



Friends Forever: A Novel

By Danielle Steel

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Five children meet on the first day of kindergarten. In the years that follow, they become friends and more than friends. Together, they will find strength, meet challenges, face life's adventures, endure loss, face stark realities, and open their hearts. In this moving novel, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Danielle Steel traces their unforgettable journey—full of tests and trials—as three boys and two girls discover the vital bonds that will last a lifetime.

FRIENDS FOREVER

Gabby, Billy, Izzie, Andy, and Sean—each bursting with their own personality, strikingly different looks and talents, in sports, science, and the arts. Each drawn by the magical spark of connection that happens to the young. At the exclusive Atwood School, on a bright September day, starting in kindergarten they become an inseparable group known to outsiders as the Big Five. In this rarefied world, five families grow closer, and five children bloom beside one another, unaware of the storms gathering around them.

As they turn from grade-schoolers to teenagers, seemingly perfect lives are buffeted by unraveling families, unfortunate missteps, and losses and victories great and small. And, one by one, they turn back to the Big Five to regain their footing and their steady course. But as they emerge from Atwood and enter the college years, the way forward is neither safe nor clear. As their lives separate and diverge, the challenges and risks become greater, the losses sharper, and the right paths harder to choose, in a journey of friendship, survival, and love.

In what may be her most intricate and emotionally powerful novel yet, Danielle Steel tells a heart-wrenching, ultimately triumphant story that spans decades, weaves together a vivid cast of characters, and captures the challenges we face in life—sometimes, if we're lucky, with a friend forever by our side.

BONUS: This edition includes an excerpt from Danielle Steel's *First Sight*.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Danielle Steel has been hailed as one of the world's most popular authors, with over 600 million copies of her novels sold. Her many international bestsellers include *Betrayal*, *Hotel Vendôme*, *Happy Birthday*, *44 Charles Street*, *Legacy*, *Family Ties*, and other highly acclaimed novels. She is also the author of *His Bright Light*, the story of her son Nick Traina's life and death.

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Chapter 1

The admissions process to get into the Atwood School had eaten up six months of the previous winter, and driven each of the families nearly to distraction with open houses, meet and greets, intense interviews with the parents, sometimes two of them, and screenings of each child. Siblings had some preferential advantage, but each child was evaluated on their own merits, whether he or she had a sibling in the school or not. Atwood was one of the few coed private schools in San Francisco—most of the old established schools were single sex—and it was the only one that went from kindergarten through twelfth grade, making it highly desirable for families who didn't want to go through the whole process again for either middle school or high school.

The admissions letters had come at the end of March, and had been anticipated with the same anxiety as an acceptance to Harvard or Yale. Some of the parents admitted that it was more than a little crazy, but they insisted it was worth it. They said Atwood was a fabulous school, which gave each child the individualized attention they needed, carried enormous social status (which they preferred not to acknowledge), and students who applied themselves in the high school usually went on to great colleges, many of them Ivy League. Getting a kid into Atwood was a major coup. There were roughly six hundred and fifty students, it was well located in Pacific Heights, and the ratio of teacher to students was excellent. And it provided career, college, and psychological support counseling to the students as part of the routine services it offered.

When the big day finally came for the new kindergarten class to enter the school, it was one of those rare, hot Indian summer September days in San Francisco, on the Wednesday after Labor Day. It had been over ninety degrees since Sunday, and in the low eighties at night. Such hot weather happened only once or twice a year, and everyone knew that as soon as the fog rolled in, and it would inevitably, the heat would be over, and it would be back to temperatures in the low sixties in the daytime, brisk chilly winds, and the low fifties at night.

Usually, Marilyn Norton loved the hot weather, but she was having a tough time with it, nine months pregnant, with her due date in two days. She was expecting her second child, another boy, and he was going to be a big one. She could hardly move in the heat, and her ankles and feet were so swollen that all she had been able to get her feet into were rubber flip-flops. She was wearing huge white shorts that were too tight on her now, and a white T-shirt of her husband's that outlined her belly. She had nothing left to wear that still fit, but the baby would arrive soon. She was just glad that she had made it to the first day of school with Billy. He had been nervous about his new school, and she wanted to be there with him. His father, Larry, would have been with him, unless she'd been in labor, in which case their neighbor had promised to take him, but Billy wanted his mom with him on the first day, like all the other kids. So she was happy to be there, and Billy was holding tightly to her hand as they walked up to the modern, handsome school. The school had built a new building five years before, and it was heavily endowed by parents of current students,

and the grateful parents of alums who had done well.

Billy glanced up at his mother with an anxious look as they approached the school. He was clutching a small football and was missing his two front teeth. They both had thick manes of curly red hair and wide smiles. Billy's smile made her grin, he looked so cute without his front teeth. He was an adorable kid and had always been easy. He wanted to make everyone happy, he was sweet to her, and he loved pleasing his dad, and he knew the way to do that was to talk to Larry about sports. He remembered everything his father told him about every game. He was five, and for the past year he had said he wanted to play football for the 49ers one day. "That's my boy!" Larry Norton always said proudly. He was obsessed with sports, football, baseball, and basketball. He played golf with his clients and tennis on the weekends. He worked out religiously every morning, and he encouraged his wife to do the same. She had a great body, when she wasn't pregnant, and she'd played tennis with him until she got too big to run fast enough to hit the ball.

Marilyn was thirty years old and had met Larry when they both worked for the same insurance company eight years before when she got out of college. He was eight years older and a great-looking guy. He had noticed her immediately, and teased her about her coppery red hair. Every woman in the place thought he was gorgeous and wanted to go out with him. Marilyn was the lucky winner, and they were married when she was twenty-four. She got pregnant with Billy very quickly, and had waited five years for their second baby. Larry was thrilled it was another boy, and they were going to name him Brian.

Larry had had a brief career in baseball, in the minor leagues. He had a legendary pitching arm, which everyone felt certain would get him to the major leagues. But a shattered elbow in a skiing accident had ended his future in baseball, and he had gone to work in insurance. He had been bitter about it at first, and had a tendency to drink too much, and flirt with women when he did. He always insisted it was just social drinking. He was the life of every party. And after Marilyn married him, he left the insurance company and went out on his own. He was a natural salesman, and had established a very successful insurance brokerage business, which afforded them a very comfortable lifestyle, and plenty of luxuries. They had bought a very handsome house in Pacific Heights, and Marilyn had never worked again. And Larry's favorite clients were the professional major-league athletes who trusted him and were his mainstay now. At thirty-eight, he had a good reputation and a very solid business. He was still disappointed he wasn't a pro ballplayer himself, but he readily admitted that he had a great life, a hot wife, and a son who would play ball professionally one day, if he had anything to do with it. Although his life had turned out differently than he planned, Larry Norton was a happy man. He hadn't come to Billy's first day of school because he was having breakfast with one of the 49ers that morning, to sell him more insurance. In cases like that, his clients always came first, particularly if they were stars. But very few of the other kids' fathers had come to school, and Billy didn't mind. His father had promised him an autographed football and some football cards from the player he was having breakfast with. Billy was thrilled, and content to go to school with just his mom.

The teacher at the door where the kindergarten filed in looked down at Billy with a warm smile, and he gave her a shy glance, still holding on to his mother's hand. The teacher was pretty and young, with long blond hair. She looked like she was fresh out of college. Her name tag said that she was an assistant teacher and her name was Miss Pam. Billy was wearing a name tag too. And once in the building, Marilyn took him to his classroom, where a dozen children were already playing, and their classroom teacher greeted him immediately, and asked him if he'd like to leave his football in his cubby so his hands would be free to play. Her name was Miss June, and she was about Marilyn's age.

Billy hesitated at the question and then shook his head. He was afraid someone would steal his football. Marilyn reassured him and encouraged him to do what the teacher said. She helped him find his cubby, in the row of open cubbyholes where other children had already left their possessions, and some sweaters. And

when they went back into the classroom, Miss June suggested that he might like to play with the building blocks until the rest of his classmates arrived. He thought about it and looked at his mother, who gently nudged him to go.

“You like playing with building blocks at home,” she reminded him. “I’m not going anywhere. Why don’t you go play? I’ll be right here.” She pointed to a tiny chair, and with considerable difficulty lowered herself into it, thinking that it would take a crane to get her out of it again. And with that, Miss June walked Billy to the building blocks, and he got busy making a fort of some kind with the largest ones. He was a big boy, both tall and strong, which pleased his father. Larry could easily imagine him as a football player one day. He had made it Billy’s dream since he was old enough to talk, and his own dream for the boy, even before that, when he was born a strapping ten-pound baby. Billy was bigger than most children his age, but a gentle, loving child. He was never aggressive with other kids, and had made a great impression during his screening at Atwood. They had confirmed that he was not only well coordinated for his size, but also very bright. Marilyn still had trouble imagining that their second son would be as wonderful as Billy. He was the best. And he forgot about his mother as he got busy with the blocks, and she sat uncomfortably on the tiny chair and watched the other children who came in.

She noticed a dark-haired boy with big blue eyes arrive. He was shorter than Billy and wiry. And she saw that he had a small toy gun shoved into the waistband of his shorts, and a sheriff’s badge pinned to his shirt. She thought that toy guns weren’t allowed at school, but apparently it had escaped Miss Pam’s attention at the door, with so many children arriving at the same time. Sean was also with his mother, a pretty blond woman in jeans and a white T-shirt, a few years older than Marilyn. Like Billy, Sean was holding his mother’s hand, and a few minutes later he left her to play in the corner with the blocks too, as she watched him with a smile. Sean and Billy began playing side by side, helping themselves to the blocks, and paying no attention to each other.

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