



# ORPHAN

Gregg Hurwitz



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# PROLOGUE

## Trial by Fire

*Evan's twelve-year-old body is stiff in the cushy passenger seat of the black sedan as he is driven in silence. His cheek is split and his temple bruised. Blood slides warmly down his neck, mixing with panic sweat. Raw skin rings his wrists where the handcuffs were. His heartbeat thunders in his chest, his head.*

*He uses all his will to give nothing away.*

*He has been in the car only five minutes. The leather smells expensive.*

*The driver has given his name, Jack Johns. But nothing else.*

*An old guy, at least fifty-something, with a wide, handsome face. He's built square like a catcher and has a baseball squint to match.*

*Jack tugs a handkerchief from his rear pant pocket, fluffs it out, and offers it across the console. "For your cheek."*

*Evan looks at the fine linen. "The blood'll stain it."*

*Jack's face registers amusement. "It's okay."*

*Evan wipes his face.*

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*He was the smallest of the kids, the last one picked for sports. It was only through a savage set of challenges that he found his way into this seat, that he'd managed to get himself chosen.*

*None of them had known what to make of the Mystery Man when he first materialized at the edge of the cracked basketball courts, eyeing the boys as they'd played and fought. Hidden behind Ray-Bans, dragging his fingers along the chain-link, smoking cigarette after cigarette. He walked slowly, never in a rush, and yet every time he seemed to vanish as quickly as he'd appeared. Theories abounded. He was Chester the Molester. A rich businessman looking to adopt. A dealer in human organs on the black market. A recruiter for the Greek mob.*

*Evan had been willing to take the leap.*

*He has been taken out of circulation as surely as if he'd been zapped off the streets by a flying saucer. Trial by fire, yes—a recruitment of some sort, but for what, Evan still has no idea.*

*All he knows is wherever he is heading now has to be better than what's behind him in East Baltimore.*

*His stomach gives off a rumble that embarrasses him even here, even now. He glances at himself in the side mirror. He looks malnourished. Maybe where he's going, food will be abundant.*

*Or maybe he'll be the food.*

*He works up his nerve. Clears his throat. "What do you want me for?" he asks.*

*"I can't tell you that yet." Jack drives in silence for a time, then seems to realize that his answer isn't satisfactory for a kid in Evan's position. "I may not tell you everything right away," he adds in a tone that stops shy of apologetic, "but I will never lie to you."*

*Evan studies him. Decides to take him at his word. "Am I gonna get hurt?"*

*Jack drives on, looking dead ahead.*

*"Sometimes," he says.*

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### Fortress of Solitude

The façade of 21A's front door matched the others in the building precisely, adhering to HOA regs and passing unnoticed before the eagle eye of Hugh Walters on his monthly floor inspections. What Hugh *didn't* know was that the thin wood laminate concealed a steel door fire-rated at six hours, immune to battering rams, and effective in repelling hinge-area breaching charges.

Arriving at his place at last, Evan slid his key into the ordinary-looking dead bolt. When he turned the key, a concealed network of security bars inside the door released with a sturdier-than-normal clank.

He stepped inside, locked the door behind him, deactivated the alarm, dropped the bloody grocery bag on a glass accent table, and exhaled.

Home.

Or at least his version of it.

## Fortress of Solitude

Copious windows and balconies maximized the corner penthouse panorama. Twelve miles to the east, the downtown skyline glittered jaggedly, and Century City rose to the south.

The condo's layout was largely open, gunmetal gray concrete floors split by a freestanding central fireplace, numerous pillars, and a steel staircase that spiraled up to a rarely used loft he'd converted to a reading room. The kitchen featured poured-concrete counters, stainless-steel appliances, brushed-nickel fixtures, and a backsplash of mirrored subway tiles. The broad island overlooked a spacious, sparse plain broken by training mats, various workout stations, and the occasional sitting area.

The windows and sliding glass doors were made of Lexan, a bullet-resistant polycarbonate thermoplastic resin, and the retractable sunscreens added a second layer of discreet armoring. Built of tiny interlocking rings like chain mail, the woven metal was composed of a rare titanium variation. The screens could stop most sniper rounds that might penetrate the bullet-resistant sheets. They added an additional protective shield from explosive devices while obscuring the sight line of would-be trackers or assassins.

And they provided excellent shade from the sun.

Even the walls themselves had been reinforced. Evan had undertaken these upgrades slowly over the years, using different suppliers each time, shipping the equipment piecemeal to various addresses, assembling much of the gear off-site. When he needed to hire installers, he ensured that they never knew precisely what they were installing. With meticulous planning and patience, he had built a fortress of solitude without anyone's taking notice.

He had great affection for the world he'd created behind the door to 21A. And yet he was prepared to abandon it at a moment's notice.

He crossed now to the kitchen, his shoes tapping on the polished concrete. The one flare of whimsy and color came in the form of the so-called living wall installed beside the stove. A vertical garden fed by a drip system, it grew everything from mint

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and chamomile for fresh tea to cilantro, parsley, sage, basil, and peppers for omelets. Though it was December, the chamomile was flourishing within the carefully controlled environment of the penthouse.

On occasion it gave Evan pause that the only living thing with which he shared his life was a wall.

But he had the Commandments, and the Commandments were everything.

Reaching the Sub-Zero, he pulled from the freezer drawer a frost-clouded bottle of U'Luvka, a Polish vodka named for a style of crystal glass. He poured several ounces into a shaker over distilled ice, rattled it until his palms adhered to the frozen metal, then tilted the contents into a chilled martini glass. He drank, letting the cool burn move past his lips, closing his eyes into the pleasure of it.

He drifted through the scent of the vertical wall and stepped out through one of the south-facing sliding doors. The floor of the balcony was layered with quartz stones that crunched loudly underfoot, which was precisely the point. Shatter-detection software embedded in the windows and doorframes picked up the precise audio signature of the crunched rock, alerting to the compression sounds of any object over fifty pounds. The sensors also were triggered if anything of size neared the glass.

A square planter toward the balcony's edge held an assortment of squat succulents and a base-jumping parachute, tucked behind an inset panel in the event that Evan had to make a rapid exit.

Setting his elbows on the railing, he sipped again, feeling the vodka warm his cheeks. In the distance the crescent of Marina del Rey sparkled at the continent's edge, riding the lip of the night-black Pacific.

Movement in the neighboring building drew his focus. Evan faced apartment 19H across the street. Joey Delarosa flickered into sight behind his vertical blinds, eating out of a pot with a wooden spoon, a football game shimmering in the background. A low-level accountant at one of the big firms, he spent most of his off-

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hours eating and watching TV. About once a month, he'd go on a drinking jag, stumble home from the Westwood bars, and call his ex-wife, crying. These calls were met with a stony reception; Joey hadn't honored the telephonic restraining order or paid child support in three years. His last domestic interlude had put his then-wife in a two-day coma and left his son with a permanent limp, growth plates being what they are in six-year-olds. The service door in Joey's kitchen, which let out near the trash chute, sported a Schlage wafer lock that Evan could get through in five to seven seconds with a forked tension wrench.

Evan made it his business to be intimately acquainted with his setting. His head held a catalog of directories and blueprints for anything within eyeshot—every resident, every stairwell, every electrical closet and yapping dog.

The Third Commandment, beaten into his head from the age of twelve: *Master your surroundings.*

For a time he sipped the crisp vodka and breathed the crisp air.

Habit beckoned him to check the black RoamZone phone again. Despite the high-power-density lithium-ion battery, it was down to one bar. He went inside at once, plugged it into its charger on the kitchen counter, and synced the ringer to the built-in speaker system so he could hear it anywhere in the seven thousand square feet of the condo. The number was easy enough to remember.

1-855-2-NOWHERE.

It featured one digit more than was necessary, but given the condition that callers were in when they dialed, they required something simple and memorable.

The black phone hadn't rung in ten weeks. Which meant it might ring soon or it might ring months from now. He never knew. No matter how long it took, he would wait.

Feeling impatient, he repeated the Seventh Commandment in his head like a mantra: *One mission at a time. One mission at a time.*

He stripped down to his boxer briefs, then started a fire with birch logs and burned his clothes, the stained grocery bag, and the bloody sock. Carrying the twin pistol suppressors, he padded

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back to the master bathroom and set them on the counter. The centerpiece of the room was a Maglev bed that literally floated two feet in the air, a slab repelled from the floor by preposterously strong neodymium rare-earth magnets. Cables tethered the slab in place, preventing the slightest wobble. The Finnish design company claimed that the magnetism had a healing effect, but medical evidence was scant. Evan just liked how it looked. No legs, no headboard, no footboard—minimalism in extreme.

Heading for the bathroom, he nudged the frosted-glass shower door, which rolled aside silently on its tracks. He turned on the shower, as hot as he could stand. The water scoured away the grime and sweat and gave him a clearer look at the wound on his forearm. Not bad at all. It was a fairly neat cut and should heal well. Stepping out of the shower, he toweled off, then attended to the wound. Deciding against sutures or butterfly stitches, he pinched the skin together and superglued it closed. As the skin healed, it would push the dried glue out.

He moved back into the bedroom. His bureau held twenty or so gray V-necked T-shirts, a dozen pairs of matching dark jeans, and the same number of sweatshirts. After he dressed, he hesitated and stared at the bottom drawer.

He exhaled. Slid it open. Shoved the folded squares of boxer briefs to one side. A fingernail-size divot at the edge of the wood was the only indication of the false bottom.

He reached for it. But his hand stopped a few inches above the wood.

He contemplated the item hidden beneath, then rearranged the boxers and closed the drawer. It had been a long day, and there was no need to open up that false bottom and everything that came with it.

After a quick detour to the kitchen to grab an ice cube, he returned to the bathroom and scooped up the pistol suppressors from the counter. Stepping into the still-wet shower, he gripped the lever handle that controlled the hot water and turned it the wrong way. The lever was electronic, keyed to his palm print. As

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## Fortress of Solitude

he pushed it through the point of resistance, a door concealed seamlessly within the tile pattern swung inward, revealing a hidden room.

He mentally referred to the irregular four hundred square feet beyond as the Vault. During an ostensible remodel, he'd "walled off" the awkward storage space in the back of his condo. Crammed beneath the public stairs to the roof, the room had exposed beams, rough concrete walls, and the underbellies of steps descending from the ceiling to crowd the head. No other condo had such a space; no one would know to look for it, let alone miss it.

Accessible only through this hidden door, his armory and workbench lined the wall beneath the inverted stairs. A central L-shaped desk constructed of sheet metal held a confusion of computer towers, antennae, and servers. A bank of monitors along one wall showed the innards of Castle Heights, various angles of halls and stairwells. The video feeds were easily pirated from the cheap but sturdy Taiwanese-make security cameras installed about the property.

One computer unconnected to the Internet held his banking information. His main account was stashed in Luxembourg under the name Z\$Q9R#)3 and had a forty-word password in the form of a nonsensical sentence. The account could be accessed only over the phone and his money transferred solely via voice commands. There was no electronic access, no virtual transactions, no debit cards. He'd sprinkled secondary accounts through other areas of nonreporting—Bermuda, Cyprus, the Caymans—and any paperwork was directed through a series of trusts and shell corporations based in Road Town, Tortola.

As Jack used to say, *Ball bearings within ball bearings.*

Evan had come a long way from the projects of East Baltimore.

Beside the mouse pad on the central table, a glass salad bowl held a fist-size aloe vera plant nestled in cobalt glass pebbles. Evan dropped the ice cube into the clutch of serrated spikes, a simple watering that Vera required every week.

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He put the suppressors away in one of the weapon lockers and then emerged, sealing the Vault behind him.

In the big room, he sat at last. Cross-legged on the area rug, his back straight, hands resting gently on his knees. Meditating. He observed the shape of his body from the inside. The pressure of his bones against the floor. The weight of his palms. The breathing channel, nose to throat to chest. The aroma of the burning birch logs tinged the back of his throat. He noticed the whorls in the sandalwood cabinet, individual threads of the Turkish rug, the way the blinds diffused the city lights into a gauzy orange glow. The aim was to see everything as if for the first time. That was the aim everywhere. All the time.

His breath was his anchor.

He veiled his eyes, neither open nor closed, turning the space around him dreamlike and vague, and there was no past and no future. He released the day—the four-hour drive from Las Vegas, the slashing knife, the drone of Hugh Walters’s voice across the conference table. Air-conditioning tickled the back of his neck. His forearm wound radiated a throbbing heat that was not entirely unpleasant.

His left shoulder, he realized, felt out of whack, and he relaxed it from its slight hunch, lowering it a few millimeters and feeling the muscle stretch. He aligned himself, flesh and thought, until he became the breath and only the breath, until the world was the breath and there was nothing else.

For some time he sat like this, lost to blissful stillness.

And then Evan was yanked out of his trancelike state on the Turkish rug. He blinked a few times, acclimating his eyes and re-orienting himself. He realized what had jarred him from his meditation.

The black phone was ringing.

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