

# PANIC

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JEFF ABBOTT

sphere

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*For Peter Ginsberg*



**FRIDAY**

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**MARCH 11**



# 1

The phone awoke Evan Casher, and he knew something was wrong. No one who knew him ever called this early. He opened his eyes. He reached across the bed for Carrie but she was gone, and her side of the bed was cool. A note, folded, on the pillow. He reached for it but the phone continued its insistent shrill, so he answered.

‘Hello.’

His mother said, ‘Evan. I need you to come home. Right now.’ She spoke in a low whisper.

He fumbled for the bedside lamp. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Not over the phone. I’ll explain when you get here.’

‘Mom, get real, it’s a two-and-a-half-hour drive. Just tell me what’s wrong.’

‘Evan. Please. Just come home.’

‘Is Dad all right?’ His father, a computer consultant, had left Austin three days ago for a job in Australia. He made databases dance and sing for big companies and governments. Australia. Long flights. Evan had a sudden vision of a plane, scattered across the outback or Sydney Harbor, ripped metal, smoke rising. ‘What’s happened?’

‘I just need you here, okay?’ Calm but insistent.

‘Mom, please. Not until you tell me what’s going on.’

‘I said not on the phone.’ She fell silent, he said nothing, and the uncomfortable tension of an unexpected

standoff rose for ten long seconds until she broke it. ‘Did you have a lot of work to do today, sweetheart?’

‘Just edits on *Bluff*.’

‘Then bring your computer with you, you can work here. But I need you here. Now.’

‘What’s the big deal about not telling me?’

‘Evan.’ He heard his mother take a steadying breath. ‘Please.’

The naked, almost frightening neediness – a tone he had never heard in his mother’s voice – made her sound like a stranger to him. ‘Um, okay, Mom, I can leave in an hour or so.’

‘Sooner. As soon as possible.’

‘All right then, in like fifteen minutes or so.’

‘Hurry, Evan. Just pack and come as fast as you can.’

‘Okay.’ He fought down a rising panic.

‘Thank you for not asking questions right now,’ she said. ‘I love you and I’ll see you soon, and I’ll explain everything.’

‘I love you, too.’

He put the phone back in the cradle, a little disoriented with the shock of how the day had started. Now wasn’t the time to tell his mother that he was in love. Seriously, crazily in Romeo-and-Juliet love.

He opened the note. It simply said, *Thanks for a great evening. I’ll call you later. Had early morning errands. C.*

He got in the shower and wondered if he’d blown it last night. *I love you*, he’d told Carrie, when they lay spent in the sheets. The words rose to his mouth without thought or effort, because if he’d weighed the consequences, he would have kept his mouth shut. He never said the L-word first. Before, he had told only one woman he loved her, and that had been his last girlfriend, hungry for his reassurance, and he’d said it because he thought it

might be true. But last night was different. No *might* or *maybe*; he knew with certainty. Carrie lying next to him, her breath tickling his throat, her fingernail tracing a line along his eyebrow and she looked so beautiful, and he said the big three words and they felt as true in his heart as anything he had ever known.

Pain flared in her eyes when he spoke and he thought, *I should have waited. She doesn't believe it because we're in bed.* But she kissed him and said, 'Don't love me.'

'Why not?'

'I'm trouble. Nothing but trouble.' But she held him tight, as though she were afraid he would be the one to vanish.

'I love trouble.' He kissed her again.

'Why? Why would you love me?'

'What's not to love?' He kissed her forehead. 'You have a great brain.' He kissed between her eyes. 'You see the beauty in everything.' He kissed her mouth and grinned. 'You always know the right thing to say . . . unlike me.'

She kissed him back and they made love again, and when they were done, she said, 'Three months. You can't really know me.'

'I'll never know you. We never know another person as much as we like to pretend.'

She smiled, snuggled up close to him, pressed her face to his chest, put her mouth close to his beating heart. 'I love you, too.'

'Look at me and say it.'

'I'll say it here to your heart.' A tear trickled from her cheek to his chest.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing. Nothing. I'm happy.' Carrie kissed him. 'Go to sleep, baby.'

And he did, and now, in the hard light of day, she was

gone, the whispers and the promises gone with her. And this distant note. But maybe this was for the best. She was nervous. And the last complication he needed was explaining a mysterious family disaster.

He tried Carrie's cell phone. Left her a voice mail: 'Babe, I've got a family emergency, I've got to go to Austin. Call me when you get this.' He thought, *I shouldn't say it again, it scared her off*, but he said, 'I love you and I'll talk to you soon.'

Evan tried his father's cell phone. No answer. Not even voice mail picking up. But his dad's phone might not connect in Australia. He put the plane-crash scenario out of his mind. He followed his clockwork morning regimen: fired up his computer, checked his to-do list, checked his news feed: no disasters reported in Australia. Perhaps this was a disaster on a smaller scale. Cancer. Divorce. The thought dried his throat.

He clicked on his e-mail, shot off a message to his dad saying, *Call me ASAP*, then downloaded his e-mails. His in-box held an invitation to speak at a film conference in Atlanta; e-mails from two other documentary filmmakers who were friends of his; a pile of music files and a couple of his mother's latest digital photos, all sent by her late last night. He synced the music to his digital player; he'd listen to the songs in the car. Mom thrived on obscure bands and tunes, and she'd found three great songs for his earlier movies. He checked to be sure he had all the footage he needed to edit for his nearly completed documentary on the professional poker circuit. Made sure that he had the raw notes for a talk he was supposed to give at the University of Houston next week. He slid his laptop, his digital music player, and his digital camcorder into his backpack. Evan packed a bag with a weekend's worth of clothes his mother hated for him to

wear: old bowling shirts, worn khakis, tennis shoes a year past their prime.

His watch said seven fifteen. It was not quite a three-hour drive from Houston to Austin.

Evan locked the door behind him and headed to his car. This wasn't the day he had planned. He fought his way through the morning snarl of Houston traffic, listening to the music his mother had sent last night. He wanted Spanish-flavored electronic funk for the opening scenes of his poker-player documentary, and no songs he'd heard yet sounded right, but this music was perfect, full of drama and energy.

He tapped his fingers to the beat as he drove and kept waiting for his cell to ring, his father or Carrie calling, his mom calling to say all was suddenly fine, but his phone stayed silent all the way to Austin.

## 2

His mother's front door was locked. Mom kept her photography studio out in a garage apartment, and he decided she must have retreated to the comfort of film, primer, and solitude.

He unlocked the door with his key and stepped inside. 'Mom?' he called out. No answer.

He walked toward the back of the house, toward the kitchen. He had bought his mom her favorite treats, peach pastries from a bakery she adored on the way from Houston, and he wanted to put up the food before he headed to her studio.

Evan turned the corner and saw his mother lying dead on the kitchen floor.

He froze. He opened his mouth but did not scream. The world around him went thick with the sound of his own blood pounding in his throat, in his temples. The sack of peach pastries tumbled to the floor, followed by his duffel bag.

He took two stumbling steps toward her. Her throat was puffed and savaged, her tongue distended, and the kitchen air held the unmistakable stink of death. He saw a silver gleam of wire wrapped around her throat.

An empty kitchen-table chair stood next to her, as though she might have been sitting in it before she died.

Evan made a low moan in his throat, knelt by his mother, brushed a tangle of her graying hair from her face. Her eyes were wide and swollen, unseeing.

‘Oh, Jesus, Mom.’ He put his fingers over her lips: stillness. Her skin was still warm.

‘Mom, Mom!’ His voice rose in grief and horror. Evan stood. A wave of dizziness buckled his legs. The police. He had to call the police. He staggered around her body to the kitchen counter, where her breakfast still sat: a coffee cup with a lipsticked edge, a plate dotted with plum-jelly drips and a scattering of English-muffin crumbs. Evan reached for the phone with a shaking hand.

Metal hammered the back of his head. He dropped to his knees, his teeth biting into his tongue, the tang of blood in his mouth. The world started to crumple into dark.

A gun pressed against the back of his head; the perfect circle of the barrel was cool in his hair. A nylon rope looped over his head and tightened around his throat with a yank. He tried to jerk away but the gun cracked hard against his temple.

‘Be still,’ a voice said. ‘Or you’re dead.’ It was a young man’s voice. Amused, saying *dead* in a cruel singsong. *Day-ed*.

Hands grabbed his duffel bag from the edge of the kitchen, pulled it out of his line of vision. A robbery.

‘Just take it,’ Evan whispered. ‘Just take it and go.’ He heard the rustle of rummaging: his computer, his camera, being removed from the bag. His laptop’s powering-up chime sounded, louder than his own ragged breathing. Then long seconds of silence, fingers tapping on a keyboard.

‘What do you want?’ he heard himself ask.

No answer.

‘My mom, you killed my mom—’

‘Hush now.’ The gun kept Evan’s face tilted forward, almost touching his mother’s dead jaw. Evan wanted to twist around, see the man’s face, but he couldn’t. The noose tightened, pulling savagely into Evan’s throat.

‘Got it,’ another voice said. Male, older than the first. Arrogant, cool baritone. Then the whisper of fingers on keyboard. ‘All gone.’

Evan heard a pop of chewing gum close to his ear. ‘Can I now?’

‘Yes,’ the other said. ‘It’s just a shame.’

Steel cracked against Evan’s head. Black circles exploded before his eyes, edging out his mother’s blank, dead stare.

Evan awoke. Dying.

He couldn’t breathe because the rope scorched his throat and his feet danced in empty space. A plastic trash bag covered his head, making the world milky gray and indistinct. He grabbed at the rope, choked out a cry as the noose strangled him.

‘You took breathing for granted, didn’t you now, sunshine?’ The younger man’s voice, cold and mocking.

Evan kicked his feet. The countertop, the chair, had to be there to take his weight, to save him. He scissored his legs with what strength he had left because there was nothing else he could do.

‘Kick twice if it hurts bad,’ the younger voice said. ‘I’m curious.’

And a blast filled his world. Shattering glass. Gunfire. A second of silence. Then the younger man yelling, ‘Goddamn!’

The rope swung. Evan attempted to inch his fingers under the choking, killing cord. Then another rattle of

gunfire boomed huge in his ears and he fell, hit the floor, plaster and splintered wood dusting him. The loose length of the gunshot-torn rope landed across his face.

He tried to breathe. Nothing. Nothing. Breathing was a forgotten skill, a trick that Evan no longer knew. Then his chest hitched with sweet air. Drinking in oxygen, drinking in life. His throat hurt as if it had been skinned from the inside.

Evan heard another eruption of shots, the sound of weight crashing into shrubbery outside the windows.

Then an awful silence.

Evan tore the plastic bag free from his face. He blinked, spat blood and bile from his mouth. A hand touched his shoulder, fingers prodded at him.

‘Evan?’

He looked up. A man stared down at him. Pale, bald, tall. Around his father’s age, early fifties.

‘They’re gone, Evan,’ Bald said. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Ca-call . . .’ Every syllable was fire in his mouth. ‘Call . . . police. My . . . mother. He . . .’

‘You got to come with me,’ Bald said. ‘You can’t stay here. They’ll be hunting you now.’

Evan shook his head.

Bald reached down, worked the broken rope off Evan’s neck, hauled him to his feet, herded him away from his mother’s body.

‘I’m a friend of your mom’s,’ Bald said. He held a wicked-looking shotgun. ‘Gonna get you out of here.’

Evan had never seen him before. ‘My mother. The police. Call the police. There was a man . . . or two . . .’

‘They’re gone. We’ll call the police,’ Bald said. ‘Just not here.’ He propelled Evan fast toward the back door with a shove to his back.

‘Who the hell are you?’ Evan said, fighting the panic

rising in his chest. A man he didn't know, with a big-ass gun, who didn't want him to call the police. Hell no.

'We'll talk later. Can't stay. I need your—' But he didn't finish as Evan left-hooked Bald's jaw, without analysis or grace, his muscles still primed with fear and grief. Bald stumbled back and Evan ran out the front door he'd left unlocked.

'Evan, goddamn it! Come here!' Bald yelled.

Evan bolted into the damp spring air. The pounding of his sneakered feet against the asphalt was the only sound in the quiet of the oak-shaded neighborhood. He glanced behind him. Bald sprinted from the house. Shotgun in one hand, Evan's yellow duffel in the other, jumping into a weathered blue Ford sedan parked on the street.

Evan tore across the graceful yards, expecting a bullet to shatter his spine or his head. He saw an open garage door and veered into the yard. *Please, God, be home.* He jumped onto the front porch, leaned against the bell, pounded the door, shouting to call 911.

The blue Ford sped past him.

An elderly man with a military burr opened the door, cordless phone already in hand.

Evan ran back into the yard, yelling at the neighbor to call the police, trying to catch the Ford's plates.

But the car was gone.

### 3

‘Walk me through this morning one more time,’ the homicide detective said. His name was Durless. He had a kind, thin face, with the gaunt healthiness of a long-distance runner. ‘If you can, son.’

The investigators had kept Evan away from the kitchen, but had brought him back into the house so he could identify anything that was out of place or missing. He stood now in his parents’ bedroom. It was a wreck. Four suitcases lay thrown against the wall, all opened, their contents spilled across the floor. They didn’t belong here. But his mother’s favorite photos, which did belong on the walls, lay ruined and trampled on the carpet. He stared at the pictures behind the spiderwebs of smashed glass: the Gulf of Mexico orange with sunrise, the solitude of a gnarled oak on an empty expanse of prairie, London’s Trafalgar Square, lights shaded by falling snow. Her work. Broken. Her life. Gone. It could not be yet it was; the absence of her seemed to settle into the house, into the air, into his bones.

*You cannot afford shock right now. You have to help the police catch these guys. So have shock later. Snap out of it.*

‘Evan? Did you hear me?’ Durless said.

‘Yes. I can do whatever you need me to do.’ Evan

steadied himself. Sitting out on the driveway, crumpled with grief, he'd given the responding officer a description of Bald and his car. More officers had arrived and secured the house with practiced efficiency, strung crime-scene tape along the front door and the driveway, across the shattered kitchen window where Bald had fired his shotgun. Evan had sat on the cool of the cement and dialed his father, again and again. No answer. No voice mail. His father worked alone, as an independent consultant, no employees. Evan didn't know anyone he could call to help him locate his dad in Sydney.

He'd left a message for Carrie on her cell, tried her at her apartment. No answer.

Durless had arrived, first interviewing the patrol officer and the ambulance crew who had responded to the initial call. He'd introduced himself to Evan and taken his initial statement, then asked him to come back into the house, escorting him to his mother's bedroom.

'Anything missing?' Durless asked.

'No.' And through the haze of shock Evan knelt by one opened suitcase: it lay choked with men's pressed khakis, button-downs, new leather loafers and tennis shoes.

All in his sizes.

'Don't touch anything,' Durless reminded him, and Evan yanked his hand back.

'I've never seen these suitcases or clothes before,' he said. 'But this bag looks like she packed it for me.'

'Where was she going?'

'Nowhere. She was waiting for me here.'

'But she had four packed bags. With clothes for you. And a gun packed in her bag.' He pointed at a gun, tossed atop one of the clothes piles spilling from a suitcase.

'I can't explain it. Well, the gun looks like my dad's

Glock. He uses it in target shootings. It's his hobby.' Evan wiped his face. 'I used to shoot with him, but I'm not very good.' He realized he was rambling and he shut up. 'Mom . . . must have not had a chance to get to the gun when the men came.'

'She must have been afraid if she was packing your dad's gun.'

'I just don't know.'

'So. Let's go through it again. She called you this morning. Around seven.'

'Yes.' Evan again walked Durlless through his mother's frantic phone call insisting he come home, his coming straight from Houston, the men attacking him. Trying to dredge up any detail that he'd forgotten in giving his initial account.

'These men that grabbed you in the kitchen, you're sure there were two?'

'I heard two voices. I'm sure.'

'But you never saw their faces?'

'No.'

'And then another man came, shot at them, blasted the ceiling, cut you down from the rope. You saw his face.'

'Yes.' Evan rubbed a hand across his forehead. In his initial statement, still trembling with shock, he had said it was a bald man, but now he could do better. 'In his fifties. Thin mouth, very straight teeth. Mole on his' – Evan closed his eyes for a minute, picturing – 'left cheek. Brown eyes, strong build. Ex-military, possibly. About six feet. He looked like he might be Latino. No accent in his voice. He wore black pants, a dark green T-shirt. No wedding ring. A steel watch. I can't tell you anything more about his car except it was a blue Ford sedan.'

Durlless wrote down the additional details, handed them to another officer. 'Get the revised description on the

wire,' he said. The officer left. Durless raised an eyebrow. 'You have an exceptional eye for detail under stress.'

'I'm better with pictures than words.' Evan heard the low voices of the APD crime-scene team as they analyzed the carnage in the kitchen. He wondered if his mother's body was still in the house. It felt strange to stand in her room, see her clothes, her pictures, know she was dead now.

'Evan, let's talk about who would have wanted to hurt your mom,' Durless said.

'No one. She was the nicest person you could imagine. Gentle. Funny.'

'Had she mentioned being afraid, or threatened by anyone? Think. Take your time.'

'No. Never.'

'Anyone with a grudge against your family?'

The idea seemed ridiculous, but Evan took a deep breath, thought about his parents' friends and associates, about his own. 'No. They argued with a neighbor last year about the guy's dog barking all night, but they settled it and the guy moved away.' He gave Durless the name of the former neighbor. 'I can't think of anyone who wishes us ill. This has to be random.'

'But the bald man saved you,' Durless said. 'He, according to you, chased the killers off, called you by name, claimed he was a friend of your mom's, and tried to get you to leave with him. That's not random.'

Evan shook his head.

'I didn't get your dad's name,' Durless said.

'Mitchell Eugene Casher. My mother is Donna Jane Casher. Did I tell you that already? Her name?'

'You did, Evan, you did. Tell me about the relationship between your parents.'

'They've always had a strong marriage.'

Durless stayed quiet. Evan couldn't bear the silence. The accusing silence.

'My dad had nothing to do with this. Nothing.'

'Okay.'

'My dad would never hurt his family, no way.'

'Okay,' Durless said again. 'But you see I have to ask.'

'Yeah.'

'How you get along with your folks?'

'Fine. Great. We're all close.'

'You said you were having trouble reaching your dad?'

'He's not answering his cell phone.'

'You got his itinerary in Australia?'

Now he remembered. 'Mom usually keeps it on the refrigerator.'

'That's great, Evan, that's a help.'

'I just want to help you get whoever did this. You have to get them. You have to.' His voice started to shake and he steadied himself. He rubbed at the raw rope burn on his neck.

Durless said, 'When you talked to your mom, did she sound afraid? Like these guys were already here in the house?'

'No. She didn't sound panicked. Just emotional. Like she had bad news to tell me, but didn't want to tell me over the phone.'

'You talk to her yesterday, or the day before? Tell me about her mental state then.'

'Perfectly normal. She mentioned taking an assignment in China. She's a freelance travel photographer.' He pointed at the cracked frames, the photos distorted under the broken glass. 'That's some of her work. Her favorites.'

Durless cast his gaze along London, the coast, the prairie. 'Places. Not people,' he said.

'She likes places better than faces.' It had been his

mother's joke about her work. Tears crept to the corners of Evan's eyes, and he blinked. Willed them to vanish. He did not want to cry in front of this man. He dug fingernails into his palms. He listened to the snap of cameras in the kitchen, the soft murmurs of the crime-scene team working the room, breaking down the worst nightmare for his family into jotted statistics and chemical tests.

'You have brothers or sisters?'

'No. No other family at all.'

'What time did you get here? Tell me again.'

He looked at his watch. The face was broken, hands frozen at 10:34. It must have happened when he fell as the rope broke. He showed the stopped watch to Durless. 'I didn't really notice the time, I was worried about my mom.' He wanted the comfort of Carrie's arms, the reassurance of his father's voice. His world set to right.

Durless spoke in a whisper to a police officer who stood in the doorway, who left. Then he gestured at the luggage. 'Let's talk about these bags she had packed, for both of you.'

'I don't know. Maybe she was going to Australia. To see my dad.'

'So she begs you to come home, but she's getting ready to leave. With a suitcase for you, and with a gun.'

'I . . . I can't explain it.' Evan wiped his arm across his nose.

'Maybe this crisis was all a ruse to get you home for a surprise trip.'

'She wouldn't scare me for no good reason.'

Durless tapped his pen against his chin. 'And you were in Houston last night.'

'Yes,' Evan said. Wondering if now he was being asked for an alibi. 'My girlfriend stayed with me. Carrie Lindstrom.'