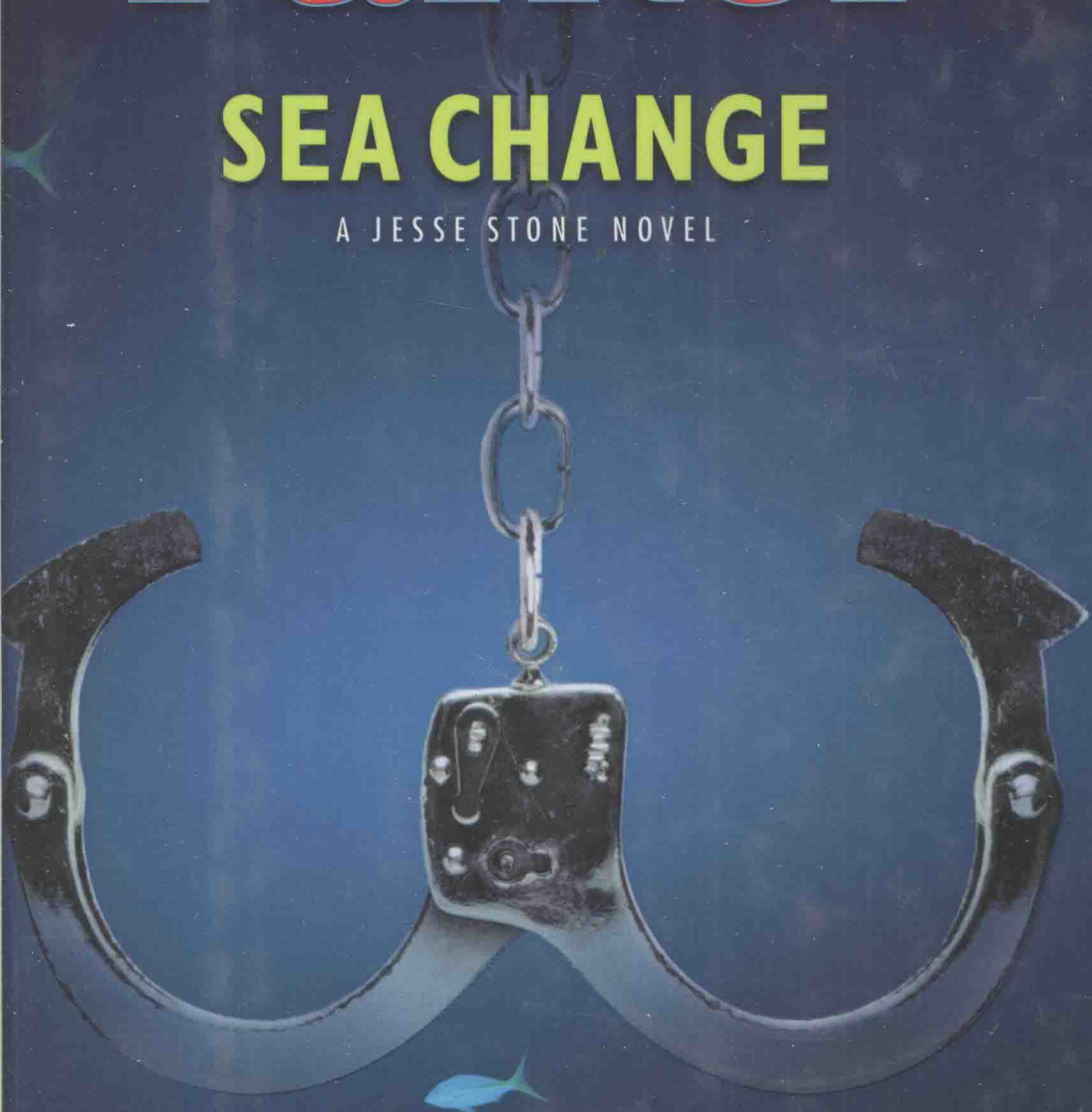


Robert B. Parker

SEA CHANGE

A JESSE STONE NOVEL





SEA
CHANGE



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Pastime
Stardust
Playmates
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Pale Kings and Princes
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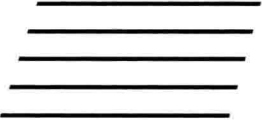
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For Joan il miglior fabbro

 **T**hey were out of the harbor, off Stiles Island, in the weather. The day had turned bad. The sky was dark. The wind had gotten hard, and a thin rain slanted in front of the wind. They had drunk all the wine and talked most of the talk and now it was time to get home.

The person at the tiller said, "It feels as if there's something fouling the centerboard, could you check it?"

Florence stood and leaned over and raised the centerboard. It felt free to her. The boat slid slightly sideways. She let the board down. The boat stabilized, and came hard about, and the boom swung over the small cockpit and hit her a numbing blow in the chest and knocked the wind out of her. She pitched over the side into the black

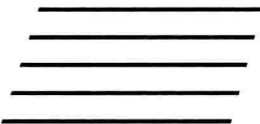
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water. It was painfully cold. She went under, gasping for breath, inhaling some of the water, choking on it. She struggled toward the surface. When she broke water she could see the sailboat turning and coming back for her. She struggled to breathe, to stay afloat, to focus. In the far distance where Paradise rose up from the harbor she could see, on the top of the highest hill, the steeple of the oldest church in town. The sailboat was coming. She treaded water desperately. Only another minute at the most before the boat reached her. Hang on. Hang on. Through the gray rain, she could see the little white bone of spray at the prow, the brass turnbuckle of the mast stay, the dark protective paint on the belly of the boat, as it leaned hard to the side, straining against the wind.

In a moment it would head up into the wind and sit, its sail luffing while she got hold of the rail. She was treading water. She was afloat. She was getting her breath. The boat didn't head into the wind. It came straight on and the bow hit her in the chest and forced her under as the boat passed and sailed on. Barely conscious, she struggled to the surface. The boat was past her, sailing away. She tried to scream but she choked on the seawater. And then she went under and choked some more and lost consciousness.

Running before the wind with its sheet full out, the little sailboat beaded home without her.



 **T**he bouncer at the Dory was holding a wet towel against his bloody nose when Jesse Stone arrived. Suitcase Simpson was with him. Simpson was in uniform. Jesse was wearing jeans and a white short-sleeved oxford shirt. His gun was on his right hip and his badge was tucked in his shirt pocket so that the shield showed.

“You usually win these, Fran,” Jesse said to the bouncer. The bouncer shrugged. His right eye was nearly closed. “Too big for me, Jesse. You guys may have to shoot him.” “We’ll see,” Jesse said. Jesse pushed into the crowded bar. There was no noise. A

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big man was standing on the bar drinking from a bottle of Wild Turkey. The bottle had a pour spout on it and he would hold it away from his open mouth and pour the whiskey in. The bartender, whose name was Judy, had ducked out from behind the bar and was standing near the door. She had blonde hair in a ponytail and wore sneakers, shorts and a tank top.

“You call us?” Jesse said to her.

She nodded.

“He was drunk when he came in,” she said.

Jesse nodded.

“He made some remarks,” Judy said. “I told him I wouldn’t serve him. He made some more remarks, Fran tried to help . . .” She shrugged.

“You know who that is?” Simpson murmured in Jesse’s ear.

“Carl Radborn,” Jesse said. “All-Pro tackle. Shall we get his autograph?”

“Just letting you know,” Simpson said.

Jesse slid through the quiet crowd with Simpson behind him.

“Hey,” Radborn yelled. “Run for your fucking life, it’s the Paradise cops.”

Radborn was 6'5" and weighed more than 300 pounds. Standing on the bar he seemed too big for the room. Jesse smiled at him.

“Should have brought an elephant gun,” Jesse said.

“Shit,” Radborn said and jumped down off the bar, still holding the whiskey bottle. “You know who I am?”

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"I always love that question," Jesse said. "Yeah, I know who you are. Jonathan Ogden knocked you down and stomped on your face when you played the Ravens last year."

"Fuck you," Radborn said.

"Oh," Jesse said, "I hadn't thought of it that way."

A few people snickered.

"I don't give a fuck. You a cop or what," Radborn said. "I'll kick your ass and Fat Boy's right here and now."

Simpson reddened.

"A lot of that is muscle," Jesse said.

"I play football," Radborn said. "You play football, you'll go with anybody. You ready to go?"

"Be better if you walked outside with us," Jesse said.

"Fuck you."

"I'll take that as a no," Jesse said. "Suit, gimme your stick."

Simpson took the nightstick from the loop on his belt and handed it to Jesse.

"You think that fucking toothpick gonna matter?" Radborn said.

He was six inches taller than Jesse and more than 125 pounds heavier. Jesse took the stick from Simpson and with one motion hit Radborn in the testicles with it. Radborn gasped and doubled over. Jesse stepped around him quickly and hit him behind each knee with the stick. The legs collapsed. Radborn went to his knees. Jesse took a handful of hair and yanked him forward so that he was facedown on the floor. He glanced back at Simpson.

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"I played baseball," Jesse said. "Cuff him, Dan-o."

Simpson handcuffed Radborn. With help from the bouncer they got Radborn on his feet and stumbled him to the squad car and strapped him in. He'd been drinking all day. It was having its effect. He was half conscious, rocking in the backseat. He was so big that the squad car rocked with him. He bent forward suddenly against the seat belt and vomited. Some of the crowd had followed them outside. They applauded.

The two cops and the bouncer looked in at him for a moment without saying anything.

"Race Week," the bouncer said.

"And it's only the first day," Jesse said.

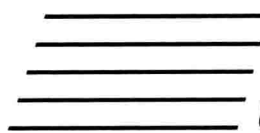
Simpson got in to drive and Jesse sat up front beside him. They put the front windows down. Jesse looked back through the thick wire screening that separated them from Radborn in the backseat. As he looked, Radford threw up again.

"One of the perks of being chief," Jesse said, "is you don't have to clean the patrol car."

"That be your driver's job?" Simpson said.

"Yes," Jesse said. "I believe so."

2

 Jenn sat with Jesse outside, at a table on the deck of the Gray Gull restaurant, where they could look at the harbor.

“Is it always like this during Race Week?” Jenn said.

“Has been since I arrived,” Jesse said.

“Just to watch a bunch of sailboats race?”

“And drink and eat and fornicate,” Jesse said, “and maybe snort a little something, bet some money. Maybe make a deal with somebody important. Big boats start arriving a month before. Lot of people come here for Race Week and never see a race.”

He was drinking iced tea. She had a daiquiri. She was

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wearing Oakley wraparounds. The veranda looked east at the harbor, and the sun was very low in the west and entirely screened from them by the body of the restaurant. Jenn was a weather girl on a Boston television station and people occasionally recognized her. The glasses didn't prevent that, and, he thought, that wasn't why she wore them. She saw him looking at her and put her hand on top of his across the table.

"How we doing?" she said.

"So far, so good," Jesse said.

The harbor was dense with racing sailboats, and beyond, in the deeper water near the point where the harbor opened onto the limitless ocean, the big yachts lay at anchor.

"Do they race those big ones?" Jenn said.

"Some of them," Jesse said. "At the end of Race Week some of the yachts race from here to Virginia Beach. I'm told that the racing yachts are different than the yachts you just sail around in, but I'm not a seagoing guy, and I can't tell you what the difference is."

The waitress brought lobster salad for each of them and a glass of white wine for Jenn.

"It came in on the news wire that you had to arrest that huge football player yesterday," Jenn said. "One of the sports guys told me."

"He was drunk at the Dory," Jesse said. "Broke the bouncer's nose."

"The sports guy said you subdued him with a nightstick."

"I borrowed Suit's," Jesse said.

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"I was with, what's his name, Redford?"

"Radborn," Jesse said.

"I was with Radborn at a charity thing," Jenn said. "He's enormous. Weren't you intimidated? Even a little?"

"The bigger they are . . ." Jesse said.

"Oh God," Jenn said. "Not that."

Jesse smiled. "How about, 'it's not the size of the dog in the fight . . .?'"

"I'm serious. It interests me. You interest me."

"If you've been a cop," Jesse said, "especially a big city cop, like I was, after awhile you sort of expect to handle it."

"But he's twice your size."

"It's not really about the other guy," Jesse said. "It's about yourself."

"So what's your secret?"

Jesse grinned.

"Usually it's backup."

"And this time?"

"Well, Suit was there, but the guy was out of control and the place was crowded . . ."

"And he gave you attitude," Jenn said.

"He did. So if you're going to go, do it quick. You gotta get a guy like Radford right away or you're going to have to shoot him."

"What did you do?"

"I hit him in the balls with Suit's stick."

"Ouch," Jenn said. "And that was it?"

"Essentially it was," Jesse said.

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"I was talking to the bartender before you arrived," Jenn said.

"Doc," Jesse said.

"Yes, he said you didn't press charges."

Jesse drank some iced tea, and grinned at her as he put the glass down.

"This morning when he was sober with a deadly hangover, we gave him the choice: district court or clean the squad car."

"Clean the squad car?"

"He puked in it."

"Oh yuck," Jenn said. "So much for dinner."

"Don't kid me, you're about as queasy as a buzzard."

"But much cuter," Jenn said. "Did he do it?"

"He did," Jesse said. "And we let him walk."

"With his hangover," Jenn said.

"Awful one, as far as I could tell."

"You would know about those," Jenn said.

"I would."

They ate their lobster salad for a time. It was mediocre. Jesse always thought the food at the Gray Gull was mediocre, but it was a handy place, and friendly, and had a great view of the harbor on a summer night sitting on the deck. Jesse didn't care much what he ate anyway.

When they finished supper they walked along the waterfront for a stretch. The street were full of people, many of them drunk, some of them raucous. Jesse seemed not to notice them.

"I brought my stuff," Jenn said.

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"For an overnight?"

"Yes," Jenn said. "I'm not on air until tomorrow afternoon."

"You bring it in the house?"

"Yes, I unpacked in the bedroom."

"That sounds promising," Jesse said.

"It is promising, but I need to walk off my supper first."

"You never were a love-on-a-full-stomach girl," Jesse said.

"I like things just right," Jenn said.

"Sure," Jesse said.

Away from the wharf the street life grew sparse. No more bars and restaurants, simply the old houses pressed up against the sidewalks. There were narrow streets, and brick sidewalks, bird's-eye glass windows, weathered siding, and widow's walks and weathervanes. It was dark and there weren't many streetlights. Away from the Race Week crowds, the old town was dim and European. Jenn took Jesse's hand as they walked.

"This time," Jenn said, "things might be just right."

"Maybe," Jesse said. "If we're careful."

The street-side windows were lighted in many of the homes, and people sat, watching television, or reading something, or talking with someone, or drinking alone, behind the drawn curtains only inches away from Jesse and Jenn as they walked.

"How long since you've had a drink, Jesse?"

"Ten months and thirteen days," Jesse said.

"Miss it?"

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“Yes.”

“Maybe, in time, you’ll get to where you can have a drink occasionally,” Jenn said. “You know, socially.”

“Maybe,” Jesse said.

“Maybe in awhile you and I can be more than, you know, one day at a time.”

“Maybe,” Jesse said.

In this neighborhood fewer lights were on. The streets seemed darker. Their footsteps were very clear in the silent sea-smelling air.

“You’ve slept with a lot of women, since we got divorced,” Jenn said.

Jesse smiled in the darkness.

“No such thing as too many,” he said.

“There certainly is,” Jenn said, “and you know it.”

“I do know it.”

“There’s been a lot of men,” Jenn said. “For me.”

“Yes.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Jesse shook his head.

“No,” he said. “Not yet.”

“Not yet?”

“Not until I understand it more.”

Jenn nodded.

“Do you still talk to Dix?”

“Sometimes.”