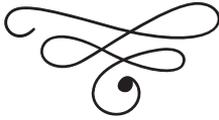


They
Danced
*a Darling Family
novel*
On

CARRE ARMSTRONG GARDNER



THEY DANCED ON



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*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
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They Danced On

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CHAPTER

1

A decorative flourish consisting of several elegant, overlapping loops and curves, ending in a small circle at the bottom right.

THERE WERE FEW BETTER PLEASURES in life, thought Jane Darling, than to sit on the screened side porch on a Saturday morning in June, in the white wicker chair, with her coffee and oatmeal, and listen to the day wake up around her. All her life, Jane had risen with the birds; she never used an alarm clock.

A year ago, Leander might have been joining her now, rummaging in the cupboard for his favorite mug, the white one that said *Aetna, for life*. It had come free from an insurance company, and he liked it because it was tall and thick and kept his coffee hot longer than other cups. Now, it was just Jane and the birds. She watched a male cardinal light on the crab apple tree, a small slash of scarlet against the riot of pink. From high in the branches, a white-throated sparrow unspooled its sweet-and-sour thread of song against the lightening sky.

When she had finished her oatmeal, Jane flipped the pages of her worn, pen-marked Bible until she found what she was looking for. *“Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases . . .”*

One floor above her, Leander still slept. He had always been an early riser too. Sleeping late was the luxury of the very young and the very old, he said. But her husband was neither very young nor very old; he was sick. Fallen prey, at the age of sixty-two, to a nearly unpronounceable disease abbreviated to three innocuous letters: *ALS*.

It sounded so innocent. Like a committee she might have joined during her children’s school years: *Academic Leadership Seminar*. Or possibly some kind of nonprofit: *American Literary Society*. But Leander had drawn no such harmless lot. His collection of letters stood for something far more malignant: *Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis*. Lou Gehrig’s disease. And day by day, Jane stood by and watched as her husband’s body wilted in the grip of this wasting illness like an uprooted plant in the hot sun.

These days, he stayed in bed until eight o’clock. Jane would listen for the thump of his feet on the floor, then head upstairs to putter about the bedroom while he washed and dressed in the attached bath. She would make the bed, and straighten the dresser tops, maybe fold a load of laundry with one ear attuned to the bathroom door, in case he should call for help.

“ . . . who redeems your life from the pit . . . so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

He could still shower by himself, although he was slow at it. In the spring, a man had come and installed bars in the

bath and around the toilet. There was a seat in the shower now, too, which their daughter Sephy had helped her pick out at a medical supply store in Quahog. Jane had protested these changes, insisting they were not necessary, but her children had overridden her. Even David, who never made waves, had said, “Mom, it’s time. What if he falls?”

“He’s not going to fall,” Jane had snapped. She never snapped at David.

“His balance is off. He stumbles all the time,” Ivy pointed out.

“Amy and I are both here with him.”

“But you and I can’t be around every minute, especially not in the bathroom,” said Amy. Her youngest was always quick enough to offer an unsolicited opinion.

Sephy, who was a nurse, added, “The bars will help him stay independent longer, Mom, that’s all.”

Jane had been exasperated. Where was their faith? Did not God promise, right in His Word, that He would heal those who asked Him? And it was not as though she and Leander were old and senile and needed their children making decisions for them. They were not even retirement age, and both of them fully in their right minds! But in the end, it was Leander who had agreed with the rest of the family, and she had no choice but to acquiesce. It was a hard thing, she was finding, to have your grown children veto you in matters of your own household. Behaving as though you were the child, and not the other way around.

It was only six o’clock, and Leander would sleep for a couple of hours yet. Jane said her prayers, then put her Bible aside, opened a spiral-bound notebook, and started three lists. One,

she titled *Graduation Party*; the second, *Wedding Reception*. The third was for groceries. Under each of the first two headings, she wrote *potato salad*. No summer gathering would be complete without it. But since the two celebrations were happening the same weekend, she would make two different kinds.

For DeShaun's party on Friday, she would make his favorite: red bliss potatoes with bacon and just a hint of dill pickle juice in the dressing. She smiled as she wrote down the ingredients she would need. Her first grandson was graduating from high school! He had come into their lives only four years ago, but it seemed to Jane that there had always been a space in their family waiting for him to come along and fill it. The awkward, quiet boy who had once been so busy taking care of his little brother and sister that he had never given a thought to dreams of his own had blossomed into a deep-voiced, focused young man who loved to cook. He was still quiet, and still protective of the younger ones, but he knew where he was going now: he was going to culinary school. And while other boys in his class were asking for cars or laptops as graduation gifts, what DeShaun wanted was a good set of chef's knives. This, Jane knew, would be Ivy and Nick's gift to him. She and Leander had bought him a Vitamix. Even DeShaun's brother, nine-year-old Hammer, seemed to realize the importance of the occasion. He had saved his own money for fireworks, which Nick had taken him to buy the previous weekend. It would be a graduation party such as Copper Cove had never seen before; it would make up for all the parties DeShaun had missed in his life.

Red bliss potato salad for DeShaun, then. For Sephy's wedding reception, she would make her daughter's favorite,

with buttermilk dressing and dill. There would be no big wedding, only a quiet ceremony before the justice of the peace on Saturday and a small picnic reception in the backyard before Sephy and Justice caught a flight for Namibia. There, they would each work in a clinic: she, vaccinating children, and he, vetting goats and cattle and any other creatures the African community might lead his way.

Cake, she wrote under each heading. Ivy would make DeShaun's cake. Sephy's had already been ordered from a bakery in Quahog. *Settlers' beans* went in DeShaun's column. For Sephy's—

A loud thump sounded from overhead. Jane froze. It was the sound of something much heavier than Leander's feet hitting the floor. *Oh, God—*

She dropped the notebook and pencil and bolted for the stairs, every nerve electrified.

Leander, in his white T-shirt and flannel pajama pants, lay on the floor beside the bed.

"Oh, honey!" She dropped to her knees. "What happened?"

"I fell."

"I can see that." Instinctively, she groped along his arms and legs. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so. I got up to go to the bathroom and just . . . tripped over my own feet."

"You didn't hit your head?"

"No. My arm will be black and blue, but I think that's all." With an effort, Leander shifted onto his back. Looking at the ceiling, he said, "Help me sit up, will you?"

She put an arm under his shoulders. He was all bones,

these days. “Up you go!” She heaved him to a sitting position and felt a twinge of pain between her own shoulder blades. “Can you stand from here?”

He pushed ineffectually at the floor and shook his head. “You’ll have to help me.”

Jane had no idea how to go about doing that. “Maybe if you put your arms around my neck, I could sort of pull you up?”

“You’ll put your back out. And I don’t know if I’m strong enough to hold on. Can you get Amy?”

“She left for the gym an hour ago.”

“She should be back soon.”

“We’re not leaving you on the floor until Amy gets home. I’ll call rescue.”

“Don’t do that. This is humiliating enough without lights and sirens and the whole neighborhood coming out to watch. Call Sephy. Maybe she can tell you how to get a hundred-sixty-pound man off the floor by yourself.”

Had he lost over thirty pounds already from this wretched disease? Jane used the bedside phone to call Sephy. Her third daughter answered by saying, “What’s wrong?”

“Did I wake you?”

“Of course you woke me; it’s six forty in the morning. Is everything all right?”

“Your father’s fallen, and I can’t get him off the floor. Amy’s not home, and he doesn’t want me to call rescue.”

“Is he hurt?”

“He says not. We did manage to sit him up.”

“Should I come?”

“No, you’re half an hour away. We can’t leave him on the floor that long. Just tell me what to do.”

“Okay. Put me on speakerphone so you have both hands free.”

Jane obeyed. Following her daughter’s instructions, she stood behind Leander and wrapped her arms around his chest.

“Lift with your legs, Mom, not your back!”

“I am!”

To her surprise, it worked.

“Got your balance?” Jane asked, when her husband was standing.

“Yep. I’m okay.” The tremor in his voice belied his words.

“He’s up,” she called toward the phone.

“Should you just run over to UrgiCare, Dad? Make sure nothing’s broken?”

Leander managed a smile. “Nothing’s broken but my dignity. I’d rather pretend this never happened.”

“If you’re sure . . .”

“I’m sure. Thank you, Sephy. I hope you can go back to sleep.”

“No, I’ll stay up. I have packing to do. I’m glad you’re okay.”

When their daughter had hung up, Leander reminded Jane, “I never did make it into the bathroom.”

“You feel steady enough?”

“I’m all right.”

“I’ll follow you, just to be sure.”

In the bathroom, the ugly metal bars along the toilet and bathtub gleamed smugly at her. Jane looked away. The man who had installed them had drilled holes in the plaster and tile of her beautiful walls. He had secured the bars with huge,

heavy bolts and some kind of cement. They were a permanent part of the structure now. Even when the day came that they were no longer needed, when Leander was better and the man came back to take the bars away, the scars they left would always be there. You would never get rid of holes like those.



The morning of DeShaun's graduation dawned cool, with a fine, drizzling rain. "It figures," Ivy said to Nick, over breakfast. "We made arrangements for an outdoor party, with no contingency plan, and now it's going to rain all day."

"It'll clear up" was her husband's unhelpful reply from behind his newspaper.

"It had better." Ivy, who was eating from a take-out container of leftover linguine with clam sauce, pointed the fork at Nick. "It had just *better* clear up, or we're in trouble."

"Do you have to eat fish and garlic this early in the morning?" said Nick, over his own sensible breakfast of whole-wheat toast and scrambled egg whites. "It stinks the whole house up."

"Sorry," she said, twirling linguine around her fork with great concentration. "But seriously, what are we going to do if it doesn't stop raining?"

"It will stop."

"But if it doesn't?"

Nick sighed. "If it doesn't stop, we'll move the party indoors somewhere. I don't know . . . the community arts center, maybe."

"There's an idea! But Amy might say no. She might con-

sider it nepotism to let her nephew use her arts center for a private party.”

“This isn’t business or politics, so does it matter? Besides, Amy doesn’t own the arts center; she only directs it.”

“Or the church. We could have it at the church.”

“Stop worrying, Ivy. The rain will be over by graduation. The forecast says so.”

Nick and the weather forecast turned out to be right, as usual. By ten o’clock, the rain had subsided, and the sun was rapidly warming the wet world to greenhouse levels of heat and humidity.

“*Wow*, it turned hot,” Ivy said. She was in her bedroom, trying to tame her daughter’s thick, frizzy hair into two French braids, something she was never very adept at, even when the humidity wasn’t 80 percent.

“You don’t know how to do black hair, that’s *your* problem,” she was informed by Jada, who was thirteen and thought everyone had a problem. “If you’d just let me get cornrows, you wouldn’t have to go through this every day. Cornrows are amazing: you get them once and they last for *months*.”

“Do you know how much cornrows cost?” Ivy finished one braid with an elastic and, moving Jada bodily a quarter turn to the right, began on the second. “Besides, where would you get them done? You’re the only black girl in a thirty-mile radius. What hairdresser around here is going to know how to do cornrows?”

“We could go to Bangor.”

“*Or* we could just French braid your hair every day.” Ivy finished the second, very creditable braid, and gave it a tweak. “You look lovely. Now go put your dress on.”

Jada rolled her eyes and sighed heavily as she went.

“And I’ve seen just about enough of the whites of your eyes, miss!” Ivy called after her.

DeShaun appeared in the doorway of the bedroom, wearing his blue graduation gown. “Why I gotta wear a dress shirt and pants under this thing? It’s like a sauna. Can’t I just wear shorts and a T-shirt?”

“And have eight inches of hairy legs showing, with your bare feet in flip-flops? I don’t think so.”

“I bet everybody else wears shorts under theirs.”

“This is high school graduation, DeShaun. It happens once in a lifetime. You can dress up for it.”

Hammer came racing down the hall and careened into his brother, knocking him forward a few inches. “Go in just your underwear, DeShaun!”

DeShaun ignored him. “Just a T-shirt at least, then.”

“Underwear, underwear, DeShaun’s wearing his underwear!” Hammer chanted. “I’m telling everyone!”

“Shut up, Hammer!” DeShaun cuffed his younger brother on the back of the head. Hammer punched him, hard, in the arm. DeShaun got him into a headlock and dragged him into the bedroom. “Come on, Mom,” he called, above his brother’s shrieks. “I could wear the pants and dress shoes with a T-shirt instead of this long-sleeved thing with a collar and necktie. It’ll suffocate me.”

“He has a point,” said Nick, who was already beginning to look damp around the edges in his own sport coat and tie.

“Let me go!” Hammer, kicking wildly at anything within reach, caught Nick in the leg.

“Ow! DeShaun, let go of your brother.”

DeShaun let go of Hammer and gave him a push backward, into the hall.

“DeShaun pushed me!”

“Come on, just let me wear the T-shirt.”

Hammer let out a piercing yell of indignation.

Ivy put her fingertips to her temples. “All right. You can wear a T-shirt under your gown. But the same rule applies today as for church: no stains—”

“No holes,” DeShaun finished for her. “I know.” He made for his bedroom to change out of the offending dress shirt and tie, pulling Hammer into another headlock as he went, and dragging him, screaming, down the hall.

“Oh, my aching head,” said Ivy to her husband.



The high school auditorium was already crowded when they arrived. Ivy’s youngest sister, Amy, and her best friend, Mitch, were already there, saving a row of seats. Ivy gave a little wave to Nick’s family, across the aisle, and sat down, fanning herself with the paper program. “It is *hot* in here.”

“Tell me about it. Hottest day of the year, so far.”

“I’m thirsty,” said Hammer, pulling at Ivy’s sleeve. “Can I get a drink?”

“You know where the drinking fountain is—but come right back!” she finished in the direction of her son’s head, which, bobbing and weaving, disappeared at once into the crowd.

Her parents arrived, with Grammie Lydia Darling, eighty-five years old but looking fifteen years younger in a mint-green dress. “So, our boy’s graduating!” She bent to kiss Ivy

on the cheek. Sephy came after that, squeezing Ivy's hand as she edged past and saying, "I'm so proud of DeShaun I can't stand it!" David, the oldest, and his wife, Libby, slipped in just as the school superintendent stepped to the microphone and cleared his throat. Ivy looked down the row of her family with a great swell of fondness. Except for Laura, who lived in Phoenix, they were all here. Each of them had embraced DeShaun so wholeheartedly, when he had come into their family. . . . Every one of them was as proud to watch him graduate as they would have been if—

A silent, instinctive warning bell interrupted her thoughts. "*Nick!*" she hissed. "Where's Hammer?"

Her husband looked around. "I thought you had him."

"He went to the drinking fountain, but I told him to come right back. That was fifteen minutes ago!"

Nick closed his eyes briefly, then stood and shuffled past the row of knees to the aisle.

Ivy's mother shot her a puzzled glance.

"*Hammer,*" Ivy mouthed, rolling her eyes.

"Ah!" Her mother flashed a better-you-than-me smile and turned her attention back to the superintendent, who was introducing the Copper Cove High School class of 2016.

Ivy stood to applaud with the rest of the crowd and put Hammer out of her mind. Nick would bring him back. But by the time the superintendent finished speaking and turned the podium over to the principal, neither of them had returned.

That was when the first burst of gunfire sounded from the hallway.

Ivy's breath left her. The auditorium erupted in screams.

“Get down!” the principal shouted into the microphone. “Everybody get *down on the floor*. Down. On. The. Floor! Close those doors!” He pointed toward the back of the auditorium, where two fathers sprang forward to obey, pulling the double doors closed on either side.

Nick. Hammer. Where are they? From her kneeling position, wedged between her own seat and the seat back in front of her, Ivy scanned the front of the auditorium, trying to catch a glimpse of black skin. *DeShaun! Where’s DeShaun?* She could tell nothing. The stage was a mass of blue and white gowns: the backs of the graduates, crouched between the rows of chairs for protection.

A second spatter of shots sounded. More screams. Ivy thought her heart would choke her. Nick and Hammer were out there, somewhere.

One of the doors slammed open, and a wave of terror moved over the crowd, like wind over a wheat field. “It’s okay!” a voice called. “It’s not a gun! It’s just some kid, setting off firecrackers in the hall.”

Ivy groaned. She did not have to lift her head to see who “some kid” was. As the friends and neighbors and families of her community climbed stiffly off the floor, buzzing with adrenaline-fueled righteous indignation, Ivy crawled on her hands and knees into the aisle, got to her feet, and tried her best to be invisible as she made her way to the corridor, where she would collect her youngest son and, very probably, have to face a police report as well.