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USA Today bestselling author

The Shell Collector

A novel

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THE SHELL COLLECTOR

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First Edition

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This story has been pressing on my heart to be told since the year I lost my husband, but I just couldn't bring the words to the page until recently. Wishing you unexpected strength in your most difficult times.

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The Shell Collector

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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.

Jack 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, Jack 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 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 enormous dog. At least Jack would return well before then.

But all those worries, and the stress of the pup on top of it all, 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.”

“I have to travel for work. We can count down the days together.”

Amanda pulled in a stuttered breath, trying to contain her own tears as she watched Hailey and Jack. She picked up Jesse, holding him so tight she could feel his heartbeat against her own.

Jack took Amanda’s hand as he held Hailey. “I have to come back,” he said to Hailey. “I promised your mom an anniversary trip to Denali. Right, Mom?”

“That’s right.” Amanda nodded. They’d been saving for the trip since the day they married.

Hailey clung to Jack’s neck. “I don’t want you to go.”

Amanda saw the sorrow in Jack’s eyes. He hated to see his baby girl sad, and this was heartbreaking.

“She’ll be fine,” Amanda said, trying to reassure him. “We’ll all be fine and waiting for you.”

Hailey lifted her tiny hand in the air and extended her pinkie. “Promise.”

“Pinkie promise,” Jack said, then set Hailey on the ground.

Hailey looked up at him, sniffing tears. “Who’s gonna teach Denali not to poop in my room again?”

“You will,” he said. “You’re smart, and Mommy will help.”

Of course I will. The puppy had been Jack’s idea. A surprise to all of them. Mostly her, because she’d have flat out vetoed getting a dog. She had enough to worry about with Jack not being around for six months. Now she had a puppy to train



on top of it all. She wished Jack had at least talked to her about it first, but then he loved surprising her.

As if Denali could read her mind, the chunky pup lumbered over to the edge of the tailgate and flopped down with an exaggerated sigh.

"You're irresistible." She already had her arms full with Jesse, but she pulled the puppy up too.

"Woof." Jesse pointed his finger toward the dog, which Denali immediately nipped.

"Ow!" Jesse jerked his hand back but then laughed and put his finger in the dog's mouth again. "Woof you, Nali."

"Careful," Amanda said, flashing a tired look in Jack's direction.

"He'll figure it out," Jack said. "He's all boy. A few scrapes and cuts are nothing for boys like us." He ruffled Jesse's hair, then took the puppy from Amanda and placed him in the truck bed and closed the tailgate.

"Yeah, he's definitely your boy." She stood and shifted Jesse to her hip so she could slip her free arm around Jack. "Thank you for the surprise. The kids love the addition, and I will too. It won't be the same as having *you* here, but Denali is a good second best."

"Don't let Denali steal my pillow," Jack warned.

She shrugged playfully. "We'll see. Just hurry home."

Across the way, a few of the wives stood talking. She could hear them already planning girls' day out and weekly get-togethers. Amanda had been part of some of those conversations before, believing it made the time go by faster and easier for those left behind.

Jack took Jesse into his arms.

Jesse simply said, "Bye." His favorite new word. Jack whispered into his ear, and to whatever Jack was saying, Jesse just kept repeating, "Bye."

He put Jesse down next to Hailey. "I love you both." They hugged his legs.

"This is it, babe," he said, pulling Amanda into the group hug.

"I love you, Jack."

"I love you. I'm already counting the days. This is a good thing I'm doing. We're doing."

"Honorable. Amazing. I know." Her throat grew tight. "I love you for it, but I hate it. I miss you already." She took Hailey's hand. "Come on, Jesse. We have to let Daddy go." Jesse looked up at Jack and then waddled over to her without a word.

Jack heaved his duffel bag over the bed rail to his shoulder, reaching for her hand one last time.

She squeezed his hand, trying to smile through tear-filled eyes. Her thumb traced his wedding band. Her heart hung in her throat as her fingers slipped from his strong hand.

Watching his long familiar strides, her breath caught with every step as he moved across the parking lot toward the other soldiers. Proud, and ready to fight for freedom.

Butterflies danced in her stomach.

"We can be brave together," she said, hoping saying it out loud would make it true.

Hailey started wailing, which made Jesse cry. She knelt and held them close. "Wave to Daddy. Make funny faces." Hailey and Jesse sniffed back tears, then started mugging. Anything to keep them from crying. "We'll go get hot dogs to take home for lunch when we leave here. Deal?"

Jesse flapped his hand. "Bye."

Hailey, with tears falling onto her cheeks, held Amanda's gaze. "Daddy has to come home."

"Yes, he does, honey. We will plan lots of things to do. He's going to be home just as soon as he can be."

She turned and watched as the bags were loaded onto the bus, and then the guys. Once Jack cleared the door, she couldn't see him through the tinted windows.

"Come on, let's blow Daddy one more kiss before we go." They all raised their hands to their mouths and blew kisses. She had no idea if he'd even seen them, but he'd know. He always knew.

She put the kids in the back seat of the truck and buckled them into their car seats. Denali was standing with his paws on the tailgate. She lifted the chubby fellow and stuck him on the floorboard under the kids' feet.

As she closed the rear door, she saw one of the gals from the women's group heading toward her.

She didn't have that much strength right now. A pedicure or a game of bunco wouldn't change that Jack was gone and would be for quite some time. Although she'd been one of them in the past—the wives supporting those who had husbands away, and she knew firsthand their intentions were honorable—she just couldn't do it today.

Amanda hopped into the front seat and cranked the truck, pretending she hadn't seen the woman. She drove off with a slight pang of guilt, mostly because she lived in base housing too. They were neighbors. No way would she be able to avoid these ladies for long. They were determined to help one another, and that was a blessing. Amanda realized that. But right now she was sad, and she wasn't ready to let go of that yet. She needed to muster every smile she could to put on a brave and happy face for her children. That was her priority.

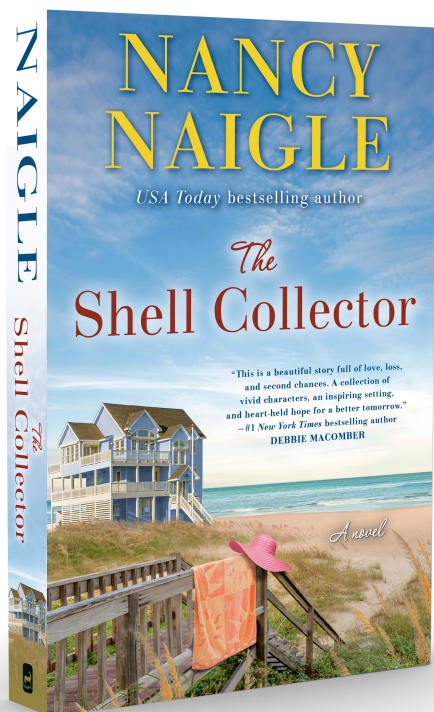
Rain fell, and from the looks of the sky, it was settling in for a while.

She stopped at the drive-through to pick up hot dogs for lunch and then drove home. Thankfully, Hailey and Jesse seemed exhausted by the morning's events too. Jesse was al-



ready asleep in his car seat. When they got home, Amanda woke them up to get them inside. They ate hot dogs and then all climbed into her king-size bed, even Denali, and watched cartoon reruns.

She hugged Jack's pillow to her heart, hoping the scent of his aftershave wouldn't fade anytime soon. Once Hailey and Jesse fell asleep, she cried quiet tears. She missed Jack already, and he probably hadn't even made it out of the state yet.



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