

A group of people are sitting on a rocky shore, looking out at the ocean at sunset. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light. The people are seen from behind, wearing various hooded jackets in shades of blue, white, red, and teal. The ocean waves are breaking in the distance, and the sky is a mix of soft pinks, oranges, and blues. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

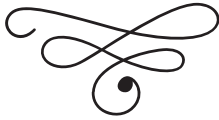
Better All the Time

*a Darling Family
novel*

CARRE ARMSTRONG GARDNER



BETTER ALL THE TIME



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*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois*

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Edited by Sarah Mason

Published in association with literary agent Blair Jacobson of D.C. Jacobson & Associates LLC, an Author Management Company. www.dcjacobson.com.

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Better All the Time is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gardner, Carre Armstrong.

Better all the time / Carre Armstrong Gardner.

pages ; cm. — (The Darlings ; [2])

ISBN 978-1-4143-8815-1 (sc)

I. Title.

PS3607.A7267B48 2015

813'.6—dc23

2014043279

Printed in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 16 15
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER

1

A decorative flourish consisting of several elegant, overlapping loops and swirls, centered below the chapter number.

IN THE BACKYARD of a house in Maine, as the light was beginning to take on the peculiar slant of a late spring afternoon, the party was just getting started. The shadows had not yet begun to lengthen into evening, nor the outline of the swing set to mute and soften with twilight. That would happen later, in time for cake. For now, the air was cool and light and filled with the scent of lilacs and grilling hamburgers. This was, Ivy Darling remarked to her husband, Nick Mason, exactly one of those rare hours that people live all year for. Or at least it might have been, had not a neighboring farmer recently fertilized his fields. When the wind was wrong, a hint of rancid chicken manure tended to waft through the backyard as well and catch you the wrong way. But then again, sometimes the breeze would shift and carry in the fresh salt breath of the ocean from the cove half a mile

away. It was a good parable for life, Ivy thought. You took the good with the bad, and a lot of your happiness depended on just what you chose to pay attention to.

Ivy was in her kitchen, rooting around in the refrigerator for an onion, when she heard the front door open and her mother call, “Yoo-hoo! Anybody home?” Jane Darling didn’t knock, but then nobody knocked at Ivy and Nick’s. As a rule, people simply opened the door and called out until someone appeared from the depths and said, “Oh, *there* you are; come in!” It was a Darling maxim that you treated guests like family, and family like honored guests.

“In here!” Ivy called. She unearthed the onion and closed the refrigerator as her parents materialized in the kitchen doorway. “Hi, Mom, Dad. You all alone?”

“Sephy and Amy will be along in a few minutes. I sent them to the store first for a carton of ice cream. And David is picking up Grammie Lydia.” Her mother set a plastic-wrapped salad bowl on the counter and kissed Ivy on the cheek. Ivy tipped her other cheek up for her father’s kiss.

“Where are the kids?” Leander wanted to know.

“DeShaun’s in the shower.” Ivy frowned at the clock. “And it’s time he was finished.” The subject of forty-five-minute showers had become a battleground between Ivy and her new sixteen-year-old son. “Jada’s setting the picnic tables in the backyard, and Hammer is . . . Oh, here’s Hammer!” Her youngest, an eight-year-old who lived life in fast-forward, careened around the corner and into the kitchen.

Hammer flung himself at Leander’s waist. “Grampie!”

“Hey there, buddy!” Leander rubbed the little boy’s nubby head.

Hammer looked up at both of his newly official grandparents. "I'm adopted."

"So we heard," said Jane. "Congratulations!"

"We came because we heard there was cake," Leander told him.

"There is. It's *huge*. Ivy made it yesterday."

"*Mom*," said Ivy. "My name is Mom now."

"*Mom* made it yesterday. It's so big that Nick—*Dad*—says we'll be eating it all week."

"Lucky you," said Leander. "Wish I could eat cake all week."

"Speaking of Nick," Ivy said, "he's grilling in the backyard. Hammer, why don't you take Grammie and Grampie out there, and while you're at it, see if Jada needs help with the tables."

She went to knock on the bathroom door and shout to DeShaun that this was not a luxury spa, and it was high time he came out and joined the party that was, after all, being thrown in his honor. She was putting drinks and glasses on trays in the kitchen when her two younger sisters arrived.

"Congratulations to you, *Mom*," said Sephy, giving her a one-armed hug as she set a plastic Hannaford bag on the counter.

"So, what's it feel like, being a mother?" Amy, the youngest in the family, came behind Sephy carrying a gallon-size glass jar.

Ivy squeezed Sephy back. "Thank you. And being a mother today feels exactly like it did yesterday, and the day before, and the twenty-two months before that, when I was one in everything but legal status. What in the name of

heaven and earth is *that thing?*” She stared at Amy’s jar, where a thick, pale object floated, suspended in an amber liquid. “Something you found at the beach?”

Amy set the jar on the counter, beside her mother’s salad bowl. “This is kombucha.”

Ivy and Sephy bent to examine the jar. Evil-looking brown tentacles trailed from the bottom of the pale thing. “I’ve never heard of a kombucha,” said Sephy. “Is it like a jellyfish?”

“No, it is *not* like a jellyfish. Kombucha is fermented tea. Look at this.” Amy unscrewed the lid. Her sisters peered in. The thing turned out to be a smooth, rubbery disc, floating on the surface of the liquid. “This is a living organism!” Amy prodded proudly at it with a forefinger. “It’s a symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast. You make sweetened tea and add this to it. The bacteria and yeast eat the sugar and turn the tea into a superfood that’s packed with B-vitamins and antioxidants. It has more probiotics than yogurt!”

“That’s disgusting,” said Ivy.

Sephy said, “It looks like an organ that’s been harvested for transplant.”

Amy screwed the lid back onto the jar. “It’s not disgusting, it’s good for you. It’s great for you, actually.”

“It smells like vinegar,” Sephy observed.

“What does it taste like?” asked Ivy.

“Here, try it,” Amy said. “Only, I should pour it through a strainer, if you have one. Otherwise, it gets little jellyish blobs of yeast in it, and—”

“No thanks!” her sisters said, at the same time.

“It’s great for arthritis.”

“I don’t have arthritis,” Sephy said regretfully.

“Alexander Solzhenitsyn claimed it cured his stomach cancer.”

“I already got over my stomach cancer,” said Ivy. “Sorry.”

“Fine,” Amy said. “I was going to give you a starter mushroom, but forget it. I can see you don’t want one.”

“Well, if I ever change my mind, I know where to find you. Now, would you two mind getting out the salads while I take drinks to the others? And put that ice cream in the freezer before it melts.”

When Ivy returned to the kitchen, delivered of her tray, Amy and Sephy had a small army of salads lined up on the kitchen counter and were rummaging in drawers for serving spoons. “What did I miss?” Ivy opened the refrigerator and began pulling out condiments.

“We’re talking about Amy’s job.”

“Or lack thereof.” Amy scowled.

Ivy set a watermelon on the counter and began to slice it. “What do you mean your *lack* of job? Aren’t you still managing the music store?”

“Not after next week, I’m not. Elliot, my boss, met a woman online. Next thing I know, he’s abandoned his lease and started selling off all the inventory in the store. He bought a one-way ticket to California, leaving me—as of next week—high and dry and unemployed.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“It’s a shame. That music store’s been in Copper Cove all our lives.”

Amy shrugged. “It hasn’t made a viable profit in years. Nobody buys CDs anymore—they just download what they

want from the Internet. People buy their sheet music from Amazon, and you can't keep a music store going in a town this size just by selling instruments."

"It seems so sad."

"It's the end of an era," Sephy agreed. They fell silent, recalling childhood and teenage hours spent in the metallic, oily-smelling depths of the music store. The sheet music considered and chosen, the drumsticks and violin strings bought. To a family as musical as the Darlings, the loss of the town's only music store was a palpable blow.

"Anyway," said Amy, who was less sentimental than her sisters, "I have to find a new job. I'll start sending out résumés tomorrow."

"How far away will you look?"

"Not very, if I can help it. You remember what happened last time I tried to move away." Homesickness had rendered Amy's one attempt at living on a college campus an hour away both miserable and short-lived.

"Something will turn up close to home," Ivy said, though privately she doubted it. This part of the state wasn't exactly a nerve center of enterprise. Small businesses like the music store were closing everywhere, edged out by the Internet and by big, soulless chain stores that could sell everything cheaper.

DeShaun ambled out from the direction of the bathroom then, borne on a steamy miasma of Irish Spring soap and Axe body spray. "Oh, hi," he said to the room in general.

"Hey there, DeShaun," said Amy.

"Hi, honey," said Sephy. "Happy Adoption Day."

DeShaun picked up Amy's gallon jar and peered into it. "What's this, a jellyfish?"

“It’s a brain,” said Sephy.

“Shut up,” Amy told her.

DeShaun unscrewed the cap. “What’s this thing in it?”

Amy told him.

“Cool. Can I try it?”

Amy positively glowed. “You, young man, show great promise as a human being. Ivy, I’m going to need a tall glass with ice immediately, please. And a strainer, if you have one.”

“You’re corrupting my son,” Ivy told her, reaching for a glass.

“I know,” said Amy, wiping away mock tears. “Isn’t it wonderful?”



Sephy Darling, home from her third year of college, had flung wide the windows of her parents’ house and was doing her best to ignore the drowsing warmth of the June day. She was studying. That is, she had been studying and would study more before the afternoon was out, but just now, she was taking a break. In the kitchen, she spread Hellmann’s mayonnaise on half a kaiser roll and added a pile of shaved ham, deli Swiss cheese, jalapeño dill chips, a slice of beefsteak tomato, a lettuce leaf, rings of red onion, and a sprinkling of chopped black olives. She salted this, peppered it, covered it all with the other mayonnaised half of the roll, and secured it with a toothpick. She put it on a paper plate and picked up a bag of Doritos from the counter. Then, balancing plate, chips, and a can of Diet Coke, she took a paper napkin from the basket on the microwave and carried it all to the screened-in front porch so she could eat lunch while

she tried to make her mind absorb one more chapter of *A Psychology of Nursing* by Elizabeth T. Gates, RN, MSN, PhD.

She had finished the sandwich and chips and was trying to keep her eyes open over what was surely one of the most stultifying texts to ever roll off a printing press when a knock came at the porch door. She looked up to find her neighbor and best friend, Liberty Hale, grinning at her and pressing her snub nose against the screen.

Sephy clapped her textbook shut with a snap. “You’ve saved me!”

Libby opened the door and came in, dropping into a chair beside her. “What did I save you from?”

“From my brain-sucking homework.” Sephy held the book up for Libby to inspect.

“*A Psychology of Nursing*. I see. It sounds fascinating.”

“You don’t know the half of it. I no more than pick the book up and I’m asleep. Full-blown REM. I’m not kidding.”

“You need an afternoon off.” Libby sank back into her chair and put her bare feet on the wicker table. “What are you doing the rest of the day?”

“Spending more precious moments with Elizabeth T. Gates.” Sephy shook the book at her. “I have three more chapters to read and outline. Quiz tomorrow.”

Libby yawned. “I wish you didn’t have to do this summer class.”

“You’re telling me.” Still, Sephy thought, as they settled into comfortable silence, it was going to pay off in the end. Taking this class kept her busy for the summer, and it would make her workload lighter during her last year of college. With a lighter course load, she could really apply herself

to her clinicals and ultimately do better on the boards next spring. She told herself this, using that loud, firm mental voice she sometimes employed when she needed to remind herself of what was really important in life.

Beside her, Libby stretched. "It's hot. Want to go to the beach?"

Sephy flicked a glance at her. "Not today. Got a date with Elizabeth T."

Libby didn't seem surprised. She was used to being refused by Sephy when it came to going to the beach. She stood up, trim and cute in her shorts and T-shirt, and smiled equably at her best friend. "I think I'll go, myself. See if I can find a volleyball game to join. Have fun with Lizzy Gates." She went to the screen door and opened it, but hesitated. "Sure you won't come with me?"

"I'd like to, but I can't. I'll call you later."

"Bye, then." Libby wiggled her fingers and let the door slip closed behind her.

Sephy shook her head and put any twinges of regret firmly away. There was no time to go to the beach. She had work to do. She looked with distaste at *A Psychology of Nursing*. Another page of it was going to plunge her into a full-blown coma. She remembered that she had seen a box of ice cream sandwiches in the freezer: instant energy. She picked up the grease-stained paper plate and the empty Diet Coke can and, struggling to her feet, went back to the kitchen in search of it.

She was washing her hands when the phone rang. It was Ivy.

"Hi, Seph. What's going on at 14 Ladyslipper Lane?"

"Not a thing. Dad's at the high school, taking inventory of the band instruments or choir music or something. Amy's

babysitting, and Mom's at a meeting. I'm putting myself to sleep with a textbook."

"What meeting is Mom at?"

"Garden club, I think."

"Is Libby around?"

"She went to the beach."

"Oh. Well, I hope you're studying outside. This isn't the kind of day to be stuck indoors. Go read in the hammock or something."

Sephy was grateful that Ivy did not say, "*You should be at the beach with Libby.*" Ivy understood Sephy's relationship with bathing suits.

"Want me to have Mom call you?"

"I can just leave a message."

Sephy took a jar of peanut butter from the cupboard and a spoon from the silverware drawer. "Should I be writing this down?"

"No, I just wanted to say we can't make it for family dinner on Thursday night. It's Nick's birthday, and I'm taking him out."

"Ooh, anyplace nice?"

"Some new steakhouse in Quahog. We may even get wild and crazy and go to a movie afterward."

"You're wilder and crazier than I am."

"You can't afford to be right now," Ivy assured her. "You're too busy being a nurse."

"I'm not a nurse yet," Sephy said, "and I never will be if *A Psychology of Nursing* continues to languish, unread, on the front porch while my sisters telephone me to leave messages at all hours of the day."

“I can take a hint. Tell Mom and Dad I said hello. And Amy, of course.”

“I will. We’ll miss you tomorrow night.”

“Love you, Seph.” They both made kissing noises into the phone and hung up.

Carrying the box of ice cream sandwiches and another Diet Coke, and licking the peanut butter from the spoon, Sephy went back to the porch. She picked up her book and held it between two fingers, as though it were something dead and distasteful. She could hardly bear the thought of opening it again. A breeze played through the screen windows of the porch, ruffling the pages and carrying with it the scent of some neighbor’s newly mown grass. In the branches of the crab apple, a pair of birds chirped back and forth in a halfhearted way. Still, there was tomorrow’s quiz, and the outlines to do, and just because it was summer didn’t mean she could afford to slack off. There would be plenty of time for that after college, when her goals were met and she had made a success of herself. There would be other summers.

With a sigh, she settled herself in the wicker chair, unwrapped an ice cream sandwich, popped the top on the Diet Coke, and began to read.



Jane Darling was at the sink hulling a large flat of strawberries when Amy wandered in. Her youngest daughter hoisted herself onto the counter and sat there, swinging her legs and toying with one of her long dreadlocks.

“The economy in this country is going down the toilet,” announced Amy.

Jane smiled. "Still haven't found a job?"

"I mean," Amy went on, helping herself to a strawberry, "it's not as if I'm not *looking* for work. I'm trying. I'm applying for jobs, but nobody will hire me. Do they *want* people going on unemployment? Because I'm telling you, that's what it's going to come to if I don't find something soon."

"Justin Bates's mother called this morning about drum lessons," Jane told her.

"Great, but that's one student. That will barely put gas in my car."

"Well . . . word of mouth, you know."

"I even applied at McDonald's, that's how desperate I was. Can you imagine me serving people *chicken?* And *hamburgers?*" Amy, who was a vegetarian, shuddered. "Anyway, it doesn't matter because they turned me down. What kind of loser gets rejected by McDonald's?" She took another strawberry.

"Stop eating the ones I've already hulled. If you want one, take it from there." Jane pointed her knife at the cardboard tray heaped with berries still to be cleaned. "But I did find something in the paper that you might be interested in." She wiped her hands on her apron and reached into the phone basket, riffling through directories, scrap paper, and pens before finding what she wanted. She handed Amy a newspaper page of classified ads. "I read it this morning and thought of you."

Amy read the ad circled in red ink.

WANTED: Community Arts Program Director

The Copper Cove town council is seeking an energetic, motivated person to build and direct a new community arts program. Bachelor's degree in business administration;

2 years experience preferred. Apply at www.coppercovearts.gov or in person at the town hall. FMI: (207) 555-1478

She looked up. “I don’t have a bachelor’s in business administration or two years’ experience.”

“You never know,” Jane said carefully. She had learned that it didn’t do to appear too invested in Amy’s decisions. “It would be interesting to at least apply for the job, see what your chances are of getting it.”

Amy put down the newspaper, slid off the counter, and took a paring knife from the drawer. “Move over. I’ll give you a hand.”

Jane made room at the sink, and the two of them cleaned berries in silence for some minutes.

“What is it, anyway?” Amy said at last. “I didn’t even know Copper Cove *had* a community arts program.”

“They don’t. At least not yet. The town council was awarded some kind of national grant to start one. It’s quite a lot of money. They’re going to use it to renovate the old Jarvis Opera House on Winter Street into a community arts center and hire someone to create an arts program.”

“What, like community theater?”

“Theater, concerts, classes . . . There was a whole article about it in the paper last month. I’m sure you could still find it at the library.”

“People don’t find old newspaper articles at the library anymore, Mom. They find them online.”

“Oh, well. Wherever.”

“Anyway, I don’t even fit the requirements.”

“That doesn’t mean you wouldn’t be good at the job.”

“You really think I’d be good at something like that?”

“You’d be good at anything you put your mind to. But I think this is exactly the kind of job you’d love.”

Amy toyed with her paring knife. “They’d probably just reject me, like McDonald’s.”

“They might.”

“But I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to at least look at the application.”

“That’s true.”

“Or I could call and just ask some questions.”

“You could do that.”

“Maybe I will.” Amy put her knife down, picked up the paper, and wandered out of the kitchen.

Alone, Jane Darling allowed herself a small smile over the flat of strawberries. *You know the plan, of course, she prayed, but if anyone’s asking, I happen to think she’d be perfect for the job.*