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The Sand Men

Written by Christopher Fowler

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THE SAND MEN

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PART ONE

The ultimate gated community is a human being with a closed mind.

– JG Ballard

Chapter One
The Beach

A SKY SO blue it looked like the atmosphere had evaporated into space.

Mandhatri Sahonta stared into the infinity, then lowered his blue NYC baseball cap over his eyes, adjusting his hardhat on top of it. He was unimpressed by the sky. It was always this blue here, always this bright.

Mandhatri dressed as if he was expecting the weather to suddenly turn cold. When he saw the crimson-faced, fat-bellied holidaymakers waddling past in their Vilebrequin shorts and Diesel tanktops like oversized toddlers, he thought of them as ghosts. He was an engineer. His world did not touch theirs. Tightly wrapped in a vest, shirt, scarf and workboots, he passed their oiled bodies roasting in the sun and assumed they were living proof of what happened when you ate pork.

At noon, with the temperature hitting 38^0C, even the mad English had abandoned their beach chairs, heading back to air-conditioned buffet lunches beside sun-fractured swimming pools.

Mandhatri stopped the Jeep on scrubland at the edge of the lot. Grabbing his steel toolbox, he set off across the sand. The landscape was bare and unforgiving, a table-flat geometry of grey and yellow patches bordered by piles of breezeblocks. In the distance he could hear the rumbling of the gravel trucks that never stopped, swerving past each other on the peninsula like tin toys on a track.

The date palms had been transported fully grown and impatiently planted into the unfinished esplanade, where many

of them promptly died. As he walked, he thought about his father and wondered if he was still alive.

Mandhatri and his daughter Sakari had abandoned their village in the South Kanara coastal district of Karnataka and moved to Delhi, because their father's house had burned down in mysterious circumstances. Not for the first time, the old man had made enemies from unpaid debts. After arguing with him Mandhatri had moved north, where he'd heard they were recruiting. He spoke perfect English and had found employment in Dubai on a two-year contract. He transferred money and called home every month, and when he spoke to his wife she avoided any mention of the father who had brought them low.

Mandhatri tightened his checked scarf and consulted his handheld tracking system. The GPS device overlaid an installation grid on the landscape, enabling him to pinpoint work locations. The problem was somewhere around here, but even the foreman hadn't been sure of the exact spot.

To his left, the high wall of a hotel screened guests from the ugliness of the site. The tourists had been lured by pictures of unspoilt beaches. They did not want to look up from their sunbeds and see tractors and diggers.

He set down the toolbox and checked inside, but found nothing that could help him. Kits were leased from the company and repaid with loans. Specialist equipment was extra, so his mates clubbed together and time-shared items. During busy hours, the foremen charged extra rental fees on certain wrenches and drill attachments. Lately, some of the crew members had started refusing to pay the bribes. Instead, they altered their shifts around times when the tools were available. There was talk of starting a union but nothing ever happened.

Mandhatri reached the broken end of the esplanade, walked beyond stacks of white plastic beach loungers and found himself standing on a plain where hot breezes scrawled their signatures across ridges of loose sand.

He knew at once that something was wrong.

Fine diamond granules lifted from the peaks of the dunes and swept around his bare ankles. He studied the sand carefully, trying to make sense of what he saw. The patterns were wrong.

He knew that the barchan dunes were carved by winds that struck the sand from a consistent direction. They should only appear as wavy crescents until they reached the sea-table. After that, the beach was flattened out by water. But just ahead, the curving lines broke and ran in a wide concentric circle.

If there was one thing Mandhatri had come to understand since he arrived here, it was the movement of the sand.

He walked out into the circle's centre and set down his toolbox. Kneeling, he removed a small spade and an oscilloscope to pick up any sounds beneath the faint rustling of migrant silica. Digging into the scorching granules, he inserted the device's metal probe and waited for the reading to settle.

The beach was radiating fearsome heat. He placed his palms down and lay as close as he could to the surface, listening intently.

Now he could actually hear it—a bad sign. He had no equipment to deal with this. Feeling for his mobile, he speed-dialled his foreman. The line was engaged.

My body weight, he thought suddenly, trying to rise. The faint hiss grew louder, turning into a roar, then a blast.

He realised what it was and forced himself to move, but the sand suddenly burst upwards and air began to condense around him. His face and hands were hit and immediately started turning numb. The crystallisation spread across his bare arms, down through his torso and into his thighs like the brumal deadness of dental Novocaine. It thickened the blood in his veins until he was no longer able to move. A thin, stinging craquelure of iridescent frost formed over his skin, sheening the backs of his hands with tiny diamonds. *My fault,* he thought dimly. *I knew the signs to watch for and ignored them. My clothes…*

But the material had already stuck to his skin and hardened so that he could not tell flesh from fabric. The fissures beneath him

grew. He knew that if he suffered serious injury, his wife would not be sent her monthly money. If he died, she would be destitute.

He remembered what had happened to his daughter, and wanted to cry with the unfairness of it all. Even now he tried to hold Sakari's face in his mind, but her features grew dark and were lost, until all that remained were the lights in her brown eyes.

At 11:47am on the burning beach of Dream World, at the edge of the shimmering Arabian sea, Mandhatri Sahonta froze to death, the wavering rolls of heat dancing around his ice-ferned body.