

NANCY NAIGLE

*Author of *The Shell Collector**

To Light *the* Way Forward

A Novel



Other Novels by Nancy Naigle

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



To Light the Way Forward

A Novel

NANCY NAIGLE



WATERBROOK

A WaterBrook Trade Paperback Original

Copyright © 2025 by Nancy Naigle

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader. Please note that no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

All rights reserved. Published in the United States
by WaterBrook, an imprint of Random House,
a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

WATERBROOK and colophon are registered trademarks of
Penguin Random House LLC.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Naigle, Nancy, author.

Title: To light the way forward: a novel / Nancy Naigle. Description:
[Colorado Springs] : WaterBrook, 2025.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024043177 | ISBN 9780593601044 (trade paper-
back) | ISBN 9780593601051 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Romance fiction. | Christian fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3614.A545 T6 2025 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/
eng/20240920

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024043177>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

waterbrookmultnomah.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

Title page art from stock.adobe.com/eyetric

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 kids' menu octopus-shaped pancakes 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.