



In loving memory of my grandmother, Nanny, who was an avid soap opera fan

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Beyond the veranda and swaying palms, moonlight shimmered on hypnotic waves. Nearby the soft insistent thrum of a guitar beat to the rhythm of the longing in Terri's heart. She sat on the bed, arms locked around her knees, waiting.

Her dark hair cascaded down her back. Her bright eyes shone with anticipation. Her fingers slid over the satin sheets, twisting the corner into a knot she rubbed slowly, ever so slowly, along the length of her long, tan shin.

A breeze caught the plantation shutters, bursting them fully open. She rose from the bed and glided to the window in her diaphanous white negligee, the wind dancing around her tiger-like body, blowing the chiffon taut against her shapely breasts and sweetly curved hips, and arching up into angels' wings beyond.

Through her mind, images of their tumultuous courtship played: the night she slapped and cursed Donovan, not knowing he was pretending to love Alicia while on an undercover assignment; the morning Donovan scolded her for being too prissy and she'd longed to prove him wrong; the summer afternoon she'd found him near death at the bottom of the ravine; the midnight they'd shared their first kiss and he couldn't leave her until they'd both satisfied their desires...

She trembled at the memory, looking out over the rustling palms and white sands.

"Donovan," she called over her shoulder in her velvety alto, "Your princess awaits!" When he didn't answer, she walked to the door of the adjoining sitting room and opened it. "Donovan?"

Chapter One

“Just kill him off!”

“Are you crazy?” Frankie shifted her cell phone as she strode along Manhattan streets searching for her favorite coffee spot. “Criminey, Ma, I’m powerful, but even I can’t just snap my fingers and have him go dead.”

She rushed by a man in leather jacket and sunglasses who did a double take as she made this pronouncement.

Arriving at the double doors of a trendy coffee bar, she stopped and turned when she saw the long line. Okay, Second Favorite Coffee Spot this morning. She kept walking.

“Just get rid of him,” her mother said. “Have the Count pop him.”

“Wow—that’s brutal.” She laughed. “What would that bring his body count up to? He’s already responsible for half a dozen deaths in Crestview. He does have that arsenal in his basement, though.”

She thought she saw a policeman look her way at this last statement. She hurried round a corner and saw her coffee mecca. Good—no long lines. Hoisting her heavy laptop-laden attaché onto her shoulder, she marched on.

“Besides, the Count never gets his own hands dirty,” she said into the phone.

“Then have that half-wit of his do it. What’s his name?”

“Mittbul.” Frankie spit it out like it was a bad olive.

“What kind of name is that?”

“I don’t know—something foreign.”

“Ohhhh...you mean Swedish, like meatball?”

“No, Ma, *Mittbul* like...like...well, Mittbul,” she said. “He nearly did himself in with that arson attempt on the Reilly Tavern. Maybe I’ll have the Count get rid of him, too.” A woman with earphones and wearing a trench coat glanced at her as she heaved open the door to a coffee bar.

“Have him taken off somewhere and tortured,” her mother said, “you know, by some group of half-naked women.”

Frankie laughed, finding her place in the queue. “A sex-ring, huh? Yeah, I think a lot of folks would like that.”

The man in front of her stared over his shoulder at her. She looked down. “I mean a lot of people would like to see Donovan half-naked.”

“Just have him snatched and sit him in a room with a dozen slavemasters.”

“Whoa—since when were you into the bondage thing?”

The man in front looked around again, this time a disquieting gleam in his eye. Frankie glowered at him.

She lowered her voice. “We could do a hostage situation, I guess.” She slid her heavy case to the floor beside her, rolling the ache from her shoulder.

Her mother snorted. “Like that’s not been done before. I thought you were more original than that!”

Frankie bristled. “Hey—nothing’s new under the sun, okay? Hostage, kidnapping, sex-ring, arson, hit-job...” Without realizing it, her voice was rising. More people stared. The man in front of her left the line and was talking to the trench coat woman who had followed her in.

Red-faced, she moved up in line. “I have to go,” she mumbled into the phone. “Love ya.” She forgot about her bag as the line pushed forward. By the time she ordered her double cappuccino and turned to leave, the woman in the trench coat had called in a dog to sniff the “abandoned” tote and was motioning for Frankie to come her way.

“Ma’am, would you please step over here and answer some questions?” Trench coat lady flashed a badge, and Frankie heaved a sigh.

It took Frankie nearly a half hour to explain she was a head writer for the daytime serial *Lust for Life* and to demonstrate that her bag contained nothing but her laptop, a half dozen one-hundred-calorie-snack packs, tissues, perfume, and the latest issues of *Soap Opera Digest*, *Daytime Serial*, *Soap Opera Today*, and *Soaps ‘n Suds*. The delay didn’t bother Frankie so much as the last question Trench Coat Lady put to her before letting her go.

“You say this show’s been on how long? I’ve never heard of it.”

You and half the soap-watching universe, groused Frankie to herself as she was finally released.

“Kayla!” Frankie called to her secretary from her office as she let her bag slide into her chair. No answer. The woman must have left her post. But she was there just a moment ago when Frankie had breezed in! Frankie swore under her breath. When she’d taken over as head writer a scant six months ago, Frankie had rejoiced at the thought of having her own “administrative assistant.” Joy quickly had turned to confusion when she’d discovered Kayla’s mysterious talent for disappearing whenever Frankie wanted to use her services. The gal must have had some sort of cloaking device.

One of these days, Frankie was going to have a talk with Kayla. But not today. Not until she read up more on how to manage the problem employee. She had put a half dozen books on the topic in her online shopping cart, and had a list in her purse for others she’d noticed at the bookstore, but hadn’t yet decided which ones to order.

Grumbling, Frankie sank into her chair, bumping against the bag she’d just put there and spilling coffee onto her blouse. “Damn!” She moved the bag to her feet while looking over a just-released ratings report placed on her blotter, presumably by Kayla. No, more likely by Executive Producer Brady Stephens’ efficient staff. They were always at the ready with bad news.

No wonder *Lust for Life* wasn’t on anyone’s radar screen. They were barely a blip, coming in a distant last behind the *General Hospital*, *Young and Restless*, *Days of Our Lives* crowd. She sipped at her coffee, the magnitude of the challenge looming before her—bring *Lust*

back from the grave, back to its heyday position, the one it had occupied years ago when Peggy McNally, Frankie's mom, had started watching the show.

Frankie McNally's mother had been a fan of *Lust* even before Frankie was born, and now that her daughter worked for the daytime serial, she talked with her regularly to get the "inside scoop." Already this week, mother and daughter had spoken several times about breaking news concerning Luke Blades, the dashing heartthrob who played Donovan Reilly on the show.

"Breaking news" was a spot-on description for what had happened to Luke. He'd decided to boost his career that winter by appearing on *Dancing with the Stars*, doing extremely well, too, making it to the final four couples. That's when victory was snatched away in a snap. Literally. He'd jived his way into a broken fibula just three nights ago, when he'd jumped off the platform and landed, not gracefully in a grand flourish of kneeling slide, but awkwardly on the edge of the bottom step, his shin cracking so loudly there was a unanimous gasp from the live audience.

But Luke—always aware of his assets—had managed to turn his best side toward the camera as he worked his jaw muscles furiously, telegraphing strength and vulnerability at the same time. Luke had told Frankie in a phone call from the hospital that he'd hardly felt anything. He was too much in shock, and, besides, he'd taken a few "supplements" before the show to calm his nerves.

Gone in a bone-breaking snap. The lovely plot she had concocted for Donovan and his lady love Terri (known to Donovan as the secret Princess Terese du Valmont-Scaiyovnova), kept apart and thrown together in a succession of wild and exciting stories designed to raise viewers' libidos to fever pitch as they cheered Donovan on to the bed posts of sexual victory, was now shattered, like Luke's leg. And it had all been scheduled to air during sweeps week a mere month away. They had just taped the initial scene with Terri waiting lustfully on the bed, the "breakdown" for which Frankie had written herself. She alone among the writers infused her story descriptions--the breakdowns, or outlines, of stories she passed along to scriptwriters—with a novel-like sense of narrative and description, as well as....something more.

Her cell buzzed. Her mother again.

"Yeah?"

"I thought of something. Why not just use old footage of him and the princess rolling around? Why do you have to shoot new stuff?"

Frankie smiled. Her mom was always trying to be helpful. "The fans will know." Yeah, all five of them.

"How fast do you need to come up with something?"

"By today. We'll redo the scripts and shooting schedule immediately." She finished her coffee and tossed the cup in the wastebasket beneath her desk. "Hey, you don't need to worry. I'll think of something."

"I know you will, sweetie."

Frankie sighed and looked at her watch. "But I've got to get going. A meeting—where we discuss the jitterbugging Donovan's fate."

"Yeah, I gotta vamoose, too. Scheduled a hair appointment for my day off."

They finished the conversation like lovers parting by train, with quick bursts of promises about visits and calls and notes they'd forgotten to send via email, ending with "love ya's" as they leaned into the phone chugging along toward its cradle.

Even though their talk was brief, it buoyed Frankie for the meeting ahead, and she now scooped up pen and pad and walked to the conference room with cheer rather than the gloom that had afflicted her when she'd called the meeting. At that time, she was facing tough choices—

abduction, coma, amnesia, runaway, false death—all stinking of a manipulation that curdled her true blue character-drives-the-plot principles. But her mother’s cavalier attitude toward Luke gave her a sense of perspective. It wasn’t the end of the world if she had to reconfigure Donovan and Terri’s story. She’d make it work, whatever “it” ended up being.

“Give me what you’ve got,” she barked as she entered the room, looking to Hank, a lean, ghost-faced newbie who’d interned with them the summer before. With his big eyes and dark hair curling around his forehead, Hank always reminded Frankie of Jethro from *The Beverly Hillbillies*, good-hearted and eager. His white shirt bore the wrinkles of a week in the laundry basket, his blue tie didn’t match the blue in his pants—*yuck, why is he wearing blue pants anyway*—and his fingernails looked like he worked a garden with his bare hands in his spare time. She glanced away.

“Uh....”

Frankie sat at the head of the table, already moving on.

“How’bout you, Nory?” Frankie turned toward goth-like Lenore, slunk in the corner away from the light as if it would melt her skin. She wore a tight black sheath the same color as her ragged black-marker hair, Cleopatra eye make up, and ankle boots. At least the multiple piercings had disappeared. The one in Nory’s tongue always freaked Frankie out. Frankie would be happy when Nory got entirely past this stage. She liked her new country music phase a lot better—well, at least the parts when Nory wasn’t quoting song lyrics all the time.

“Just shoot him from the waist up.”

“He can’t move around much,” Hank chimed in. “I checked with a friend of mine studying to be a doctor. He says these kinds of breaks are very painful and Mr. Blades will likely be incapacitated for six weeks or longer.”

“Great,” Frankie said.

As if that were the green light for more, Hank continued, “This friend of mine, by the way, would make a terrific consultant when we need help with medical stories, Ms. McNally. He’d be very reasonable, too. I know I could work something up that wouldn’t bust the budget. I could give you his name....”

“Uh-huh. Sure thing. Leave it with Kayla.” Frankie couldn’t keep track of all the people Hank knew who could be of use to the show. Lately he seemed to focus more on pushing people into the biz than on actually doing the work in front of him. She figured he must be so proud of his job he told everyone about it, and they in turn tried to use him to get gigs. She didn’t hold it against him.

“I hear he’s practically paralyzed,” Raeanne drawled in her Mississippi twang. Sitting alone at the opposite end of the conference room, she leaned into the table, revealing even more than usual of her Marilyn Monroe figure squeezed into a thin spandex-like wrap top of seafoam green. She bit her lip. Frankie could swear she saw a tear bead up in the woman’s baby blues. *Well, that’s why she’s good at this. The woman knows sentiment.* With a shag of blonde hair framing her face, porcelain skin, Kewpie-doll mouth, and a bod that every straight man in the office lusted after, Raeanne merely had to breathe to get attention. “The poor soul must be just devastated, in pain and unable to work. He’s devoted to Lust. Absolutely devoted to Lust. Lust is the most important thing in his life.”

The same could have been said of Raeanne. She was always willing to work late and go the extra mile. Well, as long as she knew she was getting credit for it. If Brady Stephens wouldn’t know of her efforts, she remained still and mute.

The three of them— Raeanne, Nory and Hank—were Lust for Life’s breakdown writers, the people who put together the story arcs for the shows before they went out to the half dozen scriptwriters who worked from their homes on contract, penning the actual dialog. Lust for Life was a lean operation. Only three breakdown writers, with the head writer— that would be Frankie McNally herself—doubling as Story Editor. She suspected they’d have a bigger team if they had higher ratings. Until then, she had to make do.

Right now, she didn’t mind. Frankie often liked to map out stories on her own, throwing them to the team for fleshing out and brainstorming of details. She liked being in control. But desperate times called for fresh strategies. She needed every brain cell in the story department working this problem fast. Executive Producer Brady Stephens had already called her a half dozen times with his own ideas which, unfortunately, were limp retreads of things they’d done with other characters in the recent past. Brady, like Frankie, was a recent promotion. Lust for Life was a cocktail shaker for careers.

Frankie shook her head. “I’ve talked directly to his doctor. He can move, but it would be awkward. He was supposed to be really heating up the sheets with Terri this week. Lots of rolling and writhing and ...”

She drifted off as she described the now-useless scenes, thinking of Luke, the man-candy actor who played Donovan Reilly on Lust for Life, rolling around in *her* sheets.

She blushed. It had been after the office Christmas party two years ago, and she’d just signed the divorce papers ending her three-year marriage to Brian Aigland, and she’d had too much to drink, and Luke had shared a taxi home with her....She had been relatively new on the job, still the assistant head writer, and he was so sweet and attentive, and one thing had led to another and another and oh baby those fingers of his, those rock hard pecs, chiseled chin, and that wicked, sweet tongue....Surely, she was allowed that one mistake, after the much larger mistake of marrying Brian....

“Frankie? You were sayin’, honey?” Raeanne interrupted like an evangelical clairvoyant reading her dirty thoughts.

“It was only one night!” Frankie blurted. They all stared at her. She cleared her throat and rustled papers in her notebook. “I mean, it’s one night, but it was going to stretch over a week or more...we had some good stuff here, guys. Great stuff! And now it’s all wasted.”

“Look, seriously, we can shoot him under the sheets,” Nory repeated. “You know, moving around with his shoulders or something.” She demonstrated, doing some weird elevator movements with each shoulder and twisting her neck back and forth, making her look like a bobblehead in a tornado. Awkward silence followed. No one knew whether she was joking. “No one will see his leg...” Nory continued.

“Oh gosh, Nory, they’ll see it perfectly well.” Raeanne clucked her tongue. “It’ll look like some big, throbbing, pulsating, hard, rigid mass of, of...”

All eyes turned to Raeanne, waiting for the punch line. “What?” she asked, wide-eyed.

Frankie resisted the urge to point out that many fans might enjoy seeing Luke’s hard, rigid mass of something under the sheets. And not all of them women, either.

A soft knock at the door shifted her attention. The mysterious Kayla poked her head in.

“You’re wanted in Mr. Stephens’ office,” the secretary said in an odd conspiratorial voice.

“Right now?” Frankie asked.

“He said he wanted McNally up there pronto.” Kayla gestured to the hall with dramatic flair. She was a tall woman, a blonde like Raeanne. Or at least today she was. Frankie had seen her as a brunette in the past couple years.

“I’ll be right there.” Frankie sighed. As Kayla left, Frankie turned her attention back to the group. “Give me a dozen different ideas— each of you—by the close of business today. Write up some treatments, too.” She flipped her leather portfolio closed and rushed from the room.

Before heading to Brady’s suite, Frankie first made a quick stop in her own office. Closing the door, she slid into her black leather chair, pulling a cosmetic bag from the bottom drawer. Whenever Frankie was around Raeanne, she felt the need to recheck her own appearance.

She stared at the fold-out mirror. Yup, the same Frankie. No transformation into sex goddess in the past half hour. Frankie looked at a long, thin face, long thin mouth, narrow green eyes, freckled cheeks that only industrial-strength make-up could hide, and long reddish hair on the fulsome side of curly. It now frizzed around her face like an electric shock aftereffect. Damn, it was damp out today. She scrabbled through various pieces of head hardware and chose a tortoise-shell clip to secure the frizzy mess at the nape of her neck, hoping it didn’t make her look like she needed a prairie bonnet to complete the ensemble. She applied a little powder to her nose and some too-pink gloss to her lips, kicking herself for not remembering to change shades. This would have to do. At least it was something.

After scraping everything back into the bag, she stood, dusted the shoulders of her charcoal silk pant suit, pulling the jacket over the coffee stain on her umber shirt, and strode with all the confidence she could muster past Kayla’s empty desk. While she walked, she thought of the story ideas they’d just discussed and how she’d present them and more to Brady, steering him away from his own ideas for Donovan Reilly—fall down the stairs (done that with Donovan’s brother Kyle just last year), satanic possession (Donovan’s half-sister Belle had suffered through that seven months ago), and coma (even though this had been on Frankie’s original list as well, she’d quickly nixed it when she’d tallied up the recent coma victims in Lust for Life’s town of Crestview, a number which probably made it the Coma Capital of the World).

As she waited at the elevator, Hank approached her.

“Ms. McNally...” he began in a soft voice indicating a request was coming.

She smiled at his boyish deference. “Hank, how many times do I have to tell you you can call me Frankie?”

He blushed and looked down. “Ms. McNally—Frankie—I hate to be a pest, but I sent you an email about my cousin, and I was wondering if you had a chance to consider it yet. He’s called me several times asking....”

Hank’s cousin? Was this the medical student he’d just mentioned? No, no, somebody else. Frankie did a quick flip through her mental files. She had a vague memory—a cousin who wanted to audition for a part. A big fan of the show. She couldn’t remember anything else.

“Nothing’s open right now,” she said. “But as soon as we have a casting call, I’ll let you know, and he can be included in the bunch.” She gave him a quick reassuring grin, which he answered with his own beaming smile.

“Thank you so much. He’s a real actor, you know. Not just some wannabe. He’s studied and all. Been in some plays...”

The elevator arrived, and she stepped on. No harm in letting Hank’s cousin in on a casting call when it happened—it was the least she could do to keep the staff happy. There were so few occasions to dole out favors.

One flight up, the elevator whooshed open onto a plush executive suite as silent as a sanctuary. Two reverent secretaries—Bob and Serena—typed at computers, their backs to each other, separated by an exquisite Persian rug of rusty hues. Bob finished a line and turned to Frankie, saying in hushed tones, “Mr. Stephens is in with someone right now,” but Frankie wasn’t sure if he was talking to her because he had a BlueTooth on his ear. Whoever he was talking to, Bob gestured for Frankie to take a seat on the long low 1950s style leather couch just beyond his and Serena’s desks.

This was typical of Brady. Make it seem like her job was on the line if she didn’t arrive in a flash, and then keep her waiting. Nonetheless, a knot curled tight in her stomach, and she picked lint from her knee in nervous anticipation.

No daytime serial was lighting the ratings world on fire these days. They’d all been losing market share over the years. But *Lust for Life* was losing it at a prodigious rate.

Yet once, years ago, the show had shone like a beacon at the top of the mountain. It was the network’s longest-running daytime drama and had been through every transformation the genre had experienced, often leading the way. Starting out as a quarter hour radio serial, it jumped to television with a half hour black and white offering in the late 1950s. From there, it splashed to color, doing the first location work in the mid ‘60s, including one fabulous shoot in Hawaii in the late ‘80s when then-heartthrob Keir Michelson lost and then recaptured his beloved Amelia, only to see her whisked away by a tidal wave (reappearing years later after he’d remarried).

That was the story that had first captivated Frankie, addicting her to it years ago when summer vacation meant sitting in the club basement drinking Coke and eating chips and watching television while Peggy McNally worked as a nurse at a downtown Baltimore hospital. *Tell me what happened*, Peggy would ask Frankie when she got home each evening, and Frankie would spill out the latest, as if reporting on the inhabitants of Crestview was her summer employment. In fact, it became that. As long as Frankie could keep her mother entertained with *Lust for Life*’s stories of love, death, and near-incest, Peggy didn’t bug her daughter to get a regular summer job but let her mow neighbors’ lawns instead. Frankie became Scheherazade during those lazy summers, entertaining her mother with daily recaps that often enhanced the lamer stories playing out on the screen.

Lust for Life was her babysitter, counselor, friend, teacher, fantasy builder, dream starter—it was a place where women were beautiful and sophisticated, where true love always won (eventually), where lost love could come back from the grave, where loneliness and trouble were banished.

It was a world where people got to say what they really thought— hurling accusations, unleashing resentments, sharing secrets, and blurting out confessions with a liberation Frankie’s long-gone hippie father would have cheered. Frankie often used the treatments she now prepared for the show to work out her own innermost frustrations, having characters on *Lust* give voice to her deepest feelings, saying all the things “civilized” people in polite society withheld from each other.

She had often wished she could live in Lust for Life's fictional town of Crestview, in fact, where everyone knew each other, where you could walk into the Reilly Tavern and run into family and friends any day of the week, and know that people loved (or hated) you. Frankie was first inspired to write, filling marble-covered notebooks with melodramatic stories, after becoming entranced by Lust for Life.

Over the years, Lust for Life had pioneered shows that included abortion, rape, UFOs, out-of-body experiences, and even the first openly gay character on a daytime drama. They'd been the first to introduce the "super couple"—a pair destined to be together yet pulled apart for years until the final consummation (and even then, smooth sailing was never guaranteed). They'd gone to an hour and a half in the late '70s, only to pull back to an hour five years later.

Despite her great affection for the show, Frankie had never set her sights on working for it. She'd stumbled into this career after first marching down the path toward a career in *Lit-rah-chure*. Academic skill rewarded by scholarships had lifted her out of suburban America into the heady halls of upper-class academe (Wellesley, then Columbia for her MFA) and then into editing jobs at a prestigious publishing house. Frankie had even thought of penning her own Great American Novel one day...if she could just make the time and figure out what story she wanted to tell. But editing same was good enough while she waited for inspiration. Reality had interfered, though, when her brief marriage to a similar dreamer and aspiring novelist had jeopardized her credit rating with debts she didn't even know she had accrued.

She could have forgiven Brian the money problems, though. It was the knocked up graduate student Brian "tutored" in the afternoons that had finally sent Frankie to the lawyer. She was glad for Lust for Life's steady money then.

Steady at least for the short term, that is. Frankie had been hired just two years ago as an assistant to the head writer and quickly promoted when he'd had a nervous breakdown. She was the fifth head writer in six years.

And every time Brady Stephens called her into his office, she expected to hear him say "The network's pulling the plug. Tell the staff." And every time, she sat here berating herself for not putting more in savings, for not getting her resume out there, for not finishing that Great American Novel that would surely sell for millions when it went to film.

Good lord, in the time Frankie had been playing in the daytime TV sandbox, even her ex had finished and sold a novel that was coming out this month. Then again, Brian's father being a golfing buddy of the publisher probably helped get that new author's proverbial foot in the door.

A door opened. A gregarious voice boomed. "Frankie, come in, come in. You weren't waiting long, were you?" Brady was always obsequiously polite in front of others, so it didn't surprise her to find someone else in the executive's office when she entered. Standing by one of the butter-yellow designer arm chairs was a tall, dark-haired man in a black pinstripe suit, white shirt and coal black tie. It was hard to guess his age but Frankie pegged him on the sad side of fifty. His craggy face gave him the air of an old gunslinger, and she half-expected him to greet her with a rich, baritone "howdy, ma'am," when he held out his hand.

She had the vocal tone right, but the words wrong. In a deep, but cultivated voice, he said, "Hello, Ms. McNally, I'm Victor Pendergrast."

As if propelled by an unseen magnet, she crossed the three miles of plush carpeting in Brady's office and shook Mr. Pendergrast's hand.

"I bet you get kidded a lot," Frankie said by way of suave introduction. At his curious look, she explained, "Pendergrast Soaps. The sponsor of Lust." When he didn't respond to that,

she offered up one of Pendergrast's best known slogans: "*When you're feeling dirty, You'll want Pendergrast in your hands.*"

It was a bane of her existence that her blush was as uncontrollable as it was intense. Now, as she looked over broad-shouldered, masculine Victor Pendergrast, she imagined he was kidded quite a lot with that slogan and hadn't minded it one effing bit. She was sure the color of her face was matching the color of her hair about now.

"I'm sorry," she murmured when Victor cut her off with a smile and a wave of his hand. "The soap is the sponsor of Lust for Life," she explained. "Not lust itself. And I didn't mean..."

"I did hear my fair share of that," he said, his eyes twinkling. (Wow—Frankie would exchange wild blushes for eye twinkling in a New York minute. Maybe there was a self-help book on that.)

Brady walked over and finished the introductions. "Vic is here to help us out," he said, gesturing for Frankie and Victor to sit while he leaned against his parking-lot sized desk. "So I thought you could take him around, introduce him to the team." For Brady, "team" was a euphemism for "peasants."

Help us out? She looked Victor up and down. Maybe he'd been a head writer for one of the competition and was now retired? No, more likely he'd been involved with Lust for Life during its heyday, which meant she'd have to find diplomatic ways to steer him away from stories featuring big hair and kids who said "groovy."

Brady was going on to extol Frankie's background to Victor, surprising her with the accuracy of his memory. Her degrees, her literary fiction mentors, her stint as an assistant editor at an artsy independent press editing fiction and a few play anthologies, which led her to a playwright who wrote for General Hospital under a pseudonym, which landed her some script writing for Lust for Life, which got her on board as a full-timer as assistant to the head writer, and the prompt promotion when that fellow left "for personal reasons." Sometimes it was hard even for her to believe that she'd evolved so far, from working class product of a single-mom household to network television. Or perhaps this was really devolution?

While Brady prattled, she stole glances at Victor. He listened with a benign, friendly smile, nodding at Brady's occasional jokes. Whatever his real background, he clearly didn't need the dough. His suit was no off-the-rack polyester blend. It had the suppleness and gleam of silk, and you don't buy off-the-rack for a physique like that anyway. *He must work out. Or he has big bones. No wedding band but a big school-type ring with a few diamonds glistening on his right hand.*

"I'd be happy to take Victor around," Frankie said at the end of Brady's dissertation. She looked at Victor. "Do you want to schedule something? I can ask my secretary to call you." After a call to the Missing Persons Bureau located her, of course.

"No time like the present." He smiled back, already standing.

"I..." She wanted to get back to work. She didn't trust the peasants to come up with anything for Donovan that was quite right, and if she could just have one uninterrupted hour, she knew she could work something out.

In fact, if she could get the Donovan stuff out of the way, she could get started on a new idea she'd been itching to write—a provocative story line for the show's latest ingénue, Faye Reilly. The character of Faye had only been introduced on the show in the past year. Oh, she'd been around as Donovan's little sister for years before that, but they'd decided to give her the soap-opera Rapid Aging Pill and turn her into a hormone-beaming college freshman in order to create some love triangles and angst-ridden tales sure to appeal to the younger crowd. But Faye's

summer sizzler story concocted by Frankie's predecessor had fizzled. He'd paired her with a geeky type whose bad acting and skeletal frame made him the gossip of the fan blogs. Now Frankie had plans, though, big plans....

Brady stood as well, signifying the meeting was over.

"Good, good....you two get going." Brady walked them to the door. "I'll have Serena set you up with an office by tomorrow, Vic. Great to see you, great to see you. Say hello to your aunt for me...."

In the hushed hallway Frankie walked at a good clip in front of Victor. Okay, she'd do a rapid fire tour and shake him free. And Serena could stick him in some cubicle tomorrow, and she'd hand him busy work—continuity checking, condensing Raeanne's summaries, and editing out Nory's tendency to throw in a country music line or two as she powered through her breakdowns. That would be enough to keep him out of her hair and contributing.

"So," she said to make small talk as they waited for the elevator, "how long have you been a writer?"

Victor stood with his hands clasped in front of him as if he was a soldier "at ease."
"Actually, I've never written teleplays."

The elevator arrived and they stepped on. *Oh good.* She smashed the button for her floor. *This is far worse than I could have imagined.* "So you're a soap Pendergrast?"

"As a matter of fact, I am." He flashed a smile, then stared straight ahead, adopting his military at ease stance once again.

An explosive-detecting ping went off in Frankie's brain. Brady had told Victor to "say hi to his aunt." With wide eyes, she looked at Victor anew.

"You're Augustinia Pendergrast's nephew?" she asked in a reverent tone.

"The one and only."

The elevator whooshed open and they stepped out while Frankie absorbed this new reality. There were two Pendergrasts on the board of the soap company, and Augustinia was one. Victor must be the other.

He was no flunky slumming it while he figured out what to do with retirement. He was a Pendergrast agent come to monitor their moves. She'd shake him as soon as she could and get back to work.

It took her exactly twenty minutes to "shake" Victor Pendergrast. That's the moment she stood outside Raeanne's cubicle, introducing the two. She'd already taken him on the nickel tour of the writers' suite, including a stop by Kayla's empty desk and her own cluttered office. She'd caught Nory and Hank in the coffee room and blitzkrieged from there to Raeanne's Palace of Pleasure. At least it seemed that way to Frankie. New Age music drifting from the woman's hard drive, a lavender scent stick in the corner of her desk, a poster poem on the cubicle wall. And Raeanne herself, all soft and curvy, sticking out her bust, er, hand, for Victor to shake.

"Why, how nice to meet you! I've been a Pendergrast products woman for forever," she gushed, hand fluttering to her chest. "When I was in college, I couldn't wait to get home on weekends to soak in Pendergrast Milk Bath. My goodness, my skin would be so soft after that you could have used me as a pillow!"

Pillow. Raeanne. Pillows. Raeanne's...

How did she do it?

“Well,” Frankie interrupted, “that’s nice. But I have some work to do so...”

But Raeanne didn’t budge. “You go right on, Frankie darlin’. I can take Mr. Pendergrast around and show him the set an all. You haven’t seen that, have you? And I can tell you all about our audience share and how we’re plannin’ on expanding it.”

“Victor. Please call me Victor.”

Raeanne was already brushing past Frankie, linking her arm through Victor’s as she went.

“I’m sure you’ll be as starstruck as I was the first time I set eyes on the set.” She looked back over her shoulder at Frankie. “Don’t you worry yourself. I’ll take care of him.” And then to Victor, “Frankie is such a workhorse. Dedicated to her job as the day is long.”

Workhorse? Why did that sound so...unexceptional and...ugly?

Faye grabbed Carla by the arm and pulled her away from the party, but especially away from Gabe. Fury rose in her eyes.

“What did I do?” Carla sputtered as they stepped outside the Reilly Tavern. She put her hands on her well-rounded hips and thrust out her ample bosom, accentuated by a skin-tight leopard-print dress. Carla always wore slutty clothes designed to draw attention to the part of her anatomy a man’s eyes lingered on.

“You know exactly what you did, you brazen hussy!” Faye slapped her.

Carla rubbed her cheek. “Why, you....” She lunged at Faye, but Faye stepped back, causing Carla to fall into a trash can. When Carla stood, wet noodles and orange rinds hung from her arms, and an onion peel decorated her nose.

“You’re just jealous, you little twit,” Carla raged. “You’ll never be able to keep him.”

Faye laughed. “Oh, I know how to keep them, Carla. You might know how to get them. But I know how to keep them.”

She stormed off.

Frankie flicked off the television late that afternoon, trying to remember when she’d plotted that scene. Oh yes, now it came back to her—it was right after the last Lust anniversary shindig. That was the one where Raeanne had been flirting with the fellow from network, the new guy everybody thought was such a hottie.

Watching the scene ignited a twinge of discomfort. She had to stop using the show and her breakdowns for it—even if a lot of them eventually ended up in the recycle bin and not on-air—as a sort of therapy for her wounded heart and bruised ego. Surely there was something wrong with that. And surely someone would notice at some point.

Doesn’t matter, she said to comfort herself. That hottie from network didn’t last long enough to figure it out. Nobody associated with Lust lasted long.

And that, m’dear, is why you shouldn’t worry about Victor Pendergrast breathing down your neck. He’ll probably stick around for a week, get bored, and go back to his hedge funds and polo meets.

She really couldn't spend time worrying about him. She had too much other work to do, most notably the whole Luke Blades fiasco. None of her writers were beating down her door with ideas. In her short tenure as boss, she'd noticed already they weren't quick to respond to ASAP requests, and she needed to fix that, to learn better managerial and leadership skills. They had to understand that when she said "jump," the correct response was "how high," not "ho hum."

More books, that was the trick. She was clicking her way to a business management site, when Kayla buzzed her.

"Mr. Pendergrast was wondering if there's an office space he can occupy," she said, her tone a whispery hush, quite different from the dramatic tones she'd used to fetch Frankie to Brady's office.

Office space? What was she—building management?

"Um, tell him to check with Brady's people on that one, okay? They're supposed to set him up, not me. I'm a little busy here." As soon as she flicked off the phone, she regretted abdicating power. That's not the way to be a leader, she thought, by palming off a problem. She hit the button for her secretary. Voicemail. Kayla must have already been making the call to Victor.

Frankie stood, looking at the piles of papers, books, scripts, and more littering her office. All right. She might not be able to give Mr. Pendergrast an office, but she would be able to keep him busy. She gathered an armful of materials about the show and dumped them on Kayla's desk, penning a quick note she affixed to the top of the bunch. "Background info and some work for Victor. Please deliver." Kayla looked at it and nodded, finishing her call.

Frankie brushed her hands together. There, that was managerial.

Right?

She threw herself back into her work, pushing aside thoughts of Raeanne, Victor, Kayla, and the thousand petty difficulties that beset her. For the rest of the day, she was lost in Lust's stories, moving the characters around in her head and on the computer screen like chess pieces, consulting story bibles about past relationships, looking up notes on actor contracts to see where renewal negotiations would fall within a story arc, even plotting out ratings upticks against a rough outline of past story climaxes. By the time she realized she was the last person in the office, dark had descended.

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