

KILLING MONICA

ALSO BY CANDACE BUSHNELL

Sex and the City

4 Blondes

Trading Up

Lipstick Jungle

One Fifth Avenue

The Carrie Diaries

Summer and the City

KILLING MONICA



CANDACE
BUSHNELL



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To Angie "Pangie" Silverstein

PROLOGUE

IT WAS SUMMER, and Monica was everywhere again. She was there, in the supermarket, on the rack of tabloids between displays of candy and sugarless gum at the checkout counter. And there, on the side of the bus kiosk. And there, on the cover of the fashion magazines in the salon. She was all over the morning shows, recommending what to wear, store, or toss from your summer wardrobe. She was with you in the backseat of the taxi, on the screen in front of your knees, telling you where to go, what to see, and what to buy. Selling, always selling. But mostly, what she was selling was happiness.

And she still looked great doing it. Her skin, soft and flawless, was radiant. Her cheeks resembled peaches. And her hair: masses and masses of it in pure twenty-four-karat color.

On June 1, like clockwork, Monica's image began to go up on the billboard overlooking the designer boutiques in Soho. First a strip of her hair appeared, followed by the smooth, high forehead, and then the eyes: the irises an almost translucent light green encircled by a band of dark gold hazel. And then the mouth: perched on her face like a sweet strawberry surprise, lips open, smiling. Monica was happy. So very, very happy. You looked at her, and suddenly you wanted to *be* her.

Unless, of course, you *were* her. Or had once been a version of

her—in the past. But now you are frazzled, beaten down, and your skin looks like crap. Your eyes are bloodshot. There is something sticky in your hair.

Pandy looked at the top of Monica's head and thought, *Just two more days. Three or four at the most.* She could do this. She could *win*.

She reminded herself that she had won before. *With Monica.*

Silly, charming, madcap Monica; the beloved heroine of four Monica books and four Monica movies.

Pandy had conjured up Monica as a child, for the entertainment of herself and her younger sister, Hellenor. Monica had hair the color of yellow marigolds, and she had quickly turned into their favorite creation, becoming the star of a series of notebooks called *Monica: A Girl's Guide to Being a Girl*.

When Pandy left home, moved to New York, and became a struggling writer, naturally she figured she was leaving Monica behind.

But she was wrong.

Because one night, when the third book she'd written had been rejected, when she'd had to borrow money to pay her rent, when the man she thought she was seeing turned out to be seeing someone else—she suddenly remembered Monica.

Monica. The goldenest of golden girls. On the outside, anyway. But what only Pandy knew was that when she'd created Monica, she'd been at the lowest point in her life.

Monica was the answer to her despair.

Pandy got up, walked to the window, and frowned. The billboard was two blocks away. The sun moved behind Monica's head, and once again Pandy found herself standing in Monica's shadow.



“Henry,” she'd said to her agent, leaning over his desk. “You and I both know I can't write Monica forever. Not that I have anything *against* Monica. I love her. We all do. And I'm grateful to her. I know I'd be a fool to turn down money on a sure thing to take a chance

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on the unknown. But I've got a million stories in my head. I need uncharted territory. I need to be..." She'd paused. "Scared."

Perhaps she shouldn't have been so glib.

"Uh-huh," Henry said, and smiled patiently. Every year or so she went through this phase of not wanting to write about Monica; of wanting to go back to writing something "serious" and "meaningful." She would write a hundred or so pages of this "different" book, and inevitably return to Monica.

Because, as Henry pointed out, she *was* Monica.

But this time *was* different. She didn't give up after a hundred pages.

She couldn't. She had to succeed.

Over both Monica and her soon-to-be ex-husband, Jonny Balaga.



The sun was now high behind Monica's head. Pandy realized that her image was still not complete. They had yet to attach her leg.

Perhaps they were changing her shoe.

Pandy smiled, suddenly feeling sentimental about Monica. She remembered the first time she'd watched the billboard go up. She'd been so excited, she'd insisted that SondraBeth Schnowzer, the actress who played Monica in the film versions of the books, come over and watch with her as it progressed. The two of them had sat there for hours, as rapt as if the universe had conspired to give them this gift—their own private movie about their very own lives.

And when the billboard was finally complete, when Monica's leg had at last been raised, revealing her famous neon blue spike-heeled bootie, they had looked at each other and screamed:

"It's you! It's you!"

"No, it's you! That part is definitely you!"

Leading to the inevitable conclusion: "It's *both of us!*"

And then SondraBeth had walked to the window and said, "Monica? I've a feeling we're not in Montana anymore."

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Pandy felt a sudden stab of yearning, not just for Monica, but for SondraBeth Schnowzer, too. This desire to see her former best friend again—to laugh giddily as if the entire world were their playground—was confusing. SondraBeth had dealt her a terrible blow, and they hadn't spoken for years. Ever since that moment in the ladies' room when SondraBeth had warned her about Jonny.

Sondra*Bitch*, she'd thought.

And now both Jonny and SondraBeth Schnowzer were dead to her.

And that was the essential problem with Monica. Monica made it look easy when it wasn't. No one ever asked the legions of Monica lovers to consider the years of struggle and hard work it would have taken Monica to *become* Monica; the self-doubt, the self-loathing, the fear, the sheer amount of energy required to set a goal and keep at it day after day, with no immediate reward in sight and the possibility that it might never materialize at all. On the other hand, who wanted reality? Reality was depressing. And *free*.



Pandy was almost finished writing by the time the entire billboard went up and she'd seen her name in those crisp white letters. Smaller and smaller each year, perhaps, but nevertheless, still there:

BASED ON THE BOOKS BY P.J. WALLIS

Pandy looked back at the billboard and frowned. Monica's leg was still missing. It had never been late before.

Maybe it was a sign?

She hit SEND.

And then the landline began ringing. Only a few people had the number, including Henry and her divorce lawyer, Hiram.

Hopefully, it was Henry. But she'd happily take Hiram.

“Hello?” Pandy said into the receiver.

“Congratulations!” a man bellowed.

“What?” *Who is this?* she almost asked.

“You, young lady, are free.”

“Hiram?”

“He’s agreed to it all.”

“He *has*?”

“Yup.”

“What about the numbers?”

“What we wanted.”

“Ohmigod!” Pandy shrieked.

“I knew I’d make you happy,” Hiram purred. “Remember the first day I met you? Remember what I told you? ‘My wife and daughters *just love Monica.*’ I promised I’d do right by you.”

“And you *have*. And I’m *so* grateful.” And then a second thought: “Did he actually sign? On the dotted line?”

“You mean, with the *actual* John Hancock? No, he did not. Nevertheless, he verbally agreed. And when you verbally agree in front of four of New York City’s top thousand-dollar-an-hour litigators, you do not go back on your word. Let’s just say we gave him a little talking-to, and he’s agreed to see things our way.”

Pandy laughed nervously. “You mean, my way.”

“Your way, our way, it’s all the same way, isn’t it?”

“Well, golly,” Pandy said. “I wasn’t expecting this to happen so *soon.*”

“I know. After all the hell he’s put you through. Put *us* through. I’ve never seen anything like it, and I’ve seen everything. One of my guys canceled his vacation to get the paperwork finished. *His* daughters love Monica, too.”

“Thank God for Monica.” Pandy paused and inhaled deeply as reality began to set in. “In that case, I suppose Jonny will be wanting his check.”

Hiram laughed. “I suppose he will. But don’t think about the

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money. Go out and celebrate. You are now officially free from that asshole.”

Hiram hung up.

For a moment Pandy could only stand there, dazed.

Divorced.

Free.

Suddenly the world came rushing back to her in all its Technicolor glory.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

PJ WALLIS! Is that really you? And what the hell are you wearing?” screamed Suzette as she came barreling into the loft, followed by a posse of Pandy’s twelve closest girlfriends.

“I’m back!” Pandy shrieked, removing the silver-sequined cardboard top hat from her head and giving a little bow. Suzette grabbed her around the shoulders, and they jumped up and down like ten-year-olds.

“I need a drink,” Meghan announced. “These divorce parties make me nervous. What if it happens to *me*?”

“It will inevitably happen to you, and then you will get one of these.” Suzette thrust her left hand under Meghan’s nose so she could get a closer look at the large yellow stone. “Ten carats. Unfortunately the guy who comes with it is eighty and has liver spots, but if he wants to pretend he’s younger than he is, who am I to object?”

“But you’re not young, either,” Meghan pointed out. “You’re nearly—”

“Shhhh.” Suzette glared at Meghan as Pandy—right on cue—cooed at the ring in wonder.

“You’re engaged?”

“Not all of us have been under a rock for the past two years,” Suzette quipped as the elevator doors opened and six more women spilled out.

“Champagne in the bathtub, cupcakes in the kitchen, cigarettes in the living room,” Pandy said by way of greeting.

“What about cock? Do we get cock in the bedroom?” one of the women screamed, sending the others into peals of nervous laughter.

“Do you think Jonny thought you spent too much time working?” asked Angie. Pandy laughed and put her arm around Angie’s slight shoulders. “Of course I spent too much time working,” she said loudly, as much for herself as for the benefit of the crowd. “What woman isn’t forced to spend ‘too much time working’ these days? And if men don’t like it, too bad. If you’re in a relationship with *me*, I come with a career. Just like Jonny came with *his* career.”

“And all those restaurants,” Nancy interjected, breezing by.

Pandy smiled stiffly. “He doesn’t actually own those restaurants.”

“Do you just totally *hate him* right now?” Amanda was on the verge of a gossip orgasm.

“Let’s just say I will never do *that* again.”

The elevator door opened and another gaggle of women rushed out.

“Pandy!” Portia screamed. “Look at you! You’re so brave. Standing there in that skintight silver dress and looking like a goddess!”

“Is it true?” shrieked Brittney. “I heard he tried to get money out of you from *Monica*. How could he do that? He didn’t even *know you* when you started writing *Monica*.”

“Ladies, please,” Pandy addressed her rapt audience. “When it comes to divorce, what’s fair and logical is the first thing that goes right out the window. Jonny was threatening to go after the rights to *Monica*. He thought I’d be so terrified he might get them, I’d give him the loft instead.”

“So what did you give him?” Portia chirped. “Not the loft. And certainly not *Monica*.”

“You gave him money, didn’t you?” Suzette scolded. “Oh, I knew this would happen. Didn’t I tell you this would happen?” She looked around at the women closest to her, who nodded. “I predicted this,”

she continued. "I said, 'Pandy is such a softy, you just watch. She'll end up giving him all her money.'"

For a moment, Pandy grimaced—if only her friends knew how true that was. But hopefully, with the success of her new book, no one would need to know the truth about anything, including her marriage.

"But he's got tons of his *own* money!" Meghan cried.

"Not as much as you'd think," Nancy chimed in. "Those chefs have all their income tied up in the real estate for their restaurants."

"Do you think he was having an affair?" Angie asked breathlessly.

Pandy smiled queasily. Angie was the most naïve of her friends—surely she'd heard the rumors of Jonny's infidelities. But Pandy had already had quite a bit of champagne, and feeling puckish, she said, "Let me put it this way. If he *wasn't* having an affair, it wasn't from lack of *trying*." She guffawed loudly.

The party had officially begun.



By seven p.m., the loft was packed. The air was filled with steam from various inhalers, along with actual cigarette and marijuana smoke. Strewn around the loft were cracked plastic cocktail glasses, sticky napkins, and empty bottles of champagne. In the midst of their celebration, Henry arrived.

"Look, Cary Grant is here!" Pandy heard Portia shout. Followed by Suzette's curt reply:

"Cary Grant is dead. That's Pandy's *agent*."

"Any word?" Pandy screamed, rushing toward him with so much enthusiasm, she knocked over several drinks in the process.

"On what?" Henry asked, coolly raising his eyebrows as he surveyed the room. Almost imperceptibly, he shook his head.

"On *The Book*. Hello? Remember *The Book*? That thing I've been writing for the last two years?" Pandy waved her hands in front of his face.

Henry didn't blink. "If I had word, you'd be the first to know." He

squeezed Pandy's shoulder reassuringly. He stayed another five whole minutes before he was forced to flee, claiming he didn't want to end up in a meat sandwich between Suzette and Nancy.

"A new Monica book?" cried Angie. Despite the booty-shaking beat now blaring from the speakers, she'd somehow managed to overhear Pandy's conversation.

"I knew it!" Brittney shrieked. "Now that Pandy's divorced, Monica will have to get divorced, too."

"Then she can try online dating."

"And a matchmaker. That would be hilarious."

"What would be even more hilarious would be watching Monica try to arrange a date by *texting*."

"And then she can date some hot young studs. With their own hair and actual muscles."

"I don't know about you," Amanda added, "but now that I'm dating younger guys, I personally can't stand men my age anymore. It's fine if you're already with one, but otherwise—"

"I agree. If I want to look at an old guy, I can look at my husband!"

"I suppose you could, if you ever saw him!"

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?"

Texting? Divorce? A matchmaker? No. That isn't Monica, Pandy thought.

She had to stop this.

"Hold on!" she shouted. "Monica *isn't* getting divorced."

"But everything that happens to you happens to Monica, right?" Brittney squawked.

"Not anymore," Pandy declared, suddenly remembering her new, very un-Monica book and how it would force the critics to finally take her seriously. This was something that would *never* happen to Monica. No one took Monica seriously at all.

And could you blame them? Look at *her* right now. Look at her *friends*: Portia was sitting on the kitchen counter, her too-short

dress riding up her thighs, while Nancy was inadvertently sloshing champagne on the front of Angie's shirt and extolling the virtues of vaginal steaming.

Pandy held up her hand for order. "As a matter of fact, I *do* have a new book coming out."

"When?"

"I don't really know. I just finished it. Last week, as a matter of fact."

"Pandemonia James Wallis," Suzette crowed. "You naughty girl. Why didn't you tell us before? Now we can stop celebrating your divorce, and start celebrating your new book." She held up a bottle of champagne. "To PJ!"

"To Monica!"

"To PJ *and* Monica!"

Pandy groaned. She pushed through the crowd to the couch. "I have an announcement—"

"You have a new boyfriend!" Amanda gasped.

For a moment, Pandy put her face in her hands. Then she climbed onto the couch, standing precariously with one foot on the cushion and one foot on the arm for balance. As she was climbing, she noticed that the sun was about to set.

"Hello! Over here!" she said, waving her arms. Most of the women were no longer paying attention.

"Hello! Me here. Wanting to say something!"

Suzette heard her voice, turned around, and shushed the crowd. "Our hostess wants to say something."

"Hey, Pandy's talking."

"Be *polite*."

As the noise level dropped, Pandy was quite sure she heard the words "needs Botox" and "still totally naïve about Jonny," although not necessarily in that order. Then Angie handed her an open bottle of champagne, and Pandy took a swig and gave it back. She touched her mouth with her fingertips.

“I have an announcement,” she repeated, scanning the room. Everyone was listening now. “I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you’re all here. You all know how much I love you!”

“Awww.”

“We love you, too, Goobers.”

Pandy bowed her head in thanks, waiting for them to settle down.

“I want to thank all of you for coming. Because this is a celebration. A celebration of not only moving forward, but also of letting go of the past.” Pandy glanced back at the billboard. The sun had set, and for the moment, Monica had disappeared.

“One of the things I learned during this divorce,” Pandy continued, “is that I probably never should have gotten married in the first place. But then my insecurities got the better of me. No matter how stupid it is, if you’ve never been married, it’s all you can think about. It’s always there, in the back of your mind: ‘What’s wrong with me? How come no one’s ever wanted *me*?’ And it’s important not to get caught up in society’s expectations—”

“Cock in the bedroom!” someone shouted.

Pandy laughed. “In any case, what I’ve realized is that I have to grow up. Which means I can’t keep on being Monica.”

“Oh, go on,” Nancy hooted. “You *are* Monica.”

Pandy shook her head. “Not anymore. I don’t want to be. Partly because if I stay like Monica, I’m going to end up with another Jonny.”

“Forget about Jonny. You were too good for him.”

“Men will be lining up to meet you. You’ll see,” Suzette cackled.

“No.” Pandy playfully pointed her finger at Suzette. “They line up to meet *you*. But that’s sort of the problem. If you have a man, great. But it shouldn’t *have* to be about men. And we *already know this*. But sometimes it takes getting divorced to learn that lesson all over again.”

Pandy’s mouth was suddenly dry. She motioned to Angie for the

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bottle. While she drank, she heard Brittney ask, “Did Jonny really have fourteen suitcases full of knives?”

“Shhhh,” Nancy said.

“And so,” Pandy said quickly, “I will keep this short. I *do* have a new book coming out, and it is *not* about Monica. It’s what I’m calling a ‘me’ book. Meaning it’s the book I’ve always wanted to write, and I’ve finally taken the chance to write it. I hope you’re not disappointed. About Monica.” She paused. “And the fact that I definitely don’t have a new man—”

“We’re almost out of champagne!” Portia screamed as if a nuclear bomb were about to go off.

“Music!” Meghan shouted. “What happened to the music?”

Pandy picked up her sequined top hat and placed it on her head. As she turned to step off the couch, the lights that bathed Monica’s image every evening at eight p.m. sharp suddenly flooded her face.

Pandy took a step backward. The heel of her shoe caught in one of the tears in the cracked leather.

She went down.