



A NOVEL

BENEATH A

Southern Sky

DEBORAH RANEY

Advance Praise for
Beneath a Southern Sky

“Forget the movie of the week. *Beneath a Southern Sky* reads like a dramatic film, but has substance of eternal importance. Six months after reading it, I’m still digesting what it means to me. Everyone will be talking about this book!”

—LISA TAWN BERGREN

best-selling author of the Full Circle series and *Midnight Sun*



“There aren’t many novels that keep me awake reading into the wee hours of the night, but *Beneath a Southern Sky* did. Nathan, Daria, and Cole slipped from the pages of this book and into my heart. I experienced all their heart-wrenching emotions, agonized over every decision they had to make, and rejoiced as they triumphed by God’s grace in the midst of an impossible, hopeless situation. Bravo, Ms. Raney!”

—ROBIN LEE HATCHER

best-selling author of *The Forgiving Hour* and *Whispers from Yesterday*



“*Beneath a Southern Sky* has magnetic qualities! I just couldn’t seem to put it down! In her normal, five-tissue fashion, Deborah Raney has created an impossible situation for her heroine, Daria Camfield. As I read, I thought I imagined all the ways Raney could tie her book into a neat little bow. Not so! The poignant ending of this thought-provoking novel took me unaware and lingered in my mind for days afterwards. You *definitely* won’t be disappointed.”

—LISA E. SAMSON

best-selling author of *The Church Ladies*

“In *Beneath a Southern Sky*, Deborah Raney reminds us that God’s ways are not our ways...but His paths lead to fulfillment and joy.”

—ANGELA ELWELL HUNT

author of *The Note* and *The Heirs of Cahira O’Connor* series



“*Beneath a Southern Sky* captured my attention on page one and held me in its grips to the last page. Deborah has written an incredible tale of passionate love, tragic mistakes, and second chances. Write faster, Deborah Raney!”

—DENISE HUNTER

author of *Reunions*



“Deborah Raney dug deeply into my heart with this story of sacrificial love. No reader could walk away from this novel without a clearer, more personal picture of the love of Christ. I thank Deborah for reminding me that, even though life’s choices aren’t always easy, God is always there to help us make them.”

—HANNAH ALEXANDER

author of *Sacred Trust*, *Solemn Oath*, and *Silent Pledge*

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For my mother,
Winifred Ann Teeter,
who taught me to love books and
who, by her example, taught me—teaches me still—
how to be a Christian wife and mother.

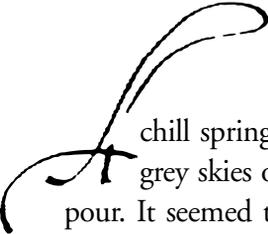
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For my mother-in-law,
Shirley Ann Raney,
whose love and friendship I cherish
and who raised the wonderful son who became my husband.

I love you both with all my heart.



Prologue

 chill spring rain washed the Kansas Turnpike, and the angry grey skies overhead offered no hope for an end to the downpour. It seemed to Daria that hers was the only car on this lonely stretch of highway. The deserted road seemed a fitting metaphor for what her life had become. She passed the Emporia exit and shifted in her seat, settling in for the long haul. She'd been on the road for well over an hour, and her destination was still more than two hours away. Was two hours long enough to decide what she would do when she got there? Was a lifetime long enough?

She took her hands off the wheel and rubbed away the beginnings of a headache. As she turned her head from side to side, trying to ease the taut muscles in her neck, her eyes fell on the yellow piece of paper that lay on the passenger seat beside her. In this world of fax machines and e-mail, she hadn't realized that people still sent telegrams. And yet it seemed appropriate somehow. She couldn't imagine news such as this 8 1/2-by-11-inch sheet of paper held coming any other way. Daria turned her eyes back to the road. She didn't need to read the telegram again. She had it memorized. But committing the tersely worded message to memory didn't answer the heartrending question it begged.

Barely forty-eight hours ago she had thought she was the happiest woman alive. But nineteen words on one thin yellow sheet of paper had changed everything, and now the reality of her dilemma nearly took her breath away. How did a woman choose between two men she had always loved with all her heart?

The relentless drumming of the rain on her windshield and the

incessant rhythm of the wipers carried her back to another time, to another rain, and bid her to walk the paths of memory one more time. And like the silver ribbon of highway that curled ahead, the past three years of Daria's life spooled out before her.

COLUMBA:
THE DOVE



The fingers of the jungle breeze swept across the village, playing the palm fronds like so many harps. Under the conductorship of the wind, the symphony of the rain forest rose to a crescendo. Over the *plip, plip, plip* of the raindrops' chorus, thunder struck its clashing cymbals before the clouds moved in, lowering a curtain on the sun.

Daria Camfield looked up from the skirt she was mending, and her eyes scanned the village for her husband's tall frame. Though the rains weren't usually severe this time of year, she always breathed easier when Nathan was nearby.

As though her thoughts had summoned him, she spotted Nate loping down the pathway, holding a large banana leaf over his head. She knew his makeshift umbrella was not meant to protect him as much as to shield the book he was carrying close to his chest.

"Hey," she hollered in greeting as he jumped the narrow stream that separated their hut from the village proper. The wind had begun to blow the rain underneath the thatched roof of the stoop where she sat, so she wove her needle safely into the thin cotton fabric of the skirt and rose to greet him.

Nathan leapt gracefully onto the stoop of their stilted hut, flashing Daria a wide smile. "Hey, babe. What are you up to?"

"Oh, I'm trying to fix this stupid skirt I tore yesterday," she huffed. "What I wouldn't give for a sewing machine."

He gave her a long-suffering look. Nate had never been sympathetic to her complaints about the lack of modern amenities in this remote South American village. She let it go and tilted her head to receive the kiss he offered.

He tossed the soggy banana leaf over the side of the stoop and took his precious book inside the hut. Daria followed him in, leaving the door open behind them.

“I’m hungry,” he said, glancing around the small room as though food might materialize at his declaration.

She threw him a smirk. “What else is new?”

“Hey, I’m a growing boy!” he said with mock indignation.

She reached up and tousled his damp hair affectionately as if he were a little boy, but when he reached for her, it was a man who took her in his arms.

“I love you, Dr. Camfield,” she whispered huskily. They had been married for three blissful years when they arrived in Timoné, but during their two years as missionaries here, she and Nathan had found new meaning to a scripture they’d only thought they understood: *And the two shall become one*. What had grown between them made their earlier romance seem like an adolescent crush. Nathan Camfield was her life, and she loved him with a love so fierce it sometimes frightened her.

Extricating herself from his arms, she went to the narrow shelf that served as their pantry. She sliced a banana in half, then reached for the thermos. Without electricity or an indoor stove, she’d gotten in the habit of making extra coffee over the fire each morning so they could share a hot drink during the afternoon rains. She poured a mug for Nate and one for herself, then took them to the table where Nate had opened his book. It seemed her husband always had his nose in one science text or another. She wondered what he’d do when he’d finished reading everything they’d brought with them.

The rain on this day proved unrelenting, reminding her of the rainy season they’d recently endured. She finally took up her mending again and they sat together, listening to the drops on the roof, enjoying this excuse for a rare respite from the hard work that life in Timoné demanded.

She put her needle and thread aside and watched her husband

now. His head was bowed over the book, and his forehead was furrowed in concentration. But any minute, she knew, he would look up with the light of discovery in his eyes, and read a passage aloud to her.

As though he'd read her mind, his voice broke into her thoughts. "Listen to this, Daria."

She started laughing.

"What?"

"You are just so predictable, Dr. Camfield," she chuckled.

He rolled his eyes, then, ignoring her laughter, he began to read to her from his book, his voice deep and authoritative. He hadn't finished one paragraph when a shout rose from below their hut. "Dr. Nate! Dr. Nate!"

Nathan and Daria jumped from their chairs and ran out onto the stoop. Quimico, one of the young men from the village, was hurrying toward them. Next to him was a native man Daria had never seen before.

Nate ran out into the rain to speak with the two men. Daria stood watching from the shelter of the doorway. The stranger gestured widely and spoke in a dialect that Daria didn't understand. The man waited then, while Quimico translated. She could make out a few of his words through the rain, and when Nate replied through Quimico, her heart began to pound. It sounded as though Nate was agreeing to go to another village with the man. Since their arrival, news had traveled that Timoné had a "medicine doctor," and Nate had been summoned to outlying villages on several occasions. Daria hated it when he left, abandoning the safe sanctuary of Timoné and her.

The men finished their conversation, and while Quimico and the stranger headed back into the village, Nathan came to the hut, his head bowed against the rain.

"What was that all about?"

He refused to look her in the eye and instead went to his side of their sleeping mat, lifted a corner and pulled an empty knapsack from underneath it.

“Nathan, what’s going on?”

He answered with his back to her, stuffing provisions into the bag as he knelt on the floor. “There’s an outbreak of fev—of illness in a village upriver.”

He had stopped himself midsyllable, and Daria knew exactly why.

“Is it dengue, Nate?” she asked, her voice tight.

“I’m not sure,” he hedged. “I couldn’t get much of what he said, but whatever it is it’s devastated the village. They’ve lost twenty lives already—mostly children.”

Anger rose in her. She knew his words were calculated for her sake, that she’d feel guilty if she selfishly asked him to remain when little children were dying upriver.

“Nathan, where is this village?”

“Upstream a ways,” he said, still busily arranging items in his knapsack.

“How far?”

“It’s a distance, Daria. Quimico thinks it’s a couple of days up the Guaviare.”

“Two days! Nathan, it takes one whole day just to *get* to the river!”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“You’ll be gone a week.”

“I might be, Daria.” He yanked on a zipper and began adjusting the straps.

His steady, measured answers made her furious.

“When are you leaving?”

“First thing in the morning.”

She started pacing the short distance of the room, desperate to come up with the words that would keep him home. “Nathan, what if it is dengue?”

Still kneeling on the floor, he turned to look up at her. “I honestly don’t think it’s dengue, Daria. It sounds more like some sort of influenza.”

“But you don’t know that.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Nathan, you almost died the first time.” She was pleading with him now, her hand on his shoulder, forcing him to look at her. “You’re a doctor. You know dengue is worse if you get it again.”

“It can be, Daria. But I don’t think this is dengue.” He looked down, ostensibly to check his watch.

“How could you possibly know?” she growled. “You’re just telling me that because you’ve already made up your mind to go.”

He stood now and put his hands on her shoulders. “Daria, stop it. You know I have to go. It’s why we came here. You know that, Daria. God did not bring us this far to refuse help to those who need it.”

She bit her tongue to keep from asking him what this “we” business was, and yet felt as guilty as if she’d let the words fly.

“Don’t worry, babe.” He softened a bit. “I’ll be fine.”

“Then let me go with you,” she begged.

“Absolutely not. You’d just slow us down...and what would you do when you got there?”

“I could help, Nate. I could—”

“No. You’re staying here.”

She reached out and gripped his arm. “Nate, please...just listen to me.”

“There’s nothing to discuss, Daria.” He set his lips in a tight line.

Why was he being so pigheaded? Couldn’t he see that she was just worried about him? She hated him just a little at that moment. But she knew her husband well enough to know that nothing she could say now would change his mind, so she stood there watching him, silent.

The rains had stopped. Nate put the knapsack beside the door and stepped onto the stoop. “I’m going to go help get the boat ready.”

Trembling inside, she followed him.

Nathan descended the steps, but when he got to the bottom he turned to look back up at her. "If it makes you feel any better, I'm going to ask Quimico and Tados to go with me."

She turned on her heel and slammed the door.



When Nathan returned to the hut that evening they ate together in chilled silence, the only sound that of spoons *thunking* against pottery bowls.

Daria refused to make eye contact.

"Is there any more of that great salsa you made?" Nate asked.

Daria rose and retrieved a Mason jar from the shelf, setting it in front of him a bit too forcefully.

"Thanks." Nate cleared his throat.

When they finished, he motioned to her with his finger. "Come here."

Daria put her hands on her hips, studying him.

"Hey, come here," he repeated, his voice coaxing and gentle.

She hated when he did that, because she knew he would melt her defenses. But she walked over to him, and he pulled her onto his lap.

"You know that I love you," he said, tracing her cheek with a slender finger.

The tears came then, and he held her close, stroking her hair.

Finally he told her, "Daria, I'm sorry. I know you don't want me to go, but I think you understand why I must."

She nodded, resigned, now desperate to make things right between them before he left.

He put a hand on her cheek. "We need to talk before I leave, okay?"

She sniffed and nodded.

"You heard me speaking to Bob earlier?"

She nodded again. Bob Warrington was their radio contact at the mission in Bogotá.

“He’s going to check in with you almost every day while I’m gone. But you know he can’t always get through, so don’t worry if a couple of days go by and you don’t hear from him. And don’t be afraid to try to contact him. I told him where I’m going, and he felt things were stable enough that it would be safe.”

Nate didn’t say the words, but Daria knew he was referring to the drug runners and the paramilitary who often posed a threat to outsiders. She tried not to think about it.

“I could be gone awhile,” he said gently. “It’ll probably take us three days or so to get there, and I have no idea what we’ll be facing when we arrive. I promise I won’t stay a minute longer than I need to. It’ll seem like a long time. I just don’t want you to panic if it takes longer than you expect.”

She nodded.

“If anything happens and you need to...to get out...of Timoné, you go to Anazu. His nephews know the river well, and they can get you to the airstrip in San José. But you be sure Bob knows you’re coming so he can meet you. I don’t want you there alone.”

She nodded solemnly, hating to have to listen. Why was he talking this way? Fear crept up her spine.

He tipped her chin, forcing her to look at him. “You okay?”

“I’ll be okay, Nate. I’m sorry I acted like such a baby. I know that just makes it harder for you.”

“Hey, I can understand how you feel. I *am* a pretty fun guy to have around.”

She giggled in spite of herself, loving the way he could always make her laugh. But he turned serious and drew her into the tight circle of his arms. “I’ll miss you like crazy, babe. Every single minute.”

“Oh, Nate, I’ll miss you so much.”

As soon as it was dark, Daria dressed for bed and plopped down on their mat. Nathan sat on the bench at the table, reading, his white-blond hair catching glints of lantern light. Watching him, a heavy

melancholy draped itself over her. Sleep eluded her, and she tossed and turned fitfully, wishing Nathan would come to bed.

He read until late, then he blew out the lantern and came to her side. Lifting the mosquito net, he crawled underneath, kneeling beside her. “Hey,” he whispered, “are you still awake?”

“I’m awake.”

He took her by the hand, lifted the net, and pulled her up beside him.

“Come on,” he whispered, leading her outside.

“Nate! I’m not even dressed,” she protested, stretching the oversized T-shirt she slept in over her knees, and trying not to lose the flip-flop sandals she’d slipped on just outside their door.

He pulled her down the steps and toward the crude path that ran parallel to the river behind their hut. The moon was full so they didn’t have need of a light, though Nate lit a small torch and carried it in front of them to ward off the jungle’s wild nocturnal creatures.

“Shh! Come on!” He had that gleam in his eye—the one he always got when he’d planned something special just for her.

She followed him in silence up a rise to a small clearing. The jungle’s wild denizens made it dangerous to venture too far from the village at this time of night, and yet she felt perfectly safe with Nathan at her side.

When they came to the center of the clearing, he planted the torch in the soft earth. He came to stand behind Daria and wrapped his arms around her, cradling her head on his shoulder. He cupped her chin in one strong, rough hand and tilted it toward the heavens.

The sight above her left her breathless. “Oh, Nate! It’s so beautiful.”

In the village, their view of the sky was filtered through a mesh-work of vines and palm leaves, but here the vista was unobstructed. The sky above them was a flawless canopy of navy-colored velvet sewn with a million glittering sequins. Daria felt as though she floated in a realm that was both sea and sky, fathomless and eternal.

But she wasn't frightened because Nathan was her anchor. They stood together in silent awe, matching the rhythm of their breaths each to the other. Nate had been studying the constellations of the Southern Hemisphere, and he began to point them out to her. His voice was soft in her ear, the bristle of his day-old beard sweetly familiar against her cheek.

"Look there, Dar," he whispered hoarsely, pointing, his arm brushing her cheek as he sighted a star pattern for her. "That's Virgo." He tipped her chin slightly to the left. "And see that star right there...the brightest one? That's Spica."

She nodded, standing on tiptoe to nuzzle her cheek against his. The star seemed to wink at her, as though it were in on Nate's little surprise.

"When you look at the sky every night I'm gone, find that star," he told her. "I'll be looking at it and thinking how much I love you."

Her throat was too full to reply. She wanted only to stand there forever, safe in his arms.



Morning came too quickly, and Nathan Camfield rolled out of bed with far more trepidation about the journey ahead than he had allowed his wife to see. He was hesitant to leave her here alone. He had asked Anazu and his wife, Paita, the only Christian converts in the village, to keep an eye on Daria. He knew they would take the charge seriously. The Timoné were a peaceable people, and he and Daria had always felt safe within the village. But still he worried.

He worried for himself as well. He wasn't sure what he would find when he arrived in the village to which he'd been called. *Chicoro*, the runner who'd come for him had called it. He only hoped the man had been right in judging the distance. For Daria's sake, Nate desperately wanted to return as quickly as possible. She seemed so fearful.

Daria was already outside making coffee over the fire when Nate came down the steps of their hut.

“Good morning,” she said, as if it were any other day.

“Mornin’, babe.”

“I fixed some fruit.” She held up a bowl of sliced bananas, guava fruit, pitaya, and a variety of the succulent berries that grew wild all over the rain forest.

He started to tell her he’d just have coffee, but then saw the pleading look in her eye. “Sure,” he said, trying to force a cheerful-ness he didn’t feel into his voice.

They sat companionably on the stoop as they did every morning, swinging their legs over the side, sipping hot coffee from their treasured University of Kansas mugs. Nate ate Daria’s fruit salad with his fingers, touched by her offering.

He turned to say something to her and saw that there were tears streaming down her face.

“Hey, hey,” he whispered. “It’s only a few days.”

She tried to smile but failed miserably, her face crumpling as she wept.

He jumped down off the stoop and stood in front of her. Taking her chin in his hands, he planted kisses on her tear-stained cheeks, memorizing the feel of her lips on his.

Then he wrapped his arms protectively around her. “Father,” he prayed, “Please be with this woman I love. Keep her safe while I’m gone and help the time to pass quickly for both of us. Father, give me wisdom to know how to help the people you’ve sent me to minister to—both in body and in spirit.”

Through tears, but with a voice that seemed stronger, Daria prayed for him too, in her simple, straightforward way. “God, go with Nate. Keep him safe. Guide him in everything he does. And, Lord, please bring him back to me because—well, I’ve grown kind of fond of him and I think I’d like to keep him for a while.”

Nate laughed and held her at arm’s length, appreciating the way her dimpled smile reached her blue eyes. A strand of wavy blond hair had escaped her braid and, returning her smile, he brushed it from

her high forehead. He was so proud of her for giving him this gift of laughter before he went. "Amen," he said, his heart full.

Together they washed the few breakfast dishes and then he went into the hut for his things.

They walked arm in arm through the village, and beyond to the place where the worn forest trail led to the navigable waters of the Rio Guaviare. Quimico and Tados and their families were already waiting when they got there, chattering excitedly among themselves. Nate loaded his things into the boat, and the two young natives lofted the craft onto their shoulders.

Nate pulled Daria into his arms and kissed her one last time. "Goodbye, sweetheart," he whispered, aware that the natives were watching and shaking their heads at this bold American display of affection. He released her and went to take his share of the boat's burden.

They started up the trail. The boat on his shoulders prevented him from turning and keeping Daria in his sight. But he didn't have to see her to know that her beautiful face was wet with tears and that her tender heart was praying for his safe return even now.