



To be the best,
sometimes you need
a helping hand

COX

KATE LACE

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About the Book

Meet the members of St George's Boat Club:

Dan - dark and brooding, he has to work day and night to achieve his dream of rowing in the London Olympics.

Rollo - rich and arrogant, when he's not rowing he spends his time seducing women and spending money.

Amy - a brilliant cox who catches the eye of both Dan and Rollo.

In a boat Dan and Rollo row perfectly together, but on land they despise each other. So with the addition of Amy to the mix, sporting behaviour is the last thing on their mind.

May the best man win? Not a chance.

From Henley Regatta to the Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race, and finally to the biggest race of their lives, their determination to settle old scores threatens to capsize everyone's plans.

About the Author

After serving in the army for eight years, Kate Lace has found the best way to deal with testosterone-filled men is to point a gun at them; it certainly helped in getting her husband up the aisle. Since that momentous, if slightly controversial, day, she has had three children and finds the same tactic works on them. However, now that she's a full-time writer, she has had to come up with more subtle ways of keeping her characters under control as pointing a gun at her own head has not proved productive. She has written six books including *Gypsy Wedding*.

Also by Kate Lace

Gypsy Wedding

COX

KATE LACE



For Ian, with love

Acknowledgements

The real Oxford Boat Race crew in 2011 did not include either Dan Quantick or Rollo Lyndon-Forster but for the purposes of fiction I supplanted two of the crew with these fictional characters. I apologise unreservedly to the real crew and coach for this.

I have also done the real GB Rowing Team's Women's Eight a huge disservice in this book for which I also give a grovelling apology but for my narrative I needed to make our national rowers much less brilliant than they are in real life. As I write, both our men and women rowers top the world ranking tables - no mean feat. There are also certain events that dominate the annual rowing calendar and which I may have jiggled about. The trouble is I am writing a work of fiction and for fictional reasons I needed things to work differently. It is not the fault of those who advised me that I mucked around with reality. So, this is all made up with just the background of the sport of rowing itself (and none of the people involved) featuring.

I need to thank a number of people in the rowing world, Henry Pelly who was patient beyond compare, who lent me books and answered endless questions, Diana and George Pelly for inviting me to Henley so I could see proper rowers in action, Ben Lewis the head coach at East Molesey Boat Club who took me out on the water so I could see rowing 'up close', Neil Hussey who told me about sports injuries and how to treat them, Richard Boulton who told me about

the training and Mark Perkins who gave me some really key material about coxing.

Besides the rowing experts I need to thank my family, poor dears, who lived with me while I wrote this, my agent Laura Longrigg for being supportive and encouraging and above all these people I need to thank Gillian Holmes for holding my hand and making sure I wrote the best book I could.

*There is nothing - absolutely nothing -
half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.*

Kenneth Grahame - *The Wind in the Willows*

PART I

1

Henley-on-Thames
July 2010

ROLLO LYNDON-FORSTER LOUNGED in a plastic garden chair in a hidden corner at the back of the vast blue and white marquee where all the boats were stored between races. It was quiet here in this little-frequented spot and Rollo felt utterly relaxed as he leaned back, his legs splayed, a happy smile lighting up his extremely handsome face as a curly blonde head bobbed up and down in his lap. Maybe this wasn't the best blow job he'd ever had but still, it was pretty damn good. He could feel the girl's tongue (What was her name? Bella ... Beatrice ... Becca? Something beginning with 'B' anyway) swirling around his cock as her mouth moved up and down. He shut his eyes as the swell of an orgasm began to build. Just a few more—

'Rollo!'

The girl kneeling at his feet jumped so suddenly he felt her teeth graze the skin at the tip of his penis. Shit, he thought, if I'm going to get circumcised I want an anaesthetic first.

He snapped open his eyes but he already knew exactly who had interrupted them. 'Fuck off, Dan.' He stared coldly at the six foot four athlete towering above him.

The girl, magenta with embarrassment, wiped her mouth and scrambled awkwardly to her feet, catching her heels in the hem of her dress, and fled.

Rollo watched her go. He didn't think, given her apparently low embarrassment threshold, he'd be able to persuade her to finish what she'd started. It was only his assurances that no one ever came to this corner of the boat tent that had enabled him to get her to go this far in the first place. Never mind, plenty more fish in the sea. Somewhere at Henley was bound to be another girl who might be up for a good time.

'What the fuck do you think you're doing?' said Dan.

Rollo tucked his now flaccid penis into his lycra shorts and pulled them up. 'I would have thought that even you might have managed to work that out.' Rollo stood, his height matching Dan's almost exactly but whereas Dan was dark, with dark brown eyes, Rollo was fair and blue-eyed. 'Please don't tell me I've got to spell it out to you. Didn't Mummy tell you the facts of life?'

Dan gave him a cold stare and shook his head, ignoring the barb. 'You haven't registered at the admin tent. Chuck told me to tell you to get your arse in gear and do it now.'

Shit, he hadn't either. He'd been on his way to do it when Blondie or Barbie or whatever her name was had distracted him. He shrugged as he glanced at his watch. He still had a few minutes but he was cutting it fine. Oops. He began to walk past the racks of boats towards open side of the tent.

'And start focusing on the race,' yelled Dan after him. 'I want to win even if you don't.'

Rollo ignored him. As if a quick blow job was going to spoil their chances. Dan really ought to lighten up a bit. He really was a bore. After all, half the girls came to Henley hoping to pull a rower but Dan never took advantage. More fool him. Still, thought Rollo, all the more for me.

'This is the life,' said Amy.

She looked around at the scene, at the July sunshine sparkling off the water, at the crowds that thronged the

banks of the Thames at Henley: the buff bodies of the rowers in their tight lycra rowing shorts and T-shirts or all-in-ones, the ladies in their high heels, frocks and fabulous hats and the men in their colourful blazers and boaters. It was almost like some sort of Seurat painting brought to life. In the distance a jazz band was playing a jolly ragtime melody, the smell of crushed grass filled the air along with vowels that could cut glass and the occasional smattering of applause as the spectators stopped socialising and acknowledged the rowing. 'Cor,' she said in a low voice to her friend Ellie, 'I wouldn't push him out of bed.' She eyed a hunk in a Harvard rowing blazer as he strolled past.

'Amy, sweetie,' said Ellie, 'you say that about almost every man you clap eyes on.'

'You make me sound like some sort of hussy. There's no harm in looking, you know.'

Ellie agreed. 'Although you probably don't have a chance; he looks the sort to have taken a vow of chastity. It's very fashionable in America these days.'

'Really! Why would anyone do that?'

'It may be hard for you to believe this but some people don't believe in sex before marriage.'

'Then they're mad. No test drive? No try before you buy?'

'Some people have standards.'

'Hey!' Amy gave Ellie a friendly punch on the arm. 'What are you implying?'

'Nothing, nothing, I swear. Don't get your knickers in a twist.' Ellie smiled down at her diminutive friend who was the cox in the Bath women's eight of which Ellie was stroke. Ellie was nearly six foot of honed muscle; she was tanned, athletic and Titian-haired and was a complete contrast to Amy's five foot three of soft curves, blonde curls and deceptively innocent-looking blue eyes.

It never failed to amaze Amy how attractive men seemed to find her. She was perfectly aware what she looked like;

didn't she stare at her own reflection in the bathroom mirror every morning as she combed her hair, slicked on some lip gloss and brushed her mascara wand over her long but pale eyelashes? Unremarkable - that summed her up. What she didn't realise was that her face *was* unremarkable in repose but the instant it became animated, the second she smiled - and she smiled a lot - her smile lit her up, her face transformed and she became irresistibly lovely.

Ellie changed the subject. 'Aren't you nervous? I mean, supposing we don't just lose but lose horribly?' She sighed and jiggled her bottle of mineral water to ease some of the tension she was feeling.

'Then we relax, have a blinding time, party till we pull - or drop - and then go home.' Amy smiled up at Ellie finding the possibility of the outcome she'd just described quite attractive.

Ellie sighed. 'But supposing we lose by miles. How humiliating would that be?'

Realistically, it was a possibility. They'd both seen the draw and their first-round race was against a women's eight from Brown University in the States; the crew that had every chance of winning the Ladies' Challenge Plate and a crew that boasted a couple of really serious contenders for the American Olympic rowing squad.

'We won't,' Amy said reassuringly. 'I mean, we may lose, but not by miles.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Because I'm your cox and I know what you're capable of. We may not win but we're not going to be thrashed.'

'I suppose,' said Ellie, grudgingly. 'But—'

'But nothing. Look, I've trained with you for months and months, I've looked after your injuries, I've done your physio—'

'Physio?' said a voice behind them.

Ellie turned round and squinted up into the sun at the man, taller even than her, who had asked the question.

'Oh, it's you. Might have guessed you'd come sniffing around at some point. Hello, Rollo.'

Amy followed her gaze. *Bloody hell, wow!* she thought as she clapped eyes on a blond, bronzed hunk with the body of a gladiator and the face of a film star. Oh, and dark blue eyes framed by even darker lashes, she noticed as her eyes met his.

'And I'm *not* sniffing around, as you so rudely put it.' He spoke to Ellie but smiled at Amy. 'Aren't you going to introduce me?'

'If I must.' Ellie sounded surprisingly sulky. 'Amy, Rollo. Rollo, Amy.'

It was an intro of sorts, Amy supposed, but she decided to ignore Ellie's lack of grace.

Amy stuck her hand out and shook Rollo's. 'Hello.' She flashed her very best and brightest smile at him.

Stuff the rower from Harvard, this was the rower to try to pull. She didn't think she stood the slightest chance but, heck, there was no harm in trying.

'And hello, Amy,' he drawled back at her, increasing the volume of his smile to give her the benefit of his dazzling even teeth. Amy's insides instantly did flick-flacks before dissolving into mush. 'So, you're a physio? How interesting. I could do with a consultation.'

'Only just,' said Amy. 'I only graduated recently.'

'And she's *our* physio,' interrupted Ellie. 'She's here to do the physio for *us*.'

I could moonlight, thought Amy, hopefully.

'I'm sure you could spare her for just a few minutes,' said Rollo.

'I'm not busy,' said Amy, avoiding the evil look that Ellie shot at her.

'I'd be very grateful,' said Rollo.

'Yeah, and we all know what *that* means,' snapped Ellie.

Amy thought she knew what it meant too, and she reckoned that a very grateful Rollo was a deeply attractive prospect. Although, to judge from the way Ellie was glowering at Rollo, Amy decided it might be best to keep that opinion to herself.

‘What’s the problem?’ Amy asked Rollo.

Rollo rubbed his left shoulder. ‘An old injury is giving me a bit of grief.’

‘I could give you a massage,’ said Amy, having to battle to keep her voice from squeaking with excitement at the thought of getting up close and personal with him. ‘Maybe help with some stretches.’

‘Perfect. And I’m sure Ellie can spare you. Can’t you?’ he said, challenging Ellie to contradict him.

‘Briefly,’ said Ellie. ‘We’re racing later.’

‘What have you entered?’ Rollo asked. ‘The coxless four?’

Did he just emphasise the word ‘coxless’? Amy thought. Unable to help herself she glanced at his rowing shorts. Well, he certainly wasn’t that!

‘We’ve got an eight entered. Amy’s cox.’

‘Really?’ he said taking Amy’s hand. ‘Well, I promise I’ll get her back to you in good time for your race, and all in one piece.’

Why did that innocent comment sound incredibly dangerous coming from Rollo, wondered Amy? And why did she hope he’d send her back in tatters?

‘Just make sure you do,’ said Ellie coldly.

Amy wasn’t sure if Ellie was cross with her for agreeing to go with Rollo or angry with Rollo for suggesting it. But she didn’t care; she had the undivided attention of a sex-god.

‘How did you get into coxing?’ asked Rollo as he guided her into the boat tent and through the racks and racks of boats and blades piled high there. There were hundreds of

rowing boats – single sculls, double sculls, quads, eights – all stacked waiting to be taken out and raced.

‘I was allocated a room in digs next to Ellie when I first went to Bath. She’d rowed at school and one day she persuaded me to have a go at coxing because she thought I was the right size. The weather was nice, the river was beautiful and I got the hang of what they wanted me to do quite fast. Actually,’ added Amy, ‘it was the coxing that made me want to get into sports physio rather than the general stuff that I’d planned to do. Somehow, dealing with athletes’ bodies is just so much more rewarding.’ She glanced across at Rollo. Dealing with his body certainly would be.

‘But you are a proper, *qualified* physio.’

‘Oh yes,’ she said cheerfully. ‘Graduated last month. Of course I haven’t had a huge amount of hands-on experience yet but—’

‘I’m sure we can change all that,’ said Rollo with a straight face but a wicked twinkle in his eye. ‘I’m happy to give you all the hands-on experience you could want.’

Oh, yes please!

They’d reached the rear of the tent. Here the air was completely still and rather muggy and smelt of crushed grass.

‘No one will trip over us here,’ said Rollo.

Trip over? So he was planning on lying down? Better and better. Although, as Amy glanced about her, there wasn’t an awful lot of cover if anyone should wander past.

Rollo sat on the grass and Amy hunkered down beside him.

‘So what was the original injury and what treatment have you had?’ she asked, trying to sound professional and cool. He’s a patient, she told herself, even if he is a fitty.

Rollo explained just exactly what was wrong with his shoulder. ‘So just a bit of massage should help,’ he said.

'Loosen me up before my race. Should I take my T-shirt off?'

Yes he should, although it wasn't going to help her blood pressure, but realistically Amy couldn't work on him if he was all covered up. She swallowed in anticipation of getting a look at his buff body. 'If you don't mind,' she replied.

Rollo stripped off, revealing a perfect six-pack and a tanned torso. Shit, he was gorgeous through and through! Amy's heart rate went ballistic.

'You'd better lie down,' she said, hoping that Rollo wouldn't realise the astounding effect he was having on her.

Rollo lay on his stomach as Amy knelt beside him and got to work manipulating his muscles.

'Oh that's good,' he mumbled. 'Wonderful. So, Amy, have you got a job lined up?'

'Yes, at the John Radcliffe in Oxford.'

'You don't say.'

'Why?'

'Guess where I'm doing my master's.'

'Oh.' Oh my God, more chances to cop off with this guy. 'So do you row for Oxford?'

'Not yet, but I'm going to. I've rowed in the Isis boat.'

At Amy's enquiring look, Rollo elaborated. 'That's the reserve Oxford rowing crew, we race against the Cambridge reserves before the actual boat race.'

The Boat Race wasn't for months and Amy didn't know much about rowing at Oxford but she was pretty certain no one could ever be sure of their seat in the Blue Boat, even if they had rowed for Isis, until it was almost race day. But Rollo was obviously in no doubt. After a beat she said, 'How can you be so sure?'

'Because I always get what I want.'

'Do you now?'

Rollo rolled over onto his side, propped himself on his elbow and looked at her. 'I do, especially if it's something I

really want.'

If Amy's heart had had a rev counter attached it would have been in the danger zone. But he was a bit of a cheeky git assuming she would fall at his feet, just like that. She brought herself up short: *falling at his feet* was exactly what she was doing. Maybe she should play at being just a little harder to get than she had - she didn't want to look too easy.

Coolly, or as coolly as she could, she returned his stare with a raised eyebrow and said, 'And you think I'm impressed by that?'

But Rollo just returned the look. 'Aren't you?'

Damn - he knew she was lying. She changed tack. 'Do you want this massage or not?'

Rollo nodded.

'Then lie down,' she ordered.

Rollo pouted but did as he was told. Silence fell as she worked but she found she wasn't able to get the right pressure on Rollo's shoulder. If he were lying on a proper massage table it would be easier but this makeshift arrangement, him lying on the grass, wasn't allowing her to dig her fingers into where they needed to be. She sighed heavily and stopped.

'Don't stop,' muttered Rollo. 'This is heaven.'

'It's no good, it's not working.'

If he was enjoying her massage it most certainly wasn't. The whole idea of a sports injury massage was to break down the scarring of the old injury so the muscle could heal again in the correct way. And breaking down the old scar was a painful business.

'Who cares?'

Amy did. 'I need ...' Amy stopped. What did she need to be able to really get to grips with Rollo's muscles? 'I need a better angle to work at.'

'So?'

'So ...' The trouble was Amy had pretty much worked out how she could achieve that angle but she wasn't sure she wanted to.

'Come on. "A problem shared is a problem halved", as my nanny used to say,' said Rollo.

'Nanny?' Then she realised that Rollo was exactly the sort to have that kind of background.

'Of course. Didn't you have one?' said Rollo. He rolled over onto his side and propped his head up using his right hand again.

Amy shook her head. Jesus, what was this guy like?

'Anyway, leaving Nanny out of it, what's your problem?' said Rollo.

'I need to sit on you, to get the right angle and pressure.'

'Sit on me?'

'Yes. Roll over again.'

Rollo did as he was told and once he was lying face down on the grass again Amy straddled him so that her knees were either side of his ribs and her bum rested on his. She got to work.

Once again Dan was searching out Rollo. Their race was in forty minutes, they had to get their boat rigged, on the water and paddle downstream to the start. If they weren't there and ready at the allotted time then the other team would be awarded the race and their trip to Henley would be a complete waste of time. What, thought Dan angrily, does Rollo not understand about that simple fact? Really, the guy is such a flake sometimes. So he'd checked the loos, checked the riverbank, checked that Rollo hadn't been eyeing up the girls queuing to get into the Stewards' Enclosure and had finally run into a fellow rower who'd told him he'd seen Rollo going into the boat tent with a blonde in tow.

Not again. Rollo had sneaked off to finish off what Dan had interrupted earlier. For God's sake couldn't he, just for once, focus on his rowing and not on his dick?

Dan strode through the tent, heading for the corner where Rollo had holed up before. He rounded the barrier formed by a stack of boats and there was Rollo on the floor with a blonde on top of him.

'Oh, for fuck's sake, I might have known it,' he yelled at his rowing partner.

'Known what, Dan?' said Rollo, not even looking at him.

Dan's temper boiled over. Like Rollo didn't know exactly what he was talking about. 'Just for once,' he thundered, 'just for one fucking time, can't you leave off screwing for a few minutes. And right before a race. Today of all days.'

'Shut up, Dan,' said Rollo nonchalantly, not reacting in the slightest to Dan's diatribe.

Dan looked at the girl, noticed her properly and instantly spotted several things. This girl was in shorts and a T-shirt and not a floaty dress. Her hair colour was a completely different blonde, and she was sitting on Rollo's back so whatever else they were doing, they weren't actually screwing. Finally he noticed that he'd made her extremely angry.

'Excuse me,' she snapped, her very pretty blue eyes narrowed in rage. 'What's your problem?' She stared at him belligerently, waiting for his answer.

'I thought ...'

'Yes?'

Dan shook his head. 'Never mind. I thought Rollo was finishing off some business he'd started earlier.'

'Business?' The blonde raised her eyebrows and then she looked at Rollo. 'Business?' she repeated as she climbed off and knelt on the grass.

Rollo gave her a lazy grin. 'It was nothing. A groupie.'

'Really.' Her voice was larded with sarcasm. 'Then no wonder your friend jumped to conclusions.'

'Danny-boy does that a lot,' said Rollo, rolling over and sitting up. 'Don't you Danny-boy?'

Amy stood up and looked from one to another as she assessed the pair. The animosity between them crackled like static. 'For your information,' she said to Dan, 'I am a trained physiotherapist and I am giving your ...' she hesitated, '... your *colleague* some treatment.'

'Oh,' said Dan.

Well, that made sense, now he thought about it. But he refused to feel guilty about jumping to conclusions. Given Rollo's track record it had been perfectly justifiable.

"'Oh" indeed, Danny-boy,' said Rollo with a sneer of superiority. He shook his head as if in complete horror at Dan's crass behaviour. 'Thanks for the massage, Amy.'

She took it as her cue to leave. 'Your shoulder should be a bit looser. And I really have to go and join my crew shortly. We're racing too.'

Rollo put a hand on her arm to stop her from leaving while he had another dig at Dan. 'Tut, tut. I think you owe Amy here an apology.' Dan didn't offer one so Rollo continued. 'One of these days, Danny-boy, someone'll take exception to your off-colour comments and knock you down. And it'll be no more than you deserve.'

Dan gave Rollo a cold stare and breathed out slowly and deliberately. 'Our race starts in forty minutes,' he said evenly, battling not to lose his temper completely. 'We need to get the boat rigged and on the water.'

'Whatever you say, Danny-boy. I'll be with you in two ticks. Run along while I say thank you to the lovely Amy.'

Dan stared at Rollo, a muscle ticking at the corner of his mouth, but he didn't leave.

'Run along, Dan. I *said*,' Rollo's voice hardened, 'I'll be with you in two ticks.'

Dan stormed off, knowing that if he didn't go he really would lose his temper.

Amy stared at his departing back as Rollo chuckled. 'So easy to wind up, it isn't really a sport at all.'

But Amy barely heard him. She'd thought Rollo was a sensational-looking man but then Dan had appeared on the scene. And while Rollo was a blond Adonis Dan was Heathcliff on steroids: dark, brooding, intense, tall, hunky

...

'Amy?' said Rollo.

'Sorry,' said Amy returning her attention back to him.

'I was saying how easy it is to wind up Dan,' Rollo repeated a tad sulkily.

'Then you shouldn't,' said Amy, feeling some sympathy for Dan. Rollo had treated him appallingly.

'He'll get over it. Besides he shouldn't be such a dreadful oik. Now then, before you disappear, follow me.'

As she trotted through the boat tent, following Rollo and trying to keep up with his long legs, she wondered for a second why she was obeying him. He was such a bastard calling Dan an 'oik', but she still fancied him. Although, if it came to a choice between the two (she should be so lucky) she'd definitely go for Dan. Towards the Lysander Club end of the boat tent Rollo stopped and bent down to reach under one of the racks. He pulled out a large padlocked plastic case. He deftly twiddled the combination on the lock and then flipped open the lid. Inside were a rowing blazer, white flannels and a rowing cap along with sundry other personal possessions. He pulled out his blazer and rummaged in the inside pocket.

'Here.' He handed her a card.

Rollo Lyndon-Forster, she read. Marford House, Marford, Berkshire. In one corner was his mobile number and in the other his email. Even Amy, who suspected that in Rollo's social circles she too might be considered an 'oik', knew that an address like his meant that Marford House was probably a big ancestral pile. It was more than likely that the village had been named after the house, not the

other way round. Which might explain the business about the nanny.

'Give me a call when you're up at Oxford.' He smiled his lazy, slow-burn smile at her and, once again, Amy's insides went into party mode, quite contrarily to the way her head was behaving. 'Ciao and thanks for the massage. Maybe we'll see each other after the racing but if not ...' And he leaned forward and gave her a peck on the cheek. Her insides went berserk.

And then he was gone.

Slightly dazed, Amy wandered back out into the sunshine to find Ellie.

'You're back,' said Ellie. 'You've been a while.' Her voice was unmistakably chilly.

'I only gave him a massage,' said Amy defensively.

'Really.'

'Yes, really.'

'So he didn't pounce.'

'No.'

'Probably only because he's got to get his shit together and get to the start for his race,' said Ellie, gesturing at their programme.

'Yes, his rowing partner said something of the sort when I was sorting out his shoulder.'

'Saved by the bell then.'

Amy nodded. 'So, has he pounced on you? Is that how you know him?'

'No.' Ellie sounded both emphatic and disdainful. 'But everyone in rowing knows everyone, and more especially, everyone in rowing knows Rollo, probably because he's loaded and is always buying people drinks or just flashing obscene amounts of cash. And that probably explains why most of the women rowers seem to know him in the biblical sense.'

'So is that why you don't like him,' asked Amy shrewdly, 'because he hasn't made a pass at you?'

'No, you're wrong and he did. I turned him down. I don't like the way he breaks hearts.'

'He won't break mine.' Amy closed her eyes and imagined Rollo with no clothes on. She opened them again when she heard Ellie's snort of disgust.

'And I don't like the way he's screwing around,' said Ellie, 'when he's supposed to be getting married to another rower called Tanya.'

'Married? But he can only be our age.'

'Look, I don't know the details,' said Ellie. 'But it's fairly common knowledge.'

'And does this Tanya know how he behaves?'

'I don't know. I've never met her, but I can't imagine she's thrilled if she does know, can you?'

'Maybe she thinks that it's worth putting up with everything because of his dosh.'

'From what I've heard, her family is just as loaded. And that said,' Ellie paused before saying, 'I've heard she's a bit of a goer too. Sleeps around a lot - bit of a slapper really. So maybe the ruling classes just do things differently. Who knows ... or cares?'

But Amy did care because, whatever Ellie said, Rollo was the fittest bloke, in every sense of the word, to have crossed her path in a long time ... or he would have been if she hadn't met Dan too. Him and Dan - what a pair.

2

DAN AND ROLLO sculled lazily downstream towards Temple Island and the start. To their left two eights, racing for a place in the next stage, thundered past, the coxes yelling at their crews to inspire them to dig deeper for resources of energy to beat the other team, the blades slicing into the water with hypnotic rhythm, the boats surging forward with each straining pull, the crews performing as a single powerful engine. Behind pattered a sleek launch with the umpire standing in the bow, his signal flag at the ready to indicate to the crews if they were failing to hold the racing line. And then came the V of the wash spreading behind the three vessels, slapping against the banks of the river and rocking Dan and Rollo's little craft. They steered their boat around behind Temple Island and its wonderfully elegant folly and approached the start. On either side rose the tree-covered hills of the Thames valley, with the occasional clearing in which stood individual houses of breathtaking grandeur commanding fabulous views and even more fabulous price-tags. George Harrison had lived here, Dan knew, and now it was presumably the natural habitat for merchant bankers, Premiership footballers and others in the 'filthy-rich' bracket.

Dan, in the bow seat, stared at Rollo's back, trying to keep his emotions under control. Why, he wondered, considering how little we have in common, how much we loathe and despise each other, should we be so compatible in a boat? One of life's sick jokes, he concluded.

Paddling gently and using a combination of their oars and the tiny rudder hidden under the hull, they manoeuvred their craft between the two pontoons and brought the stern to rest neatly against the front of the Buckinghamshire station one where a young lad, lying on it face down, grasped it to hold it in position. Looking over Rollo's shoulder and between the two pontoons Dan could see the umpire's launch and, beyond, the wooded banks of the Thames as it stretched downstream towards Marlow and then London. Next to them on the Berkshire station was a pair of Australian scullers, dressed in green and gold vests and with green and gold blades; the Davies twins. Identical in every way and so perfectly matched as a pair.

Dan began to focus on the race. He was brimming with energy and tension and his legs jiggled involuntarily as they waited to be given the signal to go. From the back, Rollo looked relatively calm but Dan knew his jaw would be working, almost as if he were chewing gum. The twins would be hard to beat but he and Rollo weighed more than a stone more than their opponents. But would the extra drag caused by their weight be counterbalanced by the added power it ought to bring them? Theoretically it should but ... but it was only theory. The reality was just about to be played out. And if they lost that was them out of the competition. Each race at Henley was a tussle between two crews with only the winner going forward to the next round. With no heats and no repêchage - where boats that have failed to qualify by a small margin get a second chance - it was instant death.

The umpire called out to check both pairs were ready. Dan and Rollo both slid their seats as far forward as they could go, their blades buried in the water behind them, ready for the moment they would thrust themselves backwards, pushing their feet against the stretcher in an explosive surge to drive the boat through the water.

'Attention, go!' yelled the umpire.

Rollo and Dan drove themselves backwards at full force, shooting the boat away from the pontoon. At the limit of their stroke they both then hauled their bodies on their sliding seats back into an almost foetal position ready to repeat the process.

With each surge they began to draw away from Australia, inch by exhausting inch, as their blades swept through the water on either side of them, a lesson in technical brilliance as they cut cleanly in and out of the water, dipping and flashing. On the towpath to their right the crowds hollered and yelled for the home team, on their left a crowd of corporate types out junketing on a paddle steamer added to the roar of noise as they raced the mile and a third to the finish.

By Fawley, the halfway point, Dan's muscles were screaming but he drove himself on relentlessly, as did Rollo in front of him. The Australians were starting to inch back again. Their blades were almost level and in danger of touching. The umpire shouted at them to keep to their own stations and Rollo must have touched the rudder pedal a smidge as they moved slightly over to the Buckinghamshire bank.

On they raced, neck and neck down the river, the crowds yelling encouragement and the temple, on its eponymous island, grew smaller and smaller as they hammered down the straight course. They flashed past the burger joints, bars and shops, past the picnickers and campsites that lined the towpath until the cheerful melee of the public area began to morph into the gracious lawned enclosures reserved for the rich, the aficionados and the connected. The finish was almost upon them.

In, out, forwards, back, Rollo and Dan swung their oars in absolute synchronicity. Dan risked a glance at the opposition. Dead level.

'Come on,' he roared at Rollo. They increased the rate from thirty-seven to thirty-eight, their bodies screamed in