THE SUMMER PARTY

Rebecca Heath studied science at university, worked in hospitality and teaching, but she always carved out time to write. She lives in Adelaide, Australia, halfway between the city and the sea with her husband, three children and a much-loved border collie. She spent her childhood summers at a remote beach not unlike where the novel is set. This is her debut adult novel.

THE SUMMER PARTY

REBECCA HEATH



An Aries Book

First published in the UK in 2023 by Head of Zeus Ltd,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Rebecca Heath, 2023

The moral right of Rebecca Heath to be identified
as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of both the copyright owner
and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events
portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (ANZTPB): 9781804540992
ISBN (E): 9781804540978

Cover design: Emma Rogers

Printed and bound in Australia by Opus Group



Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

For my Sisters – Fiona and Kirsty

Thank you for always being there. Beach summers and heartbreaking farewells alike.

29 JANUARY 2000

The heavy beat of the music thrums through the girl's body in time with the pounding of her heart. She's alone for a moment in the crowded party, but then she sees him across the room and nothing else matters. He's leaning against the mantel, all languid grace, and he's talking to someone else, but when he catches her eye, he winks. And an actual shiver races down her spine.

He's going to meet her later, outside, under the vine-clad arch by the fountain at the foot of the garden. A place for privacy. A place for lovers. Her body warms at the memory of the promises in his lips and his expert hands.

There are butterflies, too.

She hasn't done anything like this before, but she trusts him not to hurt her, physically at least. She has no illusions about what a boy like him will do to her heart. But with her third glass of the delicious punch almost empty, she can't bring herself to care. Because he's chosen *her*.

The hours pass in a blur of music and dancing and more punch, and trying not to pinch herself to be certain this is actually her life. When she finally winds her way through the garden to the rendezvous, she stumbles twice. Intoxication and nerves make her knees tremble.

The twinkling fairy lights mark the paths as if someone has caught the earlier fireworks in tiny glass spheres. White

and yellow flowers bloom in perfect stars, their tropical scent heady in the warm night air. She wonders, as the lights spin around her, whether she should have been sipping water these last few hours.

No. Courage was needed, and it's not like she's out of control. A few missing minutes, but nothing important. She takes a breath, fights nausea. No regrets.

There's a boy already there in the shadows. He lifts his head. Clearly, he's been waiting for her. Her heart trips in its beat. 'You?'

He moves closer, more assured than she would guess. 'Were you expecting someone else?'

Her lips part to answer, but he's right in front of her now and lowering his head towards hers. 'You look so beautiful,' he whispers.

His intention is clear but there's plenty of time for her to back away. She doesn't.

One kiss won't hurt even if he's not… She lets his mouth claim hers. And the butterflies in her belly roar into dragons. She never expected this. Not with him.

He makes a sound of encouragement and she arches closer. His hands slip from her shoulders to her waist, to the curve of her hip. Heat skitters from the contact, and she kisses him deeper. His fingertips find skin left bare by the summer dress. Her breath catches. The faint sounds of the distant party are lost in their heavy breathing and the ricochet of her pulse in her ears. Thoughts of interruption are fanciful; they are truly alone here.

She could scream, and no one would come.

He pulls back a little. She feels the absence of his touch like an unexpected pain, and it's all she can do not to whimper.

His hand brushes her hair back from her face and he stares into her eyes.

Don't speak, she thinks. *Don't ruin it.*

The angry scrape of footsteps approaching on the concrete path overrides the distant music.

The boy's eyes widen. Suddenly, he's leaving, ducking away from the footsteps, in the opposite direction to the lights and the rest of the party. The girl hesitates to follow; after all, he didn't ask her to go with him, and she isn't sure where the edge of the cliff lies.

Someone stops just the other side of the archway. The girl is completely hidden unless she moves.

The music volume jumps, now so loud the bass is a vibration rather than a sound. The girl strains to listen through the foliage, catching a grumble of voices. Two, she thinks, but they're low and tense and she doesn't recognise them. Not definitely. The night's drinking and what she's done in the dark is catching up with her. Tears sting her eyes. She just wants them to leave.

There's a cry. Or maybe a scream. The gut-twisting sound of someone in pain.

The girl's body tenses, ready to move, to go to them and offer assistance. But before she can take a single step, there's a new voice. This one is maybe familiar, she thinks, but her whirling brain can't be sure. She leans towards it. The tone holds anger rather than concern. The scream must have been her imagination.

Her whole body is burning. So much for privacy.

Then there's only the sounds of the party drifting on the breeze.

Wait, was that a splash?

She delays a bit longer, hoping whoever is close by will have left. Hoping to avoid questions about what she's doing there. She tries to count to twenty but loses track at thirteen. It's enough. When she steps out from the archway, there's no one in sight.

SHOE FOUND WASHED UP BENEATH JETTY 'MAY CONTAIN HUMAN REMAINS'

A beachcomber walking beneath the jetty in the bay by Queen's Point, two hours out of Adelaide on South Australia's Yorke Peninsula, has found a shoe containing suspected human bones, police have said.

Officers were alerted to the discovery by a local man at about 5.30 p.m. on Thursday and moved quickly to investigate and cordon off the area. However, they reported finding nothing else in the water. The shoe in question was found caught between two chunks of driftwood and there was no sign of a body.

A police spokesperson said the shoe's contents 'do appear to be human remains'. They have been taken to a forensic mortuary for examination.

Police refuse to speculate on the owner of the remains or where the rest of the body might be and have ruled out it belonging to any bodies already in the morgue. However, with no one in the town having reported a foot missing, talk around the area assumes it most likely belongs to someone passing through, or that it must have drifted in on the current from further up the coast.

1

PRESENT DAY

It began with Harry Whitlam buying Lucy a creaming soda, and the flip in her belly when their fingertips touched. But, if she's honest, she probably fell in love with all three of the Whitlams that summer.

Lucy Ross takes one hand off the steering wheel and brushes the pocket of her handbag, feeling for a telltale bulge in the fabric. There is none. The article she printed from the news website took only a single sheet of paper. Even folded, it's too thin to betray its location.

When she saw the headline a week ago, her first instinct was to talk to Nan about it, then the grief hit her afresh. Nan's been gone for months.

Probably for the best. Talking with Nan about Queen's Point and Lucy's summer there never ended well. On one of her last visits, Lucy had mentioned the Whitlams after seeing in the retirement home's sign-in book that Nan had a visitor from the small town in rural South Australia where she used to live. Curious, Lucy asked whether Nan had any news of Anabelle, unquestionably the safest Whitlam.

Nan's features had darkened. Although she remained in the corner of her room at Seaview Retirement Lodge, ironically

named considering its complete lack of ocean views, her unfocused eyes put her far away.

'Keep away from them kids,' she'd growled. 'It was a mistake to let you run wild with them.'

'They're not that bad, are they?' Lucy didn't comment on their being closer to middle age these days; correcting Nan in such a manner tended to upset her.

Nan had shaken her head. 'Bad things happen around them. I should never…' Her voice trailed off, her attention caught by a bird on the windowsill.

Impossible for Lucy not to think of the Whitlams now as her little car crests the hill, the last in the long drive from Adelaide, and she slows to enter the town of Queen's Point, the very place she'd once – according to Nan – run wild for a summer.

Her blood fizzes as memories jostle for prominence. Good memories, mostly. It was right to come back. The article was the prod she'd needed to finally make the two-hour trek and clean up her grandparents' cottage, a task she'd put off for the years Nan had been living close to Lucy and the months since her passing.

All that and the thing that happened at work.

Unwilling to let her mind linger on that, Lucy instead speaks to her companion. 'Well, Hades, what do you think?'

She glances in the rear-view mirror, meeting his contemplative deep-brown gaze. Unavoidably, really, since his head takes up most of the view. Hades, a jet-black short-haired mountain of a dog, with drool weeping from his impressive jowls, only tilts his head thoughtfully in response.

Her gaze catches the side of her face and faint surprise registers – not for the first time – at the crinkle of lines

creasing from the corner of her brown eyes behind the rim of the sunglasses. At thirty-five, she's not young any more, and her skincare routine is longer and more futile than teenage Lucy could have imagined.

She slows the car to a crawl to take in the view. The sight in front of her is so apparently unchanged that if she squints it could be nineteen years ago and her younger self could be glaring in the passenger seat as Mum drove her towards her summer in purgatory. This was what she'd taken to calling the need to stay with Nan for the holidays. When leaving her that day, Mum grabbed Lucy, pulled her close, and squeezed her in a long hug. In Lucy's head, that moment marks the last hug of her childhood. After that summer, she was different.

The small town huddles around the curve of the coast, like arms outstretched, poised to embrace the rickety old wooden jetty that sticks out into the sea. The ancient structure is as weather-beaten now as it was back then. The wind whips and froths the water around its footings and her mind returns to the newspaper article and the shoe found in the shallows.

May contain human remains.

A few surfers are out in the distance, although the good waves are mostly around the point, the beach there a part of what's made this small Australian town so sought-after. There are gorgeous shacks along the beachfront and a hodgepodge of weatherboard and brick houses in the town proper, with Main Street curling along a block back from the shore. All of it watched over in benevolence by the enormous house on the hill.

No matter where you stand in town, if you look up you can see it. A glimpse of the wrought-iron fence, a hint of grey-tiled roof, or the gleaming white circular turret that could

have been straight from a children's book. One where the princess is trapped by an evil witch. From here Lucy can see all of it, perched atop the cliff, its multi-storey, white-painted expanse contrasting with the green, manicured gardens. The sweeping verandas wrap around the ground floor and its many windows reflect the dark blue of the sea.

The Whitlam house.

Beep!

The blare of a car horn startles Lucy from her reverie. In case the horn isn't enough, the driver of the car behind her flashes their headlights, bright in the gloom.

She lifts her hand in apology and accelerates up to the speed limit.

Driving through the town proper, she realises her first impression – that nothing has changed – isn't true. Although it's hardly crowded, thanks to the icy wind coming off the water and the threat of rain, there are still more people around than used to be here at the height of summer tourist season. Trendy cafés have replaced empty shops. Chic gift stores and slick surf shops sit where once there was only an old second-hand clothing store and maybe a chemist. And on the corner, across from the pub that's been renovated into a gorgeous hotel, sits the glass-fronted, elegantly lit 'Whitlam Homewares'.

She's been into the store in the city, but knows she won't be able to resist a visit to the flagship store. Not least because they built it on the site of the old cinema, home of where it all began.

As she heads towards the point, she has to resist telling Hades about the places they pass.

There's the shortcut down to the beach. The surf club

might look official, but the guards did more sunbathing than beach patrol. We're almost to Nan's place.

And always ahead, like the road is leading her there, the Whitlam house.

It looms in her line of sight, right until the road curves with the coast at the foot of the hill.

Nan's cottage looks almost the same. The cheerful yellow stucco walls with blue trim were already faded that summer. Pop hadn't been up to repairs for a long time before he died, his illness making the physical work he'd loved impossible. She figures Nan hadn't wanted to have someone else in to do it. The paint is no worse now, like the sun and the salt from the sea could only leach so much colour before it gave up.

The property management company Lucy has engaged have done their job, leaving the garden merely overgrown rather than wild. The air of abandonment suggests the occupiers having ducked out, rather than never returning.

She gets out to open the gates and Hades stirs, wanting to stretch his long legs.

'Almost,' Lucy promises.

The large gate squeaks a protest but opens, another plus for the management people she rang a few days ago to say she was coming. She drives in and closes the gate. Since the smaller gate next to the letter box is shut, she lets Hades out and does a quick walk of the perimeter to stretch her travel-cramped legs. Her feet sink into the waterlogged grass in places, the squelch drowned out by the gusting wind. It seems to whistle through the bare tree branches like a plaintive cry.

With no obvious openings in the dilapidated fence, she leaves Hades to explore, and returns to the front of the cottage. She climbs the steps to the front porch with heavy

legs. Here, Nan's absence is raw, rather than the ache she's grown used to. Mum's passing more than a decade ago meant caring for Nan towards the end fell to Lucy, as does sorting out her estate.

Entering the cottage this way feels odd. When Nan was alive, only strangers used the formal entrance, but this was the only key Nan had when she moved into the home. Now Lucy's copy and hers dangle together on the keyring, the jingle betraying Lucy's shaking hands. She tucks a few strands of hair that have come loose from her ponytail behind her ear and sets herself to face what's inside.

The key slides easily into the lock. She turns it, and the front door opens.