

*And Then
There Was You*



Nancy Naigle



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*Every change in your life can be a
stepping stone to something precious.*

*This book comes with my hope that it
may open your heart and light the way
to unbelievably special moments ahead.*

Chapter One



NO MATTER how wonderful the vacation, there's nothing better than getting home and sleeping in your own bed.

That was the exact sentiment on Natalie Maynard's mind as she stared out the window at puffy white clouds from the back of the taxi. The clear blue skies in Cancún the last two weeks had been picture perfect; she'd almost forgotten how beautiful feathery clouds could be.

Missing Marc, who'd had to leave two days early because of a business issue, she couldn't wait to thank him for insisting she stay. He'd even scheduled spa appointments to make sure her vacation ended on a high note. He always thought of every tiny detail.

It's only been two days. To think she'd sworn she'd never get serious with anyone after losing Jeremy following fifteen years of blissful marriage; it still surprised her that things moved so quickly after meeting Marc. As it turned out, her heart had a mind of its own.

Jeremy had been a Monday-through-Friday, nine-to-five kind of guy. Now, being with Marc, she realized she'd underappreciated the time she had with Jeremy. Nights, weekends,

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were all spent together with him. It had taken some getting used to Marc being gone days on end and working late more often than not.

Change. It wasn't something that had ever come easy to her.

But after being widowed for two years, she'd gotten used to her own company, which probably had made it easier to accept when Marc was called away for work.

Her life with Marc was practically the opposite of her marriage. She and Marc attended fancy parties, ate at the best restaurants, and there were often unexpected surprises, like this trip.

The last two weeks they'd stayed in a swanky all-inclusive resort with shiny marble floors and upscale dining. Morning walks on soft white sand and romantic nights dancing in Marc's arms had been magical. Somehow, he'd even arranged private time with the hotel biologist to release baby turtles into the ocean under a starry moonlit sky. Bucket list stuff.

There was no comparing Jeremy and Marc, and maybe that's why it worked.

I'm almost home, Marc. What will you surprise me with tonight?

Wearing the sundress Marc had insisted on buying her at the resort boutique when they first arrived, her insides tingled in anticipation of the way his eyes would twinkle when he saw her. The soft fabric flowed around her body like a whisper, fancier than any outfit she owned.

Life had changed a lot over the last couple of years.

Two years, nine months, and three days. That's how long Jeremy had been gone, and as happy as she was now, she still missed him. A scar that would forever be a part of her.

She reached for her heart. The familiar ache pressing on her. Some days it felt like yesterday.

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The phone call.

The accident.

No chance to say goodbye.

The flurry of funeral arrangements that left me unable to process reality until weeks later when autopilot shut down. The day I broke down. Thank goodness Sheila was there that morning.

Leaning back against the vinyl seat, she crossed her legs, settling in for the ride home. *Concentrate on today. On the good things.*

Finally, thirty minutes later, the taxi driver entered the gated community where she now shared a house with Marc. The high-dollar home had been going into foreclosure when Marc told her he was looking for a partner on it, it had been too good of a deal to pass up. Plus, he knew someone who'd rent her house for more than the mortgage. Profits all the way around. Marc was good with money and the deals had all come together as easy as their own relationship.

Meant to be.

The driver pulled the taxi into the driveway. "Here we are."

"Feels good to be home." Out the window she could see that Marc had found the time to finally neaten up the flower beds, even raising the profile of the front trees like she'd been asking him for weeks. The tired-looking pine straw that had once covered the flower beds had been replaced with fresh beautiful hardwood mulch. She'd never been a fan of pine straw.

Her heart danced. *He understands my love language. Gifts of service.*

"Forty-two fifty." The driver pressed the button on the meter. "Need a receipt?"

"Oh. Yes." She tugged her credit card from her wallet and

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handed it to him. The ruby ring on her finger reminded her that his love language wasn't all that bad either.

The driver pushed the card into his handheld device, then shook his head. "Didn't go through." He handed her card back.

"Do you mind trying again?"

He shrugged and did so, but with the same results. "Sorry, ma'am. You have another card?"

"Um? Here." She pulled a fifty-dollar bill from the zippered compartment of her purse. "Here you go. Sorry. I was out of the country. Those fraud algorithms can be as much a nuisance as a help." It was the card they'd been using in Mexico. Maybe it had to do with being in two countries in one day. She tucked her credit card back into her wallet and got out.

The driver followed, wheeling her bags up the sidewalk.

She was so happy with how pretty everything looked. A little landscape love went a long way to improve the curb appeal of their home.

The driver hoisted the bags onto the porch.

"I can get those from here," she said.

"Have a good day, ma'am."

"Thanks for the safe travel." She put her carry-on bag on top of her big suitcase, then made her way to the tall double doors with an extra snap in her stride.

Natalie unlocked the doors, then stepped inside.

She sucked in a breath. Her eyes darted left, then right, trying to make sense of what she saw. "What?" It was more of a shriek than a question.

Her suitcase slipped from her hand and fell backward with a thud.

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The taxi driver was at her side in an instant. “Ma’am. Are you okay?”

She spun toward his voice, still trying to take in the situation. Twisting back toward the foyer. The shiny floors still reflected nothing but sunlight.

The house was empty.

“No!” She swung her arms in the air. “Look.” Her heart raced. “Everything is gone. Something is very wrong. It’s not okay!” She didn’t wait for his response, instead rushing inside, overwhelmed with concern. Had she fallen asleep and this was all nothing but a dream? She opened the hall closet door. Not even a dust bunny.

“Marc?” She called out more in desperation than anything, because if he’d been here she’d have seen him by now. There was nowhere to hide. Not even a place to sit. How does a lifetime of furniture and memories, two really, his and hers, all just go missing?

She grabbed her phone and called Marc. No answer, and she didn’t wait for voice mail.

“Ma’am. Are you sure this is the right house? Maybe I put it in my GPS wrong.”

The cab driver’s voice was slow and steady, but his eyes were wide. He was giving her that slow, over-polite treatment as if she might explode. *I’m not crazy.*

“I used my key.” Natalie ran to the porch. The Cancún sun hadn’t baked her brain, causing it to misfire and fail her; this was her house. The numbers on the front pillar not only matched, but they were the ones she’d hand-painted on tiles and hung herself.

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“I made those.” She stabbed her finger in the air toward them. “What is going on?”

The driver pulled his phone from his shirt pocket. “We have a problem at 4410 Landover Lane.”

“Who are you calling?” she asked.

“The police.” He stepped away, turning his attention to the phone. “I don’t really know for sure. A robbery, I think?” He shrugged, looking to her for concurrence.

“I guess.” Her mind clicked through a virtual slideshow of everything she owned that had been here. From the cherry dining room hutch that had been her grandparents’ to the blond mahogany dresser she’d splurged on with her first real paycheck. Her favorite handbag. More importantly, the things that couldn’t be replaced. The silver frame that held the picture of Jeremy asking her to marry him that stayed tucked in the bottom of her lingerie drawer. Mom’s Bible, and Daddy’s watch that his father had given him when he graduated college.

A tear slipped down her cheek.

Through the cloud of confusion, a moment of clarity flooded her with fear. Things were things, but where was Marc and why hadn’t he answered? Was he in trouble?

Chapter Two



NO LOGICAL explanation came to Natalie's mind. It had taken weeks to move everything in.

She walked back inside. "This is mind-boggling. I just don't get it."

"Ma'am, maybe you shouldn't go back in there until the police get here." The taxi driver begged her to stay put, his hand touching her elbow.

Natalie jerked her arm away. "It's my house. There has to be an explanation. A house doesn't empty itself, and—" She shrugged. "It's like it's never been lived in." She reached out and touched the wall. "There was a scuff on this wall. I hit it with my suitcase the day we left."

She started up the stairs.

The taxi driver followed a sheepish two or three steps behind.

"Marc!" Her voice echoed back. There wasn't a single picture on the wall, and for all the decorating she'd done over the past few months, you couldn't tell there'd ever been a nail.

"I lived here. Two weeks ago, this was my home," she said, but the driver just stood there with a look of bewilderment on

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his face. She tried to make him understand. “Furniture, paintings. Dirty clothes in the hamper.”

She opened the bedroom closet. Stark beige walls and empty dark cherry shelving greeted her. One wooden rod on his side, two on hers. Not one single hanger. She flipped the light switch. Even the lightbulbs were gone.

A loud bang came from downstairs. “Police.”

She ran down the stairs. “Thank goodness you’re here.” She almost slipped down the last step.

The taxi driver hightailed it right past her with nothing more than a nod to the officer. He was probably headed to the closest bar, if she had to guess. She hadn’t tipped him near enough for all of this.

“My boyfriend is missing,” she blurted out.

“How long has he been missing?”

“And my credit card didn’t work.” *Was that connected to this somehow too?* “Look! *Everything* is missing.”

The officer looked past her into the empty house, then stared at her for a long moment. “How long has he been missing? An hour, a day, a week?”

“I have no idea. I just got home. That guy . . .” She pointed to the driver slipping behind the wheel of the taxi in the driveway. “He just dropped me off from the airport. We’d been on vacation.”

The officer’s brow lifted.

“Not me and the taxi driver. Me and my boyfriend, Marc. He left on Monday, because of an issue at the office. We haven’t spoken since then, but that’s not unusual. He’s a busy man.” She took out her phone and called his office. No answer there either.

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“Yes, ma’am. Is this his house?”

“Yes. No. It’s both of ours. We lived here together.”

“How long do you think he’s been missing?”

“Since sometime between Monday and this minute. Or yesterday. Long enough for someone to clear out this place. This house was full of stuff when I left. Everything I own. Marc’s not answering his phone, and no one is answering at his office either. We have to find him.”

The officer looked past her into the room. “And you lived here. Together?”

“Yes. For months now. What does that even matter?”

“Are *you* the owner of the house?”

“I told you we lived here together. It’s investment property. We went in on it together. Both our names are on the deed. I own another house in town too.”

He pulled out a notebook and clicked his pen. “What’s your name?”

“Natalie Maynard.”

“Marc’s last name, and how long have you known him?”

“Marc Swindell. S as in Sam, w-i-n-d-e-l-l. Seven months, I guess. What does that matter?”

“Just trying to get the details. Were you getting along?”

“Definitely. He treated me like a princess. We were vacationing in Cancún. Things were great.”

“You only knew him seven months.” He looked around at the empty space. “And you already bought a house together.”

“So things moved a little fast. That’s not a crime, but some kind of crime has happened here. Look around. Everything is missing! He’s missing.”

“How did you meet?”

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“We were on the same flights to and from Dallas a few times. Finally, we started talking and became friends. Does this really matter?”

“And then you bought a place together?”

“Yes. We’ve lived here a few months now. It was an excellent investment. That’s what he does. Investments. Financial planning. That kind of stuff. You need to get people looking for him. He’s not answering his phone and no one is answering at his office either.”

“Can you give me those numbers?”

“Yes, sure.” She swept through her contacts and read them to the officer.

“What’s his office address?”

“Um, I’m not exactly sure. I know how to get there, but I don’t have the address in my phone.”

“And the crime you think has been committed?”

“I’m not even entirely sure. We’ve been robbed at the very least. Marc is missing. I can’t even take this all in.” Her body tensed at the possibilities.

And there it began, what felt like hundreds of questions. Or maybe it was only tens of questions that were re-asked in seven ways to a month of Sundays, because she felt like she was repeating what little she knew over and over.

From the corner of her eye, she saw her neighbor, Mrs. Brooks, approaching.

The woman race-walked toward Natalie. “I can’t believe my eyes. I told Frank that was you.” The woman turned to the officer. “Marc told us she’d been in a horrible accident. That she died!” The woman threw her arms around Natalie. “Thank God you’re alive!”

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Natalie stiffened under the crying woman's grasp. They hadn't been close.

"Pardon me?" The officer glanced at Natalie and then back to the woman. "You know each other?"

"She lives next door," said Natalie.

"Yes. Lived here since the houses were first built," Mrs. Brooks said.

She stepped back from Mrs. Brooks. "You've seen Marc this week? When?"

"He was a mess," Mrs. Brooks said, holding a hand to her heart. "Clearly, there's been some mistake. You look fine. Better than ever, I always thought you were too pale." The woman turned back to the officer. "I'm Joan Brooks. I sent my Frank over with a Tupperware of my famous cookies the day they moved in. They are such a nice couple. We've been friends ever since." She patted Natalie's hand. "She never returned the container, but you know people are like that these days. No offense, honey."

Natalie pulled her hands together. "He came back because of an issue at the office. Why would Marc say I'd been in an accident? He knew when I was coming back. He booked the ticket."

Mrs. Brooks withdrew. "I have no idea." Her eyes darted back to the officer. "Frank said, don't go over upsetting things, but I was just so happy to see that she was okay." She turned back to Natalie. "I wasn't sure why you'd be here, with the lease up and everything. I thought maybe you were confused after the accident or something. Is there something I can do to help you?"

"Wait. The lease? Mrs. Brooks, you're confused. Marc and I

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own this home.” The words came out in a rush. “More importantly, when did you see Marc? When? Tell us.”

“Ma’am.” The policeman raised his hand for Natalie to take a pause, which she did, but she wasn’t happy about it. Her hands shook, her heart rate as unsteady as a balloon flying across the room when you let go before tying the knot.

It felt as if the more Mrs. Brooks said, the less Natalie knew for sure.

The officer scribbled on his notepad, then dipped his chin toward the mic on his shoulder, calling for backup at 4410 Landover Lane.

Her senses became like goo swirling in a way that left her unsure if she was up or down.

Chapter Three



NATALIE BLINKED, forcing her eyes open only to squint against the bright lights. Struggling to get a clear indicator of where she was, people talking nearby, the incessant beeping, and the scent of ammonia with undertones of soap. The undeniable scent of a hospital.

She raised her left arm, where the IV taped to her hand and a thingamabob with a red light glowing on her finger made her wonder just how long she'd been here. Her glowing hand brought back a childhood memory of pressing a flashlight to her hand to see almost right through it. Her tongue stuck to the inside of her mouth. *How long have I been lying here?*

"You're awake." A cheerful nurse stepped past the curtain that cordoned off the space for privacy. "Need some water?"

She nodded, the words not wanting to come just yet. "What happened?"

"By the time you got to me, you were sedated. You were dehydrated. I think you may have had some sort of panic attack. You're going to be fine, though. Your numbers are looking good now."

"As opposed to?"

"How your vitals looked when you got here." The nurse

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raised the bed using the foot pedal and plumped the pillows behind her. “That’s got to be more comfortable.”

Not really. She inched up to get comfortable. “How long ago was that?”

The nurse handed her a styrofoam cup of ice water. “Here you go. They brought you in this morning. It’s close to dinner-time now.”

Natalie pulled the liquid into her mouth, letting it wet the inside before swallowing. “Thank you.”

“There’s a detective here who wants to talk to you.”

Slowly the pieces of the day came back together. “Okay. Yeah, I was talking to an officer earlier. I was robbed.”

“Oh my goodness.” The flash of concern was followed by a delicate pat to her hand. “Well, everything here looks fine. Can I get you something else to drink? A soda, maybe?”

“No. Thank you.”

The nurse cocked her head. “Can I call someone for you? A friend or family member?”

“How long will I be in here?”

“Well, I don’t know. We don’t have any rooms available at the moment, so we’re going to keep you here for observation until the doctor can take another look at you. Wouldn’t you feel better to have someone here with you? I know I’d want that.”

“Yes. Thank you. My best friend, Sheila.” Natalie scanned the room. “Her number is in my phone. Do you know where my things are?”

“You were brought in by ambulance. All we got was you. What’s Sheila’s last name or address? I’m very resourceful. I’ll find it.”

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“Aldridge. It might still be under her ex-husband’s name, Dan. Her number ends in zero-five-six-seven . . . no, two-seven. I’m not sure.”

“I’ll find it. You relax. The call button is tied to the rail on your bed there. Just press it if you need me.” Her scrubs swished with each quick step out of the room.

Natalie rested her head against the pillow, letting her eyes close as the pieces started coming back to her. Still nothing made sense.

“Ms. Maynard?” The voice was deep. “May I . . . ?”

She opened her eyes. Right where that nurse had been only a moment ago, now a dark-haired man stood, hesitant to make a step. His suit was gray, but the paisley tie was nice.

“May I have a word with you?” he asked.

She nodded.

He entered, scooching a chair closer to the bed before sitting. “How’re you feeling?”

“I’m not sure. You’re not who I was talking to before.” He didn’t look the least bit familiar. “I don’t know you. Right?”

“No, ma’am.” His smile was warm. “You don’t know me. I’ve been assigned your case to help sort things out.”

“Has anyone located Marc?” She scrambled to sit. “We’ve got to find him. I’m so worried.” Tears welled, one slipping down her cheek. How long had he been missing now?

“We have conflicting information. I still don’t know exactly what’s going on. I’m hoping you can help me connect some dots.” He glanced at his notes. “Marc is the man you were living with?”

“Yes. We bought the house together. An investment. We’d been on vacation, and he got called back early. Some problem at

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the office. Why doesn't anyone seem the least bit worried about him?"

"Your neighbor said that you'd been in an accident."

"No. That woman is confused. I'm perfectly fine. Well, I was when I got home, before I realized everything I owned was missing. Maybe Marc was telling her that he'd been in an accident. That might explain why Marc isn't answering his phone." She sat up. "You've got to find him. Something has happened to Marc. Can you call the hospitals? Households of stuff don't disappear. What if he caught them in the act, and they got rid of the witness?"

The detective cocked his head.

Okay, maybe that was a little dramatic, but something has happened.

"Slow down." His voice was calm and comforting, even if she was a bit annoyed by the barrage of questions. "Tell me what you know. I'm here to help."

There was something in his tone that made her believe him. She sucked in a breath and retold the entire story, from how Marc left the resort early until she got home and found it empty.

He nodded, continuing to write in his notebook and circling something.

Frustration had Natalie on edge. "I still don't understand why Mrs. Brooks would say that Marc told her I had been in an accident or that the lease was up. We bought that house. Cash outright. No mortgage. No lease."

He lifted an eyebrow, which made her feel more like this was some kind of test she had to pass or fail.

"Natalie?" Sheila bolted through the doorway. "I came straight over when I got the call. What is going on?"

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Natalie snapped her attention to the doorway. “Sheila!” Natalie gobbled back the emotion she’d been trying to control, relief rolling over her as her best friend ran to her side. “I don’t know what the heck is going on. Everything is gone.”

“Everything what?” Sheila looked over at the detective, then thrust her hand in his direction. “I’m Sheila Aldridge. I’m Natalie’s best friend. I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Detective Randy Fellowes.”

“*Detective?* Okay, y’all need to bring me up to speed here. You’re starting to freak me out a little. Are you okay, Nat?”

“Physically, I’m fine,” Natalie said.

“Then why are you in the hospital?”

“I think I got overwhelmed, and from what the nurse said I guess it was a combination of dehydration, the flight from Mexico, and all the chaos when I got home and my house was empty and I can’t get in touch with Marc. Something’s wrong, which is why he’s here.” She thumbed toward the detective.

The detective nodded in Sheila’s direction. “Ms. Aldridge, have you heard from Marc Swindell in the past few days?”

“No. I haven’t.” She glanced over at Natalie. “Not that I would. I’m Natalie’s friend, not so much his. I mean, we’re friendly, but that’s it. Natalie, did you say your house is *empty*?”

“Completely. Not even a hanger. Everything I own.” Natalie twisted the sheet in her hand.

The detective locked his gaze on Sheila. “And you’ve been to the house on Landover Lane?”

“Yes.” Sheila leaned back. “Several times.”

“Mr. Swindell was at the house?”

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“Yes. That’s an odd question,” Sheila said. “I talked to her while she was with Marc in Cancún too.”

“Nothing seemed off?”

Sheila grabbed Natalie’s hand. “Things seemed like they were going great between them. They were, weren’t they?”

Natalie nodded, and just above a whisper said, “It was the trip of a lifetime.”