

# **Forged by Fire Study Guide**

**Forged by Fire by Sharon Draper**

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## Plot Summary

As the story opens, Gerald is three years old and living with his mother, a volatile drug addict named Monique. Gerald has already learned to read his mother's moods and is careful not to do things he knows will anger her. He is fully aware that she often gets drugs from a man named Leroy. Though he is helpless to do anything about her addiction, he wants to. One day, Monique leaves Gerald at home alone, saying that she's going to find Leroy. Gerald has a new toy - a G.I. Joe action figure. He amuses himself by playing with the toy and it's obvious that he has an active imagination. When he discovers a lighter Monique had lost, he remembers that she'd once used the flame to burn his hand in an effort to show him that he should never play with lighters. But he is overcome by temptation and soon has mastered creating the flame, which adds to his game with his toy. When he sets the kitchen on fire, he realizes he's in trouble and runs to the living room to hide. A boy in the building who knows Monique often leaves Gerald alone rescues him and he's taken to the hospital.

Gerald's great-aunt Queen steps in and takes custody, though she's older and confined to a wheelchair. She has soon created an atmosphere of love and shelter that changes Gerald's life. Six years pass before his mother arrives on his birthday. She has a daughter with her, a little girl named Angel who was born while Monique was in jail, and her boyfriend, Jordan Sparks. Monique says she wants Gerald to live with her but Gerald refuses. However, when Aunt Queen dies of a heart attack he has no choice.

Gerald soon forges a solid bond with his sister, though he hates Jordan Sparks for his violent temper. When Gerald learns that Jordan is molesting Angel, he confides in the father of a friend who helps get the police involved. Jordan is arrested and the lives of Gerald and Angel improve, though Monique is uncaring and Gerald is left with the day-to-day chores of the household and is responsible for Angel. Angel learns to dance and Gerald becomes a member of the basketball team for the next six years until Jordan's release. The story comes to a climax as Gerald steps in to keep Jordan away from Angel. The two fight and Jordan dies in a fire. Gerald and Angel barely escape, and it takes this brush with losing her children for Monique to realize what kind of man Jordan really was.



# Chapters 1 through 5

## Chapters 1 through 5 Summary

In chapter one, Gerald is three years old and his mother, Monique, is screaming at him to sit down in the shopping cart. Gerald doesn't want to sit because he has had an accident in his pants and it's very uncomfortable, but he sees that his mother is serious and does as she demands. Gerald doesn't know many things three-year-old boys know because he's never been allowed that knowledge. For example, he doesn't even know that the name of his hometown is Cincinnati. But he has a great deal of knowledge vital to his survival - things like he should never try to get his mother's attention if she is in bed, regardless of whether she's alone or has a man in bed with her. Gerald has also learned to hide behind the couch anytime Leroy has been to visit because he knows that Monique might go on a rampage, hitting him repeatedly with a shoe or a belt.

Gerald's great aunt, called "Aunt Queen," sometimes intervenes, and Gerald feels safe in her presence, but he can also tell when the time approaches that his mother will take him back to their house. Once, Aunt Queen finds Gerald in a serious state of hunger and cold and had taken him home with her, though Monique told Gerald not to leave the house. Gerald knows that his mother loves him and cites the fact that just a week prior to the scene involving the shopping cart, Monique had bought him a G.I. Joe action figure, even though it wasn't any special occasion. Then Monique goes away again, leaving Gerald at home alone. He is playing with his G.I. Joe when he finds a lighter that Monique had lost. Gerald knows that he's not supposed to play with the lighter because he'd tried it once. In order to teach him a lesson about that, Monique had lit the flame and held it under Gerald's hand. She'd then bandaged the wound and told him to never play with lighters. But on this day, the temptation proves too much, and Gerald quickly gets the hang of making a steady flame. He then uses it as a weapon for his G.I. Joe as he plays in the kitchen. Suddenly, the curtain catches the flame and a fire is blazing. Gerald rushes to the living room and hides behind the couch.

In chapter two, Gerald wakes to discover that everything is white. There are medical personnel there and they talk about the situation, not realizing that Gerald is awake. They discuss the fact that he has old injuries that indicate a pattern of abuse at the hands of his mother and that she's been arrested for child endangerment for leaving Gerald at home alone. A nurse gives him some ice chips and he finds that it helps soothe his throat. Then his aunt, Queen Marie Antoinette Lincoln, arrives. She is confined to a wheelchair but has a commanding presence that's felt immediately. Aunt Queen immediately makes it plain that she plans to seek legal custody of Gerald and says that she's tried over the years to get Monique to let Gerald live with her. When asked if she can handle a child, she says that she's raised her own children from the confines of a wheelchair and that she can manage. Aunt Queen then takes Gerald into her arms and rocks him.



In chapter three, six years have passed. On this particular day, Gerald is sitting on the wheelchair ramp on Aunt Queen's back porch. He's rolling rocks down the ramp but is thinking about all the other things he's done on that ramp through the years. He's also thinking about the fact it's only one more day until his birthday. Gerald has aged and matured, and he's settled in to his life with Aunt Queen. He says that their lives are sometimes hectic and not always comfortable, but that they've always managed to get through. At times, they have been without vital services, such as lights, water or telephone. Gerald says the lack of water is worse because of the inability to flush the toilet. He recalls once when Aunt Queen had gone to the electric office, demanding that their electricity be turned back on. She tells them that she's always paid the bill and that she will pay this one too, but that "something came up." She also threatens to go to a local news agency with the story that the electric company had turned off the electricity of a disabled woman with a small child in the house. Aunt Queen finishes that tirade with, "I'm poor, not stupid," and the electricity is restored that same day.

The "something" that came up was Christmas and Gerald says that Aunt Queen always made certain that their holidays were festive. Some of their activities are tradition, such as stringing popcorn or making ornaments from old Christmas cards. The gifts are not always expensive but they are always the result of considerable time and energy. Gerald remembers his eighth birthday. Aunt Queen had given him books because he loved to read, a flashlight and extra batteries. But the best gift had been that she'd given him permission to use the flashlight to explore the attic and basement of the house - places previously off limits to Gerald. That permission to explore is the beginning of Gerald's efforts to build a go-cart. He finds an old wheelchair and Aunt Queen lets him take it apart to make the go-cart. The project began in the basement but moved to the back porch. When it was finished, Gerald went several times down the wheelchair ramp on the back porch. Aunt Queen is initially skeptical of his use of the ramp but he tacks on tar paper to provide better traction - an addition Aunt Queen finds beneficial as well. One day Aunt Queen is asleep when Gerald gets the idea to ride his go-cart down a neighbor's drive. The drive has a good slope and Gerald makes the trip several times before the contraption falls apart and he crashes, the go-cart going into the street and being hit by two cars. A woman marches Gerald to his front door and berates Aunt Queen for not watching him. Gerald knows Aunt Queen is furious and promises that he will never put himself in danger again. Back in the present, with only a day left until his birthday, Gerald hopes that he'll get a bicycle. He knows it might not be new and accepts this to be alright, but hopes that it's red and that he can make it go fast. As he's thinking about that, Aunt Queen tells him that he'll be getting another birthday present - a visit from his mother.

In chapter four, Gerald argues that it's not fair for his mother to arrive on his birthday, saying that for that one day he should be safe from outside interference. Aunt Queen promises that he won't have to live with his mother but refuses to keep Monique away. Aunt Queen then tells Gerald that she needs him to bring in a sewing machine she has stored in the garage. She tells him where it is and Gerald reluctantly goes in that direction. He has been a huge help to Aunt Queen, always willing to do what she asks, but this time he doesn't want to. He goes anyway and discovers a brand new bicycle. It's red and Gerald is immediately struck by the fact that it's not used. He knows that this



would have been a huge sacrifice for Aunt Queen. Aunt Queen herself admits that the bike had been a sacrifice. She'd had it on layaway for months and had scrimped to pay it out on time. But she says that it was worth every bit of the effort when she saw the look on Gerald's face. She admits that she'd given it to him a day early to cheer him up after the news about his mother. She also knows that she isn't going to let them take Gerald from her.

In chapter five, the day of Gerald's birthday arrives. Aunt Queen wakes him and he refuses to get up, but she insists that she needs him. He agrees, saying that he's coming out for Aunt Queen, not because of his mother. When he gets to the kitchen, he sees that his mother has a man and a little girl with her. She introduces the little girl as Angel and tells Gerald that Angel is his sister. He initially argues, but Aunt Queen says that his mother was pregnant when she went to jail and that the little girl has lived with the man - her father - all this time. The man is Jordan Sparks. Monique tells Gerald that she's now living in Cincinnati, that she'd wanted to get herself settled before coming to see him, and that she wants him to live with her. Gerald is angry and leaves the room. Aunt Queen chastises Monique, telling her that they'd agreed she wouldn't bring that up immediately, but Monique says she got overly excited. Monique asks Jordan what to do and he stands, roughly shoves her and says it's her decision.

## Chapters 1 through 5 Analysis

Monique is aware of the fact that Gerald has had an accident in his pants. He says that it seldom happens but that Monique sometimes made him wear the dirty clothes for an entire day. Her purpose, according to Gerald, is to "teach him a lesson." The first words out of Monique's mouth during this story are "If you don't sit your stinkin', useless butt back down in that shopping cart, I swear I'll bust your greasy face in." This sets the tone for the entire story. The reader quickly becomes aware that this is typical of Monique's conversations with her son because Gerald, rather than being confused or starting to cry, takes a second to look carefully at her in order to determine whether she's serious. This time he decides she is, another indication that this is not an uncommon occurrence.

When one of the medical staff is talking to Aunt Queen, he asks if Gerald has a father. Aunt Queen is immediately angry and yells at the man about making assumptions. She seems to understand that the man is asking whether Gerald has a father who is part of his life but deliberately takes it the wrong way. She tells the doctor that everyone has a father and that even though medical science has made tremendous advances, there's no way to create life without a father. She then tells him that she knows what he meant but says that he shouldn't make assumptions. After that tirade, the doctor apologizes and Aunt Queen says that, in this case, the doctor was correct and that Gerald's father does not play a role in Gerald's life.

There's an important piece of foreshadowing in chapter two. When Aunt Queen is rocking Gerald while he's in the hospital, Gerald is crying. The author points out that Gerald is crying for all the pain he's already endured and "for all the pain yet to come."



This use of foreshadowing is a common technique in this book and is typically dark, indicating something bad that is about to happen.

There are two points the reader needs to understand about Aunt Queen's reaction to Gerald's wrecking the go-cart. First is that she's angry because the woman berates Aunt Queen for allowing Gerald to run around unsupervised. Aunt Queen's reaction to that aspect of the situation is anger. She tells Gerald that he is never again to put her in a position of allowing someone to chastise her. This exemplifies Aunt Queen's pride in herself. The second aspect of the situation is that she's very angry because Gerald could have been hurt. Like many parents who have received that scare, she hugs Gerald and he seems to realize that he did a stupid thing that could have hurt him, and that would have hurt Aunt Queen.

Aunt Queen's decision to allow Monique to visit may have been prompted by Aunt Queen's failing health. Though she is a self-starter who refuses to feel sorry for herself because of her circumstances, she is older and being confined to the wheelchair has likely taken an additional toll on her health. It may also have been prompted by the fact that she knows Monique has another child, a daughter named Angel. Aunt Queen says that she tried to obtain custody of Angel while Monique was in prison, but couldn't. She may have seen Monique's visit as the only way to spend time with Angel.



# Chapters 6 through 10

## Chapters 6 through 10 Summary

In chapter six, Jordan is obviously bored and angry and Monique finally decides that they'll leave. She leaves Angel with Aunt Queen. Aunt Queen begins talking to the little girl and asks if she misses the friends she had in Atlanta, where the family had lived before. Angel says she had no friends there. Angel also says that her grandmother had claimed to be glad Angel was leaving, citing the fact that the little girl cries too much. Aunt Queen tries to reassure her, telling her that it's okay to cry sometimes. Angel is asleep when Gerald returns and he says that his little sister is pretty, though she seems sad. When Angel wakes, she's impressed with Gerald's bike and he helps her ride it, careful not to let the little girl get hurt. It's hot outside and Aunt Queen suggests that Angel take off her tights. Angel becomes frantic, saying that her mother would be angry. Aunt Queen is thinking to herself that she'll never allow Monique to take Gerald and that she needs somehow to gain custody of Gerald when she suddenly grows dizzy and falls from her chair.

In chapter seven, Gerald and Angel go into the house and discover Aunt Queen on the floor. Gerald calls for help and sends Angel next door to call Monique. Angel returns, saying no one was home and is obviously afraid there will be repercussions over her failure to do the assigned task. By that time, Gerald is off the phone and Angel calls Monique. When the ambulance arrives, one of the drivers recognizes Angel and asks if she's had any recent breaks or bruises. He then tells Gerald that they'll be taking Aunt Queen to General Hospital after being assured that an adult is on the way to the house.

Monique arrives and is worried because Jordan is angry at being called away from a game he was watching on television. He drops them at the hospital with instructions to call when they are ready to come home. Angel, Monique and Gerald are shown into a small waiting room and that's where they are when a doctor arrives, telling them that Aunt Queen has died. Gerald is grief-stricken and Monique tells him she's sorry his birthday has been so horrible, but that he can now come live with them. Monique then calls Jordan with the news that Gerald will be coming home with her. It's obvious from her side of the conversation that Jordan isn't happy, but Monique tries to tell Gerald that isn't the case. Gerald is angry and grieving for Aunt Queen and says that he would have run away except that Angel is holding his hand.

In chapter eight, six months have passed since Aunt Queen's death. Gerald is very unhappy and only Angel brings any happiness to his life. He says she is like a China doll and he fears that she will get broken. Jordan is abusive to both children and to Monique. When he hits Monique, she rushes to try to make up for whatever displeased him. One night Jordan arrives home, very drunk. He screams for Angel, yelling at her because she left a doll on the steps. He hits her as she rushes past him to pick up the toy. She is about to return when Gerald arrives. Gerald gets between Angel and Jordan





so that Jordan doesn't manage to hit Angel again. Angel is happy to have Gerald as her protector.

Christmas comes and Gerald tells Angel that he's going to see about getting them a small Christmas tree. Angel is excited at the prospect but is more anxious that Gerald not be late coming home from school. Angel stays with a neighbor until Gerald gets home so that she's never alone in the apartment with Jordan. One day during Christmas vacation, Gerald is out of the house and Jordan calls Angel to sit in his lap. She tries to make excuses not to but he insists and she complies. When Gerald interrupts the scene, he's initially confused because he thinks Jordan is being affectionate to Angel. Jordan reacts with anger against Gerald, striking him repeatedly. When Jordan storms out of the apartment, Gerald goes to check on Angel. She's afraid but unhurt. Angel tells Gerald that she's knows he's been unhappy since Aunt Queen's death but that having him in her life is the only happiness she's ever known.

In chapter nine, another year has passed. Gerald awakes on Christmas morning and notes that his life has changed dramatically and that this Christmas there are no smells of food cooking and no anticipation of presents to open. One day when Jordan isn't home and Angel seems happy, Gerald, who has never felt comfortable calling his mother anything other than Monique, asks why they can't live somewhere without Jordan. Monique is immediately angry, saying that Gerald is never to say that again. Gerald, realizing that the situation between Jordan and Angel is becoming more intense and that Angel is soon going to be seriously hurt by his attention, tells Angel that they have to tell someone. Angel refuses, saying that Jordan would deny it and that no one would believe their story. Gerald comes up with an idea and takes some screws out of the frame of Angel's bed. Jordan sets out to fix it but is not able to figure it out and Angel is granted permission to sleep on the extra bed in Gerald's room. Gerald hopes this will stop the situation, at least for the moment. On this, Gerald's second Christmas living with Monique, Jordan comes home with a kitten and gives it to Angel. She's delighted with the gift and names the kitten Tiger.

In chapter ten, Angel contracts chicken pox and Monique stays home with her for two days. On the third day, Jordan tells Monique to go to work and promises that he will stay home with Angel. When Angel wakes, she discovers that Tiger is gone then finds that Jordan is there. Jordan insists that she raise her shirt for him to look at her rash. She pleads with him to stop but he continues, then tells her that he'd put the kitten in the oven. He says that he didn't kill it this time, but that he will if she ever tells.

## Chapters 6 through 10 Analysis

Angel is initially tense with Aunt Queen, though it's obviously she doesn't really care that Monique and Jordan leave her. However, after only a little time in Aunt Queen's presence, Angel begins to calm down and is soon cuddled into Aunt Queen's embrace where she - like Gerald - feels an instant sense of security. It's obvious from the fact that Angel is wearing tights on a hot day that Monique is using the clothing to cover bruises on the child's legs.



The connection between Angel and Gerald is almost immediate. The fact that they've both been abused and neglected by Monique is probably at least partly the reason for that bond, but it seems to go deeper than that. When the two are in the hospital, holding hands after Aunt Queen's death, Angel tells Gerald that she's sorry and says that Aunt Queen gave "real good hugs." Gerald agrees then says he wonders who will "hug us now." The fact that he refers to himself and Angel as a unit is significant and is the beginning of one of the overriding themes of this book, sibling love.

The scene in which Gerald enters the apartment to find Angel in Jordan's lap is the first sign that Jordan is molesting Angel. Up to this point, the reader has been lead to believe that Angel is afraid because of the repeated violence against her. Gerald is filled with rage at what he discovers and he will do whatever it takes to save Angel from Jordan. This is an instance of foreshadowing as well. Gerald assures Angel that he won't let anything happen to her. The reader can predict that this means there will eventually have to be a showdown between Gerald and Jordan.

Gerald points out to Monique that Angel is scared of Jordan and Monique responds that she doesn't understand Angel's fears. She says that Jordan loves Angel and points out that he always goes into Angel's room at night to tuck her in and spend a few minutes with her, even if Angel is already asleep. It seems that Monique should have an idea of what's going on with Jordan but it may be that she honestly doesn't realize, or that she can't believe it's true. When Gerald says that Monique is afraid of Jordan as well, she counters, saying that it's not fear she feels. She insists that she is respectful of Jordan because he is the man of the household.



# Chapters 11 through 15

## Chapters 11 through 15 Summary

In chapter eleven, Gerald arrives home from school and discovers that Angel is feverish and that Jordan has left her alone all day. He makes her scrambled egg and gives her juice, but she's very quiet. When Gerald confronts Monique about Angel being left alone, she says that Jordan stayed home with Angel. At the sound of his name, Angel's eyes go wide with fright but she says nothing. When Gerald says that Angel was at home alone when he got home from school, Monique says he probably went to get French fries for Tiger because "he loves that cat." In the predawn hours of the next morning, Gerald wakes Angel and asks if anything happened with Jordan the previous day. Angel finally breaks and says that Jordan had threatened to kill Tiger and to hurt Gerald and Monique. She pleads with Gerald to make Jordan "go away." Gerald tells Angel that it's going to be alright and asks her to trust him. He then gets dressed and leaves the house. He takes the bus to Hazelwood Middle School, hoping that there will be some adult there he can trust with this horrible secret he and Angel have been keeping. Gerald is in sixth grade but arrives to find the school building vacant. He considers going to the police but fears he won't be believed.

As Gerald is debating what to do, a car pulls up. One of his classmates, a boy named Rob Washington, gets out. Rob's dad is driving the car and Rob explains that his father always drops him off on the way to work, and that Rob finishes his homework and usually goes to sleep in the locker room. Mr. Washington, apparently noting that Gerald seemed strained, touches Gerald on the shoulder and asks if there's anything he can do to help. Gerald is mortified when he breaks into tears. Mr. Washington says that he'll take Gerald for something to eat and sends Rob on inside. At McDonald's, Mr. Washington buys coffee and hot chocolate and waits for Gerald to collect himself. When Gerald finally feels he can talk, he tells Mr. Washington that Jordan is violent and sometimes hits, but that Gerald can handle that. He says that Jordan is now molesting Angel. Mr. Washington says that Gerald has done the right thing by coming forward and says that they must immediately go to the police.

In chapter twelve, Jordan is at home and looking forward to an entire uninterrupted day with Angel. Angel wakes to find Tiger missing again and she can hear Jordan walking around. Jordan enters Angel's bedroom, turns up the radio and closes her door behind him. Jordan doesn't hear Gerald enter with the police, but they arrest Jordan and drag him from the apartment. Angel is hysterical, saying that it's her fault. She believes that Jordan might actually have killed Tiger this time. Monique arrives home and Gerald discovers that Tiger was in Monique's bedroom. With that discovery, Angel and Gerald begin to laugh. Monique grows hysterical with rage, screaming at them that they've sent Jordan "to jail for something he ain't done." They try to tell Monique about Jordan molesting Angel but she refuses to believe it and rushes to her bedroom, crying. Gerald looks at Angel and tells her that "It's just me and you, kid."



In chapter thirteen, Mr. Washington puts in an appearance at the trial and his presence proves vital to Angel and Gerald. When Angel, Gerald and Monique are called into the courtroom, Monique angrily goes ahead, leaving Angel and Gerald to figure out what they're supposed to do. Mr. Washington goes with them and sits near them, providing emotional support. Mr. Washington also helped them through the pre-legal process, ensuring that there was an understanding social worker assigned to the case.

In the courtroom, first Gerald then Angel are forced to testify. Gerald notes that Monique is trying to get Jordan's attention and is mouthing the words, "I'm sorry" across the courtroom but Jordan doesn't pay her any attention. Gerald answers the questions, admitting that he hadn't seen anything incorrect in Jordan's actions but that he knew what was happening. Angel is given a doll to use as she explains where Jordan touched her and the two children are released from the proceedings. The jury finds Jordan guilty and he's sentenced to six to ten years in prison. The judge rules that Angel and Gerald will remain with Monique, at least for the time being. Mr. Washington is concerned and asks Gerald if they can manage. Gerald says that Monique isn't like most mothers, but that she's all he has. He assures Mr. Washington that he can manage but is relieved that Mr. Washington encourages Gerald to call anytime he has a problem.

In chapter fourteen, six years have passed. Monique, though never willing to admit that she knew Jordan was abusing Angel, does stop calling Gerald and Angel liars. Gerald is responsible for their daily lives. He does laundry, cooks and makes sure the bills are paid. Though most young men would have resented the responsibilities, Jordan continues to do it for Angel. Angel has gotten past the worst of the pain and she loves to dance. She's now twelve and Gerald is seventeen. Gerald attends Hazelwood High School and is a member of the basketball team, the Hazelwood Tigers. Mr. Washington calls occasionally, sometimes talking sports or the weather but always making certain that Gerald knows he's available if the children get into trouble.

One particular day, Angel is dancing around the apartment and tells Gerald that she has an opportunity for dance classes. She asks if Monique might pay the cost - fifty dollars. Gerald says that Monique is interviewing for a new job and that if she gets the job she'll be in a good mood. He suggests Angel ask if that happens. Gerald offers to take an after-school job but Angel says he should continue to participate in the basketball team. When Monique arrives, she announces that she has gotten the job. She sounds upset that the dance classes will cost fifty dollars and asks Gerald if the month's rent has been paid. Gerald assures her that it has and urges her to let Angel try the dance class. Monique agrees. Monique then says she's going out to celebrate her new job.

Angel is amazed that she's having the opportunity to dance. A professional group from the Dance Theater of Harlem is holding the six-week program and the slots are limited. There will also be a small group chosen to participate in a recital at the end of the year but Angel doesn't tell even Gerald about this, unwilling to believe she might be talented and lucky enough to get one of those spots.

In chapter fifteen, a boy named Andy, one of Gerald's teammates, asks Gerald if he needs a ride to that night's game. Gerald declines. He likes to ride the bus before the



game, taking time to think about the upcoming game and get himself mentally prepared. Andy and Rob are best friends and Andy is the only one of the group with a car. Andy is not nearly as good at basketball as Rob and is constantly in trouble over his grades. The inner core of the group includes Andy, Rob and Gerald, as well as several other students. One of those is B.J. Carson, who is the team's manager. He's very short, and a school bully named Dante had tried to pick on B.J. only to have B.J. turn and put Dante on the floor with a karate move. B.J., who held a black belt, was never bothered by Dante again. When the team has home games, many of the parents attend, including B.J.'s mother, even though B.J. doesn't play. Monique sometimes shows up and Gerald is proud when that happens.

After school one day, Gerald goes to meet Angel. She is very happy and has done well in the dance class. On this day, she is very excited and tells Gerald that she's been chosen to dance in the recital at the end of the session. Angel and Gerald go home, talking about Angel's costume and how she would fix her hair. As they enter the apartment, Angel yells out the good news to her mother but stops in mid-sentence. Jordan is seated in the living room.

## Chapters 11 through 15 Analysis

Gerald knows Rob before his encounter with Rob and Mr. Washington outside the school. Gerald notes that Mr. Washington is involved in school activities and that Gerald has been invited to Rob's house. Though the Washingtons have a great many comforts that Gerald doesn't have, the family makes him feel welcome and eased any fear he had of being outclassed. While Gerald is still wavering on the morning he encounters Rob, the fact that Mr. Washington puts a hand on his shoulder and offers help is Gerald's undoing. An interesting point is that Rob is not a snob. He doesn't throw it up to Gerald later that Gerald's family is in crisis. This situation creates a bond between Gerald and Rob's family, and forges the way for Angel to make friends with Rob's sister.

As Monique leaves the apartment headed out to celebrate her new job, her heels are clicking on the floor. The sound suddenly sparks a memory in Gerald. He recalls Monique leaving the apartment on the night he caused the fire. Gerald will continue to deal with the pain of these memories even though he is nearing adulthood and is almost old enough to take control of his own life.

The families of several of the basketball players, including Andy and Rob, are much better off financially than Gerald's. However, Gerald has come to be accepted among the group and is not uncomfortable because of this gap. This is a statement of the characters of all three. Andy and Rob could easily have been snobs toward Gerald or ostracizing him from the inner group, but they didn't. And Gerald could have been overly self-conscious about the gap, prompting him to be bitter and to avoid forging friendships with the others.

Andy's home situation seems to be most like that of Gerald. At one point, Andy's car is out of working order, and when someone asks if he needs a ride home, he says that he



does. He then says that his dad has promised to attend the game and provide Andy with a ride home, but says that his dad won't really show up. Andy almost says something else. He starts the sentence with "He's," but then breaks off as if he's realized that he was about to offer up too much information. He stops there and changes the subject. It's never revealed what he was about to say, but it seems that Andy's father may be drinking or doing drugs, and that Andy knows his father won't be in any condition to attend the game. It's left to the reader to decide what Andy might have been about to say, and whether it matters.



# Chapters 16 through 24

## Chapters 16 through 24 Summary

In chapter sixteen, Gerald and Angel note that Jordan looks "harder and meaner", even though he smiles at them when they come through the door. Gerald is no longer the scared child who had tried to avoid a fight with Jordan prior to his arrest. At seventeen, he's an athlete and has found courage to stand up to anything that threatens Angel. He looks directly at Jordan and says that Jordan will not be allowed to stay in the apartment with them. However, Jordan says that he is Angel's father and that the courts have granted him visitation. He says that he is going to make a "big happy family" regardless of what Gerald wants. Jordan then says that Monique has forgiven him and that Gerald should do the same. He says that he's been rehabilitated.

Monique is "fluttery and excited" that Jordan is back in her life. She says that Jordan is not going to move in immediately but that they are going out together. She says that they can be happy again, now that Jordan is home. Gerald is even angrier at this, saying that they'd never been happy with Jordan in their lives and that Monique isn't remembering well. Gerald calls Mr. Washington, who confirms that there's really nothing to be done as long as Jordan obeys the rules of his probation. Mr. Washington suggests that Gerald keep a diary with all Jordan's activities, just in case there comes a time when it's needed. Gerald is glad to be doing something, even though he isn't certain it will help. Over the coming days, Jordan is there often but he keeps his distance from both children. He sometimes asks Angel about school or dance, but doesn't touch her at all.

In chapter seventeen, the Hazelwood Tigers have a game and Angel attends with Rob's sister, Kiara. She seems happy for the first time since Jordan's return and Gerald is happy for that. Jordan and Monique arrive during the game and Gerald finds it impossible to concentrate. His poor playing gets him benched, which makes him angrier. Monique and Jordan leave before the team takes the court at half time. Gerald and Angel go home with the Washingtons that night, but Jordan is in a bad mood and knows that he's eventually going to have to have a showdown with Jordan.

The night arrives for Angel's recital, and she's nervous but happy. Gerald takes time to wish her luck before the performance. Monique is overdressed in a dress of red sequins. She can't be bothered to watch the show because she's too busy looking for Jordan. Gerald says it would be better for Angel if Jordan didn't show, and he doesn't. The Washingtons are in attendance and the entire audience is moved by Angel's dance, which is the story of a child who is afraid of the dark but finally finds sunlight.

In chapter eighteen, Jordan moves back in with Monique just as school dismisses for summer break. Gerald seldom leaves the apartment because of his fear of what Jordan might do to Angel while he's gone. But one day Angel urges Gerald to go out and have fun with his friends. She points out that Jordan has been extremely careful and says



that she can take care of herself. When Gerald gets home, the apartment is in darkness and he's initially afraid that something has happened but discovers that the electricity is off. Angel, though scared, is alright. Then one day Monique leaves the apartment headed for the store to get Jordan some cigarettes. Gerald hears a commotion outside and discovers that his mother has been hit by a car as she was crossing the street.

In chapter nineteen, two weeks pass and Angel still has nightmares. She is also increasingly afraid of Jordan and Gerald notices that Angel is throwing up very often. Monique is released from the hospital, but Gerald says his mother is often fuzzy, as though she isn't aware of her surroundings. Gerald talks to Mr. Washington, who wants to know if there's anything he can do to help. Angel talks to Kiara, who also asks to help. Angel says there's nothing she needs from her friend and says that she's certain everything will be alright in the end. Angel hangs up, admitting that there are some things that are just secret and that she can't tell even Kiara.

In chapter twenty, the summer is unbearably hot and Monique spends a great deal of time either in bed or on the couch. She watches television almost constantly. She is taking many pain pills, which are prescribed by the doctor. Gerald feels sure Jordan is giving her too many of the pain pills and that Monique is not aware that she's taking too many. Then the prescriptions run out and the doctors refuse to provide more. Jordan provides her illegal drugs and Monique takes many of them as well. Gerald believes Jordan is giving her the pills so that he doesn't have to deal with her. Monique is often confused and will even continue to stare at the television when the power is off.

Jordan hates his job and takes it out on everyone around him. He sleeps days and comes home one day to discover that someone has stolen their only air conditioning unit from the bedroom window. He is furious with Monique, who tries to rouse herself but is unable to fully understand what's going on. Jordan turns on her, shoving her down. He then attacks Gerald, accusing him of "taking my stuff" and leaving his face bloody. Angel discovers that Monique has also been hit and tries to decide if her mother is badly hurt. Monique says that she's alright, but says that she didn't really like being hit and doesn't think she's going to let Jordan do it again. Gerald suggests that they go to the police, but Angel realizes that Jordan would only be in jail for a short time. As soon as he is released, he'd be back to get revenge. Gerald agrees that they will do nothing for the moment.

At home, Gerald gets a phone call from the girlfriend of one of the players. Gerald tells her what he knows about the group's plans and hangs up. He's not particularly worried himself, says the boys are always careful and that girls are always ready to overreact. Later, Gerald calls the girl to find out if the boys ever made it to her house. He gets the answering machine at her house and a busy signal when he calls Andy and B.J. He finally reaches the girlfriend of another of the players and learns that the boys had been in an accident. Andy was driving and Rob was killed in the wreck. Gerald is stricken with grief. He falls to the floor, realizing that it could easily have been him in that car. Angel is also upset by the news, and they decide to go to the Washington's house. They arrive just as the Washingtons return home. Kiara and Angel hug. Mr. Washington picks up Rob's basketball from where it is lying on the drive. He rolls it to Gerald and when





Gerald asks if he can "hold onto it for awhile," Mr. Washington says he's sure Rob would want Gerald to have it. He and his wife then cling together and cry as Gerald and Angel leave.

In chapter twenty-two, Andy feels responsible for Rob's death, and it's especially difficult because the two were so close. Mrs. Washington refuses to acknowledge Andy. For Gerald, the loss of Rob's friendship is devastating. Most days he walks home, preferring the exercise of the five-mile walk over the bus. Jordan continues to keep his distance from both Angel and Gerald and seldom has anything to do with Monique either. He stays at a local bar most of the time. One day Angel arrives at home to find that no one else is there. She's happy to have a little time alone and puts a couple of hot dogs on the stove to boil. Jordan arrives home a short time later and is obviously drunk. Angel had become complacent because he'd been so polite to him. Because of that complacency, Jordan gets the advantage over her and she is unable to escape his advance. He slaps her violently and doesn't even notice when the hot dogs boil dry and the stove erupts into flames.

In chapter twenty-three, Gerald returns home from a basketball tournament and sees the smoke from his apartment building. He runs up the stairs and realizes that there's no one at home in any of the apartments. He fumbles with his key and finally gets the door open. He steps inside and sees flames in the kitchen. He knows he has a limited amount of time to get Angel and get out. He rushes to her room and opens the door. He sees Angel, apparently unconscious on the bed. Jordan is approaching the bed. Gerald yells at him and Jordan turns, intent now on Gerald. He says that Gerald was the one who sent him to jail and that he should have killed Gerald years ago. The two fight, but Jordan suddenly realizes that the fire is growing more intense and rushes toward the door, ignoring Angel.

Gerald wraps a blanket around Angel and heads out as well. The smoke is so thick now that he becomes disoriented. He stumbles over something and falls to the floor. There, the smoke is less intense and he is able to get his bearings. He drags Angel to the door and heads to the stairs. They are on the landing when the firemen find them. Outside, Monique is nearly hysterical and fears the children are dead.

In chapter twenty-four, Angel opens her eyes and her immediate fear is for Gerald. When she's reassured that he's in the ambulance with her, Angel relaxes. Monique approaches the doors of the ambulance and asks how the children are. Angel says they're okay and Gerald asks where Jordan has gone. The firemen say that there was a man in the apartment, that he's dead and asks if he's a relative. Gerald realizes that he'd tripped on Jordan's body as he was trying to get Angel out of the apartment. He also realizes that because of that, he was able to find his way out when he and Angel might otherwise have died. Monique realizes that Jordan was running out of the apartment, intent on saving himself and leaving Angel and Gerald behind. Monique asks if she can ride along with Angel and Jordan in the ambulance and just as they are preparing to close the doors, Tiger jumps in and up on Angel's stretcher. The paramedic pretends not to notice and they leave for the hospital.



## Chapters 16 through 24 Analysis

Monique is falling right back into the same routine with Jordan as soon as he returns. She tells Gerald and Angel that Jordan is a changed man and seems to believe it herself. At one point, Jordan is even sweeping the living room floor. Monique might really believe that Jordan has changed, but she hasn't. She bows to his every wish and rushes to try to please him. She is also willing to forgive him, no matter what he does. When Monique is released from the hospital, Gerald and Angel recruit a neighbor to pick her up. Though Monique is in the hospital several days, Jordan never comes to visit her. When Monique, Angel and Gerald arrive at the apartment after Monique's release, Jordan says he was just thinking about coming to visit her and Monique says that it would have been unnecessary. It's left to the reader to decide whether Jordan really had tried to change.

Jordan is more than willing to help Monique stay high on the pain pills and to provide her with illegal drugs after the pain pills run out. Monique has a tendency toward addiction. While Jordan was in jail, she'd often gone out drinking, and Gerald said that she'd merely replaced the drugs with alcohol. It's likely his way of eliminating the problem of dealing with Monique but having Monique addicted to the drugs also makes her more dependent on him - a common goal of abusive situations. What's interesting is that Gerald and Angel see the problem and take it upon themselves to get Monique off the drugs and alcohol.

All the boys who are friends with Rob are struck by the tragedy of his death. It's especially difficult for Andy and Gerald. Andy was closer to Rob than anyone else and was also at the wheel when the accident occurred. He feels responsible and it's obvious that the Washingtons hold him responsible. For Gerald's part, the fact that he's become so dependent on Rob's father makes the loss especially difficult.

Just before Jordan tries to run away and leave Angel and Gerald in the fire, he screams out that he is not Angel's father. That statement is never resolved and it's left to the reader to decide whether it's true.

As Monique stands at the back of the ambulance watching the paramedics work on Gerald and Angel, she seems to suddenly realize that she might have lost both of them to the fire. Monique might actually have been shaken awake by this event and it might be that she's finally ready to grow up and take responsibility for her children.



# Characters

## Gerald Nickelby

By the time Gerald is three, he has learned to read the signs of his mother's mood, a self-preservation technique that he uses to try to avoid her at her most abusive. Gerald describes both physical and emotional abuse. He is often left alone and finds a lighter one day. Playing with it, he sets the kitchen curtains on fire and might have died except for a neighbor boy who checked to make sure Gerald wasn't there alone. Gerald is hospitalized and his mother jailed. His life then takes a change for the better. He moves in with his Aunt Queen. Though confined to a wheelchair, she believes a person should never feel sorry for himself and should never mistreat others. She loves Gerald fully and he returns that love. Under her care, he thrives and becomes a self-confident boy looking forward to his ninth birthday. However, Aunt Queen's death sends him back to live with his mother, Monique. The only thing that keeps him in the situation is his love for his sister, Angel. Gerald's bond with the little girl is complete and he feels a great responsibility toward her. He finds a way to stop his stepfather's abuse of Angel and takes on the responsibility of an adult, though he is still just a child. Over the years, their bond strengthens but when his stepfather, Jordan Sparks, is released from jail, Gerald knows that the situation will eventually erupt. By that time, Gerald is seventeen. He's on the basketball team and has surrounded himself with friends. He still feels somewhat incapable of defending Angel, though he fears Jordan now only for what he might do to Angel. When Gerald discovers their apartment on fire, he rushes in to save Angel, but first has to fight Jordan. Gerald escapes with Angel but Jordan dies, lost in the thick smoke and unable to find the door.

## Monique Sparks

Gerald's mother, she is also mother of Angel and is Jordan's wife. Monique is addicted to drugs as the story opens and is brutal to Gerald, her only child at the time. The abuse is both physical and emotional and she has created an atmosphere of fear in Gerald's life. Monique is jailed after leaving Gerald alone in the house when he is three. Gerald starts a fire and that brings his plight to the attention of authorities. Monique is not a part of Gerald's life until six years later. She arrives at Aunt Queen's house on his ninth birthday. Though she has apparently agreed with Aunt Queen that she won't push the issue of Gerald moving, she almost immediately tells him that's what she wants. Monique is absolutely afraid of her husband, Jordan, and when he is near she instinctively dodges, trying to ward off the blows she knows to be coming. Despite this, she insists that she isn't afraid but merely has a healthy respect for Jordan, and that the relationship is normal. She also refuses to intervene when Jordan hits Angel and Gerald. Monique has an addictive personality and readily falls into a pattern of drinking after she is released from jail. After her accident, she becomes addicted to pain pills, which Jordan replaces with illegal drugs after her prescriptions run out. She seems to realize her mistakes after the apartment fire that almost takes the lives of Gerald and



Angel. At that point, she seems to understand that Jordan was running out on the children and would have left them to die in the fire.

## **Jordan Sparks**

Husband of Monique, he claims to be Angel's father right up until the end of the book. He is a cruel person and is physically violent with Monique as well as Angel and Gerald. When Jordan is caught molesting Angel, he's arrested and spends six years in jail. Upon his release, Monique accepts that he's changed and for a period of time, it seems she might be right. But Jordan's true nature comes through and he dies in a fire, attempting to run away and leave Gerald and Angel to die.

## **Queen Marie Antoinette Lincoln**

Aunt of Monique and great-aunt of Gerald and Angel, she likes to be called Aunt Queen. She is confined to a wheelchair but refuses to feel sorry for herself. When a doctor asks if she is able to take care of Gerald, she says that she's capable of doing whatever is necessary. She gains custody of Gerald when he, at three, is almost killed in an apartment fire. She seeks to gain custody of Angel but is unable to do so. She dies suddenly, possibly as a result of the strain of Monique's visit and the conflict she knows to be ahead.

## **Angel Sparks**

Gerald's half-sister, he doesn't know of her existence until he's nine. Angel feels an immediate connection with Gerald and has obviously been abused by Monique and/or Jordan. Angel is molested by Jordan and this situation ends with Jordan being in jail. Angel is a talented dancer and is excited when she lands a role in a recital.

## **Derryl Washington**

Rob's father. Mr. Washington is an understanding man and realizes that Gerald has a problem. When he learns that Gerald believes Jordan is molesting Angel, Mr. Washington doesn't wait but goes directly to the police. He remains a friend to Gerald, making sure that Gerald knows he has an adult who is willing to step in anytime Gerald needs help.

## **Rob Washington**

Rob is in Gerald's grade and they are teammates on the high school basketball team. Though his family is much better off financially than Gerald's, Rob sometimes invites Gerald over and is never condescending. Rob is an excellent basketball player and student. He dies in an accident when Gerald is seventeen.



## **Kiara Washington**

Rob's little sister, she befriends Angel and Angel sometimes spends the night at Kiara's house. When Angel and Gerald learn that Rob is killed in an accident, they go to the Washington's house. Kiara falls gratefully into the arms of Angel, crying bitterly for her loss. Kiara is also available for Angel, but Angel is reluctant to talk to Kiara about Jordan's abuse.

## **Andy**

A classmate of Gerald and Rob, he is always struggling with grades. He seems to be in a situation similar to that of Gerald and it's likely that his father is addicted either to drugs or alcohol. Andy is the first of their group to get a car of his own and he is driving on the night Rob is killed.

## **B.J. Cason**

The manager of the Hazelwood High School Tigers, he is a short but stocky and has a black belt in karate. He is picked on by the school bully, but when B.J. easily kicks the boy to the ground, he's left alone. B.J.'s mother is among those who usually attend home games.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Cincinnati**

Where Gerald lives with his mother.

### **General Hospital**

Where Aunt Queen is taken after she collapses and where Gerald learns that she died.

### **Atlanta**

Where Angel says she lived prior to moving to Cincinnati.

### **Tiger**

The name Angel gives her cat.

### **Hazelwood Middle School**

Where Gerald is attending school when he tells Mr. Washington that Jordan is abusing Angel.

### **McDonald's**

Where Mr. Washington takes Gerald the day Gerald decides he has to tell someone that Jordan is molesting Angel.

### **Hazelwood High School**

Where Gerald attends high school with Rob and Andy, and where he plays on the basketball team.

### **Hazelwood Tigers**

The name of the basketball team for which Gerald plays.



## **Dance Theater of Harlem**

The name of the group that gives dance lessons at Angel's school and that chooses her for a role in the recital.

## **Black Belt**

The karate degree held by B.J. Cason.



# Themes

## The Effects of Abuse

The effects of abuse are apparent from the time the story opens. Gerald, at only three years old, has already learned that he has to read his mother's moods, that he has to stay out of her way when she's high, and that the safest place for him is behind the couch where he is not in his mother's line of vision and therefore not likely to bear the brunt of her anger. Gerald escapes the environment, but Angel is not so fortunate. When Gerald meets Angel for the first time, it's hot outside, but Angel is wearing tights. When Aunt Queen suggests she pull them off, Angel is terrified. She knows that she has bruises on her legs and that Monique and Jordan will punish her for letting anyone know about the abuse. Angel spends most of her time being afraid and it's not until Jordan - the principle abuser - is in jail that her talent for dancing is discovered. Monique is another example of the effects of abuse. She rushes to do whatever Jordan demands, regardless of whether it's reasonable. She seldom tries to intervene when he beats the children and refuses to believe that he molested Angel. When Jordan returns, Monique rushes to forgive him and encourages him to come back into their lives. In her mind, the family was happy when Jordan was with them and she refuses to believe anything else. The three victims of abuse here - Monique, Angel and Gerald - escape relatively unscathed and seem to be ready to put their lives together outside that pattern of abusive behavior.

## Sibling Love

Gerald and Angel don't meet until Gerald is twelve and Angel is in the first grade. Up to that point, Gerald hadn't even known that Angel existed, though it seems likely that Angel, because she lives with Monique, knew of Gerald's existence. On the day they meet for the first time, Monique makes Gerald very angry and he leaves the house. But when he returns, despite being afraid and angry, he's drawn to the little girl. Angel, even at such a young age, is perceptive and realizes that Gerald is afraid. They play together and when Aunt Queen dies, it's Angel who comforts Gerald. When Gerald would have run away from the situation, he realizes that he can't abandon Angel. After Gerald moves in with the family, the abuse against Angel slacks off for awhile. When Angel is being abused or even molested, it's Gerald who steps in and tries to put a stop to it. He puts himself between Jordan and Angel, physically taking the blows that are aimed at Angel. When Angel is too afraid to take the steps to make the abuse stop, it's Gerald who finds the courage to tell someone who can help. This sibling bond is seen to a lesser degree between Rob and Kiara. Though they don't seem to have the same level of love, Kiara is obviously devastated when Rob dies in a car accident.





## The Importance of Environment

Environment is an important theme in the story, though the effects are not really discussed. Gerald is living with his mother as a very young boy and he is already dealing with the effects of an abusive and neglectful mother. It's noted that he doesn't know anything that he would have learned from Sesame Street and doesn't even know the name of the city where he lives. But by the time he's eight, he is living with his Aunt Queen and has developed a love of reading - a love that would probably not have been fostered under his mother's care. It's also because of his time with Aunt Queen that Gerald learns to be gentle and to love. He adores Aunt Queen and transfers that love to Angel after Aunt Queen's death. It seems likely that Gerald is anxious to protect Angel because he's lived in a home where he was safe, loved and protected. If he had never had that time with Aunt Queen, it seems reasonable that Gerald would have come to accept his mother's neglect and Jordan's abuse as normal, acceptable behavior. It also seems that having Gerald as part of her life makes Angel's life better to the point that she wants to return that. Though Angel continues to live with Jordan and Monique and the constant threats they make, she seems to have a better environment because of Gerald's presence. This change, for Angel, may be the reason that she remains a sensitive, caring little girl. As is the case with Gerald's time with Aunt Queen, it seems reasonable to believe that Angel may have come to accept abuse and neglect as normal, acceptable behavior except for the impact Gerald makes on her environment.

# Style

## Point of View

The story is presented in third person from Gerald's perspective. This means that the reader is limited to knowing only what Gerald knows. For example, when Monique arrives at Aunt Queen's on Gerald's birthday, she has a daughter with her. Gerald only then learns that Aunt Queen had known about the child since her birth but that she was unsuccessful in her attempt to get custody of the little girl. These lapses in information are not a real problem because the reader learns about them as they become relevant to Gerald's life. Typically, a limited perspective means that the reader may have a biased view of the events. In this case, that doesn't seem to be true. For example, Gerald admits to sometimes drinking beer with the boys he spends time with. The fact that there are repeated tragedies in Gerald's life makes the perspective even more important. A reader who was learning about the events of Gerald's life - his mother's drug habit, the beatings at the hands of her boyfriend, the death of his best friend - from a perspective other than Gerald's would probably not be nearly as empathetic to Gerald's situation. The perspective is appropriate for the story. The use of this perspective keeps the reader fully focused on Gerald, who is the main character of the story, but allows the reader to keep track of the other characters, including Angel, Monique, Aunt Queen, Jordan Sparks and the Washington family.

There are some very minor exceptions to this limited perspective. For example, when Aunt Queen gives Gerald the bicycle for his ninth birthday, she notes that she'd had the bike on layaway for months and that she'd made sacrifices to get it paid out in time. Gerald already knew these facts but they are confirmed for the reader through Aunt Queen's perspective.

## Setting

The story is set in Cincinnati. The city is real and using a real setting adds a level of believability to the story that might otherwise be missing. Sharon Draper has written several books set in the Hazelwood High School of Cincinnati. The setting is described, but not in any great detail. At one point, Gerald mentions that he feels uneasy in his neighborhood and that he wishes he lived in a place without so many dark corners and graffiti over every flat surface. At another point, he says that his bicycle is stolen soon after he moves into the apartment with Monique and Jordan. There are several distinct settings within the overall setting of Cincinnati. Aunt Queen's house is one of those. Gerald describes some details of that setting, saying that he'd been given permission on his eighth birthday to explore both the attic and basement. There's also a wheelchair ramp on the back porch and one of the neighbor's drives is sloped enough for Gerald to ride down it on his homemade go-cart. The apartments Gerald lives in with Monique, Angel and Jordan are not described fully other than the fact that they are usually small and overly hot in the summertime. The fact that there is not a great deal of description



means the reader may not have a good mental picture of the setting, but this shouldn't be a problem for most readers. The book was published in 1997 and it seems this was probably about the time setting for the story. Most of the modern conveniences exist but there is no mention of cell phones, meaning the time setting is likely at least in the mid-1990s, but could possibly be even earlier than that.

## Language and Meaning

The overall tone of the story is one of hope and love, though the actions of Jordan and Monique keep Gerald and Angel living in fear a great deal of the time. The story includes both narrative and dialogue. The dialogue is probably reasonable to the time and people though they will seem somewhat stiff and unnatural to some readers. Words such as "trippin'" and "peace" are used but are not overused. There are also passages of dialogue in which the adults are very abusive, especially toward the children. As the story opens, Monique threatens Gerald, though he is only three at the time. She tells him to sit "your stinkin', useless butt" down and threatens to "bust your greasy face in." The subject matter may be offensive to some readers. Angel is being molested by the man she believes to be her father. While it's obvious that there is physical, mental and sexual abuse going on, the writer does handle it carefully. There are no offensive details included in the story. The story is easily understood and followed and the reader with an average vocabulary should have no trouble comprehending the story.

## Structure

The book is divided into twenty-four chapters. Each is titled by number only and there are no words to offer a clue as to what the reader may expect in that chapter. The majority of the chapters range from six to ten pages. Each chapter begins on a new page. The final chapter, chapter twenty-four, is barely three pages in length. At the end of that chapter, the author has offered a paragraph that begins, "For readers who would like further information or who need help," and includes contact information for the National Child Abuse Hotline and the National Domestic Abuse Hotline. The book includes an appropriate mix of dialog and narration. Both are believable and acceptable to the storyline. There are several instances of foreshadowing. Chapters one and two cover Gerald's very early childhood during the time prior to his mother leaving him behind. Chapter three opens six years after Gerald began his life with Aunt Queen. A period of six months passes between chapters seven and eight. Chapter thirteen ends with Jordan's conviction for child abuse and chapter fourteen begins six years later. The author makes these time lapses completely clear so there is no confusion to the reader.



## Quotes

"I'm poor, not stupid. I know that you can't cut off heat to disabled customers in the middle of winter, especially disabled customers with small children."

Chap. 3, p. 22

"That baby's missin' some lovin' in her life. And I suspect she's got some hurtin' in her life that I'm gonna put a stop to."

Chap. 6, p. 43

"The only thing that kept him from bolting out of the hospital door and down the street into the darkness of forever was the warm little hand that held his, passing its fragile strength to him."

Chap. 7, p. 50

"Terrified, she could only weep silently as he touched her, rubbing his hand over her arms, her back, her legs. He had done this many times before, ever since she was a baby in Atlanta."

Chap. 8, p. 56

"He sighed as he thought of how much his life had changed in just one year. Today, no smells of dressing and sauce and pie drifted to his room - only the strong silent smell of fear and secrets."

Chap. 9, p. 59

"He survived each day by dealing with necessities - going to school, looking out for Angel, and hating Jordan Sparks. Jordan was mean - he smacked Gerald on the back of his head if he got a C on his report card, he punched him on his arm if he spilled the milk, and he whacked him on his legs for not bringing him a beer fast enough."

Chap. 9, p. 59

"They stood there for a minute, clinging to each other in fear of the darkness they had seen. Angel, too terrified to tell and too frightened not to, clung to her cat and wept."

Chap. 10, p. 68

"I ought to kill both of you. How dare you lie on a good man like Jordan."

Chap. 12, p. 78

"I can handle Monique. She ain't like most mamas, but she's all we got." Chapter 13, Page 87

"He never complained about the difficulty of taking care of his little sister; rather, Angels hugs and smiles kept him going. Gerald was her warrior and protector and she adored him."

Chap. 14, p. 89



"The dishes finished, Angel took Tiger into her room and turned on the radio. She danced with her cat and danced with her dreams while Gerald wrestled with memories of pain."

Chap. 14, p. 94

"I don't think I'm gonna let him hit me anymore. Did he hit you too, Gerald? That's not good, not very good."

Chap. 20, p. 128

"Even Gerald, who had seen up close the awful things a drunken man can do, would split a six-pack with Andy and Rob. It made him feel strong and in charge of his life."

Chap. 21, p. 136

"It had only been a few hours before that Jordan had actually been smiling. He was smiling once again - but it was the smile of a monster that lived within Jordan Sparks."

Chap. 22, p. 144



## Topics for Discussion

Who is Gerald Nickelby? Describe his life. What are the negative points of his life? What are the positive points? How does Gerald deal with the various negative aspects of his life? Is he a responsible youngster? Support your answer with examples from the story.

Who is Angel? What is her relationship to Gerald? To Monique? To Jordan? What is she like? How does she develop a friendship with Kiara Washington? How does Angel deal with the abusive home life?

Who is Monique? What is her relationship to Jordan? To Gerald? To Angel? To Aunt Queen? Why is Monique sent to jail? What kind of mother is she? What is her life like? Support your answers with examples from the story.

Who is Aunt Queen? What kind of person is she? What is her role in Gerald's life? What gift does she give him for his eighth birthday? What does she give him for his ninth birthday? What does she tell Gerald about Monique's insistence that Gerald move in with his mother? What happens to change that?

Who is Jordan Sparks? What is his role in Gerald's life? In Angel's life? In Monique's life? What kind of person is he? Why does he go to jail? When he gets out of jail, he swears that he's been rehabilitated and is a changed person. Do you believe that this was true or was it an act? Support your answers.

Compare the characters of Jordan Sparks and Derryl Washington. How are the two similar? How are they different? What is the difference in the roles they play in the lives of Angel and Gerald?

Who is B.J. Cason? Andy? Rob Washington? Kiara Washington? Tiger? What is the role each of them plays in the story? Compare any of these characters with the characters of either Gerald or Angel. How are they similar? How are they different?