure she could, since she didn't understand it herself. "Really. I know it's weird. But it's true, I'm practically the only person she talks to now. I'm the only one in the office she's even told, officially. She hasn't even told Nigel--"

Her father startled her by slamming his hands against the steering wheel. "You shouldn't be in that position," he said.

It wasn't anything Andy hadn't thought before, but she heard herself say, "It's not Miranda's fault this happened to her."

"Maybe not entirely," her dad said. "But I still completely fail to understand why she can't spend Christmas with her children and take care of them herself. Since when are you even qualified to be a nanny?"

"I babysat a lot in high school," Andy offered weakly, but her dad didn't go for it.

"I don't know what to tell you that I haven't already said," he said. "You're grown up, you're on your own. You make your own decisions."

The words suddenly made Andy feel very young indeed, and she fumed in silence all the rest of the way to the airport.

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Her dad left her with a kiss and a sad smile. Andy managed to contain her tears until she was sitting at the gate of her flight, but then she allowed herself a good, frustrated crying session, not caring who saw her. She wasn't wearing any makeup to ruin, for one thing. She hadn't worn any in two days. Or any push-up bras, or tummy-and-ass control panels, or hose, or high heels, or any of the other things she was going to be stuffed into for the rest of her "vacation," just so that Miranda would look down her nose a little bit less.

For a few minutes, Andy allowed herself to fantasize about greeting Miranda Priestly in London with a good, hard punch to the teeth. It was a satisfying idea, but she immediately felt guilty about even contemplating hitting a pregnant woman. It wasn't the kid's fault his mother was such an entitled bitch.

His? Or her? Andy remembered that she didn't know the baby's sex, and wouldn't for a while. Miranda wouldn't either. Her ire vanished momentarily in a little rush of curiosity, and even
anticipation. If things continued as they were, she would probably be one of the first people to know. That was kind of neat. And still very messed up, she reminded herself, determined not to let go of her bad mood just yet. Miranda had ruined Christmas, like the most fashionable Grinch ever, and Andy wasn't about to forget that.

A cramped flight, a cramped subway ride, a frantic search for her passport, a re-packing, and another cramped subway ride later, Andy found herself sitting in a first-class seat over the Atlantic Ocean. Could've been worse, she thought, as the smiling flight attendant filled her glass with complimentary champagne and wished her a Merry Christmas. Although she wondered how Miranda was going to justify this one to Irv--flying a junior assistant first-class to London, when there were far cheaper and more practical alternatives available. Oh well. Not Andy's problem, for once, and she was glad of it.

She called Miranda's London driver as soon as the flight attendants gave the OK, and by the time she'd gone through baggage claim and customs, he was waiting for her by the curb. He was older than Roy, and wore a wedding ring. Andy relaxed. "Glad to see you made it all right, miss," he said. "There's bottled water if you're thirsty."

"Thanks," Andy said. "I'm okay." She sat back and looked at the time. She'd flown out of Cincinnati at five p.m., and then out of New York at ten-thirty. One seven-hour flight later, she had staggered into Heathrow at ten-thirty a.m., local time. She remembered the jet lag going to and from Paris. This was even worse, because she was the only one suffering through it; Miranda and the twins would have adjusted to the time change and would be fresh as daisies.

"I'd kill for some coffee," she said, thinking that it could only be a plus if she arrived at Miranda's already caffeinated. "Is there any way we could make a quick stop?"

"It'd have to be fairly quick, if you want to be on time for the luncheon, miss," the driver said.

Andy, who'd closed her eyes, popped them wide open again. "The what?"

"The luncheon. Didn't you know?" he asked, glancing at her in the rear-view mirror. "When I told Ms. Priestly what time you were getting in, she told me to make sure you got there in time to attend."

"No, I didn't know," Andy moaned. "There? Where is 'there'? And what's this luncheon for?" She realized that she ought to know. Miranda's itinerary was already etched into her brain, and had been for weeks. Today was the day after Christmas, which meant, oh God, it was--

"The Boxing Day luncheon at the Ritz," he said. "In the Music Room. Loads of publishing supremoes. Very posh."

Andy looked down with horror at her wrinkled pants and shirt. "We're going straight there?"

"Yes, miss," the driver said patiently.

"Oh my God," Andy said. "No. Please. We have to make a quick stop. I have to change--I've got all my clothes and stuff in the trunk, I can just grab something--please, it won't take me more than five minutes! Ten, tops!"

The driver held up a quick, placating hand. "Calm down, miss," he said. "All right, all right--let's see. John and Nora have a flat on the way…my friends. I'll ring them." He did, and twenty-five minutes later, Andy was practically sobbing with gratitude in front of a very bemused-looking British woman.

"Well, Jimmy's told us stories about Miranda Priestly," Nora said, looking over at Miranda's driver with wide eyes. "I suppose they must be true. Here, you can change in our bedroom, love. Down the
Andy hauled her suitcase to the bedroom, threw it open, and sorted frantically through her clothes, hoping for something suitable. 'Very posh,' Jimmy had said, but how posh was posh? Well, it was lunch, so, no evening gowns, obviously, which was good because Andy hadn't thought to pack an evening gown, though apparently she should have, shit, well maybe this grey skirt would do. And this green blouse. God damn it, she looked like a secretary. Well, she was a secretary, and an expensive one too, apparently, but still...she rummaged around in her jewelry pouch and found a pair of pearl drop earrings that should lend the ensemble a little more elegance. Good, they'd go with the pearl ring her grandparents had given her for Christmas, when life had still been fun. And she could fix her makeup and hair in the car.

"Thank you so much," she said as she hurried back out into the living room. Jimmy gallantly stepped forward to take her bag.

"Oh, don't you look nice," Nora said.

"Really?" Andy asked, looking down at herself anxiously, and brushing at her skirt.

"Oh, yes," Nora said. "Very sophisticated. I especially like those pearls." Her voice was a little too placating, but Andy decided to take what she could get, and thanked Nora profusely.

"I'll tell John about this," Nora said. "He won't half laugh." She took Andy's hand and squeezed it. "Nice to meet you. Enjoy your party."

"I'll do my best," Andy muttered, and she and Jimmy hurried back down to the car.

"We'll be cutting it a bit close," Jimmy said as Andy frantically applied her lipgloss in the back seat. "But we ought to get you there in time. It's just that Ms. Priestly is always--"

"Fifteen minutes early to everything," Andy finished. "Believe me. I know." She put away her lipgloss and spent a risky couple of minutes with her mascara wand before deciding that her face looked good enough (well, except for the dark circles beneath her eyes), and then she went to work on her hair. There was only so much she could do with just a brush and a few bobby pins, but by the time Jimmy pulled up to the Ritz, she'd managed an acceptable, if slightly sloppy bun. She just hoped it could pass for shabby-chic sloppy instead of I-practically-got-dressed-in-the-car sloppy. Either way, it was too late to do anything about it now.

After checking her coat and asking directions from the desk clerk, Andy clutched her bag and headed on unsteady feet for the William Kent House, and from there to the Music Room. She was surprised at how impressed she was by the hotel. She'd seen almost every fancy place there was to see in New York, and a fair number of them in Paris--and after a while, one gilded banquet room seemed much like another, no matter where it was. Maybe her current awe was because she'd come straight from her parents' homey kitchen. Where she'd much rather be right now.

But she wasn't, and she wouldn't be again, not for some time. Andy set her shoulders back, vowed to make the best of things, and ducked quickly into a nearby ladies' room for a last-minute hair and makeup check. No lipgloss on her teeth, no mascara on her cheeks, the bun wasn't falling down: good enough. Time to enter the fray.

The fray, as always, was an exceedingly polite, sophisticated affair. The Music Room was filled with flower-festooned round tables and elegant, uncomfortable chairs, just like the luncheon room in Paris had been. A string quartet played unobtrusively in a corner. The food hadn't been served yet, so everyone was still standing in little groups, chatting and laughing through their teeth as they sipped
from glasses of wine, or the occasional hot cup of tea. All very civilized. But make no mistake, blood was in the water. It always was. When you got this rich, this famous, and this powerful, everyone wanted to be us. You. Everybody wanted to be you. Andy wasn't the 'you' in question, and she definitely wasn't part of an 'us,' so really--

At that moment, Andy saw Miranda in the corner of the room, talking to a couple of people Andy didn't recognize. Odd that the sight of Miranda should stop her downward spiral into nonsensical madness, instead of start it.

Then Miranda looked up, and saw Andy fidgeting in the doorway. Her eyes widened, and Andy felt a spasm of pure panic seize her. Shit. Her outfit was gauche. Her hair looked awful. Her makeup was clownish. She'd flown all the way out here only to disgrace Miranda completely--

Miranda gestured imperiously for Andy to join her, her face already reverting back to its usual cool mask. Andy headed towards her on shaking knees, trying not to whimper audibly. She hoped these people weren't especially important, and that she could keep lurking in the corner until Miranda ordered her out of the room in disgust.

But as Andy approached the group--Miranda, two men, and another woman--Miranda turned to look at her again and her gaze was neither hard nor disapproving. Andy blinked. Well, that was…Miranda never shied away from expressing her displeasure, even in front of other people, since she could do it so well without speaking a word. Maybe Andy didn't look as bad as she'd feared. Clinging to a tiny, newfound shred of confidence, Andy managed a smile for everyone and said, "Hello." It only came out a little bit squeaky.

"This is my assistant, Andrea Sachs," Miranda said to the three other people, none of whom appeared to notice Andy's astonishment. "She's just arrived from Ohio this morning." Her voice was pleasant without being cooing or false, just as if she was introducing a…a friend or something.

"How nice to meet you," one of the men, a portly, balding guy in his mid-fifties, said. He held out his hand. "Geoffrey Barnhardt."

Andy shook it while Miranda said, "Geoffrey is the managing director of Elias-Clarke's operations in the U.K. And these are the Goldsteins…”

During the next ten minutes, Andy found herself being introduced to several ritzy-looking people who drifted towards and then away from Miranda as she held court in her corner, letting people come to her. This shindig wasn't her doing, but somehow she still managed to be the center of attention. Everyone here knew her. Very few liked her. Andy could tell that much right away.

Then it was time to be seated for the actual food. Andy scanned the tables and saw tiny nameplates at each place. Rats--she hadn't been able to look around before Miranda had pulled her aside. Everybody else had already had time to find out where they were sitting, of course. Andy didn't want to be the only one wandering around like an idiot, so she dared to ask Miranda, "Uh--I'm sorry, but do you know where I'm supposed to sit? I haven't had a chance to…"

"We're at the center table," Miranda said, gesturing at the table in question as she absentely glanced
around the room. Apparently she'd spoken to everyone she cared to speak to, and now she proceeded like a queen to the center table, with Andy trailing in her wake. It wasn't until Andy caught other people watching her with raised eyebrows that she realized how unusual this had to look. The center table was prime real estate at any function, and usually occupied only by the people in charge and their most important guests. People like Andy, if they were lucky enough to get invited at all, always sat at the tables in the back of the room, or on the outermost periphery. But there it was: a tiny card made of embossed cream paper, with Andy's name on it in beautiful calligraphy, right next to the one at Miranda's seat.

There were no words to describe how self-conscious Andy felt as she lowered herself into her seat, feeling as if everybody in the room was watching her. Which they weren't. Of course they weren't. Miranda was already chatting with the man seated at her left, and the woman on Andy's right was talking to the person on her other side, so Andy was left to sit mutely and try not to fidget. Fortunately, at that moment, waiters emerged carrying trays of warm salad with scallops and prawns. Andy had eaten a fairly decent breakfast a few hours ago on the flight--first-class food really was a world apart from coach--but her mouth still watered and she had to force herself to eat sparingly, aware that it would look really bad for Miranda Priestly's assistant to tuck into her food like a starving animal.

She glanced over at Miranda, and noted with some amusement that Miranda appeared to have the same problem. Hunger pangs again, and not a pizza in sight. Andy bit her lip and looked back down at her salad; if Miranda caught her smirking, she'd be more likely to slap Andy's cheek than air-kiss it. Then Andy blushed again, thinking about how weird that had been. How unexpected. Nobody at Runway would ever believe it. It gave her a warm, pleasant tingle in her stomach.

The woman on Andy's right turned to her. Andy had already been introduced, but realized, to her horror, that she couldn't remember her name or anything else about her. "Did I hear that you have just come today from Ohio?" the woman asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Andy said, hoping she could pull this off anyway. "I was visiting my family for the holidays."

"I've never been to Ohio," said the woman, who spoke with a German accent.

Andy managed a smile for her. "You haven't missed much. They call it 'flyover country' for a reason."

The woman tittered. Miranda cleared her throat, somehow managing to sound displeased--Andy realized that Miranda probably didn't like to think about Ohio too much, especially in company like this--and said, "Helga, how is your dear little boy?"

Helga Schumann, that was it. And her husband Georg sat to her right. He was a big shot executive who owned tons of shares in Delton Wright, Elias-Clarke's main rival publishing house. Corporate scuttlebutt was that they'd tried to lure Miranda away from Elias-Clarke several times over the years. Andy wondered if she would have gone over to them, had Irv succeeded in his little coup.

"Alexis is wonderful," Mrs. Schumann gushed. "He turned sixteen last Wednesday, of course, and did so appreciate the card and flowers you sent--" The card and flowers Emily would have sent, undoubtedly. Yeah, what sixteen-year-old boy wouldn't love a bunch of flowers? "--and he is at the top of his class. We are so proud." She tilted her head. "And your girls? Caroline and…forgive me. Cassandra?"

"Cassidy," Miranda said, with a charming smile that almost hid the fangs. "They're quite well. I can hardly keep up with them, in fact--they're so gifted at music…"
"I had heard that," Mrs. Schumann said. "I do hope that someday I can hear them play."

"Why, wouldn't that be lovely," Miranda said. "And just last spring, they took home top honors for their science project."

"They did?" Andy blurted.

"Yes," Miranda said, giving her a look that promised a quick, but painful death if Andy said the wrong thing now.

"I didn't know that," Andy said, unable to repress her grin, and glad that it wouldn't seem inappropriate. "That's wonderful."

"I must have forgotten to mention it," Miranda said sweetly. But her eyes had narrowed just enough, and Andy backed off at once.

"And you, my dear," Mrs. Schumann said, returning her attention to Andy with a gleam of avid interest in her eyes. "You look so young! How old are you?"

"T-twenty-four," Andy said, suddenly discomfited by something in Mrs. Schumann's attitude, though she didn't know what.

"A baby," cooed Mrs. Schumann. "And how long have you been interested in fashion?"

It was Andy's turn to go red. She was suddenly acutely conscious of Miranda sitting next to her, and the memory of Miranda's words rang in her ears: 'Oh. Okay. I see. You think this has nothing to do with you."

"Just recently, actually," Andy said, trying very hard to sound casual. Airy, even. "I, um, my background is in journalism."

"Really," said Mrs. Schumann. "A reporter? You?"

'You?' What was that supposed to mean? But all Andy said was, "Yes. I, um, I edited my college newspaper, actually. And worked an internship at The Cincinnati Post one summer." Not that it had led to any particularly useful professional contacts, or indeed, to anything but the sure knowledge that Andy didn't want to work in Cincinnati. She'd heard the paper was folding this year, in fact.

"And now you work at Runway?" Mrs. Schumann asked.

'Duh,' Andy didn't say. "Yes, ma'am," she said instead, and offered a weak smile to Miranda, who was regarding her with a closed, thoughtful look on her face. Then she turned back to Mrs. Schumann. "It was an, um, unexpected but wonderful opportunity."

"I'm sure." Mrs. Schumann looked her up and down. Andy squirmed. "Well, for a reporter, you are certainly elegant!"

"Thank you," Andy mumbled, wishing like anything that Mrs. Schumann would talk to somebody else, especially since for some reason everybody at the table was looking at both of them right now. She looked desperately around the table, but the only other person she knew, of course, was Miranda.

Well…Miranda would have to do, then, since everyone was looking at Andy, and Andy had to say something that wasn't too incredibly inane. She gulped, turned over to Miranda, and said, "So, was your flight over here okay?"
Miranda looked amused for a fleeting second, before replying, "Fine. And yours?"

Oh thank God, she was playing along. Aware that they were on display, and that their teammates weren't the only ones who were listening, Andy kept looking right at Miranda, pretending that they were the only ones in the room for the sake of her own sanity. "Yes. Um, no layovers between JFK and Heathrow, so that was, you know, nice."

Thankfully, at that moment, Georg Schumann said something to the guy on his right, and Mrs. Schumann leaned away from Andy to participate in the conversation. Feeling a little less in the spotlight, Andy relaxed a little. Seeing this, Miranda looked amused again. Suddenly, Andy desperately wanted to know how she was, if she was feeling okay, if she and the girls were getting along. But of course she couldn't ask about any of that here, so instead she just said, "Have you heard from Nigel since you've been here?" There. Conversation that wasn't small talk. Miranda had, Andy knew, very limited tolerance for small talk.

Miranda sniffed and looked dismissive. "The San Francisco pictures didn't come out as well as either of us had hoped. But they could be worse, I suppose. We'll make do."

'Will make do'? That one sentence told Andy volumes about how Miranda felt. Miranda never 'made do.' Was she tired, or was she bending to Irv's pressure to keep costs down? Or both?

Andy realized she was thinking about Irv again, and then she wondered what he'd say when he learned that Miranda was pregnant. Oh. That put a whole new spin on things, didn't it? Stephen dumping her, an extremely acrimonious divorce, Miranda being a single mom in a whole new way… it'd be all over the papers, on the lips of all of New York society. And of course it would reflect on *Runway*, on Elias-Clarke, whether that was fair or not.

Andy had heard any publicity was good publicity. She just hoped Irv felt the same way.

"What?" Miranda asked. Her eyes had narrowed, and Andy realized she'd been staring at Miranda with what was probably a blank, stupid-looking expression on her face.

"Oh!" Andy said. "S-sorry. I was just, um--"

Miranda tilted her head away, obviously already bored by whatever excuse Andy was about to offer, and turned to speak to the man on her left again. You didn't lag behind if you wanted to keep Miranda Priestly's attention. Feeling oddly dejected, Andy spent the next ten minutes poking at her food and trying not to be noticed. Then she realized she was wasting a great opportunity to meet some really important people, and so she made a deliberate effort to make eye contact with, and smile at, those people over the roast fillet of halibut.

By the time the dessert was served, she was chatting shyly with the man on Miranda's left, who was none other than Vincent Wright: the CEO of Delton Wright, the host of the luncheon, and clearly the most important person in the room. Of course. Miranda wouldn't deign to sit next to anybody else. She appeared pleased that Andy was managing to fumble her way through a conversation about Broadway musicals, which was something, anyway.

Andy thought Miranda also looked relieved not to be speaking. Was that why she'd wanted Andy here—to take up some of the slack and keep the pressure off her? Andy decided to try her best. It was pretty easy, though; once she'd engaged the CEO's attention, naturally everybody else wanted to get in on the conversation, and Andy didn't have to say very much after the initial observation on how much she'd liked *Cats*. The conversation ran from there. It turned out that some of the most important people in publishing were apparently dying to talk about Andrew Lloyd Webber, so long as Mr. Wright was, too.
Miranda said very little, but sipped from her water glass instead and looked idly around the table, moving her gaze from face to face. Andy refused to stare at her, but even the quickest glances told her that Miranda was tired. Well, that made two of them, Andy thought, feeling her former irritation returning just the tiniest bit.

Of course, Miranda never saw events through to the end. It was a miracle she'd stuck around this one for as long as she had, really. Andy had just taken her second bite of cardamom cream with basil jelly when Miranda abruptly announced, "Well, this has been utterly delightful, Vincent, but I really must dash."

Mr. Wright didn't look surprised, but he put up a token protest anyway, along with the other people at the table. "So soon, Miranda? Surely you can finish your dessert, at least."

Miranda shook her head, wearing a fake little smile. "Time waits for no woman," she said lightly, "and nor do my children." Everyone at the table chuckled. "Come along, Andrea."

Andy quickly put her spoon down, dabbed at her mouth with her napkin, and rose to her feet while a nearby waiter pulled out Miranda's chair for her. All the men at the table stood up. Andy smiled at everyone, hoping it didn't look too timid or dumb, and said, "It was so nice to meet all of you. Thank you very much," she added to Mr. Wright. "I had a lovely time."

He shook her hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Andrea," he said. "Enjoy London."

Andy decided not to mention that she probably wouldn't see much of it. Instead, she thanked him again, and then quickly followed Miranda, who was already high-tailing it out of the room, pausing only to wave at certain acquaintances on her way out. Once they'd left the room, Andy suddenly remembered that she was here to work, and pulled out her phone to call Jimmy and tell him they were ready to go.

"Already at the curb," he told her. "Have been for half-an-hour. Valet service hate me, I can tell you-where has she been?"

Andy glanced over at Miranda, who was, as always, two steps ahead. "Well, we're on our way now," was all she said. "See you in a minute."

"Get my wrap," Miranda said without looking at her, when she'd hung up. Andy hurried to the coat check, and returned wearing her own coat and carrying Miranda's mink stole.

Miranda let Andy slide the stole around her shoulders. Usually she donned and doffed her coats by herself, disdaining assistance, but lately she'd been allowing Andy to help her. Andy had no idea why, or what it meant, or if it meant anything, but she played along and tried not to think about it more than necessary. Maybe Miranda was just tired. Or distracted. Or both.

She certainly looked both when her car pulled away from the curb. "Home, Ms. Priestly?" Jimmy asked.

"Yes," Miranda said, and closed her eyes briefly before opening them again and gazing out the window. They'd just pulled into traffic when she murmured, "Thank goodness that's over."

"The food was nice," Andy offered.

"The fish was bland and poorly-cooked," Miranda said.

"Except for the fish," Andy mumbled.
Miranda sighed. "You're still too easily impressed. A few more years at this and you will acquire--" Snobbery, Andy thought. "--sufficient taste to differentiate the mediocre from the good," Miranda finished. "Don't be overwhelmed by a famous venue and a pretty room."

The little lecture embarrassed Andy, made her feel like a kid who'd never seen anything of the world at all. Which wasn't fair. She would lay good money that nobody else in her family (and quite possibly Miranda's) had ever dined on cardamom cream, and they definitely hadn't met Valentino. Just because she hadn't been around high society for as long as Miranda--

Miranda tapped her fingers impatiently on the door handle. "I had an extremely disagreeable dinner last night at Bibi Lannay's penthouse," she said. Bibi Lannay was a wealthy London socialite famous for her dinner parties and supposedly impeccable taste in decorating. She was also famous for calling everyone, no matter who, 'Boopsie.' Andy would have given her right arm to see anyone addressing Miranda Priestly as 'Boopsie.'

When Miranda didn't add anything else, Andy decided that maybe, just maybe it was her cue. She said, "What happened?"

"She is the worst sort of woman," Miranda said, which meant Andy had been right. "I greeted her and she immediately bombarded me with what a hard time she'd had getting dressed for the evening." To Andy's astonishment, Miranda's voice suddenly went high-pitched as she said, "'Boopsie, I do so hope you approve of the ensemble, it's Pucci of course but I had a dreadful time deciding between this and the vintage Valentino, and the shoes are Balenciaga, naturally, but,' and on, and on, and on," Miranda concluded, dropping back down into her normal vocal register as she pinched the bridge of her nose, looking martyred.

Andy couldn't stop herself. She cackled, and slapped her hand over her mouth. At least Miranda ought to know Andy was laughing with her, not at her. Even though Miranda wasn't actually laughing.

"Can you tell me what was wrong with that little speech, Andrea?" Miranda said.

At first Andy thought Miranda wanted her to give her feedback on her Lannay impersonation. Then her brain woke up, and she realized it was a quiz. She didn't know the answer, either, and she still felt punchy: from the exhaustion of the last twenty-four hours, from lingering hunger (she'd only let herself eat half of her food), from Miranda's unexpected attempt at humor. Which was why she heard herself say--giggle, really-- "It wasn't long enough? I could have listened to you doing that for a while."

Miranda looked at Andy like she'd just suggested skinning a baby. Andy stopped laughing and started cringing. "Sorry," she said. "It, it was funny."

"There are different classes of people in our circle, Andrea," Miranda said, clearly deciding to ignore Andy's idiocy. Remarkably gracious of her. "The first class is people who act as if they do not care how they appear to the world. They are lying." She glared at Andy. "As I am sure you remember." Andy gulped, and felt the sharp rebuke. "The second," Miranda continued, "is people who know and wear designers. All well and good; that's how we sell Runway. But the third class is made up of the people who wear clothes, and it is these people, and only these people, with whom we truly concern ourselves." For a second, Miranda looked almost dreamy. "People who appreciate what fashion is, and what it means. They are few and far between. And in the meantime, I'm stuck talking to the Bibi Lannays of the world." She rolled her eyes in disgust.

Andy, still wincing from her own faux pas and Miranda's reminder of her early inadequacies, nevertheless realized that Miranda was trying to impart some kind of Important Lesson. Too bad
Andy had no idea what it was. "When you say 'wear clothes,'" she said, "w-what do you mean? I mean--you can't just mean they, you know, get dressed."

"There is getting dressed, and then there is dressing," Miranda said. "Tell me the difference." Her voice was hard-edged and relentless. She'd had a bad time at the luncheon and was going to take it out on Andy. Great.

Andy thought fast, although she knew that anything she said wouldn't be good enough. "Well--if what you said about people like Bibi Lannay is--I mean, 'getting dressed' would just be wearing labels, I guess," Andy said. "'Dressing' would be more like, I don't know, you've got your own style, and you care about the clothes, instead of who made them. Wouldn't it?"

"It would," Miranda said.

Andy, weak with relief, dared to press her luck. "But I don't understand," she said. "I mean…do you really mean that designers don't matter?" Surely Miranda couldn't possibly be saying that.

Miranda gave her a disgusted look. "Of course not," she said. "Were you asleep in Paris? Each designer has his own look, his own ethos, his own philosophy. Tap into that, and you understand everything." She looked out the window and drummed her fingers again.

"You don't care about this," she said after a moment.

What?! Oh, fuck, oh-- "That's not true!" Andy said. "I do. I mean, I want to do well, to do my job well, I want to learn…" And she wanted to please Miranda. She always had, almost from the very beginning.

"'My background is in journalism,'" Miranda mocked, still not looking at Andy. It wasn't funny this time.

"Well…it is," Andy said weakly. "She asked me. And I can't change that." She didn't want to. And she didn't want to sit back and let Miranda say…whatever she was saying, either. She wanted to stick up for herself. "I've been trying really hard, Miranda--"

"Mm," Miranda said, her jaw tightening. It was probably the closest she could come to a concession. Andy shut up. "You will never have a career in fashion," she added. "You will never truly understand it."

Andy froze. What? What was that supposed to mean? Was Miranda about to fire her or something? Blackball her from the industry? Why the hell would--

"But you will have a career," Miranda continued. She looked back at Andy, and gave her a cool little smile. "If you keep your head above water long enough."

Oh. Well, that was…okay, maybe. Andy forced herself to relax, and thought longingly of twenty-four hours ago, when she'd been with her family and hadn't had to tread carefully around every single word she spoke and heard. "Th-thank you," she stammered. "I mean, I, I hope so."

"You handled yourself well at the luncheon," Miranda said absently as she leaned forward to look through the windshield at the street ahead. Andy realized that she was on her first trip to London and hadn't once taken the time to look at her surroundings.

But she didn't quite dare to take her attention off Miranda just yet. So she just said, "Thank you," again, remembered the air-kiss, and wondered if she'd fallen into some kind of alternate dimension.
"Now," Miranda said, "we need to discuss tonight. It's dinner at the Cheltinghams'. After this evening the whirl calms down until New Year's, thank goodness."

"Oh, okay," Andy said. "Er--do you have a list of things you want me to do?" Miranda looked at her, frowning. "For the girls," Andy clarified, already dreading a whole evening of looking after Miranda's spoiled kids. Maybe she could find a reason to send them to bed at seven o'clock.

"What about the girls?" Miranda asked, her brow still furrowed.

Andy blinked. "While you're gone," she said slowly, thinking that maybe the alternate-dimension idea had merit to it. Either that or Miranda was going prematurely senile. "Is there something you want me to do while I look after them?"

Now Miranda looked at Andy like she was crazy. "You?" she said. "Do you have some kind of special childcare credentials I don't know about?"

Mentioning the babysitting probably wasn't a good idea. "Well--no, but--"

"I have engaged a temporary nanny on a friend's recommendation," Miranda said.

Andy felt like her whole face had just gone numb. "What?" she said.

Miranda glanced over Andy's outfit as if Andy hadn't spoken. "I suppose that skirt will do," she said, "but of course you'll want a different top for evening."

"I'm--" Andy had difficulty forming complete, non-moronic sentences around Miranda at the best of times, and this was not the best of times. "I'm not here to stay with the twins? I'm going with you?"

Miranda gave her the crème de la crème of the 'you-idiot' looks, but Andy wasn't about to stand for that now. "I thought you called me here because Cara had to go home. You said…"

"I said no such thing," Miranda said, turned her head, and looked out the window, evidently intending to say no more on the subject.

Andy's jaw opened and shut. Desperately trying to convince herself that she wasn't crazy, she tried as hard as she could to remember everything Miranda had said over the phone. She'd said that Cara was sick and had to return to America; she'd said that she wanted Andy to fly to London immediately. She'd never actually, explicitly said that Andy would be taking Cara's place, but surely the two things had some kind of causal link, surely Miranda wouldn't have flown Andy all the way out here just to be her fucking dinner companion, she couldn't possibly be in that desperate need of a, of a--


"What time are we leaving?" she asked.

"Eight," Miranda said, not looking at her. "We will be there at eight-thirty."

"All right," Andy said. "All right." She glanced at Miranda, and saw that Miranda's throat was a little bit red; the slightest blush was creeping up it, though whether it was from anger or embarrassment, Andy couldn't be sure. But at least it meant that Miranda knew how ridiculous this was.

She must really feel like shit, to be pulling this kind of stunt for company.

"Anyway," Andy said, "how have you been? Do I, um, need to get in touch with Dr. Finch?"
"If you need to, I'll tell you so," Miranda said. "I am perfectly fine." Her tone was quelling, but her posture had relaxed just the tiniest fraction. If Andy hadn't been looking for it, she never would have noticed. She nodded, even though Miranda wasn't looking.

They rode in silence then. Andy took another deep breath and looked out the window, deciding that now was as good a moment as any to get at least a passing glimpse of London. Although, who knew, maybe she'd get more this week. She'd thought for sure she'd be cooped up in Miranda's townhouse the whole time, watching the twins while Miranda ran the social gauntlet. Now she had no idea what she'd be doing. For all she knew, Miranda would decide to take her on a personal tour of St. Paul's Cathedral and the Tower of London.

She had to call her parents when they reached Miranda's place. They must be worried, wanting to know if she'd made it to England safely. They'd probably also want to know what the deal was with Miranda, and the kids, and everything else.

Too bad Andy would have no idea what to tell them.

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Following Miranda into the townhouse for the first time was a revelation that explained quite a few things. Jimmy set Andy's luggage in an out-of-the-way corner, where it could remain until Andy knew where she'd be staying that night. Then he discreetly nipped back out of the front door. Andy put her coat and Miranda's wrap in a nearby hall closet, turned around, and saw Miranda standing there in the hallway, looking lost. Well, not lost, exactly, but there was an odd, unguarded, almost wistful expression on her face that nearly amounted to the same thing. Andy heard noises; the twins were chattering to each other in a nearby room, where a television was on. She could smell popcorn. The hallway was decked with evergreens and red silk bows: tasteful, of course, but festive. For just one second, Andy felt as if she'd stepped into a home with normal, well-adjusted people in it.

The feeling didn't last long. Miranda headed down the hallway. Andy, lacking further instruction, followed her until they reached the living room.

Miranda cleared her throat. "Hello, girls," she called, and the voices in the TV room died. There was a moment of stillness; then Andy heard movement, and the twins came through the door. They and their mother regarded each other in silence for a second while Andy squirmed, and then the twins came forward and collided with Miranda in something that looked vaguely hug-like. Miranda's hands trembled on their shoulders, as if maybe she wanted to grasp or hold, but didn't know how and didn't quite dare. So she patted them instead, and then they let her go and stepped back, glancing at each other.

Andy couldn't have imagined anything more different from the exuberant affection of her own family. She quickly looked away, glancing around the hallway like the décor fascinated her, so that if Miranda looked at her she wouldn't see her pity. And then rip her face off.

"Girls," Miranda said, "Andrea will be joining us for the rest of the holiday."

"Hi, Ahndraya," one of the twins said, managing to make Andy's name sound like an insult. The other one giggled.

"Andy," Andy corrected her with a smile that she hoped looked friendly enough. "You can call me Andy." At that moment, a woman appeared in the doorway behind the twins. She was of Indian
descent and appeared to be in her early thirties. She wore a kind, welcoming smile, and the twins—who could only have known her for all of twenty-four hours—turned toward her like plants to the sun, beaming at her. This time, Andy didn't even dare glance in Miranda's general direction.

"Hello, Ms. Priestly," the woman said. "How was your luncheon?"

"Fine," Miranda said tightly. Andy finally looked over at her, and saw Miranda looking back, before Miranda returned her gaze to the nanny. "Padmini, this is Andrea Sachs. I told you she would be arriving today. Andrea, this is Padmini." She gestured vaguely.

Andy held out her hand, which Padmini took with a smile. "Nice to meet you," she said.

"And you as well, Miss Sachs," Padmini said.

"Andy," Andy said quickly, hoping to forestall that kind of thing right away. Padmini didn't work for her, after all. Andy was an employee too, and there was no point in pretending otherwise. "Just Andy, please."

"Well," Miranda said, her voice bright as she clasped her hands and looked at her daughters. She was obviously over talking to the help. "What have you two been up to today?"

"We practiced the piano," one twin said, sounding dutiful. "Then we ate lunch, and then you came home."

The other twin darted a curious glance at Andy, who felt compelled to ask, politely, "What are you guys practicing now?"

"Brahms," one of them said.

"It's really hard," said the other one.

"Wow, I bet," Andy said, hoping she sounded impressed. "Is he your, um, favorite composer?"

"Ugh, no," the first one said. "I mean, he's okay, but he's hardly postmodern."

"We're into Philip Glass right now," the other one added. "Especially Koyaanisqatsi, but that's not really doable on the piano."

"Oh," Andy said after a moment. They looked like they were two seconds away from laughing in her face.

"Ms. Priestly," Padmini said respectfully, "the girls and I were going for a walk in the park." She tilted her head to the side, looking inquisitive. "But would you rather--"

"No," Miranda said, sounding weary. For the first time since Andy had seen her today, she was allowing her exhaustion to appear fully on her face, which had almost a grey tinge to it now. "Enjoy your outing. I don't quite feel up to it. I'll see you when you get back."

One of the twins bit her lip and looked worried. "Are you feeling okay?" she asked Miranda.

That coaxed the first real smile from Miranda, although it still looked strained and tired. "Oh, I'm fine, darling," she said. "Mommy just needs to rest for a little while."

The twins threw Andy a very wary look. Miranda said, "It's all right, girls. Andrea knows." They relaxed, but still looked at Andy resentfully.
"Does Padmini?" one of the girls asked, looking up at the nanny.

"Yes," Miranda said. "Padmini is perfectly aware that Mommy is having a baby. And Padmini knows not to tell tales out of school." She smiled at her daughters. She didn't need to look at Padmini. The message was practically written in neon letters.

Andy's face felt scalded with sudden embarrassment, and she knew her cheeks were red. 'Mommy is having a baby'? Well, that…put it all right out there, didn't it?

"We're not in school," one of the twins said blankly.

"It's just a saying, dear," Miranda sighed. "You all go on to the park. Have a good time."

"We're going to throw bread to the ducks," a twin said.

Miranda smiled at them both. "Throw in a little extra for me."

"What time would you like us to return home, ma'am?" Padmini asked, her voice a little stiff and low after Miranda's warning.

Miranda glanced at her watch. So did Andy. It was almost two o'clock. "Until the girls want to return," she said. "Just don't let them get too cold. Andrea and I will not be here for dinner, of course, so you don't have a deadline." Right before Miranda looked back up from her watch, Andy saw one twin elbow the other and mouth the words 'of course.' Fortunately, Miranda didn't catch it.

Out of nowhere, the twin on the left looked at Andy and said, "Did you get any good Christmas presents?"

Andy started, and looked over at Miranda. Miranda gave her the what-is-wrong-with-you look, and Andy quickly said, "Oh, well, my grandparents gave me this ring." She showed them her pearl, deciding that if they sneered at it she'd give them the what-for, even if standing up to them did get her fired. God. What kind of life was this, where she had to 'stand up' to a couple of ten year olds? And where she might not win?

They didn't sneer at the ring, although they didn't seem particularly impressed, either. "We got necklaces," the one on the right said. Her tone of voice told Andy that they put her ring to shame. Andy wondered what the twins would say if Andy told them that she still wouldn't trade places with them for anything.

Instead, she just said politely, "Oh, that's nice. I bet they're really pretty."

"They are," the left twin said, and turned to Padmini. "Can we go now?" Like Andy had been holding them up or something.

"Let's get your coats," Padmini said, smiling at them and genuinely appearing to mean it.

"Not too cold," Miranda reminded her sharply.

"Yes, ma'am," Padmini said again, and the three of them headed for the hallway. Andy heard the hall closet opening and closing, heard the sound of coats and hats being donned. She realized that Miranda hadn't said goodbye to the girls, nor kissed them, nor anything else, and they hadn't seemed to expect it. Was this how it always was? Or was it because they were in front of other people and felt self-conscious? Or were the twins still angry about the baby? Andy felt a headache coming on, and it probably wasn't just from hunger or fatigue.
The door shut. Andy turned to see Miranda taking a step backwards that almost looked like a stagger. Andy's eyes widened in alarm, but Miranda righted herself immediately, and rubbed a hand over her forehead.

"We have a few hours," she said. "I suggest you use it to rest. I will do the same."

Wow. Andy hadn't expected that, and 'rest' sounded like heaven. Then she wondered where, exactly, she was supposed to do it, since she didn't know where she was supposed to stay while she was in London. Miranda hadn't said anything about a particular hotel, and Andy hadn't had time to find one herself, but surely Miranda had something in mind. Asking her questions was always dangerous, but Andy was too tired to work out a solution on her own right now. "Okay," she said. "Er. Where would you like me to--um--be?"

"Up here," Miranda said, and headed for a nearby staircase. Andy rocked back on her own feet, too stunned to follow her. "You might as well get your bags," Miranda added acidly.

Andy turned around and headed mechanically back towards the front door, glad to have something to do that didn't involve staring at Miranda like a moron. Here? She was staying here? In Miranda's house?

Well, she supposed that made sense on some planet that wasn't this one. It'd save money, if Irv was going to yell. And it'd mean Andy was available twenty-four-seven, without needing to call or text or send a homing pigeon. Miranda could yank her out of bed at three in the morning if she felt the need. Say, if she wanted some fish and chips or something. Fucking great.

But--she'd been invited to stay in Miranda's home. She was pretty sure Miranda didn't just do this sort of thing with people. It was about ten million steps up from being entrusted to deliver the book. That was sort of cool, at least.

Andy grabbed her luggage and hurried back to the stairway, where Miranda was already looking impatient, and then followed Miranda up the stairs. "Cara's room is still a general plague area, of course," Miranda said, wrinkling her nose. "The maid will disinfect it tomorrow. You'll be sleeping in the room at the far end of the hall on the left." She pointed at it, and then gestured at the other end of the hall. "My room is at the end. The twins are to either side." She glared at Andy. "I am sure it goes without saying that you should have absolutely no reason to disturb us."

"Of course, right," Andy said, and then added, "um, I-I should call my parents. You know. Let them know I got here safely."

"Be ready to go at eight o'clock sharp," Miranda said tiredly. "Until then I don't care what you do. Just be quiet." She turned around and headed for her bedroom without another word.

Andy pressed her lips together, and hauled her suitcases to the designated doorway. When she opened it and stepped inside, she stopped dead in her tracks.

There was a huge four-poster bed in the middle of the room, sitting on plush cream carpet, surrounded by mahogany furniture and next to a deep bay window with a cushioned perch. A plasma TV hung on the wall opposite the bed. Everything was spotless, of course. Andy put her luggage down on the floor, shut the door, and wandered around the room with wide eyes. She wondered if all the rooms in the house were this nice, or if some of them were even nicer. Miranda's, say, or the twins', or even Cara's. After all, this was just a guestroom.

Although, for some reason, it kind of didn't feel like a guestroom. There were little touches here and there that felt more personal than that: a desk that was definitely designed for business, and
bookshelves that were full of books that somebody had actually read. The room was also decorated in a very particular style, instead of being more, well, generic, Andy supposed. It felt almost manly, in fact, even down to the way it smelled.

Which was when Andy realized that this had been Stephen's room. She suddenly felt rooted to the spot. She had no proof, of course. It wasn't like there were photos in the room (at least not anymore), or graffiti reading "Stephen Not-Priestly Was Here." But Andy was sure that she was right, for no reason she could immediately articulate.

She supposed it wasn't surprising that Stephen and Miranda hadn't shared a bedroom, at least, not towards the end of their marriage. Miranda did like her space, after all. Or maybe he'd snored. Or maybe she did. They'd probably had the same arrangement in New York.

Then Andy looked at the bed and felt the most absurd urge to burst out laughing. Oh God. Oh God, please, please, somebody please tell her that Miranda Priestly had never had sex in this bed. She clapped her hands over her mouth to muffle a cackle for the second time that day. It was so horrifying and so ridiculous, all at the same time.

Andy sat on the edge of the mattress. Then she bounced up and down on it, hid her face in her hands, and shrieked with laughter some more, glad beyond measure that Miranda was all the way at the other end of the hall.

She took a second to get herself under control, then flopped down on the bed, pulled out her phone, and called her parents. Her mom picked up after the first ring.

"I've been so worried!" she said without preamble. "I checked online, your flight got in hours ago!"

"I'm sorry, Mom," Andy said. "As soon as I got in the car, the driver told me he was taking me straight to some luncheon. I had to beg him to pull over long enough for me to change clothes first. This is the first free minute I've even had. I swear."

"A luncheon. Oh. Well. I was afraid you were lying dead in a ditch somewhere, and she wouldn't even care, or tell anyone you were missing--"

"Oh, she would have noticed I was missing," Andy said. "Trust me."

"Is she there? You know what I'd like to do? I'd like to talk to her," her mom said. Andy bit her lip. Her mom was usually very pleasant, but when she got riled up…and it looked like she hadn't calmed down much since Andy had left Ohio. "I'd like to ask her how she'd feel if somebody treated her own daughters this way."

"Well, she's not here right now," Andy said, thanking her lucky stars for that.

"Or her new baby, how about that? Your father told me. I think this is ridiculous--"

"On that we agree," Andy said. "Yeah. Definitely. But--"

"She's got no right to treat you like this, you had a 4.0, you got accepted to Stanford Law, I mean, my God--"

"Is Dad there?" Andy asked desperately. Thankfully, at that moment, she heard her father's voice saying, "Okay, calm down, Helena," and then she heard the sound of the phone changing hands.

"Glad you got in okay, sweetheart," her dad said.
His voice, calm and reassuring, relaxed Andy at once. "Yeah, me too," she said. "Flight was fine, everything was fine. Is fine."

"Did your mom say something about a luncheon?"

"Yeah. Some Boxing Day thing I didn't know about until I arrived. At the Ritz. It was okay," Andy said. "But the fish was, um, bad."

Her dad snorted. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said. "And your boss? How's she treating you?"

Andy realized she had no idea how to answer that. "Oh, well, like usual," she hedged. "Not too… not too bad. She looks kind of sick," she added, hoping that maybe drumming up a little sympathy for Miranda might make her parents feel better.

"And the kids? They're doing what you tell them?" Her dad sounded deeply skeptical.

"Uh, I haven't spent much time with them yet," Andy said. "I… I just got in."

"But that's why you're there, isn't it?" Andy didn't say anything, and her dad said, "Andy?"

"She's hired some other nanny," Andy admitted. "I found out when I got here. I have no idea why I'm here, Dad."

"What?" her dad said.

"I said I don't know!" Andy said, and took a deep breath. "Sorry. I'm confused too. I think I need to get some rest--I was going to take a nap after I called you. She wants me to go to some dinner tonight."

"Okay," her dad said, sounding like he was trying to contain his temper. Andy hoped he was mad at Miranda and not her, since it sounded like the sympathy thing wasn't working anyway. "Where are you staying? Some fancy hotel she's paying for with the company card?"

"Uh, No," Andy said. "I'm actually at her place. I guess she didn't want to pay f--"

"Her place," her father said. Andy heard her mother say, "What?!" in the background.

"I, I think it's kind of nice, actually," Andy said. "I mean, she'll probably keep me busy, but I don't think she usually puts people up in her hou--"

"She calls you over there, not to be a nanny, but to go out to lunch and dinner with her, and she's in the middle of a divorce, and you're staying at her place," her dad said.

"What?" Then Andy realized what he meant. She sat bolt upright as her heart started hammering in her ears. "No, Dad. Come on, that's crazy."

"No, this is crazy. Quit your job," her dad said. "Quit and come home. I don't like whatever this woman is up to--"

"Oh my God, Dad!" Andy said, digging her hand into her hair, just as she had when talking to Miranda in her parents' kitchen. It was like she'd fallen down Alice's rabbit-hole. "No! It isn't like that. I mean, come on, she wouldn't…"

"Look, after what I've seen and heard, I'm starting to think there's nothing she wouldn't do," her dad said.
"It's not like that," Andy repeated, hoping she sounded firm instead of hysterical. Then she remembered where she was, and lowered her voice, just in case. "She--if you could see what she looks like now, Dad," she said. "Then you'd know. She's not--she wouldn't."

"Honey, I know you like to think the best of people…"

"I don't think the best of her," Andy said. "But, but this is something she wouldn't do. I mean, she likes men," she added, turning red. She couldn't believe that she was here in Miranda's ex-husband's bed, talking about Miranda's sexual orientation to her parents. This wasn't the rabbit-hole. This wasn't an alternate dimension. This was hell.

"She likes power," her dad said quietly.

"Can we please stop talking about this," Andy moaned. "You said I could make my own decisions. You said that."

"I did," her dad said. "But you've been making excuses for this woman for nearly a year now. What's it going to take? For her to actually--"

"Dad!"

"Okay," her dad growled. "Okay. I guess you know what you're doing," he added in a voice that suggested precisely the opposite. "But honey, and I mean this, you give us a call and we will put you on the first flight out of there. No questions asked. Just call us."

"I will," Andy said, wanting more than anything to hang up. "I promise. But everything's okay. It's weird, but it's okay. Really. I mean, with Miranda, weird's normal," she added, with a horrible-sounding little laugh.

"Andy…"

"Dad. Please," Andy begged. "I'll call you if anything happens. I swear, I swear to God I will."

"We love you, sweetheart," her dad said. "We only want the best for you."

"I love you too," Andy said, and swallowed hard. "I'll--I'll be in touch. Um, I don't think I'd better talk to Mom yet. So, um…bye."

"Probably for the best," her dad agreed. "Bye, honey. Call us." Andy heard her mother's voice saying, "Let me talk to--" before her dad hung up.

Andy took a deep, shuddering breath, and prayed that her dad could keep her mother from calling her back. She couldn't deal with that right now.

She headed for the bathroom and washed her makeup off before returning to the bedroom, already longing to collapse again. Trying not to feel self-conscious about undressing under Miranda's roof, she took off her skirt so it wouldn't get wrinkled, because apparently it would be doing double-duty tonight. Then she slipped under the immaculate bedcovers, letting the phone drop from her hand to the mattress. It was a really nice mattress. It was a really nice room.

Her father's suggestion had been ludicrous, not to mention wrong. Even if Miranda hadn't been married twice--no, wait, three times--to men, then it was still true that the only thing that excited her these days was pizza. Miranda looked so wretched that even the idea of sex was probably enough to give her morning sickness in the afternoon. Especially since sex had gotten her into this mess in the first place. No, Miranda definitely hadn't brought Andy here to, to, to do what her father had implied.
Even if Andy still wasn't sure why Miranda had brought her here. She wondered if Miranda knew, either.

There was an alarm clock by the bed. Andy set it to go off at six-thirty p.m., and then lay back and closed her eyes purposefully. She needed sleep. She was going to get sleep. She had to, if she wanted to be any good to Miranda at all this evening at the fancy-pants dinner.

Sleep was a long time coming, though. And when Andy did sleep, she dreamed about weird, improbable things involving Miranda and the lost, lonely look on her face. Andy hated that lonely look, and wanted to make it go away, to make it better. So she reached out and touched Miranda's cheek, and watched Miranda close her eyes and turn her face into Andy's palm as if she wanted to hide there. Andy felt her heart squeeze in a way that was both painful and good. Miranda said nothing, but kept her eyes closed. Andy rubbed her cheekbone with her thumb.

The alarm went off, and Andy woke up, shaking all over as she jerked out of sleep. She still felt tired, but also strung as tight as a wire, and for a second she was completely disoriented. She didn't recognize the room, and she looked around, wondering where Miranda had gone and if she was okay, before remembering it had just been a dream. And feeling oddly let-down by that.

Her stomach growled. Okay. No more sleeping until tonight, that was for sure. But…but if Miranda was asleep, and it seemed highly likely that she would be, maybe Andy could sneak around, find the kitchen, and see if she could scavenge something from there. It'd mean that she wouldn't be able to stuff herself at dinner tonight, too. A win-win situation. Maybe she could even find coffee.

She eased out of bed, stretched, yawned hugely, and put her clothes back on before heading downstairs. No TV was playing, Andy heard no voices or noise, and so she assumed Padmini and the twins were still out.

She wandered into the kitchen. The fridge was well-stocked. Andy quickly threw a sandwich together, and gave up looking for coffee in favor of a much quicker diet soda. She'd almost finished the sandwich when she heard someone moving around upstairs, and realized that Miranda had begun to stir.

Andy stuffed the last bite of the sandwich in her mouth, and gulped it down with fizzy soda, trying not to choke. Of course, Miranda had invited Andy into her home, so she had to expect that Andy would, at some point, consume her food, and she'd seen Andy eating twice now, so it wasn't like she thought Andy never did it…

Miranda's footsteps began heading towards the stairs. Andy tossed her plate into the dishwasher, finished her soda, and opened the fridge back up, operating purely on instinct. By the time Miranda entered the kitchen, Andy was slicing up a melon and artfully arranging bite-sized sections on a small plate. Melons were supposed to be especially beneficial, and if they were in the fridge then it was a good bet Miranda was willing to eat them. She'd better be remembering to take her prenatal vitamins, too.

Andy glanced at Miranda, determined to keep a pleasant poker face. Good thing, too. Miranda's clothes were wrinkled, and her feet and face were bare, as they had been that night in Paris. She'd obviously brushed her hair, but her face was still drawn and her eyes were still tired. She looked like shit. Evidently her sleep had been as unrestful as Andy's.

She said nothing, but pushed the plate of melon toward Miranda with a smile and a fork. Miranda perched on one of the counter stools and began picking at the fruit. "Did you get something?" she asked in a low voice that still sounded sleepy.
"Just a sandwich," Andy admitted. "Well, and a diet soda." Definitely had to mention the 'diet' part. Miranda made a noncommittal noise. "Do you want anything to drink?"

"Water. Non-carbonated," Miranda said, and ate a melon section. Andy pulled a bottle of Evian from the refrigerator. "Padmini called me," she added. "She and the twins have gone to a movie."

"Oh," Andy said, feeling kind of at a loss as she set a glass in front of Miranda and poured. "Did she say which one?"

"Some holiday children's thing the girls have been wanting to see," Miranda said absently, and sipped her water, staring off into space. Andy fidgeted and wondered what to do. She'd already eaten, and Miranda probably didn't want her just hanging around and staring at her while she--

"Sit down," Miranda said, irritation clear in her voice. Andy promptly sat on one of the stools opposite her and tried not to fidget anymore.

"You called your parents," Miranda said. It wasn't a question, but Andy nodded anyway. "What do they do?" Miranda asked.

Andy stared at her. Then she said, faintly, "My dad's a lawyer. Um. Property law. My mom works for an insurance agency." She decided not to add, 'And they think you're molesting me.'

"And what do they think of your career ambitions?" Miranda inquired.

"They've…always been very supportive," Andy said carefully. Well, it was partly true. "They, you know, they want me to make something of myself. And be happy."

Miranda smiled bitterly. Andy gulped. She wanted to tell Miranda that it was possible to be successful and happy. Even better, she wanted to prove it, to show her. Wasn't that why she'd stuck around Runway --to show Miranda that they weren't alike, but that Andy could be good at her job anyway? She'd stuck around Runway for something, certainly. Hadn't that been it?

Miranda glanced at the clock over the stove. It was nearly seven. "It's time to get ready," she said, and pushed her plate away. She'd only eaten a few bites of melon. Andy tried not to fret.

Instead she cleared her throat and said, "Um--we're not doing anything tomorrow, are we? I mean, going out to anything. Like a dinner or party." The schedule didn't have anything listed, but with Miranda, you never knew for sure. "It's just that I didn't know I'd be going to these things, so I just wondered if I should go shopping and grab a few…"

Miranda gave her a downright ferocious glare. "You do have something to wear for tonight, don't you?"

"Yes," Andy said quickly. "Um--a different top, you said, so I can do that. And I brought a pair of evening shoes." Even though she hadn't known she'd be yanked into Miranda's social whirl without being prepared for every contingency.

"Do something better with your hair this time," Miranda said. She slid off her stool and headed upstairs, leaving Andy to dispose of the leftover melon and clean up the plate. "We'll worry about the rest later," she added as she rose up and out of sight.

At five till eight, Andy had given up poking at her hair in an agony of indecisiveness. She wished she had the guts just to do what Miranda did, go for one iconic hairstyle and never change it--it would make things so much simpler. The only problem was, you probably had to be an actual icon first. Or did the iconic stuff help make you into an icon? What came first, the hairstyle or the legend?
In her head, Andy heard Nigel's voice saying, 'Sometimes I can't believe I talk about this crap all day.' She hissed in disgust, fluffed her bangs with her fingers, grabbed her clutch, and hurried downstairs. And not a moment too soon: when she hit the bottom step, she heard Miranda's bedroom door open and close, followed by Miranda's footsteps heading down the carpeted hallway.
"Andrea?" she called.

"I'm down here," Andy said.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes. And Jimmy's outside with the car." Miranda came down the stairs, and Andy straightened her shoulders and hoped she looked presentable. Miranda gave her the once-over, nodded briskly, and headed for the door, which Andy held open for her. Andy took in and exhaled a deep breath, and followed her down the steps. It was freezing cold, but the day had been fair, so at least there wasn't any ice she'd have to navigate in high heels.

"Oh, um," Andy said as they drove off, "who's going to be at this dinner? It's not--" She gulped. "The Schumanns won't, will they?"

This time, Andy definitely saw Miranda smile before she could stop herself. "No," she said. "Herr Schumann and his heifer hausfrau will not be in attendance tonight." Andy longed to laugh, but after the earlier disaster after the luncheon, she didn't dare. "It's a much smaller gathering, and you will not be seated next to me. Try not to disgrace either of us. Or Runway."

Andy nodded, still biting her lip to keep from grinning. Miranda definitely seemed to have gotten a little of her spunk back in the last hour. She looked better, though Andy couldn't be sure how much of that could be credited to the best makeup in the world. Her black dress helped her coloring, too. Black had always suited her.

"What?" Miranda asked, staring right ahead, not looking at Andy.


"As opposed to death warmed over," Miranda said. "Yes, I do."

Andy smiled again, and bit her lip, again. She was pretty sure she did more lip-biting around Miranda than she'd done in her whole life before Runway.

"Is something wrong?" Miranda asked.

"No," Andy said, and a giggle escaped her before she could stop it.

"I never noticed that you snickered this much before," Miranda said, sounding displeased.

"Sorry," Andy said, giggled again, and swallowed hard to get herself under control. "You know, you said funny things, so I, I laughed." She shrugged helplessly. It couldn't be that hard to understand.

"I'm well-known for my sense of humor," Miranda said, rolling her eyes and looking away.

"Well, no," Andy admitted, "but…"

"Why don't you save your voice for the party?" Miranda said. Andy took the not-a-hint-at-all, and sulked until Jimmy pulled them up to the curb in front of a very fancy London house, bigger than Miranda's.
She'd never understand why Miranda had to be so unpleasant even when there was no need for it. She'd intentionally said something funny; Andy had laughed; Miranda had made Andy feel stupid for laughing at funny things she'd deliberately said. And she'd flown Andy all the way over here on Christmas with no explanation, and talked to her like she was an idiot, and hadn't even eaten more than a few bites of melon when Andy knew she needed the calories. Bitch. How was Andy supposed to feel sympathy or compassion for her when she just wouldn't stop being herself? No wonder Stephen had found somebody else. How hard must it have been to be married to that?

So by the time a real, live, honest-to-goodness butler held the door open for them both, Andy had worked herself into an impressive snit, and was very glad indeed that she wasn't sitting next to Miranda at dinner. But she still had to stand by Miranda's side during the pre-meal mingling. Lady Cheltingham had kissed Miranda's cheeks, thanked her effusively for coming, and then turned the two of them loose on the twelve other people hanging around in the parlor. Just like at the luncheon, Miranda did most of the introductions. At least these people seemed a little friendlier and more laid-back. They weren't all out to cut each others' throats, for one thing.

Andy got her fair share of strange looks from them, though. This wasn't a meeting of publishing heavies, after all. It was a purely social function. So why was she, as Miranda's assistant, even here? Miranda, of course, made no effort to explain, saying simply, "This is my assistant, Andrea," and leaving it at that while she went on to further pleasantries.

Still irritated, Andy tried not even to look at Miranda. She couldn't ignore her outright, but she could focus instead on all the new people she was meeting, most of whom seemed a lot nicer than Miranda even if they were confused by Andy's presence. It would probably be much more fun to work for them. Well, a girl could dream. So she shook hands, and smiled, and made small talk, and did her best to pretend that Miranda wasn't there except as a voice to her right that introduced her to people out of thin air.

The dinner gong rang at eight-forty-five sharp, and the party drifted towards the dining room. To Andy's shock, Miranda took hold of her arm in something like a pinch. Andy managed not to yelp, but she couldn't quite muffle a squeak.

"Stop sulking," Miranda muttered.

Andy definitely looked at her then. "I," she said, but she couldn't really deny it. "I was being nice, wasn't I?" she asked instead, trying not to sound impudent.

"Oh yes," Miranda said, and stuck her nose in the air as she headed for the dining room, letting go of Andy's arm. "You can nice us all to death, can't you?"

"What?" Andy rubbed at her arm as she followed Miranda.

"For God's sake, laugh like an idiot if you must," Miranda said, "and spare me the cold shoulder. Now do your job."

Andy's head spun as she took her seat between two sweet old matrons, one of whom had already shown dangerous signs of talking about her three small dogs. 'Do your job'? But Andy'd been doing her job. She'd been sweet as pie to everybody but Miranda, who didn't count, because Andy was here to schmooze with other people, not with her. They weren't even sitting together. And Andy doubted anybody else would have noticed for a second that she'd been pissed off. So the 'cold shoulder' remark must have meant--

Had it bothered Miranda personally? Did Miranda actually give a crap about how Andy felt about, well, anything at all? The question gnawed at Andy all through dinner, and she was grateful that she
didn't have to do much more than exclaim over toy poodles and make sympathetic noises about the stock exchange.

They actually stayed for the whole meal this time. Andy was glad, because the food was really good, although apparently she wasn't the best judge of such things. And she needed time to get her bearings. Again. By the time the butler was helping Miranda into her coat, Andy, bolstered by good food and coffee, felt marginally more in control of herself.

Miranda didn't even wait for the door to close behind them before she said, "I despise passive-aggressiveness."

"Um--" Andy began.

Miranda headed down the steps towards the waiting car. Andy hurried after her. "That sort of high-handed attitude is precisely what I do not need," she said flatly. "How many times must I tell you, Andrea? If a problem arises, you do not wait for someone else to notice it and fix it for you. You deal with it."

"You--" Andy stopped dead on the last step, and stared at Miranda in utter disbelief. "Are you saying you want me to tell you when I'm upset with you?"

Because that couldn't be right. No way. Impossible. Miranda didn't want to know when Andy was upset about the weather, much less--there was no way she could really--

"I want never to have this discussion again," Miranda said, and waited at the car, giving Andy an impatient glance. Andy jerked herself out of her paralysis and hurried forward to open the door. "That is what I want. I have no time for that kind of childishness." She gave Andy a really good glare before she slid into the car.

Andy walked around the car and got in at the other door, welcoming the warmth, and the softness of the seats. It almost made up for her utter confusion. She'd just lost all the equanimity she'd managed to build up during dinner. But she should have expected as much, really. Childishness? Easy for Miranda to say, but Andy had been working on the assumption that Miranda would fire her ass if she so much as breathed a word of discontent.

She glanced at Miranda, who was making a great show of looking in her handbag. Jimmy pulled away from the curb. "Uh, sorry," Andy said.

"Mmm," Miranda said without looking up.

"I'll try and be more…direct."

"Mm-hmm."

"And you won't get mad at me?" Andy pressed, because it seemed important to clear that up.

Miranda whisked a small mirror from her bag and peered at her eyes in it, squinting in obvious displeasure. She prodded the skin beneath one eye. "Arrange a facial for me tomorrow," she said. "This weather is wreaking havoc on my skin."

"Sure thing," Andy said, her heart pounding. She didn't know why, though: was she scared, or relieved, or what? Why couldn't anything be simple with Miranda?

"And yes, you will need to find something to wear," Miranda said, as if they'd never stopped having that conversation in the kitchen. Like always, Andy scrambled to keep up. "For the New Year's Ball.
We will not stay long--I promised the twins I'd be with them at midnight." There was an element of pure determination in Miranda's voice, and Andy got a sudden mental image of Miranda knocking people out of her way at a fancy party so she could get home in time. Andy wouldn't put it past her. "You will go to the Runway U.K. offices," Miranda added. "Call and tell them to expect you. They have their own Closet, of course, so borrow something from that."

"Okay," Andy said, wondering if Runway U.K. also had its own Nigel.

"Just don't let them talk you into that menswear-inspired trend," Miranda added, her voice dripping with disgust. "The cuts are so boxy you'd look preg--" Then she choked and actually fumbled her mirror. Andy quickly looked straight ahead.

"Ridiculous," Miranda finished after an excruciatingly awkward couple of seconds. "You would look ridiculous."

"Okay," Andy said again, wondering if that should be the only word she ever said for the rest of her life, just to be on the safe side. They were silent for the rest of the ride to Miranda's house, where Padmini awaited them. Her smile was still friendly, but tired.

"The girls?" Miranda asked her at once, as Andy helped her out of her coat.

"We had a lovely time, Ms. Priestly," Padmini said. "They said they hoped you would look in on them when you got home."

Miranda looked blank for a moment. "Aren't they asleep?" she said. "It's nearly eleven-thirty."

"Yes, of course, ma'am," Padmini said, looking surprised that Miranda had needed to ask.

"Then why would I..." Miranda seemed to realize what she was saying, and turned pink. Padmini's eyes went wide. Andy quickly hung their coats in the hall closet, and brought out Padmini's own, holding it out to her with a bright smile.

"What time are you supposed to be here tomorrow?" she asked.

"Nine o'clock," Padmini said, giving Miranda one last, faintly spooked look. Miranda turned and walked briskly down the hallway without another word. When she was out of earshot, Padmini turned to Andy, and murmured, "Is she--have you worked for her very long?"

"No," Andy said. "Not too long. Less than a year, actually."

"Oh," Padmini said, and put on her coat, glancing back down the hall where Miranda had vanished. "I don't understand her," she added. "I don't understand women like her at all."

Andy agreed completely, so she wasn't sure why the remark got on her nerves. 'Women like her'? What was that supposed to mean? She heard herself saying, almost defensively, "Miranda loves her kids."

Padmini looked at her and said, quickly, "Oh, of course! I wasn't saying...well...good night, Miss Sachs."

Andy opened her mouth to remind Padmini not to be so formal, and said, "Good night."

The door closed behind Padmini. Andy found herself dithering in the hallway, not sure what to do, not even sure what she was thinking about, just that she was sleepy all over again, and more confused than ever.
She heard Miranda's footsteps moving around upstairs, heading towards her bedroom. As Andy listened, she stopped at one door, and then moved on to another—the twins' rooms. Andy took in a deep breath, and let it out slowly, relieved for a reason she couldn't quite put a name to.

Everything would make sense in the morning. Or at least she'd be more equipped to pretend that it did.

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Andy's alarm went off at seven the next morning. Miranda hadn't given her a particular hour at which to rise and shine, but she figured this was reasonable enough. Deciding that it probably wasn't good form to emerge from the bedroom in her pajamas, Andy ignored the grumbling of her stomach and showered in the spacious bathroom. She hadn't taken the time to look at it yesterday, but now it confirmed her suspicions: little odds and ends, like an old razor head and a leather traveling-case she found in a cupboard, had clearly belonged to a male occupant.

She made her hair presentable, dressed, and decided that not even Miranda could be anal enough to care that Andy wasn't wearing makeup at seven-thirty in the morning at home. So Andy headed downstairs, listening for other sounds of life. She didn't hear anything, but when she arrived in the kitchen, the twins were already there, munching their way through toast and cereal. The girls looked up at Andy in unison, but said nothing. Andy managed a smile. "Morning," she said.

"Good morning," they chorused, as correct as mini-Stepford wives.

Andy wasn't fooled for a second. "Is your mom still asleep?"

"She's probably been throwing up," one of them said casually, like it was the most normal thing in the world. "She does almost every morning. It's really gross," she added with a child's relish.

"It's not as bad as it used to be," the other one said. "And then she gets a shower, and then she comes to breakfast."

The first twin glanced at a nearby clock. "She should be here in a few minutes."

"Oh," Andy said faintly. "Then, um...let's...get started on that. Breakfast." She remembered what was in the fridge and the cupboards. No yogurt or bananas. "Does she like toast?"

"How can you not like toast?" The twin rolled her eyes. "It's just bread."

"Good point," Andy said. "Uh. Sorry. Which one are you?" She'd been able to guess at it once before, back at Penn Station. But she'd probably used up all her luck by now.

"Caroline," said the one on the left.

"Cassidy," said the other, unnecessarily.

"Caroline. Cassidy. Thanks," Andy said, watching them carefully. Had they even given her the right names? Probably not. The sly glances that the twins exchanged only confirmed her suspicions. She reached for a nearby loaf of bread and added, "Did you wake up last night?"

"Huh?"

"When we got home. She looked in on you," Andy clarified.
"I didn't wake up," the-one-who'd-said-she-was-Cassidy replied.

"Let's go watch TV until Padmini comes," supposedly-Caroline said, evidently not including Andy in the suggestion. She put their plates in the dishwasher and the twins headed out of the kitchen without a backward glance.

Andy sighed, slapped some butter on the bread, and popped two slices in the toaster oven before cutting up another slice of melon and putting decaf coffee on to brew.

A few minutes later, she heard footsteps descending the stairs, and glanced up to see Miranda entering the kitchen, fully dressed and made-up, appearing totally composed. Andy, looking closely, could see that her skin looked too pale beneath the makeup, but otherwise she seemed pretty steady on her feet. "I made you some breakfast, if you want it," Andy said. At that moment, the toaster oven clicked off, and Andy whisked out the buttered slices. Miranda just stared at them, and Andy suddenly felt self-conscious. "I mean…it's just toast and melon," she said. "I didn't know if you'd…or do you want something el--"

"This is fine," Miranda said. "You're making coffee?" She sat down at the table, and Andy set a plate with toast in front of her.

"Decaf," Andy said, with a tremulous little smile. "Water, too?" Miranda nodded. As Andy went to fetch it, she added over her shoulder, "Your facialist's practice opens in an hour, so I'll call then and see if she can fit you in today."

When she turned back with a glass of water, Miranda was looking at her in obvious surprise. "You already have the number?"

Andy looked back at her, surprised as well. Since when did Miranda expect her, or anyone, to be anything less than perfect? Besides, Andy'd gotten into the habit by now. "Well…yeah," she said. "It's on my list. My London contact list, in my phone, anyway." Along with Miranda's physician, her housekeeping service, her hairdresser, her favorite florist, and, of course, the main office of Runway U.K., plus a few others. When it came to Miranda, you could never, ever be too prepared. You could never really be prepared at all, in fact.

As Andy discovered when, after a moment, Miranda said, "Oh. That's…good." They blinked at each other for a few minutes. Andy felt herself turning red from both pleasure and embarrassment, and she could have sworn that beneath her makeup Miranda's cheeks had gone faintly pink, but at that moment, the coffeemaker bleeped. Relieved beyond measure, Andy poured Miranda's coffee, and began brewing some regular for herself.

"You are going to the London Runway office today," Miranda said, her tone far more businesslike as Andy poured her own coffee. It wasn't a question.

"All right," Andy said. She sat down and took the second piece of toast for herself, careful not to get crumbs everywhere.

"And try to bring back something interesting, for once," Miranda added. "You are entirely too likely to play it safe. Take a chance, for God's sake—you work for Runway, and you wear the most predictable clothes."

Andy almost choked on her toast, unable to believe what she was hearing. She'd always thought her clothes were beautiful. Classics. Not…not boring. Nigel himself had given her his stamp of approval, back in Paris. Emily had even said she looked "chic" at the benefit.
"What--" she began.

"That's one area where Emily has the advantage over you, at least," Miranda added, her voice deceptively mild, and Andy shut her mouth at once. "She takes risks. That is what you do, in fashion."

What? Like Miranda could talk. She wore classics, too. She certainly didn't show up to work in the kinds of clothes Emily wore. Emily wore iridescent eyeshadow, painted her fingernails blue, wore dresses with epaulets that rivaled a linebacker's shoulder pads, and Andy knew that red hair wasn't natural. And she so, so wasn't saying anything of the kind to Miranda. So instead, she just asked, "Is there anybody in particular I should ask for there?"

"I trust you to figure things out on your own by now, Andrea," Miranda said, and ate a bite of melon. Andy wondered if she could somehow make Miranda eat all of it this time. She had no idea how anyone might go about accomplishing such a thing. "Although heaven knows, if they don't instantly give you what you want, I'm sure you'll have a great deal of trouble handling yourself."

Andy turned red. "I can do it," she said defiantly, and almost hoped they did give her trouble, just so she could prove it to Miranda.

But they didn't. After making Miranda's appointment for ten-thirty a.m., she called for Jimmy to run her to the offices of Runway U.K. as quickly as possible so that the car could return in time to take Miranda to her facial. (Miranda had only one chauffeured car in London and clearly did not appreciate the deprivation.) Everyone at Runway U.K. was remarkably accommodating. She didn't try to speak to any bigwigs, but rather reached out to her fellow assistants, all of whom were sympathetic to the demands of people like Miranda. And surprised that Andy got to go to the New Year's Ball. "I'd kill for an invitation," said a tall, skinny young woman named Georgie.

"Imagine all the people you'll hobnob with," added a tall, skinny young woman named Janys, which she spelled funny.

"She wants me to be more daring," Andy said, and tugged at her Ralph Lauren pants, which, until this morning, she'd thought were quite serviceable. But apparently "serviceable" was suddenly a dirty word to Miranda. Maybe this was just a mood swing on her part. Hormones or something. "She thinks my clothes are boring."

Georgie and Janys nodded. They were apparently far more of the Emily School--maybe it was an English thing?--and by the time Andy left, she had a flimsy-looking little dress made of black tulle, sequins, and organza that she never would have picked out for herself in a million years, but which they assured her looked perfect.

It did fit well, but-- "Shouldn't it be floor-length?" Andy said, staring at the short skirt. "I mean, it's a cocktail dress." They rolled their eyes, and she left before she could push her luck any further.

Miranda called her just as she was heading out the door. "Are you on your way back?"

"Yes," Andy said, and practically ran for the waiting Jaguar. At least the cocktail dress wasn't too heavy to lug. "We should be back in twenty minutes." It wasn't even nine o'clock yet. Miranda had plenty of time to make it to her appointment. Jimmy helpfully opened the door so Andy could toss the dress bag into the back seat.

"I've just arranged lunch with some friends," Miranda said. "So I won't be home to eat, but I'll return for the girls in time for our outing." She was taking them to a museum, apparently determined to get some mothering in come hell or high water. Maybe she just wanted to get back in practice before the
next one was born.

"Okay," Andy said. "Uh, where will you be?" she added as she slid inside the car and buckled up.

"Roka," Miranda said, her voice absent. She was probably multitasking. Like always. "Some sushi place, apparently."

Andy sat bolt upright. "You can't have sushi!" she said.

"What?"

"It's--I read--" Andy suddenly remembered Jimmy in the front seat, and said, "I mean, I heard that restaurant wasn't very good."

"Andrea," Miranda said. She sounded, on a scale of one to ten, about Level 8 Impatient.

"Raw fish is bad," Andy muttered, staring out the window. "You, uh, you can't have raw fish. Or undercooked anything, really." It hadn't been on the caresheet--something Andy should really call Dr. Latchley about as soon as she got back to New York--but she remembered running across it in a book. The book had been very definite on the subject.

"...I know that," Miranda said, and Andy knew she totally hadn't. "They serve more than sushi, Andrea, for heaven's sake. Now come home immediately."

"We're on our way," Andy said. "Oh, and they loaned me a dress tha--"

Miranda hung up. Whoops. Andy winced. Miranda had been acting so...differently for the past couple of days that Andy had forgotten her intolerance for idle chatter. Miranda had not asked about the dress; Miranda did not want to know about the dress; that was all.

Andy looked at the garment bag lying on the seat next to her, and twiddled her thumbs.

The afternoon came as a pleasant surprise to Andy. Miranda returned from lunch, hauled the twins away from Padmini, and gave Andy the rest of the day off.

"Do what you want, Andrea, but be home in time for dinner," Miranda said, glancing almost apprehensively at the twins as they prepared to go out. For a second, Andy thought Miranda would change her mind and order Andy to accompany the three of them.

In fact, it seemed that Miranda was on the verge of doing exactly that. Andy said quickly, "Any suggestions? Uh, about what I should do?"

"Yes. Buy a guidebook," Miranda said, and, successfully diverted, ushered the twins out the door to the waiting car.

Andy, who had no such luxuries, headed for the nearest tube station, reveling in the dual sensations of freedom and anonymity. Nobody here knew she was Miranda Priestly's assistant, nobody would care about the shoes she was wearing, nobody would keep an eye on how much she ate, and she could do whatever she darn well liked.

And she would, Andy resolved. She was going to make up for Paris, and actually see the city this
time. No Bond Street, no Oxford Street, no shopping, no fashion. Not today. She was going to take in a museum or two, or see Big Ben and Parliament, or look up the houses where famous writers used to live. She was going to get some Culture with a capital C, and she’d even brought her camera. She’d email the photos home to her parents. Maybe that would mollify them a little--show them that she wasn’t slaving away for Miranda all the time, that she’d actually gotten a little mini-vacation. All paid for, too, which was nice. Her mom loved London. She’d probably be thrilled that Andy was actually getting to see some of it. At least, Andy hoped so.

But to her disgust, Andy found herself thinking about Miranda anyway. Wondering what she and the twins were up to, if they were getting along, if the girls were treating her decently, if she’d need to call Andy for anything. Not that Andy wanted her to. She was just curious.

She’d probably find out tonight at dinner, Andy told herself for the thousandth time as she tried, yet again, to capture the perfect photograph of the Millennium Bridge before a whole flock of tourists wandered in front of her camera. Even if Miranda didn’t say anything out loud, Andy was starting to get pretty good at reading her silent moods. Most of them were unpleasant, but Andy had managed to work out a classification system: irritated, impatient, disgruntled, annoyed (which was ever-so-slightly different from irritated), brisk, brusque, tired, wired, vengeful, vicious, pensive, brooding, melancholy, and, just occasionally, lonesome. Rarely happy, though. Now that she thought about it, Andy wasn’t even sure that she’d ever seen Miranda smile. Not a real smile, instead of a fake social smile, anyway. Even the smiles she gave the twins seemed strained.

Andy realized that she’d made it halfway across the bridge without even paying attention to anything but her thoughts. Growling to herself, she glanced at her watch. She had two hours left. From here, it would take about forty-five minutes to get back to Miranda's place on the tube. Give it an hour to be on the safe side. So she had an hour to herself.

She was wondering if it would be worth it to attempt the Tate Modern in an hour when her phone rang. Miranda. "Hello?" Andy said, answering at once.

"Come home now," Miranda said. "I can't reach Padmini, and I need you to watch the girls while I go to Dr. Finch."

Andy blinked, and then her heart tripped into panic-mode. Miranda didn't have an appointment, which had to mean-- "Are you okay? What's wro--"

"Be quick," Miranda snapped, and hung up. Her voice had trembled a little, though. Andy was very glad that she was wearing comfortable shoes for once as she sprinted for the nearest tube station, her heart in her mouth.

The trip back to Miranda's townhouse seemed interminable. Andy kept looking at her phone, in case somebody had called in the nanosecond since the last time she’d checked and had left a message. What could be wrong? Miranda had seemed a little listless this morning, but the twins had implied that was normal. And she'd been fine when she'd returned from lunch at Roka. Shit. She'd better not have had the sushi. It'd be just like her, though, not to listen, to ignore advice willfully just because it came from somebody stupid and beneath her notice like Andy.

Even though the trip felt like it lasted forever, Andy was surprised, when she hurried up the townhouse steps, to realize that only thirty minutes had elapsed since the phone call. She'd run as fast as she could, and had had really good timing with catching connecting trains. It could have been a lot worse. Still, she felt like it had been years since she’d seen the townhouse as she turned the key in the door.

"Hello?" she called as she closed the door behind her. She heard footsteps, and two worried-looking
ten-year-olds appeared around the corner.

"Have you heard from Mom?" one of them demanded.

"I was going to ask you the same thing," Andy said. She put her coat and scarf away, still breathing heavily, and patted down her hair. "What happened?"

"We were at Victoria and Albert, and she said she didn't feel good," the other twin said. "Jimmy drove us home, and then she took her temperature and it was too high."

A fever? Andy womanfully resisted the urge to bite her lip or otherwise look anxious as she took off her gloves. "And she was able to talk to Dr. Finch right away?"

They shrugged sullenly. "I guess," one of them said. "She left, anyway, and told us to be good until you got here."

"Oh," Andy said. Then she added, "Well, I hope you'll keep being good even though I'm here now." She attempted a smile.

They weren't buying it. "Why did she bring you here?" the one on the left said, out of the blue.

Andy started. "I--um--"

"It's because Padmini doesn't stay here all the time like Cara does," the one on the right said bitterly. "She just doesn't want to stay here alone with us."

"Oh, no," Andy said at once. "I'm sure that's not true." Although she wasn't sure of that at all. "She loves spending time with you. I--you know, she almost fired me when I couldn't get her a flight in a hurricane so she could see--"

"Shut up," said the twin on the right, and stomped off. Andy watched her leave with wide eyes. She was willing to bet anything that was the one who'd been sulking in the car when they'd returned from the Hamptons. Caroline, then.

"She was going to spend the afternoon with us," the other twin, Cassidy, said, giving Andy a very direct look. "Just us and her."

"Yeah," Andy said, nodding in relief. She dragged her hand through her hair again, and decided that the kid deserved some straight talk since she seemed to be the reasonable one. "Cassidy, right?"

Cassidy nodded, looking surprised. "I don't know why your mom wanted me to come. She didn't tell me. I'm just trying to help her."

"Caroline's really angry," Cassidy said, unnecessarily. Then she added, "She needs more therapy than me. Dr. Bryson said so. But she doesn't want to go, and Mom won't make her."

"...oh," Andy said, realizing she'd stumbled on something that was definitely none of her business. She quickly looked at her watch. "Oh, hey--how long until the cook arrives?"

She looked up, and saw Cassidy watching her with hooded blue eyes. She looked very much like her mother at that moment, and Andy knew she was being judged. Then she remembered this was an ten-year-old kid, and glared right back.

Cassidy apparently came to a conclusion, though Andy had no idea what it was, and shrugged. "Cook's been here for twenty minutes," she said. "We're having salmon." She gave Andy a quick look. "She has a list of food Mom's supposed to eat," she said. "Did you make it?"
"I, um, typed some stuff up," Andy said feebly. "From books. I need to add more, though." Maybe that would be her after-dinner project. If Miranda came home and everything was okay. Or even if she just picked up a phone and let Andy know what the heck was going on.

Echoing her thoughts, Cassidy said, "I'm gonna talk to Caroline. Will you tell us if Mom calls you?"

"Sure," Andy said, before she could think better of it, and Cassidy scampered off, leaving her dithering around in the hallway. Well, dithering wasn't good for anyone. And the twins obviously neither needed nor wanted Andy to hover over them like some Victorian nanny, so she decided to make herself useful by going to the kitchen and offering her services to the cook. The cook, a woman named Ellen, gave her a very odd look but let her cut up some vegetables. That was about all Andy could do anyway. Sometimes she really missed Nate.

She wondered what he'd say about all this. If he'd thought she was too wrapped up in her job before… It was probably for the best that they'd ended it before things could get any worse. It would never have worked. There wasn't room for Nate in her life now, or anybody like him.

"Are you all right?" Ellen asked, and Andy realized she'd been staring at a pile of raw green beans for several seconds without moving. She shook her head rapidly and began chopping.

An hour later, dinner was all ready and Miranda still wasn't home. The twins kept wandering in and out of the kitchen, looking a little more worried each time, asking if Miranda had called yet. By then, Andy had cut up what seemed like every vegetable in the house, so instead she decided to keep herself and the twins busy by setting the table. Ellen said her good-byes; dinner was being kept warm in the oven, she'd scrubbed all the pots, and she had nothing left to do. She seemed to feel bad about leaving the three of them alone, and Andy wondered if Ellen thought she was as much of a child as Caroline and Cassidy. So she straightened her shoulders, said they'd be fine, and politely saw Ellen out the door.

Fifteen more minutes passed. Andy was hungry, and she knew the girls were, too, even though they were also nervous. After five more minutes, she was on the verge of suggesting they go ahead and eat, when the front door opened and shut.

The twins ran to the hallway at top speed, and Andy, to her immense relief, heard Miranda's voice murmuring a greeting. She decided it wouldn't be helpful for all three of them to pile on Miranda in the doorway, so she went ahead and began putting the food on the table, figuring it was what her own mom would have done and was therefore an acceptable plan of action.

A few moments later, Miranda entered the kitchen, trailed by her daughters. She appeared wan and drawn: no great surprise, Andy guessed. She poured Miranda a glass of water, and some juice for the twins.

"But you're okay," Caroline was pressing, sounding remarkably concerned for a girl who'd had nothing good to say about her mother an hour ago.

"Yes, darling," Miranda said, and absently stroked Caroline's head before she sat down at the table with an obvious expression of relief. "Dr. Finch said it's nothing to worry about, and just to rest a little and drink more fluids."

"Did he give you anything?" Cassidy asked.

"Just Tylenol," Miranda said. "It brought my temperature right down." She patted Cassidy's arm. "Mommy was very silly to worry, wasn't she? Now sit down and eat your dinner."
"I'll get yours," Caroline said quickly, and ladled plenty of food onto Miranda's plate from the casserole dish.

"Thank you, dear," Miranda said. "It smells good."

"There's spinach in it," Cassidy said. She looked at Andy. "She's supposed to eat spinach, right?"

"Right," Andy said, as she set the juice glasses at the twins' places. "Folic acid. Good stuff."

"Do you like spinach?" Cassidy asked.

"Love it," Andy lied, deciding to set a good example. Cassidy appeared to buy it.

Miranda had eaten two bites of her dinner when she appeared to realize that three sets of eyes were watching her attentively. She raised her eyebrows. Andy flushed and quickly began to eat her own food, but the twins weren't so timid. "You're not sick anymore, right?" Cassidy said.

"I'm tired, but I'm fine," Miranda said firmly. "What did you girls do while I was gone?"

Caroline looked down at her plate and began pushing her food around. "We just hung out," Cassidy said, sounding evasive, and Andy wondered what she and Caroline had talked about, what they'd said about their mother. "Andy helped the cook."

"Mm," Miranda said, obviously not giving a shit about what Andy had or had not done. "I'm sorry we had to leave the museum so early."

"It was boring," Caroline muttered.

"It was not," Cassidy snapped.

"I don't like museums."

"I don't like parks, and we go to those."

"You get to watch people in parks. What do you see in museums? Just a bunch of stuff by dead people."

"Not in the Tate Modern," Andy said before she could stop herself, and Miranda and the twins looked at her. They all had identical, laser-like blue stares. Andy tried not to quail. "I mean, there's a lot of art in there by people who are still alive. It's all contemporary stuff."

"Woo-hoo," Caroline said, and rolled her eyes. Now that she knew her mother was okay, her snotty attitude had obviously returned in full force. Miranda, predictably, did not rebuke her, but went on eating her salmon. Duly chastened, Andy looked back at her own food and gritted her teeth.

"I want to go to the Tate Modern," Cassidy said. "Can we, Mom?"

"You didn't like it last time," Miranda said.

"I was nine. Now I'm almost eleven," Cassidy said. "I'm much older now. I bet I'll like it better."

Miranda shrugged, and ate another bite of salmon, looking like it took some effort. Andy tried to ignore her pang of worry. "If you want, I'll tell Padmini to take you both tomorrow morning."

At those words, Caroline's mouth curled up in an almighty sneer. She opened her mouth, and Andy knew what she was going to say. Right before she spoke, though, Caroline happened to glance at
Andy, and ran full-steam into Andy's very best Don't-You-Even-THINK-About-It glare, which, as it happened, she had also inherited from her mom. Caroline being bratty to Andy was one thing; Caroline being bratty to her exhausted, sick mother was something else. Andy wasn't the boss of the twins, and she didn't want to be, but there were limits to what she could silently endure.

Caroline's eyes widened, she went a little pale, and then she looked down at her plate. Andy realized that her heart was pounding, and she sipped her water to regain her composure. She felt like she'd just gotten away with something really dangerous.

"I don't want to go to the Tate Modern," Caroline said, but her voice was nearly a whisper. It sounded more pathetic than sullen, and Miranda gave her daughter a quick look.

"Well, remember, you're spending the afternoon at Henry and Elizabeth's house," she said, "so you won't have to stay very long."

"Maybe Andy can take you somewhere else," Cassidy said. Andy's head snapped up and she stared at Cassidy in mute horror before she got her face back under control. Not that Miranda even looked at her to see her reaction.

Then, to Andy's astonishment, Caroline said, "Okay." She was still looking at her food.

"That's settled, then," Miranda said, and dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. "Cassidy will go to the Tate Modern with Padmini, and Caroline, you will go--somewhere with Andrea. I'll stay home and keep off my feet." She patted Cassidy's arm again. "Like the doctor told me to." Then Miranda stood up. She'd eaten almost everything, which would have relieved Andy if she hadn't still been too outraged to speak. So much for not being a nanny.

"The food was good. Andrea," Miranda said, not deigning to look at Andy, "make sure spinach shows up from time to time in my lunch when we return home. Now I'm going to lie down for a little while. Girls, will you please do the dishes when you finish eating?"

"Sure," the twins chorused, and looked at Andy. Andy sighed.

Andy went to bed at ten-thirty that night, after doing dishes, watching TV, and reading in her room until she was bored to death. Unfortunately, she woke up two hours later and couldn't go back to sleep.

Damn. Jet lag was probably still screwing with her. That, and, well, pretty much everything else. She and Caroline were supposed to go somewhere in the morning, but Andy didn't know where yet, or, for that matter, how she was supposed to put up with Caroline for hours all by herself. Caroline liked Padmini, for Christ's sake, not Andy. This wasn't going to be fun. Which meant that Andy needed her sleep, but no matter how much she tossed and turned, she couldn't nod off again.

She gave up at one o'clock and slid out of bed with a grunt. It wasn't doing her any good to stay up here. Might as well do something worthwhile instead of staring at the ceiling. She reached for the novel she'd left on the nightstand, deciding to go downstairs and read in that huge, comfy-looking armchair in the den. Then, without knowing why, she put the novel aside and picked up the pregnancy book she'd brought with her instead.

Ten minutes later, she was comfortably ensconced in the comfy armchair downstairs with a fluffy
throw covering her knees, reading by lamplight. Every once in a while she paused to underline something. Miranda was three and a half months along now, and according to the book, she'd start showing in a month or so, maybe less. Heck, she might be showing now, but Miranda had an unerring knack for dressing in the most flattering way possible, so nobody would ever notice. Andy wondered how long it would be before even well-cut blouses and decorous skirts could no longer do the job. Maybe Miranda could suddenly decree that empire dresses were fashionable for office wear. And comfortable shoes. And support hose.

Looked like ultrasounds would start soon-ish, along with some other prenatal tests. The book said that these tests were especially important for older mothers, and then started saying things about birth defects, and "detecting" them early, and one-chance-in-a-hundred, that Andy didn't want to think about and decided not to underline. Miranda had had the twins late in life, and they'd come out okay, hadn't they? Andy decided instead to focus on things she could actually do something about, and took notes for a great big list of Dos and Don'ts that she could conveniently leave lying somewhere Miranda was sure to see it. No sushi, for starters, or aspirin; lots of green leafy vegetables, and take the damn vitamins, and massages were good…

Andy opened her eyes. The book was lying open on her lap, but she'd dropped her pen, and Miranda was standing over her in her grey bathrobe, with an expression on her face that looked very much like shock. It vanished almost the moment Andy focused on her.

"Oh," Andy said, and scrambled to wake up at once. "Sorry. Time is it? I'm awake. Breakfast, I can fix. Um. I think I dropped a pen." She sat up, looked around, and tried to appear alert.

Miranda sat down on the hassock in front of the armchair. "Calm down. It's four-thirty in the morning." She sounded irked, but there was still something strange in her eyes that Andy was too tired to figure out.

"Oh?" Andy blinked hard. Her eyeballs felt dried out. She glanced towards the window and saw that it was still dark outside. Her jaw almost dislocated itself in a yawn she couldn't quite stop.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Miranda said.

Even half-asleep, Andy realized that was a weird thing for Miranda to say. "You didn't," she said. "I think." She yawned again. "I couldn't sleep. Jet lag, or something."

Miranda nodded. She had bags under her eyes and did not look well. Andy squinted, and, just like that time Miranda had called her at three in the morning, let fatigue cloud her judgment long enough to say, "Are you really okay? You didn't just say so because you were in front of the twins, or anything?"

Miranda nodded again. "It was nothing serious. Thankfully. I…would not have wanted it to be." Then she stared off into space, while Andy processed the fact that Miranda had decided she wanted the kid after all.

She tucked her feet up under the blanket. "Um, so, why are you awake, too?"

Miranda ignored the question and said, "Caroline is very sensitive." She still wasn't looking at Andy.

"Oh," Andy said, when it became apparent that Miranda wasn't going to keep talking. "Yeah. I mean, sure." She rubbed a hand over her eyes, and blinked again.

"More than Cassidy," Miranda said. "She always has been. But brilliant, of course. They both are."

If that was true, Andy thought, then they damn well could have come up with an award-winning
science project all on their own. But she just nodded and made a vague noise of agreement.

"Greg and I used to say that Caroline takes after me, and Cassidy after him," Miranda continued. She shrugged, as if to say she wasn't sure it was true, or if it even mattered.

"I take after my dad," Andy said. "At least, Mom says so." Except for the glare she'd given to Caroline, apparently.

Miranda picked absentmindedly at the sleeve of her bathrobe, her lips pursed in thought. "What do they think about you being here?" she asked.

That was the second time Miranda had asked about Andy's parents in as many days. Andy, too surprised to lie, said, "They don't like it." Miranda thinned her lips. Fuck. "But, I mean, that's just because it's Christmas…" Oh, that wasn't any better. "It doesn't matter anyway," Andy tried.

Miranda finally looked at her, with raised eyebrows. "No?" She sounded disbelieving.

"Well…I mean…" Andy said, "I'm here, aren't I? You, um." She took a deep breath. "You wouldn't have fired me if I hadn't come. Would you? I mean, you didn't actually say you would, or anything," Miranda hesitated ever-so-slightly, before looking away again and shaking her head.

Andy took another deep breath, and realized she'd always known that. Miranda would have been angry, hurt, if Andy had said no. Might have made her life a little more unpleasant back at the office. But she would not have actually punished Andy, would not have ruined or fired her.

She just might have trusted Andy a little bit less. Leaned on her a little bit less. Felt like she couldn't count on her. And that, that was the thought Andy really couldn't stand.


Miranda looked back at her. Andy wondered if she knew what Andy was thinking, or if she cared. "So you are," she said, her voice and face absolutely neutral. "Where are you taking Caroline?"

"I don't know," Andy said, and swallowed around the sudden thickness in her throat. "Wherever she wants, I guess. She said she likes parks. And people-watching."

"Don't let her get too cold," Miranda reminded her, and tugged her robe's collar tighter around her neck, as if she was cold herself. Andy made to offer her the blanket, but she shook her head wordlessly. Then she said, "You got a dress for the ball?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah," Andy said. "A couple of girls there, um, helped me pick it out." She cleared her throat. "It's…short. It's a cocktail dress, really." Miranda raised her eyebrows. "Do you want me to show it to you?" Andy added, already preparing to go upstairs and fetch it. She'd feel a lot better if Miranda told her it wasn't totally ridiculous-looking.

"No," Miranda said. "I don't want to see it until New Year's." When Andy started, she added, "Andrea, is there something about 'take a risk' that you do not understand?"

"No," Andy said, hearing exasperation rise in her voice before she could stop it. "I mean, sorry, no. But--what if I look bad, or embarrass you or--"

Miranda gave Andy a scornful look. "Embarrass me?" she said. Andy hung her head. "You might embarrass yourself. I promise you I won't be bothered one way or the other."

Andy looked back up, and glared at her. Miranda glared right back. For once--due to irritation,
fatigue, or something else entirely--Andy did not back down. After a moment, Miranda appeared satisfied, although not quite impressed, and tilted her head to the side.

"Own your decisions, Andrea," she said. "You don't really care about what they think. I know that, so don't try to pretend otherwise. I will not be convinced by your corn-fed, aw-shucks wholesomeness." She rolled her eyes.

Okay, seriously? "I don't care about me," Andy snapped, "I care about--" She almost said, you. "--the reputation of the magazine. I mean, I work at Runway, how would it be if I showed up looking awful?"

"If you look awful, I'll leave you at home," Miranda said flatly. "Does that ease your mind?"

"I--well, yes, actually," Andy admitted. Heck, with that in mind, she might as well try to look as awful as possible. She'd wanted a nice, quiet New Year's, after all, not one where she got all tarted-up and had to smile fakely at rich people she didn't know.

Maybe Miranda sensed this, because she glared again. This time Andy just tried to look innocent. Although that probably didn't fool Miranda anymore, if it ever had. "I'm so sorry," Miranda said, much too sweetly. "Did you have wild, exciting plans for New Year's in Ohio? Did I interrupt your social whirl?"

"I was going to be back in New York by then," Andy said, and yawned before she could help herself. "So," she mumbled around it, "less you count maybe hanging out with Roy, I guess I didn't have any..."

Miranda blinked. "Roy?"

Andy nodded. "Yeah, Roy." Miranda looked blank. "Your driver," Andy prompted, deciding not to clarify, 'for the last ten years.'

"What about Roy?" Miranda said. "'Hanging out' with Roy?" Her brow drew down alarmingly, and her voice got sharp.

"Um--" Andy said, surprised. "I mean, he sort of mentioned...I guess we might have gone out for a beer or someth--"

"My driver asked you out on a date?"

"What? No! I mean, he didn't actually say--"

"Do you have any idea how unprofessional that is?"

"Oh my God," Andy said, wide awake now, her heart starting to race at the scowl on Miranda's face. "No, Miranda, it wasn't like that, I swear." She tried to laugh. "We're not, I wouldn't...it was just kind of a, you know, a buddy thing."

"Oh, yes, Andrea," Miranda said. "I'm sure men invite you to bars all the time so they can be your 'buddy.'" Andy turned beet red. "That kind of fraternization is completely inappropriate, and I won't have it. Nip it in the bud at once. Or I will." She frowned at Andy. "I am surprised at you, frankly."

"But nothing happened," Andy pleaded. "Nothing would have. I'm--even if he was interested, I'm not." Then she shivered. "Uh--when you say you'd nip it in the bud--"

"I'd fire him," Miranda said, and stood up without further ceremony while Andy stared at her in
speechless horror. "And at the first sign of inappropriate conduct, I will do exactly that."

"No!" Andy said. She couldn't believe this. Roy, fired? And it would all be her fault, just because she'd been thoughtless, said something stupid-- "Miranda, he...he's worked for you for so long, please, you can't..."

Miranda gave her a very, very cold look. Then she left the den without another word.

Andy slumped back in the armchair, trembling. Oh, fuck. Had she just gotten Roy fired? She hadn't meant to, she never would have wanted that. And he'd know exactly what had happened, because no doubt Miranda would tell him, and he'd hate Andy for it, and it wouldn't even be fair, because she'd tried to explain everything to Miranda and Miranda hadn't listened, just like always. Or she hadn't wanted to hear. Just like always.

But that just reminded Andy of the truth, really. Miranda was willing to throw away a man who'd loyaly worked for her for a decade, just because of some incredibly stupid, incredibly small thing. It was worse than what she'd done to Nigel, because at least Nigel still had a job. Jesus.

Andy tossed the pregnancy book aside, tossed her notes to the floor, and stomped back upstairs to her own bedroom at the other end of the hall. Not that she'd be able to sleep.

Cassidy and Padmini had already departed in the car with Jimmy. Caroline had wanted to sleep in, and now she and Andy faced each other like enemy combatants in the front hallway. At least, that was how Andy felt about it; Caroline's own expression was inscrutable.

Miranda hadn't stirred out of her room yet. Cassidy had gone to check on her earlier, and had delivered the news that "Mommy is just going to take it easy today." Andy sure as hell wasn't going to disturb her, and Caroline didn't seem inclined to go and give her a goodbye kiss or anything, so Andy supposed it was time to go.

She put her gloves on while Caroline wound a fluffy blue scarf around her neck. "So where do you want to go?" Andy asked.

She'd expected a sulky shrug, or an eyeroll. But Caroline, without looking at her, said, "The London Eye."

Okay. Fair enough. Andy could do that. "Got any money?" she asked. Because she wasn't paying for this.

"Mom gave me some," Caroline said. "For lunch, too."

"We have to be back by two, right?" Andy said. Caroline nodded. "Well, let's get going, then," Andy said, trying to sound hearty. Like that was going to work.

As it happened, Caroline seemed to like the Underground, and was surprisingly good about sticking close to Andy. Of course, she was ten, not four, and not quite so prone to wandering off by herself. But it was good to know that Andy wasn't likely to lose one of Miranda's kids in London, which could only be atoned for by ritual suicide.

Caroline didn't want to talk either. She wanted to walk around London and take pictures with her
tiny silver camera. Occasionally, though, Andy saw emotions flitting across her face, and they were rarely good: a passing spasm of sorrow, a quick flash of anger.

Then Caroline caught her looking, and snapped, "What?"


"I don't want to talk to you," Caroline said.

"Fine with me," Andy said before she could stop herself.

"Everybody's always trying to talk to me," Caroline said. "I don't want to talk to anyone, so just shut up, okay?"

"I didn't say anything," Andy felt obliged to point out.

"Yes, you did. Last night. When you gave me that LOOK." Caroline stopped walking and rounded on Andy, the snarl on her face remarkably reminiscent of Miranda's. "You're not my mom. You're not my nanny. You're just an assistant. And you're a stupid assistant who came up the stairs."

Andy took a deep, deep breath. "Okay," she said. "You're going to say you're sorry, or we're going home right now. And I'm going to march you in to your mother and you are going to tell her exactly what you just said to me."

"No, you won't," Caroline said.

"Oh, you bet I will," Andy said, trying desperately to remember how her mom had handled her when she got like this. Caroline opened her mouth to speak again, and Andy overrode her with, "On the other hand, if you say you're sorry, then we get to go to the London Eye and do other fun stuff. It's up to you."

"She won't care," Caroline said.

"Fine. Let's go, then," Andy said. She jerked her head back towards the nearest tube station. "If that's what you really want."

Caroline didn't move, but just kept staring at Andy.

"It's up to--" Andy began again.

"I'm sorry," Caroline said.

Andy straightened her shoulders. She couldn't believe that had actually worked. Caroline didn't look sorry, of course, but she'd apologized, and that was all Andy had asked of her. "Okay," she said. Then she pointed to the London Eye. "Come on. We're almost there."

After purchasing the exorbitantly-priced tickets, they stood silently in line, waiting for the next available car. Caroline didn't look angry now, or even all that mutinous. She looked thoughtful. Meanwhile, Andy looked at how high the damn thing was, and remembered how scared she was of heights. Oh, God. Not fun. Not fun at all. But it wasn't like she could let Caroline go up by herself, now was it?

Andy considered actually that for a moment, and then shook her head, earning curious glances from both Caroline and the other people in line. No. Not even a possibility. With her luck, Caroline would wind up sitting next to some old pervert without Andy to keep an eye on her.
"Where are we going for lunch?" Caroline asked.

Good question. It was eleven-thirty, and by the time they got done with this, it'd be time to eat. "I don't know," Andy said, and tried to think of something British. Not a pub. "Fish and chips?"

"Mom would be mad," Caroline said, and then considered. "Yeah. Fish and chips."

"Why would your mom be mad?" Andy asked in genuine surprise. Surely Miranda only applied those dietary standards to models and employees, not her spoiled kids.

"Too much fat and grease," Caroline said. "She doesn't let us have stuff like that. Or fast food."

Andy opened her mouth to say _Then maybe we shouldn't_, and gave up. "Well...you can eat extra vegetables tonight, or something," she said.

"I think Ellen's making pizza," Caroline said, and she actually sounded enthusiastic about something. "Mom said she wanted some. I like pizza." Andy looked away quickly, before Caroline could see the shit-eating grin she just knew was on her face. Sure, Miranda didn't approve of fatty, greasy food for her kids. She'd also gorged herself on half a pizza from Domino's. Why shouldn't Caroline get some fish and chips if she wanted?

Then the line attendant opened the chain to let the next herd of tourists into a newly-available capsule. "Finally," Caroline said, and hurried to be the first inside. Andy cast an apologetic glance at the other passengers. At least everyone could tell that she was too young to be Caroline's mother.

The capsule, which was surprisingly large and spacious, lifted up with a faint jerk, and Andy sat down hard on the bench in the middle. She suddenly had a lot more sympathy for how Miranda must feel in the mornings, and felt really pathetic, because the wheel moved at a snail's pace. She closed her eyes for a few minutes. That helped.

When she opened them again, Caroline was looking at her in obvious disgust from where she stood by the plexiglass. "I thought you wanted to be a reporter," she said.

"I do," Andy said in surprise. "How--"

"Then how are you supposed to do stuff like riding in helicopters?"

"I," Andy said, and squeezed her eyes shut again. "I'll figure that out when I come to it, I guess. But how did you know I want to be a reporter?"

"Mom told us," was Caroline's half-expected response. Half-expected, but still weird. A week ago, Andy would never have believed that Miranda talked about her to her children. Now she didn't know what to believe. About anything. "Where do you want to work?" Caroline added.

"Lots of places," Andy said, and pried her eyelids open again, trying to smile at her young charge. "I'd love to write articles for magazines, you know, freelance stuff. Like _The New Yorker_ or _Vanity Fair_. But your mom's right, too--I'd also like to work for a paper where I get to go out and cover stories." She chuckled, and then gulped. "No helicopters, though."

"Didn't you have to fly on a plane to get here?"

"Planes are different," Andy said.

"How?"
"They--I--they just are," Andy said helplessly. "I always keep my eyes shut when we take off and land, and in the middle, I can just pretend that I'm not actually floating really really high over the ground." She gritted her teeth and looked down at the Thames, so far below. "Can't exactly do that here."

"Maybe this'll be like in a movie, where the Ferris wheel stops working for hours and we're stuck right at the top," Caroline said with a certain amount of glee. Andy whimpered. "Does Mom know you want to be a writer for a magazine and not a newspaper? She didn't say anything about that."

"I'm not sure," Andy said. "We haven't, um, really talked about it. I mean, I'd be happy working for eith--"

"You should tell her," Caroline said. "You should write something in Runway."

"I should?" Andy asked, vaguely recalling that humoring children sometimes worked. "Like what?"

"That stupid crap Mom likes," Caroline said, and her eyes got dark again. "About clothes or shoes or big parties. What else?"

"…oh," Andy said. "Well--"

"Do you like Mom?" Caroline asked.

Andy became aware that some of the other passengers were starting to glance at them. No wonder: once you got inside the capsule, it became painfully obvious that it was going to be a slow trip up and down. Drama inside was probably more interesting than the London skyline outside. "S-sure," she said. "She's, um…she's…"

"She's a bitch," Caroline said, slowly and deliberately, giving Andy a very hard look. Testing her even as she tested out a forbidden word.

Andy looked Caroline right in the eye. "Okay," she said. "I'm not your mom and I'm not your nanny. I'm not your therapist. I'm not your friend. Right?"

"Right," Caroline said, looking uneasy now.

"But I work for your mom. I do a lot for your mom. And I am always, always going to be on your mom's side. No matter what." Andy took a deep breath. "You want to complain, talk to somebody else. Okay? That's not my job, and I don't want to hear it."

Caroline's eyes widened, and her shoulders straightened up. Andy felt bad for talking to her that way, and a little scared that Caroline might run to Miranda and tell her all kinds of horrible things about Andy that might not even be true. So she added quickly, "What I'd rather do is walk with you around London and look at cool stuff and not talk about anything. Isn't that what you wanted, anyway?"

"You don't want to talk to me?" Caroline said faintly.

Andy was definitely getting the stink-eye from some other passengers by now. "Sure I do," she lied, and then added more truthfully, "just not about that." She tilted her head to the side. "I mean…you've got other people to talk to about that stuff, right? And you said you didn't want to talk to me."

Caroline came and plunked herself down next to Andy on the bench. "Everybody's on Mom's side," she said. "Nobody's on mine."
Oh, hell. Why hadn't Andy tried reverse psychology? Maybe if she had pretended to want to talk, Caroline would've clammed up again, and then Andy wouldn't have to hear things she shouldn't know. "I don't know why you have to be on different sides," she said cautiously. "She's your mom. She loves you."

"She got rid of Stephen," Caroline said. "She even got rid of Dad. She gets rid of everybody."

"I, um," Andy said, and cleared her throat, "I'm sure she's not actually trying to--"

"She'll get rid of you, too," Caroline said.

Andy snapped her mouth shut.

"I'm not going to start liking you," Caroline said. "I'm not going to care about you at all." She hopped up from the bench and went back to stand at the plexiglass, looking out over the water. She didn't even look at Andy for the rest of the trip down, much less speak to her.

Which was fine, because Andy couldn't think of anything to say. The kid had a point, after all.

The rest of the morning passed pretty tranquilly, to Andy's surprise. Once they got off the Eye--Caroline hopped out while Andy staggered--they had a quick lunch of greasy fish and chips wrapped in newsprint, and then hurried back to the townhouse on the tube. They didn't speak more than a few words, and none at all about Miranda, or the baby, or fathers and stepfathers, or any other topic Andy didn't want to touch with a ten-foot pole. Caroline did, on the way back, observe that a vagrant sitting near a tube station looked really dirty and gross and should just get a job.

By the time they arrived at the townhouse, it was nearly time for Caroline and Cassidy to accompany Padmini to their friends' house. Cassidy looked happy, and Padmini seemed to have had a good morning, although the look she gave Andy was fairly cautious. Andy sighed. She supposed she had picked sides, after all. According to Padmini, Miranda was still resting in her room, although "Ms. Priestly told me she has had lunch and is feeling better today." Andy was relieved to hear it, but for Miranda to rest placidly in her room meant that she still had to be feeling pretty wiped.

When she closed the door behind Padmini and the twins, Andy found herself at loose ends. She wasn't used to being at loose ends. Not since she'd started at Runway. But she didn't have an assignment or errand, now that she was back from babysitting Caroline, and she certainly didn't want to disturb Miranda. At the same time, she didn't feel like she just ought to take off on her own without permission. Miranda might need her for something.

So Andy, too restless to read or watch TV (and feeling kind of bloated after her oily lunch), wandered as quietly as she could through the townhouse, paying close attention to it for the first time. She'd only really looked at her bedroom so far. Now she noticed the hallway lined with bookshelves, the fine china plates in the cabinets, the tasteful modern paintings and prints on the walls. But more importantly, she noticed the photographs.

Miranda had a photo of the twins on her desk at Runway. She'd had one of Stephen too, once upon a time. And Andy had seen two large portraits of the twins in Miranda's Manhattan home. But of course she'd never really had the opportunity to explore the place like this. Here, as she walked around, she saw pictures of people Miranda knew and presumably cared about. Andy didn't recognize most of them, and she didn't see pictures of anybody who looked like they might be
Miranda's parents, or brothers and sisters, or anything like that. There were a few photos from work, like a large group portrait of important people at Elias-Clarke, including Miranda and Irv. There were more pictures of the twins.

Andy couldn't stop staring at one particular photo, and she carefully picked it up from the shelf. In it, Miranda held one of the newborn twins, and her second ex-husband, Greg, held the other. It was a candid shot: Greg was grinning at the camera while Miranda looked down at the baby in her arms. You couldn't really see the look on her face, and she held the baby a little awkwardly, as if she wasn't used to it yet. But she gripped its tiny body firmly and cradled it close to her breast, protectiveness written even in the set of her shoulders. To her astonishment, Andy got a lump in her throat.

Miranda's hair was mostly dark in the photo, although going white at the temples. She'd been a brunette with hair lighter than Andy's; you could still see traces of the original color on the hair at the nape of her neck and around her ears. The twins were almost eleven, which meant the photo was almost twelve years old now. Miranda would have been nearly forty. An "older mother" even then. No doubt she'd thought she'd never go through anything like that again. God. Why had she decided against an abortion, anyway? Not that Andy knew for sure, but…in Miranda's shoes…well, she didn't know for sure.

"I hardly knew what to do with them," Miranda said behind her.

Luckily Andy didn't drop the photo, but she wasn't quite able to suppress her gasp as she turned around. Miranda, rather than looking penitent, appeared slyly pleased that she'd scared Andy. Of course.

"Well…looks like you figured it out," Andy said feebly, placing the photo back on the bookcase with a hand that only shook a little bit.

"Have I?" Miranda said. "How did you and Caroline pass your time together?" She folded her arms over her chest and tilted her head to the side. Her voice was not particularly hostile, her eyes were nowhere near as cold as they'd been last night (well…this morning), but Andy knew she was being interrogated.

She tried not to squirm, or shift back and forth on her feet like a naughty child. "We went to the London Eye," she said. "And had lunch. That was pretty much the whole morning. It was…fun."

"And Caroline?" Miranda said. Her voice was sharp now. "How did she behave? What did she say?"

Andy decided not to mention that Caroline had called Miranda a bitch. "She said she didn't want to talk to me," she said instead. True enough. "She said everybody tries to talk to her, and she's sick of it." Then Andy shrugged, as if to say nothing else had happened at all. "So, you know, we didn't say too much to each other, and just--looked at the view. Well, she did. I kept my eyes closed." She tried to laugh.

Miranda's lips thinned, and her shoulders slumped a little. She appeared disappointed, but there was no way Andy was going to tell her what Caroline had actually said: not just the bitch thing, but also the thing about Miranda getting rid of people. It might be true, but what good could that do now, except to make Miranda feel even worse while Caroline felt that Andy had betrayed her confidence?

Andy tried to think of something else to say, something that would make Miranda feel better but not be a complete lie. She was coming up dry when Miranda said, "It's one-thirty. Call Nigel. He should be awake by now. Tell him I want him to send me the applications he's screened for Lucia's
replacement."

"Oh," Andy said, relieved at the change of subject. "Okay. Um. How are you feeling today?"

"Fine," Miranda said, and brushed past Andy on her way towards the stairs. She didn't offer any other information, didn't say what she was doing or where she was going, and Andy sighed to herself as she pulled out her cell phone and called Nigel.

"Sure thing," he said, when she gave him Miranda's instructions. "I'll email them in a few minutes. But why didn't she call me herself?"

"Huh?"

"You're in New York, too," Nigel said patiently. "Why did she call you and tell you to call me?"

"Uh--" Andy remembered that today was the 28th, the day she was supposed to return to New York from Ohio. "Actually, I'm not..." her voice trailed off, and then she said, "not sure."

"Too early in the morning for you, huh," Nigel said. "Well, I hate to cut into your vacation time, but if I have to come into the office today, I'm going to need you."

"What?"

"No whining. I'll buy you a nice lunch. Think you can be here in an hour?"

"Um--that'll be a problem," Andy said, her stomach squirming at the thought of what Nigel would say. "I'm actually not in New York."

"Didn't you say you were getting back in today?"

"Yeah, well, plans...changed."

"Great," Nigel said. "Of course you didn't inform anybody else of this. I was counting on you to be here at least by tomorrow, Andy."

"I'm sorry, Nigel," Andy said. "I--I really couldn't help it."

"You better hope Miranda doesn't find out," Nigel warned. "You're not sticking to the game plan. She doesn't like that."

"Uh..."

"And if you think she won't care just because you're an assistant, well, I think we both know how that story ends--"

"She knows my plans changed," Andy said, deciding that there was no point in trying to hide anything. Nigel would know soon enough that Andy had been with Miranda in London, against all logic and common sense. Everybody would. And then he'd just be pissed that Andy hadn't told him over the phone. "She changed them for me."

"She--oh. What?"

"I'm in London," Andy admitted.

There was a very long silence. Andy tried to break it by saying, lamely, "Cara got pneumonia and had to go home."
"Really," Nigel said. "And Miranda flew you over to take care of the twins? That's what you're doing?"

"Not exactly," Andy said, and bit her lip.

"Thought not," Nigel said. "Jesus Christ, Andy--"

"Nigel, I don't know why--"

"Okay. Look, I don't have time…okay. I'll email Miranda about those candidates." He hung up.

Andy stared at her phone and fidgeted. He hadn't sounded mad, exactly. At least, not at Andy. Well, why should he be? Nigel, of all people, knew what Miranda's whims were like.

She wondered, suddenly feeling nauseated, if he was jealous, like Emily—if he resented her meteoric rise to favor. But that wouldn't make sense, that wouldn't be fair. Andy might be Miranda's go-to girl for all kinds of weird stuff now, but she wasn't Nigel. Nobody could replace Nigel. That was half his problem, wasn't it?

"Andrea?" Miranda called from downstairs.

Andy jumped, and hurried towards the stairs. "Sorry, Miranda," she said as she descended. "Nigel says he'll email you in a few minutes…"

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Andy looked at the organza-and-tulle cocktail dress lying on her bed, and sighed.

She had to be ready to leave in an hour. She might as well put on the damn thing. She just really didn't want to go to this shindig; everybody was going to think it was weird that she was there, if anybody noticed her at all, and she'd probably only recognize a few people, and her shoes were going to start hurting her feet about twenty seconds after she put them on. And with her luck, she'd spill champagne all over the dress and have to get a new line of credit just to pay for it. But there was no help for it. Miranda would kill her if she tried to back out, no matter what she'd said about leaving Andy behind.

Andy shucked off her shirt, reflecting that the last three days hadn't been so bad. In fact, she was starting to get disturbingly used to the whole arrangement of living in Miranda's home with Miranda and her kids and the occasional servant. But Miranda had definitely been keeping her close, and wouldn't appreciate having to fend for herself tonight.

Andy'd had no more afternoons out by herself. Although there had been one outing to a park with Miranda, the twins, and Padmini: Miranda, feeling a little perkier, had rested on a bench and watched the twins playing tag with the nanny with a flat, unreadable look on her face. Rather than joining in the game, Andy had sat down next to her, which was all Miranda had seemed to want. It was apparently the only reason for Andy's presence, in fact. Miranda hadn't said a word the whole time. Awkward.

So except for that one afternoon that had ended with Miranda's medical scare, Andy was either dancing attendance on Miranda, the twins, or all three at once. She still wasn't sure where she stood with the girls. Cassidy was obviously reserving judgment, but Caroline—who'd vowed not to care about Andy—had taken to sitting next to her at meals or during car rides, although she never talked to
her and rarely looked at her. She would only cede her place to Miranda, who did pretty much the same thing. Andy had no idea what to make of this, except to know for sure that she'd never mention it to Nigel.

Both twins, however, preferred Padmini to either Andy or Miranda. Andy was totally fine with this. She was pretty sure that Miranda wasn't. Which was not Andy's problem. At all.

Padmini was staying late with the girls tonight. She was going to teach them how to make rice kheer. They were excited. Andy would much rather have stayed home and learned how to make rice kheer too, but no, here she was, standing in her underwear and feeling fat as she looked down at the tiny dress. It had looked okay at Runway U.K., of course. Georgie and Janys had said so. Maybe they were just being nice. Andy wondered what Miranda was wearing. Probably nothing risky.

Mumbling and grumbling, she slipped the dress on, and fiddled with the tulle and ruffles in front of the mirror before reminding herself that the dress was supposed to look charmingly asymmetrical and un-put-together, which was okay just so long as her hair and makeup and everything else looked absolutely perfect and well-groomed. Great. The rest of the hour passed in putting on and wiping off cosmetics, putting up and taking down and putting up hair, and emergency eyebrow maintenance. When it was time to leave, Andy had lost all objectivity, and stared at the woman in the mirror with a certain sense of fatalism. She had no idea if she looked "acceptable" or not. What would be, would be.

As she hurried downstairs, beaded clutch in hand, she heard the twins and Padmini chattering in the kitchen. Well, they'd be the first people who saw her, which meant that it was likely that the first criticism would be the harshest, since the twins could be even more brutal than their mother. That'd be a relief, in a way. Get the worst of it over with.

They looked up as she came into the kitchen. Padmini's face broke into a wide, warm smile, as she said, "Why Miss Sachs, you look lovely."

Cassidy didn't smile, but she did say casually, "That's a pretty dress."

Two out of three wasn't bad. Andy glanced at Caroline, but Caroline was busy stirring a pot full of something.

"What do you think, Caroline?" Cassidy said pointedly.

Caroline shrugged and refused to look up. "It's just a dress," she said. "Who cares?"

"Well, I like it," Cassidy declared, and Andy gave both her and Padmini a grateful smile as she tugged self-consciously at the hem. But before she could say thanks, all four of them heard Miranda descending the stairs, and all four of them, even Padmini, held their breaths until she swept into the kitchen. Then Andy lost her breath completely and abandoned all hope of getting it back.

She was used to seeing Miranda in black. Miranda looked great in black. She almost always wore black to formal events, and while her dresses were never exactly severe-looking, the cut and make was always up-to-the-moment modern, not a single line or stitch wasted in unnecessary frippery or romance.

So Andy was not used to seeing Miranda in filmy, floor-length champagne silk, with a full skirt that flowed down from the empire bodice. The color, which by all rights should have washed her out, instead matched her skin tone so perfectly that she almost appeared to be naked beneath a thin film of gold lace. The dress was also extremely low-cut. It was not the dress of a pregnant fifty-year-old newly single mother. It was, it was...
Andy didn't know what it was. She was only dimly aware that her heart had started racing and the blood was roaring in her ears and her whole body felt burning hot. Mostly she was realizing that she'd never wanted to have sex with another woman before, but now she did, and specifically she desperately wanted to have sex with Miranda Priestly, and it felt like every day they'd known each other had just been building up to this moment right here and now. Andy had a horrible feeling of inevitability, of something falling into place just at the moment when she'd stopped paying attention and had let her guard down.

She heard herself saying stupidly, like she had when she saw Miranda at the benefit, "Wow." Only it sounded a lot more breathless and Miranda could actually hear her this time.

Miranda glanced at her, raising her eyebrows even as she gave Andy the once-over herself. "I mean, uh," Andy added.

"You look gorgeous, Mom," Cassidy said.

"It is a beautiful dress, Ms. Priestly," Padmini said sincerely, and Andy saw the wistfulness in her eyes. Too bad she and Miranda couldn't switch places for an evening, so Miranda could stay home and spend New Year's with her kids while Padmini dressed up like a queen and went to the ball. But if that happened, then Miranda wouldn't be in that dress, and the world would be a much poorer place.

"Hmm," Miranda said, still looking Andy up and down, tapping her lips with her fingertip. For the first time in her whole life Andy wondered what it would be like to kiss her, and immediately wished she'd taken her dad up on his offer to fly her home. The gold bangle on Miranda's wrist caught the light.

Then, without a word, Miranda turned around and left the kitchen, heading back towards the stairs. Andy helplessly watched her go, and only when the champagne silk had vanished from sight did she feel that she could breathe freely again. Holy…holy…oh, holy…

"I like your dress better," Caroline said. Andy blinked, pulled out of her stupor, and turned around to see Caroline stirring the pot more furiously than ever.

"Thanks," Andy said, and if she'd been able to muster a single coherent thought she would have been seriously worried about Caroline's good judgment. In the meantime, she tried to take deep breaths without making it obvious, and to slow down her heartbeat. The twins and Padmini didn't seem to notice anything amiss.

"Caroline, don't stir so fast," Padmini said, and Caroline slowed her spoon down, still not looking up.

Andy heard the rustling of a silk skirt, and realized that she'd been staring at the twins and Padmini almost without blinking as she tried to get her head back in order. She needed more time, but she didn't have it. So she took another deep breath, and when she turned around she was able to look at Miranda with her usual bland, helpful smile.

Miranda, who hadn't become one iota less stunning in the last three minutes, held out a hand to her. Sparkly things dangled from her fingertips: a necklace and a bracelet. They were made of wrought iron, surprisingly small and delicate, and had tiny crystals hanging off them. "Wear these," Miranda said. "You need some jewelry."

"Thanks, Miranda," Andy said, and reached out with extremely steady hands to take them. They'd look perfect with her outfit. Of course.
"It's a good dress," Miranda said, looking her up and down again, pursing her lips, only not (apparently) in the bad way.

Andy realized that she'd been much too stunned to feel self-conscious. "Thanks," she said again, like an idiot.

She fumbled with the clasp of the necklace while Miranda said, "Girls, we're off. Give Mommy a kiss. We'll be back before midnight, I promise."

Cassidy trotted forward and kissed Miranda gamely enough. Caroline darted a quick glance at Andy, and then an even quicker kiss on Miranda's cheek.

Andy got the necklace on, and said to the twins in a much-too-bright voice, "Will you save some of that rice pudding?"

"Okay," Cassidy said. "We're going to put rose petals in it," she added, sounding very impressed at the thought.

"How lovely," Miranda said. "Now come along, Andrea." She led the way to the hall closet while Andy concentrated on both walking and managing the bracelet clasp. By the time Miranda opened the closet doors, Andy had almost regained her composure, so she wasn't completely thrown when Miranda pulled out two coats: one, a fur wrap, and the other a tailored jacket. "Now," she said, in the tone of one giving a test. "Which one should I wear?"

Andy thought about it. "The jacket," she said.

Miranda looked displeased. "I would have said the fur."

"I know," Andy said. Miranda blinked. "Taking a risk?" Andy dared to add, and wondered where the hell that little bit of chutzpah had come from. Well, she supposed once you realized you were dying to have sex with Miranda Priestly, nothing else could scare you anymore. Getting fired might actually be a good thing, since it would give Andy time to check into the nearest mental health clinic.

Miranda snorted, but she actually put the fur back and donned the jacket. Then she reached into the closet, removed Andy's coat, and tossed it at her just as if she was dropping her own coat on Andy's desk back at Runway back before Emily had been demoted.

"Well?" Miranda said as she put her gloves on. Andy snapped back into reality and opened the front door.

This was turning into pretty much the worst evening of Andy's whole life.

Worse than the time she'd caught her junior-high boyfriend making out with her best friend at a school dance. Worse than the time her dad had discovered her sneaking back home at twelve-thirty in the morning on a school night, smelling of beer. Worse than the journalism awards ceremony at Northwestern where she'd come in second to her most hated rival, a vapid little blonde who'd slept with at least two professors. Worse than all that.

Sitting next to Miranda in the car was awful, for starters. Andy had to pay attention, or pretend to, while Miranda talked on and on about the candidates Nigel had put forward to replace Lucia, and
how almost all of them were completely unsuitable, and the rest were mostly unsuitable. "The hair on one of them," she said with a disdainful sniff, and Andy started thinking about the way Miranda's own hair whispered and tickled at her ears and the back of her neck. It looked softer tonight than it had on the night of the benefit, when she'd swept it completely off her forehead. Tonight her forelock curled loosely over one eye and made it sort of look like she'd just gotten out of bed, only in a good way and after doing something really fun while she was in there.

Miranda broke off in the middle of her tirade to ask, "What are you staring at?"

"Nothing," Andy heard herself say, as if from a great distance. "Didn't Nigel really like the one who works at Elle?"

"Oh my God, that one," Miranda said, rolling her eyes, and then she was off and running again while Andy sat there and thought about her earlobes and tried not to stare at her breasts.

By the time they actually arrived at the ball, Andy was pretty sure she'd used up at least a quarter of her allotted heartbeats for the coming year. And it wasn't over yet. She had to watch Miranda's jacket slide back off her shoulders and into the hands of a waiting attendant. And then she realized she was staring again, only they were in front of other people now, and she had to stop.

So then she had to pretend that she neither noticed nor cared about the appreciative looks Miranda was getting even from men half her age. They made Andy's throat close up and then it got difficult to breathe. Also, it was harder to disguise feelings of murderous jealousy than it was to disguise lust—or at least, it felt that way. Andy found it easier to concentrate on the envious glances Miranda got from the other women at the ball. Those she could handle, even take pride in, because her boss looked better than all of them.

Now she and Miranda were making their way through the party, while Miranda chatted and smiled at various acquaintances and introduced Andy, who hardly even saw their faces, let alone remembered their names. She probably looked like she was on drugs or something. Thankfully, Miranda didn't seem to notice anything wrong.

At one point, Miranda accepted a flute of champagne from a passing waiter. Before she could stop herself, Andy gasped, and had to turn it into an embarrassed little cough when Miranda's current tuxedoed interlocutor glanced at her. Miranda gave her a very pointed glare and didn't stop talking to him. When he'd wandered off, Miranda's glare got a lot more pointed, and she muttered, "Get ahold of yourself."

"But, but you can't," Andy squeaked, "I mean, you're not supp--"

"I'm not going to drink it. I'm going to hold it so that nobody else tries to give me anything and gets curious when I say no. I doubt anybody will notice that I haven't changed glasses all evening."

"...oh," Andy said. "That's a good--you look really nice tonight."

Miranda stared at her. Andy wanted to die. She looked wildly around the room, hoping that somehow Miranda wouldn't notice she was blushing, or at least would put it down to something else. "I mean, everybody does," she babbled. "This is...I wonder how many people are here."

"Why don't you go off and count them?" Miranda said. "Get a drink, meet people, and for God's sake stop hovering."

Hovering? Why the hell else was Andy here tonight, if not to be Miranda's personal satellite? And 'meet people'? That was a lot harder without Miranda around. What was Andy supposed to do, walk
up to some tight-knit group of the rich and famous and introduce herself out of the blue?

Well, they were only staying for another hour. It couldn't be that bad. She could probably find a potted fern to hide behind until it was time to find Miranda again. Feeling like a kicked puppy, Andy slunk off in search of a champagne flute of her very own, looking around for the nearest waiter.

"Allow me," a familiar voice said behind her.

Andy turned around, sure she had to be imagining things. But no: there was Christian Thompson, standing in the middle of the New Year's Ball and offering her a glass of champagne with a small smile on his face.

It wasn't his old smile, the charming one that had always tried to talk her into bed without any words at all. This one managed to be both resigned and wistful, acknowledging everything that had happened after their one-night stand.

"Didn't expect to see you here," he said.

Andy overcame her shock just long enough to take the champagne. She definitely wasn't having more than one glass. She, Christian, and alcohol were a deadly combination. "I could say the same of you," she said, and managed a laugh. "How--how are you?"

"Been better, been worse," he said. "You're here with Miranda?"

*Here with Miranda.* He made it sound like a date. No, wait, that was just Andy's fevered imagination. "Yes," she said, and glanced around, wondering where Miranda had gone. "It was kind of last-minute, but, um, here I am."

"You look great," he said quietly.

Andy took a deep breath. "Oh. Um. Thanks."

He grinned. "Sorry. It's weird, I know."

"It's not weird," Andy said too quickly. He raised an eyebrow. "Okay, it's weird, but it doesn't have to be bad."

"Yeah, well, I think a lot about you," Christian said. Andy blushed. "I know we parted on bad terms. I regret that. I do."

"Me too," Andy admitted. She'd found it in her heart to feel sorry for Christian, even though she still thought he'd acted like a sleaze. Still...he'd had no reason to care about Miranda, no reason to feel any kind of loyalty to her. He'd had no reason not to go for the gold. He hadn't known that Miranda's husband was leaving her, that her life was falling apart, and that losing *Runway* would have been the final nail in the coffin. He couldn't have known. "She sure caught everybody off guard, didn't she?"

"Including you, I guess," he said.

Andy more than anybody else. "Yeah. Including me." Andy sighed and sipped her champagne. "Well, it worked out for her, but what are you up to these days?"

"Actually I'm collaborating right now. My last collection of essays sold well, so Benny Doran and I are getting together and trying a hybrid project. Essays and short stories. Dogs and cats living together, mass hysteria, that kind of thing."
"That sounds pretty cool," Andy said. "How's it going?"

"Great. Benny's a fun guy. We're hoping to have it out in a few months, actually, luck willing."

"Cheers to you, then," Andy said, and they clinked their glasses together. "How long've you been in London?"

"Since Paris," he said, and shrugged. "Still can't face New York. I'll give it another few months. Hey." He lifted one shoulder. "Are we friends again?"

"Sure," Andy said, suddenly feeling uneasy.

"Well, when I do make it back, do you mind if I look you up? I'm not trying to rush into anything. But I always liked spending time with you."

"We never actually spent all that much time together," Andy reminded him.

"True," Christian said. "But I do have fond memories about what little we managed." He even dared to waggle his eyebrows, and Andy laughed.

Then she sobered and said, "I'm tempted." She was. "But Miranda probably wouldn't like it very much. She knows you were in on the whole thing with Irv and Jacqueline." Andy had been the one to tell her, after all.

"Hmm." Christian rubbed his chin. "It'd have to be very secretive, then. Furtive, even. You know, I've always liked the word 'furtive.'"

Andy rolled her eyes and gestured around the packed room. "We're not off to a very good start."

"Indeed we're not," Christian said, glanced over her shoulder, and raised his eyebrows again. "In fact, I'd say we're off to the worst start possible. Whoops."

Shit. "Don't tell me," Andy said.


"I'm not looking," Andy said quickly. "I'm acting innocent. In fact, you accosted me. In fact--"

"You've been trying to escape," Christian said, nodding solemnly. "Quick, let's talk about totally innocent topics before she gets here. You made any good investments lately?"

"Invest--uh--no. I don't have any money to invest. But if I did, uh, they'd…probably be good?"

Christian nodded, trying to look thoughtful when it was obvious he wanted to grin. "Well, you want to watch out for the subprime market," he said, letting his voice get a little louder, which meant Miranda was honing in on them. "You've probably seen it all over the news. Worst time possible to sell a house. Good time to be a buyer, though."

"Oh, right," Andy said, realizing how long it had been since she'd even had time to sit down and watch the evening news. Her whole life had been about the news, once. "Yeah. My sister's in real estate, actually, she was talking about…"

"Andrea," said a very frosty voice. Andy winced, straightened out her wince, and turned around with what she hoped was a surprised, but not shocked, expression.

"Oh, Miranda!" she said. "Hi."
"Good evening, Miranda," Christian said politely. Andy glanced at him and saw the laughter in his eyes. Miranda would see it, too.

"Good evening," Miranda said curtly, before looking back at Andy. She'd ditched her champagne glass. "Come along. We're leaving."

Now Andy really was surprised. "We are?" she said, and glanced over at an enormous gilt clock. They were supposed to stay for forty-five more minutes.

"Yes," Miranda said, whirled, and stalked off without another word, presenting Andy with her perfect shoulders. Andy stared at them, momentarily hypnotized, and hardly heard Christian saying something about giving her a call sometime. She waved at him, mumbled an absent 'goodbye,' and followed the shoulders, and then the hair, and then the graceful arms, towards the front door. She hoped it wasn't obvious to anybody else that she was ogling Miranda from behind, but she couldn't help herself. At least the voluminous skirt hid Miranda's ass.

They got their coats. Miranda didn't say a word, or even look at Andy. She was a little flushed, but that might have been from the heat and the crowd. She did, however, look stone-facced.

Andy waited until they were in the cold night air to say, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Miranda said, still not looking at her. Camera flashes started going off all around them as the photographers haunting the building realized that a celebrity had just exited it. "Where is the car?"

Andy craned her neck, and pointed at the Jaguar pulling up to the curb. Jimmy had spotted them, thank God. Miranda immediately descended the steps, with Andy watching anxiously to make sure she didn't slip. The steps weren't icy, but you never knew with high heels. Before they got in the car, she dared to ask, "You're feeling okay, ri--"


Then, to Andy's astonishment, Miranda said, "Christian Thompson's still hanging around, I see."

"Uh," Andy said. "Actually, I didn't know he, um, was in town. Until tonight."

"And he sought you out?"

"Yes," Andy said, confused. "I mean, I just turned around, and there he was."

"What does he want?"

"I--huh?"

"Don't make me repeat myself," Miranda said.

"He said he just wants to, uh, hang out with me again, if he comes back to New York," Andy said, completely bewildered but figuring there was no real reason to hide it. "We, you know, we didn't part on good terms. But--"

"No?" Miranda studied her bangle. "And what terms were you on before?"

Oh, God. "We were friends," Andy said. Miranda gave her an extremely direct look. "We had a thing," Andy admitted in a very small voice. "I mean, a short one," she added hastily.
"A thing," Miranda said.

"Yes," Andy said, turning red and hoping Miranda couldn't see it in the shadows. She decided it wouldn't look very good if she added, 'But I was drunk.' "But it, it was short, like I said."

Miranda looked out her window. "Christian Thompson, Roy…” she said. "The list of inappropriate men just keeps growing, doesn't it?"

"Miranda!" Andy said, shocked. "That's not true!"

"Isn't it?"

"No," Andy snapped. If Miranda wanted to know when Andy was upset with her, then they were well on their way to the first test case. "I told you I'm not going out with Roy. And Christian, okay, that was a bad idea, but that's how I found out. About Irv and Jacqueline and all that, back in Paris. And then I came and told you right away." Didn't Miranda get it? Andy had chosen her over Christian, over Nate, over Doug and Lily, over Emily, hell, over her own family. What else was it going to take?

Miranda blinked at her. "I seem to remember--" She frowned. "Yes, you did say he'd told you about it." She raised an eyebrow. "You neglected to mention how."

"Uh--" Andy suddenly wanted to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. "I'm not sure why--it's none of your--how is that even relevant?"

"Oh, my," Miranda said, and pressed her lips together as she smirked.

"Miranda--"

"Did you at least let him get his pants back on?" Miranda asked, her eyes gleaming.

"He was in a towel," Andy said, before she could summon the presence of mind to cut out her own tongue.

Miranda stared at her. Andy froze. She couldn't possibly have just said--

Then Miranda Priestly burst out laughing.

Really and truly. Her shoulders shook, her eyes went wide, and her lips parted in incredulous glee. "What?" she gasped, clapping a gloved hand over her mouth too late to stifle herself.

"Miranda!" Andy spluttered. "I--he--"

"Oh my God," Miranda said, and pressed the hand to her breast as she let out another peal of laughter. Andy growled and stared out her window, her cheeks flaming. It figured that Andy's abject humiliation would be what finally made Miranda crack up. Nice.

Miranda finally regained her voice. "Well, I suppose you had your pants on," she chortled. "That's something. You did, didn't you?"

"Yes," Andy said much too quickly.

"You didn't?" Miranda looked like she was actually about to double over.

"I did!" Andy said, deciding that she would die before she told Miranda that she'd run out of Christian's hotel room without her shirt, showing her leather bustier to the world before she'd
remembered to put on her jacket in the elevator.

"Oh," Miranda said again, and pressed her fingertips to her forehead while she got herself back under control. "Oh. Well." She took a deep breath. "I guess I do hope we run into him again, then."

"You wouldn't," Andy said, breathless with horror. "You--Miranda, you wouldn't say anyth--"

"Oh, of course not," Miranda chuckled, waving her hand. "I'd just look at him, and know."

Then she looked over at Andy just as they passed by a streetlight that shone into the car. Her cheeks were appealingly pink, her smile was unforced and natural, and her eyes still sparkled with mirth. She almost looked…affectionate.

Andy instantly forgave her for every single thing she'd ever done. Then she looked out her own window before she could be caught staring at Miranda's mouth.

Yeah. Worst night in a long time.
"Of course, when it comes to a beautiful woman such as yourself, being a fool is always the right thing to do."

-Kill Bill vol.2

Third: January.

Andy had hoped that, waking up on January 1 (after a strangely homey evening that had ended with leftover rice pudding and everybody going to bed at 12:15), she would no longer find Miranda Priestly attractive. Like, maybe it had just been the last enormous mistake she'd made in the previous year. Something that wouldn't matter anymore when they changed the calendars, and on New Year's Day she could start completely fresh. She could even make a resolution of some kind: "I will not fantasize about having sex with Miranda until we are both too tired to move." Then again, she'd broken that one in about half her dreams last night already.

After waking up from one of those dreams at six-thirty, Andy gave up on sleep and staggered into the shower to start her day. Then she dressed and went downstairs, fully expecting to have the townhouse to herself for an hour or so. Though what she'd do with the privacy, she had no idea. Watch some television, maybe. Catch up on the subprime housing crisis or whatever it was. And try to forget all about Miranda for a few hours, until the vision of her in champagne and gold vanished from Andy's mind.

It really wasn't Andy's fault--Miranda had been so stunning that practically everybody at the ball had wanted her, or wanted to be her. Andy couldn't be blamed for being dazzled by something so… perfect. Today would be different. Today everything would be back to normal.

But when she wandered into the living room at five before seven, clinging to a hot cup of coffee, she ran smack into the sight of Miranda curled up on the loveseat by the window in her grey bathrobe. She was wearing her reading glasses as she looked over what appeared to be a fax. No makeup, no jewelry. Her lips were thinned into a line of displeasure, and her brow was furrowed, making her look older. But her bare toes were peeping out from beneath the hem of her robe, and she had a tuft of white hair sticking up from behind one ear.

Andy's stomach plummeted right down into her feet. Fuck. Oh…oh, fuck.

Miranda looked up at the sound of her footsteps, and scowled. Andy immediately took a step back. "Sorry," she said, her heart beating painfully hard. "I didn't think anybody would be up yet."

"Neither did I," Miranda said testily, and tucked the tuft of hair back behind her ear before Andy could protest that it was adorable, which would have been incredibly, unbelievably stupid.

She clutched her coffee mug tighter instead. "Sorry," she repeated. "I'll just, just go back to the kitchen." Probably a good idea. Maybe when she got away from Miranda she would remember how to swallow, and breathe, and do other things that would help her stay alive and drink the coffee.

She'd already turned to go when Miranda said, "No. Stay here. Look at this." She held the fax out to Andy. Andy, accepting her doom, took a deep breath and took the fax with a hand that only shook a little bit. Maybe Miranda would put it down to fatigue. But no: Miranda was looking out of the window onto the still-dark street, not paying attention to Andy at all.
"Preston faxed it sometime last night, when we were gone," she said.

Andy sat down in the nearest chair, set her coffee aside, and looked over the fax. Her eyes widened. It was the document Mr. Praeger had drawn up about Stephen's agreement to give Miranda full legal and physical custody of the baby, and his relinquishment of visitation rights. Stephen had had to sign and initial it about fifty million times. He hadn't missed a single blank space. All the t's were crossed, all the i's were dotted, and all the dates were in good order.

"Oh," she said.

"Maybe this will convince the judge that the waiting period isn't necessary," Miranda said bitterly. Andy nodded, but didn't have a lot of hope that Miranda was right. According to New York law, Miranda and Stephen couldn't even officially file for divorce until a year had passed after they'd separated.

"I want this done," Miranda said, still staring out the window, tapping her fingertips on the windowsill in agitation. "I want this over with, I want it final." Andy held her breath, praying that Miranda wouldn't take it into her head to order Andy to change the court system for her. But all Miranda said was, "October. That's the earliest we can file, and then we've got to wait twenty days for the decree, and…" Her voice trailed off. Her other hand traced briefly over her abdomen, maybe unconsciously.

Andy bit her lip. The child would be three months old by the time Miranda and Stephen got divorced. And once he actually saw the baby, it was entirely possible that Stephen would change his mind, would want to share custody, or at least be a part of its life.

But would that really be so bad? Andy heard Mr. Praeger's voice telling Miranda that the child had a right to know its father. And Miranda had been more than willing to reconcile with Stephen before the whole infidelity thing had come out. Maybe she'd relent. Maybe that would be the best thing for everyone. It'd definitely be better for the kid, who wouldn't grow up thinking that his--or her--father had never wanted anything to do with her. Or him.

But maybe…

There was one possibility that made Andy feel ice-cold inside, and she voiced it before she could stop herself. "What if he changes his mind?" she whispered.

Miranda glared at Andy. "That's precisely what I am worried about, Andrea," she said, gesturing angrily at the fax in Andy's hands.

"Yes," Andy said, and then added, "no, I mean, not about the baby, about--about even the divorce, or something." Miranda stared at her incredulously, but Andy didn't see why the idea was so outlandish. Maybe once Stephen saw his child, he'd decide that he wanted to make his marriage work after all. Or maybe not, but it wasn't like the idea was beyond the realm of possibility.

What if he wanted Miranda back? What if she took him back? For the kid's sake?

"What if he changes his mind?" Miranda said coldly.

"Nothing," Andy mumbled, and shrugged, retreating before Miranda's clear reluctance to discuss the issue.

But Miranda might change her mind, too. And if she did, if she took Stephen back and became part of one big happy family unit again, the agony Andy had suffered last night at the ball--watching all those men watching Miranda--would be a fucking cake walk in comparison. Just thinking about it
made Andy feel sick, physically ill, now that she knew…

Knew what? Knew what?

"I, um," Andy said, looking down at her watch and swallowing hard, "I need to take my dress back this morning. To Runway U.K. The office opens at eight, I'll just call Jimmy, if, if that's okay." And if it wasn't okay, she'd take the Underground. She'd hitchhike. She'd walk in her bare feet. She needed to get out of here for an hour or so, needed to breathe.

"Fine," Miranda said, giving her a long, inscrutable look. "We're all going out to lunch today. Be back here by noon."

"Okay," Andy said, and added, "oh, do you want me to fix you some breakf--"

"No," Miranda said, and Andy saw the way her cheeks went a little paler, and the shudder that ran along her frame. Had the morning sickness happened yet? Definitely best not to ask. Andy left the room without saying another word. She called Jimmy, went upstairs, and carefully packed the dress back in its garment bag.

She used the car ride to pull herself together. Well, she tried anyway. She wasn't sure it worked. But she definitely reminded herself of a few salient facts.

Like the fact that Miranda was almost twenty-five years older than Andy. And Miranda was getting divorced. And actually might not be getting divorced, no matter what she said now. And was Andy's boss. And wasn't very nice. And liked men, not women. And was, in short, the least suitable person on earth for Andy to--to care about. She'd never care about Andy in return, that was for sure, except to think that Andy was a vaguely useful tool who sometimes made her life easier. Not a person. Not a person with thoughts and feelings and hopes and…

It had to be some kind of defense mechanism, Andy decided at once. She was still hurt from losing Nate, and so she'd fixated on somebody 'safe,' or, okay, not safe. Not safe at all. But somebody she didn't even have a chance with. Somebody unattainable. That was it. That was all.

And this was so sudden. At least, it felt sudden. It had obviously been building up for a long time, but that totally didn't matter because Andy was overreacting and letting her feelings go to her head, and in a few days' time she was going to feel ridiculous about this. This wasn't a true feeling. It was an impulse, a girl-crush on a mentor figure, the result of months of celibacy, it was anything but genuine. It'd vanish like the wind. Especially once Miranda did or said something extra nasty. That'd snap Andy out of it pretty fast.

She told Jimmy not to wait for her, deciding that taking the tube home, or even just wandering around for a couple of hours, would be good for her. Anything that kept her away from Miranda until lunchtime would be good for her, in fact.

The Runway U.K. offices were much more sparsely populated than they had been on her last visit, although--because it was a Runway subsidiary and therefore never slept--they weren't completely closed for the public holiday. They felt lonely. So did the streets outside, when Andy emerged from the building after dropping off the dress. Few Londoners, or even tourists, were out and about at eight a.m. after a night of revelry. Andy wondered how her friends had celebrated the New Year back home. Had Lily thrown the usual party? Had Doug brought his usual awful tray of pigs-in-a-blanket? Would either of them have spoken to her, if she'd shown up? The smart money said 'no.'

Andy's stomach growled, and she realized she hadn't had breakfast yet. She stopped in a nearby café, glad of the warmth inside. When she'd decided to go for a walk, she'd forgotten about how fucking
cold it would be, especially at this time of day. She'd been spoiled by cozy car rides.

She bought a coffee, bacon and eggs (might as well enjoy them while Miranda wasn't around to get nauseated), and a newspaper. She should probably go for the *Times*, after her embarrassing realization that she was so far behind on the news. But Andy realized with dismay that the *Times*’s serious front page couldn't hold her interest today. Disgusted by herself, she got the *Sun* instead, and flipped through it until she found coverage of the New Year's Ball with a whole spread of luridly full-color pictures for the curious woman-on-the-street to enjoy. She recognized several of the people she'd met last night. There was Christian, in fact, talking to some cute starlet. Surprise, surprise.

And there was one of Andy and Miranda too. Andy told herself she hadn't been looking for it, but there it was: they were leaving the ball, going down the stone steps. Miranda looked elegant, but also vaguely pissed off. Andy, thank goodness, was looking down at the steps so you couldn't really see her face. She read the caption: "Tyrannical American fashion queen Miranda Priestly leaves the ball with no date but a lowly assistant. Looks like soon-to-be-ex hubby had a better time and bubblier company [see 4D]."

Lowly assistant? Hubby? "Bubblier" company? *Lowly assistant*? Already choking with indignation, Andy tore the paper open to 4D, and saw a small, black-and-white photo of none other than Stephen Tomlinson with a dazzling, big-chested blonde on his arm. Apparently she was some young British pop star currently living in New York. And dating Miranda's husband. Stephen was looking down at her with an utterly fatuous expression on his face. His stupid, weak-chinned, indecisive face that Andy had never found remotely appealing, and which she now realized was downright repulsive. Asshole.

The caption for this photo was even worse. "Stephen Tomlinson, the former Mr. Miranda Priestly, ditches the ice queen for our own Lennie Jeff. We call it an upgrade."

Andy crumpled the paper until it was nothing but a tiny ball of newsprint and wished she could get her money back, not wanting to support that kind of garbage with one single penny. Thank God Miranda didn't subscribe.

Andy had only eaten a few bites of her breakfast, but she couldn't stomach another mouthful. Not now. Eight-thirty and her day was already ruined. Great start to the new year. Did the other papers have this kind of crap in them? Not that Andy was going to pay money to find out. She wasn't going to drop any more cash just to be insulted. She didn't have a lot of it to spare, since she was just a lowly assistant who only got to spend time with Miranda because Miranda couldn't find somebody better, somebody more deserving. Somebody like one of those tuxedoed men at the ball. Andy threw a little of that hard-earned money on the table and stomped out the door.

But that just cinched it, didn't it? Not one day later and Andy's presumption, her ridiculous thoughts, had already been shot out of the sky by the British press itself. She hadn't even been able to enjoy twenty-four hours of being in...in lust, or infatuated, or however you wanted to put it.

If Stephen tried to get Miranda back after this, he'd be lucky if Andy didn't kick him in the balls.

Thank God Andy was leaving tomorrow. Miranda and the twins didn't return until the third, but their flight hadn't had any spare seats, so Andy'd had to book a flight out for a day earlier. Good. The sooner the better. London wasn't so hot. Emily could fucking have Spring Fashion Week if she wanted it, as far as Andy was concerned. Maybe Andy could even talk Miranda into that, if she played her cards right.

Since Andy was wearing her mostly-comfortable shoes again, she hugged her arms around herself, glad of her warm coat and scarf and hat, and just kept walking. She remembered how Miranda had
needed to go for a walk after discovering Stephen's infidelity. She must have been feeling a lot worse than Andy felt right now. A hundred, a thousand times worse. God.

Andy walked and walked, and occasionally stopped to get a hot cup of something, and occasionally stopped to sit down and look at things and people, but mostly walked while thinking really unhappy thoughts. When she looked down at her watch, it was already eleven-thirty. "Shit!"

She called the townhouse right away. Thankfully it was Padmini, not Miranda, who picked up. "Priestly residence. Hello?" She sounded wary.

"Padmini, it's me," Andy said. "I'm--"

"Oh, thank goodness," Padmini said, sounding relieved. "Reporters have been calling all morning about those terrible pictures in the Sun."

Andy stopped dead on the sidewalk and closed her eyes. "Really," she said.

"It's horrible, what they print now," Padmini said. "A disgrace. But after the first one, she hasn't answered the phone anymore. It's the best thing."

"Yeah," Andy said, and pulled her coat around her tighter as a gust of wind hit her. All of a sudden it felt a lot colder. "Uh, where is she? What's she doing?"

"She is in her bedroom," Padmini said hesitantly. "She has asked not to be disturbed before lunch. She said she has work to do today."

Work? Then why wasn't Andy there to assist? That was her fucking job, wasn't it, to be a lowly assistant? "I'm on my way back," she said. "I should be there in less than an hour."

"An hour?" Padmini said in alarm. "She wants to leave at noon. Didn't she tell you?"

Andy blinked. "What? She still wants to go out to lunch?" She'd thought for sure that Miranda wouldn't want to stir out of doors after a humiliation like this.

"Oh, yes," Padmini said. "She was most definite upon the point."

Great. Miranda was set on proving something. It figured. "Okay," Andy said. "That's why I was actually calling--I wanted to ask what restaurant, so I could meet you there instead of coming all the way back."

"Aubergine, in Chelsea," Padmini said, and she sounded excited. No wonder. Chelsea was nice, and Aubergine was supposed to be really nice. Andy had overheard somebody talking about it back in Paris. "I will tell her you will meet us there. She will not be happy, though," she added. "Not today."

"I know," Andy sighed. "I'll deal with it. I'll meet you--"

Then there was a clicking sound and Miranda's voice said, "Andrea?"

Andy stood up ramrod-straight. "Miranda? Um. Hi, I was just…"

"That's all, Padmini," Miranda said, and Andy heard another click as Padmini hung up. "Where are you?"

"Um," Andy said, and looked around for a street sign. "I'm not actually sure."

"Why are you not here?"
"You said noo--I'm sorry. I'll see you at the restaurant, though."

"I told you to be back here."

"I know. I'm sorry," Andy said again, and wrapped her free arm around herself, shivering. "I, um, time got away from me."

"Got away from you. Well."

"I was upset," Andy said before she could think better of it. "I just sort of kept walking, I didn't mean to. But I can get to the restaurant before you, and make sure the table's all ready."

"Upset," Miranda said flatly.

"I saw the pictures," Andy admitted. "In the Sun, while I was eating breakfast."

There was silence for a long moment. Andy wondered if, in spite of everything, she'd just gotten herself fired. Then Miranda said, "Aubergine."

"Oh," Andy said. "Yeah. Padmini told--"

"By twelve-fifteen," Miranda said, and hung up.

Lunch was a silent and awkward affair. Andy had arrived about ten minutes before Miranda, Padmini, and the twins, and was sitting at the table by the time they arrived. Thankfully no reporters had followed Miranda to the restaurant, but several of the patrons inside recognized her. A couple of them even knew her, and as they stopped by the table to say hello, Andy saw the curiosity, and sometimes even the glee in their eyes. Miranda greeted all of them with a cold smile, and soon enough her acquaintances mumbled their farewells and left her alone.

The food was excellent, but Andy couldn't quite bring herself to enjoy it. Still, trying to set a good example (especially for Miranda, who looked less than enthused), Andy ate almost every bite. So did Padmini and the girls. Eventually Miranda managed to eat about three-fourths of her food, which still wasn't saying much, since Aubergine was one of those restaurants that served teeny-tiny portions for outrageous sums of money. Total rip-off. What Miranda needed was a Cracker Barrel. Andy tried to imagine Miranda in a Cracker Barrel, and almost choked on her ice water.

"Did you read the newspaper, Andy?" Caroline asked as the waiters took up the dessert plates. Padmini and Cassidy looked at Caroline in alarm. Miranda looked at her too, but she only appeared sad, not surprised.

Andy blinked. "Um…yes," she said. "How about that Victoria Beckham, huh? Always wearing the craziest--"

"They said really mean things about you," Caroline said.

"That's enough," Miranda said. Andy was astonished. It was the first time she'd ever heard Miranda rebuke one of her children.

"But they did," Caroline persisted. "They called her--"
"Shut up," Cassidy said.

"--a lowly --"

"I said that's enough." Miranda's voice was low, even, and deadly. It was the voice she used at Runway right before someone was about to get fired. Apparently Caroline had never heard it before, because she shrank from it, looking shocked.

Andy knew she shouldn't say anything. She should let the fraught moment pass. But she spoke anyway, and told Caroline a big fat lie. "I don't care," she said. "I am your mom's assistant. It doesn't matter what people write about me." Nope. It didn't matter what anybody wrote about an assistant. It didn't matter at all.

"I see," Miranda said, and Andy looked at her, startled. She'd been speaking to Caroline. The look on Miranda's face was closed and blank.

"It only matters what they write about your mom," Andy dared to continue, looking back at Caroline. "That's what's important, and that's why they should be ashamed of themselves. I wouldn't have let the staff at my college newspaper get away with that."

Now Miranda was the one who looked startled. She'd obviously forgotten that Andy had been an editor-in-chief too, once. Andy couldn't blame her. Since she'd started working at Runway, she'd pretty much forgotten about it herself. But she thought she'd been a pretty good boss, all things considered.

Not as effective as Miranda, though. She wouldn't do everything like Miranda did, for sure, but she'd learned a lot in the last year. If she had to do it all over again, she'd handle some things differently. She definitely wouldn't take as much crap from a couple of the more prima-donna reporters.

Echoing Andy's thoughts, Cassidy said, "You were an editor too? Like Mom?"

"Well, not exactly," Andy said, suddenly feeling very self-conscious. "Just for my senior year. And a college newspaper's a lot different from Runway."

"If you want to work at a newspaper, why are you at a magazine?" Cassidy asked, just like Caroline had.

How had she gotten herself into this? "I, I could work at either. I like working at Runway," Andy said, realizing even as she spoke that it was true. "It's different, but that's not bad. And it's all publishing anyway, right?"

"I guess," Cassidy said, and shifted in her seat, obviously impatient to leave. Caroline played with the edge of the tablecloth and didn't look at anybody. Andy and Padmini exchanged a glance, and Padmini murmured, "Ms. Priestly, the girls are going to a friend's house--"

"Jimmy's here," Cassidy announced, looking out of the window, where she could see the Jaguar rolling up to the curb. Just in time, too, as the waiter arrived with the bill. Andy realized that there were too many of them to fit in the car this time.

"I'll take the Underground back," she said to Miranda. "I should get there in no more tha--"

"I will accompany you," Miranda said.

They all stared at her. Andy was positive she'd heard wrong.
"You're riding the subway?" Cassidy asked.

"Yes, dear," Miranda said absently as she gave the waiter her credit card.

"Can we come too?" Cassidy asked. "I haven't been on the subway in London yet."

"No. Go with Jimmy, or you'll be late to Eva's house," Miranda said. She kissed the top of Cassidy's head, and then Caroline's. Caroline still wasn't looking at her. "Move along." The twins headed for the car while Andy and Miranda waited for the waiter to return with Miranda's card. Andy was still frozen with shock.

The waiter returned, and Miranda signed the credit slip. Then she stood up. Andy staggered to her feet as well, positive that Miranda didn't really mean what she'd said, that she'd actually used some kind of code that meant she wanted Andy to summon a helicopter.

As Andy helped her into her coat, she said, "Um, are you sure you don't want me to call a cab or something?"

Miranda didn't even answer, but instead led the way out the door. Still no reporters. Andy wondered why not.

"Jimmy told the press we were going to Mirabelle," Miranda said, reading her mind like it was easy. "They followed us out of the house, but then split up on their little motorcycles." She smiled faintly. "I pay him to give them inaccurate tips."

"Haven't they caught on yet?" Andy asked.

"Not yet," Miranda said, and sighed. Her breath puffed out in little clouds. Her cheeks were already reddening from the cold. Andy gulped, suddenly remembering why she'd needed to get away from Miranda this morning in the first place. She also remembered dreaming about having sex with Miranda last night, and wanted to sink through the sidewalk.

Miranda looked around with an irritated expression on her face. Crap. Andy had to focus now.

"Nearest station's this way," she said quickly, pointing down the street, still not able to believe that Miranda was actually going to enter it.

But she did. She led the way down the street, and then down the stairs into the darkness. She watched silently while Andy paid for two one-trip tickets, she walked through a turnstile, and she looked completely out of place in a fur-trimmed coat and Miu Miu pumps. People stared at her as they passed, although Andy doubted many of them recognized her. She just…stood out.

The station, though not as dirty as a New York station, still stank of people and trash and even urine. Andy almost felt like she should protect Miranda from it, from the crush and press of the real world, from dirt and grime and smells and common things that ordinarily never touched her. But Miranda did not seem particularly perturbed as she scrutinized a map of the Underground on the wall. Andy pointed at it and said, "We, ah, get on this line. Going south. It won't take long from here." Miranda's townhouse was close to Chelsea.

"Fine," Miranda said, and followed Andy through the tiled tunnels and past the big postered advertisements for shows and films.

The line was crowded. Andy stood by Miranda as they boarded the train and used her elbows as best she could to keep people back from them without actually assaulting anyone. Pickpockets were the last thing either of them needed to worry about. Miranda managed to nab a seat, and Andy stood next to her, holding on to a rail overhead.
Miranda didn't speak for five minutes. Then she said: "I took the subway not long ago. That day."

She said nothing else. Andy knew which day she was talking about, though. Andy guessed Miranda had just wanted to get out of her life for a while, even if for a couple of hours: just to be somebody else, somebody who took the subway. To disappear into a crowd and not be noticed, just once, while she got her head together.

But now Miranda was looking around the car in disgust, and Andy decided that an hour or so was probably all she needed to remember why she hated this kind of thing. At least they didn't have to change cars.

"Caroline has asked to sit next to you on the flight home," Miranda said, out of nowhere.

Andy blinked, and then got a very bad feeling. "Um," she said.

"She appears to be connecting with you," Miranda said, and snorted. "In her way."

"Oh, good," Andy said weakly. "But, I mean, you know I'm not on your flight. Right?" Miranda turned to look up at her with wide eyes. "I--when I bought my ticket they copied you on my itinerary. At least, they were supposed to. I told them to. I gave them your email."

"Why are you not on our flight?" Miranda asked, looking like she was getting ready to throw a pretty spectacular tantrum.

"It was full," Andy said. "The only flight I could get was tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes," Andy said, and added quickly, "but that's good, right? It means I'll get back a day earlier and I can take care of, of things before you arrive. Right?" Miranda did not look one jot less outraged. "Did you really not get my itinerary?" Andy said.

"I didn't look at it," Miranda snapped. "I assumed you would know that you were to accompany us home. My God, are you completely incapable of independent thought?"

A man standing next to Andy looked over and whistled at them. "Sorry for you, love," he said to Andy before turning away again.

Andy couldn't have agreed more. But, deciding that Miranda deserved a little leeway after such a crappy morning, she only said, "Miranda, your flight was full. Completely full. I didn't think one day would make any difference." Miranda opened her mouth. "I've got everything lined up for you," Andy added quickly. "There'll be porters waiting to take your bags at the airport, and you'll get priority boarding. And the VIP Lounge. And Roy will be ready and waiting to pick you up at JFK. You won't need me for anything." She tried a cajoling smile. "I even told the girl at the VIP Lounge to have decaf Starbucks waiting when you get there. And juice for the twins."

"Jesus," the man next to Andy said, turning around again. "You want to work for me instead? Not that I can pay you, mind."

"No thanks," Andy said, never looking away from Miranda's face. "I love my job."

"When does this ride end?" Miranda asked through her teeth.

"Three more stops," Andy said, deciding they couldn't come soon enough.
Miranda glared. "Cranapple juice?"

"Cranapple juice," Andy confirmed.

"Don't do this again," Miranda said.

"Yes, Miranda," Andy said. "Sorry, Miranda."

"Get over yourself, Miranda," said the man.

"Okay," Andy said, turning around and glaring at him. The brakes screeched and squealed as the train arrived at the next station.

"My stop," he said, grinning at her. "Good luck now."

"Yeah," Andy said, kind of wanting to thank him, but turning her back to him instead. Miranda glowered at him as he left.

"You certainly seem to have the touch," she said.

"I guess," Andy said sheepishly. Men had always liked her, it was true, even before her makeover. She'd conjectured that it had less to do with her shoes and more to do with her breasts.

"I've decided on Lucia's replacement," Miranda said. "Call Nigel as soon as we're home."

"Okay," Andy said. When Miranda said nothing else, she added, "Uh, which one did you pick?"

Miranda blinked, and shook her head slightly as if she was coming out of a reverie. "The least appalling. The one from Elle." Nigel's pick, then. Andy was relieved. "Judging from her application," Miranda added, glancing down and adjusting her glove, "she would be absolutely delighted to work with me." She glanced up at Andy.

Andy bit her lip to repress a grin. "Work with?" she said, trying to sound polite.

"I'm glad you understand these things, Andrea," Miranda said, and settled back against her seat.

Andy kept her word. When she flew out of London at an obscenely early hour the next morning, before Miranda and the twins were even out of bed, she was already running through her mental checklist of the things she had to take care of when she landed. First, call Nigel, and then her parents, drop her stuff off at the apartment and go to Runway and make sure Emily hadn't fucked anything up too badly…the list went on and on. But Andy had only staved off Miranda's wrath by promising to take care of things, so that's what she had to do. That's what she did best, no matter how lowly she was.

Yesterday afternoon had been okay. Reporters had been lurking across the street of the townhouse when they got back, but they didn't dare get too close, no doubt knowing that Miranda would call the police. And after her fifty minutes of Common People Therapy, Miranda had seemed her old self again, and had spent the rest of the afternoon barking orders at Andy to be fulfilled upon her return to New York. Caroline had been upset ("in her way") that Andy wouldn't be flying back with them. Cassidy hadn't cared. Padmini had given her a very nice goodbye when she'd gone home that night.
All in all, it had been the weirdest Christmas ever.

She called Nigel once the plane touched down. "Come to the office as soon as you've dropped off your stuff," he said.

She called her parents at the baggage claim. "Glad you're home safe, sweetheart," her dad said. "And she's still back there?"

"Yes," Andy said. "She and the twins are flying in tomorrow."

"And she behaved herself?" her dad asked, his voice hard.

Unfortunately, grievously, tragically, "Yes. She did. I told you it's not like that." Because life sucked.

"Well," her dad said.

Andy tried not to notice how shabby her apartment was compared to Miranda's townhouse. Especially her bed with its lumpy mattress. She was going to miss sleeping in Ste--in the guest bedroom where Miranda had definitely never had sex with Stephen, as Andy had told herself every single night with different feelings on the subject each time. From hysterical denial to toxic jealousy in just under a week. Nobody could say that Andy Sachs was an underachiever.

Keeping really busy was definitely the best way to avoid spending all her time feverishly thinking about what it would be like to have sex with a woman. Okay, a specific woman. Andy was pretty sure that a week ago the very thought of having sex with Miranda would have horrified her. Well, maybe not horrified, but she wouldn't have had the guts to sit around and think about Miranda's breasts and wonder if they were sensitive. Or if Miranda made noises. Or if Miranda liked having sex at all, because it was entirely possible that she didn't, no matter who it was with. Or if it would even be safe for her to do it now. The books said it was, "during most normal pregnancies." But what about this was normal? Not that it mattered because it wasn't going to happen, Andy reminded herself. Over and over.

She took a quick shower, and sighed at the mildew on the tiles. Sure would be nice to have a maid around. And a cook.

The shower, after a long plane ride, plus jet lag, made her sleepy. She dosed herself liberally with coffee on the way back to Runway. She still wasn't prepared to go inside, sit down at her desk, and be confronted immediately with a quivering Emily asking, "Is it true?"

Andy looked blearily up at her. "Is what true?"

"About Miranda?"

Uh-oh. "What about Miranda?"

Emily looked around, and muttered, "Is. She. Pregnant?"

Well, word had gotten around, all right. Nigel had probably given everybody the discreet heads-up. There was no point in pretending otherwise by now. "Yes," Andy said.

"Oh my God," Emily said.

"Pretty much," Andy said.

"How long have you known?"
"Um, a while."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"She didn't want me to. Nigel worked it out on his own."

"Then how did you know? How did you know before Nigel?"

"Um," Andy hedged, "she didn't tell me, exactly." True enough. "Stuff just, just sort of happened, and I knew. Um. Does everyone know now, or just us?"

"'Us'?" Emily said with a sneer, putting her hands on her hips.

"You, me, and Nigel," Andy said, reaching for patience. "Does anybody else know?"

"Who knows?" Emily said. "I haven't said anything."

"Probably the best idea," Andy said.

"I don't need you to tell me what a good idea is, Andrea," Emily said. "Now. We're going to need to start making preparations."

"Preparations?"

"Yes, for God's sake! Arrangements for her comfort. Or were you just going to let her go along as she was? Honestly, does anything like that ever occur to you?"

"Her comfort," Andy repeated.

"Is there an echo in here?" Emily said. "You've been here for almost a year and you still know nothing about the care and feeding of Miranda Priestly? First things first, we need to look up her dietary requirements--"

"You're kidding, right?" Andy said.

"I'm kidding?" Emily's mouth drew back in a snarl. "I'm joking? Oh no, Andrea, apparently I'm the only one taking this seriously. I always have been, you know. I care and you don't. And you're the one who gets to go to Paris, but you don't understand this, you don't know the least thing about this!" Emily actually slammed a fist down on Andy's desk, making everything rattle.

Andy felt all kinds of things: indignation, pity, and a really evil kind of amusement. She let pity win. "Okay, Emily," she said. "Why don't you get right on that diet thing."

"Don't think I won't," Emily said, and added, "you're not going to last as long here as you think you will."

Andy blinked. "Excuse me?"

Emily stood up straight, and her lips lifted in a mean little smile. "There's a limit to what you can handle, isn't there? Do you think she won't see that? Going with her to her lawyer's office--well, whoop-de-do. This is different, and you can't handle it, I can already tell."

"Emily," Andy said.

"Well. The truth will out. You'll see." Emily tossed her hair.
Andy remembered the way Miranda had kissed the air to either side of her cheeks, and felt sorrier for Emily than ever. She was just a lowly assistant, true, but Emily was even worse off. "I guess it will," she said, and added, "hey, she said something about you to me. About how you dress better than I do."

"She what?" Emily's eyes narrowed.

"It's true," Andy said. "She said you take more risks in fashion and you understand it better than I do."

Emily preened. "Well," she said again. "I'm glad she finally noticed." She looked Andy up and down. "You do have a tiresome addiction to Chanel." She smirked.

Then Nigel arrived. Andy could have kissed him. That was, until he said, "Well? What kind of mood was she in yesterday?"

Shit. Andy narrowed her eyes at him and tilted her head towards Emily just the tiniest fraction. "She seemed okay when I talked to her," she said, praying Emily would just think it had been a phone call. "I, uh, I think she's ready to come home."

Nigel glanced at Emily, who seemed blissfully oblivious to the conversation's undercurrents. "Emily," he said, "Keisha's setting up shop in Lucia's old office. Why don't you go schmooze and get to know her? Then report back to me and tell me what's going on."

Looking thrilled to be entrusted with such a sensitive errand, Emily hurried off. Nigel turned to Andy. "Why are you trying to keep it from her?" he said. "Do you think Miranda won't say something that'll tip her off?"

"Better Miranda than me," Andy said. "I'm not that mean. Oh! Here." She pulled out her notebook. "She had me write down a bunch of stuff for you. I'm just about to type it up. Notes about the next shoot."

"The last thing Miranda needs," Nigel said, "or any of us, for that matter, is some tiresome little office drama."

Andy glared at him. "I don't want drama. I'm not making drama. I'm just doing my job." She turned to her monitor. "She's the one with issues, not me. I've been trying to be nice to her all along."

"That won't pay off," Nigel said. "Not in the long run. What if she makes a play for your position? And don't think I'm talking about being second assistant."

Making a play for Andy's position? Andy knew what he meant. What if Emily tried to usurp Andy's place at Miranda's side, tried to get between them, tried to push Andy away from Miranda? What then?

Andy looked up from the monitor and looked Nigel dead in the eye. "I will end her," she said.

Nigel looked satisfied. "There's hope for you yet, Six," he said.

Miranda didn't have to break the news to Emily, though. The next day, with Emily sitting across
from her at her own desk, Andy got a call on her cell phone. It was from Caroline.

Andy glanced at her watch. It was ten-fifteen. Miranda's flight would have landed twenty minutes ago. Not that Andy had been keeping track or anything. But why was Caroline calling, instead of her mother? Had something happened?

"Hello?" she said anxiously as she picked up.

"Hi," Caroline said. "Mom said I could call you."

"Oh," Andy said. "Okay. Is--are you guys back now?"

"Yeah. We're in customs. It's taking forever."

Yikes. That'd do wonders for Miranda's mood. Andy winced. "But everyone's okay, right?"

"Oh yeah, we're fine. Mom threw up twice on the flight, though."

Double yikes. "She did?"

"Yeah, but she made it to the bathroom both times," Caroline said. In the background, Andy heard Miranda's voice saying something sharp.

"Well," Andy said weakly. "That's good." Emily was staring at her, and mouthed the words, 'Who is that?" Andy mouthed, 'Caroline,' back at her, and Emily's eyes went wide.

Nigel arrived carrying a red paper bag from Cole Haan. "Enjoying the last few minutes of peace?" he asked, before noticing Andy on the phone. "Oops." He placed a decorous fingertip on his lips.

"But she's feeling better now," Andy pressed, hardly noticing him.

"She's fine," Caroline said, sounding annoyed. "She's mad at you, though."

Andy froze. "At me? What did I do?"


"Wha--I did not," Andy said indignantly. "I made the bed and everything before I left. I made sure everything was…"

"You left a hairbrush in the bathroom."

"How--oh." So that's where it had gone. "Sorry. Anything else?"

"You want to ask her?"

"No," Andy said quickly.

"I can bring you the brush," Caroline said generously. "I packed it. In a plastic bag, though, so your hair didn't get all over my stuff."

"Oh. Well…thanks," Andy said. "Uh…tell her I'm sorry?"

"She says she's sorry," Andy heard Caroline say. She couldn't hear Miranda's reply, if there was one. Probably for the best. Then she remembered that she was supposed to call the Donna Karan office in
half an hour and pulled out her notebook, getting ready to scribble some notes as soon as Caroline got off the phone.

"She says it doesn't matter," Caroline said, "because she hates you and she's going to fire you." Andy heard Cassidy laugh in the background, and rolled her eyes.

"She said that, huh," she said, and quickly jotted down the name of the guy Miranda had wanted her to speak to. "Okay, I'll just clean out my desk."

"You will?" Caroline sounded surprised.

"Yep," Andy said, and realized she needed a paperclip. She opened a drawer and began rummaging around. "You'll just have to tell her I quit because of what you told me."

"What? You can't do that," Caroline said.

"Why not? She just fired me." Andy grinned as she found a little plastic container full of paperclips. This was kind of fun. "Isn't that what you said?"

"Well--"

"Caroline, where is your mom? Seriously."

"Yelling at a customs official," Caroline admitted.

Andy doubted very much that Miranda was actually yelling, but then another voice said 'Give me that,' and Cassidy got on the phone. "Hi, Andy," she said.

"Hi, Cassidy," Andy said, paperclipping a memo to a fax. "How are you?"

"Are you going to meet us at the airport?"

"No," Andy said, and then went rigid in panic. "Wait. I'm not supposed to, am I? No," she added, calming. "I'm supposed to be at the office. No. Sorry. But Roy should be waiting for you." She hadn't seen Roy since she'd returned from London. She'd been very purposefully taking the subway everywhere.

"We had to leave Padmini this morning," Cassidy said. "It was really sad."

Andy closed her eyes and tapped her fingers on her desk before looking at her watch again. She had to get going on this. "I bet," she said. "I'm sorry. But you'll see her again sometime--don't you go to London a couple of times a year?"

"Yeah. We're going to go next fall. Which is forever, but she said she'll be happy to look after us again."

"Oh good," Andy said, and remembered she was supposed to send an email to a junior designer at Christian Louboutin. Crap. She'd almost forgotten. "Whoops. I mean…good."

"Are you paying attention?"

"Sure am," Andy said, trying to remember the designer's name. Tyrone. "But listen, did your mom want to talk to me about anything?"

"No," Cassidy said. "We're going straight home. She needs to lie down. It's weird that it's only ten-thirty, it feels like it should be later in the afternoon. But she said to tell you that she'd be at work by
two-thirty."

"Okay," Andy said, and zoomed in to update the computer schedule at once. "We'll be ready and waiting." She realized that her heart had begun to beat pleasantly at the thought of Miranda arriving at the office after a miserable flight and a long wait in customs. She was clearly out of her mind. "Anything else? Because I kind of have some stuff to take care of for her." Then she began typing. 'Hi Tyrone, This is Andy Sachs from Runway' …

"I guess not. Bye," Cassidy said, and hung up. Well, the 'bye' was more than Andy ever got from Miranda, at least. She sighed and set her cell phone down on the desk and kept typing. She noticed the silence after a few more keystrokes, looked up, and saw Nigel and Emily watching her. Nigel's face was thoughtful. Emily's was pale. Andy realized that of course they'd heard her half of that conversation, and bit her lip.

Emily started to talk, cleared her throat, and tried again. "She," she began, "you--"

"I hope you got some time to see London for yourself," Nigel said, and Andy saw Emily's complexion go the color of milk.

"Just an afternoon," Andy said, deliberately focusing on his face, wishing to God that Emily weren't there. "She kept me pretty busy." Even if 'busy' just meant sitting next to her on a park bench.

"Oh well," Nigel said, "there's always next time," and he wandered out after leaving the Cole Haan bag on Emily's desk.

Emily made a horrible little choking noise.

Andy took a deep breath and looked her dead in the eye. "She's getting here at two-thirty," she said. "At two o'clock I'm going to run out and get her a spinach-and-gruyere salad which will provide her with lots of folic acid, protein, and vitamins. She will want water with lemon--not seltzer water, plain water--to drink with it. I'm leaving that up to you. She will be in a terrible mood when she gets here. We are going to get along perfectly, and do our jobs perfectly, and not create any stress for her in any way. Right?" She did her best to deliver the whole speech without blinking. Charles Manson had never blinked, if she recalled correctly.

"I…" Emily's voice trailed off, and she looked at Andy with helpless hatred.

The 'helpless' part was good. Andy had meant to be nice, to be merciful, to remember how sorry she felt for Emily. But instead she heard her voice going very low and flat as she said, "I swear to God, Emily. I'm not kidding." She backed the words up with the power of two pregnancy tests, a three-a.m. phone call, Miranda's lovely shoulders, and a ride on the Underground, all of which combined to make her feel invincible and which ensured that she would crush Emily Charleton like a fucking bug if Emily tried to take any of that away from her. Stephen might be able to, but Emily didn't even stand the shadow of a chance.

"Water with lemon," Emily mumbled, looking down at her desk, before sending her trembling fingers skittering over her keyboard as she looked up at her monitor. Her eyes were bright with tears, but they weren't falling. "Right."

Andy didn't say anything as she turned back to her own computer and finished the email. She didn't need to. They understood each other.

By two-thirty, the entire office was deathly silent. Andy could picture everybody's ears pressed to the ground when the elevator dinged and Miranda walked in, talking on her cell phone. Andy was just
putting the silverware to either side of her salad plate.

Miranda looked like hell, though probably only Andy would be able to see it. She was dressed beautifully, impeccably made-up, and moved with her usual confident stride. But Andy, who could look past that now, noticed the exhaustion in her eyes and the tension she was carrying in her shoulders. Andy made a mental note to schedule a massage for later in the week. In the meantime, she saw Miranda pause in front of her desk, still wearing her coat.

Whoops. Andy quickly left the plate and hurried over just in time to help Miranda take off her coat, and took the bag. Miranda didn't look at her or stop talking. Andy hadn't really expected anything else, but she was still a little disappointed to realize that pretty much nothing was going to change after she'd spent over a week living in Miranda's house, making her breakfast and helping take care of her kids. Well, why should it? Nothing would change because nothing was different, except that Andy had let herself ascend to new heights of stupidity starting New Year's Eve.

That was that, really. The rest of the day progressed as most days did, with Miranda being disagreeable, and Andy and Emily scrambling to obey her orders as fast as possible. Today Miranda left the office at six-thirty. Andy had the feeling she was going to do that more often now that she'd figured out she had to start spending more time with the twins.

When Andy dropped off the book that night, there was a hairbrush in a plastic bag waiting for her on the table. Well, out of all the things she'd lost in London, including her hairbrush, her heterosexuality, and her mind, it was nice to get at least one of them back.

"Have a good trip?" Roy asked in the car the next morning. "I heard."
"God," Andy said. "Don't ask. Really. How was your holiday?"
"It was okay. Spent it with my folks. Went out with some buddies to a bar on New Year's. I guess you went to some fancy 'do. Hey--is it true? I mean, is she actually pregnant?"
"Yeah," Andy said.
"Wow," Roy said. "I mean…holy shit. I guess we'll all have a lot more to deal with, huh?"
Andy whimpered. "Did I mention don't ask?"
He laughed. "Sorry. Later. Okay. Can I ask about sports? You been keeping up with the Giants?"
"The Bengals," Andy said in relief, "and oh my God, they sucked this year."
"No fooling," Roy said, "did you see that last game when--"
Fifteen minutes passed in no time, and soon they were pulling up to the curb as Miranda descended the steps of her townhouse. Andy, mid-rant about a lousy defense, hardly paid any attention to her until she actually opened the door.

"--worst secondary I've ever, oh," Andy said. "Um. Good morning, Miranda."
"Good morning, Ms. Priestly," Roy said.
Miranda ignored Andy completely as she closed the door, but gave Roy one of the coldest looks Andy had ever seen. Andy's stomach twisted. She'd forgotten all about Miranda's threat to fire him. Oh shit. Oh no. Oh please…

Roy, glancing in the rear-view mirror, caught sight of Miranda's deadly glare. Andy saw his eyes go wide in surprise.

"Is there some reason we're not moving?" Miranda asked.

"Sorry," Roy said quickly, and pulled away from the curb.

Andy sat in silence, not even daring to look at Miranda until Miranda said something to her first. Not that she actually wanted Miranda to say anything, because if Miranda said anything, it would probably be something like--

"You two were awfully chatty when I got in the car," Miranda said.

Crap. Andy bit her lip and looked out the window. Please don't fire him, she thought. Since Miranda seemed to be so goddamned good at reading her mind sometimes, maybe it'd work.

When Andy didn't reply, Roy, sounding puzzled, took it upon himself to say, "Yes, Ms. Priestly. We both love football."

"Football," Miranda said. "Really."

"Yes," Roy said. "Uh, right, Andy?"

"Right," Andy said, and finally dared to look at Miranda, whose face was absolutely closed. "Um, the Bengals…bad season…" It wasn't against the law to talk about football. It wasn't even against company policy. Was it? How insane was Miranda about to get?

"Planning to see a game sometime together, Roy?" Miranda asked

Andy stared at her. So did Roy, before he remembered he had to look at the road. "Uh," he said, "I, um…I guess that might be…fun?"

Wrong answer, wrong answer, Andy thought frantically, but with small hope that Roy could read her mind any better than Miranda could.

"Fun," Miranda said lightly, raising her eyebrows.

"…or not," Roy said weakly a few seconds later.

"Right," Miranda said. "I don't think it would be fun at all. Do you, Andrea?"

"No," Andy said, resisting the urge to tack ma'am on the end of it. She couldn't believe she wanted to sleep with this woman. But she did. Even right now, she did. Even right in the back seat, with Roy looking--

"I rely absolutely," Miranda said, "on the professionalism of all my employees."

The back of Roy's neck was turning red. "Yes, Ms. Priestly."

"I hope I never have to mention this again."

"No, Ms. Priestly."
"Good." Miranda settled back in her seat, looking almost pleased. She said nothing for the rest of the ride, not even after Andy texted in the Starbucks order. But when Andy hurried into Elias-Clarke with the coffee in hand, Miranda gave her a loaded glance over her desk. Locked-and-loaded, even.

"Well, then," Miranda said. "I did not fire him."

Andy exhaled. "Thanks, Miranda."

"I stood to gain nothing from doing so," Miranda said. "That's all."

Two weeks after her return from London, Miranda's first ultrasound appointment came up. She was at the end of her first trimester, and given that she was "older than most expecting mothers," as Dr. Viswananathan had undiplomatically put it, she was supposed to start having ultrasounds sooner.

The appointment was at three in the afternoon, and Miranda had been in a hellish mood all morning. Everyone had been ducking and covering like mad, and nobody, not even Emily, envied Andy for accompanying Miranda to the doctor. If something was wrong, if everything wasn't okay... of course, there wasn't much that the ultrasound would be able to detect yet. Just whether there was fetal heart activity, and a couple other things. Nothing about the baby's sex, or... anything else.

Andy didn't like to admit that she was frightened, too, and about more than Miranda's bad mood. It wasn't her kid, and Miranda wasn't her... anything, but Andy was still nervous and desperately wanted everything to be all right. She didn't want to look at Miranda's face if it wasn't. So she kept her hands clasped tightly together for the whole car ride to the doctor's office, even as she tried to look perfectly calm and serene for Miranda's benefit.

The hour at the obstetrician's was awful. Andy had to deal with checking Miranda in and then sitting with her in the waiting room, where Miranda didn't say a word. Just once, Andy would have given her eyeteeth for Miranda to bombard her with orders, or call her an idiot, or do anything other than sit so still and quiet that Andy knew she was terrified. She couldn't deal with Miranda being terrified. It was as bad as the night Miranda had learned she was pregnant. No. Worse. And then Andy had to deal with Miranda leaving to accompany a nurse, while Andy kept waiting, which was why they called it a waiting room. Mary tried to distract her by talking about Irish setters, but it didn't work very well.

When the nurse finally came out to fetch Andy, Andy almost tripped in her haste to get to the office. Miranda looked perfectly calm as she sat in front of Dr. Viswananathan's desk, but that could mean anything. Dr. Viswananathan smiled at Andy. She didn't have as nice a smile as Dr. Latchley, but she also wasn't the type of person to smile when something was going wrong. Daring to feel hopeful, Andy lowered herself into the other chair in front of the desk.

"As I was telling Miranda, everything seems to be normal," Dr. Viswananathan said, and Andy decided that getting out of bed this morning had been worthwhile after all. "As you know, there isn't much we can tell at this point, but early screening hasn't detected any serious issues. So we're okay so far."

"'We'?" said Miranda, like a total bitch. Andy could have kissed her.

"You, of course," Dr. Viswananathan said with a strained smile. Andy wondered if she regretted accepting this particular famous patient from Dr. Latchley. "Now I just want to clear up a few things
with you. How's your diet?"

"Fine," Miranda said.

Dr. Viswanathan glanced at Andy, who nodded. Then she looked back at Miranda. "You're getting enough iron and folic acid?"

Miranda blinked, and glared at Andy. "I don't know, am I?"

"Yes," Andy said. "In your food and in the prenatal vitamins I always put next to your breakfast. You're taking them, right?"

"Of course I am."

"Exercise?" Dr. Viswanathan asked.

"I meet with my trainer three mornings a week," Miranda said. She waved her hand. "She's got me doing the same thing as last time."

"Which is?" Dr. Viswanathan said. Andy pulled a copy of the exercise routine out of her bag and passed it over the desk. Dr. Viswanathan looked over it. "Okay. This looks good. You're sleeping?"

"Better," Miranda said, sounding evasive for the first time. Dr. Viswanathan gave her a very direct look. "I'm still adjusting to the time change."

Dr. Viswanathan looked surprised. "But didn't you get back from London two weeks ago--"

"I'm fine," Miranda said. "Better. I said I'm better."

"It's important that you get enough rest," Dr. Viswanathan said firmly. "I cannot emphasize strongly enough how much I want you to take maternity leave for the last month of your pregnancy. At your age--"

"That is not an option," Miranda said, her tone final.

"What's more important?" Dr. Viswanathan asked. "Your job, or your health? Or the child's health?"

Miranda narrowed her eyes. Andy jumped in. "I, I bet all that can be decided later, right?"

"True," Dr. Viswanathan said, and looked back down at her notes.

Twenty minutes later, as they were heading back to the car, Miranda said derisively, "'Maternity leave.' Honestly."

"Well, you're going to have to take some after the baby's born," Andy said. "Aren't you?"

"Yes," Miranda said, not sounding remotely happy about it. She clucked her tongue. "I suppose Irv knows by now. I suppose he's utterly delighted, just waiting for me to--" She cut herself off.

Andy knew what she meant. In terms of Miranda's career, the pregnancy couldn't have happened at a worse time, when Irv was looking for reasons to get rid of her. Which meant that Miranda, who should be resting, would undoubtedly work harder than ever.

Andy wished like anything that she had a say in all this: that she could make Irv leave Miranda alone, that she could make Miranda stay home and sleep in once in a while, that she could just fix everything. But wishing hadn't done her any favors so far.
It'd be nice to have a life outside of all this. Andy doubted that was going to happen anytime soon.

Then, two days later, it did. Miranda had gone home at six-thirty as usual, leaving Andy waiting for the book. Andy was almost used to it now, and told herself that she did not miss having Miranda's company until ten-thirty, when they would go down to the car and ride together to Miranda's place without even talking to each other. It was much better for Miranda to be at home with the twins, and resting herself. God knew she kept busy enough during the day.

But tonight, at nine o'clock, Andy checked her email and found a message waiting for her. It was from Christian Thompson.

The email read:

Hey You,

I'm taking you at your word that we're friends again, but I still feel that some kind of peace offering is in order. Thought you might be interested in this tidbit: Modernity is looking for a piece on the exploitation of service staff in New York. I thought of the series you did on the janitors' union for your college paper. Your writing is solid and you'd be a good fit for this. (Fair warning: the editor hates me right now, so you shouldn't mention me to him. You have tons of other contacts by now, though--make use of them.)

They want something no later than next week. Think you can throw it together by then? Say, 7,000 words of your very best?

-CT

Modernity? Christian was tossing her the opportunity to write for Modernity? Modernity was right up there with Esquire and Vanity Fair and even The New Yorker. And Christian was suggesting Andy submit something for it. Suggesting she was good enough for it.

Andy felt like her head had just been set on fire. The exploitation of service staff? She could do that. She'd be all over that. Even as she read the email, the opening paragraph popped into her mind. She grabbed her notebook and scribbled it down before she could forget it, and only then did she reply to Christian's email with effusive thanks. Yeah. Definitely friends again. No matter what Miranda would say about it, because she didn't have to know, did she? Not yet, at least.

For the next hour and a half, Andy wrote, sketching out her ideas and leaving room for further research. It was like being born again, or maybe like coming home. Now she wasn't an assistant, or a nanny, or an invisible peon: now she was a writer again, somebody with intelligence and ideas and the wherewithal to combine the two. Now she was doing what she loved.

She was actually disappointed when the book arrived at ten-thirty, but she grabbed her notes and took them down to the car. Roy saw that she was distracted, and left her alone as she scribbled furiously beneath the back seat light. And for once, as Andy brought the book and the dry-cleaning into the townhouse, Andy didn't hope that Miranda would call for her, or would notice her. She had to get home, had to fire up her trusty laptop, had to get to work.

By the time seven o'clock rolled around, Andy'd had all of three hours of sleep. But even as she staggered into the bathroom for her usual four-minute shower, she knew it had been worth it. She
just hoped she had something semi-coherent. She knew she'd made a good start. She definitely had something to work with. She could have it done in time, if she could survive on three hours of sleep for a few more nights. Which she could. She'd done it before.

"You're still going at…whatever it is?" Roy asked in surprise as Andy pulled out her draft and began studying it in the car.

"Uh huh," Andy said absently. "I need to get this done in a couple of days. Oh!" Then she remembered the bag of pretzels she'd brought for him today, passed it to the front of the car, and dove back in. When they pulled up to Miranda's house, though, Andy remembered herself, and quickly stuffed the draft down into her bag.

If Miranda noticed Andy's tired-and-wired attitude, or the bags under her reddened eyes, she said nothing. Instead she began barking out the usual list of orders while Andy scrambled to keep up. Now the usual assistant stuff seemed more like drudgery than ever: getting coffee and arranging for Cara to pick the twins up at Dalton today, when all Andy really wanted to do was write. But she couldn't let Miranda see that.

In the meantime, Andy had a problem to deal with besides writing. Even if she did finish the article, nobody said that Modernity would take it. In fact, since she was a complete unknown, there was no way they would take it unless she could come up with some kind of contact, like Christian had said.

It was tougher than she'd thought. Modernity wasn't an Elias-Clarke publication. And even most of the people at Runway hated her, after all, except for…Nigel! Nigel had lunch with Carter Mathson every couple of months, so even if Mathson couldn't stand Christian, he seemed to get along with another friend--boss--friend of Andy's. She'd ask Nigel.

She cornered him late that very afternoon, practically popping with excitement. He seemed charmed by her enthusiasm, if skeptical. "Modernity, huh?" he said. "It'd be quite a coup for someone as young and unknown as you."

"Just a chance, Nigel," Andy pleaded. "I just want Mr. Mathson, or whoever reads these things, to read my article. Not even read. Just glance over it! If it's not good enough, of course they won't publish it. I just want somebody to take a look instead of throwing it out right away."

"I'll see what I can do," he said. She gave him her most grateful smile, and vowed to think of several little favors she could do to repay him. Too bad she couldn't afford to treat him to a nice dinner or anything. But maybe that would come later. If this got her on her way…

Whoah. Too much, too soon, she told herself. She hadn't even finished her article. There was no sense in getting carried away. She had a job to do here, after all. Several jobs. Not the least of which was taking care of the woman sitting in her office around the corner, who probably wanted a decaf coffee right about now.

"Call Testino," Miranda said, as soon as Andy trotted into view. "And then get me a latte." She looked up just in time to see Andy beam at her, and blinked. Andy turned around and hurried off, not caring if she was glowing for everyone to see. She felt great, filled with possibilities, so why shouldn't she glow? That night, waiting for the book, she was able to throw together a more complete rough draft, and began to double-check her figures, turned up some new information that she could use. Well, she'd have to rewrite this part right here, but that was okay, that was good. It had to be good. For Modernity, it had to be great.

When she got home at midnight, she got on her laptop again, and didn't make it to bed until two-thirty. The next morning, all the makeup in the world couldn't hide the dark circles under her eyes.
When Miranda got in the car, Andy thought she had something almost like a concerned look on her face. But that couldn't be right, and Miranda rattled off the usual instructions without missing a beat, so it must have been nothing.

"Been hard at work, huh?" Nigel asked Andy mid-morning, when Miranda was out of the office in a meeting. Andy gave him a tired grin. "I've never seen you so fired up. Maybe I owe you an apology."

"Huh?" Andy frowned.

"That spiel I gave you a year ago. About how you weren't trying, about how you didn't really want to work here. I mean, you weren't, and you didn't, of course."

"Hey," Andy protested. "I'm--"

Nigel held up his hand. "This is different. Look at you. You love what you're doing. I like that--it becomes you." Andy smiled at him again. "Which is good for you," Nigel added, "because Carter wants your article on his desk by ten-thirty tomorrow morning. Email it to his assistant no later than ten. Can you do that?"

"I can," Andy said, her heart pounding. "But, but I won't have had time to show it to anybody else--I mean, I'll have it spellchecked but that's all I'll have time for--"

"If you can't stand the heat," said Nigel, "get out of the brazen bull."

Andy fired off an email with her article attached at nine-thirty the next morning, in between errands. She hated cutting it so close, but she hadn't had a choice: she'd been up almost all night again, and hadn't put the finishing touches on the article until eight, when she'd been yanked away from her desk by a whole series of tasks. And she still felt like it wasn't good enough.

Then again, if she worked on it for a whole year, she'd still feel like it wasn't good enough, especially for Modernity, and what was she thinking, with her presumption? They'd laugh at her. Carter Mathson would set it on fire--no, he'd order one of his assistants to do it, because he was too important for that kind of thing. And then she'd be blacklisted. She'd have to start writing under a pseudonym, because anything with the name 'Andy Sachs' on it would be--

She was getting ridiculous. She'd sent the article off, and that was that. It would either get published or it wouldn't, but at least she'd tried. At least she hadn't let the opportunity pass her by. She owed Christian one. Again. She just wouldn't pay him back with sex this time, that was all. Still, her hands trembled, and she was on edge all day long, even though she knew that nobody was going to get back to her today.

Tonight, though, was the night Miranda didn't let her get away with it. She'd stayed at the office later than usual. Emily went home at eight, and Miranda called Andy into the office as soon as she was gone, gesturing for her to sit at the other side of the desk. Andy looked at her anxiously and hoped nothing was wrong. Miranda looked pretty good today: her coloring was healthy, and she'd eaten all of her breakfast and lunch. Andy guiltily realized that she hadn't been keeping quite as close an eye on Miranda the past couple of days. But now the article was written, and she could stop obsessing over it. As much, anyway.
"What is it?" Miranda said flatly.

Andy stared at her. What was what? Miranda had been the one to call her in, hadn't she?

"What's your problem?" Miranda clarified. "You've been running around like a chicken with its head cut off for three days, and you look like you haven't slept in a week." She scowled.

Should Andy tell her? Well, why not? It wasn't a secret. She certainly wasn't ashamed of it. Andy had only wanted to hold off until it was more of a sure thing, until she could tell Miranda, 'Actually, Miranda, I'm going to be published in Modernity,' because then...

Then she'd be a writer again. More than that, a writer who'd done something pretty good, pretty important. She'd be on her way to becoming a person who deserved to talk to Miranda Priestly, someone much more interesting than a lowly assistant, someone who could bring more to the table than Starbucks and a schedule. Someone who could show up at a dinner party and not have everyone wonder why on earth she was there. Someone with a mind and heart to offer, not just an able pair of hands and feet.

But Miranda wanted to know now, and there was no use in lying or trying to cover it up. So Andy took a deep breath, clasped her hands together, and said, "Well, I...I've just been working on an article." Miranda frowned. "I heard, um, through the grapevine, you know, that Modernity was looking for an article about the exploitation of workers and stuff--I mean, the exploitation of workers. And I did something like that for my college newspaper..." Won a national award for it, in fact, not that Miranda had cared. "So I, I submitted an article."

"An article?" Far from looking impressed, Miranda wrinkled her nose. "You?"

Miranda might as well have slapped her. "Yeah," Andy said, and swallowed. "Me."

Miranda seemed to sense her hurt feelings, because she waved her hand dismissively and said, "You are unknown, Andrea. Someone like you can't just submit her work to Modernity and expect to get noticed. It's unheard of. You have to know someone."

Slightly mollified that Miranda hadn't been slighting her, just her lack of experience, Andy perked up and said, "Oh, I know!" She wasn't that dumb. "I asked Nigel about it. He said he'd help me. He did help me."

Miranda blinked. "He did?"

"Yes," Andy said. "Well, you know, he and Mr. Mathson have lunch every once in a while. So I talked to him, and he talked to Mr. Mathson, and I just emailed my article to Modernity this morning." She took a deep breath and exhaled it. "That's what I've been doing. Not while I was supposed to be working, though," she added quickly. "Just while I was at home, or waiting for the book."

This time, Miranda didn't blink. In fact, she stared at Andy without blinking. Exactly like Charles Manson. "I see," she said.

Andy was starting to get a bad feeling about this. But why? "I, um," she said, "I mean, I don't expect--he probably won't even like it. He, he's got to get submissions from better, I mean more experienced writers every day. All these famous people--"

"Yes," Miranda said, her voice clipped. "Get my coat and bag."

Tonight she didn't wait for Andy to assist her, but just snatched her things out of Andy's hands and
headed for the elevator without another word. Without even looking at Andy.

Andy sat down at her desk, trembling a little. That hadn't gone well. But she didn't know why. As far as she'd heard, Miranda and Carter Mathson weren't mortal enemies or anything. *Modernity* and *Runway* didn't compete for the same readership, although there was some overlap. All Andy knew was that her glow of anticipation was all gone now, because she was worried she'd upset Miranda.

It was just…Andy had wanted, in some tiny, utterly pathetic part of her head, for Miranda to be proud of her. She hadn't expected praise, of course. But at least for Miranda to see, for Miranda to recognize…yeah, right. So much for that. It hadn't happened, and Andy had pissed off Miranda instead of pleasing her, for some damn reason.

That night, when she delivered the book, and then sat at home in her apartment, Andy thought about how she'd felt so excited, and how Miranda had ruined that like it was worthless. And for the first time in a long time, she let herself hate Miranda Priestly just a teeny little bit.

"So tell me," Nigel said the next morning, "why is Miranda treating me like I have bubonic plague?"

Andy blinked up at him, and then bit her lip. Fortunately, Emily was away from her desk, and Miranda was out of the office. So she could say freely, "It's not your fault. She's mad at me. I mean, I think that's it. Unless you did something else."

"Something else? Other than what?"

"Other than talking to Carter Mathson for me," Andy admitted.

Nigel glared at her. "You told her?"

"I didn't know I shouldn't," Andy protested. Nigel rolled his eyes. "What? I didn't! She asked me what I'd been so worked up about for the last few days, and I didn't see any point in lying."

"Great," Nigel said.

"I still don't know what was so wrong about it," Andy said, hoping that Nigel could tell her. "I mean, I just wrote an article. Not everything I do has to be related to *Runway*. " Or Miranda. That had been half the joy of the thing, after all--to do something, just a tiny something, that had belonged to Andy alone.

"Yes, it does," Nigel said, confirming Andy's worst fears. "Miranda relies on you, Andy, to an extent I have never seen before."

"But--"

"She's afraid you'll quit," Nigel said. "She's afraid you're on to something better, and you're going to waltz off after it. Which, by the way, if the opportunity arises--do it."

"Quit?" Andy stared at him. "I'm not going to quit!" The thought had never occurred to her. Not once.

"More fool you," Nigel said.
"Oh, come on, Nigel," Andy said. "It might not get published. And even if it does, it's just one article. It's, it's freelance work. It's not a job. I'm not going to quit for that." Wasn't that what everybody told aspiring writers? 'Don't quit your day job'?

"I don't know for sure if it will get published," Nigel said. "But it's good work, Andy. I read it. I think you're in with a chance."

Andy brightened. "Really? You really think so?"

Nigel pointed at her. "There it is. There's that glow. I bet you anything Miranda saw it, too. And didn't like it."

"But...but that's not fair," Andy said weakly. And it wasn't. It was monstrously unfair, in fact. Did Miranda still not know, did she really not understand, what Andy would do--had done--for her? Didn't she even trust Andy not to quit her fucking job?

"Since when is Miranda fair?" Nigel asked. He had a point.

Andy looked down at her desk. "I didn't know she'd be like that." Then she smiled bitterly. "I guess I should have."

"You should have," Nigel agreed. "Especially since you got me in trouble, too."

"Nigel, I really am sorry," Andy said, looking up again.

He waved his hand, his enormous ring catching the fluorescent lights. "Not your fault," he said. "You can't change her. No one can."

No, Andy definitely couldn't change Miranda. That was something else everybody said, too: don't try to change the people you love. It never works.

Andy realized what she'd been thinking, and wondered if it might be more merciful for her just to jump out of the nearest window.

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Nigel wasn't the only one getting the cold shoulder. Miranda didn't talk to Andy all day either. For once, she talked to Emily instead, who practically trembled with delight and not a little schadenfreude. Her every look to Andy said, 'See? I knew you wouldn't last.'

Andy couldn't respond to it, couldn't rise to it. Not now. Her feeling of invincibility had long since faded. If she'd thought Miranda actually cared about her, then she could have done anything: outraced speeding bullets, leapt tall buildings at a single bound. But knowing that Miranda didn't care, at least not enough to give a shit about anything Andy might ever want or need, ever, if it didn't converge with her own desires--well, that kind of crushed a girl's spirits into the ground.

Miranda only wanted Andy around because Andy was useful to her, and would drop her, had dropped her, like a dirty rag at the first sign that Andy might not be useful anymore. How many times was Andy going to have to learn this one simple lesson? And when would it stop hurting?

Only yesterday she'd been waiting in feverish anticipation to hear from Modernity. Now she couldn't quite bring herself to care one way or the other, except that if her article didn't get published she'd
feel even worse. Like she'd gone through all this for nothing.

But Modernity did call. To be specific, an assistant editor called her at four p.m.--fortunately, Miranda was out--and told her they wanted her article. That it had been good work, although they had a few suggestions for her. That they'd pay her pretty well for it, too, and would keep her in mind for the future. That they liked to nurture new talent.

And in spite of herself, in spite of Miranda, Andy's spirits revived. They thought she had talent? That she deserved nurturing? That she might actually be worthwhile? She opened up her email and found a copy of her draft in her inbox, with suggestions highlighted. She vowed to follow each and every one of them as soon as she got home that night. She wasn't going to let Carter Mathson down. Maybe he'd be slightly easier to please than Miranda Priestly, anyway, who hadn't even eaten her lentil salad at lunch. And after Andy had given the restaurant such precise instructions, too.

Miranda returned to the office at six, and continued to ignore Andy. At six-fifteen, Nigel walked in, gave Miranda something Andy didn't care about, and walked out again. He paused by Andy's desk and lifted his eyebrows. "Any news?"

Andy beamed up at him, letting her face do the talking. He gave her a genuine grin in response, and even reached out to tweak her nose. "Nice work, Six," he said.

"I couldn't have done it without you," Andy said honestly. "Thank you so much, Nigel."

Nigel opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment, Miranda growled from within her office, "Emily." She sounded furious. Andy realized that of course she'd overheard, and she and Nigel winced at each other. Emily, who'd been watching Andy and Nigel curiously, hopped up and hurried inside Miranda's office. Nigel left quickly. Andy didn't hear whatever Miranda said to Emily in that low, dreadful pitch, but whatever it was, it made Emily scurry out of the office with a pale face, running for the elevator on some sort of errand. Andy kept her head down and hoped Miranda wouldn't say anything to her.

Miranda didn't. That was, until Andy arrived at the townhouse at eleven-fifteen that night with the book. As soon as Andy walked through the front door, Miranda called, "Andrea." She did not sound happy.

Shit. She was going to do it again. Andy was happy for the second time about her article, and Miranda was going to ruin her mood again. But no. No, that wasn't going to happen. Forget it. Andy wouldn't let her do that. She was excited about her work, and she was going to stay excited. So she put away the dry cleaning, lifted her chin, and marched into Miranda's living room with the book in hand and her head held high.

Miranda was not sitting in the comfortable-looking armchair, or on the plush leather sofa. She appeared to be pacing the room, her brow furrowed, her lips pressed together. When she saw Andy, she straightened her shoulders and said, "Have a seat."

Oh, boy. This couldn't be good. Andy put the book on a side table, sat down on the sofa, and tried hard not to think about how she'd made breakfast for this woman two days after Christmas, or anything else that would weaken her resolve not to let Miranda get to her.

"The article you wrote," Miranda said, and paused. Andy bit her lip, but Miranda wasn't looking at her. "They've accepted it?"

"Yes," Andy said. "They called me this afternoon. They want me to make some edits first, though."
“Mmm.” Miranda stuck her tongue in her cheek, and looked out the window, into the dark street outside. She had her hands folded behind her back. Andy, squinting, thought she could see the beginnings of a rise in the shape of her belly. Her heart squeezed painfully just at the thought.

“Let’s talk about this article,” Miranda said.

Fuck. What was going on? Would—would Miranda actually try to stop the article from going to press? She probably could. One call to the right person, and…

“It’s just one article,” Andy said, hearing and hating the plea in her voice. "Miranda, it was just a random chance I even heard about it, I didn’t really expect them to accept it, but--" She gulped. "I’m really happy about it."

“I’m sure you are,” Miranda said, still looking out the window. Her hands tensed behind her back.

“I, I thought,” Andy said, and then stopped. If she said, ‘I thought you’d be proud of me,’ or ‘I thought you’d be happy too,’ and Miranda laughed at her, sneered at her--well, Andy really might die. So she just mumbled, “I didn’t think it would bother you.”

"Bother me?" Miranda asked, her voice neutral.

Oh, crap. "Well, you, you seem kind of upset," Andy said, trying very hard to remember that night in London when Miranda had sort-of, more-or-less told Andy to be honest with her. That night seemed very long ago now. She gulped. "Um…if it’s about, I don’t know, my job, or--"

"Your job?" Miranda finally looked at her, frowning. "Didn’t you say you wrote it during your free time?"

"Well--yeah," Andy said, nonplussed.

"Then what does this have to do with your job?"

Andy stared at her. Would she ever, in any lifetime, be able to keep up with Miranda? "I," she said, and then, "I don’t know."

"You asked Nigel for a reference?"

Did Miranda think Andy had been sneaky about this, trying to go behind her back? Andy could see how that might have looked bad. "I--well, sort of--"

"You did not ask me," Miranda said.

Andy froze with her mouth open. Then she snapped it shut and found herself re-evaluating every single event in the last twenty-four hours. She looked closely at the expression on Miranda's face which, as always, gave nothing away.

"You did not ask me," Miranda repeated. "Why not?"

Andy needed another couple of seconds to pull herself together. She took them, and then said, "I told you earlier--I knew that Nigel has lunch with Mr. Mathson sometimes."

"I do too. More often, I daresay."

"Oh." Andy just looked at her, stunned. It had never occurred to her to ask Miranda for any such thing. She swallowed. "Well, I mean, I didn’t want to bother you, either. You’ve got a lot going on." She managed to smile.
Miranda did not smile back. Instead, she said, "Yes. Yes, it would have been a lot of bother for me to call Carter, and ask him to give your article special consideration."

"No," Andy said quickly, "I didn't want special consideration, Miranda, I just wanted him to look at my writing. Just to give it a chance." Because, yipes. Nigel asking Mr. Mathson to read her article was one thing. Miranda telling Mr. Mathson to publish it was something else entirely, and Andy didn't want that. She wanted to approach Miranda as somebody who'd done something on her own merits, not with Miranda's help, for crying out loud. That was the whole point.

"You didn't want to bother me," Miranda said.

"Well, no," Andy said.

Miranda looked her dead in the eye. "It never even crossed your mind, did it?" she said. Andy blinked. "It never even occurred to you to come to me," Andy opened her mouth to lie and deny it, then she wondered if she should deny it, and then she realized she had no idea what on earth she should say, period. She was in the middle of some kind of conversation from bizarro world and had no idea how to handle it.

Miranda evidently took her silence as confirmation. "Why didn't it occur to you?" she bit out. She looked more upset by the minute. "Why, when you heard about this opportunity, did your mind immediately leap to Nigel?"

Andy opened her mouth, closed it, and then opened it again to say, "I have no idea what's going on here."

"Neither do I," Miranda said. "I cannot fathom what you were thinking. Or not thinking. Why on earth--" She cut herself off, and shook her head.

"I don't know what you want me to say," Andy said hesitantly.

"Tell me why you didn't ask me," Miranda barked, and Andy jumped. "Tell me why you did not ask me for something you wanted that I could give you. That's what I want you to say."

Andy, whose head was swimming, whose heart was pounding, and who'd been on an emotional rollercoaster all day long, said numbly, "Because I don't ask you for things."

Miranda sucked in her breath between her teeth.

"That's one of the first things they told me," Andy said. "You never ask Miranda anything."

"But you--" Miranda lifted a hand to brush her hair out of her face. "Are you some kind of idiot? You're not them. " Everybody wants to be us, Andy thought nonsensically. "You...I know that you do a great deal for me. And you've never asked for anything back. You never ask me for anything at all. Did you think I hadn't noticed? Do you think I am completely ungrateful?"

Andy stared at her, scrambling for something to say. But right now, right when she needed them the most, words failed her. And that moment was all it took for Miranda to raise her chin, to go a little bit red, and to say, "Oh. I see."

"No," Andy said, too quickly.

"Oh. Well," Miranda said, and turned to look out the window again.

"That, that's not true," Andy said, even though it absolutely was. Miranda was right. It hadn't
occurred to Andy to ask her for anything, not just because she didn't want special favors, but because even if she had, she never would have expected to get them. It wasn't Andy's place to expect gratitude, not from Miranda. It was her place to give and give and give until she had nothing left. Like everybody else.

"No, I'm fairly sure it is," Miranda said. Then she added, "I think perhaps I have asked too much of you. That will stop now."

"Wha--no!" Andy gasped, horrified. What did Miranda mean? No more doctor's visits, or lawyer visits, or pizzas or diet charts or talks at four a.m. or phone calls or-- She couldn't, she didn't mean that, did she? "Miranda, you don't have to, I mean…"

"No, you don't have to," Miranda said, still not looking around. "Not anymore."

"It's not because I have to," Andy pleaded. That was true. Also absolutely. "It's not just my job. I l-like helping you."

"You do?" There was a trap waiting somewhere in Miranda's voice.

Andy was in too deep to find it, though. "Yes," she said in utter defeat. Miranda was probably going to ask her to do something horrible, just to prove a point. Something worse, more impossible than Harry Potter, because Andy had been clumsy enough to hurt her feelings.

And Andy would do it. If Miranda told Andy to go to the moon, bring back a rock, and turn it into a necklace, Andy would find a way to make that work. Wanting to cry now, Andy could admit that to herself. She wished to God she'd never even heard of Modernity.

"If it's not your job, why do you do it?" Miranda inquired. "Why do you 'like' doing things for me?"

Because Andy hated it when Miranda looked sick and tired, and because she didn't like it when the twins treated Miranda like dirt, and because she thought Stephen was an asshole who didn't deserve Miranda, and because she wanted to have sex with Miranda and she'd never wanted another woman before, and because together all of those things combined into something that was terrifyingly like--

"Because I'm happy to do it," Andy whispered. "It makes me happy to do it."

Miranda finally looked at her. Her eyes nearly skewered Andy, they were so sharp and intent.

"You don't say," she said.

Andy opened her mouth to say 'What?', and then sat very still because she'd just been struck by lightning. Or it felt like that, anyway. Her eyes stretched open wide, and then wider.

"Oh," she said.

"Well," Miranda said. "There goes the lightbulb." She looked out the window again.

"No," Andy said, though she was so breathless it was a wonder that the word made any sound at all. "I mean, yes. I'm sorry, Miranda." She licked her lips. "I…next time I need something, I'll…"

"Congratulations on your article," Miranda said, not turning around. "That's all."

Andy left the townhouse as if she was walking in a dream. Roy was still waiting for her.

"S-sorry," she said when she slid into the back seat. "I, uh, she wanted to, um, ask me something."
"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I think so," Andy said. She shook her head, and blinked several times, hard.

"I'd offer to buy you a drink for it," he said dryly, "but she'd fire one of us, and I'm betting it wouldn't be you."

"Oh my God," Andy moaned, and threw her head back against the headrest, rubbing her hands over her eyes. "I don't get her." Roy just laughed.

No, Andy didn't get Miranda. She never would. But if Miranda wanted to 'do things' for her, if Andy could trust to her favor for just a little bit longer, before Miranda got bored or got fed up or stopped needing Andy or whatever... well, Andy would have a little bit longer. That meant something.

Miranda wanted Andy to ask her for stuff. Miranda wanted to give Andy something back, for everything Andy had done for her. It would make Miranda... happy... to do that.

Andy didn't know what that meant. She didn't care. But her article was getting published in Modernity, and her glow had returned tenfold, and she had the feeling she was going to sleep very well tonight.

The next day Andy practically floated in to work with a Starbucks tray in her hand. Nothing unusual had happened that morning: Miranda had given her the usual orders in the car, and then the usual period of calm silence followed. She hadn't made any reference to the conversation they'd had the night before. But she'd looked especially beautiful--everything did, really--and Andy had enjoyed the drive very much indeed, although she'd had to be careful not to stare at Miranda or grin like an idiot.

Still, she was obviously in a very good mood, and Emily drooped the moment she came through the door, accurately divining that Andy's happiness meant the end of hers. Oh well. Sucked to be Emily. Andy was over it, she was invincible again, and nothing could stop her or get her down today.

Nigel saw it too. "Kissed and made up, did you?" he asked. Andy fought her blush valiantly. "Does this mean she forgives me too?"

"I, uh, I guess," Andy said. Why wouldn't it? "She knows I asked you for help, you didn't just, you know, offer it out of thin air."

"So you reassured her that you're still chained to your desk?"

What a weird way to put it. "Actually," Andy said, getting ready to tell Nigel that Miranda hadn't worried that Andy was going to quit, that her feelings had just been hurt. Then she said, "Yeah, I did," because something told her that telling Nigel the truth would be a bad idea. Miranda certainly wouldn't want anybody else to know that she gave a damn about Andy one way or the other.

Now that she thought about it, it was also kind of strange that Nigel had misjudged Miranda. When he'd said that Miranda was worried about Andy quitting her job, Andy had taken it as the gospel truth, because nobody knew Miranda like Nigel knew Miranda. Then again, Miranda was impossible to know, so Andy supposed even Nigel had to get it wrong sometimes.

"I'm sure she found that reassuring," Nigel sighed, and gave Andy a folder. "Do me a favor and give
this to her? I'd rather get a look at her from a distance before I come any closer today."

"Gotcha," Andy said. Then she lowered her voice, and added, "Thanks again, by the way."

He gave her a small smile, and left. Andy brought the file in to Miranda, and left with an order to
make four copies and distribute them to four junior editors. As she stood over the copy machine,
Andy thought some more about her article, and started grinning again.

Then she tried to bring herself back down to earth. She hadn't told anyone about the article except for
Nigel and Miranda. She hadn't spread it around the office. She hadn't even told her parents, although
she wanted to crow it from the rooftops. But even though she'd made all the edits and sent it in, there
was always the chance it wouldn't make the issue. Miranda cut stuff from Runway at the last minute
all the time. Andy wasn't going to stop holding her breath until she actually had a copy of the
magazine in her hand, and that wouldn't be for another couple of months.

In the meantime, she had a job to do. Several, in fact. And it wasn't just drudgery anymore. And she
wasn't going to quit it anytime soon, no matter what Nigel said.

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Andy's happy glow persisted for forty-eight more hours. But then:

**DRAGON LADY KNOCKED UP!**

As soon as Andy saw the headline in the Post, she knew that today was going to be a very, very bad
day. It was even worse because she saw the headline in Miranda's car. While Miranda was shoving
the paper in Andy's face, her own face white with fury.

"Look at this!" she spat.

And the week had started so well, too. Andy took the paper with trembling hands, hardly daring to
breathe. Up in front, Roy's eyes were fixed firmly on the road. "Um," she said, "uh…"

"Read it," Miranda said.

Andy cleared her throat. "Um. 'Priestly preg--'"

"Not out **loud** ," Miranda snapped, and turned to stare out her window. Shit. Andy cringed and read
the article.

_Priestly Pregnancy Stuns the Fashion World_ , read the sub header. Then the article proper began:
_Inside sources have confirmed that Miranda Priestly, New York's favorite frigid fashionista --who
wrote this crap?-- is expecting another child at the ripe old age of...well, don't ask, don't tell. But will
this patch up her tattered marriage to finance guru Stephen Tomlinson? Not if the pictures of him
with British hottie Lennie Jeff are any indication. Ouch! Page Six wants to know: does the Snow
Queen feel the burn?_

_And what do her young dragonettes think about their new brother or sister? An unnamed teacher at
the Dalton School, where Priestly's twin daughters Caroline and Cassidy Hanrahan attend, said,
"Well, the girls are angry, of course. What do you expect? But they'll get through this."_

_Of course they will. When you're a Priestly child, you've got to be used to it._
Andy took in a deep, sharp breath. She couldn't speak.

"My children," Miranda said, still looking out the window. The back of her neck was bright red. "They wrote about my children. One of their teachers--" Her voice broke, and she stopped talking.

"Can you find out which one?" Andy asked at once. Miranda needed a target. A blabby, indiscreet teacher would make a great one.

"I don't care what they write about me," Miranda said, as if Andy hadn't spoken. "They can say anything they like. They can say I slept with half the New York Giants, for all I care--" Andy tried not to gasp. "But not the girls. They can't do that. How dare they mention my girls?"

Andy wanted to suggest that Miranda just get the Post reporter fired. But Miranda's influence didn't extend that far in the publishing world; if it did, Page Six would never say anything about her at all. It was weird to think that her power, which sometimes seemed all-encompassing, actually had limits. And that she'd reached them.

Andy heard a crumpling, ripping sound, and realized she'd torn the paper. Miranda turned at the sound, and saw what Andy had done. Andy squeaked and tried to smooth it out, but Miranda only smiled bitterly. "Was that therapeutic?" she asked.

"Yeah," Andy said. Then she bit her lip and offered it to Miranda, who snorted.

"I'm going to need something a little more substantial than that," she said.

"Like what?" Andy asked, already prepared to get it for her on a silver platter, no matter what it was. Anything to get that look out of her eyes.

But Miranda was way ahead of her. "Nothing you can help with," she said. "It's quite beyond your purview. No, you just leave this to me." Her bitter smile turned into something much, much scarier. Her eyes gleamed with a light that Andy could only call diabolical.

Andy actually throbbed between her legs, and wanted to sink through the leather seats and onto the street below. If ever there was an inappropriate time…

"Roy," Miranda said, "stop by a bar. I am going to buy a whiskey sour."

"You're what?" Andy stared at her.

"Whiskey sours are my favorite drink."

Andy's jaw dropped. "But…what? You can't--"

"I know that," Miranda said. "That's why you're going to drink it for me."

After a long moment, Andy said, "You're kidding."

"No," Miranda said. "I'm delegating."

So, sitting in a twenty-four hour dive at eight-thirty in the morning with Miranda Priestly staring at her the whole time, Andy gulped down a whiskey sour. She'd never had one before. Her lips puckered and she decided instantly that she didn't care for it.

"Um," she said.

"Every drop," Miranda said firmly, and watched with envious eyes as Andy choked down the rest of
it without pausing for air. Thankfully, Miranda allowed her to chase it down with water, and even eat a few pretzels so she wouldn't arrive too buzzed at the office.

Well, Andy supposed there were worse ways to start a day.

If anybody noticed that Andy was a little…cheerful…that morning, they didn't say anything. Probably because everybody was too busy staring at the carpet and avoiding Miranda's eyes. 'Sources at Runway,' the article had said. Andy wondered who'd spilled the beans. It could have been anybody, she supposed. And did it really matter? The truth would've come out sooner or later. If the Post hadn't dragged the twins into the fray, then it might not even have bothered Miranda. As much.

By ten-thirty, after another glass of water, some coffee, and two trips to the bathroom, Andy was completely sober again. She kind of missed the buzz, though, since now she could feel the tension everywhere in the air, and was glad to leave the office that night. Miranda did not call her when she dropped off the book. Andy told herself that this was okay. But as she was turning to leave, she heard a "Psst!"

Sure enough, when she stepped to the staircase, she saw both twins sticking their heads over the banister. Andy quickly laid a fingertip on her lips, glancing around, but Miranda was nowhere in sight. "What are you still doing up?" she whispered.

They shrugged. "We just are," Cassidy said, keeping her voice low.

"Did you see the Post?" Caroline asked. Andy bit her lip, and nodded. "Chelsea showed us," Caroline added darkly, without clarifying who 'Chelsea' was. "She made sure we saw it."

Andy tried to shush them again, but Cassidy said, "Mom's really mad."

Andy bit her lip, and nodded. "I know," she whispered. "Are you guys okay?"

Caroline glared at her. "Oh yeah," she said. "We're just great."

"Fine," Cassidy corrected, elbowing her sister. "We're fine."

"Well, good," Andy said, feeling at a loss. "You shouldn't--you shouldn't care what those jerks say. They're not worth it." She tried to smile. "Neither's Chelsea, I bet."

"She was just mad because we told her she was dumb and ugly," Caroline said, as if this was a ridiculous reason to be mad.

"Oh," Andy said, remembering why a little of the twins went a long way. "Well. You should probably, you know, go to bed now. It's late." They rolled their eyes at her but, wonder of wonders, disappeared from the railing. She heard their footsteps heading down the hallway upstairs, presumably towards their rooms.

Andy sighed, and turned to go. As she turned, something caught her eye, and she realized that Miranda was standing at the other end of the hall, towards the kitchen, watching her silently. Andy couldn't read the look on her face, but her stomach cramped up with anxiety anyway, even after everything that had already happened. It was hard to get rid of that instinctive response: of the
knowledge that this was Miranda's house, and you didn't just come in and talk to people without her permission. The first time Andy had tried it had nearly resulted in disaster, after all.

So now she just smiled timidly and shrugged in greeting. Miranda raised her eyebrows, and Andy turned to go.

"Andrea," Miranda said, and, as always, her voice sent both dread and thrill all the way from Andy's head down to her toes. More thrill than dread now, but with Miranda, you could never be sure what would happen next, so... Andy turned back around.

"Clear my afternoon tomorrow from eleven to one," Miranda said, and Andy started to sweat. Last-minute changes always threw everybody into a panic--especially the people Miranda was canceling on. "I'll be eating lunch outside of the office."

"Right," Andy said, waiting for clarification. But none was forthcoming. Instead, Miranda gave her another long, considering stare that made her extremely nervous. It reminded her of the way Miranda had looked at her when she'd first applied for the job: sizing her up, coming to a decision.

"That's all," Miranda said, and Andy left in a hurry. She knew Miranda was watching her all the way out the door.

At three p.m. the next day, between her mysterious lunch and a meeting, Miranda called, "Emily!"

Andy still responded instinctively to that sometimes, and had actually tensed her thigh muscles to get out of the chair before she caught herself. She didn't think Emily had noticed, though, as she hurried into Miranda's office. "Shut the door," Andy heard Miranda say.

There was a brief pause, and Andy knew Emily had to be as surprised as Andy was. In all the time Andy had worked here, Miranda had never shut her office door. Now, in spite of herself, Andy felt a faint pang of worry, of insecurity. Not jealousy, of course. Just because Miranda wanted to talk to Emily about something and obviously didn't want Andy to hear, well, that was Miranda's business, and nothing to do with Andy at all. Probably. Maybe. Shit. Probably.

The next fifteen minutes seemed very long. An underling from Christian Lacroix called, and Andy had to try very hard not to be short with her when she refused to understand that Miranda was in a meeting, even after Andy had explained it three times. But it helped to pass the time, at least, and Emily came out of the office about two minutes after Andy had hung up. She looked pale, stunned, but not unhappy. She gazed at Andy as if not really seeing her.

"Emily?" Andy whispered, wondering what had happened to put that look on her face. Had Miranda fired her? But no, Emily would be in tears if that had happened, not--not--

"Andrea," Miranda called.

Andy bit her lip, and now it was her turn to go into the office. Miranda did not tell her to shut the door. She didn't even look up from her desk. Instead, she just said, "Emily has completed her tenure as first assistant. She'll finish here in two weeks and move on. I want you to contact Human Resources and begin the search for a new second assistant immediately."

Oh. That explained it. Emily had been promoted, not fired. She was 'moving on.' And hadn't been
given much of a choice, apparently.

"That's all," Miranda said, and Andy left her office.

Emily was sitting at her desk, looking blankly at her monitor. Andy paused by her desk, smiled at her, and said, "Congratulations."

"Thank you," Emily said, sounding completely out of it.

"Where are you going to go?" Andy asked.

Emily looked up at her, shook her head, and appeared to return to reality. Her lip curled in its usual sneer. "Runway France, of course," she said. "Where else?"

Andy grinned at her. Where else indeed? Emily was finally going to Paris. "Congratulations," she repeated.

Emily snorted, glanced towards Miranda's office, and mumbled "About bloody time," so low that even Andy could hardly hear it.

It wasn't until Andy had dropped the book and dry cleaning off that night, and had returned home, that she realized she'd been promoted too. Complete with a (very slight) pay raise and five extra minutes for lunch. She was first assistant now. And had to replace herself, just as Emily had done a year ago, with her.

Where would Andy be, a year from now? Maybe Miranda would have kicked her onward to better things too, whether Andy wanted to leave or not, and Andy would have no choice but to be grateful. And Miranda would have had the baby by then, too, and the divorce would be final, or maybe it wouldn't. Andy knew you weren't supposed to try to predict the future, and she didn't believe in fate, but at the moment she'd give her eyeteeth to know what she'd be doing a year from today.

But she couldn't find out, eyeteeth or not. The best she could do was think about what to look for in the new assistant. She wanted to find somebody who could do the work and not disappoint Miranda, somebody good.

Just not too good.

*Fourth: February.*

Four days later, Andy was buried under more résumés than she knew what to do with. Cherie at Human Resources said she'd actually weeded out the weakest ones, and given Andy "the cream of the crop." Andy wasn't sure how creamy they were. But some pretty famous names had made it to the top of the Human Resources slush pile: Andy recognized the daughters of society people, girls with big trust funds, big fake boobs, and big expectations of life. They had degrees in psychology, philosophy, geography, nutrition—very rarely anything to do with publishing. The few with writing and publication experience made it to the top of the list.

Andy knew from her own experience, however, that being able to write didn't mean you could do the job. The most important thing, initially, was to have a good pair of legs that you could use to run all over the city at a moment's notice, and self-esteem that could survive Miranda dropping boulders on it every five minutes. And that sort of experience didn't show up on a résumé.

In the car that morning, watching Andy frantically sorting through sheets of heavy cream paper,
Miranda said, "Have you found any likely candidates?"

"A few," Andy said. "Well, three, anyway."

Miranda held out her gloved hand. "Let me see." Andy handed over the résumés. Miranda took all of ten seconds to look at all three of them, and tossed them back in Andy's lap. "No," she said. "Keep looking."

Andy looked at her in dismay. These had been her top picks. "Okay," she said. "Uh…could you maybe tell me what was wrong with these, so I, um, know what to avoid next time?"

Miranda picked up one. "I hate her mother." She picked up another. "Her mother hates me." She picked up a third. "I've never even heard of this college."

The only useful thing out of that was-- "No obscure schools, got it," Andy mumbled. But how the heck was she supposed to know about the other? Miranda's feuds and squabbles with the New York elite were notorious and ever-changing. Well, so were everyone else's. Nobody who traveled in those circles kept Best Friends Forever, and they were all drama queens.

"Do not disappoint me, Andrea," Miranda said, and Andy quailed right down to her toes. No matter what, she dreaded disappointing Miranda more than almost anything. It was important to keep Miranda happy, for so many reasons: because it made Andy's job easier, because it was the best thing for Miranda's health (and, by extension, the baby's), and because knowing that Miranda was happy made Andy happy, too. She remembered, more often than she cared to, the sight of Miranda laughing on New Year's Eve, relaxed and amused. Andy would give her right arm to see it again.

And maybe she would. Miranda appeared to have a little more spring in her step these days, more of a sparkle in her eye. She'd had time to absorb the shock of her pregnancy, time to--well--not get over Stephen's infidelity, but she didn't seem to be dwelling on it, at least. Reporters weren't bugging her quite as much now as they had in the forty-eight hours after the news about her pregnancy had broken, and Andy and Emily could easily fend off the ones who had the temerity to continue to do so. Miranda's position was still difficult, still something Andy wouldn't wish on her worst enemy (well…maybe her worst), but she seemed to be dealing with it better than Andy would have expected.

It was totally nothing to do with Andy, of course. Just because Andy was there to make things easier, just because Miranda relied on Andy more than she'd ever relied on another assistant--heck, maybe on anybody--well, that didn't matter. So what if she knew that Andy would do anything to make her happy, keep her comfortable? Why should that give her so much…bounce?

Okay. Not the time to dwell on this, Andy decided. Not the time to let silly fantasies go to her head. If she really wanted to make Miranda happy and comfortable, she could start by doing her job and finding a halfway-decent second assistant.

Four days later, she was nearly in despair. Emily was gone for good in less than two business weeks, and she was so excited about her new opportunity that she wasn't paying as much attention to her duties as she used to. The only thing she had to say about the whole matter was, "It all depends on Miranda. You never know what she's going to want."

Which Andy had figured out for herself a long time ago. And on top of everything else, Spring Fashion Week was hurtling towards all of them like a train. How was Andy supposed to get everything ready for London while also seeking out her own replacement?

It seemed utterly impossible. Andy learned her first object lesson the hard way when, two days later,
she finally pre-interviewed a tall, willowy blonde who'd made it past the initial screening. The blonde had a permanent curl of her lip. Nevertheless, Andy, who remembered how scornful Emily had been to her, gave her a friendly smile. "Hi," she said, and extended her hand. The blonde took it limply before dropping it again. Bad start. "I'm Andrea Sachs," Andy said. "But you can call me Andy."

"Really," said the blonde, whose name was Jessica. "That's cute."

"Er," Andy said. "I guess. So, Jessica...it is Jessica, right? Or do you have a nickname too?"

Jessica looked revolted, but all she said was, "No."

Okey-dokey, then. "Right," Andy said, feeling her smile becoming strained. Jessica had better say something very impressive in the next few minutes if she wanted to have a prayer of landing this job. "Well...okay. Have a seat?" They were in a small meeting-room, near Nigel's office, while Emily manned the phones. Jessica seated herself elegantly, and folded her hands on the tabletop. "So, Jessica," Andy said. "What brings you to Runway?"

"Lots of things," Jessica said, and looked around, appearing impatient. "Listen, I'm sorry, but my time is kind of at a premium today."

Andy stared at her. "What?"

"I came here for an interview," Jessica said. "Is Ms. Priestly busy or something?"

"Ms. Priestly?"

Jessica glared at her. "You're the first assistant, right?"

"Yes," Andy said, astonished. "Or, I mean, I will be, in a week."

"So you're in charge of her schedule. When is she going to be free? How long do I have to wait?"

"Well," Andy said, and looked at her watch. "No longer, actually. Come on."

She headed for the door, Jessica following her eagerly. Then, as Jessica seemed to realize they were heading for the exit, she stopped and frowned.

"Wait a minute," she said.

"Oh, sorry," Andy said sweetly, and pointed ahead. "You probably know your way out already. You don't need me leading around by your hand like a little kid."

Jessica stared at her. "What about my interview?"

"We just had it," Andy said. "Good luck with the job hunt."

Jessica's eyes bugged out. "You were interviewing me? An assistant?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "That's kind of how it goes. Now you know."

"Do you know who my dad is?"

Oh, screw that. Andy gave Jessica her best glare, the one that had made Caroline shrivel up at the dinner table in London. It worked nearly as well on Jessica, who took a step back. Andy slowly raised her arm and pointed at the exit.

"Bye," she said. "We won't call you. We won't keep your résumé on file. And if you play your cards
right, we won't fax it to other people as a warning, either. Or a joke."

Jessica opened her mouth.

"That's all," Andy said.

Jessica turned beet red, and actually looked like she was going to cry. She turned on shaking legs and headed for the exit. When she was out of sight, Andy exhaled heavily.

She couldn't believe how terrifyingly good that had felt.

"What about that candidate you met with this morning?" Miranda asked in the car, later that day.

"Totally disappointing," Andy said.

"I'd get used to that feeling," Miranda said, "if I were you." Then she tilted her head towards Andy, and something like a smile played around her lips, like they were sharing a joke.

Something in Andy's chest became so warm and light that she forgot about being disappointed at all.

Two days later, the world had mercy on her. A short, slight redhead stood in front of her: a natural redhead, not like Emily. She was skinny, pretty, and fashionable enough to work at Runway. She seemed awed by the offices, awed by Andy, awed by even the idea of Miranda Priestly. She was also obviously very sweet-natured, hard-working, and dumb as a box of hair.

"The question is," Andy said carefully, "can you pretty much just do as you're told?"

"Oh, yes," the girl--whose name was Eleanor--replied, smiling brilliantly. "Everyone's always told me that's my natural area of expertise!"

"Sit right here," Andy said, and hurried into Miranda's office.

Miranda was on her cell phone, though it sounded like she was wrapping up the conversation. She saw Andy approaching the desk and quickly said into the phone, "Why, that sounds marvelous, darling. Yes. I'll see you then." Then she hung up and looked back at Andy.

"Was that the twins?" Andy asked, and instantly wished she'd kept her mouth shut as Miranda raised a disdainful eyebrow. "Um, I mean, sorry. I just wanted to say that there's a girl waiting about the job."

Miranda lowered her eyebrow, but only a little. Then she glanced towards where Eleanor was sitting.

"Well?" she said.

"I think we've got a live one," Andy said, hoping against hope that she was right.
"Call her in," Miranda said.

Andy turned and crooked her finger at Eleanor, who had been watching them both anxiously from reception. Eleanor trotted in, smiling brightly, her résumé in hand. She was nervous and excited and offering her throat to Miranda like the zeta female to the alpha bitch.

Miranda's eyes gleamed, and Andy knew she'd chosen well. "So," Miranda said neutrally. "Who are you?"

"Eleanor Lake," Eleanor said, and added, "Ellie, please."

Miranda's lip curled. "And what brings you here, Eleanor?"

Ellie blanched. "Um," she said feebly.

"I'll just go mind the phones," Andy said. Miranda glanced at her with a satisfied look on her face, and nodded.

Andy left the office and sat down in her chair, and held her breath as she tried to listen in.

"...think you can bring to the table?" she heard Miranda's voice saying.

"Oh, I love fashion," Ellie replied earnestly.

"Really," Miranda purred. "Well." Andy could just picture the look on her face.

Andy rather thought she could pat herself on the back. Score one brand-spanking-new minion, she thought, and settled in at her desk, satisfied that she had pleased Miranda yet again.

Miranda seemed pretty happy with Ellie. At least, as happy as she ever got around a new assistant. She was obviously having lots of fun, at any rate--all it took was one cold look from her to make Ellie turn bright red, tremble, and stutter.

As for Nigel, he took one look at Ellie, pulled Andy aside, and said, "You're kidding."

Andy shrugged. "Miranda hired her."

Nigel glanced back to where Ellie sat, blissfully oblivious. "Huh. She suits your purposes well enough, doesn't she?"

Andy opened her mouth to deny it, or act innocent, and instead said, "Yes. She does."

Nigel glanced at her, and she thought he looked impressed. "Well. Good luck training the new you," he said.

But, however much she trembled and stuttered, Ellie could do the job, and that was what saved her. Of course, a monkey could do the job, but at least Ellie was marginally smarter than a monkey. It helped that Andy paid much more attention to training her than Emily had to training Andy, so she didn't have the same humiliating awakening to the new realities of her position.

And, okay, Ellie didn't have the same superiority complex Andy had been nursing at the start of her
job. Andy could admit that now as she saw how eager Ellie was to learn, how she didn't think that her new job was beneath her. Well…good for her, Andy guessed.

It also helped that Emily was there for a few more days to man the phones while Andy dragged Ellie all over the city with her, so Ellie could pay careful attention to what needed to be done. And when Andy went somewhere with Miranda, Ellie stayed at the office and watched Emily work the phones and field all the drama.

The day after Ellie had been hired, and Roy was ferrying Andy and Ellie to Hermès, Miranda called Ellie's cell phone. "Hello?" Ellie squeaked, and then went pale. She stammered, "O-okay, Miranda," hung up, turned to Andy, and said, "She said to get her that footstool that she liked at that store. Do you know which footstool? And which store?"

Andy thought hard. Then she said, "Roche Bobois on Madison Avenue. We drove past it yesterday, and she glanced at the window. And then she had the catalogue on her desk this morning."

Ellie's jaw dropped. "Wow," she said. "But which stool?"

Andy shrugged. "We'll just have to see what they have in the window display." She gave Ellie a very serious look. "You've got to pay attention, Ellie. She expects you to read her mind. Notice as much as you can. If she shows any particular interest in something, remember it. Write it down if you have to."

"I don't think I can do this job," Ellie whimpered.

Uh-oh. "Yes, you can," Andy said sharply. Then she heard the words coming out of her mouth: "A million girls would kill for it." Shit. She couldn't believe she'd just said that. But it made Ellie nod, so Andy continued, "And you beat all of them. You made it to the top. Right?" Ellie nodded again, looking a little perkier. "So you can do this," Andy finished, not at all sure of that, but desperate to keep Ellie around until they got back from London, at least. "Just pay attention and keep trying. Roll with the punches."

They arrived at Roche Bobois. There were two footstools in the window, but Andy immediately zeroed in on the one on the left. "That one. The blue one with the modern lines. That matches the stuff in her house. Now go in, order it, and have it sent to her home tonight. Not tomorrow or the day after--tonight. Rush delivery."

Ellie hurried inside. Ten minutes later, she emerged, looking flushed with victory. "It'll be there by seven-thirty," she proclaimed.

"Great!" Andy said, and patted her on the arm. Ellie became radiant. "You've made a good start."

"I really want to do well," Ellie said earnestly. Then she beamed. "I won't let you down, Andy."

God. She could practically be on a fifties sitcom. Andy managed a smile, and said, "I know you won't."

That night, when Andy arrived to drop off the book at ten-fifteen, she heard Miranda speaking in the den. Andy couldn't hear what she was saying, but her tone was light and breezy, and she even chuckled once.

As Andy shut the door of the hall closet, Miranda called, "Andrea." Andy took the book and hurried into the den, where Miranda was just snapping her cell phone shut. Miranda held out her hand, and Andy gave her the book, even as she noticed the new footstool sitting by Miranda's chair. It matched the décor perfectly.
"The new girl certainly did a remarkable job of picking out that footstool," Miranda said, paging through the book and not looking up at Andy. Her voice was mild, and she looked remarkably relaxed. Talk about being in a good mood.

"She sure did," Andy said, keeping a straight face. Miranda glanced up at her, then, and Andy returned the glance with her most innocent look. Miranda's lips actually quirked. Andy's stomach fluttered for a second, but then Miranda looked back down at the book.

"I'll be having lunch away from the office tomorrow," she said. Just like last time, she didn't say where, or with whom. "I'll return by two. Make sure to update the schedule accordingly. That's all."

"Okay," Andy said, and dared to add, "good night."

"Mmm," Miranda said, keeping her eyes on the book. Then: "Good night."

That night, Andy went to bed thinking of the sound of Miranda's chuckle, and the way her lips had quirked, and the faint, but undeniable shine in her eyes.

Miranda's glow persisted through the next day. When she returned from lunch, she actually gave Andy something that was almost, almost like a smile. Emily, for her part, gave Andy the usual look of resentment, although it wasn't quite as poisonous as it had been before she'd gotten her new job.

Andy didn't care. She was happy. Miranda was happy, she was happy, and right now, right at this minute, things were pretty rosy. She was really looking forward to London, too. She'd had a blast watching the Paris shows.

And then, four days after Ellie had been hired, Emily was gone. Just like that. No fanfare, no going out for drinks, and certainly no office party. Runway didn't work like that. People came and vanished without a trace. That was just the way things were.

It was very weird to sit at her own desk--Andy hadn't seen any point in switching--and see Ellie across the way instead of Emily. A new redhead, but with guileless eyes and a sweet, if vacant smile.

"So," Nigel said, "how are you settling in?"

"Oh," Ellie said, and blushed. "I don't really know yet."

"Okay," Nigel said, after a moment of silence. Andy tried not to laugh.

Right at that moment, Miranda called from within, "Andrea." Andy sighed and started towards the office, but then Nigel laid a hand on her shoulder.

Then he cleared his throat. Ellie looked up and saw them both watching her. "She means you," Nigel murmured.

Andy blinked, and then grinned. Oh, wow. Now that was really weird. And funny. And weird.

"But I'm not Andy," Ellie said blankly.

"Andrea," Miranda said impatiently, and Andy gave Ellie a very pointed look. Ellie cringed, got up, and hurried within.
Andy and Nigel looked at each other, and chuckled. Nigel even high-fived her.

There was a murmur of voices. Miranda sounded displeased. Then Ellie headed out of the office, looking shaky, and said to Andy, "She said she meant you."

Andy blinked again. Crap. "Whoops," Nigel muttered, and Andy walked as fast as she could into Miranda's office.

Miranda looked pissed. "Why didn't you come when I called?"

"I didn't think you meant me," Andy said hesitantly. "I mean--you know, when I started here, you--"

"Is the new girl's name Andrea?" Miranda asked.

"Well, no, but…"

"I thought not," Miranda said. "In fact, I believe there is only one Andrea in this office."

"I, I guess so," said Andy, who hadn't really thought about it.

"When I want the new girl," Miranda continued, "I will call the new girl."

"Oh," Andy said.

"Like this," Miranda said, and then called, "New girl!"

When Ellie tottered in, looking nervous, Miranda said, "I want my Starbucks here in ten minutes."

"Yes, ma'am," Ellie whispered.

"That's all," Miranda said, and glanced down at her desk. Ellie opened her mouth to ask a question, and Andy immediately pointed to the door with a look of warning. Ellie hurried out.

Then Andy looked back at Miranda, and felt a warm, delightful glow in her chest. So, she was the only Andrea around here. Accept no substitutes. She cleared her throat, and Miranda looked up at her with a frown. "Why did you call me in here?" Andy asked, trying not to smile. "Earlier?"

Miranda looked confused for the most fleeting of seconds, and then covered it by saying, "Get me Testino."

Andy got her Testino, and as soon as Ellie hurried back in with the Starbucks, Andy took it from her and placed it on Miranda's desk while Miranda was on the phone. Then she took Ellie aside.

"A few things," she said. "You don't call her 'ma'am.' You just call her Miranda. Second, always make sure that the coffee is searing hot, that's how she likes it. Third, when she says 'that's all,' then that's all. You nod, smile, and go away. You don't ask questions. You never ask her questions. Ask me instead."

Trembling, Ellie nodded. Andy felt sorry for her, and gave her a reassuring smile and a pat on the arm as Nigel sidled up to them again, carrying his laptop.

"She's still talking to Testino?" he asked.

"Yes, but it sounds like she'll be done soon," Andy said. "Oh, hey, I have that flash drive you asked for." She went to her desk and opened the drawer.
"Why did you think she wanted to see me, when she called your name?" Ellie asked. She turned to Nigel. "You did, too."

"Well," Nigel said, rubbing the back of his neck, "that's traditionally her habit. She calls the second assistant by the first assistant's name until she decides the second assistant is worth keeping around."

"Oh," Ellie said. "Then why--"

Andy quickly handed Nigel the flash drive. "Here you go," she said.

Nigel took it, gave her a long look, and then said to Ellie, "You'll pick things up as you go."

"It feels like I'll never learn all this stuff," Ellie said, and bit her lip.

"You will," Andy said, hoping she was right. Then she added, "By the way--don't call it 'stuff.'"

So, yes. Everything was coming up roses. Andy was the only Andy, and Miranda was pleased with her, and Ellie was going to settle in, and London was just around the corner and promised to be pretty darn cool, all things considered. Life, Andy thought that night, was good.

Then, the next day, she got a phone call.

It wasn't a number she immediately recognized. "Miranda Priestly's office," she said as she picked up.

"Hello," a man's deep voice said. "Is this Andrea Sachs?"

"Yes," Andy said, surprised.

"Oh, good," the man said, sounding relieved. "I was afraid I'd get the other one. Miranda said for me to talk to you if I couldn't reach her cell phone."

"Um…oh," Andy said, even more surprised. "Well, uh, what can I do for you, sir?"

"Just tell her, when you can catch her alone, that Stan Oppenheimer called," he said. "Tell her I have to cancel tomorrow evening. Something unavoidable's come up. She ought to understand about that." He chuckled.

"Unavoidable," Andy repeated. "Oh. Okay."

"Thanks. Tell her I'll call her later, if I can actually catch her this time."

"I…right," Andy said, blinking. "Of course."

"Bye," the man said, and hung up.

Andy sat with the receiver pressed hard against her ear for a few moments before she snapped out of it and hung up the phone. Then she realized that her free hand had been digging hard into the desk for the last couple of seconds.

Stan Oppenheimer was one of the senior vice-presidents of Elias-Clarke. He was also very wealthy,

Rumor had it he'd been interested in Miranda before her marriage to Stephen. As a matter of fact.

Andy stood up and walked into Miranda's office. Miranda was in the middle of sending Jocelyn away. As Jocelyn left, Andy cleared her throat.

"What?" Miranda said.

'When you catch her alone,' Mr. Oppenheimer had said. So Andy kept her voice low as she approached the desk and said, "Uh, Stan Oppenheimer just called."

Before her eyes, Miranda's gaze became sharp and interested. And bright. She leaned forward eagerly. She...glowed.

"He, um, has to cancel tomorrow evening," Andy said. "Something came up."

And then Miranda's eyes narrowed in obvious displeasure, and she sat back in her seat, drumming her nails on the glass surface of her desk. The glow was gone.

"He, he said he'd call you later," Andy said. "On your cell phone."

"That's all," Miranda said. Andy left the office on shaking knees. Then she sat down so hard in her chair that it probably bruised her tailbone, but even that didn't distract her from her thoughts.

Those phone calls, when Miranda had been laughing, but hadn't wanted anybody else to hear. Those lunches. And they'd been planning to get together 'tomorrow evening.' Andy knew what it meant when a man and a woman got together in the evening. Everybody knew. And Miranda had lit up like a Roman candle just at the mention of it.

When you catch her alone. Away from prying eyes and curious ears.

Stupid. Stupid. Miranda's glow--because of a man. An absurdly handsome and available man. Well, of course it'd have to be something like that, instead of some stupid lowly assistant who brought her coffee and scheduled her doctor's appointments. What the hell about Andy could possibly make her glow?

Andy was, as always, an idiot.

The rest of the day felt very long indeed.

The next day, after an equally long night, Andy made quite sure to put her best game face on. And the day after that (when Miranda had her rescheduled lunch with Mr. Oppenheimer), and the day after that. God knew she had enough to take care of, right? She should do her job, right? That was fucking well why she was here, right?

Although, just for the record, Andy personally thought Miranda might have waited just one more month before promoting Emily. It was the twelfth of February, and Fashion Week in London was one week away. Like everyone else, Andy was thrown into frantic preparations, while also trying to train Ellie to hold the fort while they were gone--and Emily wasn't there to fill the gaps. Miranda wasn't slowing down for a minute, either. Their morning rides had no more silent moments; Miranda
was talking from the moment she got in the car to the moment her heels were clacking down the marble floors of the *Runway* offices.

The good news was, now Ellie was the one responsible for getting Miranda's morning Starbucks to her, so Andy didn't have to worry about texting the order in anymore. The bad news was, now Andy arrived at the office with Miranda every single morning, and people had started to notice. Miranda didn't care, of course, but Andy still felt the sting of raised eyebrows and muttered comments. Now she understood what Miranda had meant about passive-aggressiveness. It was really fucking irritating. What was the big deal? So Andy showed up to work with the boss. Who cared? It wasn't as if anything inappropriate was going on. At all.

It was actually kind of refreshing when a wide-eyed Ellie asked her, right up front and without prevaricating, "Why do you always arrive at work with Miranda? Do you really have it timed that well?" Typical. Ellie had come to be in awe of the way Andy kept up with Miranda, plus everything else. She seemed to think that Andy had flights of spirits or something that she could summon to do five different things at once on her behalf.

"Er, no," Andy admitted. "Roy picks me up every morning before he gets Miranda. It's so she can start, you know, giving me instructions right away," she added hastily.

"Wow," Ellie breathed.

Right then, Miranda breezed in. Like everyone else, she had to be exhausted from the frenetic pace. More exhausted, considering. But she never showed it, and she didn't show it now. "Get me the copy from Paul," she said, and Ellie scurried away, obviously trying to avoid eye contact.

"Confirm lunch with Stan," Miranda said to Andy in a low voice.

Andy couldn't quite speak, so she nodded and smiled brightly at Miranda as if nothing was wrong at all. Miranda turned and walked into her office without another word or look of acknowledgment. Andy tried not to gag on her latest hot, miserable surge of jealousy. She'd never felt anything like it before.

How was it possible that Miranda already had a new guy, just a few months after Stephen had left her, and in the middle of a divorce? Was she that desperate to acquire a father figure for her kids? Apparently so. Shit.

And there might be more to it than that. Or less. The bastard really was good-looking. And Andy could tell, from the way Miranda looked when she got in the car in the morning, that she'd stopped throwing up and felt a lot better. In fact, Andy's books told her that after the first trimester, women often got their libidos back. Sometimes they got more than their fair share. Maybe Miranda didn't want a father substitute for her children--maybe she wanted something a lot less complicated. The thought made Andy want to die. Or kill. Or both, that'd be good.

Well, maybe that could be the favor Andy asked for. "*Miranda, could you please not sleep with anybody else ever again?*” Then again, it might not go over well. Double shit.

That afternoon, as usual, Miranda returned from her little lunch date looking extremely pleased with herself. Probably nobody but Andy could see it, but Miranda was definitely…satisfied by something. Sated, even. She hadn't looked that happy since the pizza.

Because she was a glutton for punishment, Andy waited until they were alone and stammered, "D-do you, um, want me to make another reservation? Appointment? With him?" She might as well beat Miranda to the punch, might as well get used to it, might as well start trying to numb herself right
Miranda stared at her. "Did I ask you to?"

"No," Andy croaked, wishing Stan Oppenheimer in the hottest part of hell.

"What I want you to do," Miranda said acidly, "is check up on the London hotel reservations."

"I did that while you were at lunch," Andy said, trying very, very hard not to think about her room--Stephen's room--the guestroom--at Miranda's London townhouse. "We're all, um, all placed. I mean we've all got rooms lined up."

"'We'?' Miranda said.

"Well," Andy said, with a forced laugh, "not you, obviously, I meant--"

"Nor you," Miranda said, giving her a very flat look.

After a moment, Andy said, "Oh."

"Make sure there is enough room for Jocelyn in the front row at the Asish show," Miranda said. "That's all." She walked off.

Andy took a deep breath and sat down at her desk, reaching for the phone to call the Asish organizers, and then the hotel. Then, when she'd gotten that all taken care of, she found herself staring off into space. Ellie was off running errands, which meant Andy couldn't leave the desk, and she actually didn't have any tasks she could take care of right now. Which left her with time to think, and that was precisely what she didn't need.

So she was going back to the townhouse after all. Andy tried very hard not to feel happy. She tried very hard not to feel anything at all. It wasn't a reason to be happy, it wasn't good, it wasn't fair, it wasn't right of Miranda to get Andy's hopes up like that, whether she meant to or not.

Because Andy didn't think she could take it--living in Miranda's house again, talking to her at four in the morning again, making her breakfast and seeing her bare toes again, and knowing that none of it was really for her. That even if Stan Oppenheimer wasn't in the picture, it still wouldn't be for her. That she couldn't afford to get used to it, no matter how much she wanted to.

"Hey, Andy?" Ellie said. Andy jumped; she hadn't heard Ellie come back in. But now Ellie looked worried, and she nibbled her lower lip, which made her look kind of like a rabbit. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," Andy snapped, and then, when Ellie's face crumpled, she felt bad for snapping. She was supposed to be nice to Ellie, since Miranda, of course, was unfailingly cold. The good cop, bad cop thing again. "Fine," Andy repeated, more gently. "I just, um, have a headache."

"Oh gosh," Ellie said, looking sympathetic. "I have some Advil if y--"

"New girl," Miranda barked from within. Ellie jumped, and scurried inside. Andy sighed, and stared down at her keyboard. She hadn't been lying. She did feel a nasty headache coming on.

Well, maybe headache was better than heartache. Too bad she had a mortal case of that, too.
The day before they left for London, Miranda had lunch with Stan Oppenheimer yet again. She returned almost buoyant, yet again. Andy didn't tell anyone, yet again.

"I need these dresses messengered to Michaela immediately," Nigel said. Then: "What's wrong with you?"


"Try coffee," Nigel said. His tone was light, but she kind of thought he was looking at her with concern.

Andy knew Miranda had to be feeling better now, because she didn't throw up even once on the flight to London. She did, however, keep everyone as busy as she had on both the Paris flights. And she wasn't the only one: Nigel, Jocelyn, Keisha, Paul—all of them were always thinking of last-minute details, making last-minute changes that Andy had to punch frantically into the master schedule instead of sleeping or reading or watching the in-flight movie. Even worse, she was sitting next to Miranda. In the first class section of an Airbus they were hardly bumping elbows, but Miranda was always out of the corner of her eye, and why couldn't Andy be sitting in front of her instead? Then at least she'd have to turn her head to look at her.

After the flight landed, everyone was practically sprinting for the door the moment they got through customs. And then Fashion Week was on. This time, there was no relaxing downtime in Miranda's townhouse, no chance to take a nap before the next big social engagement. The Runway group went to the hotel, except for Andy and Miranda, who headed for Miranda's house. Andy and Jimmy exchanged 'hello, again' smiles in the car, but they didn't quite dare say much more in front of Miranda, who was obviously far more goal-oriented this week than she had been in December. Well…good. Fine with Andy. If Miranda kept moving, then Andy had to keep moving too, which was exactly what she needed. She was here to work, after all.

They didn't stop at the townhouse for longer than it took to freshen up and change. Andy noticed that Stephen's razor head and traveling-case were gone. But she didn't have much time to dwell on that as she got out of her wrinkled clothes and threw on a fresh outfit, washed her face and re-applied her makeup, and combed her hair. There. She almost looked human again. Also: talk about déjà vu.

She needed to be ready before Miranda, as always, so she didn't spend as much time on her face as she might otherwise have done, and instead clattered downstairs towards the kitchen, hoping the staff had stocked it exactly as she'd told them to. Everything seemed okay.

Miranda clacked into the kitchen just as Andy had stuck her head inside the fridge. "What are you doing?" she said, sounding displeased. "It's time to leave."

"I know," Andy said hastily, and pulled out a bottled smoothie. "But it's four hours until dinner, and I thought you might want one of these." She offered the bottle to Miranda, who already looked as fresh and awake as if she'd never set foot on an airplane. "It's, like, a protein and soymilk something. Mango-flavored."

Miranda looked skeptical, but she took a sip, and then nodded indifferently. Which meant she loved it, and Andy had better make sure she got more of them. At least she'd done something right.

Then Miranda lowered the bottle from her mouth, and Andy realized the smoothie had left a peach-
colored milky ring around Miranda’s lips. It momentarily hypnotized her, and her heart thumped pleasantly at the sight of it—it was cute, and sexy, and like she needed another reason to want to kiss Miranda?—but probably nobody else should see it. It wasn’t exactly dignified or fashionable, and nobody but Andy would think it was adorable.

She cleared her throat. Miranda frowned at her. Andy started making circling motions over her own lips with her index finger, and then Miranda stared at her like she was crazy. "You've got," Andy said, and tapped her lips.

Miranda's eyes went wide. "I've got to what?"

"You've got stuff on your mouth from the smoothie," Andy said, wincing in apology. It somehow seemed much ruder when you had to come right out and say it. Especially to Miranda.

Miranda's eyes opened even wider in understanding. Her cheeks went pink too. Hoping to stave off a snit-fit, Andy quickly offered her a paper towel. Miranda snatched it and dabbed at her mouth, peering at her reflection in a nearby glass cabinet and scowling the while. "Let's go," she said, and put the smoothie down on the counter.

"Oh," Andy said, inexplicably crestfallen. "You don't want--?"

"I want--" Miranda cleared her throat. "I want to go. Is there something complex about this?"

"I'll get your coat," Andy said, trying not to sigh audibly.

"This is an extremely important week, Andrea," Miranda said, like that wasn't a massive understatement, and like Andy didn't already know it perfectly well. "Don't let yourself get distracted."

"Distrac--" Andy began, and then cut herself off, going rigid when she figured out what Miranda meant. 'Being distracted' meant 'fussing over Miranda's pregnancy.' Which Miranda did not want and would not appreciate. Not this week, anyway. Maybe not anymore, period. Okay. Fair enough. Totally fine. Right?

"Right," Andy mumbled, tossed the smoothie in the trash, and headed to get the coats, thinking very hard about not thinking at all.

That very afternoon, disaster struck. First of all, the front row at the Asish show did not have a seat reserved for Jocelyn—a detail Miranda had told Andy to take care of personally. Fortunately, Andy noticed the mistake before Miranda (or Jocelyn) arrived, and pounced on the staging director immediately.

"Listen, I don't know what to tell you," he said.

"Tell me you're going to boot one of these people so Jocelyn Cooke can get a seat," Andy said. "I spoke to Elyssa, and she said--"

"Oh, that explains it," he said. "Elyssa quit three days ago."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that," Andy said, trying very hard not to sound panicked, because Miranda
was due to arrive any second. "But Jocelyn is in Miranda Priestly's entourage."

"Oh, she's--ohhhh," the staging director said, his eyes going wide. "Really? Shit. Okay. Let me fix that…"

Thank God. He went to talk to the woman who'd had the temerity to take Jocelyn's seat. Andy, bouncing on the balls of her feet and hoping the woman would vacate her place before the rest of the Runway crew arrived, glanced over to the other side of the room. Which led to the second part of the disaster: she saw Stan Oppenheimer sitting in the third row.

What? What the hell was he doing here? He wasn't supposed to be here. At least, Andy hadn't heard that he'd be here. Not that she had any reason to know such a thing. Mr. Oppenheimer's schedule wasn't even remotely in her purview. But surely Miranda had known he would be here. And hadn't mentioned it.

Well, why should she mention it? Andy gulped hard. Miranda wasn't accountable to Andy for her movements. If she didn't need Andy to schedule a lunch or something, then Andy had nothing to do with any of it. They had 'gotten together' in the evenings, after all, and Andy had never heard a word about it until Mr. Oppenheimer himself had told her.

Then there was a flurry of attention by the door, and Andy knew Miranda had arrived. She always made an entrance: people got out of her way, cleared a path for her, watched her with equal parts envy and admiration, murmured to each other as they watched her pass. Andy remembered the way Emily had breathed, "Oh, she's amazing!" when Miranda had descended the stairs at the museum benefit. With tears in her eyes, no matter how much she'd denied it. And she'd been right. 'Amazing' didn't even begin to cover it.

Stan Oppenheimer was watching Miranda, too. He looked approving. Andy wondered how many punches it would take before his face actually caved in.

Deep breath. Deep breath. Jocelyn's seat was free now, and Andy thanked the stage manager as she took her seat in the second row behind Miranda, who hadn't noticed the momentary glitch. Then she tried to pay attention to the models on the catwalk, and the clothes they wore, instead of on the ridiculously rich, handsome, and available man across the way.

To Andy's relief, though, Mr. Oppenheimer didn't attempt to speak to Miranda after the show. And there were two more shows before dinner, so she was able to keep busy and try not to think about him. Then there was the dinner itself, and Andy definitely wasn't sitting at Miranda's table this time. Even Nigel wasn't sitting at Miranda's table.

But Carter Mathson was. And when dinner was done, and people were milling around, Andy found herself standing by Miranda's side as Miranda introduced her to the editor-in-chief of Modernity, who'd accepted Andy's article, who thought she had talent and deserved nurturing. Andy garbled out her thanks for his consideration, trying to sound appropriately grateful without veering over into 'pathetically grateful' territory. After all, he might just be her ticket out of Runway, away from Miranda and to a place where she could do serious work and maybe even get her mind back. She should want that. No--she did want that. Of course she did. It was what she'd always wanted, wasn't it?

"You've got potential," Mr. Mathson said, and shook her hand. "I'm glad Nigel sent you my way," he added as he turned to go. "Tell him so. Miranda--always a pleasure."

"Carter," Miranda murmured, but Andy could tell the mention of Nigel had displeased her. Probably because she'd been trying to one-up his generosity, and Mr. Mathson hadn't let her.
"Thanks for introducing me," Andy tried.

"Call the car," Miranda said. "We're going home."

Andy didn't ask if Miranda was okay, because Miranda didn't want Andy to get distracted. So she just called the car, and rode in silence with Miranda back to the townhouse.

The silence was oddly tense. Andy wasn't sure why. She and Miranda hadn't had a disagreement; Miranda hadn't even found out about the almost-mistake with Jocelyn's seat. Andy had done everything right all day long. But it felt very stiff and uncomfortable in the back seat right now.

Oh, heck. Andy was totally imagining it. What was wrong with her? She was just tired, and had endured a really long day--several days--and she was still wrung-out with inappropriate jealousy over an interest Miranda might not even have in some other guy. And even if she did, it wasn't Andy's business to be jealous in the first place, as she'd told herself a million times already.

All of this tension was just in Andy's head. She was projecting it onto everything. So what if they weren't talking to each other in the car? Miranda didn't have anything to say, that was all. She was probably just as tired as Andy was, if not more so.

Jimmy stopped the car at the curb, and Andy and Miranda climbed the steps to the townhouse. Miranda's shoulders were as straight and proudly-set as ever, but she was definitely moving more slowly.

Andy unlocked the door and held it open for her, and they both stepped into the darkened hallway. There were no kids asleep upstairs this time, no Padmini waiting to welcome them home with a tired smile, no smells from dinner leftovers. Andy realized, in a way that had not actually occurred to her before, that it was just her and Miranda here tonight--all week, in fact.

The knowledge gave her a jolt, but she was far too exhausted to analyze what kind of jolt it was. Instead she just turned on the hall light and helped Miranda out of her coat. Miranda didn't say anything, but she did give Andy a long look. Her own face was expressionless.

Andy normally would have fumbled for something to say, and would have come up with something dumb like, 'Long day, huh?' Or something maybe slightly more useful, like, 'Is there anything else I can do for you tonight?' But not now. Now, for some reason, after that quiet car ride and in this quiet house, no words would come to her. So she just looked at Miranda right back, and thought about that peachy ring around her mouth; and then her brain shut down in self-defense and became mercifully blank.

Miranda kept staring at her. Andy kept staring back. It didn't feel like defiance. The opposite, in fact. Surrender. Okay. Miranda had won. She'd won whatever game they'd been playing all along, ever since Andy had been hired. Andy had nothing to say to her. She was only waiting to be dismissed.

Miranda took a breath, as if she'd decided to say something after all. But she exhaled it, didn't speak, and turned and headed down the hallway. Andy removed her own coat and hung it in the hall closet, deliberately taking her time, and by the time she got to the foot of the stairs, Miranda had already ascended them. By the time Andy got to the second floor, Miranda had shut her bedroom door.

Well...good. Feeling like her shoulders and legs and everything else weighed a thousand pounds each, Andy dragged herself into the guest bedroom, shut the door, and got ready for bed. Her alarm was set to go off at six, and it was gone eleven now, and her body's clock was completely screwed up again.
She fell asleep almost immediately. And dreamed.

"Look at this," Miranda said, and held out a newspaper. Andy looked at it. Chocolate Pudding Now In Style, read the headline. Andy smiled, happy that chocolate pudding was in fashion and now she could eat it.

But Miranda didn't seem as happy. "Did you do this?" she demanded. "I told you not to talk to the papers. Is this your fault?"

"No," Andy said. "I didn't go to the papers. I just like chocolate pudding." Miranda only sneered. "Don't you know why I want to make you happy?" Andy pleaded.

"Of course I do," Miranda said, and held up the paper again. Now the headline read, Andy Sachs Loves Miranda Priestly, like a schoolyard taunt. Andy had much preferred the news about chocolate pudding, and wished it would come back.

"You've embarrassed me in front of everyone," Miranda said.

"I'm sorry," Andy said, but that wasn't true. She looked down at the newspaper, where the headline didn't change, and felt too sad to be sorry. Too sad to do anything at all.

Then she woke up, feeling like she had a stone in her chest, and blinking back actual tears. She'd never cried in her sleep before. It felt pretty pathetic. The clock at her bedside read 2:00 a.m. She didn't want to go back to sleep, she wanted to stay awake until that dream was all gone from her head and wouldn't come back, but she couldn't. So she fell back asleep.

The dream returned. Twice.

Thankfully, though, the dream didn't show up the next night, or the next, or the one after that. Maybe Andy's subconscious had gotten it all out of her system, but it was much more likely that Fashion Week was such a sensory overload that Andy didn't have room for it anymore. For the next four nights, she dreamed about work--shows and clothes and people in fancy dress, and Andy was always scrambling to make the next appointment, always running late, always trying to catch up, always letting everybody down.

Daytime wasn't as bad as that. In spite of trying to train Ellie at the same time, Andy had done her London legwork well, and except for the snafu at Asish, everything she'd scheduled had gone off without a hitch. So far. Now that she'd had practice in Paris, this came a little easier. Even Jocelyn and Paul--who, like everybody else at Runway, had resented her ever since Miranda had begun to favor her--were grateful for Andy's attention to detail, for her efficiency. Maybe they'd cut her a little fucking slack for once when they got back to New York.

As for Keisha, Lucia's replacement, she told Andy up front, "Y'know, I can tell what Miranda sees in you. You're really on the ball."

"Thanks," Andy said, and meant it. But Miranda--who apparently 'saw something' in her--had no such kind words for Andy. She hardly had any words for Andy at all. The most she did was ask every day about how Ellie was handling things back at Runway, always in a faintly accusatory tone, as if it was Andy's fault that she'd only had one week to train her before they'd left.
Andy called Ellie every night, and made sure that Ellie told her about every single message, every little detail, no matter how insignificant Ellie might think it. The girl might not be bright, but she was definitely good at doing what she was told. Besides, Andy had given her very precise instructions, and with half the staff out of the office there wasn't all that much to do. Everyone knew Miranda would be in London, so nobody was calling to make last-minute appointments, or demanding to speak to Miranda immediately, or anything like that. The most Ellie had to do was transfer calls to the clackers who were actually there, and try not to pee until it was time to go home.

So every day Andy said, "Sounds like everything's going okay, Miranda," and would pass along anything important that Ellie had told her, which usually wasn't much. Sometimes Miranda would have her call Ellie back with additional instructions; most often, she gave Andy a curt nod and sent her off on some other errand out of an endless succession of errands. Then, at the end of the day, they'd return to the townhouse and continue not to talk.

It was awful. And weird. They were staying in the same house, and Miranda was speaking to Andy less than ever. No more talk about the twins, no more bitching about the media, and certainly no more inquiries about Andy's parents or life or anything insignificant like that. Just silence.

In fact, sometimes, just sometimes, Andy wanted to scream at Miranda. To break the silence, to yell, to remind Miranda that she was there, that she existed, that she had feelings too, that she deserved to be--to be--to be considered, even if she didn't deserve anything more. She wanted to shout, "Look at me," or anything else that would make Miranda stop staring right through her and giving her orders like she was programming a robot. But of course Andy couldn't do anything like that. It wasn't her place. She didn't deserve any such thing, anything at all.

At least Miranda hadn't been in contact with Stan Oppenheimer, as far as Andy could tell. It was easier to keep track of her during Fashion Week, of course, especially given that Andy was staying in Miranda's own house. But even that didn't necessarily mean anything. Miranda was sneaky, she always had been, and if she wanted something she'd find a way to get it. It wasn't like Andy could keep watch over her every minute of every day, no matter how often they were together. Miranda and Mr. Oppenheimer had probably found one or two opportunities…they'd probably been able to get together and laugh and do things that made Miranda glow, like, like…

Yes, all in all, it was a very good thing that Andy kept so incredibly busy. It was good not to dwell.

And then, on Thursday afternoon, at yet another reception, Andy finally caught Miranda talking to him. It didn't look particularly intimate (well, it wouldn't do to look intimate in front of other people, now would it?), and it certainly wouldn't appear unusual to anyone else--why shouldn't she chat with one of the higher-ups at Elias-Clarke? In fact, when you looked at it that way, Stan Oppenheimer was practically Miranda's boss. Which was so gross and wrong, and totally different from Andy's own situation, in ways that she was still trying to think of.

Looking around desperately for a friendly face, or at least some kind of distraction, because there was only so much she could be expected to take, Andy came up dry. Nigel was off in a corner talking to Georg Schumann. Oh God, Andy hoped that didn't mean Mrs. Schumann was around here somewhere. Whenever she thought of Helga Schumann, she heard Miranda's voice calling her the 'heifer hausfrau,' and got torn between the urge either to laugh or to drown even more in self-pity, neither of which would be appropriate at this reception. Although it would be kind of sweet to tell Mrs. Schumann--who'd said, "A reporter? You?"--that she was getting an article published in Modernity. Hah. Take that.

Then again, maybe not. And Jocelyn, Keisha, and Paul were all occupied too. Just as Andy had decided to nurse a cocktail somewhere out-of-the-way and try to forget Miranda Priestly existed, at
least until the reception was over, she heard:

"Well hello again, Miranda-girl."

Christian's voice was so sly, so full of mischief, that Andy caught herself grinning before she'd even turned around. 'Miranda-girl.' He often called her that. Andy wondered if he realized how appropriate--or, really, inappropriate--it was.

"Hi, Christian," she said.

He offered her a glass of white wine. "Apparently I've made it my mission in life to give you alcohol at important functions."

"I can't think of a better occasion for alcohol," Andy said, taking the glass. Christ knew she could use a drink right now. They smiled at each other, and clinked their glasses together. "You been taking in the shows?"

"Actually, no," he said, surprising her. "I've been visiting friends in Edinburgh. I just got back in town this morning. Otherwise I would've tracked you down a lot sooner." His eyes gleamed. "Believe me."

Andy rolled her eyes. "I'm glad you didn't dump your Edinburgh friends," she said. "I would seriously have worried about your priorities."

"Yeah," he said, looking her up and down without shame. "If they'd gotten a load of you, though, they would've said the same thing."

Andy laughed before she could stop herself. It felt good. It felt like it had been months since she'd laughed. "Wow," she said, when she'd stopped. "That's amazing. You use such terrible lines, and you're somehow the best smooth-talker I've ever met."

He laughed too. "I want to hear examples of your smooth-talk sometime," he said. "Since you're such an expert."

"I don't have to smooth-talk anyone," Andy said. "The smooth-talkers come to me." She grinned. "Obviously."

She knew it was stupid to stand here and flirt with Christian again. Really stupid. But damn it, it felt so good to flirt, to have someone pay her attention and think she was attractive, someone suave and charming who could make her laugh. She felt like she'd just been pulled out of her own head for a little while, made to stop moping, and it felt great.

"My goodness," Christian said, his grin growing wider by the second. "I can't believe I stayed away this long. Though I'm sure you've kept busy."

"You better believe it," Andy said.

He glanced over Andy's shoulder, and nodded his head. Andy didn't have to turn to know who he was looking at. "It's true, huh," he said. "She's pregnant? I notice her publicist hasn't denied anything."


"Did you know when I saw you on New Year's?"
No point in denying it. Andy nodded. Christian whistled. "We were keeping it under wraps," Andy said, unnecessarily.

"I bet," Christian said. "So, personal assistant, is she gonna have you changing diapers in a few months?" It was probably a good thing that he couldn't hear the bitterness that powered Andy's rueful chuckle. "I have to admit it looks good on her," he said. Then he grinned and added, "You can tell her I said so. It'd piss her off like crazy."

"That it would," Andy agreed. But he was right. Now that she wasn't sick anymore, being pregnant became Miranda. Not that she had some magical motherly radiance or anything—it was more that pregnancy actually slowed her down long enough for people to get a good look at her.

"But to my purpose," Christian said, thankfully breaking her chain of thought. "Seems like you could use a break. You got any free time before you're due to go home?"

Andy should say no. Should beg off. Flirting with Christian at a party was one thing; actually agreeing to date him again was something else. "Well--" she began.

"Hey," he said, and waved a placating hand, as if reading her thoughts. "I swear I'll behave myself. I heard you're staying at her place?" Andy nodded. "So what if I promise to have you home by midnight?"

Andy smiled. "What do you have in mind?"

"A careful reintroduction," he said, "to the intellectual delights of our former friendship." Andy rolled her eyes. "And maybe dinner and a play. If you're free."

A play? Andy brightened at the words. She'd been longing to go to the theatre while she was here, but of course she'd had no time. "Miranda's got a big dinner tomorrow night," she said. "What show?"

"That's my surprise," he said. "But I'll have great seats. Just say the word."

Andy shouldn't do it. But she'd already done so many things she shouldn't…going out with Christian again was the least of them.

"The word," she said.

His smile was much more genuine this time, and she blushed in spite of herself. "I hate to say it," he said, "but now might be the best time for me to split. I don't think she's noticed that I'm here."

"It doesn't matter if she does," Andy dared to say, and then shrugged. Well, it didn't, did it? Why would Miranda care about what Andy did with a man Miranda had already squashed like a bug? Why would Miranda care about what Andy did at all?

"No?" Christian looked skeptical. "Call me, okay?"

"Sure," Andy said. "When I know more about when I'll be free."

He winked at her. "Until later, then." Then, after pressing a hand to his breast, he departed.

Andy grinned again. She took a quick sip of wine to hide it, and caught Nigel watching her out of the corner of his eye with raised eyebrows. He wasn't talking to Mr. Schumann anymore, and he tilted his head, summoning her to his side. Andy hurried over, trying to look appropriately straight-faced.
"Oh, my," Nigel said.

"It's nothing," Andy said, trying to sound casual. "I mean, it's not going to be like it was before."

"Really," Nigel said.

"Really," Andy said, not at all sure of that.

"Are you certain?" Nigel said. "Or is he going to be one of those men, you know, the ones whom you know are so very bad for you, and yet you can't leave them alone?" Andy stared at him, and he wagged his eyebrows. "I've had my share of experience with them."

"Yeah?" Andy said. "You ever been one of them?"

Nigel snorted. "I wish. Just try to have a little fun before he sends your heart spinning in flames to the ground like the Hindenburg ."

Now it was Andy's turn to snort. "He doesn't have that kind of hold on me, Nigel," she said. Meanwhile, the woman who did was talking in a small cluster of people across the room. Thankfully, Stan Oppenheimer appeared to have vanished.

"Sure. Changing the subject," Nigel said, "I saw that Miranda introduced you to Carter Mathson a few nights ago."

"Yes, she did," Andy said. "He was nice."

"I'm sure he was," Nigel said. "That cleavage you were sporting wouldn't have hurt, either."

"Nigel!" Andy gasped, scandalized.

He grinned. "It's too easy. You can't take the farm out of the farmgirl."

"I never lived on a farm," Andy snapped. "Jesus, Nigel, I never meant to--"

Nigel waved his hand. "That's the way the world works, Andy. If you've got it, flaunt it. No matter what 'it' is." He raised an eyebrow at her. "You're the kind to make the most of a new opportunity, after all."

Andy's senses immediately went on alert. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Sorry?" Nigel said. And then: "Oh, look--our mistress calls."

Andy looked up and saw that Miranda was giving her an impatient look. "Whoops. You coming?" she said to Nigel.

"Not yet. I'll be at the Azzarello show by two, though."

"Okay," Andy said, and hurried after Miranda.

Andy's lingering, Christian-induced good mood lasted until Miranda said, as they were approaching the car, "I've scheduled lunch with Stan tomorrow, in the brief window between the Herrera and the Burberry shows. Keep it quiet."

Christian might as well not even have existed, then. So this was how Miranda and Mr. Oppenheimer were going to manage some alone-time. "Of course," Andy said, trying not to let her hand shake as she held open the car door for Miranda. Miranda hardly seemed to notice her as she got in the car.
Don't scream, Andy had to remind herself yet again. Don't shout. Don't dwell.

That night, they got back to the townhouse almost at midnight. For the first time all week, as Andy helped her with her coat, Miranda spoke. "I'll want to rest before the dinner tomorrow night," she said. "We'll return here at five."

Andy blinked. They would? "Okay," she said carefully. "I'm--I'm not supposed to go to the dinner too, am I?" She didn't think she was, but with Miranda's caprices--

"Of course not," Miranda said, as if she couldn't believe Andy had asked such a dumb question. "That's all." She turned and walked away.

That night, Andy lay awake thinking about Christian, and Nigel's cryptic words about new opportunities, and Stan Oppenheimer. She also remembered, for some reason, the way Miranda had looked in her bathrobe in the hotel room in Paris: tired and sad. And defeated, but not for long. That night seemed like years ago now.

This time, when Andy fell asleep, she didn't dream about either newspaper headlines or Fashion Week. Instead, she dreamed about Miranda's mouth and Miranda's body. Her mind was a little fuzzy on the actual details; all she knew was that Miranda's skin was soft beneath Andy's mouth and hands, and that Miranda, for once, welcomed Andy with open arms. And in her dream, for the first time in a long time, Andy felt joyful. Like she'd come home, like this was the rightest thing ever, like everything was okay at last. Miranda shuddered and whispered that Andy was wonderful, that what Andy was doing to her felt so good.

So of course Andy had to go and wake up in the middle of it. As she awoke she realized that her skin was tingling, and she had a wet ache between her legs, even though the dream hadn't been super-explicit. Still half-asleep, refusing to let herself really wake up or think or anything at all, she reached down between her legs and rubbed, allowing herself to remember only the noises Miranda had made in her dreams--soft, pleased little murmurs and moans--and the way Miranda had felt beneath her, so warm and welcoming. She remembered this, and only this, until she came with a moan of her own. Not a cry. Not a scream.

Then she lay still and waited for her heartbeat to slow down, still keeping her mind as blank as possible so she wouldn't start thinking yet again about how pathetic she was. She reached out, took a Kleenex from the box on the nightstand, and wiped off her fingers.

Her last thought, before she drifted back to sleep, was maybe she should try for a little action with Christian after all. She was obviously in desperate need of it.

As they were driving away from the townhouse the next morning, Miranda told Andy, "I will be leaving for the dinner from the townhouse at seven-thirty, sharp." Andy nodded, knowing that Jimmy had just taken it in, too. "And don't forget my lunch appointment."

"Right," Andy said, hoping that her voice didn't sound too sharp. She cleared her throat, just in case. "Ahem. Sorry. Of course."

The lunch appointment really was pretty short. Miranda and Stan Oppenheimer only had thirty minutes to spend together. Andy spent the whole time thinking in agony about all the different ways you could pass thirty minutes. She and a couple of her boyfriends had tried several of them.
Trying to distract herself, she used some of the free time to call Christian, and arranged to meet him for dinner at eight. The play, whatever it was, started at nine, so they'd be cutting it close, but it couldn't be helped. And just briefly talking to Christian, just the idea of going out and doing something like dinner and a play, away from Miranda, made Andy feel a little better.

At least temporarily. Miranda arrived at the Burberry show three minutes before it was due to start. She was flushed, as if with excitement, and she was practically purring as she took her seat. Her eyes glowed with satisfaction. With pleasure.

Andy wanted to vomit. She found it almost impossible to pay attention to the show itself, and only with a huge surge of willpower did she keep things running smoothly until five in the afternoon, when she and Miranda returned to the townhouse.

Miranda retired immediately to her room without a word, as usual. Andy tried to catch a little shut-eye so she'd be fresh for her...not date...thing with Christian tonight. But she only managed twenty minutes of fitful dozing, and then she gave up, got up, changed and did her makeup, and decided to pass the rest of her time going over the schedule. The Runway crew returned to New York on Sunday morning. This was Friday night. Andy thought she had everything all lined up--cars, seats on the plane (she'd definitely managed to get herself on Miranda's flight this time, she thought humorlessly), baggage check. But it never hurt to give anything a tenth look.

She went downstairs to work. At ten after seven, the kitchen phone rang. The call was from Miranda's home phone number, so it had to be something to do with the twins. Andy picked up at once, trying not to worry. "Hello?" she said.

"Hi, Andy," a twin said. "How's it going?"

The breezy words reassured Andy that all was well in New York. "Fine," she said. "How are you guys? What's up?"

"Nothing," the twin said. "We just wanted to call and say hi to Mom since we've got a thing at school later, when she usually calls us."

"Aw. She'll be really pleased by that." She looked up at the clock. "She's got to go to a dinner in fifteen minutes. I'm sure she'll be down soon." Andy certainly didn't feel up to bearding her in her lair, but if the twins wanted her to-- "Do you want me to go get her?"

"Yes," Cassidy said, but then Andy heard Caroline saying 'give me that,' and the sound of the phone changing hands.

"Hi, Andy," Caroline said. "Are you having fun at Fashion Week?"

Caroline always asked the hard questions. "I'm getting tired at Fashion Week," Andy said, trying to sound jovial. Caroline giggled. "I was just about to get your mom."

"Not yet," Caroline said. "We talk to her every day. It's been forever since we talked to you."

"I guess so," Andy said, surprised. "So, what've you guys been up to?"

"I did better than Cassidy on my math test," Caroline said.

"Oh," Andy said, and then Cassidy took the phone back and said loudly, "But I did way better than Caroline on my history paper."
Andy didn't think she'd written any 'papers' when she was ten years old. "Well, congratulations to you both," she said hastily. "That's great. Sounds like you did really well."

"Chelsea got suspended this week," Cassidy said, sounding satisfied. "For smoking in the girls' bathroom."

"What?" Andy said, appalled. "Is Chelsea your age?"

"A year older," Cassidy said, as if that made all the difference. "And she's dumb, too. The bathrooms all have smoke detectors."

"Well," Andy said, and then Caroline took the phone back.

"Our birthday's next month," she said. "We're going to be eleven."

"I know," Andy said, and tried to sound bright and chipper. "I've got to start planning your party soon. Hey, any ideas about what you want?"

"We want David Blaine to do a magic show," Caroline said. "And we want that guy from Ace of Cakes to bake our cake for us. Chocolate. Tell him we want it to look like a grand piano."

"That guy?" Andy reached for a pen and pad of paper. "Which guy?"

"I don't know his name. You know. That guy. With the stripey beard. He looks like he should be a biker or something."

"I'll find out," Andy promised. "Grand piano, huh? He can do that?"

"He can do anything," Caroline said, sounding breathless. Andy grinned.

At that moment, she heard footsteps descending the stair, and realized that Miranda had emerged from her room. She was dressed for dinner and looked absurdly beautiful. Andy had expected no less, of course, and felt an ache in her heart just at the sight.

When Miranda saw Andy, her eyes widened in surprise. Andy wondered why, until she remembered that she was dressed up in evening clothes too. Showing cleavage, no less, and on her night off. Still frowning, Miranda gestured at the phone.

"It's the twins," Andy said, and then told Caroline, "your mom's up now. I'm gonna give her the phone, okay?"

"Wait!" Caroline said. "We didn't tell you everything about the party."

"You can tell me next time I see you," Andy said. "In a couple of days. We'll get it all worked out. Bye," she added, over Caroline's continued protests, and then handed the phone to Miranda.

"Hello, bobbsie," Miranda said, never taking her eyes off Andy, looking her up and down over and over again until Andy felt really nervous. "Mommy's going to have to call you later. She's running very late right now."

Huh? Andy looked at the clock. It was twenty after seven. Miranda didn't have to leave for ten more minutes, and she was already ready to go. She had a little time to catch up with the twins, who had short attention spans anyway.

"Yes, yes, we'll work everything out with your party. I promise," Miranda said. "I'll talk to you again tomorrow. Bye-bye." Then she hit the 'off' button on the phone, and glared at Andy, who'd started to
"squirm. "Why are you so dressed up? I told you that you weren't going to the dinner."

"I know," Andy said in surprise, and looked down at herself yet again. "I'm going somewhere else."

"What? Where?" Miranda demanded.

"I ran into Christian Thompson," Andy said, trying very hard to sound casual, and not let Miranda see in any way that Andy wanted to undress her. "We're going to have dinner."

"Christian--" Miranda's eyes bugged out. "Are you joking?"

"No," Andy said, even more surprised at Miranda's outrage. Sure, Miranda had no reason to like Christian, but she'd effectively neutered him, hadn't she? He wasn't a threat anymore. Heck, after the way she and Jacqueline had double-crossed him, he'd probably never even think about challenging her again. Miranda had to know that. She could read people like a book.

The last time they'd talked about him, in fact, had ended with Miranda laughing her head off. Andy tried very, very hard not to think about that. "We're going to have dinner and go to some play," she added.

"Dinner and some play?" Miranda looked at Andy like she was speaking Chinese.

"Well, yes," Andy said helplessly. Then, trying to lighten the mood, she said, "I'll, uh, make sure he doesn't end up in a towel this time. Um. Ha, ha."

Miranda's cheeks turned bright red. "You cannot be serious," she said. "You are having dinner with this man? After what he attempted to do to Runway --to me?"

Uh-oh. Andy had obviously miscalculated. Badly. "But you stopped him," she said quickly. "This is just--he just wants to spend time with me, that's all. I mean, Miranda, if he was up to something, he wouldn't want to have dinner with me of all people, right?"

Miranda gave her most derisive laugh. "Oh really? Who better than you?"

Andy stared at her. "Miranda, he knows I went to warn you in Paris. He knows I'm not going to give anything away, he knows I won't. I won't betray you." Miranda opened her mouth. Andy quickly added, "If he does have some kind of agenda, it doesn't include me. I wouldn't give him anything. You know I wouldn't."

"I know nothing of the sort," Miranda said.

Oh.

Forget Stan Oppenheimer. Forget everything. Miranda could not have come up with a single more hurtful, hateful thing to say if she'd plotted for centuries. Andy just looked at her in complete shock.

"What?" she said after a moment.

"You heard me," Miranda said.

"You don't really mean that," Andy said faintly. "You can't mean that." Miranda just looked at her. "I--you can't," Andy added. "I, I don't believe this."

"I might say the same thing," Miranda said, plainly unaware that she'd just broken what was left of Andy's heart into a thousand pieces.
"I don't believe this," Andy repeated, as if Miranda hadn't spoken at all. "I've...you don't trust me? After everything, everything I've--I've done anything you ever told me to do, or asked me to do--I've- -"

"Yes. Indeed," Miranda said, her voice cold as ice and snow. Her eyes were hard and unyielding. What the hell was wrong with her--surely she didn't actually think--

Then Andy realized the truth. This was it.

This was when she'd finally crossed the line, made the same kind of mistake that Roy and Lucia and Emily had. She'd fucked up in a way that Miranda considered unforgivable, and nothing Andy had ever done or offered, no sacrifice she'd ever made, mattered at all compared to that.

The cold look on Miranda's face said it all. Andy had seen that look before, and it always meant the same thing. No exceptions. Specifically, it meant that now Andy was finally, officially yesterday's trash.

"I'd thought I could rely on you, I admit it," Miranda said, her voice every bit as calm and cool as when she'd fired Lucia, and threatened Roy, and told Andy that Emily wasn't going to Paris, and… "Apparently not. I'm extremely disappointed."

"Oh," Andy said. So this was how it felt when the hammer fell. Like nothing. It was much too overwhelming to feel anything. It seemed like her fingers and toes were numb, like nothing around her was real.

"'Oh,'" Miranda mimicked. "Is that all you have to say for yourself? I'm surprised."

"I'm not," Andy said, hearing her own voice coming from a long way away.

Miranda frowned at her. "What?"

"I'm not surprised at all," Andy said, hearing how hollow her voice sounded. Maybe it was good that she felt so bad--the pain was too great, too much for embarrassing tears that would humiliate her in front of Miranda.

Miranda's glare got sharper. "If you do have something to say--"

"I guess I do," Andy said

Miranda scowled and continued, "--then I suggest you say it now."

"Why, because I won't get another chance?" Andy said. Well. If that's what Miranda wanted, then here it came. Here came all the words, everything Andy had never meant to say, everything she'd kept stoppered up in her throat because it would do no good to say it.

Here came the scream. Here came the yell. It was, as they said, all over but the shouting.

She laughed. It sounded awful, horrible, and felt worse. "Oh my God. I knew this would happen," she said. "I knew it. I did everything. I did everything right. But it doesn't matter, does it? I mean, you don't care. It doesn't matter to you--"

"Excuse me?" Miranda tilted her head back.

"--you think I'd just throw it all away and go tell Christian--oh. Ohhh, I get it," Andy said, her eyes going wider. The revelations just kept coming, each new one worse than the last. "Because you think
I'm like you. That's it. That explains it." And it did. It explained everything. Andy couldn't believe she'd been so stupid, hadn't seen it until now.

"What?" Miranda's eyes bugged out again.

"You said so, in Paris," Andy said, pointing a shaky finger at her. "That I was like you. Didn't you?" Looking stunned, Miranda nodded. "So, so you think I'd turn on you, you think I'd throw you away, because that's the sort of thing you do to people. Right?"

"What?" Miranda repeated, her eyes going impossibly wider.

"No, no, I've got it now," Andy said, still unable to stop talking. Everything was boiling up to the surface now, boiling out of her mouth, and it was too late to put the lid back on it. Why bother? She was as good as garbage anyway, right? "Sorry. I just forgot for a little while. What you're really like."

"What I'm--what I'm like?" Miranda sounded disbelieving, like all this was some big fucking surprise to her, like she didn't even know--

"Yeah," Andy said, not about to stop now, because what would be the point of stopping now? "You, you treat people like things. And as soon as they fuck up once--just once--you toss them, like Lucia and Emily and--you think I'm like you? You said I did the same thing to Emily, but you think I could do it to you too? You think I could ever do something like that to you?"

Miranda's face wasn't red anymore. Now it was chalk-white. Almost like she was upset by what Andy was saying, but that couldn't be true, because even after everything they'd been through Miranda didn't think of Andy as anybody worth keeping around. She could have screwed Stan Oppenheimer on the kitchen table while forcing Andy to take notes, and it would have hurt less than this.

And the worst of it was, Andy had been so stupid, so deluded, as to allow herself to hope. Miranda had told Andy to be honest with her, had implied she'd like to help Andy, had said a lot of things that had gotten Andy's hopes up for no reason, except that it hurt that much more to have them crushed now. Too bad Emily couldn't be here to see this. She'd have gotten a huge kick out of it.

The kitchen clock chimed the half-hour.

The sound snapped Andy back to reality, and Miranda appeared to wake up too. But she was still pale and trembling, still had that same unidentifiable…something in her eyes. Rage, that had to be it. Fury. She was going to kill Andy. Tear her limb from limb because Andy had finally dared to open her mouth and--

Andy couldn't bear it, any of it. Not anymore. She had to leave. "I've got to go to dinner now," she said, and grabbed her bag as she fled for the door without another word. Outside, Jimmy was just pulling up to the curb. Andy didn't stop to wave, didn't even look at him as she practically ran for the nearest tube station in high heels.

She had no idea how she was supposed to concentrate on a play, or even eat dinner, much less have an actual conversation with Christian. But she had to try. She needed to be somebody else for an evening, or at least pretend to be, before she returned that night and learned that she'd been fired and had to leave Runway and never come within sight of Miranda Priestly again.

Nigel had said that she was good at recognizing opportunities. He probably didn't know she was even better at fucking them up. Well. He'd find out the truth, soon enough.
Christian obviously knew that something was wrong. Andy was sure that her distress had to be written all over her, no matter how brightly she smiled. But he let it go until they were sitting in the restaurant.

"Okay," he said. "What happened?"

Andy opened her mouth to deny everything, and said instead, "I think I just got myself fired."

"You?" He raised his eyebrows. "The perfect employee?"

"I mouthed off," she admitted. In a big way. 'Mouthing off' didn't even come close to what she'd done, actually. The ride on the crowded tube had calmed her down, given her a few moments of distance. And now that she was feeling better--well, not better, but 'saner'--she realized how nuts she'd gone, how she'd said things that would be beyond the pale for anyone, to say nothing of a lowly assistant giving sass to her boss.

"Good," he said, and raised his glass. "About time. To you, my dear."

Though she really didn't feel like it, Andy clinked her glass with his because it would have looked weirder not to.

"So what did you say?" he pressed.

"I, um," Andy said, "I don't want to go into it. She…she said some stuff, and I got upset, so I said some stuff back, and then I left."

"Walked out on her, huh?" Christian said, sipping his wine. Andy nodded in shame. "Sounds familiar. Did you tell her that you weren't her baby?" Andy almost choked on her own wine, and Christian smiled ruefully. "Sorry. I didn't mean for that to sound like a low blow. I guess it did, though."

"Yeah, well," Andy said with a shaky chuckle. "It's okay. I guess I'm really good at dramatic exits."

"The best. So what are the odds that she's going to call and interrupt our lovely evening to fire you?" Christian appeared genuinely concerned.

"God, who knows? I--" Andy's eyes widened. "Shit. I left my phone at home. At her place. It was on the counter next to my bag, and I just…"

"Hey," Christian leaned forward with a reassuring smile. "It's okay. You can't do anything about it now." True enough, Andy thought dolefully. "What's the worst that can happen? She doesn't call and ruin your night?"

Yeah. Yeah, that. Or maybe she'd feel sick, or have to go to the doctor and Andy wouldn’t be there, or--

"Right," Andy gulped, and took a large swallow of wine.
The play they saw was the fledgling effort of one of Christian's writer friends, and even Christian had to admit it wasn't very good. Still, Andy did her best to sound enthusiastic when Christian introduced her to the playwright backstage.

The playwright's name was Ambrosia. "What did you think about the third scene in the second act?" she asked eagerly.

Andy thought fast. Was that the one where the man dressed as a duck had been trying to flirt with the elderly maiden aunt? Or was it the one where the little boy died of pancreatic cancer? Just to be on the safe side, she said earnestly, "It was so interesting. I'd love to know your secret for coming up with such, um, inventive dialogue."

"Between you and me," Christian said as they left the theatre later, "it's coke. Lines and lines of coke. You'd be amazed what you'll come up with after that."

"Flights of brilliance, huh?" Andy said. Christian waved down a nearby cab.

"Where to?" he asked, and she could easily read the look in his eyes.

She could go home with him. She could sleep with him and forget about everything but mindless physical sensations for a while, work off some tension, and avoid facing the music for a few hours longer.

Andy looked at her watch. It was almost midnight. "I think I'd better go back," she said.

Christian looked disappointed, but not exactly surprised, as he held the door open for her. But, unlike Miranda, he wasn't into long, silent car rides, and he kept talking about his collaboration with Benny Doran. Andy was thankful. She could just listen and nod and occasionally make an impressed noise while her mind whirled and spun. By the time the cab pulled up to Miranda's townhouse, she was almost shaking with nerves.

During the last few hours, Miranda had apparently not seen fit to cordon off her house with a chain-link fence, or dig a moat, or station a guard, or do anything else to signal that Andy was not welcome to return. Still, that didn't really mean anything.

Christian got out, held open her door, and then they looked up together at the darkened windows of the townhouse. Andy guessed Miranda was home by now, and probably--hopefully--asleep. Unless, of course, she was out with Stan Oppenheimer, doing what Christian had wanted to do with Andy. Like that mattered now.

"I guess this is goodnight," Christian said. "You're leaving on Sunday, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "I am." They looked at each other. "Thanks for, for dinner, and everything," Andy said.

He smiled, bent, and kissed her cheek. "Take care, Miranda-girl," he said softly. "I'll see you around again."

Andy blushed for a variety of reasons, and then gave him a smile--but stepped back so he'd know a real kiss wasn't on the cards. He waved at her as he returned to the cab, and Andy looked up again at the townhouse, which suddenly seemed much more imposing than ever before. She took a deep breath, went up the stairs, and turned the key in the lock. Well, Miranda hadn't thrown the latch. That was something, anyway.
She crept into the house as quietly as she could, taking off her shoes as soon as she gained the hallway, and tiptoeing up the stairs. There was no light shining out from behind Miranda's bedroom door, but her coat had been hanging in the hall closet. So she was definitely home, even if she wasn't emerging from her lair to breathe flames in Andy's face before putting her on the first flight out of London.

There was no sticky note on Andy's bedroom door reading "You're fired." Nor was there any similar indicator in the room itself. Not even a message written in blood-red lipstick on the bathroom mirror, though Andy admitted that one had been a long shot.

Instead of feeling relieved, she only felt more anxious. No doubt Miranda was just stringing her along, making her wait in agony for the final blow. Miranda was good at that kind of thing. As Andy got ready for bed, she realized she was actually shaking with nerves, in spite of her exhaustion at the end of a very long and difficult day.

But the bed was soft, and the covers were warm, and even Andy's chattering psyche was no match for her physical weariness tonight. Too much. She'd been through too much today, too much all week, to keep her eyes open for another second. So she closed them, and dropped into a deep, though unquiet slumber.

Unfortunately, though Andy had dodged her earlier, Miranda was waiting for her in her dreams.

"I told you not to talk to the papers," Miranda said. "Now I have to fire you."

She wasn't showing Andy the paper this time. Andy kept trying to get a look at it, to see the headline, but Miranda kept pulling it out of her reach. "Please don't fire me," she pleaded. "Please don't make me go."

"I have to," Miranda said. "Everybody knows that. You knew this couldn't last."

"I'm sorry," Andy said. "I'll never screw up again. I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"I don't want you here," Miranda said, scowling and impatient. "You have to go."

"Please don't send me away," Andy begged. "I don't care if you're a bitch. I don't want to leave you!"

Then Miranda punched her in the shoulder.

"Ow!" Andy said, and grabbed her arm. "What was that for?"

"Wake up," Miranda said, and shoved her again. "Andrea. I said wake up."

Andy opened her eyes to find that someone had grabbed hold of her shoulder and was shaking her back and forth. "Wake up," Miranda's voice repeated. She sounded pissed off.

Andy blinked and squinted. Someone had turned on the lamp by the door. It must have been Miranda, in fact, who was sitting on the side of Andy's bed and determinedly shaking her awake. She dropped her hand when Andy opened her eyes, and pulled it back into her lap. She was wearing her bathrobe.

The clock on the nightstand read 5:30 in big red numbers. Andy immediately propped herself up on her elbows, ready to fly out of bed. "What's the matter?" she gasped. "Are you okay?" It had to be an emergency. "I've, um, hold on--" Shit, her cell phone was still on the counter downstairs, wasn't it? "Lemme get phone--Dr. Finch--just a minute, I can--"
"It's quite the education, watching you wake up," Miranda said. She didn't sound like she was sick or in pain. She didn't sound angry either, not exactly. Andy blinked, and squinted at her again.

"Are you okay?" she repeated.

"No," Miranda said.

"Shit," Andy said, before she could censor herself. "What's wrong? Don't you want me to call the doctor?"

"Why?" Miranda said. "Will calling the doctor magically make you trust me, somehow?"

"Huh?" Andy said.

"We need to discuss what you said earlier," Miranda said. "About using people, and throwing them away."

Andy stared at her. Then she turned and looked at the bedside clock again. It read 5:31. "N-now?"

"When else?" Miranda snapped. "We're both up and running at seven, aren't we? This is the only free time we have on our entire schedule today, Andrea. As you know."

"Oh," Andy said, and blinked again, raising one hand to rub the sleep out of her eyes. She didn't think she was entirely successful, but Miranda had scared her so much by waking her up that her heart was still pounding. Just like the night after she'd learned Stephen was cheating on her, and had decided on and then rejected getting an abortion within twelve hours, calling Andy at three goddamned a.m. to keep her updated. Apparently waking Andy up was her favorite hobby.

But now Andy had to focus, because both her job and her personal happiness were probably on the line. No matter how pissed off she was, how rejected she felt, she didn't think she could handle it if Miranda kicked her to the curb. Not now, not yet. Just a little more time. Please.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, "about what I said."

"No, you're not," Miranda said.

"Yes, I am!" Andy snapped, forgetting her good intentions already. What, did Miranda suddenly know Andy's feelings better than Andy did? "I feel terrible about the way I talked to you."

"But you meant every word of it," Miranda said.

"Um," Andy replied, realizing that Miranda would see through a lie in a heartbeat.

Miranda looked away, staring at the wall. For the first time, Andy noticed how straight her posture was--rigid, almost--and how tightly she was clapping her hands in her lap.

"I will do whatever is necessary to keep Runway the best magazine it can be," Miranda said, still not looking at Andy. "To that end, I will hire and fire anyone I please. No one who works for me is irreplaceable, Andrea. Not Emily, not Lucia--not even Nigel. I'll do what I have to do, and I will never apologize for that. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Andy whispered, feeling about two inches tall.

"You will not reproach me for this again. Yes?"

"Yes," Andy repeated, wondering if she would get any severance pay at all, and how many therapy
sessions she'd be able to afford with it.

"However," Miranda said, keeping her gaze firmly focused on the wall. She stopped, took a deep breath, and started again. "However, this--professional tendency of mine does not extend to my private life. As I had assumed you were aware, but obviously not." Her voice got sharp, like it always did when she was pointing out Andy's stupidity.

Andy realized that her elbows were aching from the way she'd put her whole body weight on them, and dragged herself to a sitting position. It would have put her eye-level with Miranda, if Miranda had deigned to look at her. "I, uh," Andy said, "okay."

"People who are part of my personal life," Miranda said, her cheeks going a little red, "people like that--these people are not replaceable. And I do not 'throw them away.'"

Miranda had shocked Andy before. Heck, she'd shocked Andy more often than anybody else of Andy's acquaintance. But she'd never shocked Andy into actually wondering if she was hallucinating or on drugs. "Oh," she said.

"'Oh,'" Miranda mimicked, but it lacked bite this time.

"I'm," Andy said, and gulped, "personal?"

"Yes," Miranda said, in a voice as clipped as if she'd just told Andy to get her coffee.

Miranda wasn't firing her. Miranda didn't hate her. Miranda thought of her as somebody personal, as a, as a…

"So, I'm your, your…" Andy took her courage in both hands. "I'm your friend." Just saying the words made her feel terrified and exhilarated all at once.

Miranda did not reply, and Andy wondered if she'd actually gone too far, if she'd overstepped. Then Miranda said: "I have noticed the way you look at me."

Huh? Andy opened her mouth to say something, when she realized what Miranda meant. What Miranda had to mean.

Miranda snorted--still not looking at Andy--and continued, "I'm observant, Andrea. And you weren't exactly subtle on, oh, let's say, New Year's Eve."

Andy's exhilaration was gone, but the terror remained. Plus a healthy dose of complete and utter humiliation. She'd never been so mortified in her entire life. She felt like every muscle in her body had just locked up at once.

"I'm," she choked, and finished with, "oh my God."

"Oh, calm down," Miranda said. "Although I'd thought you were straight. Didn't you have some kind of boyfriend?"

"I am," Andy croaked. "I did. It's just um--oh, Jesus. Miranda, I'm so sorry. I didn't know I was--" What? 'Obvious'? Miranda had seen through her immediately. What if everybody had? What if Andy was the laughingstock of the office--of everywhere--the pathetic, lowly assistant with a hopeless crush on her boss?

"I'm sorry," Andy repeated, wanting to die. Really wanting it, this time.
"Are you?" Miranda said.

"I," Andy said, straining to get enough air, "I didn't mean to--I mean, I never wanted to make you uncomfortable, I--" She swallowed hard. "I never meant for you to know."

"Well, I know," Miranda said. "And no matter what you are, I am straight. I have never been attracted to another woman in my life."

"I know," Andy said, wondering if leaping from the window would actually kill her, or if she'd just break a few bones. Maybe she could aim for the iron railings. "Miranda, I never, of course I never really thought--or h-hoped, or--" She almost strangled on the lie. It was a really big lie. She'd lived on hope for months now, no matter how stupid or vain it was, and she didn't know how she was supposed to get by without it. "I didn't--"

"That said," Miranda interrupted, using the shut-up tone Andy knew so well, "I have never understood why physical attraction has to be necessary for a relationship."

Whatever Andy had been about to stammer next died in her mouth.

Oh. No, forget about before. Andy really and truly had never been so shocked as she was right now.

"What?" she said numbly.

Miranda looked at her at last. Then she stood up from the bed, appearing extremely frustrated, and began to pace the room. "You and I have both had relationships with men. Several, yes?" she said. Andy nodded mutely. "Considering where we are right now, obviously those have never worked out well." She glared at Andy fiercely. "Right?"

"I-I guess," Andy squeaked.

"Right," Miranda said. "We have been with men who did not appreciate or understand our goals. Our motivations. What drives us."

"That's--I mean--yeah--"

"Yes. But." Miranda took a deep breath. "I understand you," she said. "Better than you think. And you understand me."

"No," Andy said. "No, I, I don't think so."

"Let me put it this way," Miranda said. "You understand me better than anyone I have ever known. You anticipate everything I want. You know what I will say before I say it."

"I didn't know you were going to say this," Andy said, pretty sure her eyes couldn't get any wider. Then she added, "Um…what are we talking about?"

"You care about me," Miranda said flatly. "It isn't just sexual. You care for me. I know that."

Andy nodded, trembling, thinking that she lacked the power to confirm or deny anything at all. Or to speak, period.

Miranda looked out the window into the darkness beyond. Andy could see her only in profile now. There was definitely a visible swell at her abdomen.

"I care for you," she said abruptly.
After what felt like five solid hours of silence, Andy managed to breathe, "Oh." Miranda didn't make fun of her this time. This time she just smiled bitterly and nodded.

Then she said briskly, "You should have more self-confidence. I've told you this a million times before. I don't know how long it's going to take to sink in."

"Self-c-c-c--"

"I invited you into my home," Miranda said. "Twice, for God's sake. I told you I'd do anything for you--"

"Wha…anything?" Andy sure as hell couldn't remember Miranda ever saying that.

"Anything within reasonable limits," Miranda said, gesturing impatiently. She was still looking out of the window. "I even let you go toddling off with Christian Thompson--"

"Let me--"

Miranda rounded on her with eyes full of fire. "Never do that again."

"Oh, um," Andy said, shrinking back against the headboard.

"My point is," Miranda snapped, "I care for you, obviously--" her voice growled with disbelief at Andy's thickness, "--but after tonight's little dramatic display…" Her glare got much worse. "You ruined my entire evening. I had to talk to important people about important things, and I had to do all that in an extremely bad mood."

"S-sorry?" Andy offered weakly.

"Which is when I realized that we had to talk," Miranda finished. "Now. What do you think?" Then she waited. She actually folded her arms and tapped one bare foot on the carpet.

"Think?" Andy shook her head hard. She couldn't think. She might never be able to think again. She was pretty sure that Miranda had just killed her brain. Miranda rolled her eyes. "Look," Andy said. "I'm sorry. You are really going to have to spell this one out for me. I do not understand. I'm sorry," she repeated helplessly.

"We do not have to have sex," Miranda said through her teeth, "to have a satisfying relationship. Is that clear enough for you, Andrea?" Her face was bright red now.

Andy fell back against the headboard, utterly thunderstruck. Miranda wanted--Miranda was suggesting--proposing--

"Like," she managed, "like a, a platonic…thing?"

"Precisely," Miranda said.

"We…you and me, we'd be…together?"

Miranda paused. Then she nodded, looking relieved that Andy was finally catching on.

"I'd, I'd still be your assistant," Andy said, sure now that she was on drugs, that Christian had somehow slipped an acid tab into her wine. Miranda nodded. "And we'd still…do all the stuff we already do." Miranda nodded again. "S-so…so…how is that--I mean, what you're saying--how is that different from just being friends? Or--doing what we've been doing?" Which hadn't exactly been friendship either, as far as Andy could tell.
"In practical terms, not very different," Miranda acknowledged. "In other terms…very different."

"Okay," Andy said. Then she said, "I'm going to need coffee for this, aren't I?"

Ten minutes later, they sat perched on the kitchen counter stools while Andy clutched her mug of coffee and Miranda regarded her silently.

Andy took a long sip, grateful that her hands weren't shaking so much that she sloshed the hot coffee everywhere. They still shook a little, though. "A-all right," she said carefully. "You…you care about me." Miranda nodded, her expression flat and unchanging. "But," Andy continued, trying her best not to sound stupid, "not like a friend? Exactly?"

Miranda tried to look cool, but ruined it by swallowing visibly. "Not exactly."

Andy gulped too. She'd never had a relationship talk like this before, where both parties were braced for impact. She still couldn't believe she was having a relationship talk at all. "But you said," she said, and cleared her throat, started again. "You said you were straight."

"I am," Miranda said, and shrugged irritably. "Are you expecting me to explain this logically? I can't. If I asked you for friendship, and nothing else, I'd be selling us both short. You feel more than friendship." She sighed. "So do I. I don't care when my friends go on dates with other people. I don't see the point in pretending otherwise."

"So, it, this is--you care about me in a, in a--" Andy swallowed. "Romantic way. Sort of."

Miranda tilted her head to the side: an almost-nod. Then a definite nod. A 'yes.'

Andy's heart began pounding and she got a little dizzy. She couldn't believe this was happening. "Wow," was all she could say.

Miranda's lips finally crooked in a smile. "Mm."

"For…for how long?" Andy's eyes widened. "You said--when I stayed in your house the first time?"

"No," Miranda said, and Andy blinked. "Not then. I don't know, Andrea, I didn't exactly check my watch or mark it on a calendar."

"I sure didn't see it on the schedule," Andy said, wondering if it would be okay to crack a joke for once. If it would be okay to laugh, now, when Miranda said something funny. If it would be okay to do things you'd actually do with a normal person. Miranda didn't rebuke her, although she didn't laugh either.

Then Andy remembered something, and decided she needed to clear it up fast. "But what about Stan Oppenheimer?" she asked, swallowing around the bitter taste in her mouth that had nothing to do with coffee. Because maybe Miranda was trying to get at some kind of…open relationship thing, where you were 'committed' to one person but were still free to have sex with other people. People you were actually attracted to. And Andy, who was all for letting people swing however they wanted in private, decided that she wouldn't be able to handle that at all.

Then she realized Miranda was looking at her as if she'd shown up to work wearing an Old Navy blouse. "Stan Oppenheimer?" Miranda said. "What about him?" She actually sounded a little alarmed. Then she narrowed her eyes and said, "You haven't told anyone that I've been meeting him, have you?"

"No," Andy said, stung. "You told me not to. Remember?" Hadn't they just had this conversation,
about Miranda trusting Andy not to stab her in the back at the first fucking opportunity?

"Oh, yes, I remember." Miranda tapped her lips and looked at Andy thoughtfully. "You thought I was seeing him?"

"Well...yeah. You're not?" Andy said.

Miranda glared at her. "Yes, Andrea. I often date men on the side when suggesting a relationship with someone else."

"Well, how should I know?" Andy said, and took a very resentful sip of coffee. She could get away with saying stuff like that now. She had to be able to. "All those lunches, and you met in the evenings, and you, you, you--" She couldn't say it.

"And I what?" Miranda snapped.

Andy had to say it. "You always came back looking happy," she mumbled. "I mean...really happy."

Miranda raised a curious eyebrow. "How happy?"

"Just-had-sex-happy," Andy admitted, blushing.

To Andy's surprise, instead of getting offended or annoyed, Miranda actually smiled. "Really," she said. "Hmmm. How interesting." She even chuckled. Andy looked at her in confusion, and she waved her hand. "I am not at all interested in Stan Oppenheimer," she said. Then she glared at Andy. "You might trust me that much, at least." Her voice was as even as ever; only the look in her eyes betrayed how deeply hurt she'd been by the accusations Andy had leveled at her a few hours before. Andy knew that she would never, ever admit it out loud.

So it was time to put something else out there before she lost her courage. "I will," Andy said, "if you trust me." She swallowed. "You said...earlier, you know, when I said that I wouldn't betray you to Christian--you didn't believe me." Miranda pursed her lips. "That can't be true," Andy said. "Can it? I mean, if you, if we want--that can't be true. You've got to know I'll--" she couldn't stop a sudden, bitter little chuckle. "I'll do anything for you. 'Reasonable limits' or not."

"That's a dangerous promise to make, Andrea," Miranda said lightly, although the look in her eyes was very serious. "A little too extravagant for now, don't you think? Now stop being so dramatic." She rolled her eyes. "Try not to take it too seriously when I say things in the heat of anger that I might not entirely mean."

The sad thing was, that was the closest to an apology Andy was going to get. The really sad thing was, she'd settle for it. She was probably going to settle for a lot from Miranda, Andy realized. She was probably going to make all kinds of compromises and allowances she'd never make for anybody el--

Miranda tapped the countertop and looked at Andy intently, bringing her back to Earth. "Andrea, I am asking you to trust me," she repeated. "Let's please forget about Stan."

"Okay," Andy said, and she was pretty sure she'd already forgotten about whoever they'd just been discussing. He couldn't have been very important, because Miranda didn't care about him. She cared about Andy--whatever that meant. Which was a big question, and they should probably get back to it.

"You said nothing in practice would be different," she said. "But in other ways..."
"Now we know," Miranda said simply. "We've said it out loud. Things are different, just because of that."

"Okay," Andy said, hoping for a little more elucidation.

Miranda watched her own hand tracing patterns on the countertop. "To begin," she said. "You will not see Christian Thompson, and I will not see Stan Oppenheimer. Nor anybody else."

It took a few seconds for that to sink in. Then: "We'd--we'd be…exclusive?" Andy squeaked, hardly daring to believe her ears. Miranda nodded, and though her expression was cool as a cucumber, the tips of her ears went the tiniest bit pink.

It sounded amazing, fantastic, impossible. Everything Andy'd wanted. With one tiny exception.

"Just…you said platonic," she said, still squeaky but much less hopeful. "As in. Um. C-celibate?"

"Yes, it is!" Andy said. Miranda raised her eyebrows. "I mean, okay, it's not the most important thing, not at all, b-but--I mean, I like sex."

"Sex isn't that important," Miranda said flatly.

"Well, yes," Andy said, unable to see what was wrong with that, and wondering if someone had recently whacked Miranda unconscious with a copy of The Bostonians or something. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," Miranda said through her teeth. "Only that we don't need it." She stabbed her finger against the countertop with surprising force, and then looked unhappy as she said, "I know you're young, and you think…I'm asking you to trust me," she repeated. "I know. Compared to the rest, we don't need it. We are suited for each other. I am trying to convince you of this and--"

"No, I'm convinced," Andy said quickly, horrified by the idea that Miranda might suddenly take it all back. "Miranda, I really am--"

"Then stop trying to…have you ever had a relationship with a woman before?" Then Miranda's eyes widened, and Andy realized she'd never considered that Andy might actually say yes. "I mean--well, have you?"

"No," Andy admitted, "but--" Too late. Miranda's eyes gleamed in triumph.

"Well then," she said, obviously thinking her suggestion was logic itself. "So neither of us has tried anything like this before. I seem to remember," Miranda added dryly, "that you blushed the first time you brought me Polaroids from a lingerie shoot."

Andy blushed just remembering it. All those boobs in black lace everywhere she turned, and then she had to hand photos of boobs in black lace to a sneering Miranda Priestly. "That's different," she said. Miranda smirked. "It is! Besides, I got over that stuff. I see it all the time now." She took a deep breath. "And the models--they're not you."
No. They weren't. Nobody was: not Christian, certainly not Nate, and not anybody else Andy had ever known. Nobody but Miranda could get her wound-up and worked-up like this. Nobody had ever pissed her off so much, scared her so much, upset her so much--or sent her to such extremes of joy without even trying. It probably wasn't good for her. She didn't really care.

So Andy had to look at the bigger picture here. She didn't want to talk Miranda out of her cockamamie idea, even if the 'platonic' thing wasn't Andy's style at all. So: agree. Compromise. Change Miranda's mind later. It wasn't as if they would have jumped into bed together tonight anyway. Heck, it was probably a good idea to take it slowly. A really, really good idea.

Besides, whatever else, Andy couldn't let Miranda get away--she couldn't shoot herself in the foot now, before she even knew what was going to happen next.

Miranda blinked, and then cleared her throat. "Well," she said. "Be that as it may--"

"Okay," Andy said, before she could change her mind.

Miranda stopped, and said, "Okay what?"

"I mean, okay," Andy said, and took a deep breath. Into the breach. Into the dream, maybe. Even if she really had gone crazy, even if she was only hallucinating…well, it was better than reality, so carpe diem. "Let's try it. Let's do it."

Miranda looked shocked for a second, and then suspicious. It figured. "Just like that?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "Just like that." Miranda still looked suspicious. "Look," Andy tried, "whatever we do, it's got to be an, an improvement, right? On the way it's been." Miranda nodded slowly. "So let's try it," Andy repeated. "I mean, it was your idea."

"So it was," Miranda said cautiously.

"Well, then," Andy said, as if that explained everything. Then she extended her hand. "Shake on it?" she suggested, expecting Miranda to roll her eyes.

"Ha, ha," Miranda said, right on schedule. Then, to Andy's astonishment, she stuck out her own hand and gripped Andy's firmly. Andy thought of when their hands had touched over cups of Starbucks--which had happened all of twice. Miranda's hand was soft and cool compared to Andy's, which had been clutching the coffee mug.

Andy hadn't quite realized, until that moment, how starved she'd been for the feel of Miranda's skin. So she didn't let go right away. Maybe Miranda didn't want to sleep with her, but surely she could endure a little hand-holding once in a while.

"You'll have to give me the cues," Andy said hesitantly. "In public, I mean. If you want anything to look different, or if I'm doing something weird, or…" Because it wasn't Andy's image at stake. Just her happiness, and Miranda had that on the line too.

"We'll be discreet," Miranda said, which meant, in Miranda-speak, that nobody could find out. Andy had known as much. Then Miranda rubbed her thumb against the back of Andy's hand before tugging her own away, and made Andy blush. Miranda gave her a wry half-smile. "Maybe I'm lucky. This is the first relationship I've ever attempted where somebody knew the worst about me from the start."

Andy grinned. "True." Then she stopped grinning. "Wait, I do know the worst, right? There isn't any worse-worst, is there?"
"That's all part of the fun, Andrea," Miranda said. "Finding out."

"Great," Andy said glumly. "And you've only seen the best of me." She glared at Miranda. "Wait'll you find out all the lousy stuff. You know, the things that'll drive you cra--"

She stopped. Miranda was looking at her with something that was a lot like tenderness. Andy had never seen that look on Miranda's face before. She stopped breathing for a second.

"No, Andrea," Miranda said. "I have not yet seen the best of you. You're just discovering it for yourself." She arched her back in a lazy stretch. Andy tried not to stare. "I'm going to get my shower and get ready for the day. You should probably do the same."

"Now?" It was ten after six, Andy realized. "But--we've still got a lot to talk about--" Like the fact that Miranda was pregnant, for one damn thing, and how Andy was supposed to fit in with that, and what the girls would say, or if the girls were even going to know, and…

"Yes, we do," Miranda said. "Let's not talk about it at six in the morning on the last day of Fashion Week. Honestly."

"You're the one who woke me up," Andy reminded her, so glad that Miranda had.

"Only so we could get the most important thing out of the way," Miranda said, waving her hand dismissively. "I told you we're on a tight schedule." Before Andy's jaw could drop too far, Miranda slid off the stool and sauntered around the counter towards Andy, looking a lot more seductive than she should if she didn't want to get laid.

Andy forgot whatever she'd been planning to say. "Okay," she said faintly. "So--uh--so--we'll--"

Miranda leaned in, and Andy lost track of her lungs again as Miranda, for the second time, kissed her cheek. Only this wasn't a fake, social air-kiss. Miranda's lips, softer and warmer than her hand, pressed gently against Andy's skin.

No. Not a dream at all. This was real, because even Andy's feverish subconscious couldn't have come up with this, couldn't have anticipated the way it would feel. And she learned that if she'd been craving Miranda's touch, then she'd been fucking well dying for her mouth.

She realized she'd have to die a little bit longer as Miranda pulled away before Andy could even collect herself enough to return the favor. Miranda appeared a little flushed, but sounded quite calm as she said, "We should be ready to go in about an hour," and headed for the stairs. Andy remained frozen on the stool, looking after the woman who had so casually upended her world yet again. It was getting really disconcerting.

But that was okay. It was totally fine. Miranda cared about her, cared for her, wasn't having an affair with Stan Oppenheimer, wanted to be exclusive, for Christ's sake, and Andy could do anything in the world. If Miranda was okay with Andy loving her, then Andy could jump any hurdle, she could knock down any door, she could overcome any--

She could be ready to go in fifty-five minutes. That'd be a start. Shit. Andy drained the rest of her coffee, trying not to choke on it in her excitement, and shoved the cup in the dishwasher. Then she grabbed her phone from the counter and rushed up the stairs, glad that Miranda was taking a shower and couldn't see her, because she was grinning like an idiot.

Miranda had just talked her into a relationship. A relationship with a woman twice her age, who was getting divorced, pregnant with another man's child, already had two kids, was Andy's rich and famous boss, and didn't even want to have sex with her. And to top it off, Miranda had managed to
make Andy deliriously happy about the whole thing.

Andy had been right all along. The woman was a menace. But she was Andy's menace now, so that was okay. It would be okay. It had to be okay.

Andy would make it okay. She was getting pretty good at that kind of thing.
"You know, you're absolutely right. Give me a woman who knows her own mind."

"No one gives you a woman like that. You have to capture her."

-To Catch a Thief

So far, the first day of the rest of Andy's life was disturbingly like all the other ones. She'd showered, dressed (trying especially hard to look pretty today), and met Miranda downstairs before they left to go to an official breakfast. Miranda looked lovelier than ever, though Andy couldn't tell if she too had put in some extra effort, or if it was just because the whole world seemed new this morning.

New and kind of weird. Miranda and Andy stared at each other in the hallway, taking each other in as if for the first time. Miranda raised her eyebrows and gave Andy an approving nod, which might have been almost normal if her cheeks hadn't gone pink. Andy took a deep breath and gave her one right back. "Morning," she said, and added, "you, you look nice."

Miranda opened her mouth, closed it, smiled tightly, and nodded. Her version of 'you too,' Andy guessed. Then she jerked her head towards the doorway without speaking--Andy thought she wasn't being unpleasant today, but that maybe she just didn't know what to say, for once. Apparently another peck on the cheek wasn't on the cards.

Hurrying to the door, Andy just barely remembered to stop by the hall closet and pull out their coats. She felt a thrill as she helped Miranda into hers, which was odd, because she did this at least once a day. But like everything else, it seemed, felt different now. She wasn't helping Miranda into her coat, or getting the door for her, as an assistant today. She was doing it as an, um. Girlfriend. Or… something.

It was going to be the weirdest day of her life. She could already tell. But possibly, hopefully, one of the best, too.

On the surface, the car ride was the same as always: sitting next to Miranda and writing down everything she said on the way to breakfast. But just doing that, sitting next to Miranda and thinking that they sort of maybe had some kind of thing going on, just doing that made all the difference in the world. Miranda had been right. Once you said certain things out loud, you couldn't take them back. They changed everything.

Andy had no idea how to feel right now. Happy? Scared? Incredibly awkward? She was managing the last one fairly well. But so was Miranda. She rattled off the usual instructions--not just as a matter of course, but for Jimmy's benefit as well, like she was trying to say to the first outsider they encountered, 'See? Nothing happening here. Move along.' Except that she spoke a little more quickly than usual, and sat a little more stiffly in her seat, and refused to look anywhere but out her window. Also, her neck and cheeks were pink.

Apparently it was going to be up to Andy to keep things normal. Normal-ish. As normal as things ever got, anyway. So when Miranda finally looked at her as Jimmy was pulling up to the curb, Andy gave her the usual bland-yet-helpful smile, and said, "Yes, Miranda," like the very picture of assistantly obedience.
Miranda blinked. "What? Yes what?"

Andy blinked too, and looked down at her notes, which she'd taken as meticulously as always. "Um," she said, and waved her notepad. "Yes everything?"

"Oh," Miranda said, and went pinker. Then she cleared her throat. "We're here."

Andy pursed her lips fast, hoping that would cover up her grin, and she quickly unbuckled her seat belt. She'd be lucky if she could get through breakfast without bursting into hysterical, I-don't-believe-this laughter. They both would, from the look of it. All in all, it was the strangest morning-after ever, and they hadn't even done anything the night before.

At breakfast, Miranda was again at the center table, along with Georg and Helga Schumann, Massimo Cortiglione, and a couple of other people Andy recognized. Irv was there today, too, with his wife Mavis: he'd flown in last night and was planning to spend the weekend in London, now that the frantic bustle of Fashion Week was nearly over. He and Miranda smiled stiffly at each other across the table, like very polite mortal enemies. In spite of her newfound happiness, Andy still felt a twinge of unease. It was all too likely that Irv was planning something else, because why wouldn't he be? His pride had been stung by his earlier defeat.

And compared to Irv's power and influence, Andy had to admit that Miranda's defenses were pretty weak. Sure, she had a list of all the people who were devoted to her and grateful for her patronage. But she had to know, better than anybody else, that people's loyalty only lasted until it wasn't convenient—or profitable—to be loyal anymore. If Irv could figure out how to offer better terms to all those designers, writers, editors, models, and more, they'd stick around Elias-Clarke and work with, or for, whomever Miranda's replacement was. And Andy, of course, was helpless to prevent it. No matter how much she might want to help or protect Miranda, she would be utterly useless when it came to going toe-to-toe with someone like Irv Ravitz.

Andy took a deep breath, sipped her water, and smiled politely at the woman seated next to her. The woman took this as her cue to start babbling about how much she'd liked the last issue of Runway. Would Andy pass the compliment on to Ms. Priestly? Andy nodded, and the woman, thrilled, kept on going, talking about satchel handbags and the new trend in patent leather.

Andy couldn't help but remember the last time she'd been in London, when Miranda had said to Andy, "You don't care about this." She'd been right. She usually was. Andy cared about Miranda, cared about her job, hell, even cared about Runway, but when it came to fashion itself she kind of didn't give a damn one way or the other. Patent satchel handbags versus snakeskin hobo handbags? Who cared?

Only half-listening to the woman's blather, Andy decided that when it came to Irv and her career, Miranda could take care of herself. She always had, always would, and Andy was just going to go along for the ride and try to make things easier on the home front. It had obviously been working well so far. As for right now, she might as well try to enjoy the excellent food. A little of it, anyway. She waved away a plate of chocolate-drizzled crepes in agony.

Nigel caught up with her after breakfast, as they were heading to the first show of the day. "Good morning," he said.

Andy smiled at him. "Hi."

"You're pretty happy, aren't you?" Nigel said, raising his eyebrows. "I haven't seen you this pumped since you told me about Modernity. What's up?"
Obviously she wasn't doing as well at the acting-normal thing as she'd thought. "Nothing," Andy said, trying very hard to sound casual. "I can't just be in a good mood?" Nigel obviously wasn't fooled. "Maybe I'm just glad we're going home tomorrow. This week's been crazy."

"There is that," Nigel said. "Maybe Miranda agrees with you. She's positively bubbly today."

Andy's heart began to pound and she tried very, very hard not to blush, even as she began to feel even sparklier. Bubbly? She might possibly have made Miranda bubbly? But all she said was, "R-really?" while looking around the room as she tried to regain her composure. She saw Miranda chatting with someone, but Miranda looked pretty much the same as always. Maybe a little bit pregnant. Andy lowered her voice, hoping to draw Nigel off the scent. "She didn't look too bubbly with Irv a few minutes ago."

"Ah. So you noticed," Nigel said.

"It was hard to miss," Andy said.

"Yes, it was. When's your birthday?" Nigel asked. "It's pretty soon, isn't it?"

"I--huh?" Where the hell had that come from?

"When is your birthday?" Nigel repeated patiently. "You know. The day you were born. Want me to explain how that works? When a man and a woman love each other very much, or are sufficiently drunk--"

"March thirteenth," Andy said, utterly confused. "What does that have to do wi--why do you want to know?"

Nigel nodded. "I thought so. I knew it was coming up, anyway. Isn't that about when you started working for us last year?"

"The same day I interviewed," Andy said, who hadn't thought at all about her birthday since the last one. It wasn't like she had a ton of time to worry about it. "I got a job on my birthday and then everybody started calling me fat. It was really fun."

Her friends had sure thought it was fun, getting together for a late-night toast. They'd thrown her a birthday party the weekend before, when they were all free, but the night Andy turned twenty-four and became a salaried minion was too good to pass up. "What was it, a phone interview?" Nate had joked, like a jerk. And then Andy had said: "To jobs that pay the rent." And then they'd said: "To Andy." There was more wine. Nobody'd had any idea of what lay ahead, that was for sure. Nobody would ever have dreamed--

"Going to hit the big 2-5?" Nigel asked, breaking in on her thoughts. "As in, halfway to fifty?"

Miranda was fifty. Andy didn't really like to think about that. "Yeah," she said slowly. "Nigel--why are you asking?"

"No reason," Nigel said airily, taking her arm.

"What are you up to?" Andy pressed.

"I can't just be curious? I'm hurt. Maybe I'm planning to take you out for drinks and just want to make sure my schedule is open."

"Well, is it?"
"I'll have to ask my personal assistant. Wait, you're the closest thing I have to one. Check my calendar for me." Nigel glanced over Andy's shoulder and let go of her. "Later, that is."

Andy turned to see Miranda approaching them. She wasn't quite meeting Andy's eyes, and though she was a little flushed, Andy didn't see where Nigel was getting 'bubbly' from. "Are you ready to go?" she asked Andy.

Nigel stared at her, and Andy tried not to wince. Miranda never asked, 'Are you ready to go?' She went places, and you ran along after her without asking questions, bearing Starbucks and San Pellegrino if necessary. But Andy chirped, "Yes, Miranda," as if this wasn't out of the ordinary at all.

Miranda suddenly appeared to realize her slip, and sounded twice as impatient as usual when she snapped, “Then come on.” She barreled past them towards the door without acknowledging Nigel's presence.

Play it cool. Andy turned to Nigel. "'Bubbly,' huh?" she said, trying to sound as doubtful as possible. Then she rushed after Miranda without waiting for his reply, or even to see the look on his face.

Jimmy was just pulling around the corner as they reached the sidewalk outside. Photographers were everywhere, snapping pictures. Fortunately, Andy was standing near enough to Miranda that nobody could overhear when she said, "Nigel's acting weird." She felt odd saying it, like she was betraying a confidence. But she wasn't, not really. And now that things were like this, now that Andy had dived in headfirst, she would have felt disloyal not to mention it. Miranda might need to know, after all.

"Is he?" Miranda said, her cheeks still pink. Andy really liked it when she blushed. "I haven't spoken with him today." Andy looked down and saw that she was trembling a little. Just a little. Nobody who wasn't standing next to her would have noticed it.

"Are you feeling all right?" she asked, hoping that sounded neutral enough. She could always pass it off as some kind of pregnancy-related concern. Or maybe Miranda was just cold.

"How long," Miranda said, "does it take that man to pull a car up to the sidewalk?" Andy took the hint and shut up. As luck would have it, Jimmy pulled up at that instant, and Andy hurried forward to get the door for Miranda.

The first show of the day was Peter Jensen: ready-to-wear and a new menswear line. Andy didn't see anything special about it--certainly not compared to the extravagant offerings of other designers--but Miranda seemed pleased. And Andy could tell that Nigel, seated next to Miranda, really liked it. Or maybe he just liked ogling the asses of the hotter male models. Andy, who'd had precious little sleep the night before, mainly tried not to yawn too visibly, or get too distracted by the sight of Miranda sitting in front of her, or think constantly about what had happened early that morning. She failed on all three counts.

What happened after the show got her attention, though. She'd just stood up when she heard someone murmur into her ear, "We meet again."

Andy almost jumped out of her skin. "Christian!" she said. "Jesus." When she turned, he was smiling at her. She took a slight step backwards.

He didn't appear to notice. "I see you didn't get canned," he said.

"Er, no," Andy said, and shot Miranda a quick look. She was deep in conversation with Peter Jensen himself, but would look up and notice Christian any second. "She, uh, I don't think she was happy that I went out with you, though, so…"
Right then, while Andy was looking at her, Miranda glanced over her shoulder and took in the tableau: charming Christian, nervous Andy. She immediately laid a quelling—if polite—hand on Peter's arm, interrupting whatever he'd been saying, and stepped through the first row of seats, managing her slightly-larger bulk with aplomb. Andy tried to imagine what she'd look like in a few more months, and realized that her brain still wouldn't go there. Evidently she'd have to see it to believe it.

"Miranda," Christian said, evidently deciding that sheer bravado was the way to go. "Nice to see you again."

To Andy's surprise, Miranda did not appear upset. In fact, her eyes had the slightest sparkle to them, which was both incredibly appealing and slightly worrisome. When Miranda's eyes sparkled, it usually meant someone was in trouble. "The pleasure's all mine, Mr. Thompson," she said, in a voice that was definitely amused. What was going on?

Then Andy's eyes widened. The memory of Miranda's voice on New Year's Eve sounded through her head: 'I'd just look at him and know.' Evidently she was looking and knowing right now, no doubt cherishing the idea of Christian standing around almost-naked while Andy ran out on him. Great. Andy felt her face heat up.

"Er...have you had a good week?" Christian's bravado was gone, and he looked confused. As well he might. Andy kept staring at Miranda—who ignored her, of course—and silently pleaded with her not to say anything about...anything.

"Oh, it's improved," Miranda said. Andy blushed even more and decided to attribute it to the crowded room. "Did you enjoy the show?"

"Oh, yeah," Christian said, and gave Miranda his most dazzling smile. It really was a good smile. Andy didn't enjoy it half so much now that he'd turned it on Miranda. "You know I like to keep in style." He stuck a thumb under one of his lapels. "I'm in dire need of an update. I liked the look of some of those pants." He nodded towards the runway.

Miranda said nothing, and Andy glanced at her. Miranda's eyes had just gone very wide. "Pants?" she inquired, her voice slightly strangled.

Oh. Oh, God. Andy bit down on her lower lip and tried to think about very sad things so she wouldn't laugh out loud.

"Uh, yes," Christian said, looking more confused than ever.

"Oh," Miranda choked, looking as if she was about one second away from bursting into laughter herself. She cleared her throat, and shook her head slightly before saying, "What did you think, Andrea?" Not that she actually looked at Andy, of course, because that would have meant doom for both of them.

Andy swallowed hard and managed, "Yes, they were...they looked very...well-made. Um. Everything here did, actually."

"I...I thought so too," Christian said faintly, glancing around the room as if he expected a man to jump out from behind a corner and tell him he was on candid camera. "But I've been following Peter Jensen for a few seasons now, so I'm pretty familiar with his style."

"Yes," Miranda said. "He's always done very impressive towels. Menswear. Come along, Andrea," and then she turned and headed off at top speed without another word, while Andy tried to
remember that Christian had done some very nice things for her, and tried even harder not to laugh in his face.

"What the hell?" Christian asked, watching Miranda retreat.

"Beats me," Andy wheezed. "Gotta go. I'll see you around."

"I'll...I'll look you up later," Christian said, sounding utterly bewildered as Andy hurried off after Miranda.

She caught up with her in the lobby, where there were more photographers and more important people wanting to talk to Miranda, or at least be seen talking to her. Miranda appeared to have composed herself completely, and Andy worked hard to be as straight-faced as possible.

They held themselves together until they made it to the car for the next show. The ride was silent for the first couple of minutes. Then:

"I've decided I like Christian Thompson," Miranda said. "I'm going to invite him to everything from now on."

"Oh my God," Andy said, and bent over, laughing helplessly. "Oh my God..."

"And he's very well-informed about fashion," Miranda said, her voice trembling. "I'd never have guessed."

"Towels," Andy moaned, leaning her head against her window, trying to get herself under control because they were in front of Jimmy. Too late, of course. "...Peter Jensen's line of..." She heard Miranda make a noise like a whimper. "I can't believe he said...pants..." She gasped for breath.

Miranda didn't reply. Andy looked over at her, and saw that her face was bright red, and that her shoulders were shaking with her efforts to control herself. She was also biting her lip. Then she snorted, and quickly cupped her hand over her mouth and nose, turning to look out of her window.

It took every ounce of will Andy possessed not to reach out, pull her close, and kiss her. But she vowed right then and there that she was going to ask for--no--insist on getting a goodnight kiss that very night. Miranda might have some insane idea about a chaste romance, but even she couldn't think she was going to get away without at least a kiss once in a while. If she did, Andy would just have to set her straight. She felt confident that she could manage that much, at least.

And then, after that...well. They'd just have to see, wouldn't they?

The rest of the day was pretty good. Hectic, but good--at least, compared to the rest of the week, which Andy had spent in a miserable daze. Andy kept busy enough that her sort-of-thing with Miranda spent most of its time lurking in the back of her mind, but every once in a while it jumped out from the shadows and performed a little song-and-dance routine. Like when Stan Oppenheimer, who hadn't been at breakfast, approached Miranda with a friendly smile and a handshake, and Andy thought that maybe he wasn't so handsome after all. His ears were too big, and they didn't line up right. And Miranda wasn't interested in him at all. Andy tried not to bounce visibly. Nigel might have been right about how pumped she was.
Fashion Week in London concluded with a big party at the Ritz-Carlton. Andy didn't have the fish this time, but she hoped they'd cooked it better. Miranda introduced her to a whole bunch of new people whose names she tried very hard to remember, because she had a hunch they were pretty important. She also tried to smile in moderation instead of blinding everyone around her with the idiotic grin she really wanted to wear.

That got harder when Miranda touched her. Miranda had touched her all of three times as far as Andy could recall, and only once had it been deliberate: earlier that very morning. But tonight she guided Andy around the room, piloting her like a boat by using only the tips of her fingers on Andy's elbow or shoulder or, just once, her waist. The touches were not caresses; they were subtle and occasional; they didn't linger; they came and went without warning, leaving Andy tingling wherever Miranda's fingers had brushed. Did anybody else notice it? Probably not. Miranda touched other people at social functions, after all: air-kisses, limp handshakes, pats on the arm. Just not Andy.

"I saw a proof of that article you wrote for Carter," a man said to Andy at one point. He gave her a business card. "Good stuff. We're always looking for new blood. Give me a call sometime." Andy thanked him. According to his business card, he was an editor at *Rolling Stone*.

Wow.

The party was scheduled to go 'till all hours, but Miranda was ready to leave at ten. She gave Andy a sidelong glance and said, "You can stay if you like. You're meeting some very important people here."

Yeah, that was gonna happen. Andy was going to send Miranda home alone on tonight of all nights. Sure. "No, I'm ready to go," Andy said. Miranda looked unsurprised, and rather pleased, so they said their farewells. Or, more accurately, Miranda said her farewells while Andy hovered in the background and tried to look appropriately assistant-like.

They got in the car. Miranda sat quietly, looking out the window, while Andy confirmed the details, yet again, of tomorrow's flight back to New York. All was in readiness. Whew. It would have sucked to screw up the very last thing of Fashion Week while she was so happy, after keeping everything else running so smoothly while she'd been miserable.

For the first time, it occurred to Andy that it was kind of weird to be…together…with Miranda, and still work for her. This went beyond dipping into company ink. This was more like looting the entire company supply cabinet. But her mind rebelled at the thought of quitting her job. Then who'd look after Miranda every day? Who'd schedule the appointments and set out the prenatal vitamins and decode whatever was going on in Miranda's head? Somebody had to, and Andy sure as hell wouldn't let it be anybody but her. Forget it. Besides, if Andy quit, when were she and Miranda even supposed to see each other? No. She'd stay at *Runway*. Until she had a better idea, anyway.

It had to work. It just had to.

Andy glanced over at Miranda, who was still looking out the window. But her contented glow had diminished somewhat, and she'd started to look a little tense. Andy wondered why. They'd left the busy party and were on their way home where they could relax a little, without anybody watching them.

Then Andy blinked as she figured it out. They were on their way home. Where nobody would be watching them. And Miranda was getting twitchier with every block that brought them closer to the townhouse.

Andy quickly looked out of her own window, not sure if she wanted to laugh, roll her eyes, get
nervous too, or maybe all three. Did Miranda think that Andy was going to tackle her the moment they’d shut the door behind them? Not that Andy wouldn't love to do exactly that, but she knew it wasn't on the menu tonight. And the silence in the car was getting very stifling, very quickly.

So she turned to Miranda and said, "Did you hear from the twins today?" at the same instant Miranda turned to her and said, "Are there any problems with the flight arrangements?"

After a second, Miranda said "Yes," right at the moment Andy said, "No."

"They're fine," Miranda said just as Andy said, "Everything sounds okay."

"Oh. Good," they both said together, and turned around to look out their respective windows.

After a small measure of eternity, Jimmy pulled up to the townhouse, and Andy followed Miranda up the steps. Miranda fumbled very slightly with the key, and Andy pretended not to notice, looking up and down the lamp-lit street as if she'd never seen anything like it before. Then the door swung open and they both hurried inside.

Andy removed Miranda's coat with the same proprietary thrill she'd felt that morning, heightened by the fact that now Miranda smelled like the cold night air. She turned to hang it up in the closet, and then removed her own coat and hung it up too. Then she turned back around and realized that Miranda had already high-tailed it down the corridor and was heading for the stairs like her ass was on fire.

"Hey!" Andy blurted before she could stop herself.

Miranda froze in place with one elegantly-shod foot on the bottom stair. She looked guilty for a fraction of a second before her expression regained its customary hauteur. "What?"

Andy quickly realized that she had never, ever faced a task so daunting as the mere thought of asking Miranda Priestly for a goodnight kiss. How the hell did you even… "Um," she said, "you didn't, um, say anything about the, uh, twins. What've they been, been up to?" Maybe she could just stall Miranda until she could reach the staircase. Proximity might make things simpler. Well, a girl could hope.

"Nothing," Miranda said, looking like she was going to bolt up the stairs and lock herself in her bedroom if Andy made any sudden moves. It was completely ridiculous. "It's the weekend. They didn't go to school today."

"Oh," Andy said, walking as casually as she could towards the foot of the staircase while willing Miranda to remain still with the power of her mind. "Yeah, that's right." Miranda lifted the other foot, preparatory to going up another step. "We, we need to work out their birthday party," Andy added quickly.

"Tomorrow," Miranda said, looking longingly up the stairway. "On the flight home. Caroline wants some magician."

"David Blaine," Andy said, nodding. "I think he's the guy who sits in a fishbowl in Times Square and tries not to drown or someth--oop!" Her shoe caught on the carpet, and she only narrowly prevented herself from plunging down face-first, righting herself at the last second. But her pride was pretty well bruised. Talk about making a smooth approach.

Miranda looked slightly less freaked out as she gave Andy a mean little smile. "Even after all the practice you've had," she said sweetly, and tsked.
Andy glared and yanked her shoes off, standing defiantly bare-toed on the carpet. "Yeah, well," she said. "I'm surprised you haven't tried to trade yours in for sneakers."

Miranda frowned. "What?"

"You know," Andy said pointedly. "So you can sprint up the stairs as fast as you can." Miranda's face went a dull red, and she pinched her lips. Caught. "What do you think I'm going to do?" Andy said.

Miranda cleared her throat, masterfully controlling her blush. "We've already talked about this," she said. Andy didn't give her anything in response, and she glared. "Don't play coy. I've never found that appealing."

"Okay," Andy said, and let her Jimmy Choos drop to the floor with an irreverent thump. She stepped in closer and Miranda tensed, like she thought Andy was going to hit her or something. It was… unappealing. And weird. Andy had never felt less desirable in her whole life.

But she was not, repeat not, going to start backing down now. It would set the worst precedent ever, for one thing. She took a deep breath. "I'd just like a kiss every now and then," she said. "That's not too awful, is it?"

"If you must," Miranda said, looking extremely put-upon.

"Oh, great," Andy said, feeling her face heat up.

"I told you--" Miranda began.

"I, I know," Andy said, trying to speak around a sudden lump in her throat. She'd never been with anyone who flat-out claimed not to find her attractive. It was awful. For the first time, she allowed herself to think that this could not possibly work.


Miranda looked extremely mistrustful. "Have you ever kissed a woman?"

Andy stared at her. Did Miranda expect her to bring references or something? "No," she said. "I've actually never kissed most of the people in the world, in fact."


"Oh, come on!" Andy said, and Miranda looked almost penitent as she shrugged. "I'm sorry if I enjoy kissing," Andy said. "And sex. I'm sorry if guys like me. Okay?"

"You are acting like a child," Miranda said, turning red again. She glared. "I thought you understood--"

"No," Andy said, hearing the plea in her own voice. "I don't understand, but I'm going along with it anyway, if that's all you want--"

"That's not what I--"

"--but I think you're amazing, and you knew that from the start, and all I'm saying is I'd like to kiss you. How is that a bad thing?" Andy looked helplessly at her, and then had a flash of inspiration. "Maybe you're right. Maybe it'll be awful and I'll never want to do it again." At this, Miranda had the
gall to look insulted. "But we'll never know unless we try."

"What if you do like it?" Miranda said.

This was beyond ridiculous now. "Then maybe I will want to do it again," Andy said. "I might ask you for a goodnight kiss again at some point."

"I think--"

"Let's just try it!" Andy said, more frustrated than she'd ever been in her life. She climbed up to the first step, putting her almost level with Miranda. Miranda's eyes went wider, and Andy's face scalded as she realized their sudden nearness to each other. Jesus. Her body was burning up just from standing six inches apart. How was it even possible that Miranda didn't feel anything like this? That Andy was all alone in feeling this?

Then Miranda said, "All right."

Andy blinked.

"All right," Miranda repeated. "That--if you wish it. I can," she sneered, "handle that."

Andy realized that Miranda was blushing, and shivering, and her body was giving off heat like a furnace. Andy could feel it from where she stood. She also felt the ghost of Miranda's fingertips on her elbows and shoulders and waist. And the memory of Miranda's eyes slowly looking her up and down on countless occasions.

"I feel kind of ugly right now," Andy said, watching Miranda's face very, very carefully.

"Um--" Miranda shook her head, and glared. "Don't be ridiculous. You are beautiful--a beautiful woman, Andrea. I am not denying that at all. It's only that I--" Andy stepped in closer until they were almost pressed together, and Miranda's breath caught. "--I'm just not--" Andy cupped her cheek with one hand. "--attracted to…"

There was almost a disastrous collision of noses--Miranda had a lot of nose--but Andy had taken that into consideration and had tilted her head accordingly. And now Miranda's mouth was soft and hot, her lips still moving with her objections. Andy captured them with her own, gently. Then her whole body turned to flame.


Miranda'd been right, actually: it was different from kissing a guy. Softer and smoother. Her bottom lip was damp and Andy couldn't help lingering on it for just one second. She was already aching for more and dying to see if she could coax Miranda's mouth open, find out what that would be like to really go for it with a kiss.

Instead she brushed her mouth over Miranda's lips just one more time, so lightly, and pulled back, feeling the loss as keenly as if she'd just pulled out some of her own fingernails. Miranda's blush had spread all over her neck and shoulders, she was shivering, and now she was breathing quickly and unevenly. Her eyes were glazed. Her lips moved a little as Andy pulled back, as if seeking for more. Everything about her was begging to be fucked right there in the stairwell.

She looked utterly and completely stunned.

"That was nice," Andy said softly. "Thanks."
"Oh," Miranda said. Then, "Um." She cleared her throat. "Yes. Well. Goodnight."

"Mm," Andy said, and leaned in for a quick, friendly peck on the cheek. Miranda squeaked and tried to cover it with a cough. "Sleep well." Then Andy pulled back and went down the stairs to retrieve her shoes, which gave Miranda a couple of seconds to collect herself and head up to her room alone.

Andy listened to her footsteps upstairs, and smiled to herself in the shadows below. She touched her own mouth and shivered with pure delight.

Yeah. It was in the bag.

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The next morning allowed neither room nor time for Andy and Miranda to feel awkward around each other. Andy was up at six-thirty, directing traffic: the porters who'd come to pick up their luggage, plus various minions who'd come to drop off goodbye gifts from designers and friends at the last minute, all needed clear direction. She also had to finalize the detailed list of instructions for the cleaning crew that would stop by the townhouse after Andy and Miranda had left London. Miranda--up, dressed, and perfect by seven--stalked around the house with her cell phone attached to her ear, barking out constant instructions to poor saps all over the world and mercifully ignoring the one who was actually in her home and trying to get things done.

When they were scheduled to leave in twenty minutes, Miranda breezed through the living room, where Andy was frantically packing up the gifts so they could be shipped back to New York. "David said he'd sent some 'carnelian earbobs,'" she said. "I'm sure the girls would like those."

Andy stared at the pile of gifts and mumbled, "They sure would," before rifling through it again in search of bright red earrings that Miranda could give the twins that night. It wasn't quite as bad as looking for a needle in a haystack, but it was close, especially given that she had to re-wrap everything after she'd gone through it. And also especially given--

"There's only one pair of red earrings," Andy said hopelessly when Miranda swooped through the room ten minutes later. Miranda frowned, and Andy quickly lifted up another jewelry box. "But somebody sent a turquoise ring. It's kind of funky, Cassidy might go for it."

"Mmm," Miranda said, and added, "don't forget to select something for yourself," as she left the room again in search of her handbag.

Andy blinked. Huh. 'Select something for yourself.' Sure, she was used to getting cast-offs and hand-me-downs at Runway, to say nothing of enjoying the fruits of Nigel's generosity in the Closet. But it was a little different to be set loose in Miranda's personal stash of goodies before Miranda'd even had a chance to check it out herself. That was pretty cool, Andy decided, and immediately narrowed in on a medium-sized brooch--a gold snake with malachite eyes--that she'd loved ever since she'd opened its box during the first go-round that morning. At that moment, more porters came, and Andy told them, with relief, to haul the rest of the loot away.

Miranda returned with her handbag, and already wearing her coat. Andy told herself she was not disappointed that she didn't get to help Miranda into her coat today, and that there would be many other opportunities. "Give me the twins' jewelry boxes," Miranda said, and then she popped them into her purse. "They always like having a little something when I get back." Andy guessed a six-hundred-dollar turquoise ring counted as 'a little something' when you were Miranda Priestly's kid.
"What did you choose?"

Andy showed her the snake. "I loved this one," she said. Miranda raised an eyebrow. "Unless it's too nice," Andy said quickly. Miranda raised the other eyebrow. "Oh. It's too nice, isn't it?" Andy started to panic. The damn thing was probably worth a thousand bucks or something, you never could tell with this designer jewelry crap what was expensive and what was ridiculously expensive. "Sorry, I didn't know--here, it'll look really good with your shirt, you should--"

Miranda set down her purse, took the snake brooch, and affixed it to Andy's blouse, near her collar. Andy stopped breathing as she realized that this was as close to her breasts as Miranda's hands had ever been, and perhaps she should pay attention to how it felt because it might not happen again for a while.

Once the brooch was fixed (in Miranda's practiced hands, it took all of three seconds), Miranda stepped back and gave Andy the stop-being-a-moron look. Had it always been so affectionate? Well…okay, no, it hadn't.

"When I tell you that you can have something," Miranda said, "then you can have it."

Andy blushed with pleasure. "Okay," she said, and added, "same here," like an idiot. Then she realized that had sounded like a come-on. Miranda obviously realized it too, because she cleared her throat, glared, and said, "Let's go." Andy followed her, still blushing, and feeling the memory of Miranda's hands on her blouse a lot more than she felt the weight of the golden snake.

They arrived at Heathrow early, of course. But the rest of the Runway crew was well used to Miranda's timing and had beaten them there. Everybody sat around clutching cups of coffee, trying to look fashionable and alert. There wouldn't be nearly as much to worry about on the flight home, and Andy knew everyone was looking forward to getting some shut-eye over the ocean, even Miranda.

Nigel took one look at Andy and appeared to understand what a hectic morning she'd already had. He gave her a sympathetic grin. Then Nigel took another look at Andy and appeared to notice her new brooch. His eyes widened.

"Well, look at that," he said as soon as Miranda was out of hearing. "How'd you snatch that one from under her nose?"

"What?"

"The Stephen Webster," he said, pointing at the snake. "She's been coveting it ever since she saw it in the showroom a few days ago. Or is this merely a cunning and extremely quickly-executed knockoff?"

"Would you believe me if I said knockoff?" Andy said weakly. Damn it. She would have fixated on the one piece that Miranda had actually wanted for herself. Great, just great.

"I wouldn't believe you if I'd seen you knocking it off yourself," Nigel said.

"It was just in a pile of stuff," Andy protested. "She said I could take something from it. You know, like we always do. I just happened to pick this. She didn't say anything about it." All completely true.

"I have to admit, it suits you," Nigel mused. Andy glared at him; he merely returned his most benign smile.

"Careful," she said. "Or I'll tell the flight attendants that you have a medical condition and can't be
"Meow, darling," Nigel said, and patted her shoulder. "Just calm down, drink your coffee, and enjoy your five-thousand-dollar token of Miranda's appreciation."

Andy very narrowly avoided spilling her coffee everywhere. She'd learned her lesson with the blue cocktail. Nigel was a sneaky bastard. "F-fi-five--"

"Oh, Paul," Nigel called over Andy's shoulder, "I need to bend your ear about June's accent feature."

Not a big deal, Andy told herself as she sat down on the nearest available surface, trying not to hyperventilate. Five thousand bucks. Not a big deal. In this business? With these people? Five thousand dollars was a drop in the bucket. Practically nothing. Holy crap, Miranda probably wore about ten thousand dollars' worth of clothes, jewelry, shoes, accessories, and beauty products every day.

It was just that thinking in those terms sort of blew Andy's mind, so she tried really hard not to. Maybe she wasn't the earnest idealist she'd been only a year ago, but she still thought that wearing an outfit that could feed a third-world village was ridiculous. Even, maybe especially, when she did it herself. She self-consciously tugged at her jacket so that it covered the brooch.

Then Andy glanced up and saw Miranda frowning at Jocelyn while Jocelyn garbled her way through some kind of explanation or plea. Ten thousand dollars had never looked so good. Miranda tossed her head in irritation, Jocelyn shrunk back, and Andy's stomach flopped pleasantly before she remembered herself and looked away again. She wondered how much better Miranda would look in zero dollars' worth of clothing. She hoped she got to find out.

Miranda did indeed fall asleep on the flight back. It seemed like the whole first-class section, not just the Runway group, breathed a (very quiet) sigh of relief. Andy rolled over, adjusted her pillow, closed her eyes, and for the first time since Fashion Week had started, felt that she had thoroughly earned her own rest.

The Elias-Clarke building had not burned to the ground in their absence. Ellie had made no unforgivable mistakes (although she'd managed several forgivable ones that Andy could conceal from Miranda). Within five hours of the Runway group's return to New York, it was like they'd never left in the first place. The only difference was that Miranda left work much earlier than usual so she could see the twins when they got out of school.

"Did you get lots of pretty clothes?" Ellie asked wistfully as Andy went through a whole notebook of phone messages, trying to decide if anything had been screwed up too badly. "And did you meet all kinds of cool people?"

"Yes, and yes," Andy said. She opened the notebook. "Okay, Ellie, can you remember what Bernard said when he called yesterday afternoon?"

"Oh!" Ellie said breathlessly. "I love your pin!" She was pointing at the snake, which peeked out wickedly from beneath Andy's jacket.

Ellie looked confused. "I think I remember him. He's the one who sounded like he had floppy hair over the phone."

"I, um," Andy said. Then, "Okay. Let's try this again…"

She was immensely thankful to leave the building by ten that night, book in hand, and arrive at Miranda's house at ten-twenty-five on the dot. No dry-cleaning to lug in, either. Miranda had had a long day too, of course, so Andy didn't really expect to be greeted, or to see her.

But she still grinned widely when the door shut behind her and she heard the twins saying, "Andy!", followed by the sound of their footsteps rushing down the stairs. They were in their pajamas, but Caroline was wearing her new red earrings, and Cassidy had on the turquoise ring.

"Look what we got," Caroline said, and tilted her neck so that her earrings caught the hallway light. She'd obviously learned the trick of posing from her mother.

"Very nice," Andy said admiringly, keeping her voice low. "Your mom knew you'd like those as soon as she saw them," she added.

"I bet you like my ring better," Cassidy said, sticking out her hand.

"Shut up, she does not," Caroline said.

"I like them both equally," Andy said quickly as she put the book on the table. "Shouldn't you two be in bed?"

"You always say that," Caroline said, and rolled her eyes.

"I've only said it once," Andy pointed out. "And anyway, shouldn't you? Your mom's asleep, isn't she?"

"Not yet," Miranda said from down the hallway, and Andy, Cassidy, and Caroline all jumped guiltily. Miranda was still dressed, although she'd ditched her shoes somewhere along the way. "And yes, the girls are going to bed now."

"We just wanted to say hi to Andy," Cassidy said, like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

"And now you can say goodnight," Miranda said, raising an eyebrow. "Just as I said goodnight to you an hour ago." The twins gave Andy defiant grins, and hurried back upstairs without any sort of 'goodnight' at all.

Andy waited until they were out of earshot before offering Miranda the book and saying, "I got in touch with David Blaine's people this afternoon. I think we can work something out for the end of the month, depending on what weekend you want to throw their party." The twins' birthday fell in the middle of the last week of the month.


Nothing too elaborate? Andy couldn't remember having fifty people at her eleventh birthday party, but whatever. "The Ace of Cakes guy has a pretty tight schedule, but once I mentioned your name he said he'd do his best to fit us in. He likes the grand piano idea. Oh, and I made up a list of places where you might want to have the party. Now that you've said fifty people, I think some of them are probably too small, but a few might make the cut." Andy opened up her briefcase.
Miranda took the list and glanced over it, giving the occasional nod or making the occasional 'mm' sound. "I'll return this to you tomorrow." Then she added, "That's all."

That's what? Andy stared at her. Miranda looked up, blinked, and then rolled her eyes. "Good night," she said, in a tone of voice that almost apologized, but that mainly implied Andy was far too sensitive about being dismissed like a lackey.

"Not yet, it isn't," Andy said. Miranda looked up again, blinked again, and then went red.

"The girls," she began, her voice hoarse.

"Have gone to bed." Andy stepped in closer. Miranda did not retreat, although her glare got fiercer. "Come on," she said softly, and a muscle jumped in Miranda's cheek. "Like last night. Just one."

"Then hurry up," Miranda snapped. Andy remembered the way she'd shivered last night and refused to be offended. Instead she leaned in and delicately brushed her mouth over Miranda's for only the second time ever. Miranda's lips were hard and shaking with tension; Andy met the tension with her own softness, kissing Miranda as she might kiss a sleeping child whom she didn't want to wake. And again, when Andy stopped kissing her, Miranda gasped softly and swayed in for more, apparently without realizing it.

"Good night," Andy breathed against her mouth.

"Ah," Miranda replied. Then she added, "Good night," her voice almost steady.

If Roy wondered why Andy smirked during the entire ride back to her place, he didn't ask.

Fifth: March.

Andy kept up the teasing little kisses for the next few nights, an exercise she found both frustrating and fun. She would deliver the book; the twins would either sneak down to say hi, or they wouldn't; Miranda would take the book from Andy's hand and submit "reluctantly" to a soft, brief kiss that invariably made her blush and tremble.

Reluctant. Sure. Miranda was not a stupid woman. She had to know that even if she didn't go around kissing other women as a rule, she sure as hell liked kissing Andy. Maybe she just didn't like admitting she'd been wrong. It seemed all too likely, Andy thought with resignation. Why should romance be different from work?

But that was okay for now. There really was nothing wrong with taking things slowly, Andy decided--not important things like this. There was too much at stake, too much that could be ruined by careless mistakes. If Miranda still needed a little convincing, Andy could happily do that. She could…woo. Yeah, that was it. Miranda would definitely be the sort of woman who felt she deserved a little wooing, that she was worth pursuing.

Andy was pretty sure Miranda was open to being pursued. She could easily have let Andy dump the book on the table and depart without ever showing her face. But whenever Andy opened the front door and deposited the dry cleaning, sure enough, she would hear Miranda's footsteps approaching. And she would always greet Miranda with her most radiant (if exhausted) smile, no matter how difficult the day had been, because now she got a kiss before she went home.

Miranda never smiled back, of course, but Andy thought she liked it. After all, how often were people genuinely happy to see her?
On the fourth night, and after an exceptionally smooth day at the office, Andy felt secure enough to murmur, "You know, you don't absolutely have to let me kiss you."

"Don't I?" Miranda asked, her breath warm against the corner of Andy's mouth, and Andy gave up teasing her in favor of touching her chin and kissing her mouth as softly as she ever did, trying, as always, to be patient and enjoy getting whatever she could get.

But tonight, Miranda kissed her back.

Tonight, Miranda's mouth moved gently and softly against hers, reciprocating just barely. Andy caught her breath and caught Miranda's bottom lip; Miranda made a tiny noise that didn't mean 'no' and that almost turned Andy's knees to jelly.

Rather than slamming her back against the wall and going for it, though, Andy let go of her mouth, and placed a small, soft kiss on her jaw. Miranda made a sound that was very like a whimper. God. Maybe she actually wanted--maybe Andy could--maybe--

Then Miranda stepped back and said, hoarsely, "Good night."

Maybe not. Andy blinked, swallowed hard, and mumbled, "See you tomorrow." Miranda nodded, picked up the book from the table, and walked away without another word.

The next morning, when Roy and Andy picked Miranda up, Miranda had a hard time looking Andy in the eye. Fair enough; Andy blushed every time she looked at Miranda, mainly because of what she'd done when she'd arrived home last night…twice. She wondered if Miranda had done that too--if Miranda ever did that--and very nearly missed what Miranda was saying about setting up brunch with Meisel.

When they arrived at the office, Ellie was just putting the Starbucks down on Miranda's desk. She gave Miranda a scared look and scuttled past her to her own desk. Andy gave her an approving smile and nod, and Ellie's look lightened considerably. "See?" Andy said. "You're getting the hang of this."

"Is she?" Miranda asked a few minutes later, when Andy arrived with Meisel's confirmation for brunch the next day. "Getting the hang of this."

Andy thought for a moment. "I think she's starting to, yeah," she said. Keeping her voice low, she added, "I mean, it's just errands. If I give her clear enough instructions…" She shrugged.

"Hmm," Miranda said, and turned back to her laptop. "I want you to sit in on the Charleston meeting at eleven. Now tell Keisha I want to see her, please."

'Please.' Miranda said that all the time now when nobody was watching, which was coolness itself. It was almost as if she'd figured out that you had to act like a decent human being if you wanted somebody to like you. Well, Andy could always hope.

That night, when Andy dropped off the book and dry cleaning, Miranda didn't appear. Andy tried not to feel extremely disappointed. Maybe she'd pushed too hard last night. Or maybe Miranda had just gone to bed already--nobody said it had to be anything cataclysmic, or indeed, anything to do with Andy. It was almost eleven o'clock, after all.

"Andrea," Miranda called from the den.

Andy's grin almost split her face in two. She picked up the book and tried not to bounce as she headed into the den, where Miranda sat on the couch. "Hi," she said. Miranda held out her hand, and
Andy offered her the book, still not feeling daring enough to let her fingers brush Miranda's. You never knew what would be too much. Maybe soon, though…

Miranda took the book and immediately began paging through it. "How did the Charleston meeting go?"

"Paul's having a hard time getting people motivated," Andy said. "Two of them didn't have their tasks done." Miranda didn't ask which two. She'd probably guessed already. "But he--"

"You can sit down," Miranda said dryly.

Andy realized she'd been standing in front of Miranda like a soldier giving a report after a mission. Which she sort of was, she guessed. She sat down, hoping she'd hit the right mark of sitting close to Miranda without seeming to sit too close to Miranda.

"Well?" Miranda prompted, and Andy dragged her brain back online.

"Sorry. He seems to be pretty on the ball about getting everyone trained for the new technology. I forget what it's called. That new image editing software thing." Miranda nodded. "So that seems like it's going well. He brought up a lot of new ideas he had, too. And he's pretty excited about working with Marcel."

Miranda nodded again. "All in all, about what I expected," she said. "I'll speak to him about his little personnel problem. I don't care how introverted he is--he's got to make sure everyone pulls their weight." She sighed and leaned back, arching her shoulders. Andy tried not to stare at her chest. "Paul is gifted at what he does. It might have been a mistake to put him in charge of a team."

Andy dared to offer, "Well, he, um, doesn't seem to like bossing people around." She had a hunch, in fact, that Paul would be profoundly grateful if Miranda let him return to being a team of one.

"Liking or disliking doesn't enter into it," Miranda said flatly. "You want to get anywhere in this world, you accept responsibility, and take authority." She glanced at Andy. "As you are discovering."

Andy was in charge of exactly one other person. "You mean with Ellie?"

"Is that her name?" asked Miranda, who knew perfectly well.

"But, I mean, it's not exactly a big deal," Andy said. "You're the one who really tells her what to do. I just make sure it gets done. I'm a…a mentor figure," she added in a burst of inspiration.

Miranda snorted. "If you insist," she said. She tilted her head to the side and put the book down. And added: "Well? That's all I had to say."

Andy gulped and her heart started to pound. She scooted in closer to Miranda on the couch. Miranda did not retreat. Andy leaned in. So did Miranda. Their lips touched.

Again, Miranda kissed her back. As always, her lips were feather-soft, and Andy felt like the top of her head had just caught on fire. She reached up, trying not to let her hand tremble, and cupped Miranda's cheek with one hand, never wanting it to end. But it did. It had to, and Andy slowly released Miranda's mouth with the greatest reluctance.

Miranda did not pull her head back. She moved her hand. She touched Andy's elbow very, very lightly.
Andy gasped softly, and leaned back in for a second kiss, unable to believe her luck. Less than a week, and they’d gone from having no relationship at all to something where Andy could sit on the couch in Miranda Priestly’s home and kiss her softly on the mouth. Not just once, but twice, maybe even three ti--

"Hey, Mom? Are you in here?"

Andy hit the arm of the sofa as Miranda shoved her away with enough force to knock down a quarterback. "Ow!" she said, but Miranda was already busy patting down her hair, which hadn’t even gotten messed up, and trying very hard to look casual instead of panicked. Jesus! Had that really been necessary?

But before Andy could voice her displeasure, or even sit up, a twin in pajamas came trotting into the den. She saw Andy sprawled against the cushions, painfully hauling herself to a sitting position, and her eyes went wide. Crap. It was Caroline, Little Miss "Sensitive" 2007.

"What are you doing back here?" she asked Andy.

"Telling on people from work," Andy grunted, finally sitting up. "Playing spy. You know—the usual."

"Oh," Caroline said.

"Why are you up so late, Caroline?" Miranda asked, obviously trying not to sound too freaked out.

Still looking at Andy, Caroline said, "I almost forgot to remind you that we're going to Nia's house tomorrow after school. I woke up and remembered and came down to tell you."

Andy tried very hard to look normal. Miranda said, "Yes, I know. Cara reminded me this evening." She adjusted her collar. "Now go back to sleep, dear."

"Okay," Caroline said, and gave her mother a long look before she left the room without another word.

When Caroline's footsteps had gone all the way up the stairs, Andy glared at Miranda and said, "Smooth."

"What was I supposed to do?" Miranda snapped.

"Not breaking my spine would have been a good start," Andy said, rubbing at her back. "Ow. Jeez." She supposed this answered her question about how much the twins were supposed to know.

Miranda looked extremely upset. Andy didn't know if it was because of Andy or Caroline or something else completely, but she sighed anyway and said, "Anyway. I'll see you tomorrow." Then she smiled to show there were no hard feelings. Although there kind of were.

"All right," Miranda said. She looked more troubled than ever. And in spite of her aching back, Andy felt bad for her. She opened her mouth to say something useless, but Miranda added, "Good night," in a final-sounding tone of voice.

Oh. Well, okay then. "Good night," Andy sighed, and left, trying not to remember how bouncy she'd felt just a few minutes ago. Can't win them all, she told herself.

"You look kind of blue," Roy said in the car. "Got a telling-off?"
"Yeah," Andy said, and fiddled her thumbs. "I guess so."

The next morning, Miranda called from within her office, "New girl!"

Ellie gulped and gave Andy an apprehensive look. Andy tried to give her a reassuring smile. It probably wasn't all that convincing. This morning's car ride had been more awkward than ever, and Andy knew she was partly to blame for Miranda's bad mood.

A few minutes later Ellie came out of the Miranda's office looking both surprised and pleased. "She says for you to give me the key," she said.

"Huh?"

"For her house. She says it's time for me to start bringing the book to her place."

"...oh," Andy said.

"Isn't that great?" Ellie said. "Now you don't have to stay at the office so late." Then she drooped. "Oh. I guess I do, though. But you deserve the rest, you work so hard--"

"Here," Andy said, digging the key from her purse and offering it to Ellie with a shaking hand. "Take care of it. I mean, don't lose it."

"I won't," Ellie promised. "I bring the dry-cleaning too, right?"

"Right," Andy said. "Um."

Just then, Miranda strode through the doors of her office and out of the receiving area without a word, or a glance at either of them. Off to brunch with Meisel. And she'd be out of the office for the rest of the day. Andy stared after her hard enough to burn a hole through her back.

What the fuck was she trying to pull?

"Andy?"

Dragging her attention back to Earth, Andy saw that Ellie was looking at her with wide eyes. "Sorry," she said, and managed a smile. Ellie looked relieved. She was so used to Andy being nice to her that she didn't handle it well if Andy appeared even moderately peeved. "So. Book. Dry-cleaning." She shook her head. "Right. Okay."

Then she gave Ellie the spiel that Emily had given her, only with better detail. Dry cleaning: the hall closet was the first door on the left. Put the book on the table next to the closet, also on the left. Then leave. Not a word to anyone. The front door, the closet, the table, and then the front door again.

"That's it," Andy said firmly. "That's the whole route. I mean it, Ellie. Don't wander around in the house." She might be able to drive her point home even better with the story about her own disastrous mistake, but she just couldn't bring herself to do it right now.

"I won't," Ellie said, shaking her head. Then she shivered. "I don't think I'd want to. Whenever I think about her house, it makes me think of an evil castle or something."
Andy couldn't help grinning at that. "Complete with dragon, huh?" Ellie nodded and beamed. "Well, hold that thought. And hold the phone. I've got to pee."

Miranda called the office exactly once that afternoon, and she called Ellie, not Andy. By seventy-three, Andy was tied up in knots of frustration and anger. This was ridiculous. What happened to talking to someone when you were upset, huh? What happened to hating passive-aggressiveness? Andy knew one thing. She was calling Miranda as soon as she was off work. She was going to hash this out, this...this whatever-it-was. She was going to--

"Oh!" Ellie said across the way, and hopped to her feet. Andy looked up, and saw with surprise that Miranda had returned to Runway, off-schedule. Yet again, she looked at neither of her assistants as she entered her office. Ellie gave Andy a wide-eyed look; Andy shrugged.

A minute or so later, Miranda reappeared with a binder of proofs under her arm. She stopped by the desks and looked at Andy for the first time since getting out of the car that morning. "Well?" she said irritably.

"Huh? Well what?" Andy said, trying not to sound too uppity in front of Ellie. It helped that she was as confused as all-get-out.

"Why are you not ready to go?" Miranda asked.

"...oh," Andy said, after the briefest of moments. "Right. Okay. Sorry." She rose and retrieved her coat and bag. "I'm, um, ready."

Miranda headed towards the elevator, and Andy trailed along behind, knowing that Ellie was watching them uncomprehendingly. Which was fine, and pretty much par for the course. She looked over her shoulder and mouthed the word, 'Remember,' before rounding the corner.

The elevator doors closed, and she and Miranda were, of course, the only two in the car. Andy wanted to ask Miranda a question, but she wasn't quite sure what it was anymore. It was a long shot that Andy had forgotten some kind of meeting, but it was an even longer shot that--

"Jimena's prepared an extra portion tonight," Miranda said blandly.

Jimena was Miranda's cook. Andy's eyes opened wide. Miranda refused to look at her, and Andy smiled. "Oh," she said. "Okay."

"The twins will want to talk to you about their party," Miranda continued, as if she was debriefing Andy on an assignment. "And then of course we will need to discuss the Charleston shoot."

"Of course," Andy said, her sunny mood returning as if it had never left. Twofold.

"You gave Eleanor very precise instructions?" Miranda asked pointedly.

Even that couldn't nettle Andy. "Super precise," she said. "No dumb assistant coming up the stairs tonight." Miranda hmph'd. "You going to start using her name now?"

"We'll see," Miranda said.

Roy was obviously surprised to see Andy going home with Miranda when it wasn't after eleven p.m., though he knew not to say anything. But when he pulled up to Miranda's house, he did say, "Ms. Priestly, should I stay here to wait for Andy?"

"No," Miranda said shortly. "Come along, Andrea." Andy avoided looking at Roy in the rear-view
mirror as she got out of the car, and tried even harder not to remember the little lecture Miranda had given him on professionalism.

All of a sudden, she wondered where that little lecture had come from in the first place. Miranda had been really upset to find that Roy had maybe possibly been considering asking Andy out. And she'd immediately swatted the possibility like a fly. Had she been jealous? How far back did this...this "caring for" Andy thing go?

Andy doubted that she would have the courage to ask Miranda that for a long time, if ever. Instead, she meekly followed Miranda up the stairs and into the house, while Roy drove away behind them.

Miranda fished out her own key. "Make another copy of this one tomorrow," she said.

"All right," Andy said, feeling her stomach get pleasantly warm.

"Hello, girls," Miranda called, as she stepped inside. Andy shut the door behind them both.

"Hi, Mom." Cassidy's voice, drifting down the stairs. "Dinner's warm in the oven."

"All right," Miranda said, and let Andy help her out of her coat. "We're coming."

There was a pause. "We?" Then Andy heard hurried footsteps. For the first time, it occurred to her to be very nervous.

Miranda did not appear to have the same problem as Cassidy appeared on the stairs, followed by Caroline, and then Cara. All three regarded Andy with wide-eyed surprise, but not hostility. Andy smiled at them, and said, "Hi."

"Andrea is here to talk about your party," Miranda said, as if she invited assistants home to discuss work over dinner every day. "She'll be eating with us."

Cassidy's eyes lit up at the mention of the party, and she hurried downstairs at once. "Cool!" she said. "Come on!" Cara, grinning, followed her to the foot of the stairs.

Caroline looked at both Andy and Miranda for slightly longer. Andy tried not to sweat. Caroline said, "Is David Blaine coming?"

"Yep," Andy said. "But he'd like a list of what you guys want him to do."

"We get to pick?" Cassidy said. "Awesome. Come on, Caroline," she repeated, and after another long look at Andy, Caroline followed her into the kitchen. Andy took a deep breath, and grinned when she realized Miranda was doing the same.

"I'll just be going home," Cara said, donning her coat and taking her bag from the table by the front door. "Have a good night, Ms. Priestly. G'night, Andy." Her gaze was curious, but not exactly nosy. She'd been taking care of the twins for a few years now, and she'd apparently learned to keep her thoughts to herself.

"Night, Cara!" Cassidy called from the kitchen. "Mom, Andy, come on!"

Miranda sighed and headed towards the kitchen while Andy and Cara exchanged a wry smile. Cara left, no doubt relieved to end her working day, and Andy followed Miranda.

The twins chattered their way through dinner, and Andy didn't get to eat much of her (excellent) food because she was writing so fast her hand got cramps. Miranda was silent nearly the whole time,
watching everything. Andy felt like she was on stage. For an audition.

"Okay," Andy finally said, damming up the endless flow of instructions from the twins. She flexed her hand and rotated her wrist. "I think that's all the stuff he wanted to know. And we've got everything all set up with your cake. Did you have a look at the guest list?"

"Yeah," Caroline said. "Why isn't Chelsea on there?"

"Chelsea?" Andy stared at her. "I thought you didn't like her."

"That was, like, years ago," Cassidy said, rolling her eyes. "We're best friends now."

"Oh," Andy said. "Right. Okay, I'll add Chelsea to the list."

"Have you spoken to Glorious Foods?" Miranda inquired.

"Yes," Andy said. "They said the menu shouldn't be any problem."

"I certainly hope so," Miranda grumbled, and sipped her decaf. "Now that Natalie's been fired, we might see an improvement in service. I'd hate to have to choose another caterer."

"Are you going to have dessert?" Caroline asked Andy. She and Cassidy had already plowed through their apple crumble. It smelled fantastic.

Better not risk it, Andy decided glumly. "No, thanks," she said. "I'm stuffed." Even though she still hadn't finished her food.

"Probably a good idea," Caroline said, nodding, after looking Andy up and down. Andy's eyes widened, and she couldn't help glancing over at Miranda.

Miranda was no help, of course. In fact, as she took another sip of coffee, Andy thought she was actually trying to suppress a smile.

At eight-thirty the twins headed upstairs to finish their homework. Andy knew the gears in their heads were spinning, trying to figure out what was going on. Caroline probably already half-knew, and she'd probably told Cassidy, too--that Andy and Miranda had been sitting a little too closely together in the den yesterday. They weren't dumb. But had they worked out what was really going on between Andy and their mom?

If they did, Andy sure hoped they'd let her in on it, too. In the meantime, she finished her own coffee, also decaf, and glanced across the kitchen table at Miranda.

"That went well," Miranda said cautiously.

"Yeah," Andy said, nodding in relief and making sure to keep her voice low. "But I don't think they really know. I mean, not totally."

"I hope not," Miranda said. "I'd rather they weren't that precocious." She gave Andy a cautious look. "Too many changes for them," she said. "Too many, and too quickly."

Andy didn't need any elaboration. She just nodded. "I don't know how involved you will be in their lives," Miranda added. "I don't know what role you'll play. In any of this."

Oh. So they were finally going to talk about it. "Me neither," Andy said, and then added, "what do you mean, 'any of this'?"
"I've got another one on the way, in case you've forgotten," Miranda said.

"Well, yeah," Andy said, and blinked. Then her eyes widened. "You think I'm not going to be involved with--?" Miranda had to be kidding, right? Whatever happened with the twins, Andy had been 'involved' with the new kid from the moment Miranda had found out about him. Or her. Whichever. She'd sure as heck been more involved with Miranda's pregnancy than Stephen ever had. Well, except for jump-starting it, anyway.

"Of course you are," Miranda said, and waved her hand. "You can hardly avoid it, can you?" She looked directly at Andy. "Do you want to? Avoid it, that is."

"What?" Andy said. "No!"

"You sound so sure," Miranda said. "You're, what, twenty-four? You have no idea what this is going to be like."

"Neither do you," Andy said.

"I have a much better idea than you do," Miranda said flatly. "And if this isn't keeping you awake at night, it probably should be."

"Well, it hasn't," Andy said. But she had to admit that that was only because she hadn't really been thinking about it too much. So much else had been happening. So much that the fact that, in July, Miranda would actually give birth had sort of fallen into the back of Andy's mind, in spite of prenatal vitamins and doctor's visits and everything else.

She sat back in her chair and spread her hands helplessly. "What do you want me to do?" she said. "I want to be with you." More than she'd ever wanted anything. 'Want' wasn't even the right word. "People who are younger than me have children all the time."

"Please don't trot that one out," Miranda said. "Most of them aren't ready, either. And none of them are you."

"What do you want me to do?" Andy repeated, trying not to get defensive, because that wouldn't help at all. It was tough, since Miranda put everybody she'd ever met on the defensive. "I mean--I don't have a plan written out or anything. How...I mean, won't we just have to play it by ear, like everything else? You don't know how anything's going to turn out. Nobody ever does."

"True," Miranda said, and she didn't look happy about it at all. Well, it figured--if anybody wanted life to adhere to a well-ordered plan, it was Miranda Priestly. "Which is why I said I don't know what role you will play."

"...right," Andy said, with no idea whether they'd come to any kind of resolution or not. She didn't think so. More like they'd gone in a circle. "Well, I, um. I want to be here. And I am here. So." She shrugged, and realized she was sweating under her arms.

Miranda nodded. She said nothing.

Andy swallowed and took a chance. "Um...is this about the ultrasound next week?" Then she saw a muscle twitch beneath Miranda's left eye. "Because--because--"

"Let's not," Miranda said. She'd gone tight around the mouth and eyes. Andy hated that she'd been the one to put the worry there. But in a week, after both an ultrasound and amniocentesis, they'd know a lot more about the baby: its size, its sex, and whether it was...okay. Or if it was the one chance in a hundred. "I'd rather...the Charleston shoot."
Okay," Andy said, took a deep breath, and smiled. Then she bent down to retrieve the briefcase by her chair. "I have the layout mockups from Paul right here."

"The den," Miranda said, and led the way there. Andy got the proofs out of her briefcase, and Miranda reached for them like she might reach for a life jacket in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. "Inadequate," she said, after she'd looked at the first one for all of half a second. "The misuse of color here…" Andy hunched her shoulders, feeling guilty that she'd put Miranda in such a bad mood, and that Miranda was going to take it out on poor Paul and his team. But if Andy protested, tried to call Miranda on it, that just meant Miranda would get mad at her too, and take it out even more on Paul and his team out of pure spite.

Andy sure could pick 'em. She tried not to sigh audibly, and wrote down everything Miranda said. Her wrist started cramping up again.

They were done by five after nine. Andy could tell that Miranda wanted to get her out of the house before Ellie arrived with the book, which was a really good idea, so Andy didn't mind.

"For the record," Andy dared, as she was packing up the briefcase again, "I'm almost twenty-five." As in, halfway to fifty.

"Oh, well, that's--" Miranda began sarcastically, and then paused as Andy's words sank in.

"Almost?"

"My birthday's on the thirteenth," Andy said. She grinned. "Just so you know."

Miranda raised her eyebrows then, looking almost playful. Andy was instantly and utterly enchanted.

"And? Why are you telling me?" Miranda asked.

"Gee, I don't know," Andy said, still grinning. "Hey. Do you remem--you probably don't. But I interviewed with you last year on March thirteenth. Guess what? It was my birthday."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. 'Happy Birthday, here's a paycheck.'" Andy had been able to appreciate that much, at least, even if she'd had her head up her ass about a lot of things. Then she stopped grinning, and added more seriously, "I don't expect anything. I just remembered it because Nigel asked me about my birthday in London. It was kind of weird." In a way that she still couldn't put into words. "I don't know what he's up to."

Miranda sighed. "Neither do I. But out of all the things I have to worry about right now, Nigel is not exactly at the top of the list."

"I guess not," Andy said. She glanced around to make sure that no twins were lingering around the den unobserved. Then she turned back to Miranda and blinked hopefully.

"I suppose I can't stop you," Miranda said, and took her by the hand.

"I'm the luckiest girl in the whole world," Andy said, and kissed her.

But that night, Andy followed Miranda's suggestion and lay awake worrying.
Miranda had been right. She usually was. Andy was a young professional; she wanted a career now, not kids. She needed to be focusing on her work, on making her way to the top. Not on changing diapers.

But would she be doing much of that, anyway? Miranda kept a nanny for a reason. She worked all day, Andy worked all day--no doubt Greg, the twins' father, worked all day, too. And Stephen as well. Sure, parenting was high on Miranda's list of priorities. It was also kind of convenient. She went to parent-teacher conferences, she attended recitals, she came home in time for dinner when she could manage it; she didn't exactly volunteer for the PTA, cook macaroni and cheese for lunch, and vacuum the living room, like Andy's mom had done when Andy was growing up.

Andy's mom. God. Andy's stomach cramped and seized. That was another thing she'd deliberately not been thinking about: her parents, and what they'd say. All of a sudden, that seemed a lot more real than kids and jobs. Andy would be lucky not to be disowned. It was already weird, already uncomfortable, sending the usual breezy emails and making the brief, weekly phone call and never mentioning, 'By the way…'

It wasn't even so much that Miranda was a woman. Andy's parents had never seemed to have much against gay people, as far as she could tell, and she knew they thought that altering the Constitution just so gay people couldn't get married was a bad idea. Although of course it was always different when it was your own kid. And of course they'd always liked Nate. And wanted grandchildren.

Fuck it. Rachel was getting married. And from what Andy knew about her sister, she and Mark would be popping out grandchildren within two years, if that's what her parents were worried about. No. It wasn't just that Miranda was a woman. It was everything else--age, children, divorce, everything--plus the fact that, above all, Miranda was Miranda. After all, Andy's parents weren't likely to forget:

"What does she want you to do? Call the National Guard and have her airlifted out of there?"

To say nothing of:

"I completely fail to understand why she can't spend Christmas with her children and take care of them herself."

And, most damning of all:

"After what I've seen and heard, I'm starting to think there's nothing she wouldn't do."

Yeah. After what they'd seen and heard, they'd never believe--never understand--they'd never--

But that wasn't an issue yet. Wasn't a problem. Andy's parents couldn't say any of that because they couldn't find out yet. Nobody could. Discovery was disaster: it would be the end of Andy's career (and probably her professional reputation), and it would put Miranda's in serious jeopardy. It would give Greg an excuse to demand custody of the twins, if he felt like it; it would give Stephen an outlet for his spite; it would give New York a chance to subject Miranda Priestly to utter ridicule and contempt, as though far more sordid things didn't happen every day. And what kind of defense could Andy and Miranda offer? "It's completely platonic"? Either they'd be disbelieved, or worse, people would believe them and laugh all the harder. Because people were heartless fucks.

And there wasn't a thing Andy could do about it, short of calling the whole thing off, which wasn't a possibility because then she'd probably die or something.

For want of another plan of action, Andy rolled over and yelled into her pillow. It helped a little bit.
For the rest of that week, Andy hitched a ride home with Miranda. She only ate dinner at the townhouse three more times, though; on the other nights, Roy took her home after dropping Miranda off, just like before. Andy had a definite feeling that she and Miranda were trying not to push their luck with the twins, and whenever Andy came to dinner, Miranda always came up with some bullshit work excuse just in case the twins asked why Andy was there. But the twins never asked--they seemed perfectly happy to chatter on about their day at school while Miranda listened attentively and Andy tried to keep up without feeling self-conscious. How much did they know, how much did they guess? She had no idea, and the twins still weren't telling.

After dinner, the twins did homework upstairs, and Andy and Miranda worked downstairs. It wasn't as bad as Andy might have thought. In her own home, with someone she liked and trusted, Miranda was a lot less vile, though no less focused. And Andy felt useful. Helpful. Good to have around.

More than that, it was pretty much the only time Andy and Miranda ever spent alone together. It often felt like they lived in each other's pockets all day long, but somebody else was always around: Roy, Ellie, Nigel, the clackers, the twins. Even the security cameras in the elevators. This, sitting in Miranda's house and working after the girls were gone, was the only time they could be together without worrying that somebody else might catch them…what? Sitting together and enjoying each other's company? Well, for Miranda, enjoying an assistant's company was a heck of a red flag to anyone who cared to look, so even hanging out together was a subversive act. Sure, it'd be nice to have an actual conversation not about work, or sit closer to each other than five feet apart, but Andy was trying to be patient.

Plus, when she stayed for dinner, she got a kiss before she went home. Since she'd stopped bringing the book over, she didn't get one every night now, which was the biggest disadvantage to the arrangement as far as she was concerned. It wasn't like Miranda could give her a peck before getting out of the car in front of Roy. And when Andy went straight home after work she didn't get any of Jimena's cooking, either, which really was excellent and fulfilled all of Miranda's nutritional requirements.

On Monday night, the seventh of March, Andy stopped in for dinner a fourth time. Tonight Miranda didn't volunteer any excuses to the twins. She was too pale and distracted--she had been all day, though she'd been disguising it masterfully. The ultrasound and amniocentesis were tomorrow morning. Miranda didn't look hungry, but she devoured every morsel of her spinach salad as if a last-minute dose of folic acid would make all the difference.

The twins didn't chatter on like usual, either, and Andy didn't feel up to carrying a conversation at the Priestly dinner table all by herself. Miranda hated it when people babbled for no reason. So it felt very much like all four of them were hunkered down, waiting in silence for some kind of bomb to drop.

Finally Cassidy said, "Your doctor's appointment is tomorrow, right, Mom?"

"Shut up," Caroline said.

"Yes, it is, darling," Miranda said. "Caroline, don't be rude to your sister." She sipped her water and tried to appear calm.

Cassidy didn't shut up, either. Miranda had told Andy that Cassidy could be every bit as stubborn as
her father when she was on to something. "What'll you do if something's wrong?" she asked.

Andy held her breath. She'd forgotten how blunt kids could be about the things adults never discussed openly. But she tried to look tranquil as she awaited Miranda's response.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Miranda said, and Andy wanted to applaud the reassuring tone of her voice. "Let's not go creating trouble when there's no need for it."

"Are you going to the doctor with Mom?" Caroline asked Andy, peeking at her through a veil of red-gold bangs.

"Mm-hmm," Andy said, and then looked quickly at Miranda. "I mean, I think so." She damn well better be.

"Yes, she is," Miranda said.

"Will you call us and tell us everything's okay?" Caroline said, still talking to Andy, not her mother.

"Well…sure," Andy said. "I--we can leave a message for you at the school office. If that's okay," she added, looking at Miranda.

"Of course it is." Then Miranda glanced at the clock. "Homework time." The twins sighed, but carried their ice cream bowls to the dishwasher.

After they'd gone upstairs, Andy and Miranda repaired to the den, as usual. But when Andy opened up her bag to pull out her work, Miranda waved her hand and stared off into space. She looked haunted. Andy took a deep breath, folded her hands in her lap, and waited.

But Miranda said nothing, and nothing, and then some more nothing. Finally, after about five minutes (which felt very long when you were waiting for someone to speak), Andy said, "You okay?"

"She might be right," Miranda said, still not looking at Andy. "Cassidy." She tapped her fingertips nervously on the arm of her chair while Andy sat up very straight on the sofa. "Something might be wrong with it."

"Hey," Andy said at once. "No. You don't know that."

"And if it is?" Miranda sat back in the chair, and rubbed her hands over her eyes as if Andy hadn't spoken. "I can afford to take care of it. That's not an issue."

"Right," Andy said carefully. "But remember what you said to Cassidy? There's no sense in--"

"I had an abortion when I was eighteen," Miranda said.

Andy stopped talking right away. Miranda moved her hands away from her face and looked at Andy. Then she smiled bitterly. "You're surprised."

"I…yeah, I guess," Andy said. "You…um?"

"Oh yes," Miranda said. "Knocked up at eighteen, outside of Toledo, Ohio." She snorted derisively and looked away from Andy, back into the past. "Like so many other girls I knew."

Andy swallowed. "Oh," she said. "So…so you…"

"So I got out," Miranda said. "I'd always known I had to get out. That I would never stay there. That
as soon as I graduated high school..." She took a deep breath and let it out again. "I felt like I'd been running for the gate at a prison camp, and someone had tried to stop me right before I could cross. I couldn't let that happen."

"Oh," Andy said again, wondering if Miranda was about to tell her about her past, about her family, about everything Andy wanted to know.

But all Miranda said was, "Two years after Roe v. Wade. And I wasn't a minor. I was lucky." She gave a short, bitter little laugh. "And then I packed up and came to New York with four hundred dollars in the bank. Just like that. I have never, ever looked back."

"Oh," Andy said. "So...so is this..."

The word 'atonement' hung unspoken in the air, and Miranda shook her head at it. She glanced at Andy. "I don't regret it," she said. "I never have. It was the right decision for me then."

Andy nodded wordlessly. Then she dared, "And now?"

Miranda shrugged one shoulder. "I don't know," she said. "I can afford it now. I can take care of it." She smiled mirthlessly. "I got the job. The money. The townhouse. Everything I told myself I would." She glanced at Andy, and this time her smile was incredulous. "And some other things I didn't anticipate."

In spite of herself, Andy smiled at that. She stood up from the couch and sat down on the blue footstool in front of Miranda's chair--the very one she and Ellie had tracked down, pre-London. It seemed like she'd divided her life that way now: before and after London. "You got the girl, huh?" she asked, trying to keep her own voice light.

"I seem to have," Miranda said. She looked at Andy thoughtfully, as if she was trying to decide whether or not to say something. Andy held her breath, wondering if Miranda would--if she might actually say--and if Andy, too, might say--

Then Miranda said, "I'm glad I hired you."

Andy's breath left her in a whoosh, and she bent forward, laughing helplessly. "Me too," she said. "I'm glad Nigel gave me a kick in the ass and made me put on those Chanel boots."

Miranda chuckled, evidently forgetting her worries and memories for a second. Andy reflected that it would be really easy, in this moment, to make big promises and declarations. And that Miranda might even believe them, because she needed to right now. So tempting to--

"Chanel boots?" Miranda said, stopping Andy's train of thought. She looked amused, but also curious.

"Yeah," Andy said. "The day of my big makeover. You didn't see--oh." Andy remembered that Miranda had left the office after chewing Andy out that day, and hadn't seen New and Improved Andy until the following morning, when she'd practically eaten Andy up with her eyes. Andy blushed just remembering it, and cleared her throat. "You know, the Chanel boots. Last season. The brown leather ones that go all the way up to..." She tapped her thigh. "Remember them?"

Miranda lifted her eyebrows, and then her cheeks went a little red. Oh yeah, she remembered them. She cleared her throat and said, "Did they fit?"

"Nigel wouldn't have set me loose in them if they didn't," Andy said.
"Oh. Yes," Miranda said. "I suppose." She cleared her throat again. "Well. I think it's time for you to, um, go home. It's late."

Not that late. Damn. Well...at least thinking about skintight leather had distracted Miranda a little. "Okay," Andy said, and instead of standing up, scooted to the edge of the footstool and leaned in.

Andy didn't know if it was the stress, the worry, or the thought of Andy in thigh-high boots, but tonight Miranda leaned forward too, without prompting or urging, and met Andy halfway. They lingered for a moment, brushing their lips together, little puffs of breath between them. And tonight, Andy waited.

Miranda didn't. She pressed her lips to Andy's; she cupped Andy's chin; she caught her breath and sighed when Andy tilted her head and kissed her back. That sound, that sigh, slid through Andy's brain and buzzed around at the base of her skull. She parted her lips, and felt the lightest, accidental brush of Miranda's tongue against her mouth. It made her whimper. Miranda gasped at the noise and moved her hand to cup the back of Andy's neck, apparently unable to stop herself.

Jesus. They might not be having sex, but they were definitely fucking each other right now. Andy kissed Miranda again and thought about long looks, and accidental hand-brushings, and countless tiny moments. She and Miranda had been fucking each other for a very, very long time. Before London. Before Paris, even. About time they'd figured it out.

She moved her mouth from Miranda's and trailed it down to Miranda's chin, then her jaw. Miranda gasped again, shuddered, and did not push Andy away. Andy's head spun. She was used to stubble, to roughness, but Miranda's skin was unbelievably soft and smooth. And warm.

Andy kept kissing, kept nuzzling, while Miranda trembled and tried to catch her breath. Her grip was like iron on the back of Andy's neck. Why weren't they on the sofa? Or anywhere else they could...they could...

Could Andy--would it be okay to--she touched Miranda's neck with the back of her index finger, stroked it gently up and down. Miranda hissed and arched into the touch. Andy promptly lost her mind, whispered, "Let me," and leaned down so she could kiss where her finger had touched, could kiss Miranda's throat for the first time. She barely pressed her mouth to the skin, though, kissing Miranda almost as much with her breath as she did with her lips. Miranda made a breathless noise that was almost a moan.

Then she turned her head, rubbed her nose in Andy's hair, and whispered--pleaded-- "No. No. Not here."

'Where, then?' Andy didn't say. Instead, she pulled back, her head whirling. Miranda was flushed and panting. She pressed a hand to her throat, closed her eyes, and tried to collect herself. Andy just stared at her in agony, wondering if this was what guys felt like when they had blue balls.

"So," she croaked, "so...I'll, um, I'm going home?"

Miranda nodded, keeping her eyes shut. "I think that's a good--yes."

"Sorry," Andy said, before she could stop herself, even though she wasn't sorry at all. Miranda opened her eyes again, and Andy saw that they were glazed with desire. She'd managed to get her breathing under control, but her face was still red, and she still quivered. *God.* Andy stood up really fast. "I'll see you tomorrow morning," she gasped. Miranda swallowed and nodded, and Andy grabbed her bag and stumbled for the front door.
Well. At least she might have given Miranda something else to think about tonight.

The next morning in the car, however, Miranda did not appear distracted. She kept her eyes rigidly focused on the book, making last-minute notes and changes. But she didn't blush today; rather she was pale and tense, and Andy knew she was thinking, not about their kisses, but the doctor's office.

Andy longed to comfort her, but she still didn't know what kind of comfort Miranda would accept. Andy couldn't touch her or say anything in front of Roy, and Miranda might not want that anyway, even if they were alone. So Andy did what she'd done when she'd still just been a lowly assistant, and sat quietly, ready to get Miranda anything she might need at a moment's notice. It had worked like a charm before, and she certainly didn't have any better ideas now.

In Dr. Viswanathan's waiting-room, Andy was prepared for another session of waiting in tight, tense silence. But instead, Miranda said, "What have you arranged for the team going to the Charleston shoot? Transportation-wise?" They'd already discussed that a few nights ago, but Andy gamely launched into talk about plane tickets and rental cars and hotel shuttles, and Miranda nodded silently until a nurse came to lead her into the examining room.

"Nervous?" Mary asked Andy when Miranda was gone. Andy didn't even bother denying it, and just nodded with a tight smile. "She seems to be in good shape," Mary said. "Seems like you're looking after her pretty well. Or somebody is, anyway."

"No, it's me," Andy said, trying to sound casual instead of insanely possessive and worried. Then she added, "I mean, I, uh, I try to help her do what the doctor says."

"Well, I think she's lucky to have you," Mary said, and lowered her voice to add, "are she and her husband still going to get divorced?"

"They, um--" better. "I think that's still the plan, yeah."

"That's a shame," Mary murmured, and turned back to her computer. "I'm glad she's got somebody to be there for her, at least."

At least. Andy gritted her teeth. "Yeah," she said.

The procedures took forever and ever, and Andy was an old woman by the time they were finished. At least that was how it felt when the nurse emerged and gestured for Andy to follow her. Without speaking, Andy gave the nurse a pleading look: the nurse gave her a big smile and a reassuring nod in return. After that, Andy needed a couple of seconds before she could stand up, just so she could make sure her knees would support her.

Miranda was sitting in front of Dr. Viswanathan's desk again, sipping a glass of water. Her hand didn't tremble and her breathing was steady. The look on her face was perfectly calm. Dr. Viswanathan was the one who greeted Andy with a smile. "Shall we begin?" she said.

"Please," Miranda said, not even glancing in Andy's direction.

"As Miranda already knows," Dr. Viswanathan said to Andy, "everything checks out okay today. The ultrasound detected no problems, no defects. Of course the ultrasound alone is not completely foolproof, which is why we've sent the amniotic fluid sample to the lab for chromosomal analysis.
"We should have the results in a couple of weeks." Andy took a deep breath and exhaled it, nodding. "But so far everything seems perfectly in-order. So I suggest we all relax for a while." Andy nodded again, and glanced at Miranda, who appeared to be concentrating on her water.

"It's a boy," Dr. Viswanathan added.

Andy stared at her with wide eyes. Oh, that was right--what with all the worry about, about other stuff, she'd nearly forgotten they'd learn the baby's sex today. "Really?" she said.

"Yes indeed," Dr. Viswanathan said, and for the first time, she looked as amused as Sandra Latchley had during Miranda's first consultation.

"Oh," Andy said, trying very hard to play it cool. "Well, that's...neat." She glanced at Miranda, who was still refusing to look up from her water, and felt another, very different pang of worry. Was she unhappy? Had she wanted another girl or something?

"That it is," Dr. Viswanathan said. "Would you like to see the picture?" She picked up a large sheet of paper from her desk, and Andy realized it was a print-out from the ultrasound. It wasn't much to look at, really--a fuzzy white blob surrounded by fuzzy black space--but then Andy remembered that the white blob in the photo was the kid inside Miranda, right at that very moment, and her mind got blown a little.

"Wow," she said faintly.

"Yes," Dr. Viswanathan chuckled. "'Wow,' indeed. Ms. Priestly, would you like to take the picture with you?"

"No, thank you," Miranda said to her water. Andy wanted to protest, and didn't dare.

"Very well," Dr. Viswanathan said. "Do you have any other questions for me today?"

"No," Miranda said. Andy shook her head mutely when Dr. Viswanathan looked at her. Her only question was about why Miranda was so subdued, and Dr. Viswanathan wouldn't be able to answer it.

"All right," Dr. Viswanathan said, and looked down at her notes. "I'll want to see you in another two weeks, Miranda."

"Fine," Miranda said, her voice as even and cool as ever. Andy worried some more.

Then she worried while checking out of the clinic, worried during the car ride back to the office, and worried on the way into the revolving doors of Elias-Clarke, because Miranda hadn't said anything. Not even instructions for work.

The elevator doors shut, leaving them alone together, and Miranda exhaled a long, shaking sigh. Andy quickly turned to look at her, and saw that she was pale and trembling, and that she'd pressed a hand to her heart. "Are you okay?" Andy said, scared and wondering if she should call Roy and tell him to take them back to the doctor's office right away.

But Miranda nodded, waving her hand at Andy for silence while she took another deep breath. "I'm fine," she said. "I'm fine now."

Andy fidgeted, twitched her fingers, balled her hands up into fists. Then, when they passed the eighth floor, she reached out and hesitantly touched Miranda's hand with her own, not quite daring to say anything. Miranda didn't look at her, but she grabbed Andy's hand so hard it hurt.
"A boy, huh?" Andy said, and Miranda covered her mouth with her hand, but not soon enough to stifle a half-hysterical laugh. Her cheeks finally got a little color in them. Andy laughed too, breathlessly, as a surge of relief overwhelmed her. It was okay, the tests hadn't discovered anything immediately awful, Dr. Viswanathan had been hopeful, and Andy and Miranda were holding hands in the elevator. The day couldn't get any better, really.

Then Miranda glanced over at her, and Andy saw that her eyes were actually shining with relief and happiness. Andy felt a little dizzy from that look, and wondered if the day would come when Miranda's beauty didn't shut her mind down completely. But then Miranda got herself under control, let go of Andy's hand, and just in time, too, because then the elevator dinged and the door opened and they were staring at Keisha and Jocelyn. Andy put on her straightest face right away.

They got out of the way immediately, and Miranda brushed past like she hadn't even seen them. Andy followed her, but Jocelyn grabbed her elbow, and mouthed, 'Is it okay?', nodding after Miranda's retreating back. Andy couldn't stop another relieved grin as she nodded, and both Jocelyn and Keisha relaxed. Andy realized that the whole office had no doubt been holding its breath in a prayer that Miranda's entire pregnancy would go as smoothly as possible, because the alternative, and Miranda's resulting mood, was too horrifying to consider.

But that day went smooth as glass. Even when Ellie mixed up a photo spread from Prada with one from Philip Lim, even when Paul was late getting back from a meeting because of traffic, even when Nigel had to leave the office early because of a crisis at Donna Karan, Miranda didn't flip out. Of course, it helped that Andy found the spread from Prada, re-routed all of Paul's messages and suggestions to Keisha, and had Marjorie at Donna Karan call her with updates every half-hour, but on a normal day even that wouldn't have pacified Miranda. Today was unusual, for sure. And special.

When they went to Miranda's house after work--Andy had definitely scored a dinner invitation tonight--Miranda looked tired and content. Andy felt the same, and their silence was comfortable. But when they got out of the car and the townhouse door closed behind them, Andy heard Caroline and Cassidy's pounding footsteps and knew that quiet time was over.

"We got your message," Cassidy said as she hurried into view, Caroline hot on her heels. "It's really a boy?"

Miranda smiled, bent down, and kissed both the girls. "So it appears," she said.

"What are we going to do with a brother?" Caroline asked, making a face.

"Boss him around," Cassidy said. "He's, like, ten years younger than we are. When he's our age, we'll be twenty." Caroline's eyes opened wide, and she appeared intrigued. Obviously she hadn't thought of that.

Miranda hadn't either, because her eyes widened too. "Well," she said. "That's true. You'll just have to help look after him."

"And Cara," Cassidy pointed out. As if the mention of her name had summoned her, Cara appeared, wearing her coat and carrying her bag, ready to leave now that Miranda had returned home.

"I heard," she said, smiling. "Congratulations, Ms. Priestly."

"Yes," Miranda said, and for the first time, being congratulated on her pregnancy did not appear to annoy her. "Don't forget the girls are going swimming tomorrow after school."
"Yes, Ms. Priestly," Cara said, keeping her polite smile firmly attached to her face. Andy admired her for that, considering that Cara was the one who organized the twins' schedule every day and updated Miranda on it. "Good night."

Dinner that night was salmon: the same salmon dish Miranda had said she'd liked in London that January. Jimena had done a good job of replicating it, right down to the spinach, which Andy pretended to enjoy yet again.

"So what are we going to name it?" Caroline asked.

"Not Stephen," Cassidy said at once.

Miranda gave a dry laugh and sipped her water. "No," she said. "Definitely not Stephen, darling." She shrugged. "I haven't really been thinking about it."

"What about Daniel? For Daniel Radcliffe," Cassidy said. "He is so cute."

"No!" Caroline said. "Orlando!"

"Daniel I might consider," Miranda said. "Orlando is off the table."

"Oh, come on," Caroline said, and appealed to Andy, "Orlando is an okay name, isn't it? It's from Shakespeare!"

"I, uh," Andy said, "I'm not sure I'd want to name my brother after a guy I had a crush on."

"Oh," Caroline said.

"Okay," Cassidy agreed. "Ew."

"So what would you pick?" Caroline said.

Andy deliberately didn't look at Miranda. "Me? Oh, I don't know," she said. "I haven't been thinking--I mean, we just found out it was a boy today."

"You could name it Andrew," Cassidy said slyly.

"Um, oh, ha ha," Andy said at once, wondering yet again just how quick on the uptake the twins really were. "I, I actually don't like the name Andrew," she added. "Believe it or not. It was the truth--she'd hated being taunted for having a 'boy's name' like Andy in middle school. The fact that 'Andrea' meant 'manly' hadn't helped, either.

"Huh. That's weird. Oh--I forgot!" Caroline said, got up from the table, and ran to her backpack, sitting on a chair by the kitchen door. She opened it up and pulled out several sheets of paper. "We printed these off from the internet during computer lab. A whole list of baby names for boys."

"Oh, yeah," Cassidy said. "There's like five hundred of them."

"Let's do ABC order," Caroline said, and handed Cassidy half the sheets. There seemed to be about ten total, and each one had a long column of names in teeny-tiny type. "I'll go first. 'Abelard.'"

Andy and Miranda exchanged a pained look. It was going to be a long dinner.

During dessert, when the girls had arrived at "Quincy," Miranda called a merciful halt. "Mommy will give the matter careful thought, darlings," she promised. "Although your father and I didn't decide what to name you two until after you were born."
"Really?" Caroline said in surprise.

"Why'd you wait so long?" Cassidy asked.

"Oh, well, we just couldn't decide until we saw you," Miranda said lightly. Andy wondered if there was more to it than that, and if Miranda would wait to name this baby too—until she knew everything was all right. If you named things or people, you got attached to them pretty quickly. "Now," Miranda said. "Homework."

"We have fine arts essays due Wednesday," Caroline said. "Andy, will you help me with mine?"

"Mine, too," Cassidy said, glaring at Caroline. Caroline glared right back.


"Of course she will," Miranda said. Andy's hackles rose at once: Miranda really had to stop deciding that kind of stuff for her, and besides, there went their hour of time together out the window.

Still. The twins wanted her to hang around, even if it was for their own reasons, and that was good. Right? So Andy smiled and nodded, and followed the twins upstairs into a well-lit study with a big table in the middle, where they all sat down. To Andy's surprise, Miranda came upstairs too, but detoured into a much smaller room by the study that served for an office. It had probably been Stephen's before. Mindful that Miranda was working in there, Andy did her best to keep the volume down to a dull roar so she wouldn't be distracted.

Time passed, with Andy offering suggestions for thesis statements and paragraph organization. She was impressed. In fifth grade she'd been writing essays—if you could call them that—on her summer vacation, or what she wanted to be when she grew up. And book reports. Apparently when you went to Dalton you wrote essays on Ancient Greek art (Caroline) or African dance (Cassidy).

"Of course I picked Ancient Greek stuff," Caroline said, rolling her eyes. "I mean, since Marion True got indicted for stealing stuff for the Getty, it was just a bonanza. Very topical."

"Yes, of course," Andy said, deciding to pretend she knew something about that. "I mean, talk about getting caught."

"Everybody knows all about Ancient Greece, though," Cassidy said. "It's not even original." She tapped her temple and grinned. "Think outside the box."

Andy kind of hated that the twins actually might be as brilliant as Miranda seemed to think, but all she said was, "I think you've both done some good work. Just think about the stuff I suggested, okay?" She glanced at the clock on the wall. Five past ten. "Whoah. It's way after bedtime." She was surprised at how quickly the time had gone by. They packed up reluctantly and left, stopping by the office to say goodnight to Miranda. Andy lingered in the study, not wanting to interrupt any family time; instead, she stood up and stretched her back. The chairs at the table weren't very comfortable. Then she flopped with relief down onto the much comfier sofa.

When the twins had gone up yet another flight of stairs to their bedrooms, she heard Miranda get up. After a moment, she wandered out of the office and into the study.

"You were good with them," she said neutrally.

Andy took a deep breath and said, "Yeah…well." Then she shrugged. "I'll just—you know, I'm doing my best." She smiled. "We'll see how it goes."

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Miranda seated herself at the other end of the sofa, hands folded demurely in her lap. "Yes."

Andy found that she couldn't bring herself to chastise Miranda for rearranging their evening without a by-your-leave. Not tonight. Besides, they were still so new—she was still trying to adjust to being part of a they, in fact—that she wasn't sure chastisement would go over well anyway. So instead she said, "Well, did you hear any names on that very long list that you liked?"

Miranda smiled tiredly. "Oh, a few. But I'm reserving judgment until we hear the final third of the alphabet." She rubbed her fingertips over her forehead, and shut her eyes.

"I should go," Andy said, gulping down disappointment at the thought of leaving without having spent any time alone with Miranda. "You've had a long day."

"No," Miranda said, and opened her eyes again. "Stay a little while longer."

Andy felt all the blood in her body rush to her face, and she tried to choke down the rush of hope, anticipation, and spine-tingling terror. "Uh," she said. "Do you want me to go bring in your work? From the office?"

"No," Miranda said again.

"Okay," Andy said, took in a huge breath, and scooted in until she was sitting right next to Miranda. Miranda didn't move to touch her. Instead, she held perfectly still as Andy cupped her jaw, tilted her head, and leaned in.

Warm, and soft, and nobody had ever, ever turned Andy on like this before. Just this, just brushing her lips over Miranda's over and over again, made Andy more hot and bothered than when she and Nate had been naked together. She sighed and dared to slide her hands farther back, to stroke them through Miranda's hair. She loved Miranda's hair. She remembered how it had looked on New Year's Eve—mussled-but-not-really—and wondered if she could recreate that look tonight.

Miranda took Andy by the shoulders, and Andy paused—but Miranda did not push her away. Instead she pulled, and next thing Andy knew, she'd given up on Miranda's hair in favor of sliding one arm around Miranda's shoulders and the other around Miranda's waist, being careful of the bulge between them. Then she kept giving Miranda the tiny, teasing kisses she'd been perfecting for days now. Like always, Miranda shivered and blushed and sighed, but tonight she cupped Andy's neck again and moved her mouth weakly against Andy's, her lips hot and damp.

When Andy, breathing harshly, pulled away, she looked into Miranda's eyes. Her glazed, pleading eyes. Her face was bright red, and her body was throwing off heat like the hottest-ever Starbucks latte. Andy thought about brown leather boots, and the relief of tension, and second-trimester hormones, and decided she would take advantage of all that and anything else she could think of as she leaned in again. She kissed Miranda firmer and harder this time, and this time it was Miranda who slid her fingers into Andy's hair, who parted her lips a little, just a little…

Andy lost track of the time. Her head was spinning too much to think about anything but this. Miranda was making soft little noises in the back of her throat. Andy realized that she was thoughtlessly muffling the noises with her own mouth, so she pulled away and nuzzled at Miranda's jaw for a second to collect herself. Miranda hissed and dug her hands harder into Andy's hair.

Then, suddenly, her hands were at Andy's shoulders again, and this time she was pushing Andy away. "No," she whimpered. "Oh. Please. Enough, enough."

Andy pulled back at once, her blood pounding in her temples, and her stomach twisting with nerves.
But Miranda didn't look mad. Like last night, she had her eyes squeezed shut while she desperately tried to pull herself together. And like last night, Andy ate up the sight of her flushed skin, her trembling hands, her breasts rising and falling rapidly with her breath. "How," Miranda managed, "how do you..." She took a deep breath, and shook her head. Then she chuckled mirthlessly. "How do you do whatever it is you're doing to me?"

"I dunno," Andy muttered, trying to get her own heart rate under control. If Miranda started talking about how turned on she was, the cease-fire wasn't going to last long. "I'll do as much as you let me," she added, and swallowed hard. "As much as you want."

Miranda gasped again at the words, and shut her eyes. "I, um," she said. Then she reached up and smoothed down her hair with shaking hands. "You seem to have a gift for this."

"Well...yeah," Andy said. It shouldn't have been a surprise. She'd told Miranda right from the beginning that she liked kissing and sex and everything else. Then she added brightly, "Want to unwrap it?"

Miranda stared at her. Andy abruptly wanted to sink through the couch. "That's the worst line I've ever heard in my life," Miranda said.

Andy had figured that out the moment the words left her mouth. She squirmed. "It's the worst one I've ever given." It was. It put all of Christian's to shame, that was for sure.

"Well, it did the trick," Miranda said, her lips curving into a tiny smile as she regained control of herself. "I feel much calmer now, thank you."

So much for Andy's amazing gift. "Great," she sighed. Miranda snorted, and stood up with a grunt, putting a hand in the small of her back.

"Well," she said, and glanced down at her stomach. "Give me a couple of months and it won't be an issue anymore."

"What?" Andy said incredulously. "You think I can only approach from the front?"

"Isn't it time for you to go home?" Miranda said, raising an eyebrow.

"All right, all right," Andy grumbled, and got to her feet. Then she grinned at Miranda. "A boy," she said. "Wow."

Miranda blinked, and for just a moment, got a look of wonder on her face. It vanished soon enough, and she shook her head with a resigned sigh, heading out the door of the study. "Caroline's right," she said. "What in the world are we going to do about that?"

We. Andy tried not to bounce. "What do you mean?"

"What do I know about raising a man-child?" Miranda said, and Andy got the feeling she was only half-joking.

"Oh, come on. It can't be that hard."

"I work in the most feminine business there is," Miranda said over her shoulder. Andy followed her into the hallway. "I have no husband. Two twin girls. Even the dog's female. And--"

"So we'll ask Nigel," Andy said with a grin, and pictured Nigel's expression, which made her grin even harder.
"Oh, well, then," Miranda said. "I can stop worrying."

"Come on," Andy said again, and laughed as they drew up to the stairway. "I played Little League. I took Tae Kwon Do. I love camping. Check me out, I'll be a great role model--" She casually glanced down the stairs.

Right into Ellie's wide brown eyes.

Andy felt like every drop of blood in her body had frozen all at once. Miranda, still with her back to the stairs, blinked, said "What?", followed Andy's gaze, and then went rigid as she, too, realized they had an audience.

Andy and Miranda stared at Ellie. Ellie stared right back.

"You've got to be kidding," Andy whispered.

"I…" Ellie said. Her face was so pale it was nearly translucent. She was clutching the book to her chest. "I…"

Miranda said nothing. Andy said nothing. They just looked down at Ellie in what, Andy was sure, was mutual disbelief.

"I h-heard Andy's voice," Ellie croaked. "I thought maybe it would be okay…maybe I should come up…g-g-give you the…the…"

Miranda turned and walked back down the hallway without a word, without another glance at either Andy or Ellie. Andy stared after her, and then looked back down at Ellie, wondering how much she'd heard, how much she'd guessed, how badly everything was ruined, and how badly Andy should want to kill her right now.

Looking at her, Ellie went even paler, and made a helpless little squeaking noise.

Andy, feeling like she was moving through quicksand, stepped to the head of the stairs and extended her hand very, very slowly so that it wouldn't shake with fear and rage. Ellie's hands, by contrast, were nearly spasming as she gave Andy the book.

"Andy," she said pleadingly, and glanced down the hallway, towards where Miranda had gone.

"Tomorrow," Andy managed, taking hold of the book so tightly that the edges of the cover bit into her palm.

"But…but I only, I thought…"

"We will deal with this tomorrow, Ellie," Andy whispered, wondering how illegal it was, exactly, to knock somebody down the stairs. Ellie's eyes went even wider, she gave a little cry, and then she turned and literally ran away, her heels thumping on the carpeted stairs in triple-time.

Andy didn't exhale until she heard the front door shut. Then she let loose a long, rattling sigh.

Okay. It didn't have to mean disaster. It didn't have to be the end of anything. Damage control. Andy would think of something. She clutched the book to her chest, much like Ellie had just done, and retraced her steps to the study, where Miranda had retreated.

Miranda was standing by the window, looking outside. She didn't turn around, although she must have heard Andy's approach. She didn't say anything. She didn't move.
In her memory, Andy heard herself asking Miranda, "Is there anything else I can do?"

And Miranda replied: "Your job."

Andy set the book down on the small table by the door. "I'll...I'll take care of it," she whispered.

Miranda did not respond. Andy turned and left her alone.

But that night, lying awake, Andy realized she had no idea how to take care of it. What did you do in situations like this? Blackmail? Bribery? If Ellie got fired, got angry, and talked to the press, it would be catastrophic. Rational discussion probably wouldn't do much, either, since Ellie didn't exactly seem suited to...well, discussion, period.

Andy took a deep breath and stared up at the ceiling. How much could Ellie have overheard, really? Andy tried to remember words, positions, volumes. Plus the time Ellie would have entered the house. There was no way she could have overheard Andy and Miranda making out, or even talking about making out, so that was something. No, she would just have overheard the stuff, the jokes, about raising a boy. Which was plenty weird on its own, but not nearly as bad as the other. It might be suspicious, but it wasn't damning. It could be written off, if Andy and Miranda played their cards right.

Except...their reactions might have given the game away anyway. She hadn't seen Miranda's face, but if it had looked anything like it had looked when Andy came up the stairs...God. Even now that they were together, the memory of that look scared Andy shitless whenever she thought about it. No wonder Ellie had looked like she was about to faint. That wasn't the sort of look you gave somebody when they'd interrupted something inconsequential, something casual. And Andy was pretty sure she hadn't been any subtler. Not with the way she'd felt at the time.

Fuck.

Andy ran through her options, again and again, unable to settle on any kind of solution. By the time she got to wondering how much it would cost to hire a hit man, she decided that she might be overreacting just a tiny bit, and perhaps going insane into the bargain. She threw the covers over her head. She hoped Miranda was managing to get some decent sleep, at least.

The only thing to do was wait. Wait and see what Ellie did tomorrow. Andy peeked out from under the covers and checked the clock. No...today.

All of a sudden, she understood why Miranda could never bear to wait for anything.

She clambered out of bed at six, called Roy, and told him that she'd be taking the subway that morning. It was a bad idea to arrive at work with Miranda today. Besides, she wasn't sure that she could face her in the car. She couldn't even call her right now. She needed the subway trip to wake up and get her head together.
So of course, halfway to Elias-Clarke, she found out that her connecting line was closed for a bomb threat. Everybody was forced to head aboveground, and all the nearby taxis were snatched up in a heartbeat by people who weren't hampered by four-inch-heels. Andy leaned her head back and stared up at the steel-colored sky, praying for strength and patience. Of all the days to be late--

She couldn't call Miranda. She sure as hell couldn't call Ellie. So she called Nigel, acting like she hadn't been able to get in touch with anybody else, and told him that she was on her way.

"You're going to be late? Fantastic. Miranda's going to be beyond pissed," Nigel said. "She's on a tear today."

Andy stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk, causing grumbling and cursing people to go around her. "She's already there?" It was early for that.

"As of five minutes ago," Nigel said. "And yet, it already feels like five hours."

"Great," Andy said, her stomach clenching as she walked faster. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

It took her fifteen more minutes to reach Elias-Clarke, and once she arrived, she had to detour to the lobby bathroom to fix her hair and makeup, and straighten out her clothes. No matter what, you did not show up to work at Runway looking like you'd been walking for half a mile. Instead of freaking out, Andy tried to use the moment to calm down, to focus on making herself appear sleek and polished, to try not to panic.

When she walked into Runway, nobody shunned her. Nobody stared at her or made the sign of the cross or did anything else to indicate that Ellie might have spilled the beans about...well, anything. Jocelyn even smiled at her, and Andy tried to look calm as she headed towards her desk. Towards Ellie's desk. Towards Miranda's office.

As she walked past receiving, she heard Ellie's voice, fast-paced and gabbling, sounding panicked. And as she rounded the corner, she saw Ellie standing to the side of Miranda's desk, shaking and clasping her hands at her breast, her face the color of milk.

Miranda, however, did not look angry. Miranda looked completely flabbergasted.

Andy blinked, but at that moment, Ellie turned and saw her approaching. She jumped and squeaked. The hapless look on her face reminded Andy too much of the night before, so she set her jaw and detoured very quickly into the kitchen, where she could take a deep breath and regain her composure.

Then, just as she'd finished taking her deep breath, Nigel poked his head in. "Here at last. Good. Come on."

"What? I mean, I have to--"

"Ellie's here to take the phones, isn't she? Come on," he repeated, and Andy followed him out of the kitchen with one final, curious glance over her shoulder. The scene had not changed, except that now Miranda looked a little less shocked and a little more like her usual self. Ellie still looked petrified.

Andy had said she'd take care of it, but it looked like Miranda was going to be stuck doing that now. Damn. Well, Miranda probably had a lot more practice with that stuff anyway. So Andy tried to put it out of her mind as Nigel dragged her to a meeting with Keisha and Matthias about the most recent layout, which hadn't gone well, and which they were trying to fix before Miranda could see it.
"So how badly is she going to hate it?" Keisha finally asked in desperation, holding up a mock spread.

"Pretty badly," Nigel said, looking to Andy for confirmation.

Andy bit her lip and nodded. "Especially today," she admitted. "Any way you can sit on it until later? When she's, um…"

"Not psycho?" Matthias muttered. "Just had a personality transplant?"

Keisha appealed to Andy. "Any chance you can cheer her up? She listens to you."

Andy blinked, and tried not to blush. "It, um," she said. "It depends." She glanced at Nigel. "I guess we could work together on that."

"Fine," he said, and his lips quirked. "You distract her with juggling. I'll bring the dancing bear."

Just then Matthias looked over Andy's shoulder. His eyes widened and he cleared his throat. Sure enough, the glass door swung open and Miranda, wearing her coat and carrying her bag, swept through it. "Is that the layout?" she said. She didn't look furious, either. More like…contemplative. Andy glanced at Nigel, who glanced back, looking just as cautious as Andy felt.

"Yes," Keisha managed. "Um--we were thinking about making some changes, though. Last-minute. But we'd still get it in on time--"

Nigel picked up the layout and passed it to Miranda without a word. She looked over it and pursed her lips. Everybody held their breath, but all Miranda said was, "Get rid of Kate's picture. I want to see more red, and that font's been overused." She looked at Nigel. "I'll trust you to take over from here and fix it." No condescension, no vitriol, no insults? What had happened to the 'tear' she'd been on earlier?

"Andrea, come with me," Miranda said, and turned and walked away without further elaboration. Andy's stomach twisted again. As she hurried out after Miranda, she glanced back and saw Matthias, Keisha, and Nigel exchanging confused, but relieved looks. Matthias mouthed the word, 'Hormones?'

Andy followed Miranda to the elevators in silence. Miranda was on her way to breakfast with Pat McGrath, and Andy wasn't supposed to accompany her. But she got in the elevator anyway, and turned to Miranda as soon as the doors shut.

"I'm sorry I was late," she said. "There was a bomb thing, I mean threat, on the subway--I was going to talk to Ellie before you got in--"

"Talk to Ellie," Miranda said, and the bemused look was back on her face. "Apparently it's better that you didn't."

"Why? What did she say to you?" Andy asked uneasily.

"Where to begin?" Miranda said. "The part where she all but prostrated herself in front of my chair before I could even sit down?"

Andy winced. "Oh, boy."

"Or the part where she started talking?" Miranda said. "Let's see: 'Miranda, oh my God, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to, it'll never happen again, I swear, I'll do whatever you want'--"
"God. That must be why she looked--"

"--just please don't let Andy kill me."

Andy's mouth snapped shut. She stared speechlessly as Miranda turned to regard her with raised eyebrows and an impressed-looking little smile.

"You're kidding," Andy said after a second.

"Apparently," Miranda said, "the look on your face was, and I quote, 'the scariest thing she has ever seen in her whole entire life.'"

Andy looked at Miranda, completely dumbstruck, for three more floors. At the eighth floor, the elevator stopped, and the doors slid open; two men in suits saw that Miranda was inside, and respectfully retreated. The door closed again.

"I was just really mad," Andy said weakly as the elevator started moving once more.

"So I gathered," Miranda said, looking amused now.

"I was just..." Andy realized she was trembling and not really thinking about Ellie anymore. "I was afraid. That she'd heard and that, you know, that things might..." She gulped. "Might get messed up." Which she really didn't think she could have endured. She wondered if Miranda knew that.

"I don't think she has any real idea of what she interrupted," Miranda said. "Not the brightest bulb on the porch, Eleanor."

"No," Andy said, dizzy with relief and thinking that maybe the day wasn't completely ruined after all.

"Which is why you sent her to me in the first place."

"Yeah," Andy admitted. No point in lying. Miranda must have known that from the beginning. "I didn't want anyone to...you know..."

"Do what you did to Emily." Andy nodded, ashamed. "Unlikely," Miranda added. "And nothing is 'messed up.'"

"It's not?" Andy said hopefully, thinking it would be fantastic if she'd lost all that sleep for nothing.

"Of course not," Miranda said. "Don't get dramatic."

Like Miranda could talk. But looking closely, Andy saw that Miranda's cheeks were a tiny bit flushed, and a smile lingered at the corners of her mouth. She was pleased by something. Very pleased. And in the lack of other evidence, it seemed to be by the way Andy had scared poor Ellie out of her wits.

In fact--Andy's heart tripped--Miranda appeared more than pleased. Miranda looked almost like she looked whenever they finished kissing. She looked turned on.

Andy gulped and wondered if Miranda would object terribly to having sex for the first time with Andy in an elevator. Probably. There were security cameras. And they were still supposedly all chaste and spiritual and platonic, which, seriously, was such a load of--

Miranda glanced at her, blinked, and went a little redder; Andy's thoughts were obviously written all over her face. But Miranda just cleared her throat and sounded extremely calm when she said, "Don't
forget I'm meeting Geoffrey and Tilda tonight."

She was having dinner with the Barnhards. So no hanging out at her place after dinner, for work or anything else. Andy nodded, trying to look helpful and conceal her disappointment. "Right," she said. "I've already told the restaurant to have your bottle of Clicquot Grande Dame chilled and ready."

"Mm," Miranda said, and looked sour. "It looks like I'll be enjoying alcohol vicariously again. I hope they appreciate the gesture." Andy winced sympathetically, and Miranda glanced back at her. "Try La Grande Dame sometime. It's exceptional."

Well, as soon as Andy's salary equaled Miranda's, maybe she would. Not for the first time, Andy wondered what it must be like to be so clueless about the financial realities of most people's lives. Especially since Miranda hadn't been born into money in the first place--it apparently hadn't taken her long to forget her roots. But all Andy said was, "Okay. Have a nice breakfast."

"Take care of Eleanor," Miranda said, and the door slid open at the ground floor. She gave Andy a slight smile. "You said you would, didn't you?" Before Andy could reply, she swept out, and three more people got in after making way for her.

"What's it like to work for her?" one of them, a middle-aged woman, asked Andy with wide eyes.

"Never a dull moment," Andy said, watching Miranda's retreating back until the elevator door closed between them.

When Andy returned to the office, Ellie was sitting at her desk and staring down without moving. The back of her neck was bright red, and she was practically shivering. Like a puppy left out in the rain.

Andy laughed before she could stop herself, and said, "Oh, Ellie." Ellie looked up, and then her lips wobbled in sheer relief when she saw Andy smiling. Andy reached down and patted her shoulder.

"Andy, I'm so sorry," Ellie whimpered. "I really didn't mean any…I thought if you were there, then…"

Uh-oh, had to nip that in the bud right away. "Ellie," Andy said in a low, firm voice, "does anyone else know you saw me talking to Miranda last night?" Ellie shook her head mutely. "Good. Don't tell," Andy said. Ellie nodded hard. Feeling compelled to explain further, Andy continued, "Listen, even Miranda needs somebody to talk to, sometimes. Last night, she talked to me. But if the rest of the office found out, she might get embarrassed, and, well…"

"Oh, I won't say anything," Ellie said fervently. "I swear." Then her eyes went wide in horror. "She won't ever want to talk to me, will she?"

"Uh--" Andy had to clear her throat really fast. "Probably, uh, not for a while. She still doesn't really know you. I, um, wouldn't worry about it yet." Ellie nodded, looking more relieved than ever. "Just keep it on the downlow."

"Oh, I will. I'll do anything you say." Ellie's eyes were huge with earnestness. "I knew I should right from the beginning, when Nigel talked to me. I'm so sorry I messed up."
"Well--" Andy paused. "Nigel talked to you?"

"Oh, yes," Ellie said. "A few days after I started work and you were off doing something for Miranda. He said I should probably just do whatever you said and, you know, stay out of the way."

"Stay out of the…"

"You know. Just let you handle Miranda and take care of whatever you said to do because you probably wouldn't like it very much otherwise." Ellie blinked up at her. "I told him I was good at doing stuff like that."

"Ellie," Andy said with the utmost sincerity, "I really, really like you."

Ellie beamed like the sun.

Once the matter with Ellie had been settled, Miranda appeared much happier for the rest of the day. She returned to the office at eleven, but left again at one for a couple of meetings, and did not return until a few hours later in the afternoon.

Andy was actually glad that Miranda wasn't around as much today. Maybe it was their little moment in the elevator, maybe it was just Andy's own overheated imagination, maybe it was relief about Ellie—who knew what it was?—but today it seemed that Miranda didn't so much walk as saunter. Her movements, always purposeful, today seemed almost languid; she had a slow roll to her hips, a slight sway in her walk. Taking it easier today? Balancing a little extra weight? Andy didn't know what it was, but while Miranda was in the office whispering her orders and being as terrifying as usual, her body was telling everyone within a ten-yard radius 'you should want to have sex with me.' Worst of all, she didn't even seem to be aware of it.

At least Andy wasn't the only one who saw it. Even Matthias stared when Miranda returned from breakfast, and he was gayer than Nigel. This couldn't possibly be what people meant when they talked about the glow of pregnancy, could it? Wasn't that supposed to be more of a, a *maternal* thing? Not a 'throw-me-down-and-fuck-me-now' kind of thing? Whatever it was, Andy was horribly distracted all day long.

At a quarter till five, Miranda summoned Andy into her office. Andy ignored the twitch between her legs, and tried very hard not to stare at Miranda, who was wearing a beautiful dark blue blouse that brought out her eyes and made her skin look like cream. Were her breasts bigger? Probably. That happened during pregnancy, didn't it? And Andy, who'd thought she'd noticed everything about Miranda's body there was to notice, found her head spinning with these new revelations and cursing Miranda's evening out with every fiber of her being. Of all the nights not to get a kiss…

Miranda leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes briefly, and made an 'mmm' noise. She was obviously tired, but it looked like…something else. Andy tried not to whimper. Miranda opened her eyes again, stunned Andy into immobility with their color, and said, "Find a suitable venue for a little party in mid-April."

"Uh…how little?"

"Let's say…hm, let's say fifty people, definitely no more than sixty." Miranda tapped her lips with her fingertip. This time Andy did whimper, but she covered it with a cough. "It'll be a dinner party.
And we'll look elsewhere than Glorious Foods, so bring me the names of some suitable caterers. In fact, call dear Yves, why don't you, and see if he'd do the honors?" 'Dear Yves' was Yves Camdeborde. Andy boggled. "Wine…Mouton-Rothschild and Puligny-Montrachet for the guests at my table--there will be six of us. Get Yves's recommendation for the rest. And speak to Tomás when you call my florist, he always knows what I'll like. Nothing too fancy. I'm thinking minimalist arrangements of orchids."

"Okay," Andy said, her head spinning in a different, less pleasant way now, as she returned to her desk and picked up the phone. Secure the chef first: no easy task, as Yves Camdeborde was the most in-demand man in Paris, but if Miranda wanted him, Andy would get him. Then the wine. Then the venue. Having a guest list would help, but for starters Andy would just find a few places in Manhattan, and then one or two farther afield. Nothing less than five-star, naturally. For sixty people.

'Nothing too fancy,'Andy's ass. All this in one month? On, what, a whim? It had been a while since Miranda had made a demand this bugfuck crazy. And it was beyond Andy's ability to do alone, so she was going to have to get in touch with Miranda's event planner right away, once she'd done a little legwork.

Miranda hadn't even said what the party was for, or who she wanted to invite. Another reason to be frustrated that they couldn't talk tonight. But Andy would ask her tomorrow, first chance she got.

At least it distracted her from thinking about the lazy slide of Miranda's walk, and the purr in her voice. Some. A little. Maybe.

Damn.

But nothing said Andy had to take it lying down. No, wait, standing up. She'd love to take it lying down. That was the whole problem. She needed to fight back.

And she knew exactly how to do it.

Miranda was talking about the party from the moment she got in the car the next morning. "I'm sure that Yves will plan something seasonally appropriate, but all the same, Andrea, do make sure the food is suitably…spring-y. Did you get in touch with him? Oh, and we're having it on the twelfth."

"I had him keep the middle of April open," Andy said. For Yves, 'keeping it open' meant 'laying waste to most of his pre-existing calendar,' but everyone made exceptions for Miranda. "I'll call him today and tell him about the twelfth, he'll be glad to know. Oh, and I spoke with your event planners, and they're compiling a list of potential venues--they should have it to me this afternoon. Once you pick, we can contact the stationer for the invitations. I've also put in the wine order."

"Fine," Miranda said, sounding as if she'd only been half-listening as she rifled through her handbag. Andy knew she'd absorbed every word, but she looked oddly excited this morning. Revved-up, you might say. Andy doubted it was because of the run-through at noon. Was it because of last night's dinner with the Barnhards? Had they really enjoyed the champagne?

Andy opened her mouth to ask, but Miranda barreled on. "Text Jocelyn and tell her to make sure that the Armani Privé suit shows up in the run-through, and then tell Keisha I want to see something a little more inspired than linen sandals. It's the August issue; we need to be working on transitions between summer and autumn, and women will want better ideas than a worn old retread of what
they've been wearing all season long. I'd like to see some wood accessories too. Hmm. With pyrogravure.

"Pyro--" Andy's head spun as she tried to text fast enough to keep pace with Miranda: an impossible task. "I'm sorry, could you spell that?"

"P-y-r-o-g-r-a-v-u-r-e. It means burned wood; that is, wood that's decorated or ornamented by--" Miranda's voice suddenly stuttered a little. Andy looked up and saw that Miranda was staring down at her thighs. Ah. Well, took her long enough. Andy grinned, and crossed her legs, making sure that the brown leather boots squeaked a little. They were damned uncomfortable, and hot even in the cold weather, but the look on Miranda's face right now made up for all that. Her eyes had actually gone glassy.

"Burning," Miranda said, and cleared her throat, recollecting herself at once. "Designs etched into wood with fire. Pyrogravure."

"Sounds pretty neat," Andy said, and returned to her texting. Thankfully, the boots appeared to have silenced Miranda temporarily, so she finished in relative peace. By the time they pulled up to Elias-Clarke, however, Miranda had regained her composure, and launched off again, this time about the feature articles. "I liked John's submission on summering in New Zealand," she said, striding towards the revolving door with Andy in tow. "We'll need to trim it, however. I want it down to five pages from six-and-a-half. Tell Anne to take care of that--we can at least lose the paragraphs on his love for the local shellfish. We're not Bon Appétit."

"Right," Andy said, writing so quickly she hardly saw the people rushing to get out of Miranda's way in the lobby.

"And I want a feature on the art scene. Something short: two pages of words, and a page and a half of images. Focus on abstracts with bold colors. That'll go nicely with the Testino spread. A few blurbs about four or five local galleries will do."

"Okay," Andy said as the elevator doors opened for them.

"Tell Paul to have that ready for me by the middle of next week. And then call Marcela…"

By the time they got to the office, Andy's wrist was already aching from the deadly combination of speed-texting and old-fashioned scribbling. But before they entered the inner sanctum, Miranda said, "By the way, get in touch with Seamus. You don't want him to forget you're alive."

"Seamus?" Who the hell was that?

"Seamus Burghton," Miranda said impatiently as Andy held the door open for her. "From Rolling Stone. You met him in London. I saw him the other day, and he's looking for new talent to write a few reviews."

"Oh, right, Seamus," Andy said, her head spinning. "He gave me his business card." She hoped she still had it.

"Use it, then," Miranda said as they rounded the corner. "It's all too easy for people to forget your name and face if you're a newcom--"

Just then, she was interrupted by a hacking cough coming from Ellie's desk. They both looked up to see Ellie blowing her nose and peering apologetically at them from behind watery eyes. Miranda made a small, disgusted noise and continued on into her office.
"I'b sorry, Andy," Ellie said. "I must hab picked someding up on the subway."

"Sounds like it," Andy said. She glanced into Miranda's office. "If she lets us, you can stay inside today and I'll run the errands--"

"Start with Starbucks," Miranda snapped, and both girls jumped. Andy often forgot that Miranda could hear what was going on outside her office perfectly well, if she actually gave a damn about listening to it. "Did you touch this, Eleanor?" Andy and Ellie both looked inside to see Miranda pointing at the latte on her desk.

"Well--uh--yes," Ellie said helplessly. "But, but I--"

Miranda picked up the latte, using a tissue as a buffer between her fingers and the cup, and dumped it in the trash. "Andrea, get me another one." Ellie let loose a rattling cough. "And something to shut that up."


"Cherry, please?" Ellie said, and blew her nose, looking more wretched by the minute.

"Cherry, got it," Andy confirmed, and headed out the door. Sure enough, she spent the rest of the day running around and doing the tasks she hadn't performed since Ellie had arrived. She'd forgotten how exhausting it could be. Or maybe that was just from not being around Miranda all day long. She'd kind of gotten used to that, and she felt a little lost without it. Also, when she'd put on the Chanel boots that morning, she hadn't counted on actually having to walk so much in them. Her feet were killing her and the leather was sticking to her thighs.

It was worth it, though. Around four, and in between errands, Andy overheard Miranda telling Keisha, "--linen sandals, for God's sake. I want to see something else. Like boots. Ankle boots," she added much too quickly, and cleared her throat. "Put them on Gemma Ward and stick her in a tutu."

Andy grinned, and then stopped grinning as she realized she had to run out to Derek Lam. She checked her watch and sighed.

"I'b sorry, Andy," Ellie said, apparently reading her mind, and looking penitent next to the ever-growing pile of tissues in her wastebasket.

"Not your fault."

"But I albost forgot to tell you," Ellie said, looking very penitent now, "she said to tell you that you had to drop the book off tonight because she doesn't want by germs in her house."

"Okay," Andy said, already drooping a little at the thought that after her hectic day she wouldn't get a nice meal and the chance to sit down with Miranda and the twins--

--who were staying with their dad tonight.

Ellie was blowing her nose again, so she probably didn't hear the shocked, squeaky noise Andy made. Just as well.
By the time Andy returned from Derek Lam, Miranda was gone for the day. She'd probably gone home to see the twins off for the weekend. Because they'd be gone. For the whole weekend.

Which had been on the schedule forever, and which didn't mean anything, and it certainly didn't mean anything at all that Andy was stopping by Miranda's place late at night to drop off the book. Ellie was sick, that was all. There was no way Miranda was going to let Ellie into her house, especially when she was finally being careful about her own health. Right. Good for her.

But while Andy was on the way back from Derek Lam in the Lincoln, Ellie called her. She sounded utterly miserable as she said, "Andy, Roy just called be and said Biranda told him to take the Bercedes in to the shop tonight. So you won't hab a ride to her house."

There was no earthly reason Andy couldn't take the Lincoln instead, but all she said was, "Oh. Okay." Her heart was pounding too much for more. So there wouldn't be any driver waiting for her to leave the townhouse after she dropped off the book tonight.

"I'b sorry," Ellie wailed. "You have to do all by work and go home late on the subway and it's all by fault."

"Ellie, I don't mind," Andy said, as fervently as she'd ever said anything in her life. "Really. I don't. I promise. Uh. Did the cough syrup work?"

"It's helping," Ellie said, and sniffled. "Thank you. Oh, but at least you don't have to get the dry cleaning, Roy said. Because Biranda doesn't want you bringing that onto the subway."

"Huh? Oh, I mean, right. Is there anything else I can get you? I'll bring you anything you want," Andy offered.

"I'b okay," Ellie said. "Thanks again."

'No, thank you,' Andy didn't say. And of course, after Ellie and everyone else had gone home, the minutes turned into hours turned into years. Andy found herself pacing the empty office, prowling, almost, waiting for the damn book to arrive.

While waiting, she got nervous.

Like that was going to do anybody any good. Like worrying was going to help. For God's sake, there was still the tiniest sliver of a chance that Miranda wasn't up to anything or giving any kind of signal. And even if she was, Andy probably had no idea what to make of it--who knew what was going on in Miranda's head at any given moment? It was a hell of a jump from tentatively making out to, to, to doing whatever they might be doing tonight.

When Matthias delivered the book, Andy had to restrain herself from yanking it out of his hands and sprinting down the hallway to the elevators. She clutched it closely to her during the whole ride on the subway, and then the trot to Miranda's townhouse a block away. She told herself that the brisk walk in the cool night air was the reason for her pounding heart, and didn't believe it for a second.

To Andy's disconcerted surprise, Miranda's house was dark and silent when she entered--no light shining from either the kitchen or the den, no sounds of movement. Oh. Maybe Miranda was asleep. Disappointment crushed Andy, who hadn't realized until that moment how hard she'd been hoping. She gulped and placed the book on the table between the flowerpots, glad that at least she hadn't had to wrestle with any dry cleaning.

The light went on in the stairwell.
Andy froze.

"I'm up here," Miranda called.

Andy wondered if she was actually about to faint as she headed up the stairs on unsteady legs, made worse by the high heels of her boots. Her palms were sweaty, and she had to stop when she was halfway up the endless trek to wipe them on her thighs.

When she reached the top of the stairs, she saw that the light was on in the study where she'd helped the twins with their essays, where she'd made out with Miranda on the couch. She gulped again, and walked in.

Miranda was sitting on the couch. She looked up at Andy with bright, glittering eyes. Then she raised an eyebrow. "No book tonight?"

Andy realized she'd left the book on the table downstairs. Shit. "I--sorry," she said, glancing towards the door. "I left it…I'll go--"

"No, don't bother," Miranda said, her voice a little strained. "Come here and sit with me."


"Yeah," Andy croaked. "You like them?"

"Come here," Miranda repeated, but she was the one who reached out, cupped Andy's face, and pulled her in. Andy slid her arms around Miranda's waist and went for it.

She started off gentle, like always. And like always, she felt Miranda's face and body heat up against her own, felt the shiver that chased up and down Miranda's spine. And when she'd finished the first kiss, she gave Miranda another one. And then another. And another. Then she lost track and just thought about Miranda's unbelievably soft mouth and the way it kissed her back so hungrily tonight.

Suddenly Miranda pulled back, panting, her face bright red. Andy's heart fell, but Miranda didn't retreat or push her away. Instead, she said: "Please."

Please what? Andy didn't know, but she didn't stop to think about it. She couldn't really think at all as she bent and kissed at the angles of Miranda's chin, nipping at the place where Miranda's jaw met her throat. Miranda gasped in her ear; Andy sighed and moved downward, mouthing and kissing at her throat, and Miranda dug her nails into Andy's shoulders as she stiffened and arched. "God," she whispered.

"Good?" Andy asked, breathing deeply, her head spinning from Miranda's perfume and, beneath it, the very human smell of her skin.

"D-don't stop--"

Andy didn't stop. Given permission to drown, she did, and nuzzled at Miranda's skin like she was in a dream, feeling Miranda's pulse going fast and hard near her mouth. She realized her hands had frozen in place, clutching at Miranda's back, and she deliberately loosened her grip and slid them up and down, pressing Miranda even closer to her.

"Oh," Miranda said, and moved one of her own hands up to dig into Andy's hair. "Y-you--" She gave a sudden, rueful laugh. "You win."
"I do?" Andy said, and before Miranda could reply, she kissed her again: a long kiss now, and by the end of it Miranda was practically squirming.

"You're driving me crazy," she whimpered when Andy let up. "My goddamned hormones are--and you, you've been t-teasing me for--"

Say what? "I never teased you," Andy said, letting indignation take over her arousal for a moment. "You're the one who--and I told you I'd do whatever you wanted." At those words, Miranda's eyes glazed over and she gasped; Andy's irritation vanished without a trace. She kissed Miranda again, as lightly as she had that first night, and whispered, "So what do you want?"

"I don't know," Miranda panted. "I don't--I can't think." Her eyes slid shut. "Just--please, just--"

The raw need in her voice was going straight down between Andy's legs. Andy couldn't get past the blush in Miranda's cheeks, or the smell of her, or the tremble in her mouth, or how soft her hair was when Andy slid her fingers into it and pulled Miranda closer for another kiss. And this time, for the first time, she nibbled and kissed until Miranda parted her lips and let her in.

"Oh. Drowning. Yes.

When they parted at last, Miranda moaned. At the sound of it, Andy did too, and then kissed her again, sliding her hand up and down Miranda's ribcage, feeling the heat of her through her soft knit blouse. It was a wrap blouse: comfortable, stretchy, and promising easy access if Andy just popped open the three big buttons right here…

Not yet. Too fast. Take it slow. Savor this. Andy wasn't a fifteen-year-old boy, for crying out loud.

So instead of trying to tear Miranda's clothes off, Andy started in on her throat again, and this time she didn't hesitate to use her teeth. Nothing mean or rough or likely to leave a mark: just little nips in between softer kisses while Miranda trembled and whimpered some more. When Andy pushed her blouse aside so she could get to more of her shoulder, Miranda said, "Andrea," and rubbed her nose in Andy's hair. That was more than enough to bring Andy back to her mouth, and at the end of this kiss they were clutching each other and panting for air, and Andy had slid one hand under Miranda's blouse to touch her soft, warm skin. Very soft, and very warm.

"Ah," Miranda said, and pulled Andy in for another kiss. Andy rubbed her hand up and down, her fingertips tingling, because she still wasn't used to touching Miranda, certainly not like this, and she wondered if she ever would be because she'd never been bowled over like this by anybody else. She wondered if, she hoped Miranda felt the same.

"You feel good," she mumbled against Miranda's mouth. "You feel…" She kissed Miranda's shoulder again, felt Miranda shudder. "You like this?"

"Ah," Miranda said again, and added, "Don't stop." She slid her own hand down, cupped Andy's hip, kissed Andy just by her ear. The brush of Miranda's lips on her cheek made Andy think of their first morning together, at a kitchen counter in London when Miranda had sealed their deal with a chaste little kiss that had nearly blown the top of Andy's head off. Made her think of the dizzy, terrifying joy that had taken hold of her at that moment and still hadn't let go.

No Ellie tonight. No twins. No dinners with the rich and famous. Nobody but them, nothing to stop them from--

"Oh," Miranda moaned, arching into Andy's touch, which was a good thing because Andy had cupped her breast without even thinking about it. And now she couldn't stop, couldn't stop rubbing
and stroking that strange, soft weight in her palm, longing to feel it without all the layers in the way. She didn't think Miranda would object; she'd tilted her head back and closed her eyes while she tried to breathe.

"You like this?" Andy panted again, feeling like she was melting between her own thighs, like she was so hot that all her clothes were going to burn right off. She could feel Miranda's nipple even through all the layers of clothes, and she rubbed gently at it with her thumb. "Is that--is it good?"

"Yes," Miranda gasped, and kissed Andy again, whimpering into her mouth when Andy kept moving her thumb. "It's," she managed against Andy's mouth between kisses, "it's--they're--more s-sensitive--"

That tore it. Andy decided that being prudent could go to hell, and she fumbled with the buttons on Miranda's top. Miranda gasped again, but didn't stop her; instead, she let her mouth wander over to Andy's cheek again, then Andy's forehead, and then her temple, like she never wanted to stop kissing her. Fair enough. It certainly worked both ways.

After a few more endless seconds, Andy's fingers finished their work, and Miranda's top slipped open. She was wearing a soft white bra that looked slightly more comfortable than fashionable. It hooked in front.

Now it was Andy's turn to say, "Please," as she rubbed her thumb again, already stunned at how much warmer Miranda was with one layer removed. She touched the clasp between Miranda's breasts, and Miranda's breathing got even faster. "Let me," she begged.

"Oh," was all Miranda could say, but Andy decided to take it as permission, and she popped the clasp open. Then she pulled back: not far, just enough to see. Oh...God. The Polaroid models had nothing on these. Beneath her blouse, Miranda's skin was as smooth and perfect as the rest of her, and her nipples were as pink and tightly-furled as rosebuds. Andy rubbed her thumb over one of them, realized it wasn't enough, and bent her head so she could have a taste.

Miranda melted against the couch, sagging back into the cushions as she cried out. Her nails dug into Andy's back and shoulders, but Andy wasn't really paying attention because the texture of Miranda's nipple was perfect against her tongue. Soft and rough all at once, and she'd been dreaming of this, and didn't want to miss a single detail or leave a single inch undiscovered.

She licked just at the very tip, over and over again, before taking it between her teeth and tugging gently; the nipple became even harder in her mouth. Sensitive. Yes. Why hadn't she ever realized breasts could be such a turn-on before? She licked it again, realized that wasn't enough either, and began to suck on it, alternating the softness of her tongue with the edge of her teeth.

Someone gave a sobbing moan, and Andy felt one of the hands that had been digging into her shoulders move up to rub through her hair. Feeling like she'd just been jerked out of a trance, Andy raised her head, and saw Miranda staring back at her with glassy, wild eyes. "What," Miranda began, her voice hardly recognizable, "no--don't stop--oh please don't--"

Stop? Andy was never going to stop. She was going to do this for the rest of her life. Instead of wasting her breath saying so, though, she pushed until Miranda's back was propped up against the arm of the sofa, until she was very nearly lying down, so that Andy could get to her other breast and give it equal attention. Beneath her, Miranda sobbed again, arched up, grabbed her shoulders and held on for dear life as she whimpered things like oh God and please yes.

Andy lifted her head again, giving the wet, reddened nipple one final lick-- "More," Miranda gasped, "please, more" --and switched back to the first, earning a grateful moan. And then back again. Back
and forth, between Miranda's breasts, again and again, for what seemed like hours while Miranda
writhed and begged like she couldn't get enough. Her head tossed against the arm of the couch, and
she seemed utterly shocked by the strength of her reaction, as if she'd never been this horny in her
life. She probably hadn't. That made two of them. "Oh my God," she panted, "oh my God, Andrea,"
and then Andy started pinching and stroking her other nipple in time with her mouth, which rendered
Miranda too breathless even to moan.

How could this not be enough? How could Andy still want more, still want to devour every single
inch of--she gasped helplessly against Miranda's breast, and said, "I want to do everything to you.
Everything--" She bent and sucked again, long and hard, which coaxed a new, mewling noise out of
Miranda's throat. "I want to make you feel so good--I'll do anything, anything you want--"

"Oh God," Miranda said, "oh God, oh God--" She pressed Andy's head down again, shaking all
over, shaking so hard it was a wonder they were both still on the couch. "Please--p-please--" Andy
licked. "Ah! Oh, that's...that's so...I didn't, I've never, I've oh--" Andy sucked. "Oh, oh--God--I'm--" Andy bit. "God, I'm, I'm--" Andy licked again. "Stop!"

Andy paused, sure that she must have misheard, but Miranda was, in fact, weakly pushing at her
shoulders, pushing her away. "I can't," Miranda whimpered, "I can't...no more...please stop..."

Her blood pounding in her ears, Andy raised her head. Miranda was splayed back against the couch,
hers eyes closed, with her blouse and bra open and her skirt hiked up from the way they'd been lying
together. She was panting; her throat, chest, and gently-rounded belly were blotched with red. Her
breasts were wet from Andy's mouth. She looked like she'd just been fucked six ways from Sunday,
and had loved every second of it.

"Oh," Miranda whispered, and raised one shaking hand to brush the hair out of her face before
covering her eyes with her hand. "Oh my God." She was still trembling, but less violently now, and
in fact, seemed actually to be relaxing against the sofa like she'd--like she'd--oh. No. No way.

"Did," Andy managed, "um, did you just--"

Miranda nodded, and then lifted her hand, looking at Andy with shocked, dazed eyes. She gulped.
"Twice," she rasped.

Andy stared down at her. Miranda reached up. Held out her arms. And Andy bent down, kissed her,
and came so hard at the first touch of Miranda's tongue that she cried out against her mouth.

This time it was Miranda's turn to whisper, disbelievingly, "Did you--?"

"Uh huh," Andy said, and hid her face against the side of Miranda's neck, nuzzling there and tasting
the salt, making sure not to lie directly on Miranda's stomach, glad that the couch was so enormous.
Miranda said nothing, but she did slide one hand up and down Andy's thigh, caressing the leather of
the boots. They rested there together in mutual stunned silence for a moment as they both struggled
to get their breath back.

"You okay?" Andy said when that moment had passed.

"Mmm," Miranda said, took one more deep breath, and let it go.

"That was, um," Andy said. "That was pretty good." Not a question. If two people could make each
other come without once venturing down below, then yeah, it had been pretty good.

"Yes," Miranda said, still sounding breathless. Andy rubbed her hip, and she shivered. "Umm."
"Please tell me we can do that again."

Andy half-expected Miranda to say something smart, or maybe not even reply at all; instead she just said, faintly, "Okay." And she stroked Andy's leather-clad thigh again. Andy decided that, should time and cash permit, she was getting these boots bronzed.

In the meantime, though, Miranda appeared to be returning to herself, and Andy's joy was starting to make her feel a little silly. To say nothing of really, really smug.

"'We don't have to have sex,'” she said prissily into Miranda's ear.

"Oh, shut up," Miranda said.

"'Let's be all platonic and chaste.'"

"Yes," Miranda snapped. "You respected that suggestion for an entire day, didn't you?"

"Nowhere near that long," Andy said, and laughed, feeling downright giddy.

"Again with the snickering." Which was when Andy knew Miranda wasn't really angry.

So she laughed again. "Oh, come on. It wasn't that bad." Understatement of the year. "I know I feel better, anyway." She caressed Miranda's side, enjoying the way it made Miranda shiver again. "Don't you feel better?" Miranda had been the one begging for a little relief, after all, which she'd apparently gotten in spades.

"Mmm," Miranda said, and rubbed her nose against Andy's ear. Then she paused. "Actually, I'm starving."

Andy laughed again. "Worked up an appetite, huh?"

"Are you going to start giggling every time we do this?"

*Every time*. The thought didn't exactly make Andy stop smiling, that was for sure. Still grinning, she sat up. "Maybe. You want me to bring you something from the kitchen?"

Then suddenly a thought occurred to her, and she froze and stopped grinning. "Or, um, did—should I just go home?" Because having her way with Miranda on the couch was one thing, but making herself at home without an invitation was something else entirely. Even now.

Miranda regarded her much too thoughtfully for someone who'd been a whimpering mess just a few moments ago. "Plain yogurt, please," she said. "On the door of the fridge. And bring up the book, too."

"Right," Andy said, suddenly feeling weak with relief. "Anything else?"

"Yes," Miranda said. "I prefer to sleep alone."

Andy, who had been about to stand up, froze in place again. Miranda slowly sat up and re-fastened her bra, never taking her eyes from Andy's face. "As you should already have guessed," she continued, "from London." She grimaced. "And given that I'm ten times more uncomfortable when I try to sleep now…"

"Oh," Andy said, and swallowed around the bitter disappointment in her throat. "Well, sure. I mean…I didn't mean…"
"But it doesn't follow," Miranda said, "that I don't want you to stay."

"...oh," Andy said again.

Miranda nodded towards the open door that led to the hallway and the stairs. "Unless you object to taking Stephen's room again." She chuckled mirthlessly. "Not that I'd blame you."

"I don't mind," Andy said, and now she didn't. It wasn't the room's fault that Stephen had slept there, and besides, she doubted very much it was haunted by the Ghost of Douchebag Past. It was enough, tonight, to know that at least Miranda didn't want her to leave. Sure, it was always fun to snuggle in bed--at least, Andy had always thought so--but she figured a woman who was five months pregnant, and getting bigger every day, had the right to sleep however she chose. Maybe they could re-negotiate after the baby was born.

Miranda narrowed her eyes. "You 'don't mind.' Is this like the way you 'didn't mind' when you agreed with me about keeping this platonic?"

She really was a mind-reader. "Who, me?" Andy said innocently.

"Yogurt. Book," Miranda growled, and then her stomach growled too. She turned red. Andy laughed before she could stop herself, and hurried out of the room in the face of Miranda's impending wrath.

Andy hadn't exactly brought a change of clothes, but she decided to worry about that later. Miranda lent her a pair of pajamas as if they were having a sleepover or something, which Andy guessed they were. And the bathroom, Andy discovered, was fully-stocked. Was Stephen's room the guestroom again, or had Miranda actually planned this?

It wasn't a good idea to ask, so Andy just kissed her goodnight after the yogurt. "Sleep well," Andy murmured, and then her stomach growled too. She turned red. Andy laughed before she could stop herself, and hurried out of the room in the face of Miranda's impending wrath.

What they hadn't settled was how much, or how soon. Andy realized this when she woke up because her mattress dipped and shifted, and she saw Miranda crawling into the empty side of the bed with a fierce look of expectation on her face. Andy squinted at the clock: seven-thirty a.m. Yet another Miranda Priestly wake-up call.

Only this one was a little different. "I have been waiting," Miranda said, bent down, and kissed Andy hard on the mouth without further ado.

"Y-you have?" Andy gasped, winding her arms around Miranda's neck without really thinking about it, tugging at her until they lay side-by-side, close as could be but for the bump in Miranda's belly.

"I woke up an hour ago. I let you sleep," Miranda said, and kissed Andy again. "But apparently you were going to laze the whole Saturday away."

"That was the plan," Andy said against her mouth. She'd sort of hoped Miranda would go along with it. Miranda had the whole day off today, which meant they both did. There was plenty of time for--
"Cancel the plan," Miranda growled between kisses. Through the thin silk of her pajamas, Andy could feel how hot her skin already was. "You wanted this, you did this to me, and you'd better be ready to deal with it."

Well, there were certainly worse ways to wake up. Andy grunted, and sat up until she was leaning over Miranda: not lying on top of her, exactly, but at a better angle to 'deal with' her. Already wide awake, she said, "I've created a monster, huh?"

"I fully expect to be catered to," Miranda said, and spread her legs so that Andy could rest one knee between them.

"Makes a nice change," Andy said, and stopped Miranda's impending bitchery by kissing her again. "So," she said, when she pulled away, "you decided what you want?"

"A little more finesse than last night, please," Miranda said. She'd obviously meant for it to come out sounding all haughty, but she'd already started breathing faster from the kisses, so it didn't work. She cleared her throat. "That is--not that I didn't enjoy it--"

"I noticed," Andy said, not sure whether to grumble or be smug. She settled for getting a little nervous. Finesse, huh? Okay, fair enough. But for all her enthusiasm, Andy didn't exactly know what to do in bed with another woman. She'd sort of avoided thinking about it in any sort of detail, or researching it, or anything like that. Because it, because they, still felt so…new? No, not just new. So precarious. So fragile. Like Andy could jinx them or something by presuming too much, by hoping too hard, no matter what Miranda said.

It had felt too good to be true. Still did.

But she doubted Miranda would let her push the pause button so she could go look up lesbian sex tips. And Miranda always noticed a lousy bluff. Andy sighed. "So," she began. "You, you know I haven't…I mean, with women."

"Yes. Lucky me," Miranda said.

"You haven't either," Andy pointed out incredulously. Of all the--

Miranda shifted impatiently. "How hard can it be?" she said. "Rosie O'Donnell does it, for God's sake, it can't be rocket science--" She tugged at Andy's pajama top. "Let's start with this. I want to see you."

Andy's face got hot. Miranda raised an eyebrow. Well, fair was fair, and before Miranda could say anything, Andy unbuttoned her top and shrugged it off, letting the silk slither down to the bed. Then she didn't quite know where to look, so she shut her eyes. Having Miranda look at her was different than having Nate or Christian or anybody else look at her. Miranda looked at women's bodies all day, and usually found them lacking. Andy already wanted to apologize.

"Oh," Miranda said. Andy opened her eyes, and saw that Miranda was blushing too as she looked at Andy's breasts. Miranda cleared her throat again. "Well. They're…" She reached up and cupped the left one.

Wow. Miranda's palm was soft, and very warm, and the heat from it raced through Andy's body like an electric shock. She gasped. Her nipples hardened instantly, and Miranda's eyes went wide. She actually looked alarmed for a second. Then she smirked. "Hmm," she said. She rubbed her thumb over Andy's nipple, and Andy gasped again. "I see why you like mine."

"I really do," Andy said, already having a hard time breathing. Miranda lying beneath her, glowing
with desire and anticipation, touching her--Andy was going to be lucky if she didn't come four seconds into it again. Maybe she really was a fifteen-year-old boy. But God, this was what she'd been wanting for months, and it was better than what she'd wanted. Sometimes reality didn't live up to fantasy. Sometimes, this time, it was the other way around.

"You do more for me than anybody I've ever met," she blurted. Miranda looked up at her, startled. "I mean...you do."

"Hmm," Miranda said again, and then, "well." She looked embarrassed--Andy could see her wondering if she was expected to return the compliment. Andy's face burned again, but for a different reason. She shouldn't have said that.

But before Andy could say something that would make it even worse, Miranda said, "I admit I didn't expect last night." She coughed. "It was--are we going to talk about this all morning?"

Andy grinned, her confidence back and waving little victory flags. "You don't like talking about it?" she asked, and lowered herself farther until she was tucked up against Miranda, rubbing her bare breasts against Miranda's own silk top. She sighed at how good it felt, and watched Miranda's eyelids flutter. "I like talking about it sometimes." Their nipples brushed. Miranda gasped, and dug her fingers into Andy's hair again, tugging her in for another kiss.

She was shivering when they pulled apart. "I don't like talking ab…" she began, gave up, and kissed Andy again. Andy slid her hands between them and began unbuttoning Miranda's top, already eager to see again what she'd seen last night, as she kissed Miranda's throat. Miranda arched her head back accommodatingly.

"Maybe you could just give me feedback as I go, then," Andy said, hoping she sounded calm and breezy instead of apprehensive. This was a lot harder when you had to think about it. Then Miranda's top fell open, Andy slid a hand up and down Miranda's side, Miranda gasped, and Andy decided maybe it didn't have to be so hard after all.

As it turned out, Miranda appeared to have simple tastes for once. She loved being kissed anywhere-mouth, throat, shoulders, breasts. And she liked it gentle, liked being treated and pampered, which surprised Andy not at all. So Andy pampered her: lots of long, slow kisses, and trying to do things all in a rhythm--kissing, squeezing, rubbing, moving--that would please her. She smelled good, felt better, and tasted best of all, and eventually Andy forgot about nerves and just lost herself in doing the stuff to Miranda that she'd wanted to do for ages.

Miranda gave her feedback, all right. Little moans and whimpers that gave Andy goosebumps, pleas that came out like commands ("do that again"), excited squirming and wriggling. She tried to touch Andy too, but then Andy would lick the side of her neck and she'd lose her concentration, or Andy would squeeze her breasts and she would forget how to breathe, let alone kiss.

Finally, when Miranda was starting to tremble and pant, Andy got her courage together, and tugged at the waistband of Miranda's pajama bottoms. Into the breach. Miranda went still, and Andy froze. "Um," she said. "Do you want--?"

"...yes," Miranda said. She actually sounded a little uncertain, but lifted her hips eagerly enough, and helped Andy shimmy the pants down her legs. Andy touched the inside of her thigh, and she shivered.

"This is going to be complicated," Andy mumbled.

"Do you want me to do it first?"
Andy looked at her, stunned. "You, um--you'd show me--?" She imagined Miranda touching herself, which, okay, she'd imagined several times before. The thought that she might see it in real life was almost unbearably hot, and she opened her mouth to say so.

But Miranda cut her off by going red and saying, "Of course not--I wouldn't--I meant, I'd--" She touched Andy's own hip. "To you."

"Oh," Andy said, and tried not to feel dumb. "Well…I'd like to watch you sometime, all the same."

"I wouldn't like that," Miranda said, but again, she sounded uncertain. Well, by now she probably knew that Andy was good at talking her into all kinds of things. "What's the point?"

"You could show me how you like it," Andy suggested, getting hot again just at the thought. "Or--just show me like you'd show a guy how to touch you. It doesn't have to be that different." Then she moved her hand. Oh, wow. Down here, Miranda wore satin.

Miranda took a shuddering breath and arched her hips. Andy kept looking her right in the eye. "Show me," she whispered, slid her hand higher, and cupped. Miranda gasped and arched again. Andy slid her thumb around over the satin, which made Miranda bite her bottom lip and squeeze her eyes shut. Then Andy's thumb hit one particular spot, and Miranda's hips jumped as she squeaked. Her eyes opened wide again. Andy gulped, but not from fear this time. "Here's good, huh?" she said, and rubbed again.

"A little to the--um--" Miranda shook her head. "Left--" Andy moved her thumb. "No, my left--" Andy obligingly moved it again, and pressed down hard because, just this once, she could punish Miranda for giving lousy instructions. But Miranda obviously liked it way too much for it to be a punishment, and Andy decided to forgive her instead. She rubbed until she found a pace that actually made Miranda cry out, and then she bent down and lapped at a nipple, sucking it in time with her strokes.

Miranda's body undulated like a wave, and this time she didn't make any noise, but Andy felt the quiver through her underwear. And this time she raised her head so she could watch Miranda's face, could see the way her head arched back and her mouth fell open in a silent cry. One of her hands curled into a fist and she struck the mattress. Then she writhed her hips and managed, "Move--hand--down--"

Whoops. Too sensitive now? Andy moved her thumb farther down, away from the clit, and rubbed gently where she could feel Miranda's labia through the cloth. She could feel moisture there, too. Miranda sobbed in appreciation and relaxed, shivering gently. She even smiled. Andy could not have imagined anyone less like the cool woman who'd sized her up over a pair of reading glasses on the day they met.

But it was the same woman, and she bent and kissed that woman before she could even get her breath back. Miranda hummed and lazily slid her fingers into Andy's hair. Then, when Andy paused for breath, she sighed in satisfaction.

"You might have been on to something," she conceded.

"I'm full of bright ideas," Andy said.

"Mm," Miranda said, and commented no further. "Now let's see." She sighed again, and sat up, pressing Andy back down against the pillows. "Unless you managed it again while we were kissing?" she added, sounding hopeful.
"Not quite," Andy said, and swallowed hard. "You don't have a lot of work to do, though." It was true. She'd felt like she was going to explode, watching Miranda come.

"Good, I suppose," Miranda said. Her brow furrowed as she looked down at Andy, like she was checking over an unsatisfactory layout. "It is more complicated."

"Look," Andy said, trying desperately to sound patient and calm, "it's not like I have a lever you can grab, but I promise--"

"Oh well," Miranda said, and bent down to kiss her throat, just as if she was someone who'd never advocated a chaste romance in her life. She trailed her mouth down Andy's chest eagerly, and then Andy's nipple was in Miranda's mouth, and it wasn't like nobody had ever kissed her breasts before but this was Miranda and her lips were soft and her mouth was hot--

--it was Miranda's white hair tickling Andy's chest and chin--it was--

Andy wasn't as quiet as Miranda when she came, and she was pretty sure she'd left nail marks in Miranda's shoulders. But Miranda didn't seem to mind as she gave Andy's nipple one final, affectionate lick and murmured, "Hello, lever."

"Like you can talk," Andy wheezed, falling back against the pillows again. "Oh. Wow."

"Maybe next time we'll get all our clothes off," Miranda said thoughtfully. Then she blinked. "Unless--I'm assuming we're finished."

Andy managed to pry her eyelids open. "Huh?"

"We're done, aren't we? That is, we both…" Miranda frowned. "It really isn't like men, is it?"

"Well...no," Andy said, bewildered and trying to catch her breath. "We don't have to be done, I guess. Um. What are you talking about?"

Miranda scowled and propped herself up on her elbow. Her hair fell in her face and she blew it out of her eyes impatiently. Andy grinned in delight. "I mean, it's not like with men--what if neither partner comes? How are you supposed to know when to stop?"

Andy stopped grinning and stared some more. "I, um," she said. "I guess we could set a timer." Miranda looked pissed, and Andy added, "I'm sorry. Uh…I don't think it's just about reaching the end goal, though." At least, it had never been for her. She just liked sex, period--the sensations, the closeness, the urgency. She supposed Miranda had a point. For girls, it didn't have to be all about having an orgasm. "I mean, you just do what you like, and stop when you're ready to stop." How the hell else did Miranda think it was supposed to go?

Now Miranda looked suspicious. "What if one of you is ready to stop and the other one isn't?"

This was worse than their first kiss. "I--Miranda, I'm really not sure this is going to be a huge problem," Andy said helplessly. She'd never pictured afterglow and pillow talk going like this. "Why don't we just play it by ear?"

"Well," Miranda said, still not appearing appeased. Which was weird. Why was she making this so complicated? Why had she been dead-set on making it complicated from the very beginning?

Then Andy thought about it. Miranda had been married three times. For a woman so devoted to her career, she'd invested a lot of time and energy in relationships that had never worked out. If Andy wasn't used to love being this complicated, Miranda probably couldn't imagine that love could ever
be easy. That anything could ever be easy. She was used to fighting for everything she got. And she hated being wrong.

But she’d never know for sure if she didn’t ask, and now seemed to be the right time for it. "Um. Miranda?" Andy said, hating how timid she sounded. Miranda blinked down at her, and Andy saw that she, too, was taken aback by Andy's tone. So Andy tried to have a little more gumption as she said, "Why were you so sure that you didn't, you know, want to do this? In the beginning."

Miranda scowled, and admitted, "I didn't know that I wanted to." Then she blushed and looked even madder about that. "Until you kissed me. It was…I didn't expect it."

Andy remembered Miranda's look of surprise, and how it had kept her warm during a few lonely nights--the hope it had given her. "You were, huh?"

Miranda raised an eyebrow. "Are you sorry I didn't jump into bed with you right away?"

"No!" Andy said, and now it was her turn to blush. "I think it was--I didn't want to rush you or push you." Much. "I didn't want to screw anything up. I wanted it to be okay."

"Then we agreed on that," Miranda said lightly. "Or do you think you've screwed it up now?"

"Not if I did it right," Andy dared, and Miranda finally smiled. Awesome. "Did you have breakfast already?" Andy added.

"You were breakfast," Miranda said. She stretched, and smiled again, relaxing as the tense moment passed.

"Well, seconds are available," Andy said, "whenever you want them."

"Why do you say things like that?"

"I don't know," Andy said, and laughed. Miranda rolled her eyes, but scooted in closer on the mattress.

Andy wasn't sure how it happened, but they both fell back asleep. So much for Miranda's idea that they shouldn't laze around. And when Andy woke up again at ten o'clock, Miranda had plastered herself to Andy's side and was sleeping like a baby. So much for Miranda preferring to sleep alone. Her head was on Andy's chest and she'd thrown an arm across Andy's stomach.

Andy watched her sleep. She remembered the first time she'd ever seen Miranda sleeping--that night in the car, after she'd just discovered she was pregnant. It seemed like years ago. Or at least like more than four months. Andy petted her hair, careful not to do anything that would tug at Miranda's scalp or otherwise wake her up.

The room, the whole house, was peacefully still. Even the dog had gone with the twins to their dad's place. Sunlight was shining through the blinds now, falling across the bed, painting Miranda and Andy in stripes of light and shadow. There weren't even many sounds of traffic outside on Miranda's quiet street--well, not as many as usual, anyway. Andy wondered how many people were doing what they were doing now: just lying in, sleeping late on a Saturday. She wondered, in fact, if Miranda ever had done this before. Surely? At least once?

Well, Andy wasn't going to wake her up to ask. She lay still, felt Miranda Priestly's weight against her, and enjoyed her happiness.
Andy stayed at the townhouse all day Saturday and had more fun than she could ever remember having before. It was a very specific kind of fun. Neither she nor Miranda stirred out-of-doors, and while Miranda made a game attempt at getting dressed, it didn't last very long. Miranda also had a vague idea about preparing food of some kind, but Andy wasn't particularly interested in that either.

"You had me for breakfast, I'm having you for lunch," Andy said, and slid her hand up under Miranda's skirt. "Fair's fair."

Miranda leaned her head back against the kitchen wall. "It's not f...you're the one who's always...after me to ea...mmm."

Andy was already addicted to watching Miranda lose her cool, to watching her forget how to talk. "You're the one who said 'deal with it,'" she said. Then she leaned in and smiled against Miranda's mouth so she could feel it--Miranda trembled--and whispered, "So deal."

"No wonder they're all over you," Miranda mumbled. Andy pulled back and blinked. Miranda turned a dull red, realizing what she'd said, and Andy quickly kissed her.

"I only want you all over me," she said. And added, inspired, "That's why you get all my best lines."

"Oh, for God's..."

Andy slid both hands beneath her skirt, hiking it up around her thighs, and then plucked at the waistband of her panties. Miranda's breath caught, and she looked into Andy's eyes, her own eyes wide and shocked. "You're going to try this for the first time up against the kitchen wall?"

Andy, who remembered Miranda coming just from being rubbed through her underwear, said, "Sorry. Did you want me to peel you some grapes first?" Miranda glared; Andy slid the fingers of her right hand gently up the inside of Miranda's thigh, and the glare wobbled. "Rub your feet? Fan you?" She tickled a little. Miranda twitched and gasped.

"Or I could kneel," Andy said hoarsely, her temples starting to pound with her heartbeat, her blood rushing in her ears. She slid her fingertips farther up until she was cupping Miranda through her underwear. "I could kneel right here, and..." Miranda's head fell back and thunked gently against the wall as her eyes closed. Andy realized she was thinking about it, they both were, about Andy sliding her tongue against those little folds and tucks and creases until all of Miranda's bones turned to water and her voice was hoarse with her cries.

"Maybe," Andy said, and swallowed hard. "Maybe later." When they had more room. More time. But they weren't going to take any time right now. Instead, she bent in and began to nuzzle at the sensitive spot beneath Miranda's ear and tugged at her panties again. "Let's get these off?"

Seconds later, the underwear got tossed onto the kitchen counter while Andy kissed Miranda to distraction. Then she reached for her courage once more, and carefully--very carefully--slid her hand under and up, until her fingertips brushed against soft, fine hair, and heat, and slickness. Like when she touched herself. Not so different, not so weird. Only when she did this, Miranda gasped and went wide-eyed, so it was better.

Then again, the angle was pretty different. Andy moved her hand carefully so that her fingertips were rubbing against the soaking lips. Miranda practically climbed her wrist, and Andy's fingers slid farther back, until they were... "Please," Miranda moaned. "Oh. Oh. Please."
Andy wished she could see what she was doing. Miranda had a point about doing it up against a wall. But heck if Andy was going to admit it, so she just kissed Miranda's neck again and whispered, "Show me," in her ear. "Show me."

Miranda hissed and gave in, reaching down between her legs--Andy got dizzy and moaned--and taking hold of Andy's hand. The brush of her own fingers made her gasp, and she groaned, "There, right there." She shuddered and patted Andy's knuckles. "U-use your whole ha-hand against--"

Andy cupped her again, with no underwear in the way this time, and her palm got slippery. She squeezed gently, rubbed, and Miranda rocked her hips; Andy angled her hand so that the heel of her palm could grind against Miranda's clit, and Miranda's head tossed back against the wall again. She cried out softly. Andy took a deep breath, tried not to faint, and began flexing her hand back and forth: on the rise, she rubbed Miranda's clit with her palm, and on the fall, she pressed Miranda's perineum with her fingertips.

"God!" Miranda said, her eyes squeezed shut, her face going red as she lifted up on her toes, writhing against Andy's hand.

"Beautiful," Andy choked. She wanted to kiss Miranda in time with her hand, but she doubted she had the concentration; instead, she found herself rubbing her face against the curve of Miranda's throat, nuzzling her again, while Miranda grabbed at her back. "Beautiful. You're so…"

"Inside," Miranda gasped, rubbing her own nose in Andy's hair. "Please--inside me--"

Andy couldn't think of anything to say to that other than a moan, so she kissed Miranda, slow and deep, before she did anything else. And then she hunted ungracefully with her fingertips for a couple of crucial seconds until she found it, soft and slick and giving beneath the pressure of her hand. She slid one finger in, shocked by how easy it was, and how hot Miranda was down here, how she burned like fire. "Is that--"

"B-be gentle," Miranda pleaded, cupped Andy's face in her hands, and kissed her, not gently at all.

Andy pulled back a little, murmured, "Sssh," and leaned back in, being so gentle with her mouth and her hand that Miranda nearly hyperventilated. "Nice and slow," she breathed, and sucked on Miranda's bottom lip. "Is this how you like it?" Miranda made an incoherent noise. Andy didn't wait for a better answer, but instead pressed a second finger inquisitively at the entrance. Miranda sobbed and bucked her hips, which Andy took for permission as she slid the second finger in. Very, very gently. "God," Andy whispered. "That's amazing."

"Gentle," Miranda said again, but the word was without meaning--she was chanting more than talking now. "G-gen…gentle…"

"Yes," Andy said, and kissed the side of her neck. "Is it good? Can you show me how to make it good?"

"Ah," Miranda said, "ah," and she reached down between their bodies again, between her legs. But she didn't guide Andy's hand this time, didn't touch Andy at all; she just hiked her skirt up higher and rubbed frantically at her clit, and then she was clenching all around Andy's fingers, fast and rhythmic. Andy lost her breath as she tried to watch it all at once: Miranda's hand, Miranda's face, and everything in between as Miranda stroked herself to climax, biting her lip and whimpering through her nose.

When Miranda was done, when her convulsions had slowed, Andy leaned in to kiss her. They were both gasping. When they parted, Miranda managed, disbelievingly, "I couldn't wait." Andy bit her
"God, Miranda," Andy moaned.

"How are you doing this, I don't, I don't--" Andy bit down again, harder. "Oh!" Andy began to slide her fingers in and out again, slowly. "Oh. Oh yes--" Andy flexed them. "Yes--yes--"

"As often as you want it," Andy panted. "As much as you want it--"

"Yes!" Miranda cried, and came again, longer and slower this time, finishing with a soft, broken little moan. Her knees wobbled.

"God," Andy said again, pressing her nose into Miranda's throat. She slid her fingers out very carefully--the angle was starting to make her wrist ache--and patted the inside of Miranda's sticky thigh. "You're incredible," she said. Miranda was panting too hard to reply. But she kissed Andy's temple, nuzzled her cheek, and slid her arms around her waist. Andy was trembling and wondering if this was the pattern they were going to follow from now on--Andy making Miranda come hard and fast, and getting so turned on by it that she went off like a firecracker at the slightest provocation. Nothing wrong with that, she thought dizzily, as Miranda slid one hand up and down her back. And down to her hip. And then between--

Andy heard herself say "Oh Jesus" as Miranda cupped her through the silk of her pajama bottoms, and the underwear beneath. Miranda's raspy breathing had slowed, regulated itself, dropped down into something like a purr.

"Is this nice?" she murmured into Andy's ear. "Do you want my hand now?" She squeezed. "Do you like my touch, Andrea?"

Andy shut her eyes and tried to think of sad stuff, or gross stuff, or anything but Miranda's hand between her legs. It didn't work, so she tore at the buttons of Miranda's blouse until it fell open, shoved up her bra, and hungrily bent back down to her breasts. Miranda's hand froze for a moment, and then she said "ah" and began moving her hand, rubbing and squeezing Andy firmly. Andy cupped her breasts, held them, pressed them together, and had a darn good go at sucking and biting both nipples at the same time. Miranda wailed, and her hand began to follow the rhythm of Andy's mouth until they were rocking together, and Andy wasn't able to take more than a few seconds of that before she came.

Andy rested her head against Miranda's shoulder. Miranda rested hers against the wall. They both struggled for air. Then Andy lifted her sticky fingers, sniffed them, and licked them. Not bad. Nice, even. She could probably stand to drink it right from the source, so to speak. She wondered if Miranda would be able to return the favor. Mmm. That would be…

"Lunch now," Miranda said breathlessly against her forehead. "Get dressed."

So much for the afterglow. "In what?" Andy said, straightening up, and straightening her pajamas too. "I'm not putting the boots on again. They're not all that comfortable."

"So walk around barefoot," Miranda said, tugging her bra back down. "Civilized people do not wear pajamas at noon."

She sure recovered fast. Andy still felt dizzy. Which was probably why she didn't put up much of a fight as she staggered back to her--to the guestroom and changed. Then she decided that she wasn't going to let Miranda order her around, not here, and called out of the door, "Getting a shower first!" She heard Miranda make an indignant squawking sound, but she shut the door anyway and stripped
When Andy returned to the kitchen, feeling much fresher, Miranda was nowhere to be found; upon listening closely, Andy could hear water running upstairs. Miranda must have decided to get cleaned up too. Which left Andy to make lunch. Surprise, surprise. Andy sighed, and rummaged through the fridge until she found enough stuff to make a decent salad. The fridge was well-stocked; Jimena must have gone grocery shopping yesterday afternoon. There was even cold marinated salmon, which Andy decided would do very well on top of some lettuce.

She'd just finished making the salads when the water stopped running. Andy set the plates on the counter and, out of curiosity, decided to see what secrets Miranda Priestly's freezer held. She was a little disappointed to see no human heads lining the inside of the door. Oh well. The freezer was surprisingly empty. What little was there, was nothing out of the ordinary: Tupperware containers full of food Jimena undoubtedly kept frozen for last-minute dinner emergencies, a package of frozen peas, a pint of lemon sorbet, some decaf coffee, and a couple of steaks.

Hold on. Andy blinked. Not that she knew for sure, but she was willing to bet good money that nobody in this house ever ate frozen peas. Jimena was under strict orders to buy fresh, local, organic produce that cost an arm and a leg. Raising an eyebrow, Andy stood up on tiptoe and tugged the bag of peas down from the top shelf of the freezer.

Then she laughed out loud before she could stop herself. Ice cream. Specifically, five whole pints of Haagen-Dazs: two of Triple Chocolate, one of Coffee (big shocker there), one of Butter Pecan, and one of an improbable flavor called "Toasted Coconut Sesame Brittle." No wonder Miranda had stuffed them behind the frozen peas--Caroline and Cassidy would never go near anything like that in the freezer. The poor kids were probably stuck with the lemon sorbet.

Three pints of ice cream had already been opened: apparently Miranda didn't believe you had to finish one carton or flavor before starting a new one. Or maybe she mixed-and-matched. Andy debated setting out ice cream bowls along with the salads, but acknowledged that Miranda would murder her, which would be a real shame because they hadn't even gotten to oral sex yet. Then she hesitated, grinned again, and switched two of the pints around before shoving the peas back in. Might as well give Miranda a little something to wonder about.

She heard a thump at the front door. She froze for a second, but no other sounds were forthcoming, and after a moment she dared to peek down the hallway and into the foyer. To her relief, she only saw Miranda's mail lying behind the door. Whew. Andy wandered down the hallway and got the mail, deciding she might as well bring it in to the kitchen.

She deliberately didn't look at it as she carried it back. Just because she got to sleep with Miranda didn't mean that she lived here, or had any business nosing through Miranda's stuff. Other than the freezer, anyway. The last thing she needed was for Miranda to think she was a snoop.

But she couldn't help noticing the issue of Modernity on top. Miranda had free subscriptions to just about every major magazine in town, of course, and hardly a day went by when The New Yorker, Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair, or even Esquire didn't drop through her mail slot, to say nothing of rival fashion publications. Andy had, however, been personally responsible for canceling Miranda's subscription to GQ after Stephen moved out.
Miranda probably wouldn't mind if she just looked through the magazine, Andy decided. There wasn't anything personal about getting a magazine in the mail—you read them in doctors' offices, for crying out loud. Andy's article wasn't due to appear for another month or so, but that didn't mean she didn't read each issue of *Modernity* cover to cover anyway. It was her new favorite periodical. Not that she'd ever tell Miranda that.

She perched on one of the high stools at the kitchen counter—the layout of the Manhattan townhouse's kitchen was remarkably similar to the one in London—and paged through the magazine, sipping at a Diet Coke. She glanced over the Editor's Letter, which didn't say anything particularly interesting. They rarely did. Miranda hated writing hers month after month. When she'd started at *Runway*, of course, Andy had read Miranda's letters religiously for the first couple of months, hoping for some kind of insight into her impossible boss's equally impossible psyche. It hadn't taken her long to figure out that Miranda pretty much phoned it in, compared to the amount of work she put into everything else, and Andy had given up trying. She was surprised Miranda had never tried to pass that job off on an assistant, now that she thought about it.

Chuckling as she turned the pages, Andy thought that wouldn't be a half-bad assignment. She'd always wondered how many people actually read the Editor's Letter. It'd be fun to put something surprising, or even shocking in there, and see what kind of reaction it got. Some kind of gaffe or juicy tidbit about a designer or celebrity. Not that Andy would ever do that, of course, it would be totally unprofessional—it was just kind of funny to think about, that was—

She turned the page, and saw the headline, "NOWHERE TO GO."

Just beneath the headline was: "So how badly is the working man getting screwed in the Big Apple? *Andy Sachs* investigates." Her name was in bold type.

And there was her article. Complete with the changes she'd made. It was shorter than she remembered—they must have cut some stuff—and it wasn't really a major piece. It hadn't been mentioned on the cover or anything. But it was there. In print. Staring right up at her. Right there.

She looked over it greedily, taking in every black letter on the glossy white paper, inhaling the smell of the print, wondering if this was how guys felt when they looked at porn. It was that exciting. She read her own article as if she'd never seen it before in her life, from beginning to end, drinking in every word.

"So you found it."

Andy looked up, dazed, to see Miranda standing by the kitchen counter, her head tilted to the side. She had a small, amused smile on her face.

"I--you knew?" Andy said. "That it'd be in this issue?"

"I was planning to surprise you with it," Miranda said, and nodded down at the magazine. "It's a pity, really. I don't make many sentimental gestures. You would have really enjoyed the reveal."

"I'm sorry!" Andy said, horrified. She knew she shouldn't have looked at the mail. "I just, I didn't think it would…not for another couple of…" She stared back down at her article. Even now that she had it right in front of her, she couldn't believe it was real. "Wow. My God."

"I read it," Miranda said. "It's good work."

Andy looked up at her. "It is? You read it? You liked it?"

"I did," Miranda said. "Not the sort of thing *Runway* covers, of course. But it made a nice change."
She took the magazine from Andy and glanced over the copy. "Good work," she repeated. "You should be proud of yourself."

"I am," Andy said. "I...are you?" Miranda looked at her in surprise. "Proud of me, I mean. Because--because--"

"I am," Miranda said slowly, and Andy felt like she'd lit up everywhere. "'Because' what?"

"Well," Andy said, and gulped. "You remember, we had that conversation, about...about me asking Nigel for help, and..." Miranda nodded, frowning. Andy hurried on with, "Well, I just wanted to say that even if I had thought of you instead, I wouldn't have asked you--"

Miranda's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

"--because," Andy continued doggedly, "I wanted, you know, to impress you. To show you what I could do. That I was, you know, smart, and could do things and..." She winced. Miranda was staring at her like she'd just arrived from Mars. "I mean, I couldn't do that if you'd helped me get it published. It wouldn't have been the same."

"Well," Miranda said. "Don't worry. I know quite well that you don't need me to help you succeed, Andrea." Her voice was cool. She looked hurt.

"What?" Andy said. "No! That's not what I meant at all." She huffed. "It was--" How to explain this without sounding like an idiot? "It's like when you buy somebody a present. You don't want to buy it with their own money. You know?"

Miranda blinked. Then she snorted, but didn't look hurt anymore. "So this is my present, too?"

"Yeah," Andy said, relieved. Then: "'Too'?"

"It wasn't due to be published until May," Miranda said, a little too casually. "But Carter mentioned to me, over drinks last month, that one of his feature writers wasn't going to come through for March..." She shrugged. "I was able to suggest a last-minute emergency substitution."

Andy stared at her. "So--wait--is this--?"

"Happy Birthday, I suppose," Miranda said, and glanced over at the counter. She saw the salads, and her eyes went wide with interest and not a little greed. "Well, early birthday, anyway. Is that lunch?"

Andy clapped the open magazine over her face to muffle her cry of delight. "This is the best birthday ever," she said. "Ever, ever."

"I'm glad to hear it," Miranda said. "Pour me some Evian, will you?"

Andy lowered the magazine, knowing that she was beaming hard enough at Miranda to short out all the electricity in the house. Miranda didn't seem to notice, since she was eyeing the salmon like it was the first food she'd seen in a week. "Anything," Andy said, and hopped off the stool. "Just name it."

Miranda raised an eyebrow again, and she got a look in her eyes that made Andy's giddy glee turn into something equally jubilant, but much more anticipatory. "I'm sure I can think of something," she said.

"Oh, really," Andy said, feeling a slower, much more feral smile blooming across her own face. Miranda went pink.
Yeah. Definitely the best birthday ever, early or not. And it wasn't over yet.

Andy had been half-afraid that when she actually got a look at what Miranda had between her legs, she'd be embarrassed or freaked or maybe even a little grossed out. Vaginas had never been her thing before, after all. Chiefly they made her think of visiting the gynecologist, which wasn't exactly sexy. Plus, there was something so raw and personal about getting naked with somebody and then just… looking.

"Oh my God," Miranda moaned, rolling her hips into Andy's mouth.

It actually hadn't been a problem. After lunch, they'd settled in and had worked a little bit, with Miranda going over the book and Andy making notes of whatever she said. It had been a hell of a challenge to get and stay focused, but she'd decided it would be a good exercise for her; if she could concentrate on work instead of thinking about screwing Miranda, or about her article in *Modernity*, then Andy would have achieved enough self-discipline to be a Zen master, which would be pretty cool.

She'd almost managed it, too. Then, after about an hour and a half, Miranda had said, "Ugh. Tell Matthias we have to get rid of this photo in the big band spread. Gisele looks completely ridiculous with that sexophone."

Andy had stopped writing and stared at her. Miranda obviously had no idea what she'd just said, but she kept on talking and said the word 'sexophone' at least two more times before Andy gave up and doubled over with helpless laughter. And then Miranda had scowled, and Andy had explained, and Miranda had gotten snippy, and Andy'd had to take emergency measures before Miranda worked herself into a sulk and ruined the afternoon, and, as it happened, she'd learned a couple of sure-fire ways to distract Miranda by now.

This time they'd made it to Miranda's room. Andy hadn't even had a chance to get a look at the décor before Miranda had tugged her down on the enormous bed and began pulling at her skirt (Andy had lost her blouse on the stairs and her bra in the hallway), while Andy yanked off Miranda's shirt (the only thing she'd had left by that point, which meant she now had two pairs of satin panties lying around in the kitchen). Then all of a sudden they didn't have any more clothes on, and Andy realized that the best way not to get self-conscious was just to keep going, deciding she could take the time for romantic worshipful appreciation once they'd both gotten used to the whole naked thing.

And here they were. By the time Andy had kissed her way down the rise of Miranda's belly, Miranda had begun to babble softly under her breath, and by the time Andy had slid to her knees by the side of the bed, between Miranda's thighs, she'd started to pant. She struggled to sit up; Andy leaned in and pressed a tender, careful kiss; she fell back down. And then Andy pushed her thighs wider apart so she could see everything, and it really wasn't as embarrassing as she'd thought it might be, and *wow* was Miranda ever soaking wet, all because of Andy. Andy wondered if she looked like this too, and then stopped thinking as she leaned forward and licked. The taste was sharper down here, fresher, almost, and it did funny, pleasant things to her brain.

Miranda said, "Nnngh!", and rubbed Andy's back with her left foot. Andy tried to remember stuff she liked herself, but the truth was she didn't really like it when she was as tender and swollen as Miranda was after sex last night and again today. And when she did like it, she liked it rough, which Miranda obviously didn't. So…
Well, it wasn't like she had a handbook lying around, so she might as well learn by trial-and-error. Miranda had liked it when Andy had rubbed her here, just to the left (her left) of the clit, so Andy licked there too, very gently. Miranda arched and hissed.

"Tell me what to do," Andy said. "Tell me what you like." How strange, that she actually had to prompt Miranda to give her orders. She licked again, Miranda's hand suddenly dug into her hair, and Andy said, "What do you like?"

"I--I don't know--everything," Miranda panted. "Just keep, just…no fingers," she added suddenly, and gulped. "I'm--a little sore--"

"Did I hurt you before?" Andy asked, pulling away as her libido instantly withered. Then Miranda yanked at her hair. "Ow!"

"No, you didn't hurt me, now for God's sake will you please--" Relieved, and now sore herself, Andy quickly bent back down. "--ooh," Miranda finished, arching her back blissfully. Andy thought fast. Miranda didn't want any fingers, but she'd loved it when Andy had gone inside, so…

When Andy slid her tongue inside, just a little, Miranda stiffened and squeaked; and when Andy twitched her tongue up and down, so gently, Miranda sobbed. Then Andy moved up higher, and lazily rolled her tongue over the clitoris, again and again, until Miranda's breathing went hysterical and she let go of Andy's hair to claw at the bedsheets. She gasped, "Don't--stop--please--oh--"

Andy carefully pushed back the hood, teased the little pearl directly, with just the tip of her tongue--"Oh my God!"

Miranda's thighs clenched, and Andy suddenly found her mouth and chin soaked in come. She licked again, and Miranda actually shrieked, ramming her hips hard up against Andy's mouth before jerking away again as she sank back down on the mattress, trembling all over.

"Stop," she whimpered. "Stop…stop now…"

Andy had already figured that out, and she kissed the inside of Miranda's quivering thigh before wiping her mouth and face with her hand. Then she rose to her feet and crawled back on the bed next to Miranda, who was staring blankly up at the ceiling while she got her breath back.

"Were you," Miranda began, stopped, licked her lips, and started again, "were you born. With. Sex hardwired into. Your brain. Or something?" She gulped and panted some more, closing her eyes. Andy had never felt so brilliant in her life, and probably never would again, she just knew it. She laughed. "I think I was hardwired for you, that's all." She ran her fingertips over Miranda's gently rounded belly, which twitched beneath her touch. "Huh, maybe you're wired for me too. What do you think?"

"I think you're some kind of demon," Miranda said, and covered her eyes with a hand--a characteristic gesture, Andy was coming to realize. Like she just needed to shut out the world for a moment after sex, while she got herself back together. "My God. I've never…" She trailed off, and this time Andy didn't think her blush was due to arousal.

"Never what?" Andy asked, figuring that she was probably crossing a line, and that there would never be a better time for it.

Miranda peeped at her through two fingers. Glared, really. "Never…that," she said.
"What?" Andy said blankly, and then it hit her. Her eyes went wide. "You--I mean nobody ever went down on you before?" Miranda's glare was positively blistering now, but Andy was too busy being astonished. Fifty years old, three marriages, and Miranda had never…?

"They did," Miranda snapped, and Andy came back down to earth. Miranda grunted and sat up. "It just never worked before."

'Really?' Andy didn't say, because there were limits, after all. "Oh," she said instead, feeling at a loss, because how did you respond to something like that, with someone like Miranda? "Um, I'm sorry."

Miranda rolled her eyes, obviously finished with her little moment of full disclosure. "Lie down," she ordered, and Andy obeyed without even thinking about it. Then she blushed as Miranda looked her over with gleaming eyes, and blushed harder as Miranda caressed her hip and side with one warm hand. "I suppose there are advantages to your having a little meat on your bones," she mused. It was Andy's turn to scowl, which only amused Miranda.

"Well, now," she said softly. "It's your turn, isn't it?" And oh, God, just the tone of her voice made Andy's toes curl. "You're so bold," Miranda murmured. "So insistent that I tell you what to do. What I like. That I should just come right out and say it."

Andy swallowed hard. "Well--I mean--seems sort of in-character for you--"

"Turnabout is fair play," Miranda continued as if Andy hadn't spoken. She kept moving her hand, stroked upwards to play with Andy's nipple. Andy gasped. "You've been thinking about this for a long time. Wanting this for a long time. Haven't you?"

"Yes," Andy whispered.

"I felt your eyes all over me on New Year's Eve. I was…surprised."

Andy wasn't sure if she should be elated, or intrigued, or humiliated, or what. She settled for saying, "Me too." Miranda lifted an incredulous eyebrow. "No, really. That's when it started. I saw you in that dress. And you were so--that's when it started."

"Yes?" Miranda plucked her nipple again. "When what started? What were you thinking of? What did you want, exactly?" She smoothed her hand over Andy's belly, down into the hollow of Andy's hip, which Andy hardly noticed because Miranda's gaze was swallowing her whole. "What did you want to do to me, Andrea?"

"Jesus," Andy gasped, curling her toes again. So much for Miranda not wanting to talk about it. She'd never been with anybody who could screw just with their voice, and it was…

"Slip off into a coat closet?" Miranda continued relentlessly. Her hand lay still on Andy's hip, no longer caressing her, no longer moving at all. "Or some quiet corner where you could have me up against a wall? Maybe get under my skirt in the back seat of the car?" She leaned in and inquired, softly, "Did you like the dress? Would you have had me keep it on?"

"Oh God," Andy choked, closing her eyes, unable to stop picturing it, as she'd pictured it a thousand times before. Miranda in that dress, with her head thrown back and her face flushed and her eyes closed, just as she'd been on this very bed only a few moments ago--

"Or would you have brought me home? Locked the door to my room, and made me stay so quiet?" Miranda whispered. "On my back on the bed, covering my mouth with your hand, and me still in my gown because I couldn't wait--"
"Miranda," Andy sobbed, her hips twitching desperately, "Miranda, oh my God--"

"My skirt up around my waist, legs spread and my shoes still on, and me so ready for you, so wet and ready to come for you." Miranda's voice was as cool and as calm as it had been on the day Andy had met her, and Andy couldn't even open her eyes, her body was strung so tight. "Begging you to do whatever you wanted to me. Would you have fucked me in my dress, Andrea?"

The word 'fuck' on Miranda's lips, here in bed, made Andy arch her back and whine. Little lights were starting to go off behind her eyelids. "I, I--"

"Oh, Andrea," Miranda breathed. "I would have let you."

"Miranda!" Andy shrieked, and came without a single touch. She cried out as her cunt twitched and throbbed, and she knew that Miranda was watching every second of it with avid, greedy eyes, and that made her come all the harder, knowing she was on display for this woman she'd wanted so badly that she'd thought she'd die from it, and maybe she was dying right now, it felt like it, it felt--

She slumped back down on the bed, panting, shaking so hard she thought she was going to fly apart. "Juh, juh, Jesus," she managed when she had her breath back. She opened her eyes. Miranda was watching her and looking unbearably smug.

"That was lovely," she said, and stroked the inside of Andy's sticky thigh. Andy moaned again. "So you were thinking about it. I can't wait to find out what else you've been thinking about. You obviously have quite an imagination."

"M-me?" Andy croaked. "You're the one who came up with, with all that stuff…I never told you about any of..." Miranda shrugged as if this was a minor detail, as if reading Andy's id was something she did whenever she felt like it. Oh, God. Maybe it was. "Would you really have let me?" Andy added, hardly able to believe it. "On New Year's Eve? Really?"

"Of course not," Miranda said. "But I thought you'd like the idea."

It figured. "Well," Andy said. "I guess I did." Then she took a deep breath, and held out her arms. "Come here--" Miranda did. And as soon as her breasts were within striking distance, Andy leaned up and took a nipple in her mouth, sucking and biting. Miranda tossed her head back with a shocked cry.

"You love this," Andy said, and tugged with her teeth. Miranda made a choking sound. "Been thinking about this. Wanted me to do it."

"Oh," Miranda moaned, but didn't deny it. She couldn't deny it. "I--I can't, not again--" Andy ignored her, and suckled insistently while Miranda swayed and tried not to collapse on top of her.

"Yes, you can," Andy whispered, and switched breasts, feeling drunk, feeling like she was having a fever dream. She pushed, and Miranda lay down on her back, her eyes wild and glassy again; Andy bent down and kept at it, sucking and licking, while Miranda tossed her head back and forth against the mattress. Andy hadn't been lying. She liked talking about sex in the middle of sex, sometimes. But she'd never liked it like this. "You love this," she repeated.

"Yes," Miranda whimpered.

"So you tell me your fantasy," Andy said, already on fire with revenge as she slid her fingers back between Miranda's legs. Not inside. Just brushing lightly, gently. "Do you want this in the back seat of the car? Or in the copy room? Or do you want me to fuck you--" like Andy, the word made Miranda moan, "--on your desk, with the doors closed, until you get so wet it's all over your skirt and
"You have to bite your hand to keep from screaming--"

"I can't," Miranda said, "I can't," but she could, and did, right before Andy's eyes. This time, Andy didn't let her cover her face with her hand.

Andy kissed her very gently. "Are you okay?"

"I'm going to want to do this a lot," Miranda wheezed. "From now on."

"Fantastic," Andy said, and didn't care that she was grinning like an idiot as she kissed Miranda once more.

They dozed after that, and when they woke up—which meant that Miranda woke up and shook Andy awake too—dark was creeping in. There was no need even to pretend that they were going back to work. Instead, Andy put on a bathrobe and threw together a couple of sandwiches while Miranda put on yet another outfit and wandered through the house collecting their scattered clothes. Andy grinned at the reverence with which Miranda set the brown boots by the foot of the stairs.

"Think anybody'll notice if I slip out of here wearing the same clothes I was wearing twenty-four hours ago?" Andy asked.

"Most people in this neighborhood don't actually spy on each other with telescopes through the window blinds," Miranda said. "And my assistants have been coming and going here for years. I doubt that anybody actually saw you arrive last night in the first place, much less cared what you were wearing." She paused, and took a sip of her water. "And if they did…we've all kept each others' secrets a few times."

"Oh," Andy said.

"Quite," Miranda said. "Years ago, before the twins were born, Greg was the one who noticed that Gladys Marchington across the street was spending more time with her plumber than her husband. We said nothing. That's how it's done here. Oh, it imploded, of course, but that was all to do with Gladys, not us."

"Oh," Andy said again, blinking. "I…well."

Miranda's lip curled bitterly. "I wonder if anyone realized Stephen was sneaking around." She glanced at Andy, as if expecting Andy to know the answer, and then sighed. "The point is, as long as the paparazzi are away, you've got nothing to worry about. And they're away. I'm old news by now. The thank goodness hung unspoken in the air.

"That's, yeah," Andy said, shook her head, and took another bite of sandwich. Chewed, swallowed. "That's good. I wonder if anyone realized Stephen was sneaking around." She glanced at Andy, as if expecting Andy to know the answer, and then sighed. "The point is, as long as the paparazzi are away, you've got nothing to worry about. And they're away. I'm old news by now. The thank goodness hung unspoken in the air.

"That's, yeah," Andy said, shook her head, and took another bite of sandwich. Chewed, swallowed. "That's good. I just figured I should, um. Probably leave after we eat." Otherwise Miranda would never get any work done at all, and Andy couldn't stay the night again, unless she wanted to creep out when it was still dark, which she didn't. Miranda's personal trainer was due to arrive at six-thirty in the morning.

"Probably for the best," Miranda agreed, her expression not betraying any particular emotion. Then she added, "Why don't you ever wear that brooch?"
"Huh?" Andy asked around a mouthful of sandwich, and then winced at Miranda's disgusted look. She swallowed. "Sorry."

"The snake brooch," Miranda said. "The one I gave you in London. I haven't seen you wear it since then, and I know you liked it."

Andy turned red. "I do," she said. "It's nice. Really nice." Miranda raised her eyebrow. "Too nice," Andy admitted. "I have it in a safe deposit box at my bank." Miranda looked displeased. "I just don't want anything to happen to it!" Andy added quickly. "I keep it in a safe place because it's, you know, special." Yes. Very special. It was the first thing Miranda had given her after they'd begun their…courtship or arrangement or whatever it was. It was irreplaceable. Andy wasn't about to risk that brooch being lost or stolen.

"Jewelry is meant to be worn," Miranda said pointedly.

"I'll wear it again," Andy said. "I promise. It's just too nice for everyday."

"Hmm," Miranda said. "Wear it to the party next month." Her eyes gleamed with secret pleasure.

"Okay," Andy said slowly. "What are you up to with that, anyway?"

Miranda did not reply but, wonder of wonders, put the dishes in the dishwasher. For both of them.

After Andy dressed, put on her boots, and collected her jacket and bag, she and Miranda regarded each other in the hallway. It felt strange: sort of awkward and happy and wistful and sad all at once.

"Well," Andy said. "Have, um, a good day tomorrow, then."

"Yes," Miranda said. "I'll see you on Monday."

"Call me if you need anything before then," Andy said, and realized that had sounded stupid on a number of levels. She grimaced, but Miranda only gave her a tolerant smile and nod. Andy realized that Miranda probably tolerated Andy's idiocy more than she ever tolerated anybody else's. Which was only fair, since nobody tolerated Miranda as well as Andy did, period.

They kissed. After the last few radiant hours, Andy felt only a tiny, happy flicker at the touch of Miranda's lips: something that was content to wait for more later, instead of demanding it now-now-NOW, which was good, because she was pretty sure she'd begun to chafe. Before she could say something stupid, she turned and hurried out of the front door, wondering if Miranda watched her as she left.
And where the offense is, let the great axe fall.

-Hamlet

Sunday felt very long.

It felt longer because there wasn't a hell of a lot for Andy to do. She'd done as much planning as she could manage for both parties: the twins' birthday bash, and Miranda's little mystery extravaganza. The other stuff, the Runway stuff, well, nobody liked being disturbed on Sundays unless it was a real emergency, and Andy didn't have any of those to deal with. So for once, all she had to do was sleep in, relax, maybe clean up her apartment, watch some TV or read a book or go for a walk.

Miranda had a full day, of course. There was the visit from her trainer at the crack of dawn, and then her lunch meeting at one, and then the twins returning at four this afternoon. She'd have plenty to keep her occupied. She'd have no reason to sit around all day thinking about having sex with Andy. So there was no reason for Andy, for her part, to return the favor.

Instead, just before lunch, Andy called her parents. They didn't pick up, so she left them a voicemail telling them to buy the latest issue of Modernity right away, and give her a call once they'd had a chance to look through it. Now it was time to do something else with her free time, her blessedly free time.

And besides, it wasn't like they'd have much time to get together tomorrow anyway. They'd be at work, and if Ellie was still sick, Andy would be stuck hanging around at the office until ten o'clock. It was one thing to fool around late on Friday night when you didn't have work the next day and your kids were out of the house, and quite another to do it on Monday when your kids were a few doors down.

The kids. Yikes. Andy hoped she really hadn't left any incriminating articles of clothing lying around. That wouldn't do. They might be warming up to her--better not to blow it.

Andy dusted all of her shelves and watched an American Idol re-run. Halfway through watching diminishing levels of talent, her parents called.

"Baby!" her mom gasped breathlessly, as soon as Andy picked up. "I can't believe it! Oh, honey!"

Andy beamed. Payoff. "Hi, Mom," she said. "You found a copy?"

"A copy? We bought ten copies. We're giving them to everyone! Your father tells me not to be silly, but I want to have ours framed. Well, just the article, of course, not the whole magazine--although, you know, maybe--"

Andy felt her face heat up with embarrassed pleasure. "I'm not sure that's necessary," she laughed.

"Necessary? Of course it is! My baby publishing something in a big important magazine? For the first time? You'd better believe this article is going to get better treatment than just going in a scrapbook, Richard."
There was a click, and then her father's voice sounded down another line. "Congratulations, honey," he said. "We're so proud of you. How long have you known?"

"Well, I submitted the article at the end of January, and they told me they wanted it a few days later," Andy said. "But, you know, I didn't want to say anything until it was in print. Stuff gets cut all the time at the last minute. When Miranda showed it to me, you could have--" She realized what she'd said, gulped, and soldiered on. Might as well. Hell, it couldn't hurt. "--knocked me over with a feather."

"Miranda?" Her dad sounded surprised. "She helped you get it published, huh?"

"Good," her mom said, and it was Andy's turn to be surprised. "It's about time she did something for you."

"Wha--no," Andy said indignantly. "That's not…I mean, she didn't…"

"Why not?" her mother said. "That's why you work there, isn't it? So you can make these connections?"

"Um," Andy said. "Actually, it was…well, Nigel helped me get it published." Credit where credit was due. "But Miranda pushed up the publication date," she added quickly. "She helped make sure it didn't get trashed."

"Good for her, I guess," her dad said, sounding cautious. "And Nigel, too. I'm glad they're helping you on your way."

"Yeah," Andy said. "She's, um, she's been really…good lately." She was very thankful her parents couldn't see her blush. "Good to me, I mean. She--I think she appreciates--"

"She ought to," her mother said. "She ought to have appreciated you all along."

Andy restrained herself from knocking her head against the table. "She, well, she's not that bad," she said. "Really. I swear."

"Glad to hear it," her dad said. "But honey, this article. Really. That's amazing. Congratulations," he repeated.

"Your father acts cool, but he's going to tell everyone at the office tomorrow," her mom said. "Not that I won't, too."

"You've already told everyone at the office," her dad said. "And a fair amount of strangers at the newsstand."

"Mom," Andy said, laughing again, knowing that she should be bashful and modest, and not feeling modest at all. Heck, she was twenty-four (okay, almost twenty-five) and had an article published in a prestigious magazine, and one of the most important magazine editors in the world thought it was 'good work,' which, coming from this particular editor, was the equivalent of winning a decathlon. Andy was pretty sure Miranda hadn't just been bullshitting her because they were sleeping together. That wasn't her style. The thought made her glow all over again.

All of a sudden, she wished really hard that she could tell her parents about all of it. What was going on between Andy and Miranda, how happy Andy was, how she wanted them to be happy for her too. And the impossibility of that put a lump in her throat.

"Well," she said, and swallowed, wanting to say all of it and knowing she wasn't going to. "It was a
great birthday present, I'll tell you that."

"I bet," her dad said. "You know, your mother and I were both thinking--not that we can get up in
time for your birthday, but maybe we can come visit you sometime soon-ish. Both of us, this time."

"Oh, that'd be great," Andy said, trying to sound enthusiastic, and maybe overdoing it a little bit. "I'm
sure I'll be able to snag some free time. A weekend, maybe." Actually, she wasn't sure of that at all,
but she could do her best. "I can call and let you know. Or, um, you can call me when you want to
come up and I'll see what I can do."

"Well, we don't want to put you out," her mother said. "We know you're busy."

"No, Mom," Andy said. "I'd love to see you. Really. Really! It's fine."

And it was fine, she told herself as she hung up after a few more minutes of chatter. Of course it was
fine. She'd love to see her parents and there was no reason they shouldn't come to New York. It
wasn't like they'd take one look at her and immediately intuit that she was sleeping with Miranda
Priestly and, worse, was head-over-heels in love with her into the bargain. She could handle them.

Yeah. Great. She was already looking forward to it.

Andy wondered how Miranda's Sunday had gone: if she really had kept so busy that she hadn't
thought about Andy too much. She found out on Monday morning when Miranda got into the car
and refused to look her in the eye.

At first, Andy panicked. Had she screwed up something without knowing it? Let a crucial work
detail slip by? Had the twins somehow figured out that Andy had spent the night with their mom?
Had she done something else to piss Miranda off? Which was a tricky question because, really, the
list of Things That Could Piss Miranda Off was long enough to power a perpetual-motion machine.
But had she actually done any of them?

Miranda began to give the usual stream of instructions and commands, her voice calm and
unwavering as ever. As ever, Andy scrambled to keep up, but she couldn't help noticing that
Miranda didn't look at her for the whole car ride. By the time they got out of the car at Elias-Clarke,
Andy's glow of anticipation had turned entirely into apprehension and she was almost dreading the
elevator ride to the office.

But once the elevator doors closed, Miranda didn't round on her with invective or accusations or
anything. She didn't look at Andy, either. Instead she said, in a faintly strained voice, "How was
your Sunday?"

"Fine," Andy said, surprised. Even now, Miranda hardly ever made small talk. "I didn't do much. I,
um, called my parents about the Modernity article, and they were excited, so that was nice."

"Mm," Miranda said, and Andy had a hunch she hadn't heard a word.

"What about you?" Andy said, deciding she might as well go full speed ahead and see if she could
figure out what was going on. "I mean, you know...was lunch okay? Or the twins, or...?"

"Lunch was fine," Miranda said, her voice clipped. "The twins are fine. They want you to come by
for dinner tonight."

"Oh," Andy said, surprised again, and pleased. "Well, that's...sure, of course I will. I mean, if you want me to."

"Ye--" Miranda stopped and cleared her throat. Color bloomed on her cheeks and she stared at the buttons for the different floors. "That's fine."

Andy's eyes went wide. Miranda's cheeks went redder.

"I thought about you a lot yesterday," Andy said, feeling the beginnings of a smile.

"That's enough," Miranda replied at once, standing ramrod-straight. Not straight enough to disguise her shiver, though.

Andy bit her lip to hide her grin. So that's why Miranda couldn't look her in the eye. Well, she had said she'd want to do it a lot from now on. "I hope Ellie's feeling better today," she said. "Otherwise I guess I'll have to take a rain check."

"Oh, I'm sure she's past the contagious stage of whatever she had," Miranda said, sounding like she was gritting her teeth. "How much damage can she do between the front door and the hall table?"

"True," Andy said, biting her lip harder.

"Be appropriate today, Andrea," Miranda said, her voice razor-sharp. "The last thing I need is some insinuating, giggling..." That got rid of Andy's grin right away. She turned to stare at Miranda in disbelief, and thankfully, Miranda trailed off.

"Of course," Andy said pointedly. Like she'd ever be that dumb. Wearing sexy boots to work was one thing--everybody wore outrageous stuff at Runway. Looking all moony-eyed at the boss was something else, and Andy knew it. And Miranda knew that Andy knew it.

In fact, Andy thought that Miranda might need reminding much more than Andy did. She apparently hadn't been kidding about Andy's opening up a floodgate. When she strode into her office for the first time, a muscle started twitching at the side of her lip, and Andy suddenly remembered offering to fuck Miranda on her desk. Which was undoubtedly what Miranda was thinking about right now. And as the day wore on, Miranda appeared to grow more and more distracted; her cheeks were constantly flushed, and her voice was as hoarse as if she'd caught Ellie's cold.

She had a meeting at four, followed by a thirty-minute facial. Andy hurried into her office at three forty-five to give her a folder for the meeting, and once again, Miranda refused to look at her, although Andy was pretty sure she didn't see the layouts right beneath her nose either. She had her ankles crossed tightly together, like she had to pee. Or, no, not like that, exactly. More like she was trying to restrain herself from wriggling in her seat.

"Oh," Andy breathed before she could stop herself, as a sudden rush of heat hit her. Miranda looked up at once, into her face, and read what was in Andy's eyes. Her own eyes glazed, and Andy thought, for one wild second, that there just might be some merit to closing the doors and--

"Here you go," she mumbled, shoved the folder into Miranda's hand, and high-tailed it out of there at once. Five minutes later, Miranda left her office without giving either Andy or Ellie a passing glance, and Andy didn't exhale until she'd vanished from sight.

"She's been in a strange mood today, hasn't she?" Ellie asked, keeping her voice low and looking after Miranda. Andy felt a wholly inappropriate surge of jealousy, until she realized that Ellie had
probably not been staring at Miranda's ass like Andy definitely had.

She managed a smile. "When isn't she? Hey, I'm glad you seem to be feeling better."

"Oh, I am," Ellie said with a much bigger, more genuine smile of her own. "A weekend's rest did the trick. I think it was just one of those twenty-four hour bugs."

"Good," Andy said, and added with a grin, "you were kind of pitiful." Far from being offended, Ellie giggled and nodded.

An hour later, Nigel arrived in reception. "Well," he said. "That was a fun meeting. I don't think she heard a word anybody said. It's a good thing she doesn't actually have to talk to her facialist." Andy gave him a look of non-committal sympathy, and he rolled his eyes. Then he smiled at her. "I got a look at a certain magazine yesterday morning."

Andy smiled radiantly at him. "Did you? Isn't it great? I still can't believe it. I can't believe it's actually there!"

"Your article?" Ellie said. "Oh, Andy! Why didn't you tell me? I have to get a copy!"

"I just found out myself, on Saturday," Andy said, grinning at her too.

"Nice birthday present, huh?" Nigel said. "Speaking of which, keep Wednesday night clear. Wednesday is your birthday, right? The thirteenth?" Andy nodded. "Keep it clear," Nigel repeated. "I'm taking you out for cocktails."

"Nigel," Andy said, genuinely touched. "You don't have to."

"Oh, I really do," he said. "I need something to look forward to. The Charleston shoot is going to hell."

"The shoots are always going to hell," Andy pointed out. "And then they always turn out okay."

"Well, yes," Nigel said. "But that doesn't make them less of a pain in the ass in the interim." He sighed. "The shots along the Battery shouldn't be a problem. It's just posing a bunch of stick-thin models on schooners and sailboats in the harbor that's giving me nightmares. Sun glare. Flapping sails. Wind." He shuddered. "And divas. My god, the divas."

"Aren't the models used to that kind of thing, though?" Andy said.

"I meant the photographers."

"Oh."

"And of course you want it to be dramatic. Nothing all furled up and stationary, so the sails have to be out, and I don't know about you, but I don't know much about sailing. But I do know that when the booms are swinging around like baseball bats and you have models and photographers ducking and covering left and right…well, that's how it happened in the Keys last time, anyway…"

"Oh, no," Andy said, laughing.

"Well, that's just a question of torque," Ellie said casually.

Nigel and Andy blinked at each other, and then Nigel turned to Ellie's desk. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, you know," Ellie said, smiling at him. "Torque. It's just a vector that measures the tendency of a
Ellie didn't seem to notice how she'd stunned Andy and Nigel, and spent the rest of the afternoon as
cheerfully oblivious as usual. She did read Andy's article in *Modernity* and said, with genuine awe, that it sounded really smart.

Miranda returned from her facial at five-thirty with her skin glowing and radiant. Well, it ought to be, with the amount of money those procedures probably cost. But her eyes glowed too--gleamed, really--when she told Andy to pack up because it was time to leave, and Andy's heart began to pound at once.

The ride to her townhouse was unusually silent, and Miranda spent most of it staring out of the window while Andy texted various people. When they got out of the car, and Miranda turned the key in the door, Andy saw that her hand was shaking. And as soon as the door closed behind Andy, Miranda turned on her with fire in her eyes, dropping all pretense of disinterest. Andy felt an answering clench between her own legs, and she reached up to cup Miranda's chin (Miranda's eyelids fluttered), to lean in--

Footsteps on the stairs. Fast, running children's footsteps. Andy and Miranda jerked apart at once, and for one moment Andy wondered if Miranda was actually about to scream with frustration. For her part, she wore her best, brightest smile as the twins clattered into view, and busied herself with helping Miranda take off her coat. She was very, very careful not to brush up against anything inappropriate. Miranda trembled anyway.

The twins didn't seem to notice. "I thought we heard the door," Cassidy said. "Hi, Andy."

"Hi," Andy said, and took her time sliding Miranda's scarf off her shoulders, savoring the way the back of Miranda's neck went red.

"We're getting our essays back in two days," Caroline told Andy, her eyes shining. "But the teacher already told both of us that ours were really good." She scowled. "She wouldn't say which one was better, though."

"That's great," Andy said as she hung Miranda's coat in the hall closet, and then her own as well. "I knew you'd both do well."

"Isn't that great, Mom?" Cassidy appealed to Miranda.

"Wonderful," Miranda said, glancing sideways at Andy. "I'm so proud."

"Good evening, Ms. Priestly," Cara said as she came downstairs, and gathered her own coat.

Miranda, who usually asked something about how the girls had been that day, or reminded Cara of an appointment, said blankly, "Hello," as if she had no idea who Cara was or what she was doing in the house.

Cara blinked, and then said, "Hi, Andy. Good night, girls, I'll see you tomorrow afternoon."

"Night, Cara," Cassidy said, and took hold of Miranda's hand. "Come on, dinner's ready, and we're starving. Jimena made pizza tonight!" And indeed, the townhouse did smell heavenly this evening: tomato sauce and cheese. Andy wondered if pineapple and black olives would be involved. Probably not.

"Darling," Miranda said, "Why don't you two go ahead and eat? We'll be along in a moment--I need to talk to Andrea about something urgently--"

Andy's jaw almost dropped. Miranda had to be kidding. She wanted to sneak off for a quickie before dinner with the kids just down the hall? Judging by the color high on her cheeks, yes, she definitely
did. And she wasn’t looking anywhere near Andy, which meant she knew how ludicrous it was.

"You had all day to talk to Andy," Cassidy replied. "You can talk to her after dinner. C'mon!" She tugged at her mother's hand. Miranda gave in and let Cassidy lead her down the hallway, but tossed a look over her shoulder at Andy that was both helpless and smoldering. Andy gulped and started after her. Maybe the 'creating-a-monster' idea hadn't been too far off base.

"We had a good time with Dad this weekend," Caroline said behind her. Andy jerked to a stop and glanced down at her, startled. "We ate take-out Chinese and watched Night at the Museum. Have you seen that?"

"No," Andy said, letting Caroline walk next to her on the way to the kitchen. "Any good?"

"It was really funny. I loved it when the T-Rex came alive. I mean the skeleton. What did you do this weekend?"

Andy tried very hard not to blush, or say, 'Made your mom happier than pizza ever did.' Or Caroline's dad, apparently. Instead, she said, "Not much. I just took it easy, actually. Slept in." Which was true. "Lounged around." Also true. "Called my parents." True, true, true. "Kind of a dull weekend, really." Big fat lie.

"Too bad," Caroline said, already sounding bored as they arrived at the kitchen, where Jimena, a stocky woman in her mid-forties, was getting the pizza out of the oven and putting it on a large white platter. The rest of the table was already set. "What do you like best on your pizzas?"

"I'm not picky, really," Andy said. Although she hated black olives, she wasn't dumb enough to say so. "I like most stuff. What does everyone want to drink?"

"Juice," Caroline said.

"Diet Coke," Cassidy said.

"It's too late in the evening for Diet Coke," Miranda. "Juice for both of them, Andrea, and I'll have water."

"Okay," Andy said, and raided the fridge. By the time she had all the drinks ready, Jimena had put everything else on the table and departed as quietly as a ghost, which was exactly what Miranda paid her to do. Talk about one of the silent workers of New York. Too bad Andy hadn't been able to interview Jimena for her article, but it probably would have gotten both of them fired.

The pizza was a plain-and-simple margherita, but perfectly done. The twins had gulped down two slices each by the time Andy had finished her own piece. Miranda was only picking at hers, and only half-listening to the usual chatter of her children. Every once in a while, she squirmed.

"Andy, you're coming over for dinner on Wednesday, right?" Caroline asked suddenly. "Mom's coming home that night, she doesn't have anything to do, right, Mom?"

Miranda blinked, returned to Earth, and nodded. "Of course she can come by."

Caroline looked expectantly at Andy. "Sure," Andy said, and then remembered. "Whoops. I mean, I can't. I told Nigel I'd do something with him on Wednesday."

"Nigel?" Cassidy sounded outraged. "But Wednesday's your birthday, isn't it?"

"Cassidy," Caroline growled, and Andy grinned as she realized that some sort of surprise had been
thwarted. Then she glanced at Miranda, who was glaring at her, and tried not to cringe.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I, um, he asked me this morning. We're just going to go out for a drink or two, I think, nothing big--I mean, it is a work night." Now all three of them were glaring. "I'm sorry!" Andy said, feeling very ganged-up-on all of a sudden. "I didn't know--I guess I can reschedule."

"That's okay," Cassidy said, sticking her nose in the air. "We get it."

"Oh, boy," Andy said, grinning again in spite of herself.

"She can share our party," Caroline said to Cassidy. "It's not very much later, and we'll have a better cake."

"But she can't invite any friends," Cassidy pointed out. "Everything's all set up and there's no more room."

"Oh," Caroline said, and looked at Andy. "Do you have any friends?"

"I, um--" Andy's eyes went wide as she realized that she couldn't actually say 'yes,' unless she was counting Nigel and Miranda. Possibly Christian. Maybe Ellie. "Well…"

"Caroline," Miranda said sharply. "What a question."

"Sorry," Caroline said, and returned to her pizza. All talk of a party for Andy ceased, while Andy nursed the unhappy realization that she pretty much had lost touch with all of her non-Runway friends, mostly without realizing it. She'd been keeping too busy to know how busy she was keeping--too busy to realize that Runway was becoming her whole world and reason for being.

No. Not Runway. Miranda. Which was a different thing altogether, and possibly worse. The thought made Andy feel sad and apprehensive at the same time. It wasn't good, it wasn't healthy, to be so wrapped-up in caring about one person to the exclusion of everyone else in your life. But it was kind of intoxicating too. Kind of exciting. In a scary way. A scary, dysfunctional way.

Damn it. Maybe she should bend her pride and get back in touch with Doug and Lily again. She just didn't want to, particularly, not after that bitterness with Nate, not after they'd been so high-handed about dumping her. Maybe she could make an entirely new, more understanding set of friends instead. With all the free time she had. It took some real effort not to sigh audibly.

Instead, she decided to talk about something fun. "Hey," she said to the twins with a grin, "you guys know Ellie, right…?"

The twins soaked up the story of Ellie's unexpected brilliance like two little sponges, and Andy realized that she'd been ousted as the mastermind behind their next science project. Fine with her. Ellie could probably help them build a spaceship to Mars or something.

Miranda, on the other hand, appeared not to hear a thing. Her cheeks were red again, her eyes foggy and distant, and Andy, who recognized the signs, understood that Miranda was so turned on that she actually had to be hurting by now, after waiting for so long. Two days of no sex right after Andy had helped her work up an appetite. From famine to feast to famine again. Talk about hormones working overtime. She'd be hot beneath her clothes, quivering--wet and ready--

Dessert seemed to take forever.

"Homework," Miranda said, as soon as Caroline had finished her lemon sorbet. It was the first word
she'd spoken in nearly ten minutes. "Andrea, are you ready?"

"Absolutely," Andy said, proud that her voice didn't wobble. She hoped the twins didn't notice that Miranda almost dropped her spoon.

When the twins disappeared upstairs, Miranda turned to Andy again. Her eyes were as hot and fierce as they'd been an hour before, but there was something else in them now--confusion, helplessness. She looked wildly around the kitchen, obviously realizing the truth: they couldn't do anything here. If the twins came down...and there was no way Miranda was going to be able to wait until their bedtime. Neither was Andy. They couldn't exactly slip into one of the upstairs bedrooms unnoticed, either.

"Is there a--" Andy whispered.

"Bathroom," Miranda choked, and led the way out of the den, down the hallway to a half-bath that had a toilet, a sink, and just enough room for two people to stand by the door. The door shut behind Andy, and Miranda grabbed her at once, kissing her hard, already making noises in the back of her throat, already shaking.

Andy wasted no time in turning until she had Miranda up against the door, and bent down, tugging at Miranda's collar until she could get at her throat to lick and suck. Miranda sobbed.

Andy cupped Miranda's breasts, squeezed them, and Miranda's knees nearly gave out. "Oh," Andy gasped into her ear, and kissed her throat again. "We have to work out a better system."

Miranda clawed at her back. "We will--please--"

"Because otherwise," Andy whispered, unbuttoning her blouse as fast as she could, "how am I supposed to take my time with you--" She gave up on the blouse and just shoved Miranda's skirt up, and then tugged her underwear down. Miranda immediately covered her mouth with her hand, squeezing her eyes shut. "How am I supposed to do you slow--" Andy slid her hand up into the warmth and the wet--so unbelievably wet, the result of a whole day of waiting. Miranda moaned.

"How am I supposed to give it to you so slow and gentle, just the way--" Andy slipped one finger in, "--you--" she moved the finger, rubbed gently, "--like it?" Miranda's head fell back and hit the door, her throat working, her hand barely muffling her cries. "How am I supposed to get you on a bed, how am I supposed to fuck you until you feel so good, until you can't take it anymore?" The words alone made Miranda shriek into her palm--and then Andy slid her thumb up, rubbed her clit, so lightly--

It took Andy's hand on top of Miranda's to muffle her howl. She clenched around Andy hard, and then harder, and Andy kept moving her thumb, just barely brushing Miranda's clt until Miranda began shaking her head back and forth against the door.

"How am I supposed to do all that?" Andy panted against her throat, and then slid her hands, sticky fingers and all, into Miranda's blouse so she could cup her breasts through her bra. "How am I supposed to get enough?"

"You," Miranda rasped, yanking her underwear back up. "Against the door--right now--"

Andy obeyed without thinking and then, dear God, no way, Miranda dropped to her knees with more grace than should be possible for a fifty-year-old woman who was five months pregnant and had just come her brains out. Which meant it wouldn't have been possible at all for anyone else. But Miranda did it, and she pulled at Andy's underwear.
"You're going to try this for the first time up against a bathroom door?" Andy gasped.

"For God's sake, hurry," Miranda hissed, and Andy found herself slipping out of her shoes and letting her underwear dangle around one of her ankles while Miranda spread her legs wider, slid up her skirt, and leaned in.

She didn't know any better than Andy had, of course. It didn't matter, not tonight. Just the sight of Miranda on her knees between Andy's legs had little explosions going off in Andy's brain, and then Miranda's tongue, *Miranda's tongue* was--

Andy didn't scream or anything, but by the time she was done, her knees were giving out, and she slid down to sit smack on her ass on the floor, putting her eye-level with Miranda. Who leaned in to kiss her so she could taste herself. Then they parted with a sigh. Miranda's face was still red, but she no longer looked like she was about to die of sexual frustration.

"That was," Andy began, when Miranda suddenly gasped. And pressed a hand to her abdomen.

Andy froze in panic, her afterglow vanishing as if it had never been. Oh, oh shit, she'd done something, she'd somehow hurt the baby when they'd--how could she have been so--what a complete, fucking idiot--

"It kicked," Miranda said, her eyes as big as the pizza platter from dinner.

"It--huh?" Andy stared at Miranda. "It, it did? He did?"

Miranda grabbed Andy's hand--her own still trembled--and pressed it to the bump on her belly. For a few seconds, Andy felt nothing. And then: a very slight, extremely subtle, yet undeniable thump. Movement. Miranda gasped. So did Andy.

"Holy crap," Andy said. Arousal was gone, terror was gone, and only wonder was left. She and Miranda stared at each other, and Andy was sure Miranda's look of astonishment mirrored her own.

Then Andy realized that they were both sitting on the floor of a bathroom in Miranda's house, half-naked and freshly-fucked, feeling the miracle of life. She was the one with her hand over her mouth now, muffling laughter. "Oh my God," she said. "That's--" The baby kicked again. "Wow!"

"Yes," Miranda said, and shook her head, still looking stunned. But not unhappy. Not at all.

"That's good, right?" Andy said anxiously. "I mean, it's about time for that to happen--you're feeling okay, right?"

"Right," Miranda said, starting to sound her old, exasperated self. "I'm fine." She frowned. "A pity we can't call the twins."

Andy snorted, and then started to feel kind of self-conscious. "I need to get my underwear back on," she said. "It's like we have an audience."

"Don't be ridiculous," Miranda said at once, and sat back on her heels. "You're not turning prude on me now." Her glare could have melted lead.

"Of course not," Andy said, not actually feeling very sure of that as she looked at Miranda's belly again. "Wow," she repeated.

"Mmm," Miranda said, and then struggled to her feet with a grunt, putting one hand on the sink to brace herself and looking a lot less graceful than when she'd descended. Andy stood up too, and
quickly pulled her panties on before slipping back into her shoes. "The wonder of motherhood aside, Andrea, being pregnant is a degrading and miserable experience."

Andy winced. "Well," she said weakly, "you're handling it like a champ. I mean, you seem to be." Miranda did not look particularly flattered. Andy took a risk, took her hand, and added, "Plus other stuff." She waggled her eyebrows. Miranda rolled her eyes, but looked much more pleased this time. "You were great."

"Yes, well," Miranda said, and fastened her blouse. She glowered at Andy when she realized she was missing a button. "Necessity. The mother of invention. Et cetera."

"We're a mess," Andy said, glancing in the mirror over the sink. They were. Their clothes were askew, their hair stuck up and out, and their lipstick was smeared everywhere they'd kissed: mouths, throats, cheeks. Miranda in particular looked like Andy had assaulted her with a tube of Bobbi Brown in Blue Raspberry.

Without missing a beat, Miranda slid open one of the drawers beneath the sink and whisked out a pot of makeup remover and a hairbrush. "The bathroom's too small," she complained. "Wait in the hall until I'm done."

"What?" Andy said. "What if the twins come downstairs and see me?" Even an almost-eleven-year-old could figure this one out.

"I'll be quick. And if they do, you'll think of something."

"Necessity and invention, huh?" Andy grumbled. Miranda smirked. Andy punished her by leaning in and taking another kiss. A long, soft one. Miranda gasped, and Andy pulled away with a little smirk of her own.

"Hallway," Miranda mumbled. Andy nipped out of the bathroom without another word.

Not a bad way to end your Monday, really.

"Really, do you want me to cancel on Nigel for Wednesday?" Andy asked the next morning in the elevator. "Did the twins have something in mind?"

Miranda shrugged. "I think the girls wanted to make you a cake. Or help Jimena make one."

Which meant watching Jimena bake the actual cake from start to finish, and maybe leaving to play video games in between, but Andy was touched anyway. "Aww--that's so--I can cancel if…"

"We can do it on Sunday instead," Miranda said blandly. "They'll be home for lunch, but are going to a friend's house for dinner."

"So--" Andy grinned. "After they leave--"

"Yes," Miranda said, looking straight at the elevator doors. Andy grinned some more and wondered if she could make Miranda blush before they got out of the elevator again. Maybe she should start keeping some kind of scorecard.

"Did the baby kick again last night? After I left?" she asked.
Miranda glared at Andy. "Please tell me that is not linked forever with sex in your head."

"Um--"

"It kicked again this morning around six-thirty. I woke up the girls so they could feel it." Miranda frowned. "Him. I suppose I should say 'him.'"

"What did they think? What did they say?"

"Lots of things. Questions, mainly. 'Does it hurt? Can you tell if it's a hand or a foot? Is he doing any somersaults?'"

"Somersaults?" Andy laughed.

Miranda sighed. "Greg told them, in a fit of fancy, that they accomplished all manner of acrobatics while I was pregnant with them. Their favorite has always been when he told them that they managed ballet en pointe."

"I can actually kind of picture that," Andy said, imagining two twin babies in tutus. And Caroline, at least, had obviously been a prima donna from the moment of conception.

Miranda gave her a sidelong glance. "They thought that you'd think it was 'cool' and couldn't wait to tell you all about it. They expect you tonight as well."

Andy looked at her. Miranda had a very serious look on her face, and Andy decided to respond in kind. "What do they think of me?" she asked. "I mean, what am I to them? Do you know?"

"No," Miranda said. "But they like you. They like it when you stop by. Let's be grateful for small favors."

"I am," Andy said, but then they arrived at Runway and conversation had to cease. At least, that kind of conversation. Miranda stepped into 'boss' role without missing a beat, and immediately started talking about making an appointment with her personal shopper. She even managed to say the words 'maternity wear' without gagging, which was an improvement over last time.

"Make it for Friday," Miranda said as they headed down the corridors with clackers scattering before them like seagulls on the beach. "Two o'clock."

"Got it."

"And take detailed notes for your recommendations."

"Oka--my recommendations?"

"You're going, aren't you?" Miranda said, without looking at her, her tone as imperious as ever. "Don't stick me in anything hideous."

Andy's jaw dropped, and then she recovered herself. "Right," she mumbled.

Miranda glanced at her, then, as they rounded the corner. No one was near them, and she murmured, "Since you seem to take an active interest in what I wear."

Andy squeaked and went red. Miranda smirked and swept into her office. Andy sighed; Priestly, 1, Sachs, 0.

That night, Miranda didn't squirm through dinner, although she did appear uncomfortable when the
twins asked her to 'make the baby kick for Andy,' as though fetal movement could be performed on command.

"It's okay," Andy said quickly. "I'm sure there will be plenty of, um, oppor…I mean, he'll probably…"

"He! That's right," Cassidy said, and ran upstairs. "The names!" she called over her shoulder before Miranda could object.

"We've got to finish the names list," Caroline explained. "We almost forgot them, and we've got a whole lot left."

"Oh, wonderful," Miranda said, and her shoulders slumped very slightly. Andy gave Caroline what she hoped was an enthusiastic smile.

Tonight the twins made it through the rest of the list, laughing uproariously at some of the more outrageous suggestions. By the time they were giggling over 'Zeno,' it was eight-thirty, and Miranda had to promise that she would think very seriously about several names before the twins went upstairs without a fight. When they vanished, she sat back in her chair with an 'oof.' Then she looked at Andy.

Andy grinned. "'Xerxes.' Xerxes all the way."

"I'd rather not name my son after one of the most notorious womanizers in Jewish history," Miranda said dryly.

"Christian, too," Andy said, remembering fragments of stories from Sunday school. Her family had gone to church on and off when she and Rachel were little, but by the time they were in junior high it had turned into Christmas-and-Easter, and eventually into nothing at all. She added, "You're Jewish?"

"I was raised Jewish, yes," Miranda said, and her eyes went cool.

But Andy didn't give up right away. "I'd, I'd like to know more about you," she tried. "About how you grew up." Maybe even Miranda's real name, but that might be a long shot.

"It doesn't matter," Miranda said, so immediately and flatly that Andy knew it mattered a whole lot. "I haven't practiced in years, never raised the girls in the tradition, and won't raise him either." She raised an eyebrow. "You might have noticed our Christmas decorations?"

"Right," Andy said quickly. "I mean, sure. But that's not all I'd like to…"

"I really don't want to talk about it, Andrea."

"Okay," Andy repeated, and now her voice came out a lot smaller than she meant it to. It sucked that Miranda could still scare her so much, under the right circumstances. She cleared her throat and tried to sound less wimpy. "I mean--right."

Miranda looked weary. "You already know certain things about me that I never told my husbands," she said, and Andy blinked in shock. "Other things you don't know, but please leave it at that. I'll…" She sighed and looked extremely annoyed. "If you insist, I'll tell you. I'd rather you didn't insist." But Andy was adept at decoding Mirandaese by now. 'I'd rather,' of course, meant 'don't.'

"Okay," Andy said, yet again, because what else could she say? "But if, if you ever want to--just, yeah. Sorry. I don't want to push." Although she did. But Miranda wasn't the kind of person you
could push and hope to get away with it. Which was frustrating as all hell, but again…what the heck was Andy supposed to do about it? She didn't know. Not yet. She'd figure something out eventually. She hoped.

Miranda snorted. "Now I've made it sound all romantic and mysterious. I promise it wasn't. The opposite, in fact." She wrinkled her nose and sipped at her water. "It's not the kind of thing I want to hide, exactly. More the kind of thing I just want to forget."

Andy nodded as if she understood, although she knew she didn't and couldn't. She'd had a happy childhood with a lot of good memories. She didn't want to leave it behind or forget it. But Miranda was clearly working on giving the twins that kind of childhood, too. Only time would tell if she succeeded, of course, but…but maybe Andy would be allowed to help with the new one, the boy without a name.

"So," she said. "Seriously. 'Umberto.' What about that? Don't you think it's got, you know, gravitas?" Miranda rolled her eyes so hard she probably sprained something, but she was almost smiling again. "Or 'Valdemar.' He can grow up to be a Viking."

"Are you going to spend all night joking around?" Miranda asked archly.

Andy opened her mouth to be indignant, and reconsidered. "As opposed to what?"

Tonight, they slipped into a seldom-used study down the hall from the bathroom--Miranda sheepishly admitted she'd forgotten all about it the night before--and Andy reclined on a sofa as Miranda drove her fingers in and out, hesitantly at first, and then with more confidence as Andy whispered encouragement into her ear. It didn't take long. "Ohhh," Andy said, clenched, and slumped back against the cushions, breathing heavily.

"Well," Miranda said, looking insufferably pleased with herself as she sat back and licked her fingers. "It really isn't rocket science after all."

It was Andy's turn to roll her eyes. "Maybe I'm just really easy, did you ever think about that?"

"Often," Miranda said, and stroked Andy's mouth with the tip of her finger. Andy licked it, nipped, and Miranda swallowed hard.

Easy, huh? They'd see who was the easy one. Andy looked directly into Miranda's eyes, and was pleased when Miranda swallowed again. "So," she said softly. "You want me to tell you what I wanted to do to you that night? On New Year's Eve?" Miranda's eyes widened. "In your dress?"

"Yes," Miranda whispered.

Andy didn't bother buttoning up her shirt, or even putting her underwear back on, as she slipped off the couch and knelt on the carpet, spreading Miranda's knees. Miranda's breath hitched, and Andy inhaled the wonderful smell, just becoming familiar.

"It's a long list," Andy said. She stroked the inside of Miranda's knee. "You were perfect, top to bottom. Did you know that?" Miranda shook her head. "Mm-hmm. You walked into the kitchen that night and bam, ton of bricks. Everybody else saw it too. Everybody at that ball." Andy swallowed, remembering how it had felt, seeing all those people ogle Miranda. "You talk about guys wanting me. But everybody wanted you that night. Every man in that room wanted to fuck you."

"Well," Miranda said faintly.
Andy bent down, kissed her knee, and kept going. "But nobody wanted you like I did." They couldn't have--otherwise Miranda would have been mobbed. "I like your coat closet idea. I like the idea of you on the floor, on top of a mink coat, trying to keep quiet in the middle of a party." She leaned forward until she could nuzzle Miranda's breasts through her shirt. Miranda hissed and shivered. "I would have yanked the dress down around your waist. Too bad if I tore it, I wouldn't have cared. Just so long as I could get at these." She nuzzled again. "I would have had my hands and mouth on these until you spread your legs wide and begged me." She bit Miranda's nipple through the shirt. Miranda said 'ah!' and quickly bit her lip. Andy sent her fingertips questing up past Miranda's knee, up the inside of her thigh, to her underwear.

"Now," she said, and stroked lightly. This time Miranda made the 'nnngh' noise. Andy slipped her fingers beneath the elastic and satin, and into the wetness, and the 'nnngh' became 'oh!' "Now then." She moved her hand until her knuckles, trapped between the wet and the satin, rubbed against Miranda's clit. "You like that idea? You like this?"

Miranda opened her mouth to speak, and then came instead, with a long, shuddering sigh. Then she went pink-cheeked, and sank back against the sofa.

"Talk about easy," Andy said, and licked her fingers. "All right, down to business."

Miranda opened her eyes and blinked at Andy. "What?" But she was off-guard and relaxed, and didn't put up a fight when Andy urged her to lift her hips so she could slide her underwear off.

"Now," Andy said again, and licked her lips this time. "Now let me show you what else I would have done on that mink coat." Miranda gasped; Andy leaned in; Miranda whimpered, and after that, didn't manage to say anything coherent for a while.

Which was okay. Andy had her mouth full and wouldn't have been much good at conversation.

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Andy wasn't sure how she'd expected her birthday to start off, but it wasn't with a six-thirty a.m. phone call from Miranda saying, "You'll have to take the subway this morning. Cassidy's running a slight temperature and I'm not coming in until eight-thirty."

Andy held the phone away from her mouth just long enough to spit toothpaste into the sink before she said, "Good morning, Miranda. Sorry about Cassidy, it's not serious, right?"

"No, I don't think so," Miranda said. "I'm just waiting with her until Cara arrives. Hopefully she can go to school this afternoon. I'd better go--I'll see you at the office. Oh, Happy Birthday." Then she hung up. Andy grinned, and did her best to wash the remaining sleep out of her face before she put her makeup on.

She'd almost forgotten how noisy and crowded the subway was at rush hour. She got pushed and jostled and cursed at, and couldn't score a seat, which meant she had to hang on to an overhead strap while balancing in tightly-pinching high heels. And it smelled. Maybe she'd been getting a little spoiled lately.

Andy reached Elias-Clarke at seven-forty-five: since Miranda was going to be late, there had been no real rush. The security guard smiled at her as she ran her pass card and entered the turnstile. She just missed the elevator (which was nearly full anyway), and sighed, setting back on her heels to await the next one.
"Going up?"

Andy blinked, turned, and glanced down a little bit to see Irv Ravitz standing next to her and smiling. "Oh," she said, and summoned a bright smile in return. "Good morning, Mr. Ravitz."

"Morning, Andy. It is Andy, isn't it?" Surprised, Andy nodded, but before either of them could speak again, the next elevator arrived. The door dinged open, and Irv headed in. He saw Andy hovering by the door, and motioned her in with him. "Oh, come on. I'm not Miranda," he chuckled.

Andy managed another smile and hurried in. The door closed before anyone else could join them. Irv pressed '17' for Runway's floor, and then '11' for his own. The elevator jolted into motion. "Then again," he added, "I hear you get special elevator privileges with her. How'd you manage that?"

His tone was friendly enough. Andy still felt edgy, stuck here alone with the man who'd nearly kicked Miranda to the curb, and was no doubt planning to try again sometime. Maybe sometime soon. But it was suicide to be anything but friendly to the chairman of Elias-Clarke. "Oh," she said with a little laugh, "I don't know that I managed anything. You know Miranda. You just go along with what she wants and don't ask questions."

"True, true," Irv said. "I hear a lot of good things about you, though. She seems pretty impressed with you. With your performance. Summoned you to London at Christmas, didn't she? You must be doing something right."

"Oh, well," Andy said, trying hard not to blush, and trying really hard not to think about what Irv would say if he knew how well Andy performed for Miranda. And vice versa. "I'm just doing my job. I'm glad to hear I seem to be doing it well."

"From what I hear, you are," Irv said. "You know, you and I had a pretty good conversation going about John Cheever, didn't we?" Andy nodded, trying not to wince, considering that the conversation had started up only moments after Miranda's soon-to-be-ex husband had insulted Irv. "Pretty awkward moment. You saved it. Don't think I didn't notice what you were up to."

This time Andy couldn't control her blush. "O-oh," she stammered. "I…I just--well…"

He waved a hand. "It was a compliment. You can think on your feet. You're a good kid, and I like you."

"Oh," Andy said, blinking. "Well, thank y--"

"That's why it pains me to fire you," Irv said.

Andy froze, sure that she must have misheard. "What?" she said.

"Don't worry," Irv said. "I'm sure you'll find something, a smart girl like you. Get Miranda to help."

"Help?" Andy said, her eyes going wider. "Mr. Ravitz--I don't understand--"

"Not a lot to understand, really," he said. "You're fired."

Andy stared at Irv. Irv stared right back.

"What?" Andy whispered. "But--but y-you can't just--"

"Oh, yes I can," he said, and now his eyes were hard. "I think you'll find, Andy, that I can hire and fire anybody in this building, regardless of what Miranda Priestly has to say about it. Make sure she
understands that before you go. You can stay until the end of the business day. After that, you're done."

Andy couldn't respond. Surely none of this was real. Surely this wasn't actually happening.

They reached the eleventh floor. The door slid open. Irv glanced back at her, and this time, his gaze was not without pity.

"First-class flights to London cost a pretty penny, especially on the company card," he said. "Tell her to find a less expensive toy next time."

The doors closed between them, and Andy was left alone in the car.

It came as a surprise when the doors opened again and she saw the familiar glass-and-cream walls and panels of the Runway offices. Maybe she had been dreaming. Maybe she'd just hallucinated that whole encounter.

But no. She hadn't imagined that: not the cold, hard purpose in Irv Ravitz's eyes as he made Andy the first casualty in his war with Miranda Priestly. Because that's what it was. Irv wasn't pulling his punches now. Andy had been waiting for it, dreading it, since Paris, and now it was here. And she'd been the first one caught in the crossfire.

What the hell was she going to do?

She headed into the reception area in a daze. At some point she made it to her desk--oh, but it wasn't hers anymore, was it?--and sat down hard, staring blankly at nothing.

Suddenly Ellie's voice trilled out, "Oh, Andy! Happy Birthday!"

Andy's head jerked around to see Ellie hurrying forward, still in her coat and with her face flushed from the cold; she balanced a tray of Starbucks in one hand with a small bouquet of flowers in the other. The flowers had a bouncy yellow balloon tied to the slender green vase.

"Happy Birthday," Ellie repeated, setting the bouquet down on Andy's desk with an air of triumph. "I picked these up last night, do you like them? Whoops--let me just put Miranda's coffee out before I spill it--" She glanced around, frowning. "Isn't she here yet?"

"Cassidy got sick this morning," Andy heard herself say. "She won't be here until eight-thirty."

"Oh." Ellie pouted. "I guess I didn't have to rush so fast this morning, then. I hope Cassidy's okay, though," she added quickly.

"Yeah," Andy said, still feeling like her entire body had been shot full of Novocain: puffy and numb. "Me too." She stared at the flowers. "Um. These, these are really pretty. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Ellie said, beaming. "Let me just find somewhere to put this coffee--do you want Miranda's latte? Since I'll have to run out and get her another one anyway."

"No thanks," Andy said.

"Okay," Ellie said, and added, "you look a little pale. You're not getting sick, are you?"

"Um," Andy said.

Right then, Nigel appeared. He grinned at Andy. "Good morning, birthday girl," he said. "How's the morning treating you so far?"
Andy gasped, hid her face in her hands, and started to cry.

There was shocked silence for one moment, and then Ellie asked, distraught, "Andy, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Andy said, and then the sheer absurdity of saying that made her give a sharp, painful, hysterical little laugh. She hiccupped, and Nigel quickly offered her a tissue, his eyes wide. She dashed it over her eyes, and saw little mascara smudges coming away. "Irv Ravitz just fuh-fuh-fired me," she added, deciding that there was no use trying to keep it a secret—not from Ellie and Nigel, anyway. Besides, apparently Andy had to be out of Elias-Clarke forever by tonight, so what was the point in concealing the truth?

The thought made her cry harder, but not too hard to hear Ellie gasp, disbelievingly, "What?"

"H-he fired me--just now--in the elevator--I, I, I--"

And then Nigel's hand, warm and firm, was on her shoulder as he said, "Come on. Get up. We're going to my office. Ellie, watch the phones and keep quiet."

"Okay," Ellie whispered as Andy obeyed the arm tugging her elbow. She covered her nose with another tissue and followed Nigel down the hall, glad that it was still early and not everybody had arrived at work yet.

Nigel got them both into his office and shut the door. "Sit down," he said, and eased Andy on to a high-legged stool. "Don't fall off. Now tell me what happened."

Andy related it all, every word and detail that she could remember, while Nigel's face went through a series of changes: it was incredulous, at first, and then it darkened with anger, and finally, smoothed out in resignation. "It's been coming for a while," he said. "I didn't know it would come like this, though. And on your birthday. Christ, I'm sorry, Andy."

"Not your fault," Andy mumbled, staring down at her hands, lying limp and useless in her lap.

"No," Nigel said. "But I think I can help." And now there was something else in his voice: the unidentifiable tone Andy had heard a few times before, but never understood. She looked back up at him, trying to blink her tears away.

"Well," Nigel said, and seated himself on another stool, facing Andy. He crossed his legs and rested his hands on one knee. "I was going to tell you this over drinks this evening, but why don't we bump it up a few hours, hmm?"

"Bump it up?" Andy asked. "Bump what up?"

"Remember when I asked you about your birthday, back in London?" Nigel said. Andy nodded. "Bet you thought it was a weird question, didn't you?" Andy nodded again. "Well. Call me a sentimental fool. But I knew it was in March, and I figured the timing would work out. I didn't know it would work out this well, though."

"Nigel," Andy said, and her voice wobbled.

He looked contrite and tilted his head to the side. "Sorry. Now's not the time for mysteries, is it? Let me put it plain and simple: I'm offering you a new job."

Andy just stared at him, unable to summon up any other response.

He grinned, and then stifled it, as if realizing it wasn't quite appropriate. "You heard me. That's what
I was going to tell you tonight. A new job. Consider it a birthday gift to you, from me, the newly liberated Nigel Kipling."

"Newly liberated?" Andy managed, shaking her head.

"I'm quitting," he said, as casually as if this wasn't the most shocking thing he'd ever said to her. "I'm leaving Runway. It's over, done, hey presto, fini. I'm gone. And I want you to come with me."

"What?" Andy gasped, rubbing her forehead as if that would help. "What are you talking about?"

Nigel sighed. "I wish we were at a bar. This sort of thing always goes over better when you have a drink in your hand. But here it is: for months, I've been in talks with Georg Schumann at Delton Wright. You've met Georg, haven't you? He said so." Andy nodded mutely. "Yes. Well. As it happens, Delton Wright has decided to launch a new magazine. A men's magazine. And they want me at the helm as editor-in-chief." Nigel leaned forward, his eyes intent. "Me, Andy."

"A men's magazine?" Andy asked disbelievingly. "I mean--like--"

"Oh, no," Nigel said quickly, laughing. "No, we're not talking Playboy or Maxim. I mean like Esquire, or even GQ. Sure, there's a certain amount of pandering involved, but we're going to have some class. Think of it as Runway For Men, only with articles on politics and mountain climbing instead of society parties and interior decorating." He paused, then conceded, "And a few women in bikinis, okay. You've got to. But they're not the main thing. Plenty of other magazines do that."

"Plenty of…" Andy shook her head. "Ooh. Well, that's--and you're--but Nigel…I mean, you're a fashion director, not…"

It was Nigel's turn to shake his head. "I've been Miranda's right-hand man for more years than I care to count," he said. "It was the apprenticeship from hell. I've seen every aspect of every single thing she does, over and over again. And I've helped her do about ninety percent of it without getting the credit. Trust me on this one: I can pull off being an editor-in-chief." He took a deep breath. "And don't let this give you the wrong idea, but my God, I would sell my soul never to have to direct a photo shoot again. Remember what I said about the schooners?"

"But Miranda," Andy whispered, imagining Miranda's face when she got the news.

"If I wait for Miranda to give me the go-ahead, I'll be stuck here forever," Nigel said. "I learned that the hard way. I'm ready to move on, Andy. I'm ready to get out--to live life on my own terms. She's not the only one with vision, you know." He took a deep breath. "I won't lie to you. This is a huge undertaking. It's always risky--starting a magazine from the ground up. Bringing people together, mixing new blood with established talent, trying to figure out what sells as fast as possible. But Georg wants it. And he's making sure that Vincent Wright wants it, too."

Vincent Wright. Andy had met him at the luncheon on Boxing Day. The CEO who was really into Broadway musicals. This had to be a dream.

"We've got full support from Delton Wright, full backing," Nigel said. He leaned forward. "I want you to be a part of it too, Andy. I've seen your work ethic, I've seen how fast you learn, I've seen your writing. Play your cards right, and you've got big things ahead of you. As soon as I knew for sure it was going to come together, I thought of you."

"Me?" Andy croaked.

"I can't promise you the moon or stars," Nigel said. "Not yet. But I need an assistant too. Someone who knows what she's doing, who knows the ropes beyond getting coffee and running menial
errands--someone who can really help me get this thing off the ground. Andy." His face was alight with enthusiasm. "I mean it. Inside a year or two, you can be a junior features editor. You know--the articles, the reviews, the 'real stuff' you care about. And you can go up and up from there."

"Go up," Andy said.

"I know it's a lot to take in," Nigel said. "Especially after what Irv just pulled. But Andy--now you've got no reason to say no. Think about it. It's like destiny, if I believed in destiny. Fate. Karma. Kismet!"

"I--" Andy gulped. "I guess--I--Nigel, I really think I should talk to Miranda--"

Nigel sat back with a heavy sigh. "How did I know you'd say that?"

"Nigel, I have to," Andy protested. "I mean, Irv fired me, I have to talk to her about that, at least. It's, it's basic courtesy!"

"I know," Nigel said. He added, "And I know you feel like you owe her something, too. You don't." Andy's jaw dropped. "She owes you. She owes you big time, for everything you've done for her. And it's time for her to pay you back."

"It's not like that," Andy protested, wondering why her stomach was cramping up so much.

"Of course it is," Nigel said. "It always is. Besides." He sat back again and regarded Andy very seriously. "This isn't the last move Irv will make, Andy. He's out for her blood and he's the chairman of the goddamned company. He can beat her. He will beat her, eventually."

"No," Andy whispered.

"Yes," Nigel countered. "Believe me, I don't like it either. I care about Miranda too. But Irv firing you is like sending up a great big firecracker, and everybody will know what it means. Just picture rats fleeing a sinking ship. That's what it's going to be like around here."

"No," Andy repeated, wondering if she was going to cry again. She'd definitely started shaking. Because all the denials in the world wouldn't change the fact that Nigel was only speaking the truth. Irv had somehow found a crack in her defenses, Miranda was under fire, and nobody would want to weather it with her. Except for Andy, who would have stayed by her side no matter what, but who'd already been thrown off the battlefield without being given the choice.

"Keisha's coming too," Nigel said, interrupting Andy's train of thought.

"K-Keisha?"

"Oh, yes. I sounded her out not too long after I lured her from Elle. I've always liked her. And she likes you. I'm getting together a good team: her and other people, from all over the business. Mostly men, I have to say--but not all." He took a deep breath. "Come on, Six. You owe me." He pointed his index finger at her nose. "For Modernity. No reason not to pay me back, not now."

"I know," Andy whispered. "I…it's just a lot to, to…"

"To take in, I know," Nigel said. "Look. I don't want to kick you while you're down. This was supposed to be an exciting opportunity, not something you feel forced into because you don't have a job anymore." He grimaced.

"Nigel, I appreciate it," Andy said at once, because now she was starting to come out of her daze,
and she knew she had to make that clear. "I do. Whatever happens. Really."

"Tell me you'll think about it, and answer me soon," Nigel said. "Within the next day or two. I need to know."

Andy relaxed. A day or two. That would give her time to talk to Miranda. Time to think. "I promise," she said.

His eyes twinkled. "I hope you say yes. I've started to like having you around. Come on. You and me, kid. Let's blow this popsicle stand."

Andy managed a weak smile. "Well--I--"

Suddenly, the door to Nigel's office slammed open with such force that both Nigel and Andy jumped; Andy, her nerves run ragged, actually cried out. And she felt no calmer when she saw Miranda Priestly barreling into the room, still wearing her coat and clutching her bag, her face tight and glowing with a fury Andy had never seen before. It was terrifying, and out of the corner of her eye, Andy saw Nigel cringe a little. But Miranda didn't even seem to notice him. Her gaze was so fierce that Andy wondered if it might not actually bore all the way through her head and into the wall behind.

"You're, um, early," Andy said uselessly. She wiped her eyes again with the back of her hand and sniffled. "Is, is Cassidy oka--"

Breathing quickly, Miranda said, "Eleanor has just told me, though I am sure she must be mistaken, that you said Irv Ravitz fired you this morning. There was something about an elevator."

Andy swallowed, shivered, and nodded.

Miranda took a deep breath, and held her shoulders up very, very straight, quivering like she was about to explode on the spot.

"Miranda," Andy whispered, with no idea of what she'd say next. She found herself wringing her hands.

"Don't worry," Miranda said, sounding as if she was strangling on something. Andy felt a tug deep in her gut, deep in her heart, and suddenly wanted more than anything to jump off the stool and run to Miranda and wrap her arms around her, though who would be comforting whom? She wasn't sure. "Don't worry," Miranda repeated. "I'll take care of it. I'll--he can't do this. I won't let him. You're not going anywhere."

"Don't be so sure," Nigel said.

Andy whipped her head around to stare at him in horror. "Nigel," she gasped because, seriously, oh shit, oh no--

Miranda shook herself, as if she'd just noticed Nigel was in the room. "What are you talking about?"

"Nigel!" Andy repeated, on the verge of panicking.

"It's okay," Nigel said, never breaking eye contact with Miranda. "Andy, will you please leave? I need to talk to Miranda alone."

"No--Nigel, wait, please--let me talk to her first--"
"Miranda," Nigel said, "I really must insist. Trust me. We need to talk right away."

"Miranda--" Andy began.

"Andrea, please leave," Miranda said, and Andy froze. Now Miranda was looking at Nigel with that same deadly focus. As if she'd already figured out what he was going to say. Maybe she had. "I'll speak to you later."

And…that was that. There was no arguing with Miranda when she used that tone of voice. Andy slunk out of Nigel's office, feeling as pathetic and inconsequential as she had on her first day at work. More pathetic. At least she'd had a job then.

"Andy?" Ellie whispered, when Andy returned to their desks. The phone rang, and she jumped to answer it. "M—Miranda Priestly's office…"

Ellie was going to be the only one doing this after today, Andy realized as she sat down heavily in her chair. Eleanor Lake, Miranda's only assistant. Would Irv even let Miranda hire a second person? Would he degrade Miranda as much as possible in the name of cutting costs, before moving in for the kill? Of course he would. Why shouldn't he?

Andy vowed that the next time she saw Irv Ravitz, she was going to make a crack about his height. And then maybe his weight. And then maybe his glasses. And possibly even his penis size. Anything that would make him feel as angry and humiliated as she felt right now. Fuck John Cheever, anyway. She grabbed her purse and headed for the ladies' room, where she did her best to fix her ruined makeup.

When she returned, she was just in time to hear Ellie say, "Yes, thank you, I'll tell her you called," and then the click of the phone going back into the receiver. "Andy?" she said again.

Andy sighed as she headed over to Ellie's desk, feeling how much her shoes pinched. "All right, Ellie. Irv says I have to be out of here by the end of the business day, and I can't come back."

Ellie's eyes widened with horror as she jumped to her feet. "What? But--but what about two weeks' notice, or--"

"That doesn't apply when you're firing people," Andy said. "At least it doesn't have to. At least when you're Irv Ravitz. Today is officially my last day." She raised a trembling hand to her forehead and pushed her bangs out of her face before she realized that her hands were, in fact, trembling. She tried to stop them. She couldn't, quite.

"Oh, no," Ellie gasped. "Then…then…"

"So you have to do all this yourself," Andy confirmed. "I'm sorry, Ellie. I don't even know if Irv will let Miranda hire a new second assistant." Ellie went pale. "Listen, I'll do my best," Andy said, and swallowed. "If you can handle the phones, I'll throw together a couple of lists for you--stuff you need to know--like phone numbers, the people you should always try to speak to, and her favorite restaurants and florists and stuff--"

"Andy…"

"--and of course, you know, even when I'm gone you can always call me if you have questions--you can--"

"Andy," Ellie said, and to Andy's great surprise, slipped one arm around her shoulders in a half-hug. She didn't look panicky, not right now--the opposite, in fact, like she was the one trying to calm
Andy down. "It's okay. We'll work it out. It's okay, we'll manage." She patted Andy's shoulder.

No you won't, Andy wanted to say, nobody can do what I do, I'm indispensable. But she wasn't. Nobody was.

Perhaps even Ellie could figure out what she was thinking, because she added quickly, "But I will call you, I mean, I'll have to. If you don't mind. There's still so much I don't know yet--"

"Right," Andy said, and had to restrain herself from rubbing her eyes, because she'd just reapplied all her mascara and she wasn't about to do it again five minutes later.

"But…" Ellie lowered her voice and sounded almost apologetic. "But what'll you do now?"

"I don't know," Andy said, thinking about Nigel's job offer, thinking about Miranda's furious insistence that Andy could stay on, somehow, even when she had to know that wouldn't work. "I don't know yet."

"Andrea."

Ellie immediately jerked her hand from Andy's shoulders, and Andy turned to see Miranda heading towards them. Her face was pale, but calm, and Andy couldn't read any particular emotion in her eyes anymore.

"Go home," she said to Andy, her voice flat.

Andy stared at her. "What?"

"I said go home." Miranda slipped out of her coat and tossed it, with her bag, on Ellie's desk. Ellie gasped, and scrambled over to the closet to put them away. Miranda took the opportunity to murmur, "Just…please, it's for the best, before word spreads. I'll tell Eleanor to keep her mouth shut, and I'll call you as soon as I can. I have to speak with Nigel some more, anyway."

"Oh," Andy whispered. "Okay."

For just a moment, regret and anger flared in Miranda's eyes again. But then Ellie hurried back to her desk, and Miranda jerked her head towards the door. "Well? Go on then."

"Yes," Andy said, and managed a smile for Ellie as she headed to the closet to fetch her own coat and bag, maybe--probably--for the last time. "Bye, Ellie. Feel free to give me a call."

Ellie's lip wobbled, and Andy hoped desperately that she wouldn't start crying in front of Miranda, who looked as if she was about five seconds away from taking out her rage on the nearest available object. Ellie managed a weak little wave, and then Andy headed for the elevators, glad when she didn't run into anybody who seemed to know what had happened. Glad when she didn't run into Nigel.

The subway ride felt even worse, and longer, this time. Andy felt antsy, impatient, even though she didn't know what exactly she was waiting for: just that she was going to go home, change into her pajamas, and eat something fattening while she waited for Miranda to call. It was her birthday, right? Might as well celebrate. Hell, she could even open up a bottle of wine. Who cared that it was just past nine in the morning? She'd done it before, hadn't she, in the service of Runway? Good thing Irv didn't know about that, at least.

No silk pajamas today, Andy thought, as she doffed her Sonia Rykiel and threw on a tank top, a sweatshirt, and a pair of cotton pants. Comfy clothing. And that was another thing. She was going to
have to return almost all of her clothing to the Closet--Nigel had given it to her on loan, not to keep. Plus her Sidekick. She couldn't exactly keep using the company phone plan. Or the Starbucks card. Or any of the other perks she'd become accustomed to without even noticing.

Unless Miranda somehow managed to get Andy her job back. But how could she? Nigel was right: this was Irv's opening sally, it had to be, and he wouldn't have done it if he didn't feel confident he could pull it off. Oh, he'd probably give Andy her job back, all right--if Miranda sacrificed her pride and asked him nicely. Begged him. Andy would rather jump from the roof of Elias-Clarke than let that happen, but that was okay, because she was pretty sure Miranda would too.

Besides…maybe it was for the best. Andy swallowed hard. Dipping into company ink, and all that. Maybe it was more…moral to be with Miranda only as a lover, instead of an assistant. A lowly assistant-cum-chess pawn. Maybe it might put them on something closer to equal footing--except that, since they'd started up together, Andy had never really felt on unequal footing at all. She probably should have. But she hadn't. It took something like this to show her how powerless she'd been all along, how little she mattered in the grand scheme of things.

What would happen to Miranda if she lost Runway now? What would she do? She wouldn't want to sit around at home and watch the baby all day. That wasn't who she was. She had to have challenges, big ones, high-profile ones that, when she took them on, made people look at her with respect. Andy understood that need. She felt the same way. She always had.

"I see a great deal of myself in you."

Andy laughed hysterically, for far too long, and then poured herself an oversized glass of wine.

When she'd finished the glass, she flopped down on her sofa and turned on the TV, determined to revel in the freedom to be ratty and gross and lazy. During her last period of unemployment, when she'd been frantically searching around at newspapers as she and Nate did their best to live on a sous-chef's salary, she'd never let herself laze around. Job letters and phone calls every day, reading every newspaper she could get her hands on in the hopes that somebody would need a kid fresh out of college, even applying to be an unpaid intern at the Herald-Sun once, in a moment of desperation. (Nate had nearly taken her head off for that one.) And then Cherie at Elias-Clarke had called and changed her life forever.

One year ago today, Miranda had hired her. She'd worked as Miranda's assistant for exactly one year. "You work a year for her, and you can get a job at any magazine you want," Emily had said. Except that Andy only wanted the job she'd just lost.

So she was going to sit around and be miserable for a while. No reading papers today, no making phone calls. If need be, she had another job lined up, and all she had to do was tell Nigel yes.

She tried to tell herself that he was right, that she should be happy about her new opportunity. It did sound exciting. A chance to be part of something new, to get in on the ground floor and see if the risks paid off. Sure, she'd never envisioned writing features on mountain-climbing at Runway For Men, or whatever it was going to be called. But that didn't have to be a bad thing. Surprises could be fun.

Yeah, Andy thought, trying to keep her mind on Animal Planet instead of bursting into tears again.
She just lived for life's little surprises.

She watched TV until noon, got up, realized she had nothing in the fridge, and ordered Thai. It was one o'clock by the time she finished lunch, and she decided that a nap was immediately in order, because being unconscious was definitely preferable to the alternative right now. She conked out on the couch with a half-empty container of pad thai on the coffee table, and reruns of *The O.C.* playing on the television and intruding into her dreams. Summer kept asking Andy if she should get back together with Seth or not, and Andy kept saying, "Who cares, I'm gay now," but Summer wouldn't listen and eventually turned into a chair.

She woke up to the insistent ringing of her phone, which she'd left in her bag, which she'd left on the kitchen counter. She banged her shin on the coffee table trying to get to it, but had managed to stop cursing by the time she answered the phone. It was Miranda. "Hello?"

"Are you at home?"

"Well, yeah." Where Miranda had told her to be.

"Do you have plans tonight?"

Was Miranda making fun of her? "No," Andy said incredulously.

"Fine. I'll stop by your place after work."

"You'll--" Andy's eyes bugged out. She was already looking aghast at the wreck of her apartment. It had been ages since she'd cleaned. "You're coming here?"

"Isn't that what I said?" Miranda said, sounding irritable. "It'll be easiest if I drop by after work. And we have a lot to discuss."

*We have a lot to discuss.* It was uncomfortably close to *We need to talk.* Ominous. Andy shuddered. "Did you--I mean, did Nigel--"

"Yes," Miranda said shortly. "We'll talk about it later. Look for me around eight-thirty--I've promised the girls I'll be home for supper tonight."

"Oh," Andy said. "O-okay. I'll see you…call me if…"

"I will," Miranda said, and hung up. Andy stared at her apartment again, at the shelves that badly needed dusting, at the worn carpets begging for the touch of a vacuum, at the tatty sofa and cheap table and chairs. She thought of the grime in the bathroom. Great. She'd always wanted to spend her birthday cleaning house. This was the worst day ever.

It was three-thirty now, though, so she had a decent lead time. Andy sighed, decided to tackle the living room first, rolled up her sleeves, and got to work.

It actually wasn't too bad, she realized, midway through scouring the tub. Cleaning kept her mind off other things, like, say, the future. Or maybe that was just the bleach killing her brain cells. It was hard to be sure. Either way, by the time seven rolled around, Andy's apartment was cleaner than it had been in months.

Then she sighed, and did what she'd been dreading: packing up her *Runway* clothes. Each item had its own dustbag or covering, of course, which she had religiously used when she wasn't wearing something. (Once she'd caught Nate using a folded-up Isabella Fiore dustbag as a makeshift oven mitt. It had been one of their more memorable arguments.) The shoeboxes and garment bags stacked
up on the bed until Andy was astonished by two things: one, how much stuff she'd borrowed over the course of a year, and two, how she'd managed to cram it all into her closet.

It sucked. Everything sucked. It was like she was packing a whole year of her life away. Well, she was, wasn't she? Packing away everything she'd worked for, changed for, sacrificed for, given up friends for--and for what? In the end, it hadn't even been her choice to leave Runway and take a different path. She was just like Emily, who'd been kicked on to "better" things without her own say-so, only this was about ten times more humiliating and Emily would probably be really happy if and when she heard the news.

Andy was leaving Runway now, and her place at Miranda's side, and all the duties she'd taken on and had grown to cherish: duties that made her want to get up in the morning and see what each new day would bring, for love's sake. Only now they weren't her duties anymore. All that was gone. All that was ruined.

Seven-forty. She had no appetite to finish the pad thai, and tossed it into the garbage. Then she settled in to wait, brooding.

Miranda didn't disappoint. She called Andy at ten after eight to confirm that she was coming, and arrived at eight-forty-five on the dot. Andy decided later that the moment Miranda Priestly walked into her apartment and looked around had been one of the most surreal of her life. But Miranda didn't immediately sneer, roll her eyes, or turn around and walk out, so Andy supposed it couldn't be that bad.

Miranda looked exhausted and unhappy. She'd probably had a worse day than Andy, who'd at least been able to sit on her ass and watch TV for a few hours, when all was said and done. She shut the door behind herself, and she and Andy silently regarded each other for a long moment.

"Happy Birthday to me," Andy said brightly.

A bitter smile twisted Miranda's mouth, and Andy wished she hadn't made such a dumb joke at a time like this. "Indeed," she said, and inclined her head towards the couch. "Let's sit."

"Oh, sure," Andy said, also regretting her poor manners. It had just been so long since she'd had company. "You, um, want something to drink?"

"No," Miranda said, and seated herself on one end of the sofa. Andy took the other, tucking one knee under herself so she could face Miranda directly. Miranda, however, kept both feet firmly on the floor, and appeared fascinated by her lap.

"Take the job," she said after a moment, and with what appeared to be some difficulty.

Andy swallowed. "Miranda…"

"I said take it," Miranda said sharply. "Nigel is correct. It's an excellent opportunity for you--one that is not likely to pass your way again. You'd be a fool not to take it, even if Irv hadn't forced our hands."

"So, I guess that's a 'no' on me coming back to Runway, huh?" Andy said, and yet again wished that she'd kept her big mouth shut. "I mean…"

"Yes," Miranda said. "It is a 'no.'"

"I'm sorry," Andy mumbled.
Miranda glared at her. "You're sorry? You are sorry? Out of all the people who should be sorry--" She spat out the final word, and then trailed off, turning to gaze off into the distance.

Andy had no idea what to say. None. Even now.

"I should have seen it coming," Miranda said. "Nigel. I should have seen it. You're the one who told me..." She shook her head.

"You've been worrying about other stuff," Andy said feebly.

"That I have," Miranda said. She looked back at Andy. "Not the day either of us pictured, is it?"

Andy laughed shakily, and decided she'd had enough of the 'decorous distance' thing. She scooted in closer on the couch, until her knee bumped Miranda's thigh. "I was thinking earlier about how much I love surprises," she said.

"It must have been going on in January," Miranda said, as if Andy hadn't spoken. "When we had lunch with Vincent and Georg and Helga. They would have known. It would have been in the works." She clenched her hands. "And of course they said not a word to me. Why would they have? Just because Nigel--" She nearly choked on the last word.

"Do you not want me to work for him?" Andy asked quietly. "Do you want to cut your ties with him?" She wondered what she'd do if Miranda said yes.

But luckily, Miranda said, "No. Well, I mean, I want to, but it wouldn't be wise. I doubt very much that he's outlived his usefulness just yet." The words sent a chill down Andy's spine, but Miranda kept talking. "As he proved today. At least he's got a place for you. He knows your worth. Take the job," she repeated. "He's right--it's time I did something for you."

Andy sat up very straight and glared. "He said that?"

"He said many things," Miranda said, and she looked more tired than ever. "He said many things that he has undoubtedly been waiting to say for a long time."

"Oh, God, Miranda," Andy said.

Miranda waved her hand. "I can handle it, Andrea. I assure you that I'm still quite able to look at myself in the mirror, no matter what Nigel Kipling says." Andy managed a smile. "And as I said, he's right. I've been wanting to do something for you for a while." She glared at Andy. "Not that you make it easy."

"That's not why I'm with you," Andy said.

"Exactly," Miranda said, and rolled her eyes. "Well. This isn't what I ever imagined, but it'll do as a stop-gap measure."

"A what?" Andy blinked. "What kind of gap are we stopping?"

To Andy's astonishment, Miranda smiled. A sly, secretive smile. She reached up and touched Andy's cheek. "I'm up to something," she said.

"You?" Andy said, widening her eyes. "I don't believe it."

Miranda lowered her hand back into her lap, but leaned forward slightly, her eyes gleaming. "Don't worry," she said softly. "I'm not beaten, Andrea. I never am. I can promise you that things will
improve soon." She cupped Andy's chin. "For both of us."

After that, Andy had no choice but to lean in and kiss her, so she did. It was light and surprisingly chaste; after the day she'd had, she really wasn't in the mood for sex, and besides--

"Isn't Roy waiting?" she whispered when they parted.

"Yes," Miranda said. "I told him to find somewhere to be until I called him."

"Would he mind carrying that to Runway for me, after he drops you off? Or tomorrow morning. I'll help him carry it down to the car," Andy said, gesturing to the piles of clothing and shoes on her bed, and knowing it wouldn't matter a bit if Roy minded at all.

Miranda glanced over, and her eyes widened. The stack was so high that it was actually visible from the sofa. "Good grief," she said.

"I didn't know it was adding up like that," Andy said sheepishly.

"Neither did I," Miranda said. "I hope you still have the boots."

"Yeah," Andy admitted. "I was going to return them--"

"At your peril," Miranda said flatly. "But Roy can take the rest. He was very upset to find out what Irv had done to you, by the way."

"Roy's a good guy," Andy said. "I'm glad you didn't fire him. Hey, that is something you did for me," she added with a smile.

"Is that what you think?" Miranda said, looking surprised. "Don't be silly. If I'd fired him, you would have had no reason not to date him."

Andy's mouth fell open.

"So, call Nigel and take the job," Miranda said. "And see if you can keep Sunday night free after all. The girls are counting on you."

Andy wasn't about to let her get away with it. "Roy," she said. "That was back in January, and you said you didn't--oh, you knew back then, you totally knew--"

"I wonder what kind of cake they'll decide on," Miranda said thoughtfully. She tapped her lips. "Now that you're going to be working at some men's thing, you won't have to watch your figure quite as much, but you should still be careful."

"Uh huh," Andy said, crossing her arms and relieved at the departure from seriousness, glad to embrace a moment that wasn't fraught and horrible. "Sure. Whatever. If I decide to get fat, you can't stop me anymore, can you?"

Miranda looked at Andy down the impressive length of her nose. "You're awfully cocky now that you're gainfully employed again, or about to be," she said.

"Yeah, well," Andy said, "you know, if anything happens to Runway --if, you know, Irv--"

"Oh, Irv won't--"

Andy took Miranda's hand in hers and continued earnestly, "--then I want you to know you can rely on me. We might have to pinch a few pennies to get by--"
Miranda's unwilling snort of laughter was the sweetest sound Andy had heard all day.

At nine-thirty, just a few minutes after Miranda and Roy had gone, Andy's parents called to wish her a happy birthday and ask her how her day had been. To her horror, she started crying yet again. She felt like a faucet.

"You got fired?" her mother said in disbelief. "She fired you? She fired you?"

"No!" Andy said at once, and gulped back her tears. "No, Mom, she didn't. It was the company chairman. He's mad at Miranda and wanted to take a cheap shot at her." She wiped her eyes and laughed bitterly. "I got personally canned by the guy at the top. I guess it was kind of an honor."

"Oh, sweetheart," her dad said. "Just when you were doing well. And you've seemed so happy lately."

"Yeah." Andy closed her eyes. "I have been. I've been really happy. It's been great."

"I'm so sorry, honey. And on your birthday, I can't believe… Do you have anything, any leads on--"

"Oh, I've already got a new job," Andy said quickly. "With Nigel."

"Nigel? The fashion director?"

The whole story took a long time, and by the end of it, Andy was exhausted all over again, especially because she had to keep pausing to reassure her parents and make them feel better, instead of it being the other way around.

"Well, at least you've got something lined up. Sounds like it could be exciting," her dad finally said, trying to sound bright and cheerful.

"Yeah," Andy said, trying in her turn to sound duly excited.

"I'm so sorry you got caught in the middle like this," her mother said, not trying to sound anything but angry. "I'm sorry that man is making you pay for her mistakes."

Andy's eyes widened. Crap. "Mom, no," she said. "It's not Miranda's fault. Irv was the one who decided to fire me, she's not responsible for that. I told you she's been nice to me."

"Well, apparently she hasn't behaved as she ought," her mother said, "and you're paying the price for that."

"Your mother's right, in a way," her dad said.

"In a way. Oh, well, thank you, Richard."

"I'm just saying--Andy, sometimes it's more dangerous than you'd think, sticking around such a difficult personality, putting all your eggs in her basket. It's easy to get caught in those kinds of power struggles when you don't have much power yourself. I'm sorry it happened to you."

"Yeah, me too," Andy said, and hid her eyes in one hand. "I'm going to miss Runway." That wasn't even the half of it. "Can you believe it? After all that complaining I did…"
"Well," her mother said, and now she did sound happier, "maybe you'll actually have some free time."

"I…maybe," Andy said, not very sure of that at all. "I mean, starting a whole new magazine--there's bound to be lots of--"

"And it's a men's magazine, didn't you say?" her mother said.

"Helena," her dad said firmly.

"What? 'Helena' what? All I'm saying is--"

"Let's not push--"

"--wouldn't it be wonderful if you could meet a nice young man there? Or anywhere, really--"

"Helena," her dad repeated. "Let's not…although of course we'd be very happy for you, sweetheart."

Andy clenched her jaw to keep from screaming.

Andy called Nigel the next morning and accepted his offer. "Oh, thank God," he said. "I faced down Medusa yesterday for you, and I'd hate to think it was for nothing."

Andy winced, wanting to stand up for Miranda, but also wanting to know what had happened. "Was she awful?"

"Not as much as I'd expected," Nigel admitted. "She was hurt. And angry. Okay, enraged. But she wanted what was best for you, even as she obviously yearned to break my neck." He paused. "She'll miss you, Andy. Definitely more than she'll miss me, after what I pulled."

"She'll miss you, too," Andy said, deciding not to add that she and Miranda would continue to see plenty of each other anyway. Or…no, of course they would. Wouldn't they? "That's why she's so angry at you," she added.

"Danke, Sigmund," Nigel said without venom. "It's a duck-and-cover day around here, I'll tell you that. We haven't gone within ten feet of each other. I gave her two weeks' notice. She said she only wanted one."

"Yikes," Andy said, wincing again.

"Next week can't come soon enough," Nigel said. "I can't wait to get started." His voice didn't exactly tremble with excitement, but it came close. Andy grinned, glad to focus on Nigel's elation instead of her own gloom. "And you don't have to wait. You're not officially on my payroll yet, but I've got a few things I'd like you to get started on, if you don't mind."

"Sure, hold on," Andy said, and reached for her notepad. After a year of working for Miranda, she'd almost arrived at the point where she got panicky if it wasn't within arm's reach. "Okay, go ahead."

"They're setting up the offices on the tenth floor of Delton Wright. I've called security and told them to have a pass waiting for you, so you should be able to go straight up. You can get started setting up your space, arranging everything like you want it. Just get familiar with the place, shake a few hands
"if anybody's around, introduce yourself--you know, that kind of thing."

"Gotcha," Andy said, deciding that she hadn't needed her notepad after all. "Anything else, boss?"

"I like the sound of that," Nigel sighed.

"You were always my boss," Andy pointed out. "Sort of."

"You know what I mean. Whoops--I have a meeting. Thank God she won't be there. I'll call you later." Then he hung up without saying goodbye. He'd imprinted that much from Miranda, at least. Andy rolled her eyes, wondering how much Nigel was going to emulate Miranda without even realizing it. And if he'd be able to pull it off.

During her subway ride, Andy tried not to think about how she'd been driven to and from work in a Mercedes every day until yesterday. Or how, after getting out of the car, she and Miranda had talked in the elevator--talked with Miranda! In an elevator!--as they took advantage of a few moments of privacy at the start of a busy day.

What would Miranda be doing right now? Working at her desk, most likely, since she didn't have anything scheduled this morning. Andy knew her schedule for the rest of the week. It was strange and upsetting to realize that in a few days, though, she'd have no reason to know what Miranda would be up to at any given time, no connection at all to what was happening at Runway.

Andy was halfway to Delton Wright on the subway when her phone rang again. Ellie. Hoping nothing catastrophic had happened, but glad of the distraction too, Andy answered at once. "Hello, Ellie?"

"Andy, I've been thinking," Ellie babbled, "if I use my lunch break and go downstairs to talk to Irv, maybe I can ask him really nicely, and maybe he'll hire you back."

Uh-oh. "What's going on down there?"

"She's horrible!" Ellie said. "She keeps starting to tell you to do things, and then she remembers you're not there, and she always gives me this look like it's my fault--"

"Ellie--"

"--and I know I can't do what you do, Andy, I never could, but I'm trying and she doesn't even--"

"Ellie…"

"--care, she hates me now when I didn't even do anything, and Andy, she is crazy today, I've never seen anybody be this mean in my whole life--"

"Ellie!" Andy shouted, and everybody in the subway car turned to glare at her. She ignored them as she continued, "Where are you right now?"


"Under it?"

"She's gone, so she doesn't know I'm talking to you."

"Why are you under your desk?"

"It just feels safer down here," Ellie said.
"Ellie, I am not talking to you until you get up and sit in your chair," Andy said sternly. "Pull yourself together."

"Okay," Ellie whimpered. After a moment she said, "I'm sitting down now."

"Think about..." Andy floundered, and then had an idea. "Think about Miranda like a physics problem."

"How?" Ellie sounded doubtful.

"You know," Andy said, bluffing because she'd never taken a physics course in her life. She thought it was supposed to be kind of like math. "You figure out what the, um, equation is missing, and you add it. Or whatever. Approach her like you'd approach, uh--algebra?"

"Algebra," Ellie said thoughtfully. "Actually, that was never my favorite."

Andy rolled her eyes. "Well, just--"

"Besides, I don't think Miranda is a rational number."

"You might be on to something there," Andy acknowledged.

"Chaos theory, maybe," Ellie said. She giggled. "We can call Miranda a strange attractor, how about that?"

"Absolutely," Andy said, closing her eyes briefly. "So--"

"It's so nice to make geeky jokes again! I really miss that from Physics Club in college. Didn't you just love Physics Club?"

"Ellie! Focus!"

"Sorry," Ellie said meekly.

"Now, what does Miranda want you to do that you feel like you can't?"

"Everything at once," Ellie said. "I mean, I can do all the things she wants, just not at the exact same time, and as fast as she wants them. How did you always do that?"

"I knew people who helped me," Andy said. "People at Starbucks, maitre d's at restaurants, assistants at other magazines, junior people for all the designers. Get to know everybody at the bottom, just like us. I'll email you a list."

"Thanks so much, Andy," Ellie said. Then, "Oh! Here she comes. I have to go."

"Don't go back under the desk."

"I won't. Thanks, Andy. Bye!"

It might, Andy acknowledged to herself, have been a bad idea to give Ellie carte blanche to call her when she needed help. But she hated the idea of leaving Ellie to Miranda's tender mercies.

Or maybe it was the other way around. She grimaced, thinking of Miranda depending on Ellie to anticipate her every need and wish, spoken or otherwise. How much could a list really help Ellie? Taking care of Miranda involved more than lists. Sometime in the last few months--no, even before Paris--Andy had developed a sixth sense when it came to anticipating what Miranda was going to
need, want, or do. Well…most of the time. There were, Andy thought, notable exceptions. Like London, where Miranda had walloped her. Both times.

God! Andy hated that she wasn't at *Runway* now and doing what she did best. Hated that she was not looking after Miranda in a way that Ellie couldn't. *Hated* it. She'd gotten used to being with Miranda all day, nearly every day, and now she…wasn't. And she wouldn't be again, not like that. The thought hurt with nearly physical pain. Who the hell did Irv Ravitz think he was, anyway?

Still, maybe it was better this way. Healthier. Less codependent. That's what the experts would tell her, anyhow.

Andy decided that all experts, everywhere, could go to hell. And she was definitely keeping Sunday night free.

The Delton Wright offices were every bit as lavish as the offices at Elias-Clarke: same marbled floors, same gleaming elevators. Different colors, at least. Andy showed her driver's license at the security desk, and received her pass in due order.

"The *Distinguish* offices are on floor ten," the guard said, looking bored.

*Distinguish*. Andy blinked, realizing that Nigel hadn't even told her what the magazine's title was yet. Had he chosen it himself? Probably not. She didn't think even editors-in-chief got to make that kind of call. Oh well, could've been worse. Could've been *Stuff*.

As she'd expected, the office was in chaos: a few walls were being torn down to create more open space, while elsewhere, partitions were being raised. But Nigel's office was ready, and Andy found that without much trouble. It was smaller than Miranda's, but had large windows and a great view. Her desk—at least, she assumed it was hers—sat in the small anteroom outside. Not too bad. This part of the office had hunter-green walls, and a few abstract art prints and paintings had already been hung. Tasteful without being old-fashioned. But Andy realized that she missed the pale *Runway* offices already, the illusion of light and space that the cream walls and glass panels had created.

But maybe that would've been too girly. And Nigel was obviously intent on carving out his own place, on distancing himself from Miranda and her fiefdom. Good luck, really, Andy thought.

"Hey, there! You must be Andy Sachs."

Andy turned to see a tall, confident-looking man in an argyle sweater striding towards her, hand extended. He looked to be a few years older than her—early thirties, maybe. "I'm Brad Chesterton."

Okay, so yet again she was going to be surrounded by people with fake names. Andy smiled and shook his hand. "Hi."

"I'm senior manager of marketing." Brad didn't let go of her hand. Oh, crap. "I've heard a lot about you from Nigel. Looking forward to working with you."

Well, if he was in marketing, hopefully Andy wouldn't have to work with him too much at all, since Nigel seemed to want to groom her for features—a plan she was completely on board with. "Thanks," Andy said, and tugged her hand free, trying not to appear rude. "Likewise."

"So, you're setting up? Want a hand?" Brad looked her up and down, and Andy regretted wearing just a sweater and jeans. After last night, her wardrobe had been drastically reduced. She'd scored some lovely couture in London, but it didn't exactly make up a practical working wardrobe; for that, she was left with her dowdy old pre-*Runway* clothes that didn't even fit her anymore, and she wished desperately for more sophisticated gear. Sure, it would have looked ridiculous to walk into a
construction site in a suit with high heels when she wasn't even on the payroll yet, but at least she wouldn't have felt like a little kid.

"No, I think I can manage, thanks," she said, already feeling depressed. She'd gotten spoiled in more ways than one at *Runway*, it seemed. Smarmy, smug guys like this never survived long around Miranda.

But Miranda had been right about one thing: Andy was good with men. And she'd dealt with her fair share of guys with a superiority complex at *The Daily Northwestern*, too. Newspapers were nothing if not a boys' club. She could handle Brad Chesterton. Looked like she'd have to.

"So," Andy said, drawing herself up straight and tilting her head just slightly to the side. "Marketing director, huh? Or--I'm sorry--senior manager, is there a difference?"

Brad's face fell a little, but he kept smiling. "Well, uh, a slight one. You know, I'm working my way up. Just like you."

"That's how it goes," Andy said sweetly. "But it's pretty cool, getting in on the ground floor." Memory stirred; a whisper of Miranda's voice drifted through her head, and she said, "Really an exciting enterprise."

"Definitely," Brad said, gratefully leaping onto firmer ground. "I came here from *Maxim*, did you know that? Talk about a different paradigm." He grinned. "No posters of bikini babes everywhere, for one thing."

"Yeah, well," Andy said, "I think I prefer it this way, myself." She gave Brad a knowing smile: I know what you're up to, and it's not working. He very nearly winced. "I think we'll all have a lot of adjustments to make. I'm from *Runway*. That's really different, too."

"Yeah." Brad's eyes lit up with renewed interest. "You were Miranda Priestly's personal assistant, right? God, what was that even like? I've heard she's terrifying."

"She is," Andy said with a rueful smile, "but it's not that bad. You get used to it. And I learned a lot." About all kinds of things. She tried not to blush, and then tried not to miss Miranda so much in that moment that her stomach actually hurt.

"I bet," Brad said. "You know, we should get together sometime. Share war stories. Over drinks or something."

Seriously? "I imagine things'll be kind of crazy around here at first," Andy said. "Maybe we can grab lunch sometime, if the cafeteria's as good as the one at Elias-Clarke."

His smile only wavered a little as he said, "Right. Yeah. Sounds like a da--" His eyes widened. "Plan. Sounds like a plan."

"Sure does," Andy said, clapped her palms, and rubbed them together. "Well! Looks like I'd better get started setting up. It was nice to meet you, Brad."

"Likewise," he said. "I'll, um, see you around." He gave her a weak little wave, and left. Andy watched him go with relief.

It could have been worse, she decided as she went to take a look at her desk, at the computer that hadn't been hooked up yet, at the phone with a dangling cord. She just hoped it didn't get worse. She also hoped that she could choose the artwork that would inevitably get put by her desk, since she'd be the one looking at it all the time, and she wasn't too fond of Klee and Miró and the other guys
dotting the walls.

She didn't take too long. There wasn't a lot to do or see, and she was leery of running into Brad again. Instead, she stopped by Human Resources, pleased to find that Nigel had already faxed in the appropriate paperwork—he really did want her on board—and signed a few forms, got her picture taken, and had a permanent security pass to replace her temporary one. The HR guy, a nice man named Fred, was able to reassure Andy that Information Services would provide her with a company phone within the next day or so. She'd been given her Sidekick on her very first day at Elias-Clarke. Made sense, if your whole job centered on doing whatever your boss wanted you to do at any given moment of any given day.

She left Delton Wright around one o'clock, grabbed a sandwich at a nearby deli, and headed off to shop. She couldn't afford Versace, but she still had to look like a million bucks—even if it wasn't a woman's fashion magazine, it was still a hoity-toity lifestyle rag. If she scoured the secondhand stores, or Filene's, she might be able to find a few things. Canal Street knockoffs were iffier. Nigel would spot them a mile away, and so would everybody else, probably. She'd never hear the end of it. And she couldn't exactly wear the Chanel boots, either. Brad would drool and Miranda would kill her.

Shopping served as a good distraction from her many conflicting feelings, and three hours later, she'd scored a last-season Proenza Schouler wool skirt, a used pair of black Salvatore Ferragamo pumps (in dire need of a shine, but wearable), and a Pucci scarf with a nearly-invisible stain on it when Ellie called again. Andy sighed heavily. Well, she'd asked for it, after all. "Hi, Ellie," she said. "What's up?"

"Hi, Andy, I'm sorry to bother you, but I think it's possible that I maybe accidentally deleted your address book," Ellie said hesitantly.

Andy closed her eyes and prayed for strength. "I have a backup on my laptop," she said. At least that particular gadget was hers. "I'll email it to you when I get home."

"Oh, thank you," Ellie said. "I'm sorry."

"No problem. Hey, Ellie?" Andy said, trying to be as tactful as possible as she crossed the street. "Do you think maybe you could limit the calls to once a day? That way you can, you know, accumulate your questions and ask me about them all at once."

"Oh," Ellie said in such a small voice that Andy immediately felt evil. "Okay."

"I mean, unless there's an emergency," Andy said quickly. "Losing the address book qualifies."

"Oh," Ellie said again, but this time she sounded relieved. "Thanks, Andy, I really don't know what I'd do if--EEP!"

"What's wrong?" Andy said, but she heard Miranda's cold voice speaking in the background, which answered that question.

"N-nothing, M-m-m-m--" After about ten tries, Ellie managed, "--Miranda. I was just c-calling Andy because, um, because--"

"Ellie," Andy began, stepping out of the flow of foot traffic and standing near a shop window. But then there was a muffled, thumping sound, and Miranda's voice said, "Andrea?"

"Hi, Miranda," Andy said, desperately wishing that she was hearing Miranda's voice under different circumstances. "Uh…I was just helping Ellie with…" She gave up. "How's it going today?"
"How do you think?" Miranda snapped. "In the entire time you were here, did you bequeath anything useful to Eleanor? Anything at all?"

Andy took a deep breath. "Okay," she began.

"Did I hear her say that she actually deleted our address book?"

"My address book," Andy said quickly. "The one I kept for my reference. Not the official one." Please God let that be true. "I'll send it to her again."

"She can do nothing right," Miranda spat. "I've never seen such--"

"Oh, come on," Andy said. "She'd do better if you didn't scare her so much. God knows it worked for me."

"If she had a tenth of your brains, it might work for her too," Miranda said.

"You just haven't asked her about math yet," Andy said, trying to lighten the mood.

"I can get her to count the minutes until I fire her, how about that?"

"Miranda!" Andy said, appalled. "You can't fire her!"

"I most certainly can," Miranda said.

"Is she standing there listening to this?"

"No. I'm in my office."

"She can probably still hear--"

"Do I care?"

"No," Andy said. "I guess you don't."

"I seem to remember having a conversation with you, Andrea," Miranda said, her voice tight. "About how I will hire and fire anyone I please. And how you will not reproach me for it."

"Yeah, that's right," Andy said, and, to her shock, felt tears stinging her eyelids, felt anger gathering in her stomach. "That's great. You go ahead. Fire anybody whenever you feel like it. You and Irv can start a club."

She knew she'd gone too far the moment the words were out of her mouth; seconds later, Miranda hung up and confirmed it.

"Shit," Andy said, to nobody, and stomped her foot hard on the ground. "Shit, shit..." What had that been in aid of? She'd probably just made Miranda pissed enough to fire Ellie right away.

She mastered her immediate impulse to call Miranda back and apologize, knowing that Miranda would probably be too angry to answer, and would definitely be too angry to be reasonable. Instead, she returned home. When she closed her door behind her, twenty minutes had elapsed, and she decided to risk calling Miranda's cell.

On the second ring, she got sent to voicemail. Okay, then. She sighed, and decided to leave a message. "I'm sorry," she said after the beep. "That was a stupid thing to...well, it's all stupid, the whole thing sucks, but I shouldn't have said that. Sorry. Well, mostly sorry. Um. Call me when
you're not mad anymore." Then she hung up before she could get to the choices menu, wimp out, and either delete the message or edit it fifty times.

Forty-five minutes later, her phone rang again. Her heart started working overtime, but it was Nigel, not Miranda. Trying to swallow her disappointment, Andy answered. "Nigel?"

"How'd it go this morning?"


"Yeah, isn't it great? Did you meet anyone?"

Or maybe there was no help for it. "Brad from marketing," Andy said.

"Oh boy," Nigel said. "Did you bring your mace?"

"So you've met him," Andy said, and grinned.

"I wanted Jerry on board for marketing director," Nigel said. "And Jerry wanted Brad. Sorry."

"I handled him," Andy said. "No worries. I stopped by HR, so that's all taken care of, and they said I should get a company phone by…tomorrow, I hope. So you can put me to hard labor whenever you feel like it." The sooner she was busy again, the better. "Oh, hey, I like the title. Distinguish. Who picked that?"

"Board of directors voted on several suggestions," Nigel said, "although they graciously accepted my input as well. I'm okay with Distinguish. It was certainly not the worst option."

"Oh yeah?"

"My personal favorite suggestion," Nigel said, "was Ecce Homo."

Andy—who had been in the middle of pouring herself a cup of coffee—nearly knocked her mug over. "What?" she gasped.

"Yeah. Some guy on the board thinks he's a classics scholar and likes Latin."

"Ecce Homo. Jesus. You are kidding. You're really not kidding?"

"I'm not kidding," Nigel said. "I told them that not a lot could turn me off this project, but putting the word 'homo' in the title of a men's magazine would do it for sure." Andy laughed helplessly. "Oh, sure, it's funny now. Anyway, I'd better go--"

"Wait," Andy said quickly. "Did, um, did Miranda fire Ellie?"

"I don't think so," Nigel said, sounding surprised. "I just spoke with her five minutes ago. Ellie, I mean. She didn't say anything about that. Why?"

"Oh, well," Andy said, relieved. "I was talking to Ellie earlier. She had a few questions, you know, and I gathered that Miranda was being, uh--difficult."

"Well, we're still avoiding each other," Nigel said, "but the word in the cubicles is that she's not exactly improving as the day goes on. Shocking, I know. But I'd better get back to work. I'll call you later if I think of something else."
"Bye," Andy said. Well, at least Ellie wasn't fired yet. That was something.

She needed something else to do now. Something useful. Or at least tiring. Numbing, even.

Maybe she should go shopping some more. But first, she'd copy Ellie on the address book.

Miranda finally called Andy at a quarter till six. Andy answered the phone with a shaking hand. "Hi," she said.

"I haven't fired Eleanor and you are not going to try to interfere in such a way again," Miranda said, "all right?"

Andy took a deep breath and released it. "All right," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Good."

Andy rolled her eyes. "So how was your day? Are you on your way home?"

"No. I have a dinner. How quickly some forget."

"Oh, that's right," Andy said, wincing.

"And I'd better go get ready."

Andy's heart fell. Well, Miranda never had been much for phone chitchat. "Okay," she said. "I, uh, I missed--being at work today."

There was a pause, and then Miranda said, "Yes, well. You'll be keeping busy soon enough."

Andy bit her lip. "Looks like it." Then she decided to go ahead and say, "When can I see you again?"

"Keep Sunday free, as I said," Miranda said. Andy couldn't tell anything from the tone of her voice. "You can stop by around noon."

Today was Thursday. It was going to be an excruciating couple of days. "Okay," she said. "But, I mean, we'll, you know, talk before then." She paused. "Right?" Because going from seeing Miranda all the time to talking to her for less than ten minutes a day--

"I suppose so," Miranda said. "If you want."

What? Okay, there were limits. Andy put a hand on her hip. "Are you still mad?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I told you to call me when you weren't mad anymore."

"You'll have a long wait," Miranda snapped. "I am very angry about very many things right now, and your tasteless little…joke, or whatever it was, is the least of them."

"It wasn't a joke. I was pissed off, too," Andy said. "About 'very many things.' I still am. I don't want to take it out on you."
It would have been a great time for Miranda to return the sentiment, but of course all she said was, "Then don't. I've had a wretched day, and I foresee many more in the future until things settle down."

But what did 'settle down' mean? If Irv fired Miranda, well, things would settle down pretty quickly. "How long do you think that will take?" Andy asked cautiously.

"I don't know," Miranda said. "I have to go."

Andy supposed that it was too much to ask that Miranda throw her some kind of bone. "Okay," she said, suddenly feeling very tired and very, very sad. "I'll, um--" Talk to you later? See you around? "Um," Andy said again, wishing desperately for coherent words, and feeling inexplicably as if she was about to cry. "Have a, a good dinner."

"I'll try. Goodbye," Miranda said, and hung up.

The phone wasn't Andy's property, strictly speaking, and she didn't have a replacement yet, so she didn't throw it across the room. But she really wanted to.

Andy went through the rest of the day with a heavy heart, and decided to give up and go to bed at ten o'clock. Maybe she could read until she fell asleep.

She started by re-reading her article in Modernity. The page numbers in the bottom right corners had become smudged by now, she'd looked at it so often. She looked at her title, at her by-line, at her words in print.

It made her feel better. Irv had tossed her aside like she was worthless. Even Miranda hadn't seemed to care too much about her feelings today. But looking at her article reminded Andy that she'd done something smart and worthwhile. Nigel had seen promise in it, anyway, believed that it could be a stepping-stone to a new career for her. Andy had talents. She was capable. And even in the midst of her hurt feelings and loneliness, reminding herself of that restored a little of her confidence.

Maybe she could brainstorm, see if she had any new ideas to write about. Miranda was right about one thing: Andy had made lots of good contacts lately, and it didn't make any sense not to use them. But she couldn't use them without writing, either. She ought to stretch her brain out, at least.

She'd gotten as far as "Book reviews?!...essay collections, Christian&Benny, interview maybe" when her phone rang at 10:15. She hoped it wasn't Nigel, hoped that he wouldn't prove to be like Miranda in that particular way--calling her at all hours to do completely ridiculous things.

But it was, in fact, Miranda. Andy's eyes went wide. She hadn't expected that, and she answered the phone at once, her heart lifting immeasurably. Miranda probably wasn't calling just to bitch her out. "Hello?"

"I'm home."

"Oh. All right," Andy said. "I mean, hi. How, how are you?"

"Don't ask," Miranda said, and sighed. She didn't sound angry. At least, not at Andy. And she was calling again, after Andy had pretty much given up hope for the night. Andy realized, feeling much,
much better, that the evening wasn't completely ruined anymore.

"Okay," she said, smiling. "How was dinner, then?"

"Dull, but productive. Stan asked after you. Word travels fast."

"Stan? Stan Oppenheimer?" Andy blinked. "I didn't know he was going to be there."

"We neglected to consult you," Miranda said. "But I promise we were well-chaperoned."

Andy's face burned. "I didn't mean…"

"No?"

"Well," Andy said, feeling extremely embarrassed, "maybe I meant it a little bit. But I didn't really mean it."

"No?" Miranda repeated, sounding amused now.

"Look, I spent like a month wanting to knock out all his teeth," Andy said. "I'm working on it."

"You can relax," Miranda said. "No one in their right mind would be interested in a single pregnant mother of two, now would they?"

Andy refused to take the bait. "So, what did you talk about?" she said. "You and Stan and your chaperones."

"Many things," Miranda said. "You'll be gratified to know that there was a healthy dose of anti-Irv invective. You would have enjoyed it. I wish you'd--" she coughed, "it's a pity you missed it."

Andy smiled, and got a warm glow deep in her belly. Better and better. "Well," she said, "you'll just have to invite me to the next cabal meet-up. Where did you all go, again? Wasn't it some kind of poker table in the back room of a warehouse?"

"Hilarious," Miranda said.

"Did anybody smoke a cigar?"

"Are you finished?"

"I think so. Um, seriously, though. How was your day? I mean, were people…you know, was everything…"

"I said that word travels fast," Miranda said. "I have no idea why you want me to repeat myself."

"You don't want to talk about it, I guess," Andy mumbled.

"You guess correctly. Dinner marginally improved my spirits, which meant that the day was only marginally less intolerable." Miranda sighed. "I'd rather hear about your first day of unemployment."

"First and last," Andy said. "I went by Delton Wright, saw the Distinguish offices, got put on the payroll. I am now officially a gopher again." The moment of silence went on for far too long. "Miranda?"

"You were not merely a gopher for me," Miranda said, sounding strained. "I hope you know that."
"Yeah, I know," Andy said, surprised. "And you weren't just a boss for me." Duh. And then there was another pause. "This is news?" she said incredulously.

"Apparently not," Miranda said. "Eleanor isn't--you know she's--I really might have to fire her. And I don't want to hear a word about it. I refuse to go groveling to Irv for a second assistant, which means the first one must be capable. Too much depends on it."

Andy closed her eyes. "I know," she said again.

"She's not you, Andrea. Not even close. Now that it won't go to your head, I might as well tell you that you were exceptional at your job."

"Now that it won't--" Andy sighed. "I mean, thanks."

"Everything ran smoothly." Miranda sounded like a petulant child. So what else was new? "Or at least you made it look like it did. You fooled me, at any rate."

"Only some of the time," Andy said. "I learned a lot at Runway. I was pretty hopeless at the beginning, in case you forgot."

"I forget very little," Miranda said. "Well…at any rate--"

"I missed you too," Andy said.

Silence.

"Oh, come on," Andy said. "I did. And so did you, so don't--"

"Of course I did," Miranda said impatiently. "I didn't know you were waiting for my input. I can never tell when you're just listening to yourself talk."

"Nice," Andy said, but she wasn't mad at all because Miranda had admitted to missing her, which was very cool. "There's no chance we can get together until Sunday?"

"I don't see how," Miranda said. "I'm booked, and even if I wasn't, you'll have plenty to do, yourself."

"Yeah," Andy admitted, feeling sad all over again. Sunday felt very far off. "Well. That stinks." A thought occurred to her. "Do the twins know I've been fired?"

"Not yet," Miranda said. "I didn't want to talk about it yesterday, and I didn't return home tonight until after they were asleep."

"So…what will they think when I stop by on Sunday? When I keep, um, hanging around, even though I don't work for you anymore?"

"How many times do I have to tell you that I can't read their minds?" Miranda said. "I have no idea what they'll think. I'll tell them tomorrow night."

"Okay." Andy swallowed. "I hope they say…I mean, I hope it's okay. Will you call me? Or can I call you?"

"Yes. After nine. I'll be curious to hear how Nigel's little project is starting to come together. If it is."

Andy decided not to mention Smarmy Brad. Miranda did not deal well when men came sniffing around, and her jealousy would not be cute or benign tonight. "You think it'll go under?" she asked.
instead.

"We'll know soon enough," Miranda said. "When new magazines fail, they fail quickly. I'm not holding my breath."

"Well, I am," Andy said indignantly. "Seeing as how I work there now."

"We would find something else for you," Miranda said. "I would."

Nice thought, but one thing hadn't changed: Andy still didn't want to owe her professional success to Miranda. And it wasn't just that--Andy didn't want Nigel to fail, either. And she wasn't dumb enough to say anything of the kind to Miranda. Instead, she said, "Yeah, well. Anyway. So, I'm…I've been taking notes. About articles and stuff I'm thinking about writing. Just different things."

There was a pause. Then Miranda cleared her throat and said, "Well? Like what?"

Andy beamed, and settled back against the pillows to chat with her girlfriend for a little while, enjoying her improved mood all over again. Too bad she only had a cell phone; she would have enjoyed twirling a cord around her finger.

The next day, Andy got her new phone, and immediately texted her number to Miranda, Nigel, and Ellie, in that order. A few hours later, it occurred to text her parents too. But she couldn't really be blamed for her absentmindedness, because yet again she was on the hop, running around and taking care of things for Nigel. The contractors and building maintenance were both being too slow about getting everything set up: computers, phones, office spaces, cubicles. So Andy spent a good part of her time harassing people on a Saturday and pressuring them to do their jobs. It took her best combination of being a sweet person and being Miranda, but eventually she cajoled Tech Support into hooking up computers for all the finished offices, which was a big step forward, while she stood over them and watched. She also requisitioned a coffeemaker for the break room, which would probably get her more kudos than computers ever would.

And after that, it was time to set up yet another address book and begin to send out "hello!" emails to the various designers, writers, photographers, and other movers and shakers she'd met while working for Miranda. Andy had generated a lot of goodwill during her tenure at Runway by being competent and mostly good-natured. She'd definitely been more appreciated outside the office than in it, and it couldn't hurt to leverage that with the people who could help them get, and keep, their project off the ground.

The place was a wreck, too. But the construction in this part of the office was done. Andy located a vacuum cleaner leaning idly against a wall, abandoned by housekeeping, and set to work around her desk, and then Nigel's, with a vengeance.

It felt good, keeping busy again. Making herself feel a part of the place, trying to carve out a space for herself to make up for the one she'd just lost. And after chatting to Miranda last night for nearly an hour, she didn't feel quite as much as if she'd been cast out of Eden. Not as much. But still, a little. Which was why it was good to keep busy, after all.

To Andy's pleased surprise, Nigel called her at seven-thirty and told her to wait at the Distinguish offices. He arrived fifteen minutes later, looking exhausted, and gave her a wry smile.
"I was busy wrapping up business all day," he said. "I'm so glad she wasn't there. I just thought I'd stop by and see what..." He glanced around the reception area, and saw Andy's iMac humming along atop her neatly-organized desk. Then he craned his head into his office and saw the same thing. "Wow," he said.

"I sat on Tech Support's head," Andy said.

"Do I smell coffee?"

"I got a coffeemaker."

"Did you vacuum?"

"Dusted, too."

"Do you want my job?"

Andy laughed. So did Nigel. "Give me another ten years," Andy said. "At least. Then, maybe."

"Ahh," Nigel said, and stretched, pressing at the small of his back. "I kid, I kid. I'm not giving up this gig." Then he took a deep breath, and exhaled it slowly. He looked a little apprehensive.

"You'll be great," Andy said. "This whole thing will be great. I've been sending emails," she added. "And I got some replies. It sounds like a lot of people are excited about what we're doing."

"I know," Nigel said, and raised an impressed eyebrow. "I got copied on a lot of those replies. You've been a busy little bee." Andy shrugged, deciding not to say that keeping busy was the best remedy for missing Miranda. Or thinking incessantly about having sex with her tomorrow. They hadn't been together since Tuesday night! Totally unacceptab--

"Well," Nigel said, and rubbed his hands together as he headed into his office. Andy, yanking herself away from her increasingly-inappropriate thoughts, watched with amusement as he sat down in his chair and straightened his shoulders. Then he lifted his chin.

"Ahndraya," he began.

"Oh, no," Andy said, already giggling.

Nigel prissily placed his hands on the top of the desk, and then looked at Andy over the rims of his glasses. "I'll want my Starbucks here in five minutes. No. Three."

"Oh...stop..." Andy said, and leaned back against the wall, holding her stomach as she laughed.

"And then I'll want to hear from Testino yesterday. Literally. Now hurry up and reverse the Earth's rotation--"

"Yes, Nigel," Andy managed as she tried to control herself. "I'll get Ellie on that right away."

"Oh God," Nigel said, and broke character as he lowered his head to his desk, laughing. "Ellie. We left her with Ellie."

"Well," Andy wheezed. "Maybe not for much longer." The thought sobered her. "If Ellie can't do the job on her own, she's toast."

"Out of your hands, I'm afraid," Nigel said, sitting up again.
"I know, but I feel kind of responsible," Andy said. "I mean, I hi--I recommended Ellie in the first place. And Miranda told me she might have to fire her if…" She realized just a moment too late what she'd just confessed. When Nigel looked at her with wide eyes, she knew he'd realized it too.

"And when did Miranda say this?" Nigel inquired neutrally.

Andy took a deep breath and tried to sound casual, which didn't really go well with taking a deep breath, so she wasn't surprised when it didn't work. "Uh. Recently. Yesterday, in fact."

"So you're still talking to her," Nigel said.

"Yes," Andy said, refusing to break eye contact or back down. She wasn't about to lie about it. Not to Nigel. It wasn't a crime to communicate with your former boss. She wasn't ashamed.

"You know," Nigel said, and leaned back in his chair, "I'm actually not as surprised as I probably should be." He never took his eyes off Andy's face.

"Well," Andy said feebly, "you said she'd miss me…I mean, you knew all along that she…"

"Needs you?" Nigel said bluntly.

Andy turned pink. "I guess so," she said. "But, but I won't let it interfere with my job, Nigel. I work for you now, not her. It's just--" She waved her hand helplessly. "We're sort of--"

Nigel's lips quirked. "Friends?"

"Yeah," Andy said in relief. "I mean--yeah."

"I wonder if it's easier to be friends with Miranda outside of work," he mused, and then smiled ruefully. "You'll have to let me know. I don't think I'll get the chance to find out for myself."

Andy bit her lip, wishing she could say otherwise. But Nigel had wounded Miranda. Worse, he'd caught her unawares, and that was what she'd never forgive. The best Andy could tell Nigel was that Miranda had decided he might still be ‘useful,’ and she was pretty sure she shouldn't say that at all.

"Anyway, what are you doing tomorrow afternoon?" Nigel added. "I'm attending a little get-together with Jack and Lazaro. Should be fun. Lots of alcohol. Be nice if you could come too."

"I, uh, I'd love to," Andy said, and bit her lip. "But I might already have plans."

"Oh?" Nigel raised both eyebrows. "Anything particularly exciting that justifies missing an opportunity to make new connections?"

"Well, um, I, er," Andy said, and squirmed. "Actually, it kind of falls, um, under the rubric of, uh, the subject we were just discussing."

"The sub--" Nigel blinked. "Miranda?"

Andy blushed. "It's sort of maybe possible that the twins want me to come over so they can, you know, give me a birthday cake." And then Andy could give their mother something else.


"Well--"

"The twins."
"They like me," Andy said defensively. "I was there for Christmas, and--what's not to like?"

"Nothing," Nigel sighed. "I'm just trying to imagine the cake."

"I just hope I'm allowed to eat it," Andy said, with an attempt at a smile.

"Indeed," Nigel said. "Well…have fun."

His expression was closed, thoughtful, and it made Andy nervous. She realized that she was on the verge of asking his permission, of asking if it was okay with him if she continued to hang out with Miranda, which was just crazy. So she just shrugged awkwardly and said, "I'll try." Then she tried to smile again.

Nigel sighed, and the thoughtful look vanished into something that was much more of a resigned, why-do-I-even-bother look. "I'll think of you when I'm sucking down Cosmopolitans and discreetly ogling male models," he said.

"Discreetly?" Andy blinked. "At a fashion party?" She couldn't imagine the need. Nigel wasn't exactly closeted. He wasn't a flamboyant queen, either, but everyone who knew him knew that he was gay.

Nigel sighed again. "It's not a secret that I'm gay," he said, echoing Andy's thoughts. "But it's one thing for a fashion director of a woman's magazine to be gay. It's another thing for the editor-in-chief of a men's magazine. Sure, the average Joe--well, the better-than-average Joe who buys our magazine--won't know much about me. Or care, probably. But there's something to be said for not causing a homosexual panic among the delicate American male public."

"Ecce Homo," huh?"

"Exactly."

"But what does that mean for you?" Andy's eyes widened. "You're…are you going back in the closet or something?"

"No, no," Nigel said impatiently. "That's why I said 'discreetly' ogling. I'm going to live my life, Andy. Especially now that I actually have a chance to get one." He smiled wryly. "But I must be circumspect." He shrugged. "Not a big deal, really. Frankly, the thought of having a boyfriend at all blows my mind, after my tenure at Runway."

"I never heard about you dating anybody," Andy admitted.

"I didn't," Nigel said, "unless you want to hear about more sordid--"


Andy stared at him. He looked back hopefully. Andy put one hand on her hip. He sighed.

"So much for inspiring terror in my subordinates," he said.

"Be nice or I'll sic Brad on you," Andy replied, and they laughed again.
That night, Andy was the one to call. She was pleased when Miranda picked up right away, though she knew that if she made any 'waiting by the phone' jokes, the conversation would be over before it could even begin. And she hadn't heard Miranda's voice all day long, so that option wasn't on the table.

"So, how's it going?" she said.

"It went," Miranda said, and hearing that, hearing her, made Andy feel weightless, buoyant and giddy. "I'm glad the day is over."

"What happened?" Andy said in concern.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Miranda sighed. "Just another Saturday where I had not a moment to myself, until now."

"Oh." Andy bit her lip. "Should I call back later? Or--" It was already ten o'clock. "Or just wait till tomorrow?"

"No," Miranda said, and added, "I told the twins this evening. That Irv fired you."

"Oh, um," Andy said, "what…I mean, did they…does that mean--" That Andy wouldn't be coming over the next day after all? The possibility made her feel sick.

"They were outraged," Miranda said, sounding the tiniest bit amused. "Caroline, of course, was sure it had to be my fault somehow."

Andy winced. "Whoops."

"You will have to tell her otherwise."

"I sure will," Andy said in sudden, pure relief. "So…tomorrow's still on, then?"

"Of course it is," Miranda said impatiently. "Why would you think otherwise? For heaven's sake."

Andy rolled her eyes, glad that Miranda couldn't see it. "You're the one who said you couldn't read their minds," she reminded her.

"I don't have to be a mind-reader to know they like you," Miranda said flatly. "Grow a little backbone." Andy's jaw dropped. "Can you stop by around eleven-thirty tomorrow?"

"Sure," Andy grumbled. "If I start growing that backbone now, I might be halfway-done by the time I get to your place."

"I certainly hope so."

"I got a lot of work done today," Andy said, deciding it was time to change the subject. "I set up a coffeemaker."

"My goodness," Miranda said. "And here I was afraid that your talents would be wasted."

What, like Andy had been using them to their highest potential at Runway? "Nope," she said. "In full bloom."

"So I see."
And then Andy got an idea. A wonderful, magnificent, possibly-impossible idea. "I mean, I am multi-talented," she said.

She'd tried to sound innocent--bland, even--but something in her voice must have tipped Miranda off, because the moment of silence went on a little too long. And Miranda sounded suspicious when she replied, "I suppose so."

"I've missed you," Andy said.

Miranda cleared her throat. "Well," she said. "You'll see me tomorrow."

"I haven't seen you since Tuesday."

"I came by your apartment on Wednesday."

"Not what I meant."

"Andrea--"

"I meant I haven't seen some of my favorite parts of you since Tuesday."

"Andrea!" Now Miranda sounded almost scandalized.

Andy grinned. "Well, it's true."

"You'll--as I said--tomorrow."

"Not soon enough," Andy said, and Miranda's breath caught again. "Have you missed me too?"

"I, uh," Miranda said, and then admitted, "yes."

"Any particular parts of me?"

"This conversation took a classy turn," Miranda said.

"Sorry," Andy laughed. "I didn't know phone sex was about class."

"We are not having pho--we are not doing that."

"No?" Andy made sure her disappointment came through loud and clear.

Miranda coughed. "No."

"Even if I do all the talking?"

"No."

Andy felt her face flushing, growing hot, felt her nipples going tight beneath her t-shirt. "Even if I tell you all the things I want to do to you as soon as the twins are out the door tomorrow?"

"Who says," Miranda replied, "that you are going to do all the work?"

Andy gasped. She could practically see Miranda smirking on the other end of the line. She rallied quickly. "But it's my birthday party, isn't it?" she said.

"I'm pretty sure we already had that particular kind of party," Miranda said archly.
"That was the pre-birthday party," Andy said at once. "This is the post."

"Who do you think you are?" Miranda said. "Paris Hilton?"

Andy ignored her and barged onward. "So, anyway, as birthday girl, I think I should get to do whatever I want. And what I want is to do you."

"..." Miranda's voice trailed off, until she added in a defeated tone, "Yes?"

Andy grinned. The night was looking up. "Yeah. See, I don't know why this is, but...I mean, don't get me wrong, everything you do to me feels great," she added hastily. "But what really gets me going is pinning you down and, you know. Having my way."

"Oh?" Miranda said faintly.

"And you like it too, don't you?" Andy said. "I like doing. You like being done to. Don't you?"

"...Yes," Miranda admitted.

"How's that make you feel?" Andy said, feeling her face flush hotter than ever. "All you have to do is just, I don't know, be, and you'll drive me crazy. Does that make you happy?"


"Good." Andy smiled. "So. You'll let me, won't you?"

"Let you what?"

Andy closed her eyes and swallowed hard. "Strip you off, lay you down, and fuck you."

"Oh," Miranda said after a few seconds. "Well."

"And take it slowly," Andy whispered. "No more of that quickie stuff. We'll take it so slowly. Just the way you like it. I like it too."

"Y-you do?"

"Oh, yes," Andy said. "Licking you up and down. And whatever else you want. Don't you know I like doing that?"

"I might have had a clue," Miranda croaked.

"Will you let me do that?" Andy said.

"You--" Andy could practically see her discarding a dozen clever responses before giving in and saying, "Yes."

"Good," Andy breathed. "I can't wait." She paused. "Can you wait?"

"I don't have much choice, do I?" Miranda said in a strained voice.

"Yes, you do," Andy said. "You know you do. You're alone, right?"

"Don't," Miranda warned.

"Why not?" Andy said. "What would be wrong with it?"
"With what?" Miranda inquired. "Surely if you want me to do it, you can say it."

"Touch yourself, then," Andy said, and she blushed at her own audacity, telling Miranda Priestly to masturbate.

"You would like that, would you?" Miranda murmured. "Listening to that?"

It was Andy's turn to make a croaking noise. "Yes," she managed.

"That's a shame," Miranda said, "because while I have certainly done my fair share of that, I'm afraid that this time it would not be nearly enough to satisfy me. I want your touch, Andrea. Not my own."

Andy's mouth opened, but nothing came out. And yet more nothing. Then she managed a squeak.

"Good night, Andrea," Miranda purred, and hung up.

Andy stared at her phone, and then fell back down against her pillow with a wail, cursing Miranda with all of her heart.

Andy arrived at Miranda's place at eleven-thirty on the dot. She'd been up since eight, and had filled the morning with writing, reading, even a brief, brisk walk, none of which had served to take her mind off having sex with Miranda. Not even the cold shower that had followed up the walk helped.

She rang the doorbell--she'd kept her key, but it still seemed rude just to let herself in--and heard the pounding of feet. A twin. Then the door swung open, and Andy saw it was Caroline. Instead of saying hello, Caroline turned her head and bellowed, "She's here!" back into the house.

"Hi, Caroline," Andy said.

"Come on," Caroline said, and to Andy's complete astonishment, took her by the elbow--neither of the twins had ever touched her before--and dragged her down the hallway, barely giving Andy time to close the door behind herself. "Jimena baked the cake first thing, and lunch is almost ready."

"Oh," Andy said, stumbling forward, glad that her heels were only an inch high today. She hadn't had much extra time for shopping, which meant that she was stuck wearing her pre-Runway gear again, although she'd tried to work it to its best advantage. At least Caroline hadn't said anything. "Okay. What are we eating?"

"That chicken-pasta-thing you said you liked one time. So do you like your new job? Is it going okay? I can't believe you got fired. I hate Mr. Ravitz. We all do."

"I'm not too fond of him myself," Andy said, as Cassidy hurried down the stairs to meet them. "Hi, Cassidy."

"Happy Birthday," Cassidy said. "Are you coming to our party?"

"Thanks, I..." Just a few days, and she'd already forgotten what a whirlwind the twins were. What was it going to be like with a baby boy on top of it all? "I don't know. I hope I can, but I might have to work now."

"You can't work," Caroline whined. At that moment, Miranda followed Cassidy down the stairs, her
eyebrows already raised at the sight of Caroline gripping Andy's arm. Andy smiled up at her, but tried not to beam. Phone conversations aside, it was hard to believe they hadn't even laid eyes on each other since Wednesday night. "Mom, tell Nigel to let Andy come to our party," Caroline appealed.

A shadow flitted over Miranda's face. "Andrea has a new job now, girls," she said firmly. "It's not for me to tell her what she can or can't do. And I'm not going to ask Mr. Kipling to do any such thing, either." 'Mr. Kipling'? Andy cringed. "Now what did I tell you about answering the door yourself?"

Caroline rolled her eyes. "I knew it was Andy. I checked before I opened the door. It wasn't some kidnapper guy."

"That's what you think," Andy said. "I might be very cleverly disguised." Caroline let go of her with a little squeal of fake fear and real glee.

"Let's eat lunch now," Cassidy said, and headed for the kitchen with some of her mother's natural authority. Caroline obeyed it and followed her, while Andy resisted just long enough to make eyes at Miranda, who'd reached the bottom stair. She seemed okay: she appeared relaxed—well-rested, even—and her color was good. Andy hoped Ellie had been making her eat lunch, though how Ellie would accomplish such a thing, Andy had no idea.

"So, how are you?" she said softly. "How've you been?"

Miranda did not reply. Instead, she lifted one eyebrow again. Her eyes gleamed, which probably meant she'd already forgiven Andy for the not-quite-hideous skirt and sweater.

"Ulp," Andy said, and started sweating.

Miranda smiled a tiny, predatory little smile. "And you?" she said politely. "How are you?"


"Mohhhhhhm," Caroline called impatiently from the kitchen. "Aaaaandy."

Miranda tilted her head to the side, and swept down the hallway. Andy followed her, trying not to stare at her ass, already thinking about the birthday present she wanted most.

To her surprise, the twins had presents for her too. She really hadn't expected that—the cake alone had been a shock when Miranda had first mentioned it. But after they'd all finished their chicken-pasta-thing, the girls handed Andy two slender envelopes with her name on them. For one weird moment Andy wondered if they'd given her cash, but when she opened Caroline's envelope, she saw two tickets to the Broadway production of *Wicked*. Cassidy's envelope had two tickets to *The Lion King*.

"Th-th-thanks," Andy stammered, trying not to look spooked. Were they suggesting that she take their mother on a date or something? Or was this a subtle hint for Andy to find a boyfriend and get lost?

But it all became clear as Cassidy said, in a businesslike tone, "You're taking me to *The Lion King* and Caroline to *Wicked*. I wanted to see *The Lion King* in London, but we didn't get to."

"…Oh," Andy said.

Miranda frowned at Caroline. "I thought you wanted to see *Beauty and the Beast* again." Caroline
shook her head 'no,' all innocence. "Isn't Wicked a little too adult for you? I've heard…"

"I'll be with Andy," Caroline said sweetly. "It'll be okay."

Andy gaped at her, but it appeared to placate Miranda, who nodded. Andy stared back down at the tickets: two more afternoons sacrificed to the whims of Priestly females. It could be worse. At least she liked musicals.

Besides, she was touched that the twins wanted to spend more time with her. "Thanks," she repeated, and smiled at them both. They grinned back. "I haven't seen either of these yet. We'll have a great time." Both tickets were for different Sunday matinees--not just the best time for the twins, but also the day when Andy was least likely to be running errands. Thank goodness. She didn't relish the idea of having to explain her need for time off to Nigel. If he'd thought a cake was weird…

She remembered, suddenly, the closed and thoughtful look on his face that night. And for the first time, it occurred to her to wonder if he knew--if he'd guessed--because with that little speech about being discreetly queer…

"Andrea?" Andy blinked and looked up at Miranda, realizing that she'd drifted off into space. Miranda had a little frown line between her brows.

"Sorry," Andy said at once. "I was just, just--" she glanced back down at the ticket in her left hand. Wicked. "--wondering where the Gershwin Theatre is. I know I've seen it a lot. It's, um, driving me crazy."

"Duh," Cassidy said. "Broadway."

"No, it isn't," Caroline said at once. "51st street. I looked it up online. Duhhh."

"How am I supposed to know where every theatre is? They're--"

"Girls," Miranda said, and they shut up. "Where's The Lion King?"

"The Minskoff," Cassidy said sulkily.

"Is that one on Broadway?" Andy asked, trying to cheer her up.

"No," Caroline chortled.

"It's close," Cassidy grumbled. "They're both close."

"Yeah, but you were still wrong," Caroline said.

"So," Andy said quickly, "cake, huh?"

"Oh yeah," Caroline said, and they both hopped up from the table, immediately distracted. Maybe they had ADHD or something. Didn't most kids these days? Either way, Andy and Miranda exchanged a relieved glance as Cassidy carefully carried the cake tray to the table, while Caroline followed with tiny plates and forks. They didn't sing "Happy Birthday," although Caroline hummed it almost under her breath.

It couldn't have been more domestic, more cozy. And out of the blue, Andy remembered herself as she'd been a year ago. Still big-eyed and idealistic, still wearing shabby clothes (well--at least she was in those again), still hating Miranda Priestly, still with her head up her size-six ass. Still with Nate and so many other different things.
A year ago, she could never have envisaged anything like this: sitting at a kitchen table with Miranda and her daughters, about to have birthday cake, waiting--eagerly!--to make love with Miranda when the kids were gone. She wouldn't even have believed Miranda's private world had anything this peaceful or happy in it. She wouldn't have thought much about it at all, in fact, but would instead have made all those mistakes, both little and big, that had so nearly gotten her fired and exiled in such a way that she would never have known what she was missing.

She was, Andy thought as she carefully cut the cake, very lucky indeed.

"It's made with Splenda and low-fat icing," Caroline piped up. "So you won't gain too much weight."

Well, mostly lucky. "Great," Andy laughed, not even daring to look at Miranda as she cut both girls a big slice. "Miranda?"

"A small piece," Miranda said, and when Andy finally looked at her, she saw that Miranda was struggling to hide the faintest grimace. Not surprising for a woman who loved black-ops Haagen-Dazs. But she nibbled at her slice with at least the veneer of enthusiasm, and Andy did as well. It really didn't taste the same as normal cake, but it was edible, and the girls seemed to enjoy it.

Cassidy swallowed a bite of her cake, took a gulp of milk, and said, "Mom, what did you get Andy for her birthday?"

"Oh, not much," Miranda said. "Just a few little things."

Andy almost choked on her cake. Miranda wasn't looking at her. "Um," she said. "A few little--?"

"Like what?" Caroline said eagerly. "Is it all those boxes in the living room?"

All those boxes? "Um," Andy said again.

"Good heavens, Caroline," Miranda said lightly. "There aren't that many."

"You, you didn't have to," Andy said feebly. Why had Miranda gotten her anything? She'd had Andy's article published early in *Modernity*, and they'd had a whole day in bed together. Andy couldn't have imagined a more perfect present. And the idea of getting more material gifts--especially several material gifts--disconcerted Andy a little bit. One five-thousand-dollar pin was bad enough. She didn't need a sugar…mama.

"I know," Miranda said, and sipped her water, still not looking at her. "But it seemed to me you would need a few new outfits for work."

A few new-- "You didn't," Andy said. Miranda shrugged, which meant that an entire wardrobe was probably awaiting Andy in the living room. "Oh," Andy said, wondering frantically how she could be gracious about this while also conveying disapproval. It seemed impossible. So 'gracious' it was, at least in front of the girls. "Well. Thanks," she added.

"Thank Eleanor," Miranda said. "It was her idea."

Andy blinked. "Ellie?"

Yet again, Miranda seemed to be trying to hide a smile. "She was conscripted to help bring in your castoffs from my car," she said. "And on Friday she said something to the effect of what a shame it was, that you could no longer simply call up a designer, say you worked for Miranda Priestly, and get free samples of whatever you wanted. Directly from the source."
Andy's eyes widened. "As in--not *Runway* property?" It had never occurred to her to try anything like that, since Nigel had been fairly generous in doling out samples. Now she felt like an idiot for not trying it all along.

"As in," Miranda confirmed. "It's the first insightful thing she's ever said, I'm sure. Although I was also impressed by the diagrams she left on my desk for the sailboats in the Charleston shoot."

"Oh my God," Andy said, and started laughing in relief. So Miranda hadn't spent money on--hadn't even really been involved in--that made it okay, right?

"Her taste is not completely appalling," Miranda said. "She selected everything herself. I believe she was quite particular."

"Aww," Andy said, touched and impressed and realizing for the first time that she really missed Ellie, as well as Miranda and the frantic bustle of *Runway*. "What a sweetheart."

"Well, she worships you," Miranda said, and gave Andy another amused look. "When she's not cowering, I get the distinct impression that she thinks I can't run my office nearly as well as you did."

Andy laughed out loud. "Well--can you?"

"I knew it would go to your head," Miranda muttered.

"So let's see the clothes," Cassidy said, and both Andy and Miranda jumped a little--Andy had forgotten the twins were even there, and it looked like Miranda had, too. "Do you know what she picked out for Andy, Mom?"

"I might have glanced over the collection," Miranda said. "As a gauge of Eleanor's general taste and sense. As I said--not completely appalling."

It certainly wasn't. Cassidy and Caroline peered over Andy's shoulders eagerly as they all three sat on the floor and looked through the gifts. Miranda, of course, was regally ensconced in a chair, while Patricia, who had wistfully watched them eating their chicken-and-pasta lunch, flopped down in a corner and went to sleep.

Andy let the twins unwrap the boxes, and they tore through Ellie's careful handiwork with gleeful abandon, pausing to pass judgment on each item. Andy was glad to see that Ellie had picked things that Andy would have picked for herself: nothing Emily-like, nothing too "risky," things that Andy would actually wear, no matter how Miranda sniffed. The twins seemed to approve, on the whole. Among other things, a Marc Jacobs blouse was "oooh," a Michael Kors skirt was "hmmmwell," a pair of Chanel sunglasses was "pretty cute," Loeffler Randall shoes were "nice," and a little Prada bag, striped bright pink and purple, was "Mom can I have one too, pleeese?"

"You're a little hard on your bags, girls," Miranda said sternly. "Don't think I haven't noticed how you fling them anywhere you please. Or leave them on the floor."

"We'll be careful," promised Caroline, who'd said she didn't even care about fashion and other 'stupid crap.' She was looking longingly at the bag, which almost looked like a piece of candy made out of leather. Andy cupped it protectively in case the kid got any ideas.

"I'd never throw it anywhere," Cassidy said. "Ever!"

"We'll see," Miranda said, and the twins exchanged satisfied glances. Then Miranda looked at her watch. "Oh, my. You're due to go in five minutes."
"Oh gosh!" Caroline said, and Cassidy scrambled to her feet, kicking aside wrapping and tissue paper.

"Who are you going to visit?" Andy asked. "Chelsea?"

They stared at her with matching looks of horror. "Chelsea?" Caroline said.

"Are you nuts?" Cassidy added. "We hate her!"

"Oh," Andy said, and shook her head. "I thought--I mean, sorry."

"Come on," Caroline said to Cassidy, and they gave Andy one more exasperated look before heading upstairs.

Andy glanced over at Miranda as she placed the Prada bag back in the box. "How do you keep up with that soap opera?" she said.

"I don't," Miranda replied. "That's what you're here for."

"Oh, well," Andy said, and put the top back on the box. "Is that all I'm here for?"

"None of that until the girls have left," Miranda said. But her cheeks had gone pink and the gleam was back in her eyes. "Just a few more minutes."

"Hope Roy isn't late," Andy said lightly, knowing that Roy was never late.

"Behave yourself."

"Me? I'm just packing up all these lovely presents." Andy put the lid back on a box from Alvin Valley.

Miranda cleared her throat. "There might be one more." Andy looked up at her quickly, and saw that her cheeks were even pinker.

"Really," Andy said, and grinned. Miranda nodded. "Gosh, why wasn't it here with all the other stuff?"

"You are infuriating," Miranda said, very calmly for someone with a blush like that.

"I guess." A horrible thought suddenly occurred to Andy. "Wait--Ellie didn't pick--"

"Oh, no," Miranda said. Her eyes smoldered. "No, no, I gave this one my personal attention."

"Whew," Andy said, relieved and aroused and more than a bit curious. Nate had bought her naughty underwear a few times--always the stuff that was so gaudy and cheap that they'd both cracked up before she could even put it on, but it had done the trick. She didn't think Miranda would have bought her underwear like that. "Glad to hear it."

"Yes," Miranda said, shifted in the chair, and winced. "Nnh."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes," Miranda said, and rose to her feet, "but I think I'd better go upstairs." Now her pink cheeks didn't so much suggest arousal as embarrassment. "Say goodbye to the girls when they get back, and then feel free to come on up."
"Oh, okay," Andy said, delicately not pressing for further information—Miranda had said that pregnancy was a degrading experience, and would not appreciate being asked about the particulars of whatever symptoms degraded her at any given moment. "I'll, uh, be up in a minute, then."

"Fine," Miranda said, and headed quickly out of the room. A few minutes later, Caroline and Cassidy burst into the living room with jackets and backpacks.

"Bye, Andy," Cassidy said breathlessly. "We're late!"

"Are you going home now?" Caroline asked.

Andy willed herself not to blush. "In a little while," she said. "Your mom wants to talk to me." She thought fast. "I think she, um, wants to know about Nigel's magazine."

"Does she hate Nigel now, or what?" Caroline said.

"Well, uh," Andy began, but thankfully Cassidy rolled her eyes and tugged at Caroline's sleeve.

"C'mon," she said, and repeated, "bye, Andy." She yanked her twin out of the living room, and Caroline called over her shoulder, "Happy Birthday!"

"Thanks," Andy called after them, and grinned, realizing that at some point she'd kind of gotten attached to them. They ran down the hallway, and the front door slammed shut behind them.

Andy realized she was now alone in the house with Miranda for the first time since, well, their first time. Which, okay, had only been about a week ago, but still. She took a deep breath and stood up. "Don't mess with my presents," she told Patricia sternly. Patricia opened one eye, made a whuffling noise, and went back to sleep.

Then Andy headed upstairs. She made sure to knock on Miranda's door, but when she got no answer, she worried enough to open it and poke her head inside. "Miranda?"

"I'll be out in a moment," Miranda called from behind her bathroom door. "You can come in."

Relieved that Miranda hadn't passed out or anything, Andy shut the door behind her and sat on the bed, trying not to bounce up and down in anticipation. Miranda apparently wasn't feeling well, after all. And that was the most important thing. Andy had to be considerate and thoughtful, even if she felt like she was about to explode. Because Miranda might not even feel like--

Miranda opened the door and left the bathroom in a rustle of champagne-colored silk and gold lace. She was wearing the gown from New Year's Eve.

Andy's eyes widened, her heart stopped, and her jaw dropped open. She felt like she couldn't breathe. Miranda folded her hands placidly in front of herself and cocked her head to the side, her eyes bright with amusement, which was par for the course whenever Andy looked like a drooling idiot. But how else was Andy supposed to look, with Miranda standing right in front of her and wearing…that?

It fit her differently now, of course. There was more belly underneath it, for one thing. And her breasts were bigger than they'd been on New Year's. And she obviously wasn't wearing any kind of bra. And oh, oh, oh.

"Um, uh," Andy said, and held out both her hands, frantically beckoning Miranda to the bed, not sure her own knees would hold her up if she tried to stand. Miranda chuckled and glided forward, and Andy's head spun as she remembered how Miranda had moved in that dress, how everyone in
the ballroom had stared at her, and how Andy had been so completely certain that she'd never—that Miranda would never--

She stood up. And without a word, she took Miranda's face in her hands and kissed her, very slowly, very gently, as if it was their first kiss all over again. Miranda grabbed her shoulders and pressed closer, but seemed content to let Andy take her time with their kisses. Days. It had been days since they'd...

"You have quite a few fantasies to fulfill," Miranda breathed against her mouth.

"Yeah?" Andy said, and bent down to kiss Miranda's throat. Oh Jesus, she was even wearing the same perfume. She'd even made her hair fall across her eyes the same way. Had she done it on purpose, or was Miranda just being Miranda, uncannily able to do the perfect thing with the perfect outfit every single time? "What fantasies might those be?" She nipped. Miranda hissed. "Tell me."

"Let me see," Miranda said, tilting her head to the side; Andy cupped her breast through the silk, and she shuddered. "Oh. There was...something about a coat room...if, if I remember cor--" Andy rubbed her thumb, and felt Miranda's nipple go pebble-hard. "--oh," Miranda moaned.

"That was the one I came up with," Andy said, her head starting to spin. She slid her free hand down Miranda's back, stroked her ass. Miranda shuddered again. "What about yours?" She kissed Miranda's shoulder. "Remember yours?"

"I..."

"About me pushing you down on the bed while you were still wearing the dress, and still in your shoes." Andy kissed her, deeper this time, until they were both panting. "About how wet you'd be." She bit, gently, at the side of Miranda's throat. Miranda groaned, sliding her hands up and down Andy's back; Andy felt her getting weak in the knees, felt her breath getting uneven, and recognized the other signs that meant Miranda was losing the ability to do anything but let Andy fuck her. "Are you wet yet?"

"Andrea," Miranda said, and then whimpered, "Andrea," when Andy began to kiss downward along the edge of her bodice, nuzzling at the rise of her breasts. When Andy bit her nipple through the silk and lace, Miranda gasped, and scrabbled at Andy's back with her fingernails, rubbing her nose in Andy's hair.

Andy's knees shook, and she sat down on the edge of the bed. Miranda made to join her, but Andy held her still, so that she could lean forward and bury her face in Miranda's breasts again, could reach around her and cup her ass. Miranda swayed forward even as her head fell back, and she had to put her hands on Andy's shoulders for balance.

"You said you'd beg me to do whatever I wanted to you," Andy said. She stroked up until she found the gown's zipper between Miranda's shoulder blades, and carefully slid it down. The hiss of the zipper, almost indecent by itself, made her feel faint. She didn't want Miranda to take the dress off yet, though, so she left the zipper at half-mast and tugged at one of the gown's spaghetti straps.

"Here--let's--"

Miranda wriggled, shrugged, and eased the strap down until she'd slipped her arm through it and exposed one of her breasts, flushed pink and with its nipple tight and hard. Andy leaned in and kissed and licked and pulled with her teeth until Miranda said "please" and "please" and "oh."

Then Andy, feeling dizzy with heat, paused just long enough to pull off her sweater and shirt before tugging Miranda down to the bed, laying her flat and leaning over her and kissing her again, over
and over again. She reached beneath the skirt--Miranda trembled eagerly--to find the soft, smooth skin she loved. And higher up until she realized Miranda wasn't wearing any underwear at all.

"Oh," Andy whispered, and moved her fingers. "Yeah, you're wet."

"Oh God," Miranda said, shaking, looking up at Andy with dazed eyes. Andy moved her fingers down and away, to stroke the inside of her thigh. "Oh, no, please--"

"Please what?" Andy whispered, nibbling her throat again.

"Please," Miranda managed, "it--it's been so long, I need, I need--"

Andy remembered Miranda hanging up on her the night before, and smiled against her skin. "Need what?" She kissed Miranda before she could reply, and whispered, "My mouth? You want my mouth on you?" She stroked Miranda's thigh again. "Want me to eat you right up?"

"God!" Miranda gasped, and squeezed her eyes shut. Andy pinched her nipple. "Oh! Please, I… please, just…"

"It's my birthday," Andy whispered, and something in her voice--maybe the promise of torment--made Miranda moan and tremble again. "And I get to do what I want."

"Oh, no," Miranda whimpered.

"And I want it slow. Nice and slow."

"No," Miranda repeated, which might have worked better if her nipples hadn't gone even harder, and if Andy hadn't felt her moisture beginning to drip down the inside of her thigh. "I…I need…"

"I've got what you need," Andy said, and proved it, making love to Miranda slowly, peeling the gown off her inch by inch; and the more Miranda begged for Andy to hurry, to do it faster and harder, the more thrilled she was when Andy refused to comply. By the time they were both naked, the gown was probably ruined and Miranda had lost the ability to speak in recognizable words. Andy finally gave in to her own desires, stopped the torture, and fingered Miranda so slowly, so gently, that when Miranda began to shudder and sob and clench all around Andy's fingers it came almost as a surprise to them both.

"Oh," Miranda moaned when she was done, and melted back against the mattress, trembling. The sight of her, flushed and delighted, made Andy's vision swim. "Oh my God. Oh my God."

Andy, sticky and breathless and so turned on she thought she was going to die, tried to come up with something to say. All she managed was, "I love doing this. I…" Miranda opened her glassy eyes and looked at her. But before Andy could say anything else--before she could admit to loving Miranda even more than sex--Miranda stroked her own hand up Andy's thigh.

To her own surprise, Andy gasped, "No. Not yet."

Miranda blinked and said, hoarsely, "No?"

"Not yet," Andy repeated, and swallowed hard. There was something else she wanted more. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Miranda blinked again. "What?" And then, when Andy bent her head and began lapping hungrily between her legs, she cried out, "Oh!"
"Can't get enough of you," Andy panted, feeling her cheeks and even her hair and ears getting sticky. She kissed, licked, sucked, all while Miranda writhed and grabbed at the pillows, too breathless now to beg or plead. "Wish I could do this to you--all the time--"

"Oh, oh, oh," Miranda wailed, and came again. Andy pulled away, licking her lips while Miranda's thighs quivered, and waited for Miranda to pry her eyes open. After a moment, she did, as her breathing began to slow again. She trembled, covered her eyes with her hand, uncovered them again, and swallowed hard. "Umm." Then she managed, "Come here."

Andy did, lying down next to her, looking into her eyes while she tried to get herself under control and make the moment last. Miranda, of course, was interested in doing no such thing. Instead, she touched Andy's chin, urged her in for a kiss, and greedily tasted herself on Andy's lips.

"Well," she said throatily when they parted. Her voice made Andy shiver; Miranda was always at her most mischievous when she'd just been sated and was ready to turn the tables. "Enjoyed that, did you?"

Andy might have been able to come up with something smart-assed, had Miranda not trailed her fingertips up the inside of Andy's thigh. So she just gasped, "Yeah," instead.

"Did you get what you wanted?" Miranda's eyes glinted. "'Having your way with me.' Wasn't that how you put it? Did you get to do that?" She slid her middle finger inside Andy; Andy clenched and almost came on the spot. Miranda's lips curved in a pleased little smile. "Well, did you?"

"You tell me," Andy panted. "You were there, weren't you?" Miranda pressed her thumb against Andy's clit, and Andy whimpered. "Oh. God."

"Yes," Miranda murmured. "I was there."

"A couple of times," Andy said, and grinned, suddenly elated; for no particular reason, she loved Miranda so much in that moment that it hurt. It actually took the edge off her arousal for a second. She beamed down at Miranda, combed her sweaty hair off her forehead, and kissed her nose. Miranda, of course, looked surprised, and then suspicious. Andy chuckled. "So, are you going to get me off, or what?"

"You do laugh at the strangest times," Miranda said, and took her revenge by sliding another finger inside Andy. Andy stopped giggling at once, and bit her lip too slowly to stifle a moan. It was Miranda's turn to chuckle. "So what would get you off?"

Andy decided to go for it. She kissed Miranda's forehead, then her temple, and murmured, "Last night you said you've touched yourself. More than once." Miranda hissed, and her fingers went still. "Tell me what you think about." She cupped Miranda's breast again, plucked at her nipple. Miranda made the 'nnnh' sound. Good. "Tell me."

"Stan Oppenheimer," Miranda said. Andy's jaw dropped; Miranda gave her a bland smile; Andy snarled, and Miranda's smile got a little bigger.

Her warm delight all gone, Andy said, "That was the worst possible moment to--"

"You," Miranda said.

"--joke about--what?" Andy said. And then: "Oh." She gulped.

"I think about you," Miranda breathed.
"Jesus," Andy said, lowered her head, and rested her forehead against Miranda's, staring right into her eyes.

Miranda's breath puffed against Andy's lips as she said, "Would you like to hear about the first time?"

"Yes," Andy whimpered, but forestalled Miranda by kissing her because she couldn't help herself.

When she pulled away again, Miranda flexed her fingers. It felt good. Andy trembled. And trembled harder when Miranda began to whisper. "When you kissed me in the stairwell. That first night."

"Oh my God," Andy gasped.

"I was so surprised." Miranda turned her head, kissed Andy's throat. "I dressed for bed. I tried to go to sleep." She bit down lightly. "I couldn't."

"Miranda," Andy said, digging her nails into her own palms as she tried not to come, her mind on fire. "Oh--"

"I thought about New Year's Eve. And how much you wanted me. And how soft your mouth was." Miranda licked where she'd bitten, and began to thrust with her fingers. Andy's hips jerked. "And I wondered what I would do if you came into the room and slipped into bed with me, and began to kiss me, touch me…"

"Jesus," Andy sobbed again, grinding down onto Miranda's fingers.

"What would I do?" Miranda murmured. "Would I be angry? Would I tell you to leave? Or would I…" She parted her legs. Andy groaned and buried her face in the soft, salty curve of Miranda's throat. "I wondered. And I did this. Exactly this." Miranda began to brush her thumb over Andy's clit again. Very, very lightly. "Exactly what I'm doing to you now. Which is when I discovered that I do like it slow. And gentle."

"Going to come," Andy panted against her skin. "Going to…going…"

"But you like it rougher," Miranda said, "don't you?" And she pressed down firmly with her thumb.

"Christ!" Andy wailed into her shoulder and thrust her hips once, twice, before freezing in place because she couldn't move anymore. Pleasure locked her muscles up, and Miranda didn't stop moving her thumb, and…

She almost fainted. The world definitely got blurry and grey, and she couldn't exactly remember the seconds between Miranda lifting her thumb away and Miranda sliding her fingers out.

"I think," Miranda said--gasped, rather--"that we made an even bigger mess than before you cleaned me up."

"Ungh," Andy replied. "Did…did you really do that? After I kissed you?" Or had Miranda just thought Andy would 'like the idea'?

"Oh yes," Miranda said. "I really did."

"Wow," Andy said, and could almost hear Miranda rolling her eyes. She didn't mind, but just nestled in close and waited to get control of her own mind back. Yeah. Fat chance of that by now. "Thought you said you didn't like talking dirty," she added and, for want of something better to do with her hands, gently stroked Miranda's rounded belly. She was glad the baby hadn't kicked during their
exertions. It might have put her off her stride a little.

Miranda hmph'd, but didn't sound truly upset as she said, "Many of my former rules don't seem to apply to you. That's the least of them." Andy grinned as her delight returned. "Besides," Miranda added, "apparently I'm good at it."

"Oh, yeah," Andy said fervently.

"Yes," Miranda said, having needed no affirmation. "I like doing things I'm good at."

"You don't say," Andy said, propped herself up on one elbow, and squinted at the clock on the nightstand. It was almost three. "What time do the twins get back?"

"Five," Miranda said, rubbing her thumb idly against Andy's arm. She didn't quite meet Andy's eyes as she added, "Plenty of time left."

Andy was pretty sure she wasn't talking about sex. She combed her fingertips through Miranda's sweaty hair, realizing that she was still unsure how many casual caresses she was allowed. Kissing was one thing, and sex another; touching Miranda just for the sake of doing it was something else entirely. She was disappointed, though not surprised, when Miranda's mouth thinned a little bit, and Andy pulled her hand away, resting it back on Miranda's stomach.

Miranda appeared to have no objection to that. Maybe it was just the hair. "So," Andy said, "How's it been going? What's the latest scoop on the Charleston shoot?"

Miranda rolled her eyes and said, "My God," and Andy settled down next to her, stroking her belly soothingly while Miranda held forth on Jocelyn's incompetence, Serena's incompetence, Paul's incompetence, Matthias's incompetence, and pretty much the incompetence of everybody she had ever met in her life except for Andy and, astonishingly, Ellie, who seemed to have earned herself a brief reprieve with her diagrams.

There was one other person she didn't mention. "Tomorrow is Nigel's last day, isn't it?" Andy asked softly.

"We're not talking about that," Miranda said. Her body had slowly been tensing up for the past couple of minutes, and Andy realized now that she'd been bracing for the mention of Nigel's name.

"Okay," Andy said.

"I can't believe," Miranda began, swallowed, and repeated, "We're not talking about it." She stared up at the ceiling and refused to turn her head a single degree in Andy's direction.

Andy thought she understood her anger. Nigel had been by Miranda's side for nearly twenty years, always faithful, always steady, always there. Always competent. He'd outlasted all of her husbands. He'd weathered her moods and catered to her whims and--from what Andy had gathered--very, very occasionally called her on her bullshit. He'd been her best friend. And he'd had enough.

Andy couldn't blame him, really. She remembered Miranda's total lack of remorse for screwing him over in Paris; it was one thing to protect your own interests, but it was another thing never even to apologize for it, and of course Miranda hadn't apologized. If Nigel had given Miranda unconditional support--of all kinds--it had always been a one-way transaction. No, Andy couldn't blame Nigel for wanting out. But now, looking at Miranda's blank face and tightly-pressed lips, Andy could hate him a little for it. Just a little.

"I made him what he is," Miranda rasped.
Andy froze, wondering if Miranda was actually about to cry. She wasn't sure she'd be able to handle that, because what did you do, offer to comfort her, or pretend you didn't notice, or what? But Miranda didn't cry. She just swallowed hard and didn't say anything else.

"He…" Andy's voice trailed off. She felt like she ought to say something, but had no idea what that could be.

Miranda didn't wait to hear it, in any case. "Nicky Barolini. That's his real name. Not exactly old English aristocracy, is it?"

"He told me he grew up in Rhode Island," Andy said hesitantly. Miranda snorted, but didn't seem inclined to reveal any more about Nigel's sordid past. Perhaps she realized it would open the door for Andy to ask about her own. "He, uh, told me I should change my name too," Andy added, and attempted a chuckle. "He said mine was too drab."

"He's always liked you," Miranda said. "Even when he didn't." When Andy had still been fat and dowdy, Andy supposed.

"Maybe," Andy said, and took her courage in both hands. "He, um, loves you, though."

"That's enough," Miranda said immediately, and Andy bit her lip. But she'd only told the truth. Nigel did love Miranda, as hard as it was, as bitter as he might be. "What's wrong with 'Andrea'?"

"It was the 'Sachs' part he objected to," Andy said. "He suggested 'Sackville-West.'" She managed to giggle, even if it was slightly strained.

Miranda finally turned to look at her with wide eyes. "He suggested what?"

"'Sackvi'--no, no, it wasn't like that," Andy said quickly. "Not like a, you know, a lesbian thing. It was ages ago, before we ever…he was just teasing me." Miranda did not look appeased. "It was, like, all the way back in December," Andy added. "He didn't know. Because there was nothing to know. Of course. You know? Um."

"Maybe you just should stick to sex talk," Miranda said.

"Yeah," Andy mumbled. She was starting to feel uncomfortable. Well, more uncomfortable. After all, she wasn't all that sure that Nigel hadn't guessed about their thing. And she would never say so to Miranda, who would probably freak.

But thinking of Nigel made her think of something else he'd mentioned. Something else she wanted to talk about. How to bring it up?

"You know, uh, he and I were talking the other day," she said. "About how, you know, he's openly gay, but he's editing this men's magazine." Miranda made a noncommittal noise. "He says he's going to have to be more discreet."

"Of course he will."

"But he's not going back in the closet. He just wants to be more, uh--" What was the word he'd used? "Circumspect."

"How fascinating," Miranda said. She shut her eyes and sighed. "Why are you telling me about how Nigel handles his love life? Or lack thereof?"

Good question. Why was she? "I was just, just wondering," Andy fumbled, "about how you're
supposed to manage it. I mean, how you walk the line. Between hiding and just being…
circumspect." Miranda opened her eyes again, and looked at Andy. She didn't say anything. "I'm just
saying," Andy added hastily. "I'm not trying to--I don't want--I just wondered--"

"Do you want to come out of the closet?" Miranda inquired, her voice and face absolutely neutral.

"I--" Andy realized she was seriously considering it for the first time ever. This, what they had, was
so intensely private that even Miranda's children didn't know about it, or didn't know all about it.
Andy's worries about her career and her family aside, what would it be like to be chased down the
streets by men with cameras, pilloried in Page Six?


Miranda smiled a little, and even touched her cheek, just like she had on the night she'd come to
Andy's apartment. "Compromises are possible in circumstances like these," she said. "Within certain
circles, there are certain people about which certain things are known. And not discussed. And even
hidden. Discretion is all." She dropped her hand and stroked Andy's shoulder with one fingertip.
"And even that would be too much right now. In the middle of the divorce and pregnancy." And the
trouble with Irv, she didn't have to say.

"No, I know," Andy said quickly. "I wasn't saying--I mean, I was just thinking out loud, really. I like
what we have. I like the way we have it. Private."

"Me, too," Miranda said. Then she added: "Patience."

Andy stared at her. "You're telling me to be patient?"


Andy rolled her eyes. "Miranda, you want everything yesterday. You can't even stand for your
coffee not to be…"

"That's not me being impatient," Miranda said. "That is me refusing to tolerate unnecessary delay.
Roll your eyes again, and I'm kicking you out of bed. There is a difference between waiting for
something important, and--stop. I'm trying to--Andrea!"

"Yes?" Andy said, but her voice was kind of muffled.

"I, um, I--ooh--"

Andy lifted her head for a second to say, "Just making sure you won't kick me out of bed." Then she
bent back down, and Miranda stopped complaining for a while.

"Infuriating," she moaned when Andy was done. "Utterly…utter…mmm."

Andy licked her lips and flopped back down next to her, making the mattress bounce. She tried to
think of something smooth to say. All she could come up with was, "I think I'm really gay for you."

"Oh, good," Miranda said vaguely, and then gasped again and pressed a hand to her belly. "Ah!"

Again, Andy felt that rush of panic. She tried not to freak out, and just said, "Um, is it, is he--"

"Kicking again," Miranda grunted, and shifted on the mattress. Andy raised one hand and let it hover
in the air until Miranda said, "For God's sake, of course you can." Then Andy touched her belly and
felt the faint thumping.
"How often does he move?" she asked.

"There's not much of a pattern," Miranda said, her breath calming a little. "Yesterday he moved several times. This is the first time he's moved today."

Andy nodded. "The books say it's different for everyone," she said.

Miranda looked amused. "Do they? What else do the books say?"

"All kinds of stuff you'd know if you'd read them too," Andy said. The baby kicked again, and she laughed. "See? He agrees with me."

Miranda waved her hand. "I read every single one of them eleven years ago. Most of it was common-sense, as far as I could tell. Besides, I've got you around."

"Like moss on a log." Another kick. "Huh. What's that?" Andy rested her ear against Miranda's stomach. "What did you say, kiddo?"

"Oh, please," Miranda said.

"'Hey…Mom…you…should…listen…to…Andy.'"

"It's hard not to, son, she chatters incessantly," Miranda said. Andy, in a fit of insanity, raspberried her stomach, and Miranda responded by squirming away and snapping, "No. Stop that." She didn't sound remotely amused this time.

Okay. No touching the hair, and definitely no raspberries. Andy sighed. Maybe she should ask Miranda to make her a list. Maybe Miranda already had one. "Sorry. The books also say raspberries are good for babies," she joked lamely. "I guess I got mixed up about which kind."

"Obviously," Miranda said, and then got an arrested look on her face. "…raspberries."

Great. Andy sat up with a groan and patted her hair down as she glanced at the clock, resigning herself to her fate. Three-twenty. "I'll call Agata Valentina. They should have them ready by the time I get there."

"Get papayas too," Miranda ordered, her eyes already shining. "They have wonderful papayas."

"Anything else?"

"Do you like blood oranges?"

"Love 'em," Andy said, and hauled herself to her feet, looking around for her clothes. Then she glared at Miranda. "You notice how I don't have to do this anymore, but I'm still doing it? Getting you everything you want? I am totally spoiling you." Miranda lifted an eyebrow. "No. More than that. I am enabling you." Miranda settled back against the mattress, looking smug. "You better appreciate this," Andy growled, and put on her panties.

"Oh, I assure you," Miranda said airily. She added, "Bring me my robe, would you? It's hanging on the hook in the bathroom."

"Oh my God," Andy muttered, and stomped to the bathroom. Miranda's chuckle followed her all the way inside.
That night, as she got ready for bed, Andy thought about what she'd said. She knew that she really was spoiling Miranda, of course. Indulging all her whims. And also that she didn't really care. Now that it wasn't her job, wasn't what she was paid to do, spoiling and indulging Miranda was a pleasure, both in and out of bed. Miranda clearly thrived on it, too, just as she thrived on getting fucked while Andy thrived on fucking. It seemed to be working out pretty well so far.

Andy had to keep telling herself that over and over again—that it was working out, that it was fine—during the next week. When she arrived at the Distinguish offices on Monday morning, nearly everybody was there, including Keisha, who seemed delighted to work with Andy again. Well, she'd always been nice about that, even when everybody else at Runway had treated Andy like she had the plague.

Brad was there too. "So," he said, "how about that lunch in the cafeteria?" He raised an eyebrow and grinned, showing his dimples.

"I am going to be so busy," Andy replied, wishing she could tell him exactly what she thought of him. Instead, she contented herself with imagining what it would look like if Miranda attacked him with an axe. "Sometime, though, for sure."

"Ugh," Keisha said when Brad left. "He's kind of cute, though."

"Please, take him," Andy said.

"Forget it," Keisha said. "No dipping into company ink." Andy's eyes widened. "You never heard that phrase?"

"I, um," Andy said, and tried not to gulp. "I might have."

Nigel arrived that night, at about eight-thirty, after wrapping up his last day at Runway. He received a standing ovation as soon as he walked into the office, and Andy was pleased to see how the exhaustion on his face—and the traces of sadness—melted away at all the enthusiasm. Somebody even popped a bottle of champagne.

There wasn't quite enough to go around, so Andy generously declined and raised a glass full of Perrier instead as they toasted. "To new beginnings," Nigel announced.

"And high sales!" laughed Jerry, the marketing director. Brad punched him in the shoulder with a grin. Jerry winced, and Andy and Keisha shared an amused glance. Maybe Jerry wouldn't want Brad around for too much longer, after all.

The night was intoxicating in more ways than one, and by the time she went home at ten-thirty, Andy was feeling as dizzy as someone who'd drunk half a bottle of champagne. Everyone in the office had been so energetic, so pumped, so ready to go, and tomorrow the work of the magazine began in earnest. The optimism, the potential in the air, was practically tangible. Had Miranda felt like this when she took the helm of Runway? Andy longed to ask her, but right now she had a feeling that Nigel's defection would be too new and too sore a subject.

Miranda called her as she was taking the subway back to her apartment. They didn't talk for very long tonight, as it was already late, and they carefully avoided all mention of Nigel and Distinguish and Andy's new duties and coworkers and everything else. Instead, it was mostly small talk about the twins; Andy asked how Miranda was feeling, and received a curt "Fine," which meant she felt like shit. By the time they hung up, Andy was biting her lip and wishing for the closeness of...
yesterday afternoon. Leaving Miranda had sucked (especially taking into account her post-raspberry bliss), and their schedules were so busy now that they hadn't been able to agree on a time to see each other again until next Sunday afternoon, when Andy was taking Caroline to Wicked and wouldn't be able to hang out with Miranda anyway. It was almost like being in a long-distance relationship, even though they both lived in the same city.

It didn't help that the next week was packed--getting the magazine started, and getting to know dozens of new people, certainly kept Andy occupied. She was pleased to see, though, that she hadn't lost her touch. On Tuesday, a harried-looking Nigel said, "I need the--you know, for Jeffrey's feature on the election, the--"

Andy handed him the folder without a word. "Don't forget your meeting at two," she said. "And Ramone will call in ten minutes. And you have lint on your cardigan."

"Thanks," Nigel said, and with that word, uttered so casually, he set himself apart from Miranda forever. "Why don't you read over Jeffrey's piece?" he added. "Have you had a chance to look at it yet?" Andy shook her head. "Well, go ahead. Take a pencil to it and see if you have any suggestions or corrections. He doesn't have to know they came from my assistant--and I'll take a look at them before I send them on. If all goes well, I'll put you two in touch."

Andy might get to work with Jeffrey Toobin? The thought made her head spin, and she hurried back to her desk with a draft of the article. She got interrupted several times by the phone, but by three that afternoon she'd gone through the whole thing. Nigel, back from his meeting, glanced over it quickly and nodded his approval. "Fax it," he said.

How cool. Andy grinned like an idiot for the rest of the day.

Which made it even worse when she called Miranda that night and realized she couldn't tell her about it. If the Modernity article had pissed Miranda off, then she'd be downright furious when she discovered that Nigel was personally putting Andy in touch with influential writers and editors during her very first week at work. Miranda getting jealous about men was one thing, and mostly endearing, but Miranda getting jealous about work was a whole different animal, and not endearing at all. Andy hated it and, not for the first time, wished that Miranda could act like a goddamned adult about things like this.

Maybe she should mention it. Maybe Miranda should start getting used to the idea that Andy was going to have a professional life that no longer depended on her. Maybe Andy should just go to the zoo and stick her head in a tiger's mouth and save them both a lot of time. It wasn't worth it. Not yet.

Talk about spoiling somebody. And not in the fun way.

So the evening conversations were a little strained, and a little short. But the week passed by, and Andy worked her butt off and ran errands and talked to Jeffrey Toobin over the phone, and it seemed like no time had passed at all by Sunday afternoon, when she found herself knocking on the townhouse door. Miranda answered the door herself. "Hello," she said as Andy stepped inside. "Caroline's been looking forward to this."

"Me too," said Andy, glad that it was true. She'd heard good things about the musical, and after her frantic week, it'd be nice just to sit in an audience as a face in the crowd, and let somebody else do the running around for once. "Should be fun."

"You should leave soon," Miranda said without preamble. She'd had a lunch meeting scheduled, which meant Andy hadn't been able to come by and hang out before leaving with Caroline for the show, which was at three-thirty. It was two-thirty now. "I'll call Caroline."
"Okay. Hey." Andy reached out and touched her hand, glancing down the hallway. They were alone. "How are you doing today?"

"Fine," Miranda said mildly. "Nothing out of the ordinary. And you?"

"Fine," Andy replied, feeling vaguely disappointed. It all seemed very…formal, after the easy reunion last week. "I'm good."

Then Caroline's footsteps sounded loudly on the stairs, proving that Caroline had not needed to be summoned at all. She really must be looking forward to this. Miranda rolled her eyes, and as Caroline hurried into view, she said, "How many times do I have to tell you and your sister that young ladies do not charge around the house like elephants?"

"Sorry," Caroline said. Andy was amused to see that she was carrying a little Prada bag much like Andy's own, only in different colors. Big surprise. She was sure Cassidy had one too. "Come on, let's go!"

"Caroline," Miranda said.

"Sorry," Caroline said again. "Hi, Andy. How are you?"

Surprised, Andy said, "Oh, I'm fi--"

"Cool. Come on, we're going to be late!"

"We are?" Andy blinked. They needed to get going, but they weren't exactly down to the wire. "But Roy isn't here yet."

Miranda cleared her throat, but Caroline said, "We're not going with Roy, I want to go with you on the subway again. So we have to hurry."

"Oh, okay," Andy said, trying to sound as excited as Caroline obviously felt. She'd been looking forward to a cushy ride in the car, even though she hadn't quite looked forward to seeing Roy, and watching as he wondered why on Earth she was still hanging around. Hmm. Maybe the subway wasn't a bad idea. "Yeah, that'll take a little longer. We should go."

"Be careful," Miranda said firmly. "There was a subway incident yesterday afternoon. I read about it in the paper."

There were 'subway incidents' every day, in varying degrees of severity, all over the city. But all Andy said was, "We'll be careful. I take the subway every day to work. It'll be fine."

"Hmm," Miranda said, but she had no further objections as she kissed Caroline goodbye and gave Andy another loaded glance. It wasn't the sexy loaded glance this time; it was the if-anything-happens-to-my-child-I-will-kill-you loaded glance. And in spite of everything, it still made Andy shiver.

"Y-yeah," Andy said, and got the tremble in her voice under control right away. "I mean, we should be back by seven at the latest. Probably earlier."

"You're welcome to stay for dinner, of course," Miranda said, and finally Andy saw warmth in her eyes. Something in her chest lightened, expanded.

"Yeah!" Caroline said.
"Sure," Andy said, and smiled at them both, relieved for no reason she could explain. "I don't see
why not. Thanks."

"Cool," Caroline said again, and tugged at Andy's elbow. "Now come on."

"Bye," Andy said to Miranda over her shoulder as she obediently followed Caroline out the door and
down the front steps.

Wicked was fun, and both Andy and Caroline liked it, but Andy thought that Caroline might have
enjoyed the trip to and from the theatre even more. In stark contrast to their day-trip around London,
she held Andy's hand on the subway trip--"Mom says the subway's worse than the Underground and
we shouldn't get separated"--and chattered on and on about everything she saw, including the grosser
subway passengers. This might have been okay, except that she hadn't yet learned the trick of
keeping her voice down, so both Andy and Caroline drew their share of nasty looks. Well, that was
like London, anyway.

At least Caroline kept quiet during the show, but afterwards, as she bought an exorbitantly expensive
T-shirt, she started talking again. Andy couldn’t help but remember the girl who’d said repeatedly
that she didn't want to talk at all, that she wanted to be left alone. Then again, at the time Miranda
had basically been ignoring the twins' existence as she tried to come to grips with her new
circumstances. She was much more involved with their lives now--maybe more than she'd ever been
before. That would explain Caroline's exuberance, if she no longer felt like her own mother was
cutting her dead.

Andy wondered what the twins' father thought about his ex-wife's pregnancy. If the two of them had
talked about it at all. If they ever talked, beyond what was absolutely necessary for the girls. Andy
doubted it; she'd done her fair share of leaving messages for Greg on Miranda's behalf. Apparently
Miranda didn't 'do' amicable break-ups. The thought made Andy uneasy, and she shied away from it.

Caroline kept talking all the way through dinner, and by the time they were done with the salad,
Cassidy was already writhing with jealousy. "Mom, can I change my ticket to Wicked now?"

"You've been talking about seeing The Lion King since Christmas," Miranda said in exasperation.

"I can see that later!" Cassidy looked at Andy hopefully.

Andy bit her lip. "They're sold out for the rest of the season," she said apologetically.

Cassidy rolled her eyes, but before she could say anything else, Miranda said, "There, you see?"
Which meant she didn't want to bend to Cassidy's whim; if she had, she would have thought nothing
of getting Ellie, or somebody else, to procure the impossible tickets. Come to think of it, Ellie-or-
somebody-else would already have had to do that to get Caroline's tickets too. Andy sure didn't miss
that part of the job. "Don't worry," Miranda added with a wry smile. "When you come back talking
about The Lion King, Caroline will want to see that, too."

"Bet I won't," Caroline said, and stuck her tongue out at Cassidy.

Andy opened her mouth to say, Settle down. Then she realized what she was doing and closed it
right away. It had almost been a reflex--either that, or the result of yearning to tell the twins to settle
down for months. But she had no right to do that. They weren't her kids.

Neither was the baby boy, not really. She wondered, with uneasiness, how much say she'd get in
raising him, in teaching him how to behave. Would Miranda let her guide him, scold him, anything
like that? How might you go about negotiating such a thing?
Instead of telling the twins to shut up, she said to Cassidy, "Come on, I'm dying to see The Lion King. I've heard great things about it for years. I bet we'll love it. Please?" she added with her most hopeful smile, the one that even worked on Miranda sometimes.

It worked on Cassidy too, who said, "Well, okay," and appeared mollified. They got through the rest of dinner with a minimum of fuss, and then the twins retired to do the homework they'd been putting off all weekend, as they cheerfully admitted themselves. "I had a great time, Andy!" Caroline called over her shoulder as she and Cassidy thundered, exactly like elephants, back up the stairs.

"Me, too," Andy said, and this time her smile was genuine. She turned back to see Miranda looking at her silently, and felt apprehensive for no good reason. She took a breath, realized she had nothing to say, and exhaled silently, ending with another smile.

"She behaved herself?" Miranda said neutrally. "Everything went well?"

"Sure," Andy said, surprised that Miranda had bothered to ask about Caroline's conduct. Would wonders never cease? "We had a good time. Everything was fine." Miranda nodded wordlessly.

"Um," Andy added, "whose idea was it? The tickets. For me to take them to--was it you?"

Miranda shook her head. "They suggested it."

"Oh." Andy blinked, got her courage together, and said, "Did they...I mean, when Stephen started coming around, did they ever ask to..."

"No," Miranda said.

"Oh," Andy said again.

"Well now," Miranda said, clearly done with that, "I imagine you've been very busy this week. At work."

"Yeah," Andy said cautiously. "I mean, you know, we've talked..."

"Not much," Miranda said. "You have been reticent."

Shit. She should have known Miranda would call her on it sooner or later, should have been prepared. "Well, I--I didn't know if you'd want to talk about it," Andy said.

Miranda narrowed her eyes. Double shit. "Why not?" she said. "Why wouldn't I want to talk about it?"

"Because you're mad at Nigel," Andy said, deciding she might as well get it over with. "And I didn't think you'd want to hear about him."

"I'm not 'mad' at Nigel," Miranda said coldly. "What an idea."

Oh, great. Miranda was in a mood and was going to play it like that tonight. Andy knew there was a reason she'd been nervous. She muffled a heavy sigh, and said, "Okay, then. Yes. I've been very busy. So has he. You know, trying to get everything together and off the ground..."

"Yes," Miranda said, her eyes flat and closed. "I know."

"I was thinking about that, actually," Andy said hesitantly. Time to turn the focus away from Nigel and Distinguish and on to-- "About what it was like when you started at Runway. How you had to adjust, and the things you did, and everything."
Miranda lifted one shoulder in a bored half-shrug. "You'll find out soon enough," she said. "You're going through all of that yourself."

It would be nice to blame the attitude on hormones, but Andy knew better. "But it's different," she said. "You were taking over something from somebody else, and running it in a totally different way." It was true. Miranda had swept in when American Runway's numbers were down, toppled the previous editor, and revived Elias-Clarke's flagship publication with a speed and effectiveness that had astonished the entire industry. And she hadn't slowed down since. What was Irv's problem, anyway? Weren't ad sales and subscriptions at an all-time high? Didn't the magazine turn a profit?

"Was it difficult?" Andy added. "When everyone had to adjust?"

Now Miranda looked thoughtful. "I seem to recall firing a lot of people. It settled down after that." She tapped her fingers against her lips and scowled. "Heady times, indeed."

Then Andy figured it out. "Work's been rough this week, hasn't it?" she asked quietly.

Miranda glanced at her quickly. "It's always rough."

"Extra rough, though?" Andy said. "More than you said on the phone?"

Miranda pursed her lips. "People believe they can see the writing on the wall," she said. "They think I don't hear the whispers, or know about what they say behind my back, or listen to the gossip about who will inevitably replace me when Irv lowers the boom."

"Who," Andy licked her lips, "who do they think--?"

Miranda shrugged. "Beatrice LaSalla is the current favorite," she said. Beatrice LaSalla was the editor-in-chief of Runway Italia. "But the gossip changes every day. I'm sure there's a betting pool." She smiled grimly. "Jacqueline was supposed to be a sure thing. I wonder how much money changed hands over that one."

"Do you think Irv's going to make a move?" Andy said. She added, "I've been listening. But I haven't heard people talking about it. At least, not around me or--" Nigel. Andy realized suddenly that nobody had mentioned Miranda in front of Nigel all week. "I mean, I haven't heard anything."

"I'm sure he's planning on it," Miranda said. "But he's taking his time. First he fired you; in a few days it will be Paul, or Jocelyn, or someone else. And then someone else again. He'll want to draw it out. Save me for last. He's angry about Paris--about how I humiliated him." Andy shuddered. "Try not to worry about it."

"Try not to--" Andy stared at her. "Miranda--"

"I'll take care of it," Miranda said firmly, attempting to close the subject.

No dice. "I know you will," Andy said, praying that was true. "But, I mean, I'm going to worry. I am worried. I, I can't be there, and I can't help--"

"You never could," Miranda said. "Not with this."

She'd probably meant to make Andy feel better, in her own, Miranda-ish way. It didn't work. Instead, Andy just felt reminded, yet again, of how powerless she was and always had been. "Yeah," she muttered. "I know."

Miranda sighed. "Your time will come," she said. "I told you to be patient. Just work your way up
"I know," Andy said again, trying not to sound like a sulky little kid. Miranda could do that well enough for both of them. "I'll--but is there anything I can do?" Then she winced. She hadn't meant to sound quite so pathetic.

But Miranda gave her a half-smile, and actually seemed pleased. "You do enough," she said. "In a very different capacity. You help me, Andrea. Never fear about that."

Andy blushed with sudden pleasure. Well, that was...good. She abruptly remembered that she and Miranda hadn't seen each other since last Sunday--that, in fact, it had been a whole week since they'd...how had she not noticed?

Well, never mind. No time like the present. She tried the hopeful smile again. Miranda, interpreting it immediately, turned pink herself. But she also looked apologetic. "I haven't felt well today," she said. "I really don't think..."

Andy practically tripped over herself to say, "Oh, right, sure, no problem." The last thing she needed was to look desperate. Then she added anxiously, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing dreadful," Miranda said. "Just exhaustion, discomfort, various symptoms I'm not going to tell you about, and perhaps a general malaise." She grimaced. "It was not a good week."

"You know, you can--you can tell me about that on the phone," Andy suggested. "You don't have to stew over it. It's not like I mind hearing it."

"But I mind talking about it," Miranda said, and then amended, "every day. It would wear me out. It's--easier when it's face-to-face." She frowned. "I wonder why."

Andy considered. "Maybe--"

"It was a rhetorical question." Miranda stretched in her chair, and winced as she patted her belly. She definitely looked a little bigger than last week. Andy realized that now they weren't seeing each other every day, the changes in Miranda's body would become more dramatically visible. Weird. "He gave me no rest last night."

"Maybe he'll calm down tonight," Andy said.

"I live in hope," Miranda said. "Well. I guess it's better to have him doing high kicks than the alternative." She gave Andy a quick glance. "Dr. Viswanathan's office called me at work this morning."

Andy blinked. "Yeah?" Then she sat up very straight. Of course--two weeks after the last ultrasound, the lab results from the amniocentesis would be ready. How could Andy have forgotten? She hadn't been that busy, surely? "What did--I mean, is everything--"

"Everything is fine," Miranda said calmly. "Just as the ultrasound suggested."

"I..." Andy swallowed. "Were you worried? Were you thinking about it? I--"

"Not as much as I might otherwise have been," Miranda said. "We've been a little distracted. Don't worry. I was almost as forgetful as you." She looked embarrassed for a fleeting moment, before shaking her head and saying, "Well, at least we didn't sit around tearing our hair out over it. That's one good thing, anyway."
"Yeah," Andy said, still feeling guilty as hell. Seriously, how had she… "But--just to double-check--everything came out okay? The chromosomes and, and, uh--"

"Yes," Miranda said in exasperation. She looked thoughtful. "Although I was a little worried that the ultrasound might have misdiagnosed the baby's sex, and we'd have to put up with a whole different list of names from the twins." Andy laughed breathlessly. "Oh well. I go in again next Friday, no doubt for an entirely different battery of tests." She snorted. "'Routine checkup.' Please."

"Well, you know," Andy said, "tests are, um--" She realized it would be a terrible idea to say 'important for older women.' "--useful," she finished weakly.

"If you say so," Miranda said, and glanced at the clock. It was nearly eight-thirty. "I hate to say this," she began.

"I'd better get going," Andy said, beating her to the punch and trying not to sound too disappointed. She hated being selfless. "You need to rest."

Miranda smiled mirthlessly. "Two nights ago, I fell asleep reading the book. No warning. I closed my eyes for a moment, opened them, and it was two in the morning and I was still in my chair."

"Look, take care of yourself, okay?" Andy said. She stood up and dared to squeeze Miranda's shoulder. Miranda didn't shrug her off, or seem to mind. "Is Ellie making you eat lunch?"

"Eleanor couldn't make water ripple if she threw a rock in it," Miranda said. "But every day my food appears, from a menu that I am sure she didn't make up, and I eat it."

"I left her a few lists," Andy said sheepishly.

"I'm shocked and amazed," Miranda said. She looked pleased again. Well, it was a form of getting spoiled, Andy supposed. "The pear salad in particular is delightful."

"I'll let her know," Andy said, and grinned.

"Will you be able to come to the twins' party on Saturday?" Miranda asked.

Andy stopped grinning and took her hand off Miranda's shoulder. "No," she said, and shifted from foot to foot. "There's a thing I have to go to for work." A reception in the late afternoon that Nigel had been invited to, and he was dragging her along. She hadn't dared to say no, this time. And she hadn't wanted to. Jeffrey Toobin was going to be there. It might be fun to see David Blaine's magic show, but she could catch him on TV without a ton of eleven-year-olds and their nannies running around. "I'm sure it'll be fine. The Ace of Cakes guy says everything's looking great on his end."

Miranda arched an eyebrow. "So Eleanor told me," she said. "And you as well?"

"I might be keeping on top of the arrangements," Andy admitted, feeling more sheepish than ever. So she'd felt an obligation to see the project through. Big deal. But Miranda smiled again, looking touched, which was the best possible payoff. "Maybe we can get together next Sunday again. Or before," Andy added hopefully. This once-a-week-thing sucked. They had to be able to come up with a better plan.

"We'll see," Miranda said. "You're working late most nights now, aren't you?" Andy nodded unhappily. She was Nigel's only assistant, and she'd been staying at the office until at least nine o'clock every night, like everybody else, while the first issue struggled towards the press. Sometimes later. And while she'd had to stay at least until ten every night at Runway, nine suddenly seemed unendurably late, since she was missing Miranda and the twins. But at least Nigel didn't yell at her if
he caught her sneaking a granola bar or something at her desk.

Miranda didn't look pleased anymore. More like resigned. "So it begins," she said. "The late nights and..." She tilted her head to the side and regarded Andy thoughtfully. "You wondered, didn't you," she said, "why I was late for dinners with my husband. Why I missed family events. You wondered-like so many people--why I couldn't just keep those simple, straightforward promises."

Andy swallowed hard, and nodded.

Now Miranda almost looked sad. "You're about to find out," she said.

Miranda's words troubled Andy more than she would ever have admitted. Admitted to Miranda, anyway.

She'd left Miranda that night with a kiss, trying hard not to wish for more. And she'd gone home and stared at the ceiling--since meeting Miranda and working at *Runway*, she'd started doing that a lot--and pondered.

Miranda had said Andy was like her. She'd been right; Andy had been forced to admit that long ago. But Miranda wasn't completely right. Andy was different in some ways, important ways. Wasn't she?

She remembered coming home late on Nate's birthday with her pitiful little cupcake and candle. Remembered whispering, "Happy Birthday," while he looked at her like she was a stranger in her couture. Remembered a dozen other times when she'd had to dash out in the middle of a date, or a quiet moment together, or--once--during sex, to answer Miranda's latest summons. Andy decided then and there that she'd let Nigel fire her before she tried to explain to Miranda why they had to stop making love because Andy had to pick up his dry cleaning. There. That was different, wasn't it? That was a change for the better, right?

Right. Andy groaned and pulled her pillow over her face.

She had to keep her priorities straight. There had to be room for compromise. Because God knew Andy wasn't the only guilty one; Miranda was busy too, as busy as always, and under more stress to boot. They could let work drive them apart very, very easily, if they weren't careful. Or...or if they didn't care enough--if Miranda decided their relationship wasn't as important as her career, or Andy did, or--

No. Not even an option. Andy wouldn't let this go for anything, wouldn't let go of what she and Miranda had, whatever the hell that was.

Would she?

Andy lifted the pillow from her face and thought about Jeffrey Toobin, and about being a features editor, and about writing freelance and publishing more articles, and about winning Pulitzer Prizes and everything else. And, as always, whenever she thought about those things, indulged in those daydreams, she felt a tug of desire, the pull of ambition. Her childhood dreams were within reach. She didn't want to give them up. She didn't think she could.

But she couldn't give up Miranda, either--Miranda, whom she loved more than she'd ever loved
Nate, whom she desired more than she'd ever desired Christian, and who might not love her quite as much in return, but who at least...cared for her. She'd said so, anyway. Andy didn't want to give up dinners at the Priestly table either, or the baby, or even the twins, or any other part of the strange, domestic world she'd been sucked into willy-nilly ever since Christmas. Before then, even.

How were you supposed to manage it? How were you supposed to juggle? Who the heck was Andy supposed to ask for advice--Miranda? Nigel? Yeah, right. She wondered unhappily why there were no normal people in her life anymore. Lily would probably have had some helpful pointers, except Andy hadn't spoken to Lily since October, and couldn't forget the disgust and contempt in her eyes when she'd dismissed "the glamazon," the person Andy was turning into. And in the last few months, Andy hadn't magically turned back into the girl Lily had known for years. She'd changed more than ever. Lily would never forgive her, and Andy wasn't sure she could forgive Lily, either.

So Lily was out, maybe forever. And who else was there? Who, indeed?

"I'm not surprised you're so busy, honey," her mother said the next evening. Andy'd gotten off work remarkably early: it was only ten o'clock. "It's a new job, a new magazine. You're going to have to pull some late shifts."

Andy closed her eyes. "I know, Mom," she said, trying to be patient. "I don't have a problem with working late. I got used to that at Runway. But...I just...I mean, there's got to be a little time for me, doesn't there? For my life?"

"Well, of course there does. I don't want you turning into some kind of robot. Nobody wants that."

"So how do I do it?" Andy said in frustration. "You and Dad both work full-time now." Once Andy had started high school, her mother had returned to her career part-time, and when both Andy and Rachel were in college, her mother had started working full-time again. She and Andy's father both said it was for the extra money to help pay for tuition, but Andy thought there was more to it--the need to keep busy in the face of an empty nest. "How do you two make time for, you know...each other?" Her father was a lawyer, after all, which required pretty brutal hours too. But when Andy had been little, somehow he'd always managed to come home in time for dinner, to be around every weekend and help out his wife, to play with his daughters. "How did Dad pull it off when Rachel and I were kids?"

"You just make the time, baby," her mother said, which was the least helpful advice Andy had ever heard in her life. "I don't know. You make choices. You make sacrifices. You can't have it all," and then she added darkly, "no matter what they say about 'the modern woman.'" Andy winced. "You just have to work out what's most important to you."

"I know that," Andy said impatiently. "I mean, that's easy to say. But it's harder when there's--uh, I don't know. Something fun I want to do. But I can't, because I'm at work until ten-thirty or eleven every night, and then I'm so tired I collapse when I get home. Almost every night. Not just some nights."

"Well, you've got to pay your dues," her mom said. "Isn't that what you're always telling us? Although your father and I always said you shouldn't have to--" Andy suppressed the urge to howl. Perhaps her mother sensed her distress, because she finished, "Well, never mind that. You're young. You don't have a family. You're not even dating anybody right now--are you?" she added hopefully.
"Is that what's bringing this on?"

"No men in my life," Andy said, wondering if there really was a hell, and how much time she was buying herself in it. "Sorry, Mom. I'm just asking."

"Oh," her mother said, sounding disappointed. "Well, what I meant to say was, you have less to juggle now. So it's easier for you to concentrate on work, until something better comes along."

Like a woman and her two kids, with one more on the way. "I, I know," Andy said helplessly. "That's...yeah. But..."

"And you'll know it, when it happens," her mother said. "When the right one shows up. It wasn't Nate, was it?"

"No," Andy said, closing her eyes. "No, it wasn't."

"Right," her mother said. "I know my little girl. You're smart. You've got your head together. When the right man shows up, you'll figure out what's most important. So will he, if he's worth anything."

"Yeah," Andy gulped.

"Just think about what you want, when the time comes," her mother said. "Do you want the awards and the money, or do you want friends and family? I know they say you don't have to pick, that it's not like it used to be. But it is, and you do."

"Yeah," Andy said again. "I know." She remembered the moment when she'd chosen not to leave *Runway*. How she'd decided, in a fit of self-righteousness, that she was going to prove to Miranda that you could have it all, that you could be happy and successful and nice and all of that. And that she'd prove it to herself, too. Yeah. Great. Now who was proving what to whom?

Then, to her horror, her mother said, "You know who you should think about? Your old boss. That woman." Andy realized that she couldn't remember the last time her mother had actually deigned to say Miranda's name. "A string of failed marriages, and children she doesn't know how to bring up--"

"That's not true," Andy said, before she could think better of it.

"Didn't you tell me how spoiled they were?" her mother said. "How she doesn't even make them do their own schoolwork?"

"Um," Andy said.

"Right," her mother said in triumph. "Is that the life you want? You just think about that. And now she's pregnant and her husband doesn't even want to stick around--"

"Quit," Andy said at once. "Stop it, Mom. Leave Miranda out of this."

"Well, aren't you touchy," her mother said. "Hit a little close to home, did I?"

Closer than she could possibly know. "Just stop, Mom," Andy said. "I don't want to talk about Miranda."

"Well, all right," her mom said, and now she sounded soothing. "That's all I've got to say, anyway."

She would have said a lot more if she'd known the truth. "Well," Andy said. "Thanks for your help."

"There's no need for attitude," her mother said. "Just remember. When you meet The One, it'll all fall
"Yeah," Andy said. "I bet it'll get really easy then."

"Andrea," her mother said sharply.

"Sorry," Andy sighed. "I'm just tired. I'd better go. It's late."

"You take care of yourself," her mother said. "Don't work too hard. And don't worry too much. Okay?"

Talk about easier said than done. Andy finished the phone call with the usual pleasantries, and growled with irritation when she hung up.

 Barely five minutes later, her phone rang again. Miranda, checking in for their nightly chat. Well, they still did that, at least, even if they sometimes only made it through fifteen minutes before one of them begged off from exhaustion. It was better than nothing.

"Hey," Andy said as she picked up. "What's up?"

"Hello, Andrea," Miranda said. The sound of her voice lifted Andy's spirits right away. "Things are--well, I had to go to a party tonight. Do you remember that odious little man who works for Michael Kors? Pierre what's-his-name?"

"Vaguely," Andy laughed, and made herself more comfortable on the couch. It'd be longer than fifteen minutes tonight. She could tell. Good.

 In fact, it was almost an hour. By the time they wound down, Andy was yawning hugely, and trying desperately to keep her eyes open. But she wasn't so sleepy that she couldn't come to a decision, and her heart pounded as Miranda said, "Well, I suppose I'd better go."

"Yeah," Andy said. "Good night. I, um, I love you."

 There was a moment of silence. And then another one. It felt like it lasted for years. Andy writhed on the sofa, already regretting her stupidity, but still hoping and waiting desperately for--

 "Well," Miranda said faintly. "Yes."

 Andy blinked, not at all sure what to make of that.

 "Good night," Miranda added. Her voice was softer than usual.

 "Yeah," Andy said. "N-night." And then she pressed the disconnect button right away with a shaking finger, before she could say something that would screw everything up, assuming she hadn't just done exactly that. And then she went to bed, and stared at the ceiling yet again.

 Well...she'd said it. She'd started staking a claim for what was important in her life, for what mattered the most. And Miranda had said, "Yes," whatever that meant in the grand scheme of things. So it had gone okay. Nothing to freak out about. Yeah. Sure.

 She kept looking at the ceiling until her eyes closed and she finally went to sleep, exhausted by her own thoughts.

 Her phone's insistent bleeping woke her up what seemed like four seconds later. Andy opened her eyes with a gasp; she rolled over and squinted at the phone display. It was three-thirty in the morning. And Miranda was calling.
Emergency? Still more than half-asleep, Andy answered right away. "Hello? What's the matter?"

"Did you mean it?" Miranda demanded.

"Huh?" Then Andy woke up just a little more. "Oh my God," she said, and mashed her face into her pillow.

"Well, did you?" Miranda said. "I have been lying awake for hours--"

"I haven't," Andy said, lifting her face back up. "You woke me up. Again." Although later she would realize this was a good thing. Having this conversation in broad daylight would have terrified her. It was easier when she was groggy and pissed off. "Of course I meant it. Jesus."

"Oh," Miranda said.

"I wouldn't say that if I didn't."

"Sometimes people--you know, these days the word 'love' is tossed around like--"

"Oh, my God," Andy said again. "Did you really not know? Come on."

"Well," Miranda said.

"Give me some fucking credit." Andy rubbed her hand against her forehead. Unbelievable. And there were only three hours before she had to get up again.

"There's no need for--"

"Miranda?"

"What?"

"Don't call me at three in the morning unless you are dying."

"I--ah."

"And don't die," Andy added, deciding that was necessary advice since Miranda apparently needed some kind of instruction manual for everything.

"I--"

"And I'm not going to the girls' birthday party, but I'm still sticking around and I love you." At three-thirty in the morning, this sounded like the best plan she'd ever come up with. Andy was proud of herself.

"I," Miranda said. She sounded a little strangled. "I--"

"We're gonna make it work," Andy said, and rested her head back against her lovely soft pillow. "And also, the kid's going to do his own schoolwork. Can I go back to sleep now?"

"I--" Miranda said again, and finished, "--suppose so."

"Thanks," Andy said, hung up, and dropped the phone back on her nightstand. She had the feeling that maybe they hadn't quite finished something, but she'd work it out in the morning. Later in the morning. Besides, Miranda needed the rest, too. She was sleeping for two now, and…
Andy rolled over and went back to sleep. For some reason, it was much easier this time.

She felt exceptionally tired when she woke up the next morning, and she was actually on the subway and headed to work before remembering that she'd told Miranda she loved her the night before. It made her blink a little, as she tried to recall the conversation they'd had afterward. Really afterward. She'd been kind of out of it.

But she still felt good about what she'd said. She'd told Miranda the truth, even if Miranda had been strangely surprised. Really strangely. Seriously…what did she think Andy felt? Did she think Andy would have gone through all this crap if her feelings hadn't been serious? Miranda sure wouldn't be going through this if she didn't feel the same—right?

She vowed to put Miranda out of her mind, at least temporarily, when she arrived at work. But that plan went out the window as soon as she brought Nigel his coffee and was greeted with his frown as he held out a square, cream-colored envelope to her. It had her name on it.

"I got one too," he said, and held up an invitation on heavy paper. Andy recognized it immediately. She'd been the one to order it from the stationers, after all. "Apparently we're both invited to her little shindig in a couple of weeks."

Andy didn't have to fake her surprise, at least. She was astonished that Miranda had invited Nigel. And astonished, too, that Miranda had sent Andy an invitation at all, when she'd already personally invited her. More, sent the invitation to Andy's job, where of course Nigel would be sure to see it.

"What's she up to?" Nigel said, echoing Andy's thoughts.

"I have no idea," Andy said, glad she could be honest. "She told me to organize the party last month—" She paused to be grateful that the event was now in the hands of the party planners, and not Ellie. "—but she never told me why she's throwing it, or what it's for. I don't even know who's coming." She'd been kicked out before the guest list had been finalized.

"Great," Nigel said. "Now I'm paranoid. I mean, I was invited before, of course, but that was…" His voice trailed off.

"Maybe she's, um…not as mad as we thought?" Andy suggested. Then she shrugged helplessly when Nigel raised his eyebrows at her. "Sorry. I don't have a clue. Really."

"Fantastic," Nigel said. "Andy: I now designate you my official food taster. If you try my salad and fall over dead, I'll fund a scholarship in your name or something."

"We might not get to sit together," Andy pointed out, deciding that Nigel was almost certainly joking.

"Fair enough," Nigel said. He added, "I hope we get to sit together."

"I've never felt more appreciated," Andy said.

That night, Miranda, of course, refused to say a word about her intentions. "Poisoning Nigel," she sniffed. "Where does he come up with these things?"
"So you're not mad at him anymore?" Andy asked.

"We're not talking about it," Miranda said.

Ouch. "Right," Andy said. "So you're not going to spill the beans about the party."

"Not a single bean."

"I'm supposed to wear my snake pin to this thing, right?"

"This 'thing'?"

"Sorry. I guess I don't know what to call it. I can't imagine why--"

"Wear the pin," Miranda sighed. Then she added, "But not the boots."

Andy grinned. "No? You don't want me to wear your favorite boots?" Miranda was in a remarkably playful mood tonight. Maybe Andy's little confession yesterday had made her happy. That would be wonderful. Not that Andy had been worried. She totally hadn't been worried.

"Those boots are no longer for public wear," Miranda said. "Those boots are for me."

"Those boots are made for wal--" Andy gave up. "Are uncomfortable. We'll save them for special occasions. Really, really special occasions."

"Such as?"

"Such as you just got crowned Queen of the Universe or something," Andy said.

"That would be special," Miranda allowed. "Well, give me time."

"If anybody can do it," Andy said, and laughed. "So what should I wear?"

"I do believe the invitation specified," Miranda said. "Formal wear."

"I know that," Andy said, rolling her eyes. "Anything specific in mind? Well, I have a nice red sheath I got in London…"

"The Marchesa? Hmm." Miranda said. She paused. "Oh, my, yes."

"Marchesa it is, then," Andy said, still grinning. "There are a few rosettes on the left strap. I can hide the snake in them. Like the Garden of Eden or something." She raised her eyebrows suggestively, even though Miranda couldn't see it.

"What a charming notion," Miranda said. "And you look good in red, with your skin. I like you in red."

Andy beamed. Her ego was getting stroked up and down tonight, and it was great. How often did Miranda stroke anybody's ego but her own? Not often. "You do, huh? Only in red?" Might as well fish for a little more, if Miranda was feeling generous.

"I like you best," Miranda said, "in nothing at all."

Andy's breath paused, and she felt herself begin to blush. "Oh," she said, and gulped. "Well, that's… thanks."
"Are you sitting comfortably?" Miranda inquired.

"Um." Andy blinked. She was on the sofa. "I guess so. Why?"

"Because I require you to be comfortable," Miranda said, and added, "and flexible, at least for the next few minutes."

Andy's eyes widened. "Are we," she croaked, "are we going to…over the phone?"

"Oh, yes," Miranda said mildly. "I assume you have no objections."

"No, none at all," Andy managed. She felt like the top of her head was spinning off into space. "I--uh--none at all!"

"Seeing as how I denied you on Sunday," Miranda cooed, "and after you'd waited so patiently all week."

"Not patiently," Andy said, jumping to her feet and stumbling towards her bed where she'd be a lot more 'comfortable.' And flexible. She almost tripped. "Just because I had to."

Miranda wanted to do this. Miranda was probably going to be awesome at this. Andy yanked her pajama bottoms off, along with her underwear, and tossed it all on the floor. She wondered what was making Miranda more accommodating tonight, but she wasn't about to push her luck and ask.

Instead she asked, "So, uh, have you ever--you haven't before, have you? Phone sex. Had it. I mean."

"No," Miranda said, sounding amused. "I think this is the part where I'm supposed to ask you what you're wearing, though."

"Just a t-shirt," Andy said, and confessed, "I pretty much just ripped off my pants." Miranda's breath caught. Andy bared her teeth in what was probably a pretty savage smile. "You like that idea?"

"Lose the shirt," Miranda said, her voice hoarse. She cleared her throat. "Get naked. This instant."

"Say please," Andy said.

"Oh, no," Miranda said. "You'll be the one begging tonight. Not me."

Andy damn near fainted at that, but she also set the phone down just long enough to pull off her shirt. Yes. Miranda was definitely going to be awesome at this. "Okay," she whispered when she picked up the phone again. "I'm all naked, and on the bed."

"Good," Miranda murmured. "You should never be anywhere else. Or in any other condition."

"Uh," Andy said, and shuddered. Not that she'd ever admit it to Miranda, but she'd never had phone sex before either. It was already shaping up to be a lot of fun. Once Miranda let her voice drop down low like that…


"Getting there," Andy croaked, feeling herself beginning to get slick and swollen without even a touch. Legs spread, Miranda had said. She could do that. She spread them so wide her thighs burned, and even that felt good.
"Because of me?" Miranda said. "You are wet because of me? And me alone?"

"Nobody but you," Andy said, her fingers twitching as she stroked them up and down her thigh. "Promise. Really. Uh. Should I touch myself n--"

"No," Miranda said, and Andy stilled her hand with a whimper. "Not yet. How often must I tell you to have patience?"

"I, I can't," Andy panted. "Not around you. Every time I see you, I can't wait."

"But you make me wait," Miranda said softly. "You make me wait, and then you make me scream."

Andy thought about what Miranda sounded like when she screamed. And when she had to muffle it because they had to be quiet. And how her throat worked and her cheeks went red, and her eyes closed in ecstasy, and Andy whimpered, helplessly.

"Do you like that?" Miranda continued. "I think you do. I think you enjoy knowing the effect you have on me. Knowing that no one else has ever done to me what you do."

"What--I-like what?"

"Well, let's see," Miranda said. "You already know that nobody else has made me come by eating me before." Andy whimpered again. "So that's not a surprise. Hmm. Do you know that nobody else has ever made me scream? Or...beg?"

"B-beg?"

"Oh, yes," Miranda said. "I have never begged anyone else to touch me, or lick me, or fuck me, or any of that. Anyone but you. But with you, I can't..." Her voice trailed off, and she resumed, hoarsely, "I can't seem to stop myself."

"I love it when you beg," Andy whispered. "But you don't have to. I'll give you anything you want." Miranda gasped, and Andy's hips twitched. "I'll touch you and lick you and fuck you until you can't even move anymore."

"Andrea," Miranda choked.

"And then I'll do it again. And again. You don't have to beg, Miranda." Andy took a shuddering breath. "I could do you all day long--still wouldn't be enough--wish I was with you right now, doing all those things to you, right now."

"Andrea--!"

"Are you naked too?"

"I--close enough," Miranda managed. "I wish...I wish you were here too."

"You do?" Andy panted. In that moment she really did want it more than anything--wanted to be with Miranda, who wanted her there, too, because nobody had ever made Miranda feel like Andy did--

"Yes. Let me tell you...let me tell you what I wish you were doing to me right now."

"Oh," Andy said. "Jesus, yes. Tell me."

That was a tall order, for sure. Andy gritted her teeth and brushed her fingers against herself, against her labia, and panted "Nnh," into the phone. Then she said, "All right."

"Are you?"

"Yes." Andy swallowed. "Are you?"

"Not yet," Miranda said.

"How naked are you?"


"Oh God," Andy said, and had to move her hand away and grab her thigh before it was too late. "Tell me now. Tell me--"


"Yeah?" Andy panted. "No foreplay? You want it right now?"

"Yes," Miranda said, her voice strained. "I cannot wait. You have been teasing me for hours."

"H-have I?"

"Oh yes. All day long. A low-cut blouse, a short skirt, and every chance you got, you flaunted yourself."

"I totally would," Andy admitted. If she'd thought for one second she could get away with it at work. In fact-- "Are we at work?"

"Yes," Miranda said. "You started in the elevator, of course. You knew there were cameras, and we couldn't--you whispered to me."

"I did?" Andy panted. "What did I say?"

"You tell me," Miranda said. "You tell me what you said in the elevator."

Oh God. Of all the things Andy had ever wanted to say to Miranda in the elevator-- "Okay," she said. "I said, 'Miranda, I'm going to fuck you cross-eyed. It's all I'm going to think about today. And every time I look at you'."

"Ah," Miranda said.

"...every time you see me looking at you, you're going to know that I'm thinking about it. All the time.' That's what I said. And then...after work..."

"Y-yes?"

"We're not going home. I'm locking the door to your office. I'm closing the blinds."

"You--you'd--"

Andy had her eyes closed as she tried to remember the layout of Miranda's office. It was difficult under the circumstances. "And you're on that sofa in the corner. Where you've got more room. And this is why I've got my head between your legs and you're pulling on my hair."
"Yes," Miranda whimpered. That whimper undid Andy every time. "Y-yes, that's…that's why we're here…"

"I've spread you wide and I've got my tongue in you. You taste so good. And I know you like it slow, but I can't do it slow, not now--"

"Nnngh--"

"I'm going at it fast, because…" Andy's mind raced as she tried to think it out and then say it, "…because…we could get caught any minute, we don't know if everybody's gone home--and we should have waited, but I couldn't, and I didn't even take off your clothes, I just made you pull up your skirt and--"

"And I did," Miranda panted. "I did…"

"You did," Andy moaned, and slid a finger inside herself, dying to rub her clit, knowing that she'd come in a heartbeat if she did. "You've got your leg over my shoulder. Now tell me what you want."

"I, I, um," Miranda said, and rallied. "I want you to move your tongue. I want your fingers inside me instead. T-two, I think." Andy heard her gulp. "I want your tongue, up…higher."

"On your clit?"

"…yes."

"Are you touching yourself now?"

"Yes," Miranda whimpered.

"Oh, God. Tell me what you're doing. Do you have two fingers in?"

"J-just barely. Just tickling."

"Feel good?"

"Not enough…"

"No?" Andy said. "You want me to give you more?"

"Yes--"

"Then I'll just have to unbutton your shirt."

"Oh," Miranda moaned.

"And take off your bra." Andy closed her eyes, imagining Miranda's perfect, perfectly sensitive breasts. Remembering how gorgeous they'd felt against her lips and tongue that first night, and how she'd sent Miranda through the ceiling just by nuzzling them. She tried to remember, too, the textures and the softness, and oh, God, she could practically taste-- "And I'll use my mouth. Just the way you love it. And you love it."

"Oh…God…"

"I suck you and bite you. Hard. But then I make it softer. Then I just lick."

"And, and," Miranda panted, "the other one--you use your hand, your fingers--"
That had driven her nuts, too. That had made Andy feel a thousand feet tall. "Yeah. And you've got your hand covering your mouth. You can't keep quiet. You never can."

"Not with you," Miranda admitted, and the admission itself almost made Andy come. "I--oh--"

"Are you close?"

"Yes--but I'm trying not to--"

"So am I. Jesus." Andy flicked her thumb over her clit and her hips jolted as she almost came; the close call, the risk, thrilled her even more. "Do you know what you look like right now?"

"What…what do…"

"Where are you? Really? On your bed?"

"Yes--"

"Where I ate you the first time? Where I fucked you in your dress? That bed?"

"…yes…"

Andy pulled her finger out and slide two back in, hard. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she moaned helplessly, but she didn't come. Barely. "What did you do with the dress, anyway? Do you still have it?"

"Yes--but it's rui--"

"No. We tore one of the straps, and you got wet in it, and it smells like you. It's perfect. Will you let me have it?"

"Oh," Miranda panted. Then she huffed out a chuckle and said, "Make it worth my while."

"Trade you for the boots," Andy offered, not really kidding. Hell, she'd probably trade an arm for the right to keep that dress in her closet forever.

"Well," Miranda gasped. "Good start…keep going."

"I, okay," Andy said, trying to think beyond the throb between her thighs. "I can--let me tell you what you look like right now. You're on your bed, and your shirt's off…isn't it? Because you were too hot to keep it on?"

"Yes…"

"And your skirt is hiked up around your hips, and your legs are spread, and you're still in your heels."

"One heel," Miranda managed. "I, um, the other one--"

"Got kicked off," Andy breathed. "And you've got a hand between your legs. And I'm watching you."

"Y-you…you're…"

"I'm standing in the room. At the foot of the bed." Andy's eyes closed yet again as she pictured it: Miranda's skirt (that pinstriped one Andy really liked) bunched up around her hips--her legs in the
black stockings she usually wore (on her amazing thighs)--one foot shod (in, yeah, one of those burgundy Manolos)--and from the other ankle, the one without the shoe, dangled her underwear (black lace). And those elegant fingers buried inside the most beautiful thing of all.

"I'm watching you," Andy repeated in a whisper.

"Watching--oh--no, don't look--"

"No? Why not?" Andy said relentlessly. "I told you I wanted to watch you do this. From the start."

"Don't…" Miranda sounded delirious. "…don't--oh--"

"I'm going to watch," Andy said, and curled her fingers. Lights were flashing in front of her eyes. "I'm watching you. Do what I tell you to do." Just that idea made the lights flash brighter. The idea that in bed, if nowhere else, Miranda would do what Andy wanted, because nobody else made her feel like Andy did. That idea. "Do what I tell you, so I can see."

"Oh--"

"Take your fingers out. Nice and slow. Take them out."

"Please--don't make me--"

"Take them out."

"Oh…"

"Are they out? Are you empty?"

"Y-yes--"


"Oh…slowly…" Miranda's voice was the threadiest whisper now. Andy imagined her face, the way her mouth would be open while she panted, and her eyes closed, and her chest heaving for air. If she was close enough, she would be shaking.

"Is it in?" Andy choked. Miranda's whimper was confirmation enough. "Move it in and out, just a little bit. Right around the entrance. You love that." Right where the G-spot was. God yes, Miranda loved that. "I'm watching you. Remember."

"Yes…I…I remember…" Miranda made a strangled sound, and continued, breathlessly, "I remember I said that you were going to beg…not me…"

"I--" And just like that, the tables were turned. "I am?"

"I'll do what you want," Miranda whispered. "I'll do anything you want."

"Uh--uhm--"

"But I'm not like you. You have to beg me to do it." Miranda's voice suddenly dropped into a low growl of command. "Now. Beg me."

"Jesus," Andy said, feeling like her clit wasn't just standing at attention, it was saluting and running up a flag. "Oka--please, Miranda." She swallowed harshly. "Please touch yourself. Please fuck yourself."
"How? Tell me how you want me to do it."

"Whatever it takes," Andy said, giving up, unable to prolong this for a single second more. "Make yourself come. Do whatever it takes. Now."

"Say--"

"Please," Andy begged. "Please make yourself come, please let me hear you, Miranda, please--"

"Ah--yes, I'll, oh--"

"Please, Miranda--"

"Oh!" Miranda cried, her voice low and raw enough that Andy knew she wasn't faking it, wasn't playacting even a little. "Oh, oh--" And just the sound of it, of those breathless noises Andy loved, was enough to make Andy ram in her fingers and rub with her palm and arch into her hand until she was coming so hard that her whole palm got soaked. "--oh God, yes, oh," Miranda finished, her voice dwindling down into a whimpering whine. "Oh."

"F-f-fuck," Andy managed. Yeah. More than awesome. She gasped, and exhaled. "Was that... was it good?"

There was a pause while Miranda gulped to get her own air back. "Yes," she rasped. "Yes. It was good."

"Sounded good," Andy breathed. "That was amazing. You're amazing."

"Am I?" Miranda sounded terribly pleased with herself. "Well. Now it's your turn."

Whoops. Andy squirmed. "I kind of already took my turn."

"What?"

"I couldn't wait," Andy admitted. "I got off when you did."

"I didn't hear you," Miranda said, sounding outraged. "You were supposed to--"

"Sorry," Andy said, wincing. "Guess I still don't know how to be patient."


"I know," Andy said sheepishly. "It was really nice of you, though."

"I wanted to hear you."

"Sorry," Andy repeated. "We'll just have to do it again sometime. Or in person, where you can see me, too," she added hopefully.

"I might have a headache."

"You might," Andy laughed. "I feel pretty good right now, though. Don't you?"

"I suppose," Miranda sighed. Andy could just picture her dragging a martyred, sticky hand across her forehead. "I mean, I've certainly felt worse." Andy laughed again, helplessly. "Really, is there anything that doesn't make you giggle?"
"I don't know," Andy said, holding on to her stomach, knowing that her giddiness was making everything seem a lot funnier than it really was. "Thank you. Seriously. That was great."

"Oh, well," Miranda said lightly. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"When can we get together in person?"

"Are you free on Sunday afternoon?"

"Yeah," Andy said. Apparently that was turning into their default time. Well, it was better than not having a default time, but still. "Won't you be tired after the party on Saturday?"

"Yes," Miranda said.

After a pause, Andy sighed, and said, "I'll be there. What time?"

"Come for dinner again." Andy perked up. By dinnertime, Miranda might have revived a little. And after dinner, the twins always had homework, which meant…

"Promise you won't have a headache?" she asked.

"I make no such promise."

"Okay." Yeah, that had been too much to hope for. "I'll be there by--uh--"

"Six-thirty."

"Right. Sunday at six-thirty. And I'll call you tomorrow night?"

"I've a dinner that will run late," Miranda said. "I'll call you."

"Okay." Then Andy yawned. "Sorry. Right, sounds good."

"Coming prematurely, rolling over, and going to sleep," Miranda mused. "I think I've already married a couple of men like you."

"Miranda!" Andy said. Miranda snickered. "That was mean!"

"I'm sorry," Miranda said. "I guess I wanted to step out of character for a moment."

"Yes," Andy said, deciding to imitate Miranda's snotty tones. "Well. I simply can't keep my eyes open. Do forgive me. I'd better go." She paused. "And I have to wash my hands."

Miranda hmph'd, but it was really a laugh. "Don't let me keep you from your well-earned rest," she said. "Sleep well."

Like the night before, her voice was unwontedly soft. It gave Andy the courage to say, "Okay. You too. Good night. Love you."

"I--yes," Miranda said, and now she sounded breathless. "Good night." Then she hung up.

Andy blinked, and then frowned briefly at the ceiling. That was weird. Miranda didn't exactly seem inclined to return the words, but she obviously didn't mind hearing them. In fact, judging by the way she'd felt compelled to call Andy at ridiculous o'clock the night before, the words were pretty important to her. Of course, the real test would be when Andy could finally say them face-to-face. If she could get the guts to. Looking Miranda Priestly dead in the eye and saying, "I love you"…how
were you supposed to pull off something like that?

Better than the men Miranda had married, Andy hoped. She'd figure it out. In the meantime, she followed their example by rolling over, turning off the lamp, and falling fast asleep. Washing her hands could wait.

There was no phone sex the next night, however. Nor was there playfulness. True to her word, Miranda called Andy. It was almost eleven, and her voice was brusque, her words clipped and short as she said hello and inquired after Andy's well-being as if she were about to be led off to a firing squad within moments.

"What happened?" Andy asked.

"Irv fired Jocelyn this morning," Miranda said.

"Oh no," Andy said, grimacing. "But...you expected it, didn't you?"

"Jocelyn didn't," Miranda said. "I had to put up with her wailing and crying until the moment security escorted her out. At least Irv spared you that indignity." Andy shivered, glad she'd avoided that particular abject humiliation. "She's mounting a wrongful dismissal suit, of course. No doubt she'll get some kind of quiet settlement."

It hadn't occurred to Andy to do anything like that. She didn't think she had the energy or spite for it, though, and she certainly didn't want to draw any more of Irv's attention to her relationship with Miranda. "I hope she finds--I mean, you'll probably give her a recommendation or..." Andy let her voice trail off. There was a pointed moment of silence. "Anyway, I hope it works out for her."

"It's put me in an embarrassing position," Miranda said. "To say the least. I overheard Amanda wondering if the next editor-in-chief would want new office furniture, or would keep mine as a memento."

"What?" Andy said incredulously.

"So I lost two underlings today," Miranda said. "Extremely irritating."

"What are you going to do?"

"Hire a new contributing editor and bookings editor," Miranda said. "Human Resources is even more annoyed with me than usual."

"That's not what I..."

"Beyond that? We'll see," Miranda continued. "I'm currently playing it by ear."

"Did anything good happen?" Andy asked hesitantly.

"Eleanor did something right."

"She did?" Andy smiled. "That's great. What?"

"I don't remember," Miranda said. "I just remember observing it in surprise, and moving on."
"Oh, uh," Andy said, and decided it was time to stop talking about work. "So how are the kids?"

Miranda was always happy to hold forth about her daughters, who apparently wanted Andy to know that they'd both done well on their latest French test. As for the boy-in-waiting, "I'll be able to tell you more about him Friday night."

"Wh--oh," Andy said, remembering yet again that Miranda's next checkup with Dr. Viswanathan was on Friday afternoon. She felt incredibly crestfallen as she realized she wouldn't be tagging along for this one. "That's right. I wish I could go with you. On Friday, I mean."

"Yes, well," Miranda said. "I'm not taking Eleanor, I'll tell you that."

Andy, who knew that Miranda would pick and choose the advice she wished to listen to, said, "Well, she might be usef--"

"I am not taking Eleanor," Miranda repeated. "Call and talk to that receptionist with the dogs if you want a spy."

"I'm pretty sure there are laws against that."

"Oh well," Miranda said. "If it really gives you a thrill, you can always call and schedule my cesarean section."

Andy's eyes opened wide. "I can--what?"

"Schedule my C-section," Miranda repeated impatiently. "July is already filling up, and I'm due by the middle of it. Hold on just a moment, let me get my calendar--"

"Are you kidding?" Andy said. She honestly had no idea.

"Why would I be kidding?" Miranda asked. "Ah, here we go. Yes. Well, I'm due around July sixteenth, didn't the doctor say? Something like that. Anyway, why don't you call and pencil me in--"

"P-pencil you…"

"--let's say, the weekend of the twelfth. I'm still fairly open then. Unless Dr. Viswanathan has some kind of objection, but I can't imagine why she would."

"Neither can I," Andy said faintly. "The twelfth. Okay. I'll, um, call tomorrow."

"I'm assuming--" Miranda cleared her throat. "That you don't mind--"

"No, not at all!" Andy said quickly. "No. I mean, I'd rather take care of this instead of Ellie. Absolutely. I'll, I'll make sure I have that weekend off, too." Surely by July she could come up with some excuse to Nigel for why she needed to take--paternity leave, or whatever you wanted to call it. "And, you know, after that, too, if…since…"

"Yes." Miranda cleared her throat again. "Good. Make sure you let me know when it's all arranged."

"I'll call them first thing tomorrow," Andy promised, absurdly glad to be in charge of something on Miranda's schedule again.

"Good," Miranda repeated. "I'd better go now. Tomorrow promises to be similarly trying."

"Okay," Andy said, trying not to sound worried. "Yeah. You, you get some rest. I'll talk to you tomorrow."
"Yes." Miranda paused. "Until tomorrow, then."

"Good night," Andy said. There was another pause. "Love you," she added.

She heard Miranda's breath catch, but all Miranda said was, "Yes. Good night," before hanging up.

"Yeah," Andy said to her phone. "Don't say it back or anything, it might kill you." Jeez. Not even a 'me too.' Well…maybe tomorrow night. Or at least sometime soon. Surely. Surely?

It was, Andy supposed, remotely possible that Miranda had communication problems. She snorted, plugged her phone into its charger, and turned off the light.

The next morning, while riding the subway to work, Andy called Dr. Viswanathan's office. It was nice to talk to somebody who didn't know she'd been dismissed from Elias-Clarke in disgrace, and who wouldn't think it was strange that Andy was still arranging Miranda's appointments.

"Dr. Viswanathan does surgeries in the mornings on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays," Mary informed Andy. "But have she and Ms. Priestly spoken about delivery options yet? I can't really schedule anything until Dr. V gives me the all-clear herself," she added. "That's the way we do things around here. Her way." She chuckled.

"I, uh, I don't think they've talked about it yet," Andy said. She'd been present at all of Miranda's previous consultations, and they'd never discussed anything about how the baby would actually be born. The twins, Andy knew, hadn't been born by C-section--not even Miranda would be able to cover up that kind of scar. "I mean, not that I know of."

"Well, Ms. Priestly's coming in tomorrow morning. I'm sure she and Dr. Viswanathan will get it all worked out then. And we'll look forward to seeing you too--Katie just whelped a new litter, and I have pictures!"

"Oh," Andy said, "well…uh…"

"Whoops," Mary said. "Incoming call. Sorry, Andy--is there anything else I can do for you today?" she added, in a much more professional voice.

"No, I--"

"Have a great day!" Mary chirped, and hung up.

That night, Miranda said, "What do you mean I have to talk to Dr. Viswanathan about it? Why should I have to receive permission for how to give birth to my child?"

Miranda excelled at asking questions for which there was no right answer. Andy sidestepped this one as best she could. "Why do you want a C-section in the first place?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Miranda said.

Andy blinked. "It's more painful--"

"I have every intention of being unconscious."
"--messier--"

"Doctors and nurses are paid to clean up after themselves."

"--and it has a longer recovery time."

"Nonsense," Miranda sniffed. "Most of it is mind over matter."

"Miranda, they cut a great big hole in you," Andy felt obliged to point out. "And then they have to sew it up afterwards. And you don't get to hold the baby right away, he'll have to be taken to a neonatal unit--"

"You've read up on this too, I see."

"Of course I have!" Andy rolled her eyes. She'd even tried to watch different kinds of birth videos on Youtube, but they had made her kind of queasy. She wondered how she was going to handle watching it in person, and decided now was definitely not the time to worry about it. "You should too. I mean, why do you want to--"

"I can schedule it. I know exactly when it's coming and what will be done. No surprises."

"Oh," Andy said.

"Does that answer your question?" Miranda said. "I've had enough surprises concerning this particular child. I want to know that one fine morning I will go to the hospital, undergo a routine surgical procedure, and, if all goes well, exit the hospital at a predetermined time with a healthy baby in tow. I don't see why I shouldn't."

"Well--" Andy began.

But Miranda had a full head of steam now. "I get my blood pressure and blood sugar and a dozen other things checked every time I go to that office. I've had amniocentesis and two ultrasounds, and I'll have one more. I've had children before. Why exactly does she think I need to be rubber-stamped?"

"Miranda, please don't get mad at her tomorrow morning," Andy begged. "Remember what Dr. Latchley said--there aren't as many obstetricians as there used to be--"

"Don't be ridiculous," Miranda said. "If you look, they're there."

"I'm sure she just wants to talk really quickly with you about it, and I mean, you were going anyway, it's not like you're going to need an extra consultation." Andy's plea was at least two-thirds selfishness. If Miranda dumped Dr. Viswanathan--or vice-versa--the last thing Andy wanted to do was be in charge of finding a replacement. "Just keep an open mind, please? Especially this late in the game!" Andy had no idea how 'late in the game' was considered 'too late' to change doctors, but as far as she was personally concerned they were well past the deadline.

"I'll try," Miranda said grimly, as if she'd only be able to stick to it with firm resolve. Andy closed her eyes in despair. "I expect to be treated with respect as a mature adult."

Andy bit down on a hundred different responses to that, none of which were flattering. "Yeah," she said. "Well, just...it doesn't have to be a big ordeal. The visit. You know, think of it like--you're just going in for routine maintenance. You're getting your fluids checked."

There was a long moment of complete silence.
"What I mean is," Andy began, turning red.

"These pearls just fall out of your mouth, don't they?" Miranda said.

"I just wanted to say--"

"My fluids?"

"Well, you know, they'll check your blood again, and probably swab your mouth for glucose, and of course they'll get you to--"

"Stop," Miranda said. "Stop right now."

"Sorry," Andy said, wanting to sink through the floor, but also wanting to laugh, which Miranda would appreciate even less.

"On that note, it's clearly time for bed," Miranda sniffed. "Good night. I'll call you tomorrow and let you know how it went." Then she hung up without waiting for Andy's reply.

Oops. Andy hadn't even made it to the "love you" tonight. But then she imagined what Miranda's face must have looked like when Andy compared her to a car, and it made Andy laugh so hard it didn't matter. And she was still laughing when she turned out the light and went to sleep a few minutes later.

But ten minutes after she went to sleep, her phone rang again. Miranda. By now Andy didn't automatically start panicking, but she was suitably concerned when she said, "Hello?"

"Well?" Miranda said. Andy blinked, confused, until Miranda said, again, "Well?"

"Uh," Andy said. "I...I love you?"

"Thank you," Miranda said, clearly exasperated by Andy's thickness, before hanging up again.

Of all the--! This time Andy was much huffier as she huddled back under the covers, considering and discarding the idea of calling Miranda back within moments. Miranda was weird. Andy was sleepy, and would press the issue tomorrow night.

Probably.

"I'm sending you on a mission," Nigel said the next day.

"Ready and waiting," Andy said as she set his coffee on the desk.

"I want you to go with Jamie to the Kidman interview today," he said. "Do the whole assistant thing, yeah, but mainly try to observe. Jamie's one of the best there is when it comes to interviews, and it was a real coup to get him for this job."

To say nothing of Nicole Kidman, Andy thought. She'd sell covers. "Thanks," she said, delighted. "I'll get Pam in here from the main reception desk. She can cover the phones while I'm gone."

"Great," Nigel said. He opened his leather-bound day planner and frowned. "And while you're
schmoozing with the glitterati, I'll be in Accounting."

"It's rough at the top," Andy said sympathetically.

"Just for that, I'll seriously consider sending Brad along."

"I am totally going to scoop the pool," Andy said. She, Nigel, Keisha, and a couple of other people had a betting pool going as to how long it would be before Jerry came to Nigel, requesting that Brad be let go.

"Do you know something I don't?" Nigel said.

"Intuition," Andy said blandly. That, and she'd overheard Jerry saying as much to somebody else by the water cooler.

"Wonderful," Nigel said. "Intuit yourself to work, would you?"

Nicole Kidman, as it turned out, was pretty nice, although she didn't pay much attention to Andy after the initial introduction. No wonder, really--she'd probably met more personal assistants than she could count. And Jamie was gracious about letting Andy hover out of the way while he got the scoop on Nicole's latest movie, latest charitable cause, and latest red carpet gown. She had to leave a couple of times to refresh their bottled waters, but that was it.

Jamie was good. Andy was amazed by how easily he put Nicole at her ease with banter that was friendly, but not presumptuous; by his incredible preparation (he seemed to know everything about every moment of her public life); by how quickly he thought on his feet, discarding one question or comment for another when a particular line of inquiry didn't seem to be leading anywhere. By the end of the interview, two hours later, Andy felt like she'd known Nicole Kidman since grade school.

Jamie rose to take his leave, air-kissing Nicole at both of her cheeks while Andy hurried forward with his coat. "Thanks so much for your time," he said. "I understand Annie's going to be by tomorrow for the photos?"

"I just love her," Nicole said, her eyes shining. "She always makes me look like a goddess."

As she spoke, she glanced casually at Andy, who dared to say, "Wouldn't take much work." She chuckled breathlessly.

Nicole flashed a beautiful smile. Andy got even more breathless. "Well, aren't you sweet," she said. "Good luck at the magazine." Andy swallowed hard, and nodded. "Jamie--a pleasure."

"Wow," Andy said, as they left Nicole's hotel. Andy was going back to Distinguish, but Jamie was going back to his apartment to type up his notes. "That was--thank you so much for letting me watch." She held up her notebook, where she'd frantically been scribbling her observations. "I learned so much!"

"My pleasure," Jamie said. "I've got to get going, but are you going to be at Nigel's little 'do tomorrow?" When Andy nodded, he said, "Then I'll see you there and we can debrief a little. Cheers."

Thrilled, Andy hailed the nearest available taxi--the budget for Distinguish didn't allow for the staff to be ferried around in company cars, not yet--and returned to show Nigel her findings. He was pleased by Andy's notes. "Got educated, did you?"

"It was fantastic," Andy said. "The interview's going to be amazing, Nigel. You'll see."
"Good," Nigel said. "It's our premiere issue. It better be amazing." He took a deep breath and expelled it shakily. The first issue was scheduled to go to press in six months—a vanishing moment, in magazine time, when you were starting from scratch. And they'd be competing with the big September issues to boot. Andy patted him quickly on the arm, and he shook his head, chuckling ruefully.

"Excuse me, Nigel?" Both Andy and Nigel looked up to see Jerry from Marketing walking towards them with an agitated look on his face. "Can I bend your ear for a second about an HR problem? Shouldn't take long."

Nigel glared at Andy, who blinked back at him, all innocence. "Good odds?"

"Four-to-one," Andy said smugly.

"Then you're buying a round sometime," Nigel said, and extended an arm towards his office, smiling at a puzzled Jerry. "Shall we talk?"

Andy wound up staying at the office past ten o'clock yet again, and her feet, as always, were aching after a day of running around. Just like at Runway. But she was amazed to realize—and felt a little guilty when she did—that her new job was a lot more fun than her old one, though the duties were nominally the same. Part of it was the excitement of the new venture, part of it was her increased level of responsibility, but part of it was also, undeniably, her relationship with Nigel, which was far more relaxed and friendly than it had ever been with Miranda. Even being together with Miranda wasn't exactly 'relaxed.' Andy felt disloyal even thinking about it, but it was true.

It was also true that she missed Miranda like crazy, though, so that made her feel a little better. Sure, it was healthier, more well-adjusted, whatever, to have a life apart from your lover. And sure, Andy was taking to her new position like a fish to water. But…but it would be nice to see Miranda more often than once a week. That wasn't asking too much of the universe, was it?

It was with relief, therefore, that she answered Miranda's call at ten-thirty, skipping the greeting entirely as she said, "How'd it go?"

"Dr. Viswanathan has graciously allowed me to schedule a C-section on July twelfth," Miranda said. Andy immediately reached for her pencil and paper. "Eight-thirty in the morning at Columbia University Medical Center."

"Got it," Andy said, scribbling. Dr. Viswanathan also taught at Columbia, where she was very highly regarded. Really, if Miranda had tried to drop her, Andy might actually have blown a gasket or two.

"I tried to get the girls to agree to spend the weekend with their father," Miranda said. "They refused."

"Of course they did," Andy said, astonished. "They'll want to see their brother. I mean, wouldn't you?"

"I don't want them here if--" Miranda stopped. "Anyway, it's scheduled. Tell me about your day."

"Nothing'll go--" Andy stopped too. "It was fine. It was good. I met Nicole Kidman, she was pretty nice."

"Did you tell her to stop being a blonde?" Miranda said. "Really, there are so few people who can carry off red hair, and she just throws it all away."
"I was too busy trying not to gush about *Eyes Wide Shut*,” Andy said.

"Arthouse pornography," Miranda sniffed. "I expected better of you, Andrea."

Andy rolled her eyes, but let it go. "We should rent a DVD. I bet it would be fun to watch a movie with you."

"You would be the first person ever to say such a thing."

"Sunday night. I'll bring a DVD. A slasher film. You'll be crawling in my lap by the end, begging me to protect you." Andy thought for a moment. "Then we'll have sex on the couch."

"You're destined for disappointment on that front," Miranda said. "But bring a movie, if you insist. We'll watch it with the girls."

"Yeah?" Andy perked up again. "What do you want to watch?"

"You decide," Miranda said, and Andy's excitement instantly transmuted into panic. "See if you can guess what I'll like."

"Don't I even get a hint?" Andy asked weakly.

"No," Miranda said. "Now: good night. Don't count on hearing from me tomorrow," she added. She'd probably be craving a couple of hours of pure peace and quiet, after the twins' circus of a birthday party. Andy was glad she didn't have to go anymore. "Okay. Take care. I hope the party goes well."


"Good night," Andy said, and let the pause drag out. "Oh, are you waiting for something?" she added in mock surprise.

"I don't know," Miranda said softly, and something about the tone of her voice--wistful, almost apprehensive--flipped Andy's brain upside-down. "Am I?"

"I love you," Andy said at once, suddenly wishing more than anything that Miranda was in the room with her so she could show, not tell. "Uh. Je t'aime? Te quiero. Uh…" She racked her brains. What was the German for--

"Don't hurt yourself," Miranda said, sounding amused instead of apprehensive now. "I'll see you on Sunday."

"But--well, yes," Andy said, "but--"

"Good night," Miranda said, and hung up.

"But!" Andy said again, although it was too late. She seriously considered calling Miranda back. After all, by now Miranda knew, had to know, that Andy wanted her to say it too. But she wasn't saying it. What the heck was going on? Why couldn't, why didn't she just…say it?

Miranda undoubtedly had her reasons. Andy wasn't sure she wanted to hear them, not right now. She flopped back down at the mattress and glared at the wall instead of the ceiling, just for a change of scenery.
Andy tried to be in a good mood at the reception the next day. She wasn't going to let Miranda's inability to say a very simple thing ruin what could be a very good opportunity for Andy to network and make connections. Miranda would never let such a petty little concern distract her, after all.

She arrived early--some habits died hard--so she was there to greet the first guests, one of whom was Jamie. They got to talking about the interview, and about technique and strategy, and one thing led to another until Jamie was saying, "The Daily Northwestern, huh? My nephew was the sports editor there four years ago. Lucas Usher--my sister's kid."

"Oh, I remember Lucas!" Andy said. She didn't, actually, although she'd known him by sight: until she'd actually been editor-in-chief her senior year, she'd had nothing to do with the sports section. But she remembered-- "He did some really innovative things with the spreads."

"Yeah?" Jamie said, looking pleased. "He takes after me, Linda says--my sister--and I got him to shadow my friend Bernard at the Times two years ago. Sports is his thing, though. He's actually interning at ESPN now." He waved at a waiter, who brought two small glasses of white wine. "I've heard of you before, you know. I've worked with Christian Thompson a couple of times."

Andy bit her lip. "Oh, yeah?" she said. "Christian and I have, uh, run into each other once or twice." And she hadn't given him a second thought since Fashion Week.

"He said you had talent. I saw your piece in Modernity--he was right." Jamie tilted his head to the side. "Did you know that Rolling Stone is looking out for someone to write a few book reviews here and there?"

"No," Andy said, and she knew by the way Jamie grinned that her eyes had just lit up. "I know Seamus Burghton. I mean I've met him. I can contact him, then?" Miranda had told her to, ages ago, and what with one thing and another she'd forgotten completely.

"Are you asking my permission?" Jamie laughed. Andy blushed. "Sure. I'd go ahead, if I were you-- why not? Oh look, Kennedy's here. May I introduce you? You'll love her."

So Andy met Kennedy Fraser, and then Mark Stutzman dropped by, and by the time Nigel arrived with Jeffrey Toobin, Andy's head was spinning and she felt giddy.

Mr. Toobin greeted her with a handshake and a pleasant smile as Nigel introduced them. "Haven't we met already, Ms. Sachs?"

"We have?" Andy blinked. "I mean, I don't think so."

"No, I'm fairly sure we have," he said. "Miranda introduced us, didn't she? At the Ritz in London, on the last night of Fashion Week. Just about a month ago."

Nigel raised an eyebrow at Andy, who felt her face turn bright red. Shit. Miranda, she remembered, had introduced her to a lot of people that night, including Seamus Burghton, and Andy had tried so hard to pay attention and remember everyone--but that had been the night after Miranda had told Andy she cared for her, and had kissed her cheek, and had led her around the room by touching her waist and elbow, and that meant Andy had apparently met Jeffrey freaking Toobin and forgotten all about it. "Oh, gosh," she said, wanting the ground to swallow her up. "You're right. I'm so sorry--"

"It's all right," he said good-naturedly. "I've heard stories about what Miranda's assistants have to go through during Fashion Week. I'm surprised you remember anything at all!"
"Yeah," Andy said with a weak laugh. "Well, I…I'm sorry…I've always been a huge admirer of your work…"

All in all, it could have been worse. They talked for a little while; Andy scrambled to redeem herself by discussing Mr. Toobin's article as coherently as she could, while Mr. Toobin smiled tolerantly and let her run on. Andy supposed she would have been flattered that Mr. Toobin remembered her if she hadn't been so busy with her own mortification. One of the most important political writers of the day, a hero of Andy's for years, and he'd just been a face in the crowd a month ago. It was embarrassing as hell.

Somewhere in the middle of the conversation, Nigel excused himself and drifted away. Andy didn't run into him again until the reception was breaking up. "I'm exhausted and starving, darling," he said. "Let's grab a bite. Unless you have an appointment?" he added blandly.

"Nope," Andy said. She looked at her watch: seven-thirty. The reception had run late, and she hadn't even noticed the time. "All yours tonight."

"Excellent," he said, taking her arm as they headed into the cooling evening air. He hailed a cab and gallantly held the door open for Andy before sliding in behind her. "Alfredo's Trattoria on Eighth," he told the driver, and added to Andy, "I miss the Town Cars."

"They'll come," Andy said reassuringly. "We're on our way. I was watching, during the reception—everybody wanted to talk to you."

Nigel nodded. "We've been able to offer some attractive advertising packages, we've lined up a couple of big names for content…it's coming together. I'm glad to get out of there, though."

"You didn't enjoy the reception?"

"Well, the most entertaining part was watching you face-plant in front of Jeff," Nigel said. "It was all downhill after that."

"Oh God," Andy said, as her humiliation resurfaced at nearly full strength. "I was so embarrassed. I can't believe I didn't remember him."

"It wasn't like you," Nigel agreed. "What night was it you met him, again?"

"Uh…the last night of Fashion Week, he said," Andy said. "At the Ritz. I'm still trying to remember meeting him, but I just don't." Chiefly she remembered smooching Miranda on the stairs after they returned home. That had eclipsed a lot of other stuff.

"You know, you looked like hell that whole week," Nigel said.

"Oh," Andy said. "Gee, thanks."

"Except that last day," Nigel added thoughtfully. "I noticed the difference. Do you remember that, at least?"

"Er. Yeah," Andy said. "I guess…I guess I'd just been feeling a little run down." Run down by a truck: sick with jealousy and anger and grief that had turned, all in a heartbeat, into joy. No wonder Nigel had noticed the difference. "But you know, I, I do remember feeling better that day."

"I was worried about you," Nigel said. "I'd been wondering if Miranda made you sleep chained to the wall in her house or something."
Andy forced a laugh. "Oh, no," she said. "No, no."

"Apparently not," Nigel said. Then he added, "Hey. Whatever happened to that cute pin you had on the next morning--when we were in the airport?"

"I--actually I put it in the--" Andy frowned. What the hell was going on? "Nigel?"

"Oh, you know, the Stephen Webster snake," Nigel said. "The one Miranda really liked, but apparently gave to you." Then he turned and looked her dead in the eye. His face was--not cold, exactly, but intent. Serious. As serious as she'd ever seen him.

"I…I put it in the bank," Andy said softly. "In a safe-deposit box." Nigel nodded. Andy licked her lips. "I don't want to lose it," she whispered. "I'd hate for anything to happen to it."

"I'm sure," Nigel said. He looked away from her, peering through the windshield. "This restaurant has pretty good wine."

Andy felt frozen for the rest of the cab ride. They didn't speak again, but she knew what was coming. Nigel had figured it out. Or he'd already known and was deciding to bring it up now. Or he was just guessing, but had guessed just enough.

The cab pulled up in front of a small, unprepossessing restaurant. Nigel paid the cab driver and got out, rounding the cab to open Andy's door for her. In the interval, the driver met Andy's eyes through the rear-view mirror and said, in heavily accented English, "You are busted. For what, I don't know."

"Um," Andy said. "Yeah."

"Your husband?"

"No," Andy said at once, just in time for Nigel to open her door, and she practically fell out of the cab in her haste to exit.

"Welcome to Alfredo's," Nigel said. "It's one of the few decent Italian places I've found where I'm not somehow related to the owners. Or the waiters. Or the cooks. Or anybody." They both looked up at the blinking neon sign for a moment, and then Nigel silently led her inside. The interior wasn't exactly five-star. Maybe not even three. But it smelled heavenly. Too bad Andy had lost her appetite.

A hostess led them to a booth, they took off their jackets, and Nigel ordered two glasses of the house red. Now that, Andy could get behind. She didn't want to get too drunk, though--who knew what she'd say?--and she hadn't had more at the reception than a few bites of various hors d'oeuvres, so she decided to go easy. It was going to be tough.

Nigel swirled the wine in the glass, sniffed, sipped, and then nodded appreciatively. Andy didn't know why, since this wasn't exactly the kind of place where the sommelier hung around until you'd decided you approved the vintage, but whatever gave Nigel a kick. She carefully sipped her own instead of chugging it like she wanted.

"So," Nigel said, and opened his menu. "You know I'm violently opposed to consuming carbs, but the clam linguine here is excellent."


"We'll split an entrée," Nigel announced, and waved the menus at the nearest server. "One order of clam linguine, two plates."
"You want to share, it's five bucks extra," the waitress said, and popped her bubble gum.

"Fine," Nigel sighed. The waitress left.

Out of nowhere, Andy heard herself say, "I wonder how often people spit in Miranda's food."

Nigel paused with his glass halfway to his mouth, and then snorted. "Good question."

"My ex-boyfriend was a chef," Andy said, determinedly watching the waitress until she disappeared into the kitchen, not looking at Nigel. "I heard all the horror stories about what they did to the customers' food if they didn't like them." And Miranda was no politer to underlings in restaurants than she was anywhere else. She'd probably eaten her body weight in spit, snot, dandruff, and anything else the staff felt like putting in there. At least half of those savory rare steaks had undoubtedly been dropped on the floor.

"Great," Nigel said. "Now I'm not hungry either."

"Sorry," Andy said, glancing back at him. His nose was wrinkled, but he didn't look mad. "You were pretty nice. I bet she doesn't hate you or anything." Except Nigel had ordered one entrée instead of two, which would drive down her tip, so…maybe Andy would stick to the wine.

"Well," Nigel said, and gave Andy a half-smile. "When you and Miranda go out to dinner, you'll just have to be extra sweet to the waitress. Play the sympathy card."

Andy smiled mirthlessly right back at him. "I don't think I'll be going out to dinner with Miranda any time soon," she said.

"No?"

"No," Andy said. "Nigel. Come on--"

"She's a charming dinner companion," Nigel said. "You wouldn't think so, but she is. She can be very, very charming when she wants."

"Yes," Andy said, and gripped her wineglass more tightly. "Yes, she can."

"Andy, I've been watching it happen for months," Nigel said, his voice low and utterly serious. "Maybe I didn't understand what I was seeing--not completely--well, I was kind of preoccupied." He snorted again. "I should have put it together long ago. But I have now. The twins baking you a cake was probably the tip-off." He shook his head. "I want to ask you if you're crazy, and all that kind of thing, but the answer's pretty obvious."

Well, here it came, then. There was no use hoping that maybe, by some act of God, they weren't going to have this conversation. Andy swallowed hard. "What do you want me to say?" she whispered. "I know it's a bad idea. I know it's the worst idea ever."

"That's a comfort," Nigel said. "Andy, can't you see what's really happening here?"

"Yes. Yes, I can," Andy said, looking Nigel in the eye, vowing to prove how serious she was. "Nigel, I know it's stupid. I've known all along, and so has she."

"Miranda's judgment isn't sound right now, Andy," Nigel said firmly. "Not about things like this. You of all people should know that."

Andy stared at him. "What?"
"You know what I mean," Nigel said. "Miranda needs you. I've said that all along, even when I
didn't know the whole truth. People in trouble will grab the first thing they can find to save
themselves. Sound judgment doesn't have to enter into it."

"I don't--" Andy's eyes widened. Nigel couldn't possibly mean what she thought he meant. "I don't
understand. What are you trying to say?"

"I'm sorry," Nigel said. "I know it's a hard thing to hear. It's a hard thing to say. But after Stephen left
her, and she learned she was pregnant, I watched her grab on to you--"

"Wait," Andy said, and her hand began to shake. She had to set down her glass. "How--that's not--"

"--like she realized she didn't have a friend in the world, right when she needed one," Nigel finished.
"Andy, I'm not saying she doesn't care about you. She obviously cares. She feels like she can't get by
without you, apparently." He shrugged and sighed. "Maybe that's what love is. I wouldn't know. It's
been a while."

"You think she's with me because I'm the only person around?" Andy gasped, feeling tears
beginning to sting her eyes, but vowing not to let them fall. "You think that's why she wants to be
with me?" She shook her head. "No. That's not true. You don't know what's going on, you don't
have any idea--"

"I don't?"

"No!" Andy said at once. But…maybe that wasn't true. Maybe he did.

Andy remembered, with a sickening lurch in her stomach, how Miranda had approached her in
London only after Andy had walked out on her--had she been afraid that Andy'd finally had enough
of her, that she was finally going to leave and had to be stopped by whatever means necessary? She
remembered how Miranda liked it when Andy said she loved her--how she seemed to need to hear
it--but how she never said it back. *Maybe she panics when you're more than ten feet away.* Was that
it, was that why Miranda was so willing to stick out her neck? For need, not love?

How many times had Andy thought about this very thing before she and Miranda had gotten
together? How many times had she reflected that Miranda had no friends, nobody to turn to--how
many times had her own parents told her it was bizarre that Miranda should rely on her, a lowly
assistant, so much?

No. Come on. This was ridiculous. Andy tried to remember the other stuff, the good stuff, like
talking on the phone, and laughing together in bed, and having cake with the twins, who Miranda
thought needed a second parent, a father figure of some kind--

Thinking wasn't helping. Andy took a deep breath and tried again. "She…" But she didn't know
what to say. "Nigel…" Because what could she say? Well, how about: "Nigel, she's not stupid. She
knows what's at stake for her." Everything. "You really think she would do this if I was just…" She
swallowed. "Convenient?"

"I don't know," Nigel said, to Andy's surprise. "I don't know her nearly as well as I thought I did,
apparently. Andy, listen to me. I'm not saying anything's wrong with you. I'm not saying that at all."

"No?" And god damn it, there went the first tear, dribbling mascara down her cheek.

Nigel sighed, and offered her a paper napkin. "Is that Diorshow?"

"Yes," Andy mumbled, dabbing at her cheek.
"The black shade's not right for you. Try the brown. But what I'm saying is, there's nothing wrong with you. You're a fine person. Truth to tell, you're becoming one of my favorite people." He offered her a sad smile. "Miranda has every reason in the world to care about you. I'm just not sure she's doing it for the right ones."

"Oh," Andy managed, and swallowed hard, trying frantically to shore up her dignity. "Jesus, Nigel."

"Andy, I'm not telling you this for my health, or yours," Nigel said quietly. "If you get caught--if Irv Ravitz gets wind, or hell, the press--"

"Oh, God, stop, please," Andy said.

"Stop?" Nigel sounded incredulous. "You think they'd stop, if you told them to? Do you remember what I told you about being discreet?"

Andy laughed bitterly, and wished she could stop trembling. "I wondered if you were talking about us," she said.

"I was talking about you," he said. "Miranda knows the risks. If she wants to throw herself and her job and her family to the lions, that's her business." He sounded rather bitter himself. He really never had forgiven for Miranda for Paris. "But you don't deserve that."

"We're being discreet," Andy said, and added pleadingly, "aren't we? Nigel, you--you haven't heard talk, or--"

"No," Nigel admitted, and Andy relaxed for a moment. "No talk, no gossip. Yet." He took a deep breath. "Andy. I've got to put this on the table. Distinguish is new. We can't afford a scandal." Andy stared at him. He stared right back as he said, "I've worked very hard, and I've waited a long time. If you get caught--if a scandal breaks--"

"You'd sell twice as many copies," Andy said, reached for a new napkin, and blew her nose.

"Possibly," Nigel conceded. "The people who read gossip rags would love it, at least. The advertisers, maybe, maybe not. And where the ad revenue goes, the shareholders follow." He tilted his head to the side. "It could go either way. I'll admit that. But if it went the bad way…"

"…I'd be out of here," Andy finished. Her heart felt like it was about to pound its way out of her chest.

"You need to know," Nigel said. "And that's why this is my business. Aside from the fact that I am your friend as well as your boss, and if you make me fire you when we could be having a fabulous time together, I will hate you forever." He played with the saltshaker, not meeting her eyes, while she struggled for breath. "Believe it or not…I'm not trying to tell you what to do. I don't know what you should do. I'm not even telling you Miranda doesn't love you. I have no idea how she feels. I'm not making you pick sides. I'm just letting you know…what you need to know. So you can make an informed decision. Whatever you decide."

Suddenly, the waitress appeared out of nowhere and put a big steaming platter of clam linguine between them, along with two plates and two sets of utensils. "Anything else for you, doll?" she asked Nigel.

"No, thank you," Nigel said, and in the sole remaining rational part of her brain, Andy was amused to see how politely he spoke this time. "This looks great." The waitress nodded and walked away.

"I will admit," Nigel began, and paused. Andy looked at him, but didn't prompt him. He continued
anyway. "I will admit that she was gracious--as gracious as she knows how to be--about letting me spirit you away when Irv fired you. I remember finding it remarkable, at the time, what she said." Nigel lifted his chin in the air. "I'll at least trust you to look out for her.' Believe it or not, that's what I'm trying to do."

"I think I need to go," Andy mumbled, slid back into her jacket, and picked up her handbag. Nigel opened his mouth. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you." Nigel looked incredulous. "Well, I mean, I am, but--I know you're not trying to--I appreciate--" That was a lie. She didn't appreciate this at all. "Thanks for, for telling me all this stuff." Thanks for nothing. Andy could quite happily have gone on for some time shoving all her fears to the back of her mind. She didn't want to deal with them. She didn't want to have to deal with them.

"Andy, I want you to be happy," Nigel said. "Hell, I want it for myself, too. Just remember that Miranda's got her limits. If something goes wrong, there's only so much she can--or will--do to protect you, and the same goes for me."

"Enjoy the linguine," Andy said, staggered to her feet, and hurried out of the restaurant without another word. She thought she heard Nigel say her name as she left, but she didn't stop to make sure. Thankfully, he didn't try to pursue her out of the restaurant or anything.

Now she just had to figure out where to go. Striking out down the street, towards the nearest subway stop, Andy decided she should probably just go home. Go home, maybe drink a little more, or a lot more, or watch TV, or write, or do anything but wonder if--

She kept walking, but whipped out her cell phone, and before she'd quite realized what she was doing, Miranda was on the other end and saying, "Hello?"

"Um," Andy said. "Hi. Sorry to both--how was the party?"

"It was fine," Miranda said, sounding annoyed. "And I'm exhausted. As I told you I'd be."

"Yeah," Andy said. "I, uh, sorry."

"Is something wrong?"

Andy, who was barely paying attention to where she was going, couldn't really decide how to answer that. "Um…"

"What is it?" Miranda demanded. When Andy didn't reply immediately, she snapped, "For God's sake, out with it. Are you in the hospital or something?"

"No," Andy said.

"Did somebody die?"

"N-no--"

"Did you get fired?"

"Not yet," Andy rasped.

"What's that?"

Andy cleared her throat. "Sorry. I said no. I, um--" She blinked, realizing she was close to crying again. "Shit. Sorry. I shouldn't have…" She closed her eyes, stopped walking, and moved to stand
by the side of the nearest shop window, out of the foot traffic. "I have to know something. It's not going to wait until tomorrow. I'm sorry."

"What are you talking about?" Miranda said.

"I was just talking to…and…" Andy took a deep breath, and let it out. Okay. Miranda liked it when people got to the point, and Andy was probably two seconds away from a resounding hang-up. And it was long past time to speak her own mind and to ask for what she wanted. "I need to know. Do you love me?"

The ensuing silence stretched on and on, for far too long.

"Oh," Andy finally said, wondering if an asteroid would miraculously hit her or if she'd have to go all the way to Brooklyn Bridge so she could jump off. "Oh."

"Why are you asking?" Miranda said.

"Why am--" Not all the paper napkins in the world would save her mascara now. "Oh."

"Where are you?"

"Eighth and forty-seventh," Andy said hollowly. Like it mattered? "But, um, I'm going home."

Either that or she'd crawl under the nearest rock. Or buy a one-way ticket back to Cincinnati--that could work too.

"No, you're not. Come here. Come here at once."

"But--but I--"

"I am not having this conversation over the phone," Miranda said.

"Miranda…"

"And don't hang around waiting for the subway. Call a taxi and get over here." Miranda hung up.

Andy stared down at the phone through her blurry eyes, shaking even harder than she had in the restaurant. Why hadn't--it was a fucking simple yes-or-no question--why couldn't Miranda just say--

Her phone rang, again. Andy jumped. It was Miranda, again. Andy twitched. "H-h-hello--"

"In case you were wondering, this is not negotiable," Miranda said. "I mean it. Get over here now."

Then she hung up again, and Andy found herself sticking out a hand to flag a passing taxi before she could even think about it. You didn't argue with that tone of voice.

She shivered all the way to the townhouse. This was worse than getting called on the carpet at Runway. Way worse. At least at Runway you knew that Miranda was going to tell you what a colossal fuckup you were. Here and now, Andy had no idea what was about to happen, what she was going to do. No idea at all. Was she going to get dumped? Was she going to get a patronizing pat on the head? Would anything happen at all that would allow her to salvage her remaining self-respect?

What happened was that Miranda answered the door before Andy could even ring the bell, and yanked Andy inside by her elbow so that Andy nearly stumbled and fell. Miranda's lips were pinched with displeasure, and got even more pinched when she saw the evidence of Andy's tears. Andy had done her best to wipe off her streaky makeup in the cab, but she couldn't get rid of her red
eyes or cheeks.

"The twins are asleep," Miranda said in a low, dangerous voice. Andy looked at her watch in confusion, feeling totally disoriented: it was nearly eight-thirty. "They're worn out. I don't want to wake them up. Keep your voice down and follow me." She turned and marched towards the study on the ground floor where they'd had sex on the couch the day before Andy had been fired, which suddenly seemed like ages ago.

Miranda closed the door quietly, but firmly, when they were both in the room. "What happened?" she asked flatly. "Why are you calling me in floods of tears and asking me if I love you?"

"I just want to know," Andy said feebly. "Can't you tell me? Just--one way or the other--"

But Miranda pressed on. "This hasn't come out of nowhere, Andrea. This is not some random question you have decided to ask out of the blue. Why. Are. You. Crying?"

"I'm not anymore," Andy said, and sniffled.

"Andrea," Miranda said.

"I--" Andy realized she had to tell her. Someone had learned the truth about them. Miranda needed to know about that. "Nigel," she said. Miranda's eyes darkened. "We were talking, and…and he told me he's figured it out…" She swallowed. "I think he's been putting the pieces together for a while. He--you know, he knows us, and he realized…"

Miranda's jaw tightened. "And?" she said. "Is he planning to tell anyone? Go to the press? Call Irv?"

"No!" Andy said at once, wiping at her eyes again. "No, Miranda. He wouldn't do that. He just wanted to talk to me about it."

"Why?" Miranda growled. "If he's not going to tattle, why has he stuck his nose in our business?"

"Um--uh--"

"Tell me!"

Andy straightened her shoulders, shocked at the vehemence in Miranda's voice, at the fury in her eyes. She hoped fervently it was directed at Nigel, not at her. "He just wanted to talk to me," she repeated, and swallowed. "You know, he just wanted to make sure everything was…was okay…"

She left out the part about Nigel firing her if the affair became public. It didn't seem necessary, and it did seem like the kind of thing that would push Miranda over the edge into a frothing rage. Andy had never seen that before, and she didn't want to right now, for sure.

"Was okay?" Miranda said. "He wanted to make sure everything was 'okay'? Does he think I'm putting a knife to your throat or something? Forcing you into this?"

"No!" Andy said, and wrung her hands. "He, just, he's worried too, about what might happen if--he doesn't want us to get in trouble."

"And that made you cry?" Miranda said, narrowing her eyes. "Nigel's touching concern for our mutual well-being made you cry?"

"No," Andy said, for what seemed like the millionth time. She took yet another deep breath and decided it was time to stop beating around the bush, time to stop being a coward. Miranda despised cowards. Miranda had told her, again and again, to grow a backbone and speak her mind. She
probably had no idea how terrifying that prospect was to most people when they were faced with a clearly enraged Miranda Priestly. But that didn't, couldn't matter, because--

"He said," she said, trying not to let her voice shake, "that he was worried that you, you just need me, instead of--instead of loving me, or caring about me, you know, as a person and not a--well, of course I told him that was ridiculous, that you wouldn't take all these risks if you didn't care, that would be stupid, but--" She gulped. "He said that you just needed someone to be, be there for you, because things were so tough, and I was the only one who was there, I was convenient, I guess--I mean, of course that's wrong, I know that's wrong, but, but--"

Miranda's jaw was hanging open. Andy grabbed her own arms, as if she was standing outside in a blizzard, and kept going. "I tell you I love you and you don't say it back and I don't know why. Maybe you think it's stupid or something, but if you could say it just once, I'd believe you. I'd feel a lot better. Honestly. That's really all I want. It's not such a big deal, is it? It's--"

"You'd believe me," Miranda said. "It would make you feel a lot better."

"Yes!" Andy said. Why the hell was this so hard to understand? Even if Miranda thought it was a meaningless gesture--which she didn't. "You like it when I say it to you. Don't you? I mean, you called me in the middle of the night to make sure I meant it when--"

"You believe I don't care about you?" Miranda said. Andy had no idea what to make of the expression on her face, which was completely blank except for her burning eyes.

"I know you care about me," Andy said. "I never--"

"You believe I don't care about you," Miranda repeated.

"No, I don't!" Andy yelled, and then quickly lowered her voice, remembering the twins. "I know you care. I said that. You said that. Back in London. I mean the second time. You said you cared."

"Yes," Miranda said. "Yes, I did."

"It's just a stupid word," Andy said, resisting the urge to shake Miranda with all her might. "I mean, three stupid words. Why is this freaking you out?" She flung her arms out. "I'll say them to you any time you want. I can say them till the cows come home. Hey, look at this, it's easy--"

"Stupid--"

"I love you. There, see? Want me to do it again? I can do it. I can do a lot of tricks. I can hold my breath underwater for more than a minute."

"You are being utterly ridiculous," Miranda said. Her face was pale now.

"No," Andy said. "No. I'm not." She gritted her teeth and finally put it all into words. "It's not ridiculous, it's not stupid, to love somebody, and tell them so, and want them to tell you back. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that."

"Or what?" Miranda said. Andy stared at her. "Or what?" Miranda repeated harshly. "Is this an ultimatum? If I don't make some kind of grand declaration, you walk?"

"Grand declaration?" Andy said incredulously. "Saying, 'hey, I love you,' to somebody in your own house is a grand declaration? What do the twins have to do to get it, fill out forms in triplicate?"

"How dare y--"
"How what?" Andy took a step forward. Miranda stood her ground, her jaw twitching, her eyes flashing with fury. "At least tell me why you won't say it. Can you at least tell me that?"

"I've tried," Miranda said.

Andy's mouth shut with a snap. Miranda didn't say anything else. They looked at each other.

"I've tried," Miranda repeated through her teeth. "Several times."

Andy felt like she was about to choke. "What?" she said. Miranda had 'tried' to say it? Like you might say you 'tried' to go on a horrible diet, or you 'tried' to enjoy yourself at a boring party? "So you just can't--what does that even mean?"

"I can't do it over the phone," Miranda said.

"I--huh?"

"I can't--I'm not saying it over the phone," Miranda said. "Not the first time. That's not the sort of--I told you it shouldn't be casual, because people--"

"Are you--" Andy couldn't believe this. "Are you telling me I did it wrong?"

"I wouldn't presume," Miranda sneered. "How could I? It's so easy for you. Those words are so stupid."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it!"

"I'm not going to say it over the phone," Miranda repeated. "I need to say something like that in person."

There was a pause. "Well?" Andy said, spreading her arms again. "Here I am!"

"Forget it," Miranda snapped. "Not when I want to tear your head off."

Andy's arms immediately dropped back down. "Tear my--"

"I can't believe you called me up and--have you gone through the last few months with your eyes shut?" Miranda hissed. "How can you possibly not know what you mean to me? One conversation with Nigel and you go to pieces. How immature are you?"

"Immature?"

Miranda slipped into her most vicious mimic-mode. "'Miranda, Nigel said something that made me doubt everything you've ever done or said'--"

"Everything you've--"

"--'and I left my brain in another handbag this morning, so would you please kiss me and make it all better'?"

"I'm upset," Andy yelled, not caring that she was raising her voice this time. "You told me to tell you when I get upset. Remember?"

"And what's all this about me needing you just because you were there--"

"Didn't you?" Andy said. "What about Christmas? We hadn't exactly had a lot of deep conversations
or anything when you called me to London out of the blue." Miranda twitched. Caught. "So what was that about?"

"I--" Miranda inhaled sharply through her nose, and then exhaled, slowly. "You...impressed me in Paris," she said. "I told you that. And when I learned about you and Christian Thompson, I was even more--you would have advanced at Runway if I'd been fired. You knew that, didn't you?" Andy nodded silently. Like that would have mattered to her. She'd never even thought about it in those terms. "But you came to warn me anyway. And afterwards--you did everything I needed, everything I asked, without complaint, without asking for anything in return. I noticed this. I told you I noticed this. Did you forget?"

"No," Andy said, her mouth dry. "No, I didn't."

"How many people in your position would have done the same?" Miranda said. "I'll tell you. Few. And of those, almost none would have had your resourcefulness or your intelligence, which I seem to remember dimly." Andy opened her mouth. Miranda held up her hand. "No, no, you wanted me to say this, didn't you?"

"I don't know what you're saying," Andy said, beyond frustrated. "Because it's really starting to sound like you're saying you needed me because I was there!"

"I did!" Miranda shouted. It was the first time she'd raised her voice all night. It was the first time she'd raised her voice to Andy, ever. "I needed you because you were there, and you were there because I needed you. At times like that--you learn who your real friends are--I saw what kind of person you were. Are you actually blaming me for finding that attractive? Should we have had a 'deep conversation' where I explained this to you in detail?"

"Um--uh--" Only Miranda, Andy decided, could make a declaration of feeling, or whatever, that made you feel like you were the most goddamn stupid creature on the planet. "I mean, I was just saying--"

"You're being an idiot," Miranda said. "I am extremely disappointed."

"Well, gosh, I'm sorry," Andy said, clenching her hands into fists. "I'm sorry if wanting to hear that you love me makes me an idiot."

"Well, it does," Miranda snapped. "You should already know."

Andy blinked. Miranda turned red, evidently realizing--

"You said it," Andy said slowly. "Sort of."

"Apparently," Miranda said, and cleared her throat like it was no big deal. "Well, that's all you're getting tonight--I really can't believe you sometimes, Andrea. Honestly--"

"You said it," Andy repeated. She suddenly felt like she'd been wearing a heavy suit of chain mail, and it had just dropped off her, leaving her feeling as light as air, as free as a bird. "You love me."

Then she took her own deep breath and exhaled it. "Thank you."

"No, no, thank you," Miranda said. "For making my day even more exhausting and stressful than it already was."

"Uh. Sorry." Andy dragged her hand through her hair. They stared at each other some more.
"So," Andy added after a long moment, "is…is that it? Are we--uh--okay?"

"I'm perfectly fine," Miranda said, and lifted her chin. "I'm seriously wondering about you." Her cheeks were still pink.

"No, I'm, I'm good," Andy said, boggled by the incredible feeling of anti-climax. "Thanks. I'm, uh, sorry I got so freaked out."

"Are you really this insecure?" Miranda demanded. Her coloring was returning to normal. "At the first hint of censure from the outside world, are you going to buckle? If you can't handle a few harsh words from Nigel, for God's sake…"

"No, I can handle them," Andy said quickly, realizing that yes, in fact, she could. "Now I--it wasn't the censuring part. Now I know how you, uh, feel--now that we've talked about it--I'm better. I can deal. Really." Miranda looked extremely skeptical. "I wasn't worried about what Nigel thinks." She took yet another deep breath. "You love me. I love you too. So I'm okay now."

Maybe better than okay. Miranda had said--or as good as said--that she loved Andy for who she was. Not just as somebody who was 'there.' As a person with hopes and feelings and everything that Andy had been so sure, before London, that Miranda couldn't see. But she saw.

"How romantic," Miranda sneered, but something had flickered in her eyes for just a moment that made Andy step forward, decidedly into her personal space. "That's all it takes, and suddenly the world is shiny and new again? Stop." She put up a hand between them, just as Andy leaned in. "Don't you dare kiss me. I'm not joking."

"You sure?" Andy said, remembering that some of her best sex with Nate had happened after they'd made up from a fight. Not that she and Miranda had technically made up yet, and not that this was an appropriate moment at all, but Miranda's color was up again, and they were both breathing quickly, and it had been a really long time, and it would be totally amazing if they--

"I'll bite your tongue off," Miranda said, and added, "and then I'll kill Nigel. Leaving aside the fact that you actually believed him, I can't believe he said those things to you. How dare he?" Her lips trembled. "How dare he presume to know how I feel about you, or about anything at all?"

"He said he didn't know how you felt," Andy said, and in spite of Miranda's injunctions, laid one hand on Miranda's hip. Miranda didn't push it away, and her cheeks flushed. Oh, boy. "About me, or about anything." Miranda tilted her head back. "He doesn't know how I feel about you, either."

"Andrea," Miranda began, and swallowed.

"He doesn't know--" Andy stopped and licked her lips nervously. She leaned in closer. Miranda's breath caught and she didn't move away. "I don't care if I get fired, I don't care if people find out--" Right at that moment, it was true.

"I'm still angry," Miranda said faintly.

"--and I know that's really stupid and I probably don't know what I'm talking about, and I'm sorry I wigged out but everybody wigs out sometimes, and you make me really happy and--"

"It is really stupid," Miranda said, her eyes flashing again. "And you have no idea what you're talking about. And I, for one, do not 'wig out.'" She took Andy by the shoulder. "Come here."

She kissed her. Next thing Andy knew, her hands were in Miranda's hair while Miranda unzipped Andy's jacket, and there was a slightly bigger bump between them than there had been the last time
they did this, but Andy could handle it just fine; she tilted Miranda's head back and kissed her over and over, pausing to whisper, "You going to bite my tongue off?"

"No," Miranda panted, already too worked up to snipe back. She fumbled with the buttons on Andy's blouse, pushed it open, slid her hands around Andy's back, and began clawing at the clasps of her bra.

"You still angry?" Andy nuzzled her hair, kissed her hard on her throat.

"Yes," Miranda said, popped Andy's bra open, shoved it up, and cupped her breasts.

"Okay if I bite you?" Andy asked against her skin.

"Yes!"

So Andy bit, and Miranda moaned and squeezed, and Andy kissed her again and wondered how they were going to do this, if they could even make it to the couch or what, because Andy wanted to do everything all at once and there was no way they could--

"Mom?"

They both froze. Andy heard Miranda's breath stop, just like her own heart. The door to the study was closed, but they hadn't locked it, and a twin was--

"Are you in here?" the twin persisted from outside. The doorknob turned. Andy and Miranda jumped apart from each other like they'd been set on fire, and Andy yanked her jacket around herself and zipped it up just in time for the door to open and Cassidy to step into the room. She looked sleepy. When she saw Andy, she looked surprised.

"What are you doing up?" Miranda managed, and then added, "Sweetheart."

Cassidy did not immediately reply, but instead looked back and forth between Andy and her mother with widening eyes. Shit. Andy tried to smile at her and look casual, aware that her jacket was bulging in a couple of strange places, and that they were both rumpled and flushed.

"Cassidy," Miranda prompted her, sounding sharper than she usually did with her children. "Why aren't you in bed?"

"I heard you yelling," Cassidy said. "I heard somebody else yelling too. Was it you?" she asked Andy.

"Er," Andy said, and looked to Miranda for help. "No, I was just…"

"Everything's fine, darling," Miranda said. "Andrea and I are just talking. Nothing's wrong."

"Oh," Cassidy said.

"Is Caroline up too?" Miranda asked.

"No," Cassidy said. "I think she's still asleep." She looked back at Andy, who tried to keep her arms at her sides and hold down the bulges. "She played Dance Dance Revolution for, like, hours. She's really tired."

"Oh," Andy said. "I mean--wow, that's great. So the party was fun? Did you like David Blaine?"

"Yeah, he was okay," Cassidy said slowly. "He--"
"Cassidy, you can tell Andrea all about the party tomorrow," Miranda said firmly. "She'll be coming by for dinner. Won't you?" she added to Andy.

Andy blinked, and then nodded in supreme relief. "Sure," she said. "If, if that's still the plan."

"Why wouldn't it be?" Miranda said pointedly. She turned back to Cassidy, who was watching them both. "Go back to bed, darling. I'll see you in the morning."

Cassidy glanced at Andy again. "Yeah," Andy said, trying to sound perky. Did she usually sound this perky? "Good night. Oh, hey, Happy Birthday--I've got presents for you and your sister, but I'll give them to you tomorrow."

"Were you two fighting?" Cassidy asked bluntly.

"Cassidy!" Miranda snapped, and both Andy and Cassidy jumped. "Go to bed!" Cassidy gasped, exchanged a scared look with Andy, and scurried out of the room without another word.

Andy exhaled a long, shuddering breath when the kid was out of earshot, and pressed a hand to her heart. "God." Busted twice in one night. No fun. No fun at all.

"I told you to keep your voice down," Miranda hissed.

"You were yelling too!" Andy protested. "She heard both of us."


Well, now was a great time to talk about the ex, and especially to remember his infidelity. Andy put a cocky hand on her hip. "Apparently Stephen and you never did a lot of things," Miranda snarled. Andy raised an eyebrow. "Am I right?"

"Stephen and I," Miranda said deliberately, "never had any protracted whining and moaning sessions about whether or not we were loved."

Was that supposed to be a low blow? Really? Andy looked her dead in the eye. "Maybe that would've helped," she said. Miranda's eyes widened. "What's wrong with yelling every once in a while? It's not like we're doing it all the time." She and Nate had yelled sometimes. It was when they'd stopped talking at all--when Andy had pretended that nothing was wrong and that she hadn't changed--that they'd both become resentful and unhappy.

She stepped forward. Miranda's eyes narrowed again. Andy kept her hand on her hip. "I don't think we should keep stuff bottled up. I think we should--" How had Nigel put it? "--get it out on the table, if we have to."

"Well, yes, obviously," Miranda said, rolling her eyes like she was some big relationship genius. "But--"

"And I don't know about the whining," Andy said, "but a protracted moaning session sounds pretty good."

"You are the worst," Miranda said at once. "The absolute worst. Go home. Where do you even come up with--go home." She flapped her hands in the air like she was shooing a whole bunch of flies.

"Okay," Andy said. "Am I still bringing a movie tomorrow?"
"Why not?" Miranda said. "See if you can find one where a woman throttles her clingy, irritating lover."

"Chick flick. Got it," Andy said, and added, "I'm not clingy." Well…not much.

"Out," Miranda said, pointing towards the study door.

"And you love me," Andy said, beaming.

"Out!"

Andy got out, without even a kiss, but she didn't mind. She'd arrived in tears and was leaving wreathed in smiles. For no real reason—except that Miranda had sort of almost said she loved Andy, and yeah, actions spoke louder than words and all that, but Andy still felt like she could fly. Talk about a mood swing. Andy was pretty sure she'd never really had those until she'd met Miranda.

So she flew towards the nearest subway stop, not even caring that her shoes had long since started to pinch. She did, however, forget that her blouse and bra were undone beneath her jacket until she was actually standing in a subway car. Thankfully, nobody seemed to hear her squeak.

She was grateful to gain her apartment, where she quickly stripped and changed into her most comfortable pajamas. She was in a good mood now, energetic and happy, and thought she could get some good writing done. Oh--she should email Seamus Burghton about those book reviews. In fact, she'd do that right now, and--

Her phone rang. Andy sighed and picked it up. Then she bit her lip when she saw that Nigel was calling.

She cleared her throat, answered the phone, and said, "Hi."

"Okay," Nigel began.

"Nigel, I'm sorry I--"

"--had your little drama moment, yes, yes," Nigel said. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "Yeah, I am, actually."

"I thought I'd give you a couple of hours or so to cool down," Nigel said.

"Good idea," Andy agreed, very glad indeed that Nigel hadn't called during her showdown with Miranda.

"I was just hoping to--you know what?" Nigel said. "I felt terrible. I can't believe you made me feel terrible."

"It's okay," Andy said, forgiving him instantly. It was easy to forgive people when you felt so expansive. "I don't feel terrible anymore. Don't worry about it."

Nigel sighed. "Do I need to ask how you spent those couple of hours?"

"Probably not," Andy admitted.

"Oh God, she's not there, is she?"

"No. I'm at my place. We, uh, talked it out." Andy paused. "Good talk. It was a good talk."
"Great," Nigel said. "Up charges the white knight; the fair maiden says, 'No thanks, pal,' and shacks up with the dragon. I'm never trying to help anyone again."

Andy laughed. "That's what you were doing, huh?"

"I have no idea what I was doing," Nigel said.

"Why are you so sure I'm the fair maiden in this picture?"

"No," Nigel said at once. "We're not going there. We are not even joking about it." Andy laughed again. "Christ. There are things I never want to know. Why did I call you?"

"Nigel, really," Andy said, becoming serious, "it's okay. We--you know, we're just doing the best we can. We're trying to figure it out. We don't want anything bad to happen to anybody."

"If you say so," Nigel said, and Andy had to give him credit: the day when Miranda didn't want something bad to happen to somebody was a day that had not yet arrived. "Just remember what I said."

"Gotcha," Andy said. "By the way, I have a question."

"Yes?" Nigel sounded suspicious.

"What kind of movies does she like?"

"You're going to watch movies with Miranda?" Nigel said.

"Nigel, just tell me," Andy pleaded. If Nigel didn't know, nobody would.

"You're going to--okay," Nigel said. She could practically see him rolling his eyes up to the ceiling and praying for strength. "She'll tell you she likes Truffaut and Bergman and whatever thing won the most recent Palme d'Or. She's lying. She thinks it's boring. I have no idea what she really likes, if she likes anything. We've never shared a single tub of popcorn. True story."

"Great," Andy said, rolling her eyes. "Thanks."

"Good luck," Nigel said. "Glad it's not me."

"Yeah, me too," Andy said. "So, we're...we're good, right?"

"Until you do something idiotic, we're fabulous," Nigel said. "Don't do something idiotic. More idiotic. Please." He paused. "Look, I'm sorry, but I just have to tell you one more time. What you're doing is idiotic."

"I think you've made that clear," Andy said, starting to tense up again. "I'm not asking you to approve or anything." Although she longed for him to approve. For at least one other person to.

"Good," Nigel said. "I don't." Andy closed her eyes. "But except for what I told you, it's none of my business. I'll keep out of it, Andy. I care about you, I care about her, and I'm keeping out of it."

"Nigel, I care about you too," Andy said, and to her surprise, she felt her throat getting thick. "I don't want to make trouble for you, or the magazine. I swear."

"I know," Nigel said.

"I'll--I'll try not to do anything stupid. Stupider."
"Glad to hear it. Please don't ask me any more questions about movies. Or anything else. I don't want to be involved again. I mean it."

"Right," Andy mumbled. So much for Nigel's approval. Apparently they were going to pretend, together, that nothing at all was going on. Maybe it was for the best--but-- "Okay. Yeah. I'll see you Monday morning."

"I'm counting on it," said Nigel, and hung up.

Well, that kind of brought down her mood a little. But she'd told the truth to Miranda, Andy thought, as she brushed her teeth. She could handle Nigel's disapproval. She could, if necessary, handle more than that. Of course, it would be great if she didn't have to.

Then she flopped into bed, exhausted. She was half-asleep before she remembered that she'd been planning to email Seamus Burghton, and all the way asleep by the time she decided it could wait until the morning.

The next day, after emailing Mr. Burghton and then spending more time than she liked to think about at the movie rental place (especially since Nigel had been no help at all), Andy made her movie selection. Very carefully. And brought it to Miranda's place that night as if she were bearing a golden chalice.

"But that looks boring," Caroline objected.

"I like it," Andy said, trying not to sound defensive. And she did like it. She'd watched it as soon as she'd rented it just to make sure she could say that.

"It's old!" Caroline said.

"It's a classic," Miranda said softly, regarding the DVD case; it was the first comment she'd made since Andy had dug the movie out of her handbag. "You girls will enjoy it."

"You and Andy can watch it later," Cassidy whined. "Let's watch Freaky Friday."

"We'll watch this," Miranda said, giving Andy the case back and nodding towards the DVD player. "We are restricting your Lindsay Lohan intake. And Mommy likes this movie." Andy tried not to gasp with relief. And triumph. The twins opened their mouths to protest again, and Miranda added, "You can either watch this or do your homework."

The twins--who'd talked Andy's ear off all through dinner about the party yesterday--now grabbed a couple of cushions and flopped down on the floor in resentful silence, lying on their stomachs and staring up at the enormous plasma TV, while Andy and Miranda sat together on the couch at a decorous distance from each other.

Violins and horns started swelling, the words To Catch a Thief appeared on the screen in bold pink letters, and Andy barely--just barely--heard Miranda give a soft sigh. She bit her lip to keep from giggling with childish delight. She'd chosen well. And for the next couple of hours, Andy watched Miranda out of the corner of her eye, seeing her enthralled by Cary Grant and Grace Kelly on the French Riviera, surrounded by luxury and saying their lines in smooth, cultured tones that Miranda had obviously worked hard to emulate.
Andy remembered what Miranda had told her once, about how she’d longed to escape her humdrum origins, get to New York, get the power and the money and the townhouse and everything else. How did a girl growing up poor in Toledo, Ohio develop such a burning desire? What had Miranda sought in coming to New York? Andy had wanted to change the world, but Miranda had wanted something else entirely.

So at the movie store Andy had homed in on the old classic films, slick features done in black and white and featuring the stars of decades past: Spencer Tracy, Bette Davis, Clark Gable, Greta Garbo. Movies where women swanned around banquets dripping diamonds from their necks and wrists while their satin gowns glowed in the candlelight. Where stars said the old, classic lines that everybody knew--*here's looking at you, kid* --and tilted their heads just right. Miranda was into classic things. And head-tilts.

So. Grace and Cary it was. And it had worked.

To Andy's pleasure, the twins got into it too, once they'd overcome their sulks. "He's gorgeous," Cassidy said dreamily as Cary looked deeply into Grace's eyes.

"And she's so pretty!" Caroline said. "Look at her hair!"

"Ssh," Miranda said.

"Why did I take up stealing?" Cary Grant asked. "To live better, to own things I couldn't afford, to acquire this good taste that you now enjoy and which I should be very reluctant to give up."

"Then you are frankly dishonest," John Williams replied.

"I try to be," Cary agreed. Miranda chuckled, and then bit her lip. Andy grinned.

When the movie was over, and the twins had finished rhapsodizing about how Grace's gold ballgown had looked just like the one in *Beauty and the Beast*, they retreated upstairs to do homework. They took their birthday presents with them: Andy had procured copies of the posters for both *Wicked* and *The Lion King*, signed by the current cast principals. She was still astonished by how easy it was to call up a theatre, mention Miranda's name, and get whatever she asked for. *Runway* did theatre reviews, after all, even if a lot of people never read them. Apparently it would have been simplicity itself to get those *Wicked* tickets for Cassidy. Andy was still glad Miranda hadn't given in, though.

The twins had liked the posters. Andy had even gotten them framed (although she had a hunch Miranda would insist on re-framing them in something much more expensive as soon as Andy's back was turned), so they could go up on the walls right away.

When they were alone, Miranda turned to face Andy on the couch. Andy scooted in closer, and Miranda did not object. She raised an eyebrow. "So," she said. "How much psychoanalysis did you attempt before you picked out this movie?"

Well, Miranda had seen through her from Day One, so why should today be any different? "Who said it was about you?" Andy lied. "I like the movie too. I wanted to watch it."

"Regardless, good pick," Miranda said, blessedly letting it go.

"Huh. You know what you need?" Andy said softly, looking into Miranda's eyes, reaching out and resting a hand on her knee.

"I'm sure you're about to tell me," Miranda said, and swallowed hard. Andy rubbed a thumb against
her knee, and she shivered.

Andy grinned. "You need to admit that you just can't do everything by yourself." Miranda blinked, and then rolled her eyes in disgust. Andy, undeterred, laughed and kept imitating Grace Kelly's flawless enunciation as she said, "That you need the help of a good woman--and you just aren't the lone wolf you think you are--"

"That will do, Grace," Miranda said, reached out, and tugged Andy in for a kiss. When they parted, she didn't pull back, and Andy happily settled in next to her, sliding an arm around her shoulders so they could get comfortable.

"So," Andy said, "you liked the movie? Or am I still in the doghouse?"

"You tell me," Miranda said and, without meeting Andy's eyes, slid her hand beneath Andy's shirt, and traced her fingers idly over Andy's side. Her hand was cold, and it was Andy's turn to shiver. "Does this feel like the doghouse to you?"

"Um," Andy said, shivered again, and kissed Miranda's temple. "I don't know yet. Keep going so I can decide."

"Here?"

"Anywhere's good," Andy said, chuckling breathlessly, and kissed Miranda's cheek. Miranda tilted her head, and Andy did it again. Miranda's skin was soft, and she wasn't wearing much makeup tonight. "Anywhere, anytime." She thought about the study, even though she really didn't want to move. "Maybe we should--"

"I love you very much," Miranda said quietly.

Andy's heart stopped. The words rang through her head for a moment, and she wondered if she'd imagined them; then she pulled back just enough to look at Miranda's face, and knew she hadn't. Miranda was regarding her seriously. And watchfully. Waiting for her to react.

So naturally Andy said, like a moron, "Yeah?"

"Yes," Miranda said, and nodded as if to finalize the matter.


Miranda smiled faintly. "Mm-hm." Then she wrinkled her nose. "Are you crying?"

"No!" Andy said instantly, dashing a hand across her eyes. "I just, um, I got dust in my, there was pepper in the food tonight, I think--"

"Oh, for God's sake," Miranda said, sighed, and reached over to the table beside the sofa, where there rested a box of Kleenex. She plucked out a tissue and gave it to Andy, who sniffled and dabbed at her eyes. She felt completely ridiculous, but she was also glowing so hard she felt like a nuclear reactor.

"Thanks," she said thickly, and gave Miranda what was probably a pretty wobbly smile.

"You're welcome." Now Miranda looked amused.

"And I--you know, I--me too--"

Miranda pressed her lips together as if to stop a smile, and was not entirely successful. "Yes? You
"Well," Andy said sheepishly. She looked down at the Kleenex and fiddled with it. "I do. Love you. I mean... a lot. So--yeah."

"Well, I'm glad we got that worked out," Miranda said, looking like she was about to laugh in the face of Andy's devotion. Andy couldn't have blamed her, but fortunately Miranda controlled it in time.

"What else do you want to work out?" Andy asked, trying to sound smooth again, but ruining it when she hiccupped.

"Cassidy," Miranda said, and pulled her hand out from beneath Andy's shirt.

Which was not exactly what Andy had been expecting, or hoping for. "Oh, uh," she said. "What about--" The penny dropped. "Did something happen after I went home last night?"

"No," Miranda said. "But I got my fair share of looks this morning at breakfast. Although I don't think she's said anything to Caroline yet."

Well, that was one good thing. Andy bit her lip. "What kinds of looks?"

"I'm not sure," Miranda admitted. "'Curious' isn't the right word, but it will do for now."

"Suspicious, maybe?" Andy suggested. Then she reflected that she and Miranda were still curled up on the sofa all cozy-like--snuggling, almost, and the thought made her blush--and all Caroline or Cassidy had to do was wander back downstairs and their suspicions would be laid to rest. "Is everything okay?"

"Of course it is," Miranda said. "But you're taking her to the theatre in a week, and I wanted you to know."

Andy hoped fervently that if Cassidy came up with any burning questions they'd occur to her before then, and she'd address them to her mother and not to Andy. "Well... thanks," she said. "I'll, um, bear it in mind." Then she decided that this was not going to be the main memory of tonight that she carried home with her; she was going to remember love, in words and hopefully in deeds too.

She traced her fingertips over Miranda's hip, and Miranda's eyelashes fluttered. She might actually have been batting them, but even now Andy wouldn't put money on that. "Are you tired tonight?"

"Yes," Miranda said, and Andy drooped. "But not too," Miranda added. Andy perked up. Miranda raised her eyebrows. "Does the study suit?"

"Oh, yes," Andy said breathlessly. She was really starting to like that study. She sat up and positively hopped off the couch. Miranda watched enviously as she struggled to do the same, only without the hopping part. Andy offered a hand, and Miranda glared at her.

"Not until that is absolutely necessary," she growled, and levered herself up before rising slowly to her feet. "And I don't appreciate the concern."

"Sorry," Andy said as she traced a fingertip up and down Miranda's arm. "I hope what's about to happen in the study won't bother you too much, then." Miranda tilted her head to the side in inquiry. "I'm going to be pretty thoughtful and considerate."
Miranda raised her eyebrows again. But it was no more than the truth. Andy was going to treat Miranda very, very well tonight. Leave her with no cause to complain. Not that she ever did, but tonight Andy was really planning to overdo it.

Maybe Miranda saw it in her eyes. She swallowed hard and looked eager before she could entirely master herself. Ha.

"Lead the way," Andy said, and licked her lips. Miranda rolled her eyes. And did.

Sixth: April.

Andy left Miranda's house that evening feeling thoroughly pleased with herself. She'd left Miranda thoroughly pleased too, so maybe one had led to the other. She drifted to sleep that night remembering the sound of Miranda's muffled cries and the taste of her skin.

Seamus Burghton got in touch with Andy on Monday and asked for a sample review; he returned the sample on Wednesday with a few corrections and an offer to write reviews to be published in Rolling Stone for a book that hadn't even been published yet. She'd get an advance copy. And if she did well on that review, she'd get another.

Neat.

Miranda was very pleased to hear this on Monday night--probably because she'd actually introduced Andy to Mr. Burghton. Andy was wholeheartedly relieved to be able to chatter in excitement about her career without worrying about stepping on Miranda's toes. Or hurting her pride.

As for other matters, Miranda didn't mention Cassidy all week, so Andy assumed everything was well, and there were no questions, no problems, no ripples in the water.

On Sunday, she found out differently.

Like Caroline, Cassidy wanted to take the subway to the theatre instead of the car. Since neither Andy nor Caroline had met with violent deaths last time, Miranda seemed much more okay with letting Cassidy go below-ground. She saw both of them off with a kiss to Cassidy's cheek and a pat on Andy's arm, which made Andy blush, because even though the gesture was totally chaste, it was the first time Miranda had touched her in front of the twins. Cassidy, however, did not appear to notice. Caroline was at a friend's house.

Cassidy was a much quieter companion than Caroline. She responded to Andy's feeble conversational sallies with indifferent, usually monosyllabic replies ("fine," "cool," "yeah," "nah"). It reminded Andy, in fact, of the Underground trip she'd taken in London with Caroline, who'd refused to speak until she'd finally lost her temper. But Cassidy didn't look like she was about to blow a fuse. She looked...not withdrawn, exactly, but reserved. Thoughtful. Watchful.

Andy suddenly had a bad feeling about this.

But Cassidy warmed up as the afternoon went on. She appeared to love The Lion King, and for her part, Andy enjoyed it a lot more than Wicked, though she'd never tell Caroline so. "And I don't even have to get the poster," Cassidy added as she bought a Lion King baseball cap after the show. "I like the one you got me, with all the signatures."

"Oh, good," Andy said in relief as they headed down the street and towards the subway stop. Cassidy abruptly decided she wanted to wear her cap right away, so they paused on a street corner
where Andy snipped off the tags. She grinned as Cassidy stuck the cap on her head and then carefully scrutinized her reflection in the nearest window. "Very stylish," she said.

"Yeah," Cassidy said, and led the way to the subway. "The show was pretty cool. I liked the boy who played Simba. I mean young Simba. He was cute. He…” Andy half-tuned her out while she shepherded them both through the turnstiles and through the tunnels, making sure they didn't get separated. It was more crowded than it had been a few hours ago.

But it wasn't so crowded that Cassidy didn't get a seat. Andy stood next to her, holding on to a strap while Cassidy looked idly around the subway car, swinging her legs back and forth. As always, most of the people in the car ignored everyone else completely, choosing instead to read, listen to music, or stare at the walls as if they contained the secrets of the universe.

"Hey," Andy said, and Cassidy looked at her. Andy smiled. "Thanks for my ticket. I enjoyed the show."

"Yeah," Cassidy said, and gave Andy a long, thoughtful look that made Andy extremely nervous. Then Cassidy bit her lip and looked down at her knees, and mumbled something Andy couldn't hear.

A little alarmed, Andy squatted until her ear was more level with Cassidy's mouth. "Sorry?"

Cassidy didn't look at her as she replied, "I said, I saw you kiss my mom."

Andy froze. Cassidy kept staring at her knees. "Oh," Andy said, as her heart started pounding. "Oh, um. When?"


"Oh," Andy said again, weakly. "N-not even your mom or Caroline? Or--" she swallowed. "Your dad?"

"I said I didn't tell anybody," Cassidy said, glaring at her.

"Right, right," Andy said quickly, wishing that her brain weren't failing her completely. "S-so… um…are you…"

"You were fighting with her last week," Cassidy said. "I heard you. I heard both of you."

Andy swallowed. "Yeah. Did, did you ask your mom about it?"

"I'm not dumb," Cassidy said flatly. "She'd be mad. You saw it."

"Yes," Andy admitted. "Well, it…it wasn't a big deal. We were just, you know…” Just what? How the hell did you explain something like this to a kid? Should you even try? Andy'd never had a conversation like this when she was eleven with her mom. Or anybody else. She had no point of reference.

"You yelled at her," Cassidy said.

Andy gulped. "She yelled at me too," she said faintly, feeling more like an eleven-year-old than Cassidy for the moment. She tried to rally. "Cassidy, it's okay. We worked it out."

"Mom never yelled at Dad or Stephen," Cassidy said. "Even when things got bad. I've never heard her yell."
"Okay," Andy said, trying to sound adult and reasonable instead of panicky. Kids could smell fear, couldn't they? Like horses? "Yelling doesn't have to be a bad thing. Sometimes it's better to yell than keep stuff bottled up inside where it just gets worse." Great. She had to explain it to the mother and the daughter both. "You know what I mean?"

"No," Cassidy said.

"I mean, I'm not saying that yelling's good," Andy said quickly. "I'm not saying you should go around yelling at people. In fact, that's the first time your mom and I have ever yelled. In fact--"

"I really hate Stephen," Cassidy said. "I mean, I really, really hate him."

Andy paused, nervously waiting for Cassidy to continue. When she didn't, Andy said, "Me too." That made Cassidy blink, and she looked up at Andy at last. Andy nodded solemnly, and Cassidy smiled for just a second.

Then she stopped smiling. "Stephen ruined everything," she said. "Me and Caroline were only seven when he and Mom got married, but I remember. Everything was wrong after he lived with us. Everything was different." She kicked back against her seat. "He wasn't, you know, mean to us or anything, but nothing fit right."

"I…" Andy had no idea what to say except, "I'm sorry."

"And then he left, and Mom got pregnant--" Andy decided not to mention that the two things had actually happened in reverse order. "--and everything sucked. She stopped coming home to eat, and she didn't even ask us what we talked about with Dr. Bryson--" The twins' therapist, Andy remembered. "--and she was tired and sick all the time, and Caroline started breaking all the stuff in her room and making bad grades, and one time she got in a fight and had to stay after school." Cassidy took a deep breath. "I wondered if we were going to go live with Dad. Everything sucked," she repeated.

"I'm sorry," Andy said again, uselessly. "Do you, um, think things are better now?"

"Since you got here, yeah," Cassidy said, astonishing her. But she wasn't smiling at Andy; she had that same wary, watchful look on her face. "I mean, it got better over Christmas, after you came. She lightened up, I mean Mom did, and then when we got back she started coming home for dinner again." Cassidy worried her lip. "And then you started coming over too. And…"

Andy's eyes widened. "Cassidy, that's not because of me," she said quickly. "She just needed some time to get used to things. To figure stuff out. She's always loved you, you know, worried about you and wanted you to be--"

"I don't want you to fight," Cassidy said, and looked back down at her knees. "It's okay so long as you don't fight. I don't want you to make her sad. I don't want it to be like it was before."

"It won't be," Andy said, trying to sound firm. "But, Cassidy, I--I can't promise not to fight with your mom again. Sometimes people disagree. But it's okay if we do." Cassidy shut her eyes tight. "Cassidy," Andy said, her voice low and urgent, "listen to me, okay? I love your mom. I love her a lot. And she knows it. I'm not going to make her sad, even if we do argue every once in a while." She attempted a smile, even though Cassidy couldn't see it.

"I don't see how it's okay to yell," Cassidy said. She bit her lip and looked at Andy. "You made her angry."

Andy sighed and decided not to mention that she and Miranda had actually been in the middle of
tearing each others' clothes off when Cassidy interrupted. "For a little while, yeah," she said. "But don't you and Caroline ever fight? Don't you yell at each other?" Cassidy nodded. "Does that mean you don't love each other anymore?"

"I guess not," Cassidy said slowly. Apparently this had not occurred to her. Andy hoped like crazy it was working. "But we're kids."

"So?" Andy said, shrugged, and repeated, "Sometimes adults argue, too. Everybody does. It's the way people are. If your mom and I are fighting it doesn't mean we're going to, um...break up."

And for a moment the world seemed strange and unreal again, as Andy reflected that she and Miranda Priestly had a relationship to break up at all.

"Caroline told me about how you hung out with her in London," Cassidy said, as if Andy hadn't said anything at all. "Riding the London Eye and stuff. She said you told her you were always going to be on Mom's side. No matter what."

"I am," Andy said, squirming. "But see, when I said that, what I meant was--"

"What if I don't like you?" Cassidy said. "What if Caroline doesn't either?"

Ouch. Really ouch. Andy's heart fell harder than she'd expected. She opened her mouth to say, 'Why don't you?' or maybe, 'Then why did you want me to take you to the theatre?' But then she got a good look at Cassidy's face. She was regarding Andy intently, and Andy realized she'd been asked a hypothetical question, not given a statement of fact. It was a test.

"I'd feel bad," she said. "I like you. I want you to like me. But mainly it'd make your mom sad if we didn't get along. So, if you didn't like me, I'd feel bad, but I'd handle it. But I'm not going anywhere, and we should at least get along well enough to keep your mom happy." She regarded Cassidy very seriously. "Don't you think?"

Cassidy nodded. She licked her lips. "I was just asking," she said. "I do like you okay. Well, I mean, you're better than he was."

"Better than Stephen?" Andy said, and dared to smile. "Well, that's good, right?"

"But I'll hate you worse if you ruin it," Cassidy said. "If you screw everything up like he did and then leave us alone again. I will hate you so much worse." Her blue eyes were hard as flint. And in that moment, she was so very like Miranda that it took Andy's breath away.

She swallowed. "I'm not leaving you alone," she said, and then the subway screeched. Andy realized it was their stop, and stood up so quickly she almost fell over. "Whoops," she said. "Come on." Cassidy followed her out of the car, out of the tunnels, and then back up into the fading daylight.

"You're eating dinner with us, right?" Cassidy said.

"Yeah," Andy said, unable to decipher anything from her face. The kid might be more like her dad in most respects, but she was doing an uncanny imitation of Miranda tonight. "I mean, I think that's the plan."

"Are you going to start staying over?" Cassidy said. Andy blushed, but before she could reply, Cassidy added, "Stephen didn't start staying over until after he and Mom got married. And then he just moved in."

"Oh, um," Andy said.
"But you and Mom can't get married," Cassidy said, and frowned, as if this was a real dilemma.

"True," Andy said, trying not to break out into a sweat. Then she decided that Cassidy was Miranda's child and so it was Miranda's turn to take her fair share of the heat. "You'll have to ask your mom about that. I mean me staying over." Not marriage. Definitely not marriage. And please not over dinner, either. "That's really up to her."

"I guess," Cassidy said.

"Hey," Andy suddenly felt compelled to say as they drew closer to the townhouse. "You know, I--I'll try really hard not to screw anything up. I'm not going anywhere."

Cassidy gave her a level look. "You better not," she said.

Andy's skin almost crawled. But she supposed Cassidy's threat was approval, too, in a way. The twins didn't want her to leave. They wanted her and Miranda to stay together, even if it was only for stability's sake. And because it made their mother happy. Because Andy had arrived when Miranda was miserable and had, without really meaning to, made her happy. And that was--well, really, that was--

When Miranda let them into the house, she seemed to notice the spring in Andy's step, and the sparkle in her eye. She didn't ask questions. But she did murmur, "Hello," kissed Cassidy's forehead-and then kissed Andy on the cheek, too, making her tingle. Cassidy did not appear remotely surprised. Or offended.

"Where's Caroline?" Cassidy asked.

"Upstairs," Miranda said. "Call her down for dinner, please."

"Caroline!" Cassidy yelled before she'd even taken two steps towards the staircase. Andy and Miranda both grimaced. "It's time to eat!"


"Sorry," Cassidy said blithely, and headed into the kitchen, even as Caroline's footsteps began thundering down the stairs. Elephants again. Andy grinned at the despairing look on Miranda's face, and let her hand brush Miranda's fingers as they followed Cassidy into the kitchen.

"Did you have a good time?" Miranda asked.

"Sure," Andy said. "I'm tired, though. It's good to be, um, back."

"Yes," Miranda said, and let their fingers brush again.

When Andy left Miranda's that night, Miranda did not kiss her cheek again, perhaps because the twins were both watching carefully and she didn't feel like pushing it. But neither was she surprised when, the next night, Andy told her over the phone about her conversation with Cassidy.

"They're perceptive," she said. "They often ask after you during the week. And they're--they do like you."
"I think so," Andy said. "I mean, I hope so. Yeah."

"You're...you suit them better than Stephen. They're more comfortable around you already."
Miranda paused, and admitted wryly, "So am I." Andy chuckled. "I do wish Cassidy hadn't seen us kissing, though," Miranda added, and Andy could hear the frown in her voice. "I wonder when she did?"

"Beats me," Andy said.

"The foyer. It must have been...or perhaps that time in the kitchen? Regardless--"

"You remember," Andy crowed before she could stop herself, sitting straight up on her bed and grinning. "You remember every single kiss and where I gave it to you, don't you?"

"Andrea," Miranda said, and Andy could sense her blush from halfway across Manhattan.

"It's okay," she said, and laughed. "So do I. And it doesn't really matter, does it? She was okay with it. Except for, you know, the yelling thing." Miranda said nothing, and Andy knew she was still trying to work out how she felt about the yelling thing, too. "I bet Caroline knows, too, even if Cassidy didn't say anything," Andy added.

"Really," Miranda said.

"Yeah. Remember when she interrupted us? Hey, where were we that time? You know, I just don't recall--"

"I'm about to hang up," Miranda said.

"Okay, okay," Andy said, still grinning. "Sorry."

"As you should be. But I really am about to hang up. I need to get to the book. And prepare a little more for my meeting on Thursday afternoon. And then there's the party, of course."

"Of course," Andy said, rolling her eyes. "So, are you going to tell me--"

"Good night, Andrea," Miranda said firmly.

"Oh," Andy said, crestfallen. So she still had to wait with everybody else. "Right. Well, I should get some sleep, anyway. So should you," she added sternly.

"I will," Miranda sighed. "I can't seem to help myself these days. Well. Good night, Andrea."

"Night," Andy said. And, as always, "Love you."

"Yes," Miranda said, as always, and hung up.

Andy shook her head and smiled. Some things never changed.

On Wednesday, while running errands, Andy took the liberty of stopping by her bank to make a little withdrawal. She got the Stephen Webster snake brooch from its safe deposit box, and spent the rest of the day carrying it around in her handbag and guarding it with her life.
Nigel said, "It's a lovely pin, Andy, but I'm not sure you need to carry your handbag with you when you go from the art department to advertising and back."

"I know," Andy said sheepishly. She could have explained how special the pin was, but Nigel wouldn't want to hear it. Which was too bad, because he was the only person she could have told at all. "I think it's the buildup," she added. "I haven't worn it anywhere except to this party, and I know the party is a gigantic deal, but I still don't know why."

All she knew was that Miranda was 'up to something'--she'd never said what--and was pulling out all the stops. It undoubtedly had something to do with those meetings she'd had with Stan Oppenheimer, or maybe Irv, or maybe both--Andy wasn't so dumb she couldn't put those things together, but she had no way of knowing exactly how they combined or what Miranda was planning.

"So she's never said anything?" Nigel asked.

"Nope," Andy said. "Silent as the grave. I have no idea what's happening. I mean, I have a few guesses…"

"So do I," Nigel admitted. "Well. We'll find out tomorrow." He took a deep breath and exhaled. "Why does she still make me nervous?"

Andy laughed, but privately she felt the same way. Sure, Miranda had always been secretive. And of course it was okay to have secrets. She didn't have to share everything she did with Andy, because Andy wasn't clingy, after all. But this, the party, was obviously a big deal to Miranda, and it seemed kind of weird that she wouldn't give Andy, her girlfriend, even a tiny clue about why.

By the next night, neither Andy nor Nigel had shed their case of the nerves. Andy hadn't spoken to Miranda the night before--she'd had to stay too late at *Distinguish*, so there had been no final opportunity to try to worm something out of her. So now, on Thursday night (and that was another thing, it was weird to throw an evening party on a work night), Andy and Nigel found themselves sharing a cab.

"Thanks for the lift," Andy said, smoothing down her skirt.

"Not at all," Nigel said. "I wasn't about to let you take that work of art on the subway." He admired Andy's red sheath. "Marchesa was gorgeous this year." His eyes widened. "Wait, where's your pin?"

"What?!" Horrified, sure that the pin had fallen off her gown, Andy looked down to see it shining near her shoulder, exactly where she'd fastened it. She glared at Nigel, who smirked back. "Don't do that."

"Sorry," Nigel said, not looking sorry at all. "But you do look lovely, darling."

"Thanks. So do you," Andy said, patting the arm of his tux. "How come you never wear a tie?"

"You're incurably bourgeois," Nigel said, and leaned forward to peer through the windshield of the cab. "Well. Here we are."

"Here goes nothing," Andy agreed.

"She can't do anything too awful, can she?" Nigel asked hopefully. "She's not going to announce that she bought Delton Wright and is canceling our magazine, is she?"

"I wouldn't put it past her, but I doubt it," Andy said, and patted his arm again. "Nigel, really. I mean, I don't know for sure, but I don't think it has anything to do with you. This was in the works
before you quit." Nigel did not look reassured. "Oh, come on," Andy added, and stuck her chin in the air. "Man up."

Nigel glared. "Just for that, you can open your own car door," he said as the cab pulled up to the curb. Oh well. Just so long as he paid for the ride.

The party was in a roof garden atop an art gallery; Andy had known that Miranda would disdain anything so plebeian as a normal restaurant, and besides, not a lot of well-known restaurants were keen to dethrone their famous chefs in order to make way for somebody else's cook-of-choice. The gallery, however, had a kitchen that it frequently rented out for such events (Andy suspected the place made more money from hosting parties than it did from selling art), and which Yves had pronounced adequate for his needs.

Though Miranda was closed-mouthed about the purpose of the party, she had told Andy that she'd decided to pare down the guest list to forty-five people from her original estimate of sixty. The whole event had an almost intimate air for a gathering of the New York elite. There were no movie stars here, no celebrities; and yet, surrounded by the millionaires and billionaires who played the city like a grand piano, Andy felt more out-of-place than if she'd been sitting next to Bruce Willis. Or Nicole Kidman, for that matter.

She tried to ignore the feeling as she and Nigel arrived arm-in-arm in the door, where a polite maitre-d' was informing everyone of their seats as they entered. Andy wished there had been someone like him on Boxing Day. "Nigel Kipling and Andrea Sachs," Nigel told him.

"Ah yes, Mr. Kipling," the maitre-d' said, without even needing to look at a seating chart or anything else. He obviously had it all memorized. "You will be at Table Four, between Helga Schumann and Rudolph Poindexter."

Nigel drooped visibly, and Andy tried not to grin. Rudolph Poindexter was eighty-five years old and, by all accounts, rapidly going senile, while Helga Schumann was...Helga Schumann. Talk about being in the doghouse. "She's not sitting with me?" Nigel asked pleadingly, tilting his head towards Andy.

"No, sir," the maitre-d' said. "Miss Sachs is sitting at Table One, between Miranda Priestly and Tilda Barnhardt."

For a moment, Nigel and Andy stood frozen together, too stunned to move. "I'm where?" Andy squeaked.

"At Table One, miss," the maitre-d' repeated patiently. "Your place card will be waiting at your seat."

"Um," Andy said.

"Thank you," Nigel said, and quickly steered them both away from the door, where people had begun to line up behind them. They stopped by a large potted tree, not quite hiding behind it, but almost. "Breathe," he ordered.

"I'm breathing," Andy gulped. "It's not weird. Right?"

"Right," Nigel said, patting her arm and glancing around the room.

"I mean, I sat with her at the main table on Boxing Day. And she took me to that New Year's Ball. And introduced me to people during Fashion Week. So people know that she takes me places."
"Uh-huh."

"And just because she's throwing the party, this isn't a big deal, I mean, the press isn't even here..." Security was keeping the media at bay tonight, and paparazzi usually weren't too interested by a bunch of old men in tuxes anyway. Miranda hadn't exactly gone out of her way to publicize the event, either. It was definitely private-invitation-only. So, surely--

"I said breathe," Nigel said, and Andy did. "Pull yourself together. If it isn't a big deal, then don't act like it is, or it becomes one. Man up," he added with a small smile. "At least you're not with Rudolph and Helga. Now. Let's be polite and greet our hostess."

"Right," Andy said, nodding hard, feeling her hoop earrings bobbing with her. "Right." They maneuvered their way from behind the tree and into the thick of the party, nodding and smiling as they went. Andy tried to look relaxed, to smile, but it was hard, because she kept imagining that people were staring at her as she walked by, wondering what the hell she was doing there. There were only a few other people her age present, and they were all children of the establishment, all heirs to fortunes and empires.

Or they were the trophy wives of powerful older men. Andy shied away from that thought at once. That wasn't her. She belonged to neither group. She--

"Good evening, Miranda," Nigel said.

Andy jerked herself back into the moment, and was so glad she did, because suddenly she was standing in front of Miranda. Who looked like a goddess. She was wearing a filmy, billowy, floor-length evening gown whose colors drifted from dark grey at the breast to silver at the feet; it brought out her the white of her hair and the blue of her eyes, and draped gently over her belly from where it cinched beneath her bust. Sapphires glowed and caught the light in her drop earrings and in the fantastical, spiky choker that graced her throat. Andy realized it was a piece made by Stephen Webster. Just like her snake. Holy…

"Nigel," Miranda said, tilting her head and giving him the polite, empty, I-probably-hate-you smile that she turned on almost everyone at these events. Andy felt his arm stiffen, and briefly felt very sorry for him, before Miranda turned to face Andy and the smile became, almost imperceptibly, genuine. And then--just as on Boxing Day--she leaned in and kissed the air to the side of Andy's cheeks. She was wearing a new perfume tonight that smelled of sandalwood and myrrh. And though Miranda did not linger, Andy melted.

"Andrea," Miranda said, pulling back. "Don't you look lovely tonight."

"Thanks," Andy croaked, but before she could do something so stupid as return the compliment with interest, Miranda turned to the man at her left. Stan Oppenheimer. Andy hadn't even realized he was standing there; she'd been too preoccupied with the way the candlelight played off Miranda's bare shoulders.

"Andrea, I don't believe you and Mr. Oppenheimer have been formally introduced," she said. "Stan, this is my former assistant, Andrea Sachs. She'll be gracing our table this evening. You already know Nigel, of course."

"A pleasure, Andrea," Mr. Oppenheimer said, taking Andy's hand in a firm, warm grip and giving her a charming smile. Andy managed to smile back, even though she still kind of had the instinctive desire to slap him, which really wouldn't have been fair, considering. Still, she was relieved when he let go of her to shake Nigel's hand instead. "Nigel. Good to see you again. How's the new magazine coming along?"
"Swimmingly," Nigel said, glancing back and forth between Mr. Oppenheimer and Miranda. His arm was still tense; Andy had the feeling that if she tried to disengage her own from it, she'd sprain something. "I'm very pleased with our progress."

"Wonderful," Miranda murmured, and there were definitely daggers in her eyes now. Andy's stomach squirmed as she tried to decide whether she wanted to ravish Miranda back behind that potted tree or run screaming into the night.

"Well, you were a great loss to Elias-Clarke," Mr. Oppenheimer said, apparently oblivious to the dangerous undercurrents. Or uncaring of them. "But who knows, maybe we'll be able to woo you back someday."

"Who knows," Nigel agreed tightly. "Thank you."

"Ah," Miranda said, glancing at somebody over Nigel's shoulder, smiling, and waving. "Amanda, darling."

Nigel and Andy took the hint. Nigel bowed his head and said, "It's lovely to see you both. Enjoy the party."

Miranda ignored him completely. "You too," Mr. Oppenheimer said. "Andrea, looks like I'll see you again in a few minutes." He smiled, and Andy gratefully let Nigel lead her away.

"What do you think Tahiti's like?" Nigel mused. "How fast can we get there?"

"Oh, Nigel," Andy said, though she had to admit it sounded tempting.

"It'll be great. We'll rent a bungalow. I'll wear a grass skirt and you can play the ukulele."

"I think that's Hawaii," Andy said. "But I'm game."

"Really?"

"Yeah. After dinner."

"Damn," Nigel said. Just then, the dinner gong rang; Andy glanced down at Nigel's watch and saw that it was eight p.m. on the dot. Of course a Miranda Priestly fête would never start a minute late or early. Andy and Nigel had arrived just in time, along with a few other stragglers.

Nigel released Andy, who flexed her arm until she could feel it again. Then, trying very, very hard to be inconspicuous, she almost crept to the head table, where people were already seating themselves. Miranda wasn't there yet, but a man held out Andy's chair for her as she arrived on trembling knees. Geoffrey Barnhardt, she recalled. She smiled at him; he returned it. "A pleasure, Miss Sachs," he said. "You remember Tilda, of course?"

"Oh, yes," Andy said, trying to sound breezy as she moved her head to say hello to the woman on her left. And as she did, she found herself staring at Irv Ravitz, who sat with his wife across the table.

With murder in his eyes.

Andy froze, and swallowed hard. "M-Mr. Ravitz," she managed. He just stared back at her with a narrowed gaze; his wife was studying the flowers on the table with great concentration. A minimalist arrangement of orchids, just as Miranda had specified. Each place was set with three wineglasses: two empty ones for red and white, and champagne flutes that...were already filled. Uh-oh.
Andy felt a hand on her left elbow, and nearly jumped. But it was only Tilda Barnhardt, looking at her with a kind smile, as if she'd realized how terrified Andy suddenly was. "My dear," she said, "how lovely to see you here tonight."

"Th-thank you, Mrs. Barnhardt," Andy said, and tried to smile. "It's good to see you again. How are you?"

"Marvelous," Mrs. Barnhardt replied. "And you? I understand you're working for our chief rival now?"

Her eyes twinkled, and there was no hint of malice in her voice, but Andy was still mortified. "Uh," she said, refusing to look anywhere near Irv, "I…yes, I had a wonderful, er, opportunity to…"

"So I heard." Mrs. Barnhardt playfully tapped Andy's arm with her fingertips before turning to smile at Irv. And now there was a little malice with her twinkle as she said, "Irv, however could you let her get away? Miranda's a book on how gifted she is. And you know that doesn't happen often."

Irv gave Mrs. Barnhardt a very tight-lipped smile. Mrs. Ravitz pursed her lips and moved her gaze from the orchids to the flatware.

Okay, so tonight was about screwing Irv over. Not such a surprise, on reflection. Andy wondered about the particulars, but supposed she'd find out about them soon enough. In the meantime, she just had to keep smiling and acting as if she went to parties like this every night, and be very glad that she hadn't had a hand in whatever was going on. She had a feeling it was pretty dirty. Because if it was about Irv, and screwing him over, Miranda wouldn't settle for anything clean.

Then, as if summoned by Andy's musings, Miranda appeared on the arm of Stan Oppenheimer. She smiled benevolently down at the table; the Barnhardts beamed back up at her. Andy didn't dare even look at Irv to check his reaction.

"Well," Miranda said, as Stan let go of her arm. "No reason not to kick the evening off with a toast. Irv? Would you do the honors, or should we?"

"Choke on a dick," Irv replied, his voice low and even. "Try your ex-husband's. Think that'd be enough to bring him back?"

Andy nearly choked, herself, but Miranda didn't seem particularly perturbed. Neither did anybody else, although Mr. Oppenheimer said, "Simmer down, Irv. You want to get out of this with your dignity, don't you?"

"At the very least pretend that it was all your idea," Miranda said, the corners of her mouth lifting in her cruelest smile.

"Oh for God's sake, Irv, just say something," Mrs. Ravitz said, her voice hoarse. She placed her hands in her lap and raised a vacant smile to greet the room. "Get it over with."

Irv's face darkened with fury, but Miranda said, "Excellent." She turned around and clapped her hands; thirty-eight guests raised their eyes expectantly. "Good evening my dear friends. Thank you so much for finding the time to attend our little soirée tonight." A light scattering of applause.

"Thank you, thank you," Miranda repeated. She was positively glowing with demonic joy. Andy hadn't seen her like this since Paris. "Well. I'm sure many of you are curious as to why we're all here on this lovely night, getting ready to enjoy some wonderful fare at the hands of Yves Camdeborde--" More applause, and cries of anticipation. "But before we begin, Irv Ravitz would like to make an announcement. And then a toast, didn't you say, Irv?"
Without another word, Miranda sat down smoothly in her seat. Andy hoped she wasn't planning on getting up again anytime soon, because it wouldn't look half as graceful. Stan Oppenheimer also sat down, and began to clap. Soon the other guests, looking interested and apprehensive by turns, followed suit. Andy caught Nigel's eye. He raised his eyebrows at her, but she could only shrug.

Irv rose to his feet; managed a tight smile; took a short bow.

"Ladies and gentlemen--my friends--good evening," he said. "I have some exciting news for everyone! Some of you will be surprised. Well, you shouldn't be." His smile became more avuncular. He might have been playing the part of somebody's kindly old grandpa. "It's no secret that I'm closing in on seventy, is it?"

"You carry it well!" somebody called from the far end of the garden. There was appreciative laughter; Irv forced a chuckle, and Andy saw his right hand clench briefly.

"Well, thank you, Reggie," Irv said. "But there comes a time in a man's life when he just wants the simple things. You know--playing with the grandkids, tending the garden, wintering in the Maldives." More laughter, although comprehension was beginning to dawn on people's faces. "So it is with both pleasure and regret that I announce tonight that I will be stepping down as chairman and CEO of Elias-Clarke, effective next month."

Murmuring broke out all over the roof. Andy exchanged another glance with Nigel, and saw that, like her, he hadn't exactly been expecting it, but he wasn't surprised either.

Irv raised a hand, shaking his head genially. He really was pulling this off pretty well. "No, no, my mind's made up," he said. "I've long had a dream of paradise: the prospect of a long, peaceful retirement." Hesitant laughter all around. "Mavis and I already have plans to travel the world with nary a board meeting in sight. I'm confident that Elias-Clarke will continue to move forward towards the vision I laid out for it when I took over...more years ago than I like to think about." He chuckled again. "Ladies and gentlemen: it is my pleasure to introduce to you the new CEO of Elias-Clarke: Geoffrey Barnhardt, taking over from our UK operations." Geoffrey stood up to enthusiastic applause, and sat down again.

"And," Irv continued--Andy wondered if the tic at his forehead was visible from any of the other tables--"the new chairman, Stan Oppenheimer." Mr. Oppenheimer stood up to more, slightly surprised applause, and re-seated himself. Miranda reached over and patted his arm with a smile.

So it had been a mutual power-grab. Andy didn't know squat about this kind of thing, but she was pretty sure neither Barnhardt nor Oppenheimer alone would have had the power to take down Irv. Barnhardt had worked on it from London, and Oppenheimer had kept a closer eye on things in New York.

And who had brought them together? Whose idea had it been in the first place? Not that she knew for sure, not yet, but Andy was pretty certain that she wouldn't need to look any farther than the woman on her right. Miranda had her head tilted to the side and was gazing angelically across the crowd as she joined in the applause for Oppenheimer and Barnhardt. And, of course, for the demise of Irv Ravitz.

The demise and public humiliation. Irv was being gracious because it was better than admitting that he'd been taken completely by surprise; he'd even come to a party to celebrate his own defeat before his peers and friends. Miranda wasn't just twisting the knife. She'd stabbed Irv with it while it was still white-hot from the forge.

And that was why the party was on a Thursday. Miranda wanted everybody talking about it at work
the next morning, around the water coolers and coffeemakers. She wanted it to make the rounds right away.

Andy shuddered. There was a great deal about Miranda she admired. There was much about Miranda that she adored. This wasn't one of those things.

Irv, still smiling, made to sit down. "Oh, no, Irv," Miranda trilled. "Don't forget you promised us a toast!"

"Hear, hear," Mr. Barnhardt said, and began to clap. So did everyone else, with calls of encouragement.

*Jesus.* Andy was astonished that Irv didn't leap over the table to throttle Miranda where she sat. For a split second, he looked as if he was seriously considering it, but then he gritted his teeth, took his champagne flute, and raised it high.

Everyone else picked up their own flutes. Miranda's, of course, contained mineral water. "My friends," Irv said, sounding only a little bit strangled. "To the future of Elias-Clarke!"

"The future," everyone chorused, and took a drink. Andy barely tasted hers.

Which was a shame, because Miranda turned to her and murmured, barely audibly, "Clicquot Grande Dame, Andrea. Savor it for me."

Yeah, right. Andy supposed she should have felt triumphant, too. Vindicated. When Irv had fired her, she had longed for revenge, longed to humiliate him as he'd humiliated her. But right here and now, she just felt embarrassed, and out-of-place, and as if she was still bracing for disaster. What was she doing at Table One, watching the chief of a multi-billion dollar corporation going down in flames, as if she belonged here? Why couldn't she be spending a nice quiet Thursday night in her pajamas?

Irv sat down, and Andy prepared herself for the most awkward first course in history. But then Stan Oppenheimer stood up.

"There's one more announcement," he said, "which I have been authorized to make on behalf of the lovely and multi-talented Miranda Priestly--who is apparently too shy--"

That got a real laugh out of the crowd. Miranda smiled and made an 'oh, you ' gesture with her hand at Mr. Oppenheimer.

"Elias-Clarke is in a time of great transition and, as Irv said, exciting change," Oppenheimer continued, even though Irv had said no such thing. "But change always brings startling adjustments. Therefore it is with no small regret that I announce to you tonight that Miranda Priestly will be stepping down from her position as editor-in-chief of *Runway* magazine."

The words were barely out of his mouth before the room exploded. It seemed that Andy hadn't been alone in half-expecting Irv's destruction, but nobody had expected this at all.

As for Andy, she felt as if someone had just slammed her head into a wall. Miranda? Stepping down from *Runway*, her life's blood? *Miranda*? Retiring?

And she'd said nothing about it to anyone at all? Including Andy?

She looked over at Nigel, who also looked like he was about to pass out cold. Then she looked back at Miranda, who was smiling and nodding beatifically while everyone stared at her in shock.
"But. But!" Mr. Oppenheimer said, raising his hand for silence. "It is with unmitigated pleasure that I announce that she will remain with Elias-Clarke in a new and different capacity, one which we have created especially for her: as vice-president in charge of the American division of our women's magazines."

More murmuring as people's eyes widened, once again, in comprehension. Andy, for her part, wondered how she was still upright in her own chair. "For nearly two decades, Miranda has transformed both Runway and the fashion industry," Mr. Oppenheimer continued. "She is a visionary. Many would say, a genius: I would hardly disagree." He grinned. The guests laughed. "She will now bring this incredible vision to bear in an executive role within Elias-Clarke, dictating--excuse the word, Miranda!--not only the course of high fashion, but the things that affect everyday women in their everyday lives, on every level. I for one am confident that she's up to the job. Ladies and gentlemen: to Miranda Priestly."

"Miranda Priestly," everyone chorused, and drank again.

Andy clinked her glass with Tilda Barnhardt as if in a dream, and turned back to Miranda, who did not, of course, toast herself. But she did look back at Andy, into her eyes, with a gleam of utter satisfaction.

"Oh my God," Andy muttered through her teeth, trying to smile like she was expected to. "What… how…"

"We'll talk later," Miranda said calmly, as the clapping died down.

"Enjoy your dinner, everyone," Mr. Oppenheimer said, and took his seat to one final round of applause. And next thing Andy knew, a waiter was placing the first course in front of her, and pouring her a glass of white wine. Puligny-Montrachet, if Andy remembered correctly. And there was cold lentil soup made with sheep's milk and tapioca, one of Yves's specialties. And this couldn't really be happening.

The Ravitzes left directly after the first course, waving briefly at the crowd and ducking out. Apparently it was more painful to keep up appearances than it was to retreat without a word. Well, Irv was a billionaire. He'd handle it. Andy was on to a new crisis now.

"S-so, Miranda," she stammered as the waiters brought out trays of sorbet to cleanse the palate for the next course, and began to pour the red wine. "Tell us a little more about this new job of yours. Or, well, tell me--I'm sure everybody else is already in the know." Like Andy should have been. But she still managed a smile.

"Mmm," Miranda said, looking pleased as she sipped her water. "Well, it's quite simple, really. And quite complicated." The Barnhardts and Mr. Oppenheimer chuckled. Without the Ravitzes at the table, the atmosphere had become positively congenial as the conspirators congratulated themselves on their success. "The Barnhardts and Stan and I have agreed to create this new position in which I am in charge, as Stan said, of women's publications: Runway, Herself, Vanity Chair, Women's Life, and so on. And a Teen Runway is in the works too--very exciting, isn't it?"

"I can't wait," Mrs. Barnhardt said. She turned to Andy. "My daughter Angelica is flying in from London to be part of the editorial staff. You two should get to know each other--share war stories about starting a new publication."

"Oh," Andy said, trying hard for enthusiasm. "That sounds great."

"Yes," Miranda said, taking control of the conversation once more, a skill that came easily to her.
"You see, Andrea, what I have noticed for years is that our women's magazines lack that certain unity, that uniformity of what Stan calls--accurately, I think--'vision.'" She turned to smile at Mr. Oppenheimer, who raised his wineglass in return. "Herself has stagnated for five years now, and Vanity Chair is an awful mess. It's time to clear out the deadwood. Bring in fresh blood. I'm mixing my metaphors, of course…"

"Wow," Andy said. "That's um, that's um…"

"Magnificent," Mr. Barnhardt proclaimed. "As are you, Miranda. As is everyone at this table." He smiled benignly at Andy. "Including you, I understand. But no doubt you feel a little overwhelmed by all this, yes?" Andy nodded wordlessly. No point in denying it. "Don't worry," Mr. Barnhardt said. "So do we." They all laughed. Andy managed to laugh, too.

The discussion for the rest of the dinner was more or less over Andy's head, as Miranda, the Barnhardts, and Stan Oppenheimer chattered excitedly about their plans. Andy listened in, following along as best she could and trying to learn what was going on, but there was only so much she could contribute to a conversation about trimming down the budget for The Sporting Life.

"Speaking of trimming budgets," Mr. Barnhardt said, and looked at Miranda pointedly.

Miranda waved her hand with a little laugh. "I promise not to do too much damage, Geoffrey. I'll hire people who are likelier to pinch pennies than I. If they can work up to standard." She turned her sparkling eyes on Andy. "I think I can persuade them to do that, don't you, Andrea?"

"For sure," Andy said, nodding. "But." She swallowed, and glanced briefly down at Miranda's belly. "I mean, if you don't mind my asking…"

"Oh, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Miranda said carelessly, as if she hadn't just upended her own life and, by extension, Andy's. "It's true the timing isn't ideal. But I understand that a generous maternity leave isn't off the table."

"Take at least a month," Mr. Oppenheimer said. "More, if you want it. Elias-Clarke'll be waiting when you get back."

"We hope," added Mr. Barnhardt. Everyone chuckled.

Beneath the tablecloth, Andy felt Miranda nudge her foot with her own. She froze: had she done something wrong, said something amiss? Was Miranda telling her to shut up? But then, all of a sudden, Miranda's foot didn't have a shoe on it anymore, and it was rubbing gently up and down Andy's ankle.

Footsie. Miranda was playing footsie with her. And she was in that silver dress, and smelled of sandalwood, and her eyes were sparkling, and Andy really, really wished she was less susceptible, because she was trying hard to be indignant and confused and indignantly confused. But that was going to be tough when Miranda was giving off her very best fuck-me vibe like there was no tomorrow.

Shit.

Over the dessert, when the Barnhardts and Mr. Oppenheimer were briefly engaged in chatting with each other, Miranda quickly leaned in and, without getting improperly close, murmured in Andy's ear, "Take a cab to my home tonight." She rubbed her foot again. Andy swallowed. "I should wait. I can't." Andy tried not to blush. "Can you? Will you mind if I keep you up just a little late tonight?"

"Uh," Andy said, breaking out in a sweat. "I…"
At that moment, Mrs. Barnhardt turned to Andy with a smile, and Miranda leaned back. Mrs. Barnhardt gestured at Andy's shoulder.

"My dear," she said, "I've been meaning to tell you all night—that's a really lovely pin."

Because it was a Thursday, the guests did not linger over their food and wine, and the party had largely broken up by ten o'clock. There had been only two courses and dessert, all exquisitely prepared. Miranda was one of the first to leave: she always was, even when she threw the parties herself, but she'd still stayed unusually late tonight. Undoubtedly she'd decided to lap up the glory for a while. Nights like this were few and far between, even for Miranda.

Miranda left at nine-thirty. Twenty minutes later, Andy could wait no longer, and gathered her things. "Leaving so quickly, Andrea?" Mr. Barnhardt said in what seemed to be genuine surprise.

"Oh, I, I really have to get going," Andy said, shaking his hand. "I have to be at work tomorrow morning, and it'll, um, take me a while to get home." Especially since she was stopping by somebody else's house on the way. "I enjoyed it so much. It was lovely to see you all again."

"And you as well," Mrs. Barnhardt said graciously. "Miranda has such good things to say about you." Andy's cheeks scalded; seeing this, Mrs. Barnhardt smiled. Then she leaned in to speak softly to Andy. "Of course we were all scandalized by what Irv did to you. What a low blow. It was Miranda's idea to seat you here." Of course it was. "Didn't it send a beautiful message? I so hope you enjoyed the look on his face. I know I did."

"Y-yes," Andy said, and tried to smile again. "I'm, it's a little overwhelming. Er. What a night, huh?" She laughed shakily. "I hope you all enjoy the rest of the evening."

Mr. Oppenheimer raised his wineglass. "I'm sure we will. Good evening, Andrea."

Andy hurried out of the party, just remembering to wave at Nigel on her way out. He was deep in conversation with an obviously tipsy Mrs. Schumann, while at his other side, Rudolph Poindexter appeared to have fallen asleep. He sent Andy an envious glare as she fled.

She hailed a cab as she emerged out of the gallery and into the street, glad she was carrying some cash. Paranoid once again, she took off her pin and put it in her handbag. Then she used the rest of the ride to Miranda's house to work out what she was going to say.

As it happened, she didn't get the chance to say anything. She paid the driver, left the cab, mounted the front steps, and was yet again greeted by Miranda yanking open the door and hauling her inside. Only this time Miranda didn't order her into the study so they could yell at each other. She slammed the door shut again, and Andy barely had time to hear the lock click back into place before Miranda cupped Andy's face in her hands and kissed her soundly. She was already gasping. She hadn't looked this frenzied since the time they'd had sex in the bathroom. Andy wondered if she was going to get out of this alive.

"The twins," she mumbled against Miranda's mouth.

"With their father," Miranda replied, taking Andy's clutch and tossing it carelessly to the floor before tugging at her wrap. She kissed Andy again. "Spring break." Andy's wrap fell to the floor too, and
Miranda cupped her face once more. "You're beautiful," she groaned. The raw need in her voice made Andy's head spin. So did the filmy silk of her gown, like and unlike the dress on New Year's Eve in the way it moved and hung on her body.

"Like a rose," Miranda continued dreamily, smiling against Andy's mouth, plucking at one of the rosettes on Andy's shoulder. "So beautiful in red." She actually sounded drunk. Well, if anything could intoxicate Miranda, it'd be masterminding a hostile takeover. No wonder she'd looked post-coital after meeting with Stan Oppenheimer. No wonder she'd laughed when Andy told her so.

"Come upstairs," Miranda said between kisses. "To my room."

Andy had the vague feeling there were questions she had meant to ask, or accusations she had meant to levy. But the fact was, Miranda still smelled like sandalwood and myrrh, and her skin was as soft as ever, and she was all over Andy begging for sex, and maybe, Andy decided fuzzily, questions could wait. She kicked off her shoes, and followed an already-barefoot Miranda up the stairs.

They almost didn't make it a couple of times. On the landing, Miranda stopped to take another kiss which ended with Andy's back against the wall while one kiss turned into four; the same thing happened in the hallway to Miranda's room. But they stumbled on and, before Andy quite realized it, Miranda was pushing her back down on the mattress of her bed.

Tonight varied from their normal routine. Miranda didn't seem inclined to lie back and enjoy it, like she usually did. She seemed more interested in ravishing Andy from top to bottom, and occasionally whined in frustration when her increased bulk wouldn't let her do what she wanted to do at any given moment. But mostly she wanted to kiss, which meant that her arms were wrapped around Andy's waist, and Andy's hands were tangled in her hair as they lay in a ten-thousand-dollar pile of crumpling silk, red against silver, their legs moving together restlessly underneath.

Andy moaned into Miranda's mouth, and Miranda shuddered at the sound of it, kissing her even harder. It almost bruised, it almost hurt--but only almost. Just enough to keep Andy anchored in the moment, wrapped up in the scent of sandalwood and the feel of Miranda's hair in her hands. It was so different to see Miranda so aggressive in bed. Just this side of scary. But it was hot too, Andy thought dizzily, as Miranda began kissing her throat like she was starving for it. It was hot to be wanted so much, needed so much--was this how Miranda felt when Andy pressed her down on the bed and devoured her? Like she was the most desired thing in the world?

Because that was exactly how Andy felt right now, and she moaned again, trying to get closer. Miranda clutched her tight and growled. They paused just long enough for Andy to take off her earrings, and then Miranda was at her neck again, kissing and nuzzling and sighing while Andy slid one hand down, grabbed her skirt, and began to slide it up her legs. Soft skirt, soft legs, soft everyth--

Miranda moaned. "I want to, I want," she panted, and cupped Andy between her legs, "--with my mouth--" Andy gasped. "--but I don't see how," Miranda finished with a frustrated growl. "My stomach's too…and there's no way I'm getting on my knees again."

She wrestled with the zipper on the back of Andy's dress, and Andy sat up just enough so they could shuck the gown down around her waist. Andy pulled off her bra, and Miranda bent and took a nipple in her mouth. Andy groaned, the sound echoing in the room, and she realized they could be as loud as they wanted tonight. Cassidy, she thought, would probably think this kind of yelling was every bit as upsetting as--

"You'll just have to sit on my face," Miranda said, and her words, uttered in a brisk, no-nonsense tone, sent Andy's train of thought right off the rails and into the chasm below. "Get this thing off," she added, and the work of art Nigel had so admired got tossed down on the floor like a dirty
dishrag. Miranda wedged a pillow under her head and got comfortable as Andy discarded her slip and panties with shaking hands.

"Keep the stockings," Miranda ordered hoarsely, stroking Andy's thigh-highs. Andy supposed that they were sort of the underwear equivalent of the Chanel boots. "Now--hmm--straddle me--" Andy did, throwing one leg over Miranda and straddling her chest, keeping her weight on her knees, feeling drunk herself now. Miranda had this look on her face, like she couldn't wait, like this was going to be the most incredible thing she'd ever done in her life. Like Andy always felt when making love to her.

"You smell marvelous from here," Miranda breathed, and slid her hands up the backs of Andy's thighs until she was cupping Andy's ass. Andy whimpered. "Move up. Don't you dare suffocate me." Andy scooted up and then lunged forward until she could grab the headboard, to support herself while Miranda--

"I'm going to ruin my makeup," Miranda said, grabbed Andy's hips, and went for it. She'd only gone down on Andy once so far, but apparently she'd been thinking about it since then, because she moved her tongue as if she'd been planning a well-ordered campaign for ages. Andy wailed and bucked, trying to balance on her knees and not fall down or break Miranda's nose, which was hard because all she really wanted to do was gyrate and grind against those lips and that tongue and even those teeth. Miranda's tongue skipped and slid nimbly over her labia, up inside her and then out again, teasing her clit and then moving away, until all Andy could think about was the movement of that wicked wet thing that was driving her insane.

It was embarrassingly short. Again. Andy knew that Miranda probably didn't want to spend hours eating her or anything, but it seemed like no time until Miranda's tongue--Miranda's! Tongue!--was swirling around Andy's clit so hard and fast, so hungrily, that Andy was squirming and sobbing and coming while lights flashed behind her eyelids. And then all of a sudden her clit was so hot and sensitive that she had to arch away, gasping, while Miranda's mouth chased after her with bereft little moans. But Andy wasn't like Miranda, who could come an absurd number of times in a row whenever she felt like it, and she had to lift a shaking leg up and over so she could collapse next to Miranda on the mattress.

"Oh. Wow," she said, and this time she was the one who covered her eyes. "Oh wow. Miranda. Jesus. Wow."

"Mmm," Miranda said. Andy opened her eyes and turned her head to see Miranda licking her lips. Her shiny lips. On her slick and shiny face. She'd ruined her makeup, all right, and looked exactly like the cat who stole the cream. She was panting too. "I take it that was a success."

"God," Andy said, forgetting about whatever it was she'd worried about earlier. "That was--you're amazing. You're incredible." She rolled over, threw an arm across Miranda, and kissed her, tasting herself. Miranda kissed back enthusiastically, sliding her fingers through Andy's hair, which was falling out of its stylish updo.

A stylish updo that was held together by surprisingly few pins. Miranda plucked at one, pulled it out, and smiled as a lock of hair fell down over Andy's left ear. "Take it down," she murmured. "Take down your hair for me."

Andy panted some more, sat up, and obeyed. She pulled out three more pins, shook her head, and her hair cascaded down around her shoulders. Miranda looked utterly enchanted. She'd never seemed so relaxed, so open, so happy. At least not that Andy had seen.

Time to make her happier. "So," Andy said. "Your turn, right?" Andy's turn, too. Andy's turn to eat
her right up.

But Miranda said, to her surprise, "Not tonight. I'm quite satisfied, thank you." Oh. Well. Huh, Andy thought, trying not to be disappointed. She could certainly understand how Miranda felt, after all. And besides, there would be more chances. Plenty more. They had time.

Miranda beckoned, and Andy lay down by her side again. She rolled to her own side, and combed her fingers through Andy's loose hair. "Wasn't that wonderful?"

"Oh, yeah," Andy said fervently, and then she realized that Miranda hadn't been talking about the sex. Her feelings abruptly took a one-eighty as her misgivings returned in full force. She watched Miranda's eyes shine while she thought about her new job and humiliating Irv and…

"Everything I dreamed--everything I knew it would be," Miranda said, still petting Andy's hair, oblivious to her sudden distress. "I told you, didn't I? That things would improve for us."

"Yeah," Andy said, and swallowed. "You did. Uh, I'm curious--how long has this been in the works?"

"Oh, ages," Miranda said airily. "I had the idea when I saw Geoffrey at the Boxing Day luncheon, actually. He's always hated Irv, and suddenly it all came together. I enlisted Tilda, of course--a guarantor of success." She chuckled. "We all had lunch a few days later. I agreed--"

"At the sushi place," Andy said.

Miranda blinked, and then looked astonished. "Yes," she said. "You remember?"

"I remember a lot of things," Andy said. It was part of what made her good at her job.

"Well," Miranda said, evidently impressed. "Anyway, I agreed when we got back that I'd get in touch with Stan. I did. He was more than agreeable." She chuckled. "He's always been agreeable. Geoffrey and I should handle him nicely. But he's good-looking and has charisma--I don't know if you've noticed, but Irv's lacking on both counts--and PR will love him."

"But," Andy whispered. "You're…" Where to begin? "You're giving up Runway."

"Oh no," Miranda said, and shook her head. "Weren't you listening? Everything I did for Runway, every innovation I made, everything I did to make sales skyrocket… I'll do more of that. Everywhere." Her eyes gleamed. "I am not giving up Runway, Andrea, not at all. I'm not losing a magazine. I'm gaining eight."

"Oh," Andy said faintly. "But…what about fashion and…I mean, isn't that what you really love?"

"I really do," Miranda said. "I really love a lot of things, Andrea. Why on Earth should my new job give me less influence in the fashion industry?"

"I--"

"One does not need to edit a fashion magazine to love fashion or to influence it," Miranda said firmly. "And all those people in the industry who are beholden to me--well, they have all the more reason to listen to me now. Oh, I'll still be attending Fashion Week, Andrea. And sitting in the front row. I hope you understand that, at least."

"I guess," Andy said feebly.
Miranda moved her hand out of Andy's air and began to stroke her bare arm. "My contract is written in stone, Andrea. Preston's looked over it at least twenty times. No loopholes. Nobody can touch me now." She raised her eyebrows. "And the obscene pay raise doesn't hurt anything. Executives really do make above and beyond the hoi polloi, Andrea. And then there are the shares." She bared her teeth in a terrifying grin. "It's tasteless, isn't it? I don't care. I know it's not the most important thing, and I'll never say it again, but I don't care tonight. We are going to be filthy rich."

"We. Everybody wants to be us. "Oh," Andy repeated. "I always thought, you know, that you were already pretty rich. Not that I cared--"

"Yes, yes," Miranda said, and shrugged impatiently. "I know." The look in her eyes suddenly became serious, and Andy's heart began to pound. "I do know that, Andrea."

"Oh," Andy gulped. "Good."

Miranda's lips quirked. "In fact, if memory serves, you offered to keep me on your salary should the need arise."

That made Andy laugh breathlessly. "Yeah," she said. "Um. But I, uh, I don't think you'd do so well at being kept." She paused. "Neither would I."

Now Miranda looked exasperated. "I know. Didn't I just say so? You're nobody's pet, Andrea. I wouldn't love you if you were." At the magic word, Andy's brain went blank, right on schedule. "But the fact is, I've got money, and I'm going to have more money. And you are part of my life. However you handle that--handle it." Andy went stiff, and her jaw dropped. Miranda raised an eyebrow. "Truth hurts?"

"I--" Andy swallowed hard. "Yes. Sort of."

Miranda sighed. "I knew it was tasteless. Calm down. It doesn't really matter. We've been muddling along, haven't we? Nothing has to change."

But everything had changed. Or at least, some very significant things. The money wasn't even the worst of it--Miranda obviously liked having it (probably because of Toledo, Ohio), but it wasn't her main motivation. No, Miranda's life was about her work. And now she had new work. A lot of new work. Running nine magazines instead of one--with her level of commitment and attention to detail--was she nuts? Especially now?

"Stay the night," Miranda said. The look in her eyes had become tender again. And hopeful.

Which was when Andy realized she wasn't going to say anything. Not now, not tonight. Whatever the long-term implications, Miranda was basking in her triumph and wanted to share it. And Andy, who loved her, just didn't have the heart to ruin her evening. How often did Miranda open up like this, anyway? They could have a...discussion later, couldn't they?

So all Andy said was, "I have to be at work at eight o'clock tomorrow. And I didn't bring a change of clothes or anything." She looked at the clock by the bed. It was almost eleven. Hardly insanely late, but she still felt exhausted. And the bed sure was nice.

Miranda cleared her throat. "I have a few things here that will fit you. I decided to--just in case, sometime..."

Oh. Huh. "Do you want me to bring any of your stuff to my apartment?" Andy asked. "Just in case, sometime?"
Miranda chuckled. "They're in the guest bedroom closet," she said, and patted Andy's hand.

Andy blinked. "Ah," she said.

"Well, you know I prefer--"

"Sleeping alone, got it," Andy said, sighed, and patted Miranda's belly, reminding herself that she'd already agreed to this. Oh well. It was still better than putting on her probably-shredded couture and taking the subway home, since she didn't have enough for more cab fare and she sure wasn't going to ask for a handout now. She rose from the bed and patted down her hair. Miranda watched appreciatively, and Andy blushed, remembering that she was only wearing thigh-highs.

"Can I borrow your bathrobe?" she asked.

"Nobody's here but us," Miranda pointed out.

"I know," Andy said, shifting from foot to foot. "But, um, I don't usually just walk around naked."

"More's the pity," Miranda said. "It's on the hook in the bathroom."

It was the same grey bathrobe Miranda had worn in Paris and London. Either that or a very convincing look-alike. Maybe Miranda liked this particular style of robe so much she'd bought several of them. Andy had to admit, as she shrugged into it, that it was very soft and comfortable.

"Not your color," Miranda said when Andy emerged from the bathroom. Andy rolled her eyes. Miranda, unrepentant, quirked her lips. Then she sat up with a groan. "This dress isn't as comfortable as it looks."

"It looks pretty bad right now," Andy said. It was true. The silk skirt was rumpled and crinkled, and there were bound to be a few stains in telling places. "Pajamas'll feel better." She bent down and pecked Miranda on the cheek. When she pulled away, Miranda's eyes were glowing again.

"It really was wonderful, wasn't it?" she said. Before Andy could fumble for a response, she added, "I'm glad you were there, Andrea. I'm glad you could see it, too."

Andy swallowed hard and smiled. She hoped it didn't look too fake. "Get some rest," she said. "What time are you leaving in the morning?" Maybe they could have breakfast.

"No later than seven," Miranda said. Andy drooped. "I'll have plenty to do tomorrow, believe me. There's the press, for one thing, when the announcement breaks. At least Eleanor is good at handling them."

Andy blinked. "She is?"

"Oh, yes," Miranda said. "She's still not entirely sure how the phones work, so she winds up redirecting the calls all over the building. I believe the last person to field questions about my pregnancy was Julian in Accounting."

"That's--" Andy shook her head rapidly to clear it. "Well. That's really…"

"Yes, isn't it?" Miranda rose to her feet and stretched. "I think I need a shower. Sleep well, Andrea. You have the key, so just make sure you lock the door when you leave in the morning. I'll call you," she added. "Perhaps we can get together tomorrow night. It seems a shame to waste an empty house." She smirked.
"…Sure," Andy said, and left Miranda's bedroom, heading down the hallway to the guestroom, where Miranda would probably not surprise her in the morning by crawling into bed and demanding sex.

A shower didn't sound like a bad idea. Nor did sleep. Nor did anything else that would let Andy put off fretting for a little while longer. It might be jumping the gun to fret, anyway. It would be better to wait and see what was going to happen, wouldn't it? Maybe Miranda's schedule wouldn't change as drastically as Andy feared. Maybe Miranda would be able to handle it without too many problems to herself or her family. Maybe Miranda would magically realize in the middle of the night that you were supposed to tell your significant other when you were thinking about rearranging your life willy-nilly. Not asking their permission or anything, just…informing them.

Yeah. Maybe all that would happen. Andy wasn't holding her breath, though.
Miranda’s stunt was indeed the talk of the water coolers and coffee makers the next morning, and afternoon; and, as Andy discovered, of the bars after work. Andy, Keisha, and Jerry sat around a stylish little table and sipped cocktails while Andy spilled, again and again, every little detail of the dinner the night before. It figured that Keisha and Jerry hadn’t invited her out because of her dazzling organizational skills.

Well, Andy had wanted friends, after all—people in her life besides Miranda and the twins and even Nigel. Maybe this could be a start. Sort of.

"My God, she's got balls," Keisha said, shaking her head. "I mean figuratively. Maybe literally." She and Jerry chuckled. Andy tried to smile. "And she sat at his table? She made him give a toast?"

"Yes, and yes," Andy repeated.

"What was that like?" Jerry asked eagerly. "Sitting at her table, I mean, with Irv Ravitz right there. Wasn't that…awkward?"

"If by 'awkward' you mean 'awful,' then definitely," Andy said. "He left after the first course, though." Thank God. "It was…intense. I was really uncomfortable, actually."

"I bet," Jerry said, but Andy could see that he and Keisha weren’t at all interested in how uncomfortable she’d been. "What's Oppenheimer like?"

"Besides ungodly hot," Keisha added, and winked at Andy, who smiled weakly back.

Well, she guessed it was almost like having friends again, if you squinted, even though Keisha and Jerry weren’t at all like Nate, Lily, or even Doug. They were pros too, driven and focused, who understood what it was like to make sacrifices here and there. And, to Andy’s relief, they all worked in completely different departments: Jerry ran Marketing, of course, while Keisha was on the creative directing team, and Andy wasn’t interested in going after either of their jobs. So they could hang out without needing to watch their backs too much, or call a truce.

Andy wondered, feeling kind of tired, if every job was like this, or if she was just lucky.

Before she could answer Jerry’s question, her phone rang. Nate, Lily, and Doug would have taken this as their cue to roll their eyes, or try to steal the phone, or mutter under their breaths, but Keisha and Jerry hardly seemed to notice, waving their hands carelessly when Andy said, "Sorry," and dug it out of her bag. She tried not to catch her breath when she saw Miranda’s name on the display.

She should probably go outside to talk, but it was a lousy afternoon, drizzly and cool. So when she answered the phone at the table, she felt very daring—speaking with Miranda in front of other people, bold as brass. "Hello?"

"What are you doing?" Miranda asked.
"I'm having a drink with some--" Okay, maybe not friends. "--people from work. What's up?"

"I'm afraid tonight is a no-go," Miranda sighed. "It's a madhouse around here and I can't get away. I should have predicted as much."

"Oh," Andy said. "Then…well, when do you think we can--"

"Tomorrow's out, too," Miranda said. "I've had that afternoon scheduled for ages, and if I don't get some work done in the morning…perhaps Sunday, again? Although the girls will be back in time for supper, of course," she added, sounding disappointed.

"Yeah," Andy said. "Sunday's…I mean, as far as I--"

"Good," Miranda said. "I have to go. I'll call you later." She hung up.

"Yeah," Andy said again to nobody, and snapped her phone shut a little more viciously than she'd meant to. When she looked up, Jerry and Keisha were looking at her curiously. She tried to smile. "Sorry."

"No worries," Jerry said, and glanced around the bar. "It's filling up in here, isn't it?"

"I'm starving," Keisha announced. "I know this adorable little bistro that just opened." She raised her eyebrows at the two of them.

"I'm game," Jerry said. "Andy?"

"Sure," Andy said, and managed to smile again. "I'm wide open tonight."

Andy didn't hear from Miranda all day Saturday. She called her at nine o'clock, but only got her voicemail and, in a huff, turned the volume way up on the stupid action movie she was watching in her pajamas. Too bad Keisha and Jerry didn't seem like the type to go out clubbing on Saturday night. The sad thing was, there were tons of parties going on everywhere that Andy knew about and would be welcome at, especially after the events of Thursday. She didn't want to go to any of them, though. She wanted to sit at home and stew.

But she should have known that, however she felt about her girlfriend, Miranda allowed very little to interfere with her time with the twins, and so, right on schedule, Andy arrived on Miranda's doorstep in time for dinner on Sunday.

Caroline answered the door. "You have a key, you know," she said, rolling her eyes while Andy put her jacket away. "You don't have to stand out here and ring the bell."

"I just thought it would be--I mean, okay," Andy said, and allowed Caroline to take her hand and lead her into the kitchen again, where Jimena was setting out the food while Cassidy, wonder of wonders, was helping to lay out the silverware.

"Hi, Andy," she said. "Will you pour our juice? And water for Mom?"

"Sure," Andy said, exchanging a smile with Jimena as she headed for the fridge. "Where is your mom, anyway?"
"Working in the upstairs office," Caroline said, sounding grumpy as she flopped down into her chair. She tilted her head back to stare at the ceiling, and sighed dramatically. "She's been in there, like, all day."

"Oh, well, just so long as she comes up for air," Andy said, trying to sound jovial as she brought the bottle of cranapple juice to the table and filled the twins' glasses; then, to their delight, she filled her own glass with juice as well, before returning to the fridge for Miranda's Evian.

Dinner, a roast duck, smelt heavenly, but after five more minutes, Miranda still had not appeared. "I'll call her," Cassidy said, and took in an enormous breath.

"No, no," Andy said quickly, holding up a hand. "The office, you said? I'll go get her."

"Okay, but hurry up," Cassidy said, eyeing the food longingly. "I'm starving."

"I'll try," Andy said, heading for the staircase. "Don't eat everything before we get back."

"You don't need the calories anyway," Caroline said carelessly.

Andy turned around and looked at her incredulously. Caroline blinked back. Andy raised an eyebrow. There was seriously only so much she would take, especially tonight. Caroline apparently realized this, because she squirmed in her chair and said, "I was just kidding."

"I know," Andy said sweetly, and headed upstairs.

In the office, Miranda was bent over a printout of a spreadsheet, her brow furrowed in concentration as she made notations. "Hi," Andy said pointedly.

"Mm? Oh," Miranda said, glancing up briefly. "Hello, Andrea. How are you tonight?"

"Hungry," Andy said. "Dinner's ready and the twins are wondering where you are." Which shouldn't be happening--above all else, Miranda had been trying to make more time for them for months.

"Oh," Miranda blinked and looked at the clock on the wall. Her eyes widened. "Oh," she repeated. "I had no idea of the time." She glanced back down at the spreadsheet and frowned. "Just let me--"

"The food is on the table," Andy said, trying to be patient. "The kids are waiting." Miranda opened her mouth. "I've missed you."

Miranda's mouth snapped shut, and she sighed as a resigned smile teased her lips. She stood up with a slight grunt and Andy, relieved, leaned in for a brief kiss. "Hi," she repeated.

"Hello," Miranda replied against her lips, and kissed her again.

Andy briefly rested a hand on her belly. "How're things? We haven't even talked on the phone in a couple of days." Which hadn't happened in a long time. Even after Irv fired Andy, they'd made a point of talking every day.

"Fine, of course." Miranda patted Andy briefly on the elbow. "And yourself?"

"I'm okay," Andy said, deciding that would do for now, because it definitely wasn't the time to start a discussion. She could smell the roast duck from here.

Apparently Miranda could, too. She tilted her head towards the door. "Dinner, you say?"
"Yeah," Andy said, and then daringly slid her arm around Miranda's waist as they headed through the door. Miranda tensed, but permitted it, and even slid an arm around Andy's shoulders in return. She felt good against Andy's side: warm, solid, soft. She was wearing her old perfume today, though, for which Andy was profoundly grateful. They didn't exactly have time for sex in the office before dinner. "You look nice."

"Thank you," Miranda said, and drew her arm away as they approached the staircase. Andy took her cue and let go of Miranda's waist, and tried not to look like she was keeping an eye on Miranda as they headed down the stairs. Against her will, she fretted about Miranda living on the second floor while she was getting bigger and bigger. She'd be lucky if she didn't trip and break something while trying to manage all that extra mass.

Miranda, however, would definitely not "appreciate the concern," so Andy kept her mouth shut and tried to enjoy the meal with Miranda and the twins. The duck was excellent, and so was everything else, and Andy had to concentrate not to stuff her face. It had felt like a lean few days without Jimena's magic touch. The twins, as always, nattered on about their day, although Caroline kept darting bashful glances at Andy until Andy winked at her. Then she perked up and nattered right along with Cassidy, evidently trying to keep pace.

But abruptly, Cassidy changed the subject and said, "Have you moved into your new office yet, Mom?"

Andy blinked. Miranda said, "No, not yet, darling. I will in a couple of weeks."

"Mom's got a new job!" Caroline said to Andy. "She told us about it when we got home. Did you hear?"

"Yeah," Andy said, and took a quick sip of juice to fix her suddenly-dry mouth. "I definitely heard."

"Andrea was at the party where I made the announcement, in fact," Miranda said lightly, and the tips of her ears went pink. "It was a lovely evening."

"...yeah," Andy said again.

"Mom, who's going to do Runway now?" Cassidy asked.

"I am," Miranda said.

"Mom," Cassidy said in exasperation.

Miranda relented. "The Board's considering a few candidates for editor," she said. "I'll be pushing for Beatrice LaSalla." Her lips twitched. "I'm sure Irv will be pleased. She was his original pick, too."

"Will the Board listen to you?" Caroline said.

"They'll have little choice," Miranda said, and now her smile looked like a shark's. "I'm on it now."

"So they'll do what you tell them?" Now Caroline sounded utterly transported.

"Well, I don't know," Miranda admitted. "I don't think there will be any objections to Beatrice, though. She's capable enough, and hasn't stepped on too many toes."

Cassidy frowned. "Toes?"
"Never mind, dear," Miranda said. She glanced at Andy, who was trying not to squirm, or pick at the remains of her food. "Now if only I could decide what to do with Eleanor."

"Ellie?" Andy blinked again and reached for her juice. "What do you have to decide about Ellie?"

"Whether to leave her at Runway or bring her with me," Miranda said blandly. Her eyes sparkled as Andy, who had been in the middle of swallowing, almost choked.

"What... you... Ellie?" Andy shook her head hard as she mopped her mouth with a napkin. "Why... why would you bring..."

"Don't you like Eleanor? You recommended her for the job, didn't you?"

And Miranda knew full well why Andy had done it, too. "Ha ha," Andy said. "Sure, I like Ellie, but-but--I mean, she's not exactly..." Miranda raised her eyebrows. "...good at anything," Andy finished lamely. Well, besides science.

"No, no," Miranda said. "It's not that she's 'not good,' Andrea. It's that she's bad. Utterly bad. I have never seen quite this level of ineptitude before, and that's really saying something." A strange look crossed her face; it took Andy a moment to realize that Miranda was impressed. "It takes real talent and dedication to fail so completely that your failure actually turns one hundred and eighty degrees into something like success. Now that is talent. I'd be remiss if I didn't nurture it."

"You have to be kidding."

"You're gone," Miranda pointed out, her eyes sparkling with mirth. "If I can't have the best, I refuse to settle for anything less than the worst."

"You're totally kidding," Andy said flatly. The twins laughed, but Miranda only waved her hand carelessly.

"Of course I am," she said, rolling her eyes. "I wouldn't let her within a mile of my new job. I'd transfer her to Products if I wasn't afraid that she'd somehow manage to kill herself with a tube of concealer."

"That's pretty thoughtful of you," Andy said with a laugh. "She must have grown on you."

"I admit nothing," Miranda said. "I will, however, send her to Art. If she's good at--buttresses, or whatever she calls them, she can help with set design."

"Wow," Andy said. "I bet she'll be--uh--"

"An unmitigated disaster, yes."

"Oh, God," Andy said, as the twins laughed again. "I need to give her a call. Meet her for a drink or something."

"Make her stay at Runway," Cassidy ordered. "She needs to help us with our science projects next year."

"Er--well--"

"Let's have dessert now," Caroline said, and Andy gratefully let the subject be turned.

The twins wolfed down two little berry tarts Jimena had bought from a local bakery while Andy and Miranda sipped decaf coffee; then, when the tarts were only so many crumbs left on plates, the girls
went upstairs to do homework, as usual. Andy and Miranda headed to the den, where--Andy couldn't help but notice--Miranda kept sending paranoid glances to the staircase.

"When did she see us?" she muttered.

Andy grinned. "Looks like they can be quiet when they want to be."

Miranda rolled her eyes. "Elephants in ballet slippers." Andy chuckled. "How's your weekend been?"

"Kind of dull," Andy said, trying not to remember how she'd sulked around her apartment in sweatpants all day. "I mean restful."

"Mmm." Miranda sat down on the sofa and stretched. "I wish I could say the same. This is the first quiet moment I've had."

Andy sat down next to her. "Let's enjoy it, then."

Miranda blushed. "Not in here," she muttered, and glared at Andy. "You should have said, before I sat down--"

"No, um, I mean," Andy said, and reached out to take Miranda's hand. "I just, you know, want to hang out. Catch up."

"Oh." For just a moment, Miranda looked disappointed. "Well, then. How was work on Friday?"

Her eyes gleamed. "Did anybody mention--"

"A few people," Andy said, and squeezed Miranda's hand before she let it go. "Everybody was trying to talk to me about it. I didn't get a chance to talk to Nigel, but he looked like he was about to pass out at the party." Miranda chortled. "I definitely got a lot more popular. Everybody wanted to know what it was like to sit with Irv."

"Did you tell them it was divine?"

"I told them it was uncomfortable," Andy said frankly. Miranda looked at her in surprise. "I was so shocked--Miranda, why didn't you tell me?" Might as well get it out now. There was no more sense in delaying.

But to Andy's irritation, Miranda only waved her hand again. "I didn't tell anyone, Andrea. Nobody who wasn't directly involved knew--until the Board meeting on Thursday afternoon."

"No, it's not just that," Andy said, frustrated and trying to sound calm. "I don't just mean getting rid of Irv, I mean your--your new job, and all."

"Well, that was part of getting rid of Irv," Miranda said dryly. "How could I have told you about the job without telling you about the plan? Or would you have believed that Irv was going to give me the promotion?"

"Okay, point," Andy conceded, though it hurt. "But it's just…it's such a huge change for you."

For both of them, for the twins--for all of them.

Something like comprehension flashed in Miranda's eyes, and she rested a hand on her belly. "As I said, the timing's bad," she said. "But you can only work with what you're given, Andrea. And considering the way Irv was clearly going for my throat, it was obviously in the nick of time, don't
"Don't worry so much," Miranda said, her voice gentle. "I'll look after myself, Andrea."

Andy almost laughed. Of all people, Miranda didn't need to tell anybody that she was going to look after herself. But Andy got herself under control and just said, "I know you will. It's just that you're going to be so, um, busy."

"I'm always busy."

"But busier now," Andy said. "A lot busier. Right? I mean, how can you not be?"

"At first, yes," Miranda admitted. "There's so much to arrange." She smirked. "The infrastructure needs to be reworked, so that the right people know they're answering to me now. I promise you that there's been panic all over the building. Gretchen knows her days are numbered." Gretchen edited Herself, which had apparently been stagnating for five years. Andy made an 'ulp' noise, but Miranda appeared not to notice.

"Yes, of, of course," Andy said, and then bit the bullet. "So it seems like you're going to have a lot less time for--things. Like the, um, twins. And you. And me." She paused. "Us."

Miranda's eyes widened, and Andy saw unease flit across her face for the barest of seconds. But her voice was perfectly reassuring when she repeated, "At first. Once things settle into place, it won't be so bad."

"Miranda, you're going to be running nine magazines instead of one," Andy pointed out. "You said so yourself."

"I won't be editing nine magazines," Miranda said. "Not with that level of attention to detail."

"Okay," Andy said, letting her doubt bleed into her voice. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure," Miranda said firmly, as if speaking firmly would make it true. "Give it a chance, Andrea. It will settle down. We'll have time." She gave Andy a small smile. "As we do right now."

Another good point. Friday hadn't happened, Saturday hadn't happened, but today was happening, and it wouldn't last forever. "Right," Andy said, nodding, and Miranda looked relieved.

For now, Andy decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. Sure, she'd be busier for a while. But Andy didn't want to turn into Nate--or Stephen--by refusing to understand the demands of her job, by not being supportive. This was a big deal, and Miranda was obviously over the moon about it. Who was Andy to be a wet blanket? She'd said her piece. If Miranda said she'd make time for her private life, for them, then Andy had no choice but to believe her until Miranda proved otherwise.

"I'm proud of you," she said sincerely. She was, even if Miranda's decision dismayed her too. Miranda wasn't the kind of person to lie back and accept her fate. She was a fighter, and, when you got right down to it, she'd vanquished an enemy more powerful than she. You had to respect that.

"Of course I knew you had something in the works, but I didn't have any idea it was this…huge."

"Have a little faith, Andrea," Miranda said. Her tone was light and careless, but she seemed pleased by Andy's words. "Didn't I tell you that taking risks is what fashion's all about?"

"Yeah," Andy said, and grinned. "But can I just say that I'm glad Ellie picked out boring clothes for
my birthday?"

Miranda rolled her eyes. "We just have to let you be you, I suppose."

That probably shouldn't have touched Andy as much as it did. Oh, well. She smiled at Miranda. "You're really nice to me sometimes."

"Sometimes?" Miranda began indignantly. Still smiling, Andy tilted her head to the side. Miranda closed her mouth and blushed. She was beautiful when she blushed.

Andy leaned forward and put her hand on Miranda's knee hopefully.

Miranda blushed harder. It was a lot more appealing than her Machiavelli impersonation. Then she cleared her throat. "What happened to wanting to 'catch up'?"

"Oh. Well," Andy said sheepishly. Yeah, she could see how it was a little crass. After all, they hadn't talked for days. She made to remove her hand.

Miranda grabbed it and put it right back on her knee, glaring at Andy.

"You fraud," Andy said in delight.

"It's like you don't know me at all," Miranda said. "Honestly."

"Well," Andy repeated. "You are full of surprises, you know." She rubbed her thumb against Miranda's knee.

Miranda shivered, but then glanced down at her belly and muttered, "It's getting more awkward now--I'm starting to have a hard time reaching for the pepper, to say nothing of--and you know on Thursday, we had to--"

Still smiling angelically, Andy said, "Remember when I told you I don't have to approach from the front?"

Miranda's eyes widened. The corners of her mouth twitched. "Oh, my, my," she said.

"You just let me do all the work tonight," Andy said, and rubbed her thumb against Miranda's knee.

"What a wonderful idea," Miranda said, sounding almost breathless.

Andy bent forward for a kiss. Miranda sent another paranoid glance at the stairs. Andy rolled her eyes and grabbed her chin.

"Let's give 'em an eyeful," she said. Miranda glared, but there were no twins on the stairs, after all. And kisses spoke louder than words. Sometimes a lot louder.

"The study?" Miranda whispered against her mouth, already quivering gently.

"Actually," Andy said, "think we can make it to a bedroom? I mean, if we're quiet."

"I--"

"The guest bedroom's far away from where the twins are," Andy pointed out. "I'm just saying."

"Why?" Miranda asked suspiciously.
"Bedposts," Andy said.

Miranda blinked. "What?"

"Have a little faith," Andy said, imitating Miranda's archest tone.

For once, Miranda's curiosity won out over her caution, and five minutes later, she was clinging to a bedpost to support herself while Andy stood behind her and licked and nuzzled the nape of her neck. Andy had never lingered around this particular part of Miranda before. Apparently she should have. Miranda was already panting, and they didn't even have her top off yet.

Andy remedied that, pulling back for long enough to tug Miranda's shirt over her head. Miranda cooperated, although she squirmed in protest until Andy bent back down and began kissing her neck, her shoulders. Then she sighed and tilted her head, grabbing the bedpost again.

Her bra clasped in the front. Fantastic. Andy reached around, popped it open, then licked her fingers and began playing with Miranda's nipples, trying to time it with her kisses. Miranda moaned, and Andy nipped sharply at her shoulder. "Ssh," she said playfully. "You've got to be quiet."

"I, um, oh," Miranda replied, and arched into Andy's pinching fingers.

"So quiet," Andy whispered. "So quiet, Miranda." She let go of Miranda's breasts--Miranda gasped--and slid her hands up and down the rise of her belly. Miranda twitched. Andy stepped forward and pressed in as close as she could, until they were standing back to front, melded together. It was the closest she'd ever been to Miranda, considering. "We're a good fit," she said, and nibbled Miranda's earlobe. "At least in this direction."

"Yes," Miranda said vaguely. "Yes, we are."

A perfect fit, even. Suddenly, Andy's misgivings returned, when she hadn't quite expected it--didn't, couldn't Miranda see how good this was? That it wasn't worth giving up, that it was worth sacrificing for? Before she knew it, she'd bitten Miranda's neck again, only harder than she'd intended, hard enough to leave a mark. Miranda said, "Oh!", and Andy reared back in immediate guilt--what the hell had that been about?--and said, "Oh, um, whoops, sorr--"

"Again," Miranda gasped.

Andy gasped too. And then she bent to the other side of Miranda's neck, perfect symmetry, and did it again. Miranda wriggled, grinding her ass back into Andy's hips, as she gave an appreciative little moan. "You like it rough sometimes, after all?" Andy said hoarsely. "Just a little bit?"

"Apparently," Miranda said, and Andy nipped her again for that little bit of sass. This time Miranda actually cooed in delight. "Oh, that's--mmm." She moved her ass again, and the rub of her made Andy throb. "Do you like it too?"

"God," Andy said, and circled her hips against Miranda, bending down to suck and bite hard at the curve of her shoulder. Miranda shuddered. "I like everyth--I love you." It was suddenly very, very important to make Miranda understand that. "You make me crazy--I want to make you feel so good, all the time."

"You do," Miranda said. The whimper in her voice told Andy more than the words, told her that Miranda was already starting to get lost in it. "Oh yes. You do." She shivered again. "Please."

Andy knew please what. She moved her hands off Miranda's belly and slid them down between their bodies, cupping and squeezing Miranda's ass until Miranda shivered, relented, and stood with her
legs farther apart. Andy hiked up her skirt and slid one hand under it, biting her lip when she found the damp satin. "Oh God, I love it when you're already wet," she moaned softly.

"Easy to please, then," Miranda muttered, and shifted her hips hopefully. Andy rubbed her knuckles against the satin, and she bucked backwards. "Oh--m-more--"

"You want me to take these off?" Andy asked. "You want me to slide them down?" Miranda nodded quickly. "No," Andy said, and cupped Miranda through her underwear, rocking her hand back and forth while Miranda rocked her hips, so that Andy rubbed her from clit to slit to ass and back again through the satin. She leaned forward and blew lightly against Miranda's nape, and then nibbled again. Miranda gasped and practically fell forward against the bedpost, clutching it for dear life. She whimpered again, and at the sound of it, Andy had to let go of her just long enough to unzip her jeans. Then she wedged her hand inside, beneath the zipper, beneath her underwear, until she could rub her fingers against her wetness. She jerked forward into her own touch.

Then she pulled her hand out, her fingertips wet, and reached around to rub them gently against Miranda's lips. Miranda gasped, startled, but then licked them eagerly, drew Andy's middle fingertip into her mouth, sucked on it. "Oh, God," Andy said. "Oh, God, Miranda--"

Miranda panted against Andy's finger, "Inside me. Inside me," and Andy yanked her hand from her mouth, reached down again, and tugged down Miranda's underwear while Miranda shifted and wiggled cooperatively. And then--gently, very gently--Andy slid her middle finger, the same one Miranda had just sucked, deep inside. This new angle meant that her palm rubbed firmly against Miranda' perineum instead of her clit; Miranda seemed to realize this too as she moaned, and then ground against Andy's hand.

Andy panted against her shoulder and began to move her finger. There, that rough spot--against her knuckle, there--Miranda cried out softly. "Quiet," Andy said, her lips brushing against Miranda's skin, "ssh, be quiet," and of course that made Miranda cry out again. Good thing the guest bedroom really was pretty far from the upstairs study.

"It's harder to get at your clit from here," Andy whispered. "You want to help me?" She chuckled breathlessly. "Think you can hold yourself up with one hand?"

"Oh," Miranda said, "I, yes." She removed one hand from the bedpost and reached down, circumnavigating her own belly until she was touching herself, her fingers only centimeters from Andy's inside her. Miranda shuddered, gasped, moved her fingers, and set the pace from slow to quick while Andy followed her lead. After a few moments, Miranda began to sob, and Andy quickly muffled her mouth with her free hand. She felt Miranda's breath hot against her palm, Miranda's lips and tongue moving helplessly against her skin, tasting the salt there. And then Miranda came, pulsing around Andy, her sobs reduced to quick, gasping sighs.

Then she went weak, and her head lolled backwards, against Andy's shoulder. Andy let go of her mouth and nuzzled at her temple, her hair. She slid her finger out, licked it, rubbed it against Miranda's mouth again. "Oh God," Miranda panted against it. "You…" She gulped for air, and continued, "…are astonishing."

Andy didn't bother replying. Instead she shoved her jeans and underwear down around her thighs, pulled Miranda's hips back, and ground against her ass, sliding slickly against that warm flesh, hissing into Miranda's throat as she came. "Mmm," Miranda said happily as Andy's frantic gyrations slowed to a stop. "Delightful."

"Yeah," Andy gasped as she loosened her grip. "Wow." She kissed Miranda's throat again. "You're incredible."
"Mmm," Miranda said again, and let go of the bedpost, leaning back against Andy once more. Trusting Andy to hold her up. To support her.

Andy silently vowed to do it, and hoped it was a promise she could keep.

The next week, following their very pleasant encounter in the guest bedroom, Miranda called Andy all of twice. Their conversations were always brief, and Miranda usually sounded tired. Andy attempted to phone Miranda on the nights she didn't call, and always got sent to voicemail, except for once, Thursday night, when Miranda said in a harassed tone that she was too busy to speak because she was 'putting together some numbers' and she'd call Andy when she was free to talk.

"But I might not be free t--" Andy began.

"Good night," Miranda said in an absent tone, and hung up. Andy threw the phone across the room, but that was only because she knew it would land on the bed. Miranda didn't call back later.

She was not invited to dinner that Sunday night; Miranda was having dinner with Stan Oppenheimer and Beatrice LaSalla. Andy sulked into her ramen noodles, got pissed off at herself for sulking, and went to bed early.

The next night, though, Miranda called. She was nearly chortling with excitement: her new office was being set up on the eleventh floor, close to Irv's old digs (which were now Stan Oppenheimer's new digs). "It's going to be lovely, Andrea," she said. "A very nice view, even if it is on a lower floor. You'll have to come by and see it."

"I'd love to," Andy said, wondering how they were going to pull that one off. Inspired, she suddenly said, "Maybe really late at night."

"What?--oh."

"You can give me a private tour. You know."

"Andrea," Miranda said, and Andy could practically see her rolling her eyes.

"You have a locking door, right?"

"Complete with security cameras."

"Oh," Andy said, deflating.

"Well, never mind," Miranda said. "You're adept at imagining things, aren't you?"

"I'm adept at a lot of stuff."

"I'll never look at a bedpost the same way again," Miranda admitted, and changed the subject. "The twins want to know if we're going to move."

"Move?" Andy asked in surprise.

"Yes. I think they're imagining some mansion bordering Central Park."
"Oh," Andy laughed. "Well, are you thinking about it?"

"No," Miranda said. "I like our house. We don't need anything larger, and it's very convenient." She sniffed. "I've spent quite some time getting everything just the way I like it. I've no intention of uprooting just yet."

"Yeah," Andy said. "Once you get settled, inertia sets in." She glanced around her apartment with its peeling paint and cracking walls. "Moving sucks."

"Not when you pay hefty men to move for you," Miranda said. "But yes, it is time-consuming, nevertheless."

Andy rolled her eyes. She couldn't afford professional movers, and the men she knew now were almost uniformly more slender than hefty. Although most of them did make a big deal about lifting weights at very fashionable gyms full of other slender men. "Agreed."

"I do wish you'd find somewhere new, though," Miranda added, surprising Andy. "I don't like your building."

"It's pretty safe here," Andy said, deciding not to mention the double homicide from last week. It had been a freak occurrence. "The neighborhood's cool."

"I didn't say the neighborhood, I said the building. It looks one step away from falling down around your head."

"The building is completely fine," Andy said, eyeing the crack in the wall that ran nearly from the floor to the ceiling. She was pretty sure it was bigger now than when she and Nate had moved in. "And there's a great bagel place just a few doors down."

"Oh, well, heaven forbid you leave the bagel place," Miranda said. "It's probably the only one of its kind in New York City."

"Sweetie, I'm fine here," Andy laughed. Silence fell. Andy realized what she'd just said, and her face heated up. "Er. Sorry?"

"'Sweetie' is okay, if you must," Miranda said, as if submitting to a fate worse than death. "I guess it could be worse. But use it sparingly."

Relieved, Andy grinned. She really hadn't meant to say it. She just liked endearments and nicknames, even if they weren't exactly original ones. Nate had always been 'honey' or 'baby.' She couldn't quite imagine calling Miranda either of those, though. "I'll try not to wear it out, pumpkin," she said, and laughed.

"There's that famous wit of yours."

Andy couldn't stop giggling. "You know you love it, cupcake."

"There is a limit, dear," Miranda said.

"Uh oh," Andy said, still giggling. "'Dear' means I'm in big trouble, right?"

"You always were a bright girl."

This was worth waiting for, Andy thought. Worth sacrificing for. Worth everything. "I'm glad you think so, Cary."
"Cary?"

"Sure. You be Cary Grant, and I'll be Grace Kelly, and it'll be this awesome inside joke--"

"Oh my God," Miranda said, and Andy cackled. She could just picture the look on Miranda's face. "Good night."

"Good night," Andy said, deciding not to push her luck any further tonight. "I love you."

"Yes," Miranda said, and hung up.

Andy went to bed with a smile on her face, and let it sustain her through the following hectic Tuesday. But that night Miranda did not call, and, as usual, Andy got sent to her voicemail when she tried it herself. Feeling a little down--she'd looked forward to talking to Miranda after a trying day--Andy reminded herself of what she'd been saying all along: that she had to be supportive, be patient, be understanding. A lot of couples didn't see each other or even talk every day. It was good to have some space. It didn't have to be a big deal, not at all. In fact, it was dumb to sit around waiting by the phone. How sad was that?

So the next day, Andy called Ellie during lunch. "Drinks tonight? Ooh, I'd love to," Ellie said, and Andy smiled. "I can sneak out before the book arrives, as long as I'm back by ten."

"Let's say eight-thirty," Andy said. "Nigel's going to dinner with a couple of writers, so he won't need me hanging around the office tonight."

"Great!" Ellie chirped, and at eight-thirty Andy sat across from Ellie at Federico's, where Nigel had guessed the truth about Miranda's pregnancy and made Andy spit her drink everywhere. That night seemed like years ago. It was incredible to think it had only been in December.

"I've never been here before," Ellie said, looking around with wide eyes. "It's really nice."

"Sure is," Andy said. "Whatever you do, don't get the Marianas Martini."

"The what?"

"It's blue. Trust me." Andy looked at the menu, and decided that since Nigel wasn't buying, she'd avoid the pricey mixed drinks altogether. "I think I'll just have a glass of wine."

"Then I will too," Ellie decided. They ordered two glasses of white, and then Ellie looked across the table at Andy with her usual perky expression. "So, wow, how have you been? Do you like your new job? Is it exciting?"

"I do like it," Andy said. "It's good. I'm meeting lots of new people and...yeah. What about you, how have you been?"

"Oh, well, Miranda just gave me a promotion!" Ellie said, and beamed. "Isn't that great? I'm going to the art department. I'll be the assistant to the Design Director!" She frowned. "Well, I'm not sure that's a promotion, actually, but I do get a raise. And I can help design sets."

"Congratulations," Andy said, and their wine arrived just in time for them to toast each other. "To new opportunities."

"Yeah," Ellie said, and added, "Miranda really misses you."

Andy almost did a second spit-take in Federico's, but avoided it at the last minute. "Well," she
mumbled, and took a very careful sip of her wine. "It's, um, different not working there anymore."

"Do you think she'll hire you back, now that Irv's gone?" Ellie asked.

Andy blinked. The possibility had never crossed her mind. "I, uh, don't think so," she said, realizing even as she spoke that she wouldn't accept such an offer. What had seemed okay before--working for her lover--seemed wrong now, after gaining some independence, even if she still did miss Miranda like crazy every day. "I really do like working at Distinguish, though. I'm not planning on going anywhere."

"I know how you feel," Ellie said. "Oh, well. At least you still get to see her at dinner and stuff."

Andy blinked, froze, and stared at Ellie, in that order. Ellie looked back, and her smile faltered a little at whatever she saw on Andy's face.

"Um," Andy said, "how...how did..."

"Oh!" Ellie said, and her eyes widened. "Should I not have said--it's just that, you remember, sometimes Jimena calls to check up on the schedule and everything, to see when Miranda will get home."

"Jimena?" Andy said, horrified.

"She likes me--you know, she's got family back in Costa Rica? I went there for spring break my junior year and helped build some houses."

"Houses," Andy said.

"Yeah. Well, I mean, I didn't work all the time--a lot of us went to the beach in the evenings, you know, but mainly--"

"Jimena?" Andy said again.

"Uh huh," Ellie said. "It turns out that the house I was building was actually for one of her cousins. Isn't that wild?"

"Wild," Andy said. "Yes. That's pretty wild."

"So she likes me," Ellie said. Then she tilted her head to the side. "That's, uh...that's why she told me." Ellie bit her bottom lip. "She hasn't told anybody else. I won't tell either."

Andy felt her spine go stiff, and she looked into Ellie's large brown eyes. They were full of understanding and kindness, and suddenly Andy remembered the day she'd been fired, when Ellie had tried to make her feel better. "Oh," she said.

"Yeah," Ellie said. "I mean--you know, it's just dinner, so what's there to tell?"

Andy swallowed. "Nothing, I guess," she said.

"Right," Ellie said, nodding. Then she added gently, "Everybody has a right to be happy, Andy. That's what I've always thought."

"I think so, too," Andy said, her throat suddenly thick.

Ellie's forehead crinkled in a frown. "I mean, unless you're a murderer or something, I guess. Like Hitler."
“Yeah, we’ll make an exception for him,” Andy said. She swallowed again. “Thanks, Ellie.”

“No problem,” Ellie said, and looked around the bar again with bright, interested eyes. “Wow. Why do you think they used so much red in here? I think it’s clashing with my hair.”

Andy had felt obligated to tell Miranda that Nigel knew about their relationship. She wasn’t about to squeal on Ellie, though. Miranda would turn on Ellie in full wrath, which would be kind of like fire-hosing a saltine.

Besides, Andy didn’t think Ellie would tell. She couldn’t imagine it at all. In fact, it was almost a comfort that someone knew about them and didn’t disapprove. Well, two someones, of course, if you counted Jimena. Although Andy had no idea if Jimena, too, had put together the pieces, or if she just knew that Andy was an extra dinner guest sometimes. Andy didn’t want to work all that out, either.

Miranda didn’t call that night, which Andy told herself was for the best, considering. She didn’t call the next night, Thursday, either. But somebody else did.

“Caroline?” Andy said in surprise as she answered her phone. It was about eight o’clock. She was still at the office, but things were quiet.

“Hi, Andy,” Caroline said.

“What’s wrong? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” Caroline said. “Mom’s working late again, so Cara’s staying with us. We just finished dinner.”

“Oh,” Andy said, even more surprised. “Well, that’s…uh…”

“We haven’t seen you in, like, years,” Caroline said. Then she added anxiously, “It’s not because I said you were fat, is it? I was just kidding.”

“What? No!” Andy said. “That’s not it at all, Caroline. I promise. Your mom’s just been busy, that’s all, so I haven’t had a chance to come by and see all of you.”

“You have to come this Sunday, then,” Caroline said, and plainly the matter was settled. “We’ll tell Mom. Hey, what’s another word for ‘pretty’? My teacher said I used ‘pretty’ too much in my English paper.”

“Uh—” As always, Andy raced to keep up with the twins. “Let’s see. Pretty…beautiful, lovely, gorgeous, uh—” It was tough to do this on the spot. “Cute? Um, exquisite?”

“Ooh, exquisite,” Caroline said. “Spell that.” Instead of telling the kid to get a dictionary, and a thesaurus while she was at it, Andy spelled it. “Cool. So how are you?”

“Who, me?” Andy said. “Oh, I’m fine. Can’t complain. What about—”

“Do you miss us?”

“Of course I do,” Andy said, realizing that it was the truth.
"Good," Caroline said. "Now you talk to Cassidy, and then I'll talk to you again."

"Oh, uh--oka--"

"Hi, Andy," Cassidy said. "What's up? Oh, guess what. Marcus Phelps got into a fight today during recess with a guy who was like a thousand times his size, but Marcus takes judo lessons, and it was so cool--"

All told, the twins took up over half an hour, passing Caroline's phone back and forth and never letting Andy get a word in edgewise. They would have taken longer, but then a woman from Marketing hurried around the corner looking agitated. "That's great, guys," Andy said quickly, interrupting whatever Cassidy was saying about Britney Spears. "I'm glad things are going so well, but I have to go now, okay? I'm still at work, and somebody needs me to do something."

"Oh, okay," Cassidy said. "Bye."

There was the sound of the phone changing hands, and Caroline said breathlessly, "Bye, Andy! Come for dinner on Sunday!"

"Sure, I'll--" Caroline hung up. Andy sighed, and smiled at Marketing Lady. What was her name? Theo, she thought.

"I need this faxed to Jeremiah at Valentino right away, and I don't have his direct number," Theo said, looking frantic.

"Got it right here," Andy said, whipping out her Rolodex. It was old-fashioned, but harder to delete by accident. "I'll be happy to fax it for you."

"Oh, thank you," Theo said fervently. "Nigel would have taken my head off if I'd missed this deadline. He scares me! Doesn't he scare you?"

Andy stared at her, started to say 'hell no,' and said, "Yeah, sometimes. But it's okay if you, uh, just keep your head down."

"No kidding," Theo said, nodding hard. Andy tried not to smile. Nigel would be thrilled when she told him that people were starting to cower. In fact, it would probably make him insufferable. Maybe she wouldn't say anything after all. "But you worked for Miranda Priestly," Theo continued. "I guess it's all old hat to you."

"Kind of," Andy said, getting out of her chair and heading for the printer/fax.

"So, were those your kids?" Theo asked. "I could tell you were talking to kids. I have one, too."

Great. She was a talker. But Andy remembered that a year ago she'd been chatty too, and that it had hurt when Emily looked at her as if she were tile mold whenever she tried her hand at conversation. So she pressed the 'send' button for the fax and politely said, "No, they're not my kids, but I hang out with them sometimes. They're my friend's." Deciding she didn't want to encourage any more curiosity along those lines, she said, "How old is yours?"

"Two!" Theo said, looking thrilled that Andy had asked. "His name is Mario. He's a terror. Boys, am I right?"

"Uh," Andy said. "Yeah."

"Never a dull moment. I'm glad we've got renters' insurance. Does your friend have boys?"
Andy almost said 'not yet,' but went with a safer, "No. Two girls."

"Tell her to count her blessings." Theo raised her eyes to heaven. "I've got my hands full with just one--I can't imagine adding him to a mix! I mean, not that I'd trade him for anything, but girls are so much easier."

"Ha ha, yeah," Andy said weakly.

"Anyway. Thanks for helping with that fax," Theo said. "I gotta get home now that it's done. My husband's about ready to take my head off for all these late nights. And of course, I miss my baby."

"At least he's with his dad," Andy said, giving her what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

"Oh," Theo said, "my husband's not his dad." Andy blinked. Theo's eyes widened and she blushed. "It's a long story," she mumbled. "It's kind of weird. People don't seem to get it, even when I explain."

"I don't know," Andy said. "You'd be, um, surprised."

"Yeah? Maybe we'll hang out sometime," Theo said, but she was already hurrying away. "Thanks again!"

"No problem," Andy called after her.

Yeah. Definitely a little too chatty.

The next night, Friday, Andy was hanging out at home again. She was not, she told herself, waiting for Miranda to call, because that would just be sad. She only wanted some quiet downtime, that was all.

Miranda called at about ten, though. "Hello," she said, and from the exhaustion in her voice, Andy could tell it wouldn't be a long conversation tonight. She drooped. She was tired too, but she'd looked forward to catching up. It had been two days since they'd spoken, after all.

But she just said, "Hi. How are things?"

"Oh, fine," Miranda said. "I can't speak long. I'm about to fall asleep where I sit. You're well?"

"I guess," Andy said, disappointed even though she'd expected it. "I miss you, though."

"Well, I understand my children invited you over on Sunday night without consulting me," Miranda said. The words were pure bitch, but her voice was warm. "You'll see me then."

"Good," Andy said, already looking forward to it now that she'd gotten a formal invitation. "So what's got you so tired tonight?"

"What doesn't?" Miranda said. And then she was off and running again, telling Andy about getting Runway ready to transition to Beatrice LaSalla's leadership, hunting for a replacement for Gretchen (and trying to ignore Gretchen in the hallways, because she burst into tears whenever she saw Miranda), hiring new staff, and pushing Human Resources to the breaking point because both Mr. Barnhardt and Mr. Oppenheimer wanted to clean house.
"And not that I object to hiring the most competent people, of course, but I mean really," Miranda said, exasperated. "Surely they could have waited to clean the secretarial pool until we could hire people who actually knew their way around a publishing business?"

"Yeah," Andy said, trying not to yawn. Maybe she was more tired than she'd thought. Which was funny, because now Miranda sounded a lot more energetic. Maybe she was some kind of energy-sucking vampire who operated over the phone. Andy wouldn't put anything past her, even now. Especially now. "But you're looking after yourself, right? You know. Eating. You said you would."

"Yes, yes," Miranda said vaguely, which meant she'd probably skipped a meal or two. "I've been counting calories, Andrea, believe me. Anyway, I'd better go."

"Okay," Andy said. She worried her bottom lip. "Can I call you tomorrow?"

"Don't bother," Miranda sighed. "I've got dinner with Stan again. I don't know what you were so worried about, Andrea. He's incredibly dull, one-on-one."

"And incredibly handsome," Andy said darkly. Then she added, "But his ears don't match up."

"They…you know, they don't, do they?" Miranda said. "I've never noticed that before. Now it's going to be all I see whenever I look at him."

"Happy to help," Andy said, smiling in triumph. "Believe me. Have a good time with Mr. Ears tomorrow."

"What are you, five?"

"You know what I bet you'll do? I bet you'll look at him and say something like, 'I'll have the ears. I mean the steak.'"

"You're a horrible person," Miranda said.

"You did it with Christian. And the towels," Andy laughed. It was one of her favorite memories.

"Look at how cute you are," Miranda said. "Oh, I could just pinch your cheeks until you scream, you're so cute."

"Hold that thought," Andy said. "I'll see you on Sunday. I love you."

"Yes," Miranda said, but she did not immediately hang up; instead, she said--mumbled, really--"I love you too, good night." But before Andy could do anything but blink, the phone went dead.

Huh. Cool. True, Miranda had sounded like somebody was holding a gun to her head, but Andy decided to take what she could get.

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Andy went to a party on Saturday night at a fashionable designer's fashionable loft studio, where she met many fashionable people and sipped fashionable new drinks that more often than not tasted terrible. She didn't have the time of her life or anything, but some of the people there were funny and cool, and they even seemed to think she was funny and cool too. Andy realized how much she'd missed that. She hadn't had fun at a party since college, where she'd had tons of friends and nobody spent all their time checking the labels on people's shirts.
But tonight had a laid-back atmosphere, and after a couple of drinks even the art and wine snobs were mellow enough to hang out with. There were even a few people from *Runway* who came over to say hello, and caught her up on all the insanity Miranda hadn't seen fit to mention. Andy tried to change the subject pretty quickly, though; it was nice to spend an evening talking about things not related to the chaos of her old job.

Still, even though the party was fun, Andy was much more excited on the following evening as she hurried up the stairs to Miranda’s house at seven. If it had been a long time since they’d talked on the phone, it had been a lot longer since they’d seen each other, and kissed, and…

Two weeks, Andy realized with shock. She hadn't even laid eyes on Miranda in two whole weeks. It had felt like a long time, but she hadn't realized it had been that long. Her heart pounded. She couldn't wait.

But she was destined for disappointment. When Caroline answered the door, the first thing she said was, "Mom's been at the office all day, but she said she'd be home in time for dinner." She turned and yelled over her shoulder, "Cara! Andy's here, you can go home now!"

Andy winced as she stepped inside, set down her bag, and put away her coat. Cara came downstairs, wearing her usual serene, if relieved smile. The changing of the guard. "Ms. Priestly said she'd be home by seven-thirty," she said. "Do you want me to stick around until she gets here?"

"No, that's okay," Andy said, smiling at her. "We'll be okay for half-an-hour, I think." She turned and raised an eyebrow at Caroline, who smiled slyly. "I think," Andy repeated, and shared a grin with Cara. "Catch you later."

"Night!" Cara said, offering no further protestations, and practically skipped down the stairs. It must have been a long day.

"So what's up?" Andy said, looking back at Caroline.

"Jimena's almost done cooking. We're having lamb, I think. Come on upstairs! Cassidy and me have been working on our art projects. Mine's way better."

"It is not!" Cassidy yelled down the stairs. Andy grimaced as she followed Caroline up.

The twins' art projects were pretty cool, in fact, and Andy ooh'd and ahh'd over them until she judged their egos were satisfied. "And it's for a contest, you said?" she asked.

"Yeah," Cassidy said. "The teacher wanted us to do one together." She rolled her eyes.

"Some of them still think we're, like, the same person," Caroline said. She glanced at Andy. "You don't, though."

"Sure don't," Andy said. She hadn't since Christmas. No--since meeting them with Miranda at Penn Station, when Caroline had distinguished herself as The Sullen One. Andy probably shouldn't mention that, though.

Cassidy flopped down in a leather easy chair, threw her legs over one arm of it, and let her head hang upside-down off the other. Her face instantly turned pink. "But which one of us do you like better?"

"Why do you guys always ask me stuff like that?" Andy laughed, deciding that the question didn't even deserve an answer. "You always want to know which one is better at something. What's the point?"
"There's no point," Caroline said. "We just want to know." She tilted her head to the side and batted her eyelashes. "I bet it's me."

"No, it isn't!" said Cassidy, whose face was getting redder and redder from hanging upside-down.

So much for reasoning with them. "Okay," Andy said. "What if I switch off? Cassidy, you can be my favorite today, and Caroline, you'll be my favorite tomorrow."

"No way," Caroline said indignantly. "There's an odd number of days in the year. She'd get to be the favorite more."

God, they didn't miss anything. "Uh…weeks, then," Andy said. "There're fifty-two weeks in a year. So Cassidy's my favorite this week--"

"That's too long," Caroline wailed.

"Don't listen to her," Cassidy said, sitting up. "She's greedy. She ate way more dessert than me last night. She--"

Andy held up her hands quickly before Caroline could explode. "You know what? We'll let your mom settle this," Andy was obviously unequipped. "She should be home in--" She glanced at her watch and blinked. It was seven-forty-five. "--uh, fifteen minutes ago."

"It's a quarter till eight?" Cassidy frowned and looked at her own watch. "Why isn't she home yet? I'm starving."

"I'm sure she'll be back soon," Andy said, trying not to worry. "She might be caught in traffic." She looked at her watch again, as if it might magically have turned back time so Miranda wouldn't be late. No such luck. "If she's not here in ten minutes I'll call her, okay?"

"What'll we do for ten whole minutes?" Caroline demanded, as if it was the longest stretch of idle time she could imagine.

Andy went with the easy answer. "What's on TV?"

The twins brightened up, and scampered downstairs to the TV room where they'd all watched To Catch a Thief. The twins found some kids' channel that was doing a marathon of an anime series they loved, and settled down happily to watch.

Andy hardly saw any of it. The minutes kept ticking by, although she tried not to look at her watch too much in front of the twins, who were better off watching television than getting worried. Surely Miranda was okay, wherever she was. But ten minutes passed, and Miranda had not arrived home; after fifteen minutes, when it was eight o'clock and the anime episode had ended, Andy gritted her teeth and dug her phone out of her bag.

But before she could dial the number, the display lit up and the phone rang. Miranda. Utterly relieved, Andy answered right away and said, "Hello?"

"Is that Mom?" Caroline demanded, putting the TV on mute. Andy nodded. "Tell her we're starving!"

"Hello, Andrea," Miranda said. She sounded tired. "I'm sorry I'm late. This crisis came up, and--" She sighed. "You wouldn't think crises happened on Sunday night, would you?"

"I think they happen any time," Andy said. "I'm just glad you're okay. We were worried," she added
"And hungry!" Cassidy yelled at the phone.

"Good grief," Miranda said.

Andy smiled, still relieved. "But you're on your way, right?"

"Um," Miranda said, and Andy's heart fell. The twins saw her eyebrows draw together, and went still. "I'll be there as soon as I can. This shouldn't take too much longer. But go ahead and eat. I can't let it be said that I starve my children," she added, her voice a little too breezy.

"Right," Andy said, nodding, even though Miranda couldn't see her. "Sure, we'll...but hurry home, okay?" She tried to sound hearty. "It's lamb. It smells great. You don't want to miss it."

"I don't," Miranda said. "I won't. I'll be there as soon as...I'll be there."


"Goodbye," Miranda said, and hung up. Andy sighed, put her phone back in her bag, and looked up to see the twins regarding her with identical blank expressions. Then Cassidy bit her bottom lip and looked away, back at the TV, where cartoon kids with enormous eyes were frolicking in silence in an all-new episode.

"Great," Caroline said. Andy hadn't heard that bitter tone since they'd come back from London at Christmas.

"Shut up," Cassidy said, and reached for the remote. Caroline yanked it away. "Give it back!"

"Calm down," Andy said quickly. "Let's eat. She said to go ahead."

"Of course she did," Caroline said, threw the remote on the floor, and stomped out of the TV room. Cassidy picked up the remote and put it on the coffee table while Andy rose from the sofa, feeling awkward and shaky, and not sure what she should do or say. She wasn't their parent, after all, or even their nanny, or anybody but their mom's girlfriend.

When they got to the kitchen, Caroline was dumping food on her own plate with a thunderous look on her face. Jimena had left. Andy and Cassidy got their own plates, and they sat down and ate in silence. Andy searched desperately for something to say.

Caroline beat her to it. "It's happening again," she said, stuffed a bite of lamb into her mouth, and chewed viciously.

"Shut up!" Cassidy said again.

"You shut up," Caroline said. "It's just like last time and you know it--she stopped coming home and she stopped talking to us and she--"

"Stop it," Cassidy said.

"Do you mean when she got pregnant?" Andy asked against her better judgment.

"Yeah," Cassidy said, pushing her food around her plate.

"No," Caroline said. "Before then too. When Stephen was here. She started doing it all the time. And then he left."
Andy's stomach writhed, but all she said was, "Good riddance."

Cassidy looked at her and grinned. Even Caroline smiled a little. Relieved, Andy pressed her luck and said, "This is just one night, you guys. It hasn't happened recently, has it?"

"No," Caroline admitted.

"So let's not worry yet," Andy said. "Let's just see how it goes for a little while. She does have a new job," she added, putting her own mantra into words. "It's going to take some time to get everything lined up, but it won't take forever."

"Yeah," Cassidy said. "Maybe it won't happen again, Caroline. Maybe it's not for long."

"She just needs time to settle in," Andy said.

"I guess," Caroline said. She sounded doubtful, but the bitterness was gone. She looked at the clock. It was eight-fifteen. "Gosh, we started dinner so late," she said. Her eyes began to shine. "We won't have time to do any of our homework."

Cassidy brightened as well. "Yeah!" she said, and began to eat much more slowly.

"Uh-huh," Andy said. "You think your teachers'll be okay with that?"

"Our teachers let us do anything," Caroline said carelessly. "They feel sorry for us, and they're still worried we'll find out which one of them talked to the Post back in January."

"Oh," Andy said, and blinked. She'd forgotten all about that. "Uh, well then." She took another bite of her lamb and decided not to press any further.

The twins could only pretend to eat slowly for so long, though, and soon enough they'd bolted down their meals. "Did Jimena make any dessert?" Cassidy asked, wiping her mouth haphazardly with her napkin.

"No," Caroline said sadly. "There's just the no-sugar-added cookies, and there are only two left."

"I'll pass," Andy said, but then she remembered something. She got up from the table and headed for the freezer while the twins watched curiously. Yep, there was the bag of frozen peas. And, yep--

Andy reached in, and when she turned around, she held four pints of Haagen-Dazs. The twins' jaws dropped.

"Who wants chocolate?" Andy asked.

Miranda did not arrive home until a quarter of ten.

Andy hung out and read while the twins made a vague jab at doing a couple of homework assignments; their bedtime was nine-thirty, and though they protested that they weren't sleepy, they went to get ready for bed at Andy's suggestion.

The twins were brushing their teeth when the front door opened and shut. Andy got up from the couch and quickly headed to the foyer, where Miranda was hanging up her coat, shoulders bowed
and face lined with weariness. When she saw Andy, though, she gave her a genuine—if apprehensive—smile. "Good evening," she said.

Two weeks. Andy couldn't believe it. No matter what, Miranda was a sight for sore eyes tonight. "Hi," Andy said, coming forward to greet her even as she heard the twins hurrying out of the bathroom and towards the stairs.

Miranda heard it too, and frowned at the staircase. "Why are they still up?" she muttered.

"Well, we ate dinner a little late," Andy said pointedly, and Miranda's lips pursed.

Before Andy could say anything else, the twins bounded into view. "Where were you?" Caroline demanded.

"Working, bobbsie," Miranda said, and bent down to kiss their cheeks. She moved a little stiffly, and Andy recognized some of the awkwardness, the formality, she'd shown the twins at Christmas. Not a good sign. Maybe it was just because she was tired. "I'm sorry I missed dinner."

"We left a plate for you in the oven," Andy said, keeping her voice gentle, and Miranda flashed her a quick, grateful look. "The kids were getting ready for bed."

"You're not going to start working late all the time again, are you?" Caroline said, frowning fiercely at her mother. Cassidy tugged ineffectually at Caroline's pajama sleeve.

"No," Miranda said. The exhaustion in her voice came through loud and clear. "This is just temporary, darling. I'm sorry I missed you tonight, but you need to go to bed." The twins opened their mouths. "I don't want to hear about how tired you are in the morning," Miranda added with a slight edge in her voice.

The twins sighed, but kissed her again, said their goodnights, and went back up the stairs, casting occasional glances at Andy and Miranda over their shoulders. When they were out of sight, Miranda turned back to Andy and opened her mouth to speak.

This time Andy was the one who forestalled her. She didn't know what Miranda was going to say—an apology, an excuse, even an accusation for letting the twins stay up late—but now wasn't the time. Miranda looked like she was about to keel over. "Come on," she said, and took Miranda's hand, tugging her towards the kitchen. "You haven't eaten yet, have you?"

The grateful look returned to Miranda's face, and for once she allowed herself to be led. She sat at the table while Andy pulled the plate out of the oven and set it before her. It wouldn't be quite as good as it was when it was freshly cooked, but it still smelled great, and Andy caught herself wishing for seconds. Miranda picked up her fork, glanced at Andy, and said in a low voice, "So how did you three pass the time tonight?"

Andy took her cue, and started talking so that Miranda could eat her meal without having to respond. Her eyelids fluttered in pleasure at the first bite, and Andy wondered if she'd even remembered to eat lunch. Anger gathered in the pit of her stomach, but she mastered it and barreled on, telling Miranda about the twins’ art projects. And their desire to be the favorite.

Miranda chuckled as she took a sip of her water. "They've always been competitive. From the very beginning, I swear they were doing hand-to-hand combat to determine which one got to come out first while I was in labor." She grimaced at the memory.

Andy did too. "So which one was first?"
"Cassidy," Miranda said, "but don't tell them. I've always refused to."

"Okay," Andy said, and bit her lip. "Um--how was your labor?"

"Long and grueling," Miranda said. Her lips thinned. "Nearly eighteen hours." Andy shuddered. No wonder she wanted a C-section. "I meant to get a tubal ligation afterward," Miranda added with a frown. "But I was always so busy, and then Greg and I divorced, and I suppose it just slipped my mind." She snorted. "I didn't exactly think I was in danger anymore, anyway."

"Just goes to show," Andy said. Miranda had nearly finished her food. "You want some salad? There's spinach and stuff in the fridge. It'll be good for you."

Miranda didn't look at Andy as she took another bite. "Is all this pampering meant to return me to full strength before you let me have it?"

Andy pursed her own lips, but Miranda didn't look up. "I don't know," she said. Miranda tensed. "I don't want to fight with you." Not when it had been so long since they'd even seen each other. "Like I told the twins, it's just one night. You're--you're not going to start doing this all the time, are you?"

"Like you told the twins?" Miranda asked, deigning to raise her eyes to Andy. Then she narrowed them.

"They were upset that you weren't coming home," Andy admitted. "Especially Caroline. I told them not to worry too much." Miranda's jaw tensed. "They calmed down," Andy added quickly. "I think they understood. I mean, at least a little. That it's your new job. We talked about how it won't be forever." She silently pleaded with Miranda to say--

"Good, because it won't be," Miranda said. She pushed her plate away. "It's only temporary. But there are certain things I have to do, Andrea--responsibilities I have--whether we like it or not."

"I know that," Andy said, trying not to sound offended. Hadn't she been telling herself that for weeks now? She wasn't Nate. She wasn't Stephen. She could be what Miranda needed her to be. "I said that."

"Good," Miranda repeated. She glanced at the clock. Five after ten. "I hate to say it," she said. "I really do."

Andy swallowed against the lump that suddenly appeared in her throat. She'd been looking forward to this for so long, and... "Yeah, I, I need to get home anyway," she said, and stood up. She managed a smile. "You're not the only working stiff, you know."

"Yes, I know." Miranda smiled too, but there was a look in her eyes that Andy couldn't quite interpret, which disconcerted her. She was much better at reading Miranda now, but she didn't know what that look meant. "I appreciate the salad offer, by the way."

Andy bent down, and kissed her cheek. Then she kissed her mouth too, gently. Miranda kissed back. Their first kiss in two weeks. Andy hadn't quite realized how much she'd missed this. And there was no hope for more. Not right now. When would...?

"I'm sorry I can't throw together some dessert instead," she said, trying to keep her voice light.

"I think I can live without those cookies," Miranda said.

"Well, sure," Andy said, "but we did a pretty good job on the Haagen-Dazs. There wasn't much left in any of the cartons."
Miranda's eyes widened.

"Night, sweetie," Andy said, and hurried out before Miranda could respond.

_Seventh: May._

On Wednesday, Andy decided that Caroline obviously had ESP, because Miranda called her that night with an almost obscene level of satisfaction in her voice.

"Have I mentioned that my job has many benefits, Andrea?" she asked. "Including the intangible ones?"

"Miranda, what did you do?" Andy asked right away.

"I'm sure you remember that odious little reporter who contacted the twins' teacher for that article in the _Post_ a few months ago," Miranda said. She sounded orgasmic. "That now-unemployed reporter."

"Yep," Andy said. "I think I know where this is going."

"I hope so. I always thought you were quick on the uptake." Miranda sighed in contentment. "It was a beautiful moment."

"Er," Andy said, "congratulations. That's, uh, great."

"Thank you, my dear," Miranda said graciously. "And how was your day?"

"Fine," Andy said. "Are, are you going to find out who the teacher was?"

"I haven't decided," Miranda said. "I'm not sure I want to know. The twins are very fond of almost all their teachers. I don't want to hurt them further." Well, that was a relief, anyway. "The reporter, though," Miranda added, her voice purring again, "well, that was a different thing."

"Yeah," Andy said. "Very different."

"I knew you'd understand," Miranda said. She sounded happy.

Nigel was a lot better at reading Andy's reaction. "Well," he said as they rode in the elevator together, "she wouldn't be Miranda if she didn't go mad with power." He considered. "That's one of the perks of having it."

"You love it, too," Andy accused.

"Did Theo really say she was scared of me?" Nigel asked, his eyes shining.

Andy knew she shouldn't have mentioned it. "Yeah. Don't let it go to your head," she said, smiling and rolling her eyes. "Next thing you know, you'll have people hiding whenever you walk down the hall."

"That would be fantastic," Nigel said. "Completely fantastic."

"You're a lost cause, aren't you?"

"Darling, I hope I'm never found."
The week proceeded as usual, with Andy working all day, and Miranda working all day, and speaking to each other only on a couple of nights. By Friday, in spite of trying to keep as busy as she could, Andy felt sick to the heart with loneliness, and telling herself how pathetic and unreasonable she was being didn't help matters at all. She was half-tempted to call Ellie and get regular reports. Ellie would be happy to oblige. But if Miranda found out she'd kill both of them, so it probably wasn't worth it.

Miranda called again on Friday night. There were no parties going on this time; Andy was working late at the office, buried under a schedule for Nigel's upcoming trip to Los Angeles. She was glad she wouldn't be going with him, even though it was going to be aggravating, trying to arrange everything for him by remote while he was away.

"I'm not available either Saturday or Sunday evening," Miranda said without preamble, and Andy's heart fell.

"Oh," she said, and gulped. "Um…what about the twins?"

"What about the twins?" Miranda repeated, her voice going a little hard. "They'll be with their grandmother."

"I just meant--"

"I don't forget about my children, Andrea."

Great, just what Andy needed: to make Miranda defensive on top of being unavailable. "I know," Andy said. "That's not what I--I'm sorry I can't see you this weekend."

"Well," Miranda said, and cleared her throat, "I was wondering--I don't have a great deal of time, but are you free on Sunday morning?"

Hope lit up in Andy's chest. "Yeah," she said. "I am. When do you want me to come by?"

"Actually, I won't have enough time to go home and come back, but I thought we could meet for brunch," Miranda said.

For a moment Andy sat still, holding the phone to her ear and too shocked to reply.

"Andrea?" Miranda said sharply.

"Brunch?" Andy squeaked. "Like--I mean, in a restaurant?"

"No, no, in a police station," Miranda said. "Or maybe in a tire yard. Which would you prefer?"

"You'd--you'd meet me--we'd be hanging out in, you know," Andy wet her lips, "public?" Like they were on a date?

"Andrea," Miranda said in exasperation, "our friendship is no secret. Word's gotten around that you sat at my table at the party; it's general knowledge that you helped me over Christmas. As far as everyone is concerned, you were an exceptional assistant during a difficult time, I've grown fond of you, and even if it's strange, that's all it is." She snorted. "People want to see it as evidence of my soft, fuzzy side. The Snow Queen has a heart. It might be the best PR I've ever had."

"Oh," Andy said. She had no idea what to make of that.

"We're not going out to dinner and dancing," Miranda said. "It is quite acceptable for two friends to
meet for brunch." Her voice gentled, became almost hesitant. "I'd like to see you."

"When and where?" Andy asked at once.

Miranda chuckled, and sounded relieved as she said, "Let's say Danal at eleven o'clock. However, I'll ask you to make the reservations, and not Eleanor, I think. Just to be on the safe side."

It took all of Andy's willpower to hold her tongue, but she managed it. "Sure thing," she said. Danal, she knew, did not take reservations for Sunday brunch, but that didn't matter; by now, getting other people to make exceptions for Miranda Priestly came as easily as breathing. Didn't Andy do it all the time, too?

On Sunday, Andy arrived ten minutes early, worrying that she was already late. But Miranda wasn't there yet, and Andy let the hostess lead her to a table in the back corner. The patio was open, but usually kissy-faced couples sat out there, and that would probably send the wrong message to people, because it was the right message.

Andy sat down and ordered a coffee. Eleven o'clock arrived, and Miranda didn't. That set off a whole new chain reaction of worry in Andy's head. Miranda had been so late last week that it was practically like she'd never shown up at all. Before she could help herself, Andy remembered--

"I walked out on an investment committee meeting. I sat there waiting for you for almost an hour."

"I told you that the cell phones didn't work, nobody could get a signal out--"

"I knew what everybody in that restaurant was thinking. There he is, waiting for her again."

Here Andy was, waiting for Miranda again--Miranda, who showed up fifteen minutes early for everything at work, and refused to wait for anybody else. But no. Andy needed to get it under control, because Stephen was an asshole and Andy wasn't. She remembered the soft, pleading note in Miranda's voice when she'd spoken to Stephen: the note that asked for forgiveness even as she offered up excuses, that was full of the helpless knowledge that she'd fucked up yet again. No wonder she'd looked ready to murder Andy when she saw her on the stairs.

But Andy had known about that--known about this--from the start. She'd known all along that Miranda put work before all else. Now she had to suck it up and accept it. It wasn't fair otherwise. Was it?

Miranda wanted to be with Andy because, among other reasons, Andy understood her motivations and what she wanted out of life. It wouldn't be too kosher to take all that back now.

It was worth waiting for. It was worth--

A murmuring at the front of the restaurant. Andy looked up from her coffee and saw, with a profound surge of relief, that Miranda was making her way to the table while people watched her curiously. She moved slowly, trying to be graceful while also being nearly seven months pregnant. It wasn't a good combination, but Miranda pulled it off as well as anybody could. Andy glanced at a nearby clock: Miranda was only five minutes late. Andy had been worried for nothing, and now she felt like a jerk. Paranoid much?

She tried not to give Miranda a really dopey smile as she hopped to her feet and held out the table's other chair. Miranda seated herself with a grunt of relief, and Andy saw with irritation that she was wearing four-inch stilettos. Sure, Miranda had an image to maintain, but weren't there limits?

Then Miranda raised her face, and the bright expectation in her eyes made Andy forget about
everything else. For a crazy moment she thought that Miranda was inviting a real kiss, but thankfully her brain woke up and she bent and kissed the air. Here in public, she didn't even let their cheeks brush together, just in case.

This was going to be tough, Andy realized as she sat down in her own chair. She was good at acting the part of Miranda's assistant in public, and at relaxing and being her lover in private. She didn't have much practice in being just a friendly acquaintance--the rooftop party didn't count, since that had been more of an ambush. She smiled at Miranda in a way that felt stiff and unnatural, but proper. Miranda smiled back, also very proper, also a far cry from the way she smiled at Andy when they were alone.

At least their table was pretty private, Andy thought. People might be able to see their faces and their body language, but nobody could hear what they were saying.

"How are you?" she asked, and nodded at Miranda's belly as subtly as she could. "How is he? I mean--how are you both?"

"We're fine," Miranda said, twitching the napkin out of its roll and placing it daintily in her lap. Which was probably unnecessary, since if she dropped any of her food it was going to land on her stomach first. "Although he's still playing up whenever he feels like it. And you?"

"Oh I'm, I'm good. I'm good. I'm glad you're both good too," Andy said, and decided maybe she shouldn't talk until she could sound less stupid. "So what's got you so busy this weekend?"

"Well," Miranda began, and that carried the conversation reasonably well until the waiter arrived and Andy realized with chagrin that she hadn't even looked at the menu yet. But to her astonishment, Miranda, who hadn't looked either, told the waiter, "French toast for both of us," and turned back to Andy as he hurried away.

"French toast?" Andy said before she could stop herself. "Have you been kidnapped by pod people?"

"Andrea, one does not brunch at Danal for the granola," Miranda said. Ten minutes later, Andy understood what she meant as she took a bite of her French toast and practically melted back into her seat. Miranda smirked at her. And blushed.

It was probably a bad idea, but Andy went ahead and muttered, "Foodgasm," nearly under her breath.

"Is that what they're calling it?" Miranda said. Then she shook her head quickly. "Behave yourself."

"I'm behaving," Andy said, and popped another delicious bite into her mouth. "Mmm. I can't do anything about whatever you're thinking."

"Not here, unfortunately," Miranda sighed. The words sent a tingle between Andy's legs, and she wanted to whimper at the unfairness of it all. It had been three weeks now since they'd had sex. "I do miss it," Miranda added casually, as if she'd read Andy's mind.

"And you're telling me to behave?" Andy said incredulously, trying to keep her voice low.

"I'm trying to tell you how I sympathize with you," Miranda said, giving Andy a large-eyed, innocent look that begged to be fucked right off her face. "Isn't that all right?"

"You're the meanest person alive," Andy said.
Miranda looked incredibly pleased with herself. "Thank you."

"Next time, meet me at a place with tablecloths," Andy said. "You like those, don't you?"

"You noticed."

"Or maybe, um, next time you'll have more time," Andy added hopefully. "So we can, you know--meet for a little more than brunch."

Miranda did not reply, but calmly popped another bite of French toast in her mouth and sighed with pleasure. This time Andy did whimper. Miranda took a very smug sip of her decaf. It was so damn unfair.

"Now, sweetie," Miranda purred, "tell me all about your week."

With a titanic effort, Andy recollected herself, and did. The time slipped by. By the time the check arrived--Miranda waved off Andy's suggestion that they go Dutch with a little frown of disgust--Andy had cleaned her plate without quite meaning to. She felt stuffed. Miranda had shown a little more restraint, and she merely looked contented as she said, "I'm glad you could meet me."

"Woulnd't have missed it," Andy said. "You know, since we're apparently buddies now, we could meet for lunch once in a while. During the week." She looked at Miranda hopefully.

"Once in a while," Miranda agreed. "But not too often. That would look strange. Not this week, for sure." Her eyes gleamed. "Though of course, if anybody in the press made inappropriate suggestions, I could--"

"Yeah," Andy said quickly. "Um, oh well. Too bad."

"Yes," Miranda sighed, looking regretful that she wouldn't be able to ruin someone else's career right away. Well, thought Andy, she'd undoubtedly find some other opportunity.

The waiter returned with Miranda's credit card and thanked her. Miranda glanced at her watch, and sighed in what appeared to be genuine regret. "I have to go. The car will be waiting in a few minutes. They're returning from the Charleston shoot today," she said. "I expect full reports. I won't have the last editorial spread I oversee be a disaster." She frowned. "A pity it couldn't have been a more exotic location. Oh well."

Nigel wouldn't have been there to oversee any of it either, Andy reflected. At least he hadn't had to deal with the diva photographers. "I hope Ellie's diagrams helped," she said.

"We'll see," Miranda said with a shrug. "From what I've heard, everything went well enough." Her voice expressed its customary level of doubt.

"Yes, I hope so," Andy said. Then she added in a very low voice, careful to keep her face blank, "Wish I could kiss you."

"Andrea," Miranda muttered.

"What?" Andy said, and shrugged. "I do. Invite me over on Sunday, and I will," she added, inspired, though she refrained from meeting Miranda's eyes. She knew what would happen if she did. "That's all we'll do all evening, once the twins have gone to bed."

"That's all?" Miranda asked softly.
"Maybe," Andy said, and shrugged again, letting a mischievous smile cross her face for just a second. "Thanks for brunch," she added more loudly.

"You're welcome, I'm sure," Miranda growled. She allowed Andy to pull her chair back for her, and Andy followed her out the door. Roy was just pulling up to the curb, and he waved at Andy from inside the car. Andy wondered what he thought about all this—about Andy staying friends with his difficult boss. At least he wasn't carrying a torch; during drinks, Ellie had casually mentioned that he'd found a new girlfriend. Whew.

Andy and Miranda stood apart at a decorous distance on the curb. Andy knew better than to try for even an air-kiss. Instead she stuck her hands in her pockets, shrugged, smiled, and said in a low voice, "I lo--" People could lip-read. "--you know how I feel."

Miranda kept the polite look on her face, but the expression in her eyes was touched. "And you know how I feel as well."

"Sure," Andy said, trying to sound confident. She opened the car door for Miranda. "Have a good day. I hope the Charleston shoot came out well."

"Thank you. Goodbye." And without further ado, Miranda slid into the car, Andy shut the door, and the Mercedes rolled away. Andy missed her already, but she didn't stand on the curb, didn't wait to see the car disappear into traffic. That would look weird. And the situation was plenty weird already. After all, Andy was apparently the best PR Miranda'd ever had. How strange was that? And wasn't that just the way to make a girl feel special?

Andy took a deep breath as she walked down the street, expelled it again, told herself for the thousandth time that this was only temporary. Miranda needed support. And Andy had her own life to get on with, anyway. Her own job. Her own concerns. Even though she thought that sharing her life with Miranda would be a lot more rewarding than just going it alone. Wasn't that part of the deal, after all, when you jumped in headfirst with somebody?

Andy felt it wasn't. This relationship was the sharpest learning curve of Andy's life. She wondered if Miranda felt the same. Or if she even cared.

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On Monday, Nigel had lunch with her in the Delton Wright cafeteria to go over his monthly expenses. But when they were finished with business and had twenty minutes left on their schedule, he sipped his flavored water and said, "So when may we expect your tedious moping to be over? It's been a month since you started walking around looking like somebody killed your dog."

'Tedious'? Nice. But of course Nigel had noticed, Andy realized with chagrin. "I'm not moping," she said. "It's just, um--" How to fob him off? "--well, right now it's that time of the month, and I usually get a little depr--"

"Thank you for sharing," Nigel said, though the look on his face told Andy that he only half-believed her.

"You asked," Andy pointed out, and smiled in spite of herself at the uncomfortable look on his face.

"So I did," Nigel sighed. "Okay, my evasive friend. Oh, changing the subject entirely, of course, how's Miranda these days? Busy decorating her new throne room?"
Okay, maybe he believed her less than half. "Yeah, she's busy," Andy said, poking at the remains of her salad. "You know, like you'd expect."

"Yes, well," Nigel said. "I notice you've been making some friends around the office. That's good. I hope you're planning to go to the party at Maxwell's on Friday night."

Oh, jeez. "Yeah," Andy said, rolling her eyes. "I am. It's almost like I'm getting a life." Nigel raised his water bottle in a smirking salute. "What about you? Any--" She tried to wiggle her eyebrows, but she just couldn't do it as well as he could. "--friends on the horizon?"

"I wish," Nigel said. "Don't worry, you'll be the last to know."

"I will not," Andy said with a grin. "I'll be the one arranging your clandestine lunches, your--" She remembered Christian's favorite word. "--furtive tête-à-têtes. And ordering flowers for him. And--"

"True," Nigel acknowledged. "Now you're getting me all hyped up waiting for the Hindenburg to take off again. How unfair."

"All's fair, boss," Andy pointed out.

He chuckled, and then grew serious again. "All is fair, Andy. Do what you have to in order to get by. Look out for Number One. Do you understand what I'm getting at here?"

Andy frowned at him. "Yes, I do," she said. "But I don't agree." She remembered the vow she'd made when she'd decided not to leave Miranda in Paris: to show Miranda, to show everybody, that she could still get ahead while keeping her integrity. Besides, "Relationships don't have to be like work, Nigel. It's not about always watching your back."

"It's such a treat, watching you grow up inch by agonizing inch," Nigel said. "But sometimes you stall." Andy glared at him, fed up to the teeth with the patronizing attitude, but before she could snap, he said in a conciliatory tone, "Look. Just take care of yourself. I've been watching you wilt for a month now, and it's bothering me. Don't spread yourself too thin." He paused. "Don't kill yourself for somebody who won't return the favor."

"What makes you think she wouldn't?" Andy snapped.

"Oh, boy," Nigel said. "Now I remember why I didn't want to get involved. Sorry. Good luck. And all that."

"She needs my support," Andy said, defending herself from accusations he hadn't exactly leveled. "She's busy--it's a hard time for her--I'm not going to be like her husbands. I can be there for her."

"Good," Nigel said slowly. "So long as you're not just there for her to wipe her feet on when she comes home."

"What are you--oh. Doormat. I get it." Andy glared, although she inexplicably felt like she might start crying. "Cute. But I'm not."

"If you say so," Nigel said, "but she brings that out in people. You know that. Just keep it in mind. Do what you have to do," he repeated. "I did. And it saved my sanity."

"You sure about that?"

"Now look who's the cute one."
"It's always been me. I've always been ten times cuter than you. We could take a poll. I'll win by a landslide."

Instead of replying, Nigel wadded up his paper napkin and chucked it at her nose.

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Andy didn't speak to Miranda again until Wednesday night. "Sunday's up in the air again," Miranda said. "Are you free on Friday?"

"I--actually, I have a thing," Andy heard herself saying, squirming on the couch. Doormat, Nigel told her in her head. Maybe he'd had a point. Andy's schedule mattered too. "Maxwell's throwing this party, and some, you know, some people are going to be there."

"Oh," Miranda said after a moment of silence.

"But I…" Andy licked her lips and hoped what she said next got through. "I can cancel. If you want to get together. That's important. I can do that." And so can you, she didn't say. You can do that, too.

"Don't feel obligated," Miranda said calmly. "I'm sure it will be a good opportunity for you. Meet people. Make contacts."

"Well, sure, yes," Andy said, "but I mean it--if--you know, there'll be other parties, and there are priorities and things, and--"

"Go to the party, Andrea," Miranda said.

"…oh," Andy said, and gulped. "I'm just saying I'd rather…you're more important." She took a deep breath and accepted her decision. "We're more important. So are the girls, and--you know what? I'll cancel. I'll--"

"Go to the party," Miranda repeated. Her voice was very, very firm. "My invitation is rescinded. Don't show up here. Network instead. That's what's important."

"Huh?" Andy actually felt like she'd been punched in the gut. "No, you can't, you can't say that!" she said. "You can't tell me what has to be most important to me."

Didn't Miranda get it? There would be other parties, and they'd be full of the same people, and they'd serve the same drinks, and they'd all blend into each other, and in ten days, never mind ten years, Andy wouldn't remember anything about them. But this, her thing with Miranda, was one-of-a-kind. She didn't want to wake up one morning and realize that she'd ignored the most important thing ever.

She didn't want to be like Miranda that much.

"No, I can't," Miranda said dryly, dragging Andy's mind back to the present. "But I can tell you that I'll find some way to keep myself busy on Friday night as well. And on other nights. It's fine to have a thriving career, Andrea. Better than fine. I encourage you to do whatever you can to develop yours."

"Okay, I really don't know how else I can put this," Andy said. "I know it's fine. I love my job. I love you more. I don't see what's wrong with--I don't want to miss you. It's not like I'm going to quit, or skip out on anything important. But if, if it means I just have to pick between some dumb party
"Don't be absurd," Miranda said in exasperation. "You are not 'missing' me. I'm not going anywhere. I'm simply busy. I know it's been a difficult month. It won't be for too much longer."

"It won't be, huh?" Andy said. Then she heard the words coming out of her mouth: "How often have you said that before?"

Oh…shit.

There was a long silence, during which Andy writhed and wished she'd never picked up the phone. Then Miranda said, "Excuse me?"

Crap, crap, crap, Andy hadn't meant to, hadn't been planning to… "I just meant--"

"How often have I what?" Andy could picture Miranda's face now. It would be turning red, and not in the sexy way: in the ugly, angry way that meant she knew what was coming.

Yes, Andy realized, with a flash of clarity. Miranda knew what was coming. Because she had done this before, and she always hoped it would end differently. But it never did--how could it?

"How many times did you and your husbands have this talk? Or you and anybody else?" Andy said, deciding there was no use turning back now, even though her palms felt soaking wet with fear. Was it ever going to be easy to confront Miranda? Would Andy get another chance to find out, after tonight? "I mean it. It's not a rhetorical question. How many times have you had this discussion?"

"What discussion?" Miranda snapped. "What discussion am I about to be blindsided with, Andrea? Please be explicit."

"I'm not blindsiding you," Andy said, trying to stay cool, to keep her head. "I'm, I'm just asking-- how many times have you told somebody, I'll just be busy for a little while, things'll calm down after this photo shoot, or 'after the big September issue is out,' or--"

"I don't believe this," Miranda said.

"Just answer the question," Andy said. "Can you do that? Can you really not see--"

"We talked about this from the very beginning," Miranda spat, and Andy was suddenly very, very glad that they weren't in the same room. "You knew, all along, how I felt--how my husbands never understood--"

"I know they didn't, but there's got to be room--"

"I thought that you understood. That you would be different--"

"--for compromise, I do understand, I am different, Miranda--"

"How?" Miranda said. There was a note in her voice Andy'd never heard before, and it made her feel sick, even though she couldn't say why, exactly. "If I've had this conversation a million times before, how can you possibly say you're different?"

"Because I am!" Andy said. "I'm not Stephen!" When was Miranda going to understand that?

"Then where is this coming from?" Miranda demanded. "What are you saying?"

"I'm just saying that maybe we could compromise!" Andy said, curling her free hand into a fist. "I
know nothing's going to be perfect. But we used to talk on the phone a lot more. We'd see each other once a week. That's not a big deal, is it? I don't think that's too much to ask. Do you?"

"Maybe I do," Miranda said. Andy went rigid. "Haven't you been listening to me? If I could see you more often, I would--I'd see you every day--do you think I don't want t--" Andy heard her take a shuddering breath. "I can't. I can't right now. Things are insane, Andrea, and at the moment I don't have a choice--"

Andy sat bolt upright. Her eyes went wide. "What?" she said. "What did you say?"

"I said at the moment--"

"You don't have a choice. No, you do have one," Andy said. "You always have a choice. You told me that. So did everybody else, but I didn't believe it until you said it--"

"What are you talking about?"

"You said, 'You chose to get ahead,' and you said, 'Own your decisions,' and I remember it all, I guess it really sank in--"

"I am owning my decisions," Miranda snarled. "I am telling you that this is the decision I have made, and that if I wish to see it through, then I have no choice but to act as I am acting now. Is this too hard for you to grasp?"

"No," Andy said in sheer frustration. "It's not too hard for me to grasp. But things have to change, don't you see?"

"Things have to change," Miranda repeated.

"Well, yes!" Andy said. "I mean--don't you think so too? Really? We've hardly seen each other in a month, and you know that if you want to you can stay as busy as you are right now, forever--"

"If I want--?"

"--or you could take a night off once in a while to be with me, me and the girls. All of us. They miss you too, I'm not the only one who misses you--"

"No. Don't you bring up the girls," Miranda rasped. "Don't you dare do that. Leave the girls alone." She made a funny noise. "Don't mention my girls."

"What? Miranda, I'm not trying to--I'm just saying--"

"Not the girls," Miranda repeated thickly. "Keep them out of this."

"Miranda, all I'm saying is I want to see you once a week," Andy pleaded. "You and the twins. You're part of my life now, all of you are, and I'm part of yours, aren't I?"

"You are," Miranda said, "you are," and that was when Andy realized that Miranda was crying. Her insides went hollow and cold. She felt like the lowest creature on Earth. Lower than slime. She was hitting Miranda at her weakest point, and they both knew it. But Andy hadn't meant to, she'd never wanted, she'd only tried to say-- "Miranda," she said, her own voice shaking, "do you want to…I mean, maybe I should come over, if we talked in person--"

"Will it make a difference?" Miranda said. She sounded like she was choking. "It never does. Oh, my God."
Andy hoped frantically that Cassidy was nowhere nearby. "Miranda, please calm down," she begged. To her horror, she realized she was tearing up as well. How had they gotten themselves into this, and so quickly? "I'm not calling anything off--nothing's ending, I'm just saying once a week--"

"No, you're not," Miranda said. "You're not saying that at all. You are saying that you need to come before my job. Like all the others have said. For now it's once a week. Then you'll wonder why we can't be together more. Then you'll--" She stopped.

"Miranda, no, I…" Andy used her free hand to wipe her eyes, and then cover them. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to say any of that. I'm saying, can't we just…just compromise?" She had an idea. "Maybe not once a week. Okay? If you can't do that--maybe, I don't know, a week and a half, or every two weeks or even--just something--" She felt a tear roll down her own cheek. "I mean, just something. Can't I even get a place on your schedule? Even if it's just some tiny stupid place, can't there be some time for us that you just set aside, even a couple of hours every once in a while? Like the brunch. That was good, wasn't it?" Although it really hadn't been all that good. But it was better than nothing. Andy felt like she was about to choke too. "I said we'd make it work. We can make it work. But, but we have to try, don't we?"

Oh, God. It had come to this. She was begging. She was licking Miranda's fucking shoes for the right to see her twice a month. Now Andy really wanted to cry. "We have to," she repeated. "Please, Miranda, don't you get it? Don't you want it to be different this time?"

"I thought it would be," Miranda said, her voice dull in a way that Andy hadn't heard since that night in Paris when she'd told Andy that Stephen was leaving her.

"No, it will be, it is," Andy said at once. "We're not giving up, come on--we're good together, we're really good, aren't we?" Miranda was silent. "You're the one who told me not to go to pieces, remember?" Andy added desperately.

"I am not going to pieces," Miranda said. She didn't sound like she was crying anymore, thank God. Although Andy wasn't sure that this, whatever 'this' was, was any better. "I am seeing a pattern."

"Yeah, well, so am I," Andy said, "that's why I'm saying--we have to break it. I mean, come on, won't it be good for you? Not just being with me, I mean, taking a few nights off, relaxing a little, taking care of yourself…"

"Oh, now this is about me," Miranda said. "Maybe you should have started that way. It would have made the sucker-punch a lot more effective."

"The sucker--" Andy's jaw dropped. "No! I didn't mean to, it wasn't like that. I have to work at it, too. We both will. Don't we? I mean, I know I'm not perfect--"

"Oh, good," Miranda said. "I've been wondering when you'd figure that out."

Andy's mouth snapped shut. Then she said, "What?"

"Miss Relationship Expert," Miranda said. "Everything's so easy, isn't it? Everything's so black-and-white--you know exactly what we need, you know exactly how to 'heal' me because God knows I must be broken somewhere--"

"Yeah, broken in the head," Andy shouted before she realized she was going to shout, much less what she was going to say. "I'm not telling you to quit your job, I'm telling you once a week, once every two weeks, and you're not listening to me, you're hearing things I'm not even saying!"

"No, I hear what you're saying," Miranda said. "You don't. You don't know--you don't know how
many times I've heard--"

"Miranda, I'm not your goddamn asshole husbands!" Andy actually screeched. Her throat felt sore. "Is that all you can hear when I talk? Is that what you see when you look at me? Come on!" Then, before she could stop herself: "What is wrong with you?"

The line went dead. Miranda had hung up on her.

"Oh, no," Andy said, staring at the phone. "Oh, no. No, you did not just do that." She stabbed the 'redial' key with a shaking finger. She wasn't surprised when she got sent straight to voicemail, but she was still incensed. "Hanging up in the middle of a conversation, real mature," she yelled into the receiver. "Maybe you're the one who just turned twenty-five!"

Then she hung up.

She flopped back down on the couch and stared up at the ceiling, her vision swimming. She seethed, hopped up, paced around the room while her mind whirled with a dozen things she wanted to say to Miranda, and absolutely would, the moment she got the chance. In fact, in fact--

Andy dialed, again, and got sent to voicemail, again. "Okay," she said. "I am calm. I am reasonable. No. No, I am not. I have not been calm and reasonable since the day I met you, and I can't believe you hung up on me when I was trying to tell you something important, and you're the one who said you never wig out, and I really can't fucking believe you called me Miss Relationshi--oh, shit." She hung up again. So much for reasonable.

She sat back down on the couch, dropped her head down between her knees, breathed deeply. After a few moments, she raised her head again, and dialed the phone.

"I'm calling you tomorrow," she said, enunciating very clearly so that Miranda's voicemail wouldn't miss a single word. "Stop freaking out and get some rest. I hope you sleep well. We are not breaking up. I love you. Good night."

She hung up again. That had probably been the dumbest message she'd ever left on anybody's phone, including the drunk-dial she'd made in college to her least favorite professor's office at three in the morning. But she'd said what she wanted to say. So, that was…that.

Besides, Andy couldn't believe what had just happened. Not just the hanging up-thing. The part where she'd begged. Nigel was right: she was a doormat. A doormat who'd abandoned every shred of pride and begged to see her girlfriend just once a week. Or less. Begged for crumbs. And Miranda hadn't even wanted to give that much.

Or…no, Miranda did. She'd said she wanted to see Andy more often. She'd said that she wanted to see Andy every day. Which was exactly how Andy felt. So what the hell?

In spite of her injunction to Miranda (or rather, to her voicemail), Andy couldn't stop freaking out, and she definitely didn't get any sleep. She paced, and muttered, and tried to watch television, and paced some more, and actually left her apartment at two a.m. to pace the sidewalk outside for a change of scenery. Too bad the bagel place was closed.

At six-thirty a.m., after getting not a single minute of sleep, Andy showered, did her makeup, and headed for the subway to go to work. She was going to be absolutely useless today, and was glad that Nigel had left for L.A. last night. And while part of her hoped that Miranda felt like shit too, the greater part hoped that she'd calmed down and felt better, because she didn't need to get so worked up right now, with the baby and all.
God, Andy thought, slamming a sheaf of paper into the three-hole-puncher and pushing down viciously. It must be love.

With Nigel gone, all Andy had to do was direct calls, do routine office work, and occasionally check in to make sure that Nigel's junket was going according to plan. So far, so good; his flight had arrived without problems, and his assistant in L.A. confirmed that he was headed to all the right meetings. Andy realized she should use the free time to work on her writing, to do projects of her own, but when she tried, she couldn't think of a single thing to say that didn't have something to do with Miranda. And while that would probably be very therapeutic, she didn't exactly feel like putting it to paper right now. She wouldn't even know where to begin.

It was four in the afternoon, and here Andy was, staring at a blank sheet of notebook paper because she couldn't think of a single thing to do, say, or write that would be of use to anybody on the planet.

This was no good, any of it. They had to do better than this. They had to be better than this. Because Miranda had been right when she'd collared Andy in London: they suited each other. And Andy had been right last night: they were good together. When they were together.

The office was quiet. Andy picked up her phone with a shaking hand, though she didn't know if it was shaking from nerves or fatigue. She dialed Miranda's number--and Miranda picked up.

"Hello?" she said. Her voice sounded thick and raspy. Andy wondered if she'd been crying again, and got a lump in her throat at the thought.

"Are you okay?" she demanded.

"What?"

"You sound, uh, sick. Are you okay?"

"No," Miranda said flatly. "You woke me up."

"I…huh?" Andy looked at the clock just to confirm that it was, in fact, four in the afternoon. "Why were you sleeping?"

"Because I didn't sleep well last night, and somebody told me to get some rest," Miranda said. "I took the afternoon off. How do you like that?"

"I…" Andy blinked, stunned. And worried. If Miranda had actually taken an afternoon off, then she had to feel like shit on toast. "I'm glad. I like that. But you're okay?"

"I'm sleepy," Miranda growled. "And I'm not in the mood for Round Two."

"Neither am I," Andy said. "I hate fighting with you. Did, uh…so, the twins…"

"Are blissfully ignorant," Miranda said coolly. "And they shall remain so unless and until something…irrevocable…happens."

Andy got a chill. "Irrevocable? Like what?"

"You tell me," Miranda said. "You were the one trying to lay down the law yesterday."

Andy opened her mouth to deny it, and said instead, "I had to. I'm sorry. I had to say my thing. Now you know how I feel." She paused. "Don't you?"

"Yes," Miranda said. "I guess I do."
"Tell me, then," Andy said, suddenly feeling very uneasy, because she wasn't at all sure that Miranda had heard the right message. "Tell me what I meant. I mean, um, maybe I didn't make it clear enough? You know, that I love you and just want to see you more, that's all. Uh. That is how I feel." It sounded a lot simpler this afternoon than it had last night.

"I guess I don't need to tell you, then," Miranda said. "And you know how I feel."

"Yeah," Andy said. "You said you wish you could see me more. You said if you could see me every day, you would."

"Yes," Miranda sounded exhausted and sad. "I did. I would. But, Andrea--"

Andy opened her mouth, and the words, "I think we need to live together," fell out of it.

Then Andy didn't say anything else. Miranda didn't say anything either. Andy kept not speaking, and so did Miranda, and they remained on the phone in silence for ages. Andy couldn't believe she'd just said that. She couldn't believe it at all.

Then Miranda said, "How's that, dear?"

Shit. "I don't know," Andy said lamely. "Sorry--I guess that was--" She bit her lip. "No. It's not dumb. Uh. I think we should try it. I can't believe I'm saying this. But we should." She took a deep breath, tilted her head back, and stared at the ceiling. "I want to live with you. I want to see you every day, and there's no other way we can pull that off, with things the way they are now."

"You have lost your mind," Miranda said.

"Probably," Andy said helplessly. "I know it's crazy, but, but do you have a better plan?"

"Live together?" Miranda said incredulously. "Yesterday you were saying we could see each other once every two weeks and now you want to live together?"

"I--"

"Do you know what the press would say?"

"Nothing!" Andy was glad she knew the answer to this one. "You'd kill them. Come on. You…this is a difficult time for you, and I'm your friend, everybody knows that, and you need somebody to help you out…"

"You are certifiable--"

"…and of course I'd have my own room, and we could deny everything, I'm totally okay with lying about it, just so you know. Anything that means we can just get on with it."

"Get on with it?"

"I like having dinner with you and the girls. I like being there. We pulled it off over Christmas, didn't we? Wasn't it okay? Don't you think we can?"

"You want to live with me."

"Yeah. With you. And the twins. And the baby, when he shows up. God, the baby, Miranda, of course I want to be there for that! You'll need me for that. I--"

"Are you aware that we've been together for less than three months, Andrea?"
"Well, it feels like a lot longer," Andy said, and then closed her eyes in despair. "I mean…"

"I see," Miranda said. Andy could just picture her left eyebrow climbing ever higher. "You think this will solve everything. Have you forgotten I lived with my husbands as well? Who also found me unavailable? Don't blame me for comparing you to them," she added sharply. "What else am I supposed to do?"

"They wanted you to be a good little wife," Andy snapped. Well, she guessed that's what they'd wanted. "I don't. I don't want to be one either. But I'd see you in the morning, and I'd see you at night, and we'd at least try to come home for dinner, wouldn't we? To be with the kids?"

"You want to live with me," Miranda said faintly. "You're serious."

All Andy could think to say to that was, "Yes." Because the more she thought about it, the crazier it sounded, and so far, doing the crazy thing had worked out pretty well for Miranda and her.

"You leave messes in the bathroom," Miranda said.

"I won't," Andy said. "Not ever again."

"We'd be some kind of horrible lesbian cliché," Miranda said. "Living together after two months. U-Haul syndrome. Do you know that's what they call it?"

"Not if we get professional movers," Andy said, and then shut her eyes again. Oh, God.

"And you've just invited yourself to move in to my home. What kind of presumption--"

"So move in with me!" Andy blurted.

"Lovely," Miranda said. "I can tell you're taking this seri--"

"No, I am serious," Andy said. "It would be absolutely, totally fine if you guys moved in with me. It's just you wouldn't want to."

"Indeed I would not," Miranda said. "Good God, Andrea."

"We could fit if we tried," Andy said desperately. "If that's your problem, Miranda, if that's what's going to do it for you, come live with me and split the rent and--or you know what, if you wanted, I could pay you rent, in fact, that might not be a bad id--"

"Pay me rent?" Miranda sounded appalled. "Can you hear yourself?"

"I know I sound like an idiot," Andy wailed. "I'm sorry. I just keep thinking, I can't live without you so I might as well live with you--" Then she heard footsteps. "Uh-oh, somebody's coming. I have to get back to work."

"You can't live without--wait--"

"I'll call you later, okay? We'll, we'll talk about this some more," Andy said. "Just think about it, all right?"

"But--!" Miranda said, right before Andy hung up. Keisha and Theo rounded the corner.

"Hey, girl," Keisha said. "Enjoying the quiet?"

"Oh, you know," Andy said, giving her a feeble smile. "You?"
"It's fabulous," Theo said. "Keisha and I are going out for drinks after work, you want to come?"

"I, actually I don't think so," Andy said. "I didn't get a wink of sleep last night. I mean literally," she added. "I did not sleep at all."

"What? That's awful," Keisha said sympathetically. "Does it happen often?"

"More than it used to," Andy mumbled.

"Oh, I know this amazing guy," Theo said. "He does great stuff with, y'know, herbs and energy and all that. It's totally fruity, but it works. I'll give you his number."

"Thanks," Andy said. Her phone rang. Her heart stopped. It was Miranda.

"I just wanted to get you to look over some copy for me," Keisha said, all business now, laying a manila folder on Andy's desk. "Nigel's always talking about what a good writer you are. I'd appreciate it if you could give me some feedback." The phone kept ringing. "Uh, do you need to get that? I'll wait."

Andy could not imagine any reality in which she could speak to Miranda under the current circumstances, in front of other people. She pressed 'ignore.' Then, knowing that Miranda would keep trying, she turned off the phone. "No, I'm good…I'll…sure."

"I'll leave you guys to it," Theo said, and wandered away. Keisha took a seat while Andy flipped through her copy and tried as hard as she could to concentrate on whatever the hell it said. Something about getting samples of men's watches and belts, and starting up Distinguish's own version of the Closet.

"Looks good," she finally said, hoping to God she was right. "The final paragraph threw me off a little, though. I think you lost focus. You really want to bring it home. The last line should be the clincher."

"The coup de grace, you mean?" Keisha said, picked up the copy, and looked over it critically. "Huh. You know, you're right. Thanks. Let me go work on that some more." She turned and left.

It had taken Andy over twenty minutes to read the copy. She swallowed hard and turned her phone back on. Miranda had left her three messages.

In the first message, left at 4:10, Miranda said, "Pick up this phone at once. How dare you leave me hanging this way? You 'can't live without me,' what the hell does that--answer the phone, Andrea!"

The second message, left at 4:14, said, "I understand the impulse, really, but I'm not sure this is--there are the girls to consider, of course, and…it's very soon. It's very quick. And I'm tempted, but--you're right, we have to talk. Call me."

The third message, left at 4:22, said, "All right. All right. If you've changed your mind, I'll kill you. I will kill you. We'll do it. Call me before I change my mi--we'll do it. Call me tonight. I have things to take care of this--I have things." The message clicked off. Andy stared into space.

'We'll do it.'

Andy leaned her head back, looked up at the ceiling again, and expelled a breath of profound gratitude. She was all in, now. They both were. It was the craziest idea she'd ever had. Well, one of them.
Andy called Miranda as soon as she was out the door that night, not even waiting to get back to her apartment. It was eight-fifteen. Miranda answered immediately.

"You mean it?" Andy said. "You really do? You think it's a good idea? You agree it's the right thing?"

"No," Miranda said. "I'm not sure of that at all."

"But we'll do it anyway?"

"We will do it anyway," Miranda said. For someone who wasn't sure, she had adamantine certainty in her voice.

"It's a good idea," Andy babbled. "I mean, it's nuts, but the more I think about it, it's a good idea. Like us. We're nuts, but we're a good idea."

"Stop trying to talk me out of it," Miranda said. "When do you want to move in?"

"Huh? Oh." Andy frowned as she descended the stairs into the subway. Of course Miranda wouldn't waste any time now that she'd made her decision. "I hadn't thought about that yet."

"Shocking."

"Well--my lease isn't up until July, but whatever," Andy said. It would hurt her pocketbook to break it, for sure--paying rent on a Manhattan apartment for an extra month when she wasn't even living there. But it would be no more than she was paying now, and at least she'd save on utilities. "When's good for you?"

"Sooner than July," Miranda said acidly.

"Well, yeah," Andy said. "As soon as we can, really." Then something occurred to her. It probably should have occurred to her before. "But, um, what about the twins?"

"I'll speak to them tonight," Miranda said. "When we're done."

"Oh." Andy's stomach twisted with nerves, even though she wasn't the one who had to do it. It sounded nerve-wracking. What if the kids got mad, said no way, said they didn't want Andy around that much? "Okay."

"I've looked at my calendar," Miranda said, all business now. "The twenty-sixth is good. That's a Saturday."

Today was the tenth. "That's about two weeks...okay," Andy said, her heart racing. "I'll give my landlord notice tomorrow, and I can start getting rid of some stuff. I mean--if you're sure. If you're sure you're sure."

"Can I stop you?" Miranda said. "I half-believe you'd just show up with a suitcase, even if I tried."

"No, I'd do it stealthily," Andy admitted. "First it'd be one outfit in the guest bedroom, then five, and"
then my toothbrush and pajamas…”

"I see," Miranda said, sounding amused. "Well. I'd better go. It sounds like you have some packing to do."

Oh. Ugh. Packing. Now Andy remembered why she hated moving so much. "Yeah," she said dejectedly. "And you're going to ask the twins now?"

"No," Miranda said. "I am going to tell the twins now."


"Yes," Miranda said. She hung up.

Andy snapped her phone shut and looked around the subway terminal like she'd never seen one in her life. She wasn't sure she could even put her thoughts into words.

"Holy shit," she said.

Or maybe she could.

Andy slept very well that night: a combination, perhaps, of natural exhaustion and the feeling that something had been resolved. Of course, that 'something' had just opened up an entirely new box of issues to deal with, but Andy decided they could be dealt with much better in the morning. She flopped into bed, fell asleep instantly, and didn't remember any of her dreams.

The next day was another relatively slow day at work, partly because Nigel was still gone, and partly because it was Friday and everybody was eagerly anticipating the weekend. Andy wasn't as happy about that as all her coworkers seemed to be. It gave her a lot of time to think: not just to plan details, but to worry about all the implications of her and Miranda's impulsive decision. Like what would happen when people heard about her little change of address. Nigel, for instance. Or…her parents.

Just the thought of telling her mom and dad made Andy want to crawl under her desk and hide. At least Ellie would be able to sympathize with that. What would they say? Would they disown her? Beg, plead, yell? Come after Miranda with a sledgehammer? They probably wouldn't throw a housewarming party.

Andy supposed she was to blame. She'd sure laid it on thick, those first few months at Runway, about how horrible Miranda was, and her children, and her crazy demands. But Miranda hadn't helped by throwing a shit-fit in front of Andy's dad about the hurricane flight, or, for that matter, snatching Andy from her family's bosom during Christmas.

Oh, God. Her parents had thought Miranda was trying to seduce her. Andy wanted to laugh hysterically. It probably wouldn't go over very well if she tried to tell them that she'd had to drag Miranda into bed inch by inch.

Maybe she could fob them off by telling them they'd have an instant grandchild. Except that Andy still wasn't sure what role she'd be playing in the baby's life. Second parent, second nanny, glorified babysitter, aunt, what?
Miranda thought Andy wasn't ready to be a parent yet. Maybe she was right. Andy had sort of avoided thinking about it in those terms. But...but whenever she did think about the child inside Miranda she got some kind of proprietary thrill, something that came from the knowledge that Andy had been in on the whole thing since Day One, that she'd looked after Miranda when nobody else would, and should maybe possibly have a say in how things were going to go.

She and Miranda should probably talk about all those things at some point. Andy wasn't particularly looking forward to it.

In the meantime, she used a slow hour after lunch to start listing some of her stuff for sale at local sites online. The nasty kitchen table with one uneven leg had to go, and the chairs, and the ratty old sofa would probably have to be a giveaway. To her surprise, Andy got a lump in her throat when she realized that later on she'd have to list the bed. Even though she'd been alone in it for a long time now, Andy remembered having some really good times with Nate in that bed--not just sex, but laughing and talking, especially when they'd just moved to New York and were living on their own for the first time. Everything had been so new and overwhelming. The bed had been a retreat for both of them at night, a place to huddle together and regroup for the next morning.

Now it looked like Andy wouldn't be sharing a bed again for a long time, unless she could convince Miranda that she really didn't like sleeping alone as much as she thought she did. And she'd be moving into Miranda's house which, now that she thought about it, would be pretty weird. Andy and Nate had picked out the apartment together. They'd made the space their own, together. It wouldn't be like that this time. Andy wondered if she'd feel like a perpetual guest in Miranda's house, instead of a...member of the family? Permanent resident?

Well, that settled it. She was definitely keeping her bookcase. Miranda's place didn't need a single extra stick of furniture, but something of Andy's was coming with her, and she'd always loved the bookcase.

That night Andy did, in fact, go to the party at Maxwell's, though she ducked out before nine-thirty. Miranda called her at ten. "Will you be home Sunday night?" she asked, without preamble.

"Uh, I think so," Andy said in surprise. "Do you want me to come over?"

"No." Miranda sounded very amused. "Last night I told the twins we were all going to live together because you missed us so terribly."

"That's what you told them?" Andy asked, not sure if she should be indignant or what. Well, it was pretty much the truth, but how embarrassing.

"Of course. They asked if I was serious, and I informed them that you were either moving in with us, or we were moving in with you, as you eloquently suggested yourself."

"And?" Andy asked breathlessly.

"And they want to see your apartment before making their decision," Miranda said. "Try and clean the place up a bit, will you?"

"They--what? They're--"

"We'll be by around six-thirty," Miranda said. "It's your turn to feed us this time."

"What? I mean, okay, but wh--"

"I don't see why I should always have to foot the bill on Sundays," Miranda continued. "They're
easy to please. Good night." She hung up without even waiting for the 'I love you.' Andy could just picture the evil little smile on her face.

So Andy spent all day Saturday cleaning up. The apartment needed it: she hadn't pulled out the vacuum since the last time Miranda had visited, almost two months ago, and she was pretty sure that the bathroom alone was coming to life. It seemed like a hell of a lot of trouble to go to for the sake of indulging the twins' whims, but she'd done worse, and besides, the landlord might be nicer about letting her break the lease if the place didn't look like a dump.

Saturday flew by. Sunday crawled, but by six-fifteen the pizzas had arrived, and at six-thirty a knock came at the door. Andy opened it, and two eleven-year-olds barreled past her, looking around her apartment with wide eyes, like they'd just been allowed into one of the enclosures at the Bronx Zoo. Miranda followed them, her face already set in a smirk that she obviously planned to wear all night, even though she was huffing a little from climbing the stairs.

"So this is how poor people live?" Cassidy asked, staring at Andy's twenty-inch TV and threadbare rug.

"Cassidy," Miranda said sharply.

"No," Andy said, heading over to the kitchen cabinets. "Actually, it's not how poor people live at all."

"This is where you sleep?" Caroline bounded into the bedroom alcove. "Where's the bathroom? Oh." She saw it and headed over. "Is there only one?" she asked incredulously.

"Yep," Andy said, getting out four plates. Miranda seated herself in one of the rickety chairs, looking as if she expected it to collapse beneath her at any moment.

Rummaging noises came from the bathroom. "Andy, you wear Cover Girl lipstick?" Caroline called in disbelief. Miranda gave Andy a look that said the same thing.

"Sure do," Andy called back, ignoring Miranda completely. Some days you got good makeup samples, and some days you didn't. "Get out of my stuff." She heard the bathroom mirror slamming shut, and then the shower curtain being pulled back.

"So this place is, like, basically just one big room," Cassidy said, frowning. "The bathroom's the only thing with walls?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "It's a studio apartment." She opened the fridge and pulled out the carton of cranapple juice. "Are you guys hungry?"

"The pizza smells good," Caroline said, leaving the bathroom. "How come you have a curtain in front of the shower instead of a door?"

Andy stopped grinning and stared at Miranda, who appeared totally unrepentant that her children had no idea about living anywhere other than in the lap of luxury. "I just do," she said. "It, um, does the job."

"But what about room? I mean, for sleeping?" Cassidy looked around the apartment, plainly baffled. "I mean, where would me and Caroline go?"

"The sofa pulls out," Andy said, starting to enjoy herself again. "It turns into a bed."

"Oh yeah, our couch in the den does that," Cassidy said, and flopped down on the sofa. "We've used
"It's pretty convenient," Andy agreed, deciding not to mention that nobody had ever used her sleeper sofa, and that she wasn't sure anybody should try. It was probably pretty gross. She opened up one of the pizza boxes, and the smell of cheese and sauce drifted through the apartment. Her stomach rumbled. So did Miranda's, loudly. It was Andy's turn to smirk.

"Domino's?" Miranda inquired archly. "You live in New York City and you ordered Domino's?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "Check out what I got just for you." Miranda peered into the box; half of the first pizza was pineapple and black olives. She gave Andy a blistering glare. Andy blinked back innocently.

"Hey, where would Patricia's crate go?" Cassidy asked. "She gets crated at night, downstairs."

"She gets really upset if she doesn't get to stay there," Caroline added.

"The landlord doesn't allow dogs," Andy said, breaking Miranda's gaze with relief. "Sorry."

"We can't live here," Cassidy said decisively. "You'll move into our place."

"Yeah, that sounds like the best idea," Andy said. "Thanks. Who wants cheese?"

"Me, me, me," Caroline said, plunking herself into a chair and leaning eagerly over the opened box. She wrinkled her nose at the pineapple and olives. "What's this other stuff?"

"Disgusting, isn't it?" Miranda said, and sniffed as Andy put a plate in front of her, already loaded with a gooey slice. "Don't worry. Mommy will eat this and you girls can enjoy the rest." The snooty tone didn't hide the fact that she was practically licking her lips.

"Gross," Cassidy said, and sat down in the table's third chair. In the absence of a fourth, Andy had to perch on the nearest edge of the kitchen counter, after shoving the toaster and coffeemaker out of the way. The twins stared up at her as they shoveled pizza into their mouths.

"How do you live like this?" Caroline asked.

Andy laughed around her pizza. "I've done okay," she said. Miranda gave her a disgusted look for talking with her mouth full, and Andy asked the twins, "Do you like seafood?" She opened her mouth wide to show them the chewed-up pizza, and the twins laughed in glee. "See food."

"You're a barbarian in your native setting," Miranda said. "It might be too late to save you." She looked around and grimaced. "Well, you won't need more than one truck. None of this furniture is going into my house."

"The bookcase is," Andy said, and popped a final bite of crust into her mouth.

"The bookcase?" Miranda stared at it in horror.

"I brought it with me from Cincinnati to Northwestern," Andy said. "It's been with me since I was twelve. I'm keeping it. The rest can go."

"It's staying in your room," Miranda said. "No visitor will ever, ever lay eyes on it."

"Fine by me," Andy said.

"What kinds of books do you read?" Caroline asked, leaning over the table eagerly. "What's your
favorite book? Do you have a favorite song? Do you--"

"Uh," Andy said, and struggled to think. She had no idea. "I, um, it changes. I like lots of things. Hey, save room for dessert." She opened up a smaller, skinnier cardboard box that contained cinnamon breadsticks covered with sugary white frosting. The twins shrieked with joy. Miranda rolled her eyes heavenward.

After dinner, the twins revealed that they'd brought their homework with them and asked, almost shyly, if they could do it at Andy's table instead of going back home. Andy agreed at once, not at all keen to cut the evening short, and she and Miranda went to sit on the couch.

"Can we play music?" Cassidy asked from the table. "We like to listen to Mozart while we do homework because it's good for your brain." She dug into her backpack. "I brought a CD."

"Sure," Andy said. "Stereo's in the corner." It was a cheap, crappy stereo, of course, but for once the twins didn't comment. A few moments later, Mozart drifted through the room. It was pretty soothing.

It also, Andy realized, made it easier to chat with Miranda in low voices while the twins kept busy. "Mozart makes you smarter, huh?" she said, and looked at Miranda's belly. "Do you ever listen to it? I bet it's good for him. I remember reading that now."

"I don't, but I have the sinking feeling I'm about to start," Miranda said.

Andy beamed at her. "Yes," she said. "How are you feeling?"

"Exhausted," Miranda admitted. "You're going to manage this move all by yourself, I don't mind telling you. I expect to come home on Saturday afternoon and find that you're fully situated. Like magic."

"I can do that," Andy said, nodding. She could. Performing magic had been her job for over a year now, at one place or another. "You won't have to worry about a thing. I'll get the guys to come in through the back door." Much less conspicuous that way. "You have any company you like?"

"Mike's Movers were remarkably efficient at getting Stephen in and out," Miranda said sourly. "You might as well try them."

"Okay." Andy looked Miranda up and down, and focused on her feet. She was wearing more reasonable-looking shoes today--two-inch heels, would wonders never cease?--but her ankles were puffy and swollen. Andy had an idea. "Hold on a second," she said, went to her bathroom, and returned with a bottle of body lotion. At least it was Sephora, not Lubriderm.

Andy sat down, opened the bottle, and patted her lap. "Give me one of your feet." Miranda's eyes widened, and she looked over at the twins. Andy had her feet. "It's just a footrub. And they already know."

Miranda looked as if she was about to protest, but then, to Andy's pleasure, she slipped out of her shoes--no hose tonight--adjusted herself on the couch with a grunt, and rested one foot in Andy's lap. Andy happily rubbed some lotion between her palms to warm it, and set to work. At the first rub of Andy's fingers on her instep, Miranda sagged back in the couch, her eyes practically rolling back in her head. She whimpered audibly.

Oops. Andy glanced back at the twins to see if they'd heard. They had; they looked up, and although Andy had her back to them, they could her holding one of their mother's feet. Their eyes went wide, and it took considerable effort on Andy's part not to blush. Miranda didn't even appear to notice. "What are you doing?" Caroline said.
"Your mom's been pretty hard on her feet," Andy said, trying her best to sound brisk and businesslike. Clinical, even. "The books say that all kinds of massages are good for pregnant women. Relieves stress."

"Why's she look like that?" Cassidy asked, staring at Miranda's flushed cheeks.

"Because it feels very nice, darling," Miranda said faintly, closing her eyes. "I didn't even realize how much my feet hurt." She winced when Andy rubbed against the ball of her foot. "I haven't seen my pedicurist this week."

"You need a footrub more regularly than once a week," Andy said, as if she'd gotten that right out of the AMA Medical Dictionary. The twins, bored now, turned back to their homework, and Andy began to work over Miranda's toes, one by one. Miranda quivered, and Andy twitched between her legs. She swallowed hard and decided it would be very bad form to rub up against Miranda's heel with her children in the same room.

"I will do this every night," Andy said under her breath.

Miranda cracked her eyelids open and nodded, sealing the deal. Then she said--mouthed, really-- "I hope it's enough for you." Andy frowned in confusion. "I've spoken to Dr. Viswanathan. No more…" She bit her lip and looked regretful.

Andy's jaw dropped. "You told her?" she whispered.

"Not about us, specifically," Miranda hissed back. "But yes, I did ask. I wanted to make sure…at any rate, we'd better not."

Andy nodded quickly. "Yes, of course," she said. "That's cool, that's fine, whatever's best." She tried not to get too depressed about not touching Miranda for two more months. There wasn't even a question of priorities here. "You probably don't feel that much like it anyway," she added, eyeing Miranda's bump which, at seven months, was getting considerable.

"Not often," Miranda agreed. Then she looked annoyed. "But sometimes. Too bad." She tilted her head to the side. "Well, you don't need to be deprived. I'll be happy to take care of you when and if I'm able."

Andy stared at her, her hands pausing. "Oh," she said. "Thanks."

"Not at all," Miranda replied, and wiggled her toes impatiently. "Get going." Andy rolled her eyes and began massaging again. "Have you told anyone you're moving?" Miranda added.

Andy tried not to pause again. "No," she said, looking at Miranda's foot like it was the most fascinating thing in the world. Well, she did like the shell-pink toenail polish. "I'm thinking we can do it all on that Saturday so I won't need any time off. I'll just slip in a change of address form to HR and the post office, and, you know, my bank and stuff. I doubt anybody'll notice." No matter how famous Miranda was, Andy was pretty sure nobody at the post office, or HR, or anywhere else had memorized her street address and would instantly recognize it.

"I was thinking more along the lines of your family," Miranda said quietly. Andy looked up at her to see Miranda regarding her with a very serious expression on her face. "Have you told them anything about us?"

"No," Andy admitted, suddenly feeling ashamed about that. "I haven't. I didn't know if it was a good…" She shrugged uselessly. "I haven't."
Miranda did not look offended, or even surprised. "What will you tell them now? What are they like, politically?"

"They're okay," Andy said. "Moderate to left, I guess. They don't hate gay people or anything. But, uh, it won't just be about that." Miranda nodded, so at least Andy didn't have to go into detail about how her very name was loathed in the Sachs household. "I'll tell them I'm moving in with you to help take care of you," Andy said, her plan taking shape as she spoke. "Because I am. Kind of. If they ask any more questions, I won't lie."

"And if they don't ask, it's because they don't want to know," Miranda said. "Which means, of course, that they will know." She moved her foot from Andy's lap. "Switch."

Andy took the other foot and started to rub lotion into it. Miranda was better at containing her whimper this time, but it still made Andy sweat. "I've had rough talks with them before," she said. "They didn't want me to move in with Nate when we weren't married. But they got over it." She worried her bottom lip. "I mean, this is worse, but…"

"Will they force you to choose?" Miranda asked flatly. "Can they make you change your mind?"

Andy pursed her lips and took a few moments before she replied. "They can try," she said. "But I won't."

"Good," Miranda said. Then she added, "Ankle now."

"What about your parents?" Andy dared, going for the ankle. "What would they have thought? Or think. Or--?"

Miranda's lips thinned. "It doesn't matter," she said, "but they wouldn't have approved. Not in the least." She paused. "My father was very religious."

Andy waited on tenterhooks. Miranda finally added, "I haven't set foot in a temple since I arrived in this city over thirty years ago. He is why." She gave Andy a quick look, and Andy realized that was all she was getting right now. So this was what the years were going to be like: pulling Miranda's past out of her bit by bit. But it could be done, Andy was sure. "You?" Miranda added. "Were you-- are you religious?"

"Sort of Methodist, I guess," Andy said. "We went to church when I was little, but stopped when my sister and I got older. So really, I'm not anything." Miranda nodded. "It's not a big deal to me." She glared at Miranda's belly. "I'm taking him to soup kitchens, though."

Miranda's eyebrows shot up. "Soup what?"

"I volunteered in high school and college," Andy said. "When he's old enough, I'm taking him too." She didn't want the kid to think that shower curtains were the lowest of the low.

Miranda read her mind. "I know a lot more about poverty than you do, Andrea," she said tightly.

"I know," Andy said, looking right back at her. "I guessed that much."

"Do you blame me for shielding my children from it?"

There was no right answer to that, so Andy replied, "I'm just saying there's nothing wrong with volunteering." She decided to play dirty. "I mean, it's practically impossible to get into college these days if you don't." Miranda's eyes widened and she glanced at the twins. "Yeah," Andy said smugly.
"You think you're very smart, don't you?" Miranda said. "You always have. I've noticed that. It never pays to be the smartest one in the room, Andrea, no matter what the tell y--" Andy tickled the bottom of her foot. Miranda squeaked before she could stop herself.

"Andy, are you tickling Mom?" Cassidy's voice asked from behind Andy.

"Who, me?" Andy said, and tickled again. Miranda's foot jerked.

"Is she ticklish?" Caroline asked in wonder.

"Doesn't look like it," Andy lied, and stopped tickling. Miranda gave her a glare that was two parts fury and one part relief. Andy fluttered her eyelashes. Miranda growled and then gave the twins an extremely pointed look. Paper rustled, and Andy knew they'd returned to their homework, however reluctantly.

"I just need to be smart enough to keep up with you," she said in a low voice. "And half the time, I'm not."

"On that we agree," Miranda sniffed, and settled back against the couch. "Don't neglect the heel."

One week later, Andy's apartment was stripped bare of nearly everything she owned except the bed, the bookcase, the bureau, and enough appliances to get her through until the following Saturday. The landlord, a pretty decent guy, came to inspect everything. Because Andy and Nate had been good tenants--paid the rent on time each month, never made any noise, kept the place relatively clean--he let her break the lease without penalty in exchange for the bed, the bureau, and the appliances so he could rent the place out as 'semi-furnished.' It was really weird to look at her bed and know that strangers would be sleeping in it within a couple of weeks (or less, given that this was Manhattan), but Andy was trying not to think too much about it.

A week after that, very early on Saturday, two burly men from Mike's Movers carried Andy's things into a truck, appearing amused that Andy had already packed all of it up, since "We do stuff like that too, y'know, it's part of the job." Her possessions huddled in one pitiful little corner of the vast truck: without the furniture, it was mainly just clothes, books, knickknacks, and the bookcase. Andy didn't feel that she was moving house so much as she was beginning a protracted stay in a hotel.

Then, when they all arrived at the townhouse, Andy felt like she was breaking in. Miranda was out, and the twins were with their dad. It was supremely weird to move her things in to a quiet house, as if she was hoping she wouldn't be noticed. Well, she kind of was, actually, and she was glad for what Miranda had said about neighbors keeping secrets. Besides, by the time the movers drove away, it was just creeping up on eleven in the morning, and Andy doubted very much that enough people had been up and about to notice them sneaking in through the back door.

Dear God. Andy Sachs, moving to 73rd Street, just off Park Avenue, in the Upper East Side. Who'd have thought it? She wondered if Miranda had felt the same way when she'd arrived.

She looked around the guest bedroom--Stephen's old room--her new room, and shook her head. Definitely unreal. She already felt a little homesick for the apartment, for her own space. But it was too late to change anything now, and Andy knew it was the right decision, no matter how unreal and weird it seemed. She felt a little better when she began hanging up her clothes, better still when she unpacked a couple of boxes of books, and best of all when she put her favorite tacky shot glasses on
the antique oak dresser where she'd just stuffed all her underwear and T-shirts.

She was mostly done by two o'clock, and helped herself to a late lunch from Miranda's--their--fridge, still trying not to feel like an intruder or a thief. This was going to take getting used to. She decided that she might as well start working on that, and when she'd finished eating, she set off to explore the house.

Andy had seen more of the Priestly home than most people had, but she'd never really walked around the place. It seemed much bigger indoors than it did from outside; on the outside, it was a ritzy townhouse, no larger or smaller than its neighbors, but once you got inside it was like you'd walked into some alternate dimension where the rules of space did not apply. The place felt frickin' huge.

There were four floors, plus a basement. Andy had seen all of the ground floor, at least: the den, the kitchen, the TV room, a couple bathrooms, and, of course, her favorite study. The first floor had her bedroom on it, plus a more open space that was half-living-room, half-entertaining area. It came in handy for the rare occasions when Miranda had guests over, which she hardly ever did, preferring to throw parties and host dinners outside her home. Emily had been right about one thing: Miranda was very private. No wonder she took so much glee in going after Page Six.

The second floor had Miranda's and the girls' bedrooms (which Andy left entirely alone), plus Miranda's office and Andy's other favorite study. The third floor had two more bedrooms and some storage space, plus a locked door that led up to the roof. Andy hoped Miranda would give her the key. It'd be neat to go up on the roof and look out at Manhattan on the nicer evenings. She wondered if she'd be able to see Central Park from there.

She poked her nose into the third-floor bedrooms. They were kept up as immaculately as everything else in the house, but it was obvious that nobody had stayed in them in a long time. In fact, the whole floor had an almost abandoned feeling about it, as if Miranda had never quite figured out what to do with it and had given up trying after she'd decorated it. Andy was glad she wasn't staying here, even though it was more private than the second floor. She definitely felt a little isolated down there, but she'd feel downright cloistered up here.

There were flowers everywhere, and modern art by people Andy had actually heard of. And closets. Lots of closets. Once you got on the second and third floors, where guests never went, there were family photographs, too--again, mostly of the twins. Andy eyed them critically, and wondered where photos of the baby boy would fit in. Andy was going to go absolutely nuts taking pictures, whether Miranda liked it or not. They were going to be crappy candid photos too. None of this staged, black-and-white stuff.

Miranda returned at three in the afternoon; Andy heard her talking on her cell phone as she walked through the door. She waited until she heard Miranda's footsteps heading up the stairs, and then the snap of the cell phone shutting, before she called out, "Hey there."

"Oh," Miranda said, sounding surprised. Her footsteps took a detour, her heels thumping over the rug on the way to Andy's room. Her eyes widened as she entered and saw Andy making herself at home. They went wider still at the sight of the shot glasses.

"I'm thinking a Frank Zappa poster over the bed," Andy said, came over, and kissed her on the cheek.

"Dear God," Miranda said. "It's like you've been here for a year."

"Like magic?" Andy asked hopefully.
"Something like it, yes," Miranda said, giving Andy a raised-eyebrow look that Andy couldn't quite interpret.

"I like your house," Andy said. "But it's huge." She smoothed both hands over Miranda's belly. "Where's he going to go, by the way?"

"I can probably convince the girls to move upstairs," Miranda said. "Then he can take one of the rooms next to mine." She gave Andy a quick, though cautious look.

"I can take the other?" Andy asked hopefully.

"We'll see," said Miranda, which meant 'yes.'

Cool. "My apartment is empty, my lease is broken," Andy said. She took hold of one of Miranda's hands. "If I end up homeless by the end of today, it is officially your fault." Miranda rolled her eyes. "So I hope you're okay with this."

"I'm not sure it'll be the cure-all you seem to think," Miranda said quietly. "But yes. I am okay with this." She tugged on Andy's hand, and this time they kissed on the mouth.

"Good," Andy said. She bit her own lip. "Tomorrow afternoon's the weekly phone call with my parents. I might need an okay person around afterwards."

"I'm very good at emotional support," Miranda said. "Ask anybody." Her tone was light, but she looked uneasy.

Andy sighed. "Just wish me luck," she said.

That night, she and Miranda went to Miranda's room where Miranda tugged off her shoes and got into her pajamas; Andy tactfully did not mention how nicely they accommodated her girth. She felt a pang of regret that she'd never been able to put together Miranda's maternity wardrobe after all, but it looked like Miranda's personal shoppers had done a fairly good job. Miranda looked as classically stylish as ever, at any rate, even if she was a little…bigger.

Andy had bought a Mozart CD of her own, and popped it into the Bose player on Miranda's nightstand. She beamed at Miranda as Rondo in C filled the room. Miranda sighed.

"This one's just for kids," Andy said. She held up the case, which read *Mozart For Babies* and showed a smiling infant. Miranda grimaced. "He'll be a genius," Andy added.

"Out of self-preservation, I'm sure," Miranda agreed. Then she sat on the bed, her back propped up by several pillows, and looked at Andy expectantly. "Look in the drawer on the nightstand," she suggested.

Andy did, and laughed when she saw a bottle of massage oil. "Nicer than body lotion, huh?"

"You wouldn't believe," Miranda said dreamily. Andy wondered if she'd tried to rub it on herself, before she remembered that Miranda couldn't even see her feet now, much less touch them. She felt a surprising pang of jealousy: who, exactly, had helped Miranda discover this unbelievable oil?

"My pedicurist recommended it," Miranda added, and Andy instantly felt ridiculous. Nanette was, as far as Andy could tell, very happily married. "She's a marvel, that woman." She blinked at Andy. "Well?"

"Let me get a towel," Andy said, and hurried to the bathroom. She didn't want to get oil all over her
own pajamas, or on Miranda's sheets, which probably had a ten thousand thread count or something. She returned with a towel, laid it over her lap, rubbed the oil between her palms, and set to work.

"Mmm," Miranda groaned. "Maybe you're a marvel too."

"No 'maybe' about it," Andy said, and squeezed. "I meant it. This is good for you."

"I don't believe you," Miranda said. "I think it's a very cunning plan on your part. Ten more minutes of this and I'll give you anything you want."

Really? Huh. So, ten minutes later, Andy said, "You know what I want? Let me pay one of the bills."

Miranda—who had shut her eyes in ecstasy—cracked one open. "What? Why?"

Andy rolled her eyes. "Why not? I know paying you rent would be dumb--" And insulting. She realized that now. "--but I don't think it's a bad idea for me to contribute something to the house. I mean, now I'm using up power and water and stuff too."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," Miranda said.

"I want to," Andy insisted. "I mean it. I'm not paying rent anymore, it's not like I can't afford it." It'd make a much smaller dent in her paycheck. Right?

"If you insist," Miranda said, rolling her eyes. "You are aware, of course, that all my bills are paid automatically each month from my checking account."

"So we'll switch one," Andy said. "I'll take care of it." She'd often had to take care of Miranda's household arrangements and expenses once she'd become first assistant; it was part of the job. "You won't have to worry about it."

"Fine," Miranda said, her eyes shutting again. "Whatever helps you sleep at night. Which one do you want to pay?"

"Oh, I don't know," Andy said. "Er, power?" Miranda waved her hand for permission. "Thanks."

"Mm," Miranda said. "I can't help noticing that your hands have slowed."

"Whoops," Andy said, and started back up. About ten minutes later, she'd worked Miranda's legs from calf to toes, and her hands were starting to cramp. "Okay. Twenty minutes. I'm done," she said.

"No," Miranda protested. Whined, almost.

"Yes," Andy said firmly, wiping her hands on the towel. "My hands hurt. And I'm pretty sure all the muscles in your legs are like boiled pasta by now."

"True," Miranda admitted. She flexed her toes, and looked every bit as happy as she did after sex. Andy swallowed hard. Then Miranda looked at Andy from beneath lowered lashes, and Andy started to sweat.

"Come here," Miranda said.

"But we can't--"

"Come here," Miranda repeated, stretched out one arm, and Andy was pretty sure she'd never be able to resist an invitation like that. She scrambled to sit next to Miranda, who murmured, "You said
something, at some point, about kissing me for a good long while."

"Oh," Andy gasped.

"Yes," Miranda said, and gave Andy her most innocent smile. "I'm sure kissing is good for me too. You are not done spoiling me, Andrea."

"No, never," Andy said, cupped her jaw, and leaned in. Miranda's mouth still astonished her. So warm, so luscious, so...she took her time, kissing and nibbling, just as she always had. Miranda teased her right back, appearing completely content to linger, to kiss as an end in itself instead of as a prelude to sex. And wasn't that a surprise? Well, maybe she was just taking what she could get. Andy was, too. It had been over a month since they'd had this, even this, just lots of kisses. She could hardly believe it.

Eventually the nibbles turned into more, until they were kissing deeply and Andy's breaths had turned into groans. Miranda was panting too, a little. Aching, Andy pulled away. "Okay," she managed. "I think that's, um, enough for me." It was one of the biggest fibs she'd ever told.

"Is it?" Miranda said.

"Well--"

"Is it?" Miranda repeated, her voice a husky whisper. She slid her hand beneath the elastic waistband of Andy's pajama pants. Andy gasped, and thrust her hips forward. "I don't think it is," Miranda murmured. "I don't think it's enough for you at all."

"Please," Andy said, before she could stop herself. "Please." Miranda pulled her hand out just long enough for Andy to tear off her own pants and underwear, and then her fingers were inside Andy, twisting and rubbing, her thumb pressing against Andy's clit. Andy grabbed her face and kissed her fiercely, and then bent and began mouthing selfishly at her throat, and as much of her chest as she could get to without yanking Miranda's shirt off.

Oh Jesus, over a month. How had she survived? Without Miranda's mouth and skin and fingers and-

"Oh you, oh you tease," Miranda gasped, thrust her fingers in harder, and made Andy come in a single heartbeat, all the harder for their long abstinence. It felt fantastic. More than. It felt...there probably weren't even words for...

When Andy sagged down against her, panting and useless, Miranda pulled her fingers out and added, "I was trying to be nice to you, and you had to get me worked up when we can't..."

"Whatever," Andy mumbled against her shoulder, still quivering with satisfaction and enjoying Miranda's smell. Now Mozart was on to Divert in D. Andy felt kind of weird, listening to baby music while she and Miranda had sex. Maybe she'd get a new CD. "I spent two months after Christmas being completely sexually frustrated. Now it's your turn."

"It's your giving nature that enthralls me," Miranda said. She sniffed. "I'll have the last laugh. I'm not going to be lusting after you very much for the next two months. Count on it." This did not prevent her, however, from licking her fingers and making the kind of face a dieter would make after being allowed a miniscule bite of triple-fudge cake.

"Well, whenever you've recovered, I'll be waiting," Andy said. She smoothed a hand over Miranda's silk-covered belly, and grinned at the way Miranda's nipples were standing at very obvious attention. "The important thing is your health."
"I hate you," Miranda said, her calm voice belied by her rapid breathing.

"I'm pretty terrible," Andy agreed. She glanced at the clock. It was after eleven. "You sleepy yet?"

"I'm getting there," Miranda admitted. She sighed. "The days seem so long, and yet they go by so quickly. I've always wondered how that works."

"Me too," Andy said. "I think about what I do every day, and there's so much stuff, but then I look back and the whole week disappeared when I wasn't paying attention."

"Yes," Miranda said. Andy hopped off the mattress—Miranda glared because she, Andy knew, wasn't about to hop anywhere—and tugged down the duvet and sheets. Miranda lifted her rear and then her legs helpfully, and Andy drew the covers over her. It was as much as her life was worth to make a joke about tucking Miranda in, but she thought about it.

"G'night," she said, kissing Miranda on the mouth. Gently now. She shut off the music, too. "Sleep well. If you need anything, uh--" She frowned. She was on another floor. "--call my cell phone? I'll keep it on." Miranda rolled her eyes. "What? You might need--"

"Yes, yes, I might," Miranda said, sounding exasperated. "Fine."

"Good," Andy said, kissed her on the temple, and left. She returned to the guestroom—her room—lay down, and stared up at the ceiling. Well, this was different. The ceiling in her apartment had had stains over the bed. She and Nate had tried to make shapes out of them, like with clouds. No stains in Miranda's house. Anywhere, Andy was willing to wager. Except maybe on a few pairs of underwear.

She thought about calling her parents tomorrow, and then realized that if she continued to think about that she'd get no sleep at all. It had been a busy day, and she was tired and needed rest. She rolled over, hugged the second pillow, thought about Miranda and her silk pajamas instead, and went to sleep.

"You moved?" her dad said, sounding surprised.

"Er, yeah," Andy said uncomfortably. "Just yesterday, actually. I hadn't been planning it very long. It just kind of, you know, happened."

"Why did you move?" her mother asked on the other phone. Her mom would be in the living room in front of the TV, her dad in the kitchen in front of the newspaper. Andy could picture it so clearly. Her heart ached, and her stomach squirmed. "And where are you now?"

"Why? Well, you know," Andy said, feeling her underarms getting damp, "paying for a Manhattan studio all by myself…it was, um…"

"Oh, so you've moved in with a roommate," her mother said, sounding like she cautiously approved. "Who is it? A friend from work?"

"Er, yeah," Andy said. "I mean sort—I mean, yes." She cleared her throat. "It's not the money, really, Mom. She, uh--she's in kind of a tight spot. She could use somebody around to help her out. So I'm moving in to, um, help."
If she had expected her parents to praise her altruism, she was disappointed. "Help somebody out?" her dad said, and she could picture his concerned brow-furrow. "What do you mean? As in, she can't pay her own bills or something?"

"Oh, no, it's not like that," Andy began.

"Don't get taken for a ride, sweetheart," her dad said sternly. "It's okay to be a good friend, but we don't want you to be taken advantage of--"

"No, no," Andy said quickly. "There's no problem with money, Dad. She's, uh, in kind of poor health. I'm going to help look after her."

Even as she spoke, she cringed, glad that Miranda wasn't around to hear Andy's cowardice. Why was this so difficult? Why couldn't she just come out and say it--why was she being so cagey, like she had something to be ashamed of? She wasn't ashamed of Miranda. Half the time she still couldn't believe that someone like Miranda was interested in her at all. So why couldn't she just tell her parents the truth, right off the bat?

"Oh," her mother said, sounding surprised. "Well, that's…different. What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing!" Andy said, and then cleared her throat. Her voice had come out sounding much too high-pitched. "I mean, nothing's wrong, she's just, uh, kind of having a hard time…it's okay, really, I swear. I'm not being taken advantage of. And the place is nice."

"Are you safe?" her mother asked doubtfully. "Have you moved into a good neighborhood?"

"Oh, yeah," Andy said with a shaky laugh, glancing towards her bedroom window, where chauffeured cars glided by on the street below. "The neighborhood's fine."

"Well, tell us where you are," her dad sighed. "Hold on. Let me get a pen." A pause. "Okay. What's your new address?"

"137 East 73rd Street," Andy said.

There was another pause. "73rd?" her dad said, sounding surprised, and also like he was trying to picture a map in his head. "Where's that? Still in the Lower East Side?"

"Uh, no," Andy said, trying to sound lighthearted too. "The Upper East Side, actually."

"The--the Upper East Side?" Her mother sounded astonished. "How can you afford to live in the Upper East Side?"

"I'm helping to split the bills?" Andy said weakly. "Um…Mom, Dad…"

"Honey," her dad said slowly, "who are you living with?"

"Um," Andy gulped. "You know, my friend who needs…nothing's wrong with her, but she's pregnant."

"Pregnant," her dad said.

"Yeah." Andy bit her lip. "And I'm moving in to help--" She bit it harder. "To be with her. I'm moving in to be with her."

"Andrea," her mother said. Her voice shook a little. Andy tried not to think about how her mother pronounced her name--ANdrea--and how that didn't sound right or natural anymore. "What is this?
"What's going on?"

"Answer my question," her dad said. Now his voice was low, even, and very intent. Andy's heart started to pound at a mile a minute. "Who are you living with?"

"Miranda," Andy said, finally disgusted with herself. After all, it was better to tear off a Band-Aid all at once instead of by degrees. "I moved in with Miranda."

There was a very long moment of silence.

"You--you don't mean Miranda Priestly, of course," her mother said with a wobbly laugh. "Your old boss. Isn't that silly? For a moment, I thought--it's just that you've never mentioned knowing anybody else named Miranda, but really--"

"Andy," her dad said, and nothing else.

Andy closed her eyes. "No, Mom," she said. "It's Miranda Priestly. I've, I've kept in touch with her since I got fired..." All kinds of touch. "And, and..."

"You are moving in to help take care of Miranda Priestly," her dad said.

"Well--"

"Miranda Priestly. Who can afford to hire a nanny or a nurse or God only knows what else. You are moving in to help take care of her."

"It's not..."

"Is she paying you?" her dad asked harshly. "Are you doing this to pick up some extra money or something?"

Andy tried to stop shaking. "No," she said. "No, I'm not."

"Then why are you doing it?" her mom said, her voice rising. "Why are you--" She paused. "To be with her. You said you're moving in to be with her?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "That's what I'm doing."

"What does that mean?" her mother whispered. "Andy, what does--you're her friend. You became friends while you were working for her. Right?"

"Yeah, we did," Andy said. She sat down on the edge of her bed and stared at her lap, wishing that she knew the words, any words, that would make this less horrible. "Friends and--" She paused, swallowed, and started again. "Friends and more."

"No," her dad said. "No. Oh, no."

"Dad--"

"I knew it," he said. His voice had started to get a rough edge to it that made Andy feel sick. "At Christmas. I knew she was up to something like this."

"No," Andy said at once. "Nothing happened at Christmas, Dad. I'm serious, I swear to God, nothing happened then at all--I told you it didn't--"

"Then when?" her dad roared. Andy nearly dropped the phone. "When'd she go after you? It was
"She didn't 'go after' me," Andy said, her own voice climbing up, as she hoped like hell that Miranda was nowhere within hearing distance. She was at home today, but Andy didn't know where, exactly-please, upstairs or downstairs-- "She didn't make me do anything. She's never done that!"

"Andrea," her mother moaned, "was this why you were fired?"

"No!" Andy said. "That was Irv Ravitz, not her, I told you--"

"Was it because of her? Did he know about her and you? Does everybody know--" Her mother's voice cracked. "Does everybody know but us?"

"Nobody knows," Andy said, covering her eyes with her free hand. "It has nothing to do with why I got fired. It has nothing to do with any of that. Mom, Dad, nobody knows--just her kids and--" Don't say Nigel. "Just her kids."

"Her kids," her dad said. "She's got kids. And she's pregnant. And is she even divorced yet?"

"Not yet," Andy said, and swallowed hard. "But that's only because in New York you can't--"

"Oh my God," her dad said.

"--you have to wait a year, otherwise she would, Dad, trust me--"

"Trust you? Trust you?"

"Dad," Andy gasped.

"You have no idea what you're doing," her dad said. "No idea at all. She is using you and you can't even see it, and we did not raise you to be this stupid."

"I'm not stupid. I know what I'm doing," Andy said. She closed her eyes again. "She's not using me, and I know what I'm doing. It was my idea to move in with her. That was my suggestion. I had to talk her into it. I had to talk her into a lot of things."

"Oh yes," her mother said. "Yes, I just bet you did, Andrea. Is that what she's got you thinking now? That it's all your idea?"

"No, it wasn't all my idea," Andy pleaded. "But part of it was. Mom, Dad, I'm not...I'm not some puppet, nobody's pulling my strings--we've worked this out together. We know it's going to be hard--"

"No, you don't!" her mother cried. "Honey, you don't--"

"--and it's my fault you think she's so awful, I know it is, I know I said all these bad things about her, but she isn't--"

"--have any idea, you're so young, oh my God, you're so young--"

"--she's wonderful, Mom, and yeah, she drives me crazy too, but, but it's really good and I'm really happy with her and I want to make you understand--"

"Oh, I understand," her mother said. "I understand, all right, and so does your father, I think we understand perfectly--"
"No, you don't," Andy said, balling her free hand into a fist on her thigh. "She's the best thing that ever happened to me. I'm not stupid, I know it's crazy, but that doesn't mean it's not true." She took a deep breath, trying to regain her calm. "I love her, and she loves me, and…"

Her mother began to weep quietly.

"…oh God, don't cry, Mom. Really--I'm happy, it's good, nothing's--"

There was a click. Somebody had hung up. Andy's eyes widened. "Mom? Dad?" More sobbing. The hang-up must have been her father. "Mom--please, I'm serious, it's fine, totally fine, it's--"

Another click, and the line was completely dead. Andy realized that she was shaking so hard that the mattress shook with her.

"Oh shit," she croaked, and put the phone back in its cradle.

Well. That could have gone better.

Then she sat and stared at her knees. And stared some more, and listened to her heartbeat. Pound, pound, pound. Knock, knock, knock.

She blinked, and looked up. That wasn't her heart. Somebody was knocking on the door. She looked at the clock by the bed, and blinked. She'd been staring at her knees for ten whole minutes.

"Andrea?" Miranda's voice sounded concerned on the other side of the door.

"C-come in," Andy said. Miranda did, and stopped in the doorway after getting one look at Andy. Her eyes widened.

"They didn't take it well," she said. Not a question.

"I wondered if…" Miranda shook her head, and sat down on the bed next to Andy with an 'oof.' "Well. Are you all right?" The words sounded awkward in her mouth.

"Yeah. No. I guess," Andy said, and sighed miserably. Miranda didn't seem to know what to say, but she did pat Andy's arm. "They hung up on me."

"I'm sorry," Miranda said.

"Why? It's not your fault." Andy licked her lips again. "It's my fault."

"No, Andrea. It's not mine, and it's not yours." Miranda sounded on much firmer ground now. "Why does it have to be somebody's 'fault'?"

"Well--I--um--" Andy winced. "When I started at Runway, of course they wanted to hear all about my job, and uh, my boss, and…"

"Ah," Miranda said. Her lips quirked, but she got it under control. "Say no more."

"And then there was Christmas. And they thought you were--" Andy cut herself off.

Miranda frowned. "Thought I was what? Selfishly stealing you away?" She gave a rueful chuckle. "Well, they were right."
"I guess," Andy said, deciding that it would be the worst idea ever to tell Miranda what her parents had really feared. "They, um, they don't understand. They think I don't know how to make my own decisions." She scowled.

"They think that?" Miranda asked. She rolled her eyes. "Have they met you?"

"Huh?"

"Let's have sex. Tell me you love me. We need to live together. Don't forget to eat your breakfast--" Andy managed to smile. "Maybe I should have let you talk to them for me."

"No, thank you," Miranda said. She shuddered. "Andrea, if your parents ever want to speak to me civilly, then we can do that. But I've had more than my share of run-ins with the evil in-laws. I've--" She stopped talking and went pink as she realized what she's said. "I mean…"

"Yeah?" Andy asked, and grinned—not so much at the term, as at how Miranda was starting to look uncomfortable. "In-laws, huh?"

"It's just a phrase," Miranda said in exasperation.

"Slow down, I think we're moving a little fast here," Andy said, grinning harder and feeling much better.

"The parents of my significant other," Miranda said, rolling her eyes again. "There."

"Got it," Andy said, and patted her knee. "Thanks for that. Okay." She took a deep breath and exhaled it. Time to change the subject, for her own sake. At least for now. "How was the trainer?"

"Fine. You slept through it." Miranda's personal trainer still came three times a week: at six-thirty on the weekdays and at seven on Sundays.

"You bet I did," Andy said.

"I spent the rest of the morning on my final editor's letter," Miranda said. She frowned. "I've always hated writing them. But this one's the most difficult. How do I wrap up eighteen years?"

"Jokes are good," Andy said. "People love jokes. And riddles."

"Oh good, you can finish it for me," Miranda said. She looked down at her watch. "It's noon. The twins will be home soon."

"Oh," Andy said. "We need to get lunch started, then." Jimena had the day off today. "What do you want?"

"Fish today," Miranda decided. "Not salmon," she added quickly. Andy smiled. Salmon was good for you, and Miranda had been eating a lot of it over the past few months.

"I'll call Lenox Room," she said. "I can get them to deliv--"

Her phone rang again. It was her parents.

Andy's momentary relief vanished, replaced with an all-new set of nerves, even worse than before. Especially because next to her, Miranda stiffened.

"I should," Andy said.
"Yes," Miranda said.

"Hello?" Andy said into the phone.

"Andy, we need to talk," her father said. "And I want you to listen to me very carefully."

"Oh God," Andy said, and gave Miranda a panicked look. "Just a--"

Miranda waved her off, grabbed one of the bedposts and hauled herself to her feet with a nearly-inaudible groan. "I'll be downstairs."

"Is she there right now?" her dad asked, his voice hard.

"Yeah," Andy said, her temper flaring, feeling a lot more gutsy now that Miranda was in the room, reminding Andy of what was at stake. "It's her house."

"Our house," Miranda said over her shoulder as she left, loud enough for Andy's father to hear. Andy's heart skittered at the words, though whether in pleasure or anxiety or both, she couldn't be sure.

"Let me talk to her," Andy's dad said.

"No," Andy said. "She's gone now, anyway." In the hallway, Andy saw Miranda pause and look back at her, but Andy quickly waved her hand. Miranda shrugged and began descending the stairs. "Listen, Dad--is it just because she's, she used to be my boss, or is it because she's a woman? Is that it?"

"Andy, it is so many things that I don't even know where to begin," her dad said. "I mean--there's nothing wrong with being gay. Your mother and I have never thought that. Although you and your sister never seemed to…" He trailed off. "Is this why Nate left you?"

"No," Andy said, as anger washed over her, white-hot. Left her? Not just left, but left her? Like something was wrong with her? "No, it wasn't. I'm telling you, nothing was going on back then. I haven't even spoken to him since October. I've never…" She took a deep breath. "There's never been another woman, except for her." She snorted. "So I guess I'm gay for Miranda. I hope somebody gets a toaster oven."

"I'm not ready to laugh about this, Andy," her dad said.

In spite of herself, Andy shivered. "Sorry," she mumbled. "It's just…Dad, I don't know what to tell you. I don't know what will make you okay with this."

"I'll tell you. Nothing," her dad said. "Nothing will make me or your mother 'okay with this."

"Uh--" Andy felt tears smarting behind her eyes. "Wh-what does that mean?"

"It means we're not okay with it, is what it means," her dad said. "It means you're--you're going out with, or living with, somebody we don't approve of and never will. So what does that mean to you?"

"Are you…are you trying to make me choose?" Andy closed her eyes and felt a tear streak down her cheek. "Are you saying that if I'm with her, then you won't ever talk to me again, or what?"

The silence went on for much, much too long. Then her father spoke once more. His voice was thick, and she thought he might be tearing up too. "No. It doesn't mean that," he said. "Nothing will ever mean that. You've got to make your own mistakes. Every kid does."
"This isn't a mistake!"

"But Andy," her dad continued, as if she hadn't said anything, "this is a mistake--"

"No, it isn't--"

"--that can haunt you. What'll happen when people do find out? Your name all over the papers, you getting fired again? And what about her kids, and her husbands, what role are you going to play? You're only twenty-five, for God's sake. You've got your life ahead of you, and you're too young to throw away--"

"Dad, stop," Andy said, wondering if she was about to hyperventilate. Somehow this was worse than their earlier hysteria. "I'm not throwing anything away--where's Mom?"

"You're not going to talk to your mother now," her dad replied, and then his voice went hard. "She is very, very upset."

Andy took a deep, trembling breath. "I can't help that. I didn't mean to. Dad. If, if I could make you understand…"

"Andy, you need to believe that I do understand," her dad said. "Better than you do, I think. Listen, I know you care for this woman. I can see that."

"Her name is Miranda," Andy growled.

"You've always cared a lot about things," her dad said, sounding like he was gritting his teeth. "You've always been very generous. It's one of the things I love most about you. But since last year I've watched you give and give, draining yourself, and changing into somebody I don't even recognize--"

Andy went still. "You don't what?"

"I just meant--"

"Oh," Andy said, beginning to tremble again, but with rage, this time. "That's what this is. Like Lily and Nate and--you think I've changed, you think I've turned into somebody else--"

"I didn't say--"

"--somebody you don't 'recognize,' might as well say somebody you don't like--well, guess what--"

"Andy," her dad said. This time, he was the growling one.

"I made the decision to change. I made all those choices." Own your decisions. "That was me. Nobody else. I've chosen all this." She wiped away another tear. "I chose Miranda. And she chose me. And nobody made anybody else do anything at all. And that's the way it is."

There was yet another moment of silence that felt interminable.

"That's the way it is, huh?" her dad said quietly.

"Yeah." Andy felt like she had a tennis ball lodged in her throat. "Sorry you don't like it."

"…then I guess that's all there is to say," her dad said.

Andy hid her face in her hand again. "I guess so," she said, and swallowed around the tennis ball.
"Tell, um. Tell Mom I love her."

"Okay," her dad said. Then neither of them said anything else. The silence stretched on and on, and Andy had no idea what they were waiting for.

"I'll…I'll talk to you later, I guess," Andy finally said. "Bye." Then she hung up.

Then she dropped the phone and fell back down on the mattress, looking blindly up at the ceiling—her favorite hobby—while her heart ran in her chest at a million miles an hour. Which was weird, because it also felt heavy. Like iron or lead. How did that work?

Through the open door, she heard a door open and slam shut, and a flurry of movement and noise. The twins had arrived home. Andy heard Caroline's voice, high pitched, saying, "Is Andy all moved in now? Is she here?" Andy smiled in spite of herself. Miranda said something in reply; Andy couldn't hear what, exactly, but it was low-voiced and sounded extremely firm. No doubt she was telling the twins that Andy was having a pretty shitty time, and should be left alone. At least, that's what Andy hoped she was telling them.

Then again, being left alone wasn't so hot. Being alone meant that all Andy had to do was sit and think about how maybe her parents hated her now. It would probably be good to sit tight and digest for a little while—maybe even have a good, cathartic crying session. After all, Andy was the one who had to tell Miranda (and Cassidy) not to bottle stuff up.

Later. She'd cry later. Not now. She wanted to be around people right now—her people, the people she'd chosen and who had chosen her, too. She groaned, sat up, patted down her hair, rose shakily to her feet, and headed down the stairs.

She paused as she reached the bottom. Miranda and the twins were still speaking in low voices. "--lunch?" Cassidy was asking, her voice soft and plaintive. Andy grinned.

"We're going to call Lenox Room, darling," Miranda said. "And we are not going to get Andrea to do it for us today. Would you like to make the call? You know what we like, don't you?"

"Yeah," Cassidy said. "But what does Andy like?"

"She…" Miranda's voice trailed off. She didn't know. Andy sighed. Well, why should she? Andy was always the one who ordered the food. If it wasn't something Andy had eaten and enjoyed right in front of her, Miranda would have no idea what Andy liked; meanwhile, Andy knew the details of pretty much every dish Miranda had ever enjoyed in her life.

"I--well," Miranda said, sounding awkward. Embarrassed, even. "What do you think?"

Andy rolled her eyes. Caroline sounded similarly unimpressed when she said, "How should we know? Why don't you?"

"Caroline," Miranda said.

"But you--"

Andy took pity on Miranda as she entered the kitchen and said, "I'll get the Cobb Salad." They all jumped. "They do good salads."

"No seafood?" Miranda asked, giving her a quick look, obviously wondering how much Andy had overheard.
"Not today," Andy said.

"We can order from somewhere else, if you prefer," Miranda said.

"No, Lenox is fine." Andy sat down at the counter with a deep sigh, and gave Miranda a smile that probably looked tired. Miranda smiled at her in return, but her jaw was tense and her eyes were worried. The twins watched them both curiously.

"What's wrong?" Cassidy asked.

"Cassidy," Miranda growled.

Cassidy flinched. "No, it's okay," Andy said quickly. "We can--I mean, if you don't mind--"

"It's up to you," Miranda said, still looking at Andy carefully.

"You want to call for the food first?" Andy asked Cassidy, who already had the phonebook open to the proper page.

"Oh, yeah, okay," Cassidy said, squinted down at the number, and dialed the phone with an air of self-importance. No wonder, since the twins didn't do stuff like this any more than their mother did. Maybe less. Andy leaned back against the counter and watched with genuine amusement as Cassidy ordered their food while Caroline hissed instructions at her.

Then Cassidy hung up. "They said somebody would bring it here in half an hour," she said, and pulled a face. "That's forever."

"Well, they have to prepare it first," Andy reminded her. "And they don't usually deliver. You guys are just special." She managed another smile, though this one felt genuine.

"So what happened?" Caroline asked, hopping up on another bar stool and looking at Andy expectantly.

"Oh, well," Andy said, and took a deep breath before letting it out again. "Not too much. I just spoke to my parents and they got mad at me, that's all."

"Your parents?" Caroline blinked. "You have parents?" Cassidy smacked her on the arm. "Ow!" Caroline said, glaring at her. "I mean, I know she has them, I just meant--"

"It's okay," Andy laughed. "Yes, I have parents. Back in Ohio."

"But why are they mad at you?" Cassidy asked.

Andy gave Miranda a quick look; Miranda nodded. "They were a little upset when they found out I was moving in here," Andy said.

"How come?" Caroline asked. She scowled. "What's wrong with us?"

"Nothing," Andy said firmly. "Nothing at all."

"So why are they mad?"

Andy looked again at Miranda, who nodded once more, cleared her throat, and reached out to pat Andy's hand. "Girls," she said gently, "you know why Andrea is here. Don't you?"

Andy tried not to tense up. She wasn't sure her nerves could handle coming out to two different
families in one single day, but there didn't seem to be much help for it. But the twins just glanced at each other, looked back at Andy and Miranda, and bobbed their heads up and down in almost-creepy unison.

"Why?" Miranda prodded.

"It's the same as with Stephen," Caroline said.

"No, it isn't," Cassidy snapped, glaring at her.

"You know what I mean!" Caroline said, rolling her eyes.

Miranda cleared her throat. "Yes, dear, we know what you meant."

"But still, you're not…"

"Mom, are you gay?"

Miranda turned bright red. Andy decided that coming downstairs had definitely been worth it. "Well-it depends what you mean by…"

"No," Cassidy said, leaning against the counter. "Andy's her first girlfriend. I think. Right, Mom?"

Miranda nodded speechlessly. "So she's turning gay," Cassidy added. Then she frowned. "Except I thought you were born that way and it wasn't a choice? That's what that woman said, you know, the one who came to talk to us at school about diversity and stuff."

"So she's bi," Caroline said, leaning over and poking Cassidy in the stomach. Cassidy yelped and jumped away from the counter. "Like everybody on TV."

"Girls," Miranda said, but it was too late; Andy had already lowered her head down to the counter and was laughing helplessly. "It--don't worry about what to call me. Us. Just know that yes, we are in a, um…relationship…” Andy laughed even harder at how Miranda had almost choked on the word. "…although not for much longer, since it looks like Andrea is about to laugh herself to death."

"No, I'm okay," Andy managed, the counter tile cool against her forehead.

"So your parents are, like, homophobes, then," Caroline said.

That made Andy stop laughing right away, and she raised her head so quickly she got dizzy. "No," she said. "No, they're not. They--they--"

"Then why are they so mad?" Caroline asked, frowning.

"--they, uh," Andy finished, realizing she'd talked herself into a corner. Now what was she supposed to say? That her parents did think something was wrong with Miranda and her kids, after all? Miranda was glaring at her again, plainly thinking the same thing. "They were just surprised," Andy finished lamely. "Your mom is my first girlfriend, too. They…they might need a while to get used to it."

"Oh. That sucks," Caroline said.

Andy smiled, though it probably looked very bitter. "Yeah. It does."

"At least you're old," Cassidy said. "You don't have to live with them anymore. It's worst when they're homophobes and you come out while you're living with them. I saw that on TV one time."

"I'm coming to the conclusion that you girls watch entirely too much television," Miranda said.
"No, we don't," Cassidy said quickly. "I just saw it one time!"

"It's okay, anyway. You don't need your parents," Caroline said with elaborate casualness, watching her own fingertips tracing the grout in the counter tile. "You can stay here with us now."

Andy smiled at her, and the cold weight in her heart finally lightened and warmed up a little. "Thanks," she said softly. Caroline looked up and turned pink with pleasure.

"What about Dad?" Cassidy asked Miranda then, clearly finished with Andy's homophobic parents. "Does he know? What does he say? Does anybody know? Can we tell people at school? Can we--"

Miranda held up her hand, and Cassidy mercifully stopped. "No, your father does not know," Miranda said. "Nobody does, darling. We are trying to keep this a secret."

The twins finally began to look a little uncomfortable. "Why?" Caroline asked almost timidly. "Were we not supposed to tell him--" Cassidy elbowed her quickly.

"What did you tell him, dear?"

"Nothing," Cassidy said quickly. "Just that Andy was moving in this weekend. We didn't say why."

Miranda snorted and looked relieved. "Well, I wouldn't worry about it, then. I doubt very much that this is a conclusion your father will reach on his own." She sighed. "It's nothing to be ashamed of, girls. Sometime it will be all right for people to know. It will be fine. Just not right now."

"Why not?" Cassidy asked.

"The divorce, dummy," Caroline said. Cassidy's eyes went round. Then Caroline gave a dramatic gasp and said, "Stephen might try to take the baby or something!" Then she pressed a hand to her chest and looked up at the ceiling.

"No way!" Cassidy said in outrage. "He can't!"

"No, he can't," Miranda said at once, her eyebrows drawing together in a ferocious scowl that still made Andy shake in her shoes. "Mommy has made very sure of that. But yes. It would still be best if we can keep this quiet until after the divorce." She gave Andy, and then the twins, a small, tight smile. "It's not so very long. Just a few more months."

"Yeah," Andy said, nodding hard. She wondered if she'd be ready to come out to the world even after Miranda's divorce was final. It looked like she'd better find the guts by then, or else. She probably would. How bad could the world's disapproval be, compared to her own parents'?

"So nobody's even supposed to know you're living here?" Caroline frowned. "Won't people notice?"

"What we are saying right now," Miranda said, "is that Andrea has moved in to help look after all of us while I'm pregnant, and then after the baby is born. Which is true. Without Stephen here, we need another adult around the place. Don't you think?"

"But what about Cara--" This time, Caroline was the one to elbow Cassidy. "--yeah," Cassidy finished, rubbing her arm. They were both going to be pretty bruised by the time this conversation was over.

"Cara doesn't live here," Andy said. "We don't want you and your mom to be here at night without another adult. Right?" She looked at Miranda, who nodded, looking both approving and relieved. "So if people ask, that's what you can say. Your mom's right. It's not a lie or anything."
"Okay," Cassidy said, plainly not caring if it was a lie or not. Kids rarely did, Andy thought, remembering the ones she'd babysat, all of whom had seemed perfectly comfortable with lying to her at the drop of a hat. "Gotcha."

"So can we see your room?" Caroline asked eagerly. "You're all unpacked, right? Can we look?"

"Sure," Andy laughed. "Go ahead. Just don't--" The twins were already stampeding for the stairs. "--touch anything!"

"Okay!" Cassidy yelled as they hit the first floor.

"I'm glad you're here, Andrea," Miranda said. "I've often thought the house was too quiet."

Andy laughed again, and reached out to stroke her belly. Miranda never seemed to mind that, although Andy had a hunch that if anybody else tried it, they'd lose a hand or two. "Wait 'till July," she said. "It'll really liven up then." Miranda groaned and shut her eyes.

"Hey Andy, what are these little glasses?" Caroline called from Andy's room. "Why do they have the names of cities on them?"

"They're just souvenirs," Andy called back, grinning at Miranda's blistering glare. "I brought them back from places I've been."

"We've been to L.A. too," Cassidy shouted. "And Philadelphia, and--wait, did we go here?"

"Don't think so. Mom, we never went to Daytona Beach, did we?" Caroline called.

"No, darling," Miranda said, somehow managing to raise her voice and sound very genteel at the same time. "Now stop shouting and leave Andrea's things alone." She raised an eyebrow at Andy. "Daytona Beach?"

"Best spring break ever," Andy said. "I'm not telling you a thing."

"Good, I don't want to know," Miranda said. She tilted her head to the side. "Was it very bad?" she asked quietly. "With your parents."

All of a sudden, Andy's heart got heavy again. She bit her bottom lip. "Pretty bad," she said.

Again, Miranda didn't seem to know what to say, beyond a faint grimace that was evidently meant to convey sympathy. Andy tried not to think about how Nate would have given her a long, silent bear-hug. Then again, if she were still with Nate, none of this would be an issue anyway, now would it?

"Do you think they'll come around?" Miranda asked.

"Hope so," Andy said, trying to sound nonchalant, and shrugged. "It was...Dad wasn't..." She gulped. "I don't want to talk about it right now."

"All right," Miranda said. They sat in silence for a few moments. Andy wondered how long it would take for the food to arrive.

Then, when it was starting to get uncomfortable and Andy was on the verge of making small talk, the doorbell rang, and the food did, in fact, arrive. The twins heard it and ran downstairs at once. Andy hoped they hadn't destroyed her room, but she was glad to hear their footsteps.

That afternoon, after lunch, Miranda had to work. She let Andy and the twins persuade her to work from her office in the house instead of at Elias-Clarke, but they all knew she was not to be disturbed;
in the meantime, Andy tried to focus her energies on reading the first book *Rolling Stone* had sent her for review. It was difficult to concentrate, but she was glad to have something to do. Even the twins, perhaps affected by the general mood, obediently started their homework.

The whole place felt very quiet.

Dinner was salad, and soup that Jimena had made the day before and left in the fridge. Miranda emerged just long enough to eat it, and then returned to her office. After dinner, the twins declared that they were "practically done" with their homework and begged to watch TV with Andy until bedtime. Not much was on that was good for eleven-year-olds on Sunday night, but the twins appeared perfectly happy when they stumbled across *Toy Story 2* on a kid's channel, and when their bedtime arrived they even went upstairs without protest. Andy was relieved.

It was nine-thirty and Andy had to be up at seven the next day. Miranda's place was closer to Delton-Wright than Andy's old apartment had been, but she'd still have to fight rush-hour traffic on the subway. Still, she'd get fifteen extra minutes of sleep, which was nice. Which was a perk. Which was a good trade-up.

She took a shower and, halfway through it, burst into tears.

It actually felt pretty good. She tried to keep it quiet, though she knew Miranda and the twins wouldn't be able to hear her. But it was cathartic, almost, to let her tears mingle with the shower spray on her cheeks, to stop keeping the game face on for Miranda and the kids. She remembered her dad's strained voice, and her mother's sobs, and cried like a baby for what she'd lost.

She'd never done anything like this before. Never done anything that had made her parents say they'd never accept her choices. Never done anything that might drive a permanent wedge between her and two of the people she loved most in the world, who'd always been there for her until now… and for what? Andy loved Miranda, she loved the twins and the child on the way, she didn't regret her choice. But it had been a strange and lonely afternoon. So much for emotional support.

Miranda was obviously used to operating on her own, and didn't understand what it was like to have a close relationship with your parents. That meant she also didn't understand what Andy was feeling right now. Not her fault, but, but…

By the time Andy had finished showering and getting ready for bed, she felt a little better, both for her crying and the soothing hot water. She was also very tired, even though it was only ten. Might as well get some sleep, or at least curl up in bed and read a little more of that book, and try not to think about how totally isolated she felt in this house full of people. Maybe things would look better in the morning.

Then, as she slid underneath the covers, somebody knocked at her door. Andy, suddenly hopeful, said, "Come in," and Miranda came in. She was in her pajamas too.

She shut the door behind her. "Now," she began, "this isn't going to be a regular…” She trailed off, and finished bluntly, "Would you like me to sleep here tonight?"

Andy opened her mouth to say, 'You don't have to,' or 'Only if you want,' and said, "Yes," instead. Miranda nodded and sat down on the other side of the bed. Andy felt the melting in her chest again, the rush of relief. Miranda might not understand everything, but she understood enough. And wasn't that delightfully unexpected?

Then Andy saw that Miranda was holding the bottle of massage oil, and laughed out loud. Miranda glared at her, and said, "You promised," in an injured tone.
"I sure did," Andy chuckled. The laughter felt as good as the tears. Better. "Let me get a towel."

A few minutes later, she was rubbing oil into Miranda's feet while Miranda watched her face. Andy tried not to fidget at the scrutiny. She liked it better when Miranda melted into a happy puddle.

"Now tell me," Miranda said, "will they come around?"

Andy swallowed. "I hope so," she said again. "I've never done anything like this. I mean, something they disapproved of this much." She closed her eyes and gave voice to her fears. "What if they don't come around? That would be awful." Understatement. "We've always been close. My whole family is." She remembered the way they'd all sung Christmas carols together, and wondered if she was going to bawl again.

But predictably, Miranda didn't look as if she sympathized. "Then I'm sure they'll get over it," she said. "They'll have to. People have a way of doing what they have to do."

"I guess," Andy said. "Um, but you--you weren't close with your parents. Were you? I mean…it's just that you don't know…"

"No," Miranda said. "But I have children of my own, in case you didn't notice."

"Oh," Andy said, blinking.

"Yes," Miranda said. "I like to think that there isn't much that could alienate me from them completely. I can't imagine that. If your parents are the same, then they'll deal with this." She smiled thinly. "Principles are one thing, but reality is another."

"Oh," Andy said again, feeling pretty dumb. It hadn't occurred to her to look at it that way. "That's, that's good to know."

"I doubt they'll ever like it, mind you," Miranda continued. "But they'll come to accept it eventually. That's all that matters." The shadow of a sneer lingered at the corners of her mouth. "If it helps, I don't much care whether they ever like me or not."

"That's probably good too," Andy said. "But I--I want them to like you." This time Miranda didn't even try to hide the sneer. "Or at least not run you down all the time," Andy added. "They can't 'accept' all this without accepting you."

"That's up to them, not you or me. Switch the feet," Miranda ordered. Andy did, and this time Miranda groaned softly in pleasure. "That's nice. I didn't even go anywhere today, and they're aching."

"It's all those stairs," Andy said. An idea suddenly occurred to her. "Uh," she said, trying to sound decisive and failing miserably, "you know, I know it sounds funny, since I just moved in, but maybe you and I should switch rooms? I mean, just until the baby is born," she added, as Miranda's eyebrows shot up. "That way you'd only have to climb one flight of stairs instead of two."

"My office is still upstairs," Miranda said dismissively, but she looked a little intrigued. "I might as well be, too."

"Suit yourself," Andy said, and shrugged, wondering if she could get Miranda to change her mind eventually. Maybe she could enlist the twins again—it had worked well today when they'd kept Miranda at home. Then she gave the ball of Miranda's foot an extra hard rub. Miranda groaned again, closing her eyes in delight. Andy laughed softly.
At the sound, Miranda opened her eyes again. After a moment of visible struggle, she said, "It means a lot to me that you're here. I hope you understand that."

Andy felt a jolt, both shocking and warm, go through her. "Even though it was my idea?" she asked. It was a fair question. She'd been wondering, off and on, if she'd been too pushy, too demanding, even though Miranda had quickly agreed.

"Of course," Miranda said. She sniffed. "You don't have a lot of good ideas. It only seems fair to nurture them--" Andy pinched her foot. "--ouch. Although if this is going to degenerate into abuse…"

"I'm very abusive," Andy said. She added, smiling sweetly, "I like your pajamas. You look good in purple."

"Name the shade."

"Plum. You look good in plum." Andy smiled even more sweetly. "You're so pretty."

"Oh, for God's sake," Miranda said.

"I like you a lot," Andy said, trying to look angelic as she tickled Miranda's foot.

"Stop that," Miranda said, even as she held out her arms. Andy tossed aside her towel and came forward readily, kissing her, reveling in her taste and smell and in the tangible reminder of why sacrifices were worthwhile.

Tonight, though, Andy was surprised to realize that she didn't feel particularly urgent about things. Kissing Miranda, holding and nuzzling her, felt like enough. Andy remembered their first morning together, when she'd had to explain to Miranda that sex didn't have to be all about orgasms. Time, maybe, to put that into practice.

Miranda sent her hand questing down Andy's side, toward her pajama bottoms. Andy stopped her.

"Lie down on your side," she said, and added, "how about if I just kiss you until you fall asleep?" Miranda looked completely baffled. "Humor me," Andy added.

"All right," Miranda said, sounding extremely doubtful as she curled up on her side with an 'oof.' Then Andy was forced to concede that her idea was better in theory than in practice, because it was hard to angle in and get a good kiss with Miranda's belly and knees between them. After a couple of kisses--and a couple of snickers from Miranda--Andy sighed, gave up, and crawled around the bed to spoon behind Miranda instead.

They were a good fit, indeed. Andy molded her hips to Miranda's ass, slid her arm over Miranda's side, and nosed around beneath her ear. "Thanks for staying." She began to rub her hand in large, soothing circles over Miranda's belly.

"Mmm," Miranda said, and added, "now that, you may do until I fall asleep." Just then, the baby kicked. "Oh, no."

Andy didn't think it was oh-no at all. "Well, hello there," she said, as the baby kicked again against her palm.

"So much for sleep," Miranda growled.

Andy rolled over and turned off her lamp. "I've got my alarm set for six-forty-five."
"Make it six-thirty." Andy did. "Nnh. I hope he settles down soon."

Andy slid her arm back around Miranda and patted her again. Then she decided to be emotionally supportive too, and murmured, "Better you than me, sweetie."

"I take it back. You may not call me that anymore."

"No takebacks, sorry." Andy kissed the back of her neck. "G'night."

"Hmmph," Miranda said, and Andy promptly drifted off to sleep, soothed by Miranda's breathing, the movement of the baby inside her, and the smell of her hair.

She woke up sometime in the middle of the night, still pressed comfortably against Miranda. Miranda was asleep now too, deeply relaxed and warm beside Andy's body. She'd taken hold of Andy's hand where it draped over her side, and was clutching it firmly.

Warm. Comfortable. Secure. They were together, and it was good, Andy muzzily decided, squeezing Miranda's hand with her own even as she drifted back into her dreams.

_Eighth: June._

Over the next week, Miranda kept to her word and only spent three nights in Andy's room. She rose each time at six-thirty to return to her own room before the twins got up, and Andy, who kept her eyes resolutely shut in defiance of the morning, couldn't ignore the groan Miranda always gave when she slid ungracefully out of bed, preparing to climb the steps back to the second floor.

"Should switch rooms," she mumbled into her pillow after the second night.

"Go back to sleep," Miranda ordered, and did not sleep with Andy that night. Which was a shame, because Andy liked sleeping with her, in spite of her bulk and the way she usually had to get up at least twice in the night to go to the bathroom. It was nice to have her there, and to know that she was well. That all was well.

And Miranda slept like a log in Andy's arms, no matter what she said. She nested, practically. The thought made Andy giggle, although she would never have said it out loud.

Andy always struggled out of bed at a quarter till six. The twins were up ten minutes later, and then it was goodbye to a peaceful morning. Whatever sluggishness the girls had in the mornings was gone by the time they'd taken showers and brushed their teeth, and by the time everybody was leaving for the day, they'd attained a level of energy that made both Andy and Miranda gnash their teeth with envy.

"Don't worry," Andy told Miranda as she helped her into her coat on Thursday morning. "In a couple of years they'll be teenagers, and we'll have to haul them out of bed by their ankles."

"How encouraging," Miranda said.

Four days after Andy moved in, Miranda had her final ultrasound. This time, she gave in to the pleading of Andy and the twins, and brought home the printout. "That is so weird," Cassidy said at dinner, leaning over Andy's shoulder as they all looked at it. The kid looked like a big white blob that was mostly head. "That doesn't look like a person. You can hardly see anything."

"I think that's a hand!" Caroline said excitedly. "And there's his feet!"
"Is that the umbilical cord?" Cassidy asked, pointing at a white squiggle.

"I can't really tell," Andy said, squinting. "It could be his other arm. Or his other leg."

"Did the doctor tell you, Mom?" Caroline asked.

"I didn't ask," Miranda said. "But all the parts seem to be in order."

"Yeah?" Andy asked, giving her a quick glance, not willing to risk much more in front of the twins. She tried to look casual; then, when Miranda nodded, she tried not to look too relieved.

That night, Miranda slept in her room again. "Not much longer, huh?" Andy asked as she rubbed her feet. "July twelfth. That's less than a month and a half." Miranda's foot tensed in her grip. "I mean, it's, uh, exciting, isn't it?" Andy added quickly. "I'm pretty excited. Are you excited?" Miranda just looked at her. "We, we should probably start getting the place ready," Andy continued, feeling herself slide into babble, much as she had back at Runway whenever Miranda had scared her. "Maybe move the twins upstairs? Get a crib in, get his room ready, things like that."

Miranda just kept looking. Her face was closed. Andy got nervous and kept babbling. "I can take care of that. I should, that's why I'm here, right? I mean, it's one of the--I'll get right on that."

"Please do," Miranda said, and finally the non-expression on her face shifted into something that looked at least a little amused. Then she wiggled her toes. Andy obediently began rubbing again. "I spoke to Annie," she added.

"Annie?"

"Annie Liebovitz," Miranda clarified. "She had a baby when she was fifty-two, did you know?"

"No," Andy said in surprise. "So what did you two talk about?"

"The cover shoot she's going to do for Herself in four months, for Sharon's first issue."

"...oh," Andy said.

"But as we were wrapping up, she took a few moments to offer me unsolicited reassurance."

"Well, that's, uh, nice of her," Andy said.

"I suppose," Miranda said, and shrugged. "Apparently it's not 'going to be as bad as I think it will.' Though why she believes she can guess what I'm thinking…"

"She did a great job on Nicole Kidman's shoot," Andy said quickly. "I saw the proofs." She gave Miranda a cautious look. "The first issue's coming out at the end of August. I think it's going to be really good."

"It better be, considering the money Vincent's pouring into it," Miranda said.

"Money? How much money?" Nigel had never given Andy an exact figure.

"A lot of money," Miranda said, plainly not about to oblige. Or maybe she didn't know either.

"Nigel's been handling it really well," Andy said, focusing her gaze on Miranda's feet now. "I think so, anyway." She did. She was proud of him.

"Hmph," Miranda said. Then she added casually, "You might tell him that I asked after him."
Andy blinked and looked up again. Miranda's lips were a little thin, but her face was otherwise blank. Andy bit her lip to keep from smiling, and matched Miranda's bland tone as she said, "Thanks. I will." It looked like the beginning of a thaw, then. At least, she hoped so.

"Your birthday's coming up," she added. Miranda rolled her eyes. "You haven't mentioned anything about the gigantic bash."

"There will be no 'bash,'" Miranda said, and glanced down at her stomach. "Not this year. I have expressly forbidden it. I understand that Stan and the Barnhardts are throwing me a private dinner party with a select few guests."

"No big party?" Andy asked in surprise. Last year, Miranda's party—well, true, it had been her fiftieth—had been a huge affair at the Waldorf-Astoria that ran all night long. And Miranda had only attended half-an-hour of it. "Wow. Okay."

"I've just had a satisfying moment in the limelight," Miranda said. "I'll be very happy if I don't get another one until after July twelfth. Say, at least a month after." She sighed, closed her eyes, and stretched restlessly. "My God. You're right. I'm ready for this to be over. I'm ready to see my feet, and climb the stairs, and be able to sit at a reasonable distance from my desk…"

"Not long now," Andy said.

"No," Miranda said quietly, opened her eyes, and looked back down at her belly. "Not long now."

"She asked after me, huh?" Nigel said in a cab the next day.

"Yep," Andy said. "And she didn't look mad, either."

"Hmm," Nigel said. "And when was this? Another brunch or something?"

"Um, no," Andy said, and fidgeted before she could stop herself.

"You stopped by for dinner again, then."

"You could say that," Andy said, wincing.

"Out with it," Nigel said.

"I moved in," Andy admitted. "Last weekend."

There was a long moment of silence. Andy finally glanced over at Nigel, who appeared too stunned to speak.

"Ah," he finally said, blinking rapidly. "Well, then." He shook his head.

"It's not a big deal," Andy said quickly. "Everybody knows we're friends now. We're telling people that I've moved in to help out while she's pregnant. If anybody asks. So far nobody's even asked. I'm not sure they've noticed yet. Or maybe they've already just assumed—"

"You're crazy," Nigel said.
"Not you too," Andy said flatly. "I've had this conversation with her, and with my own parents, and I don't want to have it again, okay? I know it's crazy. And everything's fine."

"Your parents? What do they have to say about this?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Andy said, staring out the window.

Another pause, and then Nigel said quietly, "I'm sorry. Mine stopped speaking to me too, for a while."

Andy closed her eyes and decided that she wasn't going to cry. She licked her lips. "Yeah, well… they'll get over it."

"I'm sure," Nigel said, and patted her arm. They sat in silence for a few moments while Andy got the tears that she wasn't going to cry under control.

"How is she?" Nigel suddenly asked. Andy sniffed and glanced over at him, surprised. "Well, she asked about me, didn't she? It seems only fair."

"She's--" Andy sighed. "Tired. And trying not to slow down. And tired."

"So you moved in to 'help,' huh? Among other things." Andy nodded, surprised by the thoughtful tone in Nigel's voice. "But you work late most nights. And so does she."

"Well--we're hoping that moving in together will--you know, give us more opportunity to…of course, it's still--"

"Start going home at seven-thirty," Nigel said. Andy's jaw dropped. Nigel kept looking at the back of the cab driver's head.

"I--" Andy said. "Nigel--"

"You work a fourteen-hour day for me," Nigel said. "I'm cutting you back to twelve." He finally looked at Andy, firm resolve on his face. "You damn well better make those twelve count, though."

"I will," Andy whispered, hardly believing her ears. "Nigel, I…are you sure?"

"No," Nigel said. "So take the offer while it lasts."

"I will," Andy said, trying to fight back tears again. "I will. Oh God. Thank you. Thank--"

"You're going to be spending more time with Miranda," Nigel said dryly, looking out of his window now. "What the hell are you thanking me for?"

When Andy told Miranda about Nigel's generosity that night, Miranda looked contemplative. But all she said was, "Well. That's good."

"Yeah," Andy said. "But, you know, it's only good if you're home, too."

"I'm home now, aren't I?" Miranda asked with some asperity. "It's not even eight-thirty yet." Andy realized that was true. Of course, it was 8:25, and of course, Miranda had only made it through the door five minutes ago, but facts were facts.

"Yeah," Andy said slowly. "You are."

"I am," Miranda confirmed. "And we had dinner with the twins last night. Didn't we?"
"We did," Andy said, remembering how Nigel had--carelessly, she'd thought--waved her out the door early. She wondered how long he'd been thinking about reducing her hours, about giving her more time with the woman who'd screwed him over but whom he still cared for. So much for him not wanting to be 'involved.' He'd always been full of crap, and she loved him for it. A lot.

"You said you didn't want to 'miss' me," Miranda said.

Andy brought herself back to Earth and blinked at Miranda, remembering. "Yeah," she said. "And you said that me moving in wasn't a cure-all."

"It's not," Miranda said, giving Andy a level stare.

Andy took a deep breath. "I'll be home by eight," she said. "If you will too, we can start having dinner later, if, if you want. If the twins do their homework before." She paused. "Do you want?"


"Shake on it?" she said, offering her hand.

They did.

The next night, Andy's sister called. Andy should have expected it to happen at some point, but she hadn't, and her stomach writhed when she saw Rachel's name on the phone display.

"You have to be out of your mind," Rachel said when Andy picked up. Not even a hello. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Rachel--"

"Dad says Mom was crying for hours."

"Oh, my God," Andy said, shutting her eyes. "Rachel, this isn't about them. I didn't do it to hurt anybody."

"I know," Rachel said, to Andy's surprise. "And Mom's always been dramatic." Andy couldn't stop a smile. She and Rachel had complained about that many times together when they were teenagers. "But--listen, I don't want to be on your back. You know I love you, you know you've got my support."

"Thanks," Andy whispered.

"But I've got to ask you. Are you sure this is a good idea? I mean, after all you've said about this woman--"

"Miranda," Andy said.

"Yeah, okay. Sorry. After all you've said about Miranda, we're suddenly supposed to believe this is some good and healthy thing?"

"I can't make you believe anything," Andy said, closing her eyes.
"I'm not asking you to," Rachel said in exasperation. "But this is damn weird, Andy, and I'm not going to pretend like it's normal. I never even knew you were gay! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm not gay," Andy said. "I mean, I don't think I am. I just want to be with her. Does it really matter?"

"Um, yeah," Rachel said, sounding incredulous. "You think it doesn't? What about Nate?"

"I loved Nate," Andy said through her teeth. "I love Miranda more. That's all. I mean, that's all there is to it. Okay?"

"Okay," Rachel sighed. "Okay, Andy. If that's the way you want it. Mom and Dad already said everything else, didn't they?"

"Yeah," Andy said, gulping at the memory. "And then some."

"I figured," Rachel said. "But you're my little sis. I might not understand, but I've got your back."

"Thanks," Andy said again, and felt a tear trickle down her cheek. "That means a lot. You, um. You don't know how much."

"No, I think I do," Rachel said. "You'd do the same if it was me."

"Of course I would," Andy said. Then she gave a croaky laugh. "Does this mean I can bring her to the wedding?"

"Uh," Rachel said, sounding hesitant. "Sure. That is, it'd be okay by me. If you really want to. But Mom and Dad--and I have to say, Mark thinks it's--"

"I was just kidding," Andy sighed. She couldn't imagine Miranda at her sister's wedding in Cincinnati, or for that matter, anywhere else. "But thanks anyway."

"Yeah. So. Tell her I said hi, I guess."

"I will," Andy said, her heart feeling lighter. If Rachel was coming around, maybe she could bring their parents with her. "Thanks," she repeated. "Thanks."

"Yeah," Rachel said. She paused. "Okay, I've got to know. What's she like in bed?"

"Wha--uh--" Andy's cheeks caught on fire. "Rachel!"

"Better than Nate? Come on. I remember when you got together with him, you couldn't stop talking about it--or, well, I guess she's pretty pregnant by now, huh?"

"Yeah," Andy croaked. "Oh my God. But, uh. She's fine. I mean, she's good. I mean, she's…" Andy reminded herself that Rachel wasn't about to go running to Page Six. "She's great."

"She is?" Rachel sounded disbelieving.

"The greatest," Andy said, and heard herself giggle like a twelve-year-old. Well, why shouldn't she? She hadn't been able to talk about this with anybody else, had she? "Seriously. Incredible."

"Wow." Now Rachel sounded impressed. "Well…good for you, then." Another pause. "That reminds me, did I ever tell you about the time Mark and I made it in the middle of a golf course?"

Andy rolled her eyes, but she was still giggling as she settled back against her pillow and let Rachel
Miranda's birthday was the twelfth of June. New York was really warming up by then, and she was starting to look a little fried when she returned home at night, even though she had air-conditioning everywhere she went. Andy always made sure to have ice water waiting, and had even started laying out thin, soft, comfortable clothes for Miranda to change into when she returned home. And Miranda, who ordinarily would have been irritated by such presumption, never said a word.

So, as Miranda prepared to go to her 'quiet dinner party' on the night of her birthday, she did not look thrilled by the prospect of dressing up and going out again. "It's going to get hotter," she muttered as she fastened the clasp of her bracelet. "Much hotter. Can you believe it, Andrea?"

"We'll keep the air conditioning nice and cold," Andy comforted her. She was sitting on Miranda's bed and watching her dress. She always liked watching that. It was both baffling and bedazzling to watch Miranda turn, all in a heartbeat, from a woman in a bathrobe to a goddess in jewelry and designer duds. Her dress tonight was a case in point. Andy had no idea how the designer--whoever it was--had managed it, but the dress somehow managed to make Miranda look…streamlined. Not bulky. "You're gorgeous," she said.

"Thank you." Miranda accepted the compliment as her due. Then she raised her eyebrows at Andy in the mirror. "Air-conditioning. That reminds me. The latest power bill arrived today." She smirked. "The envelope's on my dresser."

"Oh, okay," Andy said, reminding herself that it had been her own idea. She stood up and headed for the dresser. And there it was, on the envelope, her name: Andrea Sachs, 137 E. 73rd Street, New York, New York, 10021. Which was still weird. She opened the envelope.

Then her jaw dropped. "Jesus Christ!" Still watching her in the mirror, Miranda only laughed. "It's not funny!" Andy said. "Doesn't anybody in this house ever turn out the lights? My God!"

"The twins do have a dreadful habit of leaving them on," Miranda said. "I've spoken to them. So has Greg. As did Stephen. It hasn't seemed to take."

"Well, I'm going to speak to them too," Andy said, still goggling at the number. "Holy shit. This is ridiculous."

"If you can't afford it," Miranda began, looking serious now.

"No, no, I can do it," Andy said. "It's still cheaper than my rent was." She glared at Miranda. "Barely."

"So talk to the twins," Miranda said. "I can't wait to see how you manage that."

Andy pursed her lips. Good point. "Uh. Hmm."

"From the fairy godmother who brings the pizza, to the wicked stepmother." Miranda's smirk had to be hurting her face by now. "How the mighty will fall."

Andy glared at her defiantly. "I bet I can do it," she said.
"I'll believe it when I see it." Miranda opened one more jewelry box. This one had a gold bow on it. Her voice softened. "Now, then."

She lifted out the necklace inside: a chain of small sapphires set in white gold. Andy held her breath and sucked in her lower lip.

"Ah," Miranda said, and smiled. Then Andy tried not to faint in sheer relief. She liked it. Thank God. Andy had waffled over catalogues and websites for hours. "This is lovely, Andrea," Miranda continued. "Thank you."

"Glad you like it," Andy mumbled. Really glad. She squirmed from the memory of sticker shock. She'd definitely put her savings from the rent towards this one. And some of her actual savings as well. She'd never bought anything so expensive in her life. Or so lovely. But Miranda's soft, smooth throat would put it to shame.

"I know it's not much compared to--" she began.

"Oh, be quiet," Miranda said, rolling her eyes. "Help me put it on."

Andy went to stand behind her and fastened the clasp at the nape of her neck with fingers that only shook a little. "It, uh, it looks good with your dress, doesn't it?" she said.

"Mmm." Miranda trailed her fingers over the chain, pausing briefly on each small sapphire, coming to rest on the larger one in the pendant. "Did you choose it yourself?"

"Yeah," Andy said, turning pink at Miranda's look of approval. "I like you in sapphires. They bring out your eyes." She slid her arms around Miranda, who leaned back against her, looking satisfied. "You just wait," she added, and kissed Miranda's temple. "I'll work hard and become a famous writer and get rich. And then I'll get custom pieces made just for you." Miranda chuckled. "All kinds of stuff. Everybody'll know I'm your sugar daddy." Now Miranda actually laughed. "Diamonds and emeralds next time."

"No rubies?" Miranda inquired, her eyes sparkling. She looked exactly as she'd looked in the car on New Year's Eve: relaxed, amused, happy, as if in spite of herself. Andy kissed her throat. Definitely soft and smooth.

"Rubies, sure," she said. "If you want them." Or anything else she wanted.

"I don't wear many rubies, actually," Miranda said contemplatively.

"Oh, why not?" Andy asked. "They'd bring out your eyes even better." Miranda reached back and pinched her. "Ow!"

"It serves you right," Miranda said. "Diamonds and rubies, indeed. Aren't you supposed to lecture me about the problems of the working man?"

"Before, sure," Andy said, and reached up to trace the necklace where it lay over Miranda's collarbone. Miranda shivered. "I used to write about janitors. Now I want to make money so I can give a rich woman more diamonds." She met Miranda's eyes unflinchingly in the mirror. "You see what you did?"

Miranda raised her eyebrows. "And where did these sapphires come from?" she inquired. "The bloody mines of Burma?"

"No!" Andy said at once. "I made sure they were ethically sourced. I asked the jeweler. I--" Miranda
"Yeah," Andy finished with a sigh.

"Leopards and spots," Miranda said. "You've heard it." Then she disengaged herself from Andy's grip. "I won't be too late tonight. I can always beg off with exhaustion." She glared down at her stomach. "At least he's good for something."

"Ow," Andy said again, laughing. "Be nice. I bet he can hear you."

"What are you and the girls going to do tonight?" Miranda asked as she picked up her bejeweled clutch.

"Watch TV," Andy said. Miranda immediately looked disapproving, but what had she expected? Poetry recitations and musings on calculus? "I might run out really quick to rent a movie for us. Nothing too exciting."

"Nothing violent, either," Miranda warned. "Remember how they were when they came home from Chelsea's last week." Andy grimaced. They'd apparently watched a horror movie and hadn't been able to go to sleep. And when they did, they'd left all the lights on. Andy glared again at the power bill.

"Have a good time," Miranda said. Andy looked up, and this time Miranda's smile was pure schadenfreude as she watched Andy with the bill.

"Yeah," Andy said, rolling her eyes. Then she added, seriously, "You too. I hope you don't really get exhausted."

"Don't bet on it," Miranda said. She pursed her lips in thought, and then added quietly, "I wish you were coming."

Andy looked at her in surprise. The possibility that she might be invited to a 'select gathering' of Miranda's coterie--when there was no ulterior motive behind it, like embarrassing Irv--hadn't even occurred to her. "Oh," she said. "Well, uh, maybe next time?"

She'd only been half-serious. But Miranda looked completely serious when she said, "We'll see." She paused. "Soon. After the divorce." She took Andy's hand. "As I told the girls."

Andy blushed and fidgeted. "Okay," she said, deciding that sometime between now and November, she had to figure out how to be around Miranda's set without feeling like a complete imposter. It had to happen eventually--their homey cocoon, their nest, couldn't last forever, as wonderful as it was. Andy would have to learn how to be part of Miranda's world in a different way than ever before. Talk about coming out in style.

Miranda glanced down at her stomach. "I just realized. Isn't it strange to think that he'll be born exactly a month after my birthday?"

"I guess," Andy said, surprised again, letting herself be distracted. She hadn't thought about it like that either. "Well, it'll be easy to remember, anyway."

"True," Miranda mused, and let go of Andy's hand. "It looks like you've got the nursery nearly set up."

"Nearly," Andy agreed. The twins had moved upstairs earlier in the week, and seemed delighted to have an entire floor to themselves. They'd probably leave the lights on everywhere. "I've got clothes for him, and blankies and stuff. And the changing table and all that. All the stuff the books list, you know. Plus everything everybody's sent you."
Which had grown to an obscene number of items, including a custom-made, hand-carved oaken crib from Italy sent by the Barnhardts. And an automated, state-of-the-art mobile from Dan Rather, of all people. Although few people had chosen to send anything that would be useful on an everyday basis, like diapers and towels and blankets. It figured. Andy felt very sorry for Miranda's assistants--she had three now, though none of them had started coming by the house yet--who were going to be making baby-related runs constantly. Better them than her, though.

"I'm glad to see it," Miranda said, breaking into Andy's thoughts. She glanced down the hallway, towards the stairs, and sighed. "I've been giving some thought," she began, "to what you said about changing our rooms."

Andy gave a silent cheer of triumph. "I'll have it all ready for you by the time you get home tonight." For now, that would just involve pajamas, a change of clothes, and switching their bathroom necessaries.

"It's only temporary," Miranda sniffed. "And my office--"

"We'll all fetch and carry for you," Andy said. "Trust me. We're going to have to get used to it, anyway." Well, the twins would. Andy had been used to it for over a year. "You can't get rid of any of my stuff, though."

"I won't be held responsible if those shot glasses disappear," Miranda said, and swept through her bedroom door, her nose held high in the air.

As they reached the stairwell, the twins began to thunder downstairs. "Are you leaving, Mom?" Caroline asked.

"Yes, darling," Miranda said, and kissed both of the girls. "But I'll be home in a few hours." It was six-fifteen. "Be good for Andrea."

"We will," Cassidy promised.

"What are we going to do?" Caroline asked Andy.

Miranda smirked at Andy and descended the stairs. "Oh, I don't know," Andy said, watching her retreating back. "I'll think of something."

Miranda returned at nine o'clock. Andy heard the front door shut, and called, "We're in here," from the TV room.

Miranda entered the room, and her eyes went wide at the sight of the twins, who were watching the gigantic screen in rapt fascination. The credits had just begun to roll, and Melissa Etheridge was singing. "What's this?" she asked.

"An Inconvenient Truth," Andy said, giving Miranda her biggest shit-eating grin.

"That Al Gore thing?" Miranda asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Well, we've learned a lot, haven't we, guys?" Andy asked the twins.

Caroline turned to her mother with a look of horror on her face. "Mom, have you heard of global
"Global warming?" she asked.

"Yes, global warming." Miranda blinked. "Well, yes, of course."

"Polar bears!" Cassidy said, looking at Miranda with equally wide eyes. "Did you see this movie, Mom? The glaciers are all melting, and they'll be extinct soon!" Miranda opened her mouth. "Polar bears!" Cassidy added.

"Yeah," Andy said, nodding sagely. "It's a shame. We're all so wasteful with our resources. Water, and gas, and... electricity."

"Oh my gosh!" Caroline jumped to her feet. "We've got to be more careful." She ran out of the room, ignoring her mother's disbelieving stare. "Mom, you left the light on in the hallway!" she called back accusingly.

"And we have to buy a hybrid car," Cassidy added. "And we can buy those cool twisty lightbulbs too. And the baby can't have disposable diapers or--"

Miranda turned her most evil glare ever on Andy, who returned it with an angelic smile.

"Happy Birthday, sweetie," she said. "Your bedroom's all ready."

Miranda growled. And looked kind of impressed.

Miranda paid Andy back for the necklace with interest; as usual, she got a pile of birthday presents from various celebrities, and she didn't want most of them. So the twins got first crack at everything and Andy took the rest, which meant she ended up with a bright blue iPod Nano (the twins already had two apiece) and a Movado watch (the twins said it "looked like old people stuff").

On the night after Miranda's birthday, Andy connected the iPod to the Bose speakers in her bedroom, which was now Miranda's bedroom. And after the baby was born, Miranda would move back into her old room, and Andy would move into Caroline's old room, and the baby would have Cassidy's. Musical bedrooms. Andy was sort of wishing she hadn't unpacked at all. But she had to concede that Mozart sounded great in here.

"I can't believe I have to look at that thing every night," Miranda said, glaring over her glasses at Andy's bookcase. She was looking at the latest mockup of Vanity Chair while Andy rubbed her feet.

"Have you had any bad dreams about it yet?" Andy asked. "You said you would."

"No, but I'm sure tonight's the night," Miranda said. "Did you send off your book review today?"

"Yeah. Seamus got back to me and said it looked fine. Only a couple of revisions." Andy smiled. "So looks like I get to do the second one, too." Then she bit her lip. "I hope that one's good, because I've got to give it a good review."

Miranda looked up again, frowning. "Why?"

"It's Christian Thompson's collaboration with Benny Doran," Andy admitted, trying not to look guilty. Miranda pursed her lips. "Oh, come on. I owe him a lot."
"Do tell," Miranda said darkly.

"Pass," Andy said. Just then, mercifully, the phone rang. Miranda, still glaring, reached over to the nightstand and picked it up.

"Hello?" she said. Then she frowned. "Who is this?" Then her brows drew together so sharply that she got a deep V in her forehead. "Ah," she said coolly. A pause. "You may." Another pause. "Very well. In fact, she's here right now. Wait a moment." Then she stuck the phone out to Andy as if she were offering her a sword. "It's your father."

Andy gasped, and then hurriedly wiped the oil off her right hand before fumbling for the phone. "Uh, hi?" she said. "Dad?"

"Hi, Andy," her dad said. "Are you…uh…free to talk?"

"Yeah," Andy said, and rose off the bed. "Yeah, I'm--sure." She pointed at the door, and Miranda waved her out, looking both irritated and concerned. "So, uh, what's going on?"

"Oh, not much," her dad said. "Just, er, thought I'd give you a call and see how things were."

Andy, who'd made it to the hallway, paused. "Fine," she said cautiously. "Things are…are fine."

"Good," her dad said. "That's good."

"Er--what about you? Everything's okay at home, right?"

"Oh, yes." Her dad sounded strained now. "Same old, same old."

"So nothing's happened," Andy said hesitantly.

"Nothing has to 'happen' for me to give my daughter a call, does it?"

"No, no," Andy said as she started climbing the steps up to the second floor. She wished she knew what the hell was going on. She hadn't spoken to her parents in two weeks, and now her dad was just calling out of the blue? "Of course not. I'm, I'm glad to hear from you."

"Likewise," her dad said quietly. "So. How's work?"

"It's fine," Andy said. "I mean, it's good. I sent a book review to *Rolling Stone* today."

"Oh, hey, that's great," her dad said. "You said they gave you two, right?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "I'll write the second one next month. Er…how's Mom?"

"She's not here right now," her dad said, sounding evasive.

"Oh," Andy said. There was a long, extremely awkward silence.

"So. Any good stories about Nigel lately?" her dad asked.

"Oh," Andy said again, and struggled to think. "Yeah…"

They hung up a bare ten minutes later. Andy, who'd made it to her/Miranda's bedroom, stared blankly at a wall mirror. Her dad hadn't said anything about Miranda, or about anything unrelated to Andy's job and, briefly, the current weather in Cincinnati.
So this was how it was going to be. Like with Nigel, only worse. They'd talk, but not about…

Andy tried to tell herself it wasn't a big deal. After all, she'd been talking to her parents about everything but Miranda for months. Except that it was a big deal. Now that it was out in the open, you couldn't just shove it, well, back in the closet. Could you?

"Andrea?" Miranda called from downstairs.

Andy sighed. "Coming," she said, and brought the phone back to Miranda's room. Miranda had a curious look on her face that lapsed into resignation when she saw the slump of Andy's shoulders. "I think they're going to pretend that you don't exist," Andy said. "At least my dad is. I didn't talk to Mom."

Miranda took the phone and replaced it in the cradle. "It will take time," she said. "You said that your sister was supportive."


"I'll send a lovely gift," Miranda said firmly.

"Yeah," Andy said. "You'd be better dressed than the bride, anyway. It's for the best."

"Undoubtedly." Miranda gave Andy a meaningful look. "Shut the door, why don't you?"

Andy gulped, began to sweat, and did. A few minutes later, she'd contorted herself into a position that was only a little uncomfortable so that Miranda could leisurely kiss her while slipping one hand between her legs. Then Miranda slid her top open and began to kiss and nuzzle her breasts very gently, almost tenderly, until Andy was almost ready to grab her hair and beg her to go for it.

Instead she whimpered, "I like it, um--rougher than you do--please--"

Miranda bit down on a nipple, pressed hard with her thumb, and Andy squirmed in ecstasy, not quite able to muffle her cry.

"Rough enough?" Miranda whispered, and licked the nipple she'd bitten. Andy shivered, and Miranda pulled her hand back out of her pants. Then she rubbed her wet fingers against Andy's mouth. "Clean up, if you please."

Andy felt much too good to snipe back, so she just licked, and nestled in. Then she touched Miranda's chin, urged her close, and kissed her some more, until the last of her own unhappiness had drifted into the back of her mind. Miranda was generally quite agreeable to kisses, and allowed Andy to indulge herself nearly every night.

"Can't get enough of you," Andy sighed when she finally let Miranda go. She felt herself relaxing, felt her eyelids getting pleasantly heavy. "Can I stay here tonight?"

"If you must," Miranda said a little hoarsely, and patted her hip. Andy smiled, rested a possessive hand on Miranda's belly, and let Mozart send her to sleep.
Two days later, Nigel took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Thanks for coming in," he said. "Especially when it's such a beautiful day outside."

"At least our air conditioning's working," Andy said, glancing out Nigel's office window to where the heat shimmered in the evening air. She thought that Al Gore maybe had a point, beyond just making her power bill cheaper. "Miranda's up to her elbows in work at home, anyway. I'm going to try to give her a break tomorrow. I, uh, promised the twins I'd take them to the zoo." She gave Nigel a quick look. She didn't want him to think she was taking his gift for granted, or asking for more than she was due. "But--um--if you really need--"

"I won't call you in tomorrow," Nigel promised, straightening the papers on his desk. "But it just wouldn't be a proper Saturday if we didn't have to come in once in a while and work our little fannies off." He rubbed his hands over his forehead and yawned before adding, "Changing the subject from your domestic bliss to mine, did I tell you I'm buying my brownstone?"

"Yeah?" Andy asked, impressed.

"Yes. The landlord's going condo, and I love my place. You've never seen it, have you?" Andy shook her head. "I'll have a housewarming party. Get me something expensive."

Andy grinned. "I'll get you a buff guy to decorate the place. How about that?"

"You mock me," Nigel said. Then he added casually, "But you might meet somebody at this housewarming. Somebody I've also met, that is." Andy's eyes went wide and she leaned forward eagerly. "That's all I'm saying for now."

"When do I start buying flowers for him?" Andy asked.

"Never," Nigel said firmly. Then he added, "Yet."

Andy opened her mouth. Just then, her cell phone rang on her desk. She glanced at Nigel, who waved his hand. Andy got up and hurried to answer the phone.

It was Miranda, who knew she was working today. Frowning, Andy answered the phone and said, "Hello?"

"Are you free to leave work?" Miranda asked without preamble.

Andy blinked. "Uh, not really," she said. "We're kind of in the middle of the reports for--"

"I hope you're not working too hard," Miranda said, and for some reason, the tone of her voice made Andy's stomach seize up. She tried frantically to think of anything she might have fucked up in the last twenty-four hours, but then Miranda continued, "Because you need to come home. We have some unexpected guests."

"Some what?" Andy frowned at Nigel, who was watching her curiously. "Guests?"

"Your parents are here," Miranda said blandly.

Andy's heart stopped and her whole body suddenly got cold. She must have done something with her face too, because now Nigel looked alarmed. "My, my what," she croaked. "My--"

"Standing right in front of me as we speak, in fact," Miranda continued, using the syrupy voice she always used for people she hated, but had to be nice to until a better alternative presented itself. "What a delightful surprise."
"My…my…"

"I've already got Jimena making hors d'oeuvres, but you definitely don't want to miss dinner," Miranda said. "It's unexpected, of course, but I'm sure we'll be able to fill two extra plates, don't you think?"

"When you, when you say my parents are there," Andy began, leaning back against her desk for support. Nigel's jaw immediately dropped. "They're--you said, right in front of you? They're, they're, they're--"

"Hurry home, dear," Miranda said, and hung up. Andy stared blankly at the wall and prayed that she'd just hallucinated the last fifteen seconds, even as she knew she hadn't.

Then, panting, she turned to Nigel, whose eyes were as wide as her own had to be.

"So, can I come and watch?" he asked.

"I have to go home now," Andy whimpered.

"I know, darling," he said, and reached for his phone. "I'll call you a cab while you take deep breaths. Want a shot from my liquor cabinet?"

"Yes," Andy said. Then she added, "No."

"Deep breaths," Nigel reminded her. Andy sat down and dropped her head between her knees. "Hi," Nigel said into the phone. "I need a cab at the front door of Delton Wright, ASAP…"

Ten minutes later, Andy was sitting in the back seat of a smellier-than-usual cab, although she wasn't sure if that was some kind of synesthesia kicking in, or what. She dialed Miranda's house again, hoping she wasn't actually about to faint.

This time, after four endless rings, a twin picked up. "Andy!" Caroline said, her voice a stage whisper. "Your parents are here!"

Caroline's voice--a kid's voice--reminded Andy that she had to be a grown-up herself, had to keep it together. She rallied. "That's what your mom said," she said. "Is, um, is everything okay? Where are you?"

"We're okay, I guess," Caroline said. "I ran to your room to get the phone. I mean Mom's room, or whatever. They're all at the other end of the hall, sitting down. Your mom looks a little like you."

"Yeah, we've always…what's going on?"

"I dunno," Caroline said, her 'whisper' getting louder and more excited by the second. "Jimena's bringing up some hors d'oeuvres. Mom's being nice to them. I mean, nice like she is, you know." Andy knew. She winced. "She's making me and Cassidy sit all quiet on the couch. I was really glad to go get the phone. Oh, she's--" Suddenly Caroline's voice got really loud. "I'm coming, Mom! It's Andy, she's on her way home!" Andy held the phone away from her ringing ear. "Anyway," Caroline added, sotto voce again, "does this mean they're not mad at you anymore?"

"I--" Doubt it. "--hope so," Andy said. "You three sit tight, okay? Everything'll be fine. I'll be there soon."

"This is so great," Caroline said, with the same sadistic glee she'd shown on the London Eye when Andy had been scared of heights. "Hurry up, I can't wait to see what they're going to say when you
"Thanks a lot," Andy said, and hung up without saying goodbye. Then she dropped her head between her knees again. At least this time the cab driver didn’t offer his opinion on the matter. Busted yet again.

When Andy arrived home, she saw that the situation was about as bad as she’d expected.

Namely: on the first floor, the twins were sitting silently on the couch, using perfect posture and with their hands in their laps like Stepford children. Miranda sat in one armchair, also gracefully poised in spite of her swollen belly, smiling like a crocodile at Andy’s parents, who had chairs of their own and were glaring right back at her. A coffee table sat stranded in the middle of it all, offering a plate of hors d’oeuvres that nobody had touched.

As she approached the group, trying to smile, Andy had the wild thought that she should get the twins out of there, because it couldn’t possibly be healthy for children to breathe in an atmosphere of pure poison.

When they all saw her, her father rose to his feet, giving her a tight smile even as he came forward for a hug. He squeezed her very tightly, almost to the point of pain, while she patted him awkwardly on the back.

"Well--well, hi there!" she said as he pulled away, looking back and forth between him and her mother, who continued to sit in her chair with an unusually blank expression on her face. Andy kind of felt like throwing up, but instead she bent down and kissed her mom’s cheek. "I had no idea you guys were coming!"

"Neither did we," her dad said, trying to sound hearty as he sat back down again. "It was pretty much an impulsive thing, actually--just bought the tickets last night and flew up this afternoon. Stowed our luggage in a hotel and came right here. Guess we couldn't resist the urge to see you."

"Yes," her mother said, glancing at Miranda. "It's been a long time since Christmas, hasn't it?"

Oh, shit. But Miranda replied, with perfect equanimity, "How time flies, Mrs. Sachs. Christmas seems like years ago already."

"It really does," Andy’s mom said. Andy sat down on the couch between the twins, aware that her knees were shaking visibly. The twins scooted closer to her, instantly and without prompting. Caroline even wrapped her arms around one of Andy’s, as if in possession. Andy glanced at Miranda, whose lips twitched.

Andy’s mother saw it too, and her own lips thinned.

"How was your flight?" Andy squeaked.

"Fine, fine," her dad said. He kept looking at Miranda's belly, apparently unable to stop himself. "No real delays, even if it is the travel season."

"Yeah, New York gets a lot of tourists in the summer," Andy heard herself babbling. "I think it's a major industry. Although I've never looked up the statistics. I bet City Hall has them, though. And
the museums probably keep records. Although of course people come here to see a lot more than museums." Miranda was looking at her in disbelief. "Are you guys planning to see any museums?"
Andy added feebly.

"No," her dad said. He studied the painting on the wall behind Miranda's head for a moment before looking back at Andy and saying, "We've got a flight out late tomorrow afternoon, actually. We bought a ticket for you too."

Miranda stiffened. So did the twins. Andy stared at her dad. "You--what?" she said.

"We would like you to come home with us, Andrea," her mom said, resolutely looking at her, looking nowhere near Miranda. Caroline suddenly squeezed Andy's arm very tightly. "Just for a little while."

"You've got to be kidding," Andy said. "I mean, you have to be."

"No," her dad said. "We're not. Not at all."

"I'm not going t--" Andy began.

"Andrea, please take the girls upstairs," Miranda said quietly.

Everybody turned to look at her. Andy's muscles felt completely frozen. So did the twins'. She wondered how she was supposed to take them anywhere. "Uh--I--"

"Please," Miranda repeated. Her eyes were fixed with unwavering intensity on Andy's mother's face. Her mother looked right back. "We can get Jimena to bring dinner up to them. They have homework." She paused. "I'd like to get to know your parents one-on-one."

Andy knew that she should protest, should say she had a right to be a part of whatever showdown was on the way. She also knew that there was nothing more she wanted in the world than to get the twins the hell out of this room, and herself along with them, if she was to be honest. Just for a few minutes, so she could get her breath back. "S-sure," she said, and stood up. "Come on, guys." For once, the twins obeyed without demur and stood up too.

Then Andy gave her parents a very direct look. "I'll be right back," she said as firmly as she could, and led the twins towards the staircase. She was relieved that, when they all passed between Miranda and Andy's mother, nobody burst into flames.

They were barely one floor up before Caroline grabbed Andy's arm again. "You're not going back with them, are you?" she whispered.

"You can't, you can't," Cassidy said, looking distraught. "You said you'd stay. You said--"

"I said I'm not going anywhere," Andy said, and patted Cassidy's back as they kept on heading up to the third floor. "And I'm not. Mom and Dad can't drag me back to Ohio. Trust me."

This apparently reassured them both, at least enough for Caroline to say excitedly, "What do you think they'll say to Mom? Are they going to fight? Are they going to yell at her?"

"I don't know," Andy said. They reached the landing. She took a deep breath. "All right, you guys. You heard your mom. Rooms. Homework." She even put her hands on her hips. The twins rolled their eyes. She couldn't blame them: they were obviously planning to stick their heads over the banisters as soon as she was out of sight. She couldn't blame them for that, either, and caught herself hoping fervently that nobody would, in fact, yell. "We'll make sure you get fed."
For once the twins didn't talk about how starved they were. Instead, Cassidy glanced distractedly at the stairs, and said, "Okay."

"And we might have to put off the zoo tomorrow."

"Duh," Caroline said, craning her neck, trying to hear.

"Rooms," Andy repeated. The girls exchanged shifty glances with each other, and disappeared into their bedrooms, no doubt ready to exit them again as soon as Andy was down the stairs.

Andy took yet another deep breath and headed down those stairs, trying not to fall. Although if she broke her leg, maybe she would distract Miranda and her parents enough that they wouldn't kill each other before the night was over. But if she had a broken leg she'd be useless for taking care of Miranda and the girls, so she had to discard the notion.

Miranda and Andy's parents were speaking quietly enough that Andy couldn't hear them until she was almost back on the first floor. Caroline and Cassidy had to be feeling immensely frustrated right about now.

"--feel if it was your children?" Andy's mother was saying, her voice shaking with emotion. "Have you ever thought about that, goddamn it?"

"Helena," her dad said.

"May I assume my children are adults in this scenario?" Miranda asked smoothly. "Because if that's the case, I like to think I'd treat them as adults. Capable of deciding for themselves." She glanced up as Andy reappeared. Her face was perfectly calm, but her eyes were at their coldest. "Are the girls upstairs?"

"Yeah. Probably listening on the landing. So I hope nobody shouts." Andy steeled herself and went to stand by Miranda, placing a hand on her shoulder. Her mother pinched her lips into whiteness again; her father's hands curled into fists on his knees.

"What are you doing?" Andy asked. "How can you come here without calling, and tell me you want me to come back to Cincinnati with you? Are you nuts?" They had to be nuts. Andy would never have imagined her steady, level-headed parents pulling a stunt like this in her wildest dreams.

"Maybe so," her dad admitted, unclenching one of his hands and rubbing it over his forehead. "But we had to see you in person, Andy. This can't happen over the phone." What the hell was up, Andy wondered, with everybody deciding that you couldn't talk about big important issues over the phone? "We tried, didn't we?" her dad added. "You wouldn't listen to us. We wouldn't listen to you. It's got to be face-to-face." He looked back at Miranda. "And I'm not going to lie. We had to get a look at you, too."

Miranda did not deign to reply. She just kept watching Andy's parents with that same cold, unwavering stare, as if challenging them to tell her what they saw.

"I just want to know," Andy's mother said, her voice trembling with anger, "I just want to know, Ms. Priestly, what is it you want out of a young woman who was working for you? Who looked up to you, who admired you, who'd do anything for you?" She swallowed hard. "Can you look me in the eye--as a mother, can you look me in the eye and tell me that?"

"I can," Miranda said. "I won't." Before she could stop herself, Andy tightened her hand painfully on Miranda's shoulder. She quickly loosened her grip, but Miranda had not appeared to notice. "You cannot possibly think I am interested in explaining or justifying myself to you."
Andy's dad's control finally broke. He leaned forward in his chair, his mouth pulling back into a snarl. "I don't give a damn what you think about us," he said in a low voice. "And I don't care who you are or how much clout you have. This is about my daughter. And I want to know what your intentions are. I want to know--"

"If this is about me, maybe you should talk to me, too," Andy said.

"They're not here to talk to you, Andrea," Miranda said. "They're here to talk to me and then steal you away. Rescue you. Isn't that right, Mr. Sachs?"

Her dad's face flushed. "I've had enough of this," he said. He stabbed his finger at her. "You're exploiting my child, and you're telling her it's love. Maybe you--"

"Stop it, Dad," Andy said instantly, but her dad ignored her.

"--do this all the time," he continued, "I wouldn't know, but she's been killing herself for you for a year, and if you can't see that--"

"Dad!"

"She's done everything for you," her mother rasped. "Can't you see that? How can you ask for even more, and still sleep at night?"

"I actually sleep very well," Miranda said. "Especially when Andrea's there."

Andy yanked her hand off Miranda's shoulder, and forestalled her parents' enraged response by barking, "Not helping!" Miranda turned to glower at her, but Andy glowered right back. "Stop baiting them! They came here to talk." She glared at her parents too, like she never had before--like she'd glared at Caroline in London, like she'd glared at Jessica back at *Runway*. They didn't recoil from it (it was her mother's glare, after all), but they did look shocked. "So talk. Talk to me. Tell me what the hell you think you're accomplishing by coming here like this, and insulting us both."

"I don't know," her dad said, to Andy's surprise. "I told you it was an impulsive thing, Andy. We don't have a plan."

"Except for snatching her back to Cincinnati," Miranda pointed out.

"Will you stop it, please?" Andy said, wanting to shake her. Even Miranda ought to know that this was not the time to stir the pot. "I'm not going, okay? I'm staying here."

"Fine. Great. Then stay here--I mean, in New York," her dad said, holding up his hands. "We're not going to kidnap you, for God's sake." He glared at Miranda. "Like I said. We had to see for ourselves."

"So?" Andy said. "So what do you see?"

"I see what's here," her mother said through gritted teeth. She looked at Miranda. "I see a fifty-year-old woman who is pregnant and who--"

"Fifty-one," Miranda said. "For the sake of accuracy."

"Miranda," Andy growled.

"She gave me a beautiful necklace," Miranda continued.

"Okay, seriously, you need to--"
"I see," her mother continued, looking like she was two seconds away from grabbing the hors\nd'oeuvres tray and breaking it over Miranda's head, "somebody who uses people for a living, and\ntreats them like chess pieces, and thinks she can treat my daughter like one--well, let me tell you\nsomething about me--"

"Dinner is ready, Ms. Priestly," Jimena called from downstairs, sounding both hesitant and proper.

Her voice served to snap all four of them back into reality. Andy realized she was trembling.\nMiranda wasn't.

"Andrea?" Miranda said quietly.

"Yes?" Andy squeaked.

"Why don't you go on down to dinner--"

"What?!"

"--with your father," Miranda said, giving Andy's mom a level stare. Andy's mom narrowed her\neyes, which still glittered with fury.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," her dad said, giving Andy's mom a quick look.

"Go, Richard," her mom said. "You go on downstairs. You too, Andy. I want to talk to this…\nthis…"

"Yes, yes," Miranda said softly. "We'll talk, Mrs. Sachs. We'll get everything straightened out\nperfectly." She rose to her feet. "Let's go upstairs. We'll speak in the study there. There's a very\ncomfortable couch, isn't there, Andrea?" Andy suddenly wanted to sink through the floor. "Follow\nme. Andrea, if you don't mind, please tell Jimena to bring up two plates for the girls."

"Sure," Andy croaked. "Uh. Yeah. C-come on, Dad." She stumbled for the staircase, her dad right\nbehind her, wondering if her mother was going to be arrested for homicide before the night was\nthrough. Or if Miranda would.

Jimena was setting the table, but fortunately she'd only gotten through four place settings. "Jimena?"
Andy said quickly. "Um, Ms. Priestly wants you to take a couple of plates up to the girls' rooms. Or,\nyou know what? I will. There's no reason you should have to--"

"You stay here. Talk to your father," Jimena said calmly. She glanced towards the stairs, which\.meant she'd heard a great deal, if not everything. "I will take the food." Then she efficiently filled\ntwo plates, put them on a tray with glasses of juice, and carried them upstairs.

Andy silently filled two other plates, though her stomach was too knotted up to eat. Then she and her\ndad seated themselves at the table and started picking at their food, not looking at each other.

"Think they'll kill each other?" Andy asked.

"No way to tell," her dad said. They picked a little more. Then, to Andy's complete surprise, her dad\nsaid, "Her daughters. The twin girls. They seem to have taken to you."

Andy looked up, but he was concentrating on his orzo. "Yeah," she said carefully. "I think so. I've\nkind of taken to them, too." Which was another thing she would never have dreamed of saying a\nyear ago, when they'd gotten her in such trouble. Sure, the twins were spoiled, and could be awful\nbrats, but she didn't think they were inherently bad kids. They'd grow up just fine if they were
handled right. "I've taken to everything, really."

"I just think you're too young for all this, honey," her dad said, finally meeting her eyes. He didn't look furious now: just serious and frustrated. "I mean, what role are you playing here? Stepmother, or what? Are you ready for that kind of responsibility?" He shook his head before she could answer. "I thought you wanted to concentrate on your career. I thought that's why you and Nate fought so much."

Andy knew she had to tread very carefully now, as she put into words what she'd been thinking for months. "I did," Andy said. "I do. But it was all...out of balance, then. I worked all the time." Just like Miranda, who'd seen a great deal of herself in Andy. "I was starting to become my job. That wasn't what I wanted. I didn't want to live like that." She snorted. "I even thought about quitting while I was in Paris because it freaked me out so much."

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't know." No, that wasn't true. She'd been powered by pure self-righteousness, hadn't she? "I felt like I had something to prove. To her, to myself. That you could be good at your job without becoming your job." She frowned. "It wasn't easy, though." She doubted it would ever be. Especially with Miranda.

"When you say you had to prove it to her," her dad began, and didn't seem to know how to finish.

"Oh," Andy said. "Well, it's--her husband was leaving her, you know? Because of her...well, because of a lot of stuff--" She snarled when she remembered how Stephen had behaved at the lawyer's office, all those months ago. "--but at the time, we thought it was because of her job. And...when she told me about it, in Paris..." Andy looked around to make sure that Miranda hadn't magically materialized out of thin air. "She seemed to think it was all out of her hands. That there wasn't any other way to be and she didn't know what to do about it. I guess I wanted to stick around so I could show her she was wrong." She snorted again. "Looks like I did, huh?"

"Have you?" her dad said. "Andy, when did this start?"

Andy thought briefly before deciding that there was no sense in lying about it. "The second time we were in London," she said. "At the end of Fashion Week."

"That was in February, right?" Andy nodded. "I remember thinking you sounded pretty bad around then," her dad said cautiously.

"But I sure perked up in March, didn't I?" Andy asked, and dared a tiny smile.

Her dad didn't take the bait. "Whose idea was it? Hers or yours?"

"Hers," Andy admitted. Her father's eyes darkened. "But it wasn't like that, Dad, really," she added quickly. "It wasn't sketchy or sleazy or...you know what it was?" She blinked as she realized it. "Proper."

"Proper?" Her dad stared at her. "Andy. There is nothing about this that is proper."

"No," Andy said, and suddenly laughed as she remembered the February morning when Miranda had solemnly declared her intentions and kissed her on the cheek. "It was. Oh, wow, I just thought about it. It was downright old-fashioned, almost." She saw the aghast look on her father's face, and quickly sobered up. "Sorry. But it was. It was fine. Dad, I agreed to this. She didn't make me do anything. Nobody could make me do anything like that."
"Well, you weren't afraid to stand up to her," her dad said, looking like it pained him to admit it. "I was glad to see that, at least. Not that she listened," he added darkly.

"Not this time," Andy admitted. "But yeah, I'm, um, I'm not a--a doormat, or anything." She decided not to add, 'Anymore.' "I don't work for her. She's not my boss in here. She never has been, not like that. I mean--it was my idea to move in. I had to talk her into it." Her dad looked appalled again, and Andy said defensively, "Well, we have new jobs, and we started working all the time and never seeing each other, and at least this way we can--"

Her dad groaned, and hid his face in his hands.

"Oh Dad, come on," Andy said helplessly. "I know you don't approve. I get it."

"Do you?" her dad asked, lowering his hands again and looking at her.

"Yeah," Andy said. "I do. But, um. That's not going to stop me. I said so." She took a deep breath. "I'm playing for keeps on this one, Dad, I'm not letting her get away. This is it. It's better than Nate, or, or anything else in the world."

"Playing for keeps?" her dad asked, lifting his eyebrows.

"Yeah," Andy repeated, realizing as she said it how extraordinary it was. 'It'--her thing with Miranda, playing for keeps. They'd been doing that from the very beginning, hadn't they? There had never been any talk between them of testing the waters, or keeping it casual, or getting to know each other better, or doing any of the stuff you'd normally do--they'd both known, from that first conversation in the kitchen, that it was going to be serious, "exclusive," that they were going to risk everything without knowing what came next.

Why hadn't Andy ever thought of it like that before?

"Andy?" her dad asked, sounding worried. Andy realized that she probably had a really strange look on her face.

"It's working, Dad," she heard herself say, as if from a great distance. "It's good. You don't know how good." Even when it was hard. When it was hard with Nate, it hadn't been good. It had been over.

Her dad took a deep breath, even as Andy heard a noise on the stairs. Jimena had returned. "Good night, miss," she said, nodding at Andy. "Sir." She nodded at Andy's dad.

"Uh, buenas noches, Jimena," Andy said. Jimena gave her an indulgent smile as she left.

"Servants," her dad said, after the front door closed behind Jimena. "Servants, and cars, and drivers, and..." He rubbed a hand over his forehead. "I'd say the same thing if she were a man. I don't want you to be some rich person's little plaything." Andy opened her mouth; he held up his hand. "I know. I know. You love her."

"Yes," Andy snapped. "I do. And she loves me."

Her dad sat back in his chair. "I want you to be with someone you love, Andy. But I also want you to respect yourself. I want you to be able to look at yourself in the mirror, and admire the person you see there."

"Can you do that? Honestly?"

"Yes," Andy said, looking right back. "Honestly, yes. I can." She could. More than ever, now that she'd stood up for herself to Miranda, her parents, and everybody else. "I don't know how else to put
this, Dad. I'm okay here. I'm happy here."

She heard another noise on the stair--faint, tentative. So did her dad. They blinked at each other before Andy figured it out.

"...Except for those pesky kids," Andy added loudly. "I can't wait to kidnap them and sell them into slavery for a huge profit." Then there was giggling. "Come on in here."

Caroline and Cassidy scurried into the kitchen and seated themselves in the two free chairs. "Your mom and our mom are still all locked up in the study," Caroline said to Andy. "What are they talking about?"

"You tell me," Andy said. "Did you hear any yelling?"

"Nope," Cassidy said. "We didn't hear anything at all." She looked up at Andy's dad, who was watching both of them with a wary expression on his face. "So you're not going to take her back, right?"

"No, we didn't want that," Andy's dad said carefully. "We really just wanted to see if she'd come home for a few days."

"Well, she won't," Caroline said, and reached for Andy's fork. "She's ours, so get lost. Can I eat some of this, Andy? I'm starving."

"Jimena just brought you a plate," Andy pointed out. "And you can't tell my parents to get lost." Although she was kind of tempted to, herself. "They're my parents, and I love them."

"Sorry," Caroline said graciously to Andy's slack-jawed father, before turning back to Andy and saying, "Now can I eat your food? We couldn't eat upstairs. We had to know what's going on."

"Tell you what," Andy said. "You can have my food if you start with the vegetables." Caroline wrinkled her nose. "Those are the terms."

"I'll eat them," Cassidy said, taking the fork from Caroline and starting in on the asparagus. Apparently she'd decided that eating vegetables downstairs, in the midst of the action, was better than eating the good stuff upstairs alone with her twin. Caroline, now deprived even of vegetables, gave Andy a doleful look.

Andy's father sighed, and pushed his own plate towards Caroline, who turned to look at him with wide eyes. He gave her a small, tight smile. "Go on," he said. "I'm not hungry. There's a lot of it left."

"Why? Is it bad?" Caroline asked, frowning down at the plate.

"No," Cassidy said around a mouthful of green peppers. "Hurry up and eat before Mom gets here. She'll be mad if she sees us." Caroline obeyed and dug in.

"You could always go back upstairs and eat," Andy said dryly. "Now that you know I'm not going anywhere."

Caroline shook her head, even as Cassidy glanced at Andy's dad, swallowed, and said, "We wanted to look at him."

"At me?" Andy's dad asked.
Cassidy looked him dead in the eye. "Why not? You came here to look at us."

Andy winced, but, to her surprise, her dad tilted his head to the side and even smiled. "Touché."

Cassidy looked like she was going to say something else. Andy prepared to cringe at whatever it would be, but then they all heard a door open and shut upstairs. On the second floor. Then, after a few more moments, they heard footsteps on the stairs.

Andy, her father, and the twins all held their breaths as Miranda and Andy's mom arrived in the kitchen.

Neither of them had a black eye, and nobody appeared to be missing any teeth; her mother wasn't even flushed with anger anymore. In fact, she was kind of pale. Pale, and thoughtful-looking. Miranda's face was as blank as ever.

"Are you certain you won't have some dinner, Helena?" she inquired.

"No thanks," Andy's mom said, turning a hooded gaze on Andy. Andy squirmed, mostly because she couldn't interpret it at all. "I think we'd better be going. Come on, Richard. I'd like to go back to the hotel."

Andy's father rose to his feet, frowning in concern. "Well, wait a minute. Can't we--"

"Richard, please," her mother said. "I'm very tired, and Miranda is too. 'Miranda is too'? Andy and her father exchanged an astonished look; so did the twins. For her part, Miranda remained completely unruffled. "Andy, we'll call you tomorrow. If you can, we'll meet for lunch and talk some more then." Andy nodded dumbly. Her dad opened his mouth again, and her mother said, "Richard. Please."

"...right," her dad said. He'd been resigned and amused with the twins a few seconds ago, but now he was glaring again at Miranda. Miranda looked back serenely.

"Good night, Richard," she said.

"Good night," Andy's dad said tightly. He glanced quickly at his wife, and then at Andy, before leaning in to give Andy a brief kiss on the cheek. "We'll see you tomorrow, Andy."

"S-sure," Andy said, worried and curious.

"Allow me to call my driver," Miranda said. "There's no earthly reason for you to take a cab to--"

"No," Andy's dad growled. Then he glanced down at the twins and their enormous eyes, and added, "No, thank you. It's a nice night--I think we'll walk for a bit, right, Helena?" She nodded. "Good night. Thanks for dinner," he added, as if it pained him.

"Not at all," Miranda murmured. Andy's mother gave her a long look, and then turned it on Andy, before leaning in and kissing her cheek.

"Good night, honey," she said. "We'll see you later."

"Yeah...good, good night..."

Her parents left. As soon as the front door closed, Andy's knees got wobbly and she sat down hard on the kitchen chair her dad had just vacated. Then she stared blankly up at Miranda, who raised her eyebrows at Andy for a brief second before turning to glare at the twins. "Go upstairs and finish your
"dinner, girls," she said.

"But--" Cassidy began.

"Go," Miranda repeated. They went. Miranda sat down too, and added, "Is there any food left?"

"Yeah," Andy said blankly. Then she snapped out of it, got up, and prepared a plate for Miranda. "Let me warm it up--"

"Don't worry about it," Miranda said. Her stomach grumbled. At any other time, it would have made Andy laugh. As it was, she just set the plate in front of Miranda, and went to get her a glass of Evian. Miranda ate silently while Andy tried not to stare at her.

Finally, though, Andy couldn't stand it any longer. It was still difficult to speak during the silences, when things were tense and Andy knew Miranda would prefer her to keep her mouth shut. But now she said, "I'm sorry. I didn't know. I never would have imagined they'd…" She trailed off, and repeated, "I'm so sorry."

"I see they share your manners," Miranda said coolly. "Inviting themselves in, and so forth."

"Hey," Andy said, stung. She was feeling pretty fragile right now, and not in the mood for Miranda to be a bitch. "I said I was sorry, I said I didn't know."

"There are some other things you didn't say," Miranda replied, looking at Andy and slicing right through her with her cold blue eyes.

"What are you--"

"For example, you never said that your parents apparently thought I was molesting you over Christmas," Miranda continued. She dropped her fork on the plate and leaned back in her chair, her eyes glittering with anger. "Or words to that effect."

"Oh my God," Andy groaned, and hid her face in her hands.

"It was wonderful to hear it from your mother instead," Miranda said. "I can't tell you how much I enjoyed that."

Andy stared at Miranda through the cracks in her fingers. "Why?" she said. "Why the hell would I ever have told you about that? What good would that have done?" Miranda opened her mouth. "I can't believe she said that to you."

"Why not?" Miranda snapped.

"Because they grilled me about it after Christmas and I told them they were crazy!" Andy threw her hands in the air. "Jesus Christ, I'm going to call her right now--I'm not meeting them for lunch, I'm going to--"

"Settle down," Miranda said, and picked up her fork again. Andy dropped her hands back into her lap. "Stop acting like a child. Your mother and I spoke…civilly…once we'd gotten past that charming moment."

"I'm not acting--what did you guys say?"

"I said what I had to say." Miranda's glare was lethal now. "Don't you know me by now, Andrea? I knew everything about your parents from the moment they set foot in our house. And I knew to
tackle your mother first. If it works, she'll bring your father around, and I'll never have to deal with this ridiculous drama again."

"But what did you say?" Andy persisted, leaning forward. "I mean, she didn't look happy, but she didn't look mad anymore. Not exactly."

Miranda's lips pinched. "I did what I said I wouldn't do," she said. "I justified myself to her. I explained myself, and my situation, and my feelings--things that she had absolutely no right to know, whether she's your mother or not--"

"But…but why did you…"

"Because it worked," Miranda said flatly. "As I knew it would. That's what it took. So I did it." Her mouth quivered with anger; her eyes were practically throwing off sparks. "I always do what it takes, haven't you noticed?"

Andy felt breathless. "Do what it takes to…"

"To keep you," Miranda said, looking her right in the eyes. "To keep you with me, and to keep them off our backs. I don't want a rift between you and your parents, Andrea. That would come between us as well."

"No!" Andy said at once. "I would never have gone back with them to Ohio, I would never have left you just because they said--you don't really think I would have, do you?"

"No," Miranda said. "I don't. Not for an instant."

Andy opened her mouth, and then stopped and looked at Miranda's face. Miranda was serious. Miranda meant it.

Miranda knew that Andy would not leave her. Hadn't thought about it for an instant. Miranda--Miranda Priestly--had absolute faith, absolute trust in Andy's love for her. Miranda, who trusted no one.

Andy gulped and watched the room spin around her. Miranda continued, "But I hope you understand that everything will be much easier and more pleasant if you're not completely estranged from your own parents. And at this stage of the game, anything that makes life easier or more pleasant…" She shifted in her chair, and winced. "Well. You can imagine how I feel about that." Then she frowned at Andy. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," Andy said faintly. At least the room had slowed down. Faith, and trust, and love. "I'm just…I'm glad you…I mean, I'm sorry you had to…with my mom and…"

"I want you to be happy," Miranda said. "Here with me. I don't want you to have regrets." Her jaw hardened. "If that means I have to…explain myself to your parents, then so be it."

"Thank you," Andy whispered.

"Don't thank me," Miranda said. "I'm fantasizing about killing your mother."

"Oh," Andy said.

"Quite."

"You, you do make me happy," Andy said, swallowing harshly. "I was thinking, when I was talking
to my dad--I couldn't explain it, he wouldn't believe me, but--we work. You and me."

"So you've said before," Miranda said, and took a bite of cold orzo. She wrinkled her nose.

"Yeah, but I always mean it," Andy said. "It's just--um, are you sure you don't want me to warm that up?"

"You might as well," Miranda growled, and pushed her plate away. "I skipped lun--" She stopped herself, but she was too late to keep Andy from scowling at her. "No. I don't want to hear it. Not tonight."

Andy grabbed her plate and stomped over to the microwave. "Oh my God. I can't leave you alone for a minute." She stuck the plate inside, pressed buttons, and listened to the low-level whirr. Then she turned back around to see Miranda watching her from the table, her face inscrutable. Andy snorted with laughter before she could stop herself. "You, or your kids, or…"

"You're the giggliest woman I've ever met," Miranda said. "Really."

"Yeah," Andy said. She stuck her hands in her pants pockets, and sauntered over to Miranda's chair, grinning down at her. "I owe you the footrub of a lifetime, too."

Miranda's stoic face finally cracked as she bared her teeth at Andy in an extremely unpleasant smile. "You have no earthly idea, my dear."

"I can tell them off tomorrow at lunch," Andy said, getting more serious. "Mom had no right to say that to you. They can't treat you like that. I won't let them."

"My hero," Miranda said, her eyes roving restlessly until they landed on the freezer door. "Let me re-emphasize that I don't care what they think about me. Is there any Rocky Road?"

"You got it," Andy said, and opened the freezer door.

Andy met her parents for lunch at Tom's Restaurant. They'd always been big Seinfeld fans, and even in the midst of family conflict, they seemed to enjoy sitting in the same diner where Jerry and his friends had talked about nothing all day. It also had the benefit of being all the way across Central Park from Miranda.

She'd fully planned to tell them both off, just as she'd said she would to Miranda the night before. But something about the way they looked at her today--resigned, if not reconciled--tired, almost--told her that it wasn't necessary, and stopped her in her tracks.

Instead of jumping right back into the animosity of last night, they all sucked on the straws of their Diet Cokes in silence for a few minutes. Then Andy said, "So, Mom, what did you and Miranda say to each other?"

Her mother frowned at her. "She didn't tell you?"

"Sort of," Andy said evasively. "She said that she talked a little bit about, uh, how she felt and stuff. About the situation." And Andy was dying to know what 'stuff' entailed, no matter how mad she was at her folks.
"She did," her mother said, and she and Andy's father exchanged glances, which meant that they'd talked about everything already and weren't going to tell Andy much of it. Andy and Rachel had seen those glances many times when they were kids. "I'm not going to pretend I'm satisfied or happy, Andrea," her mother continued, looking back at her. "Or that I like her. I don't, and I don't think she's good enough for you." Andy stiffened. "But..." Now her mother sounded almost pained. "I'm willing to believe that she's sincere, at least. In how she feels about you. Which is better than what I was thinking."

"I'll have to take your mother's word for it," her dad said. He didn't sound very happy either, but he did look resigned. "She's a pretty smart lady." Andy's mom rolled her eyes and elbowed him, and for the first time since last night, something like a real smile lingered around her mouth.

It disappeared quickly, though, when she looked back into Andy's eyes. "You're an adult, honey," she said. "She's right about that. But you'll always be my baby, too. Our baby. I know in my head that this isn't our business." She tapped her chest and her eyes filled with tears. "But I don't know it here."

"Oh no, Mom," Andy gasped, reaching over and grabbing a wad of napkins from the dispenser on the table. "Don't cry, don't do that." If her mother cried, then Andy would cry, and her dad would try to pretend that he wasn't there, and that'd be it for conversation.

"I'm okay," her mom said thickly, and blew her nose. Just then, the waitress arrived with their plates, and they all gratefully diverted their attention to the greasy food.

"Think this is what Jerry and Elaine eat?" Andy's dad asked around his tuna salad sandwich. "I used to know, but it's been a while."

"No idea," Andy said, taking a relishing bite of her burger. Family problems aside, she couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten a hamburger. "Don't care. Mmm."

"You're a stick," her mother said, sniffing as she ate a French fry. "You're wasting away. You eat up, and don't starve yourself just to be pretty."

"Sure thing," Andy said, and proved it by taking another enormous bite. This appeared to placate her mother, at least enough that the Sachses all finished their food in more-or-less peaceful silence. Andy wistfully remembered roast beef sandwiches for lunch on Christmas day: the last meal they'd shared. What would the next meal be? And when?

Such sad trivia occupied her mind until her dad wiped his mouth and looked at his watch. "We should get back to the hotel and pack up," he said. "Our flight's at four. We'll be cutting it close." It was nearly one. "Thanks for meeting us, honey."

"Yeah," Andy said. "No problem." She looked at them across the table, and they looked back. "Um. Do, uh...you probably don't want Roy to take you to the airport, do you? But he, he would." She managed a smile. "He could tell you about all the dumb stuff I've said and done in the car."

"No," her dad said. "No, thanks."

But her mother looked thoughtful. "Actually--well, you know, Richard, the cost of a cab--"

"No, Helena." Her dad sounded very firm. "We did what we came to do, we're not using the driver as an informant." Her mother sniffed, but didn't deny the charge. "Based on what I've seen of Miranda, I'm betting she doesn't open up too much in front of the help, anyway."

"Not too much," Andy said, neglecting to mention that Roy had probably seen--or figured out--
plenty over the years. "You sure you want a cab?"

"We only brought overnight bags," her mother said. "We'll probably take the subway. But your 
father's right, we need to go."

They all rose to their feet and headed for the door. They would part ways in a moment: Andy was 
returning home, while her parents were off to JFK. They walked one block together, where they 
arrived at a subway station. There were hugs, and her mother looked like she was about to cry again, 
but thankfully she held it together—at least until she and Andy's father were out of sight. Andy 
watched them until they were underground, waving as they turned around right before they 
disappeared.

Then she looked up the sky, inhaled deeply, and let it out again. It was over. It was over, and it was a 
nice day, a Sunday afternoon when Miranda didn't expect her back at any particular time. Andy 
decided to walk across the park, and look at the joggers and the panhandlers and the people playing 
Frisbee with their dogs and everybody else, and just keep walking until she was finally home.

Over the next couple of weeks, life returned to normal, or as normal as it ever got. Nigel had seemed 
a little disappointed that Andy's parents' visit hadn't resulted in nuclear war, but was unequivocally 
pleased that they were talking to her again and had started mentioning Miranda's name once or twice 
during their phone calls. In a historic moment, Andy's mother had even mumbled that she hoped 
Miranda was getting enough rest, because God knew it would be in short supply in a month. 
 Granted, she'd immediately segued into Andy's and Rachel's infancies, but Andy had still been 
shocked breathless.

As for Miranda, Andy didn't know if she was getting 'enough' rest, although she was making an 
effort. With less than a month to go, she looked more exhausted than she had since her first few 
weeks. Andy had a hunch that even if they hadn't shaken on it, Miranda would have been forced to 
cut her workdays shorter. These days she came home, ate dinner, and promptly collapsed into bed, 
reading and making notes. Her laptop was always at hand now, so she could work from home as 
much as possible.

For her part, Andy was trying to walk the fine line between being home and being at work, doing 
her utmost at both places, and, on top of it all, trying to build up some more goodwill with Nigel. At 
least, enough that she wouldn't get smacked down for her greed. But there was something that she 
really needed.

"Vacation time?" Nigel said, on June twenty-seventh. "On the weekend after July twelfth. Let me 
think--what a coincidence--" 

"Just a few days, Nigel," Andy pleaded. "I'm not asking for my two weeks in one gulp." Though she 
wished she could, but it would probably be a good idea to leave some in reserve, just in case. Actual 
paternity leave was out of the question, since she and Miranda didn't have any kind of legal 
arrangement or relationship. To say nothing of how people would talk. It was one thing to live in 
Miranda's house and 'assist' her as a 'friend.' It was one thing to take a couple of days off after the kid 
was born. It was quite another to take paternity leave.

"I mean, with a C-section, she can't even go home until five days after the delivery," Andy 
continued. "She won't really need me around full-time until she's back at the house. So I was
thinking, you know, the seventeenth and eighteenth--that's a Thursday and a Friday, and maybe the following Monday, too--"

"Oh boy," Nigel said, sitting back in his chair and looking resigned. "I've worked with new fathers before. And new second mothers. Do you know what I have to look forward to that week?" Andy shook her head blankly. "Watching you shuttle between work and the hospital for five days on no sleep. You'll start showing up unshowered. You'll forget the name of the magazine. And my name. And your own. And, my personal favorite, you will be completely unable to talk about anything but babies—at least until the lack of sleep turns everything you say into word salad." He shook his head. "Try to keep it under control, will you?"

"The building's got a gym," Andy said cheekily. "I promise to shower there at least every other day."

"You think you're joking, but you're not," Nigel said. "Take your three days, with my blessing. And don't forget to get in touch with the temp agency right away."

"On it, boss," Andy said, which always put him in a good mood.

It did not put Miranda in a good mood. "Three days?" she said that night. "That's all he'd give you?"

Andy stared at her. "Miranda, remember when Mariel had her baby last August?" she asked. "How long did you give her to come back?"

"Company policy dictates--"

"Yeah, yeah, but how long did you give her? I mean informally?" Miranda sniffed, like she didn't remember. "A week. And she was the one who actually gave birth. And she worked until the afternoon she went into labor!" As in, her contractions had actually begun at work, and she'd kept sifting through advertising copy until they were six minutes apart. "And then you fired her anyway."

"That had nothing to do with it. Did you see the copy she produced?"

"I got three days," Andy said. "Plus the weekend in the middle. Let's be grateful, okay?" But gratitude was not something that came naturally to Miranda, so she brooded all night and refused to let Andy share her bed after the footrub.

Andy tried not to mind. If Miranda actually needed a good reason to act out, being eight months pregnant and counting was probably it. In fact, she'd begun sleeping alone most nights now, claiming that she needed the entire space of the bed for herself. Privately, Andy thought it was just because she was becoming self-conscious about her increasing need to get up about five times in the night to pee, but she didn't protest too much. If Miranda needed to hoard up as much rest as she could get, Andy figured she did too. Nigel was right. They'd both be pretty ragged after the baby was born.

As for the twins, they were nearly frenzied with excitement, and had been for days. They'd already insisted on helping Andy pack up Miranda's hospital kit, even though the C-section was two weeks away. They'd rearranged everything in the nursery twice. And they pestered Miranda to tell them what she was going to name the baby until, for the first time, Miranda snapped and actually shouted for her children to leave her alone for God's sake . Andy heard her all the way up on the second floor, and thus was prepared for two shocked twins to barrel into her bedroom and lock the door, as if they thought their furious mother might try to pursue them up the stairs.

Andy let them watch TV on her bed and, two hours later, dared to poke her head into Miranda's bedroom. "Hey," she said.

Miranda, who was scowling, paused to scowl up at Andy before scowling at her laptop again. "They
were driving me crazy," she said. "I'm packing them off to their father after the baby's born. No. To
boarding school. No. Siberia."

Andy closed the door behind her. "What did Siberia ever do to you? Can I come in?"

"Can I stop you?"

"Sure," Andy said quietly. Miranda looked up, sighed, and nodded. Andy sat down at the foot of the
bed. "How are those feet tonight?" Miranda wiggled her toes impatiently. Andy smiled, and Miranda
set aside her laptop.

After a few moments of being pampered, Miranda said grudgingly, "I suppose I was a little short
with them."

"Yeah, well," Andy said, keeping her eyes on Miranda's feet as she rubbed. "You're entitled. And
they'll tone it down a little now, I bet."

"I've never yelled at them before."

"Maybe now Cassidy knows it's not as bad as she thought." Miranda actually looked stricken.
"Miranda, it's fine," Andy said quickly. "They're fine. They know you're not feeling well."

"No, I'm not," Miranda said, and shifted in bed, looking miserable. Andy's heart went out to her.
"My Braxton Hicks contractions are getting more pronounced every day. It was marvelous to sit in a
Board meeting this afternoon while my uterus kept squeezing like a fist. I'm fairly certain Stan
wouldn't have been able to sympathize." Andy patted her calf. "Although they all kept looking at
me, as if they were afraid I might stand up at any second and drop a baby out on the carpet."

Andy laughed. "Serve 'em right. They can afford the cleaning bill."

"I suppose. It certainly would have livened things up. Meetings are a lot more fun when you're in
charge of them, Andrea. And even then they're not fun at all."

Andy bit her lip. "Do you miss Runway?"

Miranda looked off into space and didn't answer. For a moment, Andy thought she wouldn't say
anything. But then she replied, "Very much." Andy swallowed, and patted her leg again, feeling
totally useless. "Don't get me wrong," Miranda added, and sighed. "It was time to move on. Time for
a change. And I like my job. Or I will, once things have finally settled down." She glared at her
belly. "But I'm not going to lie. It's not the same." She smiled wryly. "I've been trying very, very
hard to stay out of Beatrice's hair."

"Good," Andy said. "I've seen her hair. She probably spends a thousand dollars a month to keep it
styled like that."

"Hmph," Miranda said. She arched an eyebrow. "Changing the subject--that little book you're
reading. How is it?"

The 'little book' was, of course, Christian's collaboration with Benny. Andy was relieved that she
could say, honestly, "It's really good. Funny and smart." Just like Christian, but she wasn't suicidal
enough to say so. "I'm glad. I'm glad I can pay him back."

"Yes," Miranda said. "And then you'll be done with him."

It wasn't a question, but Andy grinned and nodded anyway. "Yes. Completely done. Finito."
"I'm very glad to hear it." Miranda looked extremely smug. Then she looked extremely irritated as she shifted against the pillows again, and gave a pained groan. "Agh. Have I mentioned that I hate this?"

"A few times," Andy said, and wrestled with herself before blurting, "You're doing great. I'm really proud of you. I'd never have the guts to do what you're doing. All of it, I mean. Not in a million years."

"Yes, you would," Miranda said dismissively. "If it came right down to it, Andrea, you would. Because you can do what you have to do." She raised an eyebrow. "Just like I can."

"Maybe," Andy said. She looked back down at Miranda's feet. "Did I ever tell you I had a pregnancy scare? When I was in high school?"

"No," Miranda said after a moment.

"Yeah. I was seventeen. I was so terrified. It was a false alarm, but I still wonder what I would have done. I have no idea."

"I suppose not," Miranda murmured. Then she winced and moved her foot out of Andy's grip. "That's enough. Thank you. I think I need to get some sleep."

It was ten-fifteen. "Yeah," Andy said, stood up, and bent to give Miranda a gentle kiss. "Sleep well, okay? Call if you need anything."

"I will," Miranda said, and kissed her back.

As Andy got ready for bed, she thought again about her pregnancy scare. It was weird to know that it was eight years ago now, when she sometimes still had bad dreams about it. Well, she supposed as she slid between the sheets of her bed, it probably wasn't so weird to dream about it now, with Miranda's time so close.

She'd started to dream about Miranda giving birth, too. Not nightmares. Not usually, anyway, although sometimes she dreamed that something had gone wrong. And even though her subconscious wasn't totally clear on what 'something' was, she still woke in a cold sweat. But usually she just dreamed that the baby had been born: vague, fleeting impressions of a child in Miranda's arms, and the usual weird stuff that dreams usually had, like a crib floating in midair or a bottomless diaper pail.

Tonight she dreamed that she was talking to her parents. "You're going to have to be a very good father," her dad said solemnly, laying a hand on her shoulder. "Always make sure the kid has clean socks."

Andy nodded very seriously. "I've got the washing machine all ready."

"Did you clean the lint tray in the dryer?" her mother asked.

"Yes, Mom," Andy said in irritation. "And I have the socks all ready. Lots and lots of socks. You won't believe how many. Here, look." She turned to point at Sock Mountain behind her, but just then the cry of a siren interrupted her. She and her parents frowned at each other in confusion, and the sirens grew steadily louder.

"Is that your alarm clock, honey?" her dad said.

"I better wake up," Andy said, and did, blinking into the darkness of her bedroom. The clock on the
bedside told her it was just past one in the morning. The sirens were still going and, in fact, sounded like they were on the street below. Then they gave a final whoop and stopped. Andy staggered to her feet and headed for the window. She hoped one of the neighbors wasn't having a heart attack or something.

Then, as she peered through the blinds, she saw one paramedic bolting up the stairs of the townhouse with two more readying a gurney on the street below. Her mind had exactly one dizzy second to think that they'd gotten the wrong door when the paramedic at the stairs began pounding on the door so loudly that Andy could easily hear it on the second floor. Then the doorbell buzzed too, in loud and steady repetition.

Andy stumbled through her bedroom door, her heart pounding and her head whirling in confusion. As she reached the first floor, she saw that Miranda's door was closed, but she could hear faint noises behind it—groaning?

"Miranda?" she called, heading for the bedroom, when the front door pounded again. In the basement, where she slept at night in the largest crate known to man, Patricia began to bark furiously.

"Get--the--door!" Miranda shouted from behind her own.

"Are you--"

"I said, get the door!" Miranda screeched. "Now!" And while Andy might have learned to resist her softly-voiced commands, she didn't have a lot of practice with Miranda screaming, and she caught herself running down the stairs to the front door like her ass was on fire, unlocking and unbolting it until the three paramedics were hurrying inside.

"What the hell's going on?" Andy cried, looking at the paramedics and then back up the stairs, trying to ignore Patricia's barking, which was quickly turning into howling.

The first one through the door, a man, stared at her incredulously. "You tell us," he said. "We got a call from some woman saying she was having a baby--is this the wrong address?"

"What--I mean no, it isn't--she's, she's on the first fl--" Andy pointed a shaking finger at the stairs. "She, she called you? Herself?"

"Excuse us, ma'am," said the second paramedic, a woman, as she pushed the gurney past Andy. "We've got to get upstairs."

"Wait, wait a minute," Andy said, watching in shock as they all ran up the stairs, making more noise than the twins had ever managed on their best days. Patricia's howling didn't help. Then her feet caught up with her brain, and she ran after them. "She--when did she call, what did she say--"

"Said she was having a baby," said the third paramedic, another man and younger than the other two. "Ma'am, please keep out of the way and let us do our job."

As Andy reached the landing after the paramedics, Andy heard somebody say, in a high-pitched, frightened voice, "Mom? Andy?" She looked up the stairs and saw Caroline's and Cassidy's heads leaning over the banisters of the third floor. Their eyes were wide with fear as they watched the paramedics, and then they started running downstairs.

"No. Stay there," Andy ordered, and they froze at the note of command in her voice. Well, she'd learned from the best. The first paramedic had already made it inside Miranda's room, and now Andy could hear the noises more clearly: huffing breaths, interspersed with tiny groans and cries of pain.
"It's all right, ma'am, we've got you," the woman said, her voice gentle and reassuring as she headed into Miranda's room. Andy followed them, her heart going so fast it felt like it was rocking her whole body. But the third paramedic was blocking her as he wheeled the gurney in, and she couldn't even get a good view through the door.

"Miranda?" she cried. "Are you oka--excuse me, I have to get in there--"

"There's no room, ma'am," the third paramedic said in exasperation.

"Andrea," Miranda called from the room, her voice hoarse with strain, "go--sit with the girls--keep them calm--"

"But, but I--"

"Just go!" Miranda shouted.

"You heard her," the third paramedic said as he fiddled with straps and joints and screws. "You can see her once we get her to--Zach, I've got the gurney prepped--"

"No time!" 'Zach' called back. "She's already fully dilated. I can see the head starting to crown."

Andy's jaw dropped. "See if they have clean towels and--"

Before the third paramedic could say anything, Andy was already racing down the stairs to the nearest linen closet, where she grabbed all the towels she could see. Her hands were shaking and all she could think, over and over, was what the hell, what the hell, what the hell--

She ran back out with the towels and took the opportunity to lean over the railing and say, loudly and firmly, "Patricia: quiet!" And Patricia, who had been expensively trained at the best doggy obedience schools in town, finally shut up, reassured by her "key words" that everything was okay even when it was in chaos and patently not okay at all. Thank God. That was one less distraction while--while--

Then Andy was shoving the towels into the paramedic's hands. "Thanks. Wait with those kids," he said, nodding towards Caroline and Cassidy, who were huddling together on the first-floor landing, their faces pale. "If you have her doctor's number, call it now. We'll be in here with her."

"Is she okay?" Andy croaked. "Does she look--"

"Gotta go," the paramedic said, and ducked into Miranda's room, shutting the door behind him and leaving the gurney sitting in the hall. Through the door, Andy heard Miranda cry out.

"Mom's having the baby?" Caroline gasped. "But it's too early!"

"Is he going to be okay?" Cassidy whimpered. "Is he going to die? Is Mom going to die?"

That snapped Andy back to reality, and fast. "No," she said at once. "She's going to be fine. Come on, you two. Come with me. We're going to my room and call your mom's doctor, and then wait and stay out of the way, okay?" She hurried up, grabbing them each by the hand, practically dragging them back up to the second floor.

By the time they reached Andy's room, Cassidy had begun to cry--great, gulping sobs that Andy was afraid would degenerate into hysteria. "Caroline," she said, trying to sound calm, "Your mom's doctor is the sixth number on my speed-dial. Can you call it?" Caroline, looking scared but holding it together, ran to get Andy's cell phone on her nightstand.

Andy quickly sat down on the edge of the bed and hauled Cassidy into her lap. Cassidy buried her
face in Andy's shoulder, and Andy rested her chin on Cassidy's head, rubbing circles on her back. "Sssh, honey, you need to calm down," she said, trying to keep her voice low and even. "I know it's scary. It's the middle of the night and we're all--your mom's going to be fine. Okay?" Cassidy, still crying, nodded her head up and down against Andy's chest. "She's got three pros in there with her, right? I'm sure they've delivered tons of babies. Everything will be fine."

Then Andy heard Caroline say shrilly, "Hi! I'm Caroline Hanrahan!" into the phone. "I'm Miranda Priestly's daughter, and she's having a baby right now, and there are these ambulance people in our house--"

"Caroline," Andy said quickly, and held out her hand. Caroline gasped and gave her the phone. "Hello, Dr. Viswanathan?"

"Hello. Who is this?" Dr. Viswanathan's sleepy voice said.

"I'm Andy. Andy Sachs--Miranda Priestly's, uh, assistant. I've been to appointments with her--"

"Yes, Miss Sachs," Dr. Viswanathan said impatiently. "Her daughter said she is in labor?"

"Yes," Andy said, trying to keep her voice calm and even, for the girls' sake as much as anything else. "Apparently she called the ambulance while we were all asleep. She has three paramedics in there right now, and they're saying it's too late to go to the hospital, that the head's already crowned."

"I see," Dr. Viswanathan said, sounding distracted. Andy heard rummaging sounds. "I will be there shortly. What is your address?"

"137 East 73rd Street. Uh--"

"One moment. I'll have my husband call a cab immediately." There was a pause, and Andy heard Dr. Viswanathan speaking to somebody else in another language. "I'll be there soon," she repeated into the phone. "Now, to the best of your knowledge, what is going on?"

"That's it," Andy said helplessly. "I woke up, and there were paramedics at the door. She called them herself. They won't even let me in the room."

"Well, it's probably crowded in there." Andy thought Dr. Viswanathan sounded entirely too relaxed about this. "It is for the best if you stay out of the way. Unless she has asked for you?"

"Uh…no," Andy said. Unless screaming, "Just go!" was some kind of invitation she'd never heard of before. "We're all waiting in my room. Me and the girls." She looked at Caroline, who was hopping up and down in place, and tilted her head. Caroline immediately sat on the bed next to her and patted Cassidy on the arm. Cassidy had stopped sobbing, but her heart was still going fast against Andy's chest, and she was shaking all over. "Um--while you're waiting for the cab, can I ask you a favor? Can you talk to Cassidy? Her other daughter? She's a little bit scared." She patted Cassidy on the back.

"Of course," Dr. Viswanathan said kindly.

"Thanks, thanks so much," Andy said, and patted Cassidy again. Cassidy raised her red-eyed face, and sniffled as she took the phone.

"Hello?" she whimpered into it. Caroline leaned into Andy, who put her freed arm around her shoulders so that they all huddled together. She couldn't hear what Dr. Viswanathan was saying, exactly, but she sounded calm and reassuring, and like she was asking a question. "Uh huh," Cassidy gulped. There was a pause as Dr. Viswanathan said something else, and Cassidy managed, "I just

"What did she say?" Caroline asked anxiously.

"She asked me how old I was, and I said we were eleven, and she said she knew it was scary and stuff but we needed to act like grown-ups for Mom," Cassidy said. Andy blinked. That sounded kind of harsh, but it had apparently done the trick; Cassidy looked much calmer. "She said Mom was going to be fine and we were just supposed to wait here, like the guys in the ambulance said."

"And like your mom said," Andy said. She patted Cassidy's back again, and managed a smile. "You know how much she hates to be interrupted while she's working? This would make her so much madder."

Cassidy gave a wavering laugh. Caroline hopped off the bed. "I'm going to see what's going on," she said, and hurried for the door while Andy was still held down by Cassidy in her lap. But at Andy's protesting noise, Caroline waved her hand impatiently. "I'm just going to listen on the landing. I won't go downstairs."

"I want to, too," Cassidy said.

"Fair enough," Andy agreed, deciding that it couldn't do any harm so long as they were staying out of the way. Cassidy slid out of her lap, but kept a firm grip on her hand as they both hurried out to the landing, peeking through the banister railings. They sat down, and Cassidy and Caroline budged up against Andy again as they all strained to hear the noises coming from behind Miranda's door.

"It sounds like it hurts," Caroline said nervously.

"Well, I'm sure it does, um, a little," Andy said, deciding not to tell Caroline that it was sort of like pushing a watermelon through a rubber band. A really stretchy rubber band, but still. "Your mom's tough, though. She can handle it." Please, please, please let Miranda handle it, because the alternative was unthinkable. "She had you, and there were two of you, right?"

"Dad said that took a long time, though," Cassidy said. "Didn't that guy say that she's having it, like, right now? And that's why they're not taking her to the hospital?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "But every birth is different. No two are ever the same." Even as she said it, though, she wondered how the hell it was this different, and how it had happened so quickly. She'd just been hanging out in Miranda's bedroom three hours ago, for Christ's sake, rubbing her feet and talking about her Braxton Hicks contractions--

--which had obviously been real labor contractions and neither of them had realized it.

"Andy, why are you hitting your head on the banister?" Cassidy asked.

"No reason," Andy mumbled. "Everything's okay." She felt like an idiot. But even so, this still seemed crazy quick, and--

Just then, the door to Miranda's room opened. Andy, Cassidy, and Caroline all sat up; Caroline hopped to her feet and peered over the railing. From here, they could hear Miranda again, giving fast-paced, gasping cries. One of the paramedics hurried out, looked up, and saw them all hovering. Andy opened her mouth, but he just gave her a quick thumbs-up before rushing out of the house to where the ambulance waited in front of the steps. Less than a minute later, he rushed back in carrying a pack of something-or-other, slamming the door behind him.
"A whole bunch of people with cameras just drove up," he called to Andy. "Is she somebody famous or something?"

"Oh, no," Andy groaned. Great, just what Miranda needed--the paparazzi camped on their doorstep. Assholes. "Sit tight, girls, I'm calling the cops. I'm not putting up with them tonight."

"Yeah!" Cassidy said. Now that she wasn't terrified anymore, apparently the thought of the police chasing away a bunch of tabloid reporters was pretty thrilling. Caroline, too, wore a savage grin. Andy put in a quick call--the local precinct was used to this kind of thing, and an officer assured Andy that a squad car would arrive shortly and keep the press at bay.

"One of the neighbors must have seen the ambulance and tipped them off," Andy sighed, sitting down on the landing again between the twins. So much for a nice, discreet neighborhood.

"I hate those guys," Caroline said. "I hope the cops Tase them all."

"Would be nice," Andy agreed.

The paramedic had gone back inside Miranda's room, but had left the door open. Now, they heard the female paramedic's voice saying, firmly but urgently, "You're doing good, honey, now push--push!"

Miranda's reply was lower, and in a considerably strained voice, but Andy could easily make out, "Am--pushing--Christ's--sake--"

"I bet she's going to say some bad words," Caroline said.

"Sssh!" Cassidy said, pressing her face hard against the rails, as if she was trying to squeeze her head through them.

"And I'll--tell you--" Miranda continued, "when you can--call me--'honey'--"

"Yikes," Andy muttered.

Then they heard Zach's voice saying, "Okay, now. Take a deep breath and bear down. Almost there. Lovanda, have that blanket ready--now--now--"

Andy held her breath, wondering if she was going to pass out. The twins froze next to her. Caroline's knuckles went white where they gripped the banister. Time seemed to grind to a complete halt, with eons passing between each pounding beat of Andy's heart.

Then, Miranda's howl--

"SonofaBITCH!"

Caroline gasped. Andy jumped to her feet, leaning over the railing, clinging to it for balance. Cassidy grabbed Andy's leg from where she sat on the floor.

Down on the first floor, a baby began to cry.

Andy's knees promptly gave out, and she sank back down to the carpet again. She heard somebody give a gasping, shocked laugh, and realized it was her.

"Is that the baby?" Caroline said, her voice high-pitched with excitement. "The baby just got born! Can we go see it? Can we go right now?"
"No," Andy panted, and flopped down to lie on her back and stare up at the spinning ceiling. "Just wait a second. Wait until they say it's okay. Give your mom a few minutes."

"Are you going to faint?" Cassidy asked.

"If you are, you should do it now, since the ambulance is here already," Caroline said.

"I'm fine. I think," Andy said, covering her face with her hands. Or she would be. She would be in just a few minutes, because surely any second now, one of those paramedics was going to leave Miranda's room and say--

"Everything's okay," Zach called from down below. Andy sat up so quickly that she got even dizzier, and looked down to see him waving at her from the first floor. He was smiling, and glanced back into Miranda's room. "We'll want to get her to the hospital now, but everything looks good so far. Apgar checks out at eight." The baby continued to wail, and Zach winced. "He's got a great set of lungs."


"It's a test they do--heartbeat and reflexes and--can we come downstairs now?" Andy asked.

"If you can bring a small tub and some warm water, that'd be great," Zach said. Miranda said something from within her room, her voice much lower now. Zach looked back up the stairs and said, "Uh, she wants the two kids to wait outside, though, for now."

The twins looked alarmed. "Why?" Cassidy said.

"Well, it's kind of crowded and kind of a mess," Zach said soothingly. "You'll see your mom soon. She's looking good. So: small tub? Warm water?"

"Oh! Right," Andy said, and ran down the stairs until she was in the laundry room, where she located a clean, deep tub made of heavy plastic and filled it with lukewarm water. She realized she hadn't even glanced at Miranda's room as she'd dashed by. Well, one of the things Miranda liked her was her ability to focus, after all.

Then Andy made her way back up the stairs, holding the tub as carefully as she could so no water would slosh out. Zach took it from her and said, "C'mon. You're allowed in."

"I am?" Andy gasped, and followed him into the room on shaking legs. She craned her neck to see beyond him, to where Miranda lay slumped against her pillows with a red, shriveled-looking, crying baby on her abdomen. She was panting and her eyes were closed. There was surprisingly little blood.

Lovanda stood aside enough that Andy could kneel by the bed at Miranda's side while the third paramedic, whose name she didn't know yet, clamped the umbilical cord. Andy pushed Miranda's sweaty hair from where it had stuck to her forehead, and Miranda opened her eyes, gradually focusing them on Andy.

"Hey," Andy choked. Miranda lifted one hand, and Andy grabbed it, kissing the knuckles. "Oh my God, are you okay?"

"How long did that take?" Miranda croaked.

"Less than an hour," Lovanda informed her from the hallway, where she was adjusting the gurney.
"How…” Miranda's voice trailed off, and she licked her cracked, chapped lips. "How is…” She lifted her head, trying to get a good look at the baby resting against her, but then dropped it back down on the pillow with a moan.

"He's fine." Andy tried to remind herself that screaming was good in a newborn. "You're fine. Everything's fine, everything's great--" Miranda licked her lips again and tried to swallow. "Can she get some water?” Andy asked quickly.

"Sure,” said Zach. "Let me cut the cord first. Or…?” He paused and offered the scissors to Andy.

Andy's eyes opened wide, and she looked at Miranda, who nodded. Oh. Oh, wow. No, not wow. There wasn't a word in the English language for how she felt right now. Not a single word to describe this, this, this--

Andy kissed Miranda's hand again, feeling something close to reverence, and something that was definitely relief, and something else that was a hundred other things all at once; then she rose to her feet and, with an astonishingly steady hand, cut the cord.

If Andy had expected to spend the next few hours in a state of gooey bliss, however, she was mistaken. Rather, her organizational abilities and talents were tested to their outermost limits as she ran around at two in the morning trying to arrange a dozen things at once while the ambulance took Miranda to the hospital. Dr. Viswanathan had to be told to go there instead, for one thing. The twins had to be sent to their father, for another, no matter how much they protested. They were only allowed to see their brother once Miranda had been covered with a blanket and wheeled into the hallway on the gurney, and the door to her bedroom was shut behind her. Andy knew she didn't want them to see the mess inside, especially the blood spotting the sheets.

Fortunately, by two-thirty in the morning the twins' surge of energy had worn off, and Andy was able to send them off with Roy and their overnight bags without too much trouble. They were practically asleep already as they stumbled into the car. Greg had been pretty good about being woken up at two, and surprisingly concerned about his ex-wife's welfare, although the first factor might have influenced the second. ("Yeah, well," he'd said around a gigantic yawn, "I might hate her guts, but this was pretty rough on her before.") Then Andy threw on some clothes herself, grabbed Miranda's hospital kit, and called a cab, because there was no way she was going to sit around and wait for Roy to get back from the most fashionable neighborhood in Brooklyn.

On the way, she woke up Miranda's first assistant. Now that she had an executive position, and a different image to maintain, Miranda had hired three assistants who were a little older than the girls at Runway, a little more experienced, and a little more unflappable. Not totally unflappable, though, and the first assistant, whose name was Eric, seemed suitably awed by the thought of his formidable boss giving birth.

"But she's okay?” he asked.

"Sure,” Andy said, hoping like hell that she was right, and that nothing disastrous had happened during the ambulance ride. "But her appointments this week will all need to be canceled, or at least postponed for a couple of weeks. Let's say three weeks. Remind the well-wishers that flowers aren't allowed in her hospital room, and that she probably won't want visitors for a day or so. If at all. And call PR first thing in the morning--I mean, later this morning--and tell them they need to get a grip on
"Yeah—sure, hold on—let me write this down—" Andy was about to explode with impatience when she remembered that it was, in fact, a quarter till three. "Now—cancel everything…and…" To Andy’s relief, he was able to numble his way through everything she’d just said.

Then, after what seemed an inordinately long time given the low traffic and the short distance to Lenox Hill, the cab pulled up to the hospital doors. Andy shoved a wad of bills at the cab driver, and beamed at him. "She had the baby!" she said. "In the middle of the night, at home!" He smiled, took the money, and nodded uncomprehendingly.

In the hospital, Andy was dismayed to learn at the nurses’ station that she couldn’t go up to Miranda’s room because she wasn’t a family member. But they called the room after she begged, and, to her relief, Dr. Viswanathan answered the phone. She gave orders that Andy be allowed to come up. The elevator ride and walk down the blindingly-white hallway felt like a dream.

When Andy arrived in the room—of course Miranda had scored a private one—Miranda was fast asleep and there was no baby in sight. Andy gave a scared look to Dr. Viswanathan, who was sitting in a bedside chair, and who gave Andy a reassuring smile. "All is well," she said softly, rising to her feet. "The child fed for a little while and is in the nursery now, while Miranda rests." Andy nodded breathlessly. "Her little girl is feeling better now, I hope?" Andy nodded again. Dr. Viswanathan started to look concerned. "And you? You are well, too?"

Andy stared at her for a moment, and then said, "Oh!" and flung herself forward, wrapping her arms around Miranda's doctor in the mother of all bear-hugs. She heard herself give a hiccupsing sob, and then another. Dr. Viswanathan sighed, chuckled, and patted her back soothingly.

Jeez. Had to get it together. "Suh-sorry," Andy said, stumbling backwards and wiping her nose. She looked around for a tissue, and realized Dr. Viswanathan was already offering her one. She blew her nose as quietly as she could. "It's just...all these months...and finally...and there was this ambulance and I was so scared and if anything ever happened to her I totally couldn't handle it at all...and, and the kids, and I had to act like everything was--"

"Shush," Dr. Viswanathan said, kindly but firmly. "All is well. I understand you are relieved, but you should control yourself." She gave Andy a half-smile. "If her little girl could do it, so can you." Andy nodded, ashamed. Dr. Viswanathan tilted her head curiously to the side. "I thought you were her assistant," she said. "But you two--and she..."

Shit. "I, um. I was her assistant. But--I mean, of course it's--"

"None of my business," Dr. Viswanathan said blandly. "Of course. But if it helps, I consider this part of my confidentiality agreement." She reached out and patted Andy's arm.


"That is normal. She will for a few weeks or so yet, but she did not gain excessive weight." Dr. Viswanathan scowled, which meant she thought Miranda hadn't gained enough weight, period. Andy decided not to mention the Haagen-Dazs. "It will not last, especially with exercise."

"Oh. Okay." Andy remembered reading that now. "Yeah, okay. But...but why was the labor so fast? The paramedic said it was less than an hour. Did--do you think it hurt the baby or anything?"

"Not at all," Dr. Viswanathan said. "No, not at all. And I would say that the labor was not 'fast.' In
fact, it is likely that she was in labor all day long without realizing it; sometimes this happens, that the cervix has been dilating all day, with mostly painless contractions." She smiled thinly. "But it is rare. Many women would consider this a blessing."

So it really was possible that Miranda could have popped out a baby during the Board meeting, Andy thought with a faint feeling of hysteria. "And everything else--you know, when she was in the ambulance and all--"

"The placenta was delivered, no problem, as I understand it," Dr. Viswanathan said. "Everything else is taken care of, too. In fact, I seem not to have been needed at all, except for general reassurance." Her smile was warmer now than Andy had ever seen it. "Which is also part of my job, of course. I waited here with her until you could arrive."

"Thank you," Andy said, and before she could stop herself, she hugged Dr. Viswanathan again, though with more self-control this time. Dr. Viswanathan hugged back.

"Andrea?" Miranda said, sounding groggy.

"Oh!" Andy jumped out of Dr. Viswanathan's arms to see Miranda blinking confusedly at her, and shifting in the bed, looking acutely uncomfortable. She looked, in fact, remarkably as she'd looked only a few hours before when Andy had been rubbing her feet. Before there'd been a baby.

"Miranda," Andy said, hurrying to bend over the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't know," Miranda said. "Awful." She looked vaguely around the room, frowning. "Where is he?"

"Nursery, doc said," Andy replied.

"Now that Andy is here and you are awake, Miranda, I will go home," Dr. Viswanathan said. She looked a little more distant than she had while talking to Andy. Andy wondered what Miranda had said to her before conking out. "You are in fine shape, and the nurses will be able to look after you. I will return in the morning to check on you."

"Yes, yes, fine," Miranda said, as if she was only dimly aware of what her doctor was saying. "Andrea, go get the baby."

Andy was already moving to the door before realizing that she would not likely be allowed into the nursery herself, and so she pressed the nurse's button instead, waving absentmindedly at Dr. Viswanathan as she left.

Then she rubbed Miranda's arm. "Hey. You look good." This was not, strictly speaking, true. Miranda had obviously been given some sort of quick sponge bath, and she'd been put into a hospital gown, but her hair was still sticky and limp with sweat, her eyes were bloodshot, and she had faint bruises on her cheekbones. But Andy still meant it when she added, "Gorgeous, even." Because she was okay.

"Oh, I'm sure," Miranda said, sounding as if she was waking up more. "Put a necklace on me, and I'll be ready to host the Met benefit."

"That's not until the end of August," Andy said. "I think you've got a little time." Just then, a nurse poked her head in. "She'd like to see the baby," Andy said. "Is that okay?"

"Sure," the nurse said, and picked up Miranda's chart. "Priestly, room 344A. Be right back."

"The girls are with their father?" Miranda asked.
"Yeah. Roy took them, and then I came here in a cab. They're probably sound asleep by now."

"What did they say after I left?"

"They thought the baby was really ugly." Andy grinned. "I think they expected one of those babies from greeting cards."

"I've never seen a beautiful newborn," Miranda said. She paused. "Or a particularly interesting one. Not that I've seen many." She glanced at Andy. "It all happened very fast."

Andy swallowed. "Yeah." Then she glared. "I can't believe you called 911 yourself, and didn't call me."

Miranda rolled her eyes. "I really have no idea how many times I'll have to tell you this," she said. "When a problem arises--"

"Take care of it yourself, yeah, I know," Andy said. She rolled her own eyes. "Don't rely on other people, blah, blah, blah…"

"I do rely on you, and stop sulking," Miranda said. "I wasn't exactly at my most rational."

She looked hurt, and Andy was immediately contrite. Of all the times to level accusations… "I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I know. I was just worried, that's all. I'm so glad everything's all right." She suddenly reached out and grabbed Miranda's hand, the one without the IV in it. She felt tears gathering behind her eyes. "Oh my God, I'm so glad." She sniffled.

"Don't you dare cry," Miranda warned. Before Andy could respond, they both heard the rolling of wheels outside, and Miranda turned to the door with obvious relief as the nurse steered a bassinet inside.

"He's still asleep," the nurse said softly.

"Let's count our blessings," Miranda murmured. She tried to sit up, but then fell back with a groan. "Andrea--" Andy stood up, grabbed Miranda under her arms, and helped hoist her up. Then the nurse carefully lifted a little red bundle wrapped in a blanket, and gave it to Miranda, who settled it against her breast, visibly holding her breath as she did so. Then she nodded at the nurse who, satisfied that all was well, then left them alone.

Andy held her breath too as she leaned in for her first real glimpse of the child. She hadn't gotten a good look at him back at the house, when everything had been in such turmoil. His face was as red and wrinkly as a tomato that was a few days old, and his eyes were scrunched up, all of which gave him an unmistakable expression of disgust at the state of the world. Andy stared at him, and stared, and stared some more.

"Definitely not beautiful," Miranda sighed.

"Yes, he is," Andy said.

Miranda turned to look at her. Her eyes widened. "Andrea?"

"Look at that sweet li'l face," Andy said dreamily.

"Oh no," Miranda said, closing her eyes.

"Is that his hand poking out of the blanket? His fingers are so tiny!"
"What exactly did you expect?"

"Awww," Andy said, feeling the dumbest grin ever stretching across her face. "Look at what you did. Isn't he totally amazing? He's a little person!"

"You're going to be completely insufferable, aren't you?" Miranda said. "I can tell."

"Oh, I won't be that bad." Andy's eyes widened. "I think he has my nose!"

"It's a miracle," Miranda said. "I think you need to get some sleep."

"Uh-uh. Never sleeping again." Andy leaned in and rested her head against Miranda's shoulder, the hospital gown rough against her cheek. "He's perfect. So are you. You are both completely perfect."

"Well," Miranda said, "I guess you can stay awake if you're going to talk like that." Just then the baby wriggled and began to whimper. "Oh dear. Here--" She handed the baby to Andy like it was no big deal, and then fiddled with the laces on her gown. Andy gasped as she felt his weight in her arms, and stared down at him as his whimpering grew louder.

"Not so perfect now, is he?" Miranda asked dryly. She pulled her gown apart enough to expose a breast. "Let me have him. Quick." Andy handed him back with shaking arms, and then watched as his mouth latched on to Miranda's nipple, watched Miranda Priestly handle breastfeeding like a pro.

Miranda noticed Andy's incredulity. "I remind you that there were two of them before," she said dryly. "Now that was fun."

"Look, he knows exactly how to do it!" Andy said, watching him suckle. "He's totally a genius!"

"Totally."

"I bet it was the Mozart. It had to be the Mozart." Miranda actually chuckled. "Wow. Look at him go."

"Yes," Miranda said softly. Andy spared a moment to glance at her, and saw an unwontedly tender look in her eyes as she watched the baby nurse, the same look she occasionally wore around the twins.

"Hah," Andy said. "You talk tough, but you're thrilled."

"'Thrilled' is a strong word," Miranda sniffed. "'Relieved,' certainly. 'Exhausted,' yes--" Andy grinned at her. Miranda rolled her eyes, and they watched the baby in silence for a while.

Then Miranda said, "Archer."

"Huh?" Andy blinked, and then figured it out. "Oh."

"His name is Archer."

"Yeah? Why Archer?"

Miranda glared at her. "Why not Archer?"

"No reason," Andy said quickly. "It's fine." And it was, she guessed, even if it did sound kind of… mature for an hours-old baby. It had a slightly snooty ring to it, which was no doubt why it appealed to Miranda. "Archer Priestly. Sounds good. I like it." Miranda nodded, looking satisfied. "But why'd you pick it?"
Miranda gave a half-shrug, careful not to disturb the baby's--Archer's--nursing. "I don't know. I don't think I hate anybody named Archer, for one thing. And as soon as the twins read it off their list, I knew it was the right one."

"You--" Andy goggled. "And we still had to listen to all the rest of them? When you decided in the A's?"

"They were having fun," Miranda said. "And...as I said before...I wanted to wait before I said anything."

She didn't meet Andy's eyes, but Andy knew what she was thinking. "Well," she said gently, "everything turned out okay."

"Yes," Miranda said. "Yes, it did."


"Not much is coming out yet," Miranda said. "Give it a couple of days." She winced in anticipation. "It will be painful, if I remember correctly. I'm enjoying this while it lasts."

"You going to keep breastfeeding? Or do formula?"

"Breastfeeding," Miranda shuddered. "I'll have to get a pump for when I go back to work. Which reminds me--"

Andy took her cue, and gave her the rundown of everything she'd arranged in the cab. By the end of her spiel, Miranda was nodding. And looking a bit glum. "A whole week lost," she said in resignation. "And I'll need more." The admission looked as if it pained her.

"That's fine," Andy said sternly. "You've got time, Miranda. A month, if you want it. More if you want it, they said."

"Hmph," Miranda said. "We'll see." But looking at those bloodshot eyes and bruised cheeks, Andy could already tell that a month of leave was in the cards. And that Miranda knew it. "Call Eric as soon as it's feasible," she said. "Tell--do you have your notepad? Good. Tell him to..."

Andy scribbled down Miranda's various, often rambling instructions for ten minutes. Then the nurse returned to retrieve Archer, and Miranda went back to sleep almost at once. She really did look ragged. Andy tried to fight back her worry. Miranda would be fine. She could power her way through anything. Even if she was about twenty years older than the average new mother, and overworked, and overwhelmed, and...

Oh, hell, Andy decided, grabbing a nearby blanket and curling up in the uncomfortable chair. It was just past four in the morning now, and she needed some shut-eye. Thank God today was Saturday. Nigel was right--she would have been completely useless at the office. Speaking of Nigel...when it was a decent hour, she'd have to call him and...

When Andy opened her eyes, it was five-thirty, and Miranda was nursing again. "It must be nice to laze around," Miranda said. The dark circles under her eyes hadn't diminished one jot.

"Sorry," Andy said meekly. She rubbed her eyes. "Anything I can do?"

"Water," Miranda said. "And not from the tap." There was already an empty bottle by her bed. Andy staggered to her feet and headed for the vending machine down the hall. Not exactly Evian, but it'd
have to do. While she was out there, Andy stopped by the coffee machine and got herself a cup of
that, too. She felt gross: greasy in the hair and face, tired around the eyes. Miranda had to be feeling
ten times worse.

When Andy got back, Miranda took a swig from the bottle with one hand and cradled Archer with
the other. "Coffee," she said when she smelled Andy's. "I will want coffee. Starbucks. Exactly as I
like it, the moment the doctor says I can."

"One no-foam skim latte with an extra shot. Hot," Andy said. "I think I can arrange that." Not that
she had any idea where the nearest Starbucks was, but it couldn't be too far. "Hungry?"

"Starving," Miranda said. "And I refuse to eat any of the swill they'll force on me here."

"I'll see what I can do," Andy said, swaying a little on her feet.

Miranda saw it, and sighed. "Sit down first." Andy sat obediently. "Pull yourself together."

"Yeah," Andy said, and did. They remained in silence for a few moments, savoring the peace. In just
a few hours, once New York awoke, the pace would pick up again. More people would have to be
called and contacted, more decisions would have to be made, more details would have to be
painstakingly arranged. Andy could shield Miranda from some of it, could run interference with
Miranda's staff so she wouldn't need to be troubled any more than necessary--but the mêlée would be
on, and there would be no turning it off.

Yes. These moments were definitely to be savored. Andy leaned in, and looked at Archer again. He
was still going for it. "Will you want to see the twins today, or wait until tomorrow?" she asked.
Miranda was tired enough that the twins might prove to be a little too much right now, no matter how
badly they wanted to meet their brother properly.

"I don't know yet," Miranda said, and switched Archer to her other breast. "I don't exactly have my
whole day minuted, Andrea."

"Well, I never know with you," Andy said. She took a long sip of her coffee, and said, "Mm-MM,"
even though it tasted awful. Miranda gave her a baleful glare. Andy smacked her lips.

"I remember when you were afraid of me," Miranda said. "The good old days."

"I still am," Andy said. "I just hide it better." She reached out and touched Archer's cheek with the
very tip of her finger. "Wow." She gulped. "It's so soft." She pulled her hand back, half-fearing she'd
bruised him with even a feather-light touch.

"Mm," Miranda said. Archer's sucking ceased, and he gave a tiny sigh as he went back to sleep.
Andy's heart stopped, melted, and then started beating again, in that order. Then Miranda handed her
the bundle. "Here. Hold him for a while."

Andy gasped, but next thing she knew, she had an armful of baby and was reclining against the back
of her seat while Miranda did up her gown again. "Oh my God. Oh my God," she said. It wasn't like
she'd never held a baby before--she'd held several--but this was different. So different. "Hey, how
heavy was he? Is he?" she asked.

"Seven pounds, one ounce," Miranda said. "And two weeks early. I've decided I'm incredibly
lucky."

"You sure are," Andy said, and cooed down to the baby, "She sure is lucky to have the most
beautiful baby boy in the whole world, isn't she? Isn't she?" Miranda groaned and rubbed one hand
over her eyes. Andy made a kissy-face. Archer yawned and promptly began to emit an unmistakable odor.

"Is that--" Miranda began.

"Whoops. Yeah. I'm all over it," Andy said, and carried Archer to a nearby changing table, where she unwrapped him. "I brought a couple of diapers in your kit."

"They probably have a few lying around here somewhere," Miranda said. "It's a hospital."

"Yeah, but we need one right now," Andy said, and whisked it out of the bag. "Relax, it's like riding a bicycle--" A nasty, smelly bicycle. But she had the kid wiped and changed quickly. Miranda looked impressed. "I babysat in high school," Andy said, proud that it would finally come in handy. "One couple had a one-year-old boy and a two-month-old girl. They were desperate to get out for a few hours a week. I made some pretty good money, but the kids were a handful."

"No wonder you were so frightened at seventeen," Miranda said quietly.

Andy's fingers paused as she wrapped Archer back in his blanket. He'd fusssed a little while she was changing him, but now that he was clean and comfortable again, he had apparently decided to forgive her and go back to sleep. "Yeah, I guess," she said. She wondered how frightened Miranda had been at eighteen. She also knew not to ask.

"Have you decided what his middle name will be?"

Andy was glad she hadn't picked Archer back up, because she probably would have dropped him. She turned to look at Miranda, her jaw falling open. "Have I what?"

Miranda was wearing a tiny, wry smile. "His middle name. Pick it. Or do you think he shouldn't have one?"

"I…" Andy carefully gathered him back up in her arms and carried him back to the chair. "I hadn't really been thinking…uh…" She blinked at Miranda. "You'll let me pick? Me?"

"Why not?" Miranda said. "It's not like we'll be calling him by it anyway."

"Oh," Andy said, deflating a little. "I guess not."

"I wouldn't let anybody else choose it, Andrea," Miranda said. Against her will, Andy felt tears prick her eyes again. "So make it good," Miranda added, "and I reserve the right of refusal."


"Paul?" Miranda frowned, and then wrinkled her nose. "As in, Paul from Graphic Design?"


Miranda closed her mouth again, frowned, and murmured, "Archer Paul Priestly." She squinted, as if she was trying to imagine how it would look on paper. "Archer Paul…"

"See?" Andy said happily. "Sounds good, doesn't it?"
Miranda stuck her tongue in her cheek, frowned again, and then nodded decisively. "Fine. 'Paul' it is."

"Hello, Archer Paul," Andy said to the baby. Then, just to piss Miranda off, she said, "Hello, Archie."

"Don't you dare," Miranda said.

"You know people will."

"They will do no such thing," Miranda snapped, with enough venom that Andy believed it. "His name is Archer. Not Archie."

"Got it, I got it," Andy said quickly. "Really, I got it."

"Good."

At that moment, Miranda's stomach gave a rumble loud enough that it could be labeled a gurgle. She scowled.

"Bran muffins," Andy suggested. "They've got lots of fiber and--"


"Sure thing." Andy handed Archer back over. "Probably nowhere else is open, but even a hospital cafeteria can't screw up bran muffins too badly. I'll be back soon." She stood up. "Need to stretch my legs anyway."

But before she could go anywhere, Miranda reached out and grabbed her wrist.

Surprised, Andy looked down into her wide, blue, bloodshot eyes. Miranda's grip loosened enough that her hand could slide down and take hold of Andy's. Their fingers twined together.

But Miranda didn't say anything. She just kept looking up, searching Andy's face from forehead to chin, over and over. Her lips parted, as if she was about to speak, but she didn't. Then, just when Andy was starting to feel really self-conscious, Miranda said, almost inaudibly, "Thank you."

Andy opened her mouth to respond, but then Miranda closed her eyes, kissed Andy's hand, and said, "Thank you," again. And she kept mumbling it against Andy's skin, her voice hoarse with disbelief: "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Andy didn't know whom Miranda was thanking--it might not even have been her. But she still bent over, her heart pounding hard, her breath coming fast. She kissed Miranda's forehead, and then her temple, and then her cheek, as Miranda kept her own lips pressed hard against Andy's hand while she murmured her gratitude to, or for, the one who loved her best.
Epilogue: Some Kind of Wonderful

Life is trying things to see if they work.

-Ray Bradbury

Twelve: October.

Go Fug Yourself

October 14, 2007: Well Played, Miranda Priestly

I have returned, minions, and I'm fabulous.

Admit it. I had you worried for a couple of months, when I pretty much disappeared. "Who will devour the souls of the Garment District now?" you asked.

Plebeians, you worried in vain. Check me out. Okay, my dress would probably be boring without this crazy coat made from Scarlett O'Hara's leftover drapes, and it might have been a mistake to wear open-toed shoes with dark hose, but who cares? Look at these legs! Look at this waist! Bow before this magnificent coiffure! Are you aware that I'm fifty-one? And just had a baby? And took over a company? And shacked up with a hot girl half my age, and can't deny it no matter how many
people I sue? And dumped my cheating slimeball husband, because who needs sausage on the grill? NOT ME.

Now kowtow like you mean it, bitches, because Mama's back in town. That's all.

Nigel sat back, roaring with laughter. Andy grinned and shut the laptop. "Boring?" Nigel said. "I would have said it was a classic, myself," Andy said, smirking so hard it hurt her face. "Has she seen it?" he asked her. "Does she ever read GFY?"

"I doubt it," Andy said. "She doesn't look at blogs. I mean, I think she knows they exist, but she doesn't really encounter them, you know?"

"Probably for the best," Nigel said. He sobered up a little. "She did look good," he added. "In that photo."

"Yeah," Andy said, not quite meeting his eyes as she zipped her laptop up into her carrying bag. "She's been…it's been…"

"Better?" Nigel said. There was just the hint of concern in his voice. "She is better, right?"

Andy set the bag in her lap and sat back with a sigh. "Well, you know it's been rough on her," she said. That it had been rough on everybody else too was the unspoken corollary. Miranda had expected her recovery to be like it had been with the twins--but there was a big difference between being thirty-nine and being fifty-one, even if she didn't want to admit it. "But she's about up to full speed again," Andy added. "She went in to work every day this week." Which was only the fourth time Miranda had done that since giving birth.

"I'm sure that made her feel better," Nigel said, raising a sympathetic eyebrow. "I don't envy you, dealing with a convalescent Miranda." Andy's full-body shudder told him all he needed to know. "Has she been able to work from home at all?"

"Like a woman possessed," Andy said. "How did we ever survive without laptops and wireless connections? And cell phones? And fax machines? And--?" She took a deep breath. "Actually, we probably got a lot more sleep…"

"I don't remember it that way," Nigel said. "Well, at least she's getting out more. Does she like the job?"

"She was born for it," Andy said, rolling her eyes. "Stan and Geoffrey better hold on to their seats." Nigel laughed again. "She got an extra burst of energy this week," Andy added. She suddenly found her laptop case very interesting, and studied it instead of looking at Nigel. "Preston really pushed. And, you know, with one thing and another, the judge waived the rest of the time."

"For the divorce decree. It was final two days ago." "Ah. And Stephen?" Nigel asked quietly.

Andy felt anger pinching her lips. "He got out of the child support."

"Jesus," Nigel said, looking shocked. "How the hell did that happen?"

Andy shrugged miserably. "Since she's got so much money, and since they both agreed he'd give up the kid, the judge ruled for him not having to pay." She tapped her foot hard against the floor as she
remembered the thwarted fury in Miranda's eyes, the satisfied gleam in Stephen's. "But you know what? At least it's over." She'd told Miranda the same thing, although Miranda had taken it less than gracefully at the time. But she'd known Andy was right too, and had started speaking to her again in less than twenty-four hours, which was as good as anybody could expect.

Nigel nodded. "And what does all this mean for you?" he asked. "Does it mean anything at all?"

"I don't know," Andy said. She shrugged again. "It doesn't really change anything. You know, not in a practical sense." Although Miranda was getting tired of sending Preston after people, she reflected. The fees kind of racked up after a while. And it was a hell of an energy drain.

Andy glanced askance at Nigel. "But, you know--if, say, a real story breaks--"

"You think it will?"

"I think it might," Andy said. "I mean, with Cara living there too, everybody knows I'm not just there to help, you know? And the divorce is final, and--we're not ashamed." Nigel nodded. Andy took the leap. "Am I going to get fired?"

"You're kidding, right?" Nigel removed his glasses and polished them, sounding very casual as he said, "Paris is a week away, and you think I'll let you off my leash?"

"I'm on a leash? Is it a nice one?"

"Diamond-studded and everything," Nigel said, putting his glasses back on. "Besides, Colin would never forgive me. He thinks you're good for me." He sighed. "Don't worry, I'll make sure you get a little face-time with Vincent in Paris. Remind him of all those musicals, and you should be untouchable." He tilted his head. "Back to speaking of the Devil, have you scheduled my lunch with her?"

"Sure have," Andy said, watching him carefully. "On Tuesday. At Maxim's. It's not for long."

"Good," Nigel said gratefully. Andy grinned.

"Happy to do it," she said. Then she looked at her watch. She'd stayed late tonight, and now it was nearly eight-thirty. "Oh, crap. Are we done here? I've gotta get home!"

"We're done," Nigel confirmed. "Enjoy it while it lasts. In a few days we'll be living on coffee."

"But not tonight," Andy said, and blew him a kiss as she grabbed her laptop, grabbed her handbag, and got out of there. If she didn't hurry, she was going to be late.

She had good luck with subway cars, and was turning the key in the door by five until nine. Whew. Just under the wire. She heard the twins and Cara in the TV room, and she put her bags down as quietly as possible, hoping she could tiptoe upstairs unnoticed. She didn't want to be delayed tonight.

She did, however, detour to Archer's room on the second floor, across the hall from Cara's and kitty-corner to the one she and Miranda shared. At nine o'clock he should be sleeping--thank God, he was. Andy got the usual mushy feeling as she looked down at him, mixed with utter relief that he wasn't playing up. At least, not for the moment. And if she woke him...

Besides, it was time for her date. Date nights were special, and not to be delayed or interrupted except in emergency circumstances; they had agreed on this, too. Andy crept out of Archer's room and climbed the stairs to the third floor as quietly as she could, and then let herself out on the roof.
It was nice out tonight. You couldn't really see stars in New York, of course, but it was a gorgeous, temperate night nevertheless, especially for mid-October. It sucked when date nights had to be inside the townhouse because of bad weather, and all Andy and Miranda could do was tell the twins and Cara to leave them alone. The roof was a lot better. And maybe now that the divorce was final they could branch out from the building entirely. Who was to say they couldn't? The cat was nine-tenths out of the bag already. 'Sausage on the grill,' and all.

And Andy was ready for it. She'd wondered, for a while, when she would be. Or if she would be. But she was. She'd told Nigel the truth: she wasn't ashamed. More than that. She was proud. They had a great thing going here on 73rd Street. Why shouldn't people know that?

Miranda was already on the roof, reclining in one of the chairs and looking up at the sky. "Hey," Andy said, and Miranda turned to look at her. She looked a little tired, but much better than she had in a while, and tonight she appeared almost peaceful. Which was remarkable, since Fashion Week was all of seven days away. True, now that Miranda wasn't actually editing the fashion magazine, she didn't have to micromanage her trip quite as much. She might even, Andy hoped, have something like fun. God knew she deserved some.

Well, she'd have some tonight, for sure. That was Andy's plan, anyway.

"Hello," Miranda said. "Had a good evening?"

"I guess," Andy said. "I'm glad to get home. You been sitting up here?"

"For a little while," Miranda said. "It's so…free of children."

"And of nanny," Andy said. Cara had moved into the house back in July, when it had been obvious that Miranda had been utterly flattened by Archer's birth, and that Andy couldn't catch everything by herself. However long she stayed, the girl was a godsend. Even if it had finally made Andy's presence as a 'helper' in the Priestly household a little less…ignorable. "Oh, and of dog."

"A bigger house," Miranda said, looking thoughtful.

"Well, maybe not," Andy said quickly. "I mean, I kind of like it the way it is--it's lively, you know? People aren't spread out all over the place, we're pretty close together, all the rooms are full--"

"Exactly. All the rooms are full," Miranda said. "We have one guest bedroom that you occasionally occupy yourself, which is completely unacceptable. We're packed like sardines."

"Across four floors?" Andy asked in disbelief.

"Just look for a few listings," Miranda said in exasperation. "It can't hurt, and we might find something we like."

"All right," Andy sighed, already wondering how to change Miranda's mind. She liked their place, liked that it really was lively, and cozy, and there was a lot of noise and chatter, just like where she'd grown up. Exactly the opposite of the cold house she'd encountered when she'd arrived at Miranda's place last Christmas. And some of that was propinquity--it would be easy to get lost in a bigger house where everybody could hide from everybody else.

But Andy was also getting better at talking Miranda into things, largely by tricking Miranda into thinking she'd thought of it first. It wasn't easy, because Miranda wasn't dumb and knew her own mind, but when it worked, it worked perfectly. Andy would have to work pretty hard on this one, but she thought it could be done.
Might as well get started. Miranda hated being pressured into stuff, for one thing. "We wouldn't have long to decide," Andy said. "Things tend to get snapped up pretty quick around here."

"Hmm." Miranda stood up, placed her hands in the small of her back, and stretched with a faint groan. Andy longed to embrace her, but it was unwise to do so outside, even all the way up here. You never knew when some jerk with a long-distance lens was lurking on another rooftop, just waiting. Andy didn't want to give them that satisfaction.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Fine," Miranda said, like always.

"You look good," Andy said, sidling up to her. "Even Mom said so, after I emailed her those pictures."

"Well, now I can die a happy woman," Miranda said. She glanced at Andy, and raised an eyebrow. "I recognize that look on your face."

"Who, me?" Andy asked innocently. She tilted her head to the side and gave Miranda her most winning smile. "I'm just thinking about how much you mean to me."

"It's either sex, or you screwed something up."

"And how hot you are."

"I think I've guessed which."

"Only if you're up for it," Andy said quickly. "It's just you said this morning, maybe tonight we could, and I was thinking..."

Miranda gave Andy a slow, wicked smile, and Andy's stomach began to melt. "...yay," she finished weakly. It wasn't like they hadn't made love at all since Archer's birth, but it had only been twice, and it was such a beautiful night, and--

"'Yay?'" Miranda said. "Your wealth of imagination, and that's the best you can come up with?"

"You've got a point." Andy considered. "Hey, Miranda?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm going to fuck you cross-eyed," Andy said.

Miranda stiffened. Even in the dim lighting, Andy could see her cheeks turn pink.

"I'm going to spread you and take everything I want," Andy said. "I'm going to make you forget your name."

"Oh?" Miranda whispered, closing her eyes.

"And if you're not careful," Andy said, "I'm going to do it right here on the roof." Photographers be damned. She took Miranda's hand. Squeezed it. "Is that better?"

"Let's go," Miranda rasped. "Now."

"Let's," Andy said, let go of her, and held the roof door open for her. She brushed her hand against the small of Miranda's back as she passed, and watched the resulting shiver with delight.
The journey seemed to take a long time, as they headed down the floors, down the hallway, and past the photos which featured the twins, Andy, the baby, and Miranda, though rarely all five together. In their bedroom, though, there was one of Andy and Miranda: a candid shot, with Archer on Miranda's lap while Andy cooed down at him, no doubt saying something, as Miranda would put it, inane. Cassidy had snapped it when they weren't looking, and Miranda, to Andy's pleased surprise, had elected to print it in her home office and frame it. True, it was the only photo of its kind in the house (and, to Andy's knowledge, in existence), but that it existed at all meant an awful lot.

So Andy always noticed these pictures with pride, but sometimes she noticed them a little bit less. Like right now.

They made it to their bedroom without incident, but it was a near thing, since Andy could see Miranda's hands trembling. She wouldn't want slow and careful. Not tonight, not now that she was feeling better, not after just doing it twice in almost four months. She'd want, she'd want--

The door shut behind them, Miranda locked it, and before she could say anything else, Andy was on her. They kissed, and kissed again, until Miranda groaned and pushed Andy away just enough that she could start unbuttoning her own blouse. Andy tore off her own shirt, but as soon as she got another look at Miranda with her blouse open, she decided that the rest of her clothes could wait. Miranda kicked off her shoes, but that was as far as she got before Andy pressed her back against the door.

Andy tangled her fingers in Miranda's hair and tilted her head back, and Miranda slid her arms around Andy's waist, tugging her even closer. During the first time they'd done this after Archer's birth, they'd both been stunned by the way the space just evaporated between them, by the bump that, for the first time ever, wasn't there. Andy had been ready to take it slow and gentle anyway, but the novelty had helped--the way they could lie together, Miranda's legs around Andy's waist and Andy's arms around her shoulders, with nothing in between. They'd both reveled in the closeness, had taken their time savoring it, drawing it out.

Not tonight, though. Tonight Andy gave Miranda another hard kiss, and then dropped to her knees and rubbed her face against Miranda through her skirt. Miranda's hips jerked forward and she gasped, before grabbing Andy's hair. The smell of her made Andy groan, and she slid her hand beneath Miranda's skirt, let her palms rub up and down her thighs, moving the skirt up just a little higher each time, until she could rub her thumbs against Miranda's underwear. Mmm. Not satin tonight. Silk. So her thumbs teased Miranda through her panties, and her mouth and nose teased Miranda through her skirt, and Miranda's head rested against the doorway as she panted for it.

Finally, when Miranda had begun to wriggle, Andy pushed the skirt all the way up to her waist, and Miranda let go of Andy's hair so she could hold it up while Andy leaned in and mouthed at her through her underwear. Which was exquisite.

"This is new," Andy murmured as she placed tiny, gentle kisses all up and down, clit to slit, through the silk. Blue silk and lace, feeling so soft and warm against her lips and tongue. "Did you get these just for tonight? For me?" She slid her hands up and down Miranda's thighs again in time with her kisses.

"Uh," Miranda gulped, "uh, yes, I um--"

Awww. Too bad they were about to ruin them. "You want it?" Andy whispered, and exhaled hotly against the wetness that seeped through the silk. "You ready for it?" She licked, roughly, and Miranda gasped. "You going to give it to me?"

"G-give you--" Already Miranda couldn't talk.
"Give me this." Andy slid her hand up her thigh and cradled Miranda through her underwear. Miranda bucked her hips forward. "My favorite thing." Andy licked again, and even scraped her teeth. Miranda cried out and rose up on her toes, shoving frantically against Andy's mouth. "Give it to me."

"Yes!" Miranda whimpered. "Oh! Yes--"

It wouldn't take much to bring her off against the door like this, just like this. But Andy didn't want that, not tonight, not after such a wait. She stood up, leaned in, and kissed Miranda so hungrily that, by the time they parted, Miranda's breaths were all ending in tiny cries. She was beyond ready, and Andy tugged her to the bed, pressed her back down on the mattress, yanked off her panties. Spread her open, and let Miranda throw one leg over her shoulder.

"It's mine," she whispered, "it's mine," and buried her face in the wet. So wet, and Andy knew, then, that Miranda had been waiting all day for this, just like Andy had, and had tried her damndest to pretend otherwise. In retaliation, Andy licked again, even rougher than before, again and again. Miranda keened, arched up, grabbed Andy's hair once more. "Oh Jesus, yes, Miranda." Andy whispered against her, and licked and sucked. Miranda was writhing now, hissing, panting through her nose. "I'm taking it, I've got to have it, it's mine--"

"Take it, take it--t-take--" Miranda sobbed for air. Her leg was spasming where it hooked over Andy's shoulder. "Yours--take, oh please oh God oh please --"

Andy spread her wider, sank two thumbs in, opened her, lapped at her--

Miranda let go of Andy's hair, slapped both hands over her mouth, and screamed.

Oh, yes. Fast. Fast and good, judging by the way Miranda's legs were shaking. Andy wiped her mouth, stood up, and lay down next to her. Miranda covered her eyes with her hand, still panting. "Oh my God," she whimpered.

"You okay?" Andy whispered, just to make sure.

"Uh…huh." Miranda licked her lips, still panting. Andy looked down at her, eating up the sight of her messy hair, red-cheeked face, and heaving chest. Incredible. Fantastic. Still so new and so astonishing.

"Oh," Miranda finally managed. "I'll…for you. Just give me a moment…"

"It's okay. Take your time," Andy said, and grinned. Cara and the girls knew it was date night, and Andy and Miranda wouldn't be disturbed unless it was an emergency. Besides, it was time for the twins to go to bed anyway. And Archer could be bottle-fed if they weren't done. And…

It was a rare night, and Andy kissed Miranda.

"Oh," Miranda moaned against her mouth. Her breath was slowing down again. "This is a lot better than last year."

Andy pulled back and blinked. "Huh?"

Miranda opened her eyes, and blinked too, as if she hadn't quite meant to say that. She struggled for a moment, but then appeared to come to a decision, and said, "Archer was conceived one year ago today."

Andy's jaw fell open, but she couldn't think of a single thing to say other than, "Oh." Followed by,
"Um." Then she looked down at the bed, her eyes widening.

"It's all right," Miranda said. "I changed the sheets."

"Yeah," Andy said, trying not to squirm. Yuck. "Thanks for telling me that, I guess." Or not. Her libido had definitely just hopped into the back seat for a moment.

Miranda almost looked apologetic. Or as close as she ever came to it. "I shouldn't have mentioned it."

"I guess...if you were thinking about it," Andy said feebly, though she couldn't believe Miranda had been thinking about it.

"I wasn't," Miranda said, trailing a hand over Andy's hip. "Not like that, I mean. It's just--only one year, and everything's so..." Her voice trailed off. "Life's odd, isn't it?"

'Life's odd' was about as philosophical as Miranda ever got. Thank God. "Yeah, but it's cool too," Andy said, trying not to be huffy about Miranda's little revelation, because she really wanted to get off. Besides, Miranda had a point. "I mean, life is. At least, I think so." She touched Miranda's cheek. "What do you think next year's going to be like?"

"Well, I don't know," Miranda said lightly. "Stick around and find out."

"I just might," Andy whispered, bent down, and kissed her.

When they surfaced, Miranda murmured, "I'm sorry I broke the mood. It wasn't my intention." Her voice dropped into a whisper. "Or don't you like hearing about how good you are? I thought you might like it." She dragged her fingers over Andy's ass, still clad in her pants. And then down between her legs. "Knowing that you're better than anybody else. Better by far."

Andy forgave her instantly and completely. "Y-yeah," she stammered. "Yeah...that's good to know..." But then Miranda pulled her hand away. Andy bucked and whined.

"There's something else you want, isn't there?" Miranda said. "Something you've been wanting, that I can give you?"

"I, uh--" Andy shook her head. "What do you--"

"Watch me," Miranda said softly.

Andy stared at her. Miranda pushed her gently off, but then, before Andy could protest, she slithered out of her wrinkled skirt and tossed it to the floor. And then she parted her legs. And reached down between them. And arched into her own touch. And sighed.

"Oh my God," Andy said, feeling like someone had just sucked all the oxygen out of the room. "Oh Jesus."

"Watch me," Miranda whispered, like Andy could do anything else. And, trying not to faint, Andy watched.

Miranda was red and swollen now, slick and wet and no doubt extra-sensitive; so her fingertips slid up, down, and around so lightly that it almost looked like she wasn't touching herself at all. Delicate and gentle, just the way she liked it. She hadn't begun to pant or anything, not yet, but her breathing was starting to get a little deeper, a little quicker. She spread her legs to give Andy a better look at her favorite thing--parted her own labia wider with the fingers of her left hand, stroked and dipped...
between them with her right. Swirled her index finger just around the edges of her clit, and sighed, "Mmm," through her nose as she closed her eyes.

"This is how you do it?" Andy asked hoarsely. "This is how you do it when you're thinking about me?"

Miranda opened her eyes again, warm and hazy with desire. "When I'm not in a hurry," she husked.

"When--" Andy swallowed before she could choke. "When are you in a hurry?"

"I haven't been in a while," Miranda admitted, rubbed her clit again, and shivered. Andy couldn't decide which to watch: her fingers or her face. She settled on the face, just for the moment, because Miranda was still whispering. "But before…before we ever made love--" She batted her lashes, long and slow, and gave Andy a sweet smile. "Well, I don't want to bore you. You probably don't want to hear about--"

"I will give you everything I own if you tell me," Andy croaked. Miranda laughed softly, and then sighed as she slipped one finger inside herself. Andy groaned just looking at it.

"When you kissed me," Miranda said, and arched her hips. "So many times, when you kissed me after delivering the book. Before I went to sleep. Then I did it slowly, just like I like it best."

"B-but…but sometimes…"

Miranda never turned her eyes away from Andy's. "But sometimes, I couldn't wait," she said. "I'd take the book up to my room, shut the door, I wouldn't even get undressed--" Andy had to close her eyes and breathe deeply to keep from hyperventilating. "And once I didn't even make it to the bed, I just leaned up against the door, just as you had me tonight, just over there." Andy moaned, unable to open her eyes, because if she did-- "Because I knew then, I knew, that you would be so good to me, Andrea. I knew that the moment I said yes, you'd--oh--"

Andy's eyes flew open at the whimper in her voice, she looked down, saw that Miranda had buried two fingers inside herself, and was thrusting gently, rubbing her clit with the heel of her palm.

"But it wasn't enough," Miranda said, her eyes falling shut again as she remembered. "It wasn't enough just to think about it, I had to know, I had to feel it for myself--"

It was all over, then. Andy sank to the floor again, bent to Miranda again; Miranda made a faint noise of surprise that turned into a shocked, delighted cry when Andy began licking around her fingers, when Andy pressed her tongue in between them to stroke her clit. "Andrea!"

"Keep talking," Andy growled, licked her perineum, bit the inside of her thigh. "Tell me, tell me everything."

"It was so good," Miranda choked, her legs beginning to tremble again. "I had known it would be good, but I didn't know how much--" She slid her fingers halfway out; Andy nudged the knuckles with her nose, and Miranda slid them back in with a groan. "Oh my God, when you made me come and I didn't even have my shirt all the way off--"

"So beautiful," Andy gasped, reared up, and began kissing Miranda's belly, flat again, flat and smooth. "You were so beautiful I wanted to eat you up, make you mine, I never wanted anything like that with anybody before--" She bit, as if to prove her point.

Miranda groaned, pulled her hands out, and rubbed her sticky fingers against Andy's lips. "T-take off your, take," she managed, patting at the waistband of Andy's pants. Andy pulled away just long
enough until she was bare from the waist down, and then she leapt back on the mattress, pulled Miranda up into her lap; Miranda wrapped her legs around Andy's waist and her arms around Andy's shoulders, and they twined together, kissing and whimpering through their noses. Andy rubbed her sticky face against Miranda's, Miranda combed her sticky fingers through Andy's hair, and it was best like this, when they wanted so much, but could give so much too.

"I heard myself begging you," Miranda moaned against Andy's mouth, sounding drunk with it. "I'd never begged, but I thought I'd die if you stopped, I didn't recognize myself, I didn't know who I was, and I didn't even care oh my God--"

Her head fell back and her mouth fell open, because Andy had just wedged her hand down between them, and slipped two fingers inside her without further ado. Now she was thrusting them ruthlessly and holding Miranda in place, her hand pressing firmly against the small of Miranda's back while Miranda writhed and tossed her head, choking on her own breath. She couldn't get away, couldn't slow Andy's rhythm, couldn't do anything but hang on for dear life while Andy groaned against her shoulder, "I love you. I'm the luckiest person alive to be here with you, to have you like this, me and nobody else--" She bit down, hard. "You drive me crazy, you're wonderful--"

"Oh God--" Miranda's fingernails might actually have drawn blood when they scored down Andy's back, catching only on her bra hook. Then she grabbed Andy's face in both her hands and kissed her fiercely, before pulling back and staring down into her eyes as Andy fucked her.

"I," she gulped, "I--"

Andy stopped moving her hand, stopped by the...something...in Miranda's eyes. Miranda squirmed and whimpered in protest, so Andy started stroking her again, only much more slowly, more gently, just to keep things going. And she waited.

"--I do know when it started," Miranda finally choked, keeping her hands on Andy's cheeks. "I told you I didn't, but I do. The minute, the very minute I realized how I--how I--I know when it was." She leaned forward until her forehead was pressed against Andy's, still looking into her eyes. "Please," she said. "Please, now."

"Now," Andy said, only vaguely aware that she was speaking, "now." She twisted her fingers, rubbed her thumb, keeping Miranda pressed against her. And Miranda, perhaps fired up by her half-revelation, rode her hard until she convulsed, gasping so much that she didn't manage to make any other noise, though it sounded like she wanted to.

Still looking into Andy's eyes.

She closed them, though, when she finished, and slumped forward, shaking. Maybe shaking a little more than usual. Andy realized that her own urgency had abated, at least for the moment, because even more than she wanted to get off, she wanted to hear what Miranda had to say. It was something she was dying to know, and now, when Miranda was limp with bliss, was the time to ask about it.

Andy pulled her fingers out, and gently tipped Miranda over on her back. "Can you tell me?" Andy whispered, stroking her thigh soothingly. "Will you tell me? Please?"

Miranda's eyes were still closed. "London. After Christmas," she managed, still gasping. "I had a nightmare, I couldn't sleep. I came downstairs, and there you were, curled up and asleep in that armchair..."

Andy gasped too, remembering. The way she'd woken up to see Miranda standing over her in her bathrobe. The shock on Miranda's face. "The armchair?" she whispered.
"You had a book in your lap," Miranda said, her eyes still squeezed shut. "A pregnancy book, and I realized you were up in the middle of the night trying to help me, and I thought about how the last few days had just felt all wrong without you there."

She stopped, swallowed hard, while Andy stared at her, afraid she was about to clam up. But she kept going: "And you even said you'd come to me when I hadn't forced you to--I knew I had to keep you with me, I just didn't know how--even after New Year's, when I knew how you felt, I didn't know what I should…"

Then she opened her eyes, and the hazy look was gone. She was actually glaring. "I dithered for months," she said. "Because of you, and I never dither. It shows a lack of character--but obviously something had to be done. And then, during Fashion Week--"

Miranda bit her lip and looked unhappy for a second, no doubt remembering the moment Andy had finally let loose. Andy quickly kissed her, not anxious to dwell on that. "You made me totally happy during Fashion Week," she said. "I mean, at the end. You know. Whatever that's worth."

Miranda sighed and looked a little annoyed. "At any rate. I knew it was time. And then I…" Her voice trailed off, and she obviously didn't quite know what to say next.

"And then you decided we should be celibate," Andy said, and helpfully stroked her fingertips over Miranda's thigh. Miranda shivered. "That was your best idea ever."

"Shut up," Miranda said, held out her arms. Andy realized that confession time was over, maybe forever, and she was disappointed--but then Miranda tugged on her shoulders, pulled her down. Oh. Well, this was a worthwhile distraction. Andy lowered herself down onto her elbows, and the feel of that sweaty skin beneath her was still and always a turn-on.

Suddenly she took a little trip down memory lane herself. She remembered that night during Fashion Week in London, when, sick with love and despair both, she'd dreamed of making love to Miranda like this, just like this. Desire roared back through her so fast she was shocked at it, and so she bent down and kissed Miranda, because reality was better than dreaming. And if Miranda was surprised by the sheer force behind the kiss, she said nothing--just wound her arms around Andy's neck and returned the hard kisses with a languor that drove Andy out of her mind. Her head was spinning, her cunt was throbbing, and if she didn't get some relief in the next ten seconds--

Miranda wedged her thigh in between both of Andy's. Andy gasped and went rigid.

"Give it to me, Andrea," Miranda said softly, her lips curving in a soft, evil smile. "Give me what I want the most."

It only took three thrusts against that firm, smooth thigh before Andy was coating Miranda's leg with her come, trying not to scream in Miranda's ear.

"Marvelous," Miranda purred in Andy's own ear, while Andy just barely managed not to collapse on top of her with her full weight.

"Um," Andy said into the pillow. "Um yeah. Um God. Um…"

Miranda laughed softly at her, dragging her hands again--much more gently now--up and down Andy's back. "Well," she said. "If I remember correctly, I now own all of your earthly possessions. Yes?"

"Sure," Andy mumbled. "Enjoy the shot glasses."
"And say farewell to the bookcase," Miranda said, and sighed in contentment as she patted Andy's ass. It felt great.

Well played, Miranda Priestly, Andy thought, trying to get her brain back in working order. Well played indeed.

Three days later, it was Cara's night off. But even though work had been hellish from the Paris preparations (and Nigel was right about living on coffee), Andy was glad to flop down on the couch with one twin on each side and a baby in her lap. Archer's gaze roved curiously around the room, although he probably wasn't seeing much of it yet.

"He is so cute now," Cassidy said.

"When he's not screaming," Caroline replied. "And pooping and spitting up. Then he's gross."

"Oh, that's not his fault," Andy said, bouncing him a little and grinning down into his face. "That's what babies have to do to get noticed. You guys did it."

"How do you know?" Cassidy demanded. "You weren't there."

"I have a hunch," Andy said, and raised one eyebrow at her. Cassidy grinned and peered back down at her baby brother. Caroline reached over and offered Archer her index finger. He grabbed it tight, and she laughed. He laughed right back.

"He is totally cute," Cassidy said. "Shut up, Caroline."

"I didn't say anything," Caroline said, and yanked her finger away. It took some effort. "You shut up."

"Andy, tell Caroline to shut up," Cassidy said.

"Both of you shut up and somebody bring me the book," Andy said, nodding over to the bright pink paperback that rested on a nearby hassock. She'd seen it in a bookstore today and had bought it at once. "You said you wanted to hear it too."

"I can't believe this is a real book," Caroline said, hopping up and running to get it. She sat back down next to Andy. "Here. Which one are you going to read first?"

"Well, I don't know," Andy said, cradling Archer in the crook of one elbow and taking the little book with her free hand. "Let's see. Now. This Little Piggy Went to Prada." The twins were already laughing, and Andy awkwardly thumbed to the table of contents with one hand. "Ah!" she said, and grinned. "How about this one?" She began to read:

Cobbler, cobbler, mend my shoes,
Careful, please, they're Christian Lous.
These red soles, they'll never date,
They'll still be hot in Spring '08.

The twins laughed again. "Do another," Caroline urged.

"Sure," Andy said, and obliged. "I had a little shoe tree, nothing would it bear, but Manolo Blahniks
They made it through three more before the microwave bleeped. "Popcorn's done!" Cassidy announced, and she and Caroline fled to the kitchen, nursery rhymes forgotten. Andy chuckled, and then looked down into Archer's face. As always, he looked extremely...pink. And bewildered. No wonder: the world had to be very confusing.

She angled her arm so she could look at her watch. Miranda wasn't due home until nine tonight, so they had some time to kill. Archer wriggled and yawned: his next feeding was in half-an-hour, and, as Miranda's son, he would be very punctual about fussing for it when it was time. Andy smiled down at him. "One more, baby?" she asked softly, and flipped the book open to another page. "How about this one?"

Archer blew out air between his lips like a horse, dribbling spit down his chin. Andy laughed and used the corner of his blanket to wipe him clean. Then she bent down and pressed her nose to his forehead, nuzzling him, grinning like an idiot. Archer tried to yank on her hair, but Andy tossed it back over her shoulder just in time. He was becoming really good at getting hold of things. Miranda had stopped wearing her signature hoop earrings, and Andy was never going to let her forget that the first thing Archer had ever managed to grab was her nose.

Andy had no idea how she was going to handle being away from him for a whole week. Neither did Miranda, although she'd never admit it. It wasn't like nightly phone calls were going to be a whole lot of help. Not that she wouldn't make them anyway, Andy decided, but it'd still be a long seven days. At least Miranda could leave Paris early if she felt like it. Andy thought she just might.

Just then, she heard a sound in the doorway. She looked up and saw Miranda standing there, back from the office. She looked pretty tired. But she also had an amused gleam in her eyes, which meant that everything was okay. It was eight-forty-five on the dot.

"Hey," Andy said in delight.

"Hello," Miranda replied. She raised her eyebrows, and nodded pointedly down at the book, a nearly-invisible smile twitching around her mouth. "By all means, continue."

Andy grinned at her, and continued, with a slight alteration or two.

Hush-a-bye Baby, in Andy's arms,<br>When she wears Tod's, you'll come to no harm.<br>When in her Ginas she's not quite so sound,<br>You're safer with Mommy, both feet on the ground.

Miranda snorted and rolled her eyes. Andy laughed, dropped the book, and patted the cushion next to her; Miranda came over and sat down with an audible sigh of relief, and took Archer in her arms, bouncing him gently. Her smile was much more visible now. And softer.

Andy leaned forward, resting her elbow on her knee and her face in her palm. Something in her chest glowed very, very warm and bright. Miranda glanced up from Archer's face, and saw Andy watching them both. She raised her eyebrows again.

"Welcome home," Andy said.

"Yes," Miranda said. She tilted her head. Andy leaned in and kissed her.

FIN.
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