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*A Shell Collector Novel*

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Home No Matter Where



# Home No Matter Where

*A Shell Collector Novel*

NANCY NAIGLE



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*Home isn't always a place—it's the comfort of being known,  
the courage to begin again, and the love that lights the way.  
May you always know when you've found your home  
and feel it in your heart forever.*

# Chapter One

NINA HADN'T EVEN REACHED THE BRIDGE TO WHELK'S ISLAND and was already questioning everything. This trip to Mom's beach house wasn't a vacation; it felt like a surrender. A last-ditch effort to fix what she had no idea how to repair: her daughter Kendra, herself, and the invisible weight pressing on their lives since the divorce. She prayed this trip was the right answer—that the ocean breeze would carry away their hurts and the waves would wash the slate clean. A break. A fresh start. If only finding home was as simple as leaving one behind.

The steady hum of the car's engine filled the silence between mother and daughter on their drive from Pennsylvania to North Carolina, broken only by the pounding bass thumping from Kendra's earbuds. Nina tightened her grip on the steering wheel, resisting the urge to tell her daughter to turn the music down.

*Be patient.* Nina rolled her shoulders to shake out the tension that had settled in hours ago. Her fingers ached, but she wasn't sure if it was from driving or the weight of everything she'd been carrying lately. The wall Kendra was building between them was becoming impossible to penetrate, and Nina felt like she would break if she had to face one more problem.

Calling Mom—Rosemary Palakiko—had been Nina's last hope. She'd hated to do it. Admitting that she couldn't handle

her own daughter revealed an even bigger failure than the divorce, but if anyone could help, it was her mother. Slipping grades, missed curfews, and a sassy attitude were becoming Kendra's norm. Wise, warm, and never afraid to say what needed saying, Rosemary had a way of bringing clarity to chaos, even from four hundred miles away.

Kendra slouched in the seat, arms folded, chin jutting out—her fourteen-year-old armor against the world and an attitude that took up all the space in the car.

Nina's beautiful girl made her heart ache with both pride and sorrow, caught somewhere between the little one who used to snuggle close, her I-love-yous floating like butterflies, and the stranger now riding shotgun. "You okay?" Nina asked, loud enough for Kendra to hear when her daughter caught her gaze.

Kendra's hazel eyes flickered in annoyance. They were impossible to read, shifting with the light: green when she was mischievous, gold when she was angry. Was it just the afternoon sun glinting off them right now, or had she mustered up more anger in the hours of silence on the drive?

Her daughter had barely said a word since they left. No complaints, no conversation, just silence except for the occasional exaggerated sigh that made Nina's skin prickle.

Nina drew in a long breath, counting to five, the kind of breath meant to steady oneself.

This trip needed to be a fresh start. Whelk's Island—Mom's house, the ocean breeze, sunshine, vitamin D, and space to heal. It had all sounded so perfect in her head. But now, with Kendra beside her practically radiating misery, she wondered if she was fooling herself.

Could any place really fix what felt so broken? They'd been through a lot this past year, and they needed to find some peace.

Her and David's divorce had taken way too long, and it was already ugly before he'd met the new girlfriend and stopped

spending time with Kendra. In an attempt to reduce the disappointments David could inflict on her daughter with the every-other-week handovers, or lack of them, she'd fought for and gotten full custody. David was a good man, but he was dropping the ball on being a part of his daughter's daily life, so having Kendra in one home seemed best for her emotional well-being. And, frankly, Nina's own.

The divorce was tough on Kendra, but the anxiety of being a teenager added to the situation. Without two parents to keep her constantly on track, she was losing interest in sports and was left grappling for outlets that weren't to Nina's liking: reckless friends and getting into trouble. Kendra didn't understand that Nina's fight for custody had been to protect her, not punish her, and that hurt had fueled her anger.

Nina and David had balanced all their responsibilities like champs. Despite being workaholics, they'd somehow always found a way to compromise and handle everything together, making it work. Until it didn't.

When David announced he was moving out, she was completely blindsided. That's when the conversations became less civil and his participation in their daughter's activities was a passing priority. Then Dad died and she and David agreed to hold off on the divorce for a while. That pause lasted longer than planned, and the dissolution was only finalized last year.

The ink on their papers had barely dried before David announced his engagement to a woman closer to Kendra's age than hers, all glossy hair and acrylic nails, who could make him her entire focus.

Nina took a deep breath to clear her mind of all that had gone wrong. *Please, God, let us find a new healthy and happy normal on Whelk's Island. Is this too much to hope for?*

At the very least, she'd be thankful for a good night's sleep, and she was sort of guaranteed that by staying at Mom's beach

house. Nina needed a break from hearing her daughter sighing dramatically every five minutes. There were worse ways to spend the summer. She'd still have to work, but walking on the beach and watching the waves crash on the shore sure sounded good.

Kendra let out an exasperated grunt. "Mom, are we *ever* going to get there?"

Nina's jaw clenched. She recognized that tone in her daughter's voice. It said, *I don't really care. I'm just letting you know how much I hate this.*

"Think of it as a family vacation." Nina tried to keep her tone upbeat, though the strain in her voice felt like a frayed edge she could barely smooth.

"I'm already going on a vacation with Dad the second week of August." Kendra crossed her arms, her gaze locked on the road ahead as if willing it to speed up. "I'm counting down the days."

"This will be just as fun," Nina offered, knowing even as she said it that Kendra wouldn't believe her.

"As fun as an epic national park tour?" Kendra's snort added the extra twist. "Dad has it all planned out. Yellowstone, and we're renting this cool camper van, hiking waterfalls, and going to see real cave dwellings built into the side of a mountain. We'll probably see buffalo in the wild." Her voice softened as she drifted into this fantasy of her vacation, her fingers flicking across the screen of her phone. "Look, Mom. Hikes, a train ride, and even a dude-ranch cookout. Just me and Dad. It'll be the best time of my life."

Nina looked over, taking in the momentary delight that replaced the scowl on her daughter's face. *If only I believed that trip was going to be all about you.* But she forced a smile to mask her concern. "It does sound amazing. I'm glad you have something special to look forward to."

However, Nina knew her ex well enough to know it wasn't

really “all about Kendra” as her daughter was imagining. But that was for her to find out. Maybe by some miracle, David would surprise her. She swallowed hard. “Maybe both trips will be wonderful. You’re lucky to have two cool things on your summer calendar.”

Kendra’s voice turned sharp again. “This trip? This is just a free ride to see Grandma. It’s not the same.”

Nina drew in a slow breath, working to steady her words. “Kendra, it’s not about how far you go or how much you spend that makes a trip worthwhile. You know that.”

Kendra slumped against the door, staring out at the endless stretch of highway. “It’s going to be boring,” she muttered, but the fight had drained from her voice, leaving behind a trace of something Nina recognized all too well: disappointment, plain and raw.

“Your grandmother will spoil you. It’ll be great.” *And me? I’m going to try with all my heart to let her.*

“I don’t want to be spoiled.” Kendra turned further toward the window and retreated once again to silence.

Nina swallowed her frustration over the silent treatment, the heavy sighs, the eye rolls. But, she reminded herself, this trip wasn’t just for Kendra. It was for *both* of them.

The hours stretched on, exhaustion settling in, when finally the road signs started looking familiar. Now all she wanted was to cross that bridge and breathe in the salt air, if her daughter would let her enjoy even that.

She stole another glance at Kendra, who was still staring out the window, now with her lip caught between her teeth, a sign she was trying not to cry. The tough shell cracked for just a breath, and Nina could almost see her little girl again—the one who used to reach for her hand on long drives. Nina’s heart ached for her.

“Kendra,” she said quietly, “I know you don’t want to be here,

but I'm asking you to give it a chance. Please."

Her daughter's shoulders stiffened. She opened her mouth like she was going to say something cutting, then seemed to think better of it.

Finally, Kendra let out a heavy sigh that almost shook the car. "I just don't get it. Do you think the beach is gonna suddenly make everything okay because you forced me to take a trip with you?"

Nina bristled, but she softened her voice. "Just *try* to enjoy this."

Kendra didn't answer.

The road stretched on. The waves would be waiting, and maybe, just maybe, they'd give both of them a little room to figure things out.

Finally, the highway signs listed Whelk's Island among the beach destinations. The road narrowed as they approached the three-mile Wright Memorial Bridge, the only road onto Whelk's Island from the north. The waters of the sound shifted between blue and gray, catching the sunlight in a dance of fleeting glimmers.

The salt air drifted in through her open window, mingling with the faint scent of coconut from the hand lotion Kendra had spilled in the console weeks ago.

Her daughter slouched, earbuds still in, eyes fixed on the endless scroll of her phone. Nina's heart ached, the weight of these past three years pressing hard against her chest. The drawn-out divorce and the loss of Nina's father had really taken a toll on both of them.

"You still okay over there?" Nina asked softly, hoping for something more than a shrug.

Kendra didn't look up. "Fine."

That word. It had become Kendra's shield. Nina reached over, squeezing her hand. "We're almost there, sweetheart."

Whelk's Island felt like a promise. In Nina's mind, this bridge was the path passing from one world into another, leaving the chaos behind.

She slowed the car as the road narrowed ahead. They passed a bait shop with a carved-wood pelican out front, an ice cream stand already gearing up for the summer rush, and expanses of scrubby dunes that felt more foreign than familiar. There was no nostalgia here—just a quiet hope that maybe this place, her mother's new home, could offer the fresh start they both so desperately needed.

"Look at that big old oak," Nina said, nodding toward a gnarled tree with branches stretched wide as if attempting to hold the world together. "Your grandma was telling me that it's one of the oldest trees on the island."

Kendra barely glanced at the tree. "Its branches are all twisted up funny, like a dancer's arms." She lifted her own arms, striking a wobbly ballerina pose, tongue stuck out like some kind of wild little creature.

But when she dropped her arms, her shoulders sagged, and she quickly turned back to the window, leaving Nina to wonder what Kendra's silliness was hiding.

Kendra spat her next words like an accusation. "Looks kinda creepy, if you ask me."

Nina bit back a sigh, searching past the attitude to find the sweet girl she knew was still in there somewhere. She gave her daughter an encouraging grin, holding tight to hope. "If you ask me, it looks like that tree's trying to give the whole road a big ole hug. And, you know, sometimes the things that look the most tangled up are the strongest of all. And sometimes we could all use a hug." She patted Kendra's leg.

Kendra didn't even bother to look her way. "If you say so," she mumbled, her voice as flat as a pancake.

But Nina wasn't ready to give up—not on the mood, not on

this trip, not on her daughter. “Well, I do. And I’m hoping that’s how we’re gonna feel staying here this summer—like we’re right where we are meant to be.”

She took in a deep breath. The clean scent filled her lungs, and for the first time all day, she felt her chest loosen just a little.

Kendra tugged out one earbud. “Shouldn’t we be there? Are we lost?” Her voice was as weary as Nina felt.

Nina said a silent prayer, asking that she and Kendra would meet halfway soon. She cleared her throat. “It smells like the ocean already, doesn’t it?” She faced her daughter and lifted her brow in what she hoped would appear playful.

Kendra cocked her head, but as she turned, she pulled her other earbud out and muttered, “Because it *is* the ocean.”

A small victory. Nina fought back a smile. “Look at the way the sun dances over the surface. It’s so pretty.”

Kendra huffed but didn’t put the earbuds back in. Another victory.

Encouraged, Nina pressed on. “Your grandma’s excited to see you. She’s been baking all week.”

Kendra shrugged. “Fine. How much farther?”

Not exactly a warm response, but it wasn’t a fight either. Nina would take it.

Purposely adding enthusiasm to her voice, she said, “Not even thirty minutes to go. Just a couple little beach towns before we get to Whelk’s Island. Remember when we came last year and you couldn’t stop pointing out all the cool shops on the way? Ice cream, mini golf, the surf shops?”

Kendra’s gaze traced the water stretching out on either side.

Boats bobbed in the distance, their white hulls like tiny seashells scattered on blue-green glass. The marsh grass rippled at the edges of the water, and gulls wheeled overhead, their cries carried on the wind.

“Looks the same as it did last time we were here,” Kendra grumbled, tucking her hair behind one ear.

“You loved it last time,” Nina said, struggling to keep her voice even. “You didn’t stop talking about the beach for a month.”

Her daughter shrugged, shoulders sinking like they were too heavy to lift. “I don’t know why you think coming here is supposed to fix everything.”

“I love you, and I have to try *something*. I hate seeing you like this.” Nina could argue. She could remind Kendra that it was about trying, about survival, but she was too tired for a fight. “I don’t think the island’s magic,” she said quietly. “But I do think a fresh start can help. And your grandmother’s waiting for us. That counts for something, doesn’t it?”

Kendra didn’t answer. She just turned back to the window. But she still didn’t put her earbuds back in, and that felt like another tiny win.

They drove in silence, but finally the **WELCOME TO WHELK’S ISLAND** sign rose ahead like a promise, its hand-painted letters weathered but steady, just like Nina hoped *she* could be. She steered the car around the curve that hugged the coast and took the turn toward Mom’s house. Two more turns and they’d be there. Her heart thudded as she eased off the main highway, the tires rumbling over the shell-speckled road, the ocean glinting between the dunes like it was waiting to greet them.

Then, just before they turned onto the beach road, Kendra straightened. “Wait, isn’t that Hailey and Jesse’s house?”

“Sure is,” Nina said. “We’re almost there.”

Kendra dropped her earbuds into her backpack, rubbing her hands over her jeans like she was shaking off the last bit of her bad mood.

Nina stole a glance at her, her heart swelling with something she hadn’t felt in a long time. *Hope*. It was just for a second, a

flicker of light, but it was there.

And as they rounded the bend toward her mother's house, Nina whispered another silent prayer, this time asking that Whelk's Island would keep that light burning.