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| Type of Material: | Script | Title: | CONFIDENTIAL |
| Number of Pages: | 116 | Author: | CONFIDENTIAL |
| Coverage type: | Two Reader/Basic Coverage | Circa: | Present |
| Payment type: | | Location: | St. Louis, Lin Fen (China) |
| Coverage Date: | | Genre: | Thriller |
| Analyst: | | | |

LOG LINE: CONFIDENTIAL

| | Excellent | Good | Needs Work | Rethink |
|--|-----------|------|------------|---------|
| Idea | | | | X |
| Overall execution | | | X | |
| Narrative/Structure | | | X | |
| Characters/Dialogue | | | X | |
| Effective Scene work | | | X | |
| Professional appearance: grammar, spelling, typos | | | X | |
| Commercial potential | | | | X |
| Readiness for Market | | | X | |

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| Scouting Recommendation: | |
| Yes | |
| Not at this time | X |

COMMENTS:

Jeff, thank you for letting us read this script. You have a knack for incorporating interesting details into your story (I love the sinking bullet trick on page 38), and you have definitely done your research. In addition, you handle the pacing and methodology of the investigation quite well...I could see you writing for LAW & ORDER or CSI.

That said, the overall experience fell flat for me. The ground your script explores has been thoroughly trodden, and in its present form, there is nothing that sets your script apart from the droves of similar scripts floating around Hollywood. The premise itself is very straightforward, and the characters and their relationship to the case don't evoke the visceral/emotional response of serial killer films like SEVEN, SILENCE OF THE LAMBS and CITIZEN X. Also, you employ some rather over-the-top narrative tricks to give us insight into Xerxes, and to lock him into the case. A lot of what you've done with him comes across as contrived or convenient. When I was reading your script, I could see the writer's hand at work, and I wasn't able to fully invest myself in the story; I could see you *trying* to make the case personal for both Xerxes and Charlotte, but it never really got there. As a result, I never felt a connection to the material.

Rethink the basic premise.

If you're going to write a serial killer spec in the current Hollywood climate, you absolutely must do two things: Come up with a unique hook for your premise and, even more importantly, build a relationship between your story and the audience. Of course, both of those should go together. A good example of this is the recent UNTRACEABLE, which revolves around a serial killer who is using hits/views on a website as the basis for how quickly his victims die. His site is hooked up to a webcam that shows his victim in some sort of diabolical contraption that is slowly killing him or her. The more visits the website gets, the faster the contraption works. Once the viewer count reaches 10 million, the victim is pretty much a goner. And when the F.B.I. tries to plead with the public to stop visiting the website (because they are, in essence, accessories to murder), the viewer count skyrockets. The story is ultimately a criticism of the detached, voyeuristic culture the internet has helped foster. Everybody and her brother is on the internet, so the audience can identify with the story, and questions naturally arise: If this were real life, would I sit in front of my computer and watch? Would my friends? Parents? The basic premise invites audience involvement.

One of the major questions you have to ask yourself is with this script is, "Who is my audience?" And then, "How is my story going to affect them personally? Why are they going to watch this? What sets my story apart from other serial killer films? What's the 'hook?'" Because those are the questions production companies and studios are going to be asking. The market is saturated with serial killer scripts, so yours has to stand out.

Taking the basic idea of a serial killer who is targeting runaway teens as a starting point, think about how you could raise the stakes for both the audience and your characters. As it stands, the recipients of Francis's message are mostly abusive parents. Because of this, there is already an element of dramatic disconnection inherent in the premise—most of your audience will, one hopes, not be abusive parents. So how could you make this universal? An off the top of my head example: What if the victims were daughters of people who have worked extremely hard to create a secure and comfortable life for their families; i.e., live the American Dream? They've worked such long hours, in fact, that they've raised latchkey kids. Francis sees abuse in what he considers to be neglect.

Even going in a direction like that, however, you still need a unique hook. Something in the way he captures and kills these girls. Maybe he works his way into the lives of the families in a manner that is seemingly innocuous at first, but in hindsight is diabolic, and brilliant in its execution. And it ties into the nature of his crime/message.

Note: The audience's involvement doesn't have to derive from something as thematically overt as my example or UNTRACEABLE. It could stem from creating a protagonist they can identify with—an everyman of sorts who gets drawn into the world of the serial killer (MIDNIGHT MEAT TRAIN is a good current example). I don't think you've done that with Xerxes.

Xerxes

In trying to introduce us to Xerxes as a rogue detective (and lock him into the case), you've resorted to some extreme plot devices that ultimately undermine our connection to him. Xerxes shooting an unarmed man and later letting Ben kill the abusive father of his (now deceased) girlfriend are two big examples. The scene with Alberto makes the same point, but without resorting to dramatic hyperbole. You can push the envelope pretty far (check out the original INSOMNIA), but you can't *show* the audience that you're pushing it; you can't let them see the man behind the curtain. I think you can get away with Xerxes shooting Quinn if there's a little bit more ambiguity about whether or not Xerxes *really* thought Quinn had a gun. But the scene with Lyle makes it all too obvious that you're trying to present Xerxes as a

loose cannon with a grudge against parents who abuse their children—sort of like Francis. (By the way, Charlotte’s change of heart in the wake of that incident is far too quick. I didn’t buy it.) If you’re going to go that route, I would suggest drawing it out over the course of the story, so that Xerxes’s growing fury and recklessness comes as a result of this case. Perhaps he was teetering on the edge beforehand, but held himself together. Now Francis is drawing out that dark side, and it’s really working on Xerxes. The deeper he gets into this case, the more he starts to think like Francis.

I think you also need to address some general story level coincidences as they relate to Xerxes’s and Charlotte’s personal relationships to the case. I can buy Francis being the one who killed Xerxes’s daughter (and, in fact, that works pretty well with the “parents working too hard and neglecting their daughters” angle) *if* Francis somehow manipulates things so that Xerxes will be one of the primaries on this case.

Also, I can buy Bella’s involvement if you make it clearer that Xerxes has taken this street girl under his wing (no pun intended) because he views himself as a surrogate father; and then show that, in essence, his work is getting in the way of his relationship with her, and that provides the perfect opportunity for Francis to strike and STILL make his point about how we neglect our children in favor of our work. (I think you could easily expand her role.) I would, however, put Bella in danger far earlier. Doing so would raise the personal stakes, and, in turn, the audience’s involvement.

I have trouble with Quinn and the incident at the diner—it seems too conveniently timed, especially when you stack it on top of all the other coincidences. And I can’t buy Charlotte being a victim of abuse herself. I think that’s taking dramatic unity a little too far.

Basically, my suggestion is to make sure all of your story and character elements fit together organically—address coincidences on both a macro and micro level (the fake-out bald cancer victim in the park is a good example of an individual moment that feels contrived). Any coincidence should be set up within the story world so that it comes across as a pay-off to a plant, rather than mere happenstance. Also, I think you need to rein in Xerxes, especially at the start, so that his character is not so far over-the-top as to be unrealistic. Attending to these issues will ensure a stronger degree of narrative verisimilitude that will in turn allow your audience to lose themselves in the story.

Summary

Contrary to what my coverage might suggest, your script has a lot of strengths—areas where other writers of similar scripts often drop the ball. It is well-researched and well-paced, makes good use of the details of the investigation and deftly explores how your detectives put two and two together. From that point of view, I think it’s obvious you know your genre inside out. Unfortunately, the story lacks a unique hook and the universal appeal that will set it apart from other serial killer scripts. It is interesting, but not dramatically engaging. It needs to be both. Work on coming up with organic ways to make it personal not only for your characters, but for your audience as well. Also, don’t try so hard right off the bat to show us that Xerxes is a loose cannon. You can be a lot more subtle and still get the point across.