



# Every Good & Perfect Gift

by Sharon K. Souza

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## One

Gabby, I want a baby.”

I choked on my soda, grabbed the tissue DeeDee offered as I coughed up the liquid I’d inhaled, then looked to see if she was as serious as she sounded. She was.

“I want a baby,” she said again, looking for all the world as if she’d uttered nothing more than, “Look at that, a hangnail.”

I sat across from my best friend, DeeDee McAllister-Kent, at D’Angelo’s, where we’ve had lunch every Tuesday since returning from college and marrying the men of our dreams, and that would soon be twenty years.

“We said we’d never have kids. You and Jonathan, and Sonny and me. We said that.”

“I know.” She dabbed at her mouth with a baby pink napkin, which up until that moment I had always considered mauve.

“You said this was not the kind of world to bring children into.”

“I know.”

“You said the world is fraught with too many dangers, temporal and spiritual. Those were your words. I remember.”

“I know. I know everything I said. But now I want a child.” Her eyes were wide and unflinching. “You should have thought of this a long time ago, Dee. For heaven’s sake, you’re nearly forty.”

Her eyes narrowed, but she managed not to frown. She was engaged in her own little war against wrinkles. “Thirty-eight and a third,” she said with an indignant sniff. “And that’s why.”

“Oh, now there’s a good reason to have a baby. Am I supposed to see logic in that?” This was a midlife crisis at its best, assuming women had midlife crises. “What did Jonathan say?” I raised an eyebrow and waited.

She straightened the flawless tablecloth with both hands. “I wanted to tell you first.”

“Run it by me, you mean.”

“But you know what he’ll say.”

“Yes. ‘Anything you want, Dee.’ That’s what he’ll say.” I crossed my arms and looked beyond her. “You don’t deserve him.”

“Of course I don’t.”

Out of the corner of my eye I caught that taunting smile, the one that always disarmed me. But I was determined not to surrender my edge. DeeDee McAllister had been my best friend since the summer before sixth grade, and this was only the third time ever that I’d stood up to her. I’d forgotten how exhilarating it could be.

It wasn’t that she was domineering, exactly. She was just, well, in charge. Of everything. Take my name, for instance. Gabby is not what I was christened, but since the day she careened into my life, nearly annihilating me with her brand-new Sting-Ray bike, that’s what I’ve been called by everyone except my mother. She calls me Angel baby. Actually, she sings it. Angel baby, my Angel baby.

I hate to admit it, but I can see DeeDee’s point. I would never tell her that, though, and hand deliver one more thing for her to be cocky about. As if she needed it. Not in this life. And about the bike? I know Sting-Rays were for boys, but they were cool, really cool, so naturally DeeDee had to have one. With a playing card in the spokes and a banana seat. The bike was a gift from the father who had just disentangled himself from her life. A consolation prize, I suppose.

She was new to the neighborhood, new to northern California, I learned, having moved from Orange County to our little town of Lodi in the San Joaquin Valley, best known for its cherries and tokay grapes. In the past decade we’d lost many of our orchards and most of our tokays to make room for the thousands of acres of zinfandel, chardonnay, and petite sirah that have a much more lucrative market.

Anyway, I was riding my own new bicycle on the street in front of my house when DeeDee came hurtling around the corner on her Sting-Ray, heading straight for me. We locked our brakes, losing a good deal of tire tread in the process, and came to a halt with inches to spare. I was shaken to the core, on the verge of hyperventilation as I thought about how close I'd just come to mangled bicycle and body parts. DeeDee wasn't the least bit fazed. In fact, she was laughing.

"Hi," she said, balancing herself on one bare foot. I had to lower my kickstand to keep from falling. "Nice bike."

I had certainly thought so up to that point. I'd gotten it—the exact one I'd asked for—on my eleventh birthday four months before, but suddenly I felt really uncool with my rainbow-tassled handlebar grips flapping in the wind. "Thanks," I meant to say, still trying to catch my breath, but only a puff of air came out.

She seemed unaware, more likely indifferent, to the fact that she'd shortened my life by a decade. "What's your name?"

"Angel Whitaker," I said, without the usual piety I used when informing a stranger of my hallowed name.

"Angel?" Her voice dripped with disbelief. "For real?"

For real? What did she mean, for real? Everyone had always loved my name.

"Oh, hey." She thumped her forehead. "I bet you were adopted, huh?"

"No," I said, in two defensive syllables. "Why would you think that?"

She shrugged. "It sounds like a name you'd give a kid you thought you'd never have. But, hey, don't worry, I'll call you Mike."

"Mike?" I felt my celestial ego come crashing down to earth. The word dropped off my tongue like liver.

"You know, like the angel."

"There's an angel named Mike?" I'd never heard *that* in Sunday school.

"He has a sword and everything."

"A sword?" I watched as she made a piercing jab with an outstretched arm. "You mean *Michael*, the *archangel*?"

"That's what I said. Mike." She gave me a look as if I'd left my brain on top of my dresser before leaving the house. "Okay, okay. We'll go with Gabriel, if you insist. He's an angel too."

*If I insist?*

“And since you’re obviously into the whole gender thing, we’ll call you Gabriella. Gabby for short.”

“Gabby.” Was she kidding?

“Look, it’s either that or Mike. But I am *not* calling you Angel. Got it?”

I stared with my mouth agape, wondering how God would deal with such impiety, then rolled my bicycle backward one giant step. If lightning struck, I wanted to be out of range of the ricochet. I didn’t realize it at the moment, but from that day forward, that step backward would become the story of my life. Because there I stood at one of the most pivotal crossroads of my young existence, and I didn’t have the wits to recognize my new identity or the adventure I was about to begin.

What I did recognize in that moment was that I had two choices. I could ask her name, as the manners my mother tried to teach me dictated, or I could get on my bike and ride away as fast as my wobbling legs would take me. Since they were still weak from my near-death experience, I abandoned my preferred choice.

“What’s your name?”

She lifted the bill of her Los Angeles Dodgers baseball cap and glared. “Doris Day McAllister,” she said. “But if you ever call me anything but DeeDee, I’ll feed your tongue to my Doberman.” I desperately hoped she was kidding. “You live around here?”

I motioned to the house behind us. It was a two-story colonial with a camphor tree in the front yard that had a crook of a branch where I loved to sit and read and think about the books I might write someday. There was a huge old walnut tree with a tire swing in one corner of the backyard too, but at eleven I was much too old for that.

“Nice,” she said. “Got a pool?”

I nodded. “Do you?”

“Nope. Wanna swim?”

“You mean at my house?”

She gave me that look again as she pushed up the bill of her cap. “We can’t very well swim at mine.”

“I just meant—” What could I say? My parents won’t let me befriend a heathen? That’s how much I knew. Their arms were open to any and all, lost or otherwise, just like the Lord they served. I, on the other hand, was a little more cautious, having not yet embraced the message of the Great Commission, even though I had been the first to memorize it in my third grade Sunday school class.

DeeDee turned her cap so the white L.A. stitching faced three o’clock. “I suppose you have to ask your mom?”

“She’d say yes.”

“Cool. I’ll get my suit.”

She did, and from that moment on we were inseparable, connected soul to soul—with DeeDee’s soul having preeminence, of course.

Until that day I fully expected to be the most popular girl in Mr. Stevens’ sixth grade class at Reese Elementary School, based on my popularity in Mrs. Shuckle’s fifth grade class. I had also expected to be Queen Bee in the sixth grade Sunday school class at Faith Assembly, the church my father pastored. I had so looked forward to sixth grade Sunday school, which I would advance to in the fall. It was co-ed. Finally. And Bobby Shaw, the head deacon’s son, would be in that class too. With me being the pastor’s daughter and he being the head deacon’s son, it was expected among our peers that we would gravitate toward one another. That’s how things worked at Faith Assembly. And if there was a boy at our church I wanted to gravitate toward, it was Bobby Shaw.

But I made the mistake of inviting DeeDee McAllister to church the first Sunday after we met. I knew from that day on I’d have to settle for second most popular, in school and in church, because Bobby Shaw, along with every other eleven-year-old boy at Faith Assembly, couldn’t take his eyes off DeeDee, and we weren’t even in co-ed Sunday school yet. But it was worth it to have DeeDee McAllister as my best friend for the rest of our natural—if you could call them that—lives.

It was more than fate that brought us together on that memorable summer day. DeeDee could have plowed into any number of eleven-year-olds in my neighborhood and ended up as someone else’s best friend, and who knows what might have become of her then? But it was destined to be me because DeeDee’s spiritual life was about to take a major turn.

She would never have uttered the truth to any other soul on earth, but her heart had been shattered by her father's defection, as she called it, as thoroughly as if a fine china cup residing within her chest had been whacked with a Los Angeles Dodgers baseball bat. For some unfathomable reason, God allowed me to be the one to introduce her to a different kind of Father, one who knew how to put every shattered piece back in place, with only the faintest scar to show it had ever been broken.

She'd been ripe for the plucking, and with the prompting of my mother, who saw it so clearly, and the plain and simple preaching of my father, she was plucked the very next Sunday as effortlessly as the swan dive she made into my swimming pool that long-ago day. Things were usually just that easy for DeeDee.

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The eleven-year-old in a Dodgers cap faded before my eyes. "I hope it's a boy," I said.

The thirty-eight-and-a-third-year-old smiled a mischievous smile, one that wrinkled her perfect little freckled nose, then shook her head. "It'll be a girl," she said.

Knowing DeeDee, I didn't doubt it for a moment.

DeeDee and I left our cars in the parking lot of Northern Exposures, the gallery she'd opened in a coveted piece of real estate in the heart of town soon after Jonathan and Sonny made the cover of *Fortune* magazine when WordWorks, their software company, became a leader in the industry. Granted, the heart of Lodi consisted of a mere six blocks on two streets, but they were the most sought after pieces of commercial real estate in our community. DeeDee opened her doors Tuesday through Saturday from nine a.m. to one p.m., the prime time for shoppers and lookers. She was selective but kind when it came to the artisans she chose to consign, but all had to be from northern California. No exceptions. The cutoff line did, however, move farther south every year.

It was a pleasure to see the talent that proliferated in the communities that made up our little part of the world, particularly towns in the foothills of the Gold Country—towns like Sutter Creek and Jackson. Artists seemed to thrive at that elevation. Besides oils and charcoals and watercolors, DeeDee's shop displayed sculptures and carvings and pottery, some of the most unique works you could imagine.

She and I made our way on foot down School Street, looking in shop windows. It was part of our Tuesday routine. Fall fashions were already on display and it was just the middle of summer.

“April is the perfect month to have a baby.” She patted her fifty-sit-ups-a-day tummy. “I won’t have to be *out* of shape this summer, and I’ll be *in* shape by next.”

“That’s only nine months away. You’d have to get pregnant”—I stopped and counted on my fingers—“in the next two weeks.”

“Seventeen days,” she said.

“Oh, *well*, then.” I gave an exaggerated shrug.

“You don’t think I can?” She cocked her head as if to say, *just watch me*, and I surrendered.

“I guess I’d better learn to knit.”

“Crocheted blankets are much prettier,” she called over her shoulder as she led me into, of all places, Lacey’s Maternity Wear. We had made a sport on our Tuesday strolls of sniggering at women as they waddled in and out of Lacey’s in their various trimesters of pregnancy, without a cupful of compassion between us.

“I thought you’d never be caught dead in a shop like this.”

“Hush.” She stopped in front of a mannequin whose midriff bulged beneath a bright pink form-fitting Spandex top. She looked long and hard at the bulge, and I was sure she would change her mind about pregnancy. But then she said, “Eighteen pounds, twenty at the most.”

I gasped. “For the baby?”

“No, silly! For me. And I’ll use plenty of that aloe cream we get at Dillard’s. I can’t see me with stretch marks.” It was, of course, unthinkable.

“What do you suppose this is for?” I held up an item that looked like a wide elastic strap with Velcro on both ends.

“It keeps your belly button from bulging.” She sounded every inch the expert.

I looked at her sideways. “For real?”

“Don’t you remember Nina Simmons? She had to have been, I don’t know, eleven months pregnant when we saw her the summer of our fifteenth reunion. Her belly looked like an over-inflated balloon with the tied end protruding beneath her maternity smock.”

My mouth dropped open. “That was her belly button?”

She laughed at my shock, snorting as a young salesgirl approached.

“Hey there,” she said, greeting us with an expectant smile. She was all teeth, the handiwork of an overpriced orthodontist if I were making a bet, and was, of course, as unpregnant as DeeDee or me. “Can I help you find something?” She had rings on both thumbs and several of her fingers and had a row of silver loops, descending in size, climbing up her left ear.

*Filling in for her mom* was my initial thought, she seemed so out of place. I shook my head as if to dismiss her. “We’re just browsing.”

DeeDee set the elastic thingy on the display table. “Actually, I need a few things.”

Her eyes dropped to DeeDee’s midsection. “You mean ... for you?” The words came falteringly, as if she couldn’t believe this ancient woman standing before her was in the family way.

“Well, certainly.”

She arched a pierced brow. “Anything, you know, in particular?”

DeeDee pointed a long, tapered finger in the direction of the mannequin with the Spandex. “Something that won’t make me look like that.”

The clerk looked in the direction of DeeDee’s aim, then turned back to us. “We don’t exactly do smocks anymore.”

DeeDee’s lips became a thin line. “There must be something in between.”

The girl shook her head. “When are you, you know, expecting?”

“Actually, I’m expecting to be expecting,” DeeDee said.

The eyebrow ring went up again. “Really?” She looked around as if searching for a hidden camera. “Maybe you should just, you know, keep looking.” She gave us a sweet but dismissive smile, then went off to whisper with a coworker who was arranging maternity bras in the lingerie section of the little shop. The brassiere cups were large enough to hold the twin moons of Mars. Nothing DeeDee or I had on our chests would ever fill them.

“Thank you,” I called as we stepped outside, the laughter already bubbling out of me. “Maternity lingerie?”

DeeDee snickered too. “Wow. Who’d have thought?”

We resumed our walk down School Street. DeeDee reached into her purse and brought out a pair of designer sunglasses, then slipped them into place to keep from squinting in the bright summer sunlight. “About dinner. We’ll make a nice chicken salad or something light. It’s much too hot to cook.” She glanced at her watch. “Is seven okay with you?”



Seven? Tonight? “Did I forget something?”

She stopped and gave me The Look. “You don’t expect me to tell Jonathan by myself, do you?”

“Oh, now wait a minute.” I held up a hand to stop her. “Dee, this is your little project. You’re on your own with this one. Besides, best friends or not, Sonny would never go for me getting involved in something so utterly private.”

“Well, I don’t expect you to tell him. Honestly, Gab, I don’t know what you’re thinking sometimes.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head, setting her honey blonde tresses in motion. “We’ll just bring up the subject casually, and one thing will lead to another. You know I can’t do this by myself.”

“Dee! Babies have never been a casual subject with us.”

“There’s a first time for everything. This will give you an opportunity to use that creativity of yours. Think of it as a plot for the novel you keep saying you’ll write. It’ll be such fun.”

“I don’t think I can.” I honestly meant it.

She only smiled and led me toward the market. “Shall we have cantaloupe or strawberries with the salad?”

I sighed and accepted my defeat. “Strawberries. They’re Jonathan’s favorite. But let’s get them from the stand across from the old hospital. You know they’re the best.”

She tucked her arm around mine and patted my hand. “See how I need you?”

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Sonny and I arrived at six forty-five. I headed right for the kitchen—a place in which DeeDee was not much at home—ready to slice strawberries or something, but, amazingly, everything was done. Sonny joined Jonathan in front of the tube for the start of the Dodgers/Mets game. DeeDee was the only southern California native in the bunch, but, true to form, she had turned the rest of us into Los Angeles Dodgers fans.

The guys were having a great time, and they were so, I don’t know, unsuspecting, that I almost felt ashamed of our little scheme, but DeeDee glowed with such expectancy I couldn’t let her down. So, once dinner was over, the conspiracy began in earnest with coffee and crepes suzette with strawberries in front of the big-screen television in their living room.

The game was in the fourth inning. Jonathan found the remote in the pocket of his recliner and engaged the mute button. “What’s the occasion?” He filled his mouth with a bite of the crepe, never averting his eyes from the screen.

“Oh man!” Sonny cried as the Dodgers’ catcher was thrown out attempting to steal second base. They were trailing the Mets by two runs.

“Who sent him to second? Everyone knows he can’t steal.” Jonathan took another bite and washed it down with coffee. “Mmm. The last time I got crepes suzette it cost me a trip to Paris.”

DeeDee closed her eyes and smiled. “And what a trip it was. We really should go again.”

Jonathan dropped his fork with a clang onto his dessert plate.

DeeDee forced a laugh. “I’m kidding, sweetheart; don’t be so nervous. I know you don’t have time to get away, what with the new software coming out. While some of us live a life tinged with ennui,” she said, bringing her wrist to her forehead with dramatic flair, “you and Sonny live the life of the American entrepreneur—never a dull moment.”

He seemed a tiny bit relieved, but I don’t think he enjoyed the rest of his crepe nearly so much as he might have.

After an adequate pause, DeeDee said, “You’ll never guess who’s having a baby.” She threw the question into the air, supposedly for anyone to catch, but the guys weren’t playing ball.

“Do tell,” I said, taking up my cue.

She narrowed her eyes at me as a sign to behave. “Bonnie Singer. You remember, from our seventh grade Home Ec class.”

“Bonnie Singer! No kidding! I haven’t seen her since, gosh, I couldn’t tell you when.” Considering she didn’t exist. “Is this her first?”

DeeDee nodded. “Isn’t that precious?”

Precious? I forced a smile, feeling like we were reading from a really bad script.

“You were in seventh grade with her?” Jonathan’s eyes were fixed on the television. “And she’s having her first child? She has to be nearly forty.”

“Thirty-eight and a—”

“I’m glad it’s her and not you.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Sonny offered his coffee mug for a toast.

“A lot of women are putting off motherhood until later.”

“I’ll have to admit,” Jonathan said, “there was a time I hoped you’d change your mind about having a family, but you made it clear from the start, no kids!” He sliced his hand through the air for emphasis.

“I didn’t put it quite like that.”

He shrugged. “However you put it, that’s what you meant.”

DeeDee held her dessert plate in one hand, her fork in the other, her crepe untouched. “You should have said something.”

“I went into marriage with my eyes wide open, sweetheart. You were honest about how you felt, and I respected that. Looking back, I see it was the right choice for us.”

“Right choice?”

“You always said—”

“I *know* what I said.” DeeDee toyed with a strawberry stuck on a tine of her fork. “I might have been hasty in my decision.”

Jonathan laughed, and Sonny laughed too, but the laughter wasn’t high-spirited or jovial. No, it was laughter that said, *How did we ever get on this conversation?* It soon dissolved into nervous chuckles as Jonathan looked from Sonny to me to DeeDee. He was beginning to catch on.

Sonny was too. “Boy, I hate to call it a night, but—”

“It’s only eight fifteen,” our hostess said.

“Gee, is that all?” Sonny adjusted his glasses and looked at his watch again. “Must be fast.”

With a glance, DeeDee passed me the ball, which I nearly fumbled. “Well ...” I faltered right off the bat. “Did you know women over forty are becoming first-time mothers at an alarming rate? No, I mean *increasing*! The rate is *increasing*, not alarming.”

“That depends on who you ask,” Sonny murmured.

“You’ve got that right.” Jonathan wasn’t watching the game anymore.

Throwing caution to the wind, DeeDee actually frowned. This wasn’t going well at all.

Jonathan moved out of his chair, sat down next to DeeDee, and put his arm around her. “Now, honey, I just read something about this, or maybe I saw it on *Dateline*. Anyway, it’s one of those phases of life women your age go through.”

I winced as soon as the words left his mouth. Women your age? He’d actually said that? To DeeDee McAllister-Kent?

“Your biological clock is winding down, and you’re beginning to feel a twinge of maternal instinct as you see your chances at motherhood waning.” He just didn’t know when to quit. “I admit, I never would have expected it from you, but trust me, it will pass.” He placed great emphasis on the last three words. “Why, I bet Gabby here is going through the exact same thing, aren’t you, Gab?”

Sonny shot me a terrified look. “Are you?”

All eyes were on me.

“Well, *Gab*, are you?” DeeDee raised an eyebrow and waited.

This was so unfair.

“I didn’t mean to put you on the spot,” Jonathan said, and I began to breathe again.

Sonny stood in earnest and reached for my hand. “We really do have to go. Thanks for dinner, Dee. It was great. See you tomorrow, Jon.”

I gave DeeDee an apologetic half smile. “Call me in the morning?”

“First thing,” she said.

I had no doubt she would.