

CHAPTER ONE

IT STARTS WITH A BET

*I'd rather live one day as a tiger,
than my whole life as a sheep.*

George Rock, rower on the Skandia

On a Monday night, the bar at the Hermes Society feels like no other university pub in Rotterdam – packed to the limit with all-male students wearing club ties and jackets, overflowing with loud, raucous laughter fueled by endless pints of beer. The energy is chaotic, but invigorating. And it's almost impossible to be heard.

Sloshing his way across the room with a couple of beers, Jaap finds Maarten. He hands him a beer and leans in close to shout something in his ear. As Maarten looks down at the floor and listens, a slow smile comes over his face.

Jaap talks with a gleam in his eye that says, This is too good to pass up!

Guzzling their beer, Maarten and Jaap head back toward the bar. When they get close, Jaap gestures toward a group of eight guys holding court in the middle of a small ring of admirers. The tall blond hockey captain at the centre, talking, is Gijs.

"We're going to row in the Ringvaart Regatta," he says, proudly, trying to look humble. "That means no alcohol." Glancing at the glass in his hand, he shrugs, "This is only coke."

"Did you say you don't even know how to row?" a wide-eyed freshman asks.

"We don't," Gijs laughs. "But we've got three months to learn, right, guys?"

A mutter of agreement moves around the circle. Gijs has enough confidence for all of them. The air around him is so charged with energy, it's easy to believe anything's possible– rowing the Ringvaart, winning the hockey game, climbing Mt. Everest, whatever.

Pushing his way through the group to the bar, Maarten positions himself next to Gijs and orders more beer, with only the slightest smirk on his lips.

They don't hang out together, but Gijs and Maarten are on the same hockey team. Maarten, the upperclassman, has been on the team longer. Gijs was only made captain this year. Since then, Maarten has watched him inspire the team, call the plays, then get out on the field himself and beat the crap out of it, coming back to the locker room thrashed sometimes, but never defeated.

Above all else, Gijs loves to win. And more than once, this season, he's depended on Maarten for that. The goalie can make all the difference. No matter how fiercely Gijs struggles to win the prize, it can all be lost, if Maarten can't protect the goal.

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Crouched behind a caged mask at the far end of the field, Maarten is always thinking, following the plays, anticipating what might happen a few moves ahead, then throwing his whole body in harm's way to block the speeding ball. While Gijs is charging around the field like a powerhouse, fighting for all he's worth, Maarten is patiently

coiled and waiting, ready to act decisively when it counts the most. Whether they like it or not, they need each other.

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When the beer arrives, Maarten makes a great show of handing one to Jaap and drinking deeply. Wiping the foam from his lip, he savours of the taste of the beer in his mouth, then glances down at Gijs's soda with something like pity. "Only coke?" Maarten asks, in mock surprise. "Why aren't you drinking?"

"We're rowing the Ringvaart. So we can't drink beer," Gijs explains.

"The Ringvaart, eh?" Maarten says. "How many kilometres is that?"

"100," Gijs says, smugly.

Maarten and Jaap burst out laughing. "You're giving up beer to row 100 kilometres? What a wimp! We're rowing 5000 kilometres and we're still drinking beer!"

"5000!?" Gijs laughs, genuinely impressed. "Fantastic. Are you serious?"

By the end of the evening, Jaap is suggesting that Gijs find a rowing partner and enter the Woodvale race – a newly established two-man rowing race across the Atlantic that Maarten and Jaap are planning to row together in two years. "It's perfect," Jaap says. "Two Dutch teams to compete with each other!"

Gijs turns to his friend, Patrick, who is standing nearby, and asks if he wants to join the competition. Patrick is already rowing the Ringvaart with Gijs and doesn't hesitate. They make a bet with Jaap and Maarten that the team who loses Woodvale will give the other team an all-expenses-paid weekend in Vladivostok.

"Why Vladivostok?" Gijs laughs, sipping his coke.

"Who knows?" Jaap says, becoming more enthusiastic with every beer.

"Because it's somewhere we'd never normally go. It's an adventure!"

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As his beleaguered mother could tell you, Jaap was made for adventure. Since childhood, it's been an irrepressible urge in him. "If you can think it, you can do it" seems to have been hardwired into Jaap. Common sense developed a little later. While he was waiting, Jaap had 11 concussions before he was 8 years old – mostly, from jumping off stuff and landing on his head.

When he was 5, Jaap saw skydiving for the first time on TV and thought, "Wow." He immediately went upstairs and cut a piece of cloth about 1 meter square out of one of his mom's sheets. Then he carefully cut a length of rope into 4 even pieces and attached each piece to a corner of the cloth. Once he secured the rope beneath his arms, he felt ready to go. But Jaap was no fool. He tested it first, by jumping off the bed.

"When I saw the cloth going up into the air behind me, I knew it worked," Jaap said. "So I jumped off the balcony."

It was a 4 meter drop. That was one of the middle concussions. The worst was when he was playing in the attic, near the open door with his brother, Coen, and one of their cousins. Coen threw a heavy cushion at the cousin. The cousin quickly dodged out of the way, so the cushion hit Jaap and knocked him through the attic door, past the balcony, to the ground. He landed on his head on the concrete floor. To this day, his mother still wakes in the night, hearing the sound of that thud.

The concussion was so severe, it left Jaap blind. As Coen sat beside his brother,

crying, the doctor whispered to Jaap's parents that he would be blind for the rest of his life. A few moments later, a sister from the hospital came in and whispered, confidentially, "Don't worry. Sometimes people in this condition are only blind until they're 20." The whole time, Jaap was laying there thinking, *Stop whispering! I'm blind, I'm not deaf!*

A day later, his sight came back. You might almost call it blind luck.

When Maarten suggested doing an ocean rowing race together, it felt so right that Jaap was amazed he hadn't thought of it before. *A great adventure? Why the hell not!*

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The idea of going on a great adventure has been in Maarten's head since he was a boy. The stories of 17th Century explorers, who sailed the world making new discoveries, filled his imagination. Since his father was a boat designer and avid sailor, the family always spent 3-4 weeks every summer on their boat.

Maarten grew up knowing that, one day, he would take a boat out to sea on his own. In childhood, his dreams of adventure were simpler and more romantic, but as he grew into man and came to understand the dangers, the idea of facing real hardship appealed to him even more.

"We've grown up with such an easy life," Maarten says to Jaap, when he first talks to him about joining the race. "Everything has always been arranged for us. We have loving families. We go to good schools. If we join the hockey team, our moms take us to the field for practice, then pick us up afterward. We are guided and protected every step of the way."

"I know what you mean," Jaap says. "We're never in any danger. There aren't a lot of challenges to show us what we're really made of."

"So many people live in harder conditions," Maarten says.

Jaap nods vigorously. "So you're saying that, if we joined this Woodvale race and row across the Atlantic, it would be a kind of self-imposed hardship, to test our mettle."

Maarten leans back in his chair. "I want to find out if I'm capable of doing something like that."

Jaap grins at Maarten. "So do I."

From Chapter 10
Boat Full of Roosters

Party Animal Turns Captain

*If his fraternity brothers could see Robert's heart,
they'd know he would never let these men down.*

When Gijs tells their frat brothers at Erasmus that Robert has been made captain, they can barely stop laughing. Is he a strong rower? "Sure!" they say. "But the guy's a maniac! Get him drunk and he'll do anything. How can he be captain?"

When he hears about it, Robert just shrugs. Four years under the same roof in the frat house and these guys still don't know him at all. Robert who likes to drink and chase girls, Robert who never says "no" to a party – that's all they've seen this whole time? Typical. He could set them straight, but nothing inside him urges him to try. Max and Gijs and Maarten and Jaap have accepted him as captain. And he knows he's up to the task. That's good enough for him.

If some of the frat guys can't see him, maybe it's because their experience of life has been so different. Bright-eyed boys from wealthy families whose worlds till now have been so charmed that they casually assume everything they see is just a variation of what they've seen before. Life is not a mystery. Its template had been laid out for them, and funded, long before they were born. And since nothing unexpected – of any magnitude – has ever happened to them by this time, it's easy to assume that nothing ever will.

Life has already gone off-book for Robert. In high school, he shared their expectations, but the starkness of his father's death cast a pale, unflattering light on everything around him for awhile. Now that he knows something so utterly unacceptable can happen, there's no going back.

Even the adults who should have noticed, didn't. As his father lay dying and his mother was falling apart, Robert had to take his final exams. Afterward, when his teacher called to tell him he had failed to graduate by one point, she said, ominously, "Are you ready for this? I have some very bad news for you..."

While she was trying to soften the blow, Robert was wondering how she could consider it a blow at all. How could she possibly think this could be "very bad news" compared to what he was going through?

Three months later, his father was dead.

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The boy looking out of Robert's eyes when he first arrived at the frat house was not the same boy who had once learned his father was dying. In two short, but interminable, years, any whiff of carefree innocence had been lost. If his basic urge toward playfulness and joy was still intact, after what he'd been through, it could only mean that he was strong.

And that was the difference. The hard-partying frat boys, licking salt from their fists and chugging down tequila shots beside him, were just enjoying the next stage of life: getting shit-faced on a Friday night, clubbing till dawn, then waking up beside some pretty girl they'd swear they'd never seen before. It was the next stage for Robert too and he loved it – maybe even more than they did – because he'd had a detour.

To get to oblivion now, he had to learn to leave something else behind, not to dwell on something, not to mourn. For Robert, it wasn't just oblivion, it was a reprieve – from two interminable years.

Finally on his own, away from home, Robert raised such a ruckus as a freshman that, even if he'd sworn off alcohol and become a celibate monk the next year, he would've still been known as a wild man to his peers. In fact, he did tone it down the next year and the year after that, but the reputation stuck.

"Once they form an opinion of you," Robert said, "it's impossible to change it." And maybe that was true, but it was also true he didn't feel the need to try.

When they accused him of being a party animal who didn't take life seriously, Robert looked at them through lowered eyelids and didn't say a thing. What would be the point? The words didn't even form in his head. He knew what he felt. Whether he summoned it or not, a quiet self-sufficiency filled him up inside whenever he faced that kind of judgment. In a few years time, that self-sufficiency will make it possible for him to uproot his life and move to Asia, starting a business from scratch with a Vietnamese friend in Ho Chi Minh.

The sense of aloneness that arrived with the death of his father will accompany him and he won't resist. He is content to feel it. He wouldn't always say it's a part of him, but it always comes along.

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He feels it again on the ocean, rowing with these men he's come to love like brothers. His desire to prove himself worthy of this effort is, in part, an athletic ambition, but it's also a matter of sheer loyalty and dedication to his friends. We are in this together and I will do my part. If even the most callow of his fraternity brothers could see Robert's heart, they'd know that he would never let these men down.

And now – again, unexpectedly – he finds himself with new responsibilities: He's captain. Only this time, there's a clear list of requirements. When he reads it, he feels such relief, he nearly sighs.

This isn't like trying to be the man of the family in desperate straits when you're too young. It's easier than that. It's rowing.

From Chapter 8
Starting to Feel It

Meltdown

If it keeps getting worse like this, will we be able to take it?

It's only been two weeks and already everything hurts like hell. What will it be like two weeks from now? Will we still be able to stand?

By 4:00 PM, Gijs is biting into his lips with every slide to the catch. The wrenching ache from his bruised and blistered butt is so intense it sends a sick, queasy feeling through his stomach. He tries not to let it show -- even to Jaap, rowing alongside him. *Everyone is suffering*, Gijs, he tells himself sternly. *Don't be such a wimp. You chose this yourself!*

But it's too much pain.

* * *

When he goes into the cabin with Maarten at the end of the shift, Gijs is desperately pale, as if all the blood has drained from his face. Maarten has been watching him all night, knowing something is wrong, but Gijs keeps avoiding it whenever Maarten asks how he feels.

Now Maarten sits down beside him on the bed, determined to find out what's going on. At first, he doesn't say anything, waiting with silent, but eager, expectancy. His eyes reveal his compassion -- yet underneath lies the same stubborn intelligence and tenacity he brought to the design of the boat and its safety features.

The possibility that he'll give up on this -- or shrug it off -- is nil. His approach is soft and inviting, but relentless. No one can match Maarten in moments like these.

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Gijs sees him sitting there, but has so little energy to spare, it's all he can do to focus on pulling off his socks and changing his soaked shirt. He doesn't even notice that he's still biting his lips and that his shoulders are poised with tension, but Maarten does.

"The pain killers aren't working?" Maarten asks.

"I can't tell," Gijs mutters. Why does my voice sound so shaky? Must be the motion of the boat. "Aren't they supposed to work for 6 to 8 hours?"

"Yes."

"What do you do if the pain comes back in an hour?"

Maarten looks at him more closely. "Let me see," he says, gesturing for Gijs to take off his pants. "If you need another Diclofenac while you're rowing, tell me. I'll bring you one."

Frowning, Gijs removes his pants, trying not to slide them against the boils on his butt. "You'll be sleeping!"

"Wake me," Maarten insists.

"Nooo!" Gijs scoffs. "You can't wake someone up unless you need clothes – because it's raining – not just because you're cold and your butt still hurts!"

Gijs turns his back toward the cabin's light. When he sees the dark purple sores, Maarten winces. They're much worse than before. The pain must be intense. "How bad is it?" he says softly.

"We all have it the same," Gijs shrugs. Folding back the covers so he can go to sleep, he gestures for Maarten to get off the bed.

Maarten ignores him and waits for Gijs to meet his eyes. "Please tell me."

Gijs looks away, at the brink of tears. This is more vulnerable than he wants to be, but we are vulnerable out here, forced to trust each other, to leave ourselves bare – to see each other and, sometimes, have the guts to see ourselves.

Gijs turns to his friend Maarten and confesses. "The pain's so great, I want to vomit."

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Jaap

Day 15

9.00 PM

Today my third live migraine was coming on. I really felt it a bit and had to lie down for the 6.00 PM shift. The good thing is that we had to deploy the anchor by 8.00 PM.

So Gijs only had to row the next shift alone.