

## Lifetime Movie Pitch

by Ryan Harbert

All Lifetime movies are about the same three things:

- 1.) a seemingly-normal boyfriend (or older woman) who turns out to be a psychopath;
- 2.) a less attractive woman who steals a more attractive woman's children away from her;
- 3.) a mother watching her daughter struggle with drugs, sex, or bullying.

There are no other possibilities. Deviating from the formula causes the genre's threads to unravel.

With this in mind, I propose a movie about a generic brunette (not a blonde; this isn't Hallmark) played by a former sit-com actress in her forties. She's a single mother—of course—and her daughter is a high school student played by a twenty-six year-old who will one day look back on this role with horrible embarrassment. For the sake of simplicity, we'll call these two Mom and Daughter. The script can't decide if Mom or Daughter is the star, and spends equal

time with both. It hardly matters, though, because the two share a parasitic relationship. Mom creates the plot and Daughter drives it forward. Mom accomplishes nothing on her own and instead lives her life vicariously through her daughter. Daughter serves no purpose except to be an outlet for her mother's ambitions.

Mom and Daughter live in a seven-figure mansion in the "small-town" section of Hollywood. They act, however, like middle-class suburbanites. Mom may or may not have a job. All we know is that she leaves the house every day so that bad things can happen.

And bad things do happen. Mom starts dating a clean-cut, stock-photo kind of guy in a J.C. Penny sweater. Daughter notices that J.C. Penny Sweater acts vaguely menacing when Mom isn't around. Sometimes he says things like, "You remind me so much of Samantha."

"Who's Samantha?" Daughter asks.

"Don't talk about her. Don't *ever* talk about her," J.C. Penny Sweater growls, before storming away and leaving Daughter scared and bewildered.

The next day, Non-Threatening Ethnic Friend approaches Daughter at school and says, "Let's discuss your fears about J.C. Penny Sweater. It's the only reason I exist."

"The strange thing is," Daughter says, "even though he acts like a weirdo around me, I only worry about what he'll do to my mom. More specifically, I'm afraid he'll drive a wedge between us."

"Wow," says Ethnic Friend, "that sounds like a fear a real-life teenager would have. We worry about our moms' love lives all the time. We definitely don't just act like idiots and twerk on TikTok." And that's the end of the scene.

Mom, meanwhile, keeps telling J.C. Penny Sweater that she isn't ready to remarry, especially since the police never caught her late husband's killer. All anyone knows is that he was wearing a J.C. Penny sweater. J.C. Penny Sweater says she can't dwell in the past forever, then cuts her brakes. Mom crashes into a tree, but thankfully survives. The accident, however, becomes an issue with the principal at Daughter's high school. The principal deduces that a cut brake line means Mom has been drinking and is therefore an unfit mother.

That's when Alexandra "Red" Herring pokes her head into the office and says, "You know, I could take care of her daughter while she sobers up."

The principal decides, "Yes, unless you stop crashing into trees, your daughter will become the property of Red Herring, as laid out in our school handbook."

"I knew it," Mom says, "Red Herring is the one who cut my brakes. She's trying to take my daughter away from me." She spends the rest of the movie ignoring J.C. Penny Sweater's

increasingly unsettling behavior and focuses all her efforts on keeping her daughter safe from Red Herring.

Daughter, on the other hand, teams up with Non-Threatening Ethnic Friend to investigate J.C. Penny Sweater's past. This involves scouring search engines like "Boing" and "Goober" for evidence, riffling through dusty library books, and listening to an exposition dump from Vincent D'Onofrio. Eventually Daughter uncovers a grainy black-and-white photo of J.C. Penny Sweater at the scene of her father's death.

"I have to warn my mother," she says. "Are you coming with me?"

"Do I *look* like someone who will make it out of this movie alive?" Ethnic Friend asks. "Solve your own problems, Barbie. I'm out."

While daughter is away, J.C Penny Sweater cuts Mom's brakes harder than he's ever cut them before. She crashes into the world's most crashable tree, landing her conveniently in the hospital for the rest of the movie.

Daughter comes across Mom's car wrapped around the tree and realizes she's too late. She finds her in the hospital, hooked up to a breathing machine in an atmospherically-lit room. A doctor tells her, "It's not good. We're doing everything we can. If only we knew who cut her brake lines."

"It's J.C. Penny Sweater!" Daughter cries. "You have to keep him out of here!"

"Yeah, okay," the doctor says. Then he goes into the hallway to laugh at her for being so stupid.

As Daughter weeps at her mother's bedside, J.C. Penny Sweater comes up behind her and whispers, "She can't hear us now, so it's time to explain my motivation. I had a family once, but my wife cheated on me, so I cut her brakes and killed her. The problem is, my daughter, Samantha, was in the car with her at the time. Your mom looks like my wife, so I killed your father and claimed her as my mate, or whatever you kids call it nowadays. But you're not as well behaved as Samantha, so you have to go. Speaking of which, here's Red Herring, come to take you away. Goodbye forever, Daughter."

Red Herring walks into the room with a sympathetic frown. "The principal warned your mother this would happen," she says, "but she just couldn't stop crashing into trees. It'll be okay, though. You can live with me now. I'll even let you watch network television on school nights."

"I'd rather die!" Daughter shouts.

Red Herring pulls Daughter, kicking and screaming, from her mother's bedside. They get as far as the hospital lobby before Daughter stomps on her foot and makes a run for it.

“After her!” J.C. Penny Sweater shouts. “She’s leading to the climax of the movie!”

Daughter races through the hospital’s winding corridors, shouldering past nurses and upsetting crash carts. All the while hospital security, the police, J.C. Penny Sweater, and Red Herring follow hot on her heels. While they run, J.C. Penny Sweater tells the police that Daughter has been struggling with drugs, sex, and bullying. She was the one who cut her mother’s brakes. The police decide that’s enough evidence for them. They break out the live rounds normally reserved for Non-Threatening Ethnic Friend. With her life on the line, Daughter darts into a dimly lit side door and presses her back to the wall.

“Where’d she go?” security asks.

“That way!” Red Herring shouts, and they hurry in the opposite direction.

Finally able to catch her breath, Daughter examines her surroundings and realizes she ended up in the morgue. All the freezers are open, and two rows of body bags are laid out on slabs. Stationed between the bodies is a loom strung with black fabric. An inky tar drips from the fabric and splashes onto the floor. Seated behind the loom, kicking its pedals and plucking its threads, is a horned goat man. Daughter freezes. The goat man moves languidly, like a puppet on opium. The threads of the loom play distorted musical notes under his touch.

“Sit, child,” he says in a voice as dark and empty as a starless night sky.

A metal chair slides across the floor. A spotlight snaps into existence above it. Daughter turns to leave, but finds the door missing.

“Sit,” the goat man says again.

Daughter grips the chair’s arms with sweaty palms and lowers herself onto the seat. Her breath forms clouds in front of her face. The lines of body bags release clouds of their own. They shiver on their slabs, sounding like nickels dropped into a coffee tin.

The goat man grins and continues working at his loom. “I am the Weaver of Fears,” he says. “You wear my handiwork every day of your life. It goes by many names: anxiety, depression, jealousy, racism, and that funny little aversion you feel toward growing up. It all comes from me. I craft the very fabric of the modern world. Did you think your situation was unique? Everyone is motivated by fear. Some are even motivated by the fears of others. Are you really concerned about your mother’s relationship, or is that just her uncertainty bleeding into you? Are *her* fears really her own, or just the collective paranoia of a culture clinging to the last shreds of the things it *thinks* will make it happy? I’m telling you, child, the harder you cling, the stronger my influence becomes.”

“Stronger,” the body bags say in unison.

Daughter sucks in a shuddering breath. The image of the goat man swims before her eyes. Is she crying, or is something else making her vision blur?

“The pursuit of happiness is like chasing after soap bubbles,” the goat man says. “The moment you get your hands on it, it pops. There’s no substance in happiness. There’s only substance in acceptance. Can you accept your mother leaving you someday? Can you accept the chaos of death, loss, and your own powerlessness? Are you able to proceed with life knowing full well that you may never wrap your hands around the happiness you desire so much?”

“I don’t know,” Daughter whispers.

“Then you might as well pull up a body bag and join the others,” the goat man says. “It’s going to be a long eternity.”

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