

POSTCARD FROM SUNSHINE



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'The past is never dead. It's not even past.'

— WILLIAM FAULKNER

SANDBAR BOOKS

PROLOGUE

THE RELENTLESS WIND BLOWING IN FROM THE SOLENT TWISTED into an unsettling, discordant shriek as it whipped through the green mesh fence surrounding the golf club on Hayling Island.

Rising and falling, rising and falling, the high-pitched keening sounded like a thousand tiny mouths screaming, punctuated by the staccato snap of loose mesh flapping against the plastic posts. A cormorant, a silhouette of wet ink against the grey sky, perched on top of an upright, its wings spread wide, a dark, tattered cross drying in the early morning air. Its piercing green eyes surveyed West Beach with cold, reptilian indifference.

A sound from the shoreline distracted the bird. Its hooked beak tilted upwards. It leaned forward and dropped into the air, its wings beating a heavy, rhythmic pulse as it soared above the manicured grass of the golf course and the elegant curved balconies of its Art Deco clubhouse.

Swooping down, the cormorant flew low over the water with steady wingbeats, settling on top of a black daymark rising from

the Solent at the end of a groyne at Gunner Point. With the unblinking eyes of a doll, it observed the scene impassively.

Two men stood facing each other at the edge of the ocean. They argued vehemently. One threw up his arms in exasperation, drawing attention to the faded scraps of paper he held in his hand. Spittle flew from his mouth as his shouts were lost in the swirling wind. The other stood still, listening. He reached into his pocket, pulled out an object and aimed it at the man's chest.

A flat metallic crack pierced the air. The cormorant did not startle as it watched the first man thud backwards onto the wet sand. The pieces of paper he held corkscrewed into the sky and disappeared. The second man bent down to rifle through the pockets of the first. He straightened up and used his foot to push the body into the shallows until it was caught by the tide.

The cormorant shifted its weight, its beak glinting in the cold morning sunshine. It folded its wings back against its body, settled on its perch and watched the shape drift out to sea.

2026

CHAPTER 1

Thursday 18th June

‘HALE KNEW, BEFORE he had been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him.’

Dan Thomson paused, eyes fixed on Meera Dhillon and her husband Nihal. Doreen Green and Charlie O’Connor looked on with amusement. The rhythmic crash of nearby waves filled the silence as the tide on the beach ebbed and flowed, leaving shimmering, ephemeral traces on the glistening pebbles. The friends sat around the dying embers of a barbecue outside a row of five brightly painted beach huts that curved along a strip of scrubland above Hayling Island beach. To the west, the last vestiges of sunlight, a kaleidoscope of oranges and yellows, lingered behind the elegant white arcs of Portsmouth’s Spinnaker Tower.

‘That, friends, is the greatest opening line ever written. Graham Greene was a genius.’

Dan grinned. He folded his arms with mock finality.

‘That’s an interesting assertion,’ replied Meera, her eyes bright in the fading embers. ‘But where’s your proof?’

Nihal reached over and took his wife’s hand in his. He smiled.

‘You know what Mee’s like, Dan. She’s going to need some evidence. Nurses are sticklers for statistics.’

Charlie nodded in agreement.

‘She’s right to be. Without evidence, there’s no case. Thirty years in the police taught me that.’

Dan held up his hands in defeat.

'Reenie, help me out here! These skeptics are bullying me!' He smiled broadly.

'Not everything can be proved empirically, my friends. The proof of the pudding is in the reading, the economy of the writing. There are just sixteen words yet the reader is hooked. A murder, a man who somehow knows it's coming, a seaside town. It's perfect.'

Dan paused, distracted by the sound of a whinnying horse. He looked down the beach towards a group of riders ambling out of the shallows in the fading light. The animals splashed contentedly through the water, dramatically framed by the distant dimly-lit coastline of the Isle of Wight. Dan breathed in deeply and took a moment to appreciate the beauty of the surroundings. The group's beach huts were located in a secluded position, offering unbroken views across the Solent. Dan's hut was painted a vivid chartreuse yellow, a sharp contrast to the nautical light blue-and-white stripes of Meera and Nihal's next to it. The bright navy blue hut in the middle belonged to Doreen. Charlie's hut at the other end was a more subdued duck egg colour. Mark Manning owned the remaining light blue and green hut between Charlie and Doreen's. The silence was broken by Doreen, known to all as Reenie. The sprightly pensioner's silver hair escaped in lively wisps from a peppermint-coloured straw fedora perched on top of her head.

'I don't know much about literature, Dan. Mark reads a lot so I'm sure he'll have a view, but there's a Hayling Hunters meeting tonight so he can't be here. You know what these metal detectors are like.'

'Yes, I do,' replied Dan, straight-faced. 'They're handheld and make high-pitched squeals. Unless you mean Mark, of course. He doesn't make high-pitched squeals. At least not when I'm around. But that's because he's a detectorist, not a detector.'

Dan's serious face broke into a grin. Reenie moved towards him. She punched him on the arm amiably.

‘Very funny, Dan. *Detectorist* then. Either way, they’re like magpies. Obsessed by shiny things.’

Reenie bent down to pick up a white paper plate. Two half-eaten sausages and the remnants of a charred corn-on-the-cob lay on top.

‘It’s time I headed off. See you all at the weekend? The forecast looks good. Are Sathnam and Asha about, Mee?’

‘Should be. Sat needs to revise for his end-of-year tests and Ash has got gymnastics first thing, but they’ll be here before lunch with Nihal. I won’t be. I’ve got the night shift tomorrow. I envy you retirees.’

She looked at Reenie and Charlie, then turned her head until her eyes rested purposefully on Dan.

‘And part-time teachers.’

‘Oi! Who are you calling part-time? Chance would be a fine thing. That said, I’ll be here all day Saturday, Reen. Can’t wait to take the kayak out.’

He playfully stuck his tongue out at Meera. She shook her head in mock disappointment, stood up and stretched contentedly. She’d missed the laughter of the beach hut barbecues. She felt a spark of excitement rush through her as she remembered this would be the first of many in the warm months ahead.

‘We’ll say goodnight then. Make sure those kids aren’t up to any mischief. Do you need any help with the barbecue, Charlie?’

‘No, it’s okay. It needs to cool. I’ll clean it when I pop down tomorrow. Katie and Evie are heading over on Saturday so I’ve got a few things to sort out anyway.’

Nihal and Meera locked their hut, shouted their good nights and headed to the small car park behind. Dan followed suit. Reenie looked at Charlie and sighed.

‘Just us oldies left to finish clearing up. As per usual.’

She winked before shuffling off towards her hut. Charlie eased himself out of his chair. He turned the lock at both the top and bottom of his door before sliding across a heavy iron bar, padlocking it at one end. Satisfied the job was complete, he said

goodnight to Reenie. Moments later, his headlights swept across the back of the huts before vanishing into the darkness. Reenie repeated Charlie's ritual, pulling twice on her door to reassure herself it was locked. She jumped into her car, turned the key in the ignition. The sound of tyres crunching on gravel echoed loudly in the still evening air.

The beach was deserted, lit solely by the ethereal light of the crescent moon. The only sound was the wash of the waves spilling up the shore, tugging at the shingle, leaving fizzing foam in its wake. To the west, the sea was restless, waves breaking with a percussive thud. A disturbed black-headed gull wheeled against the moon, slicing through the air with wings like blades. It suddenly screamed angrily *kree-ay, kree-ay*, an unsettling, resonant sound that carried sharply across the bay. In the distance, a dark silhouette appeared on the surface of the water, bobbing slowly towards the shore. A shaft of moonlight bounced across the water surrounding it, the burst of kinetic energy a stark contrast to the stillness of the shape: a dead human body inching ever closer to land. The fully dressed male corpse faced down, arms floating to the side, wisps of black hair trailing in the water. The angry gull repeated its scream *kree-ay, kree-ay* as the body bumped along the floor of the shallows. It settled with a final thump on the pebble-strewn beach.

CHAPTER 2

LATE EVENING SUNLIGHT streamed through the high windows of the church hall. Mark Manning looked up, distracted by a large fly circling around the dust motes in the exposed rafters. He watched as the insect completed two circuits, drifted down and landed on one of the red velvet curtains at the side of the stage. A silver-haired man wearing a light brown cotton suit stood in the centre. James Wallace-Jones, secretary of Hayling Hunters metal detecting club, was informing members of the latest updates to the Code of Practice for responsible detecting.

As life president and founder of the club more than two decades earlier, Mark felt duty-bound to attend the monthly meetings at St Mary's, yet the truth was he'd prefer to be enjoying tonight's barbecue at the beach huts. Mark struggled to find interest in the finer points of the rules and regulations of metal detecting. Discussions of the minutiae of permissions, public liability insurance and the Treasure Act bored him rigid. To Mark, this was the antithesis of the romanticism of detecting. Treasure hunting had been his passion for years. It still thrilled him as he approached his twilight years: a lighter detector and longer handled digging tools were the only concessions he'd made to age. To Mark, metal detecting offered solid ground, anchoring him to the land. When he walked the fields and riverbanks, he felt connected and secure in a way he did not in his everyday life.

Wallace-Jones showed no signs of finishing his talk. Mark's eyes wandered again, this time drawn to a poster pinned to one

of the cream-coloured walls. The sight of it called forth memories of another poster decades earlier. A poster on the wall of the canteen at Marconi's in St Albans where Mark had worked as a junior toolmaker. It advertised a metal detecting club for employees interested in a new hobby, one made possible by developments in technology. Mark had become an enthusiastic member, his interest sharpened when he unearthed scores of pre-decimal coins on one of his first forays into the fields. He had met Isobel at the club. A whirlwind romance and marriage followed. The divorce a few years later had been equally rapid. Grateful there were no children to complicate matters, Mark had taken the opportunity to rebuild his life. A job opportunity in Havant at the kitchen appliance manufacturer Kenwood allowed him to move south to Hayling, a place he'd visited on childhood holidays.

A smattering of polite applause signalled the end of the update. The meeting broke up for refreshments. Mark wandered over to a trestle table at the back of the hall. A box of tea bags and catering-sized tin of cheap instant coffee stood next to a battered silver urn, steam escaping from its lid. He spooned some coffee into a paper cup, added water from the urn and carefully poured in some milk from a heavy four-pint bottle. He took a sip and grimaced. He assessed the white paper plates of biscuits scattered around the table, noticing the chocolate digestives and Hobnobs had already disappeared. Reluctantly selecting a custard cream, he turned to see Roger Carlisle at his elbow.

'Evening, Mark. Thanks for coming out to Sandy Point last week. Ferne was inconsolable when she realised she'd lost her wedding ring. I knew your Equinox 900 would be more than up to the job.'

'Pleased to help, Rog. I was delighted we found it. Always happy to help. Apart from the beach, there are slim pickings at this time of year anyway. I'll be glad when the harvest's done, the ground is softer and we can get back out in the fields again. Brush the cobwebs off the big boy, the old Hunter Xtrem.'

'Me too. I'd love to find an Iron Age hoard. It doesn't need

to be as big as the likes of Staffordshire or Great Baddow, just enough to get the juices flowing and the coroner interested. I'd like to have a turn with your new machine at some point if you'll let me. I've heard it's the best deep seeker on the market. Perhaps we can unearth some smugglers' loot?

'That's the dream, Rog.'

A short man dressed in a slightly too-tight blue designer suit and bright yellow tie suddenly appeared behind Mark and Roger. He eased himself into the space between them. His glossy black hair was swept back from his forehead, but persistently fell forward over his eyes, forcing him to push it back every minute or two. This allowed him to show off a white gold Rolex Yacht-Master watch on his left wrist. Nigel Hardacre was in his late fifties. He was the founder and proprietor of the island's most successful estate agency. Nigel measured out his life in square footage and judged the worth of others by the value of their assets. To Nigel, happiness was all very well, but where was his commission? Mark was surprised by his presence. Nigel was not the kind of man prepared to traipse across the countryside getting his hands dirty. He undoubtedly liked treasure, but had a very different way of acquiring it to members of Hayling Hunters.

'Good evening, gentlemen. Lovely to see you both. What a fascinating meeting. I didn't realise there were so many rules and regulations for you chaps to follow.'

'Hello, Nigel. What brings you here? I didn't think we were quite your scene.'

'Indeed, Mark, old boy, indeed. Derek asked me to come along. He's trying to get me to sponsor you, fork out some of my well-earned dough. He reckons we'll fit together well – 'hunt for your new home with Hardacre's' – that type of thing.'

Derek Cowan was the chairman of Hayling Hunters, succeeding Mark four years earlier.

'Well, we could do with a boost,' said Roger. 'Think of the publicity you'd get if we unearth a rare find. Hardacre's Haul, it'd go global.'

‘Hmm. When you put it like that, it does sound rather appealing. Hardacre’s Haul, eh?’

The loud voice of Derek Cowan filled the room, rudely shattering Nigel’s reverie.

‘Ladies and gentlemen. Please return to your seats. Next up, we have Dominic Nicholson. Dom’s going to summarise the latest amendments to the Treasure Act and talk about how best to adhere to the NCMD Code of Conduct.’

‘Well, gentlemen, we must catch up later,’ said Nigel. ‘Perhaps we’ll get to chat at the end of the meeting, Mark. Lovely to see you, Roger.’

Mark shook both men’s hands and returned to his seat. The presence of Nigel Hardacre bothered him. The estate agent wasn’t a man known for his generosity to others. There was no way he’d sponsor Hayling Hunters without an ulterior motive. As the drone of Dominic Nicholson’s voice began, Mark resolved to keep a close eye on Nigel Hardacre. A very close eye indeed.

CHAPTER 3

Friday 19th June

THE EVENING TRAFFIC was thinning as Meera negotiated a roundabout near her home in Bedhampton. She steered her VW Golf onto Portsdown Hill Road. She crested the hill, glanced left and looked down at the breathtaking panoramic view of the city of Portsmouth. Beyond a jumble of red and grey slate rooftops, the land tumbled away towards the sea. The sleek white curves of Spinnaker Tower were visible in the distance, a contrast to the industrial steel cranes of the naval dockyard. The grand sweep of Southsea's promenade marked the end of the land as it gave way to the sparkling blue of the Solent, the shimmering, foam-flecked ocean appearing to stretch on forever beyond the horizon. Meera connected her phone and started a pre-prepared Punjabi lesson.

'Main ajj thodi thakki hoyi haan,' the calm voice instructed.

She repeated the phrase, trying to match the speaker's crisp inflection.

'I'm a little tired today.'

'Never a truer word,' thought Meera. She had not slept well after the barbecue, unused to the dopamine hit brought on by good food, good conversation and good friends. She now faced a twelve-hour night shift in accident and emergency. It was always busy, but Friday night brought a guaranteed increase in the number of drunken injuries and domestic incidents.

'Main ajj thodi thakki hoyi haan.'

Meera repeated the words with growing confidence. Her Punjabi accent was improving. Her grasp of the language was still shaky, a legacy of her parents' decision to speak only English at home as she grew up in the eighties. The choice was a sacrifice made out of love for their child. Even now, the taunting words *'I vunt that vone'* echoed on a loop as she recalled the hurtful comments she'd faced at school. She could still see the mocking face of five-year-old Rachel Harris. In seconds, a simple game of playing shop had transformed into a lesson in shame. On the day of her fiftieth birthday, Meera had proudly resolved to reclaim her heritage, to regain what never should have been lost. She winced as she remembered how immigrant parents such as hers were told that speaking Punjabi at home would damage their children's development, that it was a language to be repressed rather than celebrated.

'Mainu apne aap te maan hai.'

'I am proud of who I am.'

Meera pulled into the staff car park and found a free space. She turned off the ignition and glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It was 6.30pm. Half an hour until she started. Plenty of time for a smooth handover from the day shift. Meera jumped out of the car, locked it, and strode purposefully towards the hospital. She'd just reached the zebra crossing outside the main building when her neighbour Sarah Henderson appeared on the far side, about to cross. A retired primary school teacher, Sarah had a kindly round face and dimpled cheeks. She wore a pair of denim shorts and a pink T-shirt emblazoned with two cartoon strawberries above the slogan 'Feeling Berry Good'. Her ever-present smile widened when she spotted Meera. She ran across the road.

'Mee!'

'Sarah! Good to see you. What're you doing here?'

'Terry had a run-in with some pruning shears this afternoon. You'd have thought he'd be more careful at his age, wouldn't you? He said it was too hot to wear gloves. Men, eh? It's pretty deep so

I thought it best to get it looked at. It needed a couple of stitches. He's just finishing up. I'm off to get the car. Are you heading in?'

'Yes, unfortunately. Twelve hours of non-stop fun.'

'Shame you can't be at your beach hut. The weather is meant to stay hot this weekend.'

'Tell me about it.'

'Aw. I know you love it over there. It's special to you, isn't it? Didn't you say the hut was a gift from your dad?'

'Yes, that's right.'

Meera's eyes glistened. Her father Gurdeep first saw the British seaside a year after he left India's Punjab to work in a Wolverhampton foundry in the early sixties. He was enchanted by a long row of beach huts on the waterfront at Llanbedrog in Wales, marking the beginning of a love affair with the seaside holiday, one shared by Meera as she grew up. When she and Nihal relocated south, Gurdeep bought the hut as a surprise gift to celebrate her permanent arrival at the seaside.

Meera realised she hadn't heard a word of Sarah's response.

'Sorry?'

'I said, I hope you have the opportunity to get over there more often later in the summer.'

'Yes, I hope so too. It's good to see you, Sarah. Send Terry my love. I hope he's not in too much pain.'

Meera crossed the road, walked briskly to the accident and emergency department and headed for the nurses' station.

'Hey, Mee.'

A man greeted Meera, eyes fixed on the computer keyboard he was tapping.

'What's up, Arturo?'

Arturo Garcia, a Filipino nurse in his mid-twenties, grinned as he looked up, his dark, expressive eyes acknowledging her. He was dressed identically to Meera in a light blue uniform, bare below the elbow, his rich black hair tied back in a simple ponytail.

'*Salamat sa Diyos!* Now you've arrived, it means it's time for me to get out of here. I've got people to see, places to go, parties

to crash...’

Arturo winked as Meera approached him. She playfully punched him on the shoulder.

‘Been busy, Art?’

‘What do you think? It’s been the usual: cuts, burns, broken bones, chest pain, head injuries, allergic reactions. My triage skills have been tested, that’s for sure.’

‘Anything major I should know about?’

‘No, but you missed some drama earlier. A fatality was brought in from Hayling. Arrived late this morning.’

‘Hayling? What happened?’

‘A runner found a dead man on the beach. He’d been shot. They sent the body straight to the mortuary. Caused a bit of excitement.’

Meera looked at Arturo in surprise.

‘Shot? On Hayling beach? Was it a suicide? A murder? An accident, perhaps? Where did the body wash up?’

‘Whoa! Too many questions, Mee!’

‘I’m sorry, Art. It’s just a bit close to home. I have a beach hut on Hayling. I was there last night. It was a beautiful evening. It’s hard to believe a body was floating around in the water while we were enjoying our barbecue.’

‘I understand, Mee. Well, I can tell you for certain it was murder. But you didn’t hear it from me.’

Arturo winked. Meera’s eyes grew wide.

‘How do you know, Art?’

‘You know me, Mee. Always gossiping. I’m good friends with Renato, the mortuary assistant. We had lunch today. He helped lift the body onto the tray for the pathologist. He said there were tiny burn marks around the entry wound. Caused by the gunpowder. You only get that if the gun was held a couple of feet back. And the man’s hands were as clean as a whistle. No soot, no residue. If he didn’t shoot the gun, it must be murder, no?’

‘I guess you’re right, Art. Have they identified him?’

‘Not yet. Renato says he had nothing in his pockets. It’s a

complete mystery.’

‘Any idea how long he was in the water?’

‘Not exactly. But Renato had a good idea from the condition of the body. He reckons he’d been in there no longer than a day or two.’

‘So I assume there’ll be a press conference?’

‘Tomorrow morning, I think. They’ll release a description of his clothing and an appeal for witnesses. I guess they’ll say no more than it’s a suspicious death at this stage, but I can guarantee you it’s murder.’

Meera looked at her watch.

‘Okay, Art. Sorry for the grilling. I guess we’ll know more tomorrow. Now, let’s finish this handover. Otherwise those parties are going to be over by the time you get there.’

‘*Labyu*, Mee! Let’s do it!’

CHAPTER 4

Saturday 20th June

'KIKI DEE!' SHOUTED Dan. 'It's bloody Kiki Dee!'

He forcefully punched the steering wheel as he guided his Nissan Qashquai across the empty Hayling bridge and onto the island. The breakfast time show on *Capital South* blared out of the radio.

'So, Colin, I need an answer. Who sang with Elton John on the chart topping 1976 hit *Don't Go Breaking My Heart*?'

'Er, I'm really not sure, Barry. Was it Dusty Springfield?'

Dan smacked his hand against his forehead as a dissonant sound effect signified Colin's failure.

'I'm afraid that's wrong, Colin. The answer is Kiki Dee. Our £500 prize pot rolls over until Monday when another listener will get a chance to show off their pop music prowess. I'm Barry Bartlett and this is Sabrina Carpenter.'

The upbeat chords of *Espresso* helped Dan recover his composure. He enjoyed quizzes, was proud to be the captain of a semi-competitive pub team in Emsworth. He once took them very seriously. He cringed as he recalled the time he'd made a fool of himself over the question: who is the Merchant of Venice? Dan knew the answer was Antonio. He couldn't believe it when the quizmaster announced it as Shylock. Given his time again, he would have made rather less of a fuss. There'd also once been a row he'd rather forget about the flavour of milkshakes drunk by

Alberto Frog and his Amazing Animal Band. Dan smiled as his thoughts turned back to the day ahead. Unbroken sun was forecast and he was determined to enjoy it. He'd set out early to open up his hut before the road to the beaches became clogged with traffic. The dulcet tones of Barry Bartlett returned as Sabrina Carpenter faded out.

'It's ten past nine on this spectacular Saturday morning. If you've just pulled back the curtains, you'll know today is going to be HOT! Yes, folks, we're in for a scorcher. There'll be wall-to-wall sunshine across the coast, heading for a high of twenty-five. So, slap that sun cream on, pack the cool box and head out for those beaches. To get you in the mood, here's the Electric Light Orchestra. This is *Mr Blue Sky*.'

The song's staccato piano chords blasted out of the speakers, prompting Dan to lean forward and turn up the volume. He tapped the steering wheel in time to the opening drum flourish then attempted, and dismally failed, to mimic Jeff Lynne's falsetto. Dan laughed at his own failure, grateful he was the only witness. He continued singing the lyrics badly as he arrived at the car park behind the huts. He locked the car, opened his hut and pulled down the drop bolt of each of the two doors to secure them in place. He heaved out his kayak, depositing it on top of the thistle growing in the gap between his hut and Reenie's. Dan pulled out a sun lounger and looked up. Wisps of clouds drifted across a sky of impossible blue, the sun shining brightly in the south-east, already well past the horizon. He started to manoeuvre the bed into a prime spot when he was interrupted by a loud shout echoing across the shingle.

'Dan? Is that you? Dan!'

He turned to see an excited young woman with wild blonde hair rushing towards him. She wore an olive-green swimming costume. A Bohemian silk-chiffon sarong with tasselled fringe was tied over the top.

'Joanna! How lovely to see you!'

Joanna Lee had been his star student last year. Dan was a lec-

turer in English at a local college. Before moving to Hampshire five years earlier, he'd spent two decades working as a journalist in Suffolk. A combination of divorce, redundancy and the departure of his son to university gave him the opportunity to retrain and relocate, a decision he had not once regretted.

'You too, Dan. What are you doing here?'

'Ah, well, I'm the owner of this rather magnificent beach hut. Are you back home from university for the summer?'

'No. I deferred my place. I was worried about the amount of debt I'd build up. I'm not sure I'll go next autumn either.'

'That's a shame, Jo. You got top grades. You are very much the type of person who should be going to university. You'd get so much out of it.'

'I know, Dan, I know. I'm just not sure I'm quite ready yet. It's a big decision to take on loans that won't be paid off for years.'

'Of course it is. I'm sure you'll find your path soon. What have you been up to since you left?'

'I'm working as a junior at Hardacre's Estate Agency.'

Joanna looked sheepishly at Dan, anticipating his reaction.

'I know, I know. Don't worry. It's only temporary. There's no way I'm staying. I'm meant to be a trainee negotiator, but I haven't negotiated anything. I'm more of a skivvy for Nigel Hardacre. He's always getting me to run errands for him. He's even got me working today. I've got to go and close up a house he's showing this morning just so he can play golf. I was told I'd be able to create marketing materials and social media posts, but that's yet to materialise.'

'Well, I hope you succeed in finding something else you enjoy doing. You deserve it.'

'Thanks, Dan. Actually, I was thinking teaching might be a possibility. If I leave Hardacre's, do you think I might be able to come in to observe you at college next term, get some advice?'

'Of course, Jo. I'd be delighted to help. I think you'll be much better suited as a teacher than estate agent. I'm sure you'd love it. Let me give you my number so you can contact me in September

to arrange something.'

Dan pulled his phone out of his pocket, unlocked it and handed it to Jo. She entered her details.

'Thanks, Dan. I really appreciate it. I'll be in touch. Enjoy your summer holidays. Wish me luck for my morning swim!'

'Good luck!'

Joanna waved energetically before heading down the beach towards the cool water of the Solent.

CHAPTER 5

BY ELEVEN, HAYLING beach was a riot of sound: the squeal of gulls, the hiss of spray, and the steady roar of the open sea. Sunbathers claimed prime spots, marking their territory with bright, striped windbreaks, towels and sunshades. Grandparents settled deep into deckchairs while parents wrestled resisting children, coating them in sunblock before letting them free to sprint toward the water, buckets and spades clutched tightly in their tiny hands. Jet-black wetsuits shimmered as a group of windsurfers manoeuvred their rigs to the shore before expertly pushing off. They joined a growing armada of wing surfers, paddleboarders, kayakers, and agile kite surfers whose colourful canopies swooped and soared across the cerulean waters, spraying salty spumes high into the sparkling sky.

High above, a lone herring gull surveyed the scene, wheeled round and dramatically plummeted. Its eye had been caught by a flash of blue and white plastic tape flapping frantically in the soft breeze. The bird settled uncomfortably on a post beside the tape, which declared: POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS. The message repeated again and again as the tape stretched out to encircle a small, deserted area to the west of the bustling beach.

Over at the huts, Nihal fought with the locks on his door. Asha and Sathnam waited impatiently behind him. Laden with heavy bags, they moaned and groaned while their dad struggled to find the right key. Amused at the teenagers' tetchiness, Dan looked up from adjusting the seat of his kayak.

'Morning, kids. Give your dad a break, eh? He's getting on a bit, you know.'

'Still younger than you,' retorted Nihal as he finally completed the task. The children hurried in to relieve themselves of their burden. They immediately shoved the door closed behind them.

'Hey,' Nihal protested. 'Let me in.'

The muffled voice of fourteen year old Asha carried through the wooden barrier.

'We're getting changed so we can go for a swim. Give us a minute, dad. We need some privacy.'

Nihal shrugged and wandered over to Dan.

'Morning, Ni. How're you doing? Did you hear about the body they found on the beach? Charlie says the police were here all day yesterday. There's a cordon where they found it.'

'Yeah, I know, Dan. Meera told me when she got home from work. The body was taken to the mortuary at the hospital.'

'Sounds like you know more than I do. Any other details?'

Reenie appeared in the doorway of her hut. She stood silhouetted in the entrance for a moment until her eyes adjusted to the light. She spotted the men and walked over. Charlie jumped off his sun lounger and joined the group. They looked at Nihal expectantly.

'I guess I do have some information. The man hasn't been identified yet. He was middle-aged, fully clothed. There was nothing to identify him, no wallet, phone or cards. No one matching his description has been reported missing.'

'Probably a tourist who had a heart attack while swimming,' Reenie speculated. 'It's colder than it looks. Or he swam too far out, got cramp and drowned.'

'Who drowned?' said a loud voice behind the group. 'No one I know, I hope.'

Mark appeared from the direction of the car park. Dressed in a pair of long khaki shorts and a short-sleeved white shirt open to his midriff, he lifted his sunhat and doffed it extravagantly by way of greeting.

Nihal smiled.

‘Actually, Mark, no one drowned. I can tell you that for sure.’

He paused, enjoying the attention as the others stared at him, waiting for him to continue.

‘The man they found on the beach was shot.’

‘Shot! Do we know how? Was it self-inflicted?’ asked Charlie.

‘Mee says it was murder. Apparently, they can tell the victim’s hands hadn’t fired a gun. That’s all I know. There’s a press conference today, due to start around now. The police will put out an appeal for witnesses.’

‘A murder!’ exclaimed Reenie. ‘On Hayling. Well I never!’

She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

‘I wonder what’s behind it? Revenge? A jealous rival? What does our former policeman think?’

She looked meaningfully at Charlie.

‘I doubt there’s much of a mystery, Reen. It’ll be straightforward enough – probably gang-related, a spillover from London, most likely. I’m sure it’ll be cleared up as soon as the body has been identified.’

‘Maybe. But it’s not every day a fully clothed body washes up on the beach. Let’s see what news this week brings. Pick through the bones at our next barbecue.’

‘It’ll be like the *Thursday Murder Club*!’ Nihal exclaimed.

There was silence, blank looks on the faces of the others.

‘You must’ve heard of it,’ he persisted. ‘The Richard Osman books, about people living in a retirement home who solve murders. Mee’s read all of them. There’s a film on Netflix.’

‘I know the books,’ replied Dan. ‘I believe they’re very popular, but I haven’t read them. I’m not retired, though, Ni. Neither are you. Nor Mee. These three superannuated lovelies may have seen better days, but let’s not pension us all off yet, eh?’

‘You cheeky bugger,’ broke in Charlie, good humouredly. ‘I’ve only just turned sixty, practically a spring chicken these days. I may be retired officially, but I’m not exactly ready for the scrap heap just yet.’

Nihal held up his hands in defeat.

‘Okay, Okay. Not like the *Thursday Murder Club* then. Anyway, as Charlie says, the murder’s not likely to be much of a mystery for long.’

The door of the beach hut suddenly burst open. Asha and Sathnam appeared, wearing shiny Lycra swimwear. Sathnam’s olive-green rash vest and rounded dark goggles gave him the air of an inquisitive turtle. He carried a large black-and-white inflatable ring. Asha clutched a pale blue bodyboard. The children stopped abruptly when they realised they had an audience.

‘What?’ asked Asha defiantly. ‘Never seen professional athletes before?’

With that, they ran towards the shore and hurled themselves into the ocean. The adults watched until the children blended in with the other beachgoers cooling off from the hot sun.

‘You know what they say,’ said Dan, expertly using one hand to pick up his dark blue kayak with its nylon handle. He grabbed a sleek black oar with the other.

‘If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. I’m going to cool off. See you in half an hour everyone.’

He headed off towards the sea and was soon a small dot in the distance, blending in with the hundreds of visitors lured by the glittering blue ocean that stretched away from the southern shores of the island.

Less than half a mile to the west, a small black bird with a glistening white beak snatched a scrap of newspaper floating across Sinah Lake. The coot glided smoothly through the algae-covered surface until it reached a large nest securely attached to one of the many reeds encircling the lake. The bird carefully tucked its find into the bottom of the nest until it sat alongside other scraps of fading newspaper. Among the jumble of torn newsprint, the words ‘August’, ‘1966’, ‘Crash’ and ‘Hayling’ clearly stood out. Satisfied, the coot climbed onto the nest. It worked its large, lobed feet into the damp pile, performing a slow rotation until the headlines were ground deeper into the reeds.

With a final, rhythmic shimmy of its underside, it settled its warmth over the speckled eggs and let out a contented *kook*.

1966

CHAPTER 26

Thursday 30th June

SHAFTS OF EVENING sunlight pierced the windows of The Boot in Bloomsbury, illuminating the haze of smoke that filled the room. The brass handle of a beer pump gleamed as a barman poured a pint of Bass, its head foaming. He placed it on the bar.

‘That’ll be two and tuppence.’

Tommy Spinks rooted around in his pockets, picked out some coins and dropped them into the man’s palm. He grabbed the dimpled jug by the handle and limped across the bar to a corner table already occupied by a well built man. Mick Compton took a drag on his Embassy Filter and blew blue-grey smoke towards the ceiling. He took a gulp from the pint of Watney’s in front of him. Mick was in his mid-forties. His black hair was thinning and his neck seemed to merge directly into broad, powerful shoulders. He placed the glass back down on the table, biceps bulging. Tommy sank into the chair next to Mick. He placed his drink on one of many bright red beer mats arranged on the table. Each advertised Watney’s World Cup Ale, the beer Mick was drinking, specially brewed to celebrate the football tournament the country was about to host.

‘Christ, Mick,’ Tommy grumbled, pausing to spark up a Woodbine with Mick’s Zippo lighter. He closed it with a clunk.

‘A two bob bit isn’t enough for a pint in here. Why couldn’t we meet in the local? You don’t need a mortgage for a round in

there. Whoever heard of a pint costing more than a florin?’

‘Stop moaning, Tom,’ Mick replied, his dark eyes glinting in the dim light. ‘It’s best we hold this meeting where no one knows us. Anyway, you’ll soon be able to afford whatever you want. You’ll be lighting fags with ten bob notes before August is out.’

Tommy leaned forward, his gaze intense.

‘Are you serious? Are we actually going to do this?’

Mick sat back in his seat. He looked Tommy up and down quizzically.

‘Let me ask you a question, Tom. Do you ever miss the war?’

Tommy looked at his friend, incredulity etched onto his face.

‘Oh yeah, every day,’ he replied sarcastically. ‘I mean, who doesn’t want to go through all that again?’

‘Well, I miss it. I turned eighteen in August 1939. I was one of the youngest conscripts, a so-called Militiaman. Before that, I left school at fourteen, worked as a delivery boy, then got a job as a machine operator at Gillette.’

‘I already know this, Mick. So why are you telling me?’

‘Because I want you to understand how dull my life was. Nothing much to look forward to. Courting girls at the flicks was as good as it got. Then it all changed. My papers came through, I was called up to the Royal Engineers, trained at Barton Stacey. Where I met you, Tom.’

Tommy took another sip of his pint. He let Mick continue uninterrupted.

‘Neither of us had been abroad before we got on that ship in Liverpool in ‘42 and sailed around the Cape of Good Hope. I’ll never forget how I felt when that woman with a megaphone sang to us when we docked at Durban. What was her name?’

‘I can’t rightly remember. We called her the ‘Lady in White’.

‘We had no idea what was waiting in store for us, Tom. I thought those Geordies would never accept us when we jumped off that truck in the middle of the desert. Suddenly, we were part of the 505.’

‘Gazala ripped the heart out of the Northumbrians, Mick.

They were desperately short of battle-ready Sappers. We had less than six weeks to fit in before we were thrown into the madness of Alamein.'

'But we did it, Tom. We became part of a team. We had a purpose. It was exciting.'

Mick's eyes gleamed as he stopped speaking. He lifted his Watney's and took another long gulp.

'I hear you, Mick. But there were also battles, bombs and bodies. Lots of dead bodies. I fought the war once on the battlefield, but I fight it every day in my mind. You're making it sound romantic when it was anything but.'

'I don't mean to, but you must get some of what I'm talking about. The Sappers were leading those lines. First in, last out. Yes, we lost many friends. Yes, we saw some things you and I will never talk of again. But at least my life had some purpose – I felt alive even as I worried I'd be killed at any moment.'

Mick aggressively stubbed out his cigarette in a glass ashtray. He picked up one of the beer mats and started distractedly picking at its edges.

'We got through it though. I didn't die. You didn't die. We won the war. And then what? Return home, return to the factory. Clock in, clock out. Yes, I married Dot. Yes, I had kids. But twenty years have gone, just like that.'

He snapped his fingers loudly, causing Tommy to jump.

'What I'm saying, Corporal Spinks, is that I need to feel alive again. I need some excitement. We're broke and bored, you know we are. This job will set us up for the rest of our lives. We can travel the world, do what we please.'

Tommy crushed his cigarette end into the ashtray. He picked up his pint of Bass and took a sip.

'I do understand, Mick. I'm forty-eight now. I was twenty-eight on VE Day. We saw more in a few years than anyone should see in a lifetime. I thought I was fighting for freedom, but that was a lie. The rich may have freedom, we don't. And they were nowhere near the front lines.'

Mick nodded enthusiastically as Tommy continued.

‘A lot of our Oppos work at sea now, Mick. They gave everything for this country but look how they’re treated. All they want is a pay rise and decent hours, but they need to strike to get even that. Is it really too much to ask? If you listen to Wilson, you’d think they’re the villains. It makes my blood boil.’

‘The cards are stacked against us, Tom. They always have been.’

‘And what about London? They say it’s swinging, but my London isn’t. I’ve been working in that garage for years without thanks. My back is going, my leg is full of shrapnel. And what do we have to show for our sacrifice? Twiggy? The miniskirt? Free love? I feel like a stranger in my own land, Mick. Where’s my freedom?’

‘Exactly! Which is why we need to do this job. It’ll bring you all the freedom you’ll ever need. Let’s get some payback. We are owed this.’

‘You’re right, Mick. But we’re not criminals. We don’t know the game.’

‘Ray does though. My big brother is what you’d call a habitual offender. He’s served the time to prove it. He can pave the way for us.’

Mick cast a quick glance around the crowded bar. The murmur of voices deep in other conversations reassured him he would not be heard.

‘Look, if we can pull off this job and Ray can help shift the goods, it’ll be happy days. I’ve been lucky enough to get a tip-off and Ray can make it work. It’s the chance of a lifetime.’

‘Okay,’ conceded Tommy. ‘Run me through the plan again.’

‘I can’t right now. Details haven’t been finalised yet. But they will be soon. I’ve just got a few more things to arrange. It’ll happen a month today, 30th July.’

He pointed to the oval World Cup beer mats littering the table. In the centre of each, an anthropomorphic cartoon lion was dressed in a Union Jack football shirt, shorts and socks, its right

foot atop a brown leather football. It held a red barrel above its head with 'Watney's' written across the length.

'And we'd better hope World Cup Willie brings us some luck. We can only do this if England get to the final. The entire city will be deserted if they do. If not, we'll have to abandon the plan.'

Tommy winced.

'It's a big if though, Mick. We've never got further than the quarters before. Sure, we're at home, but I can't see us getting beyond the semis. Brazil are the team to beat.'

'Stop being so negative, Tom. *We're* the team to beat. Ramsey's said we're going to win it. I believe him. Did you see the result last night? 6-1 versus Norway with Greavsie scoring four. We're unstoppable.'

'Yeah, but what if Greavsie gets injured? Who'll come in then? If Hurst has to play, we'll be a lot weaker. We're both Irons, Mick. We've seen him play enough times. But I'm not sure he's up to international level. As someone East End born and bred, I'll say it: Hurst is not a patch on Greavsie.'

'Come off it, Tom. Hurst scored forty goals last season. He's been brilliant since Greenwood converted him into a striker. He won't let us down if we need him.'

'I'm not so sure, Mick. He's still a fringe player. He's only played for England a handful of times. I don't think he's got enough international experience.'

'We'll see. Greaves is likely to play every game anyway. I'm worried about the first game against Uruguay. They'll kick us to death so we're going to need a strong ref if we're to avoid injuries. I'm confident we'll beat Mexico and France in the two other group games though.'

Tommy shrugged as he took a final gulp to empty his pint of Bass. He placed the glass back on the table.

'I hope you're right,' he said. 'Let's trust in Ramsey and assume he knows what he's doing. Fancy another?'

CHAPTER 30

Saturday 23rd July

THE LINE OF traffic seemed never-ending. It snaked from Sunshine Holiday Camp, across the single road bridge connecting Hayling Island to the mainland, all the way back to Langstone. A black Humber Hawk stuck in the middle of the bridge cheerfully tooted its horn as a motorbike attempted to weave its way through the stationary queue. Inside the car, excited teenagers wound down the back windows and held their thumbs up to the rider in a show of solidarity, their shouts carrying on the summer air. Behind the Hawk, a Golden Retriever's head poked out from the passenger window of a light green Vauxhall Viva, its pink tongue lolling as it tasted the salty sea air. On the back seat, six-year-old twin boys played 'I spy' to the annoyance of their older sister, whose tongue stuck out from the corner of her mouth as she concentrated on writing the first page of her holiday diary. The car's radio blasted out The Kink's hit *Sunny Afternoon*, a perfect tune to accompany the golden rays as they shimmered off the ocean flanking the bridge on either side.

Despite the heat and slow progress, there was an air of excitement and anticipation as couples and families approached their destination for the next week or two – the holiday camps of Hayling Island offered a much-needed break from reality, an escape from the humdrum of quotidian lives. Adults and children looked forward to lazy, lingering days in the sun: practising

swimming strokes, learning new dances, joining in fun competitions, making new friends, perhaps even sweethearts. A world of endless possibilities lay beyond the gates of the island's camps.

Outside The Yew Tree Inn, vehicles manoeuvred slowly around a forlorn looking green Morris Minor, its rounded headlamps and propped-up bonnet giving it the distinct air of a nervous dental patient. Standing beside it, Jack Compton, a middle-aged man with jet black hair and a sheen of sweat on his forehead, hastily rolled up his shirt sleeves and leaned in to look at the engine, brow furrowed in concentration. After a minute or two of poking and prodding, he straightened up and weaved his way through the barely moving traffic towards the pub garden.

He scanned around until his eyes landed on a slim woman with a blonde bob and a short summer minidress. Next to her were two children – a girl with strawberry blonde hair and a scattering of freckles and an older, dark-haired boy of around ten.

‘What’s happening, dad?’ the boy enquired eagerly before his father could speak, his eyes wide with anticipation.

‘It’s good news, David,’ the man replied in his distinct London accent, wiping the sweat from his brow with a pristine white handkerchief. ‘The fan belt’s snapped. It’s not a major problem. The camp’s just down the road so we only need a quick fix for now. We’ll be there in plenty of time for the game. Michelle, let’s have one of your stockings.’

The blonde-haired woman stared back at him in surprise, her eyebrows arching slightly.

‘I’m not wearing any. It’s far too hot for that. I suppose I do have a pair to hand though.’

She reached for a bright yellow vinyl clutch bag, opened it and pulled out a pair of beige stockings. She handed one to Jack, who grabbed it eagerly and disappeared.

Ten minutes later, the Morris was back on the road, inching its way towards Sunshine Holiday Camp. It limped slowly through the grand arched entrance, along the approach road and into the car park. Jack popped the bonnet, leaped out of the

car and lifted the lid to peer inside. Michelle jumped out of the passenger seat. She walked around to join him.

'I told you it'd work,' he said triumphantly. 'I need to get to a garage. There's one nearby so I'm sure they'll be able to fix it properly next week.'

'You owe me a pair of stockings. Last year, they sold Glamour Girl in the Camp Shop. We'll have to pay it a visit.'

'Hey!' came a plaintive cry from the back seat of the car. 'Let us out!'

'Sorry, kids!' said Michelle, returning to the car to tip the passenger seat forward so David and Jane could scramble out.

'Well, here we are again,' said Jack. 'Sunshine Holiday Camp. Do you remember the song? *Pack your bags, come with me, down to Hayling by the sea...*'

'To the Sunshine Holiday Camp!' finished Michelle.

'Dad! Mum! Stop! You're embarrassing!'

Jack ruffled David's hair before walking to the back of the car. He pulled two suitcases from the boot.

The family walked through the camp's beautifully manicured gardens until they reached the reception. It was bustling with new arrivals eager to register and get their holiday started.

'Welcome to Sunshine!' said a handsome brown-haired young man in his early twenties. He wore a bright yellow coat and trousers, one of twenty 'Canaries' responsible for entertaining guests throughout the summer. David walked straight up to him.

'Are you showing the football?' he asked.

The man drew back a little. He cleared his throat.

'Hello, Sunbeam! Welcome. I'm Derek Chisholm, one of your team of Canaries, here to make your holiday go with a swing. Yes, we are showing the match today in the television lounges. It's on both BBC1 and ITV. Take your pick.'

'A choice between Kenneth Wolstenholme or Hugh Johns,' said Jack. 'I don't mind, but I reckon the ITV room will be less busy.'

'Let me tell you a little about what we've got planned for you

today,' said Derek. 'If you choose not to watch the football, there's a *Meet the Canaries* event outside the Sombrero at half three. We'll answer any questions you have and show you round the camp. At four thirty, there's a tombola in the Welcome Inn. At the same time, we have a tea dance with the Coastliners in the Ballroom.'

'Sounds great,' said Michelle. 'We've stayed here before so we don't need a tour of the camp. We know where we're going.'

'In that case, you'll also know about our fabulous evening entertainment,' smiled Derek. 'Pianist and host Wally Battell will be in the Welcome Inn at half past eight followed by a Mardi Gras Carnival Show. If you bring your parents to the ballroom at quarter to eight, kids, you can enjoy our *Lots of Sunshine* show before heading off to the Sunbeams' den to watch the first part of the film *Great Adventure*. Mum and dad can stay for dancing to Roy Smith and the Sunshine-Airs.'

'Oh, yes,' interrupted Jack. 'We definitely want to do that. They were here last year. They were terrific, weren't they, love?'

'They were. Looks like we're in for a great time.'

'Good, good,' said Derek. 'You can come and collect your key after lunch. It's being served in the dining room now. Today, we have cream of tomato soup and assorted cold meats and salad.'

'Lovely. I'm ravenous,' said Jack. 'Thanks, Derek. You've whetted my appetite nicely. Here's to a fantastic fortnight at the best holiday camp on Hayling.'

CHAPTER 32

THE CROWDS SITTING at white-clothed tables around the perimeter of Sunshine's ballroom laughed and chatted with excitement as they waited expectantly for the entertainment to begin. The tables groaned under the weight of glasses of beer, Babycham, spirits and heavy ashtrays rapidly filling with cigarette butts. Jack and Michelle sat around a table with another two couples. Roy and Diane Robinson were in the next door chalet and had introduced themselves to the Comptons shortly after the boys returned from the TV lounge. They were on holiday with their friends Barry and Maria Newton, who were visiting Sunshine for the fifth consecutive year. Jack was dressed in a white button-down shirt with open neck, a smart green cardigan and black drainpipe trousers. Michelle wore a sleeveless mini shift dress in powder blue and white.

'I hope our kids are getting on,' said Jack to Diane as he took a sip from his dimpled pint glass of Brickwood beer.

'I'm sure they are,' replied Diane. 'Our Kath gets on with everybody and Robert does what his older sister tells him. She's ten, three years older than him. Barry and Maria's son Thomas is six. How old are yours?'

'David is ten and Jane is eight.'

'How lovely. Well, they're all of a similar age so I'm sure they'll get on and enjoy whatever they're doing in the Sunbeams' den.'

The couple's conversation was cut short by the arrival of a young man in a smart blue blazer and trousers. Paul Padgett

was one of the camp's photography team, responsible for snapping pictures of holidaymakers during their stay. While personal cameras were becoming increasingly common, the tradition of selling photographs to guests was still going strong. This was eighteen-year-old Paul's first season at Sunshine. He had greater ambitions than holiday camps, but being paid to practise his hobby was ideal for the time being. He lifted his Leica M1 camera towards Jack.

'Picture, sir? Will make a lovely souvenir.'

Jack looked around at the others who nodded their agreement. Paul organised the guests so all three couples were framed in the viewfinder. A bright flash briefly lit up the table as he took the picture.

'Thanks, folks. Here's your ticket. The print will be available to buy at the kiosk from tomorrow afternoon.'

'Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Sunshine!'

A voice suddenly boomed out of the speakers. Everyone turned their eyes towards the stage at the rear of the highly polished wooden dance floor. A portly, middle-aged man wearing a canary yellow coat and trousers stood in front of the microphone stand, the overhead lights shining brightly off his bald head. He winked at the audience.

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Jimmy Proffitt. Yes, that's my real name. My wife's maiden name was Owen. So she went from Owen to Proffitt in a day.'

Ba-dum-tss.

Jack looked up to see a drummer sitting at the set on stage, ready to give Jimmy's jokes some percussive backing.

'It's lovely to see everyone. Are you all looking forward to your holidays?'

The audience cheered as they hung on to Jimmy's every word.

'And England won today! Don't miss the semi-final against Portugal on Tuesday night. We're going to be world champions!'

More cheers erupted as Jimmy pulled his microphone from the stand and confidently stepped down to the dance floor to be

closer to his audience.

‘My job tonight is to warm you all up. Not that I think that’ll take much doing. Later, we have the fabulous Roy Smith and the Sunshine-Airs!’

Roars of approval came from all four sides of the room.

‘First though, you know what you’ve got to do. Everyone on your feet. It’s time for the Sunshine song! We’ve been singing it for years and we’re not about to stop now. Are you ready?’

Enthusiastic sounds of assent filled the room. Jimmy waved an imaginary conductor’s baton and led his audience in singing the first verse.

‘Pack your bags and come with me, down to Hayling by the sea, to the Sunshine Holiday Camp.’

He moved across the dance floor, approached an elderly woman wearing a long silvery ball gown. He pulled her to her feet.

‘Bring your sweethearts, bring your wives, you’ll have the time of your jolly old lives at the Sunshine Holiday Camp.’

While he sang, he held one of the woman’s hands in his and swung her arm from side to side.

‘There’s a swimming pool and dancing as well and the food’s as good as the Grand Hotel.’

He moved back to the centre of the ballroom.

‘Come on, now, everyone all together for a big finish. *So, pack your bags and come with me, down to Hayling by the sea, to the Sunshine Holiday Camp.*’

Cheers and whoops filled the hall as the holidaymakers applauded their own efforts.

‘Well done, everyone!’ yelled Jimmy. ‘Now let’s get to know each other before we hit that dance floor!’

He put his hand to his forehead to peer more closely at the crowd through the bright stage lights.

‘Anyone in from London?’

Several people cheered, including Jack and Michelle.

‘Cor blimey, guv. You’ve gotta love ‘em. I had a mate who

drove one of those black cabs. He didn't like it though. People were always talking behind his back.'

Ba-dum-tss.

Peals of laughter reverberated around the room.

'The last time I was in London, I jumped on the tube. Got toothpaste everywhere. Seriously though, I took my dog on the underground and taught him to play the trumpet. He went from Barking to Tooting in twenty minutes.'

Ba-dum-tss.

There was more laughter mixed in with a few good-natured groans.

'Hayling is very popular with the people of Reading. Anyone in tonight?'

Cheers went up from a handful of people gathered around a large table.

'Ah, there is. I'm sorry, I'll talk more slowly. What a place Reading is. Where the men are men and the women are too.'

Ba-dum-tss.

'I'm not saying it's rough, but I bought an advent calendar there last year and half the windows were boarded up.'

Ba-dum-tss.

Friendly boos and hisses came from the Berkshire contingent.

'Now we're quite far down south here. I don't suppose anyone's from north of the border?'

'Aye!' came a loud shout.

'There he is, ladies and gentlemen,' said Jimmy. 'First out the cab, last to the bar. Short arms, deep pockets.'

Ba-dum-tss.

'If he had two colds, he wouldn't give you one. He looks under the bed in the morning to check he hasn't lost any sleep. I'm only joking, sir. Welcome to the south coast.'

Ba-dum-tss.

'So, ladies and gentlemen, I'm here to get you on this dance floor. Has anyone heard of the Twist?'

Enthusiastic cheers rang out. It was clear the campers were

ready to party.

‘Okay. Well, get yourselves up here. I know some of you may take a bit of persuading so we’re going to have a few spot prizes for those of you on the floor. Let’s Twist!’

The opening chords of Chubby Checker’s hit prompted a rush to the dance floor. Jack pulled Michelle out of her chair. They found a gap in the middle of the rapidly filling space. Above them, a glistening disco ball spun, casting hundreds of tiny, shimmering lights across the faces of the dancers. Jack and Michelle stood opposite each other and swivelled their hips in time to the music. They bent their knees, moved their hips to the left and arms to the right in a well-practised manner. Jack looked across to see Roy and Diane and Barry and Maria mirroring the same movements. He was overcome by a wave of contentment. As the song faded out, Jimmy returned to the mic.

‘Okay. Spot prize time. This question is for men only. The prize is a fantastic pair of Glamour Girl stockings. The best you can get. The man who’ll be in his wife’s good books needs to do one simple thing: show me a pair of green knickers!’

The men on the dance floor looked at each other in confusion. There were laughs and giggles as some shrugged their shoulders and others looked to their wives for advice.

‘Come on fellas. I need a pair of green knickers. Who’s going to oblige?’

Understanding suddenly dawned on Jack’s face. He quickly thrust his hand into the pocket of his trousers, pulled out his wallet and rifled through it.

‘Here!’ he yelled. ‘A pair of green knickers!’

He proudly held two pound notes above his head.

‘Well done, sir!’ said Jimmy. ‘You are the first to show me a pair of green knickers. You win a spot prize!’

He threw a box of Glamour Girl stockings at Jack. He caught them and in turn threw them to Michelle.

‘Here you go, love,’ he said, smiling. ‘The pair of stockings I owe you.’

Jack winked at his wife. When the car broke down earlier, it seemed the day was going to be a disaster. Now, he was having the time of his life. Jack was certain this was going to be the best holiday ever.

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