

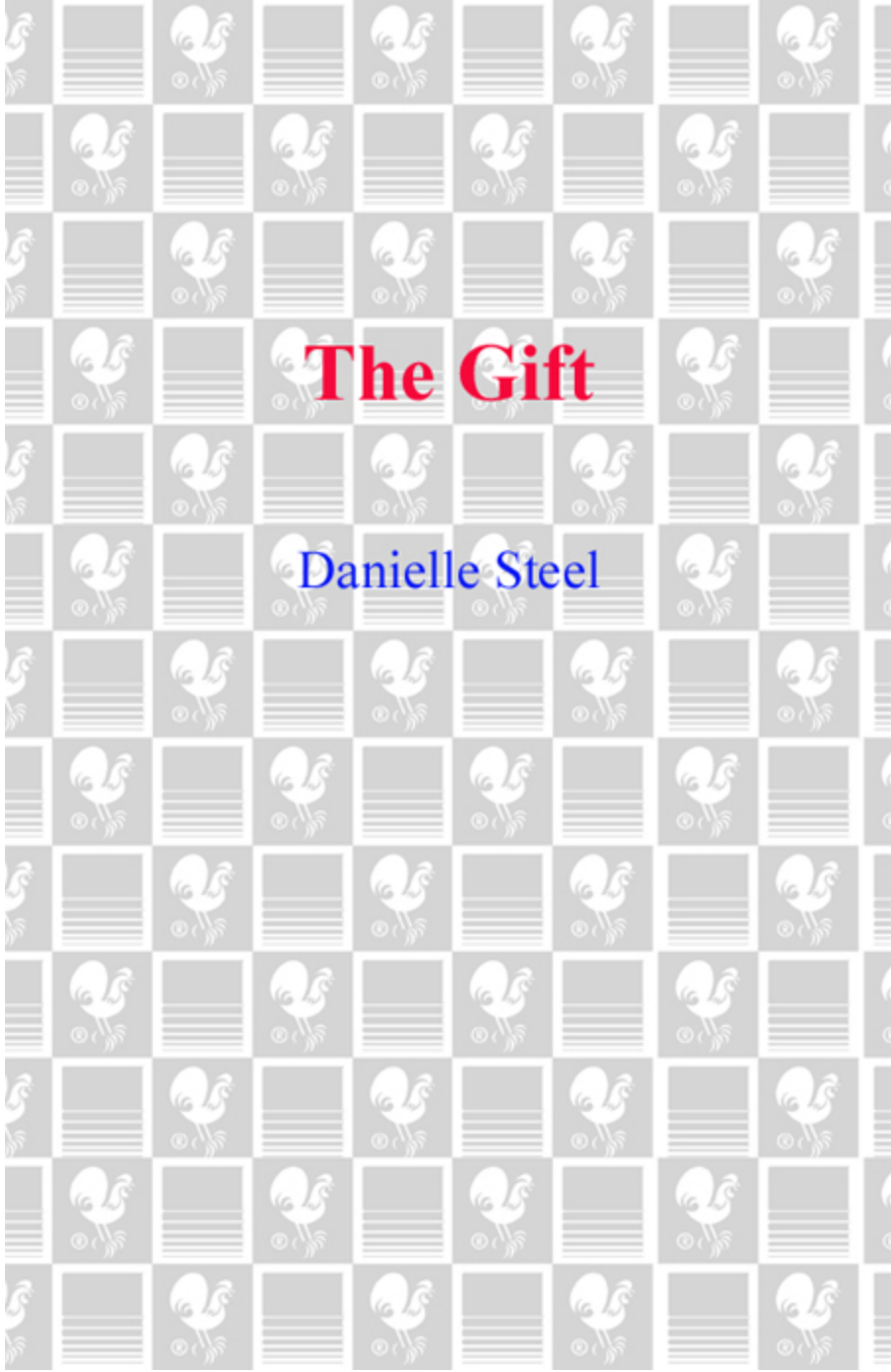
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THE GIFT

A Dell Book

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.