

Chapter 1

“Death Is Not the End”

A lot of gamblers say the action replaces sex, but I really think they mean it replaces relationships and a fear of socializing. We're all outcasts and gambling occupies our time and we get paid for it.

For me for sure it was a way to make money and be by myself. Now, it's become an obsession. I don't think it's an addiction. I don't think. But then again, I have no life.

—ALAN BOSTON, SEPTEMBER 1999, IN OLD ORCHARD BEACH, MAINE

Alan Boston walked into the Corvette dealership fourteen years ago wearing a ripped University of Pennsylvania T-shirt, shorts and a pair of boating shoes, looking like some twenty-seven-year-old punk coming to jerk the salesman's chain. He hadn't slept in two days. A binge of betting, boozing, and partying left him more wired than Con Ed. Alan knew the guys hawking cars would brush him off. He knew the dealers would see another young kid eager to take the 'Vette for a spin, and then leave them with the keys in one hand and a promise to come back soon in the other. That's what Alan was counting on, actually. He reveled in finding a mark and making his head spin.

Alan understood human nature. He bet his life on it everyday. And, as sure as he knew the Red Sox would cover against the Yankees later that night, he knew the car jockeys would ignore the opportunity that was right in front of them, bulging from Alan's pocket. That's where Alan had stuffed his life's work, what he had to show from instincts, luck, research, brass balls, and guts that translated into big wins at the track or on the game or at the card table. That's where he stuffed enough cash to buy a Corvette with all the options and maybe even leave the poor schmuck who sold it to him a tip, if anyone took him seriously. After all, what good is the money without the respect?

One by one, just as Alan expected, the dowdy group of salesmen ignored the strung out kid with the unruly mop of red hair. Finally the manager, as if by default, asked Alan if he needed any help. *Damn right I could use some help*, Alan thought. *I've got more than \$27,000 in my pocket but I pulled up to your lot in a 1972 Impala I bought for \$150. Get me a 'Vette.* Alan picked out a car—a metallic rose t-top—filled out the paperwork, and laid the money in a neat pile on the table. He drove off the lot with the music loud and enough cash left over to get down some decent action that night.

He didn't bother leaving a tip.

Fourteen years later, rose would become yellow, yellow would become purple, and purple would become gold. Batman has the Batmobile and Alan has Corvettes, even when he has nothing else. They're not just transportation, but 200-horsepower boosts to the ego. When you spend six months of the year in Las Vegas as Alan does, betting as much money in a day on sports—college basketball, specifically—as some people make in a year, gold Corvettes are a stylish statement. Another wise guy, as professional sports bettors are known, sees the car parked in the lot of a casino and says to himself, "Alan is here. I wonder what he's getting down on."

But Alan spends the other six months of the year in a cozy seaside town in Maine, where he's known as a small-time harness horse-racing

owner with a two-bedroom condo on the beach. For Alan, Maine is the perfect antidote to Las Vegas. It is an ocean whose breeze recharges him after the desert has sapped his strength. It is wide-open beachfront property after he's been trapped in the congested basin. It is the place he chooses to live, not the place he has to live. But mostly, a raw nerve like Alan living in tranquil Maine is a contradiction, like fire burning in water. For a guy who revels in the shock factor, that alone makes it worth living there. "No one expects a guy like me to say they are from Maine," Alan says. "New York or Boston maybe. But not Maine."

Up there, a gold Corvette raises suspicion. Drive it at breakneck speed with Chuck E. Weiss or Tom Waits blasting over the loudspeaker, the top down, the seatbelt unbuckled, and two cell phones attached to your ears like gaudy, oversized earrings, and you might as well have a bull's-eye on the hood. Amid the practical trucks built to survive bitter Maine winters, Alan's Corvette looks like a spaceship that has landed in the middle of Amish country. "Driving this car around here," he says, "people always think I am a drug dealer." And then he guns the engine.

It is late September, and Alan is speeding down Route 11 like a golden bullet, headed for the last day of the Rochester State Fair in New Hampshire, where he has a horse named Wingate Hanover racing in the finals of the thirteenth race. At the start of the fair two weeks earlier, Wingate Hanover was closer to the glue factory than the winner's circle when Alan picked him up at an auction for \$2,000. Wingate Hanover paid Alan's largesse back with an upset win in the first week's race that paid \$750 to the owner. A win in the finals might help Alan break even, although the price of the horse actually meant nothing to him. Alan holds most animals in higher regard than people. One year, he spent \$40,000 of the \$60,000 he had in the bank on a yearling his trainers told him would never win a race and, if he didn't buy it,

was destined for an early death. He bought it anyway, then he refused to let the trainers work the horse into shape. He promised them that if they hit the horse, Alan would hit them back twice as hard. If they tried “preparing” the horse—drugging him up—he’d fire them on the spot. Their hands tied, the trainers could only treat the animal like a pet rather than an investment. For months, the horse took leisurely afternoon trots on the track, ate fresh bails of hay, slept in a clean stall, and lived better than one of the Budweiser Clydesdales. When Alan finally saw the horse in a race, it finished sixth in a seven-horse field. The next day the owner with the deep pockets and the horse with no speed shared a sweet potato pie to celebrate their second-to-last-place finish.

Cruising along towards the fair, one hand on the steering wheel and one on the sports pager with scrolling scores that he checks more often than a paramedic looking for a patient’s pulse, Alan deftly slips in a CD by the band Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds called “Murder Ballads.” It’s a charming collection of songs in which all the lyrics center on death and dying, including such paeans to death as “Songs of Joy,” “Lovely Creature,” and “Death Is Not the End.”

“Lighten up,” Alan says when he sees his passenger cringing. “It got an A in *Entertainment Weekly*.”

With the sun out, the top down, Nick Cave whispering sweet nothings out of the Corvette’s supersonic sound system, and the horse he rescued from the scrap heap racing on the last day of the fair, life seems pretty sweet. What more does he need?

“Winnings,” he deadpans.

It’s been six months since the end of the college basketball season. A season in which Alan established himself as *the* preeminent college basketball handicapper in Nevada’s small community of professional sports bettors. We’re not talking about Jimmy the Greek types or the crooks who tout their 900 services for \$50 a pop. Those guys are no

more respected in Vegas than political pundits are by Washington politicians. Handicapping, like playing the stock market, rewards good instincts, long hours of research, and an acute awareness of how fickle human beings and human nature can be. Most of all, however, it requires guts of iron and the resilience of a Super Ball. It's not easy losing \$10,000 because an eighteen-year-old freshman choked on two free throws late in the game. Bettors live their lives on the edge of financial and emotional ruin. One night they win ten grand and on others they lose twenty. It's not sports that pulls them in, but the rush of winning a bet, of getting something for almost nothing. For Alan the goal is simple: Make enough one year to be able to come back and do it again the next.

Just the rumors about what Alan has won—"I hear people say I won more than \$1 million betting on college basketball, which is ridiculous," he says—are enough to garner respect of the entire community. But, it wasn't just what he earned; any guy off the street with money to burn could parlay a few lucky picks and a small pile of dough into a Fort Knox-sized bankroll. In the handicapping underworld the strength of your system and ability to move the spreads with your bets separates the posers from the players, the squares from the wiseguys. Some players don't even need to put their own cash on the line. Instead they make six-figure salaries acting as consultants, supplying wannabes who are long on money and short on skills with the probable winners to every night's games.

For a true wiseguy, however, consulting is what you do when you've lost your nerve, your bankroll, or both, like a cop who takes a desk job because he's too scared to walk the streets. Consultants are paper-pushing desk jockeys analyzing teams' past performances, doing all the work it takes to make a smart bet without experiencing any of the thrills.

Alan found the consulting track particularly unfulfilling when it came to college baskets and always worked on his own, building up a small bankroll and then blowing it on bad bets, bad drugs, or bad

buys. He was the equivalent of the rookie pitcher with the million-dollar arm and the five-cent head, too talented to ever go broke but too brash to get too far ahead. Then, in 1997, two guys who had been tracking Alan's work decided to back him. The deal was this: Alan, the expert, would do most of the work, they would front all of the money, and they would split all winnings three ways. The partnership was the perfect remedy to reign in Alan. With two other people involved, he couldn't go overboard on his gut-check bets. And, with a deeper pool of money than he'd ever had, he could also bet bigger, and win bigger, than he ever had. As long as his system didn't fail.

After pulling into the Rochester Fair's front gate, Alan's Corvette kicks up dust on the gravel lot as he makes a sharp turn into a parking space next to a pickup. He stops by the race office, where he drops off two bumbleberry pies he bought for the office workers. Every year, the fair organizers ask Alan to reprise his role as "Rochester Red," a handicapper who writes up the daily tip sheets the fair sells for a dollar at every race. He won't take any money for the gig, won't even accept a free tip sheet, and he exasperates the fair workers who, after saying thanks for the pie, remind him that he still hasn't picked up any of the checks he's won in the past two weeks from Wingate Hanover. "If you buy the damn horse, at least take the money," says an office worker. He ignores her. He saved a horse. Get over it. Does he really need to cheapen the deed by making money off of it?

Behind the office, in the corner of a horseshoe-shaped ring of stalls, Wingate Hanover stands on spindly legs mindlessly munching on some hay. She's a nine-year old mare with a graying mane, skin the color of wet cement with black spots, a thin beard of white whiskers, and yellowing teeth. She looks like the equine version of Miss Havisham from Dickens's *Great Expectations*.

"She had a good night and has been alert all morning," says Alan's trainer. "She'll run a good race for you."

"It don't matter," says Alan, patting her long gray snout. "She's a good girl."

That someone may feel the rush of winning, or even come close, is what drives that person to take their first steps toward a betting window. It's why some of Alan's friends had been at the track since sunrise that morning and, when the fair ends, why they were heading to another harness-racing track in Brunswick that night. It is why the Rochester Fair would make \$86,000 on this sunny Saturday in early fall on racing alone, even though there were never more than 1,000 people in the stands for any of the fourteen races.

Before a race the cavernous walkway beneath the grandstands, where the betting windows are, fills up like a train station during rush hour. Bettors walk up to the windows absentmindedly staring at Rochester Red's tip sheet and clutching their money in an outstretched hand. Fat men who were stuffing their faces with fried dough from the carnival next door thoughtlessly lay down \$20s like they're pitching pennies. Grandmas with blue-tinted hair wearing T-shirts that read "Property of the Foxy Lady" smack a couple hundred bucks on the counter hoping to score a winner. Maybe this time their horse will come home. Even more than the rush of winning, hope is the most compelling component of a bet.

As the horses line up for the thirteenth race, Alan pulls a \$100 bill from his thick, rubber-banded roll of cash. Before he can turn around, people are already asking him, "What did you bet? Who did you take? Who's the favorite? What do you like?"

"Idiots," Alan mutters. "It's illegal for me to bet against my own horse. Not like I couldn't get away with it. But, it's not right."

Settling into the aluminum chairs in the grandstands, Alan pulls out a vegan pumpkin-crunch cookie to munch on. There's always something to keep him occupied, someplace else to direct his energy toward besides the race or the bet. Seven years ago he would have pulled out a vial of cocaine to snort during the race. Three years ago it would have been fries and a milkshake that soothed his nerves. Each

fixation is indicative of his all-or-nothing lifestyle; there have never been any compromises in Alan's life. During his drinking days, he didn't just have a few drinks, he'd get wasted. He couldn't accept going bald, so he shaved his head. He didn't just snort cocaine, he inhaled it like it was oxygen. When he decided to get healthy he didn't just work out, he developed the physique of a bodybuilder. Compared to Alan, extremists lack focus.

Alan once had curly red hair, glasses, and a tire around his waist. But when he started working out—to build his self-esteem as much as his physique—the baby fat around his face melted away and his skin became taut around his skull. He transformed himself from a grown version of a Raggedy Andy doll into a walking, talking, breathing version of Mr. Clean. He also turned himself into a winner.

“Before that I was always making good numbers but bad decisions. I got more confidence once I started liking myself more,” Alan says. “But it's still all mental. The working out only helps so much.”

Wingate Hanover draws an inside position for the race. From the start, Alan knows she doesn't have a chance. She is boxed in between the railing and another driver who won't relinquish his position. As the horses on the outside maneuver freely, Wingate Hanover maintains her speed and pacing, hoping to pounce on any opening. But it never happens. She finishes third, winning \$600 for her owner. Combine that with the \$750 she won for Alan the week before and she'll only cost Alan \$650, not a high price to pay for saving a horse's life.

“For the horse,” Alan says, a smirk forming at the corners of his mouth, “death is not the end.”

Going broke, however, would be the end for Alan. Because that would mean he couldn't bet, which could be the worst fate imaginable.

Not that he economizes. He is a profligate spender. It is the

gambler's code of silly pride and outright boasting that says he must pick up the tab whenever he is out with friends. At a table full of gamblers, the most successful bettor does the honor. These days, that's Alan.

Making investments on horses that end up losing you \$650 is not the best way to make your money last either, and Alan's nest egg from college basketball is dwindling fast. In fact he's very nearly running on fumes. In addition to the payments he has on the \$356,000 house in Las Vegas, there is also the two-bedroom beachfront condo he's renting in Maine. He estimates that he gave back 25 percent of his winnings to bad bets placed on the NBA and NHL play-offs as well as poker. He pissed the rest away on horses, food, and travel. A two-day trip to New York City in midsummer included two nights at the Four Seasons, car service to and from Yonkers to see his horses race, and the requisite two cell phones, one with the Maine area code and one with the Nevada, wherever he went. But it could be worse. "If I had \$1 million dollars sitting in the bank earning interest," he says, "I would be miserable."

However, considering the six months he's had since college basketball ended, having one mil in the bank might come in handy. The last month has been particularly unkind. In early September, he endured a wicked NFL losing streak. Other sports were no kinder. Late in September, Alan turned on the Ryder Cup golf tournament between the United States and Europe to see that American Payne Stewart, in match play with Colin Montgomery, conceded a forty-foot putt, the hole and the match to Montgomery because the U.S. team had already clinched the victory over Europe. Alan had bet \$1,500 that Stewart would beat Montgomery. He lost. "I'm at a real low point in my gambling career," Alan says. "Just when I thought I had lost every way there was to lose, I outdo myself."

Because his shrink told him there must be something in his subconscious disturbing him, Alan blamed the cold streak on sleepless

nights and a lack of concentration after watching a Discovery Channel special about the slaughtering of elephants by poachers harvesting their tusks. He laughs as he says this, throwing his clicker on the table that is littered with fax paper, a laptop, dirty dishes, and old racing forms. But it's gallows humor. Come November, when he gets to his fancy house in Las Vegas with the kidney-shaped pool, he'll pull his gold Corvette into the three-car garage, riding on nothing but vapors. And vapors only last so long. He needs some wins.