Darling Grove

A game of suburban drama and friendship

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Introduction

You and your best friends have moved to the suburbs. Life is better there, and you can concentrate on fulfilling your dreams and sharing your good fortune with your girlfriends. Who will get married first? Who will get their dream job? And will you help each other, or let your own desires get in the way of your friendship? All of this drama will play itself out in **Darling Grove**.

Darling Grove is suburban drama, vaguely similar to a host of "primetime soaps" like *One Tree Hill*, *Everwood*, or *Party of Five*. It's set in the suburbs becauses it's not intended to be as dog-eat-dog as life would be in the city; you may find your desires temporarily blocked by those of your friends, but it's your choice whether to turn on them or help them out. You can all eventually make your dreams come true, although the road may be rough. It's up to you whether your friendship will survive intact.

Darling Grove requires a GM and two or more other players. The players will be referred to as "she" throughout the rules, even if the players are actually male, because the characters they play are all women, mostly the same age, although a mother or daughter can be thrown into the mix. Even if some of the characters are related, they are bound together through friendship. Their reliance on each other can be an important strength when trying to reach their goals.

The GM will be referred to as "he" throughout the rules, even if the GM is female, because he will play all the male characters in the game, as well as a few supporting female characters. The GM has no friends, but does have a great deal of power; he can create conflicts between the players or undermine their personal goals.

Overview of Play

The game is played out in a series of scenes, each of which involves at least one conflict. Players try to achieve their primary goal in a scene without undermining another goal, if possible.

Each player has several dreams they are trying to fulfill, and each dream can be divided into five minor goals; these minor goals are fulfilled one at a time, one in each scene, until the dream itself is fulfilled.

The quick version of the rules:

- everything has five "hit points";
- conflicts are resolved with dice pools that earn successes;
- circumstantial advantages allow you to roll more dice;
- odd die roll results earn successes;
- matching numbers earn additional successes;
- every success can be spent to add or diminish goals or advantages.

The mechanical trappings needed for the game are:

- ten-sided dice, numbered 0 to 9;
- character sheets and pencils;
- tracking sheets and counters, to track goals in a scene.

You'll see how to fill in the character sheets in the Character Creation section, and how to use the tracking sheets in the Scenes and Conflicts section.

Character Creation

Characters in Darling Grove are simple to create, but require more thought than some other RPGs.

First, describe the three parts of your background:

- What was your parents' background? (working class, white collar professional, military family, welfare mom.)
- What was your education? (public school, honors program, private school, college, trade school.)
- What is your current profession? (student, doctor, lawyer, teacher.)

These three backgrounds define what you should be able to do easily (rolling five dice instead of three.)

Next, describe four basic goals:

1. Health: how you look, what kind of shape you are in
2. Wealth: car, house, clothing, material possessions
3. Job: your career and social esteem
4. Love: what kind of relationship you want

You select one of these to be stable, which means you are satisfied with where you are in life, as long as nothing jeopardizes your status.

The other three goals are automatically dreams: you must define what it is you want to achieve for each of these goals.

The last part of character design is for all the players to pick their character names, then decide who their girlfriends are. In a two-player game, the players are automatically girlfriends to each other. For a three-player game, each player chooses one other character as a girlfriend; you can waive your choice if one of the other players has already chosen your character as a girlfriend (the relationship is reciprocal.) Four or more player games get two girlfriend choices.

Characters are designed in the open, with no secrets from the other players (yet.) Players are free to invent new details during this get-together; if Abigail has a dream of Love for a sensitive artist, Brenda can suggest meeting her co-worker, Henri, who likes to sculpt and write poetry when he's not working at the copy shop. The GM will play the role of Henri, when needed, but Brenda is free to create him at any time.

The GM, of course, will make notes on the dreams of all the players in the games, to keep track of which conflicts he can create. You will see how that works in the next section.

Scenes and Conflicts

Before getting into the actual meat of the game mechanics, an overview of play would be helpful.

First, the GM calls for scene suggestions, starting with generalities ("I want a scene to work on my dream Job goal",) then working out the overall details of the scene: where it happens, who is present, and what the general actions will be. If not everyone wants to be in the same scene, the scenes can run simultaneously; the GM just cuts back and forth between the scenes. Who is present in each scene mainly limits who can aid or block which actions. The GM also at this point picks which goals will be in conflict.

Once everyone agrees on the scene setup, players can ask for advantage rolls as preparation. After the advantage rolls, the scene begins, with everyone making their rolls simultaneously and working out from the die results what happens. After all the results have been applied, if the scene isn't finished, everyone makes their next conflict roll and continues the scene.

The players and the GM use a tracking sheet to show which scene goals are getting closer to being fulfilled. Essentially, you track all "hits" on a communal worksheet. It has a row for

each of the four goals (Health, Wealth, Job, and Love,) plus a fifth row for circumstantial advantages; it also has columns numbered -5 to +5. Players use unique tokens to track the ebb and flow of goals during the scene. The goals are raised or lowered by spending successes as currency; every die roll potentially earns successes that can be spent to raise or lower a goal or an advantage. Both odd die results and matching die results earn successes, so it's possible to earn more successes than the number of dice rolled.

There are two kinds of die rolls in the game: advantage rolls and conflict rolls. In either case, you are not rolling to see if you did something; you are rolling to see how well you do something (advantage rolls) or whether you finish something before something else happens (conflict rolls.)

Rolls are tied to scenes. In every scene, one of your personal goals is at stake; in many cases, one of your personal goals is at odds with another of your goals, or with another player's goals. The players decide which personal goal they will be working towards for the scene and which characters are together for this scene; the GM, on the other hand, can introduce the complications, setting one goal against another for that scene. Players may also opt to oppose

each other for a given scene, setting one of their goals in opposition to another player's personal goal.

Advantage rolls are preparations for a scene. A player may suggest that they did something to prepare for the upcoming scene; if the GM agrees it is reasonable, the player gets an unopposed roll: five dice if the area of conflict is something you are completely familiar with because of your background; three dice if you are trying something completely beyond your personal experience, but in theory could learn how to do it; one die if what you are doing is technically possible, but only through sheer luck. Any dice that come up odd count as one success; this indicates an advantage that can improve later die rolls.

An example: suppose the upcoming scene is a dinner party, and Abigail's stated goal for the scene is to impress her boss, whom she has invited, in order to get a promotion. If Abigail is throwing the party, it's perfectly reasonable for her prepare in some way: cooking food, selecting appropriate music, decorating. This means she gets an advantage roll to see how well she prepares, then assign the earned successes to each desired advantage. If she earns three successes, she could assign one success to the main course, one to dessert, and one to the mood music, for example. Which points get assigned where is important, because circumstantial advantages can be used

up (the guests ate the food) or change (another player may opt to mess with the stereo.)

If a player is not particularly interested in the outcome of a particular scene, she can always opt to be off somewhere else, preparing for some future scene. Again, she gets an unopposed advantage roll; the advantage can than be saved for later. In this way, a player could prepare multiple advantages for a big event.

Conflict rolls are part of the scene itself. The players in the scene name what it is they are trying to do, in general terms ("Brenda is visiting Abigail's party to make friends with a law student who will be there, which she will later use to fulfill her dream of Love.") The GM then sets challenges for one or two personal goals, in one of two ways:

1. pitting one player against another: "Abigail's boss is interested in the law student herself, so Brenda can potentially damage Abigail's chances at promotion and achieving her dream Job."

2. pitting one player's own goals against each other: "Abigail's boyfriend wants attention and can potentially feel abandoned, damaging her stable Love life."

For each scene, the GM challenges one personal goal, or two goals if there are two or more players active in the scene.

Each turn is divided up into ten phases, with the first phase being Phase 0. Actions occur during a specific phase all occur simultaneously -- or, at least, every player gets a chance to complete their first phase actions, even if they wind up dead, unconscious, or otherwise out of the scene. Different phases, however, are not simultaneous: actions that occur in Phase 1 happen after those in Phase 0, while those in Phase 2 happen after Phase 1, and so on to Phase 9.

Each temporary goal (flirting with the law student, schmoozing with the boss) needs five successes to be completed. The "negative goals" for the scene, if they don't overlap a positive goal, has a separate five-step track. For example, Abigail's boss has a goal of "compete with Brenda for law student's affections", which needs five steps of success; Abigail's boyfriend has a negative "feel abandoned" goal, which can take five points of "damage". Whoever finishes a turn with five steps of success in their goal wins the conflict, and the scene is over.

To resolve any conflict, make an opposed roll, rolling five dice for familiar actions, three dice for unfamiliar actions, or one die for the completely improbable. (You probably won't be rolling any one-die rolls, but it's there for you, just in case.) You can roll extra dice if the circumstances give you an advantage, either because of advantage rolls made in preparation, or because of advantages created during the scene.

Your opponent rolls dice at the same time. In fact, everyone present in the scene rolls dice at the same time, based on whatever actions they are taking during this scene. They may each contribute their results to whichever side in the conflict they prefer, or even split their results between more than one more conflict. It's even possible for each player to be involved in separate conflicts within the scene.

The GM rolls dice if he has a character or obstacle in the scene that is involved in the conflict in some way. The most obvious case would be if the conflict is with a GM's character (trying to argue with a police officer about a speeding ticket) or is focused on a GM obstacle (trying to open a stuck door to get out of the civic center basement.) However, the GM may have characters or obstacles in a scene that only indirectly affect the main conflict of the scene.

After the roll, figure out the successes each player earns on that turn. First, count up how many of your dice show an odd result; this is your basic success for Phase 0 of the turn. Each player decides how to spend each of these successes:

- you can move one step closer to your main goal;
- you can hinder another player's goal (move one step away from that goal);
- you can aid another player's goal (move one step closer to that goal);
- you can add or remove a circumstantial advantage;
- you can block another player's point of success.

Players can spend multiple successes on any of these actions, moving three steps closer to a goal, dropping someone else back two steps, partially blocking someone else's maneuvering to get a circumstantial advantage. All of the actions for Phase 0 of the turn must then be described to create a complete sense of what has occurred. How did you get closer to your goal? What did you do to block someone else?

Once Phase 0, the opening phase of the turn, is finished, Phase 1 is resolved, using the exact same die results; no reroll is necessary. Players examine the dice for matching numbers; matching zeros are ignored. The GM calls for all the matching 1s first, then the 2s, and so on through the 9s. If you have rolled two or more 1s, you have the option of using extra successes, one success for every 1 rolled. However, you must take one step of "damage" in your conflict and must describe that damage or setback; you are allowed to spend one

of your successes to block that damage, so there's no real reason not to take the extra successes, unless you really don't want your character to suffer even a near-setback.

All of the rolls with matching 1s are resolved first, simultaneously, before moving on to the matching 2s (which occur in Phase 2.) If a character is incapacitated in some way during one of these phases in the turn, the player loses any further successes for the turn, unless those successes are spent on a goal to recover. In other words, if your character is knocked unconscious on by someone's matching 1s, you don't get to use your matching 2s for anything except a five-step goal to wake up; you can't block or otherwise act until you've spent those five points.

Once the 9s are resolved and described, the turn is over. Players can either end the scene (if all are agreed) or make another roll.

Once one person's five-point goal for the scene is achieved, any opposed goal is locked out: if Brenda wins her law student's attentions, Abigail's boss can't put successes into "flirt with law student", although she can opt for revenge, hindering Abigail's goal (dropping it one or more successes) unless Abigail kicks Brenda out of her party, or threatening to leave herself.

Brenda may want to do her friend a favor and avoid fulfilling her five-step

goal, instead investing some of her successes into "get law student's phone number" as an advantage to use in a later scene, when Abigail's boss isn't present.

This covers the basics of scene mechanics, but there are rules for special situations:

Locations of Scenes:

The above rules assume the scene takes place in The Suburb. There are two other possible locations: The City and The Country.

The City is a dog-eat-dog environment. It's where the players commute for work or school, or visit for entertainment, but isn't necessary where you want to play out scenes. Random unpleasantness can occur at any moment. To reflect this, all advantage rolls in The City become conflict rolls, with the GM rolling five dice and applying the successes to annoy and impede the player. In an actual conflict, the GM rolls an extra five dice above what he would roll normally. Try to avoid The City.

The Country is any secluded spot: a campsite, an aunt's farmhouse, a bed and breakfast in a small scenic town. It's usually a safe spot to recover, but not the location of the main action. The GM never rolls dice in The Country, so the only conflicts played out are those between players. Most rolls in The Country are thus advantage rolls. You can't achieve a goal with just an advantage roll, though.

The Country has one other downside: rolls of zero normally are ignored, but in The Country, the GM can use zero results to introduce a temptation. The GM picks one of your girlfriend's goals and gives you a chance to earn extra successes on your scene, one success for every zero rolled; if you choose to give in to the temptation, your girlfriend suffers damage to her goal equal to the successes you earn. This can represent things like running into your girlfriend's husband at a ski resort, being offered a position your girlfriend is dreaming about, and so on.

Ending a Split Scene:

If the players have split the scene between two or more locations, and one scene ends while another continues, the players in the finished scene have two options:

get an extra advantage roll every time the other players get a conflict roll; join the other scene in mid action.

If the long scene is unusually long, with multiple conflict rolls, it's even possible for a player to take one or two advantage rolls and then join the other scene.

Changing Locations:

If a player ends a split scene and changes locations, she can join the other concurrent scene at the beginning of the next conflict roll if it is the same general location – Country, Suburb or City. If it is a different general location, the player changing locations must achieve a five-step goal of "join other player's scene" first; all of her successes are spent to achieve that goal before she is able to influence the scene. The exception is for girlfriends.

Affecting a Scene: the only people who can spend successes on goals and advantages in a scene are those actually present; likewise, the GM can only assign a conflict between the life goals of people present in the scene. The exception in both cases is girlfriends. If your girlfriend is not present, she can still aid you with successes in a scene; you can find notes from her, get a phone call, or find out about something she did in the past that influences the current scene. Being a girlfriend is thus like being in two places at once, and getting to roll dice for both scenes.

The downside is that the GM can pit your girlfriend's dreams in opposition to your own goals, exactly as if she were there.

Changing Girlfriend Status: you can unilaterally end your friendship with another player's character at any time. This might be someone's response to succumbing to temptation, for example. You can ask to be girlfriends again, or ask another player to become girlfriends during the game; if she agrees, you have to give her at least one success from one of your die rolls. How many successes, and how long you have to pay the debt, is up to the player you ask.

Other Friends: you can make friends with GM characters, too; these are treated as circumstantial advantages; they give you extra dice if the friend is present in the scene. Your friendships can be undermined by other players or by the GM in a variety of ways.