

## How Not to Get Away with Murder: Turning Reality into Fiction

### **Introduction**

Before deciding to major in Film Production and Content Development, I originally aspired to be a detective. From a young age, I always had interest in the subject, and in turn consumed a multitude of detective and police television shows and films. Creating the thesis film *The Suicide Suspect* allowed me to step foot into both the film and detective world. Additionally, much of the media being released today nearly glorifies serial killers, and I wanted *The Suicide Suspect* to be different. The film still encapsulates the horrifyingly brilliant mind of a serial killer, while also leaving the audience uncomfortable and aware of their surroundings. Ultimately, *The Suicide Suspect's* main theme is to be watchful of who we surround ourselves with, which is an extremely important message in today's society.

### **Research**

As previously mentioned, the script's concept was inspired by the detective work, as well as a variety of television shows, including *Dexter* and *Criminal Minds*. However, a major detail that fictional television cannot capture is realism. The biggest issue with the initial draft of the script was what caused the lead detective to become suspicious of the grieving fiancé. Therefore, in order to realistically write about evidence that tips off detectives, I had to search for real life stories, not fictional ones.

Over the span of just a few days, I consumed over twenty *Forensic Files* episodes and paged through over a hundred synopses. I combed through every episode description throughout fifteen seasons and made note of any that included staged suicides, spousal homicide, overdoses, and misleading deaths, all of which were relevant to the plot of the script. I then watched each of these episodes in search of believable details that I could incorporate into my own crime scene.

## **Script Development**

Throughout noting the details of each episode, I temporarily integrated each instance into the script in hopes of finding one that worked. This was a long period of trial and error because certain ideas worked well in some areas, but would require the remainder of the script to change, which was not the goal. Other cases either did not coincide with the story whatsoever or were too obvious, as the film is supposed to keep the audience guessing.

Eventually, the perfect method fell into place: a coat hanging suspiciously far from the dead body. Based on a real case, this misplaced garment caused just enough suspicion from the detectives to bring the seemingly grieving husband in for questioning, which is exactly what happens in *The Suicide Suspect*. The question this situation asks is that if the husband, or fiancé in my case, entered the room, saw his dead wife, and ran to her, then how did his coat end up hanging on the other side of the room? It implies that the person who found the body was not startled by the scene, and instead took his time to undress before calling the police, which again, is how *The Suicide Suspect* unravels.

## **Preproduction**

There were not many pressing issues when it came to bringing the script to life. The story was decently simple, which was purposeful in order to avoid problems. For the particular scene discussed previously, an apartment was needed, as well as the main actors and a bit of production design. We filmed in my own apartment to avoid location fees, which also allowed the production design, including Christmas decorations, evidence markers, and fake blood, to be arranged beforehand.

One thing that this research did change in the script was the character of the Lab Technician. Before, she existed as a background character, but the research required her character

to evolve for the better. This meant that a more talented actress had to be cast, as well as different locations secured, including a real police station and lab corner. The Lab Technician's big moment comes at the end of the film when she finds incriminating blood spatter on the fiance's shirt, which previously was not a moment I planned to capture on screen. However, this character and location change resulted in the film being much more entertaining, professional, and believable.

### **Production**

Because of the extensive pre-production prepared, there were no problems once the crew arrived on set. I was extremely prepared with multiple backup plans so I would be able to focus solely on my actors and the experience. Also, the crew was handpicked based both on skill and relationships to ensure there would be as little disagreements on set as possible. The crew did a magnificent job of creating the shot within the frame exactly as I imagined in my head.

### **Summary**

Overall, in order to craft a captivating and authentic screenplay, research is a necessity. If the original script without the research had been used, *The Suicide Suspect* would not have been nearly as compelling. Also, authors have to be willing to change other aspects of their story if they truly want to find the best version of their story. I was hesitant to change small aspects of my film, but am so grateful that I chose to not hold onto the parts that were holding the story back. An abundant amount of work goes into creating a film, and comprehensive research is at the forefront of important steps.