

## ZERO DARK THIRTY (2012)

For its subject matter, *Zero Dark Thirty* became the most controversial movie of 2012, but it holds the distinction of the year's most bold film due to its storytelling. The screenplay breaks a lot of rules, but it works, in large part because of the weight of the subject matter and the knowledge that the audience brings into the theater.

It's not that often that everyone in the audience knows how your film ends before they watch it. But in this case, you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone who wasn't aware that Osama Bin Laden was killed in a raid in 2011. We all know that this film will inevitably get to the mission that takes out the leader of Al Qaeda, so the first challenge for the filmmakers was to find a unique protagonist with an arc that is compelling enough to stand toe to toe with the promise of a harrowing battle sequence crafted by the director of *The Hurt Locker*. The filmmakers chose to focus the story on the female CIA operative who worked the Bin Laden case for over a decade and ultimately located him in a compound in Abbotabad, Pakistan, less than one mile from the Pakistani Military Academy. They've named this Everywoman *Maya*, and she is the POV through which we navigate this dangerous path, our stand-in for a front-line view of the war on terror.

An audio prologue begins the film – over black, we hear the actual recordings of people trapped in the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001, minutes before their death. This reminds us of the sadness, rage and hopelessness that we all felt after that fateful day. It's the only way to earn the opening scene that follows, as a prisoner is waterboarded in a brutal interrogation. The scene is shocking and sickening, but it takes us back to the political atmosphere in 2002 – we are slapped with the *urgency* and *paranoia* of that period. The U.S. State dept. and military were out for revenge for the 9/11 attacks, by any means necessary, and before their so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques” were outlawed, it was essentially the Wild West. Dramatically, the key to the torture sequences is Maya. A young hire on her first trip outside of D.C., in a pressed pant suit, she observes the torture from behind a black mask; rattled, powerless and silent. She stands in for the audience. When her boss wants to take a break from the interrogation, Maya urges him to continue, and she even refuses to wear a mask, because he's not wearing one. We now know this about her: she's tough enough to be treated as an equal by the men. This is just the first few minutes of the film. By the time we get to the 20 minute mark (Strong Movement Forward), the prisoner begs her for help and she responds coldly, “You can help yourself by being truthful.” By minute 44, she's the one ordering the waterboarding, although she follows this interrogation by breaking down in the bathroom. She may act like she's made of Teflon, but deep down, she's only human. (For the record, torture never produces good information in the film. Any advances in the case come from Maya's skills as an analyst.)

Maya has one goal. It is her External *and* Internal Goal: to catch and kill Osama Bin Laden. It starts out as just her job, but it becomes personal at the Midpoint when her co-worker, Jessica, dies in a suicide bombing. This event, like all of the acts of terror dramatized in the film, is followed by actual news footage of the event. This serves as a powerful reminder that there were more attacks in the decade following 9/11, an easy fact for us to forget as we go about our comparably comfortable lives.

Maya has no backstory. In fact, there are a couple dialogue scenes in which she's asked about her past life, and she declines to answer. We learn nothing. As they have dinner at the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad, Jessica even asks her if she has "any friends, at all?" Maya perhaps comes to a realization, but before she can answer, a bomb rips through the hotel. They narrowly escape the burning building. This scene is one example of the adept way in which the screenplay mixes the drama with historical events. We have no way of knowing if the real-life "Maya" was present during the horrific Marriott Hotel bombing on September 20, 2008, but it makes for some nice escalating conflict, a reminder that our hero is never safe.

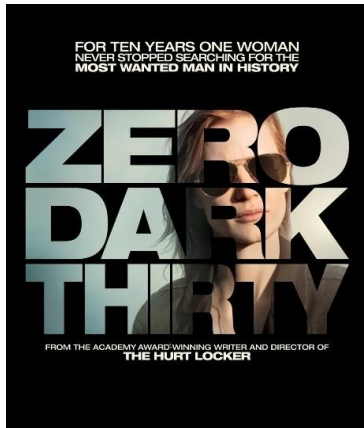
In addition to dates and locations noted in subtitles, the film is populated by interstitial "chapter headings," if you will, onscreen titles like "Human Error" and "Tradecraft." Personally, I don't think these titles add much, and their placement seems rather random, but they are an interesting device to note and I've marked them in the Beat Sheet in caps and in quotation marks.

Finally, the biggest way that *Zero Dark Thirty* breaks storytelling rules is by including a final act (labeled as *Act Four*, but it is the fifth act) in which our hero is barely on screen and totally inactive (until her climactic action of identifying the body for the brass in Washington). Again, this only works because of the subject matter – we go into this movie with the promise of seeing the mission that took out Bin Laden, and we want to see it, in detail. After two hours, we need some action, and we need to see the good guys win for once. Of course, it wouldn't be a Kathryn Bigelow-Mark Boal collaboration without an unflinching portrayal of the tactics and casualties of war. It's interesting to note that this is a rare example of a fifth act – it didn't need to take up half an hour of screen time – but it's a fascinating treatment of a modern Special Forces mission, now one of the most famous in history, and the length allows us to feel the weight of the moment. If you ask me, the two and one half hour running time of the film is welcome, and all too fitting for an unconventional, daring dramatic thriller that captures a decade of terror.

Daniel Calvisi

[Act Four Screenplays](#)

Author of [Story Maps: How to Write a GREAT Screenplay](#)



## ZERO DARK THIRTY (2012)

Written by Mark Boal

Directed by Kathryn Bigelow

Running Time: 150 minutes

### BASIC STORY MAP

**PROTAGONIST:** MAYA, 20s-30s, CIA Operative

**Skill:** Anti-Terrorism

**Misbehavior:** Tenacity

**Flaw/Achilles Heel:** Self-Isolation

**EXTERNAL & INTERNAL GOAL:** To find and kill Osama Bin Laden

**MAIN DRAMATIC CONFLICT:** Al Qaeda/CIA brass

**THEME:** Instinct vs. Certainty

**CENTRAL DRAMATIC QUESTION:** How will Maya get Bin Laden?

**ENDING:** Maya identifies the dead body of Bin Laden

**ARC:** Maya goes from a green agent to a hardened and tenacious veteran who facilitates the mission to find and kill Osama Bin Laden.

**LOGLINE:** A driven female CIA operative must employ superior intelligence tactics and fight the political machine for over a decade to locate and kill the world's most notorious terrorist, Osama Bin Laden.

## **FULL STORY MAP**

### **STORY ENGINES:**

ACT ONE: Maya and Dan interrogate their prisoner, Ammar, and obtain the name Abu Ahmed, Bin Laden's courier.

ACT TWO-A: Maya pursues leads and makes some progress, only to have her close friend killed by a suicide bomber and her best lead dry up.

ACT TWO-B: Maya leads a complex mission to locate Abu Ahmed.

ACT THREE: Maya's team finds the compound and she convinces the brass that it is the home of Bin Laden.

ACT FOUR: SEAL Team Six leads a successful mission and Maya identifies the body of Osama Bin Laden.

### **THE BEAT SHEET**

*(Note: this is not a complete scene list.)*

#### **ACT ONE**

0-2 – PROLOGUE: "September 11, 2001" Over BLACK, we hear audio of phone calls from trapped inhabitants in the World Trade Center.

2 – **OPENING**: "2 years later, THE SAUDI GROUP" Brutal interrogation of AMMAR, a prisoner, led by DAN. Meet MAYA, just off the plane from Washington.

4 – Dan suggests they get coffee and let the prisoner stew for a while, but Maya tells Dan they should resume. She refuses to watch on a monitor or wear a mask.

"BLACK SITE, Undisclosed Location"

6 – According to Dan, Ammar is related to a higher-up linked to Osama Bin Laden, made a wire transfer of money to 9/11 hijackers and was found with high explosives. Dan is trying to get an email for the Saudi Group out of Ammar.

8 – **INCITING INCIDENT**: Maya reluctantly aids Dan in waterboarding Ammar. She watches, uncomfortable, squirming, but says nothing.

10 – "Pakistan" Maya arrives at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, meets JOSEPH BRADLEY, CIA Chief in Pakistan. She corrects him in explaining she didn't volunteer for this placement. Joseph tells Dan that Washington says Maya's "a killer."

13 – Maya meets her CIA team, including JESSICA and JACK, and they discuss intelligence reports.

15 – Maya shows up Jessica in the meeting by shooting down some of her intelligence on a possible location of Bin Laden. Dan says to focus on finding Abu Faraj, a senior Al Qaeda operative.

16 – Back to Ammar in his holding cell, still strung up. Dan gives him food and drink for the first time in days.

20 – **STRONG MOVEMENT FORWARD:** Alone with Ammar, he begs Maya for help. She says “You can help yourself by being truthful.”

The interrogation fails, when Ammar cracks and passes out.

23 – “May 29, 2004” “Khobar, Saudi Arabia” Gunmen storm the embassy, kill 22 people. CIA team feels responsible since Ammar should have told them about the attack.

24 – Maya comes up with a (non-violent) deception tactic to get the information from Ammar.

27 – **END OF ACT ONE TURN:** Ammar gives up the name “Abu Ahmed,” a courier for Bin Laden.

28 – “ABU AHMED” Maya reviews interrogation videos in which several prisoners name Abu Ahmed.

30 – **DECISION:** Maya gets her wig, packs a bag for a trip to pursue this lead.

#### **ACT TWO-A**

31 – “CIA Black Site, Gdansk, Poland” Another prisoner connects Abu Ahmed to Abu Faraj and Bin Laden.

34 – Joseph rejects Maya’s leads. He needs “actual intelligence.”

35 – “July 7, 2005, London” Terrorist bombings. News footage.

35 – “Bagram Air Force Base, Afghanistan, CIA Black Site” Dan gives ice cream to pet monkeys.

36 – “ISI Detention Center, Pakistan” Maya questions a prisoner, a key financier for Al Qaeda. He confirms Abu Ahmed as Bin Laden’s courier.

39 – **FIRST TRIAL:** They capture ABU FARAJ outside of a mosque.

42 – **FIRST CASUALTY:** Dan imprisons Faraj, vows to break him.

44 – **COMBAT:** Maya interrogates Faraj, using a guy who punches Faraj then waterboards him. She’s now ordering the torture like Dan. She fails to get anything out of him.

45 – Dan tells Maya he’s going back to Washington. Invites her to come back, work with him, but she declines. He warns her to be careful with detainees now as the heat is on their tactics, and to be careful in Pakistan since everyone knows her now.

46 – “September 20, 2008, Marriott Hotel, Islamabad, Pakistan.” Maya, tense, meets Jessica for dinner.

48 – Maya feels she still got good leads out of Faraj by what he withheld. Jessica says she looks run down, as did Dan, and we learn Maya has no boyfriend and possibly no friends.

49 – Explosion! The hotel is bombed. They escape.

50 – News footage reports the attack was the work of a truck bomber.

50 – “THE MEETING” Tribal territories, Northern Pakistan. Jessica finds a mole; Maya helps her sell a meeting to Joseph.

52 – On TV, Obama vows to end torture.

53 -- “Camp Chapman, Afghanistan” Jessica is making a cake for her mole, excited to meet him.

55 – “December 30, 2009” Jessica waits for the mole on the base.

58 – Jessica makes them let the mole in without a search. Maya texts with her, excited.

60 – **MIDPOINT:** The mole detonates a suicide bomb. Jessica is killed, along with six other CIA members.

63 – Maya is told that Abu Ahmed is dead. It’s over. Jack asks her what she’s going to do...

MAYA

I'm going to smoke everyone  
involved in this op and  
then I'm going to kill Bin  
Laden.

#### **ACT TWO-B**

64 – “HUMAN ERROR” GEORGE, CIA boss, chastises the whole team, including Joseph. “I want targets. Do your fucking jobs. Bring me people to kill.”

67 – A YOUNG OPERATIVE brings Maya a photo of Ibrahim Al Sayeed. She calls Dan, who now works at Langley.

68 – Maya makes the connection that Abu Ahmed has been confused with his brother who died in 2001. Maya postulates that Ahmed, real name Ibrahim Al Sayeed, is still alive. She tells Dan to move heaven and earth and bring her the Sayeed family’s phone number in Kuwait.

70 – Dan asks his boss, THE WOLF, a practicing Muslim, for the funding to aid Maya’s op.

73—Dan buys a contact in Kuwait a Lamborghini in exchange for the Sayeed phone number.

73 – “TRADECRAFT” Abu Ahmed is tracked to Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

77 – Maya appeals to a Station Chief for help on the ground. She says "A lot of my friends have died. I believe I was spared to finish the job." He joins her team.

78 – “May 1, 2010, New York City” News footage of the botched Times Square bombing.

79 – **DECLARATION OF WAR/ASSUMPTION OF POWER:** Maya screams at Joseph, demanding movement on the hunt for Bin Laden. He tries to blow her off and she threatens his job.

80-84 – Maya’s team tracks Abu Ahmed in Rawalpindi and Peshawar.

87 – Joseph gets removed as CIA chief in Pakistan in a scandal. Maya tells him she’s sorry, but we’re not so sure she means it.

89 – **END OF ACT TWO TURN:** Her team gets a photo of ABU AHMED driving and talking on his cell phone. They have found him.

90 – **DECISION:** Maya calls for expanding the operation to her new boss, who agrees because he’s scared of her.

### **ACT THREE**

93 – Gunmen fire on Maya in her car! She narrowly escapes, alive.

95 – The team tracks Abu Ahmed to the compound in Abbottabad.

96 -- “Predator Bay, CIA Headquarters” Satellite surveillance on the compound, led by STEVE.

97 -- Meeting with Leon Panetta, SECRETARY OF DEFENSE. He wants more information. He asks Maya’s name. Her reply:

MAYA  
I’m the motherfucker who  
found this place. Sir.

100 – Steve has evidence of a man in the house who’s been unseen. He could be Bin Laden.

102 – As Maya pressures George every day by writing on his office window, George outlines to the President’s National Security Advisor how every attempt to gather better evidence has failed due to the professional security measures in the compound. His superiors aren’t convinced that the compound isn’t the home to a Saudi drug dealer. There’s too much risk to bother the President.

106 – George finally hooks the National Security Advisor by asking him about the risk of *not* doing anything, the risk of letting Bin Laden slip through his fingers.

107 – **TRUE POINT OF NO RETURN:** “Area 51, Southern Nevada” Intro Navy SEAL Team Six in a hangar with two untested, high-tech stealth helicopters.

108 - Maya briefs SEAL Team Six on Bin Laden.

110 – Maya tells the team leaders: "Bin Laden is there, and you're going to kill him for me."

111 – In the room with Panetta and all of the CIA heads, after they commit to 60% probability of Bin Laden, Maya says she thinks it’s 100%.

112 – Panetta joins Maya for lunch in the CIA commissary. He tells her she has a flair for the job.

113 – "THE CANARIES" "May 1, 2011, Jalalabad, Afghanistan" SEALs and Maya hang out at the base.

114 – Maya gets the call from George. The mission is happening tonight.

#### **ACT FOUR**

116 – Maya watches the choppers take off. The mission begins.

122 – Maya watches the monitors in the command center back at the base as the choppers reach the target.

123 – One helicopter crashes in the compound yard, but the mission continues.

124 – The men breach the house.

127 – Gunfire erupts through the door and the men return fire, killing Abu Ahmed (Ibrahim Sayeed).

130 – They kill a man and his wife in self-defense inside the house.

133 – Outside, locals gather and watch the soldiers holding security.

134 – They shoot Khalid Bin Laden.

136 – They shoot Osama Bin Laden.

137 – The family won't confirm that it is Bin Laden.

138 – They photograph the body and make the call: "Geronimo. For God and country, Geronimo." Back at the base, Maya hears the call and is stunned.

141 – They bag the body and carry it out of the house.

143 – The downed chopper explodes as the men fly off in the working helicopter.

145 – The men land back at the base with the body and intel.

147 – **CLIMAX:** Maya officially ID's the body as Bin Laden.

148 – **EPILOGUE:** Maya boards a carrier plane to go home. The pilot asks her where she wants to go, but she says nothing. She begins to cry.

150 - END