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# Big Girl

Danielle Steel

DANIELLE  
STEEL

BIG GIRL

*A Novel*



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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.



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For more information on Danielle Steel and her books, see her website at [www.daniellesteelbooks.co.uk](http://www.daniellesteelbooks.co.uk)

## *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 protected 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 mother seemed to want that too, but this time she decorated the nursery in neutral white instead of blue. She had learned that lesson once before, when Victoria took them by surprise and turned out to be a girl. Mother Dawson predicted that it would be a girl again this time, and Victoria hoped so too. Her parents had once again opted not to find out the sex for sure. Victoria's mother was*

afraid of a bad surprise, clinging to the hope, for as long as she could, that it might be a boy this time.

Victoria wasn't sure why, but her parents didn't seem as excited about the baby as she was. Her mother complained a lot about how big she was, and her father teased Victoria and said he hoped it wouldn't look like her. He never failed to remind her that she looked like his grandmother. There were few pictures of her, but those that Victoria had finally seen showed a large woman wearing an apron, with seemingly no waist, enormous hips, and a bulbous nose. She wasn't sure which was worse, looking like her paternal great-grandmother, or like the ugly queen whose photograph she had seen posing with her dog. And after seeing the photographs of her great-grandmother, she had become obsessed with the size of her own nose. It was small and round, and she thought it looked like an onion planted in the middle of her face. She hoped for its sake that the new baby hadn't inherited the same nose. But since the baby was an "accident," there seemed to be far more serious things to worry about than its nose. Her parents had never explained the accident to her, but she hadn't forgotten the conversation she'd overheard. It made Victoria all the more determined to dedicate herself to the new baby, and do whatever was needed to help with it. She hoped the damage from the accident it had experienced wasn't too great. Maybe it was just a broken arm, or a bump on the head.

Christine's C-section was planned this time, and Victoria's parents had explained to her that her mother would be in the hospital for a week, and she wouldn't be able to see her mother or the baby until they came home from the hospital. They said those were the rules, and she wondered if it was to give them time to fix whatever damage the baby had sustained in the mysterious event that no one seemed to want to discuss or explain.

The day the baby was born, her father came home at six o'clock when Victoria's grandmother was preparing dinner for her. They looked at him expectantly, and his disappointment was evident when he told them it was a girl. And then he smiled and said the baby was beautiful and looked just like him and Christine this time. He seemed enormously relieved, even though it hadn't been a boy. And he said they were calling her Grace, because she was so pretty. Grandmother Dawson smiled too then, proud of her ability to guess the baby's sex. She had been sure it was a girl. Jim said she had dark hair, big brown eyes like both of them, the same white skin as her mother, and perfectly formed tiny pink lips. He said she was so pretty they could have used her for an ad for babies. Her beauty made up for her not being a boy. He made no mention of any injury to the baby, from the accident that Victoria had been worried about for the past eight months, and she was relieved too. She hoped the baby was okay, and she sounded very cute.

They called her mother at the hospital the next day, and she sounded very tired. It made Victoria even more determined to do everything she could to help when they got home.

Grace was even prettier than they'd said when Victoria saw her for the first time. She was absolutely exquisite and perfectly formed. She looked like a baby in a picture book, or an ad, as her father had said. Grandmother Dawson clucked over her immediately, and took the bundle from Christine's arms as Jim helped her into a chair, and Victoria tried to get an even better look. She was aching to hold the baby, kiss her cheeks, coo over her, and touch her tiny toes. She wasn't jealous of her for an instant, only happy and proud.

"She's gorgeous, isn't she?" Jim said proudly to his mother, who instantly agreed. There was no mention made of his paternal grandmother this time, and no need to. Baby

Grace looked like a porcelain doll, and they all agreed that she was the prettiest baby they had ever seen. She looked nothing like her older sister who had big blue eyes and wheat-colored hair. It was hard to imagine that the two were even sisters, or that Victoria actually belonged in this family, with all of them so dark while she was so fair. And her pudgy body looked nothing like them either. No one compared this baby to Queen Victoria, or mentioned her round nose. She had the nose of a pixie or a cameo, just like Christine's. It was clear from the moment she was born that Grace was one of them, while Victoria appeared to have been dropped on their doorstep by someone else. Grace was perfect, and all Victoria felt was love as she looked at her with adoration in her grandmother's arms. She couldn't wait for them to set her down so she could pick her up herself. This long-awaited baby sister was hers. She had begun to love her long before she was born. And now she was here at last.

Jim couldn't resist teasing his older daughter, as he always did. He was that kind of guy, and loved making jokes at the expense of someone else. His friends thought he was very funny, and he had no qualms about who he made the butt of his jokes. He turned to Victoria with a wry grin, as she gazed lovingly at the baby.

"I guess you were our little tester cake," he said, ruffling her hair affectionately. "This time we got the recipe just right," he commented happily, as Grandmother Dawson explained that a tester cake was what you made to check the combination of ingredients and the heat of the oven. It never came out right the first time, she said, so you threw the tester cake away and tried again. It made Victoria suddenly terrified that because Grace had come out so perfectly, maybe they would throw her away. But no one said anything about it, as her mother, grandmother, and new baby sister went upstairs. Victoria followed them with

a look of awe. She stood at a discreet distance and watched everything they did. She wanted to learn how to do it all herself. She was sure her mother would let her, once her grandmother went home. She had asked before Grace came, and her mother said she would.

They changed the baby into a tiny pink nightgown, wrapped her in a blanket, and Christine gave her the bottle of formula they'd given her at the hospital. And then she burped her and laid her down in the bassinet. It was the first chance Victoria had gotten to take a good long look at the new arrival. She really was the most beautiful baby Victoria had ever seen, but even if she hadn't been, even if she had had their great-grandmother's nose, or looked like Queen Victoria too, she would have loved her anyway. She already did. Her beauty didn't matter to Victoria at all, only to her family.

While her mother and grandmother were talking, Victoria cautiously stuck her finger into the bassinet right into the baby's hand, and the baby looked up at her, and curled her tiny fingers around Victoria's finger. It was the most exciting moment of Victoria's life so far, and she instantly felt the bond between the two of them, and knew it would only get stronger and last forever. She made a silent vow to take care of her all her life and never let anyone hurt her or make her cry. She wanted baby Grace's life to be perfect, and was willing to do whatever she had to to ensure that. Grace closed her eyes then and went to sleep, as Victoria stood and watched her. She was so glad there had been no damage from the accident, and Grace was here at last.

She thought of what her father had said then about her being the tester cake, and wondered if it was true. Maybe they had only had her to make sure they got it right with Grace. And if that was true, they certainly had. She was the sweetest thing Victoria had ever seen, and her parents and

grandmother said so too. For one tiny instant, Victoria wished that someone else had been the tester cake, and they had felt about her the way they obviously did about Grace. She wished that she was a victory and not a failure of the recipe or the oven temperature. And whatever their intentions had been in having her first, she just hoped they never decided to throw her away. All she wanted now was to share the rest of her life with Grace, and be the best big sister in the world. And she was glad for the baby that she hadn't gotten their great-grandmother's nose too.

She went downstairs to have lunch with her parents and grandmother then, while the baby slept peacefully upstairs, having just been fed and changed. Her mother had told her that she would sleep a lot for the first few weeks. At lunch, her mother talked about getting her figure back as quickly as she could, and Jim poured champagne for the adults, and smiled at Victoria. There was always something faintly ironic about the way he looked at her, as though they shared a joke, or as though she was the joke. Victoria was never quite sure which it was, but she liked it when he smiled at her. And now she was happy to have Grace. She was the baby sister she had dreamed of all her life, someone to love, and who would love her just as much as she loved her.



## Chapter 3

*Victoria's mother taught her to do everything for the baby.* By the time Grace was three months old, Victoria could change a diaper, bathe her, dress her, play with her for hours, and feed her. The two were inseparable. And it gave Christine a much-needed break on busy days. Victoria helping her mother with the baby gave Christine time to play bridge with her friends, take golf lessons, and see her trainer four times a week. She had forgotten how much work babies were. And Victoria loved to help her. The moment she came home from school, she washed her hands, picked her sister up, and took care of whatever she needed. It was Victoria who won Grace's first smile, and it was obvious that the baby adored her, just as Victoria was crazy about Grace.

Grace remained a picture-perfect baby. By the time she was a year old, whenever Christine took the girls to the supermarket with her, someone stopped her. Living in Los Angeles, there were often movie scouts in ordinary places. They solicited Christine for movies, TV shows, commercials, print ads, and working in advertising; Jim had been offered his share of those opportunities too, whenever he showed her picture. Victoria would watch in fascination as people approached them and tried to get her mother to let them use Grace in every kind of ad, TV show, or movie, and Christine always graciously said no. She and Jim had no desire to exploit their baby, but they were always flattered by the offers and told friends about them later. Watching the exchanges, and hearing about them afterward always made Victoria feel invisible. It was as

though she didn't exist when the scouts talked to her mother. The only child they saw was Grace. Victoria didn't mind it, but sometimes she wondered what it would be like to be on TV or in a movie. It was fun that Grace was so pretty, and Victoria loved dressing her up, like a doll, with ribbons in her curly dark hair. She was a beautiful baby and turned into an equally lovely looking toddler. And Victoria nearly melted the first time her baby sister said her name. Grace chortled happily whenever she saw her, and was fiercely attached to her older sister.

When Grace was two and Victoria was nine, their grandmother Dawson died, after a brief illness, which left Christine with no help with the baby except for what Victoria did to assist her. The only babysitter they had ever used was Jim's mother, so after her mother-in-law's passing, Christine had to find a babysitter they could rely on when they went out in the evenings. Thereafter there was a parade of teenage girls who came to use the phone, watch TV, and let Victoria take care of the baby, which both sisters preferred anyway. Victoria got more and more responsible as she got older, and Grace got more beautiful with each passing year. She had a sunny disposition and laughed and smiled constantly, mostly at the urging of her older sister, who was the only person in the family who could make her laugh through her tears or stop a tantrum. Christine was far less adept with her than her older daughter. Christine was only too happy to let her take care of Grace. And by then, her father still regularly teased her about being their "tester cake." Victoria knew exactly what that meant, that Grace was beautiful and she wasn't, and they had gotten it right the second time around. She had explained that to a friend once, who had looked horrified by the explanation, much more so than Victoria, who was used to the term by now. Her father didn't hesitate to use it. Christine had objected to it once or twice, and Jim assured

her that Victoria knew he was just teasing. But in fact Victoria believed him. She was convinced by then that she was the mistake, and Grace their ultimate achievement. That impression was reinforced by each person who admired Grace. Victoria's sense of being invisible became deeply entrenched. Once people had commented on how adorable and beautiful Gracie was, they had no idea what to say about Victoria, so they said nothing and ignored her.

Victoria wasn't ugly, but she was plain. She had sweet, natural fair looks, and straight blond hair that her mother put in braids, as compared to Grace's halo of dark ringlets. Victoria's hair had gotten straight as she got older. She had big innocent blue eyes the color of a summer sky, but Grace and her parents' dark ones always seemed more exotic and more striking to her. And their eye color was all the same, as was their hair. Hers was different. And both her parents and Grace had thin frames, her father was tall, and her mother and the baby were delicate and fine-boned and had small frames. Grace and her parents were a reflection of each other. Victoria was different. She had a square look to her, a bigger frame, and broad shoulders for a child. She looked healthy, with rosy cheeks and prominent cheekbones. The one remarkable feature about her was that she had long legs, like a young colt. Her legs always seemed too long and thin for her squat body, as her grandmother had put it. She had a short torso that made her legs seem even longer. Despite her wider frame, she was nonetheless quick and graceful. And even as a child, she was big for her age, not enough to be called fat, but there was nothing slight about her. Her father always made an issue that she was too heavy for him to pick her up, while he tossed Grace in the air like a feather. Christine had a tendency to be underweight even after her babies, and in great shape thanks to her trainer and exercise

classes. And Jim was tall and lean, and Grace was never a really chubby baby.

What Victoria was more than anything was different from the rest of them. Enough so for everyone to notice. And more than once, people had asked her parents within her hearing if she was adopted. She felt like one of those picture cards they held up at school that showed an apple, an orange, a banana, and a pair of galoshes, while the teacher asked which one was different. In her family, Victoria was always the galoshes. It was a strange feeling she'd had all her life, of being different, and not fitting in. At least if one of her parents had looked like her, she would have felt as though she belonged. But as it was, she didn't, she was the one person out of sync, and no one had ever called her a beauty, as they did Gracie. Gracie was picture perfect and Victoria was the unattractive older sister, who didn't match the rest of them.

And Victoria had a healthy appetite, which kept her body broader than it might have been otherwise. She ate big portions at every meal, and always cleaned her plate. She liked cakes and candy and ice cream and bread, particularly when it was fresh out of the oven. She ate a big lunch at school. She could never resist a dish of french fries, or a hot dog bun, or a hot fudge sundae. Jim liked to eat well too, but he was a big man, and never gained weight. Christine existed mostly on broiled fish, steamed vegetables, and salads, all of which Victoria hated. She preferred cheeseburgers, spaghetti and meatballs, and, even as a child, often helped herself to seconds, despite her father frowning at her, or even laughing about it and making fun of her. No one in her family ever seemed to gain weight except her. And she never skipped a meal. Feeling full gave her a sense of comfort.

"You're going to regret that appetite one day, young lady," her father always warned her. "You don't want to be

overweight by the time you go to college.” College seemed like a lifetime away, and the mashed potatoes were sitting right in front of her, next to the platter of fried chicken. But Christine was always careful what she fed the baby. She explained that Grace had a different frame and was built like her, although Victoria sneaked her lollipops and candy, and Grace loved it. She would scream with delight when she saw a Tootsie Roll Pop emerge for her from Victoria’s pocket. And even when Victoria only had one, she gave it to her sister.

Victoria had never been popular in school, and her parents very seldom let her have friends over, so her social life was limited. Her mother said that two children making a mess of the house was enough for her to deal with. And she never liked any of Victoria’s friends when she met them. She always found fault with them for one reason or another, so Victoria stopped asking to invite them. As a result, no one invited Victoria over after school, since she never reciprocated. And she wanted to get home to help with the baby. She had friends at school, but her friendships didn’t extend past school hours. The drama of her early school years was being the only child in fourth grade who didn’t get a valentine. She had come home in tears, and her mother told her not to be silly. Gracie had been her valentine, and the next year Victoria told herself she didn’t care, and braced herself for disappointment. She actually got one that year from a girl who was as tall as she was. All the boys were shorter. The other girl was a beanpole, and actually much taller than Victoria, who was wider.

And the next drama she faced was growing breasts when she was eleven. She did everything she could to hide them, and wore baggy sweatshirts over everything she owned, lumberjack shirts eventually, and everything two sizes larger. But they continued growing, much to Victoria’s

chagrin. And by seventh grade she had the body of a woman. She thought of her great-grandmother often, with her wide hips and thick waist, large breasts and full figure. Victoria was praying she never got as big as her great-grandmother had been. The only thing different about her were the long thin legs that never seemed to stop growing longer. Victoria didn't know it, but they were her best feature. Her parents' friends always referred to her as a "big girl," and she was never sure what part of her they were referring to, her long legs, big breasts, or ever-widening body. And before she could figure out which part of her they were looking at, they turned their attention to the elflike Gracie. Victoria felt like a monster beside her, or a giant. And with her height, and her womanly body, she looked much older than her years. Her art teacher in eighth grade called her Rubenesque, and she didn't dare ask him what it meant, and didn't want to know. She was sure it was just a more artistic way of calling her big, which was a term she had come to hate. She didn't want to be big. She wanted to be small, like her mother and sister. She was five feet seven when she stopped growing in eighth grade, which wasn't enormous, but it was taller than most of her female classmates, and all of the boys at that age. She felt like a freak.

She was in seventh grade when Gracie started kindergarten, and she took her to her classroom. Her mother had dropped them both off at school, and Victoria had the pleasure of taking Grace to meet her teacher and watched her walk into the room with caution and turn to blow a kiss to her big sister. She watched over her all year at recreation, and took her home after afternoon day care. And the same was true in eighth grade, when Gracie was in first grade. But in the fall Victoria would be entering high school, at a different school, in another location, and she would no longer be there for Gracie, or see her if she