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A Mother's Gift

Written by Debbie Macomber

Published by MIRA Books

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Debbie Macomber

A Mother's Gift



Chapter One

"Danny, hurry up and eat your cereal," Dori Robertson pleaded as she rushed from the bathroom to the bedroom. Quickly pulling on a tweed skirt and a sweater, she slipped her feet into black leather pumps and went back into the kitchen.

"Aren't you going to eat, Mom?"

"No time." As fast as her fingers would cooperate, Dori spread peanut butter and jelly across two pieces of bread for a sandwich, then opened the refrigerator and took out an orange. She stuffed both in a brown paper sack with a cartoon cat on the front. Lifting the lid of the cookie jar, she dug around and came up with only a handful of crumbs. Graham crackers would have to do.

"How come we're always so rushed in the mornings?" eleven-year-old Danny wanted to know.

Dori laughed. There'd been a time in her life when everything had fit into place, but not anymore. "Because your mother has trouble getting out of bed."

"Were you always late when Dad was still alive?"

Turning, Dori leaned against the kitchen counter and crossed her arms. "No. Your father used to bring me a cup of coffee in bed." Brad had had his own special way of waking her with coffee and kisses. But now Brad was gone and, except for their son, she faced the world alone. Still, the rushed mornings were easier to accept than the long lonely nights.

"Want me to bring you coffee? I could," Danny offered. "I've seen you make it lots of times."

A surge of love for her son constricted the muscles of her throat, and Dori tried to swallow. Every day Danny grew more like his father. Tenderly she looked down at his sparkling blue eyes and the freckles that danced across his nose. Brad's eyes had been exactly that shade of bottomless blue, though the freckles were all hers. Pinching her lips together, she turned back to the counter, picked up a cup and took her first sip of lukewarm coffee. "That's very thoughtful of you," she said.

"Then I can?"

"Sure. It might help." Anything would be better than this insane rush every morning. "Now brush your teeth and get your coat."

When Danny moved down the hallway, Dori carried his empty cereal bowl to the sink. The morning paper was open, and she folded it and set it aside. Danny used to pore over the sports section, but recently he'd been reading the want ads. He hadn't asked for anything in particular lately, and she couldn't imagine what he found so fascinating in the classified section. Kids! At his age, she remembered, her only interest in the paper had been the comics and Dear Abby. Come to think of it, she didn't read much more than that now.

Danny joined her in the kitchen and together they went out the door and into the garage. While Dori backed the Dodge onto the narrow driveway, Danny stood by and waited to pull the garage door shut.

"One of these days," she grumbled as her son climbed into the front seat, "I'm going to get an automatic garage-door opener."

Danny gave her a curious look. "Why? You've got me."

A smile worked its way across Dori's face. "Why, indeed?"

Several minutes followed while Danny said nothing. That was unusual, and twice Dori's eyes sought his. Danny's expression was troubled, but she didn't pry, knowing her son would speak when he was ready.

"Mom, I've been wanting to ask you something," he began haltingly, then paused.

"What?" Dori said, thinking the Seattle traffic got worse every morning. Or maybe it wasn't that the traffic got heavier, just that she got later.

"I've been thinking."

"Did it hurt?" That was an old joke of theirs, but Danny didn't have an immediate comeback the way he usually did.

"Hey, kid, this is serious, isn't it?"

Danny shrugged one shoulder in an offhand manner. "Well, I know you loved Dad and everything, but I think it's time you found me another dad."

Dori slammed on her brakes. The car came to a screeching halt at the red light as she turned to her son, eyes wide with shock. "Time I did *what?*" she asked incredulously.

"It's been five years, Mom. Dad wouldn't have wanted you to mope for the rest of your life. Next year I'm going to junior high and a kid needs a dad at that age."

Dori opened her mouth, searching for words of wisdom that didn't come.

"I can make coffee in the morning, but that's not enough. You need a husband. And I need a dad."

"This is all rather…sudden, isn't it?" Her voice was little more than a husky murmur.

"No, I've been thinking about it for a long time." Danny swiveled his head and pointed behind him. "Hey, Mom, you just missed the school."

"Darn." She flipped on her turn signal and moved into the right lane with only a fleeting glance in her rearview mirror.

"Mom…watch out!" Danny shrieked just as her rear bumper barely missed the front end of an expensive foreign car. Dori swerved out of its path, narrowly avoiding a collision.

The driver of the other car blared his horn angrily and followed her when she pulled into a side street that would lead her back to the grade school.

"The guy you almost hit is following you, Mom, and, boy, does he look mad."

"Great." Dori's fingers tightened around the steering wheel. This day was going from bad to worse.

Still looking behind him, Danny continued his commentary. "Now he's writing down your license plate number."

"Wonderful. What does he plan to do? Make a citizen's arrest?"

"He can do that?" Danny returned his attention to his flustered mother.

"Yup, and he looks like the type who would." Judging by the hard, uncompromising face that briefly met hers in the rearview mirror… The deep-set dark eyes had narrowed, and

the thick, equally dark hair was styled away from his face, revealing the harsh contours of his craggy features. He wasn't what could be called handsome, but his masculinity was blatant and forceful. "A man's man" was the term that came to mind.

"I recognize him," Danny said thoughtfully. "At least I think I do."

"Who is he?" Dori took a right-hand turn and eased to a stop in front of Cascade View Elementary. The man in the BMW pulled to a stop directly behind her and got out of his car.

"He looks familiar," Danny commented a second time, his wide brow furrowed in concentration, "but I don't know from where."

Squaring her shoulders, Dori reluctantly opened the car door and climbed out. She brushed a thick swatch of auburn hair off her shoulder as she walked back to meet the tall formidable man waiting for her. His impeccable suit and expensive leather shoes made him all the more intimidating. His eyes tracked her movements. They were interesting and arresting eyes in a face that looked capable of forging an empire—or slicing her to ribbons—with one arch of a brow. Dori was determined not to let him unnerve her. Although she indicated with her hand that Danny should stay by the car, he seemed to think she'd need him for protection. She didn't have time to argue.

"I don't appreciate being followed." She decided taking the offensive was her best defense.

"And I don't appreciate being driven off the road."

"I apologize for that, but you were in my blind spot and when I went to change lanes—"

"You didn't even look."

"I most certainly did," Dori said, her voice gaining volume. For the first time she noticed a large brown stain on his suit jacket. The beginnings of a smile edged up the corners of her mouth.

"Just what do you find so amusing?" he demanded harshly.

Dori cast her eyes to the pavement. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

"The most polite thing you can do is stay off the road."

Hands on her hips, Dori advanced one step. "In case you weren't aware of it, there's a law in Washington state against drinking any beverage while driving. You can't blame me if you spilled your coffee. You shouldn't have had it in the car in the first place." She prayed the righteous indignation in her tone would be enough to assure him she knew what she was talking about.

"You nearly caused an accident." He, too, advanced a step and a tremor ran through her at the stark anger in his eyes.

"I've already apologized for that," Dori said, knowing that if this confrontation continued she'd come out the loser. Discretion was the better part of valor—at least that was what her father always claimed, and for once Dori was willing to follow his advice. "If it'll smooth your ruffled feathers, I'll pay to have your suit cleaned."

The school bell rang, and Danny hurried back to the car for his books and his lunch. "I've got to go, Mom."

Dori was digging around the bottom of her purse for a business card. "Okay, have a good day, hon." She hoped one of them would; hers certainly didn't look promising.

"Don't forget I've got soccer practice after school," he reminded her, walking backward toward the steps of the school.

"I won't."

"And, Mom?"

"Yes, Danny?" she said irritably, the tight rein on her patience slackening.

"Do you promise to think about what I said?"

Dori glanced at him blankly.

"You know, about getting me another dad?"

Dori could feel the hot color creep up her neck and invade her face. Diverting her gaze from the unpleasant man standing beside her, she expelled her breath in a low groan. "I'll think about it."

A boyish grin brightened Danny's face as he turned and ran toward his classmates.

Searching for a business card helped lessen some of Dori's acute embarrassment. Another man might have said something to ease her chagrin, but not this one. "I'm sure I've got a card in here someplace."

"Forget it," the man said gruffly.

"No," she argued. "I'm responsible, so I'll pay." Unable to find the card, after all, Dori wrote her name and address on the back of her grocery list. "Here," she said, handing him the slip of paper.

He examined it briefly and stuck it in his suit pocket. "Thank you, Mrs. Robertson."

"It was my fault."

"I believe you've already admitted as much." Nothing seemed likely to crack this man's granite facade.

"I'll be waiting for the bill, Mr…?"

"Parker," he said grudgingly. "Gavin Parker." He retreated toward his car.

The name was strangely familiar to Dori, but she couldn't recall where she'd heard it. Odd. Danny had recognized him, too.

"Mr. Parker," Dori called out.

"Yes?" Irritably he turned to face her again.

"Excuse me, but I wonder if I could have another look at the paper I gave you."

His mouth tightened into an impatient line as he removed the slip from his pocket and handed it back.

She scanned the grocery list, hoping to commit it to memory. "Thanks. I just wanted to make sure I remembered everything."

He looked at her coldly, and by the time Dori was in her car and heading for the insurance office, she'd forgotten every item. Just the memory of his eyes caused a chill to race up her spine. His mouth had been interesting, though. Not that she usually noticed men's mouths. But his had been firm with that chiseled effect so many women liked. There was a hard-muscled grace to him— Dori reined in her thoughts. How ridiculous she was being. She refused to spend one extra minute on that unpleasant character.

The employee parking lot was full when she arrived and she was forced to look for a place on the street, which was nearly impossible at this hour of the morning. Luckily, she found a narrow space three blocks from the insurance company where she was employed as an underwriter for homeowner policies.

By the time she got to her desk, she was irritated, exhausted and ten minutes late.

"You're late." Sandy Champoux announced as Dori rolled back her chair.

"I hadn't noticed," Dori returned sarcastically, dropping her purse in a bottom drawer and pretending an all-consuming interest in the file on her desk as her boss, Mr. Sandstrom, sauntered past.

"You always seem to make it to your desk on time," Sandy said, ignoring the sarcasm. "What happened this morning?"

"You mean other than a near-accident with a nasty man in an expensive suit or Danny telling me I should find him a new father?"

"He's right, you know."

Purposely being obtuse, Dori batted her thick lashes at her friend and smiled coyly. "Who's right? Danny or the man in the suit?"

"Danny! You *should* think about getting married again. It's time you joined the world of the living."

"Ah—" Dori pointed her index finger at the ceiling "—you misunderstand the problem. Danny wants a father the same way he wanted a new bike. He's not interested in a husband for me…." She paused and bit her bottom lip as a thought flashed into her mind. "That's it." Her eyes lit up.

"What's it?" Sandy demanded.

"The bike."

"You're going to bribe your son so he'll forget his need for a father?" Sandy was giving Dori the look she usually reserved for people showing off pictures of their children.

"No, Sandy." Dori groaned, slowly shaking her head. "You don't want to know."

Frowning, Sandy reached for a new policy from her basket. "If you say so."

Despite its troubled beginnings, the day passed quickly and without further incident. Dori was prepared to speak to her son when he stomped into the house at five-thirty, his soccer shoes looped around his neck.

"Hi, Mom, what's there to eat?"

"Dinner. Soon."

"But I'm starved *now*."

"Good, set the table." Dori waited until Danny had washed his hands and placed two dinner plates on the round oak table before she spoke. "I've been thinking about what you said this morning."

"Did it hurt?" Danny asked and gave her a roguish grin, creating twin dimples in his freckled face. "What did you decide?"

"Well…" Dori paid an inordinate amount of attention to the cube steak she was frying, then said, "I'll admit I wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea. At least not right away."

"And now?" Danny stood at the table, watching her keenly.

She paused, gathering her resolve. "The more I thought about it," she said at last, "the more I realized you may have a valid point."

"Then we can start looking?" His voice vibrated with eagerness. "I've had my eye on lots of neat guys. There's Jason—he helps the coach with the soccer team. He'd be real good, but I don't think he's old enough. Is nineteen too young?"

This was worse than Dori had thought. "Not so fast," she said, stalling for time. "We need to go about this methodically."

"Oh, great," Danny mumbled. He heaved a disgusted sigh. "I know what that means."

"It means we'll wait until the dinner dishes are done and make up a list, just like we did when we got your bike."

Danny brightened. "Hey, that's a great idea."

Dori wasn't as sure of that as Danny was. He bolted down his dinner, and the minute the dishes were washed and put away, he produced a large writing tablet.

"You ready?" he asked, pausing to chew on the tip of the eraser.

"Sure."

"First we should get someone as old as you."

"At least thirty-three," Dori agreed, pulling out a chair.

"And tall, because Dad was tall and it'd look funny if we got a short guy. I don't want to end up being taller than my new dad."

"That makes sense." Again Dori was impressed by how seriously her son was taking this.

"He should like sports 'cause I like sports. You try, Mom, but I'd like someone who can throw a football better than you."

That was one duty Dori would relinquish gladly. "I think that's a good idea."

"And it'd be neat if he knew karate."

"Why not?" Dori agreed amicably.

Danny's pencil moved furiously over the paper as he added this latest requirement to the growing list. "And most important—" the blues eyes grew sober "—my new dad should love you."

"That would be nice," Dori murmured in a quavering voice. Brad had loved her. So much that for a while she'd thought she might die without him. Even after all these years, the capacity to love another man with such intensity seemed beyond her.

"Now what?" Danny looked up at her expectantly.

"Now," she said, taking a giant breath. "Now that we know what we're looking for, all we need to do is wait for the right man to come along."

Danny seemed doubtful. "That could take a long time."

"Not with both of us looking." She took Danny's list and attached it to the refrigerator with a large strawberry magnet. "Isn't it time for your bath, young man?"

Danny shoved the pad and pencil into the kitchen drawer and headed down the hall that led to his bedroom.

Dori retired to the living room, took out her knitting and turned on the television. Maybe Danny was right. There had to be more to life than work, cooking and knitting. It wasn't that she hadn't tried to date; she had. Sandy had fixed her up with a friend of a friend at the beginning of summer. The evening had turned out to be a disaster, and Dori had refused her friend's attempts to match her up again. Besides, there hadn't been any reason to date. She was fairly content and suffered only occasionally from bouts of loneliness, usually late at night. Danny filled her life. He loved sports and she loved watching him play.

But Danny did need a father figure, especially now as he reached adolescence. Dori didn't see how any other man could replace Brad. Danny had been too young to remember much about his father, since Brad had died when Danny was just six. Her own memories of that age were vague and distant, and she wondered how much she would have remembered of her father if she'd been in Danny's place.

The house was unusually quiet. Danny was normally in and out of the bath so quickly that she often suspected he didn't get completely wet.

Just as she was about to investigate, Danny ran into the room, clutching a handful of sports cards. "Mom, that was Gavin Parker you nearly ran into today!"

Dori glanced up from her knitting. "I know."

"Mom—" his voice was filled with awe "—why didn't you *say* something? I want his autograph."

"His autograph?" Suddenly things were beginning to add up. "Why would you want that?"

"Why?" Danny gasped. "He's only the greatest athlete in the whole world."

Dori decided to ignore her son's exaggeration. Gavin Parker might be a talented sportsman of some kind, but he was also rude and arrogant. He was one man she instinctively wanted to avoid.

"Here, look." Danny shoved a football card under her nose.

Indeed, the name was the same, but the features were younger, smoother, more subdued somehow. The dark piercing eyes in the picture merely hinted at the capacity for aggression. Gavin Parker's appearance had altered over the years and the changes in him were due to more than age. The photo that stared back at her was of an intense young man, full of enthusiasm and energy for life. The man she'd met today was angry and bitter, disillusioned. Of course, the circumstances of their meeting hadn't exactly been conducive to a friendly conversation.

The back of the card listed his height, weight and position—quarterback. According to the information, Gavin had played for the Raiders, leading his team to two Super Bowl championships. In the year he'd retired, Gavin had received the Most Valuable Player award.

"How did you know who he was?" Dori asked in a tone of surprise. "It says here that he quit playing football six years ago."

"Mom, Gavin Parker was one of the greatest players to ever throw a football. *Everyone* knows about him. Besides, he does the commentary for the Vikings' games on Sundays."

Every Sunday afternoon, Dori and Danny joined her parents for dinner. Vaguely, Dori recalled the football games that had captured the attention of the two men in her life:

her father and her son. It was a sport that had never interested her very much.

"Can we ask him for his autograph?" Danny asked hopefully.

"Danny," Dori said with a sigh, yanking hard on the wool, "I sincerely doubt we'll ever see Mr. Parker again."

His shoulders sagged with defeat. "Darn. Now the guys won't believe me when I tell 'em my mom nearly ran Gavin Parker off the road."

"You may find this hard to believe," Dori admitted softly, "but I'd rather not have the world know about our little mishap this morning, anyway."

"Aw, Mom."

"Haven't you got homework?"

"Aw, Mom."

She felt her lips curve and her resolve not to smile vanished. "The room seems to have developed an echo."

Head drooping, Danny returned to his bedroom.

The following morning, in the early dawn light, Dori was awakened by a loud knock on her bedroom door. Struggling to lift herself up on one elbow, she brushed the wild array of springy auburn curls from her face.

"Yes?" The one word was all she could manage.

Already dressed in jeans, Danny entered the bedroom, a steaming cup of coffee in his hand.

"Morning, Mom."

"My eyes are deceiving me," she mumbled, leaning back against the pillow. "I thought I saw an angel bearing me tidings of joy and a cup of java."

"Nope," Danny said with a smile. "This is coffee."

"Bless you, my child."

"Mom?"

"Hmm?" Still fighting off the urge to bury her face in the pillow and sleep, Dori forced her eyes open.

"Do…I mean, do you always look like this when you wake up?"

Dori blinked self-consciously and again smoothed the unruly mass of curls. "Why?"

Clearly uneasy, Danny shuffled his feet and stared at the top of his tennis shoes. "If someone saw you with your hair sticking out like that, I might never get a new dad."

"I'll try to do better," she grumbled.

"Thanks." Appeased, Danny left, giving Dori the opportunity to pout in private. Muttering to herself, she threw back the sheets and climbed out of bed. A glance in the bathroom mirror confirmed what Danny had said. And her hair wasn't the only thing that needed improvement.

By the time Dori arrived in the kitchen, she'd managed to transform herself from the Wicked Witch of the West to something presentably feminine.

One look at his mother, and Danny beamed her a radiant smile of approval. "You're really pretty now."

"Thanks." She refilled her cup with coffee and tried to hide her grimace at its bitterness. Later, with the utmost tact and diplomacy, she'd show Danny exactly how much ground coffee to use. Any more of this brew, she thought, would straighten her naturally curly hair.

"Do you think we might see Gavin Parker on the way to school?" her son asked brightly as they pulled out of the driveway.

"I doubt it," Dori answered. "In fact, I doubt Mr. Parker lives in Seattle. He was probably just visiting."

"Darn. Do you really think so?"

"Well, keep your eyes peeled. You never know."

For the remainder of the ride to the school, Danny was subdued, studying the traffic. Dori was grateful he didn't catch a glimpse of Gavin Parker. If he had, she wasn't sure what Danny would've expected her to do. Running him off the road again was out of the question. She felt lucky to have come away unscathed after yesterday's encounter.

Danny didn't mention Gavin again that day or the next, and Dori was convinced she'd heard the last about "the world's greatest athlete." But the following Monday a cleaning bill arrived in the mail.

The envelope was typed, and fleetingly Dori wondered if Mr. Gavin Parker had instructed his secretary to mail the bill. In addition to the receipt from a downtown dry cleaner, Gavin had sent back her grocery list. Hot color blossomed in Dori's cheeks as she turned it over and saw the bold handwriting. At the bottom of her list Gavin had added "Driving lessons." Dori crumpled the paper and tossed it into the garbage.

The sooner she ended her dealings with this rude man the better. She'd just finished writing the check when Danny wandered into the room.

"What can I have for a snack?" he asked as he looked over her shoulder.

"An apple."

"Can I have some cookies, too?"

"All right, as long as you promise to eat a decent dinner." Not that there was much worry. Danny had developed a perpetual appetite of late. The refrigerator door opened behind her.

"Hey, Mom, what's this?"

Dori glanced over her shoulder at the yellow nylon bag Danny was holding up, pinched between forefinger and thumb. "Tulip bulbs. For heaven's sake, don't eat one."

He ignored her attempt at humor. "How long are they going to be in here?"

Dori flushed slightly, recalling that she'd bought them on special six weeks earlier. "I'll plant them soon," she said.

Loudly crunching a crisp red apple, Danny pulled up the chair across from her. "What are you doing?"

"Paying a bill." Guiltily she looked down at her checkbook, deciding to leave well enough alone and not mention *whose* bill she was paying. Another one of her discretion-and-valor decisions.

Saturday morning, Dori came out of her bedroom, sleepily tying the sash of her housecoat. The sound of cartoons blaring from the living room assured her that Danny was already up. An empty cereal bowl on the table was further testimony. The coffee was made, and with a soft smile she poured a cup and diluted it with milk.

"You're up." Danny came into the kitchen and grinned approvingly when he saw she'd combed her hair.

"Don't get hooked on those cartoons," she warned. "I want us to get some yard work done today."

Danny's protest was immediate. "I've got a soccer game."

"Not until eleven-thirty."

"Aw, Mom, I hate yard work."

"So do I," she said, although planting the tulip bulbs was a matter of pride to her. Otherwise they'd sit in the vegetable bin for another year.

Twenty minutes later, dressed in washed-out jeans and a faded sweatshirt that had seen better days, Dori got the hand trowel from the garage.

The day was glorious. The sun had broken through and splashed the earth with golden light. The weather was unsea-

sonably warm for October; the last days of an Indian summer graced Seattle.

Danny was content to rake the leaves that had fallen from the giant maple tree onto the sidewalk, and Dori was surprised to hear herself humming. The scarf that held her hair away from her face slipped down and she pushed it back with one hand, smearing mud on her cheek.

She was muttering in annoyance when Danny went into peals of excitement.

"You came, you came!" Danny cried enthusiastically.

Who came? Stripping off her gloves, Dori rose to find Gavin Parker staring at her from across the yard.

"This had better be important," he said as he advanced toward her.

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Published in Great Britain 2011
MIRA Books, Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road,
Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR

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ISBN 978 0 7783 0440 1

55-0411

Printed in the UK
by CPI Mackays, Chatham, ME5 8TD