

**"THE SECRETS OF ACTION SCREENWRITING is the best book on the practical nuts-and-bolts mechanics of writing a screenplay that I've ever read - Ted Elliott, co-writer "Pirates Of The Caribbean", "Shrek", "Mask Of Zorro"**

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# **THE SECRETS OF ACTION SCREENWRITING**

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**FULLY REVISED AND EXPANDED!  
NEW CHAPTERS \* NEW MATERIAL**



**A step-by-step guide from Ideas through Final Draft, Rug Pulls to Popeye Points to Weapons For Weirdos from the writer of "nineteen" produced screenplays.**

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**THE SECRETS OF  
ACTION SCREENWRITING**

by  
**William C. Martell**

**FIRST STRIKE PRODUCTIONS**

**THE SECRETS OF ACTION SCREENWRITING**

**New Revised Edition**

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First Strike Productions  
11012 Ventura Blvd #103  
Studio City, CA 91604

<http://www.ScriptSecrets.Net>

Bill's book THE SECRETS OF ACTION SCREENWRITING is "The best book on the practical nuts-and-bolts mechanics of writing a screenplay I've ever read." - Ted Elliott, co-writer "The Mask Of Zorro", "Shrek", "Pirates Of The Caribbean 1-4", "The Lone Ranger".

"His book is dangerous. I feel threatened by it." - Roger Avary, Oscar winning screenwriter, "Pulp Fiction", "Beowulf".

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"William C. Martell is the Robert Towne of made for cable movies," - Washington Post reviewer David Nuttycombe.

"There's an art to writing for guys like Chuck Norris, and thanks to Bill Martell's book I was prepared." - Genia Shipman, "Walker Texas Ranger", "Sons Of Thunder".

# INTRODUCTION

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Welcome to the new edition of *Secrets Of Action Screenwriting*. You know, I never set out to write a best selling screenwriting book that would go for \$510 as a rare edition on Amazon when it went out of print. All I ever wanted to do was write screenplays. After selling a script to a producer with a deal at Paramount, I quit my warehouse job and moved to Los Angeles to begin writing full time. I subscribed to every screenwriting newsletter or magazine, including the little newsletter that would eventually become *Script Magazine*. Almost every article was from some guru trying to sell their book or class. When I complained that no one seemed to have any actual screenwriting experience, the newsletter gave me a regular column... without pay.

As I continued to sell scripts and have them actually get produced, my friends started giving me their action and thriller scripts to read for feedback... and I found myself typing up the same notes again and again. So I created a “master list” of notes in a red booklet. Now I could say, “Read page 1, page 17, page 32 and page 49.” When the booklet expanded to 100 pages, a friend suggested I throw a cover on it and sell it. That was the first version of this book, made at a copyshop in the early 1990s; and up until *this* version, some of the chapters and sections remained completely unchanged. If you are one of the hundred people with one of those booklets, you have a real collector’s item.

Another friend thought that little red booklet was the best screenwriting book he had ever read, and suggested I expand it and find a publisher. I wrote some new material, beefing the book up to 240 pages, then sent it to several publishers who specialized in film and screenwriting books. They all turned it down for the same reason - it focused on a single genre. One of the publishers suggested I rewrite the book so that it would be about general screenwriting and let them look at the new version. I thought they were all missing the point - the shelves were already flooded with general screenwriting books, but there wasn’t a single book on how to write a specific genre. And *Secrets Of Action* worked well as a general screenwriting book even though it *also* contained techniques used in the action genre. I believed in my book.

So I took the money from my next screenplay sale, found a printer, and became my own publisher. When that run sold out, I switched printers and did another couple of runs. I was the top selling screenwriting book in the Sam French bookstores - they couldn’t keep them on the shelves! Amazon sold hundreds every month, and the book ended up a featured selection of a film and theater bookclub. Other books that focused on a single genre began popping up on the bookstore shelves... many from the same publishers who wanted me to rewrite this book.

Those old chapters and sections from the original “master list” of script notes bothered me - they needed a page one rewrite. Plus, many of the film references were decades out of date. I decided not to do another print run until I’d done a complete rewrite on the book... which became difficult, because my real job is writing screenplays. For a few years this book remained out of print while I wrote screenplays, did endless rounds of studio meetings and did “jury duty” on Film Festival juries around the world.

But now the time has come to revise the book, to add what I've learned over the past few years and examine the way the action film has evolved in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. I have not only updated the book, I've almost doubled it in length by added new techniques and tools and digging deeper into why one film is a classic and another is now forgotten. The last version of the book was 240 pages, this version is over 460 pages!

# TOOLS, NOT RULES

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The purpose of this book is to give you the tools necessary to write an action or thriller screenplay, not to tell you how to write. There are places in the book where I might say "On page 25, THIS happens"... Those are guidelines, not part of some by-the-numbers formula which must be adhered to. Whether your Plot Point happens on page 24 or 26 or 32 or doesn't happen at all, depends on the individual script you are writing. Every screenplay and every story is different.

Instead of rules or formula, think of this book as a tool box. Some of the tools you may never use, other tools you may end up using constantly. One of the reasons for reading a book on screenwriting or any creative endeavor is to call attention to tools and techniques you may have never noticed before. There's a certain "Rashomon Effect" where five people might watch the same movie or read the same script and each comes away with a different technique – one of the purposes of a book is to point out the techniques I have noticed after many viewings and studying the screenplay... and explaining the way the techniques work. You may have never noticed that tool before, and it may be exactly what you need for your next screenplay.

There is only one rule in screenwriting: the script has to work. No one cares what method you use to create the script or how many "rules" you followed or broke, they only care that the script is so exciting that they can't put it down... and they can't wait to buy it and put it on screen. Skip the rules, use the tools to write the best script possible.

Ready to open the toolbox and build something?

- William C. Martell, December 2011, Studio City, CA.

# THE VILLAIN'S PLAN

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The most important element of an action film isn't the hero, isn't the sidekick, isn't the dialogue and isn't the plot. The most important element of an action film is *\*the Villain's Plan\**.

Why? Hitchcock said, "The better the villain, the better the picture". The Villain's Plan is the fuel for the story. The Villain brings the conflict, and story *\*is\** conflict... no matter the genre. In a romantic comedy, if boy can easily get girl you don't have a story. In a drama, nothing very dramatic can happen unless there is a conflict. Conflict is the key to story... and that is what makes the Villain (or antagonist or force of antagonism) the most important character in your screenplay. Take your average cop show on television - it always begins with a crime, and *\*then\** the cops become involved. No crime, nothing for the cops to do! That CSI team can not begin searching for evidence unless there is a crime. The Homicide detectives can't start questioning witnesses unless there was some crime for them to witness. The mediums and mentalists and Monks can't do anything until the villain has committed some crime. When writing your action screenplay, remember that the villain is your most important character - they bring the conflict.

Let's use the quintessential action film "Die Hard" as an example. The Hero's desire and need is to reunite with his wife and children for Christmas. Is that an action movie? If you throw in a couple fist fights and a car chase is it an action movie? No.

But the villain's plan in "Die Hard" is to rob the Nakatomi Corporation's safe of millions of dollars on Christmas Eve. That's an action plot. There is an exciting story even without John McClane. In fact, if you were to delete all of the Bruce Willis scenes, you'd have an action film about Robbers vs. FBI agents. Maybe Agent Johnson ("no, the other one") would have been the hero. If Robert Davi's scenes were deleted, maybe Officer Powell would be the hero. But even without Reggie Vel Johnson, there would *\*still\** be an action movie. Because the Villain brings the conflict and story is conflict. No Villain, no story!

# SIZE MATTERS

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If your script is about a villain robbing the First National Bank in Omaha, it's a small movie. If the villain's plan is to rob every bank in Omaha on the same day, that's a medium sized movie. If your villain's plan is to rob Fort Knox, that's "Goldfinger". The difference between a "small movie" and "big movie" usually comes down to scale of the Villain's Plan or what is at stake. Don't just have the villain want to kill one person, have him want to wipe out an entire city or kill someone important. The higher the stakes, the more we want our hero to stop the villain.

What are stakes? Here's what my dictionary says:

- 1) Something that is wagered in a game, race or contest.
- 2) A monetary or commercial interest. Investment, share, or involvement in something.
- 3) A personal or emotional concern, interest or involvement.
- 4) An investment.
- 5) A prize or reward.
- 6) To risk (something) in the outcome of any uncertain venture.

The words "involvement" and "emotion" and "risk" are key to the definition of "stakes" and key to your Villain's Plan. If your Hero has no stake in the outcome of the story, we won't be emotionally involved in the story. If your Villain's Plan doesn't impact the Hero and the world around him in any way, the plan doesn't matter and neither does the story. No stakes - no story. The greater the stakes, the greater the audience's involvement in the story; so we usually want to play for the highest stakes possible.

An action script needs \*global\* stakes or \*personal\* stakes - or both. If the Hero doesn't stop the Villain's Plan, it will screw up the world or screw up the Hero's life forever. The Villain's Plan is either going to be something so big it effects the world, or that big life-altering event that personally changes the Hero's life forever. Global stakes are external, personal stakes are emotional. A great movie has both, which is why \*Die Hard\* works so well.

The main difference between a "small film" and a big summer action film is what is at stake. Rob your father's jewelry store or rob Fort Knox, kill the guy who has been sleeping with your spouse or assassinate the President, burn down your enemy's house or set off a dirty bomb in an enemy country. When we dial the stakes down, we end up with a drama like "Before The Devil Knows You're Dead" - nothing wrong with that at all, but it's not really an action movie. Be aware, when you lower the global stakes you really need to raise the personal stakes as high as possible to compensate. When you are coming up with your story and your Villain's Plan, look at the size of the stakes.

# ACTIVE VILLAINS

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Your Villain needs to be an active character, so his plan has to be *\*active\**. He must want to *\*do something\**. Rob a bank, blow up a plane, assassinate the President, take over Chicago, steal government secrets from a high security vault, make a million dollar drug deal, go back in time and kill the mother of his enemy, take over a corporation, or create an earthquake which turns Nevada into beachfront property.

If the Villain just wants to be left alone, you've got a dull film on your hands. Why? Because the Hero is the character who just wants to be left alone. Look at "Shane" or "The Gunfighter" or "Witness" or the last "Rambo" movie or just about any action film. The hero is trying to get through life without shooting anyone, then the Villain sets his plan into motion, and the hero must do something to stop him. The Villain is *\*active\** - their plan is what kicks off the story, and the Hero is usually *\*reactive\** (which is not the same as passive) and must stop the Villain's Plan.

You can have the most vile, un-lovable, ugly hero in the world, and as long as the Villain's Plan makes sense and is active, we will still identify with the hero and root for him to save the day. Because the Villain's Plan is the fuel for action, not the hero's appeal. If you don't believe me, check out Lee Marvin in "Point Blank" or Mel Gibson in the remake version "Payback". These are not nice people and in any other film they would be villains! I am using the terms "Villain" and "Hero" in this book for "antagonist" and "protagonist" because there's less typing involved... and we're dealing with action movies. We'll get into Bad Guy Leads - anti-heroes and anti-villain's - in the next chapter, and why sometimes Good Guys Wear Black.

The Villain's Plan will be to achieve a specific goal by the end of the story, and only the hero can stop him. The villain is usually the driving force in an action or thriller script. Their plan is what creates the forward momentum. One of the reasons why there was no *\*Daredevil 2\** is because the first film had a Villain who was not *\*active\** and the film ended up ho-hum instead of exciting. Kingpin has no plan at all, so Daredevil has nothing to stop.

Kingpin wants to maintain a status quo - he wants nothing to change. That's a non-goal. It's something he *\*already has\**, so there's nothing to pursue. Nothing active for Kingpin to do. He has already achieved his goal - which makes him *\*passive\** instead of active. Had Daredevil been active closing in on Kingpin - attacking Kingpin in scene after scene - then Kingpin could be *\*reactive\**. But Daredevil isn't doing anything that threatens Kingpin. We have no direct conflict in the story!

A Villain's Plan needs to be active. Not just maintaining his evil empire or hiding from authorities or anything else that is not actively doing something that the Hero must stop. What is your Villain's Plan? How are they working throughout the screenplay to achieve it? How does the Hero get in their way?

# MOTIVATIONALLY SPEAKING

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The villain brings the conflict and story is conflict, so your Villain's Plan is your story. A stupid Villain's Plan makes for a stupid story. A flawed Villain's Plan makes for a flawed story. An unbelievable Villain's Plan makes for an unbelievable story. A clever Villain's Plan gives you a clever story. The more clever the Villain's Plan, the more clever the Hero must be to thwart it... and vice versa. If the audience can't believe the plan will work or that the villain can get away with it, or if they don't understand why the villain would want to do it in the first place, they'll reject your story. You never want to make things easier for the hero by creating a flawed Villain's Plan - because that ends up making your Hero look stupid.

Your Villain's Plan should be the exact thing we'd do if we were the villain, and needs to make sense given the situation. Which means your villain needs to be motivated, and their motivation needs to make sense. Be logical. Villains who are pure evil are not very believable, and not very interesting. Two dimensional characters - even if the film is in 3D - come off as cartoons. If Fred Flintstone threatened to kill you, would you be worried? Just as the Villain's Plan has to make sense or the whole story doesn't make sense, the \*villain\* needs to make sense.

Your villain (and Villain's Plan) even needs to make sense even if they are crazy... maybe especially if they are crazy. Both Dietrich (Collin Cunningham) in my "Hard Evidence" MOW and The Joker (Heath Ledger) in "The Dark Knight" may be insane and unpredictable, but they have a plan that our hero must stop. The Joker keeps saying that "It's all part of the plan" but is obviously out of his mind... except all of his insanity adds up to a plan: anarchy. He is a true terrorist, creating crazy situations that throw day-to-day life in Gotham City into complete chaos. And we understand that as a plan. When he pits the ferryboat full on convicts against the ferryboat full of commuters just to see what happens; he is tearing down society and civility. His plan is to make us all crazy - and he gives us many different and conflicting motivations for doing this. Though he's crazy, he has an objective that makes sense.

Even a serial killer has some sort of motivation and some sort of plan. They don't kill random people with random weapons for no reason - even Jigsaw from the "Saw" movies has a reason for making ex-drug addicts stick their hands into a bucket of syringes to find the key to some door that may lead to freedom. A serial killer is just like any other villain - they need a motivated plan that makes some sort of sense. Watch "Manhunter" or "Silence Of The Lambs" (better yet, read the book by Thomas Harris) for an idea of how the FBI uses psychological profiles to nab serial killers. The Crawford character in both of those movies is based on real life FBI serial killer profiler John Douglas, and his book "Mindhunter: Inside The FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit" (written with Malcolm Olshaker) is a fascinating look at what motivates serial killers. There is always a pattern and always a motivation. The "because he's crazy" excuse for an unmotivated villain just doesn't work.

# UNPREDICTABLE PLANS

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Though your Villain has to have a plan, it should not be predictable. The best Villain's Plans have a twist in them. They look like one thing but are actually another... and sometimes even something else after that. In "Die Hard" at first it seems like Hans is going to hold all of the people at the Christmas Eve party as hostage for ransom... and it appears as if what he wants is for some political prisoners to be released. But underneath that is his real plan - to break into the vault at Nakatomi and steal \$640 million in bearer bonds. The Police plan on cutting all of the power to the tower to force Hans to give up... but that is part of Hans' plan! Cutting the power will allow him to open the vault. The plan seems to be one thing but is actually something else.

In "Goldfinger", the Villain's Plan seems to be to break into Fort Knox and steal the USA's gold reserves. Bond tells Goldfinger that his plan will not work - the time it would take to load all of the gold onto a train, and the weight of the gold, makes it impossible. Goldfinger laughs and explains that his plan was never to steal the gold - he has a dirty atomic bomb and his plan is to contaminate the gold - making it worthless... and all of the other gold in the world (including his stockpile) worthless more. You never want the Villain's Plan to be predictable, you want it to be twisted and clever.

# WHAT IF THINGS GO RIGHT?

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The plan also has to make sense and work. A stupid villain's plan makes for a stupid movie. The plan may make sense until the hero stops the villain... but what if the hero failed? Would the villain's plan have worked? Let's say you write a thriller about a group of bank employees who decide to rob their own bank in the two hour period one day where the security cameras are being serviced and the electronic lock on the vault is off. The employee-robbers study a photo of the same man, cut from a magazine, so that when the police question them they can all describe the same robber. But one bank employee is reluctant to break the law, and locks himself in the vault. Now the others have two hours to get him out, maybe shoot him so that it looks like the fake robber shot him, and get their money. Our hero has just changed the game, and the focus of the story is now our hero in the vault. Sounds exciting, right?

But what if the hero had gone along with the scheme? Okay, they rob their own bank, they all describe the same suspect to the police, and the police are now on a permanent wild-goose chase looking for the menswear model on page 28 of last month's Newsweek. Except for one problem. How did the menswear model know that they would be servicing the video cameras at that exact time? And how would he know the electronic lock on the vault would also be off at that exact time? There had to be an inside man. So the police begin investigating and questioning all of the bank employees, and looking for anything unusual in their recent past. And even if they sweat them all and miraculously no one in this group of non-criminals slips up, they will keep watching them until someone accidentally spends a penny more than they earned, and then they are all busted. This is a stupid plan, because it \*requires\* the hero to lock himself in the vault and ruin the original plan. You want to look all the way down the line and make sure the villain's plan works if everything happens to go right - because the villain is \*planning\* on his plan working... not planning on the hero screwing it up.

# PUNISHMENT FITS THE CRIME

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Newton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Law is that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. That means that if the villain jay walks, the cop doesn't draw his gun and shoot him. If the Villain's Plan is to kill everyone in our hero's family, the reason can't be that the hero once splashed mud on the villain's clothes... unless you're writing a satire like "Slaughterhouse 5". The villain's actions and motivations must make sense, and he has to react in a believable way. It's okay for actions to escalate (in fact it's often required), but don't try skipping from loud words to machine guns. The punishment needs to fit the crime even if the villain is dishing it out.

The Villain's Plan shouldn't be so complicated that it becomes incredible. Every once in a while you can see a film where the Villain's Plan is so complex that there has to be an easier way for the bad guy to make a buck! "Law Abiding Citizen" has a bunch of story problems, including an attempt to switch the hero and villain in the middle of the film (which never works), but Gerard Butler's plan in that film is just silly. He's a normal guy whose wife and child are killed and the DA (Jamie Foxx) made a deal that sets the killer free. So Butler murders the killer, then allows himself to be arrested so that he can have a good alibi when he tries to kill Foxx. Um, getting arrested \*on purpose\*? That does not sound like a good plan to me. But Butler has already dug a huge tunnel - complete with several rooms - so that he can get in and out of jail whenever he wants. The tunnel goes to one of the Solitary Confinement cells, and he has to kill another prisoner so that he can get sent to solitary... and by good luck, ends up in the very solitary cell that his tunnel is under. Um, since he ends up in prison anyway, and kills a guy - why not just kill Foxx \*before\* he gets arrested for murdering the guy who killed his wife and kid? He may have actually gotten away with that.

Beware of any plan where the villain plans to make the hero's life hell by killing the people around him... um, why not just kill the hero and get it over with? Less chance of the villain being caught by killing the hero's kindergarten teacher. The closest distance between two points is a direct line - no need for some Rube Goldberg plan with a dozen chances to fail and even more chances for the villain to get caught. If you want revenge, just shoot the guy. Wouldn't that be easier? Quicker? Less chance of getting caught? The minute the Villain's Plan begins looking silly, you're in big trouble. If the Villain's Plan doesn't work, neither will the movie.

A great villain's revenge plot can be found in J. Lee Thompson's "Cape Fear" (1962) where Robert Mitchum's plan is simply to follow and hound Gregory Peck until the man cracks. Mitchum's plan is to never break the law, just break Peck. He stalks the family, kills the family dog (probably a misdemeanor), and the police can do nothing to stop him because he has done nothing illegal... he wants to goad Peck into crossing the line and doing something illegal, so Peck will be arrested. This is a great game of cat and mouse, where the villain is so clever we worry that he'll actually get away with it. If you haven't seen the original version of this film, add it to your Netflix queue.

# IN 5 EASY LESSONS

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The other way that “the punishment fits the crime” is critical is the crime itself. Whatever the villain’s plan is, the degree of difficulty will be tied to whatever is at stake. If Goldfinger’s plan is to rob Fort Knox, and he just shows a gate guard a fake ID and he drives in and finds the big vault of gold on “day lock” and pops it open and fills up his truck and drives off, that is not believable. Stealing \$200 billion in gold needs to be \$200 billion worth of difficult. You need a flying circus of hot babes in crop dusters that spew poison gas that will kill all of the soldiers, you need your own army in gas masks, you need explosives to blast open gates, you need a giant industrial laser to cut open that huge steel door... none of this is going to be easy! Getting that gold will be \$200 billion worth of difficult. This is true for the over-all plan, plus anything small that happens in a scene - the risk and degree of difficulty has to be equal to the reward. If the hero lost his keys and has to break into his house, it can be easy. If he is breaking into the villain’s house, it must be difficult... or we won’t believe it. The difficulty of the task must be equal to the reward. If you make it too difficult for the villain or too easy for the hero, we won’t believe it.

# SILLY VILLAINS

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Your villain has committed the perfect murder in order to take over a multi-million dollar corporation from his partner. The Detective starts nosing around, and discovers some minor evidence not enough to convict, but enough to convince him that the villain is a suspect. More evidence mounts - but still not enough to convict. In Act 3 the Detective confronts the villain, usually in these films at a dinner party or at a country club. What does the villain do? He pulls out a machine gun and tries to kill the Detective. Why? So that the Detective won't continue his investigation.

Wait a minute! If the police didn't have enough evidence before, they sure do after the villain shoots up a dinner party!

In real life the villain would probably just call his attorney, and fight it out in court... where he has a good chance of winning. How many real life crooks have we seen walk after their "dream team" lawyers found some loophole in the law or created reasonable doubt where there wasn't any. If the villain absolutely had to kill the cop, he would find some perfect murder scenario. Maybe siphon off the brake and steering fluids from the cop's car and arrange a meeting late one night at the end of a long, winding cliff side road. He'd find some way to kill the cop that could never be traced back to him, because he isn't a silly villain. It's important to question every single move your villain makes and make sure it's logical and not far-fetched or too complicated or just plain silly.

# THUNDERBALL THEORY

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The Villain's Plan should be threatening to others... even the people watching the film or reading your script, if possible. It's nice to have the hero save himself, but if he can save the rest of the city too, even better. In "The Satan Bug" - a great thriller from 1965 - someone has stolen top secret ger warfare canisters from a government lab, and spy-guy George Maharis must find them before the terrorist leader (a great Richard Basehart) unleashes them on Los Angeles. If he doesn't outwit the terrorist and find the canisters in time, millions will die. The Villain's Plan poses a major threat to others.

But, what would have happened to Los Angeles if Maharis fails? How can the audience know what this "satan bug" will do to people so that they can be properly frightened? If I say I can kill you with this ripe tomato, you have no idea how I could do that, or how painful death by ripe tomato might be. What we need is a demonstration. In "The Satan Bug" Los Angeles is the second target - the first is a small town in Florida where everyone is instantly killed by the bug. They show Maharis some raw footage of the town full of bodies as part of his briefing. Now that the audience has seen what the "satan bug" can do, they don't want that to happen to the nice people in Los Angeles...

I call this the Thunderball Theory - in "Thunderball" Largo steals \*two\* nuclear weapons, so that he can test one just to prove to the authorities that he's not kidding. The second nuke is hidden somewhere in Miami. Now James Bond must stop Largo before he kills all of the nice people in Miami. If that sounds familiar to you, it's because it's also the plot to "True Lies", which also features a demonstration of the nuke on one of the Florida Keys before Ah-nuld has to save his wife and daughter and stop the villains from nuking Miami. For some reason, they always pick Miami! If your villain has some sort of high tech weapon, make sure he or she tests it so that we can see what it does. That will help us imagine what might happen to those poor people in Miami.

Another aspect of this is fulfilling your promise to the audience. If Dennis Hopper in "Speed" says he's going to blow up that bus, the audience wants to see the bus explode. We've been thinking about that bus exploding for almost half the film - if it goes under 55mph it's gonna blow - so the only way we will truly be satisfied is if it explodes. We've been thinking about it for too long to have it \*not\* explode. There was a time when an action movie could get by with the hero completely preventing the Villain's Plan, but we live in the time of big spectacle entertainment. In "Air Force One", we want to see the plane crash into the ocean and disintegrate. You don't want the hero to prevent all of that excitement! We want to see things blow up on screen! So, instead of cutting the red wire (no - the green one) you might have the hero thwart the Villain's Plan by removing the bomb from a populated area to someplace where it can still blow up real good... just not hurt anyone. The threat of an explosion is kind of a promise you need to pay off - whether it's having the villain demonstrate the bomb, or having the bus or plane or villain explode at the end. If you promise us an explosion, we want to see it.

## MULTIPLE VILLAINS?

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The villain brings the conflict, and story is conflict; so if you have three villains you end up with three stories in one script. Difficult enough to tell one story in a 110 page screenplay, let alone three. This may explain why those Joel Schumacher “Batman” movies with a half dozen villains didn't work. If you have four villains with four Villain's Plans going on at the same time it's like playing pinball with the hero - he just bounces back and forth between stories until the story turns to mush. You end up with a bunch of subplots instead of one main plot.

The only way multiple villains work is if there is only *\*one\** villain's plan or if you have a “Red Harvest” situation. But wait, how can you have five villains and only one Villain's plan? They are either partners (which doesn't work very well) or you have a “ladder of henchmen” that leads to your main villain.

The problem with partners is that you have a two headed villain and often this cuts each villain's power in half - making each half as threatening. Plus we have an uneasy alliance between both villains, which may mean they spend just as much time trying to kill each other as they spend trying to kill the hero. And because we have to establish each villain and then establish their alliance, we are burning through script pages before we get around to the story. In order to keep more than one villain focused on the plan and not each other, it's a good idea to have one of the partners be in charge. In “The Dark Knight”, Salvatore Maroni (Eric Roberts) and Two Face (Aaron Eckhart) may partner with The Joker, but we know who is really in charge... it's all part of the plan.

Movies like “Point Blank” and the original “Get Carter” and “The Limey” and “Columbian” create a “ladder” of henchmen that the hero climbs to get to the main villain behind it all. Though those are all revenge movies, the “ladder” also works in other kinds of action movies where the hero may think Mr. Fairfax is the villain, but Fairfax is only working for Mr. Carter, and when Carter ends up working for Mr. Bronson... and each character we think is the villain is just a rung of the ladder - an employee of someone else. Eventually our hero gets to the top of the ladder - the actual villain who employs all of these henchmen. We have one Villain behind it all and one Villain's Plan, but the hero doesn't know that as he is climbing the ladder.

Both the Unequal Partners and Ladder Of Henchmen end up being *\*one\** villain and *\*one\** villain's plan when all is said and done, but the “Red Harvest” Situation really has two villains and two villains' plans. Even if you haven't read Dashiell Hammett's novel “The Red Harvest” you have probably seen one of the movies inspired by it: “Fistful Of Dollars” or “Last Man Standing” or “Miller's Crossing” or “Sukiyaki Western Django” or any of the others. These stories have our hero stuck in the middle between two warring groups, each lead by a strong villain. Usually both villains have the same plan - take over a city or state or planet - and our hero ends up playing one villain against the other so that they cancel each other out. Of course, he has to battle *\*both\** villains along the way. Though the “Red Harvest” Situation is usually two villains fighting over a territory, they can be fighting over *\*anything\** - a stolen nuke, a magic sword, a kidnapped scientist. The more original and interesting your villain's plan, the more interesting and original your screenplay.

~~Without a logical, well motivated, threatening villain's plan and an interesting and active villain you don't have a story. And without a story, what's the hero going to do? Collect unemployment?~~

# THE HERO'S JOB

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The hero's job is to stop the villain.

Indiana Jones has to stop the Nazis from getting control of the Lost Ark and winning World War 2. Batman has to stop The Joker from creating chaos in Gotham City. Those guys in "Armageddon" have to stop that big asteroid from slamming into Earth. Dirty Harry has to stop the Scorpio Killer from killing again.

Since the Villain's Plan fuels the story, the hero has to be someone who gets in the way of the plan. "The fly in the ointment, the monkey in the wrench," as John McClane says in "Die Hard". The hero can be a cop, a fireman, a private eye, a reporter, a regular guy, a pro-golfer, a lawyer, a scientist, a psychic, a sumo wrestler, or a weatherman. The more interesting the Hero's day job is, the more interesting the character. But whatever his day job is, it has to fit in with the Villain's Plan. Your hero is connected to your villain and Villain's Plan and the concept; so you can't just create a protagonist character and then plug them in to the story. They have to fit.

If the villain is smuggling weapons into the country, the odds of a weatherman being the only one who can stop him are pretty slim. That's going to seem contrived and inorganic and silly. More likely, the hero of this story is going to be in the Coast Guard, or a Customs Agent, or maybe even a longshoreman working at the docks who sees something suspicious... or someone related to one of those people. Your Hero will be someone who would logically come between the Villain and the success of their plan. Your Hero is not some random choice - the Hero is part of the story, and the story is the Villain's Plan. So, if you have always wanted to write a movie about a sumo wrestler, you can't just force him into the weapons smuggling story without making people wonder what the heck he's doing there. Your best plan there would be to \*start\* with the Sumo Wrestler character and find the Villain's Plan he logically gets in the way of.

The hero's "day job", personality, and emotional conflict are facets of the Villain's Plan. This is why there are so many cop and private eye heroes in old films. Cops will naturally get in the way of any criminal activity. It's called a "franchise" in the TV world. A franchise is what places a hero in the line of fire week after week. You can have a cop show or a crime lab show or a lawyer show, and you know criminal activities will be part of the story every week.

# DETECTIVE DAY JOBS

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My advice on hero's day jobs is to be creative. Don't make her a cop or a private eye, if you can give her a job you've never seen on screen before. In "The Ninth Gate" Johnny Depp plays a rare book dealer hired to steal a rare first edition for a client. In "The DaVinci Code" Tom Hanks plays a college professor who is an expert on codes and symbols. In the movies based on Tom Clancy novels, her Jack Ryan is an information analyst for the CIA who always ends up in the field (where he doesn't belong). In my "Crash Dive!" movie for HBO, my hero was a retired Naval Engineer who knew everything about how submarines work, but nothing about fighting or shooting guns... so he must use the \*submarine\* against the villains who have hijacked it. If at all possible, find a franchise that hasn't been used before, instead of making your hero a cop or an FBI profiler.

When a day job is over-used it becomes a cliché, even if it's true. Yes, police detectives solve crimes... but we've seen that so many times it seems old. Even television shows don't use police detectives and private eyes any more: they have Mentalists and Crime Scene Investigators and Human Lie Detectors and Blood Spatter Experts and Psychics. Movies like "Brick" and "Winter's Bone" take all of the elements of a standard private eye story and find unique characters and unusual worlds which make the films something we haven't seen before. Though both of those are indie films, Sharl Black's brilliant "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang" gives us a complicated version of an actor on a "ride along" who ends up in the middle of a slam-bam action private eye-type story. In my "Undercurrents" script the hero is a yacht captain investigating a murder on his boat while they're hundreds of miles from the nearest port.

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