

Great Achievements Involve Great Risk

Kate clicked off the phone and looked at Steve as they waited in the airport for their flight to be called.

"They want to make a movie out of Lexi's book."

"That's great! Is she going to do it?"

"Probably. But she needs to think it over first. Sometimes I wish she would just jump into things."

"Lexi doesn't seem that type to me. She's a bit cautious, and uses her gut, but her final decisions, from what you've told me, are pretty sound."

"I guess. It was cool to see her name in a bookstore, but it would be even more fun to see it on a movie poster."

"You just want to see your character on the screen, don't you?"

Kate hadn't considered that notion, but Steve had a point. She was a character in Lexi's novel, with some thinly-veiled descriptions of her historical antics. Kate broke out into a mini cold sweat as she realized that the wild life of her 20s and 30s would be on the screen, including that backstage rendezvous with Clay Talbott back in the late 1970s, along with a few hits of coke in the 1980s. Steve had yet to read Lexi's book, and Kate's bio would be displayed on an 800-square-foot screen across the country, even in IMAX.

"You haven't read Lexi's book yet, have you Steve?"

"No, I've been kind of busy being newly married and a doctoral student."

"You might want to catch up on your reading. It has a few references to my life experiences that you've been curious about."

Steve gave Kate a curious, but excited look. "Okay. How about you stay here with the luggage, and I'll go pick up her book over at Borders. We have a long flight back to France, and I could use some new 'educational materials'. Do you want anything from the Food Court while I'm heading that direction?"

"Some fries would be great."

Steve left Kate in the VIP lounge as he headed off to go shopping. Kate immersed herself in the newest People magazine, catching up on her Brangelina news. Her phone rang, indicating another surprise she had not anticipated.

"Stacey?"

"Kate, I'm so glad I caught you. Do you have a moment? I know it's like 1 am in France, but I need your help."

Kate gave her no indication that she was only 1, not 8 time zones away, and let her continue, still considering her rudeness at calling at a potentially late hour.

Kate remained curt with Stacey. "What is it?"

"I need help."

Not again, Kate thought. The last time we helped her, she screwed us. "What is it now?"

"Well, my jewelry line...."

"YOUR jewelry line?"

Stacey continued, not acknowledging the reference to her outright stealing Kate's insomnia-induced ideas. "My jewelry line needs additional pieces, along with other Kat House stuff, and I promised the company that I would have more ideas by next week."

"And your problem is?"

"I need some help with some more ideas. You seem to be pretty good at this kind of thing, and I thought you could help me out."

Kate envisioned several ways to assassinate Stacey, some with a knife, poison, or just an unexpected fall off the roof of a 27-story building.

"I will not be helping you out, Stacey."

"BUT YOU HAVE TO!"

"I don't have to do a damn thing for you Stacey. You took credit for something that wasn't yours to start with and made your old friend think you were a genius. Now you get to live up to your reputation – as a fraud."

It's me again.

That was quick.

I just realized that if your book gets turned into a movie, then my life will be on the screen, along with yours.

That's why I like you – you're so quick on the uptake.

Steve doesn't know about some of the things in my past.

He doesn't have to know. Just tell him it's kinda based on you, just not entirely.

It's about 95% me!

Tell him it's 50% - he doesn't have to know if you don't want to. I believe the quote is that "women of a certain age are allowed their secrets".

But we have an honesty agreement...

Let me share something with you. You know I study astrology, right?

Yes.

Well I am an Aquarian, and there is a saying about us. "They always tell the truth, just not all of it."

Yeah, well....

You know how well that turned out when you told him you kissed Sam.

We had great make up sex.

But how many times can you do something wrong, force honesty, and then get rewarded for it? It's like doing stuff wrong on purpose because you get a reward of sex out of it.

I'm not complaining.

When the sex is gone, you will.

Shut up, Lexi.

You know I'm right.

Shut up.

Is that why you called?

Yes, that and STACEY CALLED! She wants me to HELP her design new jewelry for her line! Can you believe the audacity of her!

Yes. But it puts you in a marvelous negotiation position.

What are you talking about?

You can ask for anything you want from her – and her multi-billion dollar company – if you want to help.

Why would I want to do that?

Stacey will always be an asshole. And she will always be in Steve's life, and you will have to have her in your life somehow for the rest of your life. So you might as well make it on your terms. She loves cash and attention, and she gets that from that company who pays her million dollar paycheck. Go work with her, tell them the real story, and continue the business, and the charitable contributions, on a grander scale than you thought possible.

She had not considered the strategy component of Stacey's predicament. Kate knew it would induce more insomnia as she came up with more Kat House ideas to keep her busy in her French villa and create more trips to the U.S. while Steve continued his studies.

Okay, so you have a point, Lexi.

I'm pretty good at this, don't you think?

Go make your movie. I'm hanging up now.

After a two-day slumber party with Amy, Sam, and Keri, Lexi was ready to have her house back. She had a great time bonding with the women and came to respect their knowledge and experience. Sam was the creative one in the group, loving to network and come up with new ideas, sort of like the right brain of the Sam and Keri partnership. Keri embodied the organized, detailed side, but thoroughly loved supporting and contributing to the creative partnership. All four women talked about how important the role of female friends and sisters were in their lives, and they wouldn't have achieved so much in life without the support of strong women in their lives.

Lexi agreed to think about their offer, including contributing to the screen writing process, if she would get back to them soon. Lexi guessed that if they were interested, other producers would too, but it would be important to have an authentic, trusting bond with who she worked, as opposed to the manipulative, agenda-ridden partnership that David had had in mind.

As she looked out over the mountains, Lexi was glad to have David and others like him out of her life. She was ready to gain more control over her life, and determine what she did and did not want to do, and not be manipulated into the self-serving desires of others.

Lexi brushed Dakota's belly as she pondered her career, and interspersed it with thoughts of what to do with her next book. She had a lot on her plate and was going to have to manage her time wisely.

Dakota suddenly jumped up, surprising Lexi since he had been nearly asleep as she was brushing him. The pooch became very focused, started wagging his tail, and ran down the stairs to the front door.

"What is it, Dakota?" He paced in front of the door, as though he urgently needed to go outside. Lexi went back into the kitchen to grab the leash, but heard barking as Dakota became more insistent on going outside. She managed to get a leash on the 80-pound dog, as she opened the door and he dragged her to the sidewalk. Dakota stood staring east, continuing to wag his tail and bark, and would not move from his spot at the end of the driveway.

A cab slowed down as it neared her driveway, increasing Dakota's anxiousness.

A tall, bearded man stepped out of the backseat, his magnificent green eyes staring into her soul. "Is this my welcoming committee?"

"Andrew!"

Lexi encircled him with her arms as Dakota jumped on him, the trio remembering their patented group hug. He leaned down, giving Lexi a ferocious kiss that only a man deprived of a woman for three weeks could muster. Lexi could feel his rough, untrimmed beard on her face and liked the rugged feel of it.

"How did you know I was coming – using your psychic skills again?"

"No, actually it was Dakota. About 5 minutes ago, he jumped up and insisted on coming outside and would not move until you pulled up. I guess he's the psychic in the group."

Andrew stepped forward to embrace her again. "It's so good to see you, Lexi – and to be back home again." Lexi looked at him closely, literally seeing a fiery glow in his eyes that she had not seen before. The

Andrew she knew was a calm, loving man. This was a new man, full of passion, fire, and devoid of any mental or emotional encumbrances.

"Andrew – you look – entirely different. More, I guess, YOU!" Lexi kissed him again, sensing a new electric reaction to the man – her husband – who stood in her driveway.

"We better get inside before I have to fuck you right here in the driveway."

"Sounds like a good idea."

They grabbed all his bags and headed inside, Dakota not parting from Andrew the entire way. He spent a few minutes getting reacquainted with Dakota, before the dog smelled his suitcases and all the unusual scents from within.

Andrew led Lexi up to the bedroom, both of them hungry for each other in a way that they had not explored before. It was like a chemical reaction of two unknown elements that had not been combined before, but which created an explosion of energy that both needed to consume. Lexi wondered if this was why Kate and Steve...

After the equivalent of a WWF wrestling match, they lay together exhausted, but happy. "I just want to enjoy this moment, Lexi. It's the only one we really have."

Lexi looked at Andrew closely, eye to eye. "That's what you learned on your trip, isn't it?"

"It is. Just lie here with me, and let's enjoy some silence."

Lexi laid next to him, hearing the beating of his heart as it mixed with hers. For the first time in a long time, her thoughts of work, the house, and responsibilities shut off, and she was at peace.

After Kate fell asleep, as she usually did a long flight, Steve opened Lexi's book, Middle Aged Girls in Love. He found the title amusing and he couldn't help wondering if Kate found it flattering to be some inspiration for Lexi's work and an incredible ego boost to the featured in a major film. He was curious, what he might read that would offer some insight into Kate's past and some of the secrets she might be more than willing to tell if he knew what to ask.

He read the dedication and understood how much their long-time friendship meant.

Dedicated to Kate, a very good friend who has been there for me and has shared so much of her life with me. She, like so many women, has stayed within the lines, used logic and reason to govern her life, made all the right decisions and done what she should've done; and she was brave enough to cross the lines, listen to her heart, make daring decisions and throw aside all the 'shoulds.' She's happy where she is right now, and I'm grateful for her example and her unflinching support.

She's happy where she is right now, he thought. That's Lexi's tacit recognition of my role in Kate's life. At least she didn't say, 'If you screw this up Steve, I'll kill you.' He smiled, rolling his eyes as he began to read.

He marked pages where he had saw something he wanted to ask Kate about. Dozens of scraps of the airline magazine poked out of the top of the book. He had to admit Lexi was a good writer, even if the book was what Kate called chick lit, and he was intrigued by the character's adventures, because if they were really based on Kate's past, they were true revelations, the kind of things that he had said made her even more attractive because they were so unexpected. He predicted a long talk and a lot of wine to discuss these secrets.

"So tell me about the coke," he said pouring her a glass of Chardonnay when they were comfortably home in their Paris condo.

"I knew that one was going to come up," she sighed, sipping her wine and settling onto the sofa. "It was the early '80s, I was working in advertising, I went to a party, it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. It was a rush, no question, but not something that I wanted to do all the time."

"Would you do it again?"

"Then I probably would have. Now I have no interest in it." She looked at him expecting more of a reaction. "I know Stacey had a problem with coke. Did you ever...?"

"No, the most I did was some pot when I was an undergrad. It kind of just made me sick." He turned the pages to his next marker.

"Backstage with a rock star?" This was getting interesting, he thought, drinking more of his wine. She really will tell me anything if I ask. He admired her courage and honesty, and was grateful for her confidence in his ability to accept whatever she said.

"Lexi took a little poetic license with that one. I did connect for conspicuous eye-lock with the lead singer Clay Talbott during a concert, and I did get invited backstage. Clay was devastatingly attractive, and sexy as shit in his leather pants." The memory made her smile. "There was some kissing and some groping, but I didn't have sex with him. I wasn't going to risk diseases just because he dedicated a song to me."

"Was it worth it?"

"I think he gave me a guitar pick..."

"Was it really the brownie that started our romance?" he asked flipping to another page.

"It could have been a chocolate chip cookie," she said, "but the brownie makes for a better story, don't you think?"

"Does Lexi really believe that our marriage is based on sex?"

"She thinks we're obsessed with each other, like teenagers in heat."

"Well, she's right about that," he laughed, "but I prefer to think our marriage is based on love..."

"To change subjects, Stacey called me. She asked me to help her with some new designs for her jewelry line."

"HER jewelry line?! She stole the whole damn thing from you, and now she wants your help in coming up with new ideas? What a bitch..."

"She's still your stepsister, Steve." Kate knew this was uncertain territory, remembering Steve's loyalty to his father even after he was put on trial. "How much do you really care about her?"

"Not much. We did our best to help her, and she essentially screwed us over." He shook his head. "I don't care about her much at all. Why do you ask?"

"Lexi thinks I should help her, and that should give her new ideas, and that I should talk to the company that's selling and marketing her jewelry line and show them that the ideas were mine and maybe ask about their copyright registrations."

Steve smiled slyly, knowing exactly that intellectual revenge and not financial gain was on both Kate's and Lexi's minds.

"She deserves anything you might do," he said, "and I'll be happy to help you with anything that I can."

Steve was very patient with the flurry of late-night calls that Kate made to Chris Hale in Chicago and Dexter Harding in Florida to confirm and retrieve all the documentation that she needed. She didn't need to think much about new ideas for the jewelry line after all, because she had her Kat notes copied from her white board onto her laptop. She graciously called Stacey to apologize for her earlier wrath and to set up a meeting in New York; Chris and Dexter would also join them.

"You're leaving me AGAIN?" Steve asked over breakfast coffee.

"Only for a day or two this time. Unless you want to come with me?"

"I would love to come with you, but I'm really trying to turn in my dissertation before the end of the semester, and I've already skipped town enough."

"Could you do your defense before the end of semester too?"

"In the best case scenario, yeah, but I wouldn't count on it. I think I should stay in town and finish up some work. And your meeting might be less confrontational if we leave sibling rivalry out of it."

Sibling rivalry might have added some drama to the meeting, or at least some sense of compassion. Kate coolly and professionally presented her case to the appropriate company executives in New York, Chris and Dexter both offered documents to prove her ownership and registration of 'Stacey's jewelry line,' and Stacey whimpered and whined in denial. Then to further strengthen her case, Kate offered her ideas for new additions to the line, all to benefit the Kat House, which had taken a hit from the spring thunderstorms.

"I think it's just a matter of scratching out numbers now. How big a settlement do we want?" she asked Steve in a long-distance phone call from a coffee shop after the meeting.

"You should ask Dexter how much he wants. He's the one that lost income in Stacey's scam. And then double whatever he says for his cut, and figure out how much you want to give to the Kat House. And if you want to, throw in something for yourself for your pain and suffering... or at least enough to fund a good shopping spree at Victoria's Secret."

The settlement papers had barely been signed the next morning when Kate's phone buzzed. She expected to see Steve's name on the caller ID, but was surprised to see Ilene's. She excused herself and went into the hallway to call Ilene back.

"Hi, this is Kate. You called?"

"You need to call Brian Cooper, Bill's lawyer. He needs to talk to you about the will."

"The will?" Kate said with confusion. "Why would he need to talk to me?"

"Apparently Bill never changed his will, and you're still the beneficiary. He left to you everything," Ilene said with frustration and a hint of annoyance.

Kate understood her feelings. Ilene had devoted her professional life to Bill, and after the divorce, she had devoted her personal life to him as well. She had to see it as some sort of betrayal that Bill had not changed his will to recognize her commitment, but rewarded the woman who cheated on him and left him for a youngster. Kate knew she'd be pretty pissed off if she were Ilene.

"Give me Brian's number and I'll call him. I'm in New York now, and I can come to Florida tomorrow."

"I have to go to Florida," she told Steve in their next phone call.

"Do I want to ask why?" he said.

"I need to sign some papers to turn Bill's estate over to Ilene. He never changed his will and left me the house, and all of his assets."

"Wow, babe, you're making – and giving up – a lot of money this week. You sure you don't want to keep it all and dump me?"

"I've never been in it for the money – not in the Kat Project, not with Bill and definitely not with you. The Kat Project was a challenge for our theories and a great charity to support. Bill was friendship and love and growing up, I guess. And you..."

Steve couldn't wait to hear how she would describe him. Fantasy? Obsession? Great sex? He wasn't expecting her answer.

"And you are true love in a dream come true. Being incredibly wealthy is just..."

"I know, an extra bonus," he said finishing her sentence for her.

Hey.

Hey, it's been a few days. Were you and Steve making up again?

A little, but not for a week and a half. He liked your book, by the way, and is quizzing me about my past.

Please tell me you're not telling him the truth about everything...Oh, never mind, I know you are. So what's been going on?

I did what you suggested about Stacey and got a whopping good settlement from the company for Dex and for the Kat House, with a little pocket change in punitive damages for me. Plus I sold them new designs.

And Stacey?

Pissed off, but part of the agreement was not to make her repay her ill-gotten gains, so she's still rich enough to survive and annoyingly grateful for my largesse in settling.

That's a good resolution with future returns.

Oh, and I had to go to Florida because Bill didn't change his will, and I turned over everything to Ilene.

Oww, that had to hurt.

Not as much as I thought, since I'd already ceded everything to Bill when I left. If I had attachments to the house or anything else, I'd pretty much broken those ties.

Kate can't have become that cold-hearted, Lexi thought. She must have too many other things on her mind.

So anything else?

I've been thinking about the Middle Aged Girls in Love movie. So do you have some say over casting?

Worried about who might star as your alter-ego?

I don't think I'm worried about it, but it would be tremendously flattering to have an A-list star with class like Joan Allen or Jessica Lange in the role.

Done some thinking about this, haven't you?

My forte is research, after all. I just looked for an age-appropriate actress.

Any other casting suggestions? Who would you cast as Steve?

No solid ideas. Christian Bale is kind of cute when he looks a little scruffy. And I kind of like Josh Hartnett, but there's that whole sex tape thing...

And that would disqualify him how?

We may be obsessed, but we don't make tapes.

I've never known you to be camera shy... Even for those pesky photographers outside the courtroom, you posed nicely on Steve's arm.

And then I skipped the country. By the way, if you get the movie screened at Cannes, you can stay at our place on the Riviera.

Nice segue. Will you and Steve still be in France by then?

"It was amazing. Every morning I woke up to the sounds of wild animals in the bush, making a symphony of voices like I have never heard before. And at night, I would just lie there and look at the vastness of the sky. I had forgotten how spectacular it was. It reminded me that I was just an infinitesimally small speck in the scheme of all things. I was totally okay with that." Andrew leaned over to kiss Lexi, smelling of his last swallow of dark roast coffee. "But I did miss these." He took a ferocious bite of a fresh bagel, covered with cream cheese. Dakota stood nearby, patiently awaiting his serving of human breakfast food.

"Dakota would never make it in the outback. He took to sleeping in your spot on the bed." Lexi got out of her chair to sit on her husband's lap. "But I am happy to have you reclaim your position." She leaned in to hug him, noticing his sinewy muscles and lean frame. "How much weight did you lose? You look like a cast member on the last week of 'Survivor'."

"It was a lot of hard work out there. We hiked all day without a lot of food, just what we could hunt down." Andrew patted his 6-pack abs. "Not bad for a middle aged guy. But I am willing to drop the Outback diet for a while." He reached across the breakfast table for a 3rd bagel, piling on the schmear.

"I, however, was NOT on the new, revolutionary Australian secret diet, so I will stick to my veggie omelet." Lexi reached across the table, eating her breakfast nose to nose with Andrew. Dakota snuck up onto her chair, joining them at the table.

"He's really lost his manners since you've been around, Lexi." Andrew winked at her, indicating that it was a good change – for both of them.

"He just needed some babying – just like you do. How about I make you some lasagna for dinner?" Andrew gave a primal yelp, making Dakota chime in with a bark.

Lexi looked at them both. "Great. Now I have two pets. Remind me to serve the rest of your meals in a bowl on the floor next to Dakota's kibble."

An odd ring tone came from Lexi's cell phone, indicating an "unavailable" phone ID. She looked at it cautiously, answering it with a tentative "This is Lexi..."

"Lexi Michaels?"

"Yes."

"This is Denise Campbell at Madison Street films. Is this a convenient time to talk?"

"Yes...just a moment." Lexi signaled to Andrew that she needed to take the call in the living room. He and Dakota didn't seem to mind since it gave them more time to focus on clearing all food from the table, and possibly from the kitchen. "Yes, Denise – how can I help you?"

"You can let me make a movie out of your book, that's what you can do." Although said with a humorous, yet direct tone, there was the utmost undertone of authority in her voice.

"Excuse me - Denise, is it? I am afraid you have me at a disadvantage since you know me and I don't know you. Could you provide me with some background please?"

"Sam and Keri told me you were the cautious type. I am the president at Madison Street Films. We're a small but growing independent film studio. I LOVE your book, as do all my middle aged girl friends, and I've worked with Sam and Keri before on 2 of their projects. Do you have time to come see us? Let's see...this Thursday perhaps? I am going out of the country this weekend and I would like to figure this out before I leave. What do you say?"

Two days away. Andrew just arrived and she was hoping to spend some time with him before immersing herself in work. "Sure. Is this where we have your people talk to my people to make arrangements?" She hoped Denise got her sense of humor.

"How about I just send you an e-mail with the details? I don't have any peeps."

"Thanks, Denise. I look forward to seeing you." Lexi closed her phone, feeling the opening of another chapter in her life. She walked toward the kitchen watching him and the dog scarf down their 6th bagel.

"Um, I need to catch you up on a few things. Are you ready to jump back into the real world yet or do you need to go hunt something first?"

Andrew got up from his chair moseying over to her, pinning her to the stainless steel refrigerator. "Not ready quite yet." He leaned down to kiss Lexi on her neck, indicating he still had more than one primal need that required fulfillment.

Andrew looked overwhelmed. "Did I say too much too soon? Maybe you weren't quite ready to come back to life?" Lexi had shared her interaction with David, sleepover/business meeting with Caroline, Keri, and Sam, and recent offer from the film studio.

"Not to your life. I mean – you've been busy." Andrew looked at her with astonishment. "Are you sure you are done with David? He doesn't feel like the type to give up so easily. I think he's still after you."

"Now who's the psychic?" Lexi gave him a smirk, but felt guilty about all the events she had to share with him so quickly.

"I felt him when I was in the Outback. I got a very clear picture of you being busy and of a guy watching you, and I really felt I needed to protect you. I think I "saw" him – David. Everyone else you were working with was female, right?"

"Yes they were. It does sound like you were able to tune into me. How did it feel?"

"Really clear – and it was a very natural, basic instinct. Is that what it is like for you?"

"Yeah. It literally is another sense to deal with, like seeing, hearing etc. Except you just know stuff that you can't necessarily verify with facts or your other senses."

"That is what it was like. I just don't like David's vibes. We have to watch out for him."

"We will." Lexi leaned forward to kiss him. "With you on my side, David has no idea who he is dealing with." She sat back to look at him. "How do you feel about the other stuff – the movie?"

"Well, I guess it feels okay. I'm really surprised and shocked. This is new territory for both of us."

"I know. Do you want to go to LA with me on Thursday?"

"Sure. It's not like I have a job to go to or clients to work with. It's just you, me and Dakota for now."

Hey. Guess what?

You didn't even let me say Hey back. You sound excited. Glad Andrew is home?

Of course. But that's not all. I got a call from a movie studio. I am going down there in two days to talk about getting my book made into a movie.

So those two women weren't just conning you?

I will let you know after I see the studio. If it's just an office complex or bad hotel conference room, I'll have my doubts. But I Googled them and they seem to have a pretty good reputation. They've produced about 10 independent films in the last 5 years with good critical reviews. They're not huge, but they sound like they have the personal touch with high standards.

Do you want me to research them?

Like you did with my blind dates?

Hey, I stopped you from dating bankrupt yoga-boy, so back off.

Sure. I will e-mail you the names of the company officers. See what you can find out for me. Can you do it by tomorrow – before I leave on Thursday?

I'm on it, Chief.

How's the Stacey thing?

Kicked her to the curb, so to speak. Got a nice little jewelry design business going, with rights, patents, and all that other legalese stuff.

And a good chunk of cash?

And a very good chunk of cash. Should I pay you a commission?

Just save it for airfare. You'll need to come see me when my movie comes out, and probably while it's in production. Ever been to a movie set before?

Why don't you ink the deal first, and then I'll come. And remember who I want to play my character.

It's an Indie film company. They are going to have to get actresses with a conscious to play these parts. Besides Joan Allen looks too serious and Jessica Lange is too old. We need someone with – how did Steve say it? Oh yeah – street cred.

By the way, he read your book. And we had a nice little discussion about my past life.

And you lived through it?

A second time. It was fine. I told you he was very accepting of me.

He must be. Or did you leave out the details?

A few.

Have you kissed any other men besides Steve –and Sam – lately?

No. And you should really shut up about that. It was a one time thing.

Just something to put in the movie, huh?