

AMY  
CLIPSTON

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

*Finding*  
YOU



# FINDING YOU



*Amy Clipston*



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

*Finding You*

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*For my super-awesome husband, Joe,  
with love and appreciation.*

*I'm so honored and humbled to have had the opportunity  
to donate a kidney for you as a paired donor so you could  
receive your second kidney transplant.*

*I love you and this amazing life we've built together!*



## CHAPTER 1



**Y**OUR LABWORK LOOKS FANTASTIC, DARCY.” DR. MONA REYES SMILED and sank down onto the round rolling stool across from the exam table. “I can’t believe it’s been two years since your transplant. Your kidney numbers are perfect.”

Darcy forced her lips into a smile and hugged her arms over her green shirt. “Time has flown,” she said. She wanted to believe those words, but in truth, time had stopped eighteen months ago when her fiancé, Jace, died.

She sat up taller, steeling herself against the wave of grief that always seemed to lurk at the back of her mind, waiting to drag her under. She would never forgive herself for what happened to him.

The sound of Dr. Reyes scooting her stool over to the exam table jerked her from her thoughts. She took Darcy’s hand in hers. “What’s on your mind?”

With her dark hair, bright hazel eyes, and flawless, creamy skin, Dr. Reyes had become like a second mother to Darcy since she’d been diagnosed with kidney disease. Darcy was grateful for their heart-to-heart talks, which always helped settle her nerves and give her a new perspective on things.

“I always think of Jace when I think of the transplant. I’m so grateful for him.” She sniffed and swiped the back of her hand over her eyes.

Dr. Reyes patted her hand. “That’s natural. You’ll always miss him and love him. Just remember that he would be happy for your

good health too.”

“I know you’re right.” Darcy tried to clear her throat past the lump that swelled there.

“Do you want to talk about how you’re feeling?”

Darcy shook her head. She was certain her doctor had better things to do—such as seeing more patients—than to hear about Darcy’s holding pattern of grief, regret, and guilt.

She held her breath, then released it as the truth spilled out of her. “I’ve been thinking about finding my biological mother.”

“I remember when you shared with me that you’re adopted.”

“My parents never hid that from me. And even though I love them and am so thankful for everything they’ve given me, I can’t help feeling that something is missing in my life. I wonder if I wouldn’t feel so hollowed out if I found my mother.” She fidgeted with the hem of her top.

Dr. Reyes nodded. “I know you’re anxious to find out if your kidney disease is hereditary.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, I might be able to help you.” Dr. Reyes wrote something on a piece of paper and then handed it to Darcy. “My best friend is adopted, and she contacted this not-for-profit agency when she wanted to find her parents.”

“Thank you.” Darcy studied the piece of paper, where Dr. Reyes had written down a website for an organization called Lost and Found. “I want to know where I came from, but I just don’t know how to talk to my parents about this without hurting them.”

“I think they’ll understand.”

Darcy leaned over and hugged her doctor. “You’re the best.”

“Back at you.” Dr. Reyes grinned. “Now, do you need any re-fills?”

They discussed the cocktail of medications Darcy would take

for the rest of her life in order to keep her transplant viable. She often got tired of taking the medications, but she was grateful that they kept her new kidney healthy. Darcy thanked her doctor once again before heading toward the exit.

She rushed to the front desk to schedule her next six-month checkup appointment before pulling on her suit jacket, shouldering her purse, and hurrying out toward the parking lot in front of the sprawling medical complex.

Her high heels clacked along the sidewalk, and the cool, early April breeze lifted strands of her long, blonde hair off her shoulders. Birds sang in nearby trees while daffodils smiled up at the sun shining in the cloudless blue sky.

Darcy tried to shake off her murky mood, but it clung to her like a second skin as she weaved past the rows of cars on the way to her sedan. She pulled her phone from her back pocket and found no missed calls or messages waiting for her. She considered calling her mom to tell her about her appointment, but instead she pocketed her phone, not ready to talk to her mother just yet. She was on the way to an important meeting and had to mentally prepare herself.

Thoughts of Jace swirled in her head as she approached her royal-blue, late-model Lexus LS 460 sedan. She unlocked the door using her key fob and climbed in, dropping her purse on the passenger seat. As she hit the push-button start, she tried dismissing her late fiancé from her mind, but she could still see his handsome face. His brilliant smile and those sky-blue eyes seemed impossible to forget.

She and Jace had made so many plans. They were going to be married right before Thanksgiving almost two years ago, and thanks to her good health, she'd hoped they would soon start a family. Being a mom had been her dream since she was a little girl play-

ing with her first baby doll. In fact, when her friends had moved on to playing with Barbies, Darcy had still stuck with her baby dolls instead of joining them.

*Click. Click.*

Darcy's attention snapped back to her car. She hit the start button again.

*Click. Click.*

"No," she whined. "No, no, no. Not now . . ." She pushed the button again.

*Click. Click.*

Darcy leaned forward on the steering wheel, grimaced, and mashed the button.

*Click. Click.*

She rested her hand on her forehead. Her parents were at their beach house in Coral Cove, which meant she couldn't call her father for help. And her best friend, Haven, was already at work. Besides, Haven was a guidance counselor at a middle school located nearly thirty miles away, so Darcy couldn't dream of asking her for help. That left her one option—calling a roadside assistance service.

Darcy glanced at her watch, a bead of sweat trailing down the back of her neck. It was after nine, and she had a public relations presentation to make to the board in under an hour. She hated policies-and-procedures stuff, but it was part of her job, and she didn't want a month's worth of work to go down the drain.

Unlocking her phone, she shot off a message to her manager, Meredith.

**DARCY:** Hi! Just left my doctor's office, and I'm having car trouble. Calling for roadside assistance now. I'll keep you updated.

Conversation bubbles appeared almost immediately, and her



gut tightened. While she appreciated her understanding boss, she always dreaded the possibility of letting Meredith down.

**MEREDITH:** Oh, no! Let me know if we should reschedule the presentation.

That was the last thing Darcy wanted to do. She'd been preparing for this for weeks, and her bonus depended on it. She had to get to her office *soon*.

She pushed the button one last time, praying for it to start.  
*Click. Click.*

Darcy's frustration came out in a growl. "You had to let me down today of all days, car?"

Yanking her wallet from her purse, Darcy began rooting through multiple pockets for the roadside information card. She'd never used it before. What did it even look like? When a tap sounded on the windowpane, she gasped and jumped with a start.

Turning, she found a man peering in her window.

"Sorry." He lifted his hand. "I didn't mean to scare you." He pointed toward the hood of her car. "Need some help?"

She pushed her door open. "It won't start."

"I heard the clicks." He grinned, and she couldn't help but notice how handsome he was. His light-brown hair was cut short and covered with a dark-blue ball cap, and his eyes reminded her of the dark-roast coffee Dad loved to drink. He wore faded blue jeans, a black t-shirt, and a dark-blue work jacket. The outfit, coupled with the stubble on his chin, gave him a rugged look. She realized she was staring, and her cheeks heated.

The man lifted his eyebrows and nodded toward the hood of the car. "Sounds like a dead battery. I can jump it for you."

She sagged against the seat. Why hadn't she put that emergency

roadside kit Dad had given her for Christmas in the trunk of her car instead of on a shelf in her garage? “Thank you, but I don’t have jumper cables.”

“You’re in luck. I always carry a set just in case.” He jammed his thumb toward the other side of the lot. “I’m just parked over there.” He tipped back his cap.

She noticed the logo on the front: Barton Automotive. Hope lit in her chest. What were the odds of her knight in shining chrome being a mechanic? “Oh, that would be amazing.”

“I’m Carter, by the way.”

“Darcy.”

“Nice to meet you.” He stepped to the empty parking space in front of her car and pointed to the ground. “Do me a favor and try to stop anyone from parking here while I bring my truck over.”

“Got it.”

He pulled a set of keys from his pocket, causing them to jingle. “Hang tight. Be right back.”

Darcy stood in front of her car and peered across the parking lot. A few moments later, a loud engine rumbled to life, and a black Chevrolet Suburban slowly crept down the aisle and came to a stop in front of her car. Country music sang from a radio inside of the SUV, which looked as if it had been lifted a couple of inches to accommodate the huge tires. Her father, a car enthusiast, would be impressed.

Carter killed the engine and then popped the hood on his SUV before he hopped down from the driver seat and moved to the rear of the vehicle. The tailgate opened and slammed before he sauntered toward her holding a set of jumper cables.

She drank in how his jeans hugged his trim waist and how his dark t-shirt stretched over a wide chest. Those dark eyes were captivating. She had to crane her neck to take in his full height.

*Oh, I love a tall guy.*

Carter raised eyebrows, and she realized she was staring at him—*again*. Surely her face was going to catch fire.

“My dad would love your SUV.” The words slipped out of her mouth before she could stop them.

He lifted the hood on his SUV. “I guess he’s into old Chevrolet trucks?”

“Old?”

He grinned, and like nearly all hot guys, he showed her a crooked smile. “It’s a 2005, so I wouldn’t consider it new.” He pointed one of the clamps toward her car. “Can you pop your hood?”

She slipped back into the driver seat and did as she was told before rejoining him at the front of her car.

He tilted his head and scanned her car. His focus moved back to the engine, and he nodded. “This is a beautiful Lexus.”

“Thanks.” Heat prickled her neck, and she felt the strange need to explain how she could afford such a nice car. “It was my mom’s. She wanted to trade it in for a newer vehicle, and I offered to buy it since my Honda needed a lot of work.”

“Has it given you trouble before?”

“Yes.” She grimaced as more embarrassment filled her. “It didn’t want to start a few days ago. I meant to stop by the auto parts store to have them test the battery, but I had this big project at work, so I forgot.” Just like she forgot to mention it to her dad before her parents left for the beach on Saturday.

Carter connected the positive clamp to the Lexus’s battery terminal before connecting the positive clamp to his battery terminal. He followed the same procedure with the negative clamps and then climbed into his SUV. His engine came to life, and another country music song serenaded her. Then he turned off the radio and came to stand next to her. “Want to try starting it?”

“Here goes nothing,” she whispered as she returned to the driver’s seat. She closed her eyes before hitting the button. But instead of her engine purring to life, she only heard the Suburban continue to rumble. She looked toward Carter, who was frowning.

Darcy checked her watch. It was already nine thirty. Nerves now swarmed her stomach. She was running out of time before her presentation.

Carter killed his engine and removed the jumper cables from the vehicles before tossing them into his back seat. He joined her at the driver’s side door of her car and crouched down beside her. “My guess? It’s either the battery or the starter.”

“And you can only know for sure by testing them,” she finished.

“Right.” He tapped her door. “Do you want me to have it towed for you?”

“I don’t have a choice, do I?” Darcy pinched the bridge of her nose.

He shook his head. “I’ll call the tow truck driver we use for our shop. He lives around here. If he isn’t on another job, he can be here quickly.”

“That would be perfect because I have an important meeting at work in under an hour. I need to get there as quickly as possible.”

“Where would you like it towed?”

Anxiety pressed down on her shoulders, and she tried to think. Once the car was towed, she’d still need another car, and the only way to get one would be to use a car service or call her parents and ask to borrow one of theirs.

“My parents are on vacation and probably took my mom’s car with them. I could have my car towed to their house, but then I’d be stuck there.” She wrung her hands. “I’m not comfortable driving my dad’s cars.” She took a deep breath. “I mean, he has a brand-new Corvette Stingray or his Porsche Cayenne. And you know how

Charlotte rush-hour traffic is. Plus I'd be mortified if someone dinged his doors in the crazy parking garage at work." Why was she sharing so much information with a complete stranger? *Shut up, Darcy!* "Anyway, I need my car fixed right away."

"I can look at it for you today, if you want."

Her gaze snapped to his. "You can?"

"Sure. We're not that busy at our shop. I'm not trying to pressure you though. If you have a mechanic you prefer and trust, go with them. You won't hurt my feelings."

"The only mechanic I know is my dad." She studied Carter's earnest expression, and for some strange reason she trusted him.

She shook herself. She didn't even know this man!

She looked at her watch again, and her heart lurched. She needed to figure this out *fast*. "Let's have it towed to your shop."

He chuckled. "Well, it's not exactly *my* shop. My brother-in-law and his folks own it, but I'm one of the mechanics."

"Where is it?"

"On Main Street in Flowering Grove."

"My best friend's boyfriend is from Flowering Grove. I love Treasure Hunting Antique Mall."

"The shop is close to that store." He stood and pulled his phone from his pocket. "I'll call the driver now." He leaned on the grill of his Suburban, dialed the phone, and began talking. When his eyes met hers, they seemed to twinkle.

When Darcy's phone buzzed with a text, she found a message from her manager.

**MEREDITH:** How's it going?

Darcy poised her thumbs over her phone, but her fingers froze in place while she debated what to tell Meredith. A tow truck was on

the way, but how long would it take? She had expected her doctor's visit to be quick, but she'd never imagined getting stranded before her big meeting.

"Fred will be here soon."

Darcy lifted her chin as Carter leaned on the driver's side door. "Thanks."

"Is there someone who can pick you up?"

She moved her fingers over the steering wheel. She could reach out to Haven's boyfriend, but he worked forty-five minutes away. "No." She held up her phone. "I can call for a rideshare."

"Where do you work?"

"Uptown Charlotte. Not too far from here."

"I can drop you off."

Darcy studied Carter's expression and once again was surprised by how much she trusted him. At the same time, she could hear her mother's admonishing voice in her mind:

*You got in the car with a stranger, Darcy Jane Larsen? Didn't I teach you better than that? It's a wonder you didn't wind up on the news!*

And yet . . . it would be foolish to turn him down, considering her time crunch. "You sure?"

He shrugged. "It's not out of the way for me."

"I appreciate it. I'll reimburse you for gas."

He shook his head. "No need." His phone rang, and he examined it. "I'm sorry. It's my brother-in-law." He held it up to his ear. "Hey, man." He listened as he walked over to his SUV and leaned on the fender. "I'll be on my way soon. What do we need from the store?"

She shot off a text to her manager:

**DARCY:** My car is dead, but a tow truck is on the way. I also have a ride set up. Hope to be there in less than thirty minutes.

**MEREDITH:** Sounds good. See you soon.

She slipped her phone into her purse before retrieving her laptop bag. She climbed out of the car just as Carter wrapped up his call and slipped his phone into his back pocket. When he smiled, she felt a strange flutter in her stomach.

“Gage is sending me a shopping list.”

“Your brother-in-law?”

“Yeah. He’s been married to my sister for six years now.” He rubbed his chin. “Time sure does fly.”

“Right,” she said, even though she had just been thinking about how time *didn’t* fly. Instead, it had frozen for her when Jace had died. How odd that Carter would comment on something she had just thought of less than an hour ago. She held out her key fob. “I guess you need this.”

“Thanks.” When Carter took the key, her fingers brushed against his warm skin. His eyes drifted over her face. “So what do you do besides get stranded in parking lots?”

She laughed and felt some of the knots in her shoulders release. “I actually work in the communications department at one of the big banks.”

“Really?” He looked intrigued.

“I handle public relations—employee communications, media relations, that sort of thing—for East Coast Banking and Trust.” Darcy shook her head. “It’s really not that impressive.”

“Sounds like it to me.” He opened his mouth to say something but then stopped as a tow truck steered into the parking lot. “Fred’s already here.”

Darcy adjusted the strap of her laptop bag on her shoulder, grateful they would be on the road heading toward her office soon.

## CHAPTER 2



**A**FTER CARTER MOVED HIS SUV, HE HELPED THE TOW TRUCK DRIVER load Darcy's Lexus. She pulled out her phone and snapped a photo of the portly, middle-aged man with the bushy gray beard as he pulled her car onto the flatbed.

Then she texted the photo to her best friend along with a text: How's your Monday going so far?

As if on cue, her phone rang with a call from Haven. "What in the world happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. The Lexus isn't." Darcy frowned. "Aren't you working today?"

"I have a few minutes before my next meeting. Guidance counselors do get breaks every once in a while. Do you need a ride?" Her best friend sounded concerned. "Tell me where you are, and I'll be there as soon as I can."

Darcy moved over to the Suburban. "I'm fine, but thank you." She explained how Carter had approached her and not only offered to have her car towed to his shop to fix it, but also insisted on giving her a ride to her office. She moved to the back of his SUV and read his license plate to Haven, then asked her to write it down since she had accepted a ride from a stranger.

"Carter, huh?" She could hear Haven's grin through the phone. "How old is he?"

Darcy glanced at him while he helped Fred secure the car with chains. When his eyes met hers, his lips lifted. And that man had



one gorgeous smile. “Late twenties, maybe?”

“Cute?”

*Extremely!* But if Darcy admitted just how handsome he was, Haven would nag Darcy incessantly about trying to date this stranger.

“He’s all right.”

“Single?”

“How should I know?”

“Is he wearing a ring?”

“My dad never wears his when he works on cars.”

Haven expelled an impatient breath. “Then you’ll just have to ask him.”

Darcy lowered her voice. She’d pass out from embarrassment if Carter overheard their conversation. “I really don’t have time to talk about this—”

“And if he’s unattached, get his number. Girl, we’re both twenty-seven, and we should be enjoying life. Maybe Carter will be your new boyfriend.”

Darcy rolled her eyes and swallowed a groan, recalling the disastrous blind dates her best friend had set up for her. Haven was determined to get Darcy to date again. She knew Haven meant well, but Darcy just wasn’t ready to move on and probably never would be.

“You need to start living again,” Haven insisted. “Stop blaming yourself for what happened to Jace. It wasn’t your fault.” She paused. “So is Carter nice?”

Darcy’s cheeks warmed as Carter started toward her. “I have to go.”

“I want details. Call me later.”

She hung up and put her phone in her purse. “Ready to go?” Darcy asked him.

“Yup,” he said, and she was once again drawn into those dark eyes. He opened the passenger-side door for her as the tow truck

exited the lot with her car sitting on the flatbed.

She set her purse and bag on the floor. Then she wondered how she was going to climb into the tall SUV without falling and embarrassing herself.

“Need some help?” He held his hand out toward her.

“Thanks.” Grasping his strong hand, she hoisted herself up with the help of a handle and the running board. “That wasn’t so bad.”

His expression was sheepish. “My sister always complains about having to climb up in this thing, especially in heels.”

She laughed. “No problem.” Then she glanced down at her high-heeled shoes. While she enjoyed dressing up for work, she rarely wore pumps. Today, though, she’d chosen heels in order to look her best for the presentation.

Darcy settled in the passenger seat and inhaled the lingering woody scent that she assumed was Carter’s cologne. He appeared beside her and folded his long frame into the driver’s side. Soon they were on their way, with another country music song singing softly through the speakers. She gave him directions before a comfortable silence settled over them.

She snuck a glance his way as he slowed to a stop at a light. “I really appreciate this.”

“I don’t mind. I would hope someone would do the same for my sister.” He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel in time with the song.

Darcy looked down at her watch. It was almost ten. She was running out of time . . .

As if reading her mind, he said, “I’ll do my best to get you there in time.”

She smiled. Not only was he handsome, but he also seemed so kind and thoughtful. Surely he had a girlfriend.

*Not that it's any of my business.* But Haven would be so disappointed in her for not asking him if he was single.

"Does your dad work in a shop nearby?"

Darcy felt her brow furrow.

He chuckled. "You said your dad was the only mechanic you knew."

"Oh. No, he's not a mechanic by trade. It's more of a hobby."

Carter clicked on the blinker. "Does he have any project cars?"

"He has a 1958 Dodge truck that took years to restore." She adjusted herself in the seat and let her tense muscles loosen. "It's a Power Wagon."

"What color?"

"Red."

"Wow." Carter shook his head, grinning. "Those trucks are so cool."

"Yes, they are," she agreed. "It took him awhile to find it. He said he was looking for the perfect truck. He hired someone to handle the body work and paint, but he did most of the engine work himself."

"Impressive."

"Do you have a project car?"

"I do."

"Well, don't leave me hanging here," she said, and he laughed again. "What is it?"

"A 1970 Plymouth Road Runner. My grandfather's pride and joy."

She gasped. "Those cars are gorgeous. Is it close to being finished?"

He adjusted his hat on his head. "It's on hold right now. You know how sometimes life just happens."

"I can relate to that." She turned toward him. "What color is it?"

“Orange.”

“That’s the best color for a Road Runner.”

His eyes crinkled in the corners as he studied her.

“Why are you looking at me like that? Did I say something wrong?”

“Not at all. You just seem to know a lot about cars.”

“And that surprises you,” she finished.

“Well, I mean . . .” He shrugged. “Kinda.”

She rested her hands on her hips and pretended to be offended.

“So women can’t know anything about cars, huh?”

“I wasn’t saying that.”

“Yeah, you were,” she joked. “You think that just because I’m wearing heels and a suit that I don’t know how to check my oil and tire pressure.”

A smile broke out on his face. “I would never accuse a woman of not knowing her way around a car.”

“And I’ll have you know that when I was younger, I hung out with my dad in his garage and learned a little bit. I can’t rebuild an engine, but I can carry on an intelligent conversation about a car.”

“That’s actually very cool.” He stopped at another red light and glanced over at her, his eyes dancing with what looked like amusement.

“Thanks. It was how I bonded with him. My mom and I watched movies, and my dad and I hung out in his garage.”

“I bet you have some nice memories.” He tapped the steering wheel. “You mentioned your parents are on vacation. Where’d they go?”

“Coral Cove.”

“My grandparents took my sister and me there once, and we had a blast.” He looked over at Darcy. “Where do they stay?”

Darcy fiddled with her suit jacket as another wave of embar-

rassment hit her. “They have a house there, and since they’ve both retired, they go down there frequently to enjoy it.” She wondered if he thought she was spoiled, but his expression showed no evidence of shock. She almost felt compelled to tell him that her parents were retired orthodontists who had run their own practice and invested in real estate before they retired, but she decided to keep that information to herself. “Did you always want to be a mechanic?”

“Yes. I started handing my grandfather tools when I was four. I inherited my love of cars from him.” He merged into the left lane to pass a slow-moving vehicle, then motored through an intersection, heading into Uptown Charlotte.

“So you’re close to your grandparents?” she asked.

He moved his hands over the steering wheel. “I was. They’re both gone now, but they pretty much raised my sister and me after my mom passed away when I was ten. My dad had already skipped out by then.”

She grimaced. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be nosy.”

“It’s okay. I mean, I don’t normally talk about my family. But I guess you’re easy to talk to, huh?” When he smiled at her, it seemed sincere. “How about you? Any siblings?”

“No, I’m an only child, and since my parents are older, I never got to know my grandparents.” Darcy didn’t want to pry more about Carter’s family, so she changed course. “How long have you worked at the shop in Flowering Grove?” she asked.

“Eleven years. I started there right after I graduated from high school. The Bartons are like family to me.”

He steered through Uptown Charlotte toward her building. When he came to it, he parked at the curb.

She angled her body toward his. “I appreciate your help today. I’ll find a ride out to Flowering Grove.”

“Wait.” He held up his phone. “Can I get your number?”

“Oh. Uh, well, I . . .” Darcy stammered. “I think you’re really cute, Carter, and I really appreciate the ride.” She held a hand up. “I really, really do, but I’m not really dating right now.”

A strange expression flitted over his face. “Oh, I meant that I need to text you about the car.” He grinned. “But I think you’re cute too.”

Heat traveled up Darcy’s neck, and she was certain she might pass out from embarrassment. “Right.” She took his phone and then created a new contact, adding her first and last name along with her number before handing it back to him. “Here you go.”

He sent a quick text, causing her phone to chime. She glanced at her screen and read: This is Carter Donovan.

“I hope your presentation goes well,” he said.

“Thank you.” She gathered up her laptop bag and purse before climbing from the SUV.

“You’re welcome. I’ll be in touch.”

As the SUV motored away from the curb, Darcy hurried into the building. Time to change gears and focus on her presentation.

\* \* \*

WHISTLING ALONG WITH A BRAD PAISLEY SONG, CARTER PARKED AT THE back of the lot behind Barton Automotive. He unloaded a large box from his trunk, then started across the lot toward the building. The sound of meows caught his attention, and he spun as Smoky—a large, gray tabby and the shop’s unofficial mascot and greeter—trotted toward him.

“Hey, buddy,” Carter called as the cat approached. Smoky walked in circles while rubbing on Carter’s shins.

Carter set the box on the ground, and when the cat lifted his head, Carter rubbed his chin. Smoky purred his approval. “How are you this fine Monday?”

“Look who decided to finally show up at work today,” Gage teased from the open bay door.

Carter snickered while he continued to pet the cat. He was so thankful that Shauna and Gage had gotten together. Not only had Shauna gained a thoughtful and supportive husband, but Carter had gotten an older brother. He enjoyed his easy banter with Gage. “I had nothing else to do today, so I figured I’d see if you needed any help,” he joked.

“Fred said you rescued a damsel in distress and convinced her to have her car towed here.” Gage pushed his hand through his thick, curly dark hair as he walked toward Carter and Smoky. He pointed toward Darcy’s royal-blue Lexus parked near the shop.

Carter stood up to his full height. “All true.”

Gage gave a low whistle. “Nice car.” Then he grinned. “Fred mentioned the damsel was pretty too.”

“Yes, she was.” Carter couldn’t deny it. Darcy was pretty—*really* pretty—with long blonde hair falling past her slight shoulders and the greenest eyes he’d ever seen. They reminded him of the bright-green grass in Flowering Grove Park, where his mother and grandmother used to take him and Shauna to play on swings every Sunday afternoon. And then there was Darcy’s lovely smile, which lit up her beautiful face.

She’d looked embarrassed when she explained that she had purchased the car from her mom, and she seemed sheepish when she mentioned her parents’ vacation home at Coral Cove. He wondered what her parents did for a living that enabled them to afford a beach home—not to mention her father’s Porsche Cayenne and brand-new Corvette Stingray.

Carter also noticed that she wasn’t wearing any jewelry on her left hand, which meant she wasn’t married and possibly was single.

He shook himself. What was his problem? Considering his

financial situation, the last thing he needed right now was a relationship. Besides, Darcy was clearly out of Carter's league. With her looks, her corporate job, and her money, what could a mechanic with grease-stained nails and no 401k really offer outside a few dates? He could never be good enough for her.

"Car wouldn't start, huh?" His brother-in-law's question yanked him from his thoughts of Darcy. The cat tapped Gage's shin with his paw to gain his attention, and Gage kneeled to take a turn rubbing Smoky's chin.

"I was on my way to my truck when I heard the clicking. I tried to jump it for her but didn't have any luck. I figured I'd test the battery first and then go from there."

"Sounds good."

"I picked up shop towels, disposable gloves, soap, brake parts cleaner, and carburetor cleaner." Carter lifted the box and started toward the open bay doors. "I guess I'd better get to work before my boss starts yelling at me."

Gage walked beside him with Smoky at his heels, the cat still meowing as if sharing a list of jobs they had to complete today. "Hang on. How'd your appointment go?"

"Fine."

"So your kidney levels are still good?"

"Yup. They're perfect." Carter tried to shove down the familiar regret and frustration that gripped him when he thought about the years he had struggled with kidney disease.

Gage patted Carter's shoulder and nearly knocked him off-balance. At six feet four, his brother-in-law was two inches taller than Carter and looked as if he'd spent every spare minute at the gym. "That's awesome, brother. What a blessing."

It was now. When he went on dialysis three years ago, he had despised the burden he'd been on his family. The kidney disease



wasn't hereditary, and while doctors insisted it could have been environmental, the reason why his kidneys had failed remained a mystery. His illness and medical bills forced him to leave his apartment and full-time job and move in with Shauna and Gage. But he didn't want a handout from them or anyone else. He paid them a fair price for rent, including his portion of utilities, and he also chipped in for food. Shauna suggested they ask their church to hold a fundraiser for Carter, but he insisted there were other people in their community who needed help more than he did.

He'd finally undergone a transplant two years ago. Shauna insisted upon donating her kidney as a paired donor for Carter so he wouldn't have to wait on the transplant list. He had been against Shauna's donating, worrying the risk was too great—but since she was his nurturing older sister, she wouldn't take no for an answer.

And now, two years later, Carter cherished his good health but longed to climb out of his debt and move to a place of his own. If only he could pay off his consolidation loan early so he wouldn't be so reliant on Shauna and Gage. He could never repay their generosity though. That gnawed away at his insides.

"It *is* a blessing," Carter agreed with his brother-in-law as he crossed to the side of the bay where he worked. The familiar smells of tires, brake dust, oil, and cleaning solution hovered over him along with the sound of country music playing from a nearby radio. He shucked his work jacket and plain black t-shirt before changing into a dark blue shirt emblazoned with the Barton Automotive logo.

The door that led to the office and showroom opened, and Glenda, Gage's mother, shuffled out with a wide smile on her face. Although she was petite, it was easy to see that Gage had inherited his dark, curly hair and honey-brown eyes from her. The curls were threaded with gray—"Sparkles," she called them—and her eyes were lined with wrinkles, but she was still young at heart.

“There you are!” Glenda sang as she hurried over to him. “I thought I heard your truck pull into the parking lot.”

“That behemoth is hard to miss, Mom,” Gage called from his side of the large bay.

Carter shook his head and finger-combed his short hair. “You’re just jealous that it sits taller than your pickup.”

Gage snorted before opening the box of supplies and pulling out the disposable gloves.

Glenda rested her hand on his bicep. “Did your appointment go well?”

“It did. My kidney numbers are going strong.”

She gave his arm a gentle squeeze. “Well, son, you need to embrace your good health! It’s time you started dating again. You’re going to be thirty in June, and you’ll have no trouble finding the right woman. You’re a great catch.”

Carter fixed a smile on his lips as memories of his ex-girlfriend filled his mind. He’d been certain that Gabrielle would be the one with whom he’d share a home and a family, but she’d bailed on him when his health had deteriorated and he started home dialysis. Three years later, he still hadn’t recovered from that heartbreak.

Besides, what woman in her right mind would want to get involved with a man in debt up to his eyeballs and who lived with his sister and her husband? Gabrielle dumped him not only because he was ill, but also because he wasn’t “living up to his potential.” Or so she insisted. More than once she told him that he needed to find a higher-paying job, and she tried to talk him into working for her father’s race team. She couldn’t understand that he liked working for Ernie. And even after he finally agreed to work for her father, she still dumped him.

Darcy’s beautiful smile flashed in his mind, and he remembered their fun conversation of his project car. But then he shook

his head.

No, he wasn't a catch at all.

Glenda patted his cheek. "Carter Donovan, you're too handsome to spend your life alone."

Gage hooted from the other side of the garage.

"You hush over there, Gage," Glenda called with a grin.

"Enough talk about my nonexistent love life. I'll go pull the battery from the Lexus and test it." With a resigned sigh, Carter got to work.



## CHAPTER 3



‘M SO SORRY I COULDN’T LEAVE WORK EARLIER.” HAVEN STEERED HER Honda CR-V through the rush-hour traffic on Interstate 485. “I had my usual middle school drama today.” She rolled her eyes. “For one, there was a seventh grader who thought it would be a great idea to bring water balloons to the assembly. Then he dropped them all. What a mess!”

Darcy cupped a hand to her mouth to cover a snort. “You have the best stories.”

“Yeah, but the call to the parent wasn’t all that fun,” Haven said. “Anyway, I had hoped to pick you up at four thirty, but my calls went late and then the principal wanted to discuss a few things.”

Darcy looked down at her phone. “It’s okay. Carter said he’d wait for me at the shop.”

“He said he’d wait for you, huh?” Haven’s smile was mischievous. “Carter. That’s a nice name.”

“It is.” Darcy scanned their text message exchange from earlier this afternoon. He’d told her the problem had turned out to be the starter instead of the battery. She agreed to the cost of repair, and he said the car would be ready before the shop closed at five thirty.

Darcy glanced at her watch. Almost five thirty. The traffic in front of them crept along the highway. “I’ll let him know we’re running late.”

**DARCY:** We got a late start, but we’re on our way. Traffic is pretty

heavy on 485.

The conversation bubbles appeared right away.

**CARTER:** No worries. Take your time.

“So tell me about this handsome mechanic who saved the day.” Haven’s baby-blue eyes sparkled.

Although her best friend worked as a middle school guidance counselor, Darcy always thought Haven could have strutted down runways at fashion shows with her gorgeous strawberry-blond hair, flawless ivory skin, long legs, and perfect figure. She’d always secretly been envious of Haven’s height of five feet nine. It often astounded her that Haven was so humble and down-to-earth despite being drop-dead gorgeous, and she never seemed to notice how she attracted men’s attention when she walked past them.

“There’s not much to tell really. He’s a mechanic and he fixed my car.” Darcy stowed her phone in her pocket. “I’d rather you tell me more middle school stories. Were there any food fights in the cafeteria today?”

Haven lifted one of her perfectly shaped blonde eyebrows. “Nice deflecting, Larsen. I, for one, can’t wait to meet Carter.” She merged into the right lane preparing to exit. “But I’ve also been dying to tell you that Derek has someone for you to meet.”

Darcy couldn’t stop her glower. Haven and her boyfriend constantly tried to set her up on blind dates, and they’d proved to be one disastrous evening after another. “I’m not in the mood for a blind date.”

“This guy is different.”

“Sure he is,” Darcy deadpanned. “Different from the guy you set me up with who talked about Star Wars the entire night and kept

showing me photos of himself in costumes at sci-fi conventions? Or different from the one who showed me pictures of his five grandchildren? Or how about the man who never let me get a word in edgewise? Or the one who had a tan line on his ring finger?"

Haven negotiated the exit ramp and stopped at a light before holding up her hand. "I'm sorry about those dates, but I promise this will be different."

"How can you guarantee that?"

Haven's smile faded, and Darcy braced herself for a lecture. "Darce, you really need to keep an open mind. It's time for you to start dating again, okay? Derek insists this guy is great."

Darcy sighed. She knew Darcy's longtime boyfriend, Derek, was a good guy. After Jace died, he and Haven brought her meals, listened while she cried, checked on her daily, drove her to appointments, and literally held her up at the funeral. Even months later, when other friends had gone back to their normal lives, Haven and Derek continued to be Darcy's emotional support. She was thankful that Haven had such a wonderful man in her life. Hopefully she would have a relationship like theirs someday.

"Fine," Darcy grumbled. "I'll go on the blind date."

"Yay! We're going to have so much fun. I love double dates. I just know it will be a blast."

Darcy's eyes narrowed as she looked over at her best friend. "He'd better not have a wife and family."

Haven shook her head and turned onto Main Street in Flowering Grove. "He doesn't. Derek said this guy is single and has been for a while."

Darcy took in the stores lining Main Street and smiled. "I love this little town."

"Me too. Derek loved growing up here."

The sign for Barton Automotive came into view, and Haven steered into the lot in front of a one-story cinderblock building with six garage bays and a glass front boasting the business's name and logo.

Darcy saw her Lexus parked in front of the building, and it seemed to glisten in the sunlight. "Looks like my car got a much-needed bath." She gathered up her laptop bag and purse, noting the time on Haven's dashboard. "It's after six now. I feel awful for making him stay late for me."

"From as nice as you've made him sound, I doubt he minds. After all, he said he'd wait."

They crossed the parking lot to the entrance. When Darcy pulled open the front door, a bell rang and the sweet smell of rubber hit her. She took in displays of tires that led to a long counter. Carter sat behind it, flipping through a magazine.

When he smiled, Darcy couldn't help but notice how handsome he was with his chiseled cheekbones, angular jaw, and those dark-brown eyes.

Haven made an appreciative noise under her breath.

*You got that right.* She did her best to ignore her thoughts as they approached him.

Just then a large, gray tabby cat came bounding toward them while singing a chorus of meows. Darcy crouched to pet the cat's head. The feline responded with a loud purr that reminded her of a car engine.

"That's Smoky," Carter announced. "He's our unofficial shop manager and mascot."

"Hi there, Smoky." Darcy began rubbing his ear, and the cat lifted his head higher while closing his eyes.

Haven bent down and stroked his back. "It's a shame he's not

friendly,” she quipped.

Suddenly bored with the affection, Smoky took off behind a tower of tires.

Darcy moved to the counter. “I’m so sorry I’m late.”

“Honestly, it’s not a big deal. My only plans were to watch reality TV.”

“You watch reality TV?” Haven’s expression held a mixture of shock and fascination.

“Not really.” His lips twitched. “That was a joke.”

“Oh!” Haven laughed.

Darcy grinned as she set her laptop bag on the floor and then touched Haven’s arm. “Carter Donovan, this is Haven Morrisette.”

“Thank you for not leaving my best friend stranded today,” Haven said.

“It was no problem at all.” Carter turned his attention to Darcy. “How’d your presentation go?”

A ribbon of warmth unfurled deep inside of Darcy as she took in the sincerity in Carter’s eyes. “It went great, and my boss and the board members were really impressed. Thanks for asking.” She pulled her wallet from her purse and retrieved her credit card. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your help today.”

He handed her an invoice. “I’m just glad I could get it fixed for you.”

Darcy perused it and then handed him her card. “My car looks clean. Did you wash it?”

“I just took it through the car wash down at the gas station while I had it out on a test drive.”

“I didn’t see a charge for that on the bill.”

He shook his head. “It’s on the house.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Darcy spotted her best friend grinning, and she ignored her. “Thank you, Carter.” When he set her



receipts and card in front of her, she signed one receipt and handed it to him. "I'll recommend this place to all of my friends."

"We appreciate your business. Call or text me if you have any trouble."

"I will." She stuck her card and receipt in her purse and then shouldered up her laptop bag.

He handed her the key fob. "Be safe going home."

"You too." She mentally kicked herself for not thinking of something better to say as she walked with Haven toward the door.

Haven bumped Darcy's shoulder as they crossed the parking lot. "You should totally text him. Maybe you can disconnect your battery and then say, 'Come and rescue me again, Carter!'"

"Shh!" Darcy spun toward the door, hoping he hadn't overheard her friend. Thankfully, he was nowhere in sight. "He's probably married."

Haven's pink lips lifted in a wicked grin. "I'm sure his wife enjoys him if he is."

"Stop it," Darcy hissed. Then she pulled Haven in for a hug. "But thanks again for the ride."

"You know I'd help you anytime, and you would do the same for me." Haven's expression became serious. "I'm so glad your kidney numbers are great. I worry about you."

"Thank you for worrying about me, but I promise I'm fine. I'm always careful to keep up with medications and appointments. My goal is to do what I'm supposed to so I stay healthy. I'll see you soon, Haven."

"Yes, you will." Her best friend strutted toward her SUV.

Darcy unlocked her car and set her bag and purse on the passenger seat. She glanced up as Carter stepped outside and locked the shop door. He waved, and she waved back before climbing into her car.

As she nosed her car toward the parking lot exit, she wondered if she'd ever have a good reason to see Carter Donovan again.

\* \* \*

AN APPETIZING WHIFF OF SPICES FILLED CARTER'S SENSES AS HE STEPPED into Shauna's kitchen later that evening.

Still dressed in her pink Disney princess scrubs, Shauna delivered a platter of taco shells to the table while Gage brought over a tray containing ground beef and all the fixings.

"Oh, you made my favorite," Carter said while scrubbing his hands at the sink.

Shauna grinned at him. "Anything for my favorite baby brother."

Although they shared the same dark eyes, he'd always thought his sister resembled their mother with her dark-brown hair, button nose, and tall and slender stature. From all accounts, he'd been told he looked like their father with his light-brown hair and height, but he didn't like to think about that. He didn't want to be anything like their absent dad.

Carter brought three glasses of soda to the table and sank down into his usual seat across from Shauna. He was proud of his sister, who had put herself through school to live out her dream of becoming a pediatric registered nurse. "How was work?"

Shauna took a sip of her drink. "It was busy. You know it's the start of allergy season, so we saw patients all day long." She held her finger up. "Oh, we did have one interesting case."

"Do tell," Gage said as he picked up his glass of Coke.

"A little boy decided to eat a ball bearing."

Gage grunted, and Carter lifted his eyebrows.

"What did Dr. Moore say to do for him?" Carter asked.

"She said it'll pass on its own."

Carter laughed.

Gage grimaced before turning his attention to Carter. “How’d it go after I left? And did your damsel in distress pick up her car?”

“I worked on that Hyundai.” Carter added salsa, shredded cheese, and sour cream to his taco. “And, yes, she got her car.”

Shauna held up her left hand, her small diamond ring glittering in the kitchen light. “Whoa now. Damsel in distress? You’re not going to sneak that one past me. I want details.”

Carter explained about Darcy and the car.

Shauna’s eye widened. “Oh my goodness! I completely forgot you had a checkup today. How did it go?”

Carter swallowed a bit of taco and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. “Fine.”

“Your numbers are good?” Shauna’s eyes scrutinized him, looking for any signs of a lie.

“Yes, Nurse Shauna,” he insisted. “My numbers are great. Dr. Brenner doesn’t want to see me for another six months.”

“Wonderful!” Shauna reached across the table to pat her brother’s hand. “Now—back to this damsel in distress. Was she pretty?”

Carter sighed and took another bite of taco.

“Do you think she liked you?” His sister leaned forward as if Carter were one of her girlfriends sharing juicy secrets.

Carter shrugged. “She was friendly, and we had a nice chat on the way to her office.”

“You should ask her out.”

Carter looked to Gage for help, but his brother-in-law kept his eyes focused on his plate while he scooped refried beans with his spoon.

“Don’t look at Gage.” Shauna wagged a finger at him. “You know I’m right. If you liked her, then you should ask her out.” She tilted her head. “Did you get her number?”

Gage finally looked up. “Of course he did. He had to send her

the estimate.”

“Thanks, man,” Carter grouched.

Gage shared a winning smile. “No problem, brother.”

“Text her, Carter.” Shauna’s expression became serious, and he felt his shoulders stiffening in preparation for another one of her lectures. “I know Gabby hurt you, but that was three years ago. You’re well now, and it’s time you put yourself out there.”

His lips flattened into a straight line in response to his ex-girlfriend’s name.

*Yeah, no.*

Darcy was cute and seemed nice, but they were from different worlds. He’d only end up in the same situation as he had with Gabby: nursing a broken heart.

“You have to take chances.”

Gage nodded. “She’s right.”

Carter did not agree, but sometimes caution was the better part of valor when his sister was set on something, and he didn’t need another pep talk about how much he had to offer a girlfriend. “I don’t want to be creepy by misusing her phone number.”

“There’s a car show on Main Street coming up,” Gage said.

“When?” Carter jumped on the change in subject and took another bite of his scrumptious taco.

“Next Saturday night. First car show of the year,” Gage said.

Carter relaxed as their conversation moved on to upcoming events and mutual friends.

When they finished eating, Carter offered to do the dishes. He carried the plates to the counter and began rinsing them off before filling the dishwasher.

As he worked, he peered out the window above the sink toward the detached garage where he kept his toolboxes, along with his grandfather’s pride and joy. Carter had dreamed of rebuilding the

Road Runner's engine and driving it to local car shows, but his kidney disease had derailed all of those plans.

His thoughts turned to Darcy and their conversation from the morning. He smiled, recalling how she'd said that orange was the best color for his car. He found himself wondering if Darcy ever attended car shows with her father. Would they come to Flowering Grove together in his classic truck? And if so, would Carter be lucky enough to run into them and spend the evening talking to them?

As if struck by lightning, he felt a jolt of excitement at the thought and laughed out loud at himself. Why was he bothering thinking about a beautiful young woman like Darcy? She would probably never think about him again. She had a successful corporate job, and he was just a mechanic.

Carter finished filling the dishwasher and started it before wiping down the table. The hum of the dishwasher filled the kitchen, and while he worked, he imagined finding a place of his own—a small house with a garage. That was all he needed. If only he could find a way to pay off that consolidation loan, then he could start living his life for real.

But it wasn't only about living his own life. He also wanted to get out of his sister's way. He hated taking up so much space day in, day out. Shauna and Gage had been married for six years, and Carter knew she had dreamed of starting a family. Carter didn't want to be underfoot or in the way of those precious plans.

He had hoped to be on his own before he turned thirty, but his thirtieth birthday was looming only two months away. That would be impossible unless he won the lottery, but considering he didn't even play it—

“Carter?”

He tossed the dishcloth into the sink and pivoted toward his sister. She stood in the doorway clad in a pair of jeans and a faded

Trisha Yearwood concert t-shirt.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“You know I only want what’s best for you, right?”

“You’ve been like my mom since I was ten, Shauna. Why would I doubt that?”

She leaned on the back of a kitchen chair. “Whenever I mention that you should start dating, you clam up. You know Gabby was the one with the problem, not you.”

He busied himself with straightening the salt and pepper shakers.

“Carter, it hurts my heart to see you so lonely. You should really think about texting the woman you met today.”

He swept his hand over his mouth while choosing his words. “Darcy drives a late-model Lexus, a very nice car, and she mentioned that her parents were retired and own a beach house. *And* her dad has a brand-new Corvette Stingray *and* a Porsche SUV. Her father bought a very nice classic Dodge truck, which probably him cost more than this house to restore. She was dressed in what looked like a designer suit and expensive heels. She also was carrying one of those high-end designer purses, the kind you and your friends go nuts over, when I dropped her off at her job at one of the big banks in Uptown.” He folded his arms over his chest. “Darcy could do a lot better than someone like me.”

“You’re wrong.” His sister shook her head as her face clouded with determination. “You’re thoughtful, kind, generous, and giving. And you’re handsome.”

He snorted. “Whatever.”

“Seriously, Carter. My friends used to always tell me how hot you were, and I’d tell them to stop talking about my baby brother that way since it made me very uncomfortable.”

“I appreciate the compliments, Shauna, but I don’t think my

path will ever cross Darcy's again."

"You never know, and if it does, she would be blessed to have you in her life. You just need to start believing that." Shauna tapped his arm and then disappeared into the family room.

Carter stared at the doorway and wondered if Shauna was right. Should he take a chance with a woman as beautiful and successful as Darcy Larsen?

He pulled out his phone, opened his text conversation with Darcy, and poised his thumbs over the keys. Then he shook his head. He was wasting his time. He had so many strikes against him—his terrible financial situation, his dependence on his family. Most of all, his precarious health. While his numbers were good now, they might take a nosedive in the future. What woman would want to be saddled with that? Gabrielle sure hadn't.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Dan Davis Photography*

AMY CLIPSTON IS AN AWARD-WINNING BESTSELLING AUTHOR AND HAS BEEN writing for as long as she can remember. She's sold more than one million books, and her fiction writing "career" began in elementary school when she and a close friend wrote and shared silly stories. She has a degree in communications from Virginia Wesleyan University and is a member of the Authors Guild, American Christian Fiction Writers, and Romance Writers of America. Amy works full-time for the City of Charlotte, NC, and lives in North Carolina with her husband, two sons, mother, and four spoiled rotten cats.

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