

Winners: A Novel

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Even the most perfect lives can be shattered in an instant. In this moving, emotionally charged novel, Danielle Steel introduces readers to an unforgettable cast of characters striving to overcome tragedy and discover the inner resources and resilience to win at life—once again.

WINNERS

Lily Thomas is an aspiring ski champion training for the Olympics, a young woman with her heart set on winning the gold. But in one moment, Lily's future is changed forever, her hopes for the Olympics swept away in a tragic accident.

Dr. Jessie Matthews, the neurosurgeon who operates on her that night, endures a tragedy of her own, and instantly becomes the sole support of her four young children, while her own future hangs in the balance.

Bill, Lily's father, has pinned all his hopes on his only daughter, his dreams now shattered.

Other lives will entwine themselves with theirs: Joe, a financial manager, faces a ruined career at the hand of a dishonest partner. Carole, a psychologist at Mass General, is a breast cancer survivor, her body and heart scarred by what she's been through. Teddy, with a spinal cord injury worse than Lily's, dreams of college and becoming an artist.

From the ashes of their lives, six people fight to alter the course of destiny and refuse to be defeated. When Bill builds a remarkable rehab facility for his daughter, countless lives are forever altered, and each becomes a winner.

Winners is about refusing to be beaten, no matter how insurmountable the challenge. And when Lily gets on skis again and enters the Paralympics, the battle to brave life again is won.

Winners is about more than surviving, it is about courage, victory, and triumph. When all appears to be lost, the battle has just begun.

Praise for Winners

"Steel skillfully weaves the strands of the Matthews and Thomas families together in a layered story. . . . Together, they discover friendship, loyalty, and new dreams."—Publishers Weekly

"[Winners] will leave readers crying and cheering."—Booklist
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 *First Sight*, *Until the End of Time*, *The Sins of the Mother*, *Friends Forever*, *Betrayal*, *Hotel Vendôme*, 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; *A Gift of Hope*, a memoir of her work with the homeless; and *Pure Joy*, about the dogs she and her family have loved. Chapter 1

Lily Thomas lay in bed when the alarm went off on a snowy January morning in Squaw Valley. She opened her eyes for just an instant and saw the thick snow swirling beyond the windows of the house her father had rented, and for a fraction of an instant, she wanted to roll over and go back to sleep. She could hear the dynamite blasts in the distance to prevent avalanches, and just from a glance, she knew what kind of day it was. You could hardly see past the windows in the heavy blizzard, and she knew that if the mountain was open, it wouldn't be for long. But she loved the challenge of skiing in heavy snow. It would be a good workout, and she didn't want to miss a single day with one of her favorite instructors, Jason Yee.

She and her father came here every year during Christmas break. They celebrated Christmas at home in Denver, flew to San Francisco where her father visited friends and did some business, mostly with venture capital firms in Silicon Valley, and then they drove to Squaw. It was a tradition Lily loved, and good skiing. They'd been coming here since she'd started downhill racing when she was a little kid. She had won bronze in the Junior Olympics three years before, at fourteen. And she was training for the next Winter Olympics, in a year. This time she was hoping to win the gold.

Lily gave a last stretch in her warm, comfortable bed and got up to take a shower. She glanced out the window and saw how heavy the snowfall was. There were two more feet of fresh snow on the ground than there had been the night before. She grinned, thinking of the morning that lay ahead. The heavy snow might slow them down a little, but Jason always pushed her hard, which was what she liked about him. She loved skiing with him, and he was more fun than her regular Denver coach, who'd been training her for the Olympics since she was twelve.

It had been her father's idea for her to start skiing, and then racing, when he saw what a natural she was. He had loved to ski at her age. He had been mostly self-taught, and had a passion for it, and had skied on whatever skis he could afford. After his simple beginnings in a mining town in Pennsylvania, he had made his fortune in his early twenties, speculating on the commodities market and later investing in high-risk deals that brought enormous returns. Since then he had been investing more conservatively, and his fortune was secure and would go to Lily one day. She never thought about it, although she knew how fortunate she was. Her father always preached discipline and hard work, and Lily was a lot like him. She was an outstanding student and a talented athlete. She was a junior in high school and hoped to go to an Ivy League college. And in the meantime she trained for the Olympics every day, at a grueling pace. She had been the joy and main focus of her father's life since her mother died when she was three. Bill Thomas lived for her, and Lily adored him.

Bill Thomas had gone to a state college in Pennsylvania. His father had been a coal miner and died when Bill was in his teens. He knew what poverty looked like at its most extreme, and all he had wanted as a young man was to provide a better life for the family he hoped

to have one day. A scholarship to Harvard Business School had changed his life. He had used the MBA he earned there, and his own entrepreneurial sense, to achieve everything he had set his sights on as a boy. His mother never lived to see him graduate, and his brother had died in a mine accident at nineteen. Only Bill had escaped into a better world, and he never forgot where he came from, and what he had achieved. He was brilliant in business, and at fifty-two, he had fulfilled his dreams, and worked at home now, managing his investments, and spending as much time with Lily as he could. He had been both father and mother to her for fourteen years, and was infinitely proud of her.

Lily showered and dressed, and appeared at the breakfast table a few minutes later, in her ski pants, thermals, and bare feet. Her long dark hair was still wet from the shower, and her father was sipping a cup of coffee, as he looked up at her with a smile.

"I was wondering if you were going to sleep in. It looks nasty outside." As he said it, they both heard the dynamite go off again. The chairlifts weren't moving yet, but Lily was sure they would soon, at least for a while.

"I don't want to miss the day," she said, putting brown sugar on the oatmeal he had ordered for her, from room service at a nearby hotel that provided food and maid service to the house they rented every year. "I love skiing with Jason, Daddy," she said, as he uncovered the rest of what he'd ordered for her, scrambled eggs, bacon, and whole wheat toast. "I can't eat all that," she said, making a face.

Lily was lean and athletic and in fantastic shape, and she was as beautiful as her mother had been, with the same lavender-blue eyes, dark hair, and creamy skin, and a wide smile that mirrored his own. Bill was as fair as she was dark and looked younger than his years. He had never remarried and had no desire to, as long as Lily was at home. He had dated the same woman for the past two years. Penny was devoted to her career, had never married, and had no children, and she traveled so much for her PR business that it never bothered her that the most important woman in Bill's life was Lily, and most of the time he was busy with his daughter and had little interest in anyone else. He and Penny had an unspoken arrangement that worked for both of them. When they had time and were in the same city, they spent an evening together, and other than that, they had their own lives. Neither of them wanted more with each other than they had. And they had fun whenever they got together.

Penny was a good-looking redhead, and she worked hard at maintaining a spectacular body that she had "enhanced" here and there. Bill always enjoyed having her on his arm when they went out. She was younger than he was, but not so much that he felt foolish when they were seen together.

They had even managed a couple of trips, usually to resorts she represented so she could kill two birds with one stone. He had never suggested a future to her, nor did he plan to, and she was an independent woman who didn't seem to want one with him, or anyone else. She was forty-two years old, and Lily liked her, and knew that Penny was no threat to her. Her father rarely involved his daughter in his dating life—they spent their family

time alone, as on this vacation. And during their time in Squaw, Penny was at the opening of a new resort in St. Bart's, and Bill had never invited her to Squaw Valley with them on their annual trip. He liked spending the time with Lily— she was so busy with school and friends, sports, and after— school activities when they were at home. He dreaded when she'd leave for college and was trying to talk her into going to school in or near Denver, although Lily had her heart set on the Ivy League in the East, and had the grades to get in.

"Are you sure you want to go out today?" he asked, as she took a bite of the eggs and then nibbled a strip of bacon.

"They'll probably close the mountain early. I want to get in as many runs as I can before they do," she said, then stood up to go finish dressing.

"If it gets too bad, I want you to come in," he reminded her. He admired her skill, and her discipline, but he didn't want her taking crazy chances in ugly weather. But she was a sensible girl too.

"I know, Daddy," she said with a dazzling smile as she looked over her shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll be fine. Jason knows the mountain better than anyone here." It was one of the reasons why Bill had hired him years before. He wanted Lily to have fun, but he wanted her safe above all. He had lost her mother and didn't want to lose her as well. Lily's mother had been driving too fast the night she hit a patch of ice in Denver and died at twenty— five, leaving Bill widowed, with a three— year— old child. He protected Lily as if she were made of glass.

She was back ten minutes later, with her sweater on over her thermals, ski pants, hiking boots, and her Olympic team parka and helmet over her arm. She left her skis, boots, and poles in a locker at the base of the mountain every night, and she had to take a shuttle bus to meet Jason there now. She put her parka on and zipped it up. Bill was sitting at his computer checking the commodities market, and then looked up at her with a grin.

"You look mighty cute," he said, smiling broadly. The Olympic team parka and helmet said she was a hotshot, and they were a status symbol on any slope. Just looking at her, he was proud of her all over again. "And come in if the weather gets any worse," he reminded her, and she bent to kiss him on the top of his head on her way out.

"We will," she said happily, and waved her gloves at him from the doorway, and then she was off to get in as much skiing as she could before the mountain closed. He was sure it would be by midday, and so was she.

He stood up and watched her from the window, and saw her get on the shuttle bus to the base. She didn't see him, and he felt his heart tug as he gazed at her. She was so beautiful and so young, and she looked so much like her late mother they could have been sisters. It still tore his heart out sometimes. She would have been thirty— nine years old if she were still alive, which was hard to imagine. In his mind, she would be young forever, hardly older

than Lily was now at seventeen. He went back to his computer then, and hoped that Lily would come in early. The snow seemed to be getting worse, and he knew there would be a veil of fog at the top of the mountain. Only the worst diehards would venture out today, like Lily. She had her mother's looks but her father's grit, stubbornness, and determination. Because of it, Bill was sure that her skill and relentless training would win her the gold in the next Olympics.

While riding the shuttle to the base, she had time to text her boyfriend Jeremy and best friend Veronica. Both were on the ski team with her, and were practicing in Denver that day. She had no time to make friends with anyone who wasn't on the Olympic team, and she and Veronica had known each other since nursery school. Jeremy answered her with a quick "I love you." Veronica didn't answer, and Lily guessed she was still asleep.

Lily met Jason, as promised, at the lockers. He was wearing his ski school jacket, and next to her Olympic team gear, they looked very official, as they put their skis and boots on, left their shoes in a locker, grabbed their poles, and headed toward the lift. They were both wearing goggles in the heavy snow. Jason glanced at her with a grin, as they showed their passes to the chairlift operator and he nodded. There were three other people waiting for the lift ahead of them, and it had just started operating only minutes before. Two others were already high in the air on the chairs as Lily glanced at them. It was exhilarating to be out on a day like this, and she loved the challenge of skiing through the heavy snow. Jason admired that about her—nothing ever stopped her.

"You either have to be crazy to go out on a day like this," Jason said, laughing, "or very young, or both. I don't think the mountain will be open long." But they both knew it was safe, if the chairlift was operating, otherwise they'd have closed it down. And only the most skilled would brave the mountain today, and she and Jason both qualified for that. He was an astounding skier, and so was she. He had won national championships at her age, and he was an excellent teacher too. She always learned something new from him, which added to what she learned from her Denver coach, who was a taskmaster.

"I guess that means I'm crazy," Lily said happily. "My dad thinks we're nuts too." They could hear the dynamite blasting again, as Lily got on the first available chairlift, and Jason waited for the next one, right behind her. Lily felt the same thrill she always did, as the chairlift went high in the air, and she looked down at the trees and virgin snow. There was not a single skier yet on the slopes, and she could tell that part of the mountain was closed as they headed toward the top. The wind was whipping her face, and she enjoyed the peaceful silence as the chairlift hummed along, and then she heard another crack of dynamite, unusually close by. It sounded like they were right next to it, which surprised her, and at exactly the same moment, as they approached a ravine, from a great height, she saw a long snake whip through the air, like a giant rope above their heads. She looked up at it and felt herself falling fast at the same time. She didn't even have time to understand that the cable that held the chairlift had just broken, as she plummeted down, into a deep hole in the snow. When she landed, all she saw was white, and her eyes closed as she fell into a deep sleep. She never had time to turn and look at Jason, while they free-fell past the trees, and he landed in the ravine. Jason was dead the minute he hit the snow.

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