



## DECKCHAIR SUMMERS

by

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‘Hey it’s Bert, and Ernie!’

‘Welcome back Bert, Good to see you Ernie; looking dapper gents, as always.’

Bert and Ernie raised their sunhats in greeting to the young, sun-kissed deckchair attendants: straw panamas with a jaunty trim. They had never joined the baseball cap generation, Bert and Ernie had remained true to their own era and the dress code that suited them. Today they wore linen jackets with green carnations in their buttonholes. Hats lifted, the twinkle in the two men’s eyes could be seen even more clearly, as could the laughter lines that framed them; they always sparkled extra brightly when they were back at their beloved seaside, their ‘happy place’: a place of fun and freedom and a deep and enduring friendship. The smiles that animated the whole of their faces weren’t the only thing to be revealed: hidden beneath the stylish sunhats had been the somewhat less than dapper knotted handkerchiefs, although they were crisply starched white cotton!

‘Two deckchairs at the ready, in the usual spot I presume?’

‘You’re too good,’ Ernie replied in affirmation, and Bert responded by tipping his hat once more in thanks.

‘Don’t worry; we’ll be round to collect your pennies once you’re settled. We’ve got sunshades this year too, if you’re interested,’ the young attendant offered.

‘Sunshades! Whatever will they think of next? No thanks, we’re fully covered,’ Bert indicated the hankie on his head,

‘Besides,’ Ernie continued, ‘how else will we get our annual dose of Vitamin D?’

‘Vitamin D? Is that what you’re here for? I thought it was for the Bronzed Adonises’ chuckled Bert.

‘Oh, don’t worry, I’ll bronze my Adonis too’ and both men burst into uncontrollable giggles as if they were teenagers once more.

Somehow Bert and Ernie belonged to the seaside town. They weren’t quite Grockles having spent each summer here since before most locals had been born, neither were they Blow Ins as they left at the end of each season, they hadn’t quite been able to make the switch to permanent residents. For those who were, the summer season never really started until Bert and Ernie were ensconced in their deckchairs, like summer royalty on their beach thrones.

The two men had met when they were just lads, seeking a summer of sun, sea, and well.... They had come from different backgrounds, one from the East End, the other Birmingham, and both found jobs tending deckchairs, which gave them the perfect opportunity to keep an eye on all the comings and goings, and of course, flirt with the customers. They spent their wages on ice cold bottles of coca cola, paper packets of cockles and mussels, and nights out at the holiday camps. They'd had such a laugh together that they'd kept in touch when they left for home at the end of the season, and made a pact to return again the next year.

For the next five years Bert and Ernie entertained the holidaymakers with their charm and banter as they handed them their deckchair tickets and advised them on when the tides would be coming in. They earned their tips, and the trust of the locals, with their recommendations on how best to spend the hard earned holiday money that jingled so loosely in the tourists' pockets. The two young men were a welcome addition to the holiday scene, and with their flirtatious banter with older and younger deckchair users they made sure that everyone had a good time, including themselves.

Five years of carefree summers, of sunshine and laughter, gave way to more adult responsibilities. Formal office wear replaced the Elvis style Hawaiian shirts and shorts, and as the lads grew into men, their long seaside summers became curtailed to a week, and then a weekend. No longer did they work the deckchairs, but for the sake of their own tradition made sure they always hired one blue chair and one red, keeping up the banter with locals and tourists alike from year to year. The memories matured with the two men, although the attendants never seemed to age, it was a young man's job after all; each year, without fail, as the two friends eased themselves into the striped canvas of the vintage chairs, they would sigh to each other, 'Happy days, eh? Happy Days', and begin the banter of recollections, then dozing off only opening their 'resting' eyes when one or the other snorted a snore so loud that it startled them both.

They never allowed their work, or home, lives to intrude upon these golden days. Deckchair days created a universe that could not be broken into by the mundanity of everyday life. Deckchair days were for living, even if the days of swimming and fishing and dive-bombing from the pier were long gone. Ice creams and chips in cones still remained, as did the tipsy giggling home from the pub resulting in a spot of late night skinny dipping! Yes, even at their age!

This was to be the last deckchair summer though.

As the tide started to come in and the sun moved over the yard arm, Bert and Ernie removed their handkerchiefs from their balding heads, arranged their panamas into their jaunty positions, and laughing at the challenge, helped each other out of the low slung awnings of the deckchairs.

‘It’s time.’

Bert held out his arm to Ernie, who wrapped his own around it. They tipped their hats at the latest young lads to attend deckchairs, and gave them a final tip, words of wisdom and a £50 note, ‘always be kind,’ said Bert, ‘And don’t forget to smile, even when it’s raining,’ said Ernie, then they looked at each other and smiled, ‘especially when it’s raining’, their eyes bright with shared memories.

Leaving the beach, the two dapper men in their dotage meandered along the prom arm in arm, panamas just slightly tipped inwards, until they reached the sea view flat. Both men reached into their pockets, Bert finding the shiny new door key, Ernie a hidden handful of confetti he had secreted away earlier. Pausing only to kiss briefly on the threshold of their first home together, the newlyweds made their way to their own personal balcony. There, waiting just for them, were two striped canvas deckchairs, one red, one blue, and between them an ice bucket containing a bottle of vintage champagne and two bottles of coke.