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**SEA CHANGE**

**by**

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## **Synopsis**

A powerful, yet endearing story about the lives of four young girls, thrown together during the early summer of 1943, when they meet as Boatscrew Wrens at a Combined Operations Base on the South Coast.

The story covers the latter years of the war, with its brutality, single mindedness and glamour and beautifully captures the experiences of Catherine, Liz, June and Mo, both afloat and ashore. Told through the eyes of each girl, the author shares with us their experiences and individual reaction and behaviour to many different situations. The girls all come from different backgrounds and are drawn together by life on the boats.

Their work-up to D-day binds them closer together and they share in family problems engendered by the war. Their individual development and growth towards maturity is moulded by their friendship, working relationship and the traumatic world events. The girls search for their own identity and endeavour to make sense of life through personal experiences and their relationship with the flotilla.

The author is able to draw on her own very real experiences, having served in the W.R.N.S. between 1943-45 to provide a truly heart warming account of a life and time shaped by tragedy.

## **Chapter One**

It was a still summer evening and the river flowed peacefully through seagrass meadows. The wide ribbon of shining water was empty except for central lines of giant mooring buoys. Their rusty shackles bowed dutifully towards the mouth of the river, all pulled in the same direction by the slow movement of the turning tide.

This was Catherine's first sight of the river to become so important in her life. She had followed the track through the trees and found the tow-path which led to the boats and the Maintenance Yard. The Petty Officer Wren had told her she would not be needed for duty until the next day so it was an ideal time to spy out new surroundings.

The path was sheltered and there was enough heat in the sun to make her navy, serge suit feel hot and uncomfortable. She unbuttoned her jacket and defiantly pulled off her cap,

running her fingers through her dark, springy hair. Catherine's journey to this new Base and the following joining routine had been lengthy and exhausting. There had been no time to think about what was happening. On her own now, she felt anxious and wondered how it would all work out.

This place was so different. She screwed her eyes shut against the sun, low in the sky but still brilliant. She wanted, childishly, to open her eyes and be back with Jean and the others. Jean's clear voice came to mind.

"Don't expect it to be at all the same. Combined Ops isn't a bit like Coastal Forces. Not much red tape and not nearly so efficient." There had been a hint of disapproval in her voice. Jean was loyal to the Motor Torpedo and Gun Boats she was used to. Catherine had secretly hoped loss of red tape and efficiency might mean a lower standard of dress for boatscrew wrens. It was a strain forever keeping plimsolls and lanyards white, shirts crisp and bellbottoms creased in the correct places when duty boats had to be cleaned and bilges bailed. Catherine, at seventeen and a half, enjoyed change and had thought she was ready to move on to her second posting in the W.R.N.S. But, after all, would she like this new Base? Why was H.M.S. Cormorant asking for more Wrens to work on the boats? What sort of work did they actually do?

Catherine pushed the doubts firmly away and opened her eyes. She was struck by the swift movement of the river water and the peculiar tangy smell, pungent in the warm air. An open Cutter nosed round the end of a near jetty with a small figure at the helm. Her uncovered hair shone like fire in the setting sun. A second girl, taller, stood in the bows wielding a boathook.

The rising throb of engines spun Catherine round to look down river, towards the sea. A long line of Landing Craft, thrusting blunt prows aggressively through the water, creamed their way into the mouth of the river. She imagined they were coming home after the day's exercise, she was used to the Motor Torpedo Boats doing just that in Coastal Forces. The Craft looked about the same length as the Coastal Force boats but were squarer in design. As the flotillas came closer she made out individual numbers painted in red on their sides.

The river filled as she watched with rising interest. The Cutter, steered by the red-head, was joined by a second boat. The two small boats danced attendance, nosing the cumbersome vessels into position before making them secure to the central line of mooring buoys. Catherine fancied they acted like sheep dogs and were only satisfied when their flock were neatly paired and tethered in a double line down the centre of the river.

Voices carried clearly across the water. Snatches of talk easily heard as moored ships shut down engines. Exchanged greetings and laughter accompanied the sharp click of a boathook as the Cutters picked up passengers bound for the shore.

"Hi there!" A stocky fair haired girl was coming down the tow path towards Catherine. "You must be Catherine Tenant. I'm June." She pulled her right hand out of her trouser pocket and held it out in welcome.

Catherine just had time to take in the girl's frayed bellbottoms, grey gym shoes and cap perched on the back of a tangle of fair hair, before her own hand was grasped. She looked into smiling, friendly very blue eyes.

"Great you've come," June continued. "There's so much work we hardly know how to cope. Mo and I are run off our feet. None of our boats are properly manned, but it'll be easier now there are more of us."

June's warmth and clear message that she was needed dispelled any misgivings Catherine might have had. Her spirits, never low for long, lifted. June walked with Catherine back up the path, explaining the situation.

"At the moment there are four crews. Each is supposed to have a coxswain in charge, usually a leading wren, a stoker and a deckhand. Two crews at a time are on duty for

twenty four hours, running noon to noon. We are so short handed we've had to run the boats with just a coxswain and only one crew, either a stoker or a deckhand. There aren't many trained wren stokers which doesn't help."

They emerged from the tow-path and turned right into a lane. June continued.

"Deckhands have to cover for Cox's when they're on leave and no one can ever go off sick." She squeezed Catherine's arm. "Great you've come."

This was the early summer of 1943 and the country had been at war for nearly four years. The Allies were on the advance in the Middle East, working their way towards the toe of Italy. The Germans were about to launch a new offensive on Soviet soil and there were nightly bombing raids on both sides of the channel. The Navy, Army and Air Force were training in unison to prepare for the eventual invasion of Europe. Combined Operational Bases had begun to build up their resources, which meant an increase of landing craft with the attendant support services. H.M.S. Cormorant was one of these establishments. The request for more sea going wrens together with other personnel was linked to the building of strength for the European Offensive.

June led Catherine into a small, detached house, surrounded by rough grass which might once have been a lawn. "This is Pantiles, undoubtedly a pre-war des. res. but for us Wrens to live in for the duration."

Catherine's allotted bunk was on the ground floor in what must have been a sitting room with French windows opening onto a tangled shrubbery. The bunk above Catherine's was already occupied. June, standing by the door, called out introductions.

"Liz, this is Catherine, just arrived. Catherine this is Liz Howard, straight off a stoker's course and got here this morning. I'll be back to scoop you both up before supper and take you across to where we mess."

June was gone, leaving the newcomers together.

Later, Catherine could never remember if her first impression of Liz had been her appearance or her sophisticated manner. The first thought that came to mind was how incongruous for such a glamorous person to become a stoker, dealing most of the time with dirty engines. But Liz Howard loved engines almost as much as she cared for clothes and was meticulous in her care of each.

Liz eased herself into a sitting position and dangled her long legs, sheathed luxuriously in black silk stockings, over the side of the bunk. Catherine noted her slender wrists and ankles and wished her own hair was longer and curled at the ends.

"You O.K. with sleeping underneath? I don't mind taking it in turns."

Liz pushed her hair back from her face and looked hard at Catherine.

"What d'you think of this place? It's a bit off the beaten track. God knows how we get to any bright lights. Wonder what one does off duty. Where've you come from?"

Liz paused for breath and Catherine rushed in a reply. She wanted to appear confident but felt like a junior at school in the presence of a sixth former. She was too taken up with her own feelings of inadequacy to notice Liz was covering up her own shyness with chatter.

Catherine unpacked her few belongings and was comforted by the familiar sight of her family in the travelling photograph frame. She placed it carefully on the top of her shared chest of drawers.

Liz was interested. "Are those your parents? You're lucky to have two brothers and a sister. I'm on my own. Where do you come in the pecking order?"

"Helen's two years older than me, she's a nurse and Alec's only fifteen and still at school."

Catherine liked talking about them.

"Sam's the same age as Helen, but he's my cousin. He lives with us as his parents are dead. Are those your parents?"

She pointed to a silver framed photograph of a pretty dark haired woman, like Liz but older, standing by a man in military uniform.

“That’s them. At least it was my father; he was killed in action last year.”

Liz did not elaborate. Catherine was uncertain what to say. Just to be sorry did not sound good enough. But Liz did not appear to expect a reply and hurried on.

“My mother’s working for a Government Department in London. I don’t see much of her but my Grandparents are great and I go to them when I can. They don’t live far from here.”

She felt in her shoulder bag and pulled out a snap-shot of an elderly couple sitting on a garden seat with two spaniels lying at their feet.

“The smaller one is Tess, she’s mine. I’d love to have her here but it’s probably not allowed and anyway she’s really better off with them.”

Catherine admired the speckled spaniel with her tongue hanging out. She felt more at ease as she continued to unpack. June found them chatting away comfortably when she returned to take them to supper.

The Mess where the Wrens ate had been the dining room of a large, impressive, white pillared house. It housed the W.R.N.S. Administration and accommodated most of the Wren Officers. The White House, as it was known, was next door to the Naval Shore Base, a large complex of corrugated huts sprinkled with two storey brick buildings. The sentry at the gate and the White Ensign signified that this was H.M.S. Cormorant.

The atmosphere in the Mess seemed to Catherine, relaxed and informal. They helped themselves to food at the serving hatch through which she could see a large kitchen, known as the galley. Girls in overalls, wreathed in steam, produced a constant supply of food. There was a continual hum of conversation and stream of people hurrying to get fed before either going on watch or off from duty.

“Oh dear, toad in the hole yet again,” June remarked.

“More hole than toad,” a girl across the table grumbled sleepily.

Catherine wondered if she had just woken up.

“Still on nights?” June asked.

The girl yawned and nodded.

“Jenny’s in the signals office up at Base,” June explained.

“Must dash and change, or I’ll be late getting on watch.”

Jenny looked at the clock on the wall and began to bolt her supper.

“Real stodge, this spotted dick, reminds me of school,” Liz remarked cheerfully, but she was hungry. “Going for a second?”

Catherine followed her back to the hatch, hoping that the pudding had not run out.

“You’ll be even more hungry tomorrow when you’ve been working,” June warned. “Hi Mo, you’re up late. Did they keep your food?”

Catherine turned as the small, red haired girl, she had seen on the river, came into the room. She was a real carrot red head and her face was covered in so many freckles they merged into each other.

“Blimey, I could eat a horse.”

Mo came across rubbing her hands on the seat of her trousers before shaking hands with Liz and Catherine.

“Which of you is Catherine? You’ll be joining me tomorrow, thank the Lord.”

Mo was a Londoner and proud of having been born within the sound of Bow bells. She did not give Catherine a chance to reply.

“It’s been a real sod getting those Craft sorted. Number One of five three two is a fussy old woman, he wouldn’t let any one ashore till everything was tickety blue.”

Her eyes widened and she pursed her lips in disapproval.

“And did you see Bill Owen make his entrance tonight? Made an absolute balls of getting into position. He damn nearly had five thirty on the mud and with a falling tide.”

She fetched a covered plate from the hatch and sat down with them.

Catherine noticed the room had begun to empty. They stayed on, watching Mo satisfy her hunger. In between mouthfuls she amused them with the events of her day. Catherine was struck by Mo and June’s easy familiarity towards herself and Liz, different to the more authoritative approach from the coxswains towards their crews which she had experienced before. The wren stewards cleared round them and began to lay up the long tables for breakfast.

“Who will you be crewing for?” Catherine asked of Liz as they emerged from the White House into the dusk.

“She’s joining me in the Crash boat.” June answered for her. “Real luxury to have a qualified stoker on board. The Crash boat’s twin diesels are hell to start in the morning.”

“Really!” Liz was instantly interested and plied June with questions. Catherine noticed Liz had quite lost her languid look in her enthusiasm for the temperamental diesels.

June handed round cigarettes and the four smoked companionably as she and Mo gave their new crews instructions for the morning before turning in. They were quartered at Russets further down the road. Catherine could hear their footsteps and Mo’s voice fading as they merged into the shadows of the tree lined road. She stood for a moment enjoying the night scent of grass and flowers mingled with the more pungent smell of river mud now exposed by the low tide.

“Heavens I’m tired,” yawned Liz, “best get our heads down before the grand awakening.”

Catherine nodded, suddenly aware of her extreme weariness. Linking arms spontaneously, they crossed the grass to their new home. A Wren Petty Officer was waiting for them at the front door, tricorn hat under her arm.

“You must be the new boatscrew wrens, Howard and Tenant,” she said smiling at them. “Don’t forget to sign in; the book’s on the table in the kitchen.” She inserted herself with care through the blackout curtains which she lifted for them to follow. “Mustn’t infringe the blackout regulations.”

There was a gossiping group round the table in the kitchen, enjoying a late mug of cocoa. Someone pulled out a couple of stools for them. But the day had been long enough for Catherine and Liz, even a hard bunk was more attractive.

## Chapter Two

“There’s a letter for you,” Catherine called down.

Mo recognised the familiar long blue envelope and knew it to be covered with her mother’s spidery writing.

“Thanks for bringing the mail. Did your bike arrive in one piece?”

Catherine’s bicycle had at last come from her previous Base, after more than a month’s delay. Pantiles was a third of a mile from the Yard, wheels saved time to give extra minutes in bed and helped in collecting mail between trips.

“Watch the foredeck, just scrubbed,” Mo warned as Catherine clambered down. The boat sparkled in the late afternoon light, evidence of their earlier efforts. “Ten minutes to our next trip, so let’s see what’s new.”

She slit open the blue envelope using the knife at the end of her lanyard. Catherine nodded and curled up in the bows content to read her own letter.

Darling Mo, I'm writing from the shelter, not much has happened here.....Mo's mother wrote of Grandad's allotment and Tom's latest prank as if they were the only events in her life. But Mo, reading between the lines, heard the nightly wail of the warning siren as her mother and five year old brother made their way to the underground at the Angel. She knew her Grandfather would obstinately remain in the narrow terraced house, proof against her mother's persuasion. She pictured war torn streets, the corner shop, which had suffered a near miss, with Mrs Bailey all the while calmly knitting balaclavas for the arctic convoys and her small indomitable mother at the centre of it all. She felt the old compassionate ache, a legacy from her childhood when her father, full of drink, exploded over the threshold disrupting all semblance of happy family life. She folded the letter back in the envelope and sighed. Catherine stuffed her own letter into her pocket and turned enquiringly.

"I wish," said Mo emphatically, "Mum didn't have to stay with Grandad in London. Tom oughtn't to be there either but Mum won't hear of him being evacuated after everything Gina and I went through".

Catherine had already heard something of the Baker sisters' ordeal when they were sent to a Welsh village at the start of the war. The two middle-aged spinsters, allotted as carers, were Chapel and their notions of bringing up children came from their own harsh experiences. Gina had turned to Mo, her elder, for comfort but there was no one for Mo. Rebellion had been the natural outcome.

"Couldn't your Grandad go with them?"

"Obstinate old cuss, he'll only leave feet first," Mo replied crossly. "Here come our passengers," she said, changing the subject as a group of sailors advanced down the narrow Pier, carrying boxes of stores.

The Cutter filled with men returning to their ships. Mo started the engine and Catherine, standing in the bows, cast off the forward line. She made her way past the passengers, to the stern where Mo was at the tiller. Small Mo had to stand on a box to see over the Cutter's bows. She eased the Cutter away from the Pier, nodding at Catherine to open up the Ford V 8 engine, which coughed uncertainly before settling, at full throttle into a throaty song. The boat thrust purposefully through the water travelling towards the flotilla of Landing Craft moored higher up river.

Mo, in charge, absorbed the familiar busy scene. So much going on everywhere from on board the Landing craft to the Maintenance Yard slipways and the hum of machinery coming from the massive boat sheds. It was easy to shrug off troubled thoughts of home and concentrate just on the world about her. She enjoyed the light touch of sun and summer breeze on her face and bare arms as she listened to Catherine's badinage with their passengers. She had settled in so quickly as her crew and friend.

"Tide's turned."

Catherine noted the swing of the smaller moored craft either side of the river.

"Now it's springs it'll be dead low and smellier than ever for late duty trips."

She wrinkled her nose in anticipation.

They left a few men on the catamarans, the water-side approach to the village on the far side of the river. They were in a hurry to quench their thirst at the Duck and Feather.

"Don't enjoy yourselves so much that you miss the last boat," Mo shouted after them. "Bear off for'ard." This was directed to Catherine wielding a boathook in the bows.

"It's a date! Keep us a place. We'll drink to that, Carrots."

Their amused voices followed the duty boat as it continued down river.

It was after six and the slipways were quiet. The second duty Cutter was plying back and forth between the Pier-head and the lower line of Craft, busy collecting men wishing to spend the evening ashore.

“If we tear up for an early supper, there’ll be time for a quick cuppa’ on 727 before the evening trips start,” Mo proposed.

Catherine guessed Dick, one of the men in Mo’s life, was responsible for the invitation.

Catherine frowned as she shut off the engine.

“It’s running a bit hot and I think it misses a beat sometimes.”

She looked round at Mo.

“Hope it doesn’t pack up on us. If Liz was around I’d ask her to take a look.”

But Liz and June were away in the Crash boat, collecting some officers from the Island.

“Oh heck, looks as if we’re needed again already.” Mo was gazing up at the Pier-head Quartermaster standing by his hut, waving a large envelope.

“I’d better nip up and see what he wants.”

The falling tide had exposed the first slime covered steps and Mo trod carefully before taking the top, dry ones two at a time. Stripey, the three badge Quartermaster was agitated. He quoted his own manager the Boatswain.

“He’s sorry, but the signal has got to get to them fast, see and they’re lying off Calshot waiting for orders. Crash boat would be best but June’s not back yet.”

He flapped the brown envelope at Mo.

“One thing, you should have time before your next duty trip.”

“Can do, don’t worry, Stripey. Tell me where they’re lying and we’ll be off.”

Reassured by her quick response he showed, on the hut’s wall chart, where the ship should be.

“Ask the other duty bods, when they go up, to put our supper on one side in case we’re late.” If we make it at all, she thought prophetically.

“Change of plan,” she told Catherine laconically. “Better shove on something warm, it’ll be breezy out there.”

They shrugged into their seaman’s sweaters and Catherine found some chocolate, donated by visiting Americans.

“And I didn’t have to give any favours,” she grinned and Mo perfectly understood.

As they set course for the entrance of the river, Mo noticed a small motor launch ahead. It was not one she recognised.

It was late August but evenings were already cooler, a warning that summer was running out. Winter was a hard time on the boats when seamanship was tested to the full by wind and heavy weather. Mo was prone to sea sickness which was an added hazard for her. The falling tide ran strongly, helping them on the way. Breakwaters to the east were already exposed, sticking out of the water like old teeth but the shingle bank, forming the spit on the western side of the river was not yet visible. The mournful clang of the marker buoy came over as a salutary warning to keep clear.

Catherine shouted to Mo, above the noise of the engine. “Just look at that boat! Aren’t they too far over?”

“Mm, they may draw less water than us.”

Mo was concentrating on keeping in the channel. Then it happened. The small motor boat was suddenly no longer moving. Its engine roared as the Coxswain slammed the gear into reverse, with no effect. They were stuck fast. The tide was in full ebb and the shingle bank would not yield.

Mo slowed down but knew any attempt to tow them off would be fool-hardy. A wildly gesticulating figure emerged from the cabin, three broad gold bands visible on his waving arms.

“Cripes, it’s Commander Jackson! There’ll be trouble.”

The Commander of the neighbouring Base on the upper reaches of the river was renowned for his short temper. His angry voice demanded to be rescued, instantly.

“Suppose we’ll have to try,” Mo sighed. “I’ll just put our nose in and he’ll have to paddle to get on board”.

She inched the Cutter towards the shallow water while Catherine eased the engine’s throttle. The Commander was silent, watching, preparing to jump.

He suddenly yelled, “You’ll have to come closer than that”.

Catherine heard Mo muttering under her breath, “No bloody fear”.

The bows of the Cutter crunched and the deflated Commander slopped across and clambered aboard.

“Hard astern and rev up.”

Mo swiftly gave the order. Catherine obediently slipped the gear into position and opened the throttle. The engine coughed twice and died. She tried, despairingly, to coax the V 8 to life. It was obstinately silent. The motor launch had company.

Commander Jackson was speechless. Perhaps as well, when a near tearful Catherine truthfully but unwisely said, “It’s no good, I haven’t a clue what’s wrong with the beastly thing.”

His face was the colour of a ripe tomato and Catherine hoped he did not have a heart condition. Just at that moment the Crash boat rounded the point and foamed into the river. June recognising the double disaster, calmly and efficiently handled first her boat into a rescue position and then took on the irate Commander. Catherine felt it was a pleasure to hand him over. At the same time, June accepted the delivery of the Boatswain’s brown envelope.

“Try cleaning the weed-trap, or perhaps your plugs are dirty,” Liz advised Catherine as she flirted with the purring twin diesels on board the Crash boat. She politely but firmly told Commander Jenson where he should sit and, slightly condescendingly, helped him empty his shoes, which he had forgotten to remove before paddling. June was amused, knowing that Liz expected engines and passengers to do her bidding, which they invariably did.

“Sleep well!” the rescuers called as they sped away to deliver the cargo before returning to sort out the beached Cutter’s late trips.

It was a golden rule to remain with one’s boat under all circumstances. Mo and Catherine had no option but to stay with the Cutter. It would be the best part of the night before they floated off.

“But at least we’ve got company,” Mo consoled Catherine, peering bleakly into the engine.

The decks of the motor launch were aslant but as the water fell two sailors jumped down and scrunched across the shingle to the Cutter.

“In trouble then?”

Catherine sighed with relief when she noticed the stocky, curly haired lad’s stoker badge, as he immediately rolled up his sleeves and knowledgeably, felt about in the dead engine.

“Leave it to Stokes, he’s a whiz with engines.”

Taff, the Cox, was dark and wirey, the taller of the two.

“Reckon it’ll be early morning before we get off. Likely to be cold too.”

A sneaky wind had sprung up as daylight faded. Mo walked with Taff along the shingle bank. They stared out over the mud flats, glistening in the half-light. The mocking clang of the marker buoy mingled with soft bird noises from the marshy fringe of the river. It was desolate and she shivered.

Stokes finished cleaning the plugs and checked the V 8 carefully.

“Reckon she’ll run sweet now,” he said, wiping his hands on the cotton waste handed to him by Catherine. She had cleaned the weed-trap and felt better.

The four of them huddled down in the stern of the Cutter, where the half canopy would protect them from the rising wind. They draped the sailors duffle coats round their shoulders

and shared round a pack of hard tack biscuits.

“They’re so dry they stick in my throat,” Catherine complained.

Stokes felt for his tin of tobacco and cigarette papers.

“Ticklers all round?” he suggested and expertly rolled four very thin cigarettes, allowing the girls to lick and seal their own. The tobacco was harsh and stung Catherine’s mouth but she did not say anything because Stokes had been so kind.

The night was dark. The warmth under the lumped coats from close bodies was comforting. Mo sensed that Catherine slept. Stokes, too, became quiet. Taff talked quietly; his Welsh voice rising and falling rhythmically. His home was in the Rhonda Valley.

“Men in my family expect to go down the mines, automatic like, but I’ll never go back to that. The sea’s for me now.”

“Even sticking on a shingle bank?” Mo teased him. She told him about her bad time in Wales, with Miss Ada and Miss Maud.

“I know about Chapel folk,” Taff laughed. Then startled her by confiding, “I’m a married man, you know”.

Mo was amazed. He seemed no older than herself and she did not at all wish to be tied to one person, have babies and suffer her Mum’s dreary life. But Taff was in love and did not want to be free. After a while he became quiet and Mo was the last one awake, listening to the night sounds and wondering if Dick missed her.

Mo woke suddenly. Catherine’s hand was on her arm. Water sucked and gurgled round the Cutter’s stern. She was stiff and cramped and woke the still sleeping men for them to get back to their own boat. They waved as they crossed, just dry-shod and climbed aboard. The wind was lively but the dark sky held that mellow light preceding dawn.

They waited while water rose, like searching fingers over the bank, up and around them. Everywhere they looked seemed covered in water but they were still not afloat. Then with a series of bumps they were free.

Catherine crossed her fingers and pressed the starter. One groan and the engine sang into life.

“Thank you God for Stokes,” Catherine prayed as she and Mo waved to the launch. They would soon be off too.

The sky to the East was pearly grey, when they finally secured the Cutter. The Quartermaster gave them mugs of thick, scalding tea from the pot slowly stewing on the top of the stove in his hut. “727 sent this ashore for you.” He handed Mo an envelope, smaller than the one he had waved earlier.

“Catherine, Dick’s got a stand easy and has booked the Whaler. Would you like to come for a sail when we come off duty?” she enquired. But Catherine had a date of her own.

