

THE ROWING COACHES

by

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ABSTRACT

The Rowing Coaches is about friendship, money, love, loss, and rowing. It chronicles the turning point in the lives of three friends who are professional rowing coaches. The friends are Don Bestos, Bill Maxwell, and Bergman, men who are or were at the very top of their sport, and now question their friendships with each other and where their lives are headed. The story takes place on a weekend in the summer of 2000 at the USRowing Convention in Las Vegas, the big blow-out for everyone in the sport of rowing. *The Rowing Coaches* also offers a look at an esoteric and often misunderstood sport.

The main character is Don Bestos, a fifty-year-old head coach from Northeastern University. Don is recently divorced and has yet to move on from the failure of his marriage. The memory of his ex-wife Annie causes him physical pain and occasionally haunts him. Don is in crisis and he questions what he has done with his life and whether he can continue with his chosen career. Don's concerns are compounded by his alcoholism. He grapples with his addiction throughout the story. Don also has a peculiar gift; upon touching certain inanimate objects, such as a boat, he can sense if the object has a soul.

Don's best friend is Bergman, the obese head coach from the University of Pennsylvania. Bergman's team has been losing for years and he has lost the drive to continue as an elite rowing coach. Bergman is a loyal friend and he watches out for his friends.

The one coach who appears to be on the upswing is Billy Maxwell, Don's assistant coach at Northeastern. Billy is a former Olympian and he is considered one of the rising stars in the coaching profession. Billy has been a winner at every level in the sport and he is willing to sacrifice everything to win, even friendship.

Other characters include Stacy Kookla, a sociable sales representative for the top rowing boat manufacturer in the country; Andy Carr, the head coach of Yale University; and Missy Krajcik, the fastest female rower in the world.

Dedicated to Chris, Hugh, Alison, Brian, Shannon, and the others who got me into this.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DAY ONE: USROWING CONVENTION..... 1

DAY TWO: LAS VEGAS SPRINTS..... 44

REFERENCES 80

DAY ONE: USROWING CONVENTION

The rowing season had been a huge disappointment. Northeastern finished eighth at the National Championships, our worst finish in twenty years. My divorce happened right in the middle of the season and it completely derailed me. I was depressed. I hit the bottle hard and it screwed up my practices. My crew suffered for it and I suffered too. I didn't have the edge any more and I wasn't sure if I could get it back. I had been coaching at Northeastern for twenty years.

I lounged by the pool at the MGM Grand and talked about the season with Bergman. Bergman was the head coach at Penn. He reclined in a raft in the pool and I sat on the pool's edge with my legs in the water. Bergman, who used to be a lean oarsman in his youth, was now massively fat and his raft was near to sinking from his bulk. There was an empty Bloody Mary glass on his belly and he waved his fingers in the water to keep from drifting away. His face was flushed from the alcohol and red veins pulsed around his nose. Bergman and I prepped at St. Joseph's and we rowed on the crew team together. We were still best friends.

"I'm thinking about retiring," Bergman said. Penn also had a miserable season, eighteenth at the Nationals, which in fact was dead last. It was an embarrassment for a historically successful program that had won the national championship as recently as 1991. Bergman used to be a great coach, but now he was just burned out. He didn't have the drive to push himself or push his athletes anymore. His fatness was directly related to his loss of performance; in the last five years, as his crews got slower and slower, he put on more weight. Now he was a real whale. It killed me to see him like that. We had been in the coaching game for a long time together and I was used to having him as a colleague. He was the guy I always called

up to talk shop. When I needed to unwind or have a bitch session about rowing, he was my guy. I needed him and I didn't want to see him go.

"You'll come back. You always come back," I said.

"Not this time," he said. "Doesn't it get to you?"

"Doesn't what get to me?"

"The long season. The winters. The shitty money."

"Sure it does. But what else would I do? We've been coaching our whole lives."

"I'd like to travel," Bergman said. "I've got some buddies in England. I think I could stay over there for a season and coach on the side. Nothing too strenuous. God, it would be nice to get away."

"I've been to England and it's cold over there too."

"Spain then." He picked the Bloody Mary glass off his chest and waved it at me. "I'm empty."

"My turn," I said.

I went to the bar and ordered another pair of Bloody Marys. It was 11:00 in the morning and we had been drinking for an hour. The bartender was a woman, early thirties, dark hair, nice figure, fit. She had strong hands. I figured she put in four or five hours per week in the gym. I always evaluated people like that, based on their fitness, because it was part of my job as a rowing coach. It had become automatic over the years. She pushed over the two cocktails and smiled. I smiled back as I handed her a twenty and told her to keep the change. The Bloody Marys were a deep red, almost crimson in color, and impaled with fat stalks of celery.

“Don, you’re the best,” Bergman said. I handed him his drink and he saluted me. He looked ridiculous in the raft. His limbs overflowed the gunwales and the bottom of the raft sagged under the water. Bergman was six-foot-five and easily three hundred pounds.

“Where’s Billy?” Bergman asked. Billy Maxwell was my assistant coach, in charge of the freshmen rowers at Northeastern, and he had stayed out late last night partying and gambling.

“He was passed out when I left. Let me give him a buzz.”

I dialed Billy’s number on my cell phone. After the seventh ring he answered, “Yeah?” His voice sounded rough from the boozing.

“Me and Bergman are at the pool. Where are you?”

“Fuck,” he rasped. “You just woke me up. I’ll take a shower and head down. I feel like hell.”

“How did your night go?”

“I made five hundred and blew a hundred buying drinks.” He hung up on me.

“Billy just woke up,” I said. Bergman giggled and drained a quarter of his glass, leaving his mustache tinged red. “Same old Billy Maxwell,” he said.

I slipped into the pool up to my neck. The water was an immense relief from the desert heat. It was a 110°, a typical summer day in Las Vegas, and I had been dying since I got off the plane. It got hot in Boston in the summers, but never like this. The pool was packed with young men and women, all tanned hard bodies and fake breasts. I spent all my time in the tiny world of rowing, coaching men no less, so coming here was like going to another planet.

“You want to go to Hagerman’s anaerobic threshold seminar at 1:00?” I asked Bergman.

“Bubba, I’m not here to learn about the anaerobic threshold. I’m here to party. And so are you.”

“We should at least attend a few seminars while we’re here. Our respective universities are footing the bill.”

“This place is crawling with beautiful women.” He waved his meaty arm at the expanse of the pool. “Why don’t you go talk to some of them instead of thinking about rowing?”

“These women are half my age.”

“So what? You’re fit. You’re good looking. Pretend you’re a high roller from Beacon Hill with money to burn. They love older guys with money.”

“I doubt they want a fifty-year-old rowing coach hitting on them.”

“Nonsense.” He took a big drink of the Bloody Mary. “You’ve been in a real rut since Annie left.”

“Please, let’s not talk about Annie while we’re here.”

He nodded, as if to indicate that not talking about Annie was a good idea. “I know you miss her, but we’re in Vegas and I think you should loosen up a little. You know, start dating again.”

“She might come back,” I said and instantly regretted it. Bergman furrowed his brow and looked at me seriously.

“That’s dangerous. I don’t want you thinking like that,” said Bergman.

“You never know. She might,” I said. Bergman kept looking at me seriously. “Let’s just get drunk and forget about it.”

“Agreed.” He raised his glass and polished off the drink. He extricated himself from the raft, lumbered through the water Godzilla-like, and went to the bar. I held the side of the raft so it wouldn’t float away.

I didn't want to think about my ex-wife because I had already done a lot of thinking about her, every second of every day. But she was in my head again. It happened one morning in March. There had been a storm the previous night. I was out shoveling snow in the driveway when Annie pulled up in her Volvo, having just returned from dropping our daughter Lindsay off at school. I waved and Annie waved back but didn't smile. I could tell something was up. What she did next I'll never forget. She walked up and said, "Don, I don't think I can be married to you any more." Just like that. It seemed to me her face didn't move when she spoke. She hadn't even put her purse down. The next thing I know, she tells me she wanted to leave because I didn't spend enough time with the family and oh yes, in her opinion, I was an alcoholic. She also said she didn't like rowing because it took too much out of me. I could have been something better than a rowing coach. That's when I got angry. Coaching rowing was all I had ever done, it was my entire life, and here she was telling me that it wasn't good enough. We argued in the driveway for hours, me trying to convince her to change her mind, her shooting down all my arguments. I didn't understand how she could throw the marriage away. When we ran out of steam, Annie went to her sister's house and said she wouldn't be staying with me any more. Within a month, we were divorced. Annie got the house and I moved into an apartment in Somerville. Lindsay had to split time between our two houses and I saw her even less. I've thought about that morning in the driveway a million times. I didn't understand any of it. Was there anything I could have done differently to change the outcome? I don't think so. I was a mess since then.

Bergman came back with the two drinks and also with my assistant coach. Billy Maxwell was a former Olympic lightweight rower and his chiseled good looks and elite fitness made him look at least ten years younger than his actual age of forty-two. He had on red swim trunks and

an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt, which showed off a well-defined chest and stomach. Maxwell and I had become good friends during our time at Northeastern and we treated each other as equals, rather than as head coach and assistant.

“Look who I found.” Bergman handed me one of the drinks and got back in the raft. The raft strained under his fatness and Billy and I watched to see if the raft would pop or sink. It didn’t.

“Dude, I feel like hell,” Billy said. Billy had on sunglasses so I couldn’t see if his eyes were bloodshot, but I would have bet a hundred bucks they were. He had a bottle of beer in one hand already.

“What happened to you last night?” I asked him.

“I bumped into the Syracuse guys after you went to bed. We played blackjack at twenty-five a hand and drank all the bourbon in the hotel. Then we hooked up with the girls from Vespo and did shots. Those girls are maniacs. They nearly partied me into oblivion. I have no idea how I got back to the room.”

“You stumbled in like a drunken idiot, that’s how,” Bergman said.

“You came in around dawn,” I said.

“Hey!” I heard from across the pool. I had to look over Bergman’s floating bulk to see who it was. The guy was Andy Carr, the head men’s coach at Yale. Bergman turned his head in Andy’s direction and muttered, “Fuck.” Penn and Yale were the worst kind of rivals, the kind where the two teams genuinely hated each other, and their rancor extended to the two coaches. It was always a problem when Andy and Bergman were around each other. Billy and I were friendly with all the coaches in the league, including Andy, so Andy must have felt compelled to stop by and say hello despite Bergman’s presence.

Andy was dressed in pressed khakis, a navy “Yale Crew” polo shirt, and a baseball hat with the Yale “Y” stitched on it. Andy was the only guy at the pool wearing pants and he was sweating like a thief. He had a pale complexion, a large fin-shaped nose, and a delicate chin.

“You’re the only other Ivy League coaches I’ve seen today,” Andy said. “Everyone else here is a scrub. Nothing but West Coast trash.” Typical Andy. He thought because he coached an Ivy that made him something special, which was a mistake about half the coaches in our league made. The truth was Andy was mediocre at best, incompetent often, and Yale had suffered under his watch. Yale finished two notches above Penn at the Nationals, in sixteenth place.

“Hi, Andy,” I said.

“What seminars are you going to?” he asked.

“We’ve been drinking all morning, Andy,” Bergman said. “We’re tanked. I don’t think we’re going to make it to the convention.”

Carr glanced at Bergman, as if seeing him there for the first time. The Blood Mary glass was again perched on Bergman’s belly.

“There’s some good stuff today, Bergman. Maybe you ought to attend instead of getting shitfaced. It might help you get Penn out of the cellar,” he said.

“How about you go fuck yourself.” Bergman sat up and growled.

“We’re going later,” I said. “After lunch. We’ll probably do Hagerman’s AT seminar.”

“The AT seminar? That’s old-old-*old*. Hagerman isn’t on the cutting edge any more. Try ‘New Theory in Cellular Transport,’ Grinko, at 4:00. That’s the new stuff. Everyone will be there,” Andy said.

“That’s a good tip,” I said. “Why don’t you save us seats?”

“Sure thing,” Andy said.

“Just don’t expect us to show up,” said Bergman.

Andy turned to leave.

“Hey Andy,” Bergman said to him. “Why don’t you get us a couple of drinks? Double Bloody Mary. I promise we’ll pay you back.”

Carr turned and walked away. Bergman flipped him the bird.

“Did you hear that guy? What a prick. Does he think Yale is better than Penn now?”

Bergman’s face was red, partly from the booze, partly from anger.

“Yale sucks. Forget about it,” Maxwell told him.

”Andy is alright,” I said. “He comes off as a dickweed, but I think deep down he’s okay. You should try being nice to him for once.” I actually thought Andy was an okay guy and that the rivalry between Penn and Yale, the two shittiest teams in the Ivy League, was a waste of time. If you were going to have a proper rivalry, you needed to at least be good.

“Not a chance in hell. I hate him and all the other Yalies.” Bergman was still miffed.

“You need to make sure you don’t lose to him next year,” Maxwell said to Bergman.

“Losing to Yale is practically a sign of the Apocalypse. I would kill myself if my crew lost to Yale.”

“I had a weak senior class this year. Injuries. Nothing I could do about it,” Bergman replied, not looking Billy in the eye.

“Is that what you told your athletic director?” Maxwell asked.

“My athletic director is a moronic bean-counter and doesn’t know the first thing about rowing. I told him we were getting beat because I didn’t have enough money to go out and recruit the best kids,” Bergman replied.

“How did that go over?” Maxwell took a swig of his beer.

“He told me if I needed money I should go fundraise it.”

“Typical athletic director response,” I said.

“Anyway, I don’t want to talk about it. It was a hell of a bad year and I could do without you guys busting my chops.” I actually agreed with Maxwell, losing to Yale was a sign of the Apocalypse, but there was no reason to roast Bergman about it. I had a hard enough time convincing him not to retire as it was.

We changed the subject. Bergman eventually nodded off and floated into the middle of pool, his limbs splayed every which way. The empty Bloody Mary glass rolled off his stomach and lodged itself in his armpit. He looked like a sleeping bull. A fat one. I felt bad for Bergman for losing to Yale and having to take shit about it, especially from a guy like Andy Carr. Bergman used to be a damn fine coach, but he had had a rough couple of years and now he was at the bottom of his game. I was lucky that I only had one bad season in my twenty years at Northeastern, and it was no where near as bad as Bergman’s year. My crew had at least made the “B” final at Nationals.

“I’m going to register us for the Las Vegas Sprints,” Billy said. “You need to help me put together a good crew. You heard about the prize money?”

“I heard it was ninety thousand. That’s a lot of scratch for a throw-together race.”

“Correct. We are going to put a fast crew together and win that fucking money. We need to grab people who are in good shape. Ex-national teamers, maybe an Olympian or two. I’ll be stroking the boat of course.”

“Great. Let’s do it,” I told him.

“You’re committed then. Don’t let Bergman hear you talking about it. I don’t want him in there.”

I set down my drink. “How do you expect to keep Bergman out? He’s staying in our room.”

“Figure something out. Bergman is an anchor,” Billy said.

“I would feel lousy not asking him,” I said.

“He would kill our speed.”

“He’s our friend and I would feel lousy.” Bergman was my best friend and I didn’t relish the thought of keeping him out of a race.

Originally intended as a break from conventioning, drinking, and gambling, the Las Vegas Sprints was a regatta on the Sunday of the USRowing Convention that had gotten heavily sponsored in the last few years. First place was ten thousand bucks per rower, which was good money for anyone in our profession. Billy had been talking about the race for weeks.

It was almost noon and Billy and I were hungry. We left Bergman floating in the pool. We walked inside the air conditioned splendor of the MGM Grand. Slot machines beeped and squawked and masses of tourists throbbed in every direction. Twice, a server flitted by bearing drinks and both times Maxwell tried to buy a cocktail already reserved for someone else. We found a buffet still serving breakfast and Billy paid for both of us.

A woman wearing a black polo shirt and khaki shorts appeared in the restaurant. Billy waved her over. Billy gave her a hug and kissed her on the cheek, and then invited her to sit with us. She slid into the booth beside Billy. The woman was a sales representative for Vespo, the largest rowing shell manufacturer in the country. She introduced herself as Stacy Kookla. She was around Billy’s age, tall, round-bottomed, with straight brown hair, a friendly face, and nice teeth. I could tell she used to be a rower, maybe even a very good one, but she had lost the

leanness and strength from her competitive days. Now she was just a regular woman. Her eyes were unattractively bloodshot, but her smile and nice teeth made up for it.

“You want the buffet? I’m paying.” Billy asked her.

“No thanks. My stomach is a wreck. I’m just having coffee this morning,” said Stacy. She ordered a coffee from the server.

“Kookla tells me they’re debuting their new boat at the convention.” Billy rubbed his stubbly chin. “Total cutting edge. We should check it out.”

“What new boat?” I asked.

“The VortexX. It’s supposed to be killer,” said Billy.

“It has a totally redesigned hull,” Kookla said. “Five percent less wetted surface, four percent less hull weight, increased longitudinal stiffness and improved trim characteristics. We developed a new lay-up process for weaving the carbon fiber and it changed everything. Plus, we got Manolo de Elvira to design the hull shape. He does America’s Cup boats, if you’re into sailing. You should give it a whirl. We can even paint it in your school colors, no extra charge. Black and crimson, right?”

“Black and garnet,” I corrected.

“Don, we should think about switching the fleet over to Vespo. Seriously. Everyone is using them now. And the Van Dusens are fucking tanks. They belong in a museum or something,” Billy said.

“I don’t think so. I’m pretty happy with Van Dusen,” I said. Northeastern had rowed in boats handcrafted by the Van Dusen family since before I took over, which was 1980. I loved their boats and I thought they were the most finely crafted rowing shells in the world. The Van Dusen Company still operated out of a tent in Ted Van Dusen’s backyard, and it took him and

his sons two months to make a single boat. Vespo, by contrast, had a factory capable of kicking out ten shells every two weeks. Vespo also constructed their hulls with carbon fiber and other space-age composites, while Van Dusen used wood and fiberglass. Probably ninety percent of the crews in America rowed Vespo. I doggedly stuck by Van Dusen and I took a lot of heat from my colleagues for it, but I believed that Van Dusen still made the best boats even if they were low tech. My philosophy was that the rowers made the boats go fast, and not the other way around.

“Van Dusen makes a really nice shell,” said Stacy. “But your top level crew isn’t going to come down the course in a wooden boat.”

“I’ve been doing pretty well in them so far,” I said.

“Excepting this year,” Billy reminded me.

“Look, I’m not into the Vespo boats,” I said. “You guys have too many niggling design flaws. Remember that drainage problem with the second-gen Millennium washboxes? Did you ever get that fixed? Or how about the excessive fleebord issue with the midweight Enterprises? Those are big problems, and I can’t consider switching over because of things like that.”

“Those are good points,” Stacy replied, “but we addressed everything with the VortexX design. In fact, those issues are what led us to do a total re-design in the first place. Our new stuff is leaps and bounds better, and it’s going to translate to huge gains in speed on the water. I would go so far as to say the VortexX is a breakthrough design, similar to how the first-gen Millennium was back in the early nineties. We’re expecting championships at every level.”

“I’m not convinced,” I said.

“Don is a little stubborn. I’ll get him to stop by.” Billy winked at me and nudged Stacy. She smiled.

“I’d love to shoot the breeze about boats, but I’ve got to run,” Kookla said coolly.

“We’re in conference room 317. At least stop by for a drink. We’ve got plenty of free booze.”

“We’ll do that. See you Kooks,” said Billy. Kookla slid out.

“Wow,” said Billy. “Aren’t you being kind of a prick? Stacy is cool chick. You didn’t have to run her off like that.”

“I don’t like getting sales pitched. I’m into my boats and that’s it.”

“Don’t be such a stick in the mud. Just talk to her, and if don’t want the boat, don’t buy it.”

“How long have you known her?” I said.

“We met last night.”

“I guess she’s okay for a Vespo rep.” I did feel a little bad about hammering her about the boats.

“I’m going to try and nail her,” Billy said. “I heard the Vespo chicks will do anything to make a sale. Booze you up. Sex. Buy you shit. They’re on the road all the time and it makes them crazy.”

“Maybe they’re crazy because they have to interact with dumbass crew coaches all the time,” I offered.

“We *are* basically social fuckups. Can’t deny that,” said Billy. “There’s a Vespo party tonight at Tabu. Open bar. If you stay awake long enough you should go.”

“Forget it. I don’t want to get drunk and wake up with a purchase order for a VortexX in my pocket,” I said.

“I’m not talking about boats, I’m talking about women. As your assistant coach, I advise you to attend the party and chase some tail.”

“I’m not much of a tail chaser.”

“You need to loosen up. You’ve been a real tightwad since Annie left you.”

“As your head coach, I order you to go to hell,” I said hotly.

“Sorry, I’m just being honest.”

“I’m not really mad. I just don’t want everyone bugging me about my ex-wife this weekend. That’s why I’m here, to get away from that. I want to gamble and drink and have a good time.”

“I can understand that,” he said.

I pushed my plate away. “Do you want to do the anaerobic threshold seminar at 1:00? We can stop by Vespo afterwards.”

“Sure,” Billy said. “I’m going to start drinking right away though. There’s no way I’m making it through the convention sober. I can’t be clear headed with all these crew coaches around.”

We finished our meals and got up. Bergman rumbled into the buffet. His head was glowing, half from sunburn, half from alcohol. He didn’t look happy.

“You assholes ditched me,” he said.

“Jeez, sorry Bergman, you looked like you needed the nap,” I told him.

“Simmer down and I’ll pay for your buffet,” Maxwell said.

“Billy and I are doing the AT seminar. You sure you don’t want to go?” I asked.

“Hell no. I don’t have any interest in the convention.” He glanced at the buffet over our shoulders. “I’m going to eat and watch a ballgame in the sports parlor. You guys ought to join me.”

“We’ll catch up later.” Billy and I exited.

It took us twenty minutes to navigate the hotel and find the convention area, which was in a separate building that we had to access via a glassed-in skyway. The main part of the convention was on the second floor. It was packed with coaches and rowers from all over the country. The rowers were all tall, lean, and tanned, and the coaches were pasty and grim. Rowing coaches, I thought, were not a handsome bunch. I felt edgy being around this many coaches at once. I was afraid someone would say something about my shitty performance at Nationals. Billy had a good plan. We needed to get drunk.

We pushed our way through the crowd. We were looking for the registration table. A pair of lady coaches, one short and one tall, walked towards us, and I recognized them as the coaches for Lesley University. Billy said hello to the short one. She said, “Hello” back. The tall one said “Sandy!” and it was obvious she was pissed at the little one for responding to Billy. The tall one shot Billy a dirty look and then they passed by.

“What was that? Did you know them?” I said once they were out of earshot.

“They’re a couple,” Billy’s eyes darted around. “They were at Kremfins one night last winter and I got drunk and hit on the littler one. I made a raving ass of myself and the bigger one almost decked me. Christ, how was I supposed to know?”

“I remember that night. You got us kicked out,” I said. “I didn’t realize you were hitting on a lesbian rowing coach. Dumb. You should be more careful.”

“Who cares? Lesley is awful. If they were fast then I might care.”

We pulled up to a bar inside the convention area. Billy wanted to drink two beers before the seminar, so he ordered four beers, two for each of us. After we killed the beers we were feeling pretty good. I was feeling a little too good. I was worried I wouldn’t make it, so I ordered a coffee to-go. Billy ordered another beer. We were well on our way to getting trashed.

We eventually made our way to registration. The USRowing staffer, a petite young woman, probably a coxswain in her past life, gave us name tags and portfolios. Billy signed us up for the Las Vegas Sprints. There was a \$200 registration fee and Billy paid it with cash. He said it was his treat because he had won last night. I was basically broke so I didn't argue. We spent another ten minutes looking for the Hagerman seminar. We found it and it had started without us. Dr. Hagerman was up front delivering his lecture. There were about twenty coaches in the attendance, fewer than I expected. We slipped into the back row.

"This is going to suck," Billy whispered. I unzipped my portfolio and got out my pen and paper. The two beers had done the trick. I was drunk and there was a battle commencing in my gut. The cocktails, buffet, and coffee mixed dangerously. Hagerman was in full swing:

"...The lactic acid system is capable of releasing energy to re-synthesis ATP without the involvement of oxygen. This process is called anaerobic glycolysis, and it results in the formation of pyruvic acid and hydrogen ions. The build up of the H ions will make the muscle cells acidic..."

Dr. Fritz Hagerman was a white-haired gnome with thick glasses, suspenders, and a red bowtie. He was considered a giant in the field of sports performance, and he had spent the last four decades developing his training principles by studying and experimenting on rowers. Virtually every training plan for every crew in the country, including my own, was based on his principles.

"...The normal pH of the muscle cell is 7.1 but if the build up of H⁺ continues and pH is reduced to around 6.5, then muscle contraction may be impaired and the low pH will stimulate the free nerve endings in the muscle. This results in the perception of pain, in other words the

burn you feel. This point is often measured as the anaerobic threshold or onset of blood lactate accumulation...”

I glanced over at Billy. He put on his sunglasses and doodled on his legal pad. He was writing his name over and over down the center of the paper. My buzz was increasing and I felt alternating flashes of hot and cold as my body processed the drinks and foods. I started to sweat. Billy glanced at his watch. “Fuck this,” he said. A couple of coaches in the row in front of us turned and glared. Billy reached over my arm and scribbled on my pad: *red sox*. I looked at him and shrugged. He slid out of his chair, not bothering to take his portfolio.

“Dude,” he whispered in my ear. “I’ll be in the sports parlor watching the game. Show up when you’re done.”

I nodded and he slipped out.

I made it another ten minutes before my bowels got the better of me. I dashed out and hurried into the nearest bathroom. After relieving myself explosively, I was left with a piercing headache that was part caffeine, part alcohol buzz, part exertion, and I was sweating profusely. There was an empty, painful feeling in my guts, the same feeling I experienced a thousand times when I was depressed about Annie. I officially felt like shit. I sat on the toilet and swore. I swore at Annie for everything that was wrong in my life: my finances, my loneliness, my inebriation, and for my team finishing eighth at Nationals. Finishing in the “B” finals was just ridiculous. I also swore at her for leaving me. Damn, I was still mad at her. I gave Annie a good swearing and it made me feel a little better. On my way out I splashed water on my face and looked at myself in the mirror. I was six-foot-two, lean for a man my age, with a full head of gray hair. My mouth formed a natural frown, but otherwise I was a good looking guy.

Going back to the seminar was impossible, so I wandered to the third floor where the rowing vendors were set up. They had everything there, from heart rate monitors to high-tech survival suits to carbon fiber rowing oars. I heard Van Halen's "Girl You Really Got Me Now" coming from one of the conference rooms. I followed it and found conference room 317. A pair of girls in gold bikinis greeted me. "Vespo" was written across their tops in black lettering. They both smiled at me. They both had incredible cleavage.

"Welcome to Vespo. Care for a drink?" The girl on the left said. She held a tray of shooters and the one on the right stood behind a tub of iced beer. "It's free," the one on the right said.

"Fantastic," I said. I took a shooter, shot it, and tipped her a dollar.

Inside, Vespo had erected a massive swimming pool rectangular in shape and ten feet high. I briefly wondered if the floor of the room was rated for that kind of tonnage. A viewing platform ran around the edge of the pool. A huge black banner with gold lettering--***Row the NEW VortexX!***--hung from the ceiling. The room was packed. There were dozens of coaches on the platform looking at whatever was in the pool. Curious, I climbed up a rollaway staircase to the platform. There were potted palm trees every ten feet and beach sand underfoot. A Vespo girl beamed at me from behind another tub of beer. A coach was taking a nap in an actual hammock strung between two potted palm trees. The new boat, the VortexX, was *in* the pool. Eight man shells, or eights, are sixty feet in length, and I estimated the pool was just over double that. It was crazy to put a crew boat in a swimming pool because it couldn't go anywhere, but they had done exactly that. It must have been a real bitch just to get it in the room.

The VortexX was slender around the bow and stern, muscular in the middle, with long, sleek curves. The hull was painted sparkling gold and the inside decking was black. The crew of

the VortexX set up to row and I figured they could take exactly one stroke before slamming on the brakes. The coxswain called “Row!” and they drove. The boat shot forward, slicing through the water. The rowers immediately dug their oars into the water. The bow of the VortexX bumped the other end of the tank, jostling the crew. The crowd clapped and cheered. There was a Vespo girl reclining in a raft in the pool. She giggled and splashed the coaches. It was a ridiculous spectacle. I had never seen anything quite like it. Vespo had ventured into the absurd to peddle boats. It disturbed me but at the same time I found it compelling. There was no class to this spectacle, no trace of the elite and quiet professionalism that normally permeated our sport, but right now I didn’t really care. I was drunk and everyone seemed to be having a good time. I wanted to have a good time right along with them.

“Don!” I heard. Stacy Kookla spotted me and came over.

“Hi. This is quite the set up you got here.”

“Vespo goes all out for the convention. Let me tell you, it took us all night to fill up this damn tank. Oh well. You should try the VortexX. Take a stroke and see what you think.”

“No thanks, I don’t really feel like waiting in a line.”

“I’ll get you in with the next group.”

“Not necessary,” I said. Oh great. Here she was trying to sell me again.

“It’s no problem. You’ll love it.” She smiled and flashed her nice teeth.

“Why not?” I said. I didn’t really want to row the boat, but I didn’t want to be blatantly rude either. She seemed like a decent gal even if she was with Vespo, and I figured it wouldn’t kill me to try something new for once. I decided to go along for the ride.

I got in the boat with the next batch of coaches. The VortexX was a real piece of work. It was 100% unidirectional carbon fiber, from the hull to the riggers to the foot stretchers, with no

wood or fiberglass anywhere. The seat molded perfectly to my ass. I felt like I was sitting in an exotic car, not a boat. While everyone was tying in, I put my hands on the hull. I couldn't sense her. She was dead. There was nothing there. That was another problem with these Vespos, they were soulless vessels. The Van Dusen was a living and breathing thing and that's what made them special.

"Okay everyone, get ready to row." One of the Vespo girls had gotten into the coxswain seat and was setting us up to take our one stroke. We moved up to the catch. She gave the command, we gave a light pull, and the boat jumped forward, crossing the sixty feet of open water instantly. We dug our oars in hard to bring us to a halt, but not fast enough before the bow of the VortexX bumped up against the wall of the pool with a loud thunk.

"Don't worry. The VortexX is as tough as they come. That won't leave a scratch." The coxswain giggled. The crew laughed merrily.

"She's fantastic." The coach in front of me turned around and gave me a wink. His shirt indicated he was from the University of Delaware.

"Who? The coxswain?" I asked.

"No, the boat. So smooth. I'm going to buy one right away."

"How much does this thing cost?" I asked.

"Thirty-six thou, thirty-nine if you want it painted in your school colors. I'll be getting it painted of course."

"Thirty-nine thousand," I muttered. "Good luck with it." Poor guy. Delaware sucked, and this guy was going to blow his entire budget on a high tech boat and still get stomped at the races.

We climbed out and another group of coaches replaced us. Several of the guys in my crew stretched their backs or did a toe touch, working out the kinks from a phantom exertion. Kookla came up to me and touched my elbow.

“What did you think?”

“I would have liked to take a few more strokes. I hope we didn’t damage it.”

“Nah. People have been ramming it into the wall all day. It’s super-tough. It’s got our new ‘Pachyderm Skin’ technology protecting the outer hull. You’d have to take a jackhammer to dent this baby.”

“I’ll send Billy over to check it out.”

“We should sit down and do lunch sometime. I’d love the chance to take care of your team,” she said.

“I’m pretty happy with Van Dusen.” I said.

“Hey, no problem. You’re loyal to Van Dusen, I can respect that. And your team has done well in them. If there’s anything else you need, just let me know.”

“Okay,” I said. I expected her to really pitch me on the boat, but she wasn’t being pushy. I appreciated that. It occurred to me that she might be using a sales tactic, a bit of strategic withdrawal, but she seemed sincere and friendly enough. It also occurred to me that she might be just asking me to lunch, although I found that highly improbable.

“You guys should show up at the party tonight. It’s going to be a real blowout, and I promise I won’t try to sell you a boat,” she said. “Okay, maybe for just a little while, but then we’re going to have fun. Here, take these.” She slipped a pair of tickets into my shirt pocket. They were VIP passes for the party at the Tabu nightclub.

“Thanks. I’m a little old for blowouts, but it sounds like a good time.”

“Don’t be silly. You’re never too old for a blowout,” she said, laughing.

I laughed too. I told her I would try to make it. I was thinking Stacy Kookla was an okay gal, even if she worked for Vespo. At least she was easy to talk to.

Van Halen had increased my headache and the empty feeling in my gut was coming back. I needed more booze. I went outside and dialed up Maxwell. He answered and I asked, “Where are you?”

“Me and Berg are in the sports parlor watching the Sox game. Sox are up one zip.”

“Don’t go anywhere.” I hung up.

The sports parlor was really a theater-sized room on the first floor of the hotel. It had dozens of television screens on every wall broadcasting every sporting event in the world. Baseball was on the majority of them, but you also had your pick from horse racing, dog track, Sumo wrestling, cricket, soccer, lacrosse, race car driving, and plenty of others. There was no rowing, of course, but that was no surprise. Rowing didn’t get on television. There was a bar on one side of the room and a bulletproof cage for the sportsbook on the other. I found Bergman and Billy at a table front and center. Bergman had sobered since I last saw him. Maxwell had gotten drunker. They had a plate of wings and a bucket of beer in front of them. The Red Sox were on the biggest screen right in front of their table.

“How was the rest of the seminar?” Billy slid a beer out of the bucket and popped it open. He handed it to me. His eyes were a little glazed.

“I wouldn’t know. I felt like shit, so I left,” I said.

Bergman giggled. “I told you it would suck,” Maxwell said.

“I stopped by Vespo and checked out the new boat,” I said. I took a swig of beer and watched Billy carefully. I knew talking about the Vespo would provoke a reaction from him, especially when he was drunk.

“What do you think? Killer, right?” asked Maxwell.

“It’s not a bad looking boat.”

“Great! So we’re going to get one, right?” Billy said.

“I don’t think so. It’s still a Vespo. It’s dead. I couldn’t feel anything.”

“That’s bullshit,” Maxwell said to me. “You need to get off that stuff about boats having souls and whatever. Who cares? They’re long and pointy and they go fast. That’s it. We’re trying to win races here, not commune with the equipment.”

“Nope. I’m not buying a Vespo,” I said. I was just playing with Billy at this point.

“You’re an obstinate son of a bitch,” said Billy.

“I should fire you for that remark,” I said. Bergman chortled, his face turning bright red.

“An obstinate *old* son of a bitch,” he said, and Bergman giggled again.

The Red Sox plated a run off a Ramirez double to right field. Maxwell stood and whooped and shook both fists in the air. The veins in his forearms popped up. Half of the men in the parlor cheered with him. Maxwell slugged his beer and shouted something unintelligible. He was flushed with the opiate of victory and he had forgotten all about me. Bergman kept eating chicken wings. As the game progressed and the Red Sox added to their lead, Billy got drunker, louder, and more belligerent. He knocked over a beer in the fifth inning. Bergman made him clean it up, but Billy did a horrible job and slopped beer on both of us. In the sixth inning, after a pitcher error, Billy disgustedly threw an empty beer bottle into the bucket and shattered the bottle. Bergman got mad and threw a chicken wing at Billy. The wing made a small “thwap”

noise when it bounced off of Billy's forehead. This caused Billy to wrestle with Bergman but Berg gave him a good stiff arm and knocked Billy to the floor, on his ass. There was a wing sauce smear on Billy's forehead until the bottom of the seventh inning. I drank rapidly. Bergman tried to keep Maxwell under control, but Maxwell was getting uncontrollably drunk. I left in the middle of the ninth after the Sox had it wrapped up. I badly needed to sleep and I wanted to get away from these guys, at least for a little while.

I was dreaming about rowing my single on the Charles River. First snow had fallen. The bridges and banks of the river were dusted with white and the water was mirror flat. In my dream, it was quiet, and I could see my breath. Boston and Cambridge were absent of their usual city noise. The row was good, hard, and my focus was total. There was nothing but the river and the row. It reminded me why I loved the sport. It was pure. The door to my hotel room slammed open. I opened my eyes and sat up. Bergman was in the doorway. He kicked the door shut and swore at it. He didn't have on any pants. He had a passed out Billy Maxwell hung off his shoulder. I checked my watch. I had been asleep for two hours.

"Maxwell passed out at the slots." Bergman was sweating and breathing hard. He dragged Billy into the bathroom. I rubbed my temples and discovered that I felt totally fine. No hangover.

"What happened to your pants?" I shouted. I followed them into the bathroom. Bergman's ass crack was peaking out of the top of his boxers as he bent down to arrange Maxwell in the bathtub.

"Billy puked on them on in the elevator. I trashed them." Bergman flipped on the water. He had Billy pinned to the bottom of the tub with a forearm.

“The little bastard won two-fifty on his last pull and passed out cold.” Billy was mumbling and wriggling as the tub filled.

“The floor manager was about to kick him out of the hotel. I was real close to letting him do it. He was drunk and stupid and he deserved it.

“What did you do instead?”

“I gave the guy Billy’s winnings to disappear.” Billy thrashed as the tub filled.

“I’m shocked that that worked. Take him out when you’re done. I need to take a shower.” Billy had gotten too drunk, as usual. I felt good, which was a welcome change. I should have had a ripping hangover, but I didn’t, and I was thankful for it. It was one of those lucky drunks where you wake up and feel like a million bucks. Maxwell was conscious and screaming bloody murder. Bergman laughed and I could hear a lot of splashing going on in there. I went through my luggage and picked out an outfit for the evening. Bergman was really slapping him around. The water shut off. Maxwell came out first, still dressed in his Hawaiian shirt and swim trunks and dripping wet. His expression was completely neutral and I couldn’t tell if he was still drunk. Bergman came out and went into his bag for clothes.

“Dude. Sox won the game,” Billy said. He sounded sober.

“I watched it with you, remember?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, not remembering. “Berg, what happened to the slot money I won?”

“I gave it all to the floor manager so you wouldn’t get kicked out.” Bergman shook his head at Billy.

“Easy come easy go. I’ll win more tonight,” Billy said. Good old Billy. That was his philosophy for everything. He was a little screwed up but he made out okay.

I showered and it felt marvelous. I wasn't even depressed about Annie. Hell, I thought things might be looking up for me. After showering, I put on a deep blue shirt, black pants, and nice shoes. Bergman wore big man's jeans and a XXXL Penn polo shirt. Billy Maxwell put on a gray suit with a burgundy tie. He looked handsome, even classy. You never would have known he was passed out and covered in his own vomit less than an hour ago. We were quite the trio.

We went downstairs and got a table at Shibuya, one of the many restaurants at the Grand. We ordered sushi and Sapporo beers. Billy threw his money on the table to count it.

"I'm going to start with three hundred. I say we find a twenty-five dollar table with an ugly dealer. Ugly dealers always do me right," Billy said.

"Maybe you should take it easy tonight," Bergman said to Billy. "You already went down once."

"Dude, don't worry about me," Billy said.

"I already saved your ass once," Bergman told him. Bergman was obviously still miffed about bailing Billy out. This happened all the time and this was the usual routine with them.

"I would have taken care of myself."

"No, you wouldn't."

"Maybe you *should* take it easy," I said to Billy.

"What the fuck? Let's lighten up here," Billy said. He scooped his money up and put it back in his wallet.

"Okay, but can we please go one night without getting wasted and someone getting in trouble? Is that too much to ask?" Bergman said.

"You guys are acting like pussies. We're in Vegas," Billy was getting upset now. "Let's get drunk, get some ass, and win money. Anyone have a problem with that?"

“Don’t expect me to bail you out,” said Bergman.

“Jesus, you guys are acting like old men,” Billy said.

“We *are* old men!” Bergman said.

“Let’s drop it and enjoy our dinner,” I said.

We ate the sushi quietly. Bergman and I drank two Sapporos, Billy had three. We were edgy with each other throughout dinner. Billy was all fired up to get drunk again and I guess I couldn’t blame him. He was a lucky guy and things always worked out for him. If he got out of control Bergman would save his ass, just like he’d done dozens of times before, even if he said he wouldn’t do it. I usually got just as drunk as Billy and Bergman had to save both of us, so I couldn’t really say anything without being a hypocrite. The only way out of it was for all three of us to go full bore, or all of us take it easy, which wasn’t happening. It made me tired thinking about it.

“Shots, gentlemen?” Maxwell said. “Let’s get some of that sake.” Maxwell flagged our waiter and ordered a round of sake.

“Billy, you dumbass, you sip sake, not shoot it,” said Bergman.

“Shut up and drink,” Billy said.

We got the sake and raised our glasses. We were going to shoot it. Why the hell not. We always did.

“Fast boats, women, money. And winning,” Maxwell said.

“Friendship,” Bergman said.

“To you guys,” I said. We slammed the sake.

The casino was bustling. The sake felt warm in my gut and the taste of it on my tongue reminded me of mangoes. We settled on three middle seats at a twenty-five dollar blackjack table. Maxwell sat dead center, me to his right, Bergman to his left. We always made Bergman sit to the left of both of us because he played incorrectly and we didn't want to be affected by his bad hits or stands. There was a lady with a pink feather boa to my right and a Johnny Cash doppelganger on the other side of Bergman. The dealer was a gaunt Asian woman with purple fingernails and blazing fast hands. Her hands seemed to move independently of her arms and her rapidity made me worry that she would flub a deal. Her name was Hannah. Maxwell got what he wanted: Hannah was exceptionally ugly. She had a ravaged face and a dark mole starboard-side of a huge schnoz. We played a half dozen hands and Maxwell went immediately up, more than two hundred on the strength of two successful double downs. I sensed a hot streak coming up for him. Hannah handled the cards with authority and my concern about her speed was allayed. She was a total professional. I went down a few chips but nothing big. Maxwell joked with Hannah and acted flirty. Johnny Cash Doppelganger and Feather Boa Lady bantered with us. There was a good vibe at the table.

"The terrible threesome," a voice behind me said. I turned around and there was Andy Carr. He was wearing the same outfit from when we saw him at the pool. Bergman didn't bother to look at him.

"How're you doing, Andy?" I asked.

"I'm up about a thousand," he said.

"Really? I didn't know you gambled."

"Of course I gamble. How can you be in Vegas and not gamble?"

Bergman turned. “Too bad all the seats are taken,” he said. All the seats at the table were, in fact, occupied. Carr ignored him. “I’ll just watch,” he said. “Suit yourself,” I said. Bergman turned back to his cards

Bergman and I busted on the next hand. Maxwell got dealt a blackjack, causing Feather Boa Lady to squeal in delight. Johnny Cash tipped his hat. The hot streak had started.

“You lucky tonight, Billy!” said Hannah. Billy and the dealer were on a first name basis, which was a good sign. He tipped her a fiver. Bergman and I sipped our beer.

We played for an hour and I spent half the time losing my money, the second half working my way back to even. Bergman was down to his last chip and his face was screwed up in frustration. Bergman was playing all wrong, and he fed Johnny Cash a ton of cards he wasn’t supposed to get. Johnny finally threw his hands up in disgust and left the table. “Good luck,” he said to Maxwell. He tipped Hannah a fiver. We tried to coach Bergman on when to hit and when to stand, but he ignored us as usual. Maxwell kept winning and was up seven hundred. Hannah said she had one more deal before she went on break.

Hannah dealt me four-seven, Maxwell got nine-nine, Bergman got jack-deuce, and her face card was an eight of clubs. I went double down on my eleven. I had a fifty dollar bet on the table. I concentrated with every molecule of my being and attempted to transform the next card into a face card. She dealt and it was a jack! Success! I high-fived my two buddies and Andy Carr also, who was still standing behind me. Maxwell split his nines and got a queen on the first and, improbably, another nine. He split again and received a king and a five. He hit the nine-five and came up with a deuce, giving him sixteen. Maxwell hit it again. Hannah tossed him a five, giving him twenty-one on the last split. So his two splits turned out nineteen, nineteen, twenty-

one, which was damn good. He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair with a grin. Billy could do no wrong at this point.

Bergman hit his jack-deuce and got busted by the ten of spades. “Fucker,” he said, and Hannah pretended not to notice. Hannah flipped over her hole card and revealed a queen of hearts, giving her eighteen.

“Queen! Queen! Queen!” Maxwell physically stood up and shouted at the top of his lungs. Bergman frowned and I shook my head. Billy won all three hands. That was Billy Maxwell. He was a lucky son of a bitch. I was elated at my own fortune, a hundred dollar win, and I felt flushed with victory. Winning made my arms tingle, my head feel warm, and brought a smile to my face. I loved to win, and I needed it.

Bergman clapped me on the shoulder. “I’ll see you gents at Tabu,” he said. “I’m done.”

“Hold on. I’ll come with,” I said.

“Dude, you’re hot. You can’t leave now.” Maxwell said.

“Sorry Billy. I feel a nasty slide coming up. I’m going to stop while I’m ahead.”

“Fine. I’ll find you guys later. I’m going to ride this until it ends,” he said.

Hannah waved goodbye to us and winked at Billy. He flipped her another fiver. Andy Carr slid into my seat. A new dealer came in and shuffled the cards.

“Carr, you better not play like a jackass. I’m serious. I’ll leave,” Billy said.

“No worries Coach Maxwell, I know what I’m doing.” Carr changed five hundred for chips and stacked them neatly in front of him. Billy rolled his eyes at me.

“Bubba, you didn’t have to leave on my account. You were hot,” Bergman said as we left the casino.

“It’s okay. I’d loose eventually if I stayed at that table, so I wanted to play it safe and cash out,” I said.

“I’m glad you’re coming with me. We’ll go have some fun together.” Bergman clapped me on the back.

We traversed the hotel and located Tabu. There was a line down the hall to get in, and if we didn’t have the VIP passes I wouldn’t have bothered. We flashed our passes at the VIP entrance and they opened the door for us. The lighting was dark purple, with light projections of bizarre starbursts swirling on the walls and ceiling. A DJ was spinning energetic grooves and I thought the music was way too loud. There were couches in clusters throughout the club, with each cluster encircling a low table imprinted with images of sections of faces. Here, a left eye, there, a pair of lips, over there a women’s ear.

“I think Vespo is upstairs.” Bergman leaned towards me to be heard over the music.

We flashed our passes a second time at the stairs. On the second floor was a smaller room with one bar and more couches. The music was still loud. There were maybe two dozen people at the bar, mostly male rowing coaches, with a few of the female Vespo reps sprinkled in. The coaches were mostly West Coast with a few mid-Atlantic guys sprinkled in. No Ivy. I hardly knew any of them. The Vespo women were dressed in tight black dresses and I thought to a woman they looked spectacular.

Stacy Kookla peeled off from the group and came over. She was wearing a black dress also and she looked terrific, transformed from earlier. For a second I didn’t recognize her, she was so stunning. She gave me a hug. The scent of her was wonderful and it shook me. Her perfume reminded me strongly of Annie. Right then I saw a ghost of Annie juxtaposed over Stacy’s body and it made me dizzy. Annie was right there in front of me. She was lean, almost

painfully skinny, her face all pale angles. I wanted to reach out for the ghost and touch it to see if it was really there, but I resisted. Fuck, I needed a drink immediately. Stacy didn't notice my disorientation. She led us to the bar and put in an order: vodka and soda for Bergman and me, a martini for herself. I drank mine in one shot. As soon as the booze hit my stomach the ghost hovering over Stacy dissipated.

“Everything up here is on us. Have a blast!”

“Great!” We had to shout at each other to be heard.

The vodka soothed my nerves. The ghost of Annie had disappeared and it was Stacy standing in front of me again. I had never been haunted by Annie like that and I was rattled. It scared me to think that my mind was so enslaved by her memory. I felt I needed to drink heavily just to deal with it, and that's what I decided to do.

“Let's grab a seat,” Stacy said. I was glad she was here. She was friendly and warm and familiar. She understood rowing, and by extension, she understood me. I figured she was someone I could talk to. Right then, with the music and the lights and the booze and the perfume working on my system, I wanted to be close to her.

Kookla and I shared a couch and Bergman settled his bulk into an adjacent love seat. We set our drinks on the table (it was a picture of a man's chin). There were buckets of chilled vodka and various mixers on the end tables. Bergman killed his drink and mixed himself another one. His face was pinched up and I could tell he was smarting from losing at blackjack.

“So what did you really think about the VortexX? It can't be all that bad,” Kookla asked. She was sitting with her knees against mine, causing a nice warm sensation to bubble through my legs.

“Honestly?” I said.

“Of course.”

“I didn’t care for it.”

“Tell me why,” she said, looking right into my eyes. I noticed Stacy Kookla had terrific eyes.

“This is going to sound silly, but the boat is dead. It’s got no soul.”

She paused and then said, “What do you mean? Do you mean that literally?”

“Yes. Some boats are alive and some aren’t. It’s something I can sense. It’s a gift I have. Your boats aren’t alive, for whatever reasons. My theory is because you don’t handcraft them like Van Dusen.”

“Actually, our boats are handcrafted,” she said.

“Not really. I’ve been to your factory. You’ve got Mexican laborers on an assembly line slapping them together. That’s not handcrafting. These aren’t your master boat builders.”

“All of our builders go through intensive training. Some of them have had a career in boat building. We don’t let just anybody on the line.”

“What do you pay them? Fifteen an hour? Those guys don’t care about boats, or rowing for that matter. It’s not the same as a Van Dusen. A Van Dusen is lovingly made by a family of master builders. They take pride in every single vessel that comes out of there. ”

“Look,” Stacy said. “Virtually all big boat companies operate this way. And I’m not just talking about crew shells. Boston Whaler, Wellcraft, you name it, all the same process. Very few companies have the same couple of guys planing wood and gluing hulls together. That’s an inefficient process and it doesn’t meet our demands.”

“The best boats are still made by hand,” I said.

“But not necessarily the fastest,” she said. “We make the fastest hulls out there. If you look at the results of the top twelve crews at Nationals, they’re all in a Vespo.”

“Except for eighth and first, you’re right.” Eighth was me and first was Harvard, the national champions the last two years, who also rowed Van Dusen. Besides that, she was right, ten out of the top twelve crews in the country rowed Vespo.

“I think that’s a romantic notion you have,” she said. “Boats having souls. I’ve never heard another coach talk about it.”

“I agree. It adds a little bit of magic to an otherwise dark and overly serious sport,” I offered.

“Exactly! See, we do agree on something,” she smiled at me. She seemed genuinely pleased to find some common ground.

“I guess we do,” I said.

“Are you sure you’re not making this soul stuff up because you’re trying to sleep with me?” she asked.

“Excuse me?”

She slapped my leg. “That was a joke, Don,” she said. “You were getting a little serious there.”

“Oh, sorry.” I laughed with relief. Stacy was right. I was too serious. I was the tightwad that Bergman and Billy said I was. I used to be a fun, sociable guy, but now I couldn’t socialize worth a damn and I was certain I came off as a one-dimensional bore. I realized Stacy was flirting with me and that I was kind of attracted to her. The problem was I still wasn’t sure what I wanted and I sure as hell didn’t know what I was doing. That made me feel scared and stupid,

but also a little excited and hopeful. I would have killed to be Billy Maxwell right now, because he always knew what to do.

“Look, sorry I’m so serious about the boat thing. I catch a lot of flak from other coaches about my choice in boats and I get a little defensive. Plus, I’m not very good at meeting new people, as you can probably tell.”

“It’s no problem. You’re a well respected coach and I’m interested in hearing what you’ve got to say. I think it’s interesting,” she said, smiling.

“How long have you been with Vespo?” I tried to smile back.

“Five years. I’ve been thinking about getting out of it.”

“No kidding?”

“Rowing coaches are a fickle bunch. Don’t get me wrong, some of you guys are great, but I know a lot of coaches who don’t know how to talk about anything else besides rowing. There’s only so many times you can talk about fleebord and wetted surfaces and longitudinal stiffness before you get sick of it. Don’t you guys ever get sick of it?”

“I guess we do talk about rowing an awful lot. It consumes you. It’s basically an obsession.”

“Did you know that three quarters of the male rowing coaches in the country over the age of forty are divorced or have never married?”

“No. I’ve never heard that.”

“It’s true. I know all the coaches of every major program in the country and I tallied it once. That’s a sad statistic. Why do you think that is?”

“You expend a lot of emotional energy in coaching. It doesn’t leave you with a lot when you get home. I guess coaching and maintaining a normal family life don’t go hand in hand.”

“It must be a tough way to make a living,” she said.

“I got divorced four months go, so I guess I’m part of your statistic.”

“Billy told me.” Kookla looked me in the eye and put her hand on top of mine. The hairs on my arm and neck stood up. “Was it bad? You seem like such a sweet guy. I hope she was a bitch.”

“Annie is a good person. I just wasn’t around enough. I’ll give you a perfect example. One of our big races, the Eastern Sprints, is always on the same weekend as my wife’s birthday. So for the last seventeen years I haven’t been home with my wife on her own birthday. Can you imagine that? You do all kinds of things to make up for it, but it’s never quite the same. When Annie told me she was leaving I found out she resented me the whole time for being gone on all those birthdays. That’s a really tough thing to come to grips me. Like you said, it’s a tough way to make a living.”

“I’m sorry. I know how that is. I have a daughter,” she said. “Chrissy. She’s fourteen. She stays with her dad most of the time. I’m always on the road too, hustling and selling boats to you obsessive coaches. I never got married because I knew it wouldn’t work from the get go. So I spend as much time as I can with Chrissy in the summers. That’s not the way I wanted it to work out. But that’s what happened. What’s your daughter’s name?”

“Lindsay. She’s seventeen. Going to Dartmouth in the fall. She’s a great kid and I feel very lucky she turned out so well.”

“That’s great. Does she row?”

“Yes, and she’s good. That’s why she’s going to Dartmouth.”

“Good for her! Chrissy joined the crew team at her high school this year. I told her if she’s good she can get a scholarship.” Stacy still had her hand on top of mine.

“What would you do if you weren’t selling boats?” I asked.

“I was thinking about real estate. I’m good at selling and negotiating, that kind of thing. There’s a lot more money in real estate, and I wouldn’t have to travel at all.”

“You know, I’ve actually been thinking about getting out of coaching.”

Just then a voice shouted over the music: “Fucking A! There you guys are!” The voice belonged to Billy Maxwell. Kookla and I turned to see him. He had his tie off and his shirt untucked. His hair was messed up and his eyes were wild. He was obviously drunk. Andy Carr was right behind him.

“Look who it is,” Bergman said. “The fabulous Billy Maxwell. How did the cards turn out?”

“I cleaned up! Positively cleaned up, you sons of bitches. Carr here is a fucking genius. He’s a *card counting* genius!” Maxwell put his arm around Carr’s neck. “This guy fed me the cards for the last hour.” Maxwell rubbed the top of Carr’s head. “You cheating little shit! He gave me all the cards and we rode my hot streak straight to the penthouse!” Maxwell then gave him a big kiss on the cheek. Carr was grinning from ear to ear. He couldn’t have been happier.

“How much? How much did you make?” Bergman asked. Maxwell held up four fingers on his left hand and formed a zero with the right. He put his face up to his hands and peered through his fingers crazily. He stuck out his tongue and flicked it at us. He had won big alright. He was completely flushed with victory, just filled with it. I had never seen Billy this excited.

“Forty thousand!” bellowed Bergman.

“Forty thousand!” Maxwell confirmed.

“Goddamn!” Bergman said.

“Billy! That’s great!” Kookla shrieked and jumped into his arms. He lifted her off the ground and swung her around, and then kissed her full on the lips. Just like that, Kookla had forgotten about me. I hated it. I felt like I had just lost, through no fault of my own.

“Let’s celebrate, you fuckers! I’m getting drunk,” Billy said.

Several of the other coaches in the bar wandered over and asked what the commotion was all about, and Maxwell kept gesturing and screaming. The spotlight was on him and the coaches were eating it up. He got everyone excited and a crowd began to form. Rowing people are attracted to a winner like a moth to light. Maxwell was ordering drinks and slapping people on the back and making toasts and throwing down twenty dollar tips and suddenly the night was a Billy Maxwell victory party. He ordered ten bottles of champagne and two dozen cigars. Two blonde Vespo girls materialized and draped their arms around him. Andy Carr was standing on the periphery of the crowd, grinning like an idiot.

“Did he really win forty thousand?” I asked Carr.

“Basically. I was counting cards and feeding him when I knew a certain card would come up. He figured out what I was doing pretty quickly. I had to take a big loss so he could win, but we agreed to split the take, which was twenty grand each.”

“Holy shit. What happens if the hotel finds out?”

“They’ll kick us out and ask us to never to come back.”

I was stunned and I looked at him with a mixture of disbelief and admiration. Who would have thought, Andy Carr, coach of the worst crew team in the Ivy League, a card counter? My opinion of him jumped up two notches.

Everyone clustered around Billy and drank and danced together. Even Bergman, who was an elephant on the dance floor, wiggled his ass with one of the Vespo girls. Billy was grinding on

Stacy Kookla in the center of group with the other two Vespo girls behind him. Everyone loved Billy. He was the victor. I was sore that Kookla had forgotten about me, but I understood why. We had nothing together, just a little talk, and tonight was Billy's night. I stood off to the side and nursed a vodka-soda. I felt supremely tired just then, aware of every day of my fifty years of age. My soul creaked. The emptiness in my gut was sending waves of anguish and bitterness out to my extremities. I had to get out of there.

“Berger, I'm wasted. I'm going back to the room.”

“You sure, Bubba?” Bergman stopped dancing just long enough to clap me on the neck. “There are other girls here.”

“I need to pass out. You have fun. Watch Billy.”

“Alright, Bubba. You be careful.” He went back to the dancing.

I took an unopened bottle of champagne and a cigar and exited Tabu, feeling more than a little dejected. The rhythm and thump of the music receded quickly. I didn't feel like going back to the room and the truth was I was wide-awake. I found myself wandering across the skyway that led to the convention center. The convention center was busy, with several parties in full swing in a few of the rooms. Couples in formal attire wandered through the corridor. I pulled into the bar I had been in earlier.

“You want me to open that?” The bartender asked, pointing to the champagne bottle.

“Please. And a book of matches.” I placed the bottle on the bar top. He pulled off the cork, set down a glass, and poured me a drink. Then he passed over a matchbook and an ashtray. I fired up the cigar and smoked. It felt good to smoke. It heightened my buzz. Everything was in flux. My whole life was...what? I had been coaching and winning crew races for twenty-five years, and I had even won two national championships, in '90 and '92. But so what? Winning

crew races wasn't such a big deal after you did it a few times. It certainly didn't pay the bills. Working with the athletes was great, but they changed every year. They moved on and got jobs and you eventually saw the kids as bodies in a program, and not as people. Coaching just wasn't sustaining. I was poor, fifty, and divorced. My daughter was about to go to college and I would be lying if I said I spent a lot of time with her. Where was I headed? I doubted everything. I wasn't sure why I existed.

I slammed two glasses of champagne and my vision went blurry after the second. I poured another glass and slammed it. I was thoroughly drunk. The emptiness threatened to swallow me and that moment was the worse I had felt since I arrived in Vegas, as bad as any moment during the terrible stretch after Annie left. It was dark and fearsome.

My cell phone rang and "Bergman" showed on the ID. I took two big drags on the cigar and ignored my phone. I felt like shit and I didn't want to talk to him. Bergman couldn't do anything for me. After his call was shunted to voicemail I dialed my daughter Lindsay.

She answered after the third ring. "Hi, Dad. You know it's two in the morning?"

"Sorry Linz. I'm in a different time zone, lost track of time. How are you?"

"Fine. Where are you?"

"Las Vegas. For the USRowing convention."

"Oh, that's cool. I forgot about that." Lindsay had been rowing all her life and she had actually been to the convention with me before. "So, did you win any money?" she asked.

"Hundred bucks. Nothing special. Billy Maxwell, you remember him, he won forty thou. Can you believe that?"

"Wow! He should buy your team a new boat or something. That's fabulous."

"What are you doing awake anyway, Linz?"

“I just got in. I was out with my friends.”

“Jesus, does Mom know you’re out this late?”

“I think she’s asleep. It’s no big deal. It’s not like I was out drinking all night. I was with friends, hanging out and stuff.” I focused extra hard to not sound drunk. My vision stabilized slightly. Of course she wasn’t out drinking. Lindsay was a good kid.

“You’re a good kid. I miss you Linz.”

“I miss you too. I’ll come over next weekend. We should take out the double again. I need to work on my sculling. Oh, I think Mom’s awake. Hold on.” I could hear Lindsay and Annie conferring in the background. I put every ounce of my being into suppressing my inebriation. 10% of me wanted to talk to my ex-wife simply because I missed her, but the other 90% knew that no good could of it. Of course, if I didn’t want to talk to my ex-wife I probably shouldn’t have called my daughter at two in the morning. I was probably fucked.

“Dad, Mom wants to talk to you.”

“Okay.”

“Hi Don. You know it’s late, right?” It was Annie alright. Hearing her voice got my heart rate up.

“Uh, yeah, sorry. I’m in Vegas and I forgot what time it was back East. I just wanted to say hello to Lindsay.”

“Well, she’s going to bed now.”

“Okay.”

“Have you been drinking?” Annie asked me.

“A glass or two of champagne. Why, do I sound drunk?”

“Yes,” she said. Yup, I was fucked.

“Billy Maxwell won big at blackjack. Forty thousand bucks. We were celebrating.”

“You should go have fun with Billy. But you shouldn’t call when you’ve been drinking.”

“Sure thing. Won’t happen again. I miss you, Annie. I hope you’re doing well,” I said.

“We’re fine. I’ll see you when I drop Lindsay off next weekend.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Good night.” She hung up. I slowly closed and placed my phone on the bar, as if slamming it down, which I wanted to do, would send shockwaves all the back to Boston. I poured myself another glass of champagne, took a drag on the cigar, and almost cried. It felt like I had just been kicked in the gut. I was totally derailed. I couldn’t even call my daughter without getting in trouble. I drank the champagne, threw a few bucks on the bar, and left. I wandered upstairs.

The doors to conference room 317 were unlocked. It was dark inside and silent as a tomb. The VortexX was upside down on slings on the floor. It was covered in a black tarp, sixty feet in length, like a carbon fiber golem reposed in death. I lifted the tarp and touched the gold hull. There was nothing there. Lovely, though. It was too bad.

A blue glow emanated from the top of the pool and I walked up to investigate. I touched the fiber glass wall of the pool. I was surprised to find that it radiated a faint electricity. I climbed the staircase and found that the glow came from a series of bright underwater pool lights. The surface of the water was dead flat. I reached down and touched the water. Cool, faintly electric. I could sense something in the water. A presence. It was eerie and inviting. It was very odd. I put my wallet and cell phone on the deck. Then I dove in. The water tickled as it filled my ears and nose, but there was no shock from the coolness of it. It was all very tranquil. I kicked headfirst to the bottom and the pressure caused my vision to blur wildly. I instantly had a piercing headache.

I reached out and touched the floor of the pool. Yes, there was definitely something there. The tank and the water contained, no, *was* some kind of awareness. It was the same connection I could make with boats. That couldn't be right. Either this thing was alive or I was really shitfaced. I kept drifting upwards and I was getting tired from kicking, so I exhaled the rest of my air supply. I floated down gently and reached out and put both hands on the floor. Yes. There was something there and I made a connection. Something was happening. I felt some kind of transfer, an exchange of information. Images flashed in my mind, pictures of boats and rushing water. I didn't know what was happening. The emptiness in my gut exploded. I retched. I felt it all go, a jet of toxic crap bursting out and clouding the water, just as my vision went black. I broke the connection and floated to the surface.

A huge mitt wrapped around my neck and pulled me out. It dragged me onto the deck. I heard swearing.

“Bubba, what the fuck are you doing?” It was Bergman. Good old Bergman. I gasped and shut my eyes.

DAY TWO: LAS VEGAS SPRINTS

I woke up around noon feeling something awful. My head hurt so bad it was like someone soaked my brain in gasoline, lit it on fire, and then stomped on it to put it out. Besides that, there was a knife digging between my eyes and the inside of my mouth tasted like the worst place on earth. I tell you, there's nothing worse than a champagne hangover.

We were in a Skyloft, the high roller suites at the top of the MGM Grand, courtesy of Billy Maxwell's winnings from last night. I slept on the couch; or rather I was placed there last night, unconscious. After I woke up, Bergman and I ordered breakfast from room service, but I couldn't eat because I was sick to my stomach. I tried to kill the awful taste in my mouth with coffee, but it only made it worse. Bergman stuffed himself from the breakfast cart.

"It was a good damn thing Maxwell sent me to go look for you. You were floating face down in the pool and I figured you must have gone for a drunken swim and passed out. That's all it was, right? You were drunk and passed out?" Bergman said in between forkfuls.

My head was throbbing magnificently. "I don't remember much after I left the club," I said. That was basically true. I remembered bits and pieces, and I wasn't sure what I had done to myself or, more importantly, *why* I had done it. My head was all screwed up and I couldn't figure out what happened in the Vespo pool, although I knew I was totally shitfaced. I knew one thing. Last night I felt as low as I ever have. I was dismal and depressed. Talking to my ex-wife had that effect on me.

"That's both of you guys I saved this weekend," Bergman said.

"We're goddamned idiots," I replied.

“Just don’t try and kill yourself again. You could have drowned in there. You would have if I hadn’t come around. You scared the crap out of me.”

“I’m really sorry. I was just too damn drunk.” That was the pure truth. I felt huge remorse for getting as drunk as I did and relying on Bergman to bail me out. Annie was right, I was an alcoholic. I needed to take better care of myself, and I needed to start doing that as soon as possible. When I got back to Boston, I thought, I was going to change everything. My life was shit and I wanted to turn it around. I had to turn it around.

I stood up from the table and hobbled into the living room, my back and joints cracking and popping. I felt like an old man. My back was killing me from sleeping on the couch. My head hurt magnificently. What I really needed were six aspirin. One wall of the living room was a floor to ceiling window. Las Vegas Boulevard was below, distant and placid. It was a hell of a view. I could never have afforded this place.

“Are we going to do the race today?” Bergman shouted from the dining room.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ll ask Maxwell.” At this point, I wasn’t sure racing was a good idea.

The door to the bathroom opened and out walked Andy Carr. He wore khaki shorts, a “Property of Yale Athletics” t-shirt, and his Yale hat. He had a *Rowing Illustrated* magazine in one hand. Andy looked well rested and hearty, and I suspected he drank nothing harder than a Pepsi last night. I envied his obvious well being.

“Coach Bestos,” he said, “Northeastern will be glad to know that its head rowing coach is still alive. How are you are feeling?”

“Like hell. I suppose Bergman told you what happened?”

“I think everyone in the hotel knows. He carried you through the lobby like a baby,” said Andy.

That was bad news. Bergman hadn't gotten around to telling me that part. It was total humiliation and I felt even lower, if that was possible. “I'm the worst rowing coach in the world,” I said.

“You had a bad night,” he said. “I'm sure you'll finish top six at Nationals next season.” He tossed the magazine on the dining room table.

“That would be a welcome change,” I said.

“Davenport is giving an advanced rigging workshop at 1:00,” he said. “Should I save you a seat?”

“Don't bother,” I said. “My head hurts too much for the convention.” Andy put on his shoes and left. I glanced at the cover of *Rowing Illustrated*. It was the annual Hottest Female Rower issue, with U.S. Olympic silver medalist Missy Krajcik on the cover. Missy was widely considered to be the fastest female rower in the country, and in addition to her athletic prowess she was really easy on the eyes. The Hottest Female Rower issue featured examples of our sport's fairer sex provocatively posed in spandex rowing uniforms and lounging around picturesque boathouses. It was supposed to be sexy but I thought it was trash.

I found my suitcase in one of the Skyloft guest rooms along with my wallet and cell phone. I changed into a pair of swim trunks and a t-shirt. I went back to the living room and pressed my face against the glass wall. The sun was high up in the cloudless Nevada sky, and I could feel the brutal desert heat through the glass. I wasn't sure I wanted go back out into it. My head hurt like hell and I couldn't think straight. I just wanted to rest and feel human again.

“Bergermeister,” I said. “I called Lindsay last night.” Bergman was on the couch watching the Phillies-Dodgers game on the big screen TV.

“How did that go?” he asked.

“Fine. But Annie got on the phone.”

“Uh oh.”

“She didn’t have much to say.”

“Yeah?” he said. I took my face off the glass and turned to look at him.

“She’s not coming back to me, is she? Give me the truth. Just hit me with it,” I said. He looked up from the game and looked at me seriously. Bergman, I thought, was about to give me the score. “I don’t think so. I’m sorry, but I think she’s moved on,” he said.

“Fuck.”

“You going to be okay with that?” he asked.

“How did we get to this point, Berger?”

“What do you mean?”

“We were doing alright not so long ago. We were young, married to attractive women, winning national championships. Everyone loved us. We were at the top of our careers. Now everything has gone to shit. How did it happen?”

“I don’t know. It just happened slowly. I didn’t see it coming either,” Bergman said with a sad, almost teary look. It was a terrible thing to see Bergman like that. That look, more than anything, told me the truth. The truth was that we had both fallen a long way since we were at the top, and the top wasn’t very high to begin with. We were rowing coaches, nothing more, and the bitch of it was we weren’t even *winning* coaches, at least not lately. We were in our fifties, with no families, no money, and nothing good on the horizon. I felt like I had lost everything. I

felt fucked over by life, by my wife, and by myself. I hardly felt human, and that realization stabbed me deep to my core

“Maybe we should start over,” I said. “Get out of the Northeast and do some traveling like you said.” I turned around and pressed my face against the window again. I could feel the heat through the thick glass. “I need a change, Berger. I need to find myself again.”

“Say the word and I’m there,” he said. I knew he was serious. He had been talking about leaving Penn for a couple of years now. The idea certainly had its appeal. Just leave everything behind, go far away, and start over. Northeastern crew could forge on with Billy Maxwell at the helm, and I’m sure he would do a great job. The idea of leaving almost excited me.

“Think about it. I need to go work out,” I told him. “I’m going to hit the gym and burn off this hangover.”

“I hope you feel better,” Bergman said. “Let’s see if we can get into that race later.”

I took the elevator downstairs. Annie was gone. That was it. The truth hurt pretty bad, as bad as the hangover, and the two pains combined to form a rich, potent kind of suffering. I could at least do something about the hangover, by sweating and burning the poison from my body. Annie, I was still trying to figure out how to get rid of her.

I grabbed a fresh towel in the gym locker room and went straight to the sauna. Billy Maxwell was the only person in there. He was lying on the top bench, buck naked, with a towel over his face. He removed the towel when I entered, then propped himself up on his elbows and smiled at me.

“Donny boy!” His perfectly muscled body was glistening with sweat. There were crevasses around his bloodshot eyes. He was hung over too.

“Billy,” I said. “It’s good to see you.”

“You sound like shit. Tough night?” Billy asked.

“Yeah, you could say that. I don’t want to get into it.”

“You want to hear about my night?” he said.

“Okay.” I sat down on the bench opposite him.

“It was a hell of a night. After I got good and drunk at Tabu, I went back to the tables with Kookla and these two blondes from Vespo. You remember the blondes?” I nodded. He continued, “We played a hundred per hand with my money and we started off winning. I tell you, these girls love a winner. I couldn’t keep them off of me. I started making out with Kookla, right there at the table,” I felt a dull stab when he said that, “and the other girls got jealous, so I had to make out with them too. I was making out with all three of them and playing three handed at a hundred per hand all at the same time.”

“Wow,” I said. I could tell this was a going to be a vintage Billy Maxwell performance.

“Nice, I know. That’s when my luck changed. You can’t mess with women at the table. Rule numero uno. It screws up your karma.”

“Don’t tell me you lost all the money.”

“Hell no. I’m not that stupid. Well, actually I am, but Kookla saved me. I’m getting to that part.” I was sweating like a pig. My head was throbbing so bad I was having a hard time concentrating on Billy’s story.

“We moved to craps. I started losing. Chips were flying off my stack, but I didn’t care. The girls were all over me and I’ve got my hands all over them and I can’t stop throwing money on the table because we’re having such a good time. Now, you remember Johnny Cash from earlier in the evening?” He looked at me closely to see if I actually remembered. I did, and I nodded affirmative.

“This hombre shows up at the craps table and it turns out he’s some kind of wealthy aerospace guy from Seattle. A real high roller. He says he wants to place a ten-thousand dollar bet on my next throw, and if he wins he wants to take the two blondes on a date and spend all the money on them. I know what he’s up to, this damn old coot wants to sleep with these girls, hell, he probably does this kind of thing all the time, and he’s using my luck to steal my girls. Not cool. I’m about to tell him to screw off and find his own girls when the two blondes say they’ll do it.”

“No kidding?”

“They *jumped* at the proposition. I tell you, the money makes them blind and stupid.” I didn’t say it, but I thought it, that the money makes all of us blind and stupid. Billy continued, “So anyway, there’s nothing I can do now but toss the fucking bones. Johnny Cash makes a pass line bet for ten grand. The girls blow on the dice and I toss them.” Billy makes a throwing motion with his hands. “Seven! Big as life. I win, Johnny Cash wins. The son of a bitch gets his thousand chip *and* the two blondes. He shakes my hand and the three of them strut out of the casino. The girls don’t even say goodbye to old Billy Maxwell.”

“Tough break,” I said. I felt the toxins pumping out of my pores.

“Yeah, tough break,” Billy said. “I have to admit, Johnny Cash was one ballsy son of a bitch. So I’m pissed off now. I go back to the dice and I’m firing off five hundred dollar bets and losing. Kooks must have figured I was going to blow all the money so she starts talking dirty in my ear, I mean *dirty* dirty, saying how she wants to screw me all night blah blah blah. I didn’t really want to sleep with her, I wanted to keep gambling and win my money back, but she finally got me out of there. It was a good thing too, because I would have lost more. We check our comp

cards and it turns out we have enough points to upgrade to a Skyloft, which was exactly what we did.”

A drop of sweat fell off the end of Maxwell’s nose and disappeared on his chest. “How much did you blow then?” I asked.

“Ten thousand,” he said cheerily. “I’m still up ten grand.”

“Ten thousand!” I said. I shook my head and calculated who had had the worst night, Maxwell or me. It was a close call, but I gave myself the edge for attempted suicide. “So did you sleep with Kookla?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” he said. “She was gone when I woke up. I don’t remember squat after leaving the casino.”

“So it’s possible that you didn’t sleep with her?”

“Sure, it’s possible.”

“You’re a jackass,” I said.

“I know,” he said. It amused and pissed me off that Billy got the breaks like that. He always ended up on top, even when he fucked up.

“We had a hell of a good time. By the way, I think Kookla has a thing for you. She was asking about you all night.”

“Really?” I said.

“Hard to believe, I know, with you being such a fuddy duddy. I think you should go for her.”

“What about you?”

“Nah. She’s too nice for me. Plus, I like younger chicks, bigger boobs, that kind of stuff.”

“How do I know you didn’t sleep with her?”

Billy paused for a second. He scratched his scrotum and said, "So what?"

"It would be kind of weird. It would bother me."

"Don't be such a fucking square. Jesus, Don. We've all slept with plenty of people. You, me, Stacy Kookla, hell even Bergman got some ass back in the day. Just roll with it."

"I don't know. I think about Annie a lot. I've been holding out hope that she'll come back to me. It wouldn't be fair to Stacy."

"Dude, you need to get over that shit. You've been whining about Annie for too long. Let me tell you something. There are plenty of people out there with worse problems than what you've got. Sure, your wife left you. That sucks. But you're not sitting in some fucking foxhole in the desert getting shot at. Your family isn't huddling in a hellhole in a third world country, eating rats and cockroaches for dinner. You're not a poor toothless slob addicted to smack and sleeping in an alley at night. You don't have AIDS, or cancer, or anything that will make your pecker fall off. You're not starving, and you're not bankrupt. You're healthy and you're in great shape for a guy your age. You've got a decent job at a great University in one of the best cities in the world. You're a fine coach and a goddamned American," Billy sat up and pointed his finger at me. "There's a good looking woman ten years younger than you who would love it if you asked her out on a date. Just love it. In my book, you're doing just fine. So quit pissing and moaning about Annie and have some fucking fun already."

"Holy shit," was all I could say. I was stunned. If Billy had kicked me in the head it would have had the same effect. I knew at that moment that he was right. His tirade had gotten through. I had been pathetic and stupid. I had been hopeful when I should have moved on. I had made mistakes and now I needed to take it like a man. I sat there with my head ringing.

"I kind of like Stacy also," I said, finally. "I guess you're right. I should ask her out."

“That’s the spirit,” Billy said. “Time to get back in the saddle, old man.” He reached over and clapped me on the arm, thankfully not using the hand he scratched his gonads with. That was a reality check and I felt better for it.

We stayed in the sauna another five minutes before we were sweated out. We showered, dressed, and walked outside to the pool. We broke a sweat immediately, and it was like we had never left the sauna. We should have just skipped the sauna and sat out here by the pool with a couple of cold ones. I craved a cold one. Billy ordered bottled waters from the pool bar for the both of us and paid for it. My head was still ringing but I felt a little better.

“You want a beer?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “It’s race day, remember? We have to stay sober.”

“We’re still racing?” I asked.

“Of course we’re racing. It’s why we’re here. Don’t forget about the prize money.”

“I haven’t forgotten the money,” I said.

“Good. Let’s go back to the room and relax.” He took a big swig of his water.

“I’m sore so I’m going to hit the pool and loosen up.”

“Good man. No drinking though. I’m serious about that.”

“Fine, no drinking,” I said. “You know Bergman was asking about rowing.”

“Bergman is a three hundred pound anchor. There’s no way he’s making the boat.”

“Berg is our pal and he saved both of our asses this weekend.”

“Forget it. He wouldn’t be able to handle the pace. You talk to him, figure out a nice way to ditch him.”

“Who else is in the crew?” I asked, slightly pissed that he kept trying to unload Bergman on me.

“Andy Carr is in. He’s in good shape.”

“So we need one more guy and four women,” I said.

“Kookla will do it. We need a guy and three more women. We also need a coxswain,” he said. “I figure when we get there we can ask whoever looks fittest. Get pumped. I’ll need you.”

Billy finished his water and ordered another one.

“Remember, no drinking.” He slapped me on the back again.

“No drinking,” I said. Billy got his second water and left. I debated whether to get a beer. I seriously wanted one, even after I just told Billy that I wouldn’t drink.

The bartender noticed me looking at the bar. “Can I get you anything?” the bartender asked. I forced myself to walk away without a word. Billy would ream me if I got drunk, and the thought of his ass chewing is what prevented me from doing it.

I eased into the pool, my joints popping as I bent down. I still felt awful. My body was banged up and I wasn’t sure rowing in a sprint race was a good idea. I wasn’t high on our chances either. With such a hefty prize there were bound to be crews faster than us. I also didn’t like Maxwell’s attitude about Bergman. I could see myself making a stand and Maxwell turning into a major prick. I didn’t care if Bergman was an anchor, he was our friend and he deserved to be in the boat.

There was a dark-haired woman in a blue one-piece swimsuit breast stroking towards me. She had on a swim cap and goggles. She looked vaguely familiar. “Hi,” I said when she reached me position.

“Hi,” she said back. She swam off. She was long limbed, clearly very tall, and had well defined arm muscles. She had to be a rower. She swam to the opposite end of the pool, spun, and came back towards me. I realized who it was.

When she completed her lap: “You’re Missy Krajcik, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Do we know each other?” She stopped and stood up. She was well over six feet, maybe as much as six-four. She towered over me.

“We’ve never met. I’m Don Bestos, men’s coach at Northeastern. I saw your picture on the cover of *Rowing Illustrated*.”

“Oh!” She responded. “You’re the third coach this morning that recognized me because of the magazine cover. It’s so weird to have that happen. I feel like I’m famous now.”

“You made the cover of *Rowing Illustrated*, so you must be famous. Are you here for the convention?” She was young, probably no more than twenty-five or twenty-six, and, despite the concealment of cap and goggles, a stunning young woman.

“I’m speaking at the High Performance seminar today. It’s only a ten minute piece. Basically I’m supposed to talk about the training leading up to the Olympics.”

“That sounds great. I’ll have to make that. Are you rowing at the Vegas Sprints?” I said.

“I hadn’t planned on it. Should I?”

“Winners get ten thousand bucks each.”

“Ten thousand! Game *on*,” she said. “How do I sign up?”

“My friends and I are putting a crew together. We still need a couple of women. I can get you a seat if you want in.”

“You sure you want me? I haven’t done anything since the Olympics except surf and bike.” What a break it would be if we could get her, I thought.

I almost laughed. She presumed that the tiny amount of fitness she lost in the last few weeks from not rowing would make a difference. Even if she hadn’t done anything since the

Games except sit around and eat ice cream she would still be the fastest woman in the country.

“We’d love to have you,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m in. I’m staying with a friend who coxed in college. Do we need a coxswain?”

“In fact, we do. That would work out great.”

We agreed to meet at the regatta site an hour before the race. We shook hands and she swam off. Missy Krajcik! The fastest female rower in the country. What a break that was. I felt a whole better, and now I was fired up to race.

Bergman screamed at the television just as I walked through the door. Bobby Abreu blasted a 3-2 pitch over the center field wall and gave the Phils the lead.

“Yeah!” Bergman bellowed. I high-fived him. We had both rooted for the Phillies since childhood. My headache had dissipated and my stomach felt better. I parked myself at the dining room table and ate for real, my appetite back. I flipped *Rowing Illustrated* open. There was a centerfold of Missy lying on a wooden dock, wearing a red, white, and blue U.S. National Team unisuit. She had her legs wrapped around an oar in what was supposed to be a sexy/provocative pose, but I thought it looked ridiculous.

Maxwell came downstairs wearing a hotel bathrobe. He had showered again. He sat down across from me.

“I got some good news,” I said.

“What?” He dug into his left ear with an index finger, digging out shower water.

I slid the magazine over so he could see the centerfold. “I got her for our crew.”

“What? Who?” He snatched the magazine and scanned it.

“Missy Krajcik,” he read, “Age twenty-five, six-foot-four, most recent accomplishment was stroking the U.S. women’s eight to an Olympic silver medal. Dude. She’s totally hot.”

“And she’s fast. Don’t forget that part,” I said.

“Are you kidding? You really got her?”

“Yes. She was in the pool doing laps. You just missed her.”

“Donny, you’re brilliant. We’re winning for sure now.”

Bergman, from the living room: “What are you losers talking about?”

Billy shot me a look. “Nothing, Berg. We’re looking at the hotties in *Rowing Illustrated*.”

“Are we racing today?” Bergman said.

I leaned in towards Maxwell and whispered, “He wants to race.”

Billy pointed his finger at me and hissed, “He’s not in.”

Billy got up from the table and went into the living room. “Don’t know yet, Berg,” he said. “I’m going downstairs to gamble for a bit. You guys figure out what’s on the agenda.”

“Wait, I’ll go with you,” I said. Billy shot me another look but didn’t say anything.

Bergman remained on the couch. Billy obviously wanted me to stay behind and ditch Bergman, but I wasn’t going to do it.

Billy and I rode the elevator down and bypassed the casino, instead heading for the convention center. He wanted to see Missy for himself. We argued the whole way.

“That’s bullshit he can’t row with us,” I said.

“Look, it would be fine if we were doing some lame alumni race, but this is for money. Lots of money. You’re forgetting that.”

“I know about the money. I’m not forgetting the money. I need the money. But there are going to be a lot of fast crews and we haven’t even got all of our people. We need him.”

“There will be a lot of fast crews, which is why he *can't* be in there.”

“It would be a lousy move to drop him,” I said.

“Since you're his best friend, you should do it gracefully.”

“Fuck you. You figure out a way to do it gracefully,” I said.

“Don't be so hardheaded,” he said. “He's not racing, and we're winning that money. Case closed.”

We arrived at the High Performance seminar. The place was packed, and we had to stand against the back wall. At the podium was Harry Parker, head men's coach of Harvard University, the two-time defending National Champions. Harry spoke with a soft voice with a heavy Boston accent. Harry talked about winning the latest championship, how it had taken “total commitment,” “relentless determination,” and “good old fashioned hard work”; all the clichés I knew and said myself a hundred times before. Coming out of Harry's mouth they actually meant something. Harry had been in the game so long he probably invented those clichés. I listened raptly, as did all the people in the room, except Billy who was inspecting his fingernails. Billy called Harry an old coot. He didn't think much of any coach other than himself.

Harry was seventy-five years old and had been coaching for his entire life. Harry was the only coach I honestly admired, *I looked up to*, because at his age he had accomplished the impossible; he spent his entire life in rowing and never retired, never burned out, never lost the competitive edge, and, most importantly, never *lost*. He was the winningest coach in the history of the sport. I was amazed that he kept going year after year with never a dip in performance. He had coached thousands of oarsmen, enough to fill every seat in every classroom at Harvard many times over. He was a living legend, even to old hands like me. Harry showed no signs of slowing down, and many of us veteran coaches thought he would die in his launch on the Charles on a

cold winter day, doing the thing he loved most, at which point God Himself would lift Harry, launch and all, straight into heaven. No rowers in the land would be in the least bit surprised at such a miracle. Harry Parker was rowing, and rowing was Harry Parker.

When Harry finished he got a loud and long ovation. The next speaker was Missy Krajcik. When she walked to the podium she got an ovation that was just as long and loud, along with a few whistles. She was wearing a navy blue skirt and jacket that looked great on her six-foot-two frame. I didn't think it was right that she got just as much adulation as Harry, but I had to admit she looked great. She blushed at the applause.

Maxwell perked up. "I *love* her," he said.

"She's way too young for you," I said.

"It's my destiny to mate with an Olympian and generate fast offspring. I wonder if she'll sleep with me."

"Give it a rest," I said.

As promised, Missy talked about making the Olympic team and the training that led to the silver medal in Sydney. It was anecdotal, and I found her pleasant to listen to, if not very insightful. I had heard her story plenty of times before. She ate, slept, and breathed rowing. It was her life. She worked hard and won races and made the National Team. She loved it and she was passionate about it. Her story was my story when I was her age, just like it was Billy's story and Bergman's story too. It was every great rower's story. I had heard that story a hundred times before. Oddly, coming from her I found the story refreshing. She so obviously loved the sport and it was easy to be swept up by her enthusiasm. I respected her commitment. The crowd loved her and hung on every word.

"I'm going to eat," Billy said. "Damn good job getting her."

“What about Bergman?”

“Please drop him. It’s really important.”

“I don’t know, Billy.”

“I’ll meet up with you before we leave for the regatta.” Billy left.

I listened to the rest of Missy’s speech. After she finished the crowd gave her another embarrassing ovation. When she stepped off the stage there was a crush to get her autograph. Missy was a star, or as much of a star as you could get in our sport.

I went back to the Skyloft. Bergman was still on the couch and the Phillies were still winning. Maxwell hadn’t come back.

“Where’s Billy?” I asked.

“I thought he was with you,” Bergman said. I retrieved my cell phone and dialed Billy up.

He picked up. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“I hooked up with Andy. We’re going to troll around and find more people for the crew. He’s giving me a ride to the regatta, so you take the rental. Do me a favor and grab my unisuit out of my suitcase. There’s one in there for you too. Are you back at the room?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Did you talk to Bergman yet?”

“No.”

“Get to it,” he said. “Do it gracefully.”

“Fine. I’m on it.” I hung up and went back to the living room. Now I was mad. Billy was out of line if he thought he could order me around like that. I was still his boss, and Bergman was still my best friend.

“Bergman, I just talked to Billy. We’re racing this afternoon. You up for it?”

“Hell yeah. I’ve been waiting for this.” There was an excited look on his face, like a kid who had just been told he could go out and play. He was genuinely thrilled, and I knew nothing would make him happier than to race with his pals. Screw Billy Maxwell. Bergman deserved to race.

“You got something to race in?” I asked.

He went into one of the guest rooms and riffled through his duffel bag. He pulled out a faded cotton racing top with crimson and white colors. It was an ancient St Joseph’s Prep jersey, our high school alma mater.

I touched the jersey reverently. We had had a lot of good times racing in those tops. Bergman and I were great rowers back then, strong, lean, and fit. When we raced we won everything in sight. A wave of nostalgia hit me and seeing that top nearly brought a tear to my eye.

“Does it still fit?” I handed it back to him.

He stripped off his shirt and got into the jersey. It was a tight squeeze, but sure enough he got himself in there. He looked fat and sad, but also sort of handsome, a shadow of his former self. The old Bergman was buried deep in there, beneath the flesh and blubber. He had a look of glee on his face and I felt profoundly happy for him.

I went into Billy’s suitcase and retrieved his unisuit from the 1988 Seoul Olympics. It was bright white, with an American flag sewn between the shoulder blades and “USA” in black letters on the front. The National Team had skimped on uniforms back then, and the ’88 unisuit was paper thin and left nothing to the imagination, especially in the nether regions. Maxwell loved it of course and he wore it every chance he got. He also had a Northeastern unisuit and I

took this for myself. I put it on and looked at myself in the mirror. I was muscular and thick, with only small love handles disrupting my figure. I still looked like an oarsmen, and that made me feel good.

We went to the lobby and had the valet bring us Bergman's rental. We took the Las Vegas Expressway south to Henderson and cut north on the 564 towards the Las Vegas Resort. The drive to the Resort from the hotel was about twenty miles. Lake Las Vegas, where the regatta was held, was surrounded by three golf courses, a couple of five star hotels, a resort, and a neighborhood of super high end luxury homes. I was excited about racing now. My headache had subsided and my thoughts were clear. I opened and closed my right hand, the one I used primarily to pull on an oar. I was getting it ready for the task. We kept on the 564 and entered hill country, and finally took a left on Northshore Road. We came up to the shore of the lake and the regatta staging area. The lake was circular in shape and just big enough to hold a thousand meter sprints course. To the south, across the lake and blooming out of the hills, were the colorful Mediterranean-style buildings of the Las Vegas Resort. It was beautiful here, almost paradisiacal, if you could get past the heat.

There was a big tent on the lake's edge that served as the regatta headquarters. Vespo had brought their swimming pool over and repurposed it as an actual swimming pool. It was getting plenty of use. They even installed a low diving board on one end. A banner that said, "Welcome to the USRowing Las Vegas Sprints," hung from the side of the pool.

There were dozens of rowers crowded under the tent and everyone was stripped down to their unisuits. I saw plenty of ex-National Team and Olympic rowers mixed into the crowd. We weren't the only ones taking the race seriously. There would be fast crews here, no doubt about it.

A voice boomed over the PA system, “First call for all racers!”

The VortexX was slung inside the tent, rigged and ready to go. Maxwell, Andy Carr, and Stacy Kookla stood beside it and watched us as we walked up. There were two other women with them, the coaches from Lesley University. I guessed they were our last two female crew members. I couldn’t imagine what Billy had said to get them to join our outfit. Maxwell looked at Bergman in his race jersey and then shot me a dirty look. Bergman muttered something nasty about Andy Carr. We were off to a bad start already.

“Don, are you okay?” Kookla put her hand on my arm. I was glad to see her even though I was ashamed for what happened last night. I hoped she wouldn’t hold it against me. She was wearing a black unisuit underneath a pair of gym shorts and a sleeveless top. She had good, strong rower’s legs, something I hadn’t noticed before. Stacy was still a rower after all.

“I’m a lot better. It’s good to see you,” I said. I was genuinely glad she was here.

“Bergman told me what happened last night,” she said.

“It was dumb. I shouldn’t have wandered off on my own.”

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

“We’re checked in,” Billy said. “Don, can I talk to you for a minute?”

I left Bergman and walked with Billy to the edge of the lake. The water was blue and inviting, and a small breeze puffed across the surface. There were no docks here. A few crews were wading in and launching. One crew was clad in crimson unisuits with a white block “H” on their chests. They were all athletic looking and fairly young, probably in their thirties. They were Harvard rowing alumni. That crew would certainly be fast. Sitting in the stroke seat was Harry Parker! That son of a bitch. Even at age seventy-five, Harry wasn’t too old to grab an oar

and blast it out over a thousand meters. Now I was really fired up, because I wanted to beat Harry.

“Don, did you tell Bergman he could race?” Maxwell asked quietly. Veins stood out on his neck.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Dude, I told you Bergman wasn’t in the crew.” There was a quiet fury about him that made me nervous. I couldn’t back down now.

“Tough shit,” I said. “Bergman should race if he wants to race. If you don’t want him in there you better tell him yourself,” I said.

“He’s your best friend. You tell him,” Billy said.

“Don’t give me that. Bergman is your friend too, or did you forget? He saved your ass this weekend.”

“That doesn’t matter here. There’s money involved and that’s what’s important. We should do everything we can to win.”

“The money isn’t that important to me,” I said.

“Yes it *is*. Don’t be dense. Look Don, we don’t get paid shit at school and we need to get as much dough as we can when we can get it. Hell, you can put it back into your program or you can pay for some of Lindsay’s college. Whatever you want to do. We have to go for it. This is easy money. We can win this, but not with a three hundred pound gorilla in there.” Billy threw his hands up. “Christ, it’s not like you’re loaded, especially after the divorce. Fucking Annie left you high and dry. You need the money worse than I do.”

I paused and looked him in the eye. “Fuck you. I’m not ditching Bergman. You tell him if you don’t want him.”

“Fine. I just figured he would take it easier coming from you.” Billy started for the tent.

“Billy,” I said quietly. “Don’t fucking talk to me about Annie like that.”

“I’m just trying to help you out.”

“I don’t need your help,” I said. I was angry at Maxwell and I was angry at myself for getting into a lousy situation. Maxwell was a prick, but he had a point. I needed the money and there was no getting around it. Lindsay was starting at Dartmouth in the fall and her tuition was going to kill me. Now I was on the fence about Bergman racing with us. Maybe I should have been paying more attention to this opportunity. Maybe I should have been selfish and done the thing that would help me the most. Billy took risks and he always seemed to come out on top. We could win this race if we did it right. I needed the money. Billy would drop Bergman. Bergman would get over it eventually. He would understand. I turned and walked up to the Vespo swimming pool. It was devoid of people. I touched the side of the pool expecting to feel the faint electricity from last night, but it was completely dead. Whatever was there was now gone.

“Hi, Coach Bestos.” The voice belonged to Missy Krajcik. She was standing behind me. She had on her red, white, and blue unisuit, the same one from the *Rowing Illustrated* shot. Missy’s coxswain friend was with her. She was the petite USRowing staffer from the registration table yesterday. I took my hand off the wall of the pool.

“Missy. I’m glad you made it,” I said.

“Coach, this is my friend Morgan, she’s the coxswain I was telling you about.” Morgan and I shook hands. She had a nice grip.

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “Missy tells me you’ve coxed before?”

“Yes sir,” she said. I winced at the *sir*. “Missy and I were on the team together at the University of Washington.”

“Great. Why don’t we go meet the rest of the crew?” I said.

The PA announced, “Second call!” Several more crews were launching. We had to get this thing moving.

The three of us walked towards the tent together. I heard some loud cursing and there was a commotion inside. Bergman was dragging Billy towards us with Billy in a headlock. Billy was beating on Bergman’s back, to little effect. Both men were red in the face and screaming and swearing at each other. They brushed right past me, headed towards the lake, Maxwell struggling vainly. Kookla and Carr followed behind them.

“What happened?” I asked Kookla.

“Billy tried to kick Bergman out of the boat and they got into an argument. Bergman flipped out and then they started fighting. What’s going on? Why can’t Bergman race with us?” she asked.

“Billy doesn’t think we can win with Berg in the boat.”

“Why? Because Bergman’s fat?”

“Yes. That’s basically it.”

“That’s stupid. You guys are taking this way too seriously.”

“You’re probably right,” I said. This was totally screwed up. Billy and Bergman were fighting, and I didn’t think our crew wouldn’t get it together in time to race. What was Stacy thinking about all this? She could bail on the whole thing and I’d never see her again.

Bergman grabbed Maxwell around the waist, hoisted him up into the air, and threw him into the lake. It was a powerful toss and Billy flew an impressive distance before splashing down

in about three feet of water. Billy slowly picked himself up, unhurt but full of rage, gazing knives in Bergman's direction. Bergman waded in, not bothering to remove his sandals, and casually approached Billy Maxwell. They weren't done fighting, not even close. Everybody on shore dropped what they were doing.

"Are those two in our crew?" I heard Missy say. This was a hell of a way to introduce her to the team.

Billy pounced, cat-like, reaching for Bergman's head with both hands. Berg swatted him and Billy flew sideways and into the drink. Billy leapt again, and again Bergman smacked him down. Billy did it a third time. Same result. The last blow had a good meaty thwack to it. Billy got madder and madder each time he was swatted. Billy was in great shape, but he was still a lightweight and Bergman was twice his size. If Bergman got a hold of him he could crush him. Bergman rumbled over and reached down for Billy's head like he was going to throttle him. Billy dropped backwards and lifted his foot right into Bergman's groin. Both guys paused for an instant, Bergman with a thoroughly surprised look on his face. A bunch of people on the shore gasped. I heard Andy Carr say, "Ouch!" Bergman toppled over, and Billy disappeared underneath the surface of the water.

"Holy shit!" I said. Kookla and I rushed over and grabbed Bergman's shoulders. Bergman was writhing in pain. I gave a tug on him but he couldn't be moved.

"Berg, can you breathe? You need to get up. Billy's going to drown," Kookla said.

Bergman moaned by way of response.

"Berg, seriously, roll over or something," I said. Bergman cracked open an eye and looked at me.

"Screw Billy," he hissed.

“Berg! That’s enough!” I yelled at him.

Bergman slowly rolled over. Maxwell sat up, gasping and swearing. He reached for Bergman but I dragged him by his shirt collar away.

Kookla checked on Berg and I held Maxwell. We all sat in the water for a minute, catching our breath and letting the absurdity of the situation sink in. Bergman got up first, groaned, and lumbered to shore. He didn’t look at us or say anything.

“He just blew his stack,” Billy said. “I tried to be reasonable. How was I supposed to know he would react like that?”

“You’re an asshole,” Kookla said. She was genuinely angry. “Seriously. You really hurt Bergman’s feelings.”

“We can’t win with him in the boat,” said Billy.

“That’s not what rowing is all about,” Kookla replied. “He’s your friend.”

Billy looked down between his knees and frowned deeply. It must have dawned on him that he actually was an asshole. The lines around his eyes creased even more and for once he looked his age. His normal look of happy-go-lucky youthfulness disappeared. His right eye was puffing, where he had taken a hard swat. Billy looked sad and pathetic. I chuckled. Stacy looked at me like I was crazy.

“I just wanted to win,” Billy said.

“We can win with him in the boat,” I said. I truly wanted to believe it, and I did. In that moment I felt inspired. I had faith in Bergman. He used to be a great oarsman, and once you are a great oarsman you never truly lost it. I believed he could get the job done.

“No, we can’t,” Billy said.

“Bergman will be awesome, and we’ll do great,” I said.

“You’re crazy,” he said.

“Let’s just do it. Bergman can still pull with the best of them. I feel good about this.”

Billy shrugged his shoulders and turned his palms up. “Fine. I guess we owe it to him for all the shit he’s done for us. We’ll just have to find a way to win,” Billy said.

“Go tell him before he leaves,” Kookla said. “Make sure you apologize too.”

“Don, please come with me,” he said. “I suck at apologizing.”

“Okay,” I said.

I helped Billy up and pushed him towards the tent. I helped Stacy up. I laughed. This whole situation was absurd. This wasn’t the rowing I coached, but in a few ways it was pure rowing. It reminded me of my high school days, when we got into fights at practice and then went out and had a great row. There were no colleges, no athletic directors, no National Championships. We were just a bunch of friends trying to get a race in. Stacy Kookla looked at me and shook her head.

“Those are some friends you got there,” she said. She looked me in the eyes and smiled finally. Her smile was a real beacon of light. She was a wonderful woman, I thought, and she was one of us. I felt something move inside me.

That’s when I kissed her. She hesitated for a second, unsure what to do, undecided, then returned the embrace. My heart rate jumped up thirty beats. I felt like I was jumping out of an airplane. There was a bolt of lightning sizzling through my body. I felt alive. It was wonderful.

We stopped and she said, “What was that for?” Her face was flushed and we had our arms around each other.

“I don’t know. It seemed like the right thing to do.”

“It was very nice. I’m glad you did.” She kissed me again, briefly.

We walked up the beach together. I introduced her to Missy and Morgan, who appeared to be fascinated by us. The four of us walked into the tent together. Billy and Bergman had disappeared, and I was worried about that. "I'm going to look for them," I told Kookla. I bolted for the parking lot. Bergman was in the rental car, pulling out of his space, with Billy clinging to the hood. Bergman had the window down and was shouting at him and honking the horn. His face was bright red and he was spitting as he yelled.

"What's up?" I said to them.

"Bergman, I'm sorry," Maxwell said. "We want you to row with us. Really." Billy was clinging to the windshield wipers. Bergman honked the horn again.

"Fuck off, Billy! Go find someone else to row. I'm a fat slob, remember?"

"I screwed up. I ran my mouth again. I didn't mean it. I want you in the boat. I really do."

"Billy, get off the fucking car. I'll drive back to Vegas with you on it, I swear."

"I'm begging you here," Billy pleaded. "I'm an asshole and I say stupid things. I really want you to row. It'll be great. Look, you can even sit six-seat, you love sitting six-seat."

Bergman paused for a second.

"Six seat, Bergman. We'll put you in six," he repeated.

"Berg," I spoke, and Bergman noticed me standing there finally. "I really need you on this one. It'll be the two St Joe's guys again. Just like old times. We can win it together."

"I don't know if I can row with this guy," he said, pointing at Billy.

"Come row with me then," I said.

Bergman's face was puckered up in deep conflict. I hated what we had done to him and to each other. We had been awful to Bergman and he was always there for us. I couldn't blame

him if he told us to screw off. I was especially angry at myself for letting Maxwell challenge my friendship with Bergman. The money had made us do awful things.

“Shit,” he said. He rolled up the window, shut the car off, and climbed out.

“Okay, I’ll do it. I’m doing it for Don, not for you Billy. I’m rowing because Don asked me.”

“You won’t regret it.” Billy said. He slid off the hood.

“We’ll tear it up, just like we did in high school.” I grabbed Bergman around the neck and gave him a neck hug. I felt some of the tension drain out of him, and my own tension drained away with it. I loved Bergman and I was tremendously happy that he was racing with me. There was nothing more I wanted to do right now than row with my buddies. Nothing in the world.

“Yeah Berg, this’ll be great,” said Billy.

We were the very last crew on shore and we were out of time. I looked at my watch. It was quarter till five. We needed to get our butts out there or all the drama would amount to nothing. The three of us walked back into the tent together.

“How the hell did you get the two Lesley coaches to join us?” I asked Billy.

“Sandy has a crush on me. She’s the short one.”

“Bullshit,” I said.

“You’re right. I told them we had a shot to win, and if they wanted to be our bow pair they could win ten grand each. Lesley coaches make less than we do.”

“So that’s it? It was the money again?”

“Well, I also apologized for what happened at Kremlin’s. I think that helped.”

“You can be a royal ass sometimes,” I said. “You know that?”

“I know,” he said.

The PA voice: “Last call! All boats to the start line!”

We circled the group up and introduced everyone who hadn’t already been introduced.

There was Morgan, the former University of Washington coxswain; Missy Krajcik, stroke of the U.S. Olympic eight; Maxwell and me, men’s coaches from Northeastern; Sandy (the short one) and Diedre (the tall one), coaches from Lesley University; Bergman, head coach at Penn; Andy Carr, from Yale; and Stacy Kookla, the Vespo rep. We finally had our crew.

“What kind of race plan are we doing?” Morgan asked.

“Here’s what we’re doing,” Billy said. “I’ll sit stroke, Missy in seven. I figure we’ll match up pretty well.” He winked at her. She pretended not to notice. “Bergman in six, with Don and Andy five and four. Stacy, you sit three, Sandy and Deirdre will go bow pair. Everybody agree with that?” No one dissented. We were running out of time.

“Let’s do a three-quarter-half-three-quarter-lengthen-full start, then high twenty, then settle to a thirty-eight. Morgan, make sure we don’t get too low. This is only a thousand meters, so we’re going to basically sprint the whole way. Keep us updated on the other crews. Counter every move and take power tens liberally. Let’s do a lift with twenty strokes to go, shorten the body swing, and just wind it up for the finish line. This race should only take three minutes, maybe three-ten at most. I say we grab the lead early and hang on. I’m real excited about this crew we got here. We’ve got power and skill. I think we can really kick some ass. After we win and pick up our checks, beers are on me tonight. How does that sound?”

Everyone nodded. It was a good plan, and Billy had said it right. We circled up tightly and brought our hands together in the center of the group.

“Let’s do *team* on three.” He said. We counted down and cheered, *team*, nice and loud. I looked around at their faces. Everyone was in the zone. Bergman was purely focused, and he

looked like he was going to rip the oar apart. Billy had brought us together, finally. He had been horrible lately, but he was a winner and a leader, and rowers loved to row for him. That's what made him special.

We lifted the boat over head and hustled down to the water. We were the very last crew to launch and in the distance I could see the other boats warming up. We placed the boat in the water, grabbed our oars, locked the oars in the locks, and climbed in. Deidre tapped our point around until we were aimed towards the center of the lake. We rowed by sixes, with the bow pair sitting out. The shore receded. Water flowed underneath us quietly.

Bergman, sitting in front of me in six-seat, barely fit between the gunwales. His ass overflowed over the thin carbon fiber seat. I couldn't see around him to see Missy or Billy, but I could follow their oars sweeping back and forth. It was no problem to pick up the rhythm. I had rowed behind Billy a few times before and he had a wonderful stroke, easy to follow with just the right ratio of power and relaxation. Bergman's stroke was also very familiar, and I easily fell into rhythm with the trio in front of me. Bergman's breathing was labored. I hoped he would make it. I didn't know if we were going to win, but I thought it would be a hell of a fun race. Morgan called us to row all oars. Sandy and Deidre added in. The boat was tippy for just three strokes, and then righted itself. We were completely balanced. Considering the mixed crew, we were clicking along nicely. It was brutally hot and I sweated profusely, but otherwise I felt good.

The lush shore of the Reflection Bay golf course streamed by to our port. There were a couple of golfers up there gawking at us. We passed the starting line. There were eleven crews lined up and ready to go. A race marshal in a powerboat motored over and screamed at us, "Get that crew locked in! NOW!" Morgan spun the boat around and put us in the far outside lane of the racecourse. In the adjacent lane, to our port, was the crew from Harvard. The Harvard

oarsmen and oarswomen looked us over as we got settled. Harry Parker had his head bowed and eyes closed, relaxed, almost meditative. I badly wanted to beat him because I hadn't beaten him in a long time.

"That's everyone. Please sit ready," the marshal said. This thing was going to start any second now. Morgan called us to sit ready. We slid up to the catch and placed our oars in the water.

"I hope I don't have a heart attack," I said to no one in particular.

"Bubba," Bergman twisted around to look at me, "We're winning this thing. You and me."

"Okay," I said.

"All crews at attention. Set. GO!" shouted the marshal.

We pounded off the line, ripping through our start five and high twenty, water exploding off the blades. We were *flying*; the boat accelerated with every stroke. It felt fast, too fast, and I figured Maxwell must have had the rate through the roof. Morgan called out the rating, "forty-five!" I swore to myself. Forty-five strokes per minute, that was way too high. That was going to cook us. We had to settle it down. Bergman rolled up the slide with surprising nimbleness for such a large body. He hammered each stroke. I was having a hard time keeping up with his leg drive. Maxwell and Missy were perfectly in the time. Andy Carr was making sharp little exhalations behind me. Morgan called a settle and Maxwell brought down the rate just a tiny bit. We were still high and short. She called for the settle again, and finally we lengthened out. "Thirty-eight, right there!" she said. I was pulling for all I was worth and we had only been racing for thirty seconds. The pace was going to catch up with me quickly.

I looked over to the right. The line of crews stretched across eleven lanes and it was impossible to tell if we were leading or behind. Harvard was right there with us. They looked strong.

After sixty seconds, I hit the anaerobic threshold, just like Hagerman talked about. An overload of lactate assaulted my limbs. I felt the burning immediately. My heart rate was near maximum. Maxwell and Missy were setting a torrid pace, a pace worthy of Olympians. There was nothing polite or responsible about how fast we were going. We were quite simply sprinting all out, every stroke, in an attempt to take the lead. At this pace, if someone didn't have the fitness, or the guts, the crew would crash. Harvard was doing the same thing, and it felt like we were at war with them. It had been, I realized, a long time since I had done this.

I sucked wind and my heart buzzed. Lactate addled my brain and all the toxins from the weekend sizzled out of my body.

"Five hundred down, five hundred to go, even with lanes eight and eleven, we're right in this!" Morgan's voice came through the speakers.

We were at the halfway mark. Water flowed noisily past the hull as we crushed each stroke. I said goodbye to Annie. I loved her, but she was gone. I knew this. I could have been a better husband. I could have been a better father. I should have been around more. Thoughts flickered inside my head like sparks. I pulled as hard as I could. I stole another glance at Harvard. I saw the taut muscles in Harry Parker's forearms and back. He looked twice as big and forty years younger than when I saw him on shore. He was setting the same pace as Billy, and I knew they were feeding off each other.

"Last two-fifty! We're even with Harvard!" A quarter of the race left. We were about to sprint.

I loved coaching, but I needed a change. I needed to renew. I needed to reconnect with the sport and with myself. Bergman growled in front of me and really laid into it. What a guy. I can't believe I doubted him.

"In two wind up and sprint!" Morgan called. We took two strokes, Billy jacked up the rate, and then we shortened our strokes, and sprinted with everything we had.

I loved Bergman. I even loved Billy, even though he could be a jerk. He would make a fine head coach. He was a winner. It was Harvard and us blazing for the line.

I had a crush on Stacy Kookla, and I might even be in love with her. She seemed to understand me. I could talk to her. It was time to get on with my life. We had five strokes left.

One

There were two reasons why we did it. The first were the friendships among crewmates, forged through sweat and blood. Bergman and I had that. The second reason was the racing. There was no better rush than a crew race. When you did it with seven other people, you were able to push yourself past what you could do on your own. It took you to the very edge. It was a drug, the best drug in the world.

Two.

I thought about my friends and pulled even harder. Right then I recalled what it was like to really be alive, and it was a fine thing.

Three.

I didn't know how to do anything else besides coaching. I needed to learn something new.

Four.

My blood pumped. Muscles tensed, exploding. Arcs of water through the air. I grimaced.

Five.

I hit it. And then it was over.

“We did it!” Morgan yelled as we crossed the line. The finishing horn sounded. We took a few light strokes to clear the racecourse and then stopped, spent. I doubled over and sucked air. I heard Andy Carr moan behind me. Harvard had finished just a single seat down, a distance of about four feet. They paddled past us. Parker glanced over with his head tilted forward. He had a very cross look on his face. I caught his eye and he gave the slightest nod, an acknowledgment that we had gotten him. Maxwell had done it. He had driven us to victory. Bergman turned around, reached over and rubbed my head. He said, “Good job, Bubba.” Andy Carr slapped me on the back and I reached back and shook his hand. Maxwell stood up in the boat, resplendent in his paper-thin white unisuit. He raised his arms in the air and roared. Then he jumped in the water. “Weeeeeee!” he screamed giddily. We all laughed. He swam around to the side of the boat. The look on his face was pure joy. He reached up, shook Bergman’s hand, and said, “That was awesome motherfucker!” Then he reached up and shook my hand.

“It feels good to win, doesn’t it?” he said. He pulled and I ungracefully fell into the water. He was right; it did feel good to win. We laughed like little kids and splashed each other. Stacy jumped in, then Andy Carr, and then the rest of the crew, including Bergman. We were all in the water, on top of the world.

We helped take down the tent and pool after the regatta, and afterwards we spent the evening by the lake. Vespo unloaded cases of cold beer from the back of their truck and we dug in. Everyone mingled and it was a nice way to end the weekend. Even Harry Parker stuck around and had a beer and a few laughs with us. His crew was stacked with former Harvard studs so it

was pretty amazing that we won. “Pure guts,” he told us. Harry wasn’t peeved that he lost, and I guessed that he didn’t mind letting a few races slip by as long as he won the important ones.

After sunset the temperature was bearable, almost pleasant. Billy Maxwell was drinking beer and splashing around in the lake with Morgan and Missy. Both girls seemed to be quite smitten with him. I stood by the edge of the lake with Bergman and Stacy and watched the lights of the Las Vegas Resort wink on. It was a fine sight. I felt very far from Boston, and I had to admit I wasn’t looking forward to going back. Annie was there, my job was there, and those things made me uneasy. I felt better about myself than when I arrived in Vegas, and that was something. I was getting better.

“What do you think about getting out of coaching still?” I asked Bergman.

“I’m done with coaching,” he said. “I’m traveling this fall. But first I’m going to get in shape. I’m going to hit the weights and the erg and slim down. I want to be a rower again. I forgot how much I missed it.”

“I like that,” I said. “That sounds great, Berg.”

“What about you?” he asked.

“I think I’ll go on sabbatical. I can take some time off. Then we’ll see about coaching next summer.”

“What will you do with yourself in the meantime?” Stacy asked. She reached over and held my hand. Her reaching out to me was the best feeling in the world. I truly liked her.

“I don’t know what I’ll do,” I said. “But I’m looking forward to it.” Whatever I did, I wanted her to be in my plans. It was time to move on from my old life. As I watched Billy, Missy, and Morgan play in the lake, I realized that I loved coaching, but I needed to get myself straightened out. I needed to take a break from the endless season and I needed new challenges.

If I left for awhile I could still come back to it. Or I simply could not to come back at all. I could do anything I wanted. That was scary as hell, but it was exciting too. Who knows what would happen.

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