

NANCY NAIGLE

Author of *The Shell Collector*

To Light the Way Forward

A Novel



Praise for
To Light the Way Forward

“Bringing to life characters you can’t help but fall in love with, Nancy Naigle goes straight to the heart with this story of tragedy turned to triumph. A poignant reminder to never give up hope.”

—SHEILA ROBERTS, author of *The Best Life Book Club*

“An emotional and uplifting story about surviving—no, make that thriving—after great loss, thanks to connection, friendship, and love (of all kinds!). Nancy Naigle truly understands the human heart and its incredible capacity for resilience. I came away wishing all the wonderful characters from Whelk’s Island were my friends too!”

—MIRANDA LIASSON, Amazon bestselling author
and author of *Sea Glass Summer*

“A beautiful, tender, uplifting novel about love, loss, and the courage to embrace new beginnings. Nancy Naigle crafts a story that will touch your heart and inspire your soul.”

—RAEANNE THAYNE, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Naigle returns to Whelk’s Island in this charming tale of loss, love, and taking chances. *To Light the Way Forward* shines hope on the strength of family and friendship—and the power of coming together. Well-paced with rich detail, this story will delight readers.”

—RACHEL HAUCK, *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Wedding Dress

“Nancy Naigle creates characters who are so multidimensional and real that it’s like you are walking along the beach with them. It’s a joy to go on their journey of miracles and weathering the storms of life.

To Light the Way Forward beautifully illuminates how resilient the human spirit is. Naigle splendidly captures the journey of love and loss through laughter, tears, and all the feelings. This book is an uplifting story of miracles and human connection. I want to live in the world of Whelk’s Island!”

—ERIN CAHILL, actress, Hallmark

Praise for
The Shell Collector

“This is a beautiful story full of love, loss, and second chances. A collection of vivid characters, an inspiring setting, and heart-held hope for a better tomorrow.”

—DEBBIE MACOMBER, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“As an avid shell seeker, I enjoyed this tale of surprises deposited among the tides, with its underlying message of finding just the shells we are meant to discover. A tender story of faith, love, and friendship that will warm the hearts of beachgoers and lovers of the sea.”

—LISA WINGATE, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
Before We Were Yours and *The Book of Lost Friends*

“A touching story of hope and renewal—proof that you can find more at the beach than shells.”

—SHEILA ROBERTS, *USA Today* bestselling author

“An amazing emotional story of putting one foot in front of the other, of overcoming heartache, and of learning to live—and love—again. You’ll cry—and smile—and you’ll close the book with a very full heart.”

—LORI FOSTER, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Nancy Naigle is at the top of her game with *The Shell Collector*. A compelling cast of characters—all acting in accord with their best lights—tackles the issues of loss and grief with wit and grace. ‘The Wife’ is my favorite new character. An uplifting, hopeful page-turner that shouldn’t be missed!”

—BARBARA HINSKE, author of the Rosemont series
and *Guiding Emily*

“A touching story about love, loss, and healing, *The Shell Collector* gives you all the feels. I enjoyed spending time at the beach collecting seashells—and pondering the encouraging messages inside them—right along with the characters. Don’t miss this uplifting, faith-affirming read!”

—BRENDA NOVAK, *New York Times* bestselling author

“*The Shell Collector* is a beautiful, emotional story about the glorious sunrise that can come after a dark night, about surviving loss and finding hope and joy again. Amanda, Maeve, and the entire cast will break your heart and then heal it all over again. I loved every word.”

—RAEANNE THAYNE, *New York Times* bestselling author

“In *The Shell Collector*, Naigle takes readers on a hopeful journey of healing after unimaginable loss. A tragic past, lovable characters, and a charming small-town setting align for a meaningful beach read. Don’t miss this tender tale full of wisdom and insight!”

—DENISE HUNTER, bestselling author of *Bookshop by the Sea*

“*The Shell Collector* is utterly charming. Naigle’s story of restoration, love, and hope is a perfect read any time of the year. The characters are fun if not a bit quirky, and the setting evokes so much peace. Well done. I loved it.”

—RACHEL HAUCK, *New York Times* bestselling author

“*The Shell Collector* is an unforgettable story of love, hope, and healing. This inspiring novel has found a place in my heart.”

—JANE PORTER, *New York Times* bestselling author

“*The Shell Collector* gives voice to the profound truth of grieving and learning to come alive again. Nancy Naigle beautifully shows how love can come in so many different forms, as long as you’re open to the unexpected miracles life has to offer. In her own words, ‘Life is rarely predictable if we’re doing it right.’”

—ERIN CAHILL, actress, Hallmark

Other Novels by Nancy Naigle

Adams Grove Novels	A Shell Collector Novel
<i>Sweet Tea and Secrets</i>	<i>The Shell Collector</i>
<i>Out of Focus</i>	Stand-Alone Titles
<i>Wedding Cake and Big Mistakes</i>	<i>inkBLOT</i>
<i>Pecan Pie and Deadly Lies</i>	<i>Sand Dollar Cove</i>
<i>Mint Juleps and Justice</i>	<i>The Secret Ingredient</i>
<i>Barbecue and Bad News</i>	<i>Recipe for Romance</i>
Boot Creek Series	<i>What Remains True</i>
<i>Life After Perfect</i>	<i>The Wedding Ranch</i>
<i>Every Yesterday</i>	<i>And Then There Was You</i>
<i>Until Tomorrow</i>	<i>The Law of Attraction</i>
Seasoned Southern Sleuths	Christmas Novels
Mysteries	<i>Christmas Joy</i>
<i>In for a Penny</i>	<i>Hope at Christmas</i>
<i>Collard Greens and Catfishing</i>	<i>The Christmas Shop</i>
<i>Deviled Eggs and Deception</i>	<i>Christmas Angels</i>
<i>Fried Pickles and a Funeral</i>	<i>A Heartfelt Christmas Promise</i>
<i>Wedding Mints and Witnesses</i>	<i>Mission: Merry Christmas</i>
<i>Christmas Cookies and</i>	<i>Christmas in Chestnut Ridge</i>
<i>a Confession</i>	
<i>Sweet Tea and Second Chances</i>	



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Wishing you a grateful heart that will allow disappointment and worries to drift out with the tide, and welcome love and light to surround and comfort you every day going forward.

Prologue

TUG BASNIGHT STOOD AT THE COUNTER OF HIS DINER, holding the latest issue of *The Scout Guide for the Outer Banks*. His fingers grazed the soft pink ribbon tied around it. Maeve would've loved the delicate ribbon—the color of her favorite sea glass—the ocean blue cover, and the gold foil lettering shimmering like sunlight on the waves. She had an eye for details and this—this was the kind of thing she made a fuss over. Her memory washed over him, and the weight of her absence pressed down on him again.

With a quick pull, the ribbon came undone, slipping through his fingers like a memory he couldn't hold on to. He set the delicate ribbon aside, too pretty to throw away. Maeve might be gone, but he still found himself saving pretty things, as if there'd be someone to wrap a fancy gift for someday again.

He glanced toward the booth where Maeve used to sit, expecting to catch a glimpse of her sandy flip-flops peeking out from the hem of her long skirt under the table. An old man with old habits, ones he wasn't ready to let go of just yet.

Tug flipped open the glossy book, the pages thick and luxurious. It looked totally out of place in his simple oceanfront diner.

Paul had convinced him to be a part of this—insisting on funding a spread to highlight Whelk's Island. Paul's business, Paws Town Square, had gained positive exposure in the north-

ern Virginia edition, with a glowing story about Paul's work with military dogs. He was a true American hero. The book was designed to connect small businesses, show the people behind them, and serve as a vacation and community guide. And here he was flipping through it, trying to feel connected to a world that seemed to move on without him.

Tug looked through the beautiful photographs, searching for a familiar face.

There it was. Paul's. And his. "I'm a star, and they must've airbrushed me," he managed to say through laughter. "I look right good there." He straightened and pulled his glasses to reading position.

"Talking to yourself again?" The Wife called from the deck.

"Not talking to you," Tug replied without even a glance. His parrot, lovingly named The Wife, kept him company and sane most days, but she lived up to her name with all the unsolicited commentary. Still, he loved that old bird. Maybe he'd use that ribbon on a nice present for her someday. "I'm reading something. You can't read," he hollered back.

A series of smooching sounds came from The Wife's direction.

He shook his head and read on. There were snippets about each of the businesses and a summary about Whelk's Island.

Whelk's Island isn't your typical tourist beach destination. No, this small town in North Carolina with beautiful sandy beaches and an abundance of shells has somehow remained a best-kept secret. It's a tight-knit community steeped in tradition, and if you do happen to veer off the highly traveled paths down the coast into this town and stop in at Tug's Diner, you're likely to notice a town secret hanging right there on the wall in plain sight.

Framed are shells along with the letters people have written to Tug about the special gifts they found while visiting. The shells are all different shapes and sizes, but they have one thing in common. Anonymous messages profoundly perfect for the moment in which they were discovered.

How the shells with the messages came to be, how they landed in the right hands at the right time, is a mystery, and for some, it's impossible to comprehend. But to those who've experienced it firsthand, Whelk's Island will forever hold a special place in their hearts.

Tug's heart swelled with love for Whelk's Island. They'd captured her perfectly.

Nostalgic tears blurred the words.

He'd been blessed with plenty of customers during every season. He loved serving this community, and a good meal at a reasonable price was getting harder to find with inflation.

But did he have the energy for an influx of customers? Tables were tight as it was. He'd have to hire more help if this ad did what it promised.

Just the thought made him tired. *I'll cross that bridge if we get there.*

The company that created the booklets was holding a launch party for the promotion of the guide in every new city. He glanced at the calendar, where he'd circled the date in red so he wouldn't forget.

If the storm swirling in the Caribbean ever got its act together and started moving this way, it might rain out the *Scout* shindig next week.

Tug never trusted early-August storms, and this one looked like it might actually hit hurricane status. He shook off the tingle that chased up his spine.

Chapter One

AFTER A WEEK OF WEATHER WATCHING AND PREDICTIONS, the storm reached hurricane status and hit a couple of smaller islands in the Caribbean. Following a few bobbles, Hurricane Edwina gathered strength, and now the models were predicting she would follow the coastline right through the Carolinas.

Whelk's Island hummed with anticipation as residents prepared for the approaching hurricane. Locals were no strangers to the routine.

Messages to past tempests peppered sheets of plywood all around town, reused each year. The spray-painted messages carried a confidence that leaned toward arrogance, almost daring the storms to do their worst. *GO AWAY, HUBO. TURN AROUND, THOMAS, OR ELSE!* and *FORGET YOU, FREDA* were some leftover warnings from the past.

No matter how bad the hurricane predictions got, there were always some residents who stayed put, defying evacuation orders with the same stubborn resolve as surfers who refuse to abandon the waves as a storm churns the ocean, threatening to rip them to no tomorrow in a blink.

Tug knew that attitude firsthand. He used to be one of those surfers riding the trickier waves the storm blew in. But with eight decades of experience, he'd grown less cocky. Tug had never evacuated before, but he would at least give it a thought

these days. He wasn't sure if the storms were getting worse or if he was getting wiser, finally.

A man laid a tip on the counter as his family of four left the diner.

Tug gave him a nod of appreciation and wiped down the counter to make room for the next customers.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingled with the anxious chatter coming from the line of people waiting to get in. The storm chugging out in the Atlantic was the topic of the day, and televisions on the wall caught everyone's attention with each update.

Tug couldn't shake the uneasiness gnawing at his gut.

Early-August hurricanes were a rarity, and the fiercest ones weren't usually until late September or October, but this one stirred disquiet in him.

He forced a smile through the ominous warnings, welcoming his customers like it was just another Monday.

In her cage, The Wife stretched her charcoal-gray wings to their full span of eighteen inches, then screeched.

Tug glanced toward her cage on the deck. Beyond the windows that overlooked the beach, the ocean was choppier than it had been earlier.

"Get your sea legs!" The Wife called.

Tug seated the customers, then walked out back to check on The Wife. "Are you okay?"

"Are you okay?" The bird cocked her head.

"I asked you first."

She jerked her head around. "No!"

He checked her food and water. "What's got you upset?"

"Get your sea legs. Time to go," The Wife said.

Tug laughed every time The Wife pulled that phrase out. The first time he'd ever heard her say it was to Willa, the woman he almost married a long, long time ago. Turned out The Wife

knew Tug's taste better than he did, because she'd been telling Willa to go for months before Tug realized it wasn't going to work. The Wife had loved Maeve, though.

"It's getting antsy out there," he said to The Wife. He pointed to the water. "Do you recognize that angry-water dance? Don't worry. We'll get you moved to safety in due time."

She made water droplet sounds, one of her favorite noises, and then snapped her wings tight to her body.

Tug and Maeve had talked about this before.

How the ocean spoke its own language, warning of things to come.

This is my first big storm without you, Maeve. What do you think? Any communication from Maeve would be welcome, but all the wishing and talking to himself couldn't bring her back. I'm always thinking about you.

Sometimes it felt like Maeve was close by, but that would mean he believed in ghosts—and he didn't. He believed in angels, though, and Maeve had been the most angelic woman he'd ever known.

Life on Whelk's Island wasn't the same without her. He wasn't the same. He missed her. Every single day, sad moments snuck in. Life would never be the same, and that made it a little less appealing. He sighed.

"I'm just an old man talking to an old bird."

The Wife scooped close to the bars and lowered her head, insisting on a scratch. Tug slipped his fingers through and gently massaged her head. "Just like a woman, always wanting a shoulder rub." He reached down into the cabinet and pulled out a dried banana chip. "Here's a little something to sweeten your afternoon. We've still got a lot of work to do today."

"Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it's off to work we go," she sang out.

"Talk to you in a little while."

"Goodbye. Talk to you later," The Wife said.

A couple of surfers paddled out along the pier. The restless ocean was producing good waves today. Tug could watch them all day, but he had a diner full of customers. “Keep an eye on the surfers,” he said to The Wife.

She stood on one leg and stretched the other behind her. “Lifeguard on duty.”

As he headed back to the kitchen, more surfers gathered next to the diner’s fancy blue-and-white sign. It had become a traditional meetup spot for surfers when he started the place and was still surfing himself. Big and hand-sandblasted by a local guy, it was worth the years of breakfasts Tug had bartered for it. That sign had lasted all these years with only a few touch-ups. The only thing that had changed was the addition of a smaller swinging sign that read SURFERS ALWAYS WELCOME, which his surf buddies had given him when he officially hung up his board for good. The lifestyle of a surfer never goes away.

He stepped inside, doing a cha-cha as the servers whisked past him.

Tug washed his hands and plucked the next ticket off the clips. He dropped a basket of clam strips into the fryer just as the local news broke in again on the television show in progress.

The reporter was in a frenzy over the possibility of the hurricane making its way to their area. “And *now* it looks like this storm could threaten the Outer Banks of North Carolina,” he said. “Residents need to prepare for the damaging winds and potential of a disastrous storm surge. If things keep going the way they are now, this tropical storm is expected to become a Category 2 hurricane by morning.”

Tug looked up. The projections still looked like an enormous bowl of spaghetti. *We’re overdue for another big storm.* They’d been lucky the last few years with the storms sort of bouncing off the Carolina coast before they got to Whelk’s Island.

He tried to keep his mind on the orders. There was no sense getting worked up about the weather this early in the game. They had at least three days before that needed to happen.

As Tug pushed two orders of their popular octopus-shaped pancakes from the kids' menu into the pickup window, he noticed it was for the table where Amanda, the newest resident of Whelk's Island, and her kids usually sat.

He leaned over the counter. Indeed, it was them sitting there. He snatched one of the warm plates of pancakes back to swap with a fresh stack. The diner's famous octopus pancakes came with blueberry syrup to match the ocean, but Hailey was a strawberry fan. He quickly doctored up a custom version for her. This family was closer than real family to him, and he loved delighting them with the little things.

"I'll be right back," Tug called to the cook. "I'll deliver this order," he told the server, then carried all three plates over to their table.

"Tug!" Jesse squealed. "Hi! Mom said it was too busy for us to say hello."

"I'm never too busy for y'all." He gave Jesse a wink. "How's my man this morning?"

"Grrreat!"

"Glad to hear it." Tug set the plates on the table. "Traditional for Jesse with the Atlantic Ocean blueberry syrup, and the strawberry syrup for you, Hailey."

"Thank you for my special red sea octopus," Hailey said in appreciation of the strawberry substitution. At eight years old, she was quite confident in her preferences, not hesitating to inform Tug of hers the first time they ordered these pancakes.

"You are welcome, young lady." It was their special little something, and even though Amanda's family were still relative newcomers to Whelk's Island, having moved here a couple of years ago, this family had touched his heart in a way he never

knew possible. He imagined this was what being a grandpa felt like. It was the best feeling in the world.

Jesse immediately stabbed his fork into his pancakes. “Mom says we have to leave town for a while because of the storm,” he whined. “It’s not even raining.” He shoved a bite into his mouth.

From the way Amanda looked, the kid was wearing her out this morning.

“Well, Jesse, it’s your mom’s job to keep you safe.” He leaned close enough to whisper. “What’s so bad about leaving town if it’s going to be raining here, anyway? Look.”

The meteorologist on the local news dramatically swept his arm across the map, warning of possible high winds and rain.

Jesse rose from his chair to get a better look at the television, then plopped down and dropped his head into his hand. “It’s sunny outside. I think the weatherman has gone cuckoo.”

A loud whistle came from the deck. “People are more cuckoo than birds,” The Wife squawked, ending with a high-pitched chirp.

“See? Even The Wife thinks so.” Jesse looked pretty smug for a six-year-old.

Tug eyed the boy. “Did you teach her that?”

Jesse glanced around, trying not to look guilty, and then shrugged. “I might have said that to her a couple times.”

“Mm-hmm. I know you.” Tug settled his gaze on the young boy. “Can I expect her to be saying ‘Jesse’ soon too?”

“I wish.” Jesse shrugged in disappointment. “She could say it if she wanted to. She just won’t. I’ve been trying and trying to get her to say ‘Jesse is the best.’”

Tug loved how Hailey and Jesse made a fuss over The Wife. If she outlived him, she’d be in great hands with these folks. He’d already written it into his will, not even bothering to ask, because if all else failed, Amanda’s longtime friend Paul would take care of her since he had the perfect facility over at Paws

Town Square to house a wisecracking, opinionated old bird. Actually, Amanda and Paul were more than friends. Everyone else could see that plain as day, but they were taking their relationship slow.

Couldn't blame them. They'd both been through a rough patch. The kind some never figure their way through. But those two were better together, and everyone knew it. Tug just wished they'd make it official already, so people would quit gossiping about it behind their backs.

The volume in the restaurant softened, as folks' attention was captured by the weatherman's apprehension and the report about the potential weather risks.

"It's never ending. It's like this every fifteen minutes." Tug groaned. "Seems to me all the triple Dopplers, satellites, Nexrads, and quadruple-whatever predictions just get people worried way sooner than need be."

"We went to the grocery store, and there was no bread." Jesse's eyes were wide. "None." He made a big zero with his fingers. "I can't even have a sammich."

"I'll make sure you have bread," Tug said. "Don't you worry, little man."

Amanda brushed Jesse's hair back from his forehead. "We'll be traveling, anyway. We can stop and get some, and your grandmother has everything we need at her house."

"You're going to your folks' place?" Tug asked.

"That's the plan. I wanted to just go inland a little, but Paul insisted it was the perfect time to visit. He's right. It has been a while since we've been."

"I'll put together some snacks for your road trip," Tug said. "I pack a really good picnic."

"You don't have to do that," Amanda insisted.

"I want to. Besides, they love my cooking." He nodded toward the kids.

“We do!” Hailey and Jesse said.

“Jinx!” Hailey said it first, and Jesse should be used to it. She always beat him to the jinx.

“One of these days you’re going to be faster than her,” Tug teased Jesse.

Hailey put her fork down. “The lines were forever long at the store. I thought we’d never get here. It’s almost lunchtime, and we’re just having breakfast. I was starving. This hit the spot.”

“Well, folks round here have been through a lot of hurricanes over the years. Some were false alarms, but it never hurts to be prepared.”

“Now, wait a minute.” Amanda lifted her coffee cup and cocked her head. “Maevie once told me you hosted the best hurricane parties on Whelk’s Island back in the day.”

Tug pressed a finger to his lips and slid into the booth next to Jesse. “I used to, but that was a long, long time ago. The storms weren’t as brutal back then, or maybe we just weren’t informed enough to know the difference. They seem to get worse every year.”

“Don’t let me find out y’all are planning a big old party and sending me out of town with these two. Else we’re staying.” Amanda giggled, and Tug loved how her smile could light up a room.

“Let’s have a hurricane party,” Jesse said. “Will there be cake?”

“No, I’m just teasing Tug,” Amanda assured him. “We’re leaving tomorrow.” She turned to Tug. “They don’t want to go. We’re all dragging our feet a little.”

“It’s the right thing to do. Leave, I mean, not drag your feet.”

“I don’t feel good about going without Paul.” Her lips trembled, and she pressed them together.

Amanda would probably always hold a fear in her heart about being separated from the ones she loved, since Jack was

killed while deployed. It was a sensitive situation. Tug wondered if Paul had thought that through.

“Why don’t you come with us?” Jesse begged.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’d rather go down with the ship!” He regretted the flippant remark when concern washed over Jesse’s expression. “I’m teasing. Does this look like a ship? Paul and I will both be safe.”

“Then we should be safe here too.”

“How do you argue with that?” Amanda pulled her plate in front of her. “Maeve said her house had weathered every hurricane—”

“But Maeve was a stubborn old gal, and she didn’t have these two precious hearts to protect. Enjoy the time with your folks. Seriously, even in the weaker storms, it’s frightening. The houses creak and moan. The ocean is so angry you wouldn’t recognize it, and when you get back, you’ll have the best treasures the sea can wash up.”

“I can’t wait,” Hailey said.

Chapter Two

THE FRONT DOOR OF THE DINER SWUNG OPEN, AND FOUR deeply suntanned men walked in. “There an old surfer in the house?” one of them bellowed.

“Excuse me.” Tug slid from the booth. “We’ve got windows to board up.” He patted the table twice and then pointed a playful finger at Jesse. “You be good for your mom.” Tug leaned in toward Amanda. “Stay in touch. We’re going to be fine.”

Tug headed for the two men at the entrance of the diner. “Hey, boys.” He’d known them since they were just shaggy-haired teens riding waves at the pier. They were men now, with families and real jobs. But they still often stashed their longboards down here after a morning of surfing to come in and grab coffee and breakfast. “Thanks for coming over to help me get ready. We all know these storms have a mind of their own.”

“That’s for sure,” Skip said. “I already boarded my place up and sent the family ahead to my in-laws’.”

“You’re staying?” Tug found it hard to hide his surprise.

“You know he’s leaving.” Skip’s best friend, Bebe, elbowed Skip. “Missus wouldn’t let him stay.”

“I don’t want to,” Skip defended himself. “My family needs me, and I’m smart enough not to risk my fool neck on the waves

in a hurricane now.” Skip looked at Tug and thumbed toward Bebe. “You know where that guy will be.”

“We have this talk every year.” Tug ran a hand through his gray hair, but he understood. He really did. He’d been one of them a long, long time ago.

Bebe had wild hair, and his skin looked like leather from all the years in the sun. “I hope we can find the panel numbers on those old boards for all the graffiti on them. They got more paint than they got wood on ’em.”

“Hey, they’ve done the trick for fifteen years. No reason to replace them now.” Tug grabbed the storage door keys from the hook and led the way down to the storage area. “I even came up with a couple of new warnings for this storm.”

“I don’t think there’s room to paint any more new sayings.” Skip chuckled. “It’s looking like abstract art as it is.”

Tug wagged a finger in Skip’s direction. “That’s *my* abstract handiwork, and I’ll find a spot. I take great pride in these paintings. It might just be hurricane warnings to you, but to me . . . it’s art, and it works!” He twirled an imaginary paintbrush in the air.

“Yeah. Whatever. Don’t quit your day job.” Skip slapped Tug’s back.

Tug shrugged, enjoying the ribbing.

“Since we added two-by-four frames around the boards after Dorian blew through and *tugged* the corners right off them, you should have some room to paint your warnings there.” Skip laughed at his own joke. “See what I did there? *Tugged* at the corners.”

Tug shook his head as he unlocked the door to the storage room. “Yeah, yeah. Get to work.” The guys started pulling sheets of plywood out and leaning them against the building. For the first time, Tug was happy not to have to do it himself.

Before previous storms, he'd been the one to board up Maeve's house, too, but Paul was taking care of that for Amanda now that she lived there. The pretty blue beach house had weathered every storm that had hit this coast since it was built. That was back when craftsmen were so proud of their work they overbuilt rather than skirt even the code minimum to turn a dollar. They sure didn't build them like that these days. Not even the million-dollar homes.

His vision blurred as tears built, as they still often did when he thought of Maeve. Regrets had a way of tearing a man's heart at the edges like a weathered hurricane board.

Bebe slid out another sheet of plywood. "Can't even make out most of them." He stood back, trying to decipher the spray-painted words. "I can't even make this one out since there are so many names on top of each other."

"I think it was *Matthew*. That one goes on the front windows. F1, and there should be panels F2 and F3 right behind it if we put them back in the order we took them down. Oh, look." Tug gestured toward the board Skip was carrying out. It read, *DON'T GET ON SANTA'S NAUGHTY LIST.*

There were four names scratched out. *DORIAN. FLORENCE.* Then *FAY* and *FAN*. The last scrawl wasn't a name at all. Just *HASTA LA VISTA, HURRICANE* in big letters.

Bebe hiked a sheet over his head with a grunt. "Remember the back-to-back storms that one year? Flooded the beach roads for weeks."

Tug recalled it well. "Who could forget? People were coming to the diner on floats and inner tubes. If I remember correctly, you and Bebe paddled around on your surfboards for the better part of a week."

"Guilty on both accounts," Bebe agreed. "But in my defense, I only used the inner tube to get back to my house, so I could

get my surfboard. We'd all been at Skip's when that storm bounced back and hit us again. No one expected that."

Tug laughed at the explanation. When he was their age, he might've thought it was a pretty good excuse too. "Well, there's always you, Bebe. You never surprise me anymore."

"I'm taking that as a compliment." Bebe grinned, never apologizing for his love of surfing. He was more chill than all the rest of them put together, but when it came to these big weather events, he was always here to help.

"You're a good one, no matter what they say about you." Tug clapped Bebe's shoulder, then chuckled when the backhanded compliment registered on his face.

"Wait—what?" Bebe looked confused. "Who said what?"

"Kidding, Bebe. Thanks, boys. I've got a diner full of customers, but as soon as you get these in place, you've earned a free lunch."

Ladders rattled as they hit the side of the diner, followed by the hum of screw guns securing the discolored plywood. With two teams at it and everything prenumbered, it wouldn't take long.

"One last thing," Tug said before he turned to head back inside. "Can y'all bring the big coolers from storage up to the kitchen for me?"

"Sure thing," Skip answered. The guys had helped enough times to know the drill.

Tug probably didn't even need to be here supervising. "I'll meet you inside when you're done." He walked through the front door. "No hurry, no worries," he announced over the chatter. "We aren't closing early. We're just getting the windows boarded up so everyone will have a safe and dry place to come until the storm decides what it's going to do. Sorry to steal your view so soon. With any luck, it will have all been for nothing."

A rolling echo of thanks filled the space. There were a few appreciative shouts from the customers too. “You’re always here for us, Tug.”

“My pleasure,” he said with a smile.

Tug cleaned a table for the guys and plopped a Reserved sign on it to hold it for them.

About half the people inside right now were probably scoffing at the warnings, while the other half were worried.

Tug refrained from comment, not wanting to sway anyone one way or the other, because the ugly truth was, people lost their lives in these natural catastrophes every year. The tropical storm was gaining strength, but her path was still uncertain, bouncing from east to west in a squiggly trail.

Amanda got up from the table, her children beside her.

“You know, Tug, you could come with us,” Hailey said. “I asked Mom. It’s okay.”

“I can’t leave The Wife.”

“Paul will take care of her for you,” Jesse said matter-of-factly. “He has to stay to work. You can come and take care of us.”

“I’d like that very much, but I think I’m going to stay where I can be helpful to the folks who stay behind who are not prepared. I have food, water, and generators. People will need the basics.”

Amanda rested her hand on Jesse’s drooping shoulder. “We are going to be fine. And we will be back in no time.”

Hailey bit her lip.

Tug stooped and leaned in. “Are you okay?”

She shrugged. Wise beyond her years. Losing her father at such a young age, she’d stepped into the big-sister role and been sensitive to the pain her mother experienced when Jack didn’t come home from his tour of duty. Reuniting with Paul, Jack’s best friend, had been a blessing for them all.

“Are you worried?” Tug whispered.

Her lips pressed into a thin line. She glanced over her shoulder, then turned her back toward her mother.

“You can tell me,” he said.

“What if we come back and you and Paul aren’t here anymore?” she whispered. “What do we do then?”

“Can I talk to you? Out there in the gazebo?”

Hailey nodded and allowed him to take her hand. Tug gave Amanda a wink. Amanda pressed her hand to her heart as he led Hailey outside.

“My mini-Maeve. You’re smart just like she was. You’re so much like Maeve I don’t know how you aren’t related.”

“We love her like family,” Hailey said.

“Me too.” He nodded to one of the tables. “Sit with me for a minute.” He held out the chair for her and then sat across from her.

“Mom says that makes us family.”

“I guess it does, then.” Tug reached over and squeezed her hand. “What can I do to help you?”

“It doesn’t make sense to me. If it’s so dangerous we have to leave, I don’t know why you and Paul can stay.”

“That’s fair. So here’s the thing. Every storm is different, but usually it’s a lot of high winds, and they can cause power outages. Sometimes shingles fly off, and some signs will blow out, leaving shards of glass lying around. The buildings moan and groan against the high winds, which is pretty scary to hear, and the way we sit along the coast, we always experience some flooding.”

“We could just stay inside and wear ear plugs, so we don’t hear the scary sounds.”

Tug couldn’t hold back a smile. “You’re right. You could. But with no power, it’ll be hot and miserable and there’s nothing you can do until the storm is over except sit there and

wait. Sometimes the electricity goes out for days. I promise, you are going to be way more comfortable at your grandparents' house."

She twisted her foot nervously, then looked into his eyes. "Will you call me every day and let me know you're okay?"

"Sure. I can do that. Don't be afraid. We'll be okay."

"I'll pray every day. Every hour!"

"I know you will, Hailey. You are a sweet angel. I'll be praying for you, too, and we will be back together soon. You just wait and see."

"Thank you, Tug." She leapt up and raced to his side, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I love you."

"I love you, too, kiddo."

She released him, and he stood and reached for her hand.

"Will you do something for me while you're gone?"

"Anything," she said, hope dancing in her eyes.

"I've been thinking I need some new pictures to put up around here. Could you work on that for me?"

"Yes! I'm getting really good at drawing." Her face grew serious. "I can definitely do that for you."

"I still have the picture of the diner you drew for me. It's very special to me."

"I'll pack my markers to take with me. You just wait until you see what I make for you this time." She looked like her spirits had lifted.

"I think your mom is ready to leave. Why don't you get Jesse and y'all tell The Wife your plans so she won't worry about you two while you're away?"

Hailey ran off and grabbed Jesse, who was resistant until she explained what they needed to do.

Amanda walked over to him. "What would I do without you, Tug?"

"You've got Paul. You'll always be fine."

“I like having both of you on my side.”

“I like it too.” He pointed to the line of customers still growing outside his diner. “I’m going to get these folks seated.”

There was a constant flow of customers all day long, and the to-go orders were still piling up at closing time. Tug worked until they had every single one satisfied before calling it a night.

Chapter Three

UPDATES ABOUT THE HURRICANE IN THE ATLANTIC BUZZED on the television, leaving Rosemary grappling with her situation. Though there was no threat of the hurricane here in Pennsylvania, she'd planned this trip to Whelk's Island months ago and, depending on which of the models was right, it could be bad news for that area. It was unfortunate timing.

The storm was moving so slowly, she might be able to get to the island to visit her high school friend Kathleen and leave before it ever came ashore—or not.

Rosemary dreaded the conversation sure to arise about this with her daughter, Nina.

Since she'd moved in with Nina earlier this year, they'd had their share of differing opinions. They'd based the decision to live together on economics. Nina's divorce left her alone with a teenage daughter in their huge house. With interest rates through the roof, it made little sense for Rosemary to purchase her own home when Nina had all that room. One household payment, one yard to take care of, and they'd help each other.

But Rosemary hadn't considered how living under someone else's roof would stymie her. It was different when you were on your own turf.

This morning she'd gotten up extra early to prepare a nice breakfast for her daughter and granddaughter. The last time

she'd done it, she hadn't taken into consideration that they were always in a hurry in the morning, and they'd left without touching it.

Rosemary peered through the glass window of the oven at the breakfast casserole. The cheese had blistered just right, and the smell of the salty breakfast meats peppered the air in the most delicious way.

She turned off the oven and grabbed the pot holders. Warm air wafted toward her as she took out the piping-hot casserole and set it on the counter.

"That smells amazing." Kendra breezed into the room. "Mom never cooks stuff like that."

Nina walked in right behind her. "I do. Sometimes. We just don't have a lot of time for that during the week."

"Which is why it's my pleasure to do this for the two of you." Rosemary grabbed three small plates and started serving the casserole. "And I know you're in a hurry—you always are—but it's just a few bites, and breakfast is the most important meal of the day."

"I'll be the size of a house if I eat like this, Mom," Nina said.

"You'll burn it off before lunch. Trust me." Rosemary watched Kendra take a bite, praying she'd like it.

"The best!" Kendra gave her a thumbs-up.

The teen shoveled the small portion in so fast Rosemary had to hold back from telling her to slow down. Nina had already voiced her aggravation about Rosemary cutting in too often with unsolicited advice.

Rosemary plastered a smile on her face. "I just want to be helpful."

"I know, Mom. Thank you." Nina walked over and gave her a hug. "I know you mean well." She released her, her smile drooping. "But mostly you just make me feel inadequate."

"Oh, honey. No. That wasn't my goal." Rosemary's heart

sank. It seemed no matter what she did, it was wrong, or not the way Nina wanted it.

“I know, I know. In my heart I know. I’m just . . .” Nina stopped and put her purse on the counter. “You know what? Let’s take five minutes and sit down and eat.”

“I’m done,” Kendra said.

“Then have seconds,” Nina said through a forced smile.

“Awesome.” Kendra scooped another serving onto her plate and plopped down at the table.

Rosemary sighed. “You don’t have to—”

“I know, Mom, but you’re right. We should appreciate your help. It’s just a few minutes. I’m sorry I kind of ruined the whole moment.”

The moment had been ruined, but Rosemary appreciated the sentiment. It was so hard to live in the shadows. She’d always been the lady of the house, and she didn’t know any other way to be, with or without Kai. *I miss him so much.*

They quickly ate breakfast in quiet with only the television in the background. Rosemary mentally kicked herself for not thinking to turn it off when they agreed to stay and eat. The meteorologist pointed out the various models and hurricane threats to the coast.

“Guess you’ll have to reschedule your trip.” Nina got up and put her plate in the dishwasher.

“Not necessarily,” Rosemary said.

Nina slowly turned and pulled a hand to her hip. “You can’t go with a storm on the way.”

At seventy-two, Rosemary wasn’t about to start taking orders from her daughter.

“Actually, I can.” She checked her tone, trying to keep her words kind and even. “I don’t need your permission, and with the storm moving so slowly, I can probably get there and come back before it ever makes a turn.”

Nina huffed. “Don’t be silly. There’s a hurricane barreling up the coast. It’s no time to go on a pleasure trip.”

“There’s nothing barreling.” Rosemary cocked her head, resisting raising her voice. “That storm is days away, and they don’t even know where it’s going to land. Have you seen the cone of uncertainty? The only thing the weather reporter is certain of is that he’s got our attention and bread sales are up.”

“Stop downplaying the situation.” Nina snatched her purse from the counter. “You haven’t seen Kathleen in fifty years.”

“And I don’t have another fifty to wait. I’ve been looking forward to this.”

“Why is it suddenly so important that you need to travel with a hurricane on the way?”

“It’s still just a tropical storm.”

Nina raised her hand. “I’m not arguing with you. This is ridiculous. I don’t think you should go see Kathleen. This conversation is going to have to wait. I’ve got to get to the office.” She motioned for Kendra to get up. “Come on. If you want me to drop you off, we have to go now.”

Rosemary stood her ground, not wanting to make things worse but unwilling to give in. “This trip is more than just a meetup with an old friend. I need to feel the sand beneath my feet, the salty air in my hair. I miss that. I need to do this for me.”

“You can. Just not during a storm. I love you, Mom,” Nina said. “Your time is your own. It’s not like you can’t reschedule.” She shrugged as if it were no big deal.

“I don’t want to reschedule.” It felt like a big deal. “Why can’t you just be supportive of my decision?”

Nina closed her eyes, her jaw set. “You know what? Do whatever you want,” she said. “I know you’re going to anyway.” She grabbed her things and stormed toward the door with Kendra chasing after her.

They left aggravated and in a hurry just like every other workday.

Rosemary grimaced. That was a horrible way to start the day, but there was nothing she could do about it. She'd tried, and all she did was make things worse.

She sat back down to finish her breakfast and then cleaned up the kitchen.

Rosemary pressed her lips together, trying not to be angry with Nina. She was under a lot of stress. The divorce had left her bitter and tired, but Rosemary didn't appreciate catching the brunt of her moods. It was a lot like when Nina was a brooding teenager—only at least back then, she had Kai to talk her down when it made her crazy.

The tension in the room lingered, a silent reminder of the unresolved conflict between them. Kai had always been the peacemaker.

"What was I thinking coming here, Kai?" If only he could answer.

She picked up her coffee cup and walked into the living room.

Nina was probably thinking the same thing right now. They'd always ruffled each other's feathers. Kai had always said it was because they were so much alike, but Rosemary was certain she'd never been as controlling as Nina.

Moving here was proving to be a huge adjustment. It had been six months already, and it still didn't feel like home.

Rosemary missed Hawaii, and she missed being outside on the macadamia farm. It was hard work, but it was a labor of love, and she and Kai had always been such a great team. The activity had kept them young.

She cherished those memories, but the farm was too much for her to handle on her own, and the offer had been too good to turn down. Selling the farm had been the right thing to do.

Moving in with Nina was the part she hadn't thought through, and getting out of this without hurting Nina's feelings wasn't going to be easy. She couldn't imagine what her life was supposed to be like, but it sure didn't seem to be this.

Rosemary was busy chauffeuring Kendra to after-school activities, but Nina didn't want her doing things around the house except in her own room. What a waste of idle time. Nina treated her like she was an old lady, and that was already wearing on her.

Rosemary had her own emotions to deal with after losing Kai and leaving Hawaii, and she was trying so hard to do the right thing by Nina and Kendra that it was making everything unenjoyable. *I'm sad. I have to change this.*

Restless, she picked up her phone and called her friend. "Hey, Kathleen. It's Rosemary. I was hoping I'd catch you at home. Are you busy?"

"Just tidying up before I head out to play some pickleball with friends." Kathleen's voice was full of energy.

"Are you worried about the storm?"

"Not really. We've been through tons of them. Might be nothing but a rain event. I've got enough groceries to last me no matter what, and a generator to last a few days if we lose power. Nothing to worry about at this point."

"You don't think it'll be a hurricane by the time it gets to North Carolina?"

"Who knows? They get everybody all hyped up, and half the time it's nothing."

"Then half the time they're right?"

"I suppose that would be true," Kathleen said. "Are you worried? If it looks like we're going to take a hit, we'll evacuate. We've done it before. Would you rather reschedule?"

"No. Not really. I've been looking forward to our visit. I just

wanted to get your local perspective on the situation. You know how these weathermen can be.”

“Don’t I know it,” Kathleen said.

“But if now isn’t convenient, I can be flexible.”

“It’s the perfect time!” Kathleen seemed delighted. “Please come.”

“Great! I can’t wait to stroll along the shore and indulge in fresh seafood. If I eat one more frozen square piece of salmon, I’m going to turn into one.” Since when did salmon grow in squares? “I’m not sure it’s even real salmon. Doesn’t have any taste.”

“Tell me about it. We live in a generation that relies on frozen food and microwaving, air frying, and Instant Pots, which is just a fancy crockpot if you ask me. Give me old-style home cooking any day.”

“I feel the same way. I’ll make you my special macadamia-crusted mahi-mahi while I’m there. Everyone raves about it.” She’d wanted to make it for Nina and Kendra, but they belly-ached so much, no matter what she offered to make, that she just let them order pizza on the nights she was supposed to cook.

“Around here, we usually grill mahi, but I’m open to trying your recipe. It sounds delicious. My neighbors keep my freezer full of fresh fish. We’ll do a potluck so you can meet everyone.”

“I can’t wait to catch up.” Even though they’d only reconnected through social media once Rosemary moved back to the mainland, Kathleen had been to every reunion and they’d had fun reminiscing about old friends. She knew who had died, divorced, and dodged bullets, as she liked to say.

“Me, too, and this is the perfect time to come,” Kathleen said. “The best shells always wash up after a storm. No matter

what the weather does, we'll have fun. Come on. What's the worst thing that could happen?"

"It turns into a hurricane, and Nina will utter those words we hate to hear."

"I told you so," they said in unison.

"My girls are the same way," Kathleen said. "It's why I really like knowing they are three states away. They stay out of my business."

"You're smarter than I am."

"No. Your daughter just caught you while you were aching. It had to sound like a great idea to be surrounded by your daughter and granddaughter. When I lost Stu, I was a hot mess too. I'm thankful that we had the foresight to invest in this beach cottage all those years ago. It was so hard to be in our home without him. I packed up and moved here immediately. This was my sanctuary. I totally understand why you'd want to leave the home you'd spent nearly fifty years with Kai in. Everything is a memory, and that's painful."

"It was. Every repair that hadn't been done. Every project we did or didn't complete together. He was in every inch of that farm." Her throat tightened. "It seemed like such a great idea to move to Philadelphia, and since Nina was sort of grieving the end of her marriage, I had this fantasy that we were going to be on this uplifting journey together. You know, navigating through our emotions to move forward like one of those best-friend movies you see on television. But mostly we just bicker. It's exhausting."

"Don't give it another thought. We're old enough to do what we want, and wise enough to be safe about it. If that storm transforms into a hurricane and makes landfall on Whelk's Island, we can take shelter and enjoy canned beans and wine by candlelight until the electricity is restored. If it looks really threatening, we'll take a road trip inland. No big deal."

Of course they could pivot on a dime, and she needed some adventure in her life right now. “What do you think about me coming early?”

“I’ve already got your room made up. You can come right now. You’ve got my address. What’s stopping you?”

Rosemary hesitated, but only for a moment. “Not a thing. I’m on my way.” She hung up, slugged back the rest of her coffee, and raised her hands above her head, offering a little hula swish of her hips to the heavens. “I miss you like crazy, Kai. This would’ve been way more fun with you, but I can’t wait to get on the road and share some laughs with my old friend.”

She showered, got dressed in travel clothes, and packed a suitcase in less than an hour. She could almost feel the sand between her toes.

Acid churned in her gut at the thought of calling Nina to tell her the plan. Nina would blow a fuse, and she really had no appetite for dealing with that right now. In the kitchen, she took the dry-erase marker and scribbled a note on the message board.

Gone to Kathleen’s on Whelk’s Island, then on to
St. Augustine to see Patty. Weather permitting.
See you in a few weeks.
Mom

She swept away *in a few weeks* with her fingers and changed it to *soon*.

Soon gave her more wiggle room. Could be sooner or later.

Silently marking things off her mental packing list, she remembered James. He was just a red betta in a small bowl. He didn’t eat much, and he required little oversight, but he did need some attention. Nina had brought the fish home as a surprise the week after Rosemary arrived. It was a welcome present, and he was beautiful. Nina thought the betta would be

good company, but honestly, most days Rosemary felt like that fish looked pretty miserable all alone, and most days she did too. But that wasn't his fault.

She rustled through the entryway table drawer for an envelope. Twenty dollars should be enough for Kendra to remember to feed James and perhaps clean his water while she was away.

Rosemary jotted down the instructions and tucked the envelope safely beneath Kendra's pillow.

"That's it. I think I'm ready." Rosemary inhaled deeply, then blew out the anxiety she felt about making Nina mad . . . again. "This is my life. I need to live it."

She made her way toward the door, the wheels on her suitcase chugging along the hardwood floors. She locked up, stepped outside, and loaded her belongings into her car.

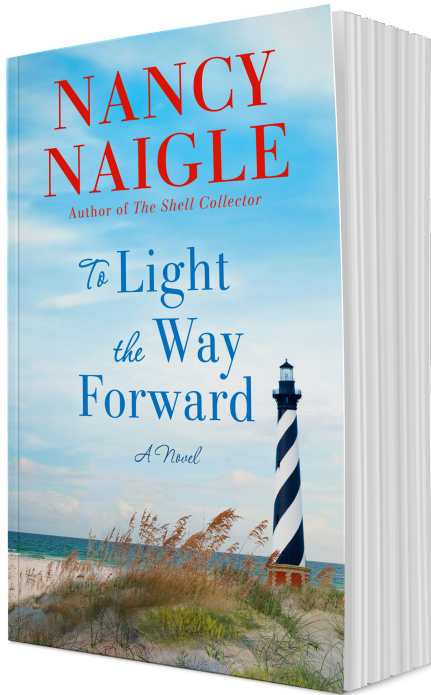
With Kathleen's address punched into her GPS, Rosemary backed out of the driveway, feeling like she'd just sprouted wings.

She donned her sunglasses and drove in silence for the initial hour.

It was a beautiful, clear summer day, and having missed the morning commute traffic, she enjoyed smooth sailing out of the city.

She found a comedy channel and settled in, laughing out loud at some of the jokes. It was just her, the radio, and the sunshine.

It was nearly a seven-hour drive to Whelk's Island, but if she limited her stops, she could still get to Kathleen's before dark.



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