

NANCY NAIGLE

USA Today bestselling author

What Remains True

A Novel

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Praise for Nancy Naigle



“*The Shell Collector* 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 *The Shell Collector*—a 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 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

“Set in a scenic beach town, *The Shell Collector* has the quaint feel of small-town living that brings with it both nostalgia and appreciation of nature and the sea. . . . A pleasant story of friendship, family, and life after loss that will be appreciated by fans of the Christian overtones of Karen Kingsbury and the beachy settings of Mary Kay Andrews.”

—*Booklist*

“Readers looking for a heartwarming holiday story will enjoy *A Heartfelt Christmas Promise*, set in a vibrant small town populated by lovable people, gorgeous horses, and a very cute puppy.”

—*Booklist*

“Libraries looking for holiday romances that are sweet rather than passionate will want to snag *Christmas Angels* for their collections.”

—*Library Journal*

“Another superbly crafted and thoroughly entertaining novel by a master of narrative-driven storytelling, Nancy Naigle’s *Christmas Angels* is certain to be an immediate and enduringly popular addition to community library collections.”

—*Midwest Book Review*

“Naigle’s wonderfully heartwarming *Hope at Christmas* will appeal to romance and women’s fiction readers alike.”

—*Library Journal*

“Bright with abundant holiday cheer and good-hearted community members, and, like a dash of HGTV with a large dose of Hallmark, *Christmas Angels* is delightfully entertaining.”

—*Booklist*

“*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

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Adams Grove Novels

Sweet Tea and Secrets

Out of Focus

Wedding Cake and Big Mistakes

Pecan Pie and Deadly Lies

Mint Juleps and Justice

Barbecue and Bad News

Boot Creek Series

Life After Perfect

Every Yesterday

Until Tomorrow

Seasoned Southern Sleuths

Cozy Mystery

In for a Penny

Collard Greens and Catfishing

Deviled Eggs and Deception

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Christmas in Evergreen:

Letters to Santa

Christmas in Evergreen:

Tidings of Joy

Christmas Angels

Mission: Merry Christmas

A Heartfelt Christmas Promise

What Remains True



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WATERBROOK

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It's easy to get caught up in this fast-paced world, juggling priorities and multitasking, only to wake up one day and realize you've forgotten to allow time to think, rest, respond, and renew.

Embrace this day, and make it your goal to make each one memorable. Say yes to new opportunities.

What Remains True

I

Merry Anna Foster loved spring for its promise of new beginnings, and this year she needed one desperately. She inhaled the fresh mountain air. Where else, aside from Antler Creek, could you work in a store that had a screen door for taking advantage of beautiful days like this? It was just one more reason she loved living and working in this small town. It had turned out to be a good first step in her new beginning.

Across the way, a woman held two sets of sheets and an embroidered kitchen towel in one arm. In the other, she cradled two candles, while three quilt-block ornaments hung from her widespread fingertips as if she dared the porcelain tiles to clink together.

“Let me help you with that.” Merry Anna raced to her side.

“I’ve got it. I should’ve picked up a basket, but honestly, I had no intention of buying anything.” She piled her treasures on the counter. “I could absolutely live in this store.”

Merry Anna had felt the same way the first day she’d happened upon Hardy House Fine Linens and Gifts. She rounded the counter and pulled the generous stack of items toward the register. “I know what you mean. A couple of months ago, I was passing through town, just like you, only that day there

was a Help Wanted sign in the window.” The antique register clicked and dinged with each manual entry. It was beautiful but a real beast on her nails. “And here I am.”

“You just stayed?” The woman’s eyes widened with a look that easily translated to *Are you crazy?* even without the finger twirl at the side of her head.

“I did.” And maybe it had been crazy, but the happiness in her heart meant more to her than a stranger’s opinion. “I’d just meant to stop for gas and a quick lunch,” Merry Anna explained. “Then I saw this place and peeked in. The rest is history. I’d never done something like that. No plan whatsoever, but I’ll tell you . . .” She leaned in. “I’ve never been happier in my entire life.”

“Then it wasn’t crazy at all. Good for you. Some things are just meant to be.”

“I suppose so.” Merry Anna folded each item in patterned tissue paper, then tucked the bundle gingerly into a bag with the Hardy House logo on the front. She held up one of the hand-painted tile ornaments on display at the register. “I didn’t even know what a barn quilt was when I stopped in. Aren’t these great?”

“Yes. I bought a different one for each of my girlfriends. They are so unique and beautiful in their own way, and I love the personal story about the location of each one that’s written on the cards. I didn’t have time to take the barn-quilt tour today, but I plan to bring a few friends and make a day of it soon. I figure I’ll use those ornaments as the invitations.”

“That’s a fantastic idea.” Merry Anna picked up a stack of shiny brochures. “I’ll tuck these in your bag too. They have all the information you need about the tour.” Often she dreamed of moving out of her rental and into a home with her own barn quilt, but she kept that to herself. There was a lot she

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kept to herself these days. It was necessary to do so when she'd first arrived, but now that she'd been here a while and gotten to know folks, it was harder.

The customer handed over her credit card. Merry Anna finished the transaction and walked around the counter with the pretty bags. "Here you go." Leading the customer to the front door, she said, "If you haven't eaten, the Creekside Café is a real treat. Tell Maizey we sent you over, and she'll give you the locals discount."

"Well, thank you." The woman's smile warmed all the way to her twinkling blue eyes. "I love this place."

Me too. "You have a wonderful day. I hope you'll come back and see us." And she wasn't just saying that. Sure, after years of retail, she knew what to do, but doing it and meaning it were two different things.

"Count on it," the woman said. "My friends are going to love this store too."

Merry Anna waved, holding the white screen door so that it wouldn't slap against the frame. Just as the woman stepped off the curb and loaded her loot into the trunk of her car, Merry Anna's boss, Krissy, walked out of the coffee shop next door with a cup in each hand.

She raced over with a grin on her face, leaned in toward Merry Anna, and whispered, "You are very good for my business." After handing her one of the cups, she slipped by Merry Anna and walked inside. "I don't know what I did to deserve to have you show up out of the blue, but I sure am thankful for it."

Merry Anna made her way to the long white glass counter. "Works both ways."

"I bought you a tea."

Merry Anna twisted the blue cup in her hand. "Thank you."

You didn't have to do that." She lifted the hot tea to her lips. "Oh, it's my favorite."

"Which is why I *did* have to do it."

"Thanks." From the moment they met right there in that store, it had been as though they'd known each other forever. Krissy had just left her teaching job back in Hilton Head to try to make her dream come true of having an upscale shop on that Main Street in the town where she grew up. Merry Anna was on her own new journey. Entirely different circumstances, but they were both sort of settling in at the same time, which drew them closer.

Merry Anna sipped her tea as she straightened and restocked the hand-painted replica tiles of the barn quilts associated with the county's barn-quilt tour.

Krissy was sort of a celebrity in this region for all the full-size barn quilts she'd been commissioned to paint. She'd done the small porcelain tiles on a whim one afternoon, and they'd brought in steady revenue for the store ever since.

"Are Matt and Liz coming tonight to help paint more of these?" Merry Anna asked. She'd met Krissy's brother, Matt, the first week she moved here. He and Liz were the perfect couple. She wouldn't be surprised if there'd be wedding bells in their future.

"Oh, I meant to tell you. They're preparing for the Spring Fling. It's a huge deal, and they host it every year. They're going to help, but we're taking all the supplies to their place to work on them. Matt's going to cook. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind? For a home-cooked meal, you couldn't keep me away. Besides, I've been dying to see Angels Rest." The inn on the hill was the talk of the town, and Merry Anna hadn't come up with a good way, short of paying to stay a night or

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two, to get up there to check it out. She had been gushing over the handiwork Matt did around the store when Krissy told her about his house and all the things he'd done for Angels Rest. Plus, Matt and Liz were such a sweet couple that it was enough to keep a gal's hopes up that there might be everlasting love out there for real someday.

Krissy helped the next customer who walked in pick out a wedding gift. Hardy House wasn't huge; it was just one of the narrow brick two-story buildings nestled in the middle of the main block between Java Nice Day Coffee Shop and Hoppers Fly Fishing Outfitters. Every building on the street had its own personality. Hardy House, all white with gold accents, stood out from the other buildings, which dressed their awnings and shutters in shades of red, green, and blue that looked just right against the mountain backdrop.

The trees were so green with new growth that it looked as though someone had tossed fake Easter-basket grass in the branches, and flowers spilled out over the edges of the planters that lined Main Street. Everything was in full bloom, and it was the prettiest thing she'd ever seen in her life. Sometimes she couldn't believe she'd been so lucky to have come across this town, where she could soak up the peaceful beauty every single day.

For so many years all she'd done was work. She'd missed this kind of stuff, and for what?

The mailman, an older, white-haired man, came in and placed a stack of envelopes on the counter. "Having a good day?"

"Yes sir, I am. I hope you are too."

"Always a delight to see your smile." He turned and waved his hand in the air as he departed.

He was always saying something charming. Sweet old man.

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She tucked the mail in the slot next to the register, then walked over to greet the next customer at the door.

“Welcome to Hardy House.” Merry Anna handed her a small white basket. “Let me know if I can help you with anything.”

She clutched the basket. “It won’t fit in here, but that beautiful barn quilt caught my eye.” She pointed to a large, colorful square board painted to look like a quilt square. Krissy had hung that one there just yesterday. “How much is it?”

“That’s a thirty-six-inch. The artist only does one-of-a-kind barn quilts. That one is two hundred dollars. She does custom work too.” One customer told Merry Anna that they’d paid more than three hundred for the one they’d ordered online, and it wasn’t even custom. These were a bargain. “It’s the same price if you order a custom one. Might as well get exactly what you want, right?”

“I’ve got to have one, but I wouldn’t know where to begin on a custom design. And this one is just like the quilt my grandmother had on the bed when I was growing up.”

“The Carpenter’s Wheel,” Merry Anna said with confidence, although until yesterday she’d never heard the term. “The colors on this one, turquoise and taupe, are so eye-catching and up to date. Let me introduce you to the artist.” Merry Anna lifted her hand to get Krissy’s attention, but she was already headed their way.

“Someone mention me?” She stuck her hand out. “Hi, I’m Krissy. So, you think you might want a barn quilt of your own? That’s so exciting!”

Merry Anna left the two of them to talk and create. It had been a four-foot yellow barn quilt that had initially caught her eye in the Hardy House display window the day she’d hap-

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pened into town. Only, truth be told, she'd thought it was a carrom board at the time. She wondered if her grandmother still had that old thing in her attic. It was quite obviously not a carrom board when she saw it up close, but she was thankful for the memory. Plus, when she'd admitted the faux pas to Krissy, they'd gotten a good laugh out of it—and her first lesson in barn-quilt history.

And from there, things just kept falling into place. Merry Anna had talked herself right out of heading to South Carolina. It wasn't until after her divorce from Kevin and then being here in this town that she'd realized that all she ever did was focus on work. It had always been her priority. Being part of a family business, she'd been pulled in as a teenager, and it had taken over her whole life. When Kevin asked her who she was without that job, she didn't have an answer.

It had been six months after the papers were signed when he'd called complaining about the "pittance," as he'd referred to it, that she'd agreed to for alimony. She'd been right across the street filling up her gas tank when he called. She'd made a deal with him on the spot that for three months, she'd try to live on the exact same amount she was giving him. If she could do it, then he needed to leave her alone and never call her again. If she struggled, however, then she'd go back and adjust the amount. Fair was fair. And so she was living on what seemed like a reasonable amount of money, and if he wanted more, then he could get a real job for once.

And that's how she'd ended up in Antler Creek that day, taken the job at Hardy House, and accidentally found a whole new rhythm to her life.

She'd been planning to use the leave of absence from the family business, the Supply Cabinet, to figure out what she

really wanted out of her life besides work. The national office-supply chain had taken over her life somewhere along the way, and she hadn't even noticed.

Antler Creek, where she didn't know a soul, had turned out to be the perfect place. No one knew anything about her financial status, her career, or *her*—and that was liberating. No one had any expectations of her for the first time in her life.

At the end of the day, Merry Anna counted out the cash drawer and balanced the sales tickets. The task would take way less time if they used a new register that automatically summed the daily sales, but the antique one was such a conversation piece. The machine drove her absolutely nuts in the beginning, but now using it was a great way to wind down the day. She especially loved it when they beat their forecasted sales, as they had today. *Sometimes the old-fashioned way is good enough.*

She snickered at that thought. Being COO of the Supply Cabinet chain had been something her family had groomed her for from a very young age, and she'd loved it—or at least she thought she had. Merry Anna was known for automation and streamlining processes, so keeping quiet with suggestions for the Hardy House hadn't been easy. "*Time is money,*" she'd been known to say. She rolled her eyes, embarrassed at some of her behavior now that she'd been away a little while. She'd rarely listened to pushback from team members on new processes, accusing them of just not wanting to adapt to change. How many of those complaints might have been legit feedback? If she ever went back to headquarters, she would do things differently.

She put everything away and dropped the deposit in the safe. Krissy would take it to the bank at the end of the week.

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Time to get home to the bunkhouse. Her mom and dad would die if they saw where she was living, and Kevin would accuse her of lying about living there, because it was a far cry from the home they'd lived in together. As modest as it was, though, she found it quite charming. The little house on the hill used to be owned by the guy who lived on the horse farm next to it. It was where his guests and ranch hands would stay. He sold it to Krissy, and when she heard that Merry Anna needed a place to stay, she decided to let her rent the place rather than renovating and flipping it as she'd planned.

She stepped outside and locked the front door of Hardy House to leave, then pressed the screen door tight until it latched.

Looking back at the window displays they'd worked on today, she found delight in how crisp and lush they looked. They'd look even prettier once the sun went down and you could see the twinkle lights. That wouldn't be for a while yet. The days were starting to noticeably last longer.

Traffic on Main Street still slowed after five, though.

She walked down the sidewalk, enjoying the softer sounds as the town quieted and families finished their days. She could picture parents preparing meals while kids did their homework and wished away those last couple of weeks before school was out for the summer.

Her cell phone jingled, something she was beginning to really enjoy. She'd left her business phone on her desk when she started her leave and picked up a new one. Only a few close friends and her parents had this number. "Hello?"

"Hi, honey. It's Mom. I've got you-know-who here with me."

Mom was clearly on speaker, a habit that drove Merry Anna nuts. "You can say his name, Mom. Hi, Kevin."

“Hi, Merry Anna. I’m already out of money for the month. How about you?”

“It’s barely the middle of the month, and by my budget, I should still have forty-eight dollars left over at the end,” Merry Anna said.

“Don’t spend it all in one place,” Kevin said with that snarky laugh of his.

“Look, I don’t mind helping you get on your feet, but, Kevin, you have to work if you want to live the lifestyle we used to have together.” The wager wasn’t over yet, but she didn’t see any problem with living modestly. “I have to tell you, living on this much money isn’t half bad.” She smiled as she walked. “In fact, it’s pretty darn good. It’s going to be very hard to leave this place.”

“Seriously?” Kevin’s voice rose, the way it did when she said something he didn’t agree with.

“Yes. I really mean it.”

“You’re insane,” he sputtered.

Mom said, “Be nice, Kevin.” She reprimanded him as though he were one of her own kids, and probably it seemed that way, since he and Merry Anna had met in the first grade.

“Living on twelve hundred fifty dollars a month can be done.” *And I’ve never been happier.* She placed her hand against her heart. *I really am.*

“A deal is a deal, and it’s not over. I’m also not convinced, although you do sound different. Calmer. I don’t know, just different.”

“I *feel* different, Kevin.” She waved to George, the owner of the hardware store. He’d been in just the other day to buy his wife a new apron for her birthday. Such a sweet man. “I’m trying new things. Listening. Discovering.”

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“That doesn’t sound like you.” Kevin cleared his throat. “I’ve got to ask. Is there someone else?”

Did he really just ask that? Even if there were, at least she’d waited until after the divorce, unlike him, who’d broken the cardinal rule while married. But she wasn’t going to go there. What had needed to be said had already been said about a hundred times. Can’t change it. “No, just me, but that’s okay too.”

“I guess we’ll see how next month goes. You wouldn’t lie to me about your spending to make your point, would you?”

“No, I wouldn’t. Thanks for being the mediator, Mom.”

“Anything for you, my darling. Don’t be a stranger. I miss you, and the business needs you.”

“The business is fine, but I miss you too.” Merry Anna strolled down Main Street. Going home was so much easier since most of it was downhill. But the driveway to her house was a steep uphill climb. Too bad she hadn’t been able to rent the big old manor house at the foot of the hill. Someone had bought it just a few weeks ago. It needed some TLC, but it could be a stunning home again with some work.

I feel as though a little TLC could transform me too. But the thought of another man in her life left her a little numb. *Maybe I should get a puppy.*

The hike up the hill was a better workout than a run on the treadmill she’d so faithfully used every morning back at home. She was even a little winded. When she entered the bunkhouse, she noticed that the room air conditioner had kept the place comfortable despite the pounding sun today, but this evening it was nice enough to open a few windows. She flipped the switch, and the unit rumbled to a stop.

She opened a window on each side of the bunkhouse to get

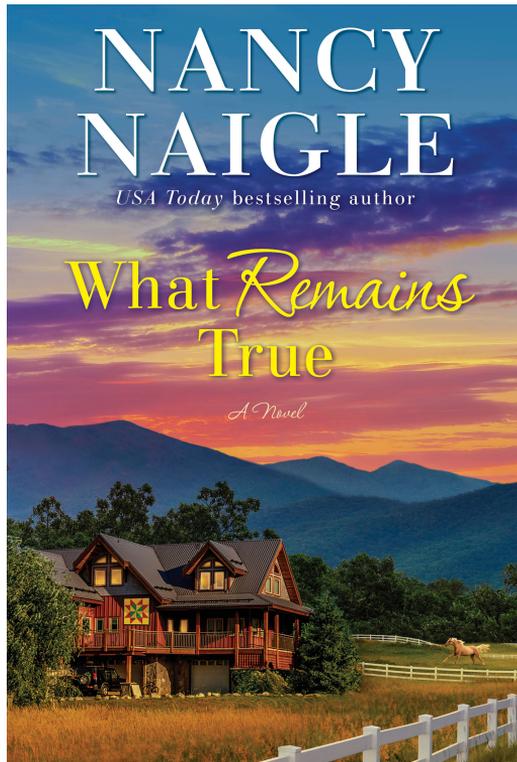
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a cross breeze. When Krissy had said she owned a bunkhouse she could let her rent, Merry Anna had no idea that it was a real, cowboys-had-been-hanging-their-hats-there bunkhouse. Chaps with long leather fringes, some in bright colors, still hung across the wall about ten feet in the air. Rodeo numbers had been stapled to one wall. Lots of them, from all over—Texas, Wyoming, Oklahoma, Arizona, and the East Coast too. She wondered how many people had contributed them.

It was a man's world, with the galvanized roofing panels as wainscoting and the big woodstove, but she'd girlied it up a little over the past few weeks. The feminine stuff in Krissy's store was so hard to resist. Merry Anna had added soft pinks, yellows, and oranges, with flowers, throw pillows, towels, and an awesome barn quilt that Krissy had surprised her with just last week.

She grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and walked outside to sit on the porch swing. The patinaed chain creaked, but she didn't mind. It was just one more item to add to her list of things she'd never done before. Who knew saying yes to new opportunities could bring so much unexpected joy?

I wish this could last forever.



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