

THE MAILMAN

JEREMY BATES

“The killer awoke before dawn...”
—Jim Morrison

Los Angeles, 1985

Chapter 1

Watching her husband eat the bacon-and-egg breakfast she'd made for him, Jade thought only one thing: *I don't love you anymore.*

It was a terrible thing to think about the man you had married and promised to love through sickness and in health, and Jade wasn't sure she believed it. They'd been together for twenty-one years, she and Mick. They'd had their ups and downs. She was just in a down moment. It was the depression, she told herself. Not Mick. He was the same man she had married. He hadn't changed. It was she who had changed.

Seated at the kitchen table, Mick wore a three-piece white seersucker suit and a red linen necktie. The duds were a step up from his usual attire of Polo shirt and Levi jeans, but right then she thought they made him look as though he should be selling ice cream from a truck, or pacing a Southern courtroom. His soft brown hair, graying at the temples but still covering everywhere it was meant to cover, was parted to the side and brushed back from his forehead. His ordinary face was cleanly shaven and smelling of Old Spice, which was sharp enough to cut through the kitchen aroma of fatty grease and crisped pork.

"Do you really have to dress up for these guys today?" she asked as she rinsed under hot water the cast-iron skillet she'd used to fry the eggs. Through the window above the sink, she had a view of the backyard and the Hollywood Hills beyond. The bushy gardens were overgrown and infested with weeds. She'd been meaning to get out there and clean it up ever since they'd moved into the midcentury faux-Tudor home. But each morning she'd put it off, telling herself tomorrow.

Mick crunched bacon audibly between his teeth, then chugged back half a glass of orange juice. Had he always been such a noisy eater?

"They might be a bunch of degenerates," he said, dicing his scrambled eggs with his fork, "but I'm not. Half my job is to look good."

Mick was an Arts & Recording executive at Chrysalis Records, a British label that had signed Jethro Tull, Blondie, Billy Idol, Ultravox, and Spandau Ballet among other big names. The "degenerates" he was talking about were apparently all the rage right now, consistently selling out The Troubadour and The Roxy on any given night. Jade had listened to one of their demo tapes. Their songs were all about drugs and prostitutes and giving their middle finger to authority. Mick, however, put a more eloquent spin on the lyrics, calling them a spirited defiance against Regan's and Thatcher's prudency and censorship.

If everything went well today, Mick expected to sign them to the label.

"I hope they actually show up," she said.

"They'll show up," he replied sagely. "They're broke. They need money, and fast, or their drug dealers are going to start breaking arms and legs."

"What kind of advance are you offering?"

He finished the rest of the eggs on his plate and dabbed his lips with his napkin. “Seventy-five grand. Half upon signing the memo contracts today, the other half when the real contracts are executed in the next couple of months.”

“What will they do with all that money?”

“Who knows? Pay off their dealers and order a whole lot of pizza and expensive wine, I suppose.”

Jade set the skillet in the drying rack and turned off the tap. “I hope you know what you’re getting into, Mick.”

He stood. “These guys might be a toxic squad of gonzo assholes, but they’re the real deal. They can sing and play. They’re going to be the next Aerosmith. Bigger.”

“The most dangerous band in the world,” she said, repeating a phrase Mick had used before. She carried the coffee pot to the table.

Mick shook his head. “I should get going.”

“What time’s the meeting?”

“Not until noon. But I have calls to make before then.” He straightened his tie and picked up his briefcase, which had been resting on the chair next to him. “How do I look?” he asked.

“Great,” she said, thinking her initial impression of the suit had been too harsh.

Mick leaned close, turning his face perpendicular to hers, like he always did. She obediently planted her lips on his freshly shaven cheek. She didn’t approve of this. A kiss should be mutual. This cheek thing was cheating. She was giving the affection; he was receiving it. She always wondered if this was some sort of psychological power trip on his part. She should say something...but what was the point? They’d probably just get in a fight. It was easier to remain silent. Smile, cook, clean, play the doting, submissive wife. That’s what he wanted. That’s what her life had become.

Mick exited through the back door, and she followed. The morning was bright and brisk, laced with the fresh scent of spring. Mick rounded his canary-yellow Corvette and opened the driver’s door. He asked her, “What will you do today?”

Jade shrugged, wrapping her arms across her chest. She wore jeans and a sky-blue sweater, but the air carried an out-of-season chill. “Write a book, compose a symphony, you know, the usual.”

“If you want something to do, I’m sure the library could use a volunteer. You might enjoy that, getting out, meeting people.”

Jade nodded. But she wasn’t going to volunteer at the library. She liked books, and she liked to read...but Christ, she’d once had so many dreams, ambitions. How had her once seemingly endless number of opportunities been whittled down to staying home all day or volunteering at the local library? She wanted to *do* something with her day, her life.

“See you this afternoon,” Mick said, blowing her a kiss. He slid into the low-slung seat and pulled the door closed with a loud bang. The sporty engine chugged to life.

As Mick tooted the horn and rolled past, Jade noticed a glob of white bird crap that had dried on the windshield. She followed the car down the fern-lined driveway, arms still folded across

her chest. She watched it turn right onto the street—no blinker, she thought disapprovingly—and then accelerate away with a loud vroom.

Jade took a deep breath, drawing the cool, fragrant air into her lungs. What a beautiful morning—so why couldn't she appreciate it? Why did she have to feel so...empty...inside?

She started to return the way she had come but stopped next to the hose reel, which was attached to the side of the front porch. Atop the loop of green hose were her orange-handled garden clippers. She picked them up and went to the rose bushes that lined the eastern property margin.

She should have pruned the bushes during the winter, but she'd put off this task, just as she'd put off weeding the backyard. Now she went about decapitating the smorgasbord of faded and once-showy flowers. She also removed all the dead or broken stems and branches. She felt an incursion of guilt for destroying such beauty, albeit decaying beauty. But that was the thing with roses. The more vigorous you cut them back while they were dormant, the more they flowered in the summer. One of life's great many ironies, she supposed.

As she snipped and clipped the deadheads, careful not to prick her ungloved fingers on the army of thorns, she found herself thinking, *He's a good man, Mick. And I do love him. Of course I do.*

Really, how could she not? After all the years together, all the time spent together? Yes, there was no one on the planet she cared for more. He was kind, generous, charming (when he wanted to be), caring if not affectionate—

“Morning!”

Jade glanced over her shoulder. The mailman stood before her mailbox at the bottom of the driveway, smiling up at her. He was young, early twenties. He had a straight posture and chiseled, movie star looks. His postal-blue shorts and shirt fit him snugly, showing off an athletic frame. She had never seen him before, but then again, she rarely paid attention to the mailmen.

“Hi,” she replied, her voice croaky from a lack of use.

He continued down the sidewalk, past a large sycamore sporting a new coat of green springtime leaves, before disappearing out of sight behind a greenbelt of scraggly, arid vegetation.

Jade went back to pruning.

Chapter 2

Mick stood at his office window, staring past his faint, glass-caught reflection at the sunbaked streets of Hollywood and Los Angeles stretching to the fog-smear horizon. Anxiety fluttered inside his gut, unobtrusive but impossible not to notice. He glanced at his wristwatch: 12:47 p.m. The meeting with The Tempests was scheduled for noon, which made the band close to an hour late. He'd harbored no fantasies they'd be early, or even on time. But this was pushing it.

Come on, you bastards, he thought, rocking on his heels, his hands clasps behind his back. *Don't leave me hanging here.*

Mick had first heard about The Tempests during a visit to Vinyl Fetish on Melrose Avenue, one of the record stores he would frequent to find out what was happening on the underground Hollywood rock scene. The melee of teens hanging around out front were from all over—Sherman Oaks, Beverly Hills, Brentwood, Malibu, Encino, Van Nuys—but they were only talking about one band: The Tempests. One clean-cut kid gave Mick The Tempests' latest flyer. It showed a picture of the five rockers slouching against a cinderblock wall in some graffiti-filled parking lot. And below that:

LOUD AS FUK [sic]/ BAD AS FUK [sic]/ THE TEMPESTS/ 11 PM/ Sat. April 24th/
STARWOOD THEATER/ \$2 off with flyer

Mick went to the show. He'd been to the Starwood countless times before. The staff knew him well and showed him to his own table in the VIP section. The opening act was largely forgettable, while The Tempests were a train wreck, all of them drunk and on heroin and snorting lines off the top of the Marshall amps during the blackouts between songs.

But, man, could they play.

The drummer, a blur of curly hair and drumsticks, seemed intent on bashing his kit in two. The bassist thrashed his fingertips raw. The lead guitarist chopped out power chords like a mad butcher. And the singer wailed his ass off, either pogoing on the spot like a reincarnated Sid Vicious or running headlong around with an adamant energy, as if he were fronting a stadium show. They were as loud as a fighter jet screaming through your kitchen, and the headbanging SoCal crowd loved it—punks, metal heads, stoners, psychos, and preppies alike.

Sitting at his table, his beer forgotten, Mick got a tingly feeling inside him he only got when he was witnessing a band he knew could make it, and make it big. The Tempests had a rawness and authenticity that had been lacking on the Hollywood scene since the days when Brian Jones and Jim Morrison and Janis Joplin would stagger up and down Santa Monica Boulevard hunting for the next whiskey bar. Sure, they had the big hair and the feminizing makeup like everybody

else lately, but they were different, real. You could tell they lived the down and dirty they sang about.

After the last song, Mick went looking for the manager and bumped into an A&R rep from a competing label. The guy was pumped about The Tempests' performance and wanted Mick's reaction. Ears still ringing, Mick told him he thought they were shit, they had no talent, they were drug addicts, and they would never make it off the Strip.

When he found the manager backstage, a fresh-faced, chubby country girl named Michelle who seemed too naïve to be involved in the slummy underground rock scene, he said, "I want a meeting with your band as soon as it can be arranged."

She smiled sweetly and said, "I'll see what I can do."



Mick met with The Tempests the following day. As it turned out, they were living out of a storage shed in the cross section of Hollywood and downtown LA, fifty yards off Sunset Boulevard, which you got to via an alleyway littered with smashed bottles. The five rockers were all hair and leather and jewelry, and despite it being late morning, they were sitting in front of the garage on stolen lawn chairs, drinking vodka and whiskey and smoking pot. Mick pulled up a chair and chatted with them for a good hour. He flattered them while being genuine. He told them they were the loudest band he had ever heard, the best band since AC/DC, and, in the right hands, they could become superstars, probably sell more records than anyone with the exception of Zeppelin or the Stones. All the while he turned a blind eye to the bass player who twice left to peddle heroin to customers, and to the half-naked feral girls who kept poking their heads out of the shed to see what was going on.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Mick told The Tempests he wanted to sign them to a record deal. They demanded six figures, which was an unheard-of advance for an unknown artist—made all the more audacious given right then they likely couldn't scrape together five dollars between themselves. Mick, however, accepted on the spot. They might be a band with a massive drug and alcohol problem that seemed determined to destroy itself—really, they were a ticking time bomb waiting to blow—but their raw talent trumped that, and he knew if he didn't sign them when they were still relatively unknown, Electra or Warner Bros. or Asylum would snatch them up, they would live up to their hype, become the biggest, baddest rockers on the planet, and he would never forgive himself for letting them slip through his fingers.

Mick turned away from the window now.

Bob Corker, the CEO of Chrysalis Records, shifted in his chair, crossing one leg over the other. Thumbing through an old copy of *Rolling Stone* he had undoubtedly read before, he covered a yawn with the back of his hand. Fred Taylor, one of the best-known entertainment attorneys in the music business, sat next to him in a thousand-dollar suit, his hands folded neatly on his lap, a small, patient smile on his lips.

Mick picked up the receiver of the red rotary phone that rested next to his brand new Apple Macintosh computer (which he'd turned on once in the brief time he'd had it, not knowing what to do with the damned thing and its newfangled mouse contraption). He hit a button on the phone. "Genie," he told his secretary when she answered, "give Michelle another call, will you?"

"Yes sir," she replied, and they disconnected.

"I hope this isn't all a big waste of my time, Mick," Bob said without looking up from the magazine.

"They're coming," he insisted, though in the back of his mind he was thinking about the A&R rep he'd run into at the Starwood.

Had he swooped in at the last minute with a better offer?

"You've vouched for these shitheads," Bob said. "You told me you would have them under control."

"I do, they like me. Look, they can be a bit moody. Difficult, sure. But they still get out there every show and play their asses off. They'll be here."

"Ten minutes, then I'm going for lunch."

Mick clenched his jaw, and the anxiety inside him was no longer so unobtrusive. It was making him nauseous.

The phone rang. He pressed the receiver to his ear. "Yes?"

"No answer at her home," Genie said. "I left a message on her machine. Is there any other number you want me to try?"

He didn't have any other numbers. "No. Just buzz me when they get here."

Bob made a grunting noise of the sort that meant he didn't believe Genie would be buzzing him any time soon.

Mick hung up and glanced at his wristwatch again.

Where the hell are you guys?

Chapter 3

Jade spent the day puttering around the house. She vacuumed and did the laundry and sorted through one overflowing closet. At eleven o'clock she sank into the sofa and flipped between *The Price is Right* and a rerun of *The Love Boat*. Afterward, in the kitchen, she ate a sandwich and an apple for lunch, then went to the living room to play the piano. She got through Edward MacDowell's "To a Wild Rose" and Lennon's "Imagine" before her fingers became sluggish and she felt unmotivated and heavy.

She thought about weeding the backyard but decided she had done enough garden work already. Instead she went to the bedroom to read. She was in the middle of Wilbur Smith's *The Angels Weep*, which followed the adventures of the Ballantyne family of Rhodesia. She especially liked that Smith's books were set in Africa. She often daydreamed about visiting the continent, having a romantic adventure of her own. But of course she knew the reality would fall far short of the ideal. It would be hot and sticky and filled with bugs and poverty, and she would likely get mugged if not raped on some winding little backstreet...

Jade had not realized she'd fallen asleep until she woke up. Looking at the clock on the bedside table, she was demoralized to find it was already five o'clock. Somehow she had slept the entire afternoon away. *I'm sleeping my life away*, she thought despondently. She had a cold shower to wake herself up and was just getting dressed when Mick came home.

He was in an ebullient mood. He had signed The Tempests to the label. He didn't say much more than this, only that his boss was having an intimate get-together at his house, and they were to be there at eight o'clock. Jade didn't like these things. Intimate dinners, gala dinners, the red carpet events Mick got invited to, whatever. She didn't feel like she fit in with the crowds Mick now ran with. She was a simple Jewish girl from the Castle Hill neighborhood of the Bronx. Her father had worked the night shift at an insurance company so he could sell vacuums door-to-door three days a week. Her mother had died at the age of forty-seven, and her father the following year, leaving her a teenaged orphan with no money. She moved in with her married sister in Bayside, Queens, dropped out of high school, and got a job working at McDonald's. She met Mick about this time. He was the drummer in a rock n' roll band that played local gigs. He put his heart and soul into his music, but the band wasn't going anywhere, he knew it, and so he gave it up for a job with Atlantic Records. His initial role was as a writer and photographer, but he began writing songs on the side for popular musicians, one of which reached the Billboard Top 20. The following week he was headhunted as an A&R executive for Chrysalis Records—which prompted the move to LA, where they settled in the musical haven of Laurel Canyon, in the hills above Hollywood.

While Mick began schmoozing with rock stars and celebrities and the like, Jade remained home, cleaning, cooking, gardening. She tried keeping herself busy outside the house. She

attended yoga classes on Wednesdays, music lessons on Fridays. She went to art exhibitions and galleries on the weekend. But none of this made her happy. She missed New York. She missed her family and friends there. She even missed having a *winter*. Then one day she woke up depressed. It didn't happen gradually; it was as sudden as if a switch had been flicked inside her, shutting off the lights. Every day after this became a slog, every chore or task a Herculean effort. At first she thought she was just in a funk, a dark funk, but a funk, and it would pass. It didn't. The days of darkness became weeks of darkness, and then months. It had been half a year now since the lights went out inside her.

She should probably be talking to somebody, seeing a professional, but, well, she simply couldn't motivate herself to organize something. Besides, what could anybody tell her she didn't already know? She needed friends, she knew that, a life of her own, she knew that. Nevertheless, accomplishing these feats was easier said than done. She had no job, which meant no coworkers to befriend. The few women she knew were Mick's rather louche acquaintances, and they only seemed to care about clothes, money, scandal, and lists—A lists, B lists, and, most importantly, the people who could make neither list.

Jade spent the next hour or so in the bedroom standing in front of the mirror in her underwear and bra contemplating different dresses Mick had purchased for her since the move to LA. She didn't feel comfortable in any of them—quite frankly, they all put either too much leg or cleavage, or both, on display—but she wanted to look good for him. She didn't want to disappoint him. This was his night, his celebration.

Finally she settled on a one-shouldered gown that would have made Vanna White proud. She did her makeup, stepped through a spray of Channel No. 5, and met Mick downstairs, where she selected a bottle of red wine from the wall rack. Then they were off, driving down the forested slope of Laurel Canyon Boulevard in the uncomfortably low-riding Corvette.

Bob Corker's Southern Colonial mansion was situated in the heart of Beverly Hills and featured a crescent driveway, topiary garden, and a champion-sized tennis court. A butler wearing a collared shirt and slacks answered the towering double-doors, and she and Mick stepped into a foyer that featured one of those true Beverly Hill winged staircases you expected Cinderella to come floating down. The butler led them through a two-story family room to a manicured and well-lit backyard.

Four people sat in wicker chairs around a large block of travertine that rested on a polished nickel base. They stood to say hello, offering handshakes and double-cheek kisses. Bob Corker, a classically handsome man with dyed jet-black hair, said, "You look stunning tonight, Jade. Have you done something with your hair? It looks...bigger?"

"I might have gotten carried away with teasing," she replied, handing him the bottle of wine. "Thank you for having us."

Bob read the label. "Barbaresco. Marvelous. We love Italian wine."

"Thank you, darling," Gloria, his wife, added. "It's just lovely." She'd been married to Bob for more than twenty years, a brunette with a stunning figure for fifty, as well as a youthful face,

though this had been achieved with the help of a chin tuck and an eye-lift, if not a complete face-lift.

Mick and Jade settled into seats at the end of the table, the butler took a round of drink orders, and the conversation picked up where it had been interrupted by their arrival: the serial killer Christopher Bernard Wilder.

“They finally caught the bastard?” Mick said, surprised.

Bob nodded. “Police shot him in New Hampshire.”

“Why was he called the Beauty Queen Killer?” Gloria asked. “The victims weren’t all beauty queens, were they?”

Jeffrey Griffin, Chrysalis’ chief entertainment officer, shook his head. He was Mick’s age, thirty-eight, but given he was bald and wore thick-framed glasses, he looked about ten years older. “But they were all attractive.”

“How many women did he kill?” Jade asked.

“Eight confirmed murders, I’ve heard. At least a dozen rapes.”

“What the hell drives these psychos?” Desiree, Jeffrey’s wife, drawled. Only twenty-five, she was by far the youngest at the table, a platinum blonde who’d had two boob jobs, the second to correct the first, which apparently hadn’t made the girls massive enough.

“Bands like the one that our husbands just signed,” Gloria said sardonically. She looked at Jade. “Have you heard their lyrics? They’re all about killing people. Seriously—killing people.”

Jade nodded. “Mick played me a demo tape.”

Mick chuckled. “You should have seen them today, hon. They came into my office, an hour late, their hair dyed all Day-Glo colors with enough Aqua Net to support a bridge, wearing leather, chains, cowboy boots, you name it. The singer threw his feet up on my desk like he owned the place, while the bassist ducked into the bathroom for the entire time they were there, and I’m not sure he didn’t tie off because when he came out, he was, I don’t know, a bit too elastic.”

“They’re crazy, that’s for sure,” Bob said. “But the label needs its own Mötley Crüe.”

“They make Mötley Crüe look like Poison,” Jeffrey remarked.

“Anyway,” Mick said, “I can’t agree with you, Gloria. You can’t blame today’s music for the shit that goes on in the world. I mean, I listen to all sorts of stuff, and I’m not going to go out and start murdering people. This guy, this Beauty Queen Killer, who killed all those women, he was crazy, plain and simple. He wanted to kill just to kill. Blame him, not what’s on the airwaves.”

“But it’s not just the airwaves anymore, is it?” Gloria said. “With this MTV cable channel, kids can see what musicians look like, the image they’re projecting. That’s much more powerful than just hearing their lyrics over the radio. And kids nowadays, teenagers, they’re impressionable, a lot are angry or confused. So if they watch their God-like idols on TV surrounded by beautiful women while they sing about burying an ex-girlfriend in a grave, or stabbing her in the heart... Who knows, right? Who knows how this might affect them? What they might do? Don’t get me started on Charles Manson and his followers.”

“I won’t, don’t worry,” Mick said as the butler returned, placing an ice cube-clinking Manhattan in front of him. “But speaking of MTV, we’ll want to get The Tempests on heavy video rotation.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Mick,” Bob said. “First we’re going to need to find them real management—”

“They have Michelle—”

“Not some ditsy booking agent. A *real* manager, and a producer, who can get them into a studio to focus on making a record...”

And so the conversation went until dinner was served, a feast that featured lobster flown in from Maine, Alaskan king crab, and chocolate mousse for dessert. Afterward, the men disappeared somewhere to enjoy their four-star French cognac and Cuban cigars, while the women retired inside to the family room for coffee.

When Gloria and Desiree started talking about their children, Jade listened and smiled politely but privately wished they would change the subject. Children were a sore point for her. She had gotten pregnant when she was eighteen while she was working at the McDonald’s and Mick was in the penniless rock n’ roll band. They hadn’t been ready to have a baby then. They hadn’t even known if they were going to stay together. Which was why she’d allowed him to convince her to put up the baby for adoption. It had been the worst mistake in her life. She had never forgiven herself. She’d even gone so far as to track down the family who’d adopted the baby a couple of years later. She’d stalked their house for days until she’d seen her little Leslie—that’s the name she’d planned for the baby—out on the front porch, toddling around on two feet, trying desperately not to fall over. The image burned itself into her memory and broke her heart, and she had cried every day for the next two weeks. Her only consolation was that her baby was happy and in a good home. It was more than she and Mick could have provided at the time.

Once Mick got the job at Atlantic and started making decent money, they tried to conceive another child. She was twenty-three then. She’d thought she’d had all the time in the world. But then she was twenty-five, then twenty-eight, then finally thirty—and she couldn’t get pregnant for the life of her. She and Mick saw a specialist, who broke the news that she was infertile. She was devastated but not surprised. Her barren state was God’s retribution. It was the punishment bestowed upon mothers who gave away their children.

She and Mick’s sex life all but died. Sex, in her mind, had become associated with failure. There was no longer any pleasure in it for her, no purpose. And Mick had become so busy with work he would often come home long after she had gone to sleep. He might be randy some mornings, especially on the weekends, and she would give in now and then, but usually she would satisfy him with a quick hand job.

And since they’d moved to LA? She couldn’t remember the last time they’d had sex. Twice? Twice in the last year? This was a terrible reality, sad and pathetic. They were married. They were still young. But...well...whatever.

Whatever.

That seemed to be her motto nowadays.

Whatever.

God, she felt like crying.

Gloria and Desiree continued talking about their kids for the next twenty minutes: an upcoming birthday party Gloria was organizing for her fifteen-year-old son, Desiree's one-year-old daughter's first week in preschool, gossip about their nannies, their friend Jenny Wilson, whose autistic child had just turned eighteen but still acted like a spoiled six year old. They seemed to delight in the challenges raising the boy had caused her, eagerly swapping stories of his antics.

Finally, thank God, the men returned. They reeked of tobacco and were drunk. Jade excused herself, pulled Mick aside, and asked him if they could leave. He didn't want to, she could tell. He was having fun. But he didn't tell her this or put up a fuss. He simply kissed her on the forehead, then announced their departure to the room.

Jade drove the Corvette home while Mick nodded off in the passenger seat. Beverly Hills to Laurel Canyon, without traffic, was a ten-minute drive along Santa Monica Boulevard. At North Crescent Heights she turned left into the hills. A few minutes later she was on their winding, tree-lined street. As she pulled onto the steep driveway, the headlights flashed over the mailbox, and she thought of the mailman she'd seen that morning. The movie-star looks. The toned body. The well-fitted uniform—

She ground the gears as she shifted down to first. The Corvette jerked but didn't stall.

Mick sat straight. "What the hell?"

"Sorry," she said, overcompensating on the gas and revving the engine. "This car..."

"Jesus, hon. Be easy with it."

She reached the garage behind the house without further incident. In the kitchen Mick gulped back water from the sink tap, while she boiled water in the electric kettle.

"Tea?" she said.

He shook his head. "I'm going to crash."

She nodded but didn't say anything.

Mick left the kitchen heavy-footed, a giveaway of how drunk he was. She was pouring water into her mug when she heard a loud bang upstairs.

"Mick?" she called.

"Clothes hamper," he replied. "Tripped."

Jade added a dash of milk to her tea and carried it to the living room where she settled down on the sofa. Thursday was her "TV Night." She would usually watch the NBC lineup straight through from eight to ten thirty, beginning with *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties* and ending with *Hill Street Blues*. The only time she varied from this routine was during the summer if *The ABC Thursday Night Movie* held any appeal to her.

She flicked on the TV now with the remote and found *Night Court* playing, which meant it was sometime between nine thirty and ten; she hadn't worn a watch this evening. One of Mick's friends had once told her she resembled the show's public defender, Christine Sullivan. She supposed she had the same feathered haircut and heart-shaped face. Nevertheless, the

comparison likely had just as much to do with Christine Sullivan's character: honest to a fault, bighearted, and somewhat naive. Your typical Goody Two-shoes.

Jade hated being seen that way. It made her feel like a girl trapped in a woman's body. She wanted to let her hair down. She wanted to break the rules. She wanted to be spontaneous. She wanted to be free.

So why couldn't she? What was her problem?

When had she become such a bore?

When had she stopped loving Mick?

She blinked. That last thought was a bit of a non sequitur, but it made her think.

Was it true?

Why did she keep thinking it?

Did she truly no longer love her husband?

No. She did. She did love him.

You get older, she told herself. Everything isn't going to be exciting and new forever. You have to act your age. And she was nearly forty. She and Mick had a good marriage. A respectable one. Mick never hit her, rarely yelled at her. He was a bit controlling, and he worked too much. But what did she have to complain about? A lot of women had it worse—much worse.

A fantasy played through her head. Going outside tomorrow to greet the young mailman, wearing one of the sheer negligees Mick had bought her, nothing but skin beneath. The wind blowing the fabric tight against her body, delineating her curves, her legs, hiding nothing. The mailman's eyes on her, warm with lust, coming toward her, touching her, reminding her what it was like to feel like a woman again, attractive again, wanted again—

Stop it. You're being terrible. You need to forget that nonsense and go upstairs and slip into bed next to Mick, get frisky with him...

Only he was passed out drunk. He wouldn't wake up. He might even push her away.

Jade snapped off the TV, unable to get into the *Night Court* episode. She sipped her tea in the semi-darkness. The house was quiet, the tick of the clock the only sound she could hear. There was something sinister about being awake in a big, dark house.

She went to the kitchen, took her cigarettes and a lighter from her purse, and went outside. Mick had emphysema and was trying to quit smoking, so she no longer smoked around him or inside the house.

She lit her cigarette, then tilted her head to look up at the vast black sky. The sibilant moon glowed silver, surrounded by a civilization of shimmering stars. One glittered especially bright. She wondered if it was Venus.

Inhaling a long drag, Jade stepped deeper into the backyard, which smelled of cut grass and oak trees. She continued through the dark, feeling her way with her feet. An old couple lived to the left. Jade had seen both the husband and wife pattering around the garden at various times in the day. She would wave but had never spoken to them. To the right were the Katzenbergs, a youngish couple named Eli and Bianca who had two boys and one girl. They had come by for dinner once and were friendly and pleasant. Their kids were loud as heck, however, especially on

weekends, when the boys would play road hockey or basketball in the driveway. They'd had a For Sale sign on their front lawn for a while now. Eli was a real estate agent in Malibu, and he apparently wanted to move closer to his office.

Neither Jade nor Mick knew the neighbors whose property abutted the back of theirs. They had just moved in a few weeks before. Jade had only seen them once through the trees that bordered the fence. They had been having a barbecue. The wife, maybe fifty, was a skinny waif with long black hair. The husband, maybe five years older, was tall and seemed in good shape for his age. Presently the upstairs lights were on in their house, though all the blinds were drawn.

Jade took a final puff on her cigarette and was about to go back inside when the light in the neighbor's kitchen turned on. The skinny wife appeared, going to the stove, heating the kettle. She wore a red bathrobe. Her black hair was tied back in a ponytail. She turned, as if someone was talking to her. Then the husband appeared, buck naked. He was broad-shouldered and lean, though he was fighting a beer belly. And even from this distance, which must have been fifty yards, it was clear he was well endowed.

Jade's heartbeat spiked. This was wrong, she was spying, she should turn away. Instead she ashed the cigarette out beneath her toe and remained right where she was.

The man went to the woman and began to dry-hump her with exaggerated, comical movements. She laughed and slapped him playfully. He slid his hands inside her robe. She turned her head sideways, still laughing. Then he dropped to his knees. His face was level with her vagina, and good God, was he...? Yes, he was.

When he stood, he was fully erect.

Now Jade did turn away.

Blushing fiercely—but feeling wickedly alive—she went back inside.