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The Devil Returns



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1

as long as she lived

The rain fell in sideways sheets, cold and relentless, the winds whipping it in every direction, making an umbrella, slicker, and rain boots nearly useless. Not that Andy had any of those things. Her two-hundred-dollar Burberry umbrella had refused to open and finally snapped when she tried to force it; the cropped rabbit jacket with the oversize collar and no hood cinched fabulously around her waist but did nothing to stop the bone-chilling cold; and the brand-new stacked suede Prada pumps cheered her with their poppy fuchsia color but left the better part of her foot exposed. Even her skinny leggings left her legs feeling naked, the wind making the leather feel as protective as a pair of silk stockings. Already the fifteen inches that had blanketed New York were beginning to melt into a slushy gray mess, and Andy wished for the thousandth time that she lived anywhere but here.

As if to punctuate her thought, a taxi barreled through a yellow light and blared its horn at Andy, who had committed the grievous crime of trying to cross the street. She restrained herself from offering him the finger – everyone was armed these days – and instead gritted her teeth and hurled mental curses his way. Considering the size of her heels, she made decent progress for the next two or three blocks. Fifty-Second, Fifty-Third, Fifty-Fourth . . . it wasn't too far now, and at least she'd have a moment or two to warm up before beginning the race back to the office. She was consoling herself with the promise of a hot coffee and maybe, just maybe, a chocolate chip cookie, when suddenly, somewhere, she heard *that* ring.

Where was it coming from? Andy glanced around, but her fellow pedestrians didn't seem to notice the sound, which was growing louder every second. *Br-rrring! Br-rrring!* That ringtone. She would recognize it anywhere for as long as she lived, although Andy was surprised they were still making phones with it. She simply hadn't heard it in so long and yet . . . it all came rushing back. She knew before she pulled her phone from her bag what she would find, but she was still shocked to see those two words on her caller ID screen:

MIRANDA PRIESTLY.

She would not answer. Could not. Andy took a deep breath, hit 'ignore,' and tossed the phone back into her bag. It started ringing again almost immediately. Andy could feel her heart begin to beat faster, and it got more and more difficult to fill her lungs. *Inhale, exhale*, she instructed herself, tucking her chin to protect her face from what was now pounding sleet, and *just keep walking*. She was less than two blocks from the restaurant – she could see it lit up ahead like a warm, shimmering promise – when a particularly nasty gust propelled her forward, causing her to lose her balance

and step directly into one of the worst parts of a Manhattan winter: the black, slushy puddle of dirt and water and salt and trash and god knows what else so filthy and freezing and shockingly deep that one could do nothing but surrender to it.

Which is exactly what Andy did, right there in the pool of hell that had accumulated between the street and the curb. She stood, flamingo-like, perched gracefully on one submerged foot, holding the other one rather impressively above the watery mess for a good thirty or forty seconds, weighing her options. Around her, people gave her and the slushy little lake wide berth, only those with knee-high rubber boots daring to tromp directly through the middle. But no one offered her a hand and, realizing that the puddle had a large enough perimeter that she couldn't jump to escape in any one direction, she steeled herself for another shock of cold and placed her left foot beside her right. The icy water rushed up her legs and came to a stop on her lower calf, subsuming both fuchsia shoes and a good five inches of leather pant, and it was all Andy could do not to cry.

Her shoes and leggings were ruined; her feet felt like she might lose them to frostbite; she had no option for extricating herself from the mess except continuing to slog through it; and all Andy could think was, *That's exactly what you get for screening Miranda Priestly*.

There wasn't time to dwell on her misery, though; because as soon as she made it to the curb and stopped to evaluate the damage, her phone rang again. It had been ballsy – hell, downright reckless – to ignore the first call. She simply couldn't do it again. Dripping, shivering, and near tears, Andy tapped the screen and said hello.

'Ahn-dre-ah? Is that you? You've already been gone for

an eternity. I'll ask you only one time. Where. Is. My. Lunch? I simply won't be kept waiting like this.'

Of course it's me, Andy thought. You dialed my number. Who else would be answering?

'I'm so sorry, Miranda. It's really horrid out right now, and I'm trying my best to—'

'I'll expect you back here *immediately*. That's all.' And before Andy could say another word, the line was disconnected.

No matter that the icy water trapped in her shoes was squishing around her toes in the most disgustingly imaginable way, or that it had been hard enough to walk in those heels when they were dry, or that the sidewalks were growing slicker by the second as the rain started to freeze: Andy began to run. She sprinted as best she could down one block and had only one more to go when she heard someone calling her name.

Andy! Andy, stop! It's me! Stop running!

She would recognize that voice anywhere. But what was Max doing there? He was away that weekend, upstate somewhere, for a reason she couldn't quite remember. Wasn't he? She stopped and turned, searching for him.

Over here, Andy!

And then she spotted him. Her fiancé, with his thick dark hair and piercing green eyes and rugged good looks, was sitting astride an enormous white horse. Andy didn't particularly like horses ever since she'd fallen from one in second grade and shattered her right wrist, but this horse looked friendly enough. Never mind that Max was riding a white horse in midtown Manhattan in the middle of a blizzard – Andy was so ecstatic to see him, she didn't even think to question it.

He dismounted with the ease of a practiced rider, and Andy tried to remember if he'd ever mentioned playing polo.

In three long strides he was at her side, enveloping her in the warmest, most delicious embrace imaginable, and she felt her whole body relax as she collapsed into him.

'My poor baby,' he murmured, paying neither the horse nor the staring pedestrians any mind. 'You must be freezing out here.'

The sound of a phone – that phone – rang out between them, and Andy scrambled to answer it.

'Ahn-dre-ah! I don't know what part of "immediately" you don't understand, but—'

Andy's whole body was shaking as Miranda's shrill voice drilled into her ear, but before she could move a single muscle, Max plucked the phone from her fingertips, tapped 'end' on the screen, and tossed it with perfect aim directly into the puddle that had previously claimed Andy's feet. 'You're done with her, Andy,' he said, wrapping a large down comforter around her shoulders.

'Ohmigod, Max, how could you do that? I'm so late! I haven't even made it to the restaurant yet, and she's going to kill me if I'm not back there with her lunch in—'

'Shhh,' he said, touching two fingers to Andy's lips. 'You're safe now. You're with me.'

'But it's already ten after one, and if she doesn't—'

Max reached both hands under Andy's arms and lifted her effortlessly into the air before gently depositing her sidesaddle on top of the white horse, whose name, according to Max, was Bandit.

She sat in shocked silence as Max removed both her soaking wet shoes and tossed them to the curb. From his duffel bag – the one he carried everywhere – Max pulled out Andy's favorite fleece-lined bootie-style slippers and slid them onto her raw, red feet. He settled the down comforter over her lap, tied his own cashmere scarf over her head and

around her neck, and handed her a steel thermos of what he announced was specially sourced dark hot chocolate. Her favorite. Then in one impressively fluid motion, he mounted the horse and picked up the reins. Before she could say another word, they began to trot down Seventh Avenue at a good clip, the police escort in front of them clearing the way of traffic and pedestrians.

It was such a relief to be warm and loved, but Andy couldn't get rid of the panic she felt at not completing a Miranda-assigned task. She'd be fired, that much was sure, but what if it was worse than that? What if Miranda was so livid that she used her limitless influence to make sure Andy never got another job? What if she decided to teach her assistant a lesson and show her exactly what happened when one simply walked out – not once but *twice* – on Miranda Priestly?

'I have to go back!' Andy shouted into the wind as their trot became a run. 'Max, turn around and take me back! I can't . . .'

'Andy! Can you hear me, sweetheart? Andy!'

Her eyes flew open. The only thing she felt was the pounding of her own heart as it raced in her chest.

'You're okay, baby. You're safe now. It was just a dream. And from the looks of it, a really horrible one,' Max crooned, cupping her cheek with his cool palm.

She pushed herself up and saw the early morning sun streaming in from the room's window. There was no snow, no sleet, no horse. Her feet were bare but warm under the buttery soft sheets, and Max's body felt strong and safe pressed against her own. She inhaled deeply, and the scent of Max – his breath, his skin, his hair – filled her nostrils.

It was only a dream.

She glanced around the bedroom. She still felt half asleep,

fuzzy from being awakened at the wrong time. Where were they? What was happening? It took a glance at the door, from which hung a freshly steamed and utterly gorgeous Monique Lhuillier gown, before she remembered that the unfamiliar room was actually a bridal suite – *her* bridal suite – and she was the bride. Bride! A rush of adrenaline caused her to sit straight up in bed so quickly that Max exclaimed in surprise. 'What were you dreaming about, baby? I hope it didn't have anything to do with today.'

'Not at all. Just old ghosts.' She leaned over to kiss him as Stanley, their Maltese, wedged himself between them. 'What time is it? Wait – what are you doing here?'

Max gave her that devilish grin she loved and climbed out of bed. As always, Andy couldn't help but admire his broad shoulders and tight stomach. He had the body of a twenty-five-year-old, only better – not too hard and muscled, but perfectly tight and fit.

'It's six. I came in a couple hours ago,' he said as he pulled on a pair of flannel pajama pants. 'I got lonely.'

'Well, you better get out of here before someone sees you. Your mother had some whole big thing about us not seeing each other before the wedding.'

Max pulled Andy out of bed and wrapped his arms around her. 'Then don't tell her. But I wasn't going to go all day before seeing you.'

Andy feigned irritation, but she was secretly glad he'd sneaked in for a quick cuddle, especially in light of her nightmare. 'Fine,' she sighed dramatically. 'But get back to your room without being seen! I'm taking Stanley out for a walk before the masses descend.'

Max pushed his pelvis against hers. 'It's still early. I bet if we're fast we can—'

Andy laughed. 'Go!'

He kissed her again, tenderly this time, and let himself out of the suite.

Andy gathered Stanley in her arms, kissed him squarely on his wet nose, and said, 'This is it, Stan!' He excitedly woofed and tried to escape, and she had to let him go so he wouldn't scratch her arms to shreds. For a few lovely seconds she managed to forget the dream, but it quickly reappeared again in all its detailed realness. Andy took a deep breath and her pragmatism kicked in: wedding-day jitters. A classic anxiety dream. Nothing more. Nothing less.

She ordered breakfast from room service and fed Stanley bits of scrambled eggs and toast while fielding excited phone calls from her mother, sister, Lily, and Emily – all of whom were champing at the bit for her to begin preparations – and leashed Stanley up for a quick walk in the brisk October air before the day got too frantic. It was slightly embarrassing to wear the terry-cloth sweatpants with a hot-pink BRIDE emblazoned across the butt that she'd received at her bridal shower, but she was secretly proud, too. She jammed her hair into a baseball cap, laced up her sneakers, zipped up a Patagonia fleece, and miraculously made it out to the sprawling grounds of the Astor Courts Estate without seeing another living soul. Stanley bounded as happily as his little legs would allow, pulling her toward the tree line at the edge of the property, where the leaves had already changed into their fiery fall colors. They walked for almost thirty minutes, certainly long enough for everyone to wonder where she'd gone, and although the air was fresh and the rolling fields of the farm were beautiful and Andy felt the excited giddiness of her wedding day, she couldn't get the image of Miranda out of her mind.

How could this woman still haunt her? It had been nearly *ten years* since she bolted from Paris and her soul-destroying

stint as Miranda's assistant at *Runway*. She had grown so much since that dreaded year, hadn't she? Everything had changed, and for the better: the early post-*Runway* years of freelancing, which she'd proudly parlayed into a steady gig as a contributing editor writing for a wedding blog, *Happily Ever After*. A few years and tens of thousands of words later, she was able to launch her very own magazine, *The Plunge*, a beautiful glossy high-end book that was three years into the endeavor and, despite all predictions to the contrary, was actually making money. *The Plunge* was getting nominated for awards, and advertisers were clamoring. And now, in the midst of all her professional success, she was getting married! To Max Harrison, son of the late Robert Harrison and grandson of the legendary Arthur Harrison, who'd founded Harrison Publishing Holdings in the years right after the Great Depression and had built it into Harrison Media Holdings, one of the most prestigious and profitable companies in the United States. Max Harrison, long on the circuit of most eligible bachelors, a guy who'd dated the Tinsley Mortimers and Amanda Hearsts of New York City, and probably a fair number of their sisters, cousins, and friends, was her betrothed. There would be mayors and moguls in attendance that afternoon, just waiting to cheer on the young scion and his new bride. But the best part of all? She loved Max. He was her best friend. He doted on her and made her laugh and appreciated her work. Wasn't it always true that men in New York weren't ready until they were ready? Max had started talking marriage within months of their meeting. Three years later, here they were, on their wedding day. Andy reprimanded herself for wasting another second thinking about such a ridiculous dream and led Stanley back to her suite, where a small army of women had gathered in a nervous, twittering panic, apparently wondering if she'd

fled the scene. There was a collective audible sigh of relief the moment she walked in; immediately Nina, her wedding planner, began issuing directives.

The next few hours passed in a blur: a shower, a blowout, hot rollers, mascara, enough spackle foundation to smooth the complexion of a hormonal teenager. Someone tended to her toes while another fetched her undergarments and a third debated her lip color. Before she could even realize what was happening, her sister, Jill, was holding open Andy's ivory gown, and a second later her mother was cinching the delicate fabric in the back and zipping Andy into it. Andy's grandmother clucked delightedly. Lily cried. Emily sneaked a cigarette in the bridal suite bathroom, thinking no one would notice. Andy tried to soak it all in. And then she was alone. For just a few minutes before she was expected in the grand ballroom, everyone left her to get themselves ready, and Andy sat perched awkwardly on a tufted antique chair, trying not to wrinkle or ruin any inch of herself. In less than one hour she would be a married woman, committed for the rest of her life to Max, and he to her. It was almost too much to fathom.

The suite's phone rang. Max's mother was on the other end.

'Good morning, Barbara,' Andy said as warmly as she could. Barbara Anne Williams Harrison, Daughter of the American Revolution, descendant of not one but two signers of the Constitution, perennial fixture on every charitable board that socially mattered in Manhattan. From her Oscar-Blandi-coiffed hair to her Chanel ballet flats, Barbara was always perfectly polite to Andy. Perfectly polite to *everyone*. But effusive she was not. Andy tried not to take it personally, and Max assured her it was all in her head. Perhaps in the early days Barbara had thought Andy was another of

her son's passing phases? Then Andy convinced herself Barbara's acquaintance with Miranda had poisoned any hope of bonding with her mother-in-law. Eventually Andy realized it was just Barbara's way – she was coolly polite to everyone, even her own daughter. She couldn't imagine ever calling that woman 'Mom.' Not that she'd been invited to . . .

'Hello, Andrea. I just realized I never actually gave you the necklace. I was racing so frantically this morning trying to get everything organized that I ended up late for hair and makeup! I'm calling to let you know that it's in a velvet box in Max's room, tucked into the side pocket of that vile duffel bag of his. I didn't want the staff to see it lying about. Perhaps you'll be more successful in persuading him to carry something more dignified? Lord knows I've tried a thousand times, but he simply won't—'

'Thanks, Barbara. I'll go get it right now.'

'You'll do no such thing!' the woman trilled sharply. 'You simply cannot see each other before the ceremony – it's bad luck. Send your mother or Nina. Anyone else. All right?'

'Of course,' Andy said. She hung up the phone and headed into the hallway. She'd learned early on that it was easier to agree with Barbara and then go on to do what she pleased; arguing got her nowhere. Which is exactly why she was wearing a Harrison family heirloom as her 'something old' instead of something from her own relatives: Barbara had insisted. Six generations of Harrisons had included that necklace in their weddings, and Andy and Max would, too.

Max's suite door was slightly ajar, and she could hear the shower running in the bathroom when she stepped inside. *Classic*, she thought. *I've been getting ready for the last five hours and he's just now getting in the shower.*

'Max? It's me. Don't come out!'

'Andy? What are you doing here?' Max's voice called through the bathroom door.

'I'm just getting your mom's necklace. Don't come out, okay? I don't want you to see me in my dress.'

Andy rummaged around in the bag's front pocket. She didn't feel a velvet box but her hands closed around a folded paper.

It was a piece of cream-colored stationery, heavyweight and engraved with Barbara's initials, BHW, in a navy script monogram. Andy knew Barbara helped keep Dempsey & Carroll in business with the amount of stationery she bought; she had been using the same design for birthday greetings, thank-you notes, dinner invitations, and condolence wishes for four decades. She was old-fashioned and formal and would rather have died than send someone a gauche e-mail or – horror! – a text message. It made perfect sense that she would send her son a traditional handwritten letter on his wedding day. Andy was just about to refold it and return it when her own name caught her eye. Before she could even consider what she was doing, Andy began to read.

Dear Maxwell,

While you know I do my best to allow you your privacy, I can no longer hold my tongue on matters of such importance. I have mentioned my concerns to you before, and you have always pledged to consider them. Now, however, due to the imminence of your upcoming wedding, I feel I can wait no longer to speak my mind plainly and forthrightly:

I beseech you, Maxwell. Please do not marry Andrea.

Do not misunderstand me. Andrea is pleasant, and she will undoubtedly make someone an agreeable wife one day. But you, my darling, deserve so much more! You must be

with a girl from the right family, not a broken family where all she knows is heartache and divorce. A girl who understands our traditions, our way of life. Someone who will help shepherd the Harrison name into the next generation. Most important, a partner who wants to put you and your children ahead of her own selfish career aspirations. You must think carefully about this: do you want your wife editing magazines and taking business trips, or do you desire someone who puts others first and embraces the philanthropic interests of the Harrison line? Don't you desire a partner who cares more about supporting your family than furthering her own ambitions?

I told you I thought your unexpected get-together with Katherine in Bermuda was a sign. Oh, how delighted you sounded to see her again! Please, do not discount those feelings. Nothing is decided yet – it is not too late. It is clear you've always adored Katherine, and it is even more clear she would make a wonderful life partner.

You always make me so proud, and I know your father is looking down on us and rooting for you to do the right thing.

*All my love,
Mother*

She heard the water turn off and, startled, dropped the note to the floor. When she scrambled to pick it up, she noticed her hands were shaking.

'Andy? You still here?' he called from behind the door.

'Yes, I'm . . . wait, I'm just going,' she managed to say.

'Did you find it?'

She paused, unsure of the right answer. It felt like all the oxygen had been sucked from the room. 'Yes.'

There was more shuffling, and then the sink turned on

and off. 'Are you gone yet? I need to come out and get dressed.'

Please do not marry Andrea. Blood pounded in Andy's ears. *Oh, how delighted you sounded to see her again!* Should she fly into the bathroom or run out the door? The next time she saw him, they'd be exchanging rings in front of three hundred people, including his mother.

Someone knocked on the suite's front door before opening it. 'Andy? What are you doing here?' Nina, her wedding planner, asked. 'Good god, you're going to ruin that dress! And I thought you agreed you wouldn't see each other before the ceremony. If that's not the case, why didn't we do pictures beforehand?' Her constant, unrelenting talking drove Andy crazy. 'Max, stay in that bathroom! Your bride is standing here like a deer caught in headlights. Wait, oh, just hold on a second!' She scurried over as Andy tried to stand and fix her dress at the same time and extended her hand.

'There,' she said, pulling Andy to her feet and smoothing her hand over the dress's mermaid skirt. 'Now, come with me. No more disappearing-bride antics, you hear? What's this?' She plucked the note from Andy's sweaty palm and held it aloft.

Andy could actually hear the pounding in her chest; she briefly wondered if she was having a heart attack. She opened her mouth to say something, but instead a wave of nausea came over her. 'Oh, I think I'm going to—'

Magically, or maybe just from lots of practice, Nina produced a trash can at exactly the right moment and held it so tightly to Andy's face that she could feel the plastic-lined rim pressing into the soft underside of her chin. 'There, there,' Nina nasal-whined, oddly comforting nonetheless. 'You're not my first jittery bride and you won't be my last. Let's just thank our lucky stars you didn't have any

splash-back.' She dabbed at Andy's mouth with one of Max's T-shirts, and his smell, a heady mixture of soap and the basil-mint shampoo he used – a scent she usually loved – made her retch all over again.

There was another knock at the door. The famous photographer St Germain and his pretty young assistant walked in. 'We're supposed to be shooting Max's preparations,' he announced in an affected but indeterminate accent. Thankfully, neither he nor the assistant so much as glanced at Andy.

'What's going on out there?' Max called, still banished to the bathroom.

'Max, stay put!' Nina yelled, her voice all authority. She turned to Andy, who wasn't sure she could walk the couple hundred feet back to the bridal suite. 'We've got to get your skin touched up and . . . Christ, your hair . . .'

'I need the necklace,' Andy whispered.

'The what?'

'Barbara's diamond necklace. Wait.' *Think, think, think. What did it mean? What should she do?* Andy forced herself to return to that hideous bag, but thankfully Nina stepped in front of her and pulled the duffel onto the bed. She rooted quickly through its contents and pulled out a black velvet box with *Cartier* etched on the side.

'This what you're looking for? Come, let's go.'

Andy allowed herself to be pulled into the hallway. Nina instructed the photographers to free Max from the bathroom and firmly shut the door behind them.

Andy couldn't believe Barbara hated her so much that she didn't want her son to marry her. And not only that, but she had his wife chosen for him. Katherine: more *appropriate*, less *selfish*. The one, at least according to Barbara, who got away. Andy knew all about Katherine. She was the