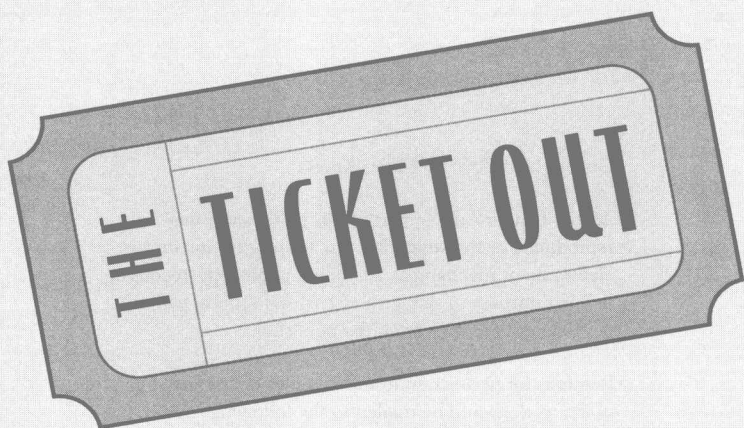


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exceptionally action-packed and  
occasionally harrowing." —CHICAGO TRIBUNE

HELEN KNODE



Helen Knode

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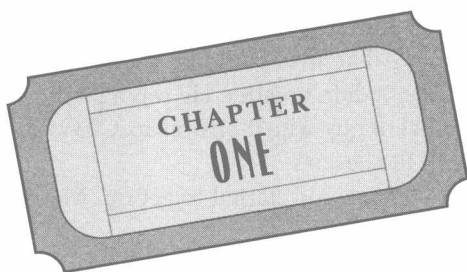
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K J I H G F E D C B A

To James Ellroy

# THE TICKET OUT



THE MOVIE lost me way early on. I sighed, uncrossed my legs, and stuck them in the aisle. Mark poked me. He whispered, "Stop it. Sit still."

I said, "If this tuna doesn't end soon, I'm going to shoot myself."

Mark patted my arm. I pictured the gun I kept in a closet at home, and laughed out loud.

Someone said, "Sssh!" Two people in the row ahead of us turned around.

I bit my lip and slumped down lower. The theater was packed with journalists. A new Tom Cruise movie was always an event, and the studio had put us in their largest screening room. I picked the major critics out of the crowd and tried to guess what they were thinking. Their faces were blank, of course: their jobs were too political for them to let their real feelings show. But I could guess what the feature writers were thinking. They were worried how much time they'd have with Cruise and how much space they'd get after the photo spread. They had no choice about the movie; they had to be nice. Sometimes I envied them.

I sighed again. Mark reached over and tapped my notebook with his pen. He whispered, "Write."

"Can't I please go?"

Mark pointed at my notebook. I flipped to a new page and looked up at the screen. Tom Cruise was kissing Penelope Cruz on

a background of dark bedsheets. He dabbed at her mouth while the camera and music tried to make it sexy.

I stopped myself from laughing again. I'd never bought Cruise as a romantic hero. The film could be set in the nineteenth century or cyberspace; it didn't matter. He was a plastic corporate doll. He made love like a guy who'd answer to CEOs if he mixed his bodily fluid with the costar's.

I shut my notebook and started to get up. Mark looked over. I whispered, "I'll be right back."

He nodded and I walked up the aisle to the lobby. Out in the light I checked the press kit for a running time. The movie still had an hour left. I found an upholstered bench, lay down, and closed my eyes. There was the rest of this screening, then Barry's party tonight. I didn't want to go to his useless party. I wanted to be alone to think.

Something was very wrong with me. I'd been acting unprofessional and I couldn't figure out why. Over the past month I'd missed a deadline and refused to write about the fall season. I just couldn't get enthusiastic about *Harry Potter*—or even a new David Lynch film. It wasn't normal. The summer movies were bad, but low morale was no excuse. There'd been bad periods before and I didn't miss deadlines or fight Mark's assignments. No one had said anything at the paper yet. But there were hints that I might be in trouble.

If I was in trouble, I knew Mark would take my side. I didn't know, though, if Mark could protect me from our boss. Barry's attitude about Hollywood had changed. He'd softened up toward the studios and started to interfere in the film section; he said he wanted our coverage to be more "mainstream." Mark and I were having a hard time believing it. On every other topic, the *L.A. Millennium* was raucously un-mainstream: we couldn't believe that Barry Melling would cave in to Hollywood. We also knew that the pressure to cave was tremendous and that Barry wouldn't be the first or last casualty.

I'd felt the pressure myself when I moved to L.A. I knew that Hollywood was a company town, but I didn't know what that

meant for me as a critic. I'd gotten the picture fast. The *Millennium* was a hip local weekly—close to the bottom of the clout barrel by Industry standards. Our opinion might affect the fate of an independent or foreign film, but we couldn't hope to affect the opening weekend of a studio movie. Which meant, among other things, that we weren't on the list for early Tom Cruise previews. Tonight was a total surprise. Barry had exerted himself to arrange this screening. He'd made phone calls and twisted arms and somehow gotten Mark and me in.

Mark didn't know what Barry was planning. He feared what I feared: that Barry wanted Cruise for the cover. We both thought that was impossible. The *Millennium* hardly ever got access to Hollywood stars, and never a star as big as Cruise. But Barry just might swing an interview, and if he did, I might be forced to contribute. I might not be in a position to refuse.

Someone touched my shoulder. I opened my eyes. Mark was standing over me. He said, "It's been fifteen minutes."

I rolled off the bench and followed him back into the theater.

This was the best job I could ever imagine. I loved movies—and all I did was see movies, think about movies, and write about movies. They let me say what I wanted and I earned decent money doing it.

But I opened my notebook, looked up at Tom Cruise, and felt profoundly tired.

BARRY'S PARTY was going full blast by the time I got home. The driveway was blocked with cars, so I left mine down the street and walked back up to the main house. The front door was standing open; voices and light came from the ground-floor windows. People stood around on the lawn, talking.

I lived in the pool house of a mansion in an old section of town called Los Feliz. Los Feliz was one of L.A.'s first movie-money enclaves. It grew up during the silent era, when most of the film companies were based between downtown and Hollywood. The mansion was a huge stucco Spanish with painted tiles and hand-carved wood everywhere. It'd been built by a fruit rancher for his



mistress, a Mack Sennett bathing beauty. Now it belonged to a group of investors who rented it out for parties and film shoots. Barry was one of the investors and he'd offered me the pool house in exchange for minor caretaking. I jumped at the chance to live on a movie set in the historic Hollywood Hills. I'd never liked to do anything halfway.

I ducked through the crowd in the foyer looking for Barry. Last week the mansion had been dressed to imitate a Santa Barbara hotel. That film crew was finished and the interior had been stripped again. The walls were blank, the floors were bare, and the big front rooms were empty except for catering tables. There were two bars and a ton of hors d'oeuvres. Barry had put on a spread.

I found him in the telephone alcove at the back of the foyer. He'd just hung up the phone and he was frowning. His clothes were different for the occasion; he was wearing a blue blazer and tan slacks. At the office he wore thongs and a kimono over jeans.

Barry saw me and checked his watch. He said, "You're late. How was the flick?"

I made a face and dropped my briefcase in the corner. "Tom Cruise always has been, and always will be, a human prophylactic."

"I knew you wouldn't like it—I had Mark take you as a test."

Barry pointed at the stool. I sat down. He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms.

Barry Melling owned and ran the *L.A. Millennium*. He was a former hippy radical turned Wall Street investment analyst. In the '80s he took a trip to California and had yet another revelation. He sold his business, moved west, and started the *Millennium* with himself as editor in chief. I'd met him at a party in New York in '96. An intense little man with frizzy red hair had come up to me and started talking about his hot alternative weekly. I'd mentioned movies and we had a long argument. After the argument—which I won—he offered me a job. I'd just gotten in from Paris and was looking for work. It was an incredible stroke of luck.

Barry said, "I've been going over your recent stuff and I have to tell you, I'm not happy."

I leaned out of the alcove and waved at the people. "Aren't you the host here? Can't this wait until tomorrow?"

Barry quoted one of my lines from memory. "'*Bridget Jones's Diary* made me sorry to be female.'"

"Well, it did."

"Listen to yourself, Ann — 'human prophylactic,' 'sorry to be female.' You sound like a bitch. What's happened to your sense of humor?"

I thought about the screening that afternoon. If Mark hadn't been there, I would have run out of the theater for sure.

Barry nudged me with his knee. "What's up?"

I sat there thinking. Barry nudged me again. I said, "I think I need a break, actually. You know that I saw four hundred movies last year? I counted. I've averaged four hundred every year since I started working for you. That's more than a movie a day for five years, and I think I'm just sick of it."

Barry looked down and brushed a crumb off his jacket. He didn't want to hear about a break, I could tell. He said, "You're coming across like you hate movies—our readers have been commenting."

"You mean that your new Hollywood crew complained. I'm rattling the wrong cages."

"I'll remind you that Hollywood is the *Millennium's* main source of entertainment advertising."

"You don't consider out-call massage 'entertainment'?"

"Ann..."

I laughed. "Barry, come on, until recently my mandate was to be tough and iconoclastic. You gave me that mandate yourself, remember? I can't start lying just because you've crashed the movie business."

We blamed the LAPD for Barry's change.

The Rampart scandal broke two years ago, and the *Millennium* beat everyone to the story. This impressed Industry liberals who'd ignored Barry as too low-rent during previous police scandals. The *Millennium* suddenly became a legitimate political tool. Barry was recruited for the district attorney campaign, and the

civilian-oversight work that had mushroomed since the Rodney King riots. Now he attended skull sessions with movie stars, and Democratic fund-raisers in Malibu. Now he could get the biggest names in Hollywood on the telephone. He loved the milieu and he loved the action. Mark and I guessed that he wanted in for keeps: that's why he was pushing to make our film coverage more mainstream.

Barry said, "Before you get excited, listen. I want you to do some feature writing because I agree, you need a rest from reviews."

I sat forward. "How about a piece on the Rampart groupies? They hang around at a couple of bars in Elysian Park called —"

Barry shook his head. "What I want is a big profile of Scott Dolgin and his new production company."

I shook *my* head. "No way, you've mentioned Scott Dolgin before. There's no story in someone's unborn dreams — let's wait until he makes a good movie."

"I threw this party to introduce Scott to my Industry connections, and I want you to meet him."

"I'd rather have a month off. You don't have to pay me."

Barry shook his head.

"I could print a retraction for the video release. '*Bridget Jones's Diary* — I laughed! I cried! See it!'"

Barry wasn't going to be moved. He crooked his finger and walked out of the alcove. I sighed, stood up, and followed him. He walked into the dining room and touched a younger guy on the back. The guy turned around.

Barry said, "Scott, this is Ann Whitehead, the writer I've assigned to your piece. Ann, this is Scott Dolgin."

I said, "Hello."

Dolgin smiled and looked past me. He said, "I'm a big fan of yours." His eyes roamed over the crowd.

He was good-looking and probably my age, thirty-two or thirty-three. I remembered what Barry had said about his background. He'd been kicked out of film school and lost some studio jobs before he tried independent producing. His soul patch and Prada suit told me he aspired to the cutting edge. I really hoped he wasn't scum.

Barry said, "Give her your card, Scott. She'll call you tomorrow."

Dolgin handed me a business card. His company was In-Casa Productions; the logo was an old-fashioned California bungalow and the office was in Culver City. Barry patted us both and walked out of the dining room. He headed back to the telephone.

I stuck the card in my pocket and waited for Dolgin to make his pitch. But Dolgin wasn't thinking about me. He was looking around the rooms, taking an inventory of the guests. I looked around, too.

The turnout was high for a weeknight. But the crowd wasn't as glamorous as I'd expected; it wasn't the famous people Barry had met in his anti-LAPD crusade. The famous people must have sent their personal assistants, I decided, or executives from their film companies, or midlevel studio contacts. Whoever they were, they couldn't dial a phone and get Scott Dolgin a producing gig. They could eat and drink for free, and maybe set up a few meetings.

Dolgin finished his survey of the guests. He said, "After you write your article, you should come to work for me. Critics don't create anything, you know. They're parasites—"

He stopped. Something in the foyer had caught his eye.

A tall blond had just walked in the front door. Her looks were striking, and so was her expression. It was the opposite of partylike: it was grim. She slipped past the woman checking invitations and crossed the foyer. She was carrying a beat-up duffel bag over her shoulder. As she scoped out the guests, she opened the hall closet and dumped the bag inside.

Dolgin took off in her direction, pushing through the crowd. The blond saw him coming but her expression didn't change.

Dolgin said something to her. She said something back and walked away. That didn't satisfy Dolgin. He followed her into the living room. Heads turned as she passed; she had that kind of looks. I saw a guy stop Dolgin for a talk. Dolgin didn't want to stop but his career instincts won. He shook the guy's hand and let the blond get away. She disappeared at the far end of the living room.

I realized I was hungry. I walked over to the buffet to see what they had. People stood two deep in front of the tables, and I had to

wedge in. The group beside me had just seen a preview of *Training Day*. I served myself a spring roll and listened. They were raving about Denzel Washington's performance. They called him by his first name: "Denzel." Someone asked if his character was based on Ray Perez, the crooked Rampart cop. Someone else had a crooked-cop script in development; they'd seen a working print of the movie months ago. Another person wondered how *Training Day* would do overseas; stories with blacks were a tough sell in foreign markets.

Barry saw me at the buffet and waved from the front hall. He had a new guy with him. I groaned inside, set my plate down, and walked out to them.

Barry said, "Ann, this is Jack Nevenson. Jack works for Len Ziskind at PPA. They're negotiating to sign Scott."

Nevenson and I shook hands. This was interesting. Leonard Ziskind had left CAA to form his own management company. He'd caused a recent stink when he criticized the studios in *Variety*. He'd said that the star system wasn't working anymore, aesthetically or financially.

Barry was waiting for me to talk, so I said, "I'm anxious to see what Ziskind does. He's saying the right things."

Nevenson smoothed his necktie; it had blue-and-white stripes. I knew they were Yale colors because Barry'd gone to Yale. Nevenson said, "Len is surrounding himself with very smart people."

"Do you think smart people make the best artistic decisions?"

Nevenson was instantly offended. He looked at Barry and Barry frowned at me. I wanted to explain what I meant but Barry cut in. He said, "She'll call you about the Scott piece."

He hustled Nevenson away, frowning at me behind Nevenson's back. I shrugged and turned, and saw Mark and Vivian at the bar. They must have just arrived. Mark waved and pointed toward the back of the house. Vivian made the strangling sign at her throat. I laughed and nodded. They picked up their drinks and we snuck around the edge of the crowd. We passed Barry in the back hall. He didn't see us. He was in the alcove again, dialing the telephone.

Back in the library it was quiet and cool. I opened the French doors for a breeze and a view of the swimming pool. I took my shoes off and stretched out on the floor.

Vivian said, "What a bunch of freaks."

I said, "The guest of honor called me a parasite, and I insulted the guest of honor's future manager. I was beginning to think you guys wouldn't show up."

Mark and Vivian were my closest friends at the paper. Vivian was a reporter and Mark was an encyclopedia of world cinema. He and I had a short affair when he was hired to run the film section. The attraction had been more about movies than sex; all his vitality, I discovered, was mental. But he'd taught me lots and we worked well together. I was a better critic because of him.

Vivian picked a spot against the wall and sat down. "It's the new DA. We're hearing rumors he's closing the Rampart investigation, but there's other rumors that he's impaneled a secret grand jury. I feel like I spend my life at city hall."

Mark sat down beside me. He said, "I forgot to tell you — your sister was at the paper today."

I said, "What for?"

"Your father arrived this morning. You're supposed to have dinner later in the week."

I shut my eyes a second. *Father, damn.* My sister had mentioned a business trip, but I hadn't heard anything since and I was praying it wouldn't happen.

Vivian lifted her vodka. "To Barry's freaks. May they stay forever on the Westside."

Mark lifted his beer and drank. I said, "I pitched him on the cop-groupies but he wasn't interested."

Vivian said, "Then he's an idiot because they'd be a fun story. I've been talking to a registered nurse who has the Rampart logo tattooed in four places. Two pairs — think about it."

Vivian lifted her eyebrows. I laughed. Mark said, "Tell Ann what else held you up."

Vivian sighed. "First, I'm late at city hall. Then I get a tip on

Doug Lockwood and go chasing over to Parker Center to check it out. He's back from suspension—excuse me, *leave*—and they've buried him somewhere until things cool off."

Detective Douglas Lockwood was the cop in the Burger King siege. A Latin gangbanger took some people hostage and Lockwood, who was inside the restaurant at the time, shot and killed the kid. It was one of many second-tier police scandals.

Vivian said, "Lockwood's a mystery. He hardly talked to the media and it'd be a coup to get him on record. But I couldn't find out where they put him, and my usual sources are acting pissy. The LAPD's in a state, my god. The rank and file hate Chief Parks, they're drowning in internal audits and short on manpower, they're hamstrung. They can't go backwards, and they can't go forward either. It almost makes you feel sorry for them—almost."

She poked at her ice cubes. Mark squeezed my shoulder. "Have you talked to Barry?"

I nodded. "If you can call it a talk. I resisted and he pretended not to notice."

"And?"

"I'm in a different kind of trouble than I thought. He says my reviews have gotten bitchy, and he's not wrong."

"But you don't like the Scott Dolgin story."

I squinted at him. Mark said, "I know, it's terrible—but I want you to do it anyway."

"What I really need is a break from movies. I'm going in tomorrow and demand a vacation."

Mark pointed his beer bottle at me. "Don't."

"But I'm burned out—I need a rest."

Vivian said, "Don't do it, Ann."

Mark nodded. "This is a bad time to leave the paper. Barry's in a mood, as we know, and I'm concerned because he's always been such a booster of yours, and now he's having problems with your stuff. I think we should do what he wants until he sees that this 'mainstream' idea is nonsense."

I said, "Which is why you're going along with Tom Cruise."

"Which is why I'm going along with Tom Cruise."

A knock at the door interrupted us. We all looked up: it was the grim blond from earlier. She stood in the doorway and she was staring straight at me. She said, "I want to speak to you."

I sat up and patted the floor between me and Mark. The woman shook her head. "I want to speak to you *alone*."

Her manner was very bizarre. I looked at Vivian and Mark for an opinion. They just shrugged, so I got up and walked over to the door.

The woman backed into the hallway, signaling me to follow. Up close her looks were amazing. She was beautiful. She had green eyes, perfect skin, and ash-blond hair twisted up in a messy knot. She might have been an actress, but there was nothing self-conscious or artificial about her. She had a locked-down ferocity that suggested something else.

She said, "You can't give up."

Her voice was low and gravelly; any actress would be thrilled to have that voice. I waited for her to go on.

She jabbed her finger in my chest. "You're ready to give up. But I didn't give up, and I won't let you."

I stepped back from the finger, noticing other details. Her clothes were too casual for the party: she wore a tight T-shirt and bell-bottom jeans. The hair around her face was damp, and her T-shirt had fresh water spots, like she'd just washed up in the powder room. But there was dirt under her fingernails and I could smell stale sweat.

She said, "*Thelma & Louise* is ten years old this year. Why didn't you write an anniversary article?"

"I—"

She grabbed my arm. "It's the most important movie Hollywood ever made about women! It took a subject no one wants to hear about—female freedom—stuck it in a traditionally male genre, the road movie, and hit big. It proved that the American public is ready for the truth about the condition of women, *if you present it entertainingly!*"



She dug her nails in hard, and the emotion in her eyes was weird. *She* was weird. I pulled my arm free.

She said, "All we have these days is kicking feet and talking vaginas, *Lara Croft—Tomb Raider* or *What Women Want*. But *Thelma & Louise*—"

I cut in on her. "Why don't you do a piece for us? It's a perfect time with Callie Khouri directing *Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. I can introduce you to my editor right now."

"I'm not a critic—I'm a filmmaker. I've just sold a screenplay that starts where *Thelma & Louise* left off."

I smiled. "They hit a trampoline in the Grand Canyon and bounce back alive?"

The woman was beyond humor. She said, "I'll send you a copy of the script when we close with the studio. I'm going to direct it."

I caught a whiff of stale body. I said, "Really? Direct?"

She leaned close and clenched her fist in my face. "*I will beat the System.*"

The body odor got more distinct, then she spun around and ran down the hall. I pinched my nose, waved the smell away, and walked back into the library.

Mark said, "She looks like a Swedish ingénue."

Vivian nodded. "Fabulous collarbones. What's up?"

I rubbed the nail marks on my arm. "Just another unhappy reader. The consensus seems to be that I'm not doing my job."

Mark smiled. I said, "We better get back." Vivian shrugged and finished her drink.

The party was winding down out front. Most of the guests had left and waiters were taking dirty dishes to the kitchen. We split up at the foyer. Mark told me to call him tomorrow, and Vivian went to check the buffet.

Barry and Scott Dolgin stood at the front door saying good-bye to people. Barry had a mentorly arm around Dolgin's shoulder. A petite woman in a black pantsuit was trying to get Dolgin's attention. She pulled at his sleeve while he passed business cards to the people leaving. Barry waved for me to come and talk.