**THE WHEN**

Do a little free writing about your intended plot. Then extract from that a list of as many ideas for your novel’s main problem as possible: the ones you already had a notion about, perhaps new ones that are just occurring to you now, even ones that seem far-fetched. Don’t worry about sorting them out; the goal is simply to identify as many as you can. Sure, some of them will ultimately be discarded, but it’s not just the main story problem you’re identifying here; it’s also secondary problems that it will bring to the surface and drive forward. So none of this effort will be wasted.

**PLOT PROBLEM TEST 1: Can the problem sustain the entire novel from the first page to the last?**

* Can the problem build?
* Is there a real-world, specific, *impending* consequence that this escalating problem will give my protagonist no choice but to face?
* Is there a clear-cut deadline, a ticking clock counting down to that consequence?

Run your list of potential plot problems through Test 1. Be ruthless; don’t let any problem through unless it clears all three hurdles. Chances are, your problems have begun to evolve and merge. Even so, you may have several still in the running. If so, get ready, because the dilemmas that have passed the first test—the external test—now have to face the internal test.

**PLOT PROBLEM TEST 2: Is the problem capable of forcing your protagonist to make the inner change that your novel is actually about?**

* Will the problem’s impending consequence force my protagonist to struggle with her misbelief?
* *Regardless* of whether or not my protagonist achievers their goal, will the approaching consequences cost them something big—emotionally speaking, that is?

Run your remaining plot problems through Test 2, until you’ve winnowed them down to a single, overarching dilemma that touches your story’s third rail. It often takes a bit more digging, refining and tweaking to get there. They may seem like minor nitpicky tweaks, but they’re critical tweaks. Don’t skip over them!

Keep at it until you’ve developed one overarching plot problem that leaps over every hurdle and meets both tests.

Sketch out the ticks that will lead you to your opening scene. Your goal is to find the tick that catapults your protagonist into unavoidable action. You’ll know it when you get there, because you’ll feel a strong tug of momentum—a sense that your protagonist must act and must act now. Keep the clock ticking until you get there. Don’t be afraid to try this again and again until you get a tick that has everything it needs—the overarching plot problem, the main ticking clock, the third rail.

Once you’ve nailed that tick (could be your third or fourth or seventh tick—there’s no prescribed number,) you’ll be ready to delve into the opening scene of your novel, which means you’ll now be blueprinting in earnest.