

Sea Fever

SARAH MASON

sphere

SPHERE

First published in Great Britain as a paperback original in 2007 by Sphere

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7515-3598-3

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Typeset in BerkeleyOS-Medium by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

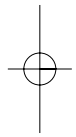
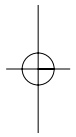
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc
Paper supplied by Hellefoss AS, Norway

Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Brettenham House
Lancaster Place
London WC2E 7EN

A Member of the Hachette Livre Group of Companies

www.littlebrown.co.uk

For Toby



Acknowledgements

Sea Fever was a difficult and long book to write so there is a huge debt of thanks. The America's Cup sailors are very much a closed-off community so I am very grateful to anyone who helped me gain access to them and their world. All the people below deserve my thanks but there were some who went out of their way for me. In particular, I have to thank Bob Fisher who was unstintingly generous with his time and advice. He truly is an authority and, I have to add at this point, any mistakes are of my own making and I only took his advice insofar as to suit my plot. My fiction should not reflect on him or his expertise. Also Tom Schnackenburg, who was wonderfully friendly and never minded being called even when so much was going on in his own life. Matt Sheahan was happy to talk to me for hours on end and also deserves a special thank you. Ben Ainslie was amazingly helpful and even managed to find time to take me sailing for the day (for which I also have to thank the Team Volvo for Life), and had to put up with me wittering on about my new Sebago shoes for half an hour.

I also have to thank: David Atkinson, Barbara at Shosalozza, Christine Belanger, Vanessa Bellamy, Mark Beretta, Andrew Biggs, Amy Bradley-Watson, Peter De Savary, Mike Desmond, Louise Dier, Guillermo Garcia Román, Andy Green, Mo Griffiths, Julian Hocken, Bob Holt, Alice l'Anson Widdows, John Longley, Margaret at Villa Rothsay, Antony Matusch, Daphne Morgan

Barnicoat, Hayley Pattison, Sarah Rees at Team Volvo for Life, Robin Richardson, Dawn Riley, Nick Rogers, Peter Rusch, Leslie Ryan, Jenny and Greg Searle, Katie Strachan, Peta Stuart-Hunt, Bruno Troublé, Ian Walker.

On a personal note, there were many people who helped me with the constant pressure on time and schedule that such a book demands, which was particularly hard with one little one and a pregnancy. I need to thank my mother and her uncomplaining help with childcare. Also Sue and Brian, Tasha and Laurence, Christopher and Katie Cornwell and Lisa King for making my family life so comfortable and lavishing love on my little ones as though they were their own. I am so grateful for their support.

The lion's share of the gratitude does have to go to my husband who never complained (and only very occasionally raised his eyes to heaven) at the extra home duties. More importantly he was the biggest source of emotional support, incredibly loyal and always had confidence in me. He was encouraging when things were going well and comforting when they were going badly. I can honestly say that this book would not have been written without him.

I also have to thank Gina Smith, my wonderful PA; I could not have done without her kindness and good humour. She is now retired and living in Cyprus. I miss her greatly. I had to do a certain amount of work just after having my second child and Ele Stronge, my maternity nurse, certainly went beyond the call of duty and was such a pleasure to have around. Thank you.

I thank everyone at Little, Brown who has worked so hard in producing this book in such a short time, but mostly my editor, Jo Dickinson, who championed my cause throughout, even though the book was running terribly late. She worked unstintingly hard and made lots of suggestions on plot and character. I also have to thank Alison Lindsay for her work, and bothering to traipse all the way out to Valencia to see what all the fuss was about, Louise Davies and Richenda Todd for being wonderful

and friendly editors, taking up the difficult mantle of the book whilst Jo was on maternity leave, and also Kerry Chapple and Emma Stonex for helping with some of the research. Thank you also to Tara Lawrence for giving up her free time and for being an invaluable sounding board and friend.

Great Britain did indeed challenge in the 2003 America's Cup held in Auckland (although not in the 2007 Cup in Valencia) and it was the first challenge in over twenty-five years. I do have to stress that *Sea Fever* is completely a work of fiction and none of my characters is supposed to resemble any of that crew or indeed any crew or organisation within the America's Cup. With such a wonderfully colourful past history there are many stories and anecdotes surrounding the Cup, but if an incident or a part of dialogue is acted or spoken by a character in this book then is it not meant to portray the original subject. All boat names are also fictional. Most of the action sequences were taken from real-life events and again are not supposed to portray the original crew.

Whilst going to press, I hear that Great Britain are planning to challenge for the America's Cup in 2009/2011 and I wish them the best of luck.

Character List

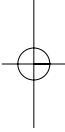
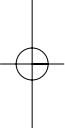
<i>Fabian Beaufort</i>	Troubled and ostracised young sailor.
<i>David Beaufort</i>	Fabian's missing father.
<i>Elizabeth Beaufort</i>	Fabian's snobby mother.
<i>Rosie Beaufort</i>	Fabian and Milly's little girl.
<i>Franco Berlini</i>	The owner of the Italian syndicate.
<i>Jason Bryant</i>	Callous helmsman who likes to win.
<i>Beatrice Burman</i>	Rafe's aunt. Also known as <i>Bee</i> . In her early fifties but a goddess by anyone's standards. She loves life and enjoys it to the full.
<i>Carla</i>	Local Spanish lady who caters for the syndicate and firmly believes in the crew and the restorative powers of buns and coffee.
<i>Corposant</i>	Henry Luter's sumptuous yacht where he lives with Saffron during the Cup. It is moored in the America's Cup marina.
<i>Consuela</i>	Saffron Luter's maid.
<i>Milly Dantry</i>	Sweet waitress working on the Isle of Wight during Cowes Week.
<i>Bill Dantry</i>	Her kind father.
<i>Griff Dow</i>	A sail maker and passionate devotee of the America's Cup.
<i>Excalibur</i>	The British challenge's awe-inspiring boat.

<i>Marco Fraternelli</i>	The skipper of the Italian syndicate.
<i>Hattie Frobisher</i>	Sweet PR girl, in charge of all the PR for the British syndicate.
<i>Jane</i>	Henry Luter's beady personal assistant. As thin as she is mean.
<i>Tim Jenkins</i>	Efficient and capable shore manager of the British syndicate.
<i>Laura</i>	The meteorologist for the British syndicate. Her nerves and inaccuracy at the start give her the nickname of <i>Fog</i> .
<i>Rafe Louvel</i>	Enigmatic loner who is loath to compete.
<i>Tom Louvel</i>	His father, also a wanderer.
<i>Daisy Louvel</i>	Rafe's long-dead mother.
<i>Henry Luter</i>	Ruthless billionaire, determined to win the Cup which ever way he can.
<i>Saffron Luter</i>	His beautiful trophy wife.
<i>Sir Edward Lamb</i>	A retired veteran persuaded to return to the Cup to coach. A slight hypochondriac.
<i>John MacGregor</i>	Also known as <i>Mack</i> . One of the most celebrated sailors of his generation. Highly respected until the 2003 America's Cup after which his capabilities are cast under shadow.
<i>Josie MacGregor</i>	Mack's ex-wife.
<i>Colin Montague</i>	Main sponsor of Mack and then the British challenge. A rich industrialist and a good sort of bloke.
<i>Ava Montague</i>	His wayward and Bohemian daughter. A talented artist in her own right but forever in the shadow of her father's name.
<i>Luca Morenzo</i>	The bowman of the Italian crew. Beautiful too.
<i>Mucky Ducky</i>	The tug-like hospitality boat of the British syndicate which also doubles up as

- Neville* coaching boat and tow.
The young apprentice boat designer on the design team of *Excalibur*. Generally attributed with her design.
- Erica Pencarrow* Known by everyone as *Inky*. A very talented sailor, ahead of her time. Constantly battles to get ahead.
- James Pencarrow* Inky's highly competitive father who is disbelieving of Inky and her ambitions.
- Mary Pencarrow* Inky's mild mother.
- Pipgin* Custard's dog. A red setter.
- Mr and Mrs Rochester and Alicia Rochester* Ghastly friends of Elizabeth Beaufort. Put up Fabian during Cowes Week on their yacht.
- Salty* Bee's annoying dog. Well known for his love of food and trouble.
- Slayer* The number-two boat in the British challenge, crewed by the second crew.
- Will Stanmore* Also known as *Custard*. Friendly sailor, well respected on the match-racing circuit. Good friend of Inky.
- Rob Thornton* Friend of Fabian's, killed whilst sailing together.



It is the world's oldest sporting trophy.
During its one-hundred-and-fifty-four-year history,
Great Britain has yet to win the America's Cup.



Prologue

Inky was first round the mark on the makeshift race course, ignoring the shouts of her brothers in the boat behind and unseeing of the beautiful scenery around her. The golden, solid sands of the beaches, the dull blue-grey of the sea combed lightly with white and the promise of the ocean lying just outside of the mouth of the bay. All she cared about right now was beating her brothers.

‘HOIST THE SPINNAKER!’ she yelled at her ever-patient godfather who also happened to be one of the most famous match racers on the planet. A tall, aggressive, dark-haired Scot, he was generally acknowledged to be a formidable talent on any water. He had a wide, sensuous but expressive mouth which could instantly laugh or curl into a terrifying scowl.

‘POLE!’ he shouted back as the spinnaker pole clipped into place. The beautiful white sail puffed out like a cloud in front of them. He climbed back across the deck to his eleven-year-old charge and smiled indulgently at her. ‘Now what?’

‘Em . . .’ Inky peered around, trying to assess her brothers’ progress behind them. ‘Are they going to try and cover me?’ she asked hesitantly. Inky had salt water in her blood. She and her three older brothers came from the stormy north coast of Cornwall.

‘That’s right,’ said her godfather. ‘They’re going to try and take your wind and then overtake us.’ Inky hadn’t mistaken the

competitive edge to the brotherly teasing and already she could hear the tell-tale flapping of her own spinnaker's edges as the other boat started to hunt them down. Ignoring the Mohawk yells coming from the other boat, he went on, 'You need to try and shake them off us.'

'Then we gybe?'

He nodded. 'You give the orders.' He leapt over the coils of line to the bow of the boat again. The art of match racing was still relatively new to Inky, mainly because her family were keen offshore sailors, but John MacGregor – her celebrated godfather – was slowly introducing her to the field. She had found that she looked forward to Mack's visits more than ever before, if that were possible

'GYBING!' Inky yelled. Mack smoothly lowered the spinnaker, reset the pole and then powered the sail into her new set as Inky turned the boat through the wind. She peered anxiously behind, watching her brothers effortlessly follow them in a perfect gybe, but she knew that their nonchalance had an edge to it as they were desperate to claim her godfather's attention. They didn't seem to have lost any time out of their gybe and were as closely on her tail as before. 'GYBING!' she yelled again. But no matter how many times she gybed, she simply couldn't lose them until eventually the boys claimed her wind and steamed past her to take the finish line.

Doubly competitive wherever her brothers were concerned, Inky Pencarrow was furious at being beaten, especially in front of Mack – though her brothers only deigned to sail with her when he visited anyway. But she especially didn't want Mack to think that she was useless; her sailing had little enough attention at home as it was. Her three brothers had all been sent away to school and excelled within the school's prominent sailing squad. They were given opportunities that Inky could only dream about. She had stayed in their native Cornwall, content at the village school because during the summer she could escape as soon as the bell went and jump on her bicycle, straight down

to Rock village where she could take out a little Laser dinghy into the Camel estuary. Her greatest fear was that her father would carry out his oft-repeated threat to send her away to a school without sailing facilities. It was only her and her mother's pleading which had thus far kept her at home.

'Never mind, squirt,' said her brothers, patting her head once they had all landed on the pontoon. 'Better luck next time.'

'Can we race again tomorrow?' asked Inky eagerly.

'Mack won't be on board with you tomorrow. I'm not sure you'll be worthy competition. Besides, match racing isn't really our thing.'

'Let me try!' pleaded Inky.

'These boats are absolutely archaic.'

'Or let me sail with you?'

'You're not heavy enough. One puff of wind would take you out.'

'I'm heavy enough for match racing!' said Inky indignantly, tossing the blue-black hair that had inspired her name. 'It's much harder than you think.' Inky found her recent introduction to this more aggressive style of yachting absolutely addictive. The concept was simple. Two boats and a finish line. But the techniques required great ingenuity and resourcefulness, perfect reflexes, timing which could not be a millisecond out and the ability to think one step ahead. It was never a matter of just racing for the line and the fastest boat won. You had to put yourself between the finish line and the competitor and do anything to stay there. A bit like a game of British Bulldog except you were running for the line at the same time.

'Keep practising, squirt.' They turned their attention to Mack who had just appeared at her shoulder. 'We've got these fantastic boats at school, Mack. Charlie is going to take one across the Channel. Will you come and see them sometime?'

Mack laughed but seemed to refuse to be distracted from Inky. 'I think you should take Inky out again tomorrow. You

need to keep on top of her otherwise one day she'll be beating the lot of you.'

Her brothers all wanted to be professional sailors, much to the bursting pride of their father who had been a highly respected helmsman, now retired. Inky also wanted to be a professional sailor but it was a secret ambition because she knew her father wanted her to follow a more traditional, more *womanly* profession.

The boys were diverted by their mother delicately picking her way down the pontoon carrying a picnic basket and, ever hungry – like Labradors – they made for the food.

'Do you want to have lunch on my boat?' Mack asked Inky.

'Yes, please,' said Inky with relief. Whenever Inky was with Mack in a public place, people were forever stopping and asking him for his autograph or talking to him about boats. She had also noticed rather beadily that women in particular liked to toss their hair and smile a lot at him. At least if they had lunch on his boat she could have him to herself for a little while longer. Once they went home, Inky's father James would claim his attention and Inky wouldn't be able to ask him all the questions she had been saving up for months.

John MacGregor was Inky's father's oldest friend. They knew each other from the days they had spent together in the British youth squad. Whereas James Pencarrow won a respectable bronze medal dinghy sailing at the 1976 Olympic Games, John MacGregor walked away with the gold and once again (just to show it wasn't a fluke) four years later. But he then started experimenting with offshore and match racing, and for a long time his critics (and he had a few – his gruff straight-talking style, which didn't suffer fools easily, had ruffled a few feathers over the years) gleefully predicted his downfall. But every time Mack would prove them wrong by beating a record or winning a race until they were all but silenced. Inky often wondered whether, if her father could have foreseen Mack's almost meteoric rise to iconic status, he would have still asked him to be her godfather.

But James always tactlessly pointed out that when she was born was the only time Mack was in the country.

Mack watched Inky's mother Mary walk back up the pontoon. 'What are you looking at, Mack?' asked Inky, already biting into a banana.

'Your mother.'

Inky focused on someone usually quite invisible to her eleven-year-old eyes. 'Yes,' she said critically. 'She really shouldn't be wearing those shoes on the pontoon. We keep telling her.'

Mack laughed. 'I was thinking how little she's changed from when I first met her all those years ago.'

'What? Mum?'

'She used to be quite the socialite, you know. Admired wherever she went.'

But Inky had already eagerly jumped into the launch which would take them out to Mack's boat. 'She's such a beautiful boat,' she sighed on the short journey out to the mooring, not able to take her eyes off her. To Inky it looked as though *Wild Thing* had been tied down to her mooring to prevent her from getting away. They thanked the launch driver before clambering aboard and arranging their lunch in front of them. 'Why did you sail *Wild Thing* over?' Inky asked unwrapping her peanut butter and banana sandwiches and apple and watercress rolls.

'You know I'm going to be away for a while.'

'Doing the America's Cup,' prompted Inky. 'I wanted to come to America to see you but Dad said you didn't need any distractions.'

Mack smiled. 'Well, I thought you might like to use her for the summer.' She would need help but Mack would make it clear whom he was lending it to.

Inky's jaw dropped open. 'Me? Sail *Wild Thing*?' Her mind raced with delight as to what her brothers might say. 'Why?' was all she could manage to say.

'I don't need to see you winning to see how good you might be.'

Inky beamed at him. 'You think that I might be good one day?'

'I do.'

'I wish you would tell Dad that.'

'I do. Often.'

'He's always talking about sending me away to school. He thinks I need more of an education.'

'What do you think?'

'I think I would die. My mother wants me to stay here too but I don't think it's because of the sailing thing. I think it's because she doesn't want to be left alone.' Inky wondered if she should have said such a thing but Mack didn't look at all shocked.

'Maybe you should consider joining the national youth squad.'

'I would love to!' exclaimed Inky, her eyes shining. 'But Dad or Mum would have to drive me to places.'

'I'll talk to your father.'

Inky thought she might expire with happiness. The prospect of sailing *Wild Thing* all summer and joining the youth squad seemed almost too much to bear. 'Tell me about the America's Cup again. I got a book out of the library about the boats.' The America's Cup boats which Mack was so passionate about were not little dinghies. The masts scraped the sky at 110 feet high and they weighed nearly twenty-five tonnes. They were meaningless statistics on the page but when Inky talked to Mack they came to life as elegant and fierce war machines which were perfectly honed, yet so interbred they were useless for any other purpose except the race they were born to compete in. 'I would love to compete in the America's Cup one day,' she sighed. 'That's the best match racing ever, isn't it?'

'I think so and it's an obsession for some of the richest, most powerful and most eccentric characters in the world,' admitted Mack. 'But I'm afraid there are no women in the Cup. Maybe there will be by the time you grow up,' he added hastily.

‘Would you win a lot of money if you won the Cup?’ asked Inky.

‘Nothing. No money. Nothing except the Cup itself and the right to set the rules and venue for the next one. It’s a bit bizarre. Like giving the Olympic Games to the country who wins the most medals. But one of things you must understand is that it is not designed to be a fair contest. Whoever wins the Cup can set the rules.’

Inky absorbed this for a second. Her next question was on a more personal note. ‘And will Auntie Josie be going with you to America?’ Josie was Mack’s wife. They had been married for about five years and she was terribly glamorous – or so Inky thought anyway. Her mother must have thought so too because she was always asking her about her clothes and about the cities she had visited. Inky knew that something funny was going on between Mack and Josie because she had overheard her parents talking.

‘No, she won’t,’ said Mack shortly. ‘I don’t know what your parents have told you, Inky, but I’m afraid that Auntie Josie and I aren’t . . .’

‘Married any more?’

‘Well, I suppose that’s exactly right. Or won’t be soon anyway.’

‘Why not?’

Mack paused for a moment and put down his sandwich. ‘You know that you said that you thought you would die if your father sent you away to school and from the water?’ Inky nodded. ‘Well, that’s how I feel about sailing too. And Aunt Josie wants me to feel differently about it.’

‘What do you mean, differently?’

‘I think she would like me to love sailing a little less and her a little more.’

‘But you can’t help the way you feel!’ said Inky indignantly.

‘No, I can’t. But when you love something like we do, Inky, it sometimes has a great cost to it. Maybe that’s something your father is trying to protect you against. But you and I both know

that there's nothing you can do about it. Stopping doing something you love would be as alien a concept as chopping off your arm.'

Mack waited until Inky had gone to bed that night before broaching the subject of her sailing with James. He watched in silence as Inky's beautiful mother, with her apron neatly tied in a bow behind her back, speared the lamb joint with more rosemary picked from her much beloved garden. Mary Pencarrow was constantly out there wrestling the elements and almost taking on the sea itself as she tried to introduce plants and bulbs which time and again failed to survive the wind or the constant pervasion of salt. It amazed Mack afresh how out of place Mary seemed on the rough and ragged coast of Cornwall instead of in her native and beloved London. It was still like seeing a sleek thoroughbred in a stable of ponies, even though it had been eighteen years since Inky's father had surprised everyone and married her within months of meeting her at a fashionable London party, the sort he usually so determinedly avoided. Their attraction to each other was undeniable but many of their family and friends thought it would be short-lived as James Pencarrow immediately whisked his new bride down to the remote family house on the north coast of Cornwall that he had recently inherited after his own father's death. But Mary's love for her new husband had overcome her love for her old cosmopolitan city life. At least until recently, anyway.

She had had four children in quick succession and was thrilled when her fourth child was a long-awaited girl. She dressed her slavishly in gingham frills and pastel florals, waiting and hoping for the day when she could chat to her about fashion and tea parties, nail varnish and Delia, only to find that her little girl spent more and more time on boats with her brothers and father. As soon as Inky found a voice she demanded to be dressed in the same clothes as her brothers and if her mother refused, patiently holding out gorgeous embroidered Capri pants, then she would run out into the sand dunes in her knickers.

Mary Pencarrow had long since come to terms with this and although she was inordinately proud of her daughter, she did long for just a glimmer of femininity from her, if only to give them something to talk about. Only she still called her Erica, although Inky actually suited her far better, with her blue-black hair and creamy, pale complexion, so reminiscent of fresh ink on thick parchment.

Mack jumped up to help her as Mary started to lay the table for supper. 'Mack, sit down. I'll do this. You talk to James.' She inclined her head firmly towards her husband as though reading Mack's mind. Mack smiled slightly at her. As someone about to be divorced he was ultra sensitive to others' unhappiness, but she was such a private person that he could only tread warily around hers. He stared at her for a moment, wondering how she had become involved in this obsessive world of boats, tides and wind with language and customs of its own – as if a coven of witches had ensnared a unicorn. He shook his head and tried to concentrate on Inky.

'I think Inky should be thinking about joining the youth squad,' he said to James who was sitting in the armchair next to the Aga, trying to find an article for Mack in one of his yachting magazines. Mary didn't react; she carried on setting the table slowly.

James sighed and laid down the magazine. 'Not this old chestnut again, Mack.'

'She's talented,' insisted Mack.

'It's pointless. I don't want you building up her hopes only for her to have them dashed. She thinks she can do everything that the boys can do. Look at that stupid stunt she pulled last week.' On the strongest spring tide of the season the boys would attach ropes to the buoys and water-ski behind them on the tide. James had expressly forbidden Inky from copying them but she had ignored him nonetheless, promptly fallen off and been swept out to sea. The lifeboat had to pick her up. 'We nearly died of worry. She shouldn't be trying stupid tricks.'

‘But you didn’t punish the boys for doing the same thing?’

‘They didn’t get swept out to sea. It’s about time that Inky realised she’s not just like the boys and she can’t do anything she likes.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It may have escaped your notice, Mack, but Inky is a girl. And that has its limitations.’

‘But I don’t think it’s Inky’s limitation. I know that I’m not around as much as I would like for her but Inky is the closest thing to having my own child, James . . .’

‘I know that and it’s wonderful that you take your responsibilities so seriously but Inky isn’t going to be a great sailor. Women and sailing are incompatible. The sooner she learns that then the less of a disappointment it will be for her. She should spend her time more constructively. God knows her mother would like her to . . .’ He gestured his head towards Mary who didn’t meet his eye.

‘Constructively? What do you mean, constructively?’

‘I don’t know! Doing more womanly pursuits! Things that will stand her in good stead later on. You’re simply encouraging her by lending her that boat for the summer.’

‘You think I should have lent it to one of the boys,’ said Mack quietly.

‘They are actually going to have careers in sailing. Whereas Inky . . .’

‘Whereas Inky what?’

‘I’m just trying to protect her, Mack. I want her to have other options.’

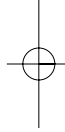
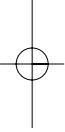
‘This is 1995, James. Not 1895. Why can’t you . . .’

Inky, from the landing, didn’t hear what he was about to say as one of her brothers came out of his bedroom. She drowned herself in the shadows until he passed and then scurried back into her room with her father’s words still ringing in her ears. Pulling the covers over her head, she thought about what she had just heard. She might only be eleven years old, but it was

old enough to realise that her mother wasn't terribly happy and yet too young to know why. This pursuit of womanly things (and her mother was the most feminine woman she knew) hadn't seemed to have brought her much happiness. It felt as though her own sex had betrayed her. Inky desperately wanted to sail like her brothers. She wanted the same freedom. And she would get it, whatever it took, whatever her father said.

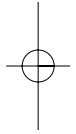


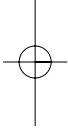
'I must go down to the sea again . . .'
John Masefield, 'Sea Fever'





PART ONE





Chapter 1

Eight years later.

The Spanish boat, *Guerrero*, stormed in from the other side of the start box snarling with aggression. They were arrogant and insistent – a crew on the knife edge of perfection. As if stamping on an accelerator, Mack turned his boat, *Firebird*, into the wind and placed himself on a collision course with them. The two respective bowmen, oblivious to the bad weather, dipped in and out of each other's views as they called the distance between them. The five-minute gun had just gone, indicating the time left until the start of the race. Mack and his competitor were going through the vital pre-start battle. It was an elaborate game of cat and mouse where you were alternately the hunter and the hunted.

The boats were aimed head on. For all the money spent on her, *Firebird* was a difficult boat to control even after the countless hours spent practising and racing; Mack still couldn't get a real feel for her. It was like flying a plane simply on instruments. The two boats charged to within a few feet of one another before Mack threw *Firebird* into a tack. *Guerrero* matched him with a complementary one and the boats circled, waiting for the other to make an error. The crew could hardly hear themselves think above the frenzied shouts of the helmsman, the squeal of tortured lines, the thunder of sails as the boom slammed back and forth over the deck.

Again and again the boats drove at each other, battling for supremacy until the water was simply a bubbling, boiling mass. Again and again the better manoeuvrability of the Spanish boat would force Mack over, apparently holding him by the neck – but every time he wriggled free. On this last tack, he coiled back towards *Guerrero* and the two yachts charged to within half a foot of each other.

‘Christ,’ snapped the boat designer who was watching from one of the support launches. ‘Was that necessary? Those are fucking three-million-pound boats they are playing chicken with.’

For the first time, the skippers were close enough to see each other properly. Mack eyed the Spanish skipper thoughtfully, then took the opportunity to wheel round and come up on the right-of-way starboard side. He practically nudged their stern, forcing them off their line. But suddenly: ‘He’s on our tail, Mack! Get him off us!’ called his tactician and, wheeling round, Mack saw that *Guerrero* had circled sharply and popped up behind them. As in a dogfight, whoever is on the tail of the opposing boat can control them. Mack dived into the spectator boats, desperately trying to wipe him off. He saw a small opportunity to lose him, made as though he was about to tack and at the last second he swung the opposite way round the committee boat in a turn so tight and unexpected that he could see the whites of his opponents’ startled eyes. *Guerrero* thankfully didn’t follow suit.

Mack’s navigator started the one-minute countdown to the actual start. ‘Sixty . . . fifty, forty-nine, forty-eight . . .’

As though thinking ten moves ahead in a chess game, Mack glanced round. He started to run for the line, relying on his instinctive judgement of time on distance.

‘You’re not going to make it, Mack,’ snapped Henry Luter, seeing what he was trying to do, for *Guerrero* had suddenly wheeled round and was making her approach for the line from the opposite end. The problem was that Henry Luter’s advice was never to be relied on, a fundamental flaw for a strategist. Not least because he had absolutely no judge of time on distance.

The numbers echoed in the background, ‘Thirty . . . twenty-nine . . . twenty-eight . . .’

‘I fucking well am. I NEED MORE SPEED!’

‘They’re trying to cross our bow! This is going to be close, Mack!’ yelled his bowman over his microphone – he was standing at the bow to watch the distance.

‘Fucking hell,’ Mack muttered. Instinctively he looked up to the mainsail to make sure it was trimmed hard enough and they were going as fast as they could.

The count went on. ‘Nineteen . . . eighteen . . . seventeen . . . sixteen . . .’ His crew looked over to him, willing him to stop the other boat in its tracks, and then back to their bowman who was the only one who could see properly. ‘They might make it,’ the bowman muttered to himself. But in the last few seconds, the skipper of *Guerrero* obviously decided they couldn’t and the bow literally whooshed past *Firebird*’s stern as he ducked behind. Mack’s crew started to breathe again. The starting gun went and they hit the line running, ahead of *Guerrero*.

Inky Pencarrow hated having to sit on the reserve bench. She was watching the British crew race the mighty Spanish during the thirty-first America’s Cup. They were 3–1 down in a best of seven series, and it was looking increasingly as if even their legendary helmsman, John ‘Mack’ MacGregor, couldn’t save them. She was on the sumptuous yacht belonging to Henry Luter, who also insisted on taking the position of strategist on *Firebird*. Luter was the millionaire financing the syndicate behind the British challenge, and his boat, *Corposant*, was by far the largest and most ostentatious in the spectator fleet. The weather was awful and the guests were enjoying (what they could of) a lunch of oysters placed in a shooter of Bloody Mary followed by soft shelled crabs and salad all accompanied by ice-cold champagne – Henry Luter was generous only when he could pass the whole thing on expenses. The corporate helicopter delivering more guests to the watery dais

momentarily drowned out the voice of the on-board commentator who was struggling to clarify some of the more complicated rules of the America's Cup.

At present he was just explaining the pre-start. 'On the first gun there is a five-minute countdown to the actual start, the boats enter from opposite ends and wrestle for the optimum position to start from, but woe and betide them if they are over the line when the actual starting gun fires. They will have to circle and restart. What you have just witnessed was an amazing display of time-on-distance judgement by our legendary helmsman John MacGregor. He has to know how long it will take the boat to get to the start line with the present wind speed, direction and current. Some of the most talented match racers in the world still get it wrong and it is disaster when they do. The pre-start is the biggest cat fight of them all, ladies and gentlemen, and will probably win or lose the race for them . . . ' said the commentator.

Inky sighed and stared after the two America's Cup yachts. They looked like no other boat. They were monstrous things, scarily narrow with barely any room for the seventeen-strong crew to move but with a mast that reached over thirty metres into the sky. The boats carried such powerful loads that they were as dangerous as standing inside an industrial machine because they were also built to be as light as possible, which meant they often broke. They were the most beautiful things that Inky had ever seen.

Inky's best friend, Will Stanmore, more popularly known as Custard, appeared by her side. He always reminded Inky of a Labrador, with his blond mane and exuberant love-me demeanour. His looks were actually very average but his personality beamed through every pore and he had a stunning, genuine smile which could work its magic on the sternest race official. 'There you are! I've been waiting outside the Ladies for the last ten minutes.'

'You could have used the Gents, Custard. No one would have minded.'

‘Looking for you, you arse.’

‘It was a good start,’ sighed Inky gesturing her head towards the yachts. *Corposant* started her engines and prepared to follow them up the course.

‘I know. I was watching the screen. But even Mack might not be able to fight his way out of this one.’ Custard looked nervously over his shoulder in case Henry Luter’s ever-present, beady personal assistant, Jane, might hear, and lowered his voice. ‘First British entry in the Cup for over fifteen years and Henry Luter is the syndicate head. Fucking awful luck. Why couldn’t we have had a different billionaire?’ he joked.

‘He runs the syndicate like one of his companies,’ grumbled Inky.

‘You heard about poor old Joe? First he knew about getting fired was a plane ticket pushed under his door last night. Christ, it’s like musical chairs.’ The comings and goings of their syndicate had entertained the America’s Cup fraternity, who were well seasoned in the antics of eccentric billionaires, all summer long.

‘Yeah, I heard. Lucky that you keep your room in such a mess. You wouldn’t notice if a plane ticket was pushed under your door.’

‘I know,’ said Custard cheerfully. ‘I’ve probably been fired six times already and they can’t work out why I keep on turning up.’

‘Luter would have been better off spending his millions on some good PR rather than an over-technical boat which no one can sail.’ Luter had in fact used more computer power on the boat design than was used to crack the human genome.

‘I keep wondering, why hasn’t Mack left?’

Inky shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Same reason why you haven’t, I suppose.’

‘Regular cash and Kiwi crumpet?’

‘No, idiot. Mack says it’s the first chance that most of us have ever had to sail for our country in the Cup.’

‘Inky, we’re in the second crew. We’re not going to get the chance to sail for our country.’

‘At least you know it’s because one of Luter’s cronies is in your position. The America’s Cup is positively archaic. I don’t know why I bother,’ she grumbled, thinking of Tracy Edwards’ and Ellen MacArthur’s pioneering path through off-shore sailing – much to her father’s astonishment.

Custard put his arm around her. ‘There’s always next time.’
‘As long as Luter isn’t in charge.’

‘So you’re not going to join the next challenge?’

‘Not Henry Luter’s, no I’m not.’

‘He’s not going to stop until he’s got his paws on the Cup. We could always join another syndicate.’

‘Marvellous. Then I could sit on the second crew for them,’ grumbled Inky. A woman was a rarity in the America’s Cup. She was like a duckling amongst crocodiles. But the fact was that Inky couldn’t be sure whether it was her abilities or her breasts which had kept her off the first boat.

‘Let’s go inside and chat up prospective syndicate heads for the next Cup. Try to persuade them that a mere fifty million for a challenge would be a very shrewd tax dodge.’

‘It’s so cheap I don’t know why more people don’t do it,’ said Inky, parroting Luter’s favourite joke. Custard laughed.

Henry Luter’s personal assistant, a thin, pale girl who made herself look more than her twenty-five years of age by dragging back her hair and wearing no make-up on her bony face, crept up on them. ‘What are you two doing out here?’ Jane hissed. ‘We pay you to entertain the guests, not to gossip.’ Of course, they were there to entertain the guests; Custard, by virtue of the fact he was extremely personable and Inky because Luter liked to show off how marvellously equal-opportunist he was.

‘It’s an exciting race,’ protested Custard who actually hadn’t taken his eyes off the two boats in front of them. ‘Look, Mack’s starting a tacking duel.’

Back on the boats, conversation had been scarce. After starting behind, *Guerrero* had sailed out to the left-hand side of the

course, hoping to find some breeze which Mack had missed. Mack, knowing that his crew work was sloppier than *Guerrero's*, had also gone out to the left side. If the Spanish were to gain on them then at least Mack could cover them by placing his boat between them and the wind. They would be forced to use his second-hand air. It was like being offered the dregs of someone else's fuel tank on a Formula One race track. The Spanish boat had caught up enough to try and overtake *Firebird* but every time they made to stamp on the accelerator and overtake, Mack would swerve in front of them and block them. The only way to pass would be to tack and tack again until *Firebird* made a mistake. This was known as a tacking duel.

'TACKING!' yelled Mack as *Guerrero* threw yet another tack at them. Every time a boat tacks it puts enormous stress not only on the boat but also on the crew. He's hoping either the boat or the crew will break, Mack thought to himself, glancing at the Spanish skipper as *Firebird's* massive mainsail swung across the deck again. For the first time in the series, he felt some nerves. *Firebird's* grinders were crouched over their pedestals in the middle of the boat, ready for another tack. But they looked at odds with the fiery corporate orange they were wearing. They looked tired and their eyes already had that haunted look of failure. All of Henry Luter's screamed threats, on and offshore, had failed to motivate them. It was as if they were watching their own obituary.

'Mack, they're gaining on us,' snapped Luter. 'Fucking well do something. Don't just lie there and let them shit all over us.'

Mack ignored him. It was too late in the competition to explain to Luter how the crew actually worked. 'TACKING!' Mack yelled as *Guerrero* threw another tack. The Spanish skipper had obviously noticed the tiredness of their grinders – he was barely giving them four breaths between forcing them to tack again.

The sea was bitchy and acting up and, combined with the wash of the spectator boats, was making the boat hard to control, like a particularly lively toddler. The noise on the boat was deafening as the waves bashed into them from all sides.

Mack eyed the first mark of the course up ahead. It would be tight to hold them until then. Even though *Guerrero* was wallowing in their second-hand air, she was still faster and Mack was having trouble holding her. But just as Mack was thinking these thoughts, there came a cry which meant an almost certain loss in an America's Cup race.

'MAN OVERBOARD!'

'Jesus, where?' Mack muttered, frantically looking round for a bobbing head between the waves. He stared at the crew expecting an immediate damage report from whoever witnessed it and made the call, but as though guilty by association, they shifted their eyes.

A whistle from the umpire's boat and the showing of *Firebird's* identifying flag indicated a penalty.

'Who was it?' asked Henry Luter.

'Bowman,' Mack muttered, seeing the empty position up ahead. That in itself was no surprise. The bowman is the most exposed of all the crew on a boat with a minimum of working surfaces and no safety rails. In this sea it was also acting like a bucking bronco. Nevertheless for a bowman to lose his footing was a rarity.

Mack left Luter muttering death threats as he spun the wheel through to make the obligatory 270-degree penalty turn. He wished he knew what exactly had happened but the man overboard cry was so sudden and unexpected that Mack couldn't even identify which crew member it had come from.

None of that mattered right now. One of *Firebird's* support launches was picking up the bowman whilst Mack took the yacht through its penalty turn and *Guerrero* stormed past them towards the mark. They were already rounding it and breaking out their spinnaker by the time Mack was headed back on course with the embarrassed bowman back on board.

'COME ON!' Mack yelled at his crew. 'I WANT A PERFECT SET! WE CAN STILL BEAT THEM!'

The crew bustled round, getting ready for rounding the mark.

‘CODE SIX SPINNAKER!’ yelled Mack’s tactician. The sewer man hauled it up from the sewer on to the deck. The genoa was getting ready to be lowered and be replaced by the spinnaker which the trimmers would form to a perfect aerofoil. And all of this had to happen in under eight seconds.

‘*Guerrero* has six boat lengths on us,’ announced Mack’s tactician. ‘Let’s try and catch her in our wind shadow.’ Once the boats have rounded the mark and are going downwind, the trailing boat can creep up and punch the air out of the leading boat’s spinnaker by stealing their wind.

‘Get ready to tack,’ growled Mack. ‘TACKING!’

Mack managed to extract rare moments of brilliance even from the most disgruntled of crews. They rounded the mark in a perfect set and in under eight seconds. The huge white spinnaker puffed into place and opened its giant wings in front of him. The wind was still big though and Mack frowned to himself.

‘That spinnaker looks too big,’ he said to his tactician. ‘Are you sure we should—’

Mack didn’t get to finish his sentence. The next moment *Firebird* punched through the middle of one big wave and then buried herself deep into the back of the next. The mast couldn’t stand the extra tonnes of pressure, a rigging fitting broke and the mast, along with any last hopes of the 2003 America’s Cup, came tumbling down.

The wake party, as they are so euphemistically called, certainly had a funereal air. It was being held in the vast hangar used to house the yachts; *Firebird*, forlorn under her tarpaulin skirt, stood close by on her enormous cradle.

Mack was standing by the door chatting to some of the crew. People who read of his exploits and adventures often dismissed them as overblown: it wasn’t until you walked into his presence and felt the force of his personality that you instantly knew all those things must be true. In his late forties, he was not traditionally handsome but terribly attractive in a rugged sort of way.