



February

Author: *Nicole Pyland*

Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Bridgette Musgrave has been planning on taking over the family business her entire life, but her parents have mismanaged it, and it's in danger of being sold off to Arnette Assets, a giant corporation that might come in and steal the one thing Bridgette has been working toward for a decade.

Monica Arnette is slated to take over the multinational business based in New York when her aging father retires. It's been her plan all along. Not part of that plan is to take a trip down to hot and humid New Orleans as a favor to an old friend of her father's to buy some small greeting card company that Arnette Assets doesn't need to add to their portfolio. Also not on her list of things to do is meeting a fiery redhead who doesn't want Monica there.

As the two women are tasked with working together, Monica discovers that there's more to New Orleans than her first impression. Moreover, as they begin to get to know one another, maybe, just maybe, Bridgette might discover that she doesn't mind having Monica there at all.

Total Pages (Source): 143

CHAPTER 1

“Why does my head weigh a hundred pounds?”

Bridgette’s eyes opened slowly. There was a female voice in her bedroom. It was coming from behind her. She thought she recognized it but was too tired to identify it.

“No, it’s a thousand.” There was a sigh. “Bridge, do you have all the ibuprofen in the world in your bathroom?”

Jill. It was Jill. Bridgette’s eyes opened wider, and she looked down at her body. She was clothed. Well, she was sort of clothed. She was wearing a tan bra and a pair of old cheer shorts from high school that still somehow fit, so she considered them to be like the jeans in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*: no matter how much weight she gained, the magic shorts would always fit her, or so she hoped.

“Bridge?” Jill asked.

Bridgette tried to remember the previous night. She and Jill had gone out, and they’d definitely had too much to drink. Jill had been on three dates with a woman she’d met online, and at the end of the third one, she’d known it wasn’t going to go anywhere, so she’d called Bridgette to see if she wanted to sulk with her over drinks. Bridgette remembered that part. They’d gone to a bar in the Quarter, which was probably a mistake because the drinks had been cheaper, and it had been an all-night happy hour, which meant that the drinks were also basically doubled, and they’d danced and drank and danced some more. Bridgette hadn’t danced like that in a while, and she definitely hadn’t drunk like that in a long time, either. Maybe last year, during

Carnival season, but she didn't remember much beyond the drinking and the dancing.

"We didn't sleep together, Bridgette," Jill said. "Well, we passed out together, but nothing happened."

Bridgette sighed and rolled over to face Jill, who had the blanket pulled up to her neck, but Bridgette assumed she was clothed, given her statement.

"No?"

"God, no. You're pretty, I guess, but... no, thanks."

Bridgette laughed and said, "Thanks, I think."

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah. So, what happened?"

"We got drunk."

"I don't remember leaving the bar."

"Melinda drove us. I texted her to go get your car. She and Kyle met us on Canal, and I don't think we'll be hearing the end of this one for a while. I remember them offering to take me to my place, but I really had to pee, so I told them to just leave me here. I think they walked back to her place after that."

"So, they probably assume we..."

"Yeah," Jill said. "And I plan on correcting them today when I can make my legs move and get to work."

“Your legs don’t work?”

“I passed out in my heels,” Jill replied. “I woke up and kicked them off, but I think my feet will be deformed for a while. Should be fun walking around the city today, giving tours.”

“Shit... Work,” Bridgette muttered, rubbing her hands over her face. “I’ve got work, too. Why did we get that drunk?”

“I’m only twenty-five. I should be able to handle my booze still, right?”

“I’m only twenty-seven. I should be able to do the same,” Bridgette replied.

“I need a shower and a lot of coffee.”

“I can make us coffee. Do you want to shower here?”

“No, I’ll go home. And I’m going to call a car because I cannot walk right now. I need to get my uniform, anyway,” Jill replied. “Can you make my legs move, though?”

“I can shove you off the bed,” Bridgette offered. “Gently, I mean.”

Jill laughed a bit before she stopped and said, “Don’t make me laugh. My head is killing me.”

“Well, I can at least help with that and send you home medicated and with a bottle of water that you should chug. I’ll do the same.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

“Thanks,” Jill replied as she sat up slowly.

The blanket fell to her waist, and Bridgette noticed that Jill was wearing one of her old T-shirts.

“Can I give this back to you later?” Jill asked, tugging on it.

“Sure. Did you steal it from my drawer?”

“Yes. And those other things you have in there don’t usually go under your shirts. Everyone knows that, Bridge. Sock or underwear drawer or bedside table, not in the top drawer, where anyone could reach for a shirt and be surprised.”

Bridgette laughed and said, “I’ll make a note of that.”

“And the blue one you have in there... You need to tell me where you got that,” Jill noted and went to stand up and stretch.

Bridgette noticed then that Jill was only wearing that old T-shirt and white boy shorts. She had always liked the woman enough, but for whatever reason, she wasn’t at all attracted to her. Still, seeing a beautiful woman in only her underwear and a borrowed T-shirt was enough to make any lesbian realize how horny and lonely she was, and Bridgette was no exception.

She watched Jill put on her jeans from the previous night and then stare down at her heels, so she asked, “Do you want to borrow a pair of flip-flops?”

“God, yes,” Jill replied.

???

“Honey, you look like hell,” her mom said when Bridgette walked into the small, local office for the family greeting card company.

“Gee. Thanks, Mom.”

“What happened?”

“I drank a little too much hanging out with Jill last night,” she replied.

“You’re really getting too old to be partying in the Quarter,” her mom noted.

“I am not too old. I’m twenty-seven,” she reminded. “That’s not even thirty.”

“It’s a workday, Bridge,” her mom said.

“And I’m here with my gallon of coffee and my headache.”

“We need you at one hundred percent, honey,” her mom replied.

“I’m at, like, eighty-two. If you can give me an hour, I’ll get up to ninety. That’s about all I can promise today.”

“Can you even drive to restock?”

Bridgette placed her bag and coffee cup onto her desk, which was in the middle of the large room where four other people worked. Her mother wasn’t always here, but when either one or both of her parents were in town, they used the single private

office in the space or the conference room, leaving Bridgette in the bullpen until they left and she could take the office.

“Yes, Mom. I’m not drunk. I’m just hungover.”

“I’ve got the list for you,” her mom said and dropped a piece of paper onto Bridgette’s desk. “And the stock is organized and ready to go.”

“Thanks,” Bridgette replied.

She sat down and took a long drink of her coffee before she risked looking up at her mother.

“I’m not judging, honey, but... Are you okay?”

“Mom, Jill had a promising date situation that ended up not being promising, so she asked me to go out and commiserate with her. I’m fine.”

“You haven’t really dated anyone since—”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

“Yes, I know.” Bridgette gritted her teeth.

“Honey, Jill is very nice. And Melinda said Kyle had a sister when she came by the other day.”

Bridgette laughed, her headache be damned, and said, “Mom, Kyle’s sister is super straight; not at all into women. And Jill and I are just friends in the same way Melinda and I are just friends.”

“But maybe it could be more.”

“I’m not into Jill, Mom.”

“But you’re over Toya, right?”

“Yes, Mom. I’m over her. It’s been nearly eight months since we broke up.”

“She broke up with you, you mean?”

“You just had to point that out?”

“Well, when you’re the one who gets dumped, it takes longer to get over.”

“I’m fine,” she repeated through gritted teeth.

When her phone beeped from inside her bag, she pulled it out and checked the screen. It was a text from Melinda.

Melinda Andrews: Jill looks like crap. I'm taking her to lunch later. Do you want to go? I'm buying you both a lot of carbs and some bacon, too.

Bridgette wanted to reply with a 'yes' because she could use some carbs and protein to soak up the sugar in the alcohol she'd consumed, but she also wanted to ask if Kyle would be there, too, and didn't know how to do that without Melinda understanding why she wanted to know.

"What's wrong?" her mom asked.

"Melinda and Kyle are really happy."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"No, it's great. I'm just feeling a little left out."

"That's Melinda on the phone, I take it?"

Bridgette nodded.

"And she's been spending all of her time with her new girlfriend?"

"No, that's not it; we still hang out all the time. It's just that Kyle is usually there."

"Do you not like Kyle?"

"I do. She's great. Just seeing them all loved up and happy makes me wish I had that, too. And before you say anything, I don't mean with Jill."

Her mom nodded and patted her shoulder as she sat back against the desk.

“Bridgette, it’ll happen when it happens. You can’t rush these things.”

“You met Dad in college. He’s the only guy you’ve ever dated.”

“I’m still a mother, which means I come with infinite wisdom. If you ever give me grandchildren, you’ll see that.”

“Mom, I don’t want—”

“Kids, I know. I’m not giving you a hard time about that anymore. I respect your wishes. I’m only saying that I’m older and wiser.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

“Go on,” Bridgette said.

“If it’s not Toya, honey, it’ll be someone else, and that someone will be perfect for you.”

“I thought Toya was perfect for me.”

“And maybe she was for a while, but not forever. You weren’t together all that long.”

“Six months.”

“And you fell pretty hard for her. Sometimes, all those hormones, when you first meet someone, get in the way of figuring out if it’s meant for now or meant for forever.”

“I get it. I just sit here, writing and stocking cards about happily-ever-afters and anniversaries and love, and it’s hard sometimes because I don’t have that, the thing that we put in all of those cards, summarizing the feelings in a few words so that someone can give it to the person they love.”

“Do you want to write some breakup cards for a while? That could be fun.”

Bridgette laughed but said, “That’s not a bad idea. I bet if I made some and put them online, we’d—”

“Honey, we’ve talked about the online thing.”

“Mom, we’re struggling. Why won’t you let me do this?”

“Your father and I like the local part of our business. We’ve always done well enough here.”

“But that’s not the case anymore. We need—”

“Morning,” Dan, the newest member of the team, who had joined them about a year ago, greeted as he walked into the office.

“We’ll finish this later,” Bridgette said.

“We’ve already finished it,” her mom told her with a wink. “Good morning, Dan. How’s your mom?”

“Oh, she’s good. The break wasn’t as bad as the doctor thought, and she’ll be out of the cast in a few weeks.”

Bridgette didn’t listen to the rest of their conversation. She got to work after declining the offer for lunch, knowing that Kyle would be there. They’d only just gotten together, meeting at the beginning of the year, and they were already, somehow, magically in love, which was amazing, but considering they’d only met because Bridgette had asked Melinda to go out with her to help Bridgette meet a woman, and that Bridgette had actually seen Kyle first, it still kind of stung that Melinda had happened into love while Bridgette continued to sit at her desk, coming up with words to describe it for their next card line that would come out in just a week to be in time for Valentine’s Day.

She worked until lunch, went to grab a sandwich from a local shop down the street, and then picked herself up with another cup of coffee around two. After that, she grabbed her list and the cards she’d need and hit the road. Since laying off the

contractors they used to use to replenish their cards in the local stores, Bridgette had mainly been responsible for doing it. She didn't mind. It got her out of the office, and she could take her mind off of things as she focused on making sure the stores all had the right quantity of the cards they'd ordered. She also liked seeing her family's company work out in the wild, so to speak. Whenever she walked into a shop in the Quarter or on Canal Street, she'd walk over to the card rack or wall to see if they carried anything from them. If she didn't see anything, she left her card, and if she did, she smiled. It made her proud that the small family business she'd inherit someday was delivering smiles through their work. If she ended up working on break-up cards, though, she supposed that might change.

After hours of restocking, her drive back home was long due to the traffic coming in and out of the city, so as she sat in her car, she thought about Toya and their time together, wondering what had gone so wrong. They'd met, instantly connected, and had a lot of really amazing sex. While it was true that they'd used every toy in the drawer that Jill had seen that morning, it had been more than that, though: she'd been in love. Toya had been, too. They'd said as much to each other. And they'd made plans, damn it. They'd made plans.

"Hello? Bridgette?" Toya said when she answered.

"Yeah, it's me. Her," Bridgette replied.

She'd called Toya for no reason in particular and connected through the Bluetooth in her car. Now, she had no idea what to say.

"What's going on?"

"We were making plans."

"What are you talking about?"

“When we were together, Toya, we were making plans.”

“Oh,” Toya said. “Why did you call, Bridge? We broke up months ago.”

“I wanted to know why, so I called.”

“Why we broke up?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

“Yes.”

“Where are you right now?”

“I’m driving. Stuck in traffic, really.”

“And you need to know this now?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’ve been trying to figure it out ever since, and I think I need to know so that I can move on.”

“Bridge, it just wasn’t working.”

“But why? We were talking about how we’d move in together.”

“Yeah, and when we talked about it, I realized that that wasn’t what I wanted.”

“Oh,” Bridgette uttered.

“I’m sorry. I thought we talked about this back then.”

“We did. I just thought there might be more to it than that. I thought things were good. We were making plans,” she repeated, not caring how pathetic she sounded because she needed to know this.

It could help her finally move on if Toya would give it to her.

“It was only six months, Bridge.”

So, Toya wouldn't be giving it to her how she'd hoped.

“And you've already moved on?” Bridgette asked.

“No. I told you, I didn't want a relationship. I meant it. I still don't really want one.”

“I kind of thought you were just saying that to make me feel better,” Bridgette replied.

“What? No. Bridge, I thought I was in love with you, but I think I just loved what we had then.”

“What was that?”

“A lot of sex, nights out, and fun. I'm twenty-four. I was twenty-three then. That was what I wanted.”

This was more than what Bridgette had been given during their actual breakup, so she decided that even though it hurt to hear, she needed to actually hear it.

“And it still is?”

“Yeah. I'll settle down one day, but I'm not there yet. I knew you wanted a relationship and love and the moving-in thing and whatever came after all of that, so I thought it was better to just end it. I didn't want us to keep going on and on and end up hurting you worse than, I guess, I already had. If I thought—”

There was a pause, so Bridgette's eyebrows furrowed. She looked at the screen in her car, where she could see the call information, as if Toya's actual face were on the

screen and Bridgette would be able to read it and know what the woman had been about to say.

“Thought what?” she asked when nothing else came from Toya’s end of the phone.

“If I thought that you could be casual, I would’ve kept seeing you. I liked all the other stuff with you; I just didn’t want the commitment. You did. I don’t want to only see one person right now. I shouldn’t have gotten into a relationship with you, but I don’t think I knew it then that I didn’t want one.”

“Wait. You’re saying if I were all no-strings-attached, you would’ve been okay with that?”

“Yeah. But that’s not you,” Toya said. “You made that clear when you started talking about moving in together at, like, month four.”

“No, it’s not, really. But...” Bridgette sighed because she didn’t say what she was about to say. “I miss you.”

“No, you don’t. You miss what we had, which was a lot of fun, Bridge. It was really, really good sex and a lot of fun.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

“I can do fun.”

“Really? You told me you loved me two months into our relationship. And I repeat: you asked me to move in at month four.”

“Well, I don’t love you anymore; I know that much. I just miss it. I miss... God, I miss really, really good sex.”

Bridgette hadn’t meant to say that last part to Toya. It was more for herself because that was true. She missed having sex with a beautiful woman. Yes, she wanted a relationship, to fall in love like Melinda and Kyle, but she also just missed being touched by another woman, touching her, hearing her come at Bridgette’s fingers or mouth, and coming in return.

When no immediate response followed her statement, Bridgette thought that was probably a good thing, but she could still hear Toya breathing, so she knew that the woman hadn’t hung up on her.

“We shouldn’t be talking about this,” Toya finally said. “I’m at work, anyway, and my break is over, so I need to go.”

“But you’re thinking about it, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Bridge... Just drive safe, okay?”

“Yeah. Fine. Bye,” Bridgette replied.

When Toya hung up, Bridgette disconnected as well and wondered what she'd just done, knowing full well that she'd just started something that she had no idea what to do with.

CHAPTER 2

"Representative," Monica said into the phone.

"If you need to speak to one of our—"

"Representative," she repeated louder.

There was a moment of silence on the other end, and Monica was hopeful the demon machine had heard her.

"If you need to speak to—"

"Fuck you," Monica said and hung up her cell phone.

She then pressed a button on her desk phone.

"Yes, Miss Arnette?" her assistant said.

"Can you please get the stupid shipping company support line on the phone and find out what happened with my package? I keep getting the robot and can't get to an actual human being to help."

"Of course, Miss Arnette."

Monica pressed the button again to disconnect them, wondering why she'd tried to do it herself, to begin with. She had an assistant for a reason. And she didn't technically

insist that people around the office call her Miss Arnette. It had just happened the day she'd started working here right out of her MBA, and she hadn't corrected anyone. She supposed it was a combination of two things that had led them to believe that she'd prefer it. One, she was the heir to the Arnette empire, which spanned so many businesses now that she'd lost count of how many they owned. And two, her father had expected everyone to call him Mr. Arnette. He was seventy-five years old, so that moniker was more of a holdover from other times, but as a result, they'd all begun calling her Miss Arnette and, for a short while, Mrs. Arnette because she'd gotten married but never changed her name.

She was supposed to wear the shoes she'd ordered to an event tonight. Yes, she had other shoes that she could make work; she had an entire closet of them in her Manhattan penthouse that she'd paid far too much money for after her divorce, but since half of it had been paid by the divorce settlement, she didn't consider it to be all that bad. These shoes, though, were a limited edition, and she'd managed to find them prior to them being released, which meant that she could ensure she'd be the only one wearing them at the gala and wouldn't end up in the same awful situation she had last year when she'd shown up in the same shoes as her now-ex-wife's new girlfriend because she'd tried letting a stylist dress her. No more of that. Monica would be dressing herself from now on, and she'd do everything she could to ensure that she wouldn't match the younger woman her ex had left her for. How cliché was that?

Monica probably should have known it would happen. After all, she'd been the younger woman once. Her ex was ten years older than her and had a son from her previous relationship, which she'd ended to be with Monica. Now, Monica was forty years old, watching her fifty-year-old ex-wife bring her thirty-year-old girlfriend to parties. It was all very New York society to Monica, which was annoying and frustrating, and all she had wanted was the perfect pair of shoes to show off to the thirty-year-old who had once been a model and still looked rail thin; way too thin for Monica's taste. She preferred her women to look like they enjoyed eating food, not that they counted every calorie.

“Monica,” her father said in his usual scraggly voice that hadn’t aged well due to his insistence on smoking a pipe at least once a day and sometimes, twice.

“Yes?” she asked as she looked up from her computer, knowing he’d just walk in without asking for permission anyway.

“Acquisitions wants us to pick up this little company,” he said.

“Well, I’m over the acquisitions team, so that’s a little surprising.”

“You’re over four departments, so you don’t hear everything,” he replied.

“Okay. Why am I hearing about this one?” she asked.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

Her father sat down in the chair opposite her desk and said, “I want you to vet it.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“You mean my team?”

“No, I mean you personally.”

“Dad, I have a hundred people who could all—”

“I know the owner personally,” he interrupted. “I went to business school with his father.”

“Oh, okay. What’s the company?”

“They do greeting cards.”

Monica closed her computer to look at him more fully.

“A greeting card company?”

“We have a greeting card company that they’d fold into,” he replied.

“We have a pretty big one. Are they causing us problems? Competition?”

“No, not really. They’re local only; no online presence. They’re in New Orleans, and they’re staying afloat but just.”

“They’re in a major tourist hub, which should’ve given them good sales numbers, and they’re barely afloat?”

“Yes. I think we can help by acquiring them, taking the assets, letting them retire younger than they’d planned, and we’d benefit from eliminating the competition.”

“You just said they weren’t competition.”

“Not seriously, but they have a presence there, and rack space is everything in tourist towns like New Orleans.”

“So, you’re sending me to New Orleans? Dad, I have departments to run.”

“I’d handle this myself, but the doctor told your mother that I’m not allowed to fly for the next few weeks because of my heart.”

“Yes, and you should listen to them,” she replied.

She remembered the scare they’d all just been through, with her father in the hospital, having an operation, and her worrying that she’d never see him again, holding her mother’s hand and telling her that everything would be all right at the same time.

“I am listening to your mother,” he argued.

“Wise man.” She laughed.

“You should find yourself a woman like your mother, not like the one you married. Your mom puts me in my place but loves me, even though I’m an old man set in my

ways.”

Her father, surprisingly, had had no issues with Monica being gay or marrying a woman. He’d just hated the particular woman she’d married and had said as much every chance he got. Then, when the marriage had ended, he’d thrown Monica a divorce celebration dinner and opened his most expensive bottle of wine for the occasion.

“When and how would I find this imaginary woman? You’re sending me away,” she replied.

“You’ll find her. You want someone to share your life with, Monica.”

“Dad, I work eighty hours a week. When would I even see this woman to share my life with?”

“You need to delegate. I delegated to you, but you have yet to delegate anything I’ve given you, so you have too much on your plate.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

“I actually just delegated to my assistant.”

“Oh, you did, didn’t you? Is that why I just heard her arguing with a shipping company because you couldn’t get through to a human about a certain pair of shoes you’re missing before I walked in?”

“Well... baby steps,” she replied.

“Monica, I’m retiring soon. You know that. Your mom wants me home, and I’m very much ready to finally enjoy retirement.”

“I know, Dad. I’m ready,” she said.

“You’re ready to take over, yes, but I don’t want this place to become your entire life. I have every belief that when I retire, you will move a bed into this office and sleep here.”

Monica laughed and said, “No, I won’t.”

Then, she thought about how, only three nights ago, she fell asleep in her business suit on her office sofa, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Go to New Orleans, meet with the company, make it seem like a quality acquisition as a personal favor to me, even if it doesn’t get us all that much, and try to enjoy yourself while you’re down there, too.”

“Wait. Is this your weird way of getting me to take a vacation?”

“How do you even know what that word means?” he joked as he stood up.

Monica tried her best to pretend like it hadn’t taken him a lot longer to stand than it used to and just focused on his smiling face, happy with his own joke.

“Dad, I don’t have time right now.”

“You’re working there, so it’s not a vacation. I’m only suggesting that you work during the day and enjoy your evenings. You’ve never even been to New Orleans. You never went to the football games at Tulane when I tried to take you. We have a box there, Monica. You never let me take you back home.”

“Dad, you’re a New Yorker. You went to Tulane for business school, but you’re not exactly from Louisiana.”

“I was for a few years, and it was home.”

“You know, Aaron is considering Tulane,” she shared.

“Oh. Good boy,” he replied.

“And LSU.”

“Well, talk him out of that one, obviously.” Her dad laughed.

“I’m trying not to talk him into or out of anything. Lily is trying to talk to him about Columbia. She’s pretty insistent.”

“Well, the boy will go where he goes,” her dad replied. “He has a letter of recommendation from me if he needs one for Tulane, and I’m happy to make a call.”

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll let you know if he wants that,” she said.

The door to the office opened, and her assistant stood there, looking a little scared.

“Yes?” Monica asked.

“Um... Your shoes are currently in Miami and will not be here by the time of the gala tonight. I tried everything I could. I even offered to fly down there to get them myself, but I wouldn’t make it back in time. The guy laughed at me when I suggested that.”

“Perfect,” her dad noted. “Not the laughing part,” he added to Monica’s assistant before he turned back to her. “You’re leaving tonight, anyway.”

“I am?” Monica asked.

“The jet is ready when you are. Pack for a few weeks, at least, to be safe. These things can take a while, and I’d rather get it all tied up in a bow before the next board meeting. Our lawfirm has an office down there, so reach out to them when you need them. Just tell them that this is a priority, and you’ll be fine.”

“Dad, I can’t just leave tonight.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

“Yes, you can. I’ll tell your mother you’ll be missing family dinners for the next few weeks. Just make sure to call her to check in so she doesn’t worry.”

“Dad!”

“And tell Aaron about the call. He needs to make his mind up soon if he’s hoping for fall admittance. It’s already February. Has he even applied? The deadlines are usually in February.”

“Not yet. Lily had him apply to Columbia only to see if he got in. He did, so now she doesn’t want him applying anywhere else.”

“That ex-wife of yours...” The old man shook his head. “Can you have the shoes delivery changed to the office?” He asked her assistant. “She’s going to be out of town for a while.”

“Dad!” Monica laughed.

She had no idea how she was supposed to go to New Orleans, of all places, for a few weeks and leave in a couple of hours to acquire a business for the company. It sounded like the business in question was about to go under and had nothing to offer them, but her father had a connection to it, which meant she couldn’t really argue. The gala was something they’d paid a lot of money to attend, but she hadn’t requested a plus-one, so the company would only have to find one person to take her seat at the table. This trip would also give her a great excuse to skip it and not run into Lily and her young girlfriend. For a minute there, she actually wondered at the likelihood of Lily finding out about her shoes, requesting them be rerouted to Miami

and then delivered to her house just in time for her to slip them onto her girlfriend's feet before the gala. Monica wouldn't put it past her.

She packed up her things and chatted with her assistant about moving some meetings around and giving the ticket for the night to someone else. Then, she rushed home in the company-provided town car and stared into her overly large closet. She had to admit to herself that she'd gone too big for a place she planned to live in alone. After her marriage, Monica had decided she'd date around here and there as time permitted. She'd enjoy some liaisons as she was able, but she wouldn't attempt another serious relationship. She'd at least hold off on that until long after her dad retired and she had a handle on the company she was about to inherit.

She'd bought the penthouse more out of revenge than anything else. It had just appeared on the market, and she'd known that Lily would be interested in it, so she'd snatched it up before her ex-wife had gotten the chance. It had three bedrooms, with the walk-in closet being basically the size of a bedroom all on its own. One bedroom was a guest room that hadn't had any guests outside of the times Aaron had asked to stay over at her place instead of going home, and the other bedroom was her at-home office. She had to hire a maid because the apartment was too large for her to clean on her own, but since she rarely spent more than eight hours a day there and she was sleeping for most of that time, she wasn't sure what she was really paying that maid for. The apartment was essentially empty. Yes, it had her possessions, and there were many of those, but that was it. There was no life in this place, only things.

Monica pulled out two large suitcases from the closet. Then, she stared out through the floor-to-ceiling windows, which automatically tinted when she turned on the lights to block her bedroom from prying eyes, and she stared out at the Manhattan skyline. This city was truly an amazing place, but she was beginning to feel like her father might be right: she could use some time away from it.

CHAPTER 3

“Hey, honey. Can I talk to you for a minute?” her mom asked.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Can you come into the office?”

“Well, at least I know I’m not getting fired,” Bridgette muttered under her breath as she rose from her desk and followed her mom into the office. “Everything okay?”

“Your dad wanted to be here, but he’s meeting with an attorney, so I told him I’d talk to you.”

“Mom, what’s going on?” Bridgette asked.

She closed the door behind her and turned around, leaning back against it while her mom took one of the chairs in front of the desk.

“Have a seat.”

“No, I’m okay standing,” she replied.

“Bridge, please.”

Bridgette saw the pleading look in her mother’s eyes and sat down next to her, turning the chair the way her mom had done so that they were now facing one another.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

“Honey, do you remember me telling you about your grandpa’s business friend, Kevin Arnette?”

“Not specifically, no. Should I?” she asked.

“Well, he’s the head of a company called Arnette Assets, which owns a lot of different companies. They focus mainly on real estate, but they own a chain of grocery stores and some other things now, too.”

“Mom, why are we talking about some company?”

“Because your grandfather went to school with the head of the company. They’ve remained good friends. Your father and he have been talking for a while now.”

“What about, Mom?” Bridgette asked.

“About him buying the company. They own Good Day Greeting already, and he thinks they could use our lines and buy up existing inventory.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

Bridgette leaned forward in the chair and said, “You’re talking about selling the company?”

“Yes, we are.”

“I’m supposed to take over the company when you and Dad retire.”

“I know. Honey, we’re hoping the money we make will be enough to help you later, and we can ask if they can keep you on, if you want. We can include it in the deal.” Her mom looked around the room. “I’m not sure what they’ll do with this office, but we can ask to keep you local, if you want to stay.”

“Stay?”

“Well, their headquarters is in New York.”

“New York?”

“Yes.”

“Mom, you’re selling to some massive organization in New York? Why would they even want us? We’re small and local.”

“It’s a favor. Your father is trying to deal with his pride, but they’d be doing us a favor. We’ve been struggling for a while now, and they’d mainly be interested in the card lines we own.”

“They’d tear us apart?”

“I don’t know, honey. We’ll have to talk to the person they’re sending down to talk about the possibilities.”

“Someone’s coming here?”

“Their head of acquisitions. It’s actually his daughter. Her name is Monica, I think. She should be here tomorrow. It was supposed to be today, but something came up.”

“So, they’re late trying to buy our family’s business?” Bridgette asked.

“I know this is hard to think about, but it might be the best decision for us. Your dad and I can retire, or we can start thinking about something else we want to do, and you can make a little money and decide what you want to do, too.”

“I wanted to do this.”

“Honey, it’s the family business. You were supposed to take it over, and we’ve been telling you that for years, so you’ve never really thought about doing anything else.”

“Yes, I have,” Bridgette replied. “Mom, if I wanted to do something else, I would’ve told you and Dad that years ago. I love my job.”

“You have a funny way of showing it,” her mom joked.

“Because I think we need to make changes. And I don’t hesitate to tell you and Dad my ideas. If it’s going to be my company one day, anyway, why not just listen and let me try them? If they’re bad ideas, I’d have to deal with the consequences.”

“The whole company would.”

“But we’re already struggling anyway. So much so that you’re planning on selling the whole thing. What about the employees?”

“We’d give them a severance,” her mom replied. “We can talk to Monica about them maybe being given an opportunity to interview for jobs at Good Day Greeting.”

“Which is in New York.”

“Yes.”

“I can’t speak for them, but I do work with them all every day, and I can’t see any of them wanting to move to New York.”

“Well, that would be their decision.”

“Assuming this Monica woman would even be interested in keeping them on.”

“I don’t like this any more than you do, Bridgette, but your father and I have made up our minds to at least see what happens with this possibility. Monica might say no or might not give us a deal we want. That’s why your father is talking to the attorney about our best options right now.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

“I don’t like this, Mom. I don’t agree with it. We have other options.”

“Maybe, but this is the best one,” her mother replied.

“And I don’t get a say in this?”

“No, honey.”

“Sell me the company,” Bridgette stated and stood. “I can’t pay what they’d pay you, but I have some savings.”

“Bridge, you’d drain everything you had for nothing. If you did that, you’d have nothing to pay the employees and nothing to pay the printers and—”

“I’ll think of something else, then. Maybe you and Dad can sell it to me for cheap. Like, I pay you something up front, and I pay the rest as we start turning a profit again.”

“You’d have no money left, Bridgette. We aren’t going to put you in a position where you don’t have a job and your savings are gone.”

“So, that’s a no?”

Her mom nodded.

“Fine,” Bridgette replied. “Then, that’s that. I guess we should just all give up.”

“That’s not what we’re doing. We’re trying to save as much as we can.”

“I need to go,” Bridgette told her.

“Honey, let’s keep talking.”

“There’s no point, anyway,” Bridgette replied.

She pulled open the door and left the office. When her mom didn’t follow, Bridgette grabbed her bag and walked out to her car. She climbed inside and pulled out her phone, planning to call Melinda to see if her friend wanted to go for a drink, but she saw a text from her ex-girlfriend instead. Bridgette’s eyebrow lifted. She knew it was a bad idea, but she responded anyway before hitting the road. Thirty minutes later, she knocked on Toya’s door and was met with caramel skin and dark-brown eyes looking back at her.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hey,” Toya said back as she pulled the door open farther.

“So, how does this work?”

“I don’t think there are any rules,” Toya replied as she closed the door behind her.

“I had a shitty day at work, Toya.”

“So did I.”

“So, you texted with this idea because you had a bad day?”

“I texted you to see if you really meant what you said on the phone, that this could

just be fun with no strings and no talk of us moving in together.”

“This, meaning sex?” Bridgette asked.

“Well, it’s not sexyet.”

“You want it to be?”

“Yes,” Toya replied. “There were parts of our relationship that stressed me out, but there were other parts that were always really, really good.”

“And you’d like only those parts?”

“I’d like your parts on my parts,” Toya told her as she wrapped her arms around Bridgette’s neck. She shook her head and laughed. “I can’t believe I just said that.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

“Yeah, that was awful.” Bridgette laughed. “But you’re sure?”

“Are you?” Toya checked.

“I have no idea,” she replied. “My mom just told me that they’re going to sell—”

Next thing she knew, Toya’s lips were on hers, cutting her off. Bridgette hadn’t been expecting the kiss, but once she registered what was happening, it was like old times. Toya’s lips were full and moved against Bridgette’s quickly, asking her for more without demanding, so Bridgette turned them around until she had the woman pressed to the door. She supposed Toya wanted them to stop talking and get on with the real reason Bridgette had shown up at her tiny studio apartment.

Bridgette hadn’t been here since the breakup, and she’d never expected to have Toya’s lips on her own again. She’d spent the past eight months trying to forget how good it felt to kiss this woman. Now, she was doing it again, and it felt good. It felt good, and it also felt wrong; really, really wrong. She knew she should stop, but she couldn’t. Her lips moved to Toya’s neck, and she breathed in her scent, which was familiar and made Bridgette think about the last time she had Toya pressed to this door. Toya moaned when Bridgette shifted her thigh between Toya’s and her hands to Toya’s jeans, which she unbuttoned and unzipped. Toya lifted at Bridgette’s shirt, revealing Bridgette’s pale skin and purple bra. The shirt landed on the floor, and Toya moved to her own shirt then, pulling it off, revealing her perfect breasts.

“No bra,” Bridgette noted. “You were ready for me.”

“You have no idea,” Toya said as she took Bridgette’s hand and slipped it into her

panties.

Bridgette practically grunted when she dipped between Toya's folds and found the woman soaking wet for her. Toya had always been wet for her before, but this was more than Bridgette had ever felt.

"Fuck," she said mostly to herself.

"Yes, do it," Toya requested as she pushed at her own jeans and panties until they were around her knees.

She then spread her legs, and Bridgette wasted no time. She slipped inside her and thrust deep, earning a moan. Her lips moved back to Toya's neck as she continued to thrust inside her, letting her thumb play against Toya's clit in the way Bridgette knew she liked.

"Did you bring it?" Toya asked.

"No, I came straight here," Bridgette replied, knowing Toya was referring to her favorite strap-on, which Bridgette still had in her drawer at home.

"Fuck, baby. Yes!" Toya moaned as her hands moved to Bridgette's ass, cupping it hard. "I have one. Will you get it? You know where."

"Can I finish this first?" she asked, moving harder and faster now.

"Yes! God!"

Bridgette knew it wouldn't take long. She also knew that Toya would come once, and they'd move to her bed, where Bridgette would strap on for her, and Toya would want her behind her. She loved that position, letting Bridgette fill her all the way.

Bridgette loved it, too, and as Toya came, she couldn't wait to fuck her on the bed just like that.

“God, I’ve missed that.”

“Bed,” Bridgette said.

“No, sofa.”

“Sofa?”

“I want to straddle you,” Toya replied right before she kicked off her jeans and panties the rest of the way and walked toward the sofa.

Bridgette watched her do that for a second before she headed to the bedside table, where she pulled out the dildo already in its harness. She didn't think Toya would need any lube, but she spotted the small bottle, so after hastily removing the rest of her clothes, she slipped into the harness and rubbed the toy with the lube just to make sure. When she moved to the sofa, Toya shoved her down into a seated position and climbed on top of her. Bridgette heard the pop as the head of the dildo slipped inside, and she watched her ex-girlfriend lower and raise herself up, slow at first and then faster and faster while she held on to her hips.

She sucked on one dark nipple after the other, biting down on them just a little, which she knew Toya liked. When Toya came this time, it was louder, and her hips practically thrashed as Bridgette held her in place. Bridgette wanted so badly to flip them over and use her own hips to make Toya come again, but the woman was still coming hard and looked so sexy above her. When she finally came down, Bridgette waited as Toya stilled before she finally lifted up and off her, knelt in front of Bridgette on the floor, and pulled off the harness. She spread Bridgette's leg and stared.

“You need me, baby?” Toya rubbed her hands up and down Bridgette’s thighs.

“Yes,” Bridgette replied.

She didn’t wait before she pressed her hand to the back of Toya’s head, earning a smirk. Then, Toya’s head lowered between her legs, and Bridgette spread them farther for her, letting Toya take her clit between her lips and suck.

Bridgette hadn’t had sex since the last time they’d done this. She had tried, too. She’d gone out. She’d wanted to meet someone and hook up just to let sex with someone else take her mind off how good it had been with Toya and how much she’d once loved the woman. She wasn’t naïve, though. She knew this wouldn’t solve anything. Toya didn’t want her like that, and Bridgette wasn’t going to be able to change her mind. Instead, she’d let Toya make her come a few times. Then, she’d go home, take a shower, and try not to think about how much it had hurt when they’d broken up.

“Fuck,” she said. “Yes! There!”

“You still taste so good,” Toya said.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

“Just suck me. Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Toya asked as she looked up at her.

“Toya, make me come.”

Toya smirked again, likely assuming Bridgette needed her that badly, but in reality, Bridgette just didn’t want to talk about how good she tasted or how good Toya felt when she’d been inside her. She wanted to come because this was them simply having sex.

Toya’s head lowered back down, and her tongue licked for several strokes until Bridgette tugged a little at her head.

“Tell me to suck you again. That was fucking sexy,” Toya muttered against her clit.

“Toya... Come on,” Bridgette said.

As she enjoyed her clit being sucked, Bridgette thought about all the greeting cards she’d written over the years. Most of them had been about the beauty of love. She’d never made one to capture this moment: a woman kneeling on her own floor, sucking on another woman’s clit, while that woman told her to until she came. Bridgette laughed to herself, picturing the front of that card and thinking about what shops in the Quarter might sell it. Then, she came.

“Oh, fuck!”

Her hips rocked against Toya's mouth until she had to tap Toya's shoulder to get her to stop because she couldn't handle any more touches.

"Bed?" Toya asked as she glanced up at Bridgette and licked her lips, looking satisfied and confident in what she'd just done.

Bridgette considered saying yes. She knew if they went to the bed, she'd likely come again and again after that. But there was something in her that just couldn't turn off her thoughts about the fact that her family was going to lose their business and she couldn't talk to Toya about it. She'd made that clear before when she'd kissed Bridgette to shut her up.

"No," Bridgette said. "I think I'll go, actually."

"Bridge, you said you could handle this."

"I am handling this. That's why I need to go." She stood up. "You don't want to be the person I talk to about things, which is fine. I'm good with that. I just have some things I need to talk about, so I'm going to go."

Toya stood up and asked, "So, is that it? You stop by for, like, ten minutes, we have sex, and you leave?"

"That's what you wanted," she replied as she found her pants and pulled them on with her underwear.

"I didn't mean you'd leave after one really quick round, Bridgette. I didn't mean that we couldn't talk to each other at all."

"Well, I think that's what I need this to be if we do it again. Besides, you cut me off when I was trying to talk to you, Toya."

“If? You said if we do this again. I thought...”

“If you want to, we can. It just needs to be sex.”

“And you’re sure? You’ve never wanted this before.”

“I still want a relationship.”

“Which is why I’m surprised that you even said what you said on the phone and that you came here today.” Toya wiped her mouth.

“Well, it happened.” Bridgette clasped her bra. “Now, I’m going to go. Text me if you want to do this again, and I’ll decide if that’s what I want to do then, I guess.” She picked up her shirt and threw it on over her head.

“Um... Okay.”

Bridgette pulled open the door and closed it quickly behind her, stopping for a second to let it hit her. She’d just slept with her ex-girlfriend, the woman she’d been trying to get over for the past eight months, and it had actually just been sex to her. That part was a good thing. Having sex with her at all, though, wasn’t.

CHAPTER 4

The weather had prevented the company jet from taking off the previous night, leaving Monica all packed and ready to go but with no way to get there. She’d returned home and had to unpack her toiletries since she rarely had backups and hadn’t been prepared with travel-sized anything, so after that, she’d sent an email to her assistant asking her to pick up at least three of every staple in her bathroom so that she’d never have to run into this situation again. She’d already been upset about having to go somewhere at the last minute, and then, she’d had to unpack her stuff

and repack it all over again the following morning.

After spending a few hours in the office to try to give herself a little more time with her team before she'd be gone unexpectedly for a few weeks, she headed back to the airfield. There, she was told all was clear, and they took off. She hadn't even thought to bring her assistant with her, which seemed like something she should have suggested because as she sat on the flight, Monica came up with at least ten things for her to do while she was gone. She could delegate. Of course, delegating to her assistant was one thing. Asking a director in one of the departments she oversaw to handle something she wasn't sure they could take care of properly was quite another.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

When they landed on the runway, she was helped off the small plane and led straight out into a humidity she'd only ever experienced in two places. One was Orlando, where she had gone for a conference. She'd stayed only as long as she had to and had left immediately after, unable to wait for her hair to return to its usually shiny, soft self instead of the frizzy mess it had turned into. The other time was on her honeymoon to Bora Bora, which had been Lily's idea and not at all the honeymoon Monica had wanted. When she'd dreamed of a honeymoon, it had been somewhere they could mix romance and relaxation with a little history and culture. It wasn't that Bora Bora didn't have those things. It was that Lily only wanted to lie on the beach and spend time in their resort room making love. While there was nothing wrong with either of those activities, it wasn't ideal for her, but back then, Monica had been so in love and so in lust with her older and more experienced wife that she'd just given in. She'd still enjoyed her honeymoon, with the exception of her frizzy hair and how everything felt like it was sticking to her body, which always felt clammy.

"God, it's humid," she remarked out loud to no one.

"You should try coming here in the summer," the flight attendant said as she climbed off the plane.

"It gets worse than this?" Monica joked.

"Much," the woman replied.

"It's only a few weeks. It's only a few weeks," Monica recited.

It was her new mantra, and she said it a few more times to herself as she picked up

her phone.

“Yes, Miss Arnette?”

“Can you please look up and find some kind of anti-frizz hair product and have it sent to the hotel?”

“Anti-frizz?” her assistant asked.

“Yes. The humidity here is awful.”

“Oh,” the woman replied. “Of course. Anything else you need?”

“A pocket fan,” she joked.

“You want me—”

“No, I was kidding. That’s all for now, but I’ll email you a list when I get to the hotel.”

“Okay. I’ll have something dropped off for you.”

“Thank you,” Monica replied and hung up the phone.

A car was waiting for her on the runway. She climbed inside while others placed her luggage into the trunk. Grateful for the air conditioning, she took a minute to rest her head back and let the cool air hit her. She wasn’t sure how she’d deal with three weeks of this. New York got humid, too, but mainly in the summer, not all year round. Then again, it was nice that there was no snow on the ground, and it wasn’t the thirty degrees she’d left at home. That was something good. Monica decided to try to focus on that, the good, as she was driven from the airfield and into the city.

She had been told that the offices were in the Central Business District, so she'd booked the nicest hotel that was close by, which happened to be the Four Seasons. She'd seen the photos, and it was right on the water, with a ground-floor pool that overlooked the river. She had managed to book a deluxe king suite with a river view at the last minute, which gave her something to look forward to. Their spa also gave her something to look forward to, and she planned to book many, many treatments and massages to help her occupy her time when she wasn't working.

Upon arrival, she was greeted as a VIP and escorted to her room, which, she had to admit, was beautiful. Everything in the room was white and looked brand-new. The valet dropped her bags off for her as she looked out the window and took in the river. There was something about water that calmed Monica, but at the same time, she was a New Yorker; she'd seen rivers before and wished for a view of clear ocean water as far as the eye could see instead.

"Can I book a spa service with you? I forgot to ask when I was checking in," she said to the valet.

"Of course, Miss Arnette," he replied.

Monica took cash out of her purse and handed it to him.

"Can I get a massage booked for tonight, a facial for tomorrow night, and a wrap of some kind for the day after? Anything after seven is fine. I assume you're open late?"

"The spa normally closes at eight, but yes, we'd be able to get you those appointments," he replied, taking the tip. "I'll have maid service leave you a card with the appointment times on the desk if you'd like."

"That would be fine," she said.

“Very well. Thank you, Ma’am,” he said and turned to go.

“Ma’am,” she muttered under her breath.

When she was in her twenties, no one had even thought about calling her ‘ma’am.’ In her thirties, it had depended, but ever since she’d turned forty, she’d been getting it a lot more frequently. Then again, she was in the South now. Most people used ‘ma’am’ and ‘sir’ down here, so she decided that the valet had just been polite and respectful and hadn’t called her ‘ma’am’ because she was older now. For whatever reason, that had her thinking about Lily’s girlfriend. Did anyone ever call her ‘ma’am?’ Probably not for another decade, at least. Monica sighed and sat down on the bed.

There were still a few hours left in the workday, and she was expected at the office to meet the family who owned the place. She knew she should freshen up and head that way, but something had her needing to relax just for a moment. In New York, she was always on the go, but as she sat on the end of the crisp, clean bed, she thought about how it felt good to just be still. Across from the bed was the desk, where she saw three bottles of water and the minibar under them. It was too early for her to start drinking, but she could use some water to rehydrate after the flight. She downed half the bottle before she, once again, moved to the window overlooking the water. It wasn’t so bad, being here, she thought as she finished the water.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

Monica checked her watch and decided she still had at least an hour until she needed to leave, so she removed her business suit, which hadn't gotten wrinkled on the plane, to her surprise, and lay down over the comforter in her matching bra and panty set. She only meant to close her eyes for a minute, but when they finally opened, she noticed she was wrapped in the comforter now, and the sun seemed a whole lot lower than it was supposed to be.

"Shit," she said, jumping out of bed.

She checked her watch and realized that she'd napped for two hours. Having run into the bathroom, she looked at herself in the mirror. Her hair, which had been perfect before, now looked like she'd slept on it for a day and a half, and it was frizzy. Monica tried to tame the brunette strands and remembered about that anti-frizz ask she'd made of her assistant. It hadn't been at the counter when she'd checked in and still wasn't here.

"Yes, Miss Arnette?" her assistant asked, picking up.

Monica rushed around the bathroom and tried to fix her lipstick while also still brushing her hair.

"Where is that anti-frizz stuff I asked you for?"

"It should be on its way. I asked the pharmacy to deliver it to the front desk, but they don't normally deliver, so I had to ask them to do it just for you. They said they'd have it to you within a few hours."

“Well, it’s been a few hours,” she replied. “Did they call you wondering where I was?”

“The pharmacy?”

“No, the people at Southern Hospitality Greetings.”

“Oh, no. Were they supposed to?”

“I’m late for our meeting.”

“They haven’t called. Would you like me to call them and let them know you’re running behind?”

“No,” Monica said as she picked up the phone off the counter and carried it into the bedroom, where she dropped it onto the bed and picked up her pants from the chair she’d draped them over. “Can you order me a car, though?”

“Sure,” her assistant replied.

“And they really haven’t called or emailed? I’m at least an hour late.”

“Nothing that I’ve seen, no. Did they call your phone instead?”

“They have the office number, not this one,” Monica replied.

“Well, I could call them to see if they meant to cancel, if you want.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll be downstairs in ten minutes.”

“The car will be there waiting for you.”

“Great.”

Monica readied herself as best as she could and slipped into her heels as she made it to the door. Two minutes later, she was in the lobby.

“Oh, Miss Arnette, we have a delivery for you,” the front desk agent said.

“Perfect timing,” she replied under her breath. “Would you mind having it brought up to my room?”

“Of course, Ma’am.”

There was that ‘ma’am’ again. The door was opened for her by the doorman, who greeted her with a kind smile. The doormen in New York did the same because their jobs in the high-end buildings of the city depended on it, but this man seemed to have a genuine smile as he asked her if she needed a cab called.

“No, thank you. This is my car,” she said as she pointed to the town car that had just pulled up in front of the building.

“Have a nice afternoon,” the doorman said in response.

The chauffeur got out of the car just in time and opened the door for her. Monica climbed in and reveled again in the air conditioning.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:48 pm

“I wasn’t given an address for your destination,” the chauffeur said once he was behind the wheel.

“Oh, one second,” she said. She pulled out her phone to check the email that had the address in it and handed it to him. “Here you go.”

“Oh. That’s where you’re going?”

“Is there a problem?”

“No, it’s just that it’s right over there.” The chauffeur pointed ahead. “About a block and a half away.”

Monica looked through the windshield to try to follow his finger and saw a building that looked to be about three stories.

“That’s it?” she asked.

“That’s it.”

Monica sighed and asked, “Can you just take me? I’m too tired to walk, and I am incredibly late already.”

“Sure,” he replied, putting the car in drive.

A whole minute and a half later, the car pulled over to the sidewalk. Monica felt like an idiot, and a lazy one at that, but she was grateful for the AC and the fact that she

didn't have to walk even the short distance in this humidity. When the chauffeur opened the door for her, Monica got out and looked down at her foot when she felt something squishy.

"What the hell?" she said.

"Oh," he replied apologetically. "Um... Yeah... The horse-drawn carriages take the tourists through here sometimes."

"Horses?"

"They go around the city. Usually, though, not all the way over here, which is probably why no one's picked that up yet." He pointed down to the horse poop she'd stepped in. "I might have a rag or—"

"Yes. Whatever it is, yes," she huffed out.

Monica sat back in the back seat of the car, removed her beautiful red heel, and stared at the bottom of it, covered in a muddy brown now. The chauffeur was kind enough to use a bottle of water and a rag of some kind to clean it for her while she texted her assistant to make sure to tip this man well because he definitely deserved it. When he was finished, he handed her the shoe back and helped her over the pile of manure.

"You're my hero," she said, meaning it.

A few seconds later, Monica opened the door to the office building, carrying her bag in her free hand, and looked for the suite where she was supposed to be meeting the current owners. There were no numbers on the doors or walls next to them, which was odd, so she checked the floor directory and guessed that she should be turning right, and it would be there. She pushed open the door and found a small, open office space with old furniture and a few employees milling about.

“Can I help you?” a young man in his twenties asked.

“I’m looking for Southern Hospitality Greetings.”

“This is it,” he said. “Can I—”

“Miss Arnette,” an older man said as he headed her way.

“Yes. Monica is fine,” she replied, holding out her hand for him to shake.

“I’m Dale Musgrave.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I apologize for being so late.”

“You’re late?” he asked as he shook her hand.

“You didn’t notice?”

Monica wondered if that was one of the reasons why they were struggling: no one here could keep time.

“We’ve been busy around here,” the man replied with a chuckle. “Come on in. This is our satellite office, so we only have a few people here, but we have a conference room where you, my wife, and I can chat privately.”