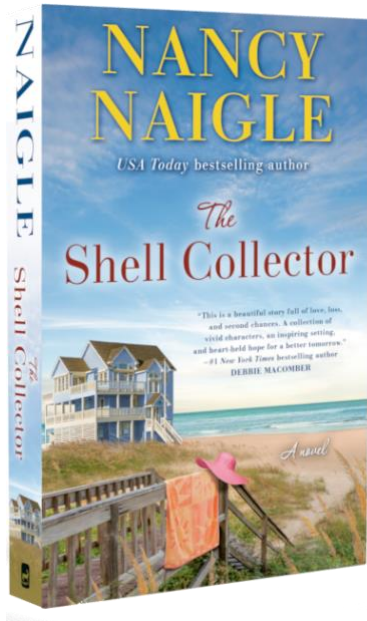


The Shell Collector

By NANCY NAIGLE



It was her nerves, not the December chill in the air this morning, that made her shiver as they sat on the tailgate of his pickup truck. She pushed her palm beneath Jack's warm hand. He'd be leaving shortly. She readjusted her position, hoping he hadn't noticed the fear racing through her right now. The last thing she wanted was Jack distracted by worry about her.

He scooped closer, wrapping his arm around her. She nestled against his chest. A safe place.

Behind them, squeals of excitement from an overzealous game of ring-around-the-rosy filled the air as Hailey and Jesse climbed up on Jack's seabag. One following the other, they leaped as if they were ten feet off the ground. Round and round in the truck's bed, their eight-week-old English bulldog, Denali, chased them, nipping at their heels before tumbling unsteadily over his own paws.

They'd celebrated Christmas early since Jack had to ship out. She'd been dreading this day. While she'd been worrying, her husband was obviously shopping for the ultimate gift: the puppy. Since Jack was a Marine to his core, the breed shouldn't have surprised her. She had to admit that at this age, the bulldog was absolutely adorable. That droopy face and those wobbling folds of skin made them laugh, and that was what they needed.

Denali jumped on, chased, and chewed on everything in his path. At the moment, that happened to be the dangling orange grosgrain ribbon hanging from Hailey's left braid.

"Denali! No." Not even four years old yet, Hailey had already mastered that command, and they'd only had the puppy for six days.

The black-and-white pup cocked his head but hesitated only a beat before leaping into the air again.

"No!" Hailey pulled her hands onto her hips.

"That poor dog will think his name is No," Amanda whispered to Jack.

"At least they're letting him walk today. They carried him around so much those first two days that I was afraid the passive pooch would forget he had legs and could run."

“I know, right?” It would be like having another toddler in the house. Put the puppy down. Don’t pull his tail. No, don’t feed Denali your lunch. Denali, don’t bite. Don’t chew. Don’t. Trying to conceal her sigh, she said, “It’ll be interesting.”

That puppy was going to be a handful, and if he grew into all those wrinkles, he’d be one big dog. At least Jack would return well before then.

But all those worries, and the stress of the pup on top of it, fell away when she turned and saw how the lines at the sides of Jack’s eyes crinkled as he watched their children play. His smile still made her insides tumble. She reached for his hand and squeezed it.

He tugged her closer. “Livin’ the dream,” he said with a playful bump of their shoulders.

She nodded in agreement, but an icy lump in the pit of her stomach settled right on top of that warm, loving feeling. This wasn’t the first time she’d seen him off, but it was different now that it wasn’t just her.

The kids’ cheeks and noses were red from the cold, despite the fact she’d bundled them in so many layers they could barely raise their arms. The crazy frigid temperature wasn’t normal for this part of North Carolina. Jack had suggested they say their goodbyes at home, but she didn’t want to miss one second with him before he had to leave.

Vapor from Amanda’s breath hung in the air like smoke as she watched the other Marines starting to move out.

Jack slid down from the tailgate and stood in front of her. As if he’d read her mind--her worries--he placed his hands on her shoulders and then pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I love you.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “Forehead kisses mean the most.” He didn’t have to say it out loud now; he’d told her that the day he’d asked her to marry him. She’d never forget it or that feeling. Safe. Loved. Protected. Everything will be okay.

She rested her cheek against his shoulder.

“You’ve got this,” he whispered softly.

“I know. I know.” But she didn’t, really. She was trying so hard to be strong for him. She looked up into his deep-blue eyes. His dark hair and lashes stood out even more against the blasé tan, brown, and gray camouflage uniform he wore today. Both Jesse and Hailey had his eyes.

He looked anything but afraid. In fact, excitement twitched in his smile. Alive with the anticipation of what was to come. Proud to be a Marine.

Her heart raced. She already missed him.

“And we’ve been talking to Jesse and Hailey about it. They’ll be fine,” he said.

She knew better. “Hailey asked me this morning if we could have you make pizza tonight.”

He sighed. “Okay, I guess you were right. Maybe she’s too young to really understand.”

She shrugged. “She’s your baby girl. She adores you. She misses you every day even when you’re here.”

“I adore all three of you.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “Goes both ways.”

Amanda tugged her coat tighter, dipping her chin into the warmth of her white infinity scarf. Six months. They’d been lucky it hadn’t been a twelve-month deployment. Be thankful.

They sat quietly until Jack lifted her chin and brushed a strand of her hair back from her face. His eyes held her gaze.

“My beautiful wife. I love you.” He leaned in close. “Don’t worry. Time will fly. I promise.” He rubbed his freshly shaven cheek against hers, then nuzzled her. “I’ll be home before you know it.” Then he made an animated growling noise against her neck.

She curled into herself, laughing as his breath tickled her skin. In the middle of that laughter, they both knew it would feel like forever. “Hurry.”

“Enjoy it, because when I get back, we’ll have a lot of time to make up for.” He raised an eyebrow. “I will miss you like crazy.”

She looked away, trying to ignore the swelling loneliness. Across the parking lot, other Marines moved toward the buses.

He inched over, blocking her view.

She lifted her gaze.

The calm in his voice soothed her, if only for a moment. "It'll be summer. We'll take the kids to the zoo, Carowinds, and the water park. And it'll be beach weather. You know how I love chasing you through the waves."

"No fair." She swatted at him playfully. "You always catch me."

"You love it."

"I do. You're right." He'd proposed to her at the beach not all that far from here, and they'd gotten married in that very same spot the following summer. A private ceremony with her best friend, Ginny, and his best friend, Paul, to witness their vows to each other. Her parents still hadn't forgiven her for not doing the big church thing. Instead, they'd had the minister from the chapel on base perform the private ceremony. It was small and perfect. A meaningful promise rather than a party. She'd never apologize for that.

Jack leaned against her and made that stupid growly noise again that always made her laugh. And she did. Laugh, that is, because the truth was, it was every silly, stupid, playful, romantic thing this guy did that made her love him like no tomorrow.

She squeezed his hands, wishing she could blink and spring forward six months.

Standing tall, he repositioned his hat. It was time to leave.

Amanda followed Jack's line of sight as he turned and looked at the four buses nose to tail at the end of the parking lot. In red script, "Holiday Tours" covered the side of the white buses as if all these folks were going on a fun excursion. But this wasn't a holiday. And it was definitely a different kind of tour. A tour of duty. The irony wasn't lost on her.

A loud "Oohrah!" carried across the parking lot. All that the guys seemed to notice was they'd have a plush-seated ride down to Florida to start this endeavor. She couldn't blame them for their excitement about that. It sure beat the rough ride of a convoy, and for that she was thankful.

Marines huddled with their loved ones, working in those last instructions, promises, and kisses. Saying goodbye was never easy.

"Come here, Hailey-bug." Jack held his hands out, and their daughter ran into his arms. "I've got to go. I need you to be a good girl for Mommy, okay?"

"I'm always good."

"Yes, you are. I'll be back soon." He touched his finger to her nose. "Boop."

Hailey giggled, but then her lower lip protruded and her chin quivered. "No, Daddy."

“I have to go,” Jack said. “Remember, we talked about it. You’ll have Denali to keep you company while I’m away. Teach him lots of tricks. I can’t wait to see how smart he is. You’ll be such an excellent teacher.”

“Stay, Daddy.” Tears welled in her blue eyes. She looked so much like Jack. “I need you.”

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