

Beauty for
Ashes

Kathleen Neely

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Beauty for Ashes

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Dedication

To my husband, Vaughn Neely, Thank you for
encouraging me to chase dreams.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;

To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;

To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified.

Isaiah 61:1-3

Prologue

January 1, 2006

Heaviness pressed down upon him. Nathan tried to open his eyes, but as a sliver of light penetrated his eyelids, pain exploded in his head. He hooked his arm around the pillow and pulled it to block the light. He ran a hand over the wrinkled sheets and risked opening his eyes.

He was in his own bed, fully clothed, still wearing shoes. A leaden feeling held him there, his own weight too heavy to lift. A glimpse at his alarm clock showed eleven fifteen in red lights. Sunshine forced its way through the window, and dust particles danced in the sunbeam, telling him it was morning.

Fragments of memory surfaced. Music. Pulsations rocked the truck at deafening decibels. Sam's singing. Blinding lights moving in concentric circles and changing directions. Nathan wedged his foot free of the covers and then forced his legs off the side of the bed. Once he managed a sitting position, his stomach rebelled. He remembered something else—something red in his foggy brain. A swift image ripped through

his head. A spinning top. No, that wasn't right. It wasn't a toy. A car! A red car—brakes screeching as it spun and twirled before crashing into a pole.

His mouth watered and his throat filled with bitter acid. He wouldn't make it to the bathroom. He grabbed the trashcan as his stomach lost the battle.

1

Ten Years Later

July 28, 2016

Nathan Drummond's photo stared at him from the back cover of his latest release. The full-length shot captured him leaning against a tree, gnarled branches behind him, heavy with moss. It was a relaxed scene—his arms loosely folded at chest height. Coffee-brown hair and the hint of a smile repeated on each novel and on the website. His publicist insisted that face recognition was as important as name recognition.

The picture captured enigmatic eyes—the steely gray hue brought an intense look, while flecks of light indicated amusement, creating a furtive paradox. A practiced look. Perfect for a mystery writer.

He turned the hardback over, enjoying the weight of it. Nathan's debut novel had only been printed in paperback. It attained mediocre success, but the second one hit the New York Times Best Seller list and stayed there for eleven weeks. His hand slid along the book jacket, feeling the rise of embossed letters.

Eight novels in the six years since he graduated from Emory had allowed him to quit his teaching job to write full time. It never got old. He couldn't suppress the grin as he snapped a picture of the cover and sent it in a text message to his mother and his sister, Leah. They had always been his top supporters,

along with his dad, until his sudden death three weeks ago.

He had barely hit the send button when his phone rang. Diana's name filled the screen. They'd been dating for the past two months and had dinner plans this evening. "Hello, you must have read my mind. I was getting ready to call you."

"I have about three minutes until my next client. Just checking on tonight. Are we still meeting for dinner?"

"We are, but let's change locations. I'll make reservations at the Sun Dial."

"Whoa. Are we celebrating something?" She sounded as though she was moving around, opening and closing a file cabinet.

"The books came in today. I'm holding one in my hand."

"Wonderful. Got to go. My appointment's here."

"I'll pick you up at six." He disconnected the call and hit the button to dial his mother. She was slow to answer, fatigue evident in her voice.

"Hey, Mom. Did you see the picture I just sent?"

"I did. The cover looks great. I can't wait to read it."

"You OK? You sound tired today." In fact, she sounded tired a lot of days, now that she lived alone with her grief and a bad hip. "I'm fine, Nate. Just the same old trouble with this hip."

"So, are you ready to talk surgery? I told you I'll come to help you." His sister lived on the west coast while her husband finished his residency at UCLA Medical Center. She had flown in for their dad's funeral, but the trip was long and expensive.

"Why are you and that doctor always wanting to

rush me to the operating room? I'll know it's time when the pain from the hip is worse than the idea of surgery."

Nathan paced while he talked, a habit he'd developed long ago when he began writing. "I get that, but it makes you unsteady on your feet. There might be some merit to getting it done now. And I hear that hip replacements are an easier recovery than knee replacements."

"You worry too much. I'm planning to fly out to LA when my first grandchild is born. I've waited a long time to be a grandma."

Leah was younger than him, married, and expecting her first child. It just hadn't happened for him.

"All right, Mom. Just take care of yourself. I'll send you a book."

"You're two and a half hours away. Why don't you bring it? You might like a home-cooked meal." She liked to remind him how close he was to home.

Greenville, South Carolina, always rocked his world, taking him too close to memories he'd rather leave dormant. But he couldn't tell that to his mother. He had just spent time there for his dad's funeral and hadn't planned to return this soon. "I'll do that. But it won't be this week. I've got a few book signings set up, one here in Atlanta and then in Macon and Chattanooga."

"Why not schedule one here in Greenville? Everyone likes seeing their hometown boy."

"I'll see what I can do about that. Let's plan on a visit next week."

~*~

After riding up the scenic glass elevator to the top of the Westin, the hostess showed them to their table beside the floor-to-ceiling glass panels. Nathan pulled out a chair to seat Diana. The Sun Dial was so much more than dinner. The revolving restaurant had panoramic views of Atlanta. As the day faded, lights began illuminating the city, casting colorful halos. Diana scanned the room. "Nice. I was only here once before, and that was a luncheon. It's dazzling at night."

"Speaking of dazzling, you look lovely tonight." Diana's blond hair had been pulled back and twisted around a band caught at the nape of her neck.

"Thank you. It's been a long week, so this is a welcome respite." A crisis counselor saw many heart-wrenching situations and could never discuss them with any detail. She broad-brushed enough that Nathan knew the job took a toll on her.

The waiter brought wine for Diana and coffee for Nathan.

She pointed toward a distant cluster of buildings. "Is that the historic district? I'm losing my sense of direction."

"That happens when you're in motion." He pointed out the window, identifying landmarks. Atlanta spread before them with views of Centennial Olympic Park, Turner Field, and CNN headquarters. As the restaurant rotated, he caught glimpses of the Georgia Dome and the World of Coca-Cola.

"So, tell me about the book. Is it available in stores?"

Nathan tipped the creamer, sending a small stream of white into his coffee. "It's available online. It should reach stores within the next few days. I have a book signing here on Tuesday then in Macon on

Thursday. I'll drive up to Chattanooga next week for another."

Diana leaned in, bright-eyed. "You've been close-mouthed about this one. Are you going to give me a synopsis now that it's out?"

Nathan flashed a grin. "Nope. But I'll give you a copy. You can read the blurb, but I'd rather you enjoy the surprises."

"Speaking of surprises, I got one at work today. I have to go to Phoenix for two weeks. Required training. I'm trying to rearrange my schedule. The people who plan these things fail to consider clients that can't go two weeks without help. I'm doing video conferencing sessions for some of them." She gave a theatrical groan. "I leave a week from Monday."

"Not a lot of lead time to plan."

"No kidding."

After dinner, Nathan drove Diana back to her Alpharetta apartment, joining the flow of bumper to bumper traffic. He parked in front of her building and got out to dig through a box in the backseat. "I have a copy of the book back here."

"No hurry, Nate. I'll have no reading time before I get back." She reached for his hand as they walked to her door. "Come in for a while?" She arched an eyebrow in question.

Nathan never went inside when he took her home. She wanted to move their relationship to a deeper level, but he kept it light. The further he got in, the harder it would be to end it. And it would end eventually.

They'd met eight weeks ago at Drake's home. A Memorial Day picnic with a few friends. Nathan suspected the chance meeting had actually been

contrived by Drake's girlfriend. Diana was good company, but he didn't see that relationship going the distance.

"I have an early morning. I'll talk with you later this week but won't see you until you get back from Phoenix. I'll be in Greenville." He leaned in to give her a platonic kiss.

Diana turned his way with a pout and an audible sigh. She accepted the slight touch of lips and opened her door. "Good night, Nate. Thank you for dinner."

Nathan walked to his car. He wouldn't call her mid-week after all. Let it be the beginning of the decline.

~*~

The sun had not yet surfaced when Nathan awoke. Early mornings and late nights were his best writing times. He planned to get an hour or two in before Saturday morning basketball. The informal pick-up game consisted of whomever managed to make it out on any given Saturday. Nathan, Brian, and Drake were regulars, probably because they were the single ones.

With a steaming cup of coffee in hand, Nathan went to his desk. He pushed the laptop to the back, reached for the journal, and opened it to the first blank page. Handwritten journal entries had been the start of his writing career, a discipline he vowed to continue. His father's untimely death kept him from it, but he'd get back on track, starting today.

Two hours later, Nathan had completed his final edit, just six months after his last submission, a schedule that his publisher hoped to accelerate.

~*~

Grabbing his towel from the bleacher, Nathan wiped the sweat off his forehead, and took a long swig from his water bottle. Brian came up behind him and gave a thud to his shoulder. "Better luck next time."

A quick glance around told Nathan the new guy wasn't in earshot. "Yeah, you gave me a rookie against you and Drake."

"Ha. Throwing your teammate under the bus. See you next week."

"Hey, Brian." Nathan called to his retreating back. "Can you get me a book signing in Greenville? Have to appease my mother."

As his publicist, Brian worked with him to schedule signings and speaking opportunities. Nathan and Drake were both authors with McAllen Publishing House.

"That should be easy. Bookstores like local authors. I'll get back to you."

Bittersweet. Nathan wanted to see his mother, but once again, he'd need to brace himself to face the past.

2

Angie Hernandez took her seat beside her cousin, Elizabeth, at the table in the small office of The Herald Center. She reached to rub her cousin's shoulder. "Liz, you look tired today."

"I didn't sleep well last night. Too much going through my head." Elizabeth's brow wrinkled when she reviewed the papers in front of her. The job of Executive Director could be taxing at times.

Angie glanced at the clock, ticking rhythmically on the wall. "My dad should be here any minute. Has he seen the estimates?"

"Yes. Actually, he talked with the building inspector and got the estimates for us. He e-mailed everything to me but will brief you and Jonas this morning."

Angie's dad went above and beyond the scope of his role as Chairman of the Board for The Herald Center. Elizabeth had lost her mother last year, ten years after losing her father, and he kept a protective eye on her.

They both looked up when they heard the front door. Alex Hernandez walked in, briefcase in hand.

He poked his head into the office. "How are my girls this morning?" Angie recognized his forced attempt at cheerfulness.

“Good morning, Papi.”

Elizabeth got right to business. “I’d like Jonas in this meeting. He’s been managing this place for twenty-five years.”

Alex plopped his briefcase on the table. “Yes, ever since the doors opened. He knows the history.”

The titles sounded lofty. On paper, Elizabeth Garcia, Executive Director; Angie Hernandez, Director of Operations; and Jonas Coleman, Program Director. In reality, they all pitched in, worked together, doing what needed to be done.

Elizabeth stood. “He’s in the back room. I’ll get him.”

Jonas lumbered toward the office, the massive black man a stark contrast to Elizabeth’s slender form. Closing the door behind them, all four gathered at the table. The metal folding chairs were slightly too short for the surface of the scuffed wood table, but they had grown accustomed to the mismatch. A glassed enclosure adjacent to the multi-purpose room served as their office. It was beneficial when the room filled with teens. More eyes to supervise.

Elizabeth slid the papers across the table. “Uncle Alex, will you get us started?”

He separated duplicate copies of the documents and turned one toward Angie and Jonas. “These are the estimates to replace the roof and the HVAC system. We’ve gotten three estimates for each. The building inspector didn’t mince words. Without the necessary repairs, they’ll close our doors. We have sixty days.”

Elizabeth watched in silence.

Jonas picked up the roofing quote and emitted a low whistle. “Ain’t no way we can meet this in sixty days. Can we patch and repair instead of replacing the

roof?"

Angie glanced at her dad as he shook his head. "I asked that. The damage is too substantial. Three roofers said they wouldn't touch a patch job. It needs to be replaced."

Angie's gaze followed Jonas's as he peered upward. Watermarks stretched across the ceiling even in this tiny office. The multi-purpose room had sustained worse damage. An air conditioning unit rested in a high window, running at full speed to help the faltering central air. Its noisy motor amplified off the hard gym surfaces. In a little while, that room would be filled with kids playing basketball. If the AC stopped, it would be stifling.

Jonas shook his head and reached for the HVAC estimate. "Guess that means we can't get the gym floor fixed." The warped section of water-damaged hardwood had buckled, creating a tripping hazard. Bright orange safety cones cordoned off that corner.

"Let's deal with one thing at a time." She turned from face to face. "Does anyone here think God's work at this center is ending?"

"No," they resounded in unison.

Angie joined the others in shaking their heads.

Elizabeth nodded her agreement. "I know there may be a day when He has other plans for this community, but as long as we all agree that God's call is still here, we have to believe that He'll supply all of our needs. God says to make our requests known to Him. I think we should do that and then make our needs known to the community. They've supported us through tough times before."

Jonas grimaced. "I always hate asking folks for money. Telling people we can't keep our doors open.

Folks around here mostly live on hard times.”

Alex looked from face to face. “Folks around here may live on hard times, but we can appeal to businesses. And to the greater Greenville area. The Herald Center’s work with teens helps everybody.”

Angie rested her chin on her arm, thinking. After a long silence, an idea began to take form. “People need to know what we’re doing here. Let’s see if we can get a video with some testimonies and then launch a fundraiser. I’m sure I can talk Mr. Williams into doing some free videography.”

When Jonas smiled, his gleaming white teeth stood in stark contrast to ebony skin. “Angie, you could talk an Eskimo into buying snow. I think we need your face on that video.”

Angie shook her head. “Not mine. Elizabeth’s. The Executive Director should do it.”

Elizabeth agreed with Jonas. “No, Angie. You do have a gift of persuasion and a look of pure innocence. And right now, you’re more hands-on with the kids. Let’s script it coming from you.”

Angie looked at her father. “I agree. And I have a friend at the TV station who I might convince to cover it for us.”

Elizabeth glanced at the clock. “I have a parenting class to teach. Time is of the essence. Can we all gather our ideas and reconvene tomorrow at 9:00 AM? Come with suggestions about the video—who would be good for a testimony. Bring some thoughts about the direction of a fundraiser. We could do a fundraising dinner, a walk-a-thon, a fair. Think about the logistics of each and the time we have to work with. Let’s set a timetable.”

Ideas were already taking root in Angie’s mind.

~*~

Once they started, everything moved at record speed. Darren Williams brought his video equipment. Two former student testimonies bookended candid shots of programs that the center offered, ending with Angie voicing their need and inviting all of the community to a fundraising jamboree.

Volunteers organized games, a craft show, a corn hole tournament, and an antique car cruise. Women from their church planned baked goods to be prizes for a cake walk. Angie's dad, true to his word, managed to get airtime as well as newspaper coverage.

Angie caught sight of her cousin standing before the picture of her father in the lobby, its gilded frame inscribed. Elizabeth, six months older, was more like a sister than a cousin.

Angie walked to the foyer, a closet-sized cubby separating the front door from the gymnasium. She draped an arm around Elizabeth.

"You OK, Liz?"

Elizabeth leaned into Angie's embrace. "I feel such a burden of responsibility to protect his legacy. He worked so hard to build this place. I can't lose it all."

"You won't lose it. You said it yourself—God has kept these doors open through tough times. He's able to do it again."

"Thank you for always reminding me of what I know. Sometimes I allow fear to hide my faith." She gazed again at the portrait. "I still miss him."

Angie grasped her hand. "He taught me so much. When I was a child, I once complained about some of

the kids acting out. He bent down to my level and took my hands in his. He said, 'Angelina, look deeper. There's so much more to see. Some people have a lot of hurt inside. Maybe we can show them the answer to their pain.'" Angie could still hear his beautifully accented voice, his words slow and eloquent.

Elizabeth squeezed her cousin's hand. "Yes, he met each cynical, rebellious teenager with respect and grace."

"I try to remember that today when these kids come in with big attitudes and bad language. I remind myself to look deeper, just like Uncle Ramón once did."