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The Gift

Danielle Steel

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DELL PUBLISHING

DANIELLE STEEL

THE GIFT

To the gifts in my life, my husband, John, and all of my children, and to the angels who have passed through my life, quickly or over time, and the blessings they've brought me. With all my love,

d.s.

Chapter One

Annie Whittaker loved everything about Christmas. She loved the weather, and the trees, brightly lit on everyone's front lawn, and the Santas outlined in lights on the roofs of people's houses. She loved the carols, and waiting for Santa Claus to come, going skating and drinking hot chocolate afterwards, and stringing popcorn with her mother and sitting wide-eyed afterwards looking at how beautiful their Christmas tree was, all lit up. Her mother just let her sit there in the glow of it, her five-year-old face filled with wonder.

Elizabeth Whittaker was forty-one when Annie was born and she came as a surprise. Elizabeth had long since given up the dream of having another baby. They had tried for years before, Tommy was ten by then, and they had finally made their peace with having only one child. Tommy was a great kid, and Liz and John had always felt lucky. He played football, and baseball with the Little League, and he was the star of the ice hockey team every winter. He was a good boy, and he did everything he was supposed to do, he did well in school, was loving to them, and still there was enough mischief in him to reassure them that he was normal. He was by no means the perfect child, but he was a good boy. He had blond hair like Liz, and sharp blue eyes like his father. He had a good sense of humor and a fine mind, and after the initial shock, he seemed to adjust to the idea of having a baby sister.

And for the past five and a half years, since she'd been born, he thought the sun rose and set on Annie. She was a

wispy little thing with a big grin, and a giggle that rang out in the house every time she and Tommy were together. She waited anxiously for him to come home from school every day, and then they sat eating cookies and drinking milk in the kitchen. Liz had changed to substitute teaching, instead of working full-time after Annie was born. She said she wanted to enjoy every minute of her last baby. And she had. They were together constantly.

Liz even found time to do volunteer work at the nursery school for two years, and now she helped with the art program at the kindergarten that Annie attended. They baked cookies and bread and biscuits together in the afternoons, or Liz read to her for hours as they sat together in the big cozy kitchen. Their lives were a warm place, where all four of them felt safe from the kinds of things that happened to other people. And John took good care of them. He ran the state's largest wholesale produce business, and he earned a decent living for all of them. He had done well early on, it had been his father and grandfather's business before him. They had a handsome house in the better part of town. They were by no means rich, but they were safe from the cold winds of change that touched farmers and people in businesses that were often adversely affected by trends and fashion. Everyone needed good food, and John Whittaker had always provided it for them. He was a warm, caring man, and he hoped that Tommy would come into the business one day too. But first, he wanted him to go to college. And Annie too, he wanted her to be just as smart and well educated as her mother. Annie wanted to be a teacher, just like her mom, but John dreamed of her being a doctor or a lawyer. For 1952, these were strong dreams, but John had already saved a handsome sum for Annie's education. He'd put Tommy's college money away several years before, so financially they were both well on their way toward college. He was a man who believed in dreams. He

always said there was nothing you couldn't do if you wanted it bad enough, and were willing to work hard enough to get it. And he had always been a willing worker. And Liz had always been a great help to him, but he was happy to let her stay home now. He loved coming home in the late afternoons, to find her cuddled up with Annie, or watch the two of them playing dolls in Annie's room. It warmed his heart just to see them. He was forty-nine years old and a happy man. He had a wonderful wife, and two terrific children.

"Where is everyone?" he called that afternoon as he came in, brushing the snow and ice off his hat and coat, and pushing the dog away, as she wagged her tail and slid around in the puddles he'd made on the floor around him. She was a big Irish setter they had named Bess, after the president's wife. Liz had tried to argue at first that it was a disrespect to Mrs. Truman, but the name seemed to suit her, and it had stuck, and no one seemed to remember how she'd gotten her name now.

"We're back here," Liz called out, and John walked into the living room to find them hanging gingerbread men on the tree. They had decorated them all afternoon, and Annie had made paper chains while the cookies were in the oven.

"Hi, Daddy, isn't it beautiful?"

"It is." He smiled down at her, and then lifted her into his arms with ease. He was a powerful man, with the Irish coloring of his forebears. He had black hair, even now, a year shy of fifty. And brilliant blue eyes, which he had bestowed on both of his children. And in spite of her blond hair, Liz's eyes were a soft brown, sometimes almost hazel. But Annie's hair was almost white it was so fair. And as she smiled into her father's eyes and rubbed her tiny nose playfully against his, she looked like an angel. He set her down gently next to him, and then reached up to kiss his wife, as an affectionate look passed between them.

“How was your day?” she asked warmly. They had been married for twenty-two years, and most of the time, when life's petty aggravations weren't nibbling at them, they seemed more in love than ever. They had married two years after Liz graduated from college. She'd already been a teacher by then, and it had taken seven years for Tommy to appear. They had almost given up hope and old Dr. Thompson had never really figured out why she either couldn't get, or stay, pregnant. She had had three miscarriages before Tommy was born, and it seemed like a miracle to them when he finally came. And even more so when Annie was born ten years later. They admitted easily that they were blessed, and the children gave them all the joy that they had hoped and expected.

“I got the oranges in from Florida today,” John said as he sat down and picked up his pipe. There was a fire in the fireplace, and the house smelled of gingerbread and popcorn. “I'll bring some home tomorrow.”

“I love oranges!” Annie clapped her hands, and then climbed on his lap, while Bess put both of her paws up on John's knees and tried to join them. John pushed the dog away gently, and Liz came down the ladder to kiss him again and offer him a glass of hot cider.

“Sounds too good to turn down.” He smiled, and then followed her into the kitchen a moment later, silently admiring her trim figure. He was holding Annie's hand, and it was only moments after when the front door slammed, and Tommy came in, with a pink nose and bright red cheeks, carrying his ice skates.

“Mmm ...smells good ... hi, Mom ... hi, Dad ...hey, squirt, what did you do today? Eat all of your mom's cookies?” He ruffled her hair and gave her a squeeze, getting her face wet with his own. It was freezing outside, and snowing harder every moment.

"I made the cookies with Mommy ...and I only ate four of them," she said meticulously as they laughed. She was so cute she was hard for anyone to resist, least of all her big brother, or her doting parents. But she wasn't spoiled. She was just well loved, and it showed in the ease with which she faced the world and met every challenge. She liked everyone, loved to laugh, loved playing games, loved running in the wind with her hair flying out behind her. She loved to play with Bess ...but better yet her older brother. She looked up at him adoringly now, taking in the well-worn ice skates. "Can we go skating tomorrow, Tommy?" There was a pond nearby, and he took her there often on Saturday mornings.

"If it stops snowing by then. If this keeps up, you won't even be able to find the pond," he said, munching on one of his mother's delicious cookies. They were mouthwatering, and they were all Tommy could think of, as his mother carefully took off her apron. She wore a neat blouse and a full gray skirt, and it always pleased John to notice that she still had the figure she'd had when he first met her in high school. She'd been a freshman when he was a senior, and for a long time it had embarrassed him to admit that he was in love with a girl so young, but eventually everyone had figured it out. They teased them at first, but after a while, everyone took them for granted. He'd gone to work for his father the following year, and she had spent another seven years finishing high school and college, and then two more working as a teacher. He had waited a long time for her, but he never doubted for a minute that it was worth it. Everything they had ever really wanted or cared about had come to them slowly, like their children. But all the good things in their lives had been worth the wait. They were happy now. They had everything they had always wanted.

"I've got a game tomorrow afternoon," Tommy mentioned casually as he gobbled up two more cookies.

"The day before Christmas Eve?" his mother asked, surprised. "You'd think people would have other things to do." They always went to his games, unless something really major happened to prevent it. John had played ice hockey too, and football. He had loved it too. Liz was a little less sure, she didn't want Tommy to get injured. A couple of the boys had lost teeth in ice hockey games over the years, but Tommy was careful, and pretty lucky. No broken bones, no major injuries, just a lot of sprains and bruises, which his father claimed were all part of the fun.

"He's a boy for heaven's sake, you can't wrap him up in cotton wool forever." But secretly she admitted to herself sometimes that she would have liked to. Her children were so precious to her, she never wanted anything bad to happen to them, or to John. She was a woman who cherished her blessings.

"Was today your last day of school before Christmas?" Annie asked him with interest, and he nodded with a grin. He had lots of plans for the holidays, many of which included a girl named Emily he'd had his eye on since Thanksgiving. She had just moved to Grinnell that year. Her mom was a nurse and her father was a doctor. They had moved from Chicago, and she was pretty cute. Cute enough for Tommy to ask her to several of his hockey games. But he had gone no further than that yet. He was going to ask her to go to the movies with him the following week, and maybe even do something with him on New Year's Eve, but he hadn't gotten up the courage yet to ask her.

Annie knew he liked Emily too. She had seen him staring at Emily one day when they had gone to the pond, and run into her. She was there skating with some of her friends and one of her sisters. Annie thought she was okay, but she couldn't see why Tommy was that crazy about her. She had long, shiny dark hair, and she was a pretty fair skater. But

she didn't say much to him, she just kept looking over at them, and then as they left, she made a big fuss over Annie.

"She just did that because she likes you," she explained matter-of-factly, as they walked home, with Tommy carrying Annie's ice skates.

"What makes you say that?" he asked, trying to sound cool, but managing to look both awkward and nervous.

"She kept looking at you goo-goo-eyed all the time when you were skating." Annie flung her long blond hair knowingly over her shoulder.

"What do you mean, 'goo-goo-eyed'?"

"You know what I mean. You know, she's crazy about you. That's why she was nice to me. She has a little sister too, and she's never that nice to her. I told you, she likes you."

"You know too much, Annie Whittaker. Aren't you supposed to be playing with dolls or something?" He tried to look unaffected by what she'd said, and then reminded himself of how dumb it was to worry about how he looked to his five-and-a-half-year-old sister.

"You really like her, don't you?" She was needling him then, and giggled as she asked him.

"Why don't you mind your own business?" He sounded sharp with her, which was rare, and Annie didn't pay any attention.

"I think her older sister is a lot cuter."

"I'll keep that in mind, in case I ever want to go out with a senior."

"What's wrong with seniors?" Annie looked baffled by the distinction.

"Nothing. Except that she's seventeen years old," he explained, and Annie nodded wisely.

"That's too old. I guess Emily is okay then."

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” she said seriously, as they reached home, and went inside to drink hot chocolate and get warm. In spite of her comments about the girls in his life, he really liked being with her. Annie always made him feel enormously loved, and extremely important. She worshiped him, and she made no bones about it. She adored him. And he loved her just as much.

She sat on his lap that night before she went to bed, and he read her her favorite stories. He read the shortest one to her twice, and then their mother took her off to bed, and he sat and chatted with his father. They talked about Eisenhower's election the month before, and the changes it might bring. And then they talked, as they always did, about the business. His father wanted him to get a degree in agriculture, with a minor in economics. They believed in basic, but important things, like family, and kids, and the sanctity of marriage, and honesty, and being helpful to their friends. They were much loved and respected in the community. And people always said about John Whittaker that he was a good husband, a fine man, and a fair employer.

Tommy went off with some of his friends that night. The weather was so bad he didn't even ask to borrow the car, he just walked to his closest friend, and then came home at eleven-thirty. They never had to worry about him. He'd sown one or two wild oats by fifteen, all of which consisted of two instances of drinking too much beer and throwing up in the car when his father brought him home. The Whittakers hadn't been pleased, but they hadn't gone crazy about it either. He was a good boy, and they knew that all kids did those things. John had done them too, and a few worse, especially while Liz had been away at college. She teased him about it sometimes, and he insisted that he had been a

model of virtuous behavior, to which she raised an eyebrow, and then usually kissed him.

They went to bed early that night too, and the next morning, as they looked out their windows, it looked like a Christmas card. Everything was white and beautiful, and by eight-thirty that morning Annie had Tommy outside with her, helping her build a snowman. She used Tommy's favorite hockey cap too, and he explained that he was going to have to "borrow" it that afternoon for his game, and Annie said she'd have to let him know if he could use it. He tossed her into the snow then, and they lay there, on their backs, waving their arms and legs, making "angels."

They all went to Tommy's game that afternoon, and even though his team lost, he was in good spirits afterwards. Emily had come to see him too, although she was surrounded by a group of friends, and claimed that they had wanted to come, and she had just "happened" to join them. She was wearing a plaid skirt and saddle shoes, and her long dark hair was in a ponytail down her back, and Annie said she was wearing makeup.

"How do you know?" He looked surprised and amused as the whole family left the skating rink at school and walked home together. Emily had already left with her gaggle of giggling girlfriends.

"I wear Mom's makeup sometimes," Annie said matter-of-factly, and both men grinned and looked down at the little elf walking beside them.

"Mom doesn't wear makeup," Tommy said just as firmly.

"Yes, she does. She wears powder and rouge, and sometimes she wears lipstick."

"She does?" Tommy looked surprised. His mother was nice-looking, he knew, but he never suspected that there was any artifice involved, or that she actually wore makeup.

"Sometimes she wears black stuff on her eyelashes too, but it makes you cry if you use it," Annie explained, and Liz laughed.

"It makes me cry too, that's why I never wear it."

They talked about the game then, and other things, and Tommy went out with his friends again, and a classmate of his came to baby-sit for Annie that night, so her parents could go to a Christmas party at a neighbor's house.

They were back home by ten o'clock, and in bed by midnight, and Annie was sound asleep in her bed when they came home. But she was up at dawn the next morning, and wildly excited about Christmas. It was Christmas Eve, and all she could think of was what she had asked Santa Claus for. She wanted a Madame Alexander doll desperately, and she wasn't at all sure she would get one. And she wanted a new sled too, and a bicycle, but she knew it would be better to get the bicycle in the spring, on her birthday.

There seemed to be a thousand things to do that day too, a myriad of preparations for Christmas. They were expecting some friends to visit the following afternoon, and her mother was doing some last-minute baking. And they'd be going to midnight mass that night. It was a ritual Annie loved, although she didn't really understand it. But she loved going to church with them, late at night, and being sandwiched between her parents in the warm church, dozing off, as she listened to the hymns and smelted the incense. There was a beautiful manger with all the animals surrounding Joseph and Mary. And at midnight, they put the baby in the manger, too. She loved looking for it before they left the church, and seeing baby Jesus there with his mother.

Just like you and me, huh Mom?" she asked, nestling close to Liz, as her mother bent down to kiss her.

"Just like us," Liz said gently, counting her blessings again. "I love you, Annie."

"I love you too," Annie whispered.

She went to the service with them that night, as she always did, and fell asleep as she sat comfortably between her parents. It was so cozy and pleasant there. The church was warm, and the music seemed to lull her to sleep. She didn't even wake up for the procession. But she checked for baby Jesus in the manger, as she always did, on the way out, and he was there. She smiled when she saw the little statue, and then looked up at her mother and squeezed her hand. Liz felt tears in her eyes as she looked at her. Annie was like a special gift to them, sent just to bring them joy and warmth and laughter.

It was after one in the morning when they got home that night, and Annie seemed more asleep than awake when they put her to bed. And by the time Tommy went in to kiss her, she was sound asleep and gently snoring. He thought she felt kind of hot, when he kissed her head, but he didn't think much of it. He didn't even bother to tell his mom. She looked so peaceful that he didn't think anything was wrong.

But she slept late on Christmas morning for the first time and she seemed a little dazed when she woke up. Liz had put out the plate of carrots and salt for the reindeer, and the cookies for Santa the night before because Annie had been too sleepy to do it. But Annie remembered to check to see what they'd eaten when she woke up. She was a little sleepier than usual, and she said she had a headache, but she didn't have a cold, and Liz thought maybe she was coming down with a mild case of influenza. It had been so bitter cold lately, and she might have gotten a chill playing in the snow with Tommy two days before. But by lunchtime she seemed fine. And she was elated over the Madame Alexander doll Santa had brought her, and the other toys, and the new sled. She went out with Tommy and played for an hour, and when she came in for hot chocolate that

afternoon her cheeks were bright red and she looked very healthy.

“So, Princess,” her father smiled happily at her, puffing on his pipe. Liz had given him a beautiful new one from Holland, and a hand-carved rack for all his old ones. “Was Santa Claus good to you?”

“The best.” She grinned. “My new dolly is so pretty, Daddy.” She smiled up at him as though she almost knew who had given it to her, but of course she didn't. They all worked hard to keep the myth going for her, although a few of her friends knew. But Liz insisted that Santa Claus comes to all good children, and even some not so good ones, in the hope that they'd get better. But there was no question as to which kind Annie was. She was the best, to them, and to everyone who knew her.

They had friends in that afternoon, three families who lived nearby and two of John's managers with their wives and children. The house was quickly filled with laughter and games. There were a few young people Tommy's age too, and he showed them his new fishing rod. He could hardly wait for the spring to use it.

It was a warm, enjoyable afternoon, and they had a quiet dinner that night, after everyone had gone. Liz had made turkey soup, and they ate leftovers from lunch, and some of the goodies people had brought them.

“I don't think I'll be able to eat again for a month,” John said, stretching back in his chair, as his wife smiled, and then noticed that Annie looked kind of pale and glassy-eyed, and there were two bright spots on her cheeks, which looked like the rouge she liked to play with.

“Have you been into my makeup again?” Liz asked with a mild look of concern mixed with amusement.

“No ... it went into the snow ...and then I ...” She seemed to be confused, and then looked up at Liz, surprised, as

though she wasn't sure herself what she had just said, and it scared her.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" Liz leaned over to gently touch her forehead, and it was blazing. She had seemed happy enough that afternoon, she had played with her new doll and her friends, and she seemed to be running through the living room or the kitchen every time Liz saw her. "Do you feel sick?"

"Sort of." Annie shrugged, and looked suddenly very little as she said it, and Liz pulled her onto her lap and held her. But just holding her there, she could tell that Annie was running a fever. She put a hand on her head again and thought about calling the doctor.

"I hate to bother him on Christmas night," Liz said pensively. And it was so bitter cold again. There was a storm coming in from the north, and they said it would be snowing again before morning.

"She'll be fine after a good night's sleep," John said calmly. He was less of a worrier than Liz by nature. "It's just too much excitement for one small person." They'd all been wound up for days, with seeing friends, and Tommy's game, and Christmas Eve, and all the preparations for Christmas. And Liz decided he was probably right. It was a lot for one little girl to handle. "How about riding to bed on Daddy's shoulders?" She liked the idea, but when he tried to lift her up, she called out sharply and said her neck hurt.

"What do you suppose that is?" Liz asked, as he came out of Annie's bedroom.

"Just a cold. Everyone at work's had one for weeks, and I'm sure all the kids have them at school. She'll be fine," he reassured his wife, with a pat on the shoulder. And she knew he was right, but she always worried about things like polio and tuberculosis. "She's fine," John said to Liz again,

knowing how inclined she was to be overly concerned. "I promise."

She went to kiss Annie herself then, and felt better when she saw her. Her eyes were bright, and although her head was hot, and she was still pale, she seemed completely coherent. She was probably just tired and overexcited. And he was right. She had a cold, or a little flu bug.

"You sleep tight, and if you feel sick, come and get us," Liz told her as she tucked her tightly into bed and kissed her. "I love you very, very much, sweetheart ...and thank you for the beautiful picture you made me and Daddy for Christmas." She had made John an ashtray too, for his pipe, and painted it bright green, which she said was his favorite color.

Annie seemed to fall asleep almost before Liz left the room. And after she finished the dishes, she went back and checked her. Annie was even hotter by then, and she was stirring and moaning in her sleep, but she didn't wake up when Liz touched her. It was ten o'clock, and Liz decided it was worthwhile just calling the doctor.

He was at home, and she explained that Annie had a fever. She didn't want to risk waking her up by taking it, but she had had a hundred and one when she went to bed, which wasn't dangerous. She mentioned the stiff neck, and he said that aches and pains weren't unusual with the flu. He agreed with John that she was probably just overtired and had caught a cold over the weekend.

"Bring her in tomorrow morning, Liz, if the fever's gone, or I'll come by to see her. Just give me a call when she wakes up. But she'll be fine. I've got a couple of dozen of those bad colds with fevers. They don't amount to much, but they're pretty miserable while they last. Keep her warm, the fever might even break before morning."