



Candace Bushnell

On Top

After years of sleeping on a pullout sofa, she's written her way to the top. Now, at 46, the author of *Lipstick Jungle* is married, owns two homes and has a shoe closet that (finally) rivals Carrie Bradshaw's. But she's still a Cosmo-drinking *Sex and the City* girl at heart. By Phoebe Eaton

Photographs by François Dischinger

It was the week two helicopters had mysteriously death-spiraled into Manhattan's East River, and Candace Bushnell was concerned. The kind of power babe who lives and works and gets obnoxiously rich in Candace's latest novel, *Lipstick Jungle*, uses helicopters like yellow cabs—just another way to show her time is as valuable as any man's.

In the new book, Candace spends much time diagramming a vastly revised social order: The fluff bunnies and Mr. Bigs who monopolized her best sellers *Sex and the City*, *4 Blondes* and *Trading Up* are about to be upstaged by a trio of Ms. Biggers, two househusbands and an obedience-schooled billionaire boyfriend.

Instead of uncapping a Montecristo cigar or some top-shelf scotch to celebrate a deal or promotion (usually after some male colleague finds himself impaled on the business end of a stiletto heel), the women of *Lipstick Jungle* reward their ambition by purchasing gob-stopping jewelry. They pick up the checks. They decide when a relationship is kaput. In *Lipstick Jungle*, the underwear model is a He, and his most glorious achievement is that he gets to be the piece on the side for one of these fabulous feminatrixes.

"Men are expected to aspire to make a million a year, but what about women?" Candace was saying to a courtyard rustling with some of New York's most accomplished ladies. They were gathered here at the home of heat-seeking journalist Tina Brown to raise a watermelon-martini toast to Candace and the alpha females of *Lipstick Jungle*: fashion designing Victory Ford, magazine editrice Nico O'Neilly and studio boss Wendy Healy.

Candace was throwing off sparks in a gold-sequined dress from her friend Nicole Miller. "It's better to talk about making money on your own than marrying a man for money," she said in her morning-after rasp. "Isn't that more honorable?"

Candace is 46, but the palomino-pony blonde certainly didn't look it. A 10-carat yellow sapphire winked on her finger. In Bombay for a wedding after she finished *Trading Up*, Candace escaped to a little shop where the riches of the subcontinent were laid out before her. Was there something in the tea? That Bombay sapphire of hers enjoys some nifty product placement in the new book, as does other booty from her own closet. She wondered if there was a tax deduction in there somewhere.

Candace's friend Cynthia Rowley arrived on a motor scooter in a flap of satin and leather, her dark hair punked with a few bolts of blonde. Between sips of Sancerre, Candace confessed that she'd downloaded some of Rowley's own trials and tribulations right onto Victory Ford's résumé.

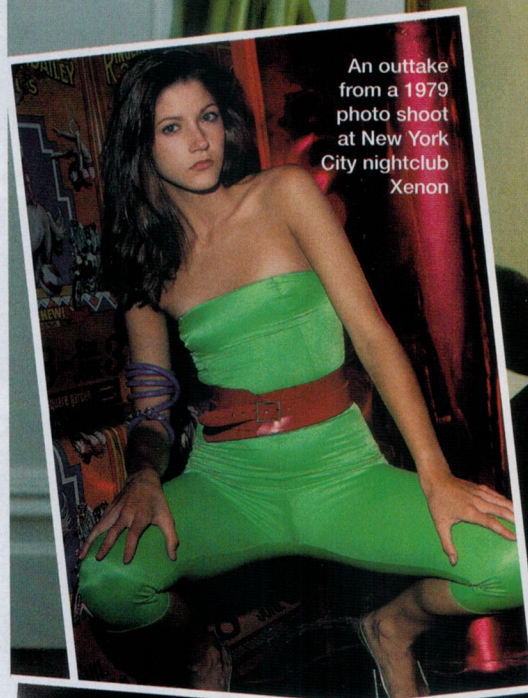
"At the end, you end up with \$20 million and a gold Cadillac!" she told Rowley.

"Only \$20 million?" asked Rowley, genuinely deflated. "Is the Cadillac a convertible?"

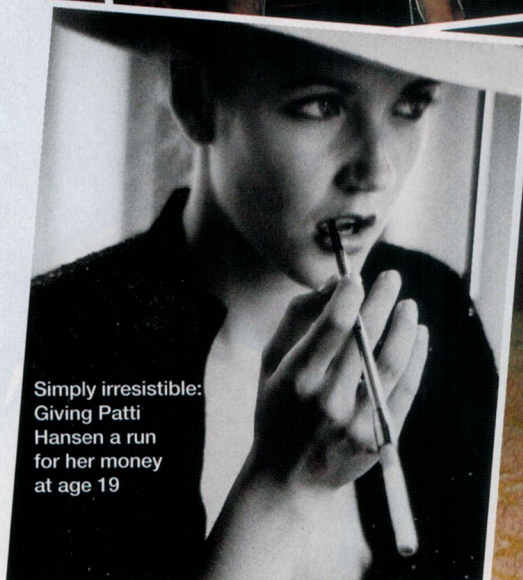
"No. But you have a driver," Candace offered soothingly.

Candace's publisher, Hyperion's Ellen Archer, likes to say this isn't a revolution on the order of public bra burnings. "We're not out there marching. We're just doing it," explained Candace. "We're quietly becoming CEOs." This is chick lit's forgotten ▶

Candace met Charles Askegard at a ballet benefit and married him eight weeks later. Dress, \$4755, **Alexander McQueen**. 212-645-1797. Platforms, **Christian Louboutin**. See Where to Buy for details. Fashion editor: **Jill Swid**. Hair: Alex Dizon; makeup: Landy Dean for Edris Salon, NYC



An outtake from a 1979 photo shoot at New York City nightclub Xenon



Simply irresistible: Giving Patti Hansen a run for her money at age 19

INSET: COURTESY OF CANDACE BUSHNELL (2)

audience: "Ten years ago, people really thought that women over 35 were not sexy," said Candace. "Today it's *sooo* not true. I see so many women like myself in New York today who are successful and in their 40s. They might be married or they might be single or they might have kids or they might not. But they're *happy!*"

Candace's clique didn't see several women wed until they were over 40. Three summers ago—after just an eight-week courtship—Candace married Charles Askegard, a New York City Ballet principal dancer. Rangy, blond and Minneapolis-bred, Charles, 36, has made a career out of playing The Prince. As the TV show *Sex and the City* wrapped, Prince Charles admits he was "a little irritated" when in the last episode Mikhail Baryshnikov's character smacked Carrie Bradshaw (who has always been closely identified with her creator) hard across the face.

Candace met Charles at the Ballet's annual spring gala. Later that night, at the nightclub Bungalow 8—like just about every bad-boy billionaire she'd ever written about—she asked Charles to come away with her to the country that weekend. "You want a man who has the guts to go!" she said.

Candace believes it's easier to meet a mate if you're successful: "Psychologically, it frees you from a lot of things that have been keeping you down, like self-doubt."

In the days before the couple had a washer and dryer, it was Charles whose tights were hanging in the bathroom. But Candace insists dancers are *mucho* macho—and Charles does seem it. People are always surprised to hear the two spend quiet evenings at home. Reading, apparently. "I'll start *Sentimental Education* or *Appointment in Samarra*, and she'll pick it up," Charles says. "Then I have to steal it back." Every chapter from his wife's novels in progress gets a look as it emerges from the printer. Rarely is he shocked by the goings-on therein. "I know Candace pretty well," he says.

"Charles is just the best person I've ever met—aside from my girlfriends," Candace was saying. "He is *incredibly* nice. The experts always say the most important thing in a marriage is communication. It really is true."

Who wants to marry a billionaire, anyway? "The reality of being with a guy like that is, it's *a job!*" said Candace. "Women I know who are married to super-rich men, basically, what they do is they run households." She grimaced.

Candace grabbed a bottle of Pouilly Fuissé out of her professional-chef wine refrigerator and started up the stairs to her Greenwich Village co-op building's rooftop garden. There was a skyline of lipsticks before her, but Candace's own fuchsia pout had faded after lunch at Michael's restaurant, the renowned media-business observation deck. "I am a lipstick *disaster*," she confessed. "It never stays on because I talk too much."

Not so very long ago, Candace was sleeping on a foldout couch in an apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, a mere mallet swing from Ralph Lauren's superfantastic flagship store. She was in her mid-30s, painfully aware that most college students

enjoyed a better quality of life. Still, she refused to hang it all up.

"I can't tell you how many nights I would be at home and say, 'Okay, I'm going to write that novel! I'm going to write my way *into my destiny!*'"

There had already been five or six false starts. "I was really trying to write *The Sun Also Rises*. Isn't that the book every twentysomething wants to write?"

The day Candace got her first big check, she walked over to Ralph Lauren. The page had turned. "I realized I could buy whatever I want in this store and not be, like—!"

Candace yelped.

Candace is now some kind of rich. A reported \$1 million book deal is now being tailgated by a rumored \$2 million deal. Writing about people and their money—she pronounces it *munny*, with a prancing lilt—has fetched her some of her own. But Candace doesn't think of herself as rich. Not yet, anyway.

Being rich means being able to buy your own yacht, she's decided. Once, an ex-boyfriend took her on somebody's 60-foot cruiser to the Turkish islands. It was the best 10 days of her life.

"Why is it always the *men* who have yachts?" she was asking. "Why aren't there any women?" Men never seemed to treat the crew very well. "Once, I tried to start a mutiny," she said, laughing. "I don't think they're going to invite me back. I always thought I'd be a better rich person than a lot of rich people."

It's a theory she was clearly aching to test, but she'd been busy. For weeks, she'd been puzzling before her laptop at her new Victorian farmhouse in Litchfield County, Connecticut, over the infinitely various transactions between men and women. There is a very pretty garden outside—not that Candace gardens: "I'm better at kind of walking around and saying, 'I see a weed.'" If she makes a lot more money, she was thinking she might plant a maze.

She'd done an admirable job of figuring out the novel from the likes of Flaubert, *Anna Karenina*, Edith Wharton and another writer who found fame later rather than sooner—Jacqueline Susann. Candace has read *Valley of the Dolls* pink cover to pink cover about 20 times. (A handful of character names and the reality-fiction cast of *Lipstick Jungle* are Candace's pulp tribute.)

"*Valley of the Dolls* is an incredibly modern book," said Candace. It was the '60s, but already, Susann was referencing the pre-nup. Candace calls the commonly held notion that Jacqueline Susann was one of history's worst best-selling writers "*very, very passé.*"

Growing up just outside Hartford, the eldest of three girls, Candace rode horses, streaked her hair pitilessly with Sun-In and had a low-impact Catholic girlhood. Her father, an engineer who helped develop the fuel cell for the Apollo space missions, banned his brood from dating in high school. Not that little Candace was trouble: "I was a little moralist. I was actually one of the smart kids." She and her best friend took younger men to their prom.

Candace and her mother speak three times a week. When Candace was growing up, Mom would gab on the phone with her own best friend for hours, even though they actually lived right across the street from each other. Eventually, they started a travel

agency, and Mom finished up president of a local real estate company.

But her firstborn was dead-bang set on making it in New York City. As a kid, Candace would picture herself pulling up in her parents' driveway in a Ferrari—a red one. Candace dropped out of Rice University in Houston and headed to New York after meeting photographer-filmmaker Gordon Parks at a celebrity tennis tournament. They split up, and Candace noodled through acting classes. "It was scary. I would go to auditions and there would be maybe 200 girls. I was terrible. I just *knew*."

But armed with the all-access pass that attractive, ambitious women in New York are invariably handed, Candace soon found herself invited to a dinner party in some society dame's Uptown apartment. "Barbara Walters was there, and I was almost having a coronary. It was a spring dinner, and the old-timey hostess was serving only green food, and out came fiddlehead ferns. I was like, God, fiddlehead ferns. *What the hell are fiddlehead ferns?* How do you even eat them? Of course, nobody really knew."

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She made the rounds at the women's magazines as she pursued her degree at New York University. Her days at *Ladies' Home Journal* began in front of the pencil sharpener. "My boss said I was the best pencil sharpener he ever had," she recalled, with no sense of personal outrage. "But you know what? If you can't sharpen pencils, you can't do anything." Though her new book is all about winner-take-all office politicking, the truth is that Candace hasn't worked in an office for almost 20 years. Offices are kind of like high school—a troubling thought. "Kids are little savages," said Candace. "Your whole job as a kid is to survive other kids. And if you've got three kids in a family, two are always fighting, and then you're always trying to get the third one on your side." There are no plans to see any of her own tumbling about her sunken living room amid the peonies, pink Moroccan poufs and crystal chandeliers.

"Oh, I'm too old," said Candace—a fan of the show *Nanny 911*—quickly, resolutely. Kids tend to break into tears when they get a load of Candace: She was convinced that one of her nephews was shooting her dirty looks. "Nobody in my family would believe me! Well, one time, my father finally saw it."

Karen Duffy, the former MTV VJ and Court TV host, is one of Candace's crew. Candace was incredibly supportive as Duffy was scaling what she calls "the fertility Mount Everest." She was so nervous about asking Candace to be her baby son's



Life in the Lipstick Jungle. Dress, Christian Lacroix. 33-1-42-68-79-04. Pumps, Dolce & Gabbana. See Where to Buy for details

godmother, she had a bottle of chardonnay on hand. At the christening, Candace gifted him with a sterling-silver engraved flask.

Candace has maneuvered things so she now lives across the street from several of her bestest girlfriends. They seem to orbit her apartment, sometimes meeting for a 4 P.M. lunch and her big-sisterly advice; a late, lamented restaurant nearby used to serve a different glass of wine with every course.

Candace is still enlisting all of them in various intrigues. On a recent afternoon, it is a doggy fashion show in support of the Humane Society. "You never know who you might meet!" Candace chirps to her assistant, Sara, who doesn't seem to relish the prospect of telling anyone she met a beau *there*, of all places. Candace rather wishes she owned a slinky little Italian greyhound, only Charles is afraid it might drive Betsy Lou, their lugubrious Labrador, a bit crazy. Today Candace is accompanied by her sauvignon-blonde friend Jeanine Pepler—Jay McInerney's publicist girlfriend—whose French bulldog, Zelda, is attired in a pink polo shirt flecked with green whales. "I'm counting on the dogs to cause some mayhem," says Candace.

Conversation in her PT Cruiser on the way to the benefit veers perilously from the faked orgasm to the strangely affecting coupling of Lance Armstrong and Sheryl Crow. Candace is hitting one delay after another. A Cadillac-Chevrolet dealership looms in the distance, and she wonders if she can charm the guys on the lot into letting her park there just this once. "Damn, this is a Chrysler!" she says, slapping the steering wheel right before a spot magically materializes.

Inside the discotheque on the far west side of town, bartenders are shaking up Cosmo-Paw-litans. Candace volunteers that she is a fool for *Showdog Moms & Dads* on Bravo as a Chihuahua in a burgundy cha-cha number waddles by. Howard Stern's bulldog, Bianca, is wearing Theory, says the emcee.

Back in the car, Candace convinces herself that Betsy Lou had a good time. "That was like a mother-daughter thing," she says. "I feel like I just visited a small town."

"You did, sweetie. It took us *an hour* in the car," says Jeanine. Now Candace sees something on the street that disturbs her: "What are guys *that* young doing with *that* Mercedes?" Her next book is going to be about a patent lawyer, the richest woman in New York. "And when we meet her, she's jumping off a 34-story building with a parachute," says Candace. "Only she comes crashing down on this guy who's her nemesis."

As usual, the woman lands on top. ■