



The Eleventh Annual
FilmMakers International
Screenwriting Awards
2012

Detailed Studio Story

Title: XXXXXXXX

Type: Feature Screenplay

Genre: DRAMA

Grade: Pass

Log Line:

A lonely woman gets more than she bargained for when she helps break a death row inmate out of prison.

Overall / Premise:

XXXXXXX is an intimate drama about two lonely people who decide to embark on a journey together that they know can only end badly. The focus on just a few characters is refreshing, the narrative that tells the story engaging, and the through line is clear and remains on track. Though well-written, the script could use a few more drafts to make it stand out on its own. More focus on individual character development, bringing in more conflict between the main characters, varying the pace by taking advantage of the opportunity for action sequences (for which the groundwork is already laid), raising the stakes, and trimming back redundant scenes will really bring this project to the next level. Since neither the overall story nor the style of its execution are unique in and of themselves, what is going to set this script apart from the others is the characters, any truly spectacular plot twists or reversals (of which now there are few, if any), and a plot that is original (how they make their escape) even if the story itself (a prison break) is not. Dramas can be the hardest genre to sell at times, so even if the script is brilliant, if it isn't necessarily different from all the rest, it can easily get lost in the pile.

Synopsis:

SIAN, a lonely caterer at a high-security correctional facility, quickly falls for BUFF, a death row inmate who used to be a popular professional baseball player. Determined to make his last days a bit more meaningful, she convinces him to marry her so he can have someone who cares for him at his execution. He reluctantly agrees and she takes it one step further – with the help of sympathetic guard EDDIE, she manages to break him out. Having stolen all the cash from her family's business, she goes on the run with him to escape a joyless life under her controlling FATHER.

The authorities are quickly on their trail and Buff orders Sian to go back home and say he forced her to help him so she won't get in more trouble. When he leaves momentarily, she tries to hang

herself and he saves her just in the nick of time. Fully realizing her devotion to him, he takes charge in getting them disguised, swapping cars, and figuring out a plan to evade the cops.

Sian's father is just as relentless in his pursuit of her, and catches up with them to force her home. When Buff realizes Sian truly feels her place is with him, he scares her father down, takes his car, and they go on their way. With their pictures now blasted all over the media, the pair decide to split up and meet via bus in New Orleans. Sian goes first, but is mugged along the way, losing thousands of dollars and leaving them with nothing.

When Buff finally joins her in Louisiana, they are forced to take jobs as live-in laborers for WILEY and LUCILLE, a friendly elderly couple rebuilding their home after Hurricane Katrina. Wiley soon discovers Buff's identity, but keeps their secret even from his wife. Buff and Sian begin to enjoy their freedom a bit too much too soon, however, and Wiley soon isn't the only one who recognizes him.

The cops quickly descend on Wiley's property, and the two fugitives retreat to hide in the barn with a gun the old man gives them. Buff again tries to convince Sian to surrender herself, but she steadfastly refuses. When the standoff escalates and gives him no hope of escape, Buff decides being caught is not worth the consequences. At his insistence, Sian shoots Buff in the temple - then turns the gun on herself.

Plot /Story Development / Structure:

GENERAL NOTES:

1) The plot takes a bit too long to get going and the pace stays slow throughout. The narrative is very descriptive, sets a nice tone, and guides us through the scenes in a compelling way, but such detail also slows down the reading if not much is happening. Easing your way into the story is not bad in and of itself, but the script never really picks up the pace, even once they are on the run. That doesn't mean necessarily cutting back on these action statements – it means using them more strategically to set the pace of each scene, build suspense, and differentiate how quick or slow the action is from one scene to the next (and varying it!). For instance, when the Father shows up and tries to get Sian in the car and Buff pulls the gun – there is no lead up to this action that builds the suspense. All the action is thrown together in one small paragraph and then it's suddenly over. There isn't a chance for the audience to be moved to the edge of their seats or sweat it out that something bad might happen. These are the moments when you want to milk the actions statements and tell the scene much as you would a ghost story, with a lot of build up before the boogie man jumps out and says “Boo!” The same thing happens at the end of the scene when the Father pulls the gun on Buff. The moment is completely rushed and dropped. This exact thing was handled really well during the prison break, so just use that same technique throughout.

In addition, there are plenty of opportunities for the action sequences (the prison break, the train wreck, being hunted down by the father, the cops descending on the barn) to go much further and heighten both the pace and the stakes. It is going to be difficult to sell a movie about fugitives on the run that keeps a slow pace throughout and doesn't have at least a few real action sequences (set pieces). These don't have to go so far as to drive the script into ACTION FILM status, but if written slow-paced, those moments have to work even harder at being WROUGHT WITH TENSION! Check out *No Country for Old Men*. That is a slow fugitive-on-the-run film, but the moments when we know something bad might happen are absolutely CHILLING. Go for one or the other, but either way, VARY THE PACE!

2) As far as structure, you have three acts here: a) the prison b) on the run c) and in New Orleans. Each of these should have its own arc that builds to its own mini-climax at its own individual pace. The climax of the prison break does have some nice tension. We suspect what's going on, but since Buff's point of view is left out, the opportunity for much more heightened tension is left out as well.

The climax with the second act has the same problem – once Sian gets on the train, we have no idea what's going on with Buff. There is so much setup about whether or not he is going to leave her at any one time, but we never see him seriously consider it. However, if we see her on the bus all alone getting severely beaten and mugged at the same time we are seeing him deciding not to follow her, and then he surprisingly shows up at the terminal, it would greatly RAISE THE STAKES.

Once in New Orleans and the build to the main climax, it's hard to follow the logic of any of the characters' actions, which makes it difficult to engage in the final showdown. We don't understand why they aren't making smarter decisions and why they allow everything we suspect to happen, happen! More on that in the detailed notes below. The point is, for the climax to work, we really have to be on the edge of our seats and think it could go either way, but that is not the case here.

3) Low stakes will kill any script, great idea or not. RAISING THE STAKES is needed here in EVERY SINGLE SCENE. Part of the problem is that Sian and Buff have absolutely nothing to lose, so nothing is at stake. Buff has no family and no chance at playing ball again, Sian doesn't care at all about her family or the catering business and those are the only two things we know about her. They don't even talk about the kind of life they could possibly have together, so that's not something they "lose" either. Her father and brother are not even left destitute when she takes the money.

Starting off with nothing to lose is okay if the characters eventually find something they value – in this case, each other – but that doesn't come to full fruition either. There isn't a sense that they come to genuinely love each other or fall in love. Sian comes across throughout as emotionally disturbed, manipulative, and clingy, while Buff, though he has a good heart, remains a self-absorbed opportunist. If this unlikely pair were to discover along the way that they really do love each despite the circumstances that brought them together, and that they desperately want to get out of this so that they can have a life together (rather than just avoiding being in trouble), the stakes would be higher, the plot more interesting, the characters would be more dimensional, and the story would have more depth. A good example of this exact thing is *True Romance*. You have already set up the love story, but it doesn't go all the way. That will only work if there is something absolutely vital they learn from each other that brings the story full circle (i.e. she realizes he would have been better off if she left him in prison or he realizes being free can be feel just as hollow as prison unless he can learn to care for someone besides himself). Right now, nothing along these lines happen.

4) Both plot and character development will take a huge leap if there is also MORE CONFLICT between Buff and Sian. Right now it's them against the world, but they have little to work about between themselves. Besides him constantly telling her to get lost and her constantly refusing, there is nothing else for them to overcome with each other. This example is totally off-genre, but *Finding Nemo* is a journey story where the two characters have to constantly overcome the conflicts between them in order to keep going. And overcoming them is exactly what enables them to achieve their goal. Without the conflicts in the first place, they would never make it.

Such a device adds depth to the plot, story, and characters. Without conflict there is no story and with no story, the script will not be successful.

The conflict(s) between Sian and Buff could involve their love story, their family issues, him using her to break him out, her unrealistic expectations of him, both of them being socially inept so not knowing how to relate to each other, her emotional problems with men, their radically different ideas on how they should evade authorities, etc. It could be any or all of the above, or something else that is relevant to the overall arc of the script.

5) Some of the scenes start to feel redundant. After reading the third scene focused on Buff telling Sian to leave him and make a run for it, we know she isn't going to listen to him, we realize their relationship is not going to grow, and we start to suspect that nothing unexpected is ever going to happen in the scenes between them. Much of the movie is focused solely on them, so each scene between them should be somehow different from the rest. What do they learn from each other or discover about each other in each one? How does their interaction change? When, through each other, do they start to question themselves and their end goals? Right now the time between them is mostly focused on plot issues – not their relationship and corresponding character development. More on that in character notes below. Approaching their scenes with the notes above in mind will solve a wide-array of issues including pacing, plot, character development and motivations, story arc, and build to the climax. This is also a structural issue. Lay these scenes in an outline if need be to see what each one serves. Any scene that doesn't serve a different purpose than the others or doesn't add significant build to the story or the climax is likely going to be cut by the director or editor. Make each scene ESSENTIAL in every possible way if you don't want to see it go.

DETAILED NOTES:

6) The opening scene is interesting, but doesn't end up being as relevant as it could be. We don't get the sense that Sian frees Buff because he's locked up – otherwise why would she choose one prisoner over the other? And why deliver meals to a prison anyway if seeing people caged causes her such torment? The scene doesn't end up telling us anything about Sian that is the focus of her character later on. She says the reason she frees Buff is because they are “kindred spirits”. This is what we need to see in the opening scene, and what we also need to see later in their relationship. This idea is a bit cliché and feels forced because we don't ever see what about the two of them is so alike. What does she recognize in him that she sees in herself? He never appears to feel the same way – so we either have to definitely see what connection she's talking about, or the point needs to be made that she is decidedly wrong and has made a big mistake.

7) It feels odd given the rest of the script that the mother isn't in the second scene with Sian and her father. She plays such a big part, supposedly, in Sian's motives, and it would be easier for us to relate if we saw her here. The assumption is that the mom has already left by this point, but then we learn near the end that this incident was part of the reason she left! As of now, this scene would probably be cut.

8) It's pushing it a bit to believe that Sian could push the cart with a 200 lb. man in it in a normal way and not arouse suspicion. Especially since earlier it takes two of the kitchen workers to pull it in when loaded with food.

9) Get the prison break happening by page 30. This is when producers and studios executives stop reading if they aren't totally hooked.

10) We immediately realize Buff and Sian aren't going to be the smartest fugitives when they decide to sleep at night and drive their completely conspicuous getaway vehicle during the day. This will only work if the movie is about how they learn to become better fugitives. Otherwise, audience members don't like to watch the main characters do obviously dumb things. It pushes the script more into the B-movie realm, which does not seem to be what you want.

11) Likewise, Buff's outburst in the hotel room at the new report of their escape and their "Wanted" pictures leaves us wondering "What did he think was going to happen?!" His proclamation of "I never meant to do this to you, Sian" also doesn't feel honest or earned yet. There is no build to it (from their first meeting until now) – and we find out later it's *exactly* what he meant to do! So if the purpose of him saying this now is to prove later that he's not being honest with her, then things need to go there. It might be that this is a sentiment that needs to come out much later in the script when he can actually mean it.

12) The "thank you for the moon and the stars" scene also feels much too early. If his entire motivation is to be free for freedom's sake, we need to see significant moments throughout where he is really reveling in it. Most of these don't happen until so late that there is not time for it to change him in any way. He doesn't even have a moment where he contemplates that he may never actually get the freedom he wants because he's going to have to spend his life on the run. This shortcoming stems from too much focus on plot (getting them from one place to the other) and not enough on story and character development (what they learn, discover, and change from on the way.)

13) The discovery that Buff had manipulated the escape is a GREAT REVERSAL that could be played up much more with higher stakes. She is awfully forgiving, he faces no ramifications (she still trusts him implicitly), and he expresses no remorse at what the break out most likely means for the guards who helped him. His conflict in telling her doesn't even appear that soul-wrenching.

There need to be more such REVERSALS throughout. Perhaps one for each character. Maybe we learn Sian actually had a different reason for freeing Buff than we've been led to believe. Right now, once out of prison, Buff retains power over her for the rest of the script. Perhaps we find out she faked the hanging and has been manipulating him the whole time. Or that Wiley and Lucille aren't the sweet old couple we thought they were.

14) Not very believable that the prison guards get off so easily. RAISE THE STAKES! If getting fired was the worse thing that could happen, guards would be freeing prisoners all the time if paid enough money. In addition, none of the other guards even get mad at Eddie for getting them fired, including the ones who weren't even aware they were taking part in a prison break! Conflict, conflict, conflict! Bring it in at every single moment possible. There's also a missed opportunity to bring the Warden back as a character who wants Buff relentlessly pursued and brought back in order to save his own name. It's not absolutely necessary, but something to consider. And structurally speaking, this scene (the Warden firing the guards) is really the resolution of your first act (the prison break), but you've delayed it and inserted it randomly into the next act. Consider moving it up earlier, otherwise we will expect to see these characters again.

15) Buff wanting to go to Vegas to gamble (her money) is a big setup that falls flat because it never goes anywhere. Sian is not the least bit concerned, it causes no conflict between them or within himself, and they never even come close to doing it. The audience is going to expect a big

tense scene where Buff gambles their money and almost or does lose it all. This is much more interesting than her getting mugged, especially if he is really close to winning a ton of dough.

16) Not clear how the Father tracked them to the city of Province. It's not that close to the prison. Likewise, how does he catch up so quickly when they are being chased by the cruiser? Everything needs to be MUCH HARDER for the characters. If her father can find them so easily, the FBI would have already been on them. We aren't told the father has any information they don't.

17) In this chase, what sharp turns is Buff making on the freeway?!

18) Again, the fact that after they lose the cop, they stop out in the wide open at a picnic area with their car in plain view makes it hard for us to hope they don't get caught. We want them to escape the cops because they are extremely smart or have remarkably dumb luck (which would need to be carried through and definitely pointed out). What we don't want is for them to escape despite making obviously questionable choices that could easily be handled better. This will come across as not very well thought-out plot choices.

19) Not clear why Buff and her father are "astounded" that Sian steps in front of the gun to protect her husband. She has done nothing but hasty, risky acts to protect him from the very beginning! The idea is good though – to have her do something completely unexpected that makes them both look at her in a new way. This will add layers to the scene not currently there. And whatever it is, it should affect how Sian acts from now on in a way markedly different than before.

20) It's also unclear in this scene why Buff is suddenly so aggressive towards her father when up until now he has done nothing but try to Sian go back to him and give him his money back.

21) In the diner, Sian's nervousness seems grossly out of character. What has happened that has suddenly made her unable to function? Up until now she has been decidedly blasé about everything. The entire setup seems to be for the diner guest who mugs her later. This plot point feels extremely forced. How does he follow her through another cop car chase, train wreck, and round about trip to the bus terminal to track her down?

22) What's the point of going all the way up to Chicago then all the way back down to New Orleans? If it's to throw the feds off track, incorporate that into the plotline. Is this trip really only two days long?

23) It seems a little unlikely a vagrant would be up on the news enough to know there's a possible reward for Sian's stuff he finds in the dumpster. Maybe show him earlier covering himself at night to keep warm with a current newspaper that has the story.

24) 100 miles into a bus trip feels a little early for a rest stop.

25) Given that Buff was a popular / famous baseball player, it's likely that most of his previous crime history that he relays to Sian would have been all over the media and somewhat common knowledge. More on his character development below.

26) It's not clear why Wiley instructs Buff and Sian to hideout in the barn and corner themselves, rather than sneak off the property in the night. The barn is the first place the cops are going to look! It's not like in *Thelma & Louise* where basically their only choices are to drive off the cliff

or surrender. If it's important to you that they stay in the barn, give a really good reason why that is their only viable option.

27) The ending scene does not do the rest of the script justice yet. It's focused on two characters we haven't gotten to know that well (again, a character development issue) and it hastily wraps everything up with non-dramatic exposition. All of this information could just as easily be given earlier, and the movie could end with the barn bust which is much more exciting.

Characters / Dialogue :

Developing a more interesting relationship between Buff and Sian, which draws on their own quirky characters, is what will sell this movie. There needs to be more back and forth of power between them, through which we discover each of their characters more. Again, as in *Thelma and Louise*, the overall goal is for them to get away, but they are each also running away from their own personal demons that they overcome through each other. Those are starting to crop up in this draft, but there is so much focus on plot that they are more like after-thoughts and not the driving force behind all the characters' actions.

If the idea is that to both of them, being free is the most important thing in the world, then every single scene needs to touch on this somehow and their characters need to have some arc directly relating to this theme. There should be more scenes where Buff is enjoying the freedom (those moon and star moments) that make breaking out of prison worth it. These don't happen until quite late in the script.

SIAN:

The premise that Sian frees Buff because she can't bear to see him caged isn't something that feels like an organic part of her personality. This part of her character needs to be much more built up. She is very opinionated, but once the prison break happens and they are on the road, she becomes very passive and her stubbornness to stay with him comes across more as clingy behavior than sticking to her principles. Her attempted suicide further weakens her (meaning she becomes less of a strong person), which is fine – but we never see her become stronger by the end. She is not much of a different person from the beginning of the script to the end, so therefore doesn't really have an arc. If she is attracted to Buff because of her emotional problems, play those up and let her work them out on their journey. If we can't understand why she is making any of her decisions, the audience will not relate to her.

BUFF:

The idea that Buff has manipulated Sian and the guards to break him out is a smart move – but none of his decisions after this rival those smarts. Finding out little by little that his criminal history is more extensive than she thought is also a nice twist, but again, since he was in the public eye, much of this information would have been difficult to keep secret and she could have easily found all of it out from his lawyer. And this knowledge never seems to make her have second thoughts. Most importantly, since we never know the details of the crime which put Buff on death row in the first place – specifically whether the shooting was justified or not – we are never able to make our own solid assessment of him. Another important thing to decide is what is most important as far as his character: his need for freedom or how quickly someone who has it all can fall. He went to jail in the first place because then, retaining his dignity was the most important thing to him. But there is little dignity in running away, so at what point and why did freedom become the most important thing to him?

FATHER:

He feels very one-dimensional in this draft. Give him some layers, the opportunity to react in scenes in different ways, show both his weaknesses and his strengths, and give him higher stakes. The journey of him chasing Sian should be just as important to him as her journey to get away. Whether it's the money, not repeating past mistakes, protecting her from a criminal, being outraged at her insolence, fed up with the authorities, or all of the above – push everything much further. He is never in any imminent danger, we never think necessarily that going home with him is the better choice for Sian (and it would be more interesting if we were conflicted about that), and it would be more dramatic if he learned to forgive her *before* she died, but by then it is too late in her mind. Also, he is a big enough character that he should have a name.

WILEY / LUCILLE:

They come across as extremely naïve in being so hasty to bring two people into their home they know nothing about. And what about Wiley makes him decide to harbor fugitives when he finds out the truth? Most importantly, what do Buff and Wiley learn from each other that brings them to the final scene where Wiley is willing to put his entire family, including children, in jeopardy and Buff allows him to do it (instead of giving himself up)?

BROTHER:

This character adds absolutely nothing to the script plot or story-wise, then quickly disappears. Suggest cutting.

WARDEN / EDDIE:

These two are quite likeable and add color to the script, but they also disappear. We want to know more about what happens to Eddie, and if the Warden is going to reappear in the end, there's no reason we can't see him a couple of times throughout while the law is on their tail.

DIALOGUE:

The dialogue is at times too on the nose and needs to vary more between the characters. For the most part however, it flows and is easy to read. The Father's speaking is a bit stilted, but if that is a character choice, go further with it and make it really stand out.

Marketability / Box Office Viability:

This could be a medium-budget studio movie if the action sequences are pumped up and the characters fleshed out sufficiently so that big name actors will clamor to get them. Instilling some more humor throughout, especially between the two leads, will also push it in this direction.

Sticking more with the extremely dark, focused solely on the two characters without any big set pieces (elaborate sequences you might show in a trailer) will push this more into the independent film realm.

Both of these are perfectly fine, just gear your rewrites to whichever path you see best for the script.