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Daydream Girl

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Prologue

In a small bedsit in Earls Court, Luke Bradshaw, hands on hips, stares into the mirror. Wholly absorbed, he studies his reflection critically. A long minute comes and goes, then another. Finally a car horn, honking repeatedly, breaks his concentration. Easing up the window, he cranes his neck out and waves. Forcing the window shut again he throws on his leather jacket and sprints down the narrow stairs to the street.

His girlfriend waits in the car outside.

'Kit,' he says, wrenching open the door and leaning over to kiss her. 'You're a real honey.'

'I know.' She grins at him.

'I thought you had to work late?'

'Johnny Too-Fat's covering for me. Anyway, I reckoned you could do with the support.'

'How's the traffic?' He peers at the queue of black taxis blocking the entrance to the Exhibition Hall.

'Not great.'

'Take the next left then.' He rests his hand on the back of her neck. 'It'll be quicker.'

*

Through the windscreen a tailback of cars forms a ladder of brake lights against the horizon. Luke moves his hand away and starts drumming his fingers against the headrest.

'You OK?'

'Nervous.'

'There're some Marlboros in the glove compartment.'

He eases out the packet from beneath a mangled *A–Z*. 'I just can't believe the amount of castings I've been to in the last year.' He opens the window to let the smoke from his cigarette escape.

'What's this one for?'

'Some alien hospital drama.'

'You'll make an adorable alien.'

'I've got to get some work, Kit.'

'It'll happen soon,' she says robustly. 'Anyway, who says you won't land a part in this and become an overnight sensation?'

'There's no such thing.' He snorts.

'Course there is.'

'Give me an example?'

'OK.' Kit manoeuvres the car into the right-hand lane and jumps the lights into Regent Street.

'Your father wouldn't take this long to come up with one,' Luke teases.

She shakes her head. 'You know he called me *three* times today?'

'He's got nothing else to do poor sod.'

'Still.'

'*42nd Street*,' she says after a minute or two of silence.

'Where?' he mumbles, lighting another cigarette.

'Ruby Keeler, *42nd Street*. Overnight sensation.

Tomorrow your agent will call with a six-figure contract. My screenplay will be ready to send out soon. Six months down the road we'll be a throbbing power couple.'

'Hmm.' Luke drops the half-smoked cigarette out the window. 'What happens if in six months I'm still out of work but you've turned into Nora Ephron?'

'Then obviously I'll drop you.'

'You couldn't be so disloyal.'

'Course I could. I'm not going to want you dragging me down.'

'But you find me irresistible.'

'I'll get over it.'

'What if I cunningly married you so you couldn't drop me?'

She shoots him an amused look. 'I thought love cynics didn't get married.'

'Aha, but under every cynic beats the heart of a romantic.'

'*Trembles* the heart of a romantic more like.' Kit eases the car on to a yellow line.

'Maybe,' he concedes. 'Still – promise you won't dump me when you're a Big Golden Person.'

'Come on, Luke, stop being so pessimistic.' She switches off the engine and turns to face him. 'Listen. Trailer of our future: you're going to go through that door, tell them you're *only* prepared to read for the lead, then you're going to get it and become a major TV personality. My script will be hailed as a masterpiece and optioned for record figures. Soon we'll move into a nine-bedroom house in West Hollywood and people all over the world will suck up to us.'

'You're right.' He leans over to kiss her. 'I mean look at us . . . we're brilliant, talented –'

'Funny, intelligent . . .'

'Handsome, sensitive and –'

'– and probably late if you don't get out of the car,' Kit finishes, giving him a push.

Luke hovers uncertainly on the pavement as Kit rolls down her window.

'Wish me luck then,' he says making a face.

'Good luck.' She blows him a kiss, then watches him as he swaggers down the street with a confidence she knows he doesn't feel. 'Hey Luke,' she suddenly shouts after him, 'bet you anything . . . Six months' time and you'll have forgotten you ever needed it.'

One Year Later

Travels of a script – 1

Offices of the prestigious Film A production company, London, England

A large pile of unsolicited screenplays sit on a desk. Voices in the background indicate a meeting is in progress. From the conversation we learn that British pictures are all the rage, that everyone is looking for a successor to Film A's latest hit: one of the voices asks to use a phone to make a private call.

A youngish man comes into shot and sits down at the desk. He is an Independent Producer, at Film A for a meeting with an ex-girlfriend, Louisa, who happens to be the vice Head of Production. He'd like to be in a meeting with someone more senior, Michael Ryan, president of the company, preferably, but unfortunately his reputation doesn't yet warrant it.

On hold for British Airways he absent-mindedly leafs through the pile of scripts. The title of one catches his eye, it has the word 'Kissing' in it.

Hey! What a great title, he thinks attempting to extract it with his free hand. His fumblings knock the pile to the floor.

Picking them up hurriedly, he notices that the bindings for several have become loose, including the synopsis and cover note of the script he was taken with . . . On a whim, he takes the synopsis and puts it into his briefcase.

1

Monday evening, the Oscars. The evening has a smell to it, the potent smell of success. Some of the most intoxicating perfumes in the world are here tonight, hitching a lift on pampered skins, clinging at first to their host, but once safely within the environs of the room, free to roam and mingle with each other in a playful orgy of Rose, Geranium, Vetiver. Calvin Klein's Obsession stalking and curling around DKNY's Innocence producing a whirling, wicked offspring of exotic fumes.

And the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay goes to . . . Wolf whistles drown out her name. In a daze she stands as the noise reverberates around the room. It has a sound to it, a groaning, roaring sound, so concentrated it is almost tribal! Mystical! Religious! A frisson of electricity runs from her crotch to her brain. Oh the joy, the elation: Lord what a high.

She turns her head as if in slow motion; people are all around, 360 degrees. A woman with a mashed-potato Mrs Simpson hairstyle widens her lips as Kit looks her way. Everywhere she turns mouths smeared in different hues of lipstick contort themselves into smiling shapes. Opening,

closing, stretching, flapping, they look like hundreds of red admirals, sucking on the faces of the women.

It's time to begin the long approach to the stage. Through the sudden hush she can sense the awe swelling around her and as she floats towards the podium she is blinded by twin circles of light burning hot in her eyes, branding the message into her brain: you are a Goddess, a Goddess, a Goddess . . . A . . .

'Moron, a FREAKING MORON!' The driver's head jerks itself like a giant tortoise back into the fibreglass shell of his Citroën as he flashes his headlights at me for the third time. I blink into the glare, but blinded see nothing. The light must be green. I press on the accelerator, my car lurches towards the crossing – then a scream. I stamp on the brake. Oh God, now I've nearly mashed the toes of some guy stepping off the edge of the pavement, having obediently awaited his signal to cross.

He's a mean-looking bastard whose neck muscles ripple and bulge under his shirt collar like slabs of oiled beef. For a second he stares at me, testosterone zinging through his body. His hands are clenched angrily and I know what to expect. I can expect death. I can expect his fists to come crashing through the window and connect with the side of my head. Why? Because I've transgressed the law of the metropolis that's why; because this is that time of the evening when the city is indeed at war, when traffic anarchy is loose on the street and when every frustrated city-dweller committing a random act of road rage has the mitigating circumstance of mind-numbing commuting, secretaries dating, families waiting.

And me – God knows, no different from anyone else –

getting nowhere on a daily basis. I mollify the pedestrian with a rueful grin. Red has merged to orange. Safely across the junction now, I pull into the side of the road and collapse back against the seat. Johnny Too-Fat's number flashes on my ringing mobile. I press the tiny green ear.

'My Superquim.' The line crackles with static.

'Hey there.'

'What *is* that awful racket? Sounds like you're pulling the phone through your armpit hair or something.'

I give the phone a good shake. 'That better?'

'It's better but less exciting. Listen, I've got to talk to you about my wife's latest obsession.'

'Please, Too-Fat,' I implore, 'I nearly just flattened Mike Tyson, and anyway, didn't you get my message?'

'*Your problem is held in a queue and will be answered shortly.*' Johnny adopts an operator's voice.

'I got another rejection letter today.'

'Oh bollocks, who from?'

'Channel 4.'

'Well . . . don't get too worked up about it.'

'How many more am I supposed to get before I'm allowed to get worked up?'

'Plenty more fish, my darling.'

'You know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking the title was a mistake.'

'Come on, it was inspired.'

'It was flip, bordering on silly even. You know how crucial a title is. Maybe it's turning people off.'

'Maybe you're being neurotic.'

'But maybe not. People could be looking at the title and

chucking it straight in the bin. We should have thought longer, had a back-up. How about we think up a better title then send it out again?'

'Kit, firstly "Kissing" 's got a great title, secondly it was mine, and therefore thirdly I must apprise you of the fact that, in accordance with my rights as your most long-suffering friend, I will withdraw your licence to its use, word by word, with each hysterical phone call I receive.'

'First impressions are everything, Johnny.' I'm not listening to him.

'Come on, Kit, keep your nerve.' The line sputs again. 'Where are you anyway?'

'On my way to Luke's. He's cooking me dinner.'

'Perfect, get him to give you some love and affection, and ideally a massage for your ego.'

'My ego doesn't need a massage, it needs a course of anabolic steroids.' Johnny chuckles at this and the panic that's been gnawing at my insides dies down a little. 'Are we still on for lunch tomorrow?' I ask him.

'My whole body quivers at the thought.'

'That's very sweet,' I say but the dial tone is already buzzing. I toss the phone into my bag, fire up the ignition and pull back out into the fray.

To the left, beyond the roadworks, the concrete arteries of the M40 flow smoothly away from the heart of the city. My car shunts round the circumference of the Shepherd's Bush Green, past the Bingo Hall and now, finally, the traffic is easing up. Overhead navy darkens towards black. God's hand on the dimmer switch of evening.

*

As soon as the door to Luke's house jump-starts open I can feel it, the unmistakable electric vibe in the air. The television is on.

'Luke,' I shout. As I climb the stairs to the bedroom, the whine and cajole of mistress TV grows louder with every step. Sport, by the sound of it. I can make out the animal roar of the crowd, the hushed expectant silences. On the first floor I poke my head around the bedroom door. Dr Hybrid, aka Luke Bradshaw, aka my boyfriend, lies on his bed, inert, staring at the black box in front of him.

'*Honey, I'm home,*' I sing.

'Mmm,' he agrees, failing to drag his eyes from the screen. Instead he gives me an almost imperceptible nod causing the tiny part of his brain, not lulled to sleep by the mesmeric light before it, to activate the nerves down the right side of his body. I fancy I can almost see the static running down his arm, the signal causing a twitch in his hand, which in turn forces his thumb to apply pressure to the miniature red arrow of the remote control. Lawnmower Racing switches to Topless Darts.

'So how was your day, my beloved?' I dump my bag on the bed. 'How did the mutant gynaecological scene go?' Still silence, then a small grunt signifying penalty disagreement.

I bite my lip thoughtfully. It's very tricky communicating with Luke these days. Surely it doesn't have to be this hard? You ask him about his day, he asks you about yours. No one's saying you have to listen to the reply, it's just the rules, reciprocal common politeness, straight from the

Handbook of Relationships – Chapter Two, the third year together. Suddenly, a roar from the crowd. Miss Slovakia, nude and shivering on her ice-skates, has just scored the first bull's-eye.

Luke sighs with happiness. 'My Pussykitten,' he says twisting his immaculate form into an exaggerated stretch, 'God, but I'm shattered. You?' He turns in my general direction. 'Tired? Fed up? Thirsty?' He peers at me tenderly and I melt. He's just being a lad I think indulgently, and lads do love their sporting activities.

'All of the above,' I say, bending down to kiss him, 'and starving.'

'Me too.' Luke nods vigorously, brushing his lips against my cheek. 'Why don't you be a honey and bring up something to eat?' He leaves a tiny pause, kisses me again before adding into my ear, 'I didn't quite make it to the shops, I'm afraid.'

'Luke, you promised.' I straighten up.

'Well, yes I know.' He looks guilty. 'But I was so shagged out after the session I just crashed.' Every Monday Luke has a read-through of the week's shooting with the other members of the cast but following that the rest of the day off.

'But you've been home since two o'clock.' I look at my watch. 'It's past seven now.' The whining tone in my voice worries me. It seems I can pretty much rely on whining on regular days of the week, rather like having a period. Recently I've even begun to wonder whether I'm genetically prone to it.

'I know, I know.' Luke's features break into a contrite grin that on screen would have every housewife from

Venus to Mars swooning over their ironing boards. 'But I really was shattered, honest.' He holds his hands out. 'C'm here and give me a kiss.' He takes hold of my hips, hooks his thumbs through the loops on my combat pants and pulls me close. 'Ooh, go on,' he nuzzles. 'I'll take you out to dinner tomorrow, promise, I'll give you fifty pounds to make a salad, sixty kisses, one hundred hours of foreplay, a full year of high quality frottage, come on, please? As you're up? Angel, angel, angel, darling beautiful lovely pudding?' he sings.

And of course I give in and smile, because no matter what anyone says – kissing is a laxative for the blues. He kisses me again and this time I kiss him back, though primly to signify disapproval. Luke, of course, isn't fooled for a second. He knows full well he could snap his fingers and, like a magician's assistant, I'd divest myself of all outer garments and start pulling rabbits out of my pants for him. I can't help it, he has that effect on me. Luke *per se* I have always found attractive. Luke plus charm is irresistible.

'Doesn't have to be anything major.' He grins, sensing weakness. 'Something healthy, obviously, but whatever's easiest.' He releases me, simultaneously flicking the remote to UK Gold. The theme tune of the *Professionals* blasts forth, and by the time I've reached the doorway he's settled comfortably into peak-viewing position. 'Oh, and darling,' he adds, looking at the screen and shaking his head fondly at Doyle, or is it perhaps Brodie? 'while you're about it, you wouldn't just feed the fish would you?'

There are certain words that attach themselves to a person's character like limpets to a rock. The following, I

decide as I measure out a teaspoon of designer foodstuff for the designer fish, apply to Luke on good days; and by good days, I mean those days when I'm madly in love with him. These adjectives are:

Gorgeous
Talented
Self-assured

And then there are the adjectives for the days when I'm less madly in love with him:

Gorgeous
Lucky
Smug

So the obvious constant here is Luke's gorgeousness, which must therefore be addressed first – and it has to be said that both on and off screen Luke is visually intoxicating by any standards. One of those people who could be forgiven for scrawling on the line in his passport, where it says Distinguishing Features, the simple words – thank you. More specific than that? It's hard to describe. When a person's butt ugly you can at least render them recognizable by saying: You know Stan of course? Nose like a hole puncher; or Remember Gloria? Breasts like spaniels' ears. But good looks can often be too smooth to get an angle on. To give an idea though, Phoebe, Luke's agent used to market him, in pre-Dr Hybrid days, as a man-mix of Peter Gallagher (*Sex, Lies and Videotape*) and Matt Dillon (*To Die For*). Whereas I, with my straggly ponytail and Tibetan monk's eyes might have to be marketed more as a cut-rate

Maggie Gyllenhaal who's had a disastrous and possibly suable experience at the hairdresser.

Close-up of fingers picking crumbs off a plate, dabbing them on to a tongue, then timing their stay before they dissolve. This nail-biting competition has turned out to be the highlight of the evening's entertainment so far and although it's not the first time that Luke and I have spent a silent evening in such a way, enjoying our electronic *ménage à trois*, it makes me uneasy that since I plopped the tray on his lap, Luke has not actually spoken beyond the grunted affirmation as to whether he required salt or pepper.

So I sit here cross-legged on the bed, trying to plot a way of extracting a little love and attention from my boyfriend, and as I watch him out of the corner of one eye I wonder whether I should try one of those relationship tests magazines are so fond of i.e. not say another word, not attempt conversation in any form thereby forcing him to take the initiative.

'Baby' – I'd like to think he'd respond within seconds – 'you seem a tad down. Tell me everything that's bothering you.' Which will be the cue for me to say:

'Luke, I've had it with writing. I'm going to give it all up, end this agony now.' Which will be the cue for him to gather me into his arms and hold me close.

'Darling,' he will lecture sternly, 'you are adorable, funny and talented and if a few short-sighted executives are too up their own arses to see the creative force pulsating from your masterpiece, well that's their loss and it will

only be a matter of time before somebody out there has the vision to recognize your genius.'

At which point I will sob and bury my face into his armpit which will reek of fresh man-sweat, a heady turn on, and in no time at all we will be making passionate love, falling on the floor and smashing lights and bookshelves all around us like Emma Thompson and Jeff Goldblum in *The Tall Guy*.

'Oh, Luke,' I will croon into his chest, 'whatever would I do without you?'

'Marry me, Kitten,' he'll beg. 'We'll do it next spring. What with your exceptional writing talents and my looks and expressiveness on screen we could still be a big, fat Golden Couple. Together we could be a Morticia and Gomez, a Hillary and Bill.'

'Laurel and Hardy,' I will add, overcome with happiness.

So I could do this *Cosmopolitan* test, but it might not be worth the risk. Instead, I put the now crumbless plate on the floor, squirm out of my clothes, slither down the bed until I'm in an identical position to Luke, then stare robotically at the flashing screen in front of me.

Bed. Midnight. Time studiously occupies itself pushing the hands around the clock on the bedside table. As the last of our neighbours return home, the bedroom is finally dark in sharp relief from the car headlights that have been discoing round the ceiling. Next to me Luke breathes deeply while his body shifts in accordance with his dreams but although

my every muscle is relaxed with the drug of sleep, my mind is, as usual, immune. This is my stolen time of the night, the point at which I normally creep downstairs, open up my laptop on the kitchen table and write, but tonight I can't even begin to summon the urge. And I'm wondering why. I've always taken it for granted that life was destined to move forward and improve but in the last couple of months this optimism seems to have been eroded by all kinds of self-doubts. I'm trying not to show this to Luke; lack of confidence does not make for great company. But hard as I try, I cannot escape the feeling that I'm being judged by an inner critic, one who is consistently reporting me as being devoid of wit, cheer, depth of feeling, and awarding me one of those tiny silhouetted women falling asleep in a chair that *Hello!* magazine uses to rate boring movies.

After another hour of tossing in the dark, the need to tell Luke about today's bad news becomes so overwhelming that I ease myself over to his side of the bed, plant a tentative kiss on his shoulder, then heave a loud and not unhopeful sigh – then another and another.

'What *is* wrong, Kit?' Luke mumbles eventually.

'I got another rejection letter today.' Luke immediately puts an arm around me and my earlier misgivings evaporate like hot air on a cold window. 'Oh Luke.' I snuggle self-pityingly into his shoulder. 'I feel like such a failure . . . maybe I'd just better give up the whole idea.' I tack on this last bit as a wanton double-bluff because getting a screenplay made into a movie whether big, small, block, Indie, good, or bad, is my fate, and already inscribed, I'm convinced, on the CV of my life by the God of Personnel.

There's a beat, then some sheet shifting, as Luke extricates his arm from under my shoulder and turns to fix me with a grave look that is curiously familiar.

'Now look, Kit,' he begins, and even in the darkness of the room the expression is recognizable; it's one often used on screen relatives when patients in Dr Hybrid's care croak, 'maybe this writing lark . . .' He props himself on his elbow and runs a finger round the small mole to the left of my collar bone.

'Yes?' I whisper hopefully, lamb to the slaughter.

'Well, Kitten, you really mustn't pin all your hopes on it.'

Horrified to have the entire spectrum of my fears confirmed, I shoot bolt upright and make a choking noise like a diver with the bends.

'It's just that it is *so* competitive,' he says carefully, 'and I hate to see you torturing yourself like this.' He executes a tremendous yawn. 'God, what time is it anyway?' He leans across me, reaches for the clock and makes a face. 'Don't think I don't understand how much it means to you,' Luke continues indulgently, the kind of indulgence that borders so closely on patronizing that it nearly activates my slapping reflex. 'But if it doesn't work out, you could do loads of other things.' He settles back against the pillows.

'What things?'

'Well,' he says doubtfully, 'anything you want.'

'Like what?'

'Oh, come on, anything. Learn to cook, sew, even make the garden grow . . . Kit?' He continues more soberly when I don't reply. 'I'm just saying that maybe now is a good

time to stop messing around with a dead-end job and a pipe dream.'

I keep my mouth shut. Only a year ago, Luke was a housepainter, an invisible actor scrabbling on the treadwheel of castings and rebuttals. Now he's Mr Big Television Star with his fat pay cheque and throwaway perks, so of course it's OK for him, but the sad truth is that almost everyone else I know *does* still have a dead-end job and a pipe dream.

Johnny Too-Fat, for instance, works weekends at the Orange Cinema, weekdays selling classic cars whilst pursuing his 'career' as an actor. Julie (box office), writes endless tunes which she fervently believes will one day be sampled and turned into number one hits. Callum, the Orange's General Dogsbody, is an unpublished poet. And, in reverse order of dead endedness, my job is Manager of the Orange Cinema and my pipe dream? – To hear the lines and see the scenes I've sweated over right up there on the big screen.

Success has not come easy to me. In fact, let's face it, success has not come at all. I got the job at the cinema because of a misplaced romantic obsession with movies, and the pipe dream thing? Well that originally came about through my insomnia.

An odd sound breaks through the silence that has enveloped the room. 'Luke?' I say, shaking his shoulder.

'Darling, sorry,' he mumbles. 'Cheer up.' He rolls on to his back. 'So, so sleepy.'

I shake him again but he's out cold. A gentle smacking motion pushes the Adam's apple in and out from his throat like a miniature accordion. I slide down the bed, shut my

eyes and try to ignore the noise, but underneath my lids, my eyeballs roam their sockets like a couple of teenagers trying to escape a detention room. I sit up, switch on the light and pluck yesterday's *Sunday Times Magazine* from the bedside table. I read it for half an hour before dropping it to the floor, angrily shove a pillow over my head to muffle the now orchestral ripple of Luke's snore, then finally settle down for a night of primary sleep deprivation.