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Orphan X

Written by Gregg Hurwitz

Published by Michael Joseph

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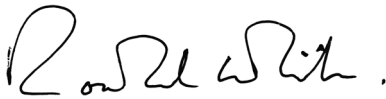
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Orphan X

Dear Reader

Like thrillers? Then you're going to love what follows. Every so often an author delivers a manuscript that reads as if they just lit the afterburners. And that's exactly what we've got with *Orphan X*. Against a richly imagined backdrop of classified government programs and deniable operations, *Orphan X* delivers the kind of widescreen cinematic thrills that we're more used to getting from the very best action movies. And a lead character, Evan Smoak, to die for (something he's more than capable of arranging . . .). So, if *The Bourne Supremacy*, *Skyfall*, *Mission Impossible* and *Enemy of the State* rang your bell, read on.

Enjoy. You'll quickly see why the movie rights for *Orphan X* were snapped up by Sony as a vehicle for Bradley Cooper – star of *American Sniper*.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rowland White". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a period at the end.

Rowland White
Publishing Director

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Orphan X

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MICHAEL JOSEPH

an imprint of

PENGUIN BOOKS

MICHAEL JOSEPH

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Michael Joseph is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in Great Britain 2015

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Typeset by Penguin Books

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978-0-718-18184-0

OM PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-405-91071-2

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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Orphan X

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.

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 human organ dealer 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 looks at 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.

1. The Morning Beverage Measure

After picking up a set of pistol suppressors from a nine-fingered armorer in Las Vegas, Evan Smoak headed for home in his Ford pickup, doing his best not to let the knife wound distract him.

The slice on his forearm occurred during an altercation at a truck stop. He usually didn't like to get involved with anything or anyone outside his missions but there had been a fifteen-year-old girl in dire need of help. So here he was, trying not to bleed onto the console until he could get home and deal with it properly. For now he'd tied off the cut with one of his socks, using his teeth to cinch the knot.

Home would be good. He hadn't slept in a day and a half. He thought about the bottle of triple-distilled vodka in the freezer of his Sub-Zero. He thought about a hot shower and the soft sheets of his bed. He thought about the RoamZone phone in his glove box and how it was due to ring any day now.

Forging west through gridlocked Beverly Hills, he entered the embrace of the Wilshire Corridor, a stretch of residential towers that in Los Angeles qualified as high-rises. His building, the flamboyantly named Castle Heights, was the easternmost in the run, which gave the higher floors a clean line of sight to Downtown. Unrenovated since the '90s, it had an upscale dated vibe, with gleaming brass fixtures and salmon-tinged marble. Neither posh nor trendy in a city that revolved around both, Castle Heights suited Evan's needs precisely. It drew the old-fashioned well-to-do – surgeons, senior partners, silver-haired retirees with long-standing memberships at country

clubs. A few years back, a middling point guard for the Lakers had moved in, bringing with him fifteen minutes of troublesome press, but he'd soon been traded away, allowing the residents to settle back into their cushion of quiet, low-key comfort.

Evan pulled through the porte-cochère, gesturing to the valet that he'd park himself, then turned down the ramp leading beneath the building. His pickup slotted neatly into his space between two concrete pillars, shielded from much of the floor and the glow of the overhead fluorescents.

In the privacy of his truck, he untied the sock tourniquet from his forearm and eyed the cut. The edges were nice and clean, but it was a sight. Blood had caked in the faint hair of his forearm and the cut itself hadn't fully clotted off. The damage was superficial. Six sutures, maybe seven.

He retrieved his cell from the glovebox. The RoamZone was constructed of hardened black rubber, fiberglass casing, and Gorilla Glass. He kept it within earshot.

Always.

After checking the rear-view to make sure the garage was empty, he got out and changed into one of the black sweat-shirts he kept stashed behind the seat. The pistol suppressors were shoved into a paper grocery bag. He tossed the bloody shirt and sock on top of them.

After checking the RoamZone battery (two bars), he slid it into his front pocket and took the stairs up one level.

Outside the lobby door, he allowed himself a deep breath, readying for the transition from one world to another.

Thirty-two steps from door to elevator, a quick ride up, and he was clear.

He stepped into the lobby, the cool air scented of fresh-cut flowers. His shoes chirped against the tiles as he threaded through the bustle, smiling blandly at the residents moving

to and fro with their shopping bags and cell-phone conversations. He was in his mid-thirties and quite fit, though not so muscular that he stood out. Just an average guy, not too handsome.

Castle Heights prided itself on its security measures, not least of which was that the elevator was controlled by the security desk. Evan gestured at the guard reclining before a bank of screens behind the high counter.

‘Twenty-one please, Joaquin,’ Evan said.

A voice came from behind him. ‘Just say *penthouse*, why don’t you? It *is* the penthouse level.’ A claw-like hand closed over his injured forearm, squeezing, and Evan felt a surge of burning beneath his sweatshirt.

He turned to the stubby, wizened woman at his side – Ida Rosenbaum of 6G – and produced a smile. ‘I suppose that’s right, ma’am.’

‘And besides,’ she continued, ‘we have our Homeowner Association meeting in the conference room on *ten*. Starting right now. You’ve missed the last three, by my count.’ To compensate for hearing loss, her volume was prodigious, acquainting the entire lobby with Evan’s attendance record.

The car arrived with a ding.

Mrs. Rosenbaum’s grip intensified. She fixed her imperious stare on Joaquin. ‘He’ll go to the H.O.A. meeting.’

‘Wait! Hold the elevator!’ The woman from 12B – Mia Hall – hipchecked her way through the glass front door, heavy purse swinging one direction, her son the other, iPhone pinched between her cheek and shoulder.

Evan released a weary breath and gently twisted his arm free of Mrs. Rosenbaum’s grasp as they stepped into the elevator. He felt the blood running again, causing the sweatshirt fabric to cling.

As Mia hustled toward them, dragging her eight-year-old

by his arm, she finished singing into the phone in double-time: ‘Happy late birthday to you, happy sorry-my-car-broke-down-and-I-went-to-the-mechanic-who-told-me-I-needed-new-brake-discs-for-an-arm-and-a-leg-and-so-I-missed-picking-Peter-up-from-school-and-he-had-to-go-to-a-friend’s-which-is-why-I-forgot-to-leave-you-a-message-earlier biiirrrt-thday, happy birthday to you.’

She lifted her cheek, letting the phone drop into her capacious purse. ‘Sorry! Sorry. Thanks.’ Rushing into the elevator, she called across, ‘Hi, Joaquin. Don’t we have an H.O.A. meeting right now?’

‘Indeed we do,’ Mrs. Rosenbaum said pointedly.

Joaquin raised his eyebrows at Evan – *sorry, brother* – and then the doors were closing behind them. Ida Rosenbaum’s perfume, in close quarters, was blinding.

It did not take her long to break the relative silence of the car. ‘Everyone with their phones plugged into their faces all the time,’ she said to Mia. ‘You know who predicted this? My Herb, may he rest in peace. He said, “One day it’ll be so that people talk to screens all day and won’t even require other humans.”’

As Mia took up the conversation, Evan glanced down at Peter, who was staring up at him with charcoal eyes. His thin blond hair lay lank, aside from one lock that swirled up in the back, defying gravity. A colorful Band-Aid had been applied to his pronounced forehead. His head tilted as he peered down at Evan’s foot. Slowly, Evan became aware of cool air on his bare ankle. The missing sock. He took a half step, sliding the offending ankle out of the boy’s line of sight.

Mia’s voice floated over him.

Clearly, she had asked him a question. He looked up at her. A scattering of light freckles, not visible under weaker light, covered the bridge of her nose, and her glossy chestnut hair

was a lush, piled mess. He'd grown accustomed to seeing her in frantic single-parent mode – runs in her stockings, slightly out of breath, juggling Batman lunchbox and satchel briefcase – but the glow from behind the panels cast her now in a different light.

'I'm sorry?' he said.

'Don't you think?' she repeated, mussing Peter's hair affectionately. 'Life would be boring if we didn't have other people around complicating everything?'

Evan felt the fabric of the sleeve wet against his forearm. 'Sure,' he said.

'Mom? Mom. *Mom*. My Band-Aid, it's coming off.'

'Case in point,' Mia said to Mrs. Rosenbaum, who did not return her smile. Mia fussed in her purse. 'I have some more in here somewhere.'

'The Muppet ones,' Peter said. He had a raspy voice, older than suited an eight-year-old. 'I want Animal.'

'You *have* Animal. On your noggin.'

'Then Kermit.'

'Kermit was this morning. Miss Piggy?'

'No way. Gonzo.'

'We have Gonzo!'

As she smoothed the new Band-Aid into place with her thumbs, kissing Peter's head at the same time, Evan risked a quick glance down at his sleeve. He was bleeding through, the black fabric even darker over his forearm. He shifted and the pistol suppressors clanked together in the paper grocery bag dangling at his side. A wet splotch had appeared on the bag – the bloody sock leaking through. Gritting his teeth, he spun the bag around and set it on the floor with the stain facing the wall.

'It's *Evan*, right?' Mia had directed her attention at him again. 'What do you do again?'

‘Importer.’

‘Oh? What kind of stuff?’

He glanced at the floor indicators. The elevator seemed to be moving glacially. ‘Industrial cleaning supplies. We sell to hotels and restaurants, mostly.’

Mia shouldered against the wall. Due to a missing button, her knock-off blazer gapped wide at the lapels, providing a generous view of her dress shirt. ‘Well? Aren’t you gonna ask me what *I* do?’ Her tone was amused, yet stopped shy of flirtatious. ‘That *is* how conversations work.’

District Attorney, Grade Three, Torrance Courthouse. Widowed five years and change. Bought her small unit on the twelfth floor a few months ago with what remained of the life-insurance money.

Evan produced a pleasant smile. ‘What do you do?’

‘I am,’ she said, with mock grandiosity, ‘a district attorney. So you better watch your step.’

He hoped the noise he made sounded appropriately impressed. She gave a satisfied nod and produced a poppy-seed muffin from her purse. From the corner of his eye, Evan noticed Peter again staring at his bare ankle with curiosity.

The elevator stopped on the ninth floor. Fresh from the social room, a coterie of residents crowded in, led by Hugh Walters, H.O.A. president and monologist of the highest order. ‘Excellent, excellent,’ he said. ‘A good showing at tonight’s meeting is essential. We’ll be voting on which morning beverages to offer in the lobby.’

Evan said, ‘Actually, I –’

‘Decaf or regular.’

‘Who drinks decaf anyways?’ asked Lorilee Smithson, 3F, a third wife with a face turned vaguely feline by decades of plastic surgery.

‘People with A-fib,’ Mrs. Rosenbaum weighed in.

‘Knock it off, Ida,’ Lorilee said. ‘You just talk down to me because I’m beautiful.’

‘No. I talk down to you because you’re *stupid*.’

‘I say we offer Kombucha,’ Johnny Middleton, 8E, chimed in. A hair-plugged forty-something, he’d moved in with his widowed father, a retired CFO, some years back. As always, Johnny wore a warm-up suit with the decal of the mixed martial arts program he’d been attending – or at least talking about incessantly – for the past two years. ‘It’s got probiotics *and* antibodies. *Way* healthier than decaf.’

A few more residents piled in, crowding Evan against the rear wall. His skin prickled; his blood hummed with impatience. Theaters of war and high-threat zones focused his composure, but Castle Heights small talk left him utterly devoid of bearings. Mia glanced up from the muffin she was picking at and gave him an eye roll.

‘We haven’t heard much from *you* lately, Mr. Smoak,’ Hugh said with a practiced air of superciliousness. Probing eyes stared out from behind black-frame glasses so old-fashioned they were trendy again. ‘Would you like to weigh in on the morning beverage measure?’

Evan cleared his throat. ‘I don’t have a strong need for Kombucha.’

‘Maybe if you worked out once in a while instead of playing with spreadsheets all day,’ Johnny stage-whispered, the dig bringing a titter from Lorilee and glares of condemnation from others.

Fighting for patience, Evan glanced down, watching the stain on his sleeve slowly spread. Casually, he crossed his arms, covering the blood.

‘Your sweatshirt,’ Mia whispered. She leaned toward him, bringing with her the pleasing scent of lemongrass lotion. ‘It’s wet.’

‘I spilled something on it in the car,’ Evan said. Her eyes remained on the sleeve, so he added, ‘Grape juice.’

‘*Grape* juice?’

The elevator lurched abruptly to a stop.

‘Whoa,’ Lorilee said. ‘What happened?’

Mrs. Rosenbaum said, ‘Maybe your augmented lips hit the emergency stop button.’

The residents milled and stirred, livestock crammed in a pen. A blur at Evan’s side drew his attention – Peter crouching, his little fingers closing on Evan’s pant cuff, lifting it to reveal the curiously bare ankle. Evan pulled his foot away, accidentally knocking over the grocery bag. One of the pistol suppressors rolled free, the metal tube rattling on the floor.

Peter’s eyes flared wide, then he snatched up the suppressor and shoved it back into Evan’s bag.

‘Peter,’ Mia said. ‘Get up. We don’t *crawl* on the *floor*. What are you thinking?’

He rose shyly, twisting one hand in the other.

‘I dropped something,’ Evan said. ‘He was just getting it for me.’

‘The hell *was* that thing?’ Johnny asked.

Evan elected to let the question pass as rhetorical.

Johnny finally unstuck the red lever and the elevator continued up. When they reached the tenth floor, Hugh held the doors open. He looked from Peter to Mia. ‘I take it you didn’t arrange child care?’

The eight or so women in proximity bristled.

‘I’m a single mom,’ Mia said.

‘H.O.A. guidelines expressly specify that no children are allowed during committee meetings.’

‘Fair enough, Hugh.’ Mia flashed a radiant smile. ‘You’re the one who’s gonna lose the swing vote on the hanging begonias in the pool area.’

Hugh frowned and moved on with the others into the hall. Evan tried to stay behind with Mia and Peter, but Mrs. Rosenbaum reached back and fastened her hand over his forearm again, cracking the developing scabs beneath the sweatshirt. ‘Come on now,’ she said. ‘If you live in this building, you’ll do your part like everyone else.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Evan said. ‘I have to get back to those spreadsheets.’

He loosened Mrs. Rosenbaum’s hand. Her pruned finger pads were smeared with his blood. He gave her hand a formal little pat, using the gesture as cover to wipe her fingers clean with his other palm as he withdrew his arm into the elevator.

The doors closed. Mia folded the remains of her poppy-seed muffin in the paper wrapper, jammed it into her purse, and shot a sigh at the ceiling. They rode the elevator up in silence, Evan holding the paper bag, the top crumpled down to cover the stain. He kept his sockless foot and bloody sleeve facing the wall on the far side of Mia and Peter.

Peter held his gaze dead ahead. They reached the twelfth floor and Mia said goodbye and stepped out, Peter trailing her. The doors started to close behind them, but then a tiny hand snaked through the bumpers and the doors jerked and retracted.

Peter’s face appeared, his solemn expression undermined by Gonzo staring out from the Band-Aid on his forehead. ‘Thanks for covering for me,’ he said.

Before Evan could respond, the doors had slid shut once again.