

The Villain: Developing the Diabolical Prima Donna

By Lisa Gardner

I admit that Lois Lane is a beautiful, feisty heroine. But let's face it, Lex Luthor is the one who ensures Superman acts as the Man of Steel. *Silence of the Lambs*? I don't even remember the name of the FBI agent. Hannibal Lector, on the other hand, is now probably better known than most rock stars.

In the new age of suspense, the villain is every bit as important as the hero and heroine. Diabolical laughter? *Passé*. Fat and ugly? *Overdone*. The truly chilling villain is a psychopath, the charming, brilliant boy-next-door. This kind of villain doesn't just push the envelope of diabolical behavior—he pushes the hero and heroine into smarter, bolder, braver acts of heroism in order to save the day. With a weak villain, you have inherently weak conflict. With a strong villain, you can create an intense battle of wits that will keep the reader riveted until the very last page.

So to give the devil his due, here are four tips to develop a proper villain using excerpts from my first suspense novel, *The Perfect Husband*.

1. Sometimes evil wears a friendly face

I've done the smirking Mafia boss and I've done the maniacal lunatic. In hindsight, the bad guy doesn't have to be that stereotypical, exotic, or surreal. He could be anyone. Like a police officer. But not one of those doughnut-popping, trigger-happy, corrupt slouches. Say a model officer. A charismatic, police poster child who is also your heroine's husband.

The first day she met Jim, he held out his hand to offer her assistance. Blond and handsome, he looked like Robert Redford in a police uniform. Just a year later, he stood beside her at the altar and solemnly pledged to take care of her forever. Theresa had believed him.

After all, no one had ever told her the devil would be so beautiful.

2. Even Lucifer has principles

More than just charisma, a good villain needs character. Did you know Ted Bundy didn't like to steal cars that were uninsured? He thought it was cruel. Villains come

alive when you give them twisted ethics, their own chilling sense of justice, compassion, and love. Then add a dash of dangerous nonchalance.

Jim materialized in the doorway, a lean shadowy figure, slapping a baseball bat rhythmically against his pant leg. He knew, Theresa realized. Knew that she knew who he really was and what he'd been doing all those nights he'd told her he had to work. The baseball bat came up.

"Don't," she whispered, transfixed in their marital bed and hearing the plea in her voice.

"Why not?" he asked casually.

She stared at him, her eyes burning, the sweat beading on her cheeks like tears. "Because I was the one who loved you," she whispered and her voice broke. She looked at the floor; she knew she was going to die.

The moment she looked up, however, he was gone.

3. When the going gets tough, the villain gets tougher

To maintain suspense, the villain must engage in a true battle of wills with the hero and heroine. This means both sides should suffer set backs and launch fresh attacks. Both sides have dark moments when defeat is imminent and each see a faint spark of hope that keeps the outcome uncertain. The hero will fight to the bitter end, but so will the villain.

Sometimes these battles will be physical, hand-to-hand combat, attempted killings, perhaps a car chase. But the war can also be mental. Continuing the above example, the police do manage to capture Theresa's husband Jim. Jim, however, doesn't simply bow his head. He agrees to confess to his homicidal hobby--but only if his wife will sit across from him.

For six hours he sat handcuffed across the table and, without revealing the slightest twinge of emotion, he described how he methodically stalked, kidnapped, and murdered young girls, then came home for dinner. His gaze never wavered from hers. She was the guilty one, his eyes told her, because she was his wife--she should've seen what he was, she should've stopped him. The guilt belonged to her.

When he was done, he sat back. He released a great sigh, like a sinner redeemed. Then he looked at her and simply smiled.

4. Give the villain something worth fighting for

Okay, you've established that your villain is cunning, deadly, and charming. He looks like take-home-to-mother material, but isn't. Now what does Mr. Bad need, want, fear? Maybe he thinks he's omnipotent, maybe he thinks the opposite. But he must have

something vital at stake, something deep and personal even if he doesn't realize it—perhaps he thinks it's just money he wants, but we know it's self-worth. The best villain goals are goals we would fight for as well. Then give the hero and heroine just as much at stake.

Maybe, the villain wants to keep his freedom and he thinks to do that, he must kill his ex-wife. His ex-wife, the heroine, on the other hand, wants to remain alive. Those are two good goals. That is great conflict. Now all you have to do is turn the characters loose.

The police lieutenant personally made the call, a sign of respect. Once he had Theresa on the phone, he didn't sugar coat what had happened, another sign of respect. "Jim's out," Difford said simply.

"How?"

"Escape."

"Thank you."

"Tess, don't you get it? It's started again."

"No, Difford. Now it ends."

And the reader knows the villain is sitting somewhere right at that moment, thinking exactly the same thing.