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nancy thayer

secrets in summer

a novel

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A NOVEL

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Dedication

Acknowledgments

By Nancy Thayer

About the Author

It was completely by accident that Darcy Cotterill spied on her ex-husband. She didn't *want* to see down into his backyard, or the yards of any of her neighbors, for that matter.

Really, it was the fault of the men who built these houses on Nantucket Island in the 1840s. Almost all the houses in the historic district, within walking distance to town, were built with an English basement, meaning the space was partly below ground but had large windows and its own door on the side of the house.

So, in order to walk in and out the front or back door of the main floor of the house, you had to climb a set of stairs at both the front and back doors.

That put the first floor, the main floor, ten feet above ground level, the perfect height for casually glancing into her neighbors' yards as Darcy went about her day.

And how was she to know her ex-husband and his new family would rent the house behind hers for the summer? She had no warning. One moment she was relaxing in her garden, and the next moment, *heart attack!*

Darcy owned this gorgeous house in the center of the town because her beloved, if slightly eccentric, grandmother had left it to her in her will. From the age of ten, Darcy had lived here with Penny, who was the only person in Darcy's dysfunctional family who stayed in one place long enough to take care of her. Darcy had adored Penny, and even now, every morning, she sent a prayer of gratitude to her grandmother.

Years ago, her grandmother had planted a hedge of spruce around the perimeter of the yard to form three tall thick walls with arched arbors on

both sides of the house so friends could enter from the street. The backyard was private, and Darcy liked that. A narrow lane cut through on one side of her house, and she was glad the hedge concealed her yard. She had a public job, and she knew it wouldn't be appropriate if people passing down the narrow lane saw her as she was on this hot summer day, wearing only her briefest bikini.

And she wanted to keep this job forever. It was the job she had always dreamed of. She was a *librarian*! Specifically, she was the assistant director of the children's library of the Nantucket Atheneum. Her work was meaningful and pleasurable and involved lots of people. Still, she was glad when Sunday and Monday rolled around. These were her days off, her own special time to be alone to read and dream, especially in July and August when the island's population exploded from sixteen thousand vigorous year-rounders to sixty thousand summer people.

On Sundays, Darcy joined a group of friends—some married, some with children, some single—for a lazy day of swimming and boating and cooking out. Monday was her day to run necessary errands and work in the garden or, on a rainy day, lie in bed reading, with her cat, Muffler, beside her.

Because July 4th was next Monday, work schedules were scrambled, so Darcy had today off from work. She had time to relax. She lay on a thick cushioned lounge, surrounded by flowers and birdsong, a wrought iron table nearby for her phone and iced tea.

She tilted her head back so the rays could touch her neck. Her face was protected with sunblock, and she felt as pale as a parsnip. Too many days working. Although, she remembered with a satisfied grin, during the nights she'd spent in bed with Nash Forester, he had liked her skin just fine.

Next Sunday, when the gang met at Fat Ladies Beach, she'd wear something with more coverage, but she enjoyed the thought of Nash seeing her with new tan lines. And that was the kind of thought she hadn't had for a long while, if ever.

The sun beat down on her closed eyelids. Sweat began to bead up behind her neck, trickling down her shoulders. She remembered last Sunday with Nash, when she was in his arms and the waves rocked their bodies together while they floated in the blue Atlantic and—

Her thoughts were interrupted by the quiet growl of a car as it pulled into the driveway of the house behind her.

Of course. It was almost July. Her summer neighbors were coming—cue music from *Jaws*—to occupy the houses around her. Some were pleasant, some were loud hard-drinking partiers—as the joke went, “Summer people—some are not.” Some said hello when they saw her on the sidewalk in front of her house. Most ignored her. For them, she existed outside their summer fantasy bubble. It was all good with her. She was glad people could live here for a summer month or two. She had when she was younger, and she’d thought it was paradise.

It still was, even as, on the other side of the hedges, car doors opened and slammed shut. Her new backyard neighbors spilled out into the sun, all talking at once.

“Oh, isn’t it lovely here! And the house looks as pretty as the pictures!” *A woman, probably a wife and mother.*

“Mom. All the houses are gray.” *An adolescent girl, her tone a mix of sarcasm and tenderness.*

“Come on, gang, grab a bag and let’s see what this old place is like on the inside.”

A man. Obviously the father. And something more, something *impossible*—it had been so long since Darcy had spoken with her ex-husband—surely it couldn’t be Boyz. But this particular male voice made her eyes snap open and the hair stand up on the back of her neck.

It *couldn’t* be Boyz. His family always went to Lake George for the summer. It was an unforgiveable *sin* not to go to Lake George for the summer.

“Willow, you can carry more than that. Take another bag of groceries.” *The woman’s voice. The mother’s.*

The woman Boyz had left her for had a daughter named Willow.

Could it be Boyz?

“Here, Willow, take the keys and unlock the front door. I’ll get the suitcases.”

The man’s voice had the same tone as Boyz’s, and Darcy was certain she heard just the slightest fake European accent all the Szwedas had. Their

family had been American for generations, but they liked to claim an exiled Polish count as a relative, to explain their aristocratic (Darcy thought *snotty*) attitude.

The family headed toward the back door. Everyone talked at once. The voices receded as the group entered the house, but any minute now they'd be checking out the second floor, choosing bedrooms—looking out the window at the view.

She knew she could see all the adjoining backyards from her windows, which meant they could see her from *their* windows. She couldn't lie here like a strip of undercooked bacon, yet she recoiled from the thought of running into the house like a frightened heroine from a Gothic romance.

But Darcy knew she wouldn't be able to relax in the garden until she was certain that the man on the other side of the hedge was *not* Boyz Szweda. Even though it was *impossible* that it was Boyz, this was a pretty desperate case of seeing is believing.

She stood, picked up her book and her water bottle, and slowly, humming, she strolled through the garden to her house. Boyz wouldn't recognize her from the back, after all, especially since she'd grown out her once-chic asymmetrically cut hair so long it fell in dark waves below her shoulders. She didn't hurry. She even paused to check her Knock Out rosebush before climbing the steps to the back porch and stepping inside.

She shut the door gently, quietly. She put her gardening tools in their rack. She leaned against the door and drew in a few deep breaths.

This was ridiculous. This was so *not* her kind of behavior. She was no longer a divorced and lonely female sniveling herself to sleep at night. She held an important position in the town's library. She had friends—she had a boyfriend, a carpenter, big and handsome and very good with his hands.

She should have Nash over for dinner tonight! She could throw something on the grill and they could open some beer and eat outdoors. She could change out of her gardening clothes and slip into a pretty sundress....

Really? Were these thoughts really coming from her own mind? Clearly, she wasn't plotting to seduce Nash. All she had to do was open the front door to seduce Nash. Obviously, she wanted to show off for Boyz who might not even be there.

Maddening. Here she was, an accomplished woman thinking like a love-scorned teenager.

The important thing was that Darcy was only *thinking* that way. Not acting that way. Yet.

She needed a distraction. She needed to get out of the house and away from this mood buzzing around her like a swarm of wasps.

So: Where was her cellphone? On the kitchen counter. Good. She hit Jordan's number. Darcy had known Jordan for only three years, but with some people a friendship fit perfectly and immediately, like the rare times when the first dress you tried on was instant magic. She had first met Jordan at the library—always a good omen. Darcy had taken her bag lunch out to the garden to eat on a bench by the crab apple trees, and she'd heard the unmistakable sound of retching. Expecting to find some inexperienced drunken teenager, she discovered a pretty blond woman on her knees near the tulips.

"Are you okay?" Darcy asked. "How can I help you?"

Without looking up, the woman croaked, "My tote's over there. I've got some saltines in a plastic bag and a can of 7Up. If you could bring it to me..."

"Of course. And I'll get you some wet paper towels from the bathroom, so you can wipe your hands and face."

"Oh, thank you. But please don't tell the librarians that I barfed in their garden."

"We'll shovel some dirt over it. No one will know."

By the time Darcy returned with the paper towels, the other woman had managed to move to a bench, where she sat very slowly chewing a tiny corner of a saltine.

"Thanks," she said to Darcy. She carefully wiped her hands and face and a few strands of sticky hair. "I'm not drunk," she announced. "I'm pregnant."

"And I'm a librarian," Darcy told her.

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes."

“I’m so sorry I barfed in your garden.”

“Better than if you’d barfed on the books,” Darcy said wryly.

The other woman managed a weak chuckle.

They sat on the bench for an hour, talking. For more than an hour, actually; Darcy went fifteen minutes over her lunch break, but she often came in early, so she figured she was allowed. She learned that Jordan was newly married to Lyle Morris, an island guy she’d known and adored all her life. They’d started kissing and making out when they were fourteen. They lost their virginity to each other when they were both sixteen, but it had been so quick and weird and they’d been so guilt ridden and afraid she’d gotten pregnant—she hadn’t—that they never dated after that. After high school, Lyle went into the army. Jordan had worked at her parents’ liquor store and tried going out with other guys, but it never worked. She missed Lyle. She started writing Lyle, cheerful, sex-free, letters. Four years later, when Lyle got out of the army, he walked into her parents’ store on Main Street, picked Jordan up in his powerful arms, carried her to his car, and drove to his apartment out on Surfside Road.

“I know how to do it *right* this time,” he’d told her.

And he did.

They’d married a few months later. They’d been married a year and they were going to have a baby.

Darcy gave Jordan a capsule summary of her life and promised a more detailed account when she wasn’t working. That night, Jordan came to her house and drank milk while Darcy drank wine and told her about her fruitcake parents, her darling grandmother, her weird marriage, her divorce. By the end of the evening, they were both hoarse from talking fast and laughing hysterically. Their friendship grew strong and fast from that evening, and when Darcy joined Jordan and Lyle at the beach with their friends one Sunday, she slipped into the group as easily as a fish into water. She’d found her tribe.

Now Jordan answered her cell. “This is your neighborhood help line. I’m sorry, but you may not park your car in my driveway.”

Jordan and her family lived in town, like Darcy did, and their big old house was surrounded by rental houses, just like Darcy’s. Jordan’s husband

was a contractor, so he was responsible for some of the nouveau mansions built on the outskirts of town, with ocean views to die for, but Lyle and Jordan chose to live in town. They had a daughter, Kiks. They planned on having at least one more, and they wanted their children to be able to walk to the library, the pharmacy, the post office. They wanted to have that small-town feeling—and they did, until one by one the houses around them were sold off to people who used them as their third or fourth or fifth home or for rental income. Nice in-town houses could rent for a good five grand a week in the summer.

Most first timers to the island were shocked by how close the houses in town were built to one another. Some were only five feet apart. Probably the sensible builders of the nineteenth century intended these walls of houses along the main streets of the village to block the wind that howled over the water. Certainly the houses served this purpose. Maybe the forefathers and especially the foremothers, often alone while their husbands were out at sea, liked having neighbors nearby on this isolated island. The streets in town were narrow. Many were one-way. Few had garages; even fewer had driveways. Parking could be an issue—kind of like city parking—but no one expected problems here in paradise.

“What have you got?” Darcy asked, sitting down on the white bench in the back hall to take off her gardening clogs.

“Family with twin babies!” Jordan laughed. “Three months old. They’ll scream even more than Kiks!” Kathryn—Kat—Kiks was Jordan’s two-year-old daughter. She was a champion screamer.

As they talked, Darcy padded barefoot into the kitchen. She filled a glass with cool water and took a long drink. Nantucket had the purest, sweetest water in the world.

From her kitchen window, she could see right into her backyard, and over the hedges, some of the yard behind it.

“What about you?” Jordan asked.

“Boyz and his family are at this very moment carrying their luggage into the house behind me.”

Jordan went quiet. After a moment, she said in her best GPS bitch voice, “Recalibrating.”

“I know. Never in my wildest nightmares did I imagine this. His wife, the luscious Autumn, is hauling in some grocery bags, and her daughter, Willow, who must be about fourteen now, is wearily schlepping in her duffel bag right behind Boyz, who’s got three heavy suitcases.”

“You’re sure it’s Boyz?”

“I was in the garden when they arrived. I heard their voices. And now I can see them from the kitchen window. Yes, dammit, I’m sure.”

“I don’t know what to say. This is beyond belief. Do you want to come over?”

“No, I’m fine. It’s just so weird.”

“Maybe you should invite Nash over for noisy time on a blanket in your backyard.”

“Ha! My first thought, too!” Darcy left the kitchen and wandered through the dining room and into the living room and on into the room she called the library, which was what her grandmother Penny always called it, probably because its walls were lined with bookshelves and those shelves were packed with books.

“Is Nash coming over?”

“Not today. We were together all weekend. But, anyway, I don’t need to impress Boyz! It’s been three years since I last saw or even talked to him.”

“But wait, Darcy, why would Boyz rent a house so near yours?”

“I can’t imagine he knows I’m living in this house. He knew my grandmother lived on the island, but when I was married to him, Penny was in an assisted living center on the Cape. He met her, but he never came to the island with me. He never saw this house. We always had to go to Lake George in the summer. It was another one of the Family Traditions. I have no idea why he’s here.”

“You’re bound to run into him this summer.”

“I know. I can’t believe it. But you know what? I hope I *do* meet him sometime so I can find out why he’s here instead of at the family compound at Lake George.”

“Do you really care?”

“*Care*, no. But I am curious. He was so all about his family—”

“Darcy, Kiks is howling. I’ll call you later.”

Darcy climbed the stairs to the second floor and entered the bathroom off her bedroom. It was one of the luxuries she had built in when she first inherited the house. Large, with a white tile floor and the original old claw-foot tub and a new shower and piles of thick white towels—it was her own private spa. She stripped off her clothes, turned the water on hot, and stepped into the shower.

Memories streamed down on her like rain.