

Carole  
Matthews

Sunny  
& days  
Sea  
Breezes

sphere

SPHERE

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Carole Matthews is the *Sunday Times* bestselling author of over thirty novels, including the top ten bestsellers *The Cake Shop in the Garden*, *A Cottage by the Sea*, *Paper Hearts and Summer Kisses*, *The Chocolate Lovers' Christmas*, *Million Love Songs*, *Christmas Cakes & Mistletoe Nights*, *Happiness for Beginners* and *Sunny Days and Sea Breezes*, which won Romantic Comedy Novel of the Year at the 2021 RNA Awards. Carole is also the recipient of the RNA Outstanding Achievement Award. Her novels dazzle and delight readers all over the world and she is published in more than thirty countries.

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# Chapter One

The ferry slips out of the port at Southampton and heads out into the choppy, grey waters of the Solent. The sky hangs low, malevolent and brooding, as grey as the sea, the peaks of washed-out clouds mirroring the white-tipped waves. I sit outside, alone on the rear deck – the only one foolish enough to face the inclement weather. The threat of rain whips in on the sea air and I wish I'd worn a coat more appropriate for the falling temperature. This is a smart, serviceable one for popping between city meetings, not for facing down the elements. The wind is finding all the gaps around my neck, up my sleeves, and cashmere isn't known for its waterproof qualities. But I left in a hurry and the last thing on my mind was my choice of wardrobe. Maybe it should have been. As it was, I just slung as much as I could in a couple of bags and left.

It's the end of March and there are rows and rows of empty bench seats which I'm sure are better utilised in the summer crossings. Now, long before the start of the holiday season, the ferry is probably only half full, if that. A few people brave the cold and come out to look over the rails towards the dwindling view of the port behind us, but soon hurry back inside to the

fuggy warmth of the onboard café. I bought a sandwich there, but it looks beyond grim and I can't face eating it. I could throw it to one of the cawing gulls that shadow the ferry, but they look huge and menacing and I feel so light, so insubstantial, so irrelevant, that they might lift me away entirely instead of just taking my disgusting sandwich.

While I further contemplate the many inadequacies of my stale-looking BLT, we pass the magnificent, floating city of the *Queen Elizabeth* – a Cunard liner in posh livery heading somewhere much more exotic than I am, no doubt. Yet, somehow, I still have the sense that I'm escaping. Perhaps there is no set distance-to-escapee ratio. A mile might be as good as a thousand, if you just want to leave everything behind you. I'm hoping less than twenty miles will do the job, as it takes in both a stretch of sea and an island destination. OK, it's not exactly Outer Mongolia, but that has to be worth something.

The Solent is a busy motorway of water, and vessels of all shapes and sizes bob, zip or lumber along beside us. The Red Jet speeds past and I know that I could have taken that, a quicker way to the Isle of Wight, but I wanted to feel the distance growing more slowly, the space opening up between me and my old life.

It sounds as if I know what I'm doing, as if there was a plan. But I don't and there wasn't. I only know that I had to get away to a place where no one knows me, where I don't keep having the same conversation over and over, where I don't have to talk at all, where no one looks at me with pity and thinks 'Poor Jodie'.

For something to do, I abandon my sandwich on the bench and cross to one of the rails, looking out to sea. I can't tell you if it's port or starboard as I'm a confirmed landlubber – but it's most definitely one or the other. The wind whips my long hair across my face and for once, I'm glad that I haven't spent money on an expensive blow-dry.

A few minutes later, the door behind me bangs and a hardy smoker joins me. Though he nods in my direction, he keeps his distance as he puffs away. I wish I smoked. It's years since I had a cigarette – a teenage flirtation – and I didn't much care for it then. Yet I'm tempted to pluck up the courage to blag one from him. I want to feel something, even if it's just burning in my lungs. However, before I can find my voice, he takes a deep drag, throws his butt into the water below and, with a theatrical shiver, disappears inside. Not as hardy as he looked, then.

Alone again, I stare down at the churning wake of the boat, mesmerised, listening to the deep thrum of the engines, feeling the vibration beneath my feet. My phone rings and I take it out of my pocket, even though I already know who it is. Sure enough, Chris's number is on the screen so I let it go straight to voice-mail. I don't want to speak to my husband now. I don't want to speak to anyone. What would happen if I dropped my phone into the sea? I hold it over the rail while I think, dangling it precariously. If it sank into the depths of the ocean would I, Jodie Jackson, simply cease to exist? Would I be so off-grid that no one could find me? No more Twitter, no more Instagram, no more WhatsApp. It sounds too appealing. If my phone rings again now, I'm going to throw it into the sea. I am. But I wait and wait and my phone, for once, stays silent. I switch it to mute and, still reluctant to give it a reprieve, put it back into my pocket. I suppose that I might need it for an emergency.

I try not to think, to keep my head empty as the sea slides by below me. And it nearly works. Behind me there's a shriek and two gulls are on the bench fighting over my cast-off sandwich, having plucked it from its cardboard packet. I don't like to tell them that they'd probably be better off eating the box. The funnel belches black smoke and covers them in smuts of soot but they are too focused on the limp lettuce and the white, slimy fat on the bacon to care.

Then a sea fret rolls in and shrouds everything in mist, taking away any semblance of a view. I'm going to arrive at my destination engulfed in thick fog – both physically and metaphorically.

The ferry crossing is barely an hour long and, too soon, we're docking in Cowes. I'm sure it's usually a bustling place, but not today. The scene that greets me looks as if it's been filmed in monochrome. Even the colourful flags on the little sailing boats that line the entrance to the harbour are failing to compete with the mist, the forbidding light, and are bleached out to grey. Alabaster sand meets the silver sea, joins the battleship sky.

I came here on holiday as a child, just the once. I must have been seven or maybe eight. I remember playing on the beach with my older brother, Bill, burying our dad up to the neck in sand and sitting in deckchairs eating fish and chips from greasy paper. But that's all. After that we went to Spain every year. I don't remember much about that either. People say that the Isle of Wight is still like Britain was forty years ago. That sounds perfect to me. If only I could wind time back to then. I'd be two, would have the whole of the world ahead of me, and could make very different life choices.

## Chapter Two

At the port, I take a taxi and look out of the window as we bump across the island to my destination. The driver is determinedly chatty. ‘First time in the Isle of Wight, love?’

‘Yes.’

‘Business? Holiday?’

‘Yes.’ How can I explain that it’s neither one nor the other?

‘It’s a great place. If you’re looking for some tips on how to enjoy yourself, I’m your man.’

‘Thanks.’

In theory, if I keep giving one-word answers, he’ll stop speaking. After a few more futile attempts, he does, and I sink into my seat in silence. I’m glad he has the heater on full blast so it’s cosy and warm, which thaws me out after my freezing journey.

It looks pretty enough here. Green. Lots of green. But then, compared to where I live in Inner London, so are most places. After a short while, we crest a hill and there’s a rough layby marked VIEWPOINT.

‘Can we stop here, please?’

The driver pulls in. ‘Do you want an ice-cream?’

‘No.’ The lone van looks as if it has few customers today. ‘I’d just like to look for a moment.’

So I climb out of the cab and go to the edge of the fields to gaze out. A meadow of rather hopeful early wildflowers spreads out in front of me. Beyond that the lush, green pastures drop away, rolling gently towards the ribbon of sparkling silver sea that stitches the land to the vast blue-white sky. It’s as if I’ve entered a different land. The mist has gone, the sun looks like it might be struggling to come out. Even on such a dull day, it’s beautiful and I take a moment to breathe in the air, to admire the view.

Sensing the driver waiting patiently behind me, I return to the car. A short while later and I’m looking at the sea again as we drop down to the coastal road on the other side of the island. I check the address again, even though I’ve already given it to the driver and he hasn’t, thus far, looked once at his satnav. A few minutes later, the taxi turns onto the curving harbour road and a sign says WELCOME TO COCKLESHELL BAY.

He slows down as we pass a long line of smart houseboats and, eventually, he pulls up outside one that’s rather smarter than the rest.

‘Here you go, love.’ He turns in his seat and I hand over a modest amount of cash for my journey and get out of the cab. The price of taxis is also quite different in London.

The driver joins me at the boot and flicks it open. ‘Want a hand with your bags?’ he asks as he lifts out my two bulging holdalls.

‘I’m fine, thank you.’

‘Nice place,’ he observes with a nod at Bill’s houseboat.

‘Yes, it is.’ This is the first time that I’ve seen it in the flesh. Although Bill’s shown me enough photographs of it.

‘Enjoy your holiday.’ The driver jumps back into his warm car and buzzes off, leaving me standing there at the side of the harbour.

Holiday. That's not quite how I'd describe it.

I have a good long look at Bill's boat – my home for the foreseeable future. It's called *Sunny Days* and is painted cream and grey. It's not hard to tell that his lengthy and rather expensive renovations have only recently been finished. Everything looks shiny and new, even though the day is trying its best to stay dreary. My brother has clearly thrown a lot of money at his latest project, which is so typical of him. He has, of course, been too busy to visit it since it was completed, so I'm to be the first occupant. I think his plan is to use it as a weekend bolthole, but I can't see that ever happening. Bill runs his own company – the one that I work for too: WJ Design. I've been with him for years, ever since he set it up and I love working with my older bro. We lost Mum and Dad some years ago, so now it's just the two of us and, because of that, we've always been close.

Bill's company specialises in designing the interiors for hotels, office blocks, shopping centres and, though I say it myself, we're very much in demand. Which, as a result, leaves us little time for play. I'm marginally better at crafting a social life than Bill, who is a complete workaholic. My dear brother has more money than he knows what to do with and no time to spend it. At the moment, I'm feeling grateful that he has this folly as I had no idea where else to go and, when Bill suggested I escape to his houseboat, it seemed like the answer to my prayers.

The houseboat is solid, and sturdy on its moorings – I think Bill said it had been in service as a Thames Lighter. I don't even know what that is, but while the houseboat looks like it might have started out life as some kind of workaday tug there's not much evidence of that left now. Bill's team have worked their magic on it and now it's a houseboat fit for a queen – or a sister who's broken into little pieces.

I pick up my bags and walk up the gangway. As I do, I can't

help but note that the houseboat next door is not quite so chi-chi.

The entrance to Bill's boat is flanked by two bay trees in gleaming steel pots – so perfect that they look artificial. Where my brother has fancy, architectural plants, my new next-door-neighbours have instead a gas cylinder, a pile of wood, a tatty green and yellow wicker chair, a mountain bike and an abandoned shopping trolley to welcome their visitors. On shore by their boat there's a lean-to shed made out of a dozen different types and sizes of board. That too is filled with wood. No doubt it's individual, but it's also kind of an eyesore compared to Bill's fancy refit.

The owners seem to have taken shabby-chic to the extreme as this houseboat looks as if it's been cobbled together from stuff that was previously destined for the Tidy Tip and, as such, stands out in a row of pristine weekend places. The sides are covered with worn cedar shingles and one wall is painted a vivid purple. The window frames are many shades of bright blue and of every shape and size conceivable. There's an intricate totem pole carved from driftwood too with a kayak propped up against it and there are other attractive carved motifs on its shingle walls – a sunshine, a leaping fish, a tree. Though it sits uneasily next to the other boats – which with this one exception all look rather like Bill's – I admire its bold quiriness and individuality. It's a hippy squatting in an office of accountants. Jed Clampett in the middle of Beverly Hills. In a world of grey, don't we need more colour? Just don't tell Bill I said that. Like me, he tends to favour the muted shades. The houseboat – *Sea Breezes* – doesn't look as if it's currently inhabited, so maybe no one lives there any more. There'd be no point asking Bill about his neighbours as I'm sure he hasn't a clue.

With a last appraising glance at *Sea Breezes*, I let myself in and, of course, my brother has worked his amazing magic with the interior too. I expected no less. I haven't seen any photographs of it completely finished inside and the ones I did see

certainly didn't give any indication of just how lovely it is. If I hadn't been so busy with my own projects, I would have given him a hand, but the time was never available. Seems like he's done a pretty good job without me.

Dropping my bags in the hall, I catch sight of myself in the mirror. What a sorry picture. My long blonde hair hasn't benefited from being styled by the wind. It looks lank and lifeless. I used to get it coloured every eight weeks, cut every four weeks and would splash out on a professional blow-dry every week, but I can't remember when last I went. Whenever I look in a mirror, I see Bill looking back too. He and I share the same looks and, as kids, we were often mistaken for twins. My brother is only eighteen months older than me, so we're not very different in age – or outlook, or likes and dislikes. We're both tall, slim and are strawberry blondes – though my hair is highlighted with blonde and Bill's is now naturally highlighted with silver-grey. We both have green eyes – though there is no sparkle in mine any more. Once people used to remark on my eyes, including my husband. Now there are dark shadows beneath them and my skin looks as washed-out as the day. I've avoided mirrors for months. Now there is too much reflected there and I can't bear to look. I trace the line of my jaw, the curve of my nose, run my fingers over my long black lashes. I see my past, my present, my future staring back at me and it's all too much. When my eyes fill with tears, I turn away.

Going through to the main living area, I push all other thoughts aside and concentrate hard on appreciating it. There's a lot to admire. It's a huge space, flooded with light. On a sunny day, it will be incredible. The kitchen is fitted with white units and a huge Aga in a soft dove-grey colour – which does make me smile as I don't think I've *ever* seen Bill cook. I'm sure that the majority of numbers in my foodie brother's iPhone are for restaurants that he favours. The table is white, possibly a French

antique, and has a distressed finish. To go with it are a range of beautifully co-ordinated mis-matched chairs in soft seaside colours – pink, pistachio, duck egg blue, lemon.

I walk towards the back. Again, my lack of boat-based terms evades me. I don't know if it's the bow or the stern, but it's the end of the boat that overlooks the sea. There's a comfortable living room with an oversized pale blue velvet sofa with navy sail-stripe cushions scattered over it. There's a range of accompanying eclectic accent armchairs and I remember Bill telling me that he'd sourced them through various up-and-coming designers, as we do with all of our work when we can. It's what gives our interiors an original edge. Every piece has been hand-picked and placed with painstaking care – Bill's forte – from the furniture to the artworks on the wall. There are giant sea charts on one wall and, on the other, a huge poster of Sean Connery and Ursula Andress on a beach. He's catching hold of her slender ankles as she does a handstand in her bikini – it's an iconic image and is perfect for the space.

In front of the span of bi-fold doors there's a telescope set up and I put my eye to it, but can see very little as it's all blurry. When I'm settled, I'll have plenty of time to work out how to focus it properly. With a bit of fiddling, I open one of the doors and step out onto the spacious rear deck. The wind has dropped and the air isn't quite as nippy as it was on the ferry coming over here, but I don't think I want to hang about out here too long today.

The view is breathtaking. *Sunny Days* is situated right in the middle of the curving sweep of the harbour, so has an all-encompassing vista. Bill certainly knows how to pick his spot. Right now, the tide is high and I can see that, at the mouth of the harbour wall, there's a circular, brooding fort ahead of us which is currently shrouded in low cloud. It looks as if it's floating on the water like a mirage. To the left, there's a line of

moored boats, what appears to be a sailing club and a shack painted bright blue that's a café selling fresh seafood. To the other side, more sailing boats and houseboats, but not much else. Ahead of me, there's just the sea, the gulls wheeling in the air and the sturdy fort.

Out on the deck there's a dining table with four chairs which will be an ideal spot for breakfast or reading should the weather perk up. Beyond that is a small ramp which goes down to a wooden pontoon that extends out over the water and is home to two pristine, teak steamer chairs.

The only other human figure I can see in the harbour is a man out on a paddleboard in a wetsuit. Even looking at him makes me shiver. I guess these coastal types are more hardy than soft townies like me. Nothing on earth would persuade me into water that cold, that grey. I'm not even keen on venturing into the sea when the climate is tropical. I watch him for a few moments as he glides across the calm water of the harbour, before I retreat inside. Not my idea of fun, but he looks as if he's enjoying himself, anyway. It takes all sorts, I suppose.

My cursory exploration of this floor over, I scoop up my bags again and head downstairs to the bedrooms. There are only two, but they're both generously proportioned. The second bedroom is, as yet, empty, waiting to be finished. The master suite is, of course, beautifully furnished. My brother has impeccable taste and flair. He's so fussy, though, which probably explains why, at the age of nearly forty-four, he's still resolutely single. I don't think anyone could live up to his exacting standards. He says he might rent out this place, but I can't see him wanting to let strangers in here on a regular basis.

The main bedroom is the furthest away from the harbour road, facing the sea. Down here, all windows are traditional portholes and it does feel more boat-like. The theme is fresh, seaside-influenced without it being clichéd. There's a white

bed-frame and crisp white linen topped with pale blue tweed cushions and a couple that are hand-stitched with delicate shell patterns. A rich, royal blue throw is meticulously arranged in a casual style. The bedside cabinets are stripped-back wood with glass lamps and white shades. The white dressing table has a Philippe Starck ghost chair in front of it – no doubt an original rather than a copy. It's all so pristine and wonderful.

Looking round, I like what I see. I can definitely be comfortable here, even if happy might be stretching it a bit. I can't exactly say that I feel any better or lighter, but some of the weight that's been pressing down on my heart and my head has lifted for a moment. Perhaps that's what sea air and some well-placed designer furniture does for you. I haven't lived on my own for years and it feels strange to be completely by myself without any detritus from another person in the house – or boat, in this case. All I can hear is the sound of the gentle waves lapping against the hull which is soothing, hypnotic. Perhaps I could learn to live again here. Heaven knows, the total solitude is appealing.

Then I hear the front door bang and a voice shouts, 'Coooooooooeeee!'