

*Ashes to Ashes*

by

Nancy W. Carroll

A NOVEL

Represented by

Julie Gwinn, AAR

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*To give unto them beauty for ashes,  
the oil of joy for mourning,  
the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. Isaiah 61:3*

*“You can have the other words—chance, luck, coincidence, serendipity.*

*I'll take grace. I don't know what it is exactly, but I'll take it.”*  
— *Mary Oliver*

**Part 1: Dearly Beloved, We Are Gathered Here**

Ashes to Ashes

Chapter 1

**Adele Had to Have a FUNeral**

*Tamara*

Adele had way too much time on her hands before she died.

Once she knew, as she put it, “her end was nigh,” Adele began dictating her last wishes to Tamara.

“Are you taking this all down? I want a fun funeral. A FUN-eral. Wait! I could twitter that—whatever they call it. Get my own hashtag #FUNeral. Start a trend.”

Adele wanted the reception to be like an Irish wake, with people laughing and hugging and eating and drinking. Lots of drinking. But Pastor Pete nixed the idea of mimosas and Bloody Mary’s so Tamara suggested that folks wouldn’t hang around “celebrating.”

Adele gave her that one-eye squint. “Tamara, hush. You just handle the ‘ambiance’ for the church and reception. Tell BonBon he’s in charge of the food. It’ll be great for business.”

Tamara scribbled notes for the rest of the family's responsibilities.

Jonathan had double duty: pulling her funeral playlist together and handling MeeMaw. Adele chuckled, "Pay him extra, Tamara!" Becca's only job was to make sure not to birth the baby during the service. Neither of them mentioned Robert.

Tamara let out her breath as she sank into the last row of scarred oak pews. She repeated the list in her head.

Flowers from Adele's backyard in jars on the altar. Check.

Lit candles on every possible flat surface in the foyer and church. Check.

Broadway music piping in from the speaker system. Check.

Pastor Pete already arranged Adele's last remains in their strange assortment of boxes and mugs and vases on the altar. None had see-through glass. Adele hated the thought of being seen naked, even if it was her ashes.

A hand touched her shoulder and she jerked back. A man in a blue suit leaned over and whispered, "Are you Tamara?" She nodded. "There's a seat for you up front."

Tamara gritted her teeth. Adele *knew* Tamara was a lapsed, back-row Catholic. She *knew* Tamara loved anonymity. One of the reasons she got here early—besides being "Miss FUNeral Ambiance Giver"—was to plant herself in the coveted back pew.

Professional Funeral Man ushered her to the front row. Seven stickers written in Adele's scrawl dotted down the bench. Hers was the second from last. After Robert, Becca and Jonathan and their significant others, but before Adele's mother. That should go well. Tamara slid to the end of the pew. On the second row, there was one sticker for Adele's brother, Walter.

People started shuffling in. Business suits and black dresses next to ripped jeans and batik. Even a tennis dress. Tamara recognized Terrence the hairdresser and Mel the bookstore owner. Bitsy, the six-foot-two bartender. That homeless guy Adele always fed took Tamara's seat in the back row. The "Moms-in-Touch" prayer group from when Adele's kids were preschoolers walked in as a clump and sat together in the fourth pew back. One of them gave her a discreet wave. Adele had renamed them the "Moms-No-Longer-in-Touch" since their kids hadn't turned out quite like they prayed.

Jazmyn sat in the shadows of the back pew on the other side of the church, alone, head down, her African braids hiding her face. Tamara hadn't seen Jazmyn since the foster agency removed her from the Urlaub house when they learned Adele was terminal.

Adele's family lined up in the aisle according to their sticker placement. MeeMaw, scooting down the pew first, peered through her glasses, found her name, settled in, and then pointed at Tamara's sticker. Sliding around MeeMaw's swollen knees, she sat in her designated place. MeeMaw's mustard-colored tweed suit smelled of mothballs. Tamara sneezed and MeeMaw turned her head. Her dark, drawn-on eyebrows made her look perpetually angry. She squeezed one of her wadded-up tissues into Tamara's hand.

“In case you need it, dear,” she whispered. “It’s clean.”

Robert nudged into the remaining space. What was left of his hair had gone gray.

Pastor Pete read from Adele’s instructions and then started his one-minute eulogy, another of Adele’s requests. He made some weird analogy to *The Sound of Music* and *Maria* and then sounded like he was white-man rapping. All Tamara heard was “How do you keep a moonbeam in your hand?”

Tamara started composing a text in her head. *To Adele: Pete’s shortest sermon ever. He called you a “moonbeam.”* 😊🌙 The reality of where she was jolted her. She clenched her fingers around the tissue and willed her eyes to stay dry.

The parade of ash receivers began. Pete walked a small antique vase down to MeeMaw. She clutched it with gnarled fingers.

Walter stood next. Pale and balding, he wore a short-sleeve plaid shirt and navy pants that showed his brown socks. Tamara hadn’t seen him since high school. He transferred to some private school in the middle of his senior year when she and Adele had been freshmen.

Jonathan’s shoulders shook as he climbed over his sister to pick up his gnawed-on Tigger sippy cup. Tamara remembered him toddling around with that cup way longer than he should have. He was the only one crying so far.

Jonathan trudged back to get a painted bone-china sugar bowl for Becca. Tamara heard Becca suck breath through her teeth when Jonathan fumbled the bowl before handing it to her.

She imagined Adele's laughter if her ashes had spilled across the slate floor.

"Clean up on Aisle One."

Pete then gave Jonathan a small silver box and yellow envelope for Becca's baby which he handed over the pew to Ricky before sitting down.

The lidded plastic wine glass went to the Steel Magnolias. They stood in unison: Barb, a tall black woman with three-inch heels; Paige, a too-tanned woman with cropped red hair; and Cecilia, a short round woman with clanking bracelets and a long, flowing skirt. If Tamara had lived in town, she'd have gone on one of their infamous girls-only beach trips. But she rarely made it back to Midlin. She heard Adele's voice in her head. "Not too big, not too small...it's just...Midlin."

BonBon stood next. Tamara was suspicious of any chef who could look that athletic and make the kind of food he did. From under the altar, Pete pulled out a locked recipe box. "Sorry, no ashes for you. Against all the health regulations. But you do get the business and my never-to-be-shared brownie recipe."

Pete called Ofebia's name. Wrapped in a bright yellow and red-patterned cloth with a head wrap in the same material, Ofie made her way to the front like a visiting dignitary. Tamara hadn't seen her since Adele's father's funeral two years ago.

Pete pulled a large colorful cloth purse from under the altar and placed it in Ofebia's hands. "My dear Ofie, my sister from Uganda and pen pal since second grade. I kept all your letters. You've had enough ashes in your life so I'm not giving you any of mine. I want you to



save only the good memories.” Ofie bowed, pulled the bag of letters to her chest, and returned to her seat.

There were two urns left. Tamara knew which one was hers. The Ghirardelli chocolate tin. That was the trip when they got stuck in the San Francisco airport overnight and ate every piece of chocolate in that box.

Pastor Pete lifted it. “To my best friend, Tamara Gonzales. Who will finally be older than me.” Tamara swallowed as he continued reading Adele’s instructions. “I almost ran out of myself—but I saved just enough of me for you.” Tamara crawled over MeeMaw to the outside aisle and walked on shaking legs to the altar. Pete handed her the tin and a letter and squeezed her arm. His palm was moist. Tamara pulled her gaze away from his unusually large Adam’s apple to walk back to her seat.

Pastor Pete handed Robert a dented travel coffee mug, along with a manila envelope. Another song from Jonathan’s playlist started, Aretha Franklin singing “I’ll Fly Away.” She was dead, too.

Pete invited people to the reception at the fellowship hall, mumbled a prayer and slid through the side door as the funeral men ushered the family out to a song from *Wicked*.

Ending with their favorite song from their favorite musical. That was a kick to both kneecaps. *Wicked* had been their splurge after her divorce. A girls’ weekend in New York City. They charged the hotel and tickets to Tommy’s Visa before he cut it off.

Tamara let MeeMaw scoot around her as she sat and listened until the song stopped.

*I've heard it said*

*That people come into our lives for a reason*

*Bringing something we must learn . . .*

*Well, I don't know if I believe that's true*

*But I know I'm who I am today*

*Because I knew you . . .*

The sanctuary was empty. Her heels echoed off the slate floor as she retrieved the last helium balloon and stepped outside the church alone. Drizzling rain fell on her dark hair. She let go her balloon. It floated upward. She hummed the last stanza as she headed to the reception.

*Who can say if I've been changed for the better?*

*But because I knew you*

*I have been changed for good*

Ashes to Ashes

Chapter 2

### **Embarrassed to Death**

*Mary Agnes*

Mary Agnes had never attended a more inappropriate funeral, and she'd been to plenty, especially in the last two years. That's when her Douglas passed, then her cousin, and her hair dresser. They followed protocol.

The day began with cold spitting rain, the kind that made Mary Agnes's bones ache and her fingers curl in like claws. She hated arthritis. And old age. And funerals.

Jonathan pushed at the heavy front door of the church while holding an umbrella over her head. When the door didn't budge, he pushed his shoulder into it and spoked Mary Agnes in the back of her neck with the umbrella spine.

"Jonathan, really. Give me that." She grabbed the handle from him, shook and closed the umbrella, and rubbed her neck with her free hand. As he held the door for her, Mary Agnes inwardly rolled her eyes, anchored her purse strap on her shoulder, and stepped into the narthex.

"Sorry, MeeMaw." Jonathan gave her that side-mouth smile that made him look unbalanced.

Stained-glass light danced across the blue slate floor. Yellow balloons tied to the back pews swayed in the breeze from the opened door. They had happy faces on them. Peppy music played in the background. Lit candles scattered on the round table in the vestibule. The smell of incense triggered Mary Agnes' memories of when she used to go to Mass.

She rolled her eyes, this time outwardly. She preferred church on the television, where she didn't have to deal with unwanted smells, sounds, or people.

Two men in navy-blue suits with serious expressions and Perfect Peace Funeral Home nametags stood at either side of the entrance to the sanctuary. They looked like FBI agents without the wires sticking out of their ears.

The rest of the family stacked into the church's small entry behind her. Jonathan let go of the door and held her arm like she was going to tip over. His girlfriend who she couldn't remember her name followed after him. It began with an M. Mona? Millie? Marcia? Then came Rebecca and her doctor-in-training husband, Ricky. He was from somewhere they spoke Spanish, like Guatemala or Mexico or Puerto Rico. Robert stumbled in, looking worse for wear. Finally, Walter, who flew from Oregon for his sister's funeral, slipped in and disappeared into a corner. They were twenty minutes early.

St. Ambrose's sanctuary had whitewashed walls, a vaulted wood ceiling, and dark oak pews. Three vertical stained-glass windows beamed shafts of light onto the Shaker-style altar where there were Mason jars stuffed with ferns, snapdragons, and gardenias. Mary Agnes' mother used to wear gardenia perfume.

Random containers rose in the middle of the flowers.

The only person in the sanctuary was Adele's Filipina friend, Tamara, sitting in the front row. In her day, that was reserved for family.

One of the FBI men handed Mary Agnes a program. A photo from an Urlaub family ski trip took up most of the front. Adele stood smiling, surrounded by Robert, Jonathan and Becca, her arms and ski poles outstretched, wearing that horrid yellow puffy jacket. Under the photo was written:

*Adele Mayhew Urlaub*

*Beloved Wife, Mother, Friend*

*1961-2018*

There was no "beloved daughter" descriptor. One more thing to bear as a mother.

The FBI-funeral man ushered them into the "Bride's Room." Before shutting the door, he whispered that he'd seat them right before the service began. Incense seeped into the small room, but, thank God, none of that Broadway music. She sank back onto the flowery sofa and scooted her skirt over her swollen knees. Jonathan sat next to her and patted her shoulder. Robert slid into a chair with matching upholstery and looked at his feet. Everyone else stood, staring at their phones in silence.

Opening the program, she shifted her dentures. On the right side, the program listed songs from *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Annie*, and *Mary Poppins*, and had some computer jargon to link

people to Adele's top-ten favorite funeral hymns. On the left side, there was another photo of Adele strapped in harnesses ready to sky dive for her fiftieth birthday. That was how Adele celebrated three years of "all clear from cancer" reports seven years ago. Mary Agnes had told her it was bad luck to declare herself cured.

The FBI man tapped on the door, stuck his head in, and nodded.

"It's time to seat the family. Please silence your phones."

One by one, they poked their phones and put them in their pockets or purses. Except for the Mona-girl. Mary Agnes frowned at her. She frowned back but clicked a button on the side of her phone that blackened the screen.

The family formed a line, with Mary Agnes at the front. The right side of the church had filled with people and they all turned and looked at her. Over the sound system, a screechy child voice belted out "The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow." Mary Agnes closed her eyes so no one could see her rolling them.

She opened her eyes, straightened her shoulders, and began to take a step but the funeral man held her in place. Looking past the people, she counted how many lit candles were in the sanctuary. The altar glowed like a halo. Two simple candlesticks would have sufficed.

Then, as if on cue, "Sunrise, Sunset" piped in from the speakers. Jonathan, behind her, began singing under his breath. Mary Agnes pulled her glasses down her nose and glared at him, her dark eyebrows pointing at him like a bull's horns at a matador. He stopped. She turned her

head, stood as straight as her curving spine allowed, lifted her chin, and stared at the funeral man. He nodded and began walking her down the aisle.

Eight stickers written in Adele's scrawl stuck to the seats in the front two rows. She adjusted her trifocals. Hers was at the far end. The closest said Robert, then Rebecca (Adele had scrawled her nickname *Becca* on the sticker), Ricky, Jonathan, and Moriah—she was right, her name *had* started with an M. At least it was an Irish name. Then Tamara's before hers. Walter's sticker was on the second row all by itself. Adele should have put her back with him.

Tamara pity-smiled at her and stood at the end of the pew and pointed for Mary Agnes to sit on the sticker that read *Tamara*. No thank you. She abided by the rules.

The rest of the family waited as Mary Agnes crab-walked to her sticker, *MeeMaw Mayhew*. She rolled her eyes for the fourth time and gripped the pew in front of her to lower herself. Her knees popped. She looked at Tamara and pointed to her sticker. Tamara slid around her and sat at her place. Her eyes were red and puffy. Mary Agnes retrieved a wadded-up tissue from her sleeve and gave it to her.

Jonathan had shaved and brushed his teeth and put on long khaki pants. But he wore those flip-flop things. No man should show hairy toes in public. He began moving the kneeler back and forth with his foot. Mary Agnes and Moriah both stared at him and he stopped. Moriah looked like a motorcycle gang moll. Dyed black hair, straight and chopped at her chin. Too-white skin. No freckles. Black lipstick and eyeliner and a ring in her eyebrow, which looked painful. She started chewing her cuticles.

Ricky put his arm around Rebecca's shoulder. She wore a black tent of a raincoat hiding her pregnant belly. Ricky looked down the pew at Tamara and Mary Agnes with his Hispanic version of a Frank Sinatra smile. He was in a charcoal gray suit with a bright yellow tie.

Robert slid his bony frame into the last remaining space. He fiddled with the program. Walter slumped into the seat behind the rest of them. Mary Agnes tried to get his attention to sit up straight but he wouldn't look at her.

A lanky young man in a black shirt and white priest collar popped out of a secret side door in the wood paneling and stood behind the altar littered with flowers and jars and boxes and vases. Those candles could catch the whole place on fire. The boy's collar didn't hide his Adam's apple, which bulged over the top of the starched white band. His hands trembled as he held ink-blotched, wrinkled sheets of papers.

“If you're here it means you know. . . I mean, you *knew* Adele Urlaub. So you know not to expect the usual. First, she wanted me to remind you that she *had* to love Robert to become an Urlaub.” Several people tittered. Mary Agnes looked back to see who it was. “Did you know Urlaub means ‘vacation’ in German? Adele always said her spiritual gift was vacationing.” He shook his head, and peered at the people packing one side of the sanctuary. “Sorry, my bad. Back to the eulogy. Adele made me promise to talk for less than one minute—good training for my sermons she said.”

Pete took a breath. “So here it goes.” He hit the stopwatch on his phone. Mary Agnes glanced at her watch.



“Of all the Broadway songs on Adele’s funeral playlist, she didn’t include the one that makes me think of her. It’s from *The Sound of Music*: ‘How do you solve a problem like Maria?’ For me, it’s ‘how do you describe a woman like Adele?’ She made you laugh. She made you crazy. She made you think. She made you tired. She had the rare gift of seeing you and believing in you—usually more than you did yourself. She gave all of herself away—literally.”

He floated his hand over the table of odd urns and, in an out-of-key voice, chanted, “Many a thing you’d like to tell her. Many a thing we’ll never understand. But how do you make her stay? And listen to all you say? How do you keep a moonbeam in your hand?” He paused to take a breath. “More than anything, I just wished she had stayed.”

He hit the stopwatch. “49.24 seconds. Challenge met, Adele. Challenge met.” Mary Agnes looked down at her watch.

“And now to Adele’s final words.” Pete smoothed the crumpled sheets of paper. “Remember. These are her words, not mine:

*‘Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here today (remember, I’m here in spirit and finally weigh less than anyone in the room) to lay me down to rest and for you to get through this thing called life—not just get through it but embrace it—the groans as well as the grace. Choose to live a life filled with courage, kindness, and laughter. A life filled with failures, mistakes, and do-overs. A life of faith, hope, love, and forgiveness that will outlast the pain and questions. And Jesus. I want each of you to have Jesus.’”*

She cringed. Adele had gotten all religious in her thirties. Even started preaching to Mary Agnes, who had a good Catholic upbringing.

Pete turned the page and continued reading.

*“This last year, I realized I wanted to leave a small part of me to everyone. Not by inheriting my junk, but . . . me.”* His voice cracked like a middle-school choir boy as he said “me.” *“But I only can spread myself so thin, so eight lucky folks won the lottery. I’m tickled that I’m going to make some of you sticklers-for-the-law nervous by scattering my ashes where I shouldn’t go. I’ve written a letter for each of the eight of you that I put a lot of thought into so you better read it.”*

Pete sighed and cringed. “Her final, final words?

*‘Spread the love.’*”

Mary Agnes rolled her eyes for the fifth time.

Pastor Pete took the first container to his left, a small antique vase, and read the name on the letter. “To my mother, MeeMaw Mary Agnes McLinden Mayhew.” Pete walked around the altar, down the steps, and leaned over the pew to pass the vase and an envelope to her. Her hands shook as she pulled them both to her lap.

Returning to the table, the child-pastor glanced between Adele’s instruction sheet and the urns. His face reddened as he read, “For the rest of you, come up as Pete calls your name and get your prize.”

The envelope slipped to Mary Agnes’ lap as her swollen thumb and forefinger crooked

around the lip of the bud vase. That vase couldn't hold much more than a single rose stem. How many ashes could be in there? She adjusted her trifocals and squinted in. Shortchanged again. At least she'd made the top ten list of last-remains recipients. Mary Agnes was never sure she was in Adele's top ten of anything.

On the front of the envelope, Adele scrawled "MeeMaw" in that horrid handwriting that would have gotten a rap on the knuckles from the nuns. "MeeMaw." She repeatedly told the children and grandchildren she detested being called that. It made her sound like she sang at the Grand Ole Opry in a calico dress and army boots. She tucked the letter and vase into her purse and stuffed a tissue into the top of the vase so none of Adele would spill out.

She couldn't keep up with the people walking up and back with urns and letters. Walter got a stainless steel mug. The pastor handed Jonathan his sippy cup that he hadn't given up until he was four. Of course, he was crying.

Rebecca made her brother go back to retrieve hers, the sugar bowl from Douglas's family china set. Jonathan stumbled over his flip-flops on his way back and almost dropped it. Rebecca took the bowl from him with both hands and sank back into the pew. He went back to get a small silver box for Rebecca's baby. He handed it, with a book and letter to Ricky. How could Adele give dead ashes to an unborn child? That baby could develop allergies or syndromes or something.

People kept going up and back. Adele's three partying friends walked back with a wine glass inside an insulated clear plastic glass with a lid. Then her homosexual catering partner, "BonBon," and Ofebia, the African woman who'd been Adele's pen pal for all those years.

All that was left on the altar was a dented travel coffee mug and a tin box. Tamara squeezed by Mary Agnes. Filipinos aged so much better than white folks. Tamara hardly had wrinkles. But she'd put on more than a few pounds. How many years since she divorced Two-Timing Tommy Long? Mary Agnes remembered Tommy's mother, Carole-with-an-e, from her Junior League days. She was dead, too. As was Tamara's daughter who passed away from meningitis when she was six. And Tamara's mother, who'd been a housekeeper to the uppity-ups in town. Tamara held the box close to her chest as she went around Mary Agnes to her seat. She'd gone back to being a Gonzales. It'd have been simpler to stay a Long.

Robert, looking older than his fifty-eight years, walked up and took the mug. Nothing left but the candles and flowers on the altar. Time to go.

But the prepubescent preacher kept talking. "Adele wanted me to invite everyone to a reception in the church hall. And yes, her brownies are there. As a parting favor, Adele wants you to take a balloon as you leave the church. You can release it or keep it. She told me, 'I want everyone to look up and,' he paused, "her words, not mine. . . don't worry—be happy.'" Mary Agnes rolled her eyes for the sixth time.

He mumbled through the end of his prayer and the family stood. Mary Agnes climbed out of the pew without tripping on the up-ended red-velvet kneelers. Jonathan helped her navigate

the uneven slate aisle as that god-awful Broadway music played. Mona-Molly-Whoever shuffled in front of them, tattoos of mermaids on her arm. She'd regret that.

Mary Agnes looked back into the sanctuary. Everyone was still seated. Several looked at her. She raised her eyebrows as Jonathan tried to hand her one of those balloons.

She did not want to go to the reception. Everyone would say sympathetic drivel. Everyone would try to hug her. Her plan was to sign the guest book, stand in the receiving line for ten minutes, then sway slightly and excuse herself, and drive to the "Home." One of the benefits of old age. No one questioned when you said you were tired and needed to leave. Anyway, they stopped serving lunch at Cheerwood Home for Unwanted Seniors at 12:30.