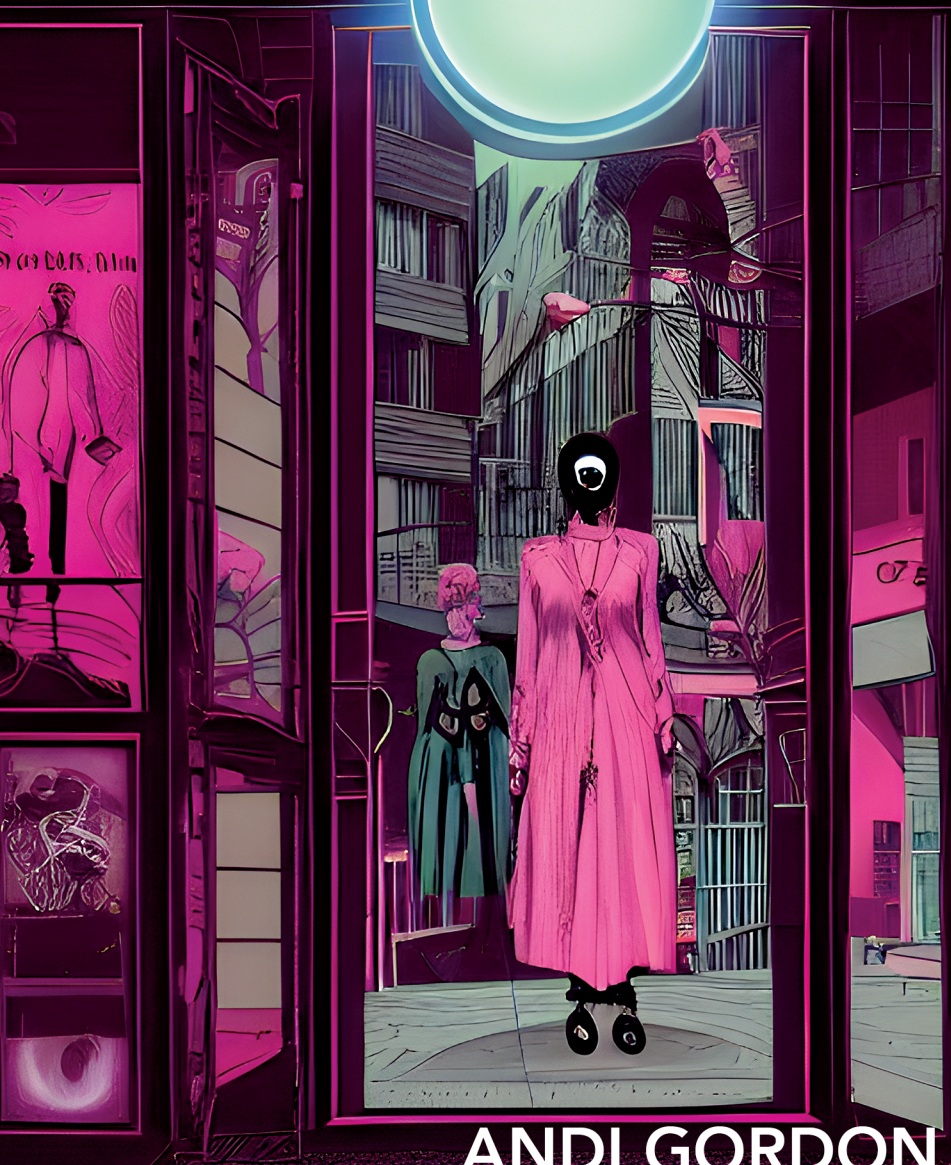


BOUTIQUE



ANDI GORDON

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A short story by

Andi Gordon

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*For all the victims of domestic and
psychological abuse.*

Boutique

Lyndsey awoke just as she did each morning, the blinding Sedona sun flooding in through the Taylor & Reeves curtains, cascading across the Divinity bedsheets and crashing finally across a shining rarewood floor before coming to rest at the foot of her Beckenhauer recliner. The room palatial in its worship to the Gods of designer retail, every surface an altar, some hosting lavish ornaments in their service, others cluttered with bejewelled receptacles holding various holy elixirs and poultices.

The ruffled sheets, heaped and mounding across the bed indicated her solitude, her husband having already left to perform his daily rituals in service of the corporate deities that delivered them the opulence in which they lived.

Gently she lifted the satin that encased her and reached her hands heavenwards with an audible breath before slipping her feet into the cosy slippers waiting patiently beside the bed. Standing she turned one-eighty, straightening the satin layers before moving round to the opposite side, tidying the smooth cloth and tucking the top layer back in on itself, just about two inches. Just the way he likes it.

"Morning setting" she commanded, and the Gods provided.

The luxurious curtains bowed and parted, furnishing the

chamber with a full compliment of light illuminating everything, banishing the shadows from all but the furthest recesses. A gentle breeze from the geometric slits in the ceiling provided a subtle chill that energised Lyndsey as she made her way through the alcove on the far side of the room into the vestry.

The regimented racks of shoes stood to attention either side of her, whilst the main rank and file of her vestments waited, poised for inspection, directly ahead of her. Looking each one up and down in turn Lyndsey assessed each recruit in turn, searching for the perfect combination of casual and smart, classy and subservient that would be sure to enthrall her husband upon his return from the front. Finally settling on a mid length, pine coloured, low cut bodycon with raised collar and dark shoulder detailing, she held it up to her body, interrogating the reflection before her until she was sure this was the right choice. Something simple but sophisticated. Just the way he likes it.

She zipped the dress up tight to her neck and moved over to the dresser where she sat down, a pale reflection staring back at her, tranquil. The ornate filigree of the brass drawer handle let out a faint whimper as it lifted, the drawer itself joining the chorus with a husky sigh as it opened towards her. Inside a small selection of cosmetics, neatly ordered. Nothing too bold, mostly nudes and warm tones. Picking up a small brush and a box with a light shimmery bronze pressed powder, she loaded the brush and swept it gently across her eyelids, her soft skin shimmering with a metallic sheen catching the light, shading and illuminating. Next a long round tube. Twisting the bottom encourages a shy soft pink pastel to emerge from its nest, glistening with a silky lustre. Lyndsey kissed the creature, caressing it with her lips one at a time, drawing it across until they were fully covered. Replacing the stick, she grasped a thick bushy plume,

scouring a large rouge pad with it before barely dusting her cheeks. The ritual complete, Lyndsey examined herself in the mirror. Not too much, just enough to enhance, nothing too brazen. Just the way he likes it.

The kitchen shone with a spotless gleam, the marble worktops polished to the point of reflection, pristine, perfect. A single mug abandoned on the counter, standing alone in a small pool of beige liquid. Lyndsey descended the stairs and without breaking stride scooped up the solitary vessel effortlessly escorting it to the auto-washer rack before returning with a damp muslin to eradicate the errant brown pool.

Taking a tall ceramic mug from the shelf Lyndsey placed it beneath the coffee maker. A small dark plexi on the front of the machine sprang to life, offering a modest selection of hot beverages. She selected the third option, flat mocha, steamed, the way she liked it, the way he liked it too. They shared a lot of life's little coincidences, she thought, as the machine spluttered and choked to life, hissing and gargling while it produced its beige elixir. An idyllic couple in perfect sync with each other, from their morning brew to their favourite fine dining hotspots their tastes were always so flawlessly matched. The plastic barista gave a final hiss before surrendering its creation. Lyndsey collected the mug, cradling it in her hands as she retired to the lounge.

The lounge was a mausoleum of dark shiny surfaces, over polished, over lacquered. A large glass pyre dominated the centre of the room, red and orange deities danced in its flickering hearth, surrounded by three large leather pews to play host to their worshippers. The gleaming temple illuminated on its far side with gigantic glass panels offering a view of the hallowed grounds beyond, decked with whispering acacias and delimited by regimented ceramic stone retainers.

Lyndsey sat on the nearest sofa, placing her coffee on the edge of the adjoining table, looking out across the soft manicured lawn and the colourful curated flowerbeds.

Her morning contemplation was interrupted by an obnoxious looking notification in the periphery of her ocular overlay. Her curiosity overriding her irritation at this intrusion, she focused on the icon and opened the message. A video stream slid into view, hovering disembodied in front of her, overlaid directly on her retinal receptors, the audio playing silently and directly into her brain. She immediately recognised the troubled countenance that appeared. It was her. Clearly shaken, her dishevelled reflection spoke with a distressed delivery.

"With any luck Garrett has left for work and you're alone." The mirror said.

"Don't Trust Him." she warned. "He's dangerous. He's a liar."

Lyndsey paused the video, stunned by its contents, dumbfounded. Was this real? What actually was this? She certainly didn't remember making the video. Her confusion giving way to fear, she continued the playback.

"There are things I don't remember, places I've been and people I've met that recognise me, but I have no recollection of. I can't explain it."

This is preposterous, she thought, and yet something was nagging her, tugging away in the back of her mind. The video continued.

"He tells me I'm crazy, feeds me these pills. I'm making it up he says. But I've seen him, followed him. These people he says I don't know, he's meeting them."

Lyndsey's concern mounted.

"There are days I wake up tired with no memory as to why." The reflection continued. "You're probably drinking a

Flat Mocha right now. You don't even like Mocha. You hate it. He likes it and somehow he's convinced you that you do too. I'm terrified. He'll be back soon. I don't know what to do, but I had to send this to you, to me, in case everything goes badly. If you get this, leave, get out. Run like your life depends on it and above all else, don't trust him."

The video ended abruptly as the mirror image suddenly turned sideways, startled by something just out of view.

Lyndsey sat stunned, frozen, petrified in place for the next hour. She replayed the video multiple times, each time with the same incredulity. It couldn't be true. He did everything for her. They rarely fought with each other. He doted on her, took her for romantic trips to everywhere she ever wanted to go, bought her expensive clothes and jewellery. She couldn't remember a time she'd ever been unhappy with him.

For a moment, that scared her.

No. She didn't know what that video was. It was probably some scam, some deep fake for a bad actor somewhere on the UnderNet. Perhaps some sick joke, a hazing or initiation for a scruffy kid trying to earn his chops in a jacker group. It wasn't her though. The details were wrong. She didn't dress like that. It wasn't her style. Ridiculous, she thought. Besides, she'd know if he was lying to her. There is nothing in her life unexplained, no loose ends, nobody she didn't know that knew her, at least not personally; perhaps people Garrett knew also knew about her, but that's normal.

Calming down, her racing mind finally decelerating, she re-positioned herself and took a sip of the now tepid brew. It tasted sour. Not the way she liked it.

The crisp, clean air of the Sedona parkland was exactly what she needed to clear her mind, if only temporarily, of the nagging sensation that burrowed deep into her brain, planting its seeds, casting the roots deeper and deeper. The

manicured lawns bisected with pristine paving and bordered with precisely measured railings were in all aspects perfect, as was expected for the exorbitant sums exacted by the rental company. Sedona was more than a locality, it was an ideal, an aspiration. You didn't live in Sedona, you became it.

Lyndsey strolled along the central causeway, breathing in the alchemic aromas diffused from sporadic fragrance posts. The smell was sweet, invoking memories of the Parisienne bakeries in the Burlington Arcade that her mother used to take her to as a little girl. Or was it the romantic trips to Paris with Garrett? The idyllic evenings along the Seine, the heady scent of alcohol and tobacco mixed with the gastronomy of the Michelin eateries. She couldn't quite place it.

Further down the park she noticed an unfamiliar woman fixated on her, surveilling her every move as she inched closer and closer. At a glance, the woman seemed inconspicuous, but as she drew in, the poor cut of her jacket and the department store shoes betrayed her station. She wasn't from Sedona, yet here she was, staring, intently watching.

"Susan?" The woman enquired. "My God, it is you."

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" Lyndsey responded, at a total loss for the identity of her stalker.

"It's Claire." She replied, an incredulous look on her face. "You don't recognise me? It's Claire, your sister."

Lyndsey took a step backwards. She didn't have a sister. She had no siblings of any kind. Who was this stranger? What did she want from her? Extortion perhaps. Some kind of elaborate con, the old long lost sister trick.

"I don't know who you are, but I don't have any sisters, or brothers for that matter. Please leave me alone." Lyndsey shouted as she moved away from the woman.

Claire was stunned, adamant that he was Lyndsey's sister, unable to comprehend how she couldn't recognise her. She

grasped at her arm, pulling her back.

“What has he done to you Susan?” She shrieked. “What has that bastard done to make you forget your own sister so easily?”

“Please miss, you’re hurting me.” Lyndsey tugged her away, wrenching it from the woman’s grip.

“Please Susan, just... just try to remember... don’t trust him... don’t trust Garrett.” The woman shouted as Lyndsey hurried back towards her home.

The gentle tones of the nanofryer alert roused Lyndsey from the romance novel she was engrossed with, curled up like a fox on her Hausmann leather sofa, nestled deep in a literary slumber, trying to forget the traumatic encounter in the park. Placing the book neatly on the side table, she unfurled herself and glided across to the kitchen, its pristine worktops and shining knives reflecting every part of the house in their mirrored facades. The fryer’s melody was joined soon enough by the rousing symphony of the oven and microwave timers, all reaching their climax in hedonistic unison. A cacophonous trill of syncopated leads, complex in their timing, simplistic in their diminuendo phrasing.

One by one she removed the meal’s components. Initially plating the thin, tender beef slices, carefully overlapping them as the succulent juices flowed down in layer after layer of culinary waterfalls. Next the potatoes, blanched, not too firm, not too soft, meeting the cascading meat at its plunge, damming the spread of the oily flavours. Finally, a medley of vegetables, pert and colourful, arranged carefully, precisely, to maximise the aesthetics of the meal. She stood back and inspected the banquet. Not too showy, not too fattening. Lean, healthy, delectable. Just the way he likes it.

She hurried the plates to the large slate-topped dining table. He would be home soon and she had to ensure

everything was just right after his long, hard day, toiling away to provide such a charmed life for her. The light stone placemats lay in casual uniformity, marking the landing zone for the inbound platters, their polished grain an inverted offset to the darker burnished slate they assembled upon. Tall silver ceramic candlesticks, glossy and brutal, overlooked the preparations, a trio of corporate edifices dominating the horizon. She laid the plates to rest on their headstones, pristine cutlery guarding on all sides, then took another step away from the table to assess the meal.

A tiny blip sounded from the front door as the maglock conceded entry to her husband. He stepped in, slipped off his shoes, lining them up fastidiously next to the other three pairs that lived at constant attention under the coat rack in the hallway, never daring to relax. He walked over to Lyndsey, pecking her cheek with a militaristic affection.

"Evening, my darling, something smells good." He ventured as he alighted his bag.

"It's beef." She responded dotingly.

"Can't wait." Garrett replied as he headed into the dining area.

He approached the large dark table, skirting round to his seat. The chair moved effortlessly backwards, nervously welcoming him, its cushion letting out a downtrodden sigh as he pulled the chair back closer to the table. He picked up the knife and fork, looking deep into Lyndsey's eyes as she took up her position opposite. Carefully, he sliced the meat, extracting a perfect quarter of its succulent hide.

"This is excellent, dear." He said, finishing his first mouthful. "Truly excellent. Just tender enough without being sloppy. Just the way I like it."

Lyndsey let out a cagey smile. She was glad he liked it. It was the least she could do. They exchanged small talk in-between the tasty mouthfuls, every bite as pleasant as every

exchange.

Emptying her plate, Lyndsey's heart murmured as a wave of anticipated dread fell over her.

"Garrett." She ventured, swallowing back the trepidation with every breath. "Who's Claire?"

Garrett froze, his eyes transfixed, piercing, his countenance dropping.

"Claire who?" He responded, clearly vexed at the name.

"I'm not sure. Some woman in the park. She..." Lyndsey struggled. "She said she was my sister?"

"Well, that's ludicrous. You don't have a sister." He sharply confirmed, his agitation visibly growing, the muscles in his face tightening, suggesting a welling anger within.

"I told her that, but she grabbed me. She was very forceful. She kept insisting, insisting, nagging." She gestured the physicality of the encounter to her husband. "Why would she do that? Why would she make up a thing like that?" She continued, her voice becoming more fraught with every word uttered.

"She's just a crazy, probably from Junkertown, trying it on up here. It's all a con, pay it no heed." He dismissed her with a staunch finality that signalled this was the end of the conversation.

Lyndsey continued.

"There was something about her tho. I mean, she wasn't from here, but she seemed familiar. Are you sure we don't know any..."

"Enough!" Garrett bellowed, his face swollen and red like some unfortunate snakebite victim, his hand clutching the dinner knife with such pressure that his knuckles near burst from his fingers.

"But what if she..." Lyndsey was cut off again.

"Did you take your pills today?" He asked in a deeply parental tone, trying to recapture his composure.

Lyndsey sat silent, terrified to speak. Was this what the recording meant? Why the sudden question about her meds? Was he dosing her, keeping her sedated and compliant? Every question raced through her mind far too quickly to await an answer, leaving only more anxiety, a greater feeling of panic. Perhaps the woman was her sister. Perhaps he was keeping them apart, ensuring she didn't meddle in his reign absolute over her. Yes, that had to be it. The video. The woman. The Pills. How could she have been so blind? Why couldn't she see it before?

She stood sharply, knocking the chair backwards, toppling it with a thunderous crash. She clutched at her chest, her incarcerated heart racing, her cavernous pupils dilated. Garrett reached into his pocket, producing a small white plastic bottle, which he opened. He emptied a small pile of round white pills into his hand, stretching out towards her.

"Please Lyndsey, you're not well. You need to calm down. Take two of these. We can relax, maybe watch a movie or something. Please, you need to calm down."

Lyndsey shrieked as she swiftly batted the pills out of his hand, sending the bottle and its contents soaring across the immaculate dining area.

Garrett raised his hands, stepping back, lowering his voice further.

"OK, OK, no pills, that's fine." he said.

He crept slowly round the table, his grasping arms reaching out for her.

"No." She screamed, her contorted face streaming with tears, her eyes bloodshot, her skin taught and blushed. "Get off me. What are you doing to me? Why are you keeping me here? You don't even want me. You lie to me, manipulate me. Make me like the things you like. I don't even fucking like Flat Mochas. What are you doing to me? You're sick, sick. Fucking psycho control freak. Stay the fuck away."

Garrett took a step back.

"Ok, Listen. I understand, we've been here before. But trust me, you need to stick to your meds."

"Trust you? How can I ever fucking trust you? You controlling piece of shit. You have done this to me. You."

Garrett tapped on his forehead, priming a video in his ocular.

"OK, honey, this isn't the first time this has happened. We knew you'd never believe me, so we made a video. Someone you would trust. The only person you would trust. Please...".

He gestured two fingers towards their living room wall which burst into life, the wallpaper instantly transforming into an ad hoc display. Lyndsey stopped in shock as she looked upon the face staring back at her from the wall.

"Hey, is this thing on... OK." The face spoke. "Hi Lyndsey, it's me, well you. Us I guess."

Lyndsey gawped incredulously to the image of herself on the videowall. What twisted fucked up scheme was this now?

"Look, I'm recording this because I think at some point in the future I might relapse and I reckon you'd never trust Garrett, I know I didn't the last time and it made things so much harder. I, you, we, had a break a few months back after the death of our sister. She meant so much to us and we couldn't process the grief properly. We spiralled, things got very bad very quickly. We thought Garrett had killed her, or had her killed. She never liked him and that got us thinking, well, you can probably figure the rest out. Suffice it to say, that was just paranoia. Anyway, the docs had us sectioned for five days at the Manor clinic, following which we were released and prescribed Risperidone. You can go check the bottle of the meds that you probably flushed or hurled across the room or something. They should match and be prescribed from Dr. Dawson at the Manor. Please look. Garrett has been super supportive the last few months. He's kept me, us, sane

and able to lead a normal life. I'm hopeful I can return to work soon. Garrett agrees the distraction will help. Being alone in the house all day is enough to drive anyone potty, let alone a recovering paranoid. Anyway, I hope you never have to see this, that everything is fine from now on. Please look after yourself, me, us. Love yourself Lyndsey."

The video ended. Lyndsey was motionless. Slowly she turned to Garrett, then looked across the room for the scattered pill bottle. She wandered, aloof, discombobulated across the dining area, a ghost unable to comprehend her own demise, lost in a fog of confusion and sudden realisation. She knelt down gently, lifting the empty white container off the rarewood floor.

'Risperidone 1mg - Lyndsey Solomon - To be taken twice a day - Dr Dawson, The Manor Clinic'

She collapsed, inconsolable. How did it get this bad? How could she have doubted her husband? That patient soul that has had to cope with so much while keeping the household going. She felt ugly, ashamed, embarrassed. Garrett knelt down beside her.

"I'm sorry, honey. We both hoped we would never have to use that video. Just know that I'm here for you. We can beat this for good this time."

Lyndsey reached out to him; he helped her up and held her close.

"I'm so sorry. I love you. I'm sorry I doubted you. I'll stay on top of the meds next time, I promise."

"It's OK. I'll try to be more attentive, help you with every little thing. We can make this home happy again, just the way we like it, right?"

Lyndsey smiled at him.

Lyndsey awoke the next day, the sun streaming in, bringing with it a fresh start, a chance for a better life. She snuggled

into her duvet, its warm, soft, ample caress drowning her past traumas, promising her comfort and tranquility.

Garrett rolled over, his arm reaching over her, gently sweeping the hair from her face.

"Morning. How are you feeling?" He enquired as his tired eyes ratcheted up his heavy lids.

"Better." She affirmed. "Shouldn't you be at work already?"

"Not today, I called in. Thought I'd spend the day with you."

Lyndsey smiled. How could she have doubted the love of her man? People at his level don't take days off, she thought. This was an enormous gesture.

"I thought I might take you for dinner tonight, Barclays."

Lyndsey stopped. "I have nothing to wear for there though, it's way too much."

"Nonsense, we'll go to the boutique in Alto, the one all the big corpos go to." Garrett responded with a knowing grin.

Lyndsey was speechless. She had long wanted to visit that particular boutique. She knew Garrett had been moving up in the company, but this confirmed it. He was certainly up there now. Only the top level execs were wealthy enough to shop at such a place, their wives were always so flawless, so composed, so elegant. The very model of perfection. She kissed him affectionately on the cheek.

"I can't wait."

The boutique stood ageless before them. Its classical lines, its elegant woodwork, the flourishes ensconced within. Every part was immaculate. It had a stern demeanour, an old wisdom about it that belied its humble footprint. It could size you up before you even entered, your exact style and fit, your wants and desires. You did not choose your garments; it did. However, there was something disquieting about the way it

looked at you, the judgement it made and the candour it extracted. In many ways, it was the most wondrous and most terrifying shop to have ever opened its doors to the moneyed elite of Alto.

Lyndsey stepped inside, breathless in awe at the wondrous melange of vestments on display. Silks so fine they were nigh on transparent, taffetas crisp as parchment, velvets so rich and creamy they nearly melted from the hangers they barely clung to. From the deep damson pile striding the length of the ancient wooden flooring to the antique gilded architraves, cracked and crumpled in the most exquisite way, everything about the shop bled opulent resplendency.

In the corner, a withered silver gent in rare flannels peered out above clouded thick lenses supported on old copper frames.

"Good afternoon Sir, Madam." The gentleman greeted them with gentrified charm. "How may I assist?"

"Ah, good afternoon Godfrey. I believe we spoke earlier." Garrett responded.

"Ah, Mr and Mrs. Solomon, of course, pleasure to make your acquaintance today. Was it just the lady we'll be attending to?"

"Yes, my wife and I are dining at Barclays this evening. I was hoping you could help with something classy, but restrained. Elegant, composed, subdued."

"Very good, sir, we have just the thing."

Lyndsey was lost in the luxuriance surrounding her. It had long been a dream of hers to be robed in such splendour. She had imagined it nearly every day from her childhood through her teens and long into adulthood. This was everything she wanted, to be adored and adorned, to love and be loved.

Why then did she feel so very perturbed? Her stomach tied in knots, a dreadful hollow feeling, like all the air suddenly sucked from within, like there was nothing left inside. Her

throat tightened, gently asphyxiating her as she suffocated with anxiety. The folded demeanour of the attendant seemed harsher somehow, his furrows slowly churning, his eyes devoid and soulless. The dread grew, hysterics upon hysterics now eminent, controlling her every thought. She wanted to escape, turning towards her guardian husband for salvation. He saw in her eyes the unbridled and inexplicable terror.

"Honey, what's wrong? Is it too much? This place is a little kooky for sure, but it's OK. I'm here. No need to worry." He paused and approached a small cluster of dresses, each one costing more than the average personal hover. "Just look at these gowns. They're exquisite, aren't they? When we're done here, you'll barely recognise yourself."

Lyndsey relaxed slightly, Garrett putting her at ease.

Godfrey stepped over to her, taking out a long, thin, marked tape, lifting her arm and running the tape around different sections of her body, noting the measurements.

"Mrs. Solomon, if you could please follow me to the fitting room, we'll start making the necessary alterations."

"Alterations?" Lyndsey asked apprehensively.

"Oh yes, nothing here is off the peg. We tailor every aspect to ensure the perfect fit. It's all part of the service, Madam."

Lyndsey nodded. She followed the tailor to the rear of the shop floor and through a large velvet curtain held open by him.

"Just through here, Mrs. Solomon, we'll have you all fixed up in no time." He said.

"Just the way he likes it."

Also by Andi Gordon

Persona

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and connected world.



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