

DANIELLE STEEL

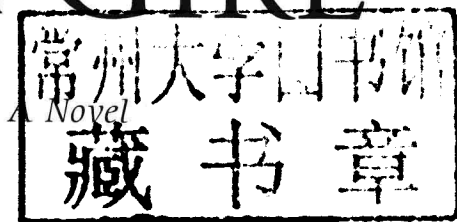


BIG GIRL

A NOVEL

DANIELLE
STEEL

BIG GIRL



Delacorte Press



New York

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BIG GIRL

By Danielle Steel

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As always, to my very wonderful
children, Trevor, Todd, Beatie,
Nick, Sam, Victoria, Vanessa,
Maxx, and Zara,
who are always there for me,
and give me so much joy,
caring, love, support, kindness,
and just plain old terrific times.
In good times and bad, we are
there for each other.
Thank you for being such
huge blessings in my life.

With all my love,
Mommy/d.s.

BIG GIRL

Chapter 1

Jim Dawson was handsome from the day he was born. He was an only child, tall for his age, had a perfect physique, and was an exceptional athlete as he grew older, and the hub of his parents' world. They were both in their forties when he was born, and he was a blessing and surprise, after years of trying to have a child. They had given up hope, and then their perfect baby boy appeared. His mother looked at him adoringly as she held him in her arms. His father loved to play ball with him. He was the star of his Little League team, and as he grew older, the girls swooned over him in school. He had dark hair and velvety brown eyes and a pronounced cleft in his chin, like a movie star. He was captain of the football team in college, and no one was surprised when he dated the homecoming queen, a pretty girl whose family had moved to southern California from Atlanta in freshman year. She was petite and slim with hair and eyes as dark as his, and skin like Snow White. She was gentle and soft-spoken and in awe of him. They got engaged the night of graduation and married on Christmas the same year.

Jim had a job in an ad agency by then, and Christine spent the six

months after graduation preparing for their wedding. She had gotten her bachelor's degree, but her only real interest during her four years in college was finding a husband and getting married. And they were a dazzling pair with their flawless all-American good looks. They were a perfect complement to each other and reminded all who saw them of a couple on the cover of a magazine.

Christine had wanted to model after they were married, but Jim wouldn't hear of it. He had a good job, and made a good salary, and he didn't want his wife to work. What would people think of him if she did? That he wasn't able to provide for her? He wanted her at home and waiting for him every night, which was what she did. And people who knew them said they were the best-looking couple they had ever seen.

There was never any question about who wore the pants in the family. Jim made the rules, and Christine was comfortable that way. Her own mother had died when she was very young. And Jim's mother, whom Christine called Mother Dawson, sang her son's praises constantly. And Christine readily revered him just as his parents had. He was a good provider, a loving husband, fun to be with, a perfect athlete, and he rose steadily in importance in the ad agency. He was friendly and charming with people, as long as they admired him and didn't criticize him. But most people had no reason to. Jim was a personable young man, he made friends easily, and he put his wife on a pedestal and took good care of her. All he expected of her was to do as he said, worship and adore him, and let him run the show. Her father had had similar ideas, and she'd been perfectly brought up to be the devoted wife of a man like him. Their life was everything she had hoped for, and more. There were no unpleasant surprises with Jim, no strange behavior, no disappointments. He pro-

tected her and took care of her, and provided handsomely. And their relationship worked perfectly for both of them. Each knew their role in the relationship and played by the rules. He was the Adored, and she the Adorer.

They were in no hurry to have children for the first few years, and might have waited longer if people hadn't begun to comment about why they didn't have them. It felt like criticism to Jim, or like the suggestion that maybe they couldn't have them, although they both enjoyed their independence without children to tie them down. Jim took her on weekend trips frequently, they went on fun vacations, and he took her out to dinner once or twice a week, although Christine was a good cook and had learned to make his favorite meals. Neither of them was suffering from the lack of children, although they agreed that they wanted them eventually. But five years after they got married, even Jim's parents were beginning to worry that they might be having the same difficulties that had delayed them from having a family for nearly twenty years. Jim assured them that there were no problems, they were just having fun and were in no hurry to have children. They were twenty-seven years old, and enjoying feeling free and unencumbered.

But the constant inquiries finally got to him, and he told Christine that it was time to start a family. And as she always did, Christine agreed. Whatever Jim thought best seemed right to her too. Christine got pregnant immediately, which was faster than they expected. It was easier than they both had planned, they had assumed it might take six months or a year. And despite her mother-in-law's concerns, the pregnancy was easy for Christine.

When she went into labor, Jim drove her to the hospital and opted not to be in the delivery room when the baby came, which seemed

like the right plan to Christine too. She didn't want him to do anything that would make him ill at ease. He was hoping for a boy, which was her fondest wish too, in order to please him. It didn't even occur to either of them that the baby might be a girl, and they had confidently opted not to find out the baby's sex. As virile as he was, Jim expected his firstborn to be a son, and Christine decorated the nursery in blue. Both of them were absolutely sure it was a boy.

The baby was in a breech position and had to be delivered by cesarean section, so Christine was still asleep from the anesthetic in the recovery room, when Jim heard the news. And when he saw the baby the nurse presented to him at the nursery window, for a minute, or longer, he thought the baby he was seeing had been switched. The baby had a perfectly round face with chubby cheeks that bore no resemblance to either of them, with a halo of white blond hair. And more shocking than her features or coloring, it was a girl. This was not the baby they had expected, and as she stared at him through the nursery window, all he could think of was that the infant looked like the elderly British monarch Queen Victoria. He said as much to one of the nurses, and she scolded him and said that his daughter was beautiful. Being unfamiliar with the grimaces of newborns, he disagreed. She looked like someone else's child to him, and surely nothing like him or Christine, and he was filled with disappointment as he sat glumly in the waiting room, until they summoned him to Christine. And as soon as she saw the look on his face, she knew that it was a girl and that, in her husband's eyes, she had failed.

"It's a girl?" she whispered, still woozy from the anesthetic, as he nodded speechlessly. How was he going to tell his friends that his son had turned out to be a girl? It was a major blow to his ego and image and something he could not control, which never sat well with him.

Jim liked to orchestrate everything, and Christine was always willing to play along.

"Yes, it's a girl," he finally mustered as a tear squeezed out the corner of Christine's eye. "She looks like Queen Victoria." And then he teased Christine a little. "I don't know who the father is, but she looks like she has blue eyes, and she's blond." No one on either side of their families was fair, except his own grandmother, which seemed like a stretch to him. But he didn't doubt Christine. This child was obviously some kind of throwback, in their combined gene pool, but she certainly didn't look like she was theirs. The nurses had been saying that she was very cute, but Jim wasn't convinced. And it was several hours before they brought her to Christine, who gazed at her in wonder as she held her and touched her little hands. She was tightly swaddled in a pink blanket. Christine had just been given a shot to keep her milk from coming in, since she had decided not to nurse. Jim didn't want her to, and she had no desire to either. She wanted to get her figure back as quickly as possible, since Jim had always liked her petite, lithe shape and didn't find her attractive while she was pregnant. She had been careful with her weight during the pregnancy. Like Jim, she found it hard to believe that this chubby white blond baby was theirs. She had long, straight sturdy legs like Jim's. But her features didn't look even remotely familiar to either of them. And Mother Dawson was quick to agree with Jim when she saw her, and said she looked like Jim's paternal grandmother, and said she hoped she didn't look like her later. She had been a round, heavyset woman for her entire life, who had been best known for her cooking and sewing skills and not her looks.

By the day after her birth, the shock of her being a female had worn off a little, although Jim's friends at the office had teased him

that he would have to try again for a son. And Christine was worried that he was angry at her about it, but he very sweetly reassured her that he was glad that she and the baby were healthy, and they'd make the best of it. The way he said it made Christine feel as though she had come in second best, and Mother Dawson endorsed that idea. It was no secret that Jim had wanted a son and not a daughter, almost as confirmation of his manhood and ability to father a son. And since it had never dawned on either of them that they might produce a daughter, they had no girls' names ready for the chubby blond baby that lay in Christine's arms.

He had been joking about her looking like Queen Victoria, but they both agreed that they liked the name, and Jim took it one step further, and suggested Regina as a middle name. Victoria Regina Dawson, for Queen Victoria. Victoria the Queen. The name seemed strangely apt as they looked at her, and Christine agreed. She wanted her husband to be happy with the choice of name at least, if not the sex. She still felt as though she had failed him by having a girl. But by the time they left the hospital five days later, he seemed to have forgiven her.

Victoria was an easy, happy baby who was good-natured and undemanding. She walked and talked early, and people always commented on what a sweet little girl she was. She remained very fair, and the white blond fuzz she'd had when she was born turned into a crown of blond ringlets. She had big blue eyes, and pale blond hair, and the creamy white complexion that went with it. Some people commented that she looked very English, and then Jim always commented that she'd been named for Queen Victoria, whom she looked like, and then laughed heartily. It became his own favorite joke about the baby, which he was more than willing to share, while Christine

tittered demurely. She loved her daughter, but the love of her life had always been her husband, and that hadn't changed. Unlike some women who became totally focused on their children, the central focus of her world was first Jim, and then the baby. Christine was the perfect companion for a narcissist of Jim's proportions. She only had eyes for him. And although he still wanted a son to complete him, and toss a ball with, they were in no hurry to have a second child. Victoria fit easily into their life and caused few disruptions, and they were both afraid that two children, particularly if close together, would be hard to manage, so they were content to have only Victoria for now. Mother Dawson rubbed salt in Jim's wounds by saying it was too bad they hadn't had a son, because then they wouldn't have had to consider having a second child, since only children were always brighter. And of course her son was an only child.

Victoria appeared to be extremely intelligent as she got older. She was chatty and amiable, and had nearly adult conversations with them by the time she was three. She said funny things, and was alert and interested in everything around her. Christine taught her to read when she was four. And when she was five, her father told her she had been named after a queen. Victoria would smile with delight every time he said it. She knew what queens looked like. They were beautiful and wore pretty dresses in all the fairy tales she read. And sometimes they even had magic powers. She knew she had been named after Queen Victoria, but she had no idea what the queen looked like. Her father always told her that she'd been named after the queen because she looked like her. She knew that she was supposed to look like her father's grandmother, but she had never seen a picture of her either, and she wondered if she had been a queen too.

Victoria was still round and chubby when she was six. She had

sturdy little legs, and she was often told that she was big for her age. She was in first grade by then, and taller than many of the children. And she was heavier than some of them too. People called her a “big girl,” which she always took as a compliment. And she was still in first grade when she was looking at a book with her mother one day, and saw the queen she had been named after. Her name was written clearly under her picture. Victoria Regina, just like Victoria’s own name.

The queen was holding a pug dog, who looked astonishingly like the monarch herself, and the photograph had been taken late in her life. Victoria sat staring at the page for a long time and didn’t say a word.

“Is that her?” she finally asked her mother, turning her huge blue eyes up to her face. Christine nodded with a smile. After all, it was just a joke. She looked like Jim’s grandmother and no one else.

“She was a very important queen in England a long time ago,” Christine explained.

“She’s not even wearing a pretty dress, she doesn’t have a crown, and her dog is ugly too.” Victoria looked devastated as she said it.

“She was very old by then,” Victoria’s mother said, trying to soften the moment. She could see that her daughter was upset, and it tugged at her heart. She knew he meant no harm, but Jim’s little joke had momentarily backfired, and Victoria looked stricken. She stared at the picture for ages, and two tears rolled slowly down her cheeks. Christine didn’t say a word as they turned the page, and she hoped that Victoria would forget the image she had seen. She never did. And her sense of how her father viewed her, like a queen, was never the same again.

Chapter 2

A year after Victoria saw the photograph of Queen Victoria, which forever changed her image of herself, her parents informed her that she had a baby brother or sister on the way. And Victoria was thrilled. Several of her friends at school had had siblings by then, she was one of the few who didn't, and she loved the idea of a baby to play with, like a real live doll. She was in second grade when they told her the news. And when she heard her parents talking about it late one night, when they thought she was asleep, she heard the frightening words that the new baby was an accident, and she wasn't sure what that meant. She was afraid that it had been injured somehow, and feared it might even be born without arms or legs, or maybe it would never walk when it got older. She didn't know how bad the accident had been, and she didn't want to ask. Her mother had cried about it, and her father sounded worried too. They both said that things were fine the way they were now, with just Victoria. She was an easy child who never bothered them and did as she was told. At seven years old, she gave them no problems, and her father said during the entire pregnancy that he hoped it would be a boy. Her