



**Real City**  
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### **About Vaughn:**

Carrie Vaughn is an American author who writes the urban fantasy Kitty Norville series. She has published more than 30 short stories in science fiction and fantasy magazines as well as short story anthologies and internet magazines. She is on the list of authors for the upcoming Wild Cards books. She graduated with a BA from Occidental College (during the course of which she also spent a year at the University of York) and later graduated from the University of Colorado at Boulder with an MA in English Literature. She currently lives in Boulder, Colorado. She has a number of "Best Scifi" and "Best Horror/Fantasy" honorable mentions to her credit, but has yet to win an award in any category. Carrie Vaughn was a 1998 graduate of the intensive 6-week Odyssey Writing Workshop, one of the top speculative fiction writing workshops in the USA. While the Kitty Norville books are published as fantasy, they have been popular with romance readers as well. In 2005, Kitty and the Midnight Hour won Romantic Times' Reviewer's Choice Award for 'Best First Mystery'. Vaughn has said she welcomes the attention, but that it was unexpected. Source: Wikipedia

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## Real City

Stalking around the party without her referencing link flashing names and stats at her felt a little like being drunk. It was Cass's way of making an adventure for herself. Off-balance, senses muffled, she indulged in self-induced paranoia. Smiling faces, links hooked to their ears, nodded in greeting as she passed. They all knew who *she* was, thanks to their links, and she hadn't a damn clue about two-thirds of the people here. She was working blind and stupid, and it made her giddy, along with the glass of wine she'd had.

It seemed like most of Hollywood had shown up for the RealCity Productions launch party. Probably because they all wanted to be able to say they'd been here and known the company was doomed from the start.

Vim had said they had to have a party to manufacture hype.

"We don't have the money for that kind of party," she'd told him.

"Oh, but we will! We have to throw parties like this if we're ever going to have enough money to throw parties like this!"

Stacy in marketing had nodded sagely at the logic. No one ever listened to the accountant.

Without the link, she couldn't even tell the live people from the interactive holoforms Vim had set out as decorations. She *knew* that wasn't really Harrison Ford because he was dead. Same with Bogart and Grace Kelly. But surely the *real* Penny Cho wouldn't be here.

Cass scored another glass of wine and tried to work up the nerve to poke Penny Cho in the ribs, to see if she was real.

"Cass!"

She gasped and nearly dropped her wine. Vim had snuck up behind her and hissed in her ear. *That* wouldn't have happened with the referencing link.

Beaming, he said. "Isn't this great? You would not *believe* who is here. *Everybody's* here."

"Investors? Are potential investors here?"

"Haven't you been drinking? You wouldn't talk like that if you'd been drinking."

She sighed. "I'm trying to loosen up, honest I am."

"You should. You look great."

He trotted off. She smiled absently after him and resisted tugging at the hem of her awfully short black silk dress.

Stay for an hour, that was what she'd promised Vim, and herself. She could do this for an hour. She was even having a little fun. Lots of good people-watching here. If nothing else, she could park in a corner and make a dent in the sushi tray.

She decided that Penny Cho was a holoform. The actress never moved from the same spot. Same with Nick May. *The Nick May*. She'd sure like to tickle *his* ribs. Not really, of course. That was what movies were for. With a movie she could think about it all she wanted and not have to deal with the consequences.

He stood by the sushi tray, smiling at people who looked admiringly at him as they walked past, like a good holoform. Fidgeting even, with those gee-whiz boyish good looks that made him a heartthrob. The wine kicked her over the edge.

She approached him from behind, a little to the side. She'd do it. She'd have to, to get to the sushi. Reach right through the holographic light stream to the tekka maki. How amusing.

Her hand touched silk. The slick blue silk of Nick May's shirt. Nick May turned to look at who had poked him in the ribs.

Solid flesh stood between Cass and the sushi. Solid flesh, looking back at her with interested eyes.

"You're not a holoform. Um—" Oh, wow. "You're Nick May."

"Yeah. And you're Cass Nellis."

She wrinkled her brow. *She* wasn't famous. Then—the link hooked to his ear. Right.

"Yeah," she said weakly. She stuck out her hand. He actually shook it.

She hated making conversation. Never mind conversation with famous people. She was a great listener, and she liked talking to her friends. But this— He wasn't saying anything. And he wasn't going away. He was smiling. Boy, was he smiling. "So. Um. What brings you here?"

"Schmoozing."

"Huh?"

"Old Hollywood term. You know—schmoozing. Networking. Chatting up people who can get me a job."

"*You* need a job?"

“In on-location film, yeah.” He looked into his glass of wine and shrugged, his smile turning into an almost embarrassed wince. “I’m trying to get into real film. See if I can do something cutting-edge for a change. Respectable.”

“That’s cool,” she said with a vague smile.

Vim needed to hear this. No, not Vim. Nathan Pauli, the creative force behind RealCity and the spearhead of the revival of on-location filming, needed to hear this. If they could get a name like Nick May aboard—the publicity of casting the best selling body in bluebox interactive movies would guarantee success for the film.

She must have been staring, imagining this scene for way too long, because he cleared his throat and said, “Your file says you’re an accountant for RealCity.”

She shrugged, as if in apology for not being something more interesting. Truth be told, she was *the* accountant for RealCity, but they were supposed to be playing Big Time here, so she nodded. “Yeah. I add numbers for people who can’t.”

“Aren’t there computers that do that?”

“That’s the beauty of it. Not only can they not add, they can’t use the computers that can. I can. So really, I don’t even do what they’re paying me for.”

“That’s Hollywood for you.”

She giggled, shaking her head. “You don’t know the half of it. Vim has spent more time planning this party than gearing up for production. Here they are trying to be all artistic and new, and—”

“So RealCity’s in production? That’s not on any of the news feeds.”

She narrowed her gaze and gave a lopsided smile. “You going to start chatting me up for a job?”

“I could just start chatting you up.”

Her knees went weak and she bit her lip to try to keep from smiling wide enough to split her face. Failed. His eyes really were that clear rich brown, no tell-tale line of colored contact lenses in sight.

“Hey, you gotta know, I don’t have any pull with these people. If you’re thinking that I’m a good contact, or a good networking prospect—nobody listens to me. I tell them not to spend too much money on parties and they don’t listen. They just need me to make sure the credit stays good.”

He switched off the link, pulled the device off his ear, and shoved it in his pocket.

"I didn't feel much like working anyway."

They claimed a sofa in a corner and were still talking four hours later. Working on yet another glass of wine, Cass was probably giving away trade secrets, but she didn't mind.

"—not that there are any numbers for me to account, but having an accountant looks good on the business plan. Besides, it's cool. This whole business is cool." She sighed. She was too chicken to step into a bluebox or in front of a camera, didn't have the gung-ho personality for production work, so here she was, making Hollywood magic the only way she knew how. And she loved it. Getting to work with people like Vim and Nathan at any level was worth it.

"Yeah, it is."

If this were a movie, she'd jump him. She was in the perfect position, curled up on the sofa with her legs tucked under her, him reclining within arm's reach. She could wrap herself around him, just like the heroine, just like she might in an interactive movie. Who was she kidding: just like she *had* in an interactive movie.

But he was looking at *her*, her for real, and her stomach had awful butterflies. And she couldn't do it.

"Cass!" Stacy from marketing yelled across the room. "Cass!"

She should have done it. If she'd been making out with Nick May, surely even Stacy would have known better than to interrupt.

Instead, she ran to Cass's side and clutched her shoulder. Then she caught sight of Nick. She batted her eyelashes. Giggled. Batted them again before remembering her grip on Cass. "You've got to come help Vim. He's in tears."

There it was, a bill had come in that they couldn't pay. She took a deep breath. "What's wrong?"

"He's having trouble figuring the tip for the catering staff." She had a desperate, pleading grimace on her face, like she'd just asked Cass to talk Vim down off the roof.

"Tell him to move the decimal one and double it."

"Come on, Cass—he'll move the decimal the wrong way. You gotta come help."

"Can't his link do it for him?"

“He’s too drunk. His link’s gone hazy.”

“But—” Nick looked amused, wearing a dead-cute smile. Nick May, who wouldn’t be here when she got back because people like him didn’t sit alone on sofas waiting for accountants. Or she could sit here while Vim tipped the catering staff with the entire budget for costumes. “I have to go. It’ll just be a minute. I hope.”

“It’s okay. I should probably be going.” He stood and brushed off his slacks.

She had to *do* something. Say something, anything. Wasn’t this talking to boys you liked thing supposed to get easier after high school?

“It was really nice talking to you,” she said earnestly.

“Yeah,” he said. “We’ll have to do it again sometime.”

He squeezed her hand before Stacy dragged her away. Cass smiled at him all the way across the room and held that hand to her chest.

“Cass was making out with Nick May on the sofa,” Stacy said for the ninetieth time. She had to tell everyone as soon as they came into the office Monday morning. “I’ve got the replay. Here, you can upload it.”

Cass had tried to correct her for the first dozen or so.

Vim stared off into space for a moment as he watched the replay on his link. “They’re not making out,” he said with a disappointed whine.

“Well, close enough.”

Vim looked over at Cass’s desk and grinned. “Good job, Cass.”

She winced.

The RealCity main offices were four rooms tucked in the back of an ancient building in Burbank. The front room was posh, with blue carpeting, a huge receptionist desk and Nathan Pauli’s awards on display in bullet-proof cases. The other three rooms looked like the set of a second-rate 1970s police drama: vinyl flooring, desks crammed together, sub-standard lighting, filing cabinets, all drenched in hope. Things usually stayed busy, or at least with the humming computers and files of paper scattered around, storyboards and headshots pinned to the wall, it seemed busy.

Nathan arrived and went straight from reception, through the main offices, to his own private office in the back, where he locked up his cameras.

“Hey Nathan, Cass was making out—”

Nathan walked right past her without stopping.

Cass managed to intercept him when he paused to unlock his door.

“Hi Nathan.”

“Hi Cass.” He was boyish, unassuming, with disheveled brown hair and an untucked t-shirt. No one would ever pick him out of a crowded room for being the hyped-up big-shot director. He’d paid his dues, spending the first ten years of his career in bluebox engineering before he got the idea of reviving on-location filming.

“I wondered if I could talk to you for a minute.”

“Sure.”

“Privately?” She gestured at Stacy, who was watching them.

“Right. Come on in.”

The room was part office, with the requisite desk and computer, and part laboratory, with dissected cameras scattered over a workbench and tripods propped against the wall like insectoid skeletons. Nathan closed the door.

“I talked with Nick May at the party.”

“I saw. You looked like you were having a good time.” Her knees went all weak and silly again.

“Yeah. He, uh—he wants to act in on-location film.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Said he wanted to do something respectable.”

His brow wrinkled. “He called it respectable?”

“Yeah. It almost seemed like he was bored with bluebox.” She pointed her finger in emphasis. “He’s seen *Casablanca*.”

“It’s funny. Film has turned into what live theater was to film a hundred years ago—the poor aristocratic cousin. Everyone respects it, but no one gives money to it. Did he put you up to this?”

“No. That is, I don’t think so. He didn’t ask me to talk to you if that’s what you mean. It’s just—you might talk to him. Having him on board might give the company the boost it needs.”

“If he can act in front of a camera.”

That was the kicker, wasn’t it?

A knock came at the door. Wearing a sinister grin, Stacy peeked her head in. "Cass? Hi. There's someone here to see you. Out in reception."

Cass shrugged at Nathan and followed Stacy out.

There, scuffing his feet on the carpet in the middle of the reception area, stood Nick May, dressed in photogenic casual wear and holding a bouquet of pink star lilies.

His expression lit when he saw her. "Hi."

"Hi," she said, digging her nails into her palms.

"Um, here. These are for you." He offered the flowers. Roses would have been presumptuous, carnations would have been cheap. These were just perfect. "I wanted to tell you I had a really nice time Saturday."

Speaking of theater, she felt like she was in a play, with Frank the receptionist watching from his desk, Nathan standing in the doorway, Stacy struggling to see over Nathan's shoulder, and a couple more people crowding behind Stacy.

Slowly, she moved to take the flowers. Her eyes were stinging, and she hoped her smile wasn't as big and stupid as it felt. "Wow. Been awhile since anyone gave me flowers. Thanks."

She looked at him, and the link she hadn't been wearing at the party scrolled a library of information at her optic nerve.

—opening date of his next film, *Lunar Wake* (in a week), the latest starlet he's been attached to (Sylvia Fremont), clerk at Gino's reveals his shirt size (36), and a dozen other facts with the option to see more, (yes or no). More raw data than she'd learned in four hours of luscious conversation. But the data didn't say *anything* about him being allergic to sushi, as she'd discovered at the party.

She might have stood there beaming all day, hugging the flowers, but Nick looked over to where Nathan stood in the doorway.

Cass made introductions. "Um, Nick. This is Nathan Pauli. Nathan, Nick May."

They shook hands. Enthusiastically, Nick said, "I'm a big fan of yours."

Which was awfully surreal.

"Good to meet you. Hey Frank, can you go get a couple cups of coffee?" Nathan gestured to the back office. Crestfallen, Frank made a show of how hard it was to leave his desk. "Thanks. Stacy, don't you have some email to check or something?"

Nathan managed to herd them all back and close the door. “So, Mr. May. You ever think of trying your hand at acting on-location?”

Nick smiled and breathed a little sigh. “I was hoping I could talk to you about that. After I talked to Cass and all.”

“Let’s go back to my office. Nobody’ll listen through the door there.” He opened the door, almost knocking Stacy over.

Cass stayed behind as they headed for Nathan’s office. Nick looked back and mouthed, “Thank you.”

Maybe she did have pull around here. And the flowers said he wasn’t just using her for her influence. Right? Cass touched her cheek to the petals.

The only thing she could find to put the flowers in was a plastic super-size cup from a fast food place, so worn out she couldn’t read the logo. She set the bouquet on her desk and tried to make it look nice.

They were in Nathan’s office talking for two hours. Stacy found every excuse she could to wander back there—fetching a file, consulting a storyboard. She pestered Cass, but Cass ignored her.

Finally, the door opened. Nick’s steps were almost bouncing as he left the office.

He scanned the room, found Cass, and went straight to her, crouching by her desk.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“Well,” he said with a shrug, but his smile belied him. “He’s going to talk to my agent. We’ll see. So—are you doing anything tonight?”

Monday night. Could she go on a date on a Monday night? Had she ever been on a date on a Monday night?

Was Nick May asking her out on a date?

“Nope,” she said and bit her lip.

“Can I take you to dinner?”

“Sure.”

“Seven?”

“Okay.”

“Can I pick you up at your place?”

“Okay.” She was blushing horribly. “I’ll upload directions for you.”

“Great. See you then.”

And off he went, leaving Cass to not get much work done.

“The secret to miniature golf,” Nick explained to her on their third date, a Saturday afternoon at Americana World, “is the distractions. All the windmills and moving parts and bright colors and stuff don’t have anything to do with the play. They’re just distractions to mess up your shot.”

“Have you learned the secret to ignoring the distractions?”

Distractions, right. Three teenage girls at the next hole over kept pointing at them. Cass could hear their whispers. “I think that’s really him!”

Nick fished his ball out of the alligator pond again. “No,” he said with a sigh. “Who’s winning now?”

“Me, still.” She was one under par for the course.

“That means you’re buying the ice cream, right?” He shifted his club to his other hand and put his arm around her waist, pulling her close.

“You bet.”

He kissed her, long and leisurely, and Cass leaned into him. They let the teenage girls play through.

The first time they slept together, Cass couldn’t get Patton Walsh out of her mind.

Her favorite movie of Nick’s was *Dark Waters*, the Europa mining action/drama. He played Patton Walsh, an idealistic young mining foreman caught between vicious corporate interests and exploited miners. Something was killing the miners one by one, and it was up to him to discover what: terrible working conditions, or a mysterious alien life-form? The film managed to transcend the action genre to deal with real-world issues of exploration, the friction as the frontier of the solar system was absorbed into the mainstream economy, the still unresolved question of whether or not life existed on Jupiter’s moon—and at the center of it all was Nick May, boyish and tough at the same time, sensitive and unrelenting. He struck a deep and abiding chord with the 18-35 female demographic.

The film had one intimate scene between Patton Walsh and the company doctor, played by Estelle Reasoner, who hadn’t made a decent movie since. They were trapped in a mining rover, the battery cells were burned out, the temperature was dropping. She’d kept her guard up for the whole story, he’d never trusted her stonewalling, but sparks flew

every time they were in the same room, and finally—it was just one kiss. A chaste kiss even, mouths closed, both of them bundled to the gills in survival gear. But it was one scene where the wonders of interactive bluebox entertainment rose to their full potential.

With just a couple clicks of a button, an adjustment to her link, Cass was there in that rover, in Patton Walsh's arms, and he was unfastening her parka, groping with determination. The interactive link tapped into her senses, and responded to her thoughts. If she wanted to be passive, she could be, thrilling to the sound of ripping fabric. Or she could fight him—and will him to fight back, if that was what she wanted. And she could always shut it off exactly when she wanted to. And turn it back on, whenever she wanted to.

They'd gone to her place because it wasn't being watched by the tabloid reporters yet. They sat on her hand-me-down sofa in her little one bedroom apartment, and neither of them seemed to know what to do next. Not like being with interactive Patton Walsh at all. But he looked like Patton Walsh, and that made it strange.

Her skin tingled just thinking about him.

She ended up making the first move, which surprised her—she never made the first move. She touched his face and kissed him. Then, everything seemed to work just fine. If a bit unexpectedly a time or two, since her imagination had never told Patton Walsh to do *that*. And once or twice she had to whisper, "touch *there*," and guide his hand.

She woke up the next morning cuddled against him, happy.

Nathan called Cass into his office one morning. He gave her the room's only chair and perched at the edge of his desk.

"What do you think of Nick?" he said.

She blushed. That was hardly fair. "He's nice. Why?"

"Can I show you something?"

He swiveled around his computer monitor and touched an on-screen key. The film editing software booted up and a sequence began rolling. The slate read "Nick May Screen Test. Take Twelve." Nathan turned up the volume on the speakers.

The scene was the convenience store down the street, the one they all went to for coffee and chips when they were avoiding work. Nathan had set up his camera looking straight across the counter, so the frame caught the clerk on the left, and Nick on the right. The clerk was laughing, pointing at the camera, pointing at Nick, amused by the whole

situation. Nathan's voice, sounding echoy and distant, said, "Just relax. Be normal."

Nick, veteran actor, was also staring at the camera. In bluebox, the actors couldn't see the camera because the box was basically one large camera, with a dozen fiber optic lenses taking in all angles. Nathan's camera locked down the scene—all mobility and dynamic movement had to come from the actors. Nick was fidgeting.

Bluebox actors were trained to be cyphers, blanks on which digital engineers could paint any setting, costume, or prop necessary. It was still more economical and less time consuming to have actors provide the faces and the nuances of emotional expression—for all their efforts, the animators still could not get human faces and movement exactly right. But everything else? Why fly to Tunisia when you can program it? Who in Podunk, Wisconsin would know the difference?

"Action!" Nathan said.

Nick shrugged, uncomfortable in his own jacket. "Um. Yeah. Lotto ticket, please," he enunciated unnaturally. The clerk handed over the lottery card. Nick dropped it, looked at the camera and smiled an apology.

A sinking feeling weighed down Cass's stomach. What happened to his suave? The easy-going elegance that had made him the biggest film hero in the last five years? It couldn't have *all* been digitally enhanced. "That was take twelve?"

"Yeah."

"Um, he's a little uncomfortable, isn't he?"

"He can't act."

"But—" A half-dozen bluebox blockbusters couldn't be wrong, could they?

Nathan clicked off the film. "You ever see *Singin' in the Rain*? Some of the greatest silent film actors couldn't make the transition to sound. This may be the same thing. It's not that Nick isn't great at bluebox. He maybe just isn't cut out for film."

Nathan's vision for RealCity's first film was simple—simple story, simple setting, minimal sets and characters. That was part of the point, with bluebox it was so easy to create complex, baroque worlds, pour on the detail without bounds of location or expense. All Nathan's shoots would happen in L.A.—the real L.A., not the stock footage digital creations that had become the norm over the last generation. The story was one main character's journey across the city as he followed clues to find a

woman he'd fallen in love with at first sight. The weight that one actor would carry was enormous. He had to show that a man interacting with his genuine environment was as interesting as a bluebox extravaganza.

The simple task of buying something at a convenience store, something he'd probably done a hundred times himself, Nick made look like an exercise in torture.

"I can't use him," Nathan said.

Of course he couldn't, but Cass's heart broke for Nick anyway.

"Can you—" Nathan said, tapping his finger on the desk and looking away. "Can you tell him?"

She stood. "No. You're the director—that's *your* job."

"I thought he might take it better coming from you. I know how much he wanted to do this—"

"That's why I can't tell him. I don't want him getting pissed off at *me*."

"But he wouldn't—"

"No. No way. I have no connection to him professionally."

"Can you at least be here when I break the news to him? Just in the room."

"Then he'll know that I knew and he'll be mad that I didn't tell him."

Nathan pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Okay. You're right. That isn't fair. I'm sorry."

Nathan let her off the hook, but her stomach churned the rest of the morning. Nick arrived, and the churning got worse. Nathan called him to his office just as he was saying good morning to her, saving her from trying to act like nothing was wrong.

They'd been seeing each other for six weeks. If he had just been after her for the job, he wouldn't have stuck around. And if she'd just been seeing him because he was famous, *she* wouldn't have stuck around. Right?

When Nathan was finished with Nick, she'd take the afternoon off. She'd get sandwiches and take him to the park.

"Cass? Could you come here please?" Nathan called from his office.

He closed the door behind her and put his hands in his pockets. Nick was leaning against a cabinet, arms crossed, shoulders hunched sullenly.

"What's up?" she said warily.

"Here's the situation: I've been considering whether or not to keep Nick on the film." Graciously, he saved her from being in on a conspiracy. No explaining to Nick how much she did or didn't know. Still out of the loop, like a good accountant. She tried to look shocked.

Nick shook his head. "You can't can me. The press is already talking about this. 'Nick May Does Real Film,' on the *Variety* feed. If it gets out that I was kicked off the film—it'll look bad. Like I couldn't hack it, you know?"

"We're trying to work out a compromise," Nathan said. "You might be able to help."

They played tag with their gazes: Cass looked at Nick, Nick looked at Nathan, then at Cass, Nathan looked at Cass.

"What can I do?"

Nathan pursed his lips. "Help Nick learn how to act."

Nick looked wounded, hunched in on himself like a bear. But his eyes were hopeful, pleading with her.

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because you're smart. Because you genuinely like film. Because then *Variety* won't report that Nick May has hired an acting coach, who'd probably be some wizened professor from UCLA who doesn't know the first thing about film anyway."

She didn't know anything about acting, much less teaching acting. But Nathan was right; she loved film. She'd spent hours of her childhood watching old video disks when she should have been out playing with the other children or cultivating a sports habit. Movies were windows into other times and places. She liked peering through them. She liked modern bluebox as well as the old stuff, which had a visceral solidity.

Cass Nellis, acting coach? It sounded a lot sexier than Cass Nellis, accountant.

Nick looked so hopeful, she couldn't say no.

It couldn't hurt to try. Famous last words.

She borrowed a couple of cameras—vintage handheld jobs—from Nathan and followed Nick around with them for a day. She didn't actually film anything—just held the camera like she was. He worked out in the morning, spent a couple hours over lunch reading scripts on his handheld, did an interview, dealt with calls from his agent. Most of it

was dead boring. But she kept the camera on him and yelled whenever he looked at it.

“Ah-ah-ah. Stop looking at the camera. Ignore it.”

He scowled. “How am I supposed to concentrate with that damn lens staring at me?”

“That’s the whole point. You just have to do what you’d normally do, even with the lens staring at you. I’m desensitizing you.”

He got back to work, smirking. Eventually, he forgot the camera was there.

The minute he had to work from a script, though, he was back to his self-conscious hyper-awareness.

“Do you have some psychological fear of cameras?” she said to him finally.

“It’s just that this is important. I don’t want to mess up.”

She set the camera down. “This is like miniature golf. You have to ignore the distractions.”

“You’ve seen how well I do with that.”

“I think you’re thinking about it too hard.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Read the lines and pretend I’m not here.”

He started in on another scowl, then turned it into a smirk, matched by a lascivious wink. “Couldn’t possibly do that, babe.”

He reached for her, she pretended to resist, and they ended up on the floor together, which finished any more coaching she had planned for the day.

That weekend, they were sprawled on Cass’s living room floor, eating popcorn and watching *Casablanca* on the old-fashioned flat screen.

“What makes this great,” she said, blathering on again. “Better than bluebox stuff, is that this is all about setting, and characters interacting with the setting. I mean, the title’s the name of the city. The story couldn’t have happened any other time or place, and these characters grow out of the time and place. The film manages to capture all this in a tiny little frame. It forces you to watch and you can’t escape.”

“*The problems of two people don’t amount to a hill of beans...*”

“Wasn’t this filmed at a studio? Not really Casablanca.”

“But it was still a *set*. Setting. The actors were still *there*.”

"You really love this movie, don't you?"

"Yeah." She didn't need an interactive link to imagine she was right there with Rick and Ilsa and the rest, singing "La Marseillaise." That it was black and white didn't even matter.

"You think we'll ever be able to make a movie like that? Something so compelling it carries the audience right along and they don't care if they can't change the view?"

"If anyone can, it's Nathan."

"What about me?"

"You know I'd follow those brown eyes anywhere. We just have to get them onto film."

"So what's next?" He scrolled through the file list on her handheld for the next film. It took a while. She had hundreds of movies stored digitally.

He paused, his brow furrowing. "You have a dozen saved interactive versions of *Dark Waters*?" He looked at her sideways.

"It's my favorite of yours." She donned a vacant, nostalgic smile. "That scene in the broken-down rover's a killer."

"Thanks, I think. I can't help but wonder how the real thing measures up."

She pulled her knees up to her chin and watched him. He was in full-force casual mode, which never showed up in the tabloid photos: sweatpants, faded university t-shirt, barely combed hair. When he knew, or even suspected cameras were going to be around, he dressed up, not a hair out of place. Right now, she wanted to grab him and roll around on the floor with him. He was Nick—she hadn't superimposed Patton Walsh on him in weeks.

"You're asking if I prefer the Nick May who played Patton Walsh, or the Nick May who's in sweatpants in my living room."

He looked away; his smile was humorless.

She ruffled his hair. "I haven't watched that movie since we started dating. I know every line by heart, but I never know what you're going to say, and that makes me smile. The rest of the world can have Patton Walsh. I'll take the guy in the sweatpants."

He took hold of her hand, kissed it, and that ended another afternoon of coaching.

Nathan gave them a week, then ran another screen test. He filmed in the alley behind the RealCity offices, with a full crew on hand to make it seem more like a real set. Cass came along to watch, and felt a buzz in the air at the sight of the camera on the dolly, the boom mike, the cables, the lights, the chairs. For a hundred years, Hollywood had been filled with sets that looked like this, before the blue screens, then the three-dimensional blueboxes took over. It wasn't just a piece of history coming to life; it was a different medium being revived. Films done on location felt different, and she wondered if this hum of energy, the excitement that jumped from person to person with a glance or a word, was why.

Cass found Nick leaning in a doorway, out of sight, while final preparations continued. He was rubbing sweaty hands on his jeans and looked pale.

Cass's heart sank. They'd worked so hard on this. They'd read scenes from dozens of scripts, watched dozens of classic films. He'd studied Brando, Hoffman, Washington, Damon. He'd been *getting* it.

"I don't think I can do this," he said.

She took his hand and leaned her forehead on his shoulder. "You can."

She didn't understand why this was so hard for him. It was like he faced the psychological hurdle and simply refused to leap over it. She supposed it happened like that sometimes.

Maybe there'd be a miracle.

The production wasn't just for Nick. Nathan was training his entire crew. Hollywood hadn't seen a full-scale on-location shoot in thirty years, before a lot of these people were born. They'd probably never seen most of this equipment, except maybe in museums. The boom operator was practicing, moving the mike up, down, up, down. The cameraman yelled whenever it showed up in the shot.

It was all part of the atmosphere. DeMille or Kubrick might walk by any minute.

Cass stayed well in the back, out of everyone's way, and leaned on the wall to watch.

Nathan took Nick aside for a conference, probably telling him what to do, what the scene was about. Then came the magic. Cass held her breath, ready for it.

"Quiet on the set!" Nathan called. The production assistant ran up with the slate. "Nick May outdoor screen test, take one."

Then, "Ready? And...Action!"

Nick, who had moved some ways off, ran up the alley, toward the camera. He stopped, looked around for a split second, hesitating. Cass's stomach flip-flopped. She doubted that was part of the scene he was supposed to be playing. He seemed to recall himself, which gave her hope. He just needed to warm up was all.

He looked at the roof, put his hands to his mouth, preparing to shout—a scene perhaps meant to recall Marlon Brando.

"Jenny!"

It came out flat. Not that it was the most forceful name in the world, not like STELLA! or ADRIAN! But he conveyed no feeling. He invited no belief that he was desperate for anything. Not even the job.

"Jenny!"

It wasn't acting, he wasn't emoting. He was simply following directions.

She closed her eyes. She'd failed as a coach as much as he had as an actor. She didn't know what else she could have done. She was an accountant and didn't know anything about acting, so it seemed. So Nick proved. She knew how hard he'd been trying, how much he wanted it. Maybe Nathan was right. He had his niche in bluebox, and that was that.

They endured this for an hour and a half before Nathan finally announced, "Let's break for lunch."

No one had moved much except for Nick, but the crew heaved a collective sigh of exhaustion.

Nathan said, "Nick, would you come inside for a minute?"

No one on the set said anything. It was like someone had died. Nick's career, maybe? The tech people shuffled in place, fiddling with their equipment. Transmitting word of Nick's failure to the gossip feeds?

She waited until the door closed behind them before following them inside.

They were at the other end of the service corridor, next to his office, when Nathan spotted her. Not that she was trying to sneak. Instead of shooing her away, though, he gestured her inside with a tilt of his head.

All the tension that had been simmering on the set when she left followed her into the room, concentrated and unbearable. Nick glanced up at her entrance, set his jaw and appeared annoyed. After that, no one looked at each other.

Finally, Nathan said, "This isn't working."

Nick tightened his fists and begged. "I'm close to getting it right, Nathan. I can feel it. I'm this close—" He showed thumb and forefinger touching. "I just need a little more time."

It was a small comfort that at least Nick realized he wasn't any good.

Nathan shook his head. "There's a thousand actors in this town with stage and camera experience who'd kill for a shot at this. It's nothing personal, Nick. It just doesn't make a whole lot of economic sense for me to spend time with you when I can pull someone off the street who's ready to go now. I'm sorry."

Nick paced a small circle, looking away, turning back like he wanted to say something, but no words revealed themselves. Cass had never seen him like this, tension running through his whole body, a frustrated snarl twisting his features, his arms clenched like he wanted to break something. He never even looked like this around paparazzi. Even Patton Walsh never looked like this.

Nick closed his eyes and took a deep breath, calming himself. When he was finally ready to speak, his voice didn't shake. Much.

"I've never failed at anything. My career's one long string of lucky breaks, I know that and I'm grateful for it, don't think I'm not. But here, I thought if I actually *worked* for something, it might... I don't know. Mean something."

Cass's turn to speak. Her voice caught, making her sound even softer than usual. Not that anything she could say would help.

"I'm sorry. I tried everything I could think of, and I don't know what else to do because the skills are there, you know what to do, it just—" She gestured vaguely. "—isn't happening. I don't know what to say."

Angrily, he brushed her words aside. "Oh come on, Cass. This isn't your fault. It's not like I'm some interactive fantasy you can change at will, push a button and turn me into Humphrey Bogart, or... or Patton Walsh. You're not the actor, I am. It was up to me and I blew it. You don't have anything to do with this."

Then, something happened. His expression went slack for a moment, a light dawning, a realization overcoming him. He narrowed his gaze, which dropped for a moment. The room had fallen dead still while Cass and Nathan let Nick think.

After the space of several heartbeats, he glared at Cass. "Did you guys set me up? At the party, you coming onto me—"

She'd come on to him? Was that how it had happened? If she'd had her link on at the time she could have played it back, but no, the scene was lost to memory now.

"Did Nathan put you up this? I can just hear it. 'Yeah, we get Nick May on board and investment capital will come pouring in. Cass, you're on it. Soften him up a little.'"

She stared at him, amazed. Didn't he know her well enough to know how incapable she was of such... conniving? She couldn't even flirt, much less seduce anyone for commercial gain. "Nick, that's just a little ridiculous."

"Is it? Come on, think about it. Everyone in the business knew that it didn't matter how much of an artistic hotshot Nathan was, without a name actor he wouldn't get a cent of funding. So you threw a big party to see who showed up, sent your little minions out to bait the hook. Must have been a big shock to find out I didn't have any talent."

Cass had never thought of herself as bait and was almost flattered.

Nathan smirked. "Sounds like a movie plot to me."

The actor gave a bitter huff of a laugh and turned away. "I should have known. I should have known the minute you guys took me seriously."

Cass dared a step toward him. "Nick, calm down, you're pulling this out of thin air—"

By now, he'd worked himself up to shouting.

"Christ, Cass. For the first time I'm thinking, here's someone who doesn't care what I do for a living, who doesn't care about the fame, who I can be around without any pressure—and it was all *fake*."

"No!" she said, her voice gone thin and high-pitched. Her eyes went wide. "No, Nick, I—" *I love you*. She hadn't said those words to him yet. She choked on them now. Swallowed. Tried it again. "Nick, I can't stand not being with you. There was never any conspiracy, I met you totally by accident, and I—I love you."

The anger sputtered a moment. He stared, unable to retort immediately. But suspicion still darkened his features. "I'm booted off the film. You don't have to pretend anymore. And you—" He pointed at Nathan. "—you can just take your cameras and—" Rather than finish the thought, he let out a growl, made a dismissive toss with his hand, and stalked out of the room.

Her eyes were burning. She would *not* cry. She wouldn't. Wiping tears away, she wondered why she wasn't running after Nick, and realized her legs wouldn't move.

"If he could emote like that on camera..." Nathan muttered. "I'm sorry, Cass. I'm sure he'll cool down in a little while."

*Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but someday...*

She wasn't going to wait that long.

Nick owned a bungalow in one of the nicer parts of the Los Feliz area. It was a cozy bachelor pad, not at all gigantic and pretentious like he might have had. Except for the security gate.

That afternoon, Cass stood at the gate's A.I. box and begged. Nick had changed the codes. She couldn't get in.

"The resident is currently unavailable. Please depart the premises or the authorities will be contacted."

"I know he's in there," she said to the A.I. guard program's speaker. "If he won't talk to me, at least let me leave a message. Come on, it's me! You have my voice print on file!"

"Voice print unrecognized. Please depart the premises—"

"Goddamnit, Nick! Talk to me!"

"If you do not depart in ten seconds—"

Wrong tack. She leaned on the brick wall by the steel gate and took a deep breath.

She tried again. "Hi. I'm an accountant from RealCity Productions, and I have a file upload for Nick May. It's his severance check." Money: the only thing in Hollywood that talked.

The guard program clicked ominously for a moment. Then, "File upload approved. Proceed."

She uploaded the file, along with a voice message. "Nick, I wasn't kidding about what I said. You said it yourself, I'm not an actor." She couldn't think of anything else that didn't sound trite, so she ended the message.

Back to the wall, she sat on the sidewalk and hoped.

She didn't know how long she planned on waiting. She'd told herself fifteen minutes. Any longer, the A.I. program would notice and call the cops. Then she realized that someone calling the cops was about what it

would take to get her to leave. The paparazzi were going to have a field day with this.

Two minutes had passed when the gate opened.

Nick leaned out, standing half on his property and half on the sidewalk, hanging onto the bars of the gate. He went barefoot, wore sweatpants and a t-shirt, and his brown hair was ruffled, like he'd been crashed out on the sofa. He looked like a million bucks.

"Hi," she said, staring up at him.

"Hi." He scraped a toe on the concrete, and she just kept staring.

"You could have just emailed it."

"I wanted to talk to you. I'm sorry the movie didn't work out. I wish it had."

He made a boyish shrug. "It's okay. I've got a contract on the table for a sequel to *Lunar Wake*. That's the story we're going to put out, that the production schedules conflict so I had to quit Nathan's film. That happens all the time. Career saved."

"Good," Cass said. It wasn't what she wanted to say, but everything else that occurred to her started with *please don't leave me, please please please!* There had to be a more dignified way to beg.

He looked up into the heat haze of the afternoon sky. "It's not your fault that it didn't work out. Working in Hollywood, living like I do, I forget sometimes that life isn't a fairy tale where all the endings are happy. The real world isn't like that."

In the real world, movie stars didn't date accountants. Cass swallowed a lump in her throat. "We're not going to have a happy ending?"

"I wasn't talking about us." He slid down to the sidewalk next to her and leaned against the wall. "I lost my temper. I'm an ass. I'm sorry."

She wasn't going to argue.

"You meant it, what you said back there."

She nodded. Her tears had started falling. It'd be hours before she got them to stop. He offered his hand. He wasn't going to take hold of hers; he was letting her choose.

She put her hand in his and squeezed.

"So, I'm just a bluebox actor and you're just an accountant. We've learned our lesson and we shouldn't try to be anything we aren't."

She snuggled against him and leaned her head on his shoulder. “I don’t know. We just haven’t found the *right* glamorous artsy job yet. You know when Nathan said this sounded like a movie plot? I was thinking, maybe we should try writing it down.”

“Write a screenplay—you and me?”

“Sure. How many movies have we watched and thought, I could do better than that? I mean, you turn down how many scripts a year? You must see some pretty bad ones.”

“I’ve *made* some pretty bad ones.”

“So we know what *not* to do, right? Couldn’t hurt to try.”

Her eyes felt round and puppyish. He grinned back at her and kissed her forehead, humoring her.

“All right, but we have to give it a happy ending. Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds riding into the sunset.”

“I think you mean Roy Rogers and Dale Evans.”

“Them too.”

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