

1

The furor in the media had just died down when Solly's call came that rainy midweek day. I'd been hiding from the wolves of the fourth estate for nearly three weeks, holed up in my book-filled condo/prison in Charlestown, unable even to slip outside for a breath of fresh air without some cookie-cutter reporter, with a paint-by-numbers smile, sticking a microphone in my face and asking me the same tired question: "What was it like?"

As if the whole of my experience could be quantified in a sound bite.

Truth was I was avoiding everyone, even Julia and her earnest attempts to help me sort through the miasma of doubt and pain.

Sweet Julia.

We've been on-and-off again for the last five years. And I hadn't seen her for the better part of a year. I guess she thought now was as good a time as any to mend fences. Christ, if she only knew...

And what was worse, the book I'd promised my publisher, the one that was supposed to chronicle all I'd been through, lay like a beached whale on the shore of my imagination. I was standing at the bay window overlooking the harbor, watching the rain sluice down the glass, wondering if I would ever have the courage to write again, when my gaze shifted to the pile of audio mini-DVDs lying in a scattered heap on the teakwood coffee table.

My eyes filled with tears for the umpteenth time.

"I'm so sorry, Maddy," I groaned, knocking my forehead against the cool glass. "I'm so goddamned sorry."

"You have a call," the computer intoned in a quiet contralto, making me wince. Even the goddamned computer's voice reminded me of Madeleine.

"Who is it?" I asked, expecting to hear it was yet another call from the Globe. Hometown reporters were the worst, the most ravenous.

And then I remembered that I'd instructed the computer to screen all calls, allowing access to only a select few.

"The caller has an Identity Block in place. Shall I take a message?"

I sighed.

To hell with it. I had to rejoin the human race at some point, even if I felt as if I no longer belonged in it.

"Put it through," I said, making my way over to the sleek black Compaq Millennium sitting atop my writing desk. The monitor came to life and Solly Rubens' round face filled the screen. His saturnine looks were etched with concern, an expression that somehow looked ominous on him.

"Hey, Hughes, you okay? How are you holding up?"

The tiny "picture-in-picture" in the upper lefthand corner of the screen showed me what Solly was seeing, rendering his question moot.

I looked as if I'd taken the cook's tour of Hell: blue eyes—red-rimmed and puffy—surrounded by dark circles, sandy hair greasy and disheveled, three-day growth of a patchy red-flecked beard, and the same clothes I'd worn since Monday. I looked sixty-two, instead of forty-two. All in all, I presented a picture about as far as one could get from what Boston magazine had called: *"The World's Most Eligible Author."*

"How the hell do you think I'm holding up?" I said, staring back at Solly. His eyes blinked rapidly and I debated whether or not to instruct the Compaq to disconnect, when he spoke again.

"Shit, I'm sorry. I really put my foot in it, didn't I?" he said, trying to appear contrite. "Listen, I know we've never been the best of pals, but we had some good times back in school, didn't we? I mean, Christ,

we've been through a hell of a lot since Harvard. You a hotshot writer. Me hittin' the big time. Shit, I can't believe it's been a year—"

"What do you want, Solly?"

His porcine eyes darted somewhere off-screen, then riveted onto mine.

"Ken and I thought you should get out of the house, maybe meet us at the Harvard Club. What do you say?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You *gotta* talk about it sometime," he said, his Brooklyn tenor rising in pitch. "You've been avoiding us for weeks, you look like crap, and everybody—and I mean *everybody's*—been trying to find out what the fuck happened out there. And what about Julia? You shutting *her* out? You treatin' her like shit, too?"

I resented him bringing her name up, only because I knew he was using her as leverage, and not out of any real concern for her feelings. Not that I was any better.

"She's none of your business, Solly. Leave her out of this."

"All right, I'm sorry. But you *know* I'm right. You gotta get on with your life, for Christ's sake. If you're not gonna do it for yourself, do it for Harlan."

I leaned forward, my nose practically touching the screen. "Where were *you* when Harlan needed the three of us? Huh? Where the hell were you when the fucking chips were down? Taking Karen to another New Broadway show?"

Solly's lips compressed into a thin angry line. "Okay, I deserved that. But Ken and I have a right to know what happened."

So, that was it. Like everyone else, they wanted to know the truth about Harlan's death—wanted to know all the gory details. Christ, they were no better than the goddamned muckrakers slinking around my front door. And why was it so important to Ken and Solly, anyway? Would it bring Harlan back? Would it bring *any* of them back? Why the hell couldn't they just leave me alone?

And then, all at once, the anger passed, as if someone had thrown a switch inside me. Suddenly, I wanted very badly to tell someone—anyone. And perhaps it was more than fitting to do it where it all began.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll meet you guys at the club, Friday night at six.”

Solly cracked a grin, revealing crooked yellow teeth. “It’ll do you good, Hughes, you’ll see.”

“Maybe.... But drinks and dinner are on you.”

He chuckled.

“My pleasure. See you there.”

The screen went dark, and I sat there for a long moment, wondering if I shouldn’t blow them off. And then I realized that Harlan would want me to go. I doubted very much, however, once they heard the whole story, that it would be any pleasure for any of us....



By five-thirty that Friday, when I left my condo, the rain had intensified, crashing down in a raging torrent all-too-familiar in the Northeast, the last gasp of the latest El Niño.

I picked up a cab at the corner stand, told the driver the address of the Harvard Club and settled back into the rayon plush of the mock leopard-skin seat covers.

“How do you wanna go?” he said, eyeing me in the rearview.

I thought about it for a moment. “Stay on this side of the river. We’ll take Land Boulevard to Memorial drive and cross at the Harvard Bridge.”

The driver nodded. “I tell you, bud, you made the right choice. Besides bein’ more scenic, you don’t get the congestion. I just took a fare down to Rowes Wharf through the fuckin’ Artery....” He shook his head, his jaw working a piece of gum. “Man.... Those goddamned bastards who spent all that money puttin’ that piece of crap underground forgot that people was movin’ into the city at the rate of a hundred and twenty a day all during the time they was buildin’ it. Now, it’s as bad as it ever was, except you gets to look at tile walls and breath all that lovely exhaust, too. And if you have an accident? Forget it!” He shook his head and pulled the cab out onto Charlestown Avenue, heading for the Gilmore Bridge.

I leaned back in the seat and tried to order my thoughts, absently patting the leather briefcase that contained my mini-DVDs, along with the recorder. My story was only part of it. If Ken and Solly wanted to know what *really* happened, they would learn it the way I did.

From them....

The cab pulled up to the Harvard Club's brownstone edifice at 374 Commonwealth Avenue at precisely six p.m. I smiled. Harlan would have appreciated my punctuality. And when I entered the club—my senses taking in all the old familiar sights and smells: the dark mahogany paneling adorned with the framed portraits of past university presidents, plush red carpet, and leather-covered chairs permeated with the smell of expensive cigars—the sense that he was lurking somewhere about, in spirit at least, overwhelmed me.

I found Ken and Solly exactly where I expected to find them: in the front parlor seated at the round table overlooking the street. Unlike last time, the table was set with linen and silverware, the bone china painted with the Harvard crest. What struck me as odd was that Harlan's empty seat also had a place setting, as if they expected him to make a last minute appearance, laughing that it was all some cosmic joke. My anger returned, in spite of the fact that I knew the oversight was more the fault of the club than that of my friends.

Ken was the first to spot me, since Solly's back was turned. He flashed a weak smile and raised his glass of scotch in salute. I wondered how many drinks he'd had already.

Of the three of us, Ken Faust had aged the worst, the skin sagging on his long face, making him look like a sad old hound dog. Most would put it down to the pressures of turning a garage software business into a juggernaut rivaling Microsoft at a time when few would have thought it still possible. I knew the truth, however: the death of his young son from leukemia, and a marriage gone sour had eaten the heart out of him.

Ken nodded to Solly, who stood and turned, his meaty hand outstretched. I took it, feeling his warm flesh envelop mine in a viselike grip. He clapped me on the back. "Glad you could make it, Hughes. You clean up good, too."

His innocent reference to the fact that I'd showered, shaved and changed my clothes came out of his mouth sounding like an insult. I ignored it, taking my seat to the left of Harlan's chair, my back to the six-foot sash windows.

One couldn't blame Solly for his faults. He'd been crapped on in school, called all sorts of names, "kike" being the least of them. But he showed all those snooty WASPs a thing or two by making a killing on Wall Street during the crash of 2000. And after the SEC gave him a clean bill of health, he'd sent all his detractors "Get Well" cards each with a torn half of a hundred dollar bill in it. Some say he's still counting his profits.

As soon as I'd settled into my chair, a waiter appeared dressed in a red jacket festooned with brass buttons and gold braid. "Would you like something to drink, sir?"

I stared at him a moment then nodded to Solly. "Since my esteemed friend is paying for tonight's repast, I think we should have something fitting.... Chateau Lafite Rothschild, 1942."

The upward arch of the waiter's eyebrows was subtle, and he swiveled his gaze to the others, as if waiting for one of them to signal his approval or let him in on the joke.

Solly chuckled, shaking his head. "You always were a wine snob, Hughes." He nodded to the waiter. "Go ahead and bring it. Why not?"

Why not, indeed? It was the rarest vintage the club owned and cost about \$10,000 a bottle. I thought Harlan deserved at least that much.

We waited in awkward silence until the waiter reappeared with a bottle on his silver tray, surrounded by three gleaming crystal goblets. He set it down on the table, pulled out a corkscrew and began the elaborate ritual of opening the seventy-year-old wine. Solly scowled, pulled out one of his ever-present Churchill cigars and lit it, puffing away like an old steam locomotive. With his flaming red hair and the smoke spewing from his mouth, he resembled nothing so much as a fire-breathing dragon. From what I'd heard from others, it was an apt description of the man, as well as his business practices.

The waiter handed me the cork, and I waved it under my nostrils. I nodded for him to proceed and watched him pour a small portion into

one of the goblets, which he then set in front of me. I picked it up by the stem and swirled the deep crimson burgundy, noting its strong legs, then brought it up to my face and inhaled deeply. The wine's nose was still full-bodied, piquant and fruity, with the characteristic cinnamon snap known to all the Rothschild reds. And even more important for a wine of this vintage: there was not even a hint of vinegar. She was an elegant old lady past her prime, but would drink well.

"Perfect," I said to the waiter. "That'll be all."

"Very good, sir," he replied, bowing slightly. He turned and left, and I picked up the bottle, feeling the pleasant heft of it.

"Normally, I would wait at least twenty minutes before drinking a wine of this quality," I said. "Under the circumstances, however, I think waiting would be an unpardonable sin."

I poured about three ounces into each goblet and handed them out. I then raised mine and said: "To Harlan Astor, friend and compatriot. May he finally find the peace he deserves."

"Hear, hear," Ken mumbled, taking a tentative sip.

Solly only nodded, swigging down the wine in a single gulp worth, by my estimation, at least eight hundred dollars.

Ken broke the uneasy silence that followed my impromptu toast. "What happened out there, Trev? The media's filled with all kinds of wild rumors."

"And you're not helpin' it any by clamming up," Solly cut in. "Some people are saying it's your fault, you being the only—"

"My fault?" I chuckled. "Now that's a good one."

I hadn't eaten all day and the wine was already making me lightheaded. I refilled my goblet and took another generous swallow, eager for the numbing euphoria it would bring.

"What about it, Hughes?" Solly said, annoyed.

I turned to him and met his gaze, then Ken's, who looked down almost immediately. "You sure you guys can spare the time?"

Both men remained silent, their guilty eyes the only indication that my barb had found its intended target.

I reached for my briefcase and placed it on the table in front of me, unsnapping the latches and throwing open the lid. I pulled out the

mini-DVD recorder and the tiny three-inch disks, stacking them in a neat pile that emitted a golden glow in the soft lighting of the club.

All but one.

I could not bring myself to share Maddy's life with them. I left her DVD in the briefcase, which I placed flat on the floor at my feet.

"What's this?" Solly asked, waving his Churchill at my equipment.

"Ever since your call, Solly, I've been culling the interviews I conducted, dictating my part in all of this. I've been up for the last two days. I guess I should thank you."

"For what? Insomnia?" A wry grin spread across his face.

"For waking me up, for making me realize the story needed to be told.... And for keeping my publisher from taking out a contract on me."

Ken laughed, the wine finally loosening him up.

"Seriously, once you hear this, you'll both understand."

And wished to God you didn't, I added silently.

I reached over to the pile of mini-DVDs and picked up the one lying on top, placing it gently into the recorder. The drawer, sensing the weight of the disk, slid shut with a soft wheeze. The disk whirred silently, and a red light on the face of the machine began blinking, changing to a steady green.

It was ready. God only knew if I was.

Taking another sip of wine, I set down my goblet, pressed the "play" button, and settled back into the chair, listening as a stranger's voice—my voice—blared from the speakers:

"My mind says that nearly a year has passed, but to me it seems more like a lifetime...."