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Cathy Bramley is the *Sunday Times* Top Ten bestselling author of *A Patchwork Family*, *My Kind of Happy*, and *The Lemon Tree Café*. Her other romantic comedies include *Ivy Lane*, *Appleby Farm*, *Wickham Hall*, *Conditional Love*, *The Plumberry School of Comfort Food* and *White Lies and Wishes*. She lives in a Nottinghamshire village with her family and a dog.

Cathy turned to writing after spending eighteen years running her own marketing agency. She has always been an avid reader, never without a book on the go, and now thinks she may have found her dream job!

Cathy loves to hear from her readers. You can get in touch via her website [www.CathyBramley.co.uk](http://www.CathyBramley.co.uk), on Facebook @CathyBramleyAuthor or on Twitter @CathyBramley

# The Summer that Changed Us

Cathy Bramley



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# Chapter One

In Merle Bay, a small seaside town on the north-east coast of England, two seagulls were squabbling on Katie Small's kitchen roof. She flung open the window and threw out her toast crusts into the cottage's tiny backyard.

'Stop fighting, you hooligans,' she yelled.

The squawking stopped instantly, and two enormous white and grey birds swooped down to collect their spoils and flew off above the rooftops.

Peace at last, thought Katie, swallowing the last of her coffee.

The seagulls didn't bother her anymore; she was used to their boisterous antics. Unlike her auntie, she laughed to herself, remembering how Auntie Jean used to yelp and duck down if one of them ever came near, convinced they'd attack her if they got the chance. Vicious blighters, she'd mutter darkly.

The yard, deserted now, was bright with spring sunshine and the terracotta pots her dad had filled with cheerful primulas yesterday caught her eye. Good old Dad. He and Mum had come up from Nottingham to spend the weekend here at the cottage. Allegedly to relax before flying off on holiday last night, but Dad had hardly taken his coat off before he was wielding a screwdriver, oiling squeaky hinges and tidying up the garden. He was always the same when he was here. Auntie Jean had been his older

sister and he'd worshipped her, but now she was gone and the cottage belonged to Katie, he'd taken up the role as official handyman. Mum was as bad: washing everything in sight, from the net curtains (which really had to go, Katie thought with a sigh) to the cushion covers, right down to the skirting boards. Never knowingly without a damp cloth in her hand, that was his Josie, Dad had said fondly about his wife, teasing that that would be the epitaph on her tombstone.

Breakfast over, Katie quickly shoved the butter and milk back in the fridge, tossed the bread in the bread bin and ran hot water in the Belfast sink. The kitchen was tiny, a single storey addition to the terraced cottage. It was the only room which had been redecorated since Katie moved in with her auntie ten years ago. With its cream and pale blue colour scheme and beach-themed artwork, it was the room Katie felt most at home in. She washed her mug and her toast plate, drying them up with one of her auntie's tea towels, which she noticed was looking a bit threadbare these days. Another thing to add to the list, she thought. But not right now, because it was already eight o'clock and she wanted to put a new window display in the shop before she opened up.

Katie went through to the living room to collect her keys and all the props she'd prepared for the window. She was filled with a sudden rush of warmth as she recalled one of a series of conversations she and Auntie Jean had had when it became obvious that the old lady's days behind the counter were numbered.

'Let's talk shop, our Katie,' she'd say, making herself as comfortable as her advancing illness would allow. 'The shop window is our biggest advert. It's our customers' first impression of Auntie Small's. Always make it a good one.'

Katie swallowed a lump in her throat at the memory.

The crocheted blanket draped over her aunt's wingback armchair in front of the gas fire, the collection of china figurines on the shelves of the dresser, the hessian bag bulging with sea glass in the corner next to the plastic case full of Jean Small's seventies disco vinyl records . . . Despite it being over a year since she'd died, her presence was evident in every nook and cranny of the cottage.

'Right,' said Katie determinedly, scooping up her shoulder-length chestnut hair and securing it into a bun. 'I'm off to make a good impression.'

She picked up a wooden crate and a black sack full of willow twigs and stepped out onto Merle Bay's high street, a steep hill lined with a mix of cottages, shops, tea rooms and a pub or two. She gazed downhill as always while she locked the door, marvelling at the view: a shimmering blue-green sea, under an endless sky.

Her heaven, her haven. She was happier here than anywhere else in the world.

Still with keys in her hand, she moved uphill a couple of paces to the next door and unlocked it. Her five-second commute was over. It was time for work.

Forty-five minutes later Katie climbed down off her chair and fanned her face, glad to be out of the direct sunlight. She studied her new spring window display critically. *Not bad at all.*

After her parents had left yesterday, she'd spent the evening making flowers from tissue paper. Now they were suspended with coloured thread from branches of twisted willow. She'd taken a rustic wooden crate that had been lurking in the shed full of Auntie's gardening paraphernalia and brushed it clean. Now it was stuffed with armfuls of

tulips and anemones and bluebells – artificial of course, she didn't want to have to touch the window again for at least another four weeks.

She leaned back into the tight space and adjusted one of the mannequins. *There. Done.* The new spring lingerie collection at Auntie Small's was officially on sale: cotton prints, sleek satin and pretty lace in pastel shades of yellow, pink and aqua – something for everyone. Well, nearly everyone. She pushed up the sleeves of her oversized shirt and remembered the utilitarian plain white garments beneath. She favoured sports bras: supportive and comfortable with the added bonus of strong compression which made her boobs look smaller than they were. Not in the least bit flattering, and neither were her big knickers, but as it had been two years since she'd allowed anyone close enough to see her in her undies, what did it really matter?

'Why can't you wear something a bit more sexy?' her last boyfriend, Gareth, had complained. 'Even my mum wears smaller knickers than you.'

It was the last time Gareth saw her underwear, or her for that matter, because she dumped him on the spot. That sort of comment made Katie's skin crawl. It wasn't that she was a prude, but she wanted a partner who respected her choices, not ridiculed them. And shortly after that, Auntie Jean's leukaemia worsened, and Katie had taken over the running of the shop. As much as she loved living here, the average age of residents was nearer sixty than thirty. There might be plenty more fish in the sea, but not many of them seemed to have made their way inland to Merle Bay. And as for internet dating, the thought of putting her profile online brought Katie out in a cold sweat.

The bell above the door chimed as the first customer of the day walked in and Katie abandoned thoughts of her dismal love life with pleasure.

It was Mel who owned the hair salon at the top of the high street.

‘Hello!’ said Katie, surprised.

There were only about six hundred people who lived in Merle Bay all year round (some of the houses were second homes, or holiday lets with no permanent residents); a good proportion of the women bought their underwear here and Katie was familiar with a lot of people’s vital statistics. But until now, not Mel’s. As far as Katie could remember, Mel had never bought anything from Auntie Small’s.

‘Hi.’ Mel hovered at the door, twirling a lock of her dark hair around her fingers. ‘Have you got anything that will make me feel like a million dollars, but ideally only cost me about twenty-five pounds?’

‘You’re in luck, loads of things fit that request,’ said Katie.

Nula, the shop’s only member of staff knew everyone. Katie remembered her saying that Mel’s husband had left her just after Christmas out of the blue. Which might explain why Mel looked as if she had lost quite a bit of weight since Katie had last been into the salon for a trim.

‘Is it for a special occasion?’ she added.

‘I wish,’ Mel said flatly. ‘No. I looked in my underwear drawer yesterday and was greeted by a sea of grey. It was depressing.’

‘Grey is a lovely colour,’ said Katie, ‘I wear a lot of grey myself.’

‘Maybe, but most of mine were once white. Anyway, I fancy something bright and beautiful.’

‘Something just like you then,’ she replied, causing Mel to pull a face. ‘I mean it. Look at you. You manage to look glamorous in jeans and a ponytail.’ She gestured to Mel’s outfit.

‘You are kind.’ Mel ventured further into the shop. ‘Sorry. The last thing you want to hear is my whinging.’

‘If you want to get something off your chest,’ Katie grinned at Mel, ‘pardon the pun – feel free, you can tell me anything. I promise, I won’t tell a soul. Coffee?’

Mel accepted her offer and Katie poured them both a small cup from the machine. Freshly brewed coffee was something she’d introduced recently. Not only did it smell wonderful, it made everyone feel like a special customer – which to Katie, they all were.

Katie sipped her drink and waited.

‘My ex came to collect the kids for the day yesterday and after they’d gone, I moped about feeling sorry for myself. I just felt . . .’ Mel sighed.

‘It’s OK to feel whatever you feel,’ Katie encouraged her.

She chewed her lip, saying finally, ‘I felt obsolete. Oh God, it sounds so lame and pathetic.’

Katie had a sudden flashback to coming home from sixth form one day to find her mum hastily drying her tears. *I used to look forward to having more time to myself once you’d grown up, Mum had admitted sheepishly, but now it’s actually happening and you’re so independent, I miss being needed.* But Katie had needed her, and at twenty-eight, still did. Even though they lived three hours’ drive away, her parents were her support system.

‘Mel, I doubt your children could manage without you for very long. Not to mention your clients at the salon. Can you imagine the state of our hair if anything happened to you?’ Katie tugged at her own thick mane. It had a bit of a kink to it – neither straight nor curly – and she felt it looked messy whatever she did with it.

Mel managed a lopsided smile. ‘True. And by the way, I don’t remember seeing you in the salon for a while.’

‘I know, it’s on my to-do list, promise.’ Katie hated sitting in the hairdresser’s chair feeling exposed when surrounded by so many mirrors and bright lights. ‘What I’m saying is, you’re a long way from obsolete. Why not see it as an opportunity for some me-time?’ she suggested. ‘Do the things you don’t get a chance to do when the kids are with you.’

Mel drained her coffee. ‘Good coffee and good advice. Thanks.’

‘You’re welcome.’ Katie ran her eyes expertly over Mel’s body and made a quick assessment of her new size.

Katie might be young to be running a well-established lingerie shop, especially one which catered to the needs of an ageing and ample population, but she’d been doing this job for ten years and she was good at it. Half of her customers came in wearing the wrong size and were amazed how much better they looked with a narrower strap or a bigger cup.

‘Now, why don’t you go and undress while I select some options. We’ll have you feeling like a goddess in no time.’

‘OK.’ Mel gave Katie a wobbly smile on her way to the changing rooms. ‘The window looks very enticing, by the way. I love spring colours, so much nicer than all that red stuff for Valentine’s Day. Which I totally ignored this year, for obvious reasons.’

Katie sympathised; she tried to avoid Valentine’s Day herself, but it wasn’t that easy in her line of work. More men came through the door of Auntie Small’s in the run-up to February the fourteenth than in the rest of the year put together. Whatever her views on their purchases were, she couldn’t deny it was good for the shop’s takings.

‘We celebrated Galentine’s Day here too,’ Katie said diplomatically. ‘And it wasn’t all red.’

‘Hmm. You don’t splash out on fancy knickers for the *gals* though, do you?’ said Mel from inside the cubicle.

‘No,’ said Katie firmly, ‘we do it for ourselves. Because we’re worth it.’

Mel popped her head back out of the changing-room door. ‘Thanks for listening. I have people in and out of my hairdressing chair all day long telling me about themselves. It’s nice to do the talking for once. But you won’t mention my woes to anyone, will you?’

Katie shook her head. ‘Wouldn’t dream of it. Nula and I are keepers of many secrets; from nursing bras to naughty nights away, there’s not much you can hide from us at Auntie Small’s.’

Mel’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Blimey, I never thought of that. Who’s been buying sexy undies?’

‘Couldn’t possibly say,’ Katie said primly, with a sparkle in her eye. She slid a froth of satin and lace through a crack in the door. ‘Here, try these on. Trust me,’ she said, as Mel started to argue that she’d given her the wrong size. ‘I’m an expert.’

Ten minutes later, Mel had left with an Auntie Small’s bag containing some pale pink satin wrapped in scented tissue paper. Katie had made her promise faithfully not to save it for best and in return for a discount, Mel had booked Katie in for a trim free of charge.

For the next hour, Katie sat in the small space she’d carved out as an office at the rear of the shop, working through her admin jobs methodically, whilst keeping an ear trained for the sound of customers at the door and enjoying the peace. Nula started at ten o’ clock and was a complete extrovert. The job in the shop was absolutely perfect for her; she was great at putting customers at ease,

but Katie found concentrating on the accounts quite tricky when her employee was in full flow.

At five to ten, Katie stood, stretched and put the kettle on ready for Nula to brew her ginger tea as soon as she arrived.

The shop had originally been called Merle Bay Lingerie when Jean Small had set it up in the eighties. She had been the sort of grown-up you called 'Auntie', even if you weren't a blood relative, because she made you feel like you were family. She was warm, welcoming and had turned the mundane act of buying new undies into a celebration. After a year of everyone referring to the shop as simply Auntie Small's, Jean had given in and renamed it.

Katie missed her aunt terribly; her death had been Katie's first taste of grief. Discovering that Jean had left her the cottage and the business in her will had been a real shock. She was honoured and grateful but also a little overwhelmed by the responsibility. But it had been Auntie Jean's wish that her only niece inherited her modest empire and with her parents' support, Katie was trying her best. She hadn't managed to make the cottage her own yet, but the shop, she had to admit, was thriving.

'Well, doesn't that display look a sight for sore eyes!' Nula exclaimed, staring at the window while peeling off a handknitted cardigan from her plump arms. If Jean Small had been everyone's auntie, then Nula was everyone's nanna. She'd been a dinner lady at the local primary school before working here and Katie just knew she'd have been the type to give children extra portions when no one was looking.

'Why thank you,' said Katie, pouring hot water into her assistant's favourite mug and handing her her first tea of the day.

‘You should have waited; I like doing it.’ Nula stopped at one of the mirrors, patted her grey curls into place and gave Katie a look of rebuke.

‘I know you do, and your displays are far better than mine,’ said Katie, ‘but I need the practice.’

Besides, it was a point of honour with Katie: whenever she found something challenging, she’d grit her teeth and persevere until she got the hang of it.

Nula blew on her tea. ‘And how are Josie and Brian? Full of the joys of spring, I hope?’

‘Very well, thanks,’ said Katie. ‘They’ll be in Malta by now, sunning themselves. Dad will be halfway down his first ice cream.’

Katie loved having her parents to stay. She also heaved a sigh of relief when they left. When they weren’t doing practical jobs, they were on some campaign or other where Katie was concerned; this time it was that she should clear Auntie Jean’s things from the cottage and move into the biggest bedroom, not stay cooped up in the little single that she’d been staying in since she was a child. They’d even offered to help her. She would do it, she promised them, soon. It was comforting somehow, keeping it like it was; erasing Jean’s presence seemed too final.

‘They’ll like Malta,’ said Nula authoritatively. ‘They’ve got a Marks and Spencer.’

The door opened again.

‘Post!’ declared Alice Jennings, the post lady.

While Nula crossed to the counter to check the diary to see if they had any fittings booked in as she did every morning, Katie waited as Alice sorted through her bag for their usual bundle of letters.

‘You’ll be wanting some new lingerie now that you’re famous,’ said Nula.

Alice batted a hand. ‘Oh, give over.’

The post lady had made a delivery to a pregnant woman on the far side of town two weeks ago only to find herself delivering a premature baby single-handedly.

‘I read the article in the *North East Gazette*, Alice,’ said Katie. ‘Lovely photo of you with the baby.’

‘We got three copies,’ Alice smiled coyly and pulled a newspaper cutting out of her jacket pocket. ‘Graham’s got one to show his buddies and we’ve got one in a frame. It’s the most exciting thing to ever happen to me.’

‘Not just to you,’ said Nula, ‘I don’t think anything that exciting has happened in Merle Bay for years!’

Which was one of the things she loved about it most, thought Katie: its gentle pace of life.

Nula managed to get Alice to put her bulging post bag down and peruse a rail of jersey camisoles. Katie took the pile of letters through to her office, intending to sift through them later, when her eye fell on a hardbacked envelope addressed to Catherine Small with ‘personal’ written in capitals across the front in red pen.

She frowned; usually her private mail was directed to the cottage next door but this one definitely had the shop’s address on it. And no one called her Catherine anymore, that name was part of her old life. She slid her finger under the flap and pulled out the contents.

The shock of what she saw made her heart stop. She stared in horror as a tremor of fear shot through her. A large black and white photograph of a naked young girl with wild chestnut hair, too much make-up around her wide eyes, lips parted in surprise.

A handwritten note had been paperclipped to the picture: REMEMBER THIS?

All at once the room spun and she swayed on the spot,

her fingers fumbling to get the photograph back in the envelope.

‘Katie?’ Nula’s face loomed large in front of her and she touched Katie’s arm. ‘Are you OK, love? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I ... um,’ Katie forced a smile. ‘Can you hold the fort for an hour? I need some fresh air.’

‘Of course, love,’ said Nula, full of concern, ‘you take your time.’

Fresh air and space to think or maybe scream out loud where no one would hear her. There was only one place that would do: Sea Glass Beach.