

*Female Lead
or A Pitch for a Character-Driven
One-Hour Procedural Television Show*

Cold open on her hands, steady hands, as she slices open a chest cavity. The blood rises in a thin, red ribbon. It is strangely beautiful.

Our heroine is a surgeon. She is thin. She looks good in her scrubs.

Maybe she is too thin. Poor thing. When she wears street clothes, the ends of her sleeves fall down past her thumbs, like a girl in her boyfriend's sweatshirt. She is vulnerable. But tough.

Our heroine is lovely. *No—*

...she is hot. Model hot. When she walks away, the camera lingers on her ass. And she walks away often, especially from men who lust after her.

She grew up an orphan. *No, not an orphan—*

...a motherless child. She grew up a motherless child, in the South. She has a drawl like thick honey. Men flock to it like bees. But she is broken inside.

Her daddy is a cop. *No, not a cop—*

...no longer a cop. She adores him, but she hates the unjust world that kicked him off the force. His brothers in blue will never know his sacrifice. Little do they know that her daddy came this close to taking down the biggest drug dealer—no, drug kingpin—that the Southland has ever seen.

Daddy may have been a maverick. But he was a good cop. Those felony possession charges that brought him down, the

drugs they found in his locker... That stunt that he pulled when they tried to give him a breathalyzer test... The nasty thing he said to Mom, the horse-and-buggy porn... His weakness for that last beer... The way he starts to tell the same story, over and over, about that brick of hash that went straight into the koi pond that one time... “Man, those fish must have been stoned...” Every weakness, every pathetic tinge in his character—they planted it on him. It was all a hoax. A frame-up. It was all a ruse by the kingpin, the King of Heroin, who is Hispanic. Who is Mexican. Who is named *Guapo* and is head of a cartel that owns Juarez, and also half of San Diego. He has strewn bodies up and down the Texas border.

Beautiful bodies.

Guapo, the King of Heroin, loves his family. He has a beautiful young daughter of his own—brunette, but still beautiful. She is too young to have an ass. The camera lingers on her glossy black hair. Reflected in the perfect sheen of that onyx hair is the fact that our society has offered the kingpin no other path. He grew up poor with big dreams. He longed to be rich. He longed to be a broker of mortgage-backed securities. But he could not afford to go to Harvard and become a banker. He collected the shoe-shaped pieces from Monopoly games and dreamt of America and became *el Rey de la Heroína*. The screen fills with the image of his soft, dry, earnest lips. He purses them together. He is troubled by his latest kill. But, *No—...it's not enough*. It doesn't mean that we'll forgive him.

Guapo knew our heroine's mother, in their sexual youth. Perhaps they dated. Our heroine's mother is lovely. But faded. Not as beautiful as her good, young daughter. Not as strong as the girl who stood by her father through the hard years after he lost his job. But still. Mother has good bones.

In flashbacks, when the nuclear family eats happy breakfasts served out of frying pans in a bright kitchen, the camera lingers

on the faint, sympathetic, but ultimately weak wrinkles at the corner of her mother's eyes. *No—*

...her mother was killed. She was killed, and beautiful. A vision in a simple blouse and jeans, on her way to the grocery store. She purchased a baguette at the grocery store, and it poked rakishly out of the grocery bag next to a bunch of celery. Then, she was brutally murdered. Sliced open. Raped. Tortured. Yes. And then everything that our heroine's mother had done before was forgiven. The pass she made at her boyfriend, the martini-soaked crying jags in front of *Extreme Makeover Home Edition*, the vacant stares, the headaches that shut her in her room—all that was burned off in the sheer depravity of her murder. Her sins were seared away in the brutality. All that was left was the noble and sympathetic longing for a woman who died knowing that the world's most evil, but *guapo*, kingpin would someday go after her husband and daughter.

My heroine and her father are united in their passion to defeat her mother's killer because...

...our heroine is a cop. *No—*

...our heroine is a medical examiner with a law degree and a penchant for quippy remarks and a dog that is all she has left to remind her of her dead mother. *No—*

...our heroine is a pet psychic. She is a veterinary forensic psychologist who every week must reconstruct what a different animal may have been doing in its final moments before death. She needs to know exactly what that pony was thinking. In the back stables. At the racetrack. On the day her mother died. *No—*

...our heroine is a just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her.

She writes this on a blackboard, every day. *No—*

...our heroine is an explorer.

Our heroine is an Arctic explorer. The camera lingers on the calluses on her palm, hard from many years of wielding a harpoon. She took up seal hunting against her father's wishes. "You're such a smart girl, such a pretty girl..." She bucked

parental pressure to go to law school, or at least, to join the force and become a forensic examiner.

Instead, she sails a boat sixty leagues up Frobisher's Strait trying to retrace the steps of *The Discovery's* expedition to the Northwest Passage. She watches icebergs calve into Baffin Bay, stows away on Coast Guard boats, watches the sun hover without setting over the true pole. She navigates cities of ice in a Carolina skiff—skyscrapers of ice, great curving claws of ice like the talons of a giant submerged phoenix. She sleeps with quiet, acne-scarred scientists just to get a ride on their research boats. She sits between rocks slick with permafrost and lets the hypothermic pain gather in her toes, one by one, just to catch a glimpse of a leopard seal mare poking its nose into the drift. She does all of this, anything—just so she won't have to be a cop or a forensic scientist. Just to purge her eyes clean of all the butchered girls who fill the frame with their pale, bloody bodies. Just to replace the gunshots and the click of handcuffs, the meaningless handcuffs, with the creak and groan of pack ice along the Continental shelf. *No—*

...our heroine is a seamstress, a maker of gloves.

...our heroine is a librarian, with no access to the Internet. She writes sestinas on the backs of cocktail napkins and fights crime with pencils and a graphing calculator.

And our librarian's mother is alive. She is a dignified woman—an older woman who cracks jokes but is not one. Our heroine loves her complicated and deeply wrinkled mother. They talk about the handicaps on the ponies at Santa Anita. She has a strained relationship with her father—a father who could never see past his Old Testament worldview, past his daughter's choice to hunt seals. Her father, after all, believes in animal rights. He is allergic to seal fat. *No—*

...our heroine wears an old sweatshirt with a picture of a robot on it. She drives a dirty car. She refuses to wax anything. She never went to college, choosing instead to teach circus skills to children with brain cancer in Ensenada. She sings

off key. She delivers cupcakes to deserving old people. Every episode will feature a different flavor. Vanilla for innocence. Red velvet for sex. *No—*

...our heroine is unemployed, calm, has no motives, no goals, no mission, no obstacles, no superpower—just an obsession with leopard seals and legs that go on forever. The men in her life find the leopard seals disarming.

Have I mentioned they are beautiful, these men?

No?

Our heroine writes: “I am a rogue” in frosting, on a cupcake.

She drives her car into the Mojave Desert. She veers off the road and stops and walks out into the heat. She looks at a tarantula making its way across the cracked earth. She bites into the cupcake, icing first. It is lemon-flavored. She closes her eyes, and thinks about the polar ice caps, melting.

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