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A Sea Change

Written by Veronica Henry

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A Sea Change

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Chapter One

The M5 motorway on a Friday afternoon in August was enough to drive you mad. It took Craig forty minutes just to get out of the city. Then the traffic would be nose to tail all the way from Birmingham to Taunton. Stop–start. Stop–start. A slow crawl that had him drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

Craig looked longingly at the hard shoulder. It was so tempting. If he got stopped, he could just flash his badge. He'd probably get away with it, except he wasn't that sort of copper. He didn't abuse his position. He had mates who had no problem with doing that kind of thing – breaking the rules – but Craig liked to stick to the letter of the law. He always played it straight, even if it wasn't always the easy option.

He could feel his T-shirt sticking to the back of his seat. He wasn't going to be a pretty sight by the time he got to the beach at Everdene, nor a pretty smell. The air-con didn't seem to make any difference, and opening the windows

didn't help. He took a swig from the bottle of water he'd stuffed in the cup holder. It was warm, but it took the edge off the dryness in his throat. He wiped his brow with the back of his arm and looked at the sweat. Gross.

After Taunton, the traffic cleared and he put his foot down, keeping at a steady seventy miles an hour until he turned off the motorway. The car headed over Exmoor – its high, bleak landscape parched and brown from the summer sun. Away from the traffic Craig started to relax. He had a whole week off. A whole week to do what he liked. All he had with him was a few clothes, a wetsuit and his surfboard. And the key to the beach hut.

There were eight of them from the police station who'd clubbed together to rent the hut. Young people who were all into beach life and loved surfing, rock climbing, walking and kayaking. It was cheaper than going on holiday. It took just over three hours to get there, if you put your foot down, so between them they made the most of it.

Craig was the only one going down this weekend. All the others had different plans. After all the stress he'd had lately, he was looking forward to the peace and quiet. He couldn't wait to get there.

As he drove past the last supermarket before Everdene, he decided to pull over and pick up some food so he wouldn't have to venture out for a day or so. He bought a hot chicken and some rolls, a bag of salad, fruit, biscuits, some beers and bottled water. By six o'clock he would be sitting on the step, sipping a beer and looking at the sea.

As he left the car park he turned up the radio, grinned from ear to ear and gave a whoop.

Let the weekend begin.

Chapter Two

Jenna ran a damp cloth over the counter of her ice-cream kiosk for the tenth time that afternoon. She liked to keep it spotless. Behind her the radio was blaring, and above her the sun was shining in the sky. She adjusted the cones waiting to be filled, smoothed out the surfaces of the tubs and washed her scoops again. She looked down at the cabinet, pleased with the way it looked.

Inside there was a rainbow of ice creams to choose from. There were the usual, of course – chocolate and strawberry and vanilla. Then there were the more exotic flavours. Maple and walnut, rhubarb and ginger, Mississippi mud pie, peanut-butter cluster. The one that most kids seemed to hanker after was bubblegum, bright blue and sickly sweet. Dream Ices certainly didn't leave you short of choice.

The kiosk was situated at the top of the row of shops that led down to the harbour. Tawcombe had once been a thriving holiday resort, bursting at the seams with tourists. Now, in the

recession, it was feeling the pinch. The hotels were closing down one after the other, as were the restaurants. Eventually the empty places got boarded up, then covered in graffiti, which didn't make the place very inviting.

The fishing boats still came in and out of the harbour, but there was a run-down air to the seafront, which had once bustled with life. Now it was deserted most of the day, until evening when gangs of bored youths collected there with cans of lager. The coastline was spectacular with its craggy rocks and crashing waves, but the town itself had become grey. A handful of attractions remained – a merry-go-round circled on the front, its horses in need of repainting. The arcade beeped and flashed with fruit machines.

And Dream Ices sold twenty-nine varieties of ice cream, which you could have in a waffle cone, or in a cone coated in sprinkles, or in a cone dipped in chocolate. You could also have chocolate, raspberry or butterscotch sauce on top. Then if you still wanted more, there were chocolate flakes and fingers of fudge and a squirt of whipped cream to finish.

Twenty-nine flavours had always annoyed Jenna. She would have made it thirty, but one of the tubs was filled with water for washing

the scoops. Three rows – two of ten and one of nine – of brightly coloured, mouth-watering ice cream. She had noticed over the past week that some of the tubs were nearly empty and hadn't been replaced. Usually they were filled up before you could see the white plastic at the bottom. They'd almost run out of rum and raisin, and mint chocolate chip, and Devon clotted-cream fudge. There wasn't any in the freezer, which was strange. When she mentioned it to her boss, Terry, he just nodded and said he'd get onto it.

Dream Ices had done OK. Even though times were hard, it seemed like people still had money for an ice. There were just enough day trippers to keep the place ticking over. Sometimes Jenna scooped away all afternoon. All the same, she should have sensed trouble coming. For some reason, she hadn't.

So when the owner of Dream Ices, Terry, came up to her on Friday afternoon, Jenna hadn't expected to be sacked.

'I've got some bad news, love,' he said. 'I was hoping this wasn't going to happen but times are hard. I'm going to have to let you go.'

Her eyes widened in shock. 'You're not closing down, surely?'

'No. Not yet.' He looked gloomy, as if this

might happen. 'But I can't afford to keep you on. I'll have to run the place myself.'

She wasn't sure how he was going to manage that. Terry spent most of his time in the pub or at the bookies. Maybe that explained why he was in difficulty.

'Things will pick up,' she said hopefully. 'We've been busy today. And the forecast for the weekend is great. Nearly thirty degrees, they reckon.'

Terry was always moaning that the glory days were over. He was always telling her about the life he used to have, when the town was in its heyday and his pockets were stuffed with cash.

He shook his head. 'Even if we doubled the takings in the next month, I can't afford you. I'm sorry.'

'Surely we've done all right this summer?' she asked. 'I've been rushed off my feet some days.'

He shook his head. 'Not like the old days. I could clear five hundred quid cash, no problem, on a bank holiday. I struggle to get that in a week now. And the rent's gone up. And the wholesalers have put their prices up.'

Jenna didn't know what to say. Terry looked out to sea and cleared his throat. 'I can't give you your wages, either.'

Jenna's heart skipped a beat. He owed her over two weeks' money.

'You're kidding me.'

'I haven't got it. I had to pay the supplier. There was nothing left.'

There had been enough for him to have a few pints at lunchtime. She could smell the beer on his breath.

'I'll bring it round when I get it,' he promised her. 'If we have a good weekend . . .'

She'd never see it. She knew that.

'You could have told me before,' Jenna told him. 'You must have known you couldn't pay me, but you let me carry on working.'

'No,' he said. 'I promise you. I was hoping for something to happen. I was hoping . . .'

'For a win on the horses?'

Terry gave something between a shrug and a nod. Jenna felt hot with fury.

'Gambling is a game for mugs. Surely you know that by now, Terry? If it was that easy, everyone would be doing it.'

Terry just walked away and stood by the harbour railings. He lit a cigarette.

Jenna couldn't believe what Terry had done. She had been so loyal to him. She'd kept the place afloat all summer, smiling and laughing with the customers. She talked them into

having two scoops when they only wanted one. She persuaded women who were watching their figure that just one wouldn't hurt. And the locals came here to buy ice cream from her too. She'd become a bit of a local landmark over the summer. It was her banter rather than the ice cream that they came for. And her singing.

She'd started off singing along to songs on the radio, using a cone as a microphone. Then she started singing whatever she felt like, her own favourites that she could belt out behind the counter. It kept her sane even if she did look mad, but people seemed to enjoy it. Her mood was catching.

She was known as the Ice Cream Girl. She didn't mind being called that at all. It was a happy name. People had started making requests. They were always telling her she should go on *The X Factor*, or get an agent, or join a band. But Jenna knew there was a big difference between mucking about and doing it for real. She wasn't convinced she had any real talent. She just wanted people to have a good time.

She wasn't going to be the Ice Cream Girl any more, though. In the past two minutes she had been turned back into a nobody. That would teach her to have trusted Terry, and to have

done her best for him. She had genuinely thought he would look after her and see her right, but no. As soon as things got tough he had dumped her. He was just like everybody else. Out for himself and what he could get.

She felt tears pricking the back of her eyelids, but she refused to cry. Terry Rowe wasn't going to see the effect he'd had on her.

She took off her apron and folded it up carefully. Then she picked up the strawberry sauce and squirted it all over every tub of ice cream in the cabinet. She followed it with the chocolate. Then she sprinkled a shaker full of hundreds and thousands over the lot.

She felt sick with anger. She remembered the number of times Terry had rung her, begging her to do a shift because he'd had a skinful. The days she'd stayed late because he couldn't drag himself out of the pub. He had repaid her loyalty by sacking her the minute things got tough.

He came back when he had finished his cigarette. She could smell the tobacco on him and it turned her stomach.

'What have you done?' he asked, outraged.

She shrugged.

'You can pay me back for all of that! There's a couple of hundred quid's worth there.'

'Take it out of my wages,' she told him.

It hadn't been a dream job. No one dreamed about selling ice cream the way they did being an actress or a supermodel or a singer. She'd enjoyed it, though. Ice cream brought a few moments of pleasure. She loved watching people's faces as they looked at what was on offer, dazzled by the choice. She loved their smiles as they took their loaded cones. There were worse jobs.

She walked away from the kiosk without looking back or bothering to say goodbye.

By the time Jenna got to the end of the quay, her anger had turned to fear. She felt anxious. So anxious that it felt like her insides were being eaten. It was turning out to be a bad summer. Three weeks ago, someone had broken into the house where she had a room. They'd smashed in all the doors and taken everything they could. Jenna didn't have much in the way of valuables. But she had had three weeks' worth of wages tucked into the back of a drawer, waiting to pay the rent.

Her landlord hadn't been at all understanding. He reckoned it wasn't his fault the house had been burgled, even though everyone said the locks hadn't been strong enough. He'd

agreed to wait for the rent until Jenna got her next lot of wages, which should have been today.

How was she going to pay now? Her landlord was going to kick up, she knew he was. He wouldn't be interested in reasons or excuses. She'd promised him the rent she owed in cash by the end of the week, which was today. Friday. Otherwise he was going to boot her out. She knew he would. He knew people who would come and pack up her stuff and throw it out of her room, then drag her out afterwards. She'd seen it happen before.

It didn't matter where she stood legally. People like her landlord didn't take any notice of the law. They knew the system wouldn't look after her. She was a nothing, a nobody, and no one cared.

Jenna trudged into the centre of Tawcombe, past the chip shop and the arcade and back to her house. She'd never call it 'home'. Home was somewhere you were glad to come back to. Somewhere you felt you belonged. She was yet to feel that about anywhere.