The Summer Girl

Jenny Blackhurst lives in Shropshire where she grew up dreaming that one day she would get paid for making up stories. She is an avid reader and can mostly be found with her head in a book or hunting Pokemon with her son, otherwise you can get her on Twitter @JennyBlackhurst or Facebook. Her favourite film is Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe, but if her children ask it's definitely Moana.

Also by Jenny Blackhurst

How I Lost You
The Foster Child
Before I Let You In
The Night She Died
The Perfect Guests
The Girl Who Left
The Hiking Trip
The Summer Girl

The summer girl

JENNY BLACKHURST

CANELO

First published in the United Kingdom in 2023 by

Canelo
Unit 9, 5th Floor
Cargo Works, 1-2 Hatfields
London SE1 9PG
United Kingdom

Copyright © Jenny Blackhurst 2023

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

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

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

Print ISBN 978 1 80436 505 2
Ebook ISBN 978 1 80436 506 9

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

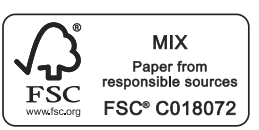
Cover design by The Brewster Project

Cover images © Depositphotos, Shutterstock

Look for more great books at www.canelo.co

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

1



To my honorary sisters, Jo, Lorna, Sarah and Laura, who always have gum.

Prologue

She can see him watching her across the bonfire again. He's been looking her way all night, not even being subtle about it, like he doesn't care who sees. The other teenagers drink and dance and laugh, but for her there may as well be no one else there. A summer of gentle flirting, teasing, it has all come down to tonight, the last big blowout before they leave their summer homes and go back to their normal lives.

Her hair glows golden in the light of the flames, her tanned skin smelling of warmth and sunscreen. She smiles, self-conscious of his attention, but enjoying it all the same. She is everything it means to be young, beautiful and full of life. Soon, her lifeless body will be found floating face down in the marina.

She watches as he makes his way around the fire, greeting everyone as he goes. They all know who he is. He's older than her, but that hasn't seemed to matter to him and it makes it all the more thrilling as far as she's concerned. She's seen how the other girls look at him and it makes her nervous, this weight of responsibility she has to be cooler than them, to be funnier and sexier – otherwise why would he want to be with her?

She wonders if he will kiss her tonight; innocent as she is, she has no idea that he will expect – no, demand – more than a kiss when the time comes. For now, there is

still a way out for her, she still has a chance to put down her drink and call for a lift home, ask her sister's advice – her sister would warn her away from boys like him and she doesn't want to be warned away.

He's closer now, and she knows that she is his final destination, after all the hollow greetings and cheek kisses, she is the one his arrow has sighted on. The thought makes her palms slick and she wipes them on her denim shorts. The gap between them closes and the air between them fizzles. Any small action might change her fate – if she decides to get her own drinks instead of taking the one he hands her, if one of the bystanders recognises the signs and calls someone to come and collect her. If it had been a different boy she had set her sights on, if anyone had ever taught him that power and influence don't entitle you to take whatever you want, or if just one of the girls before hadn't been silenced so effectively.

She is not the first summer girl whose course will be forever altered by the thousand small actions that led to them both being here tonight, and tragically she will not be the last. Maybe the next summer girl will be luckier than she is. Maybe someone will discover the truth before another life is ended.

Or maybe not.

Chapter One

Claire

The music thumped in my chest and the buzz from the alcohol I'd been drinking all evening surged through me, making it hard to focus. That last whisky on the rocks had made me feel absolutely certain that the man sitting opposite me was The One That Got Away and I was pretty adamant that he wasn't getting away tonight – although he didn't actually seem to be trying that hard.

'I'm trying to remember why we ever broke up,' I said, wagging my finger in his face in what I knew was an incredibly sexy, teasing gesture. Well, it was until I almost knocked his pint of beer into his lap.

'It was because you said I had fewer prospects than Katie Hopkins trying to win the Nobel Peace Prize,' he helpfully reminded me.

I frowned. It did sound like something I'd say.

'That doesn't sound like something I'd say,' I replied.

'It was also because he tried to sleep with your sister,' a voice from behind me said. A voice I knew very well, even over the pounding bass.

I let out a groan and turned to face my cousin and best friend, Jess, while plastering on a smile. She was standing with her hand on her hip, silently judging me. Jess was three months younger than me, but she had been trying

her best lately to act like my mother, as if I was a wayward teen who was coasting off the rails. For context, I was thirty years old and perfectly entitled to get drunk and sleep with an ex if I so wanted. And tonight I so wanted.

'What are you doing here?' I asked, not bothering to hide my irritation.

Jess frowned. She looked even younger when she did that. Jess somehow still managed to look like a fresh-faced teenager; she was one of those annoying natural beauties who barely wore make-up and could dress however she wanted. She was even a real blonde. 'Never mind me,' she said. 'What are *you* doing?'

'What does it look like I'm doing?'

She gave Chris a long, withering glare. 'It looks like you're pouring alcohol on an old flame.'

'Nice to see you too, Jess,' Chris retorted.

Those two had never got along. Probably because he had fewer prospects than Katie Hopkins trying to win the Nobel Peace Prize and had tried to sleep with my sister.

I raised my eyebrows. 'Did you come here just to get annoyed at me?'

'Have you spoken to your sister?' Jess demanded, ignoring my tone.

I sighed. Leaning back, I murmured to Chris that I'd call him when I could get rid of my dear cousin. I was lying. She was right, he was the same shade of loser now as he had been when I'd thrown him out for trying to sleep with my sister.

Chris nodded, and, scowling at Jess, he turned to leave.

'Which one?' I asked.

Jess frowned, *again*. I got the feeling I was irritating her. 'You only have one sister,' she pointed out.

'Yes,' I agreed. 'But she has multiple personalities.' I drained the last of my drink and put up my hand to order another, but Jess took it and pulled it down.

'Don't be an idiot. I know you're mad at her for leaving, but you're not the only one going through a tough time. This was her way of dealing with it.'

I twisted my wrist from her loose grip and put my hand back up. 'And this is mine.'

'Same again?' the barman asked.

I nodded and gestured to Jess. 'And a Virgin Mary for my virtuous best friend.'

Jess gritted her teeth. 'Holly isn't returning my calls.'

'Maybe that's her way of dealing with it.'

Jess slammed her hand down on the bar. 'Don't act like you don't care when we both know you do. I've been calling her and calling her and she isn't answering. When was the last time you spoke to her?'

I thought about it. When was it? Could I really not remember the last time I'd spoken to my sister? Whenever it was, it had ended in an argument. I remembered Holly's voice, almost pleading her big sister to be happy for her, loving life three thousand miles away, and the pain and fury I had felt at the thought of us being so far apart, her having fun and moving on, without me. I'd tried to call her since we fought – maybe this morning? But she hadn't answered. Not surprising, it probably would have been five a.m. in Massachusetts and I had been a complete bitch.

'I don't know… maybe Thursday?'

Jess took in a deep breath as though she was struggling to stay calm with me. 'I spoke to her Friday morning. And I've called her every day since. Today it just went to answerphone.'

I pressed my eyes closed and tried to think again, but everything felt muddled. That last Jack and Coke was probably a bad idea. Today was Tuesday, nine thirty p.m. in Hampshire, so it would be, what… I counted on my fingers. Four thirty in the afternoon in Massachusetts?

I took my phone out of my pocket and pressed Holly's name, putting it on speaker so that when my sister answered, Jess could hear her voice. The phone didn't even ring.

'You have reached the T-Mobile answering service. Please leave a message after the tone.'

Jess's eyes widened. 'I *told you* it was going straight to answerphone. What's going on?'

'Jesus, Jess, she's probably blocked my number,' I said, tiring of the conversation. I didn't like thinking about my sister. I hated being mad at her, but I *was* mad at her, and I also knew I was unreasonable for being mad at her. It hurt my head. I just wanted to drink and forget. 'We didn't exactly have the best chat the other day. You try it again.'

Jess dialled from her phone and we both heard the same answerphone message. Jess clenched her jaw and glared at me. 'It's off. I'm telling you, there's something wrong. Holly never goes this long without responding to my messages.'

'Lucky you,' I said, well aware of how sulky my voice sounded.

The bartender arrived with another JD for me and a Virgin Mary for Jess. Ouch. He clearly hadn't picked up on my sarcasm. Jess looked as though she wanted to throw the drink at me.

'What's this really about, Jess?' I asked with a sigh. 'If Holly was just ignoring your calls, you would have rung me, or texted. You wouldn't have stormed down here to

accost me and slam me for having a few drinks after a nine-hour shift. Why don't you just tell me what's actually going on?'

Jess and I had been thick as thieves for as long as I could remember. She was the reason I had tolerated my younger sister hanging around us as we'd grown up – Jess was an only child and had doted on Holly, who was eight years younger than us. Boy, had that been a shock for me, growing up used to having my parents' attention all to myself and then suddenly realising I was going to have to share. And when my parents had broken up not long after Holly was born, I had *known* it was all Holly's fault. I'd spent so much time resenting my little sister that if it hadn't been for Jess, we probably wouldn't have had a relationship at all. It had only been in the last few years, when Holly was around nineteen and I was in my late twenties, that we had settled into a normal sisterly friendship. Now we were further apart than ever, and not just physically.

Jess looked around and sighed. 'Tom's waiting in the car. Can we just talk about this back at mine?'

Jesus, she'd brought the cavalry.

'Why?' I asked. 'Just tell me now. She's run off and got married, right? Pregnant? What are you trying not to tell me?'

Jess pulled out her mobile and started tapping on it. She handed it to me.

'She sent me this today.'

'I thought you hadn't heard from her since…' I stopped as my brain took in what she was showing me. It was only a couple of lines of text, but I knew now what Jess was doing here. I knew what had made her so worried.

Having a great time. Going away for a few days so won't have signal. Will speak to Mum when I'm back, tell her sorry I missed her call this morning. Love you all xx

'Oh shit,' I muttered. 'You got this today?'

'Right before she turned her phone off,' Jess confirmed.

'Or someone did,' I replied, getting up off the stool and grasping the bar for support. I had no idea if my legs were wobbly from the drink or from the shock. 'Because we both know Holly didn't send that text.'