



Five friends on life's
journey of challenges,
survival and love

Danielle STEEL

Friends Forever

About the Book

Five children meet on their first day of school, one bright September morning. Drawn by that magical spark of connection that happens to the young, Gabby, Billy, Izzie, Andy and Sean – each bursting with their own personality, all with strikingly different looks and diverse talents – soon become an inseparable group, known to everyone else as the Big Five.

As they grow up, their seemingly perfect lives are altered by families falling apart, unfortunate mistakes, and losses and victories great and small. Throughout their adolescence, the five are able to turn back to their trusted group to regain their footing and steady their course. But as they emerge from school, their futures seem neither safe nor clear. As their lives separate, the challenges and risks they face become greater, the losses sharper, and it becomes much harder to know the right path to choose.

But despite life's ups and downs, together they are able to face up to challenges with the help of the important bonds forged all those years ago. And the five realise just how lucky they are to treasure valuable friendships that last a lifetime.

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About the Author

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DANIELLE STEEL

FRIENDS
FOREVER

This book is dedicated to Nick Traina and Max Leavitt, bright shining stars, and the footprints they left on our hearts forever.

And to my precious children, Beatrix, Trevor, Todd, Sam, Victoria, Vanessa, Maxx, and Zara. Please God, may you always be among the survivors. I love you so much!!!

Mommy/ds

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, could have filled in, 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 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.

Within minutes Miss June spotted the gun and went to talk to Sean, as his mother watched. She knew they wouldn't let him keep it at school. She had a son at Atwood in the seventh grade, Kevin, and she knew the policy. But Sean had insisted on taking the gun with him. Connie O'Hara had taught school herself before she married, so she knew the importance of school rules, and after trying to reason with Sean to leave the gun at home, she had decided to let the teacher deal with it. Miss June approached Sean with a warm smile.

"Let's leave that in your cubby, Sean, shall we? You can keep the sheriff's badge on."

"I don't want someone to take my gun," he said with a stern look at Miss June.

"Let's give it to your mom, then. She can bring it when she picks you up. But it's safe in your cubby here too." Still, she didn't want him sneaking over to take it and put it in the waistband of his shorts again.

"I might need it," he said, struggling with a big block and setting it on top of the others. He was a strong boy, in spite of his size, which was no more than average, and he was thin. "I might have to arrest someone," Sean explained to Miss June, as she nodded seriously.

"I understand, but I don't think you'll need to arrest anyone here. Your friends here are all good guys."

"Maybe a robber or a bad guy will come in to school."

"We wouldn't let that happen. There are no bad guys here. Let's give your mom the gun," she said firmly. She held out her hand for it, as Sean looked her in the eye, measuring how serious she was, and he could tell that she meant it. He didn't like it, but he slowly took the gun out of his shorts and handed it to the teacher, who walked over to Connie and gave it to her. Connie was standing near Billy's very pregnant mother, and she apologized to Miss June and slipped the gun into her purse, and sat down on the small chair next to Marilyn.

"I knew that was going to happen. I know the rules. I have a son in seventh grade. But Sean wouldn't leave the house without it." She smiled at Marilyn with a rueful look.

"Billy brought his football. He put it in his cubby." Marilyn pointed to where he was playing next to Sean.

"I love his red hair," Connie said admiringly. The two boys were playing peacefully side by side without a word, as a little girl entered the corner with the blocks, and she looked like an ad for the perfect little girl. She had long beautiful blond hair with ringlets, and big blue eyes, and she was wearing a pretty pink dress, white ankle socks, and pink shoes that glittered. She looked like an angel, and an instant after she arrived, without a comment, she took the biggest building block out of Billy's hands and set it down for herself. Billy looked stunned but didn't resist. And as soon as she set it down, she saw the one Sean was holding and about to put on his fort, and she took that one too. And she gave them both a look that warned them not to mess with her, and proceeded to help herself to more blocks while the boys stared at her in amazement.

"This is what I love about coeducation," Connie whispered to Billy's mother. "It teaches them to deal with each other early, as in the real world, not just all girls or all

boys." Billy looked like he was about to cry when the little girl took another block from him, and Sean gave her a dark look when she took his block from him too. "It's a good thing I have the gun in my purse. He'd arrest her for sure for that. I just hope he doesn't hit her," Connie said as both women watched their sons, while the little angel/demon continued to build her own fort, undaunted by them. She was in full control of the block corner and had both boys on the run. Neither boy had ever met or dealt with anyone like her. Her name tag had two names on it, "Gabrielle" and "Gabby." She tossed her long blond curls while the boys looked at her, dazed.

Another little girl walked into the block corner, only stayed for two seconds, and headed for the play kitchen nearby. She got busy with pots and pans and was opening and closing the oven door and putting things in the oven and the pretend fridge. She looked extremely busy. She had a sweet face and wore her brown hair in two neat braids. She was wearing overall shorts, sneakers, and a red T-shirt. She looked ready to play and paid no attention to the others, but all three were watching her as a woman in a navy blue business suit walked up to the little girl in the kitchen and kissed her goodbye. She had brown hair the same color as her daughter's and wore it in a bun. Despite the heat, she was wearing the jacket to her suit, a white silk blouse, stockings, and high heels. She looked like she was a banker, or lawyer, or business executive of some kind. And her daughter looked unconcerned as she left. You could tell that she was used to not being with her mother, unlike the two boys, who had wanted their mothers to stay.

The little girl with the braids was wearing a name tag that said "Izzie." The two boys approached her with caution after her mother left. The other girl had scared them, so they ignored her and left the block corner. No matter how pretty she was, she wasn't friendly. Izzie looked easier to deal with as she kept busy in the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” Billy asked her first.

“I’m making lunch,” she said with a look that said it was obvious. “What would you like to eat?” There were baskets of plastic food that she had taken out of the fridge and oven and arranged on plates, and there was a small picnic table nearby. The kindergarten at Atwood had great toys. It was one of the things parents always loved when they toured the school. They also had an enormous playground, a huge gym, and excellent athletic facilities. Larry, Billy’s father, loved that, and Marilyn liked the academics. She wanted Billy to learn something too, not just grow up to play ball. Larry was an astute businessman and a great salesman, and had an enormous amount of charisma, but he hadn’t learned much in school. Marilyn wanted to be sure that her sons did.

“For real?” Billy asked Izzie about the lunch order she had requested from him. His eyes were wide as he inquired, and Izzie laughed. All his childhood trust and innocence were in his eyes.

“Of course not, silly,” Izzie chided him good-humoredly. “It’s just pretend. What do you want?” She looked as though she really cared.

“Oh. I’ll have a hamburger and hot dog, with ketchup and mustard, and French fries. No pickles.” Billy placed his order.

“Coming right up,” Izzie said matter-of-factly, then handed him a plate piled high with pretend food, and pointed him toward the picnic table, where he sat down.

Then she turned to Sean. She had instantly become the little mother in the group, attending to their needs. “What about you?” she asked with a smile.

“Pizza,” Sean said seriously, “and a hot fudge sundae.” She had both in the arsenal of plastic food, and handed them to him. She looked like a short-order cook in a fast-food restaurant. Then the angel in the pink dress and sparkly pink shoes appeared.

“Does your father own a restaurant?” Gabby asked Izzie with interest. Izzie was in full control of the kitchen and looked very efficient.

“No. He’s a lawyer, for poor people. He helps them when people are mean to them. He works for the ACUUUUU. My mom is a lawyer too, for companies. She had to go to court today, that’s why she couldn’t stay. She had to make a motion. She can’t cook. My dad does.”

“My dad sells cars. My mom gets a new Jaguar every year. You look like you’re a good cook,” the angel said politely. She was much more interested in Izzie than she had been in the boys. But even if each sex stuck together and had similar interests, they were in the same classroom and tempered each other in some ways. “Can I have mac and cheese? And a doughnut,” Gabby said, pointing to a pink doughnut with plastic sprinkles. Izzie handed her the mac and cheese and the doughnut on a pink tray. Gabby waited as Izzie helped herself to a plastic banana and a chocolate doughnut, and they joined the boys at the picnic table, and sat down like four friends who had met for lunch.

They were just starting to pretend to eat the lunch Izzie had fixed for them, when a tall thin boy ran over to them. He had straight blond hair, and was wearing a white button-down shirt and perfectly pressed khaki pants, and looked older than he was. He looked more like a second-grader than someone in kindergarten.

“Am I too late for lunch?” he asked, looking breathless, and Izzie turned to smile at him.

“Of course not,” she reassured him. “What do you want to eat?”

“A turkey sandwich with mayo on white toast.” Izzie got him something that looked vaguely like it, and some pretend potato chips, and he sat down with them. He glanced at his mother, who was just leaving the classroom with a cell phone pressed to her ear. She was giving someone instructions and looked like she was in a rush.

“My mom delivers babies,” he explained. “Someone’s having triplets. That’s why she couldn’t stay. My father is a psychiatrist, he talks to people if they’re crazy or sad.” The boy, whose name tag said “Andy,” looked serious. He had a grown-up haircut and good manners, and he helped Izzie put everything away in the kitchen when they were through.

Miss June and Miss Pam were both in the classroom by then, and asked everyone to form a circle. The five children who had eaten “lunch” at the picnic table sat next to each other in the circle, no longer strangers, and Gabby squeezed Izzie’s hand and smiled, as the teachers handed out musical instruments, and explained to them what each one did.

After the instruments, they had juice and cookies and then went outside for recreation. The mothers who had stayed were given juice and cookies too, although Marilyn declined and said that even water gave her heartburn now. She could hardly wait for the baby to come. She rubbed her enormous belly as she said it, and the other women looked at her sympathetically. She looked miserable in the heat.

Gabby’s mother had joined Marilyn and Connie by then, and there were several other mothers sitting in small groups in the corners of the classroom. Gabby’s mother looked young and was very striking. She had teased blond hair, and was wearing a white cotton miniskirt and high heels. Her pink T-shirt was cut low enough to see some cleavage, and she was wearing makeup and perfume. She stood out among the other mothers, but didn’t seem to mind it. She was friendly and pleasant, and sympathetic to Marilyn, when she introduced herself as Judy. She said she had gained fifty pounds with her last pregnancy. She had a three-year-old daughter, Michelle, two years younger than Gabby. But whatever weight she had gained, she had obviously lost it, and had a fabulous figure. She was flashy but a very pretty girl, and the others guessed her to be in

her late twenties. She said something about having been in beauty pageants when she was in college, which seemed about right, given the way she looked. She said they had moved to San Francisco from southern California two years before, and she missed the heat, so she was loving the Indian summer weather.

The three women talked about forming a carpool, and were hoping to find two other women to go in with them, so they'd only have to drive one day a week. Judy, Gabby's mother, explained that she'd have to bring her three-year-old with her on her days, but she said she had a van she would use for carpool, so there would be plenty of room for all the kids, with seatbelts. And Marilyn apologetically explained that she might not be able to drive for a few weeks because of the new baby, but she'd be happy to after that, as long as she could bring him along.

Connie agreed to organize the carpool for them, since she had done it before for her son in seventh grade when he was younger. She had been hoping that Sean's brother, Kevin, would take him to school in the morning, but their schedules were too different, and Kevin didn't want to be bothered with his little brother, and had flatly refused to do it. So the carpool made sense for Connie too. It would be helpful to all of them.

After the children came back from the playground and were engrossed in story time, with Miss June reading aloud to them, the mothers were able to leave, with their children's permission, and promised to be back when they got out of school that afternoon. Billy and Sean were slightly uneasy, but Gabby and Izzie were busy listening to the story and holding hands again. While out on the playground, they had agreed to be best friends. The boys had all been running around and yelling, and the girls had had fun on the swings.

"Did you hear about the meeting tonight?" Connie asked the other mothers as they left the building, out of earshot

of the children by then. The others said they hadn't. "It's really for the middle school and high school parents." She lowered her voice even further. "A sophomore boy hanged himself this summer. He was a really sweet kid. Kevin knew him, although he was three years older. He was on the baseball team. His parents and the school knew he had a lot of emotional problems, but it was still shocking when he did it. They're bringing in a psychologist to talk to the parents about recognizing the signs of suicide in kids, and prevention."

"At least that's one thing we don't have to worry about at this age," Judy said with a look of relief. "I'm still working on Michelle being dry at night. She has accidents once in a while, but she's only three. I don't think suicide at three and five is a big issue," she said blithely.

"No, but apparently it can be as young as eight or nine," Connie said somberly. "I don't worry about it with Kevin, or I haven't, but he's a pretty wild kid sometimes. He's not as easy as Sean, he never has been. He hates following anyone else's rules. The boy who died was really a sweet kid."

"Divorced parents?" Marilyn asked with a knowing look.

"No," Connie said quietly. "Good parents, solid good marriage, mom at home full time. I just don't think they thought this could happen to them. I think he'd been seeing a counselor, but mainly for problems he had in school keeping his grades up. He always took things pretty hard. He used to cry whenever the baseball team lost a game. I think there was a lot of pressure on him at home, academically. But the family is very wholesome. He was their only kid."

The other two women looked disturbed by what she said, but they agreed that the meeting wasn't relevant to them, and they hoped it never would be. It was just sad to hear about it happening to someone else. It was unimaginable to think of any of their children committing

suicide. It was hard enough worrying about accidents in the home, drownings in swimming pools, and illnesses and mishaps that befell young children. Suicide was in another universe from theirs, much to their relief.

Connie promised to call them when she found two more candidates for their carpool, and then they went their separate ways. All three were driving when they saw each other later that day and waved. Izzie and Gabby bounced out of school holding hands, and Gabby told her mother how much fun they'd had that day. Izzie's babysitter picked her up, and Izzie said the same thing to her. Billy was clutching the football he had retrieved from his cubby when he came out. Sean asked his mother for his sheriff's gun the moment he got in the car, and Andy was picked up by the housekeeper, since his parents were still at work, as they always were at that hour.

All five of them had had a great first day at the Atwood School, they liked their teachers and were happy with their new friends. Marilyn told herself that it had been worth the long, agonizing admission process. As she drove away with Billy, her water broke on the front seat, and she felt the first familiar labor pains, which heralded Brian's arrival into the world. He was born that night.

Chapter 2

BY THE BEGINNING of third grade, the five best friends had been bosom buddies for three years. They were eight. They were still in the same carpool, with Andy and Izzie's babysitters pitching in when needed, and they often had play dates with each other. More often than not Connie O'Hara, Sean's mother, would invite several of them to her house. Her older son, Kevin, was fifteen by then, and a sophomore at Atwood. He was always getting demerits or study hall for talking in class, or for homework he hadn't done. And no matter how difficult he was to get along with, how much he fought with their parents, or how often he threatened to beat Sean up, Kevin was a hero to his little brother, who worshipped him and thought he was "cool."

Connie loved having kids over, both Kevin's friends and Sean's. She volunteered for field trips and various projects at school, and worked for the PTA. As an ex-schoolteacher and devoted mother, she enjoyed her kids and their friends. And Kevin's friends particularly enjoyed talking to her. She was as sensitive to the problems of teenagers as she was to those of her eight-year-old. She was known to keep a cookie jar full of condoms in the kitchen, where Kevin's pals could help themselves, no questions asked. Mike O'Hara was equally great with kids, and loved having them in the house, and had coached Little League and been head of Kevin's Boy Scout troop until Kevin quit. Connie and Mike were realistic about what their kids did, and were well aware of the experimentation with marijuana and

booze among kids Kevin's age. They discouraged it, but also knew what went on. They managed to be firm, protective, involved, and practical at the same time. It was a lot easier for them being Sean's parents than Kevin's, but Sean was a lot younger. Things were dicier at fifteen, and Kevin had always been more of a risk taker than Sean, who followed all the rules.

Sean was doing well at school, and his best friends were still the ones he had made in kindergarten. He had gone from wanting to be a sheriff to wanting to be a policeman, then a fireman, and by eight back to the police again. He loved watching any kind of police show on TV. He wanted to keep law and order in his life and among his friends. He rarely broke the rules at home or at school, unlike his older brother, who thought they were made to be broken. They had the same parents but were very different boys. And in the three years since Sean had started kindergarten at Atwood, Mike's business had done extremely well, and he spent a considerable amount of time with both boys, doing activities with them. He and Connie were very comfortable financially. There had been a major construction boom, and he was the contractor that people were fighting to hire in Pacific Heights. It afforded the O'Haras a very secure lifestyle, they went on nice vacations in the summer, and he had built them a beautiful lakefront house in Tahoe two years before, which all of them enjoyed. He had a background in economics, but building houses had always been what he loved. He had set up his own construction company years before, and started small. And it had become one of the most successful private contracting firms in the city, and Connie had encouraged him from the beginning.

Marilyn Norton's life was more hectic than Connie's, with two young boys. Billy was eight by then. Brian was three, and had all the needs appropriate to his age, but was a quiet, well-behaved boy. The big disappointment to Larry,

his father, was that Brian had no interest in anything athletic—he didn't even like to throw a ball. At the same age, Billy had already shown his father's love of sports, which he had inherited from him. Brian hadn't. He could sit and draw for hours, was already learning to read at three, and had a strong aptitude for music. But Larry wasn't interested in his achievements. If Brian wasn't going to be an athlete, Larry had no use for him, and barely spoke to the child. It infuriated Marilyn and was often the spark that set off a fight, particularly if Larry had too much to drink.

"Can't you just talk to him?" Marilyn said, looking unhappy, and inevitably raising her voice. "Just say something to him, for five minutes. He's your son too." She was desperate to have Larry accept him, and he just wouldn't.

"He's *your* son," Larry said angrily. He hated to be called on it. Billy was his boy, and they had so much more in common. Billy shared his father's dream for him, he wanted to play pro football, it was the only career goal he ever talked about. He didn't care about firemen or policemen. He just wanted to play sports. But Brian was a quiet, serious, less outgoing child. He was small, and didn't have his father's and brother's talent for athletics. Billy played baseball and soccer at school, and Larry went to all his games. He cheered them when they won, and gave Billy hell when they didn't. He said there was never an excuse to lose a game. His father's exuberance and tough demands made Brian uncomfortable around him and even scared him, but it didn't faze Billy.

Larry's business had been growing too, but his success just seemed to add more stress to their lives instead of less. He was home less often, and he stayed out later when he spent the evening with clients. And most of his clients were professional basketball, baseball, and football players now. Larry spent a huge amount of time with them, and went to Scottsdale for spring training for his clients who played for

the Giants. Some of them were now his closest friends, and some of them had a wild side that Larry loved sharing. He rarely included Marilyn in those evenings, and she was just as happy to stay home with her boys. She had gotten back in shape after Brian, and she was looking great at thirty-three, but the girls most of Larry's clients went out with were twenty and twenty-one, and she had nothing to say to them. It was a racier crowd than she wanted to hang out with. She preferred to be with her kids. She almost always went to school functions alone, and when Larry did come, he always had just a little too much to drink, of the wine they served at school. Not so much that the other parents would notice, but Marilyn always knew he had had too much wine, or a couple of extra beers or even a bourbon on the rocks before they left home. It seemed to be the only way he could get through evenings he thought were boring. He wasn't interested in his boy's school, except for sporting events, which he always attended. And more than once he had commented that Judy Thomas, Gabby's mother, was quite a babe. Larry had an eye for pretty women.

Judy and Marilyn were good friends, and Marilyn ignored the comments Larry made about Judy. She knew that however flashy Judy looked, she was crazy about Adam, her husband, and was well behaved. Judy had just turned thirty, and had already had a lot of work done, liposuction, a tummy tuck, breast implants, and regular Botox shots, and although her friends told her she was foolish to do it, she looked great. She had never gotten over her youthful beauty pageant mentality. She had admitted to Marilyn and Connie once that she had entered Gabby in baby beauty pageants at four and five, and Gabby had won hands down, but Adam had had a fit and made her promise never to do it again, and she respected his wishes. Adam adored both his girls, although Gabby was undeniably the star of the show. She had more personality and more spark to her than her much quieter younger sister, Michelle. It

was Gabby who Judy was certain would make a mark on the world. She had a dazzling personality. In contrast, Michelle lived in her sister's shadow, but she was only six, so it wasn't fair to compare them.

In third grade, Gabby was taking piano and voice lessons, and seemed to have real talent at an early age. Judy was trying to convince the school's drama department to do a full musical production of *Annie* and put Gabby in the lead role. For the moment, they had decided it was more than they wanted to undertake, and not many of the students were as well prepared as Gabby for a Broadway musical on their stage. Gabby already knew she wanted to be an actress when she grew up, and Judy was seeing to it that she had all the skills she needed. She had been going to ballet lessons since she was three. Michelle loved ballet too, but her abilities weren't as obvious as Gabby's. Gabby was a star. Michelle was just a little girl.

The couple who did the most for Atwood were Adam and Judy, who made big donations to the school, and had both girls there. Michelle was a better student than Gabby and got straight A's, but it was Gabby's many talents that caught everyone's attention. Michelle was just as pretty, but Gabby was more extroverted and infinitely more noticeable.

And Adam was happy to do whatever he could for the school. He had donated a Range Rover from his car dealership for the school auction. The evening had made the school a fortune, and Adam was the hero of the hour. They were flashy and certainly not subtle, but they were nice people and well liked by all, except for a few more reserved parents who thought they were just too showy and could never understand how they had gotten their daughters into a school like Atwood. But they were clearly there to stay, whether their critics liked it or not.

Gabby and Izzie were still best friends in third grade. At eight, they loved each other even more than they had at

five. They shared Barbies and traded clothes. Izzie spent weekends at Gabby's house as often as she was allowed. They had carved their initials into Izzie's desk at home, G+I4EVER, which hadn't gone over well with Izzie's mother, and she'd been on restriction for a weekend. Izzie loved staying at Gabby's, where she could try on all her pretty clothes. Practically everything Gabby owned had sparkles on it, and she had two pink jackets trimmed in real white fur, and a pink fur coat her mom had gotten for her in Paris. They wore the same sizes in everything, and traded clothes when they were allowed to, although not the coat from Paris. And Izzie liked Michelle, even though Gabby said she hated her sister, and blamed her for everything whenever she could. Gabby hated it when her mother insisted they play with her, because she wanted Izzie to herself, but Izzie was a good sport about including Michelle in their games, and she even let her win sometimes. She felt sorry for Michelle. She never seemed to have as much fun as Gabby, and her parents seemed less interested in her. Izzie had a strong urge to nurture everyone; she always felt sorry for the underdog, and even took care of Gabby sometimes if she was in a bad mood or had a cold. Izzie was the perfect friend.

Judy always said about her older daughter that she was born to succeed at everything she did, and it seemed to be true. Gabby had modeled a few times for ads for children's clothing, and one national campaign for GapKids by the time she was in third grade. No one ever doubted that Gabby would be a star one day. She already was in her own little world. And Izzie loved being best friends with her, although she loved the three boys in her group too.

Izzie's father, Jeff, took them all out for pizza and bowling sometimes. The girls loved it, although they could hardly pick up the ball. Once in a while, Izzie's mother went with them, but usually she had to work late at night. Katherine always brought a lot of work home from the