



AN EVAN DELANEY THRILLER

MEG  
**GARDINER**

SEX, DRUGS, ROCK 'N' ROLL. AND MURDER.

**JERICHO POINT**

## One

It's only rock 'n' roll, I hear. What a lie.

We know – any of us who has held a lover skin against skin while a song aches from the car radio. Anyone who has shed rage or sorrow to a thundering backbeat. Anyone who holds a guitar and strikes a chord and hears the shout rise from the crowd. We know. It's glory, it's riches, it's a craving. It's immortality. And as I drove through a winter storm, with rain drumming on the windshield and dark rhythms pounding in my ears, I was about to discover another truth. That night, it was also death.

I pulled into the driveway just as the sofa tumbled off the balcony in front of me. It was on fire, an orange shriek in the night. I braked. It hit the driveway and a burning cushion bounced onto the concrete. Though the rain was a cold lash, the fire burned bright. People stood in the street, cheering. Sorority girls danced under flame light. From the house came hoots and braying, and a keg flew off the balcony. It crashed in front of the couch and flailed beer in an arc. The girls dashed away shrieking.

Welcome to Friday night in Isla Vista.

My stomach was gripping. Eleven p.m. on a February night, and the phone had stabbed me awake. *Can you come? We don't know what else to do. He had your phone number in his pocket.*

Midterms were over, that's why IV was romping tonight. Take 15,000 college students, add testosterone and ethyl alcohol, and you get *The Lord of the Flies* with a Top 40 soundtrack. I rolled down my window to doublecheck the address. Del Playa Drive – when I went to the university, I had neither the cash nor the cool to live here. The wind kicked up, blowing rain onto my face. I wiped my eyes, backed the Explorer onto the street, and parked. This was the place.

The house sat on the beach side of the street, the choicest real estate in Isla Vista, on the cliff overlooking the Pacific. The paint was peeling off the walls. I headed for the door, hunching against the rain, smelling

salt air and acrid smoke. A young man strolled around the side of the house, ribboned yellow by firelight. Ten feet from me he pulled a full frontal, unzipping his combat trousers and pissing against the side of a car.

‘Hey.’ I turned my face away. ‘This isn’t America’s Rudest Home Videos. Keep it to yourself.’

Rain and beer spray were dousing the sofa. I walked to the door, hearing music pound, feeling my throat go dry, wondering how it had come to this.

I knocked.

It made no sense. Even given a family taste for liquor, and too much time staring face to face with tragedy. This was wrong. Someone had made a mistake. A voice in my head said, *Denial is a river in Egypt*.

The door opened. Music jackhammered from the stereo. The man holding the knob was older than I expected, early thirties, my age.

‘Evan?’

He had the desiccated look of an old surfer. ‘I’m Toby. Thanks for coming.’ He let me in. ‘Nobody at the party seems to know him, and I didn’t know what else to do.’

The living room throbbed with dancing college students. It smelled like Doritos and tequila. We cut a path back into the house.

‘Where is he?’ I said.

‘Locked in the bathroom. Look, obviously he has issues, but people at the party want to pee.’

‘I hate to tell you, they aren’t waiting for the john.’

He frowned, walking down a hall toward the back of the house. ‘Who is he, anyway?’

A strong spirit going out like the tide. A ghost. My life.

‘My boyfriend.’

He stopped at a door and knocked. Inside the bathroom, a man said, ‘Fuck off.’ I felt heat behind my eyes.

‘Evan’s here,’ Toby said. ‘Why don’t you unlock the door?’

‘Go away.’

Toby looked at me, and held up a bobby pin. ‘This will pop the lock. I just didn’t want to have to haul him out, maybe start a fight. Want me to open it?’

I couldn’t find my voice, so I nodded.

He leaned against the door. ‘Blackburn. She’s coming in.’ He stuck the bobby pin into the lock and turned. Gave me a sad look. ‘Good luck.’

He pushed the door open.

The bathroom smelled like ripe socks and mildew. My head throbbed and my eyes stung. He was sitting in the bathtub, head in his hands, dark hair falling over his face.

He turned his face to the wall. 'Close the door. Don't let them see.'

I shut the door behind me. And shut my eyes, fighting the sting. But still I saw him – his rangy frame, his handsome features, his blue eyes. Relief coursed through me. God. I sank against the doorframe.

It wasn't him. Of course it wasn't. How the hell could I have believed it? I felt ashamed for buying any bit of it.

'Come on, I'll take you home,' I said.

He put up a hand, as if fending me off. 'I can't go out there.'

'Why not?' I crouched next to the tub. 'What's wrong?'

'You have to promise me.'

'Are you in trouble?'

'Don't tell him.'

'Who?' I said, though I knew.

'My brother. He'll go ballistic. Promise you won't tell Jesse.'

I put my hand on his arm. 'PJ?'

His eyes met mine for an instant before he looked away again. Relief drained from me as fast as if someone had pulled a plug. I had seen that look in his eyes before. Years ago, on that awful day. He slumped back in the tub.

'Something's wrong. Tell me,' I said.

'Oh, fuck.' He started banging his head against the tiles. 'She went off the balcony.'

Bang, bang, again and again.

'Over the edge. All the way down into the waves.'

I grabbed him. 'Did you call 911?'

He scrabbled for the faucets but I tipped him over the edge of the tub and hauled him up. His shoulders scrunched. I yanked open the door and shoved him out into the hall, pulling out my cell phone.

'Did you tell anybody?'

He shook his head.

I urged him into the living room, jostling through the throng, and into the kitchen. Half a dozen girls stood gabbing, running a batch of margaritas through the blender. PJ kept his head down, as though he were a dog being punished. I opened the sliding glass door to the

balcony and pushed him outside. The wind drove nails of rain against my face. I dialed 911.

The balcony ran the width of the house. Beyond the railing, forty feet below, the surf pounded the cliff. It was a huge, roaring tide. The light from the kitchen petered out, but I could see that further along the balcony a bedroom door was open, the drapes billowing out.

The dispatcher came on the line. '911 Emergency.'

'I need a rescue. There's been an accident at a house on Del Playa.'

PJ blinked. 'No. You promised you wouldn't tell.'

Before I knew what was happening, he grabbed the phone from my ear and stumbled back toward the kitchen door, mashing buttons.

'You promised,' he said.

'Dammit.' I grabbed his hand and pried at his fingers, but he clenched the phone to his ribs. 'We have to get Search and Rescue out here. Now.'

His chest heaved. 'No we don't.'

'Yes. Now.'

The rain was flattening his hair against his head in stringy tails. 'We don't need Search and Rescue. I think— mean, I think I'm wrong. It didn't really happen.'

Shit. 'Don't give me that.'

He stared into the storm. 'I think I just freaked out.'

'Truth. Right now. Did a girl fall off this balcony, or not?'

'I don't know.'

Planting both hands against his chest, I pushed him back inside the kitchen, where I could get a good look at his eyes in the light. He didn't resist, just shivered and stared out the door at the ocean. I backed him against the counter.

The margarita girls said, 'Hey, what?'

I wiped rain from my face. 'Look at me.'

His gaze tagged me and jumped away again. His pupils were the size of fleas.

'What did you take?'

A shrug.

'Coke? Speed?'

The girls grabbed the blender and left the kitchen. PJ didn't respond. I put my hands on his cheeks and held his face.

'How much, PJ?'

His skin felt hot, the rainwater warm against my palms. He wasn't as tall as Jesse, didn't have his shoulders, but otherwise the resemblance

gave me a punch, at the thought of everything that separated the two of them.

I shook his face between my hands.

‘Some E,’ he said. ‘And maybe a few lines.’

Exhaling, I let my hands drop. ‘What happened here? Tell me.’

He stared out the door again. ‘I don’t know. Me and some guys were here in the kitchen. People were everywhere. I couldn’t get a clear look.’

‘What did you see?’

‘Something out on the balcony, like, voices. But it was so loud, the music— and that sliding glass door was shut, and the lights here were reflecting. The rain, on the glass it looked so bright.’ His knee began jittering. ‘I don’t know. It just scared me.’

He was wired to the ends of his hair, bouncing toward hysteria, and I still didn’t know if he’d hallucinated it or not.

He was shaking. ‘It was freaky. So freaky.’

I looked around the kitchen. The phone had been torn out of the wall, leaving a gaping hole. Written in marker beneath it was, *No more coffee for Alex.*

‘Give me my cell phone, PJ.’

He clutched it like a precious toy. ‘You won’t call?’

‘No.’

Slowly, he extended it to me. I closed my fingers around it, waiting. It rang.

I answered. ‘Here. A woman fell off the balcony.’

It was the emergency dispatcher, calling back. I gave her the address. The last I saw, PJ was running through the crowd toward the front door.

*Keep it to yourself.* Prude. Priss. Got a look at it, and that’s all she could say? Frigid bitch.

Just like he’d hoped.

He walked away from the house with the hood of his sweatshirt pulled low over his face. Keeping his head down, when he really wanted to laugh and pull off his clothes and sing. The rain felt great, coming down hard now, like it *knew*, and was showering him with applause. It had been perfect.

Except for running into that woman. Ice queen. Lady Rudest-Home-Videos, thought she was a comedian.

But the joke was on her. She saw what he wanted her to see. And she got a good, long, beautiful look, too. Whip it out and they never notice your face. Wangdangling just blows their minds.

He balled his hands. They weren't exactly slick, more sticky. He held them out and spread his fingers and let the rain lick it off. He wondered if it got on his dick when he whizzed on that car. An ache began in his crotch. But he couldn't pull down his pants and let the sky kiss it all away. Not on the street. But that was okay, it was only blood.

He walked, feeling his hands turning clean. Perfect, yeah, it had been fucking perfect. And gone in a flash.

He should have gotten it on film.