

Contents

Prologue.	9
One: Reality Bites	13
Two: The Sprinter	29
Three: Man Two	58
Four: The Devil	74
Five: Endurance	105
Six: Two Become One	126
Seven: London Calls	143
Eight: Everything Changes.	158
Nine: Shifting Gear	176
Ten: Growing Up Together	193
Eleven: Comeback Kids	217
Twelve: Together But Apart	242
Thirteen: The Home Straight	255
Fourteen: Aftermath	275
Acknowledgements	286
Picture Credits	287

Prologue



Tuesday 16 August, 2016.
The Olympic velodrome,
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

JASON: It is just after 6 p.m. I am sitting on a remarkably uncomfortable plastic chair next to one man with huge legs and another whose legs are even bigger. My feet are in tight cycling shoes. My torso, legs and arms are encased in a skinsuit that feels tighter than my actual skin. I am wearing white gloves and a helmet that squeezes the side of my head, and under all this it is hot and sweaty.

I am a sprinter. I am waiting for the final of the Olympic keirin, and I am waiting for history. In the five days before this I have won my fourth and fifth Olympic gold medals – one in the team sprint, one in the individual sprint. In these same five days the woman who will shortly become my wife has won her third and fourth golds. She now not only has my engagement ring on her finger but more gold round her neck than any other female athlete in British history. She is sitting no more than ten paces away from me, but there can be no communication, no hugs or kisses. Not now.

LAURA: I'm happy, but I can't relax. These Olympics are over for me, but they're not over for us. I won a gold medal in the team pursuit three days ago and a gold in the omnium less than an hour ago. I have just been standing on the top step of the podium while they played the national anthem, watching the Union flag go up. I need a rest, I need a shower and want to celebrate, but I can't. Not yet.

Four finals down, four gold medals. One final left. Jason against five other riders. Jason, my partner for more than four years now, due to walk down the aisle with me in a few weeks' time, my housemate, my best friend.

One more race. One more win for a perfect Olympics. One more race and we can at last sleep in the same bed again. Olympics can do strange things to you. Your relationship takes second place to other demands, even if the two of you will be sharing the same surname by the end of the next month.

Always together. In this nervous moment, alone.

JASON: Laura gets more anxious watching my races than I do. My mum Lorraine, up there in the packed stands, has to bury her head in her hands until it's over. I'm the calmest man in the race. I might be the calmest man in Rio. I have planned how to race this final, and I know I have the speed to make my tactics work.

There are some things I don't know. I don't know that there are nearly 12 million people watching all this live on television back in the UK, or that BBC One has delayed the ten o'clock news to let them see these last few minutes of flat-out action. I don't know either that the *News at Ten* is going to be waiting much longer than its presenters ever thought.

In an Olympic final you fret about nothing except the Olympic final. There is no room for doubts, for emotion, for looking across at your fiancée and trying to tell her to stop worrying. It is just me, strapped into the pedals of my bike, my coach pushing me on to the track, two rivals lined up to my left, three to my right.

I know my rivals and I know my tactics. The German, the reigning world champion, has a fierce kick. I have to be ready to follow him when he accelerates. The Malaysian and the Colombian will finish strongly. I sit behind them as we all follow the derny, the electric motorbike that controls the pace for the first six and a half laps before leaving us to fight it out.

Round we go. Everything as I expected – two in front, three behind. Round goes the derny, picking up speed. Fifty kilometres an hour now, and as it dives off the track the German is hammering past. I get out of the saddle and give it absolutely everything I have, because I need to get on his wheel, otherwise ...

BANG.

The restart gun has fired. Gasps all around. Riders slowing, looking at each other, looking up at the big screens at either end of the arena.

This doesn't happen often. This doesn't happen unless there is something wrong, unless a rider has gone past the rear wheel of the derny before we are meant to, getting a jump on his rivals, almost false-starting the final two-and-a-half-lap showdown.

Someone must have done it, because they don't fire the restart gun in the Olympic final on a whim. But who?

The Inside Track

LAURA: Hands to my face. They had looked to be going too fast too early. Riders right up on the deryn and Jason shouldering his way to the front.

Heart pounding. Staring at the big screen. Not now, please. Not when everything has been so flawless; when he's got the form and the legs; when we are so close.

JASON: Riding round, trying to keep my face and body language from betraying any emotion. I don't think it's me. I wouldn't make such a mistake, certainly not in an Olympic final, would I? The bigger the battle, the more intense the pressure, the calmer I feel. And then, as I watch the replay on the big screen, it hits me: this is far too close for comfort.

LAURA: I stare at that big screen with a sick feeling in my guts. Jason looks out. I watch again. It's so hard to tell – it could be Jason, it could be the Malaysian, but it could be both, and it has to be someone, or why else would they fire the gun?

Our British Cycling coaches are rushing over to the officials. Arguments and gesticulations. Jason's mum not looking in the first place and now pushing her head even lower in her lap. Millions back home, hands on mouths, waiting, and wondering, and still waiting.

And me in the middle of the track, watching Jason pedalling slowly round the pale brown polished boards, powerless to do anything about it, waiting and wondering and thinking: Is that it? Is it over?