

The Key to the Golden Firebird Study Guide

The Key to the Golden Firebird by Maureen Johnson

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Plot Summary

May, Palmer and Brooks Gold lost their father to a heart attack as he was exiting his beloved classic Firebird after work. The death was sudden and unexpected, leaving the family in shock. A year goes by and the girls and their mother are trying to hold on to some semblance of a normal family life. However, the private pain that each member is experiencing is driving them apart.

May Gold is the main focus of the story. However, the story is also recounted from her sisters' point-of-view. May is the dependable, middle child. May is responsible for her sisters while her mother works. In order to help her family, May needs to pass her driver's exam. Pete, her family friend and crush, offers to help her. May passes her driver's test and begins to discover her feelings for Pete.

Brooks Gold is the oldest daughter. She can't handle the passing of her father and begins to act out, getting drunk and high. Brooks is put on probation after receiving a DUI. The differences in expectations for Brooks and May causes sibling rivalry and hard feelings between the two.

Palmer Gold is the baby of the family. She watches as her family falls apart, but is unable to connect with her sisters in order to talk to them about what is happening. Palmer works out her feelings on the softball field. She finds their father's ashes and institutes a plan to bring the girls together.

The girls spread their father's ashes on the pitcher's mound at Camden Yards in Baltimore, Maryland. The risks that they take in doing so help to bond the sisters together. In the end, the Gold women move forward in their lives together as a family unit.



Before.

Before. Summary

The section begins with diary entries from May. She describes her father's Firebird.

May Gold and her 13-year-old sister, Palmer, are waiting in the local swim club's pool house for May's nemesis, Peter Camp. Peter is eleven months older than May and has made a habit of pulling practical jokes over on her since they first met - shortly after May was born. The Golds and the Camps are family friends who have spent a lot of time together over the years. Although May and Peter went to the same schools most of their lives, they were separated in high school when he went on to public school and the next year she began high school at an all girls school in downtown Philadelphia.

During the families' annual trip to Camden Yards, Pete played the ultimate prank on May. He told the baseball managers that May was born blind and had recently recovered her eyesight. He told them it was her lifelong dream to see an Orioles game. The mascot came to take her to the field where she was applauded and her face was put up on the jumbo screens. May was humiliated and decided to get revenge.

May, Palmer and their older sister, Brooks, have a plan. Peter thinks he is meeting his crush, Diana Haverty, at the pool for a private swim. Diana doesn't show, but May and Palmer, posing as Diana, manage to get Peter to take off his clothes and get in the pool. Palmer runs out and takes Pete's clothes and May takes Polaroid instant pictures of him chasing them. Pete realizes they are taking pics of him naked and jumps back in the pool. Brooks meets the girls in their minivan and drives home. When they arrive there is a police car and ambulance at their house.

The girls arrive home to find the emergency team in the garage next to their father's Firebird. They are covering something on a stretcher. May processes everything in a daze. She finds Pete's father on the phone in the kitchen and wonders if she should tell him his son is at the pool without clothes. Richard hangs up the phone and tells May that her father had a heart attack about 45 minutes earlier. There was nothing that could be done when the medics arrived; he is dead. Richard asks May not to call her mother. Her mother knows something is wrong, but he doesn't want her to find out about her husband's death while driving in the car. May agrees and goes outside to her special spot in the back yard. She begins to laugh hysterically. Pete finds her there and she tells him that she has his wallet.

Before. Analysis

May's diary entries are recounted in the first-person perspective. They are short and show her intellectual humor.



May is the central character of the book and the reader is privy to her thoughts in the text. The author wastes no time jumping into the action of the story. This section is both informative and highly entertaining. The characters' personalities are told actively through action and dialogue.

May, Brooks, and Palmer are close sisters. However, as of yet, it is unclear how far apart in age they are. Brooks is the oldest Gold sister and Palmer is the youngest. As May remembers the family's trip to Camden Yards the reader discovers that her father is a playful person and her family appreciates the humor in Pete's pranks. The girls plan the revenge prank on Pete as a team. Their roles in the family are evident in their roles in the prank: Brooks isn't there, but she is the getaway driver, Palmer is the instigator, and May wants revenge but must be prodded into action by Palmer.

Clearly there is romantic tension between May and Pete. May describes herself as the least attractive of the sisters with strawberry blond hair and short legs. She also identifies herself as the most intelligent of the sisters. Given that May is the target of Pete's jokes and he seeks her out in the family yard after he learns of her father's death implies he may have feelings for May. May's admiration of Pete's form when he is naked, and her desire to seek revenge on him for his earlier prank imply that the feelings may be mutual.



Next May: Chs. 1 - 5.

Next May: Chs. 1 - 5. Summary

In Chapter 1, May reveals that her real name is Mayzie and that she and her sisters are all named after her father's favorite baseball players. May is the only sister who doesn't play softball. It has been almost a year since her father's death and May is taking her driver's test. She is slow behind the wheel and the test proctor is becoming increasingly irritated. May fails her driver's test and her mother takes her home. May's mother is a former punk rock girl turned soccer mom. She is Dutch and is a nurse. She apologizes to May for not having more time to teach her to drive; May tells her she couldn't be helped because their schedules were at odds lately. Mrs. Gold tells May that Brooks will take May to work later. She asks May to make sure Palmer has a descent dinner. May comes home to find Palmer watching TV. She goes upstairs to sleep and comes down to fix dinner and get ready for work. May has to clean up the mess left by the rest of the household and scavenge for something edible to feed herself and Palmer. She settles on mac and cheese with hamburger. May and Palmer exchange snippy words over a phone call that they let go to voice mail. Palmer is rude to May and tells her she doesn't know where Brooks is, that Brooks left the house with David. David is her new boyfriend who usually brings Brooks home late and drunk. May resentfully stares out the window into the rain and wonders how she is going to get to work.

Brooks is in the care with Dave and his friends: Jamie, Fred and Damage/Bob/Rick. Brooks refers to them as Dave's henchmen. Dave hands Brooks a bottle of a drink he refers to as King of Pain. It is orange and contains 151 proof rum. The kind that lights on fire. Fred tells about a time when he lit the rum on fire and burned his eyebrows. He shows Brooks the scarred skin. All the other kids think this is funny. The group is drunk and Dave is driving them to the art museum so they can play out the movie Rocky on the steps. Dave's friends could be described as punk/alternative or possibly Goth. Jamie is wasted and keeps talking about getting a tattoo. Everyone leaves and Brooks finds herself alone with Dave. He asks her why she still plays softball if she isn't that into it anymore. It occurs to Brooks for the first time that she can quit. Dave kisses Brooks. His friends come back to the care, but he waives them off.

Pete comes to pick up May for work. She gets into the car and he throws a bunch of trash from the passenger seat into the back. Pete pulls a prank and tells May that he took the transmission out of the car and replaced it with a duel battery. He makes a huge show of trying to get it started and even looks under the hood. Right as May starts to break down he tells her he is joking that you can't take out a transmission and get a car to run. May isn't thrilled with him. She tells him she flunked her test and thinks about how sometimes Pete knows too much about her family. Their father didn't have insurance and the Gold family is now in dire financial straits. Pete offers to pick May up after work at eleven and tells her he is working on the production crew for the school's musical.



Pete comes early to pick May up at the Presto Espresso, the job she has been working since December. May works with Nell Dodd, the assistant manager. May describes Nell as "challenged." Nell is currently a vegan and dropped out of college just two weeks in because she thought the classes were unchallenging. May feels working at the coffee shop is an exercise in killing her slowly. Pete drops May off at home and offers to teach her to drive. He said his mom suggested it, but it is something he wants to do. May feels like a charity case. Pete is always being sent to the Gold house to do chores. She accepts his offer. May returns home to find Palmer still planted in front of the TV where she left her four hours earlier. She asks if Brooks called, Palmer says no and that is all the words they exchange. May goes to bed and the phone rings. Pete asks when she wants to start driving practice. They agree on Monday at 6:00.

In Chapter 2, Palmer is so good at softball that she is a freshman on the varsity team. She practices hard so that some day she can be better than Brooks, the star of the team. Brooks is so good she may be able to get a scholarship or try out for the Olympic team. Palmer finds out at practice that Brooks quit the team. She returns home and questions her sister about her choice. Brooks tells her she doesn't want to play pro ball and quit because she is tired of playing. Palmer can't understand this. May comes in and Palmer tells her that Brooks quit. May asks Brooks how she will pay for college without a scholarship, there is only one pool of money for the three of them to go to school. Brooks shoots back that May is the only one who attends a private high school and that maybe they could use the money for something else. May tells her that grandma and grandpa Gold pay her tuition and it is in the hopes of May receiving an academic scholarship for college. May tells her sisters that Pete is picking her up for driving lessons. Brooks teases May about Pete. Palmer hopes that Pete can talk some sense into Brooks, but May is out the door before she can tell him what has happened. Palmer shuts the door and Brooks goes upstairs to tell her mom she quit softball.

The radiator is leaking in Pete's car; as a result he has the heat blasting in an attempt to cool off the engine. The car is like a sauna when May gets in. Pete takes May to an empty parking lot where they spend time driving. May has a hard time judging distances in the car, so Pete suggests she drive on the left side of the road so she can see the curb. He cracks a joke about pretending to be in England and tries a British accent. May is frustrated and is having a hard time driving. She tells Pete is better at things than she is. Pete tells her she is always ahead of him in academics. By the end of the lesson May is driving on the correct side of the road and is driving the correct distance from the curb. Pete tries to get May to open up about Brooks, but she doesn't want to tell him what is happening with the softball team. May mentions that the only reason she has to learn to drive is so she can do stuff for her mom. Pete offers to take her driving some more and May asks what the catch is. Pete laughs and tells her she'll see.

In Chapter 3, May has to go through Brooks' drawers for a pair of clean underwear. Brooks was assigned new chores after quitting softball, but hasn't bothered to do any of them. Laundry is on her list. May catches the bus for the hour ride to her private school and meets her best friend, Linda Fan, when she gets off the bus. Linda's parents are doctors and May bets that Linda never has to look for clean underwear. Linda asks about May's driving lessons and tells her she will be able to get a life of her own when



she can drive. May doubts it. The family only has one car and no money for insurance to cover another driver. Again May says she is only learning to drive so she can do things for her mom.

Palmer loves softball. Being on the field is the only place she doesn't feel gangly and gawky. She feels uncomfortable and unfeminine in the locker room where the other girls are all so cute and well built. Palmer overhears a conversation between two girls about Brooks. They talk about how Brooks' boyfriend is a dealer. Palmer's mom picks her up and Palmer asks what she is going to do about Brooks. Mrs. Gold tells Palmer there is nothing she can do, she can't force Brooks to play softball.

Pete picks May up at work and takes her "parking." He thinks the innuendo is a riot, May tolerates the joke and they drive behind Pets Mart to practice parking the car. As May gets behind the wheel, Pete mentions that he heard about Brooks quitting softball. He asks if this is why May was so mad the last time they drove. May tells him she can't remember. She mentions wearing Brooks' underwear and Pete tries to take a peek under the side of her waistband. May freaks out and runs the car over a parking block. It takes May a while to realize the accident was Pete's fault and not hers. They end the lesson and Pete drops her off at home.

Palmer has been experiencing irregular heart beats since her father's death. She begins to panic as another one begins. She gets out of bed, turns on the TV in the living room and lays down in front of it. May comes to tell her to turn down the volume and asks if Brooks has returned. She hasn't. May returns to bed and Palmer goes into the garage. She stands in front of the Firebird. No one has opened the door since her father's death. Palmer gets into the car and stretches out in the backseat to sleep. A drunk Brooks comes home and teases her for being in the car. Palmer gets out and goes inside.

In Chapter 4, Nell approaches May at work and asks about her relationship with Pete. May tells her they are just friends and Nell asks for Pete's phone number. May doesn't really want Nell to have it, but she gives it to her because she can't think of a reason not to.

Pete pulls up behind May on her bike when she gets home. The move scares her to death. He is dressed in all black because he has been working the lights at the theater. Pete hands May a box of ramen noodles his mom picked up at the store. He tells her that Nell called and asks May what she thinks. May tells him she should go out with her. Pete tells May he agreed to do that some time. Pete begins to fidget and tells May he hasn't decided what to do about prom yet. May isn't sure what to say and spends a long time putting her bike away. She forgot that Pete and Brooks were in the same grade and that he would be going to prom. She suggests he ask Nell. Pete replies that he thought she would say that.

Palmer watches May and Pete outside with the noodles and wonders what is between them. She has always liked Pete as a friend. Palmer asks May about Pete, but doesn't get an answer as May goes upstairs to bed. Palmer knows she won't be able to sleep at night so she goes to her mother's room and pulls out the boxes from under her mom's



bed. There are years worth of boxes of keepsakes and school work from the girls. Palmer is pulling out more stuff when Brooks and Dave enter. She goes downstairs to discover them making out in the kitchen. Brooks sees Palmer and tells her to go away. Palmer goes to the living room to watch Sports Center and Dave leaves. After Brooks goes to bed, Palmer returns to her mother's room to put things back where she found them.

In Chapter 5, Brooks wakes up hung over on a Friday morning and has to get ready for school. She stayed out late at a pool party and parties too much. She arrives at study hall after spending ten minutes in the school bathroom trying not to get sick. Dave sees her and takes her to the nurse's office. He hugs her and is worried about her. Brooks tells him that today is the one year anniversary of her father's death. He rubs her back and tells her to go home and rest. Then he watches until she enters the nurse's office.

Diana pulls up to see if Palmer needs a ride home. Practice is over and she is waiting for Brooks to pick her up. When Brooks doesn't show, Palmer finds some money and calls May from a pay phone. May tells her to hang tight, she will send someone. Palmer hopes that someone is Pete. Pete is someone she trusts and can feel happy around. She thinks about the emotional game that Pete and May are playing and figures he will come because May will call him first.

It is Memorial Weekend and May can tell that everyone knows it is the anniversary of her father's death. She is tired of telling people she is ok and isn't sure what normal is anymore. Nell tells May that she and Pete went out on a date. She tells May that he collects movies and they watched one together, and he asked her to prom. May begins to feel sick and leaves for some aspirin.

May isn't happy to see Pete's car in the driveway when she gets home. She is even more upset that he took Palmer to dinner and now she has to eat alone while doing homework - again. Pete and May have a tense exchange in the kitchen. She tells him she knows he asked Nell to the prom, but they don't discuss it further. Pete tells her that his father has ordered a memorial bench for her father at the ballpark. He asks if they have plans to remember her father this weekend and she tells him no. He tries to talk to her about Brooks and about how she has been drinking more and more. May doesn't want to talk about it. Pete leaves and May is upset and alone.

Next May: Chs. 1 - 5. Analysis

In Chapter 1, the Gold family is starting to show the strain of losing a parent. May and Palmer, once close, are at each other's throats. Brooks is out drinking, which is out of character for her. Mrs. Gold works late hours and doesn't have time to do everything herself. May is the child who helps her mother by pulling slack in the house.

Brooks is happy to allow Dave to determine her life right now. She is busy escaping her home and feelings by drinking and acting out.



May can count on Pete to be there for her. He is there for her the day her father dies and he is now there to pick her up in the rain. He is also there for her emotionally as he tries to tease her out of her bad mood.

May hates work, but needs the money. She is academically a high achiever and feels that Nell is all talk. May feels like a charity case for Pete and his family even though the Camps go out of their way to make their help seem normal. Pete cleans the gutters, mows the lawn; his mother sends over stuff she buys in bulk claiming the items were too good of a deal to pass up. Pete is clearly offering to help May because he wants to; it is May who feels like an obligation.

Chapter 2 begins with Palmer. She is both hurt and upset that Brooks quit the team without telling her first. Softball is something they share and something they shared with their father. Brooks' defection is just another way the family is changing and falling apart.

Pete is a funny guy and he tries to use humor to shake May out of her bad news. He can also be serious in ways. He is paying for his car by working at a theatrical rental company, something May didn't know. He compliments May on her grades and comes up with good solutions for her driving inabilities. May is too caught up in her own world to appreciate the things Pete is doing for her. She still feels that he is helping her for a reason, not just to spend time with her or be her friend. May isn't willing to share her burdens with anyone yet. She seems to be struggling to function.

In Chapter 3, May is bitter about her father's death. She blames him for his heart attack, feeling that he was a big man who didn't eat well or exercise. She also feels that Brooks was his favorite, in his eyes Brooks could do no wrong. Even though May considers Brooks to be lazy, she feels her father didn't care because Brooks could play softball so well. May's resentment toward Brooks is building, as is her frustration with being the only person contributing to the overall wellbeing of the family.

May isn't the only sister who feels as if she is unattractive. Palmer also suffers from some body issues. She is tall and flat chested and this bothers her. Palmer feels abandoned by Brooks and is angry about it.

Pete and May are struggling to redefine their relationship. Pete's attempt to peek at May's underwear was meant as a normal joke between the two, but something has changed with them and the joke backfired.

The reader begins to understand why Palmer is always in front of the TV. She seems to possibly have panic attacks of some sort. As with all of the girls, Palmer feels she is alone.

In Chapter 4, May is not happy when Nell asks for Pete's number, but she doesn't want to think too much about why she is uncomfortable.



It is clear to the reader that Pete wants to ask May to prom but May is unaware of his intention. She still sees herself as Pete's pest and not as someone he would be attracted to.

Palmer has the unique position to watch as her sisters begin to become involved in relationship. She can also see how each of them is having trouble coping. Even though she can see they are also falling apart, the emotional distance between the sisters leaves her feeling isolated and alone.

In Chapter 5, Brooks is out of control. She is having a difficult time dealing with her father's death. Her boyfriend's access to drugs and alcohol is not helping the situation. It seems that Dave cares for Brooks and he is very tender with her while she is sick. Brooks thinks it is worth being sick just to be coddled by him.

Palmer counts on Pete as much as May does, but she is not burdened by sexual attraction so she is able to admit she depends on him.

May isn't happy to hear about Nell and Pete, but it is what she needs to hear so that she can stop thinking about her father. She is upset to find that Pete and Palmer have been having a good time and is a little jealous of their happiness. Pete is trying hard to get May to open up to him, but she isn't ready yet.



June: Chs. 6 - 8.

June: Chs. 6 - 8. Summary

In Chapter 6, May writes another diary entry about the Firebird. Brooks was conceived in the car. The car was also used to rush Mrs. Gold to the hospital for May's delivery.

Dave finally asked Brooks to prom two weeks before the event. She was able to borrow the items she needed and then get some luxury things with the \$200 her Gold grandparents sent to help out with the dance. Brooks is at the drug store finishing the items on her prom list and decides to buy condoms. Dave has never officially said they were boyfriend and girlfriend, but Brooks thinks that sex at prom just might seal the deal. She is a virgin, but only because the right opportunity hasn't presented itself. Prom is perfect. She goes to check out and is embarrassed to be rung up by a girl in her Spanish class.

Mrs. Grady, the school's coach, calls Palmer into her office and offers her the chance to play in front of scouts in July. She tells Palmer that she can go for free if she agrees to work as Grady's assistant. Palmer is thrilled. She doesn't know how Grady knows the family is in financial straits and she doesn't care. She agrees to talk to her mom. Palmer thinks she might actually get some sleep that night.

In Chapter 7, Linda finds May sulking at her locker and brings her into the girls' bathroom. May says she is upset over Brooks' prom, which is that night, but Linda thinks May is actually upset that Pete is going to prom with Nell. May denies that she likes Pete, saying he is more like a brother to her than anything else. Linda tells Nell that the only reason Pete is dating Nell is because she told him to. She also warns May not to let Nell tell her too many personal details about her relationship with Pete.

May has to be forced to come downstairs to see Brooks and Dave take prom pictures. Dave thinks May's Polaroid Instamatic camera is cool and wants to borrow it. May says "no." Brooks follows May into the kitchen trying to get the camera, but May shuts her up by mentioning Brooks' prom tattoo.

May shows up at Presto Espresso relieved that she will be working the evening alone. It is prom night and she is in a sour mood. Pete's car pulls in and he gets out with Nell. Nell comes in looking beautiful in her Betsy Johnson dress. Pete goes to the bathroom and Nell begins to over share about Pete. . . just as Linda warned she might. Nell tells May that she traced a star pattern in the freckles on Pete's neck. She suggested he get the star outlined in a tattoo. Nell tries to adjust her bra and manages to get fabric caught in her piercings and rings. May remembers Pete's gray suit from her father's funeral the year before and thinks the sleeves are too short now. The couple leaves for prom and May settles in to do homework. She stares at the quickmart across the street and thinks about her dad. Then she decides to change her nametag instead of sitting thinking about sad things.



Brooks and Jamie are in the bathroom during prom. They are drinking tiny airline bottles of liquor that Jamie snagged from her dad. This isn't the first time they've headed to the bathroom to drink their shots. Brooks shows Jamie the green condom packets she purchased and tells her she may have sex with Dave at his party the next night. They leave the bathroom and Brooks spots Pete and his date having fun at a table in the corner. She thinks about how he has been stalking May and decides to go over and see what's going on. By the time they reach the table, it is apparent that Brooks is drunk. Her speech is too loud and her actions are sloppy. She smudges her mascara on the front of Pete's shirt. She also gets the chair caught on the hem of her dress, pulling down the front of her dress so that her chest is almost exposed. Brooks wants to know who Pete's date is and realizes that Nell works with May. Nell can't believe that the tall, blond, drunk Brooks is May's sister. Brooks and Jamie head off to find Dave. Nell tells Pete that Brooks' behavior is why she doesn't drink. Pete watches Brooks leave.

In Chapter 8, Brooks sleeps off the effects of the alcohol from prom and wakes the next day to get ready for Dave's party. She has a hard time finding something to wear; settling on dark jeans and a cropped blue top. Brooks isn't used to dressing up, she is a jeans and t-shirt girl. She puts on make up, but isn't used to doing that either. Fred picks her up and they arrive to find the party in full swing. Dave lives in a large house and there are people everywhere. The blender is going in the kitchen, there is a candle and music area in the basement. Brooks finds Jamie in the basement drinking blue liquor. She thinks about how perfect Jamie looks and how gawky she herself looks. Dave is making the rounds, playing host, and leans on the girls. They walk around the house greeting people, Jamie under one of Dave's arms and Brooks under the other. Dave is already really drunk. The trio end up in the master bedroom on the bed. Dave lays in the middle with Jamie snuggling him on one side and Brooks on the other. Dave alludes to having a threesome, but Brooks doesn't understand what he is talking about. He flips a coin saying Brooks is heads and Jamie is tails. When the coin ends up tails he rolls on top of Jamie and they begin to make out. Brooks is in shock and confused. She leaves the room and goes back to the party. A guy gives her a few shots of alcohol through a bug sprayer shooter and she proceeds to get more and more drunk. She is on the porch when a girl in an 80s prom dress comes over and starts to cry. Partygoers tell the girl to shut up and she goes nuts, banging her cell phone on the iron table and chairs. Brooks thinks she should feel hurt about Dave and Jamie, but is almost too drunk to care. She heads back to the bedroom to look in on them and finds the door locked. A girl approaches her and asks where to find the puking sink. Brooks points to the bedroom door and tells the girl it is in there, to keep knocking until they let her in. Then she walks away.

While Brooks is partying, May and Pete are driving on the highway toward Philly. May is in a complete panic and almost kills them a few times. She gets off in the heart of the city and pulls into a parking garage so someone else can park the car. While driving, May and Pete have been arguing because May won't just stop the car and allow Pete to take over the wheel. The two set off in search of an ATM so May can pay the parking garage attendant. Pete offers to give her money, but she refuses. As they walk they remember visiting the Liberty Bell as a child and how disappointing it is that the stories about the bell make it seem so much grander than it is when you actually see the bell.



May asks about Pete and Nell. He tells her he doesn't know if they are dating and he will probably see her again. He tells May about his last girlfriend and how they just stopped talking so it was over. He also expresses that sometimes you just date whoever is around. May is irritated by all of this. Pete asks May about dating. She sarcastically tells him she goes to an all-girls school so there aren't any boys there and since he has taken Nell she is out of options.

Brooks is frustrated and drunk when she arrives home from the party at 9pm. Palmer is in front of the TV. Brooks can't find anything to eat or drink and becomes restless, until she sees the keys to the Firebird. She goes into the garage and gets into the driver seat. The car won't start. Remembering what her father taught her, Brooks pours a can of soda over the battery to cut the corrosion. Palmer is standing in the garage and asks her what she is doing. Brooks tells her to go away and gets into the car. She is driving down the road when she sees a police car, with its lights on, behind her.

Pete and May pull up to the house and find Palmer waiting for them in the front yard. She tells them that Brooks took the Firebird to get Gatorade and has been gone two hours. Everyone is in a mild state of disbelief that Brooks would take their dad's car. A police car pulls up and Brooks gets out. The cop gives May some papers and tells her that Brooks has been processed and that the Firebird is at the station until her parents pick it up. Brooks goes inside, as does Palmer. May sees the neighbors watching and sinks down behind Pete's car. She tells him Brooks is drunk 2 -3 times a week. She doesn't tell her mom because she doesn't want to upset her anymore than she already is. May explains that she will have no life until she is in college and plans to get a scholarship so she can get out of the house. While they talk, Pete takes her hand. May's mother arrives and she is angry. She is cursing in Dutch. Pete leaves and Palmer points out that he and May were holding hands.

June: Chs. 6 - 8. Analysis

In Chapter 6, June has always been a great time for the Gold family. Until last June when they had her father's funeral. For Brooks, this June is again a good one. Dave doesn't seem to be the commitment type, but Brooks feels that sex will secure him as her boyfriend.

Things are looking up for both Palmer and Brooks. Palmer is excited about a future softball prospect and Brooks is looking forward to moving her relationship forward.

In Chapter 7, Prom is making May face the feelings she is having for Pete. She seems to be coming to understand that what she feels for him is not sister/brother affection.

May is upset that Brooks gets everything. Brooks seems to feel entitled to have what she wants and do what she wants.

May doesn't want to think about Nell tracing her finger along Pete's neck. She also doesn't want to think about Pete looking at Nell's breasts.



Brooks is on a downward spiral. Not only is she drinking at prom, being drunk doesn't seem to worry her. Her confrontation of Pete and Nell shows that she cares about May. It is her, poorly executed, attempt to stick up for her sister.

In Chapter 8, even as Brooks dresses for the night and tries to put on make up she shows that she is not from the same world as Dave and Jamie. She is more innocent and more naive than they are. She can't believe what is happening with Dave and Jamie. It is clear that the couple has engaged in this type of behavior before. As Brooks wanders the party the reader has a glimpse of change in the way she views her new social scene. What seemed fun now seems seedy, hedonistic, and harmful. Brooks is now experiencing the destructive underside of drinking and drugs. As she sits on the porch watching 80s prom girl self-destruct, Brooks seems to hit a turning point in her mindset. This is shown when she heads back to the bedroom where she left Dave and Jamie.

May seems incapable of cutting Pete a break. She is clearly jealous over the girls he sees, but has yet to come to grips with her feelings. She takes her irritation out on Pete, but he doesn't seem to mind.

Brooks is angry and she is acting out. She thinks about how much her father loved the Firebird and how he wouldn't have wanted it to sit in the garage as a memorial to him. She decides to drive the car, despite Palmer's irritation and being drunk. She realizes that Jamie did what she did on purpose.

May is feeling even more resentful toward her sisters. Resentment that was there when her father was alive is just getting worse as the family breaks down. She expresses how Brooks never got in trouble by her father, but how he would scold May over little things. She feels that Palmer is clueless about everything, even though Pete thinks Palmer notices a lot of things that are going on.



June: Chs. 9 - 11.

June: Chs. 9 - 11. Summary

In Chapter 9, Brooks is standing in front of the judge on a rainy Tuesday when she pleads guilty for drinking and driving. Her license is suspended for the rest of the year, she has to see a counselor for substance abuse, and pay a \$300 fine. As she stands in front of the bench, all she can think of is the image of Dave and Jamie on the bed. Dave is elusive at school and Jamie doesn't have time to talk to her. She feels alone at school. However, now that she has taken out the Firebird everyone wants to drive it.

May watches the rain fall from the window at work while listening to Nell tell about her previous night with Pete. They were naked in bed together when his mother came home and almost caught them. May is in hell. She is stressed out about final exams, the house has been a bunch of screaming and crying since Brooks' arrest, and now Nell is over sharing. She wants to run into the rain screaming, but maintains a calm look and listens to Nell talk about Pete.

Brooks is sharing her life with May for the first time in a year. May is trying to study for a final in the morning and can't be distracted. Brooks is about to tell May about Dave and Jamie when May stops her. She asks if they can talk about it in the morning so she can study. Brooks reacts as if she has been slapped, she calls May selfish and walks out.

May comes out of her room two hours later and goes to Brooks' room. Brooks tells her she called Dave. He slept with Jamie and they are now dating. Jamie told Brooks she and Dave were never officially dating so what they did was ok. May touches Brooks' shoulder to comfort her, but Brooks tells her to leave.

Linda meets May at the bus stop. They talk about Brooks and how they didn't get any sleep.

May and Linda head to Linda's house after an exhausting 22 page biology final. May tells Linda what Nell shared about having sex with Pete. She admits to Linda that she is jealous. Linda suggests she talk to Pete, he may only be dating Nell because he doesn't think he has a chance with May. May tells her that she can't compete on Nell's level, she isn't ready for that yet. Linda suggests maybe she stay away from Pete for a while so she doesn't torture herself. May thinks that sounds like a plan. They are almost done with driving lessons. She feels like she should do the rest alone.

Palmer is home alone and plans to finish going through her mother's things. She empties the closet and looks through the pictures she finds: of her parents in college, pregnant with Brooks, May's birth, her father holding her as a newborn. She notes the changes in them as the years progress. As she is putting everything back she finds her father's ashes in a shoe box. She can't put it back in the closet, so she takes the ashes to her room.



In Chapter 10, May comes downstairs the first week of summer vacation to find her mom sitting in front of a box of doughnuts. They have been offered the use of an RV on a beach in Maryland for the week. She is insisting the girls go so the family can regroup. May and Palmer are not happy.

Palmer is upset about Maryland. She is already behind in softball because she doesn't have a private coach. Most players in the Olympics and with scholarships have one. Her mother becomes irritated and tells her their lives don't revolve around softball. It is only a three day trip.

In Chapter 11, May is doing laundry the night before the vacation and decides not to do it anymore. She hasn't seen Pete in two weeks and it hasn't made things easier, it has made them harder. She misses him. She throws the laundry in front of Brooks and tells her she isn't doing her jobs anymore. If Brooks wants clean underwear, she will have to clean the clothes. She goes upstairs and calls Pete. He tells her he will cancel plans with Nell and come get May in 15 mins. May changes into a cute outfit, puts on perfume and does her hair. She sails out the door to the amazement of Palmer and Brooks.

Pete takes May to the golf course where he works. They get into different golf carts and race around the grounds for about an hour. May can't figure out how to stop her cart, so Pete jumps in and takes over. The two sit on the darkening course and talk. Pete asks if May is mad at him. She says no and asks if Nell was his first sexual partner. He tells her that Jenna, his last girlfriend was. He tells her Jenna was emotionally unhappy and would cry after they had sex. He started to feel bad about himself because of it so he stopped calling her. He feels bad about how he ended things with Jenna, but didn't know another way to handle the situation. May seems to ease when she hears this. She pulls her hand through Pete's hair and he is surprised. She gets out of the golf cart and has to nudge him to get him to move.

May and Pete pull up at her house and see the RV. May takes him inside for a tour and they talk about how she and her sisters used to tease her. Pete sits down next to May and begins to kiss her.

June: Chs. 9 - 11. Analysis

In Chapter 9, both May and Brooks are upset over their situations with boys. Brooks has been betrayed by her friends and feels alone. May is coming to realize she cares about Pete and hates thinking about him with Nell. Some good things have come out of Brooks' misbehavior: her mother is now aware of her drinking problem, and the Firebird has been "liberated." It is now ok to drive.

Brooks' problems have become too much for her and she is now willing to share with May, but she is not quite yet ready to become vulnerable. May feels that Brooks is part of the reason she is behind in her studies, but she can't ignore her sister when she is so obviously hurting.



May has had a realization about her feelings for Pete. She also seems to have made the decision to go forward with her driving on her own. Palmer takes her father's ashes and harbors feelings of needing to guard and protect them.

In Chapter 10, Mrs. Gold realizes that her family is falling apart. She may be late in coming to help, but she wants the family to use the RV at the beach as a time to be together as a family. She says to "regroup." Palmer is upset at being taken from softball, it is her refuge. May isn't happy either.

In Chapter 11, Pete and May enjoy each other's company. Her questions about his sexual encounters seem to help May relax a little around him. She knows she likes Pete, and she shows she is willing to risk rejection when she pulls her fingers through his hair. Pete takes advantage of the mood and the darkness in the RV to kiss May. His kiss makes her panic go away.



July: Chs. 12 - 14.

July: Chs. 12 - 14. Summary

Chapter 12 starts off with May's list of family vacations where the girls would throw up or fight while traveling in the Firebird.

The four Gold women are getting ready to leave in the RV. Palmer isn't happy with her bed, but May and Brooks had already claimed their spots. Mrs. Gold tells the girls that if they put a little water, a ball and clothes in a bag and hang it off of the back of the RV it will work as a washing machine. As they buckle in for the drive, May is pretty sure her mother has lost it.

Palmer and Brooks sleep most of the six hour drive to the Maryland beach. May spends the time replaying the make-out session that took place between her and Pete the night before. She is pretty sure Pete is now her boyfriend and she is convinced she is going to become the pathetic girlfriend who has to call her boyfriend every two minutes.

It takes twenty minutes to find their RV parking spot. Mrs. Gold tells the girls to find the beach while she gets the water and electricity hooked up. Palmer stays at the site while May and Brooks find the beach. It takes them forever, but they find it. They return to the RV to discover they can't get water and have no electricity. They are not happy.

After asking someone how to unhook the Firebird from the RV, the group goes to get some fast food for dinner. They get the water and electricity hooked up, but they opt to bathe in the bathhouse just in case the bathroom isn't hooked up right. The girls go in and lie on their cramped beds. Palmer steps on May and Brooks while getting up and down into her bunk. Brooks says mom has been camping, but dad probably did all the work. Just like mom said they went for coffee all the time in Amsterdam, but the coffee houses are really pot shops. Palmer and May are surprised to learn there mom smoked pot. May wonders why dad told Brooks, but not her.

In Chapter 13, Mrs. Gold and Palmer go to dinner and a movie, dropping Brooks and May at the boardwalk for a few hours in the evening. Brooks teases May about being in the RV with Pete for an hour before they left. Brooks pulls out some vodka and convinces May to drink with her. May wants to bond with her sister, and so she takes a drink.

May and Brooks are in the arcade playing skee-ball drunk. May wanders off down the boardwalk and decides to call Pete collect. He comes to the phone and she tells him thanks for being there for her, she then tells him to break up with Nell and date her. Pete is startled and tells her he did break up with Nell. May's thoughts and words are scattered and hard to keep track of. She decides to get off the phone and tells Pete she loves him. He is silent so she drunkenly hangs up the phone and goes to walk on the



beach. She gets sick on the beach and lies down in the sand, thinking she will die from being drunk.

Brooks realizes that May is not coming back to the arcade and becomes panicked. She looks everywhere and finally sees May on the beach sitting between some anchored kites. Brooks gets May out of the sand and walks her down the boardwalk. She puts May on a bench and May passes out. Brooks realizes the only way to get her back to the camp site without their mom knowing they are drunk is to take the Firebird. Brooks is sober now and enters the theater to get the keys from her mom, she tells her she forgot her wallet in the car. Palmer is suspicious, but doesn't say anything. Brooks takes May back to the campsite and puts her on a blanket. May passes out again. Brooks makes it back to the theater to find the parking spot taken. She parks a couple of spaces away and hopes her mom won't notice. Brooks tells her mom that May was bored and walked back to the camp site. She continues the ruse when they arrive, saying May is in the shower house. After Palmer goes to bed, Brooks grabs May and puts her in her bunk. Palmer's voice comes from her bunk commenting that May is the drunk one for a change and not Brooks. Brooks rolls over and goes to sleep.

In Chapter 14, Mrs. Gold wakes May up on the 4th of July and invites her to the beach. May declines, she has a huge hangover. Brooks gives May some Gatorade and medicine. May remembers pieces of the night before and is horrified when she remembers her phone call to Pete.

May is sick the majority of the day. She manages to get herself up to go to the boardwalk with the family to watch fireworks. May is traumatized by the memory of telling Pete, "I love you." The reality is setting in that she and Pete cheated on Nell by making out before she left. This doesn't sit well. May feels like she is in one of Pete's horror movie analogies where the girl wakes up and thinks the horror was a dream, only to see the ax murderer pop up.

July: Chs. 12 - 14. Analysis

In Chapter 12, the family goes to the RV park and things don't go according to plan. The kids are miserable and Mrs. Gold is trying to force family time.

In Chapter 13, May and Brooks are bonding, but they are doing it by breaking the rules. May shows that she is desperate to connect with her sister when she gets drunk. Brooks shows that she loves her sister when she takes responsibility for her safety after they drink.]

In Chapter 14, Mrs. Gold is either completely out of touch with her daughters, or she is willfully blind to May's day long hangover. May is feeling the consequences of her drinking: she revealed embarrassing thoughts to Pete and she is sick.



July: 15 - 17.

July: 15 - 17. Summary

In Chapter 15, May is home in bed when Pete calls. He wants to come and see her, he wants to talk. May isn't ready to face the realities of her behavior with Pete. She is nervous and scared. She tells Pete she is sunburned and needs rest before her driving test. They agree to meet up after the test. May is pretty sure Pete is about to say "I love you," so she gets off of the phone quickly. May takes out the naked Polaroids of Pete from the summer before. She notices that he has put on some muscle since the pictures were taken. She thinks he has a nice butt, but still can't see enough to decide if he is well endowed in other areas. May puts the pictures away because she feels like her father is watching her from heaven.

Palmer is alone in her room with her father's urn. She doesn't want to get up and roam the house at night anymore, but she still can't sleep. She is anxious about softball the next day. She is behind because she missed the first day of practice, there will be scouts there and the other girls are going to be good. Palmer needs to do something with her father's ashes, she isn't sure she wants the responsibility of keeping them. She decides to tell May about them, May is the responsible one. Palmer lets herself into May's room, which upsets May. Unsure of how to begin, Palmer asks May about Pete. It is the wrong thing to say and May asks her to leave. Palmer feels like there is something about her that always makes people ask her to leave.

In Chapter 16, May passes her driver's test and receives her license. The test seemed easy after all of the crazy car situations she went through with Pete. Mrs. Gold is happy for May and immediately asks her to take Palmer somewhere and to run errands. May explodes. She asks her mom if she can just celebrate like a normal kid for a minute. She points out that Brooks didn't have a list of chores once she had her license. She tells her mom that she and her father always favored Brooks. May goes on to accuse her mother of turning a blind eye to Brooks's drinking and behavior problems. Mrs. Gold angrily gets out of the car when they reach the house. Palmer is upset that May angered their mom and wants to know what happened. May doesn't want to talk about it and asks Palmer for some space, Palmer doesn't give it to her. Pete shows up with three Gerber daisies for May. They go to sit in the Firebird and talk. Pete asks May if she meant what she said on the phone, he leans in to kiss her and May panics. May isn't ready to face her feelings for Pete. She decides to attack him and accuses him of having sex with girls and dumping them. She asks if he will do that to her. Pete is hurt and angry. He leaves May in the Firebird and goes home. May knows she should go after him, but she doesn't.

May continues to fight with people as her sisters get into the car for Palmer's game. Brooks tells her that what she did to Pete was cruel, that he would do anything for her and she used him. May tells Brooks that she isn't far enough in her 12 steps to start criticizing people. Brooks tells May she needs a therapist and May shoots back that



maybe she can see Brooks's when she is done with rehab. Palmer is in the backseat. She quietly tells her sisters to stop. When they pull up at the game Palmer gets out quickly. Brooks and May part ways still upset with each other.

Palmer is on the pitcher's mound and she isn't playing well. She is preoccupied with May. She is used to Brooks falling apart, but she can't handle May going to pieces. Palmer tries to get herself to focus on the game, but feels a panic attack coming on. She winds up for a pitch and the ball hits the batter's helmeted head.

Palmer leaves the mound and runs to the Firebird. Brooks knows instinctively that something was wrong with the pitch and is already on her way down the bleachers. She reaches Palmer at the Firebird before May does. Palmer lets out a scream that reminds Brooks of fearful screams she used to have as a kid. May sits in front of Palmer and asks what happened. Palmer tells them she had an attack where she couldn't breathe and things went dark. Brooks thinks they should go back to the game and explain what happened, but May insists on taking Palmer home.

Palmer goes to her room. She feels crazy now that the attacks were happening during the day and not just at night. She knows she will be kicked out of the softball camp and is afraid she will be kicked off of the team too. She stares at her father's urn and knows she has to do something with it. Then a plan comes to her.

Palmer takes her father's urn to the kitchen. May and Brooks are talking about the game. Brooks thinks the girl who was hit will be fine, but she thinks Palmer was head-hunting and aimed at the girl's head on purpose. Palmer stops listening and presents them with the urn. The other girls instantly know what it is. Palmer tells them she wants to take the urn to Camden Yards and dump the ashes on the pitcher's mound. May and Brooks think she is nuts. Palmer tells them that she has money and May can drive. If they don't go with her, she will take a bus and a train and go by herself. May agrees to go. Even though she thinks it is a bad idea, Brooks agrees to go too. The experience will take 8 or 9 hours. The girls think they can do it and their mom will never know because she will be at work.

The one hundred mile drive to the ballpark is driving Palmer and Brooks crazy. May refuses to go over 50 miles per hour. They agree not to talk until they are out of Delaware.

The girls buy tickets to the Oriels game and enter the park. They have a plan to take the field when the game is over and everyone is leaving. Palmer gives them each a baggie of their father's ashes and the girls jump over the barrier and run for the pitcher's mound. They huddle together and dump the ashes, rubbing them into the dirt mound with their feet. Ballpark security chases them off of the mound and to the car. The girls are on an adrenaline high as they get on the road and pull off at a gas station. They buy snacks and sit by the car talking about what they did. May thinks they should tell their mom, but Brooks thinks they should put the urn back and not mention it. The girls have a feeling that they are united.



The girls take the convertible top down and enjoy the ride home. Palmer questions May about Pete and Brooks tells her that Pete tried to kiss May and May yelled at him. May admits that she screwed up with Pete. Palmer tells her that the things we try to avoid are the things that bite us in the end.

The girls pull in at midnight to find their mother home early. They agree to tell her they were at the mall and then a movie. Mrs. Gold meets them in the garage and is very upset. She knows that Palmer hurt someone at the game and is still upset with May over their fight from earlier. They tell her their story, but she sees the ticket from the ballpark on the dashboard.

In Chapter 17, May wakes up the next day and doesn't want to get out of bed. She isn't ready to face the realities of the day before. She comes downstairs to find Mrs. Camp, Pete's mom, there. Mrs. Camp has come to sit with the girls for the day. The key to the Firebird is missing and Mrs. Camp kindly tells May she will have to ride her bike to work. The other girls haven't come downstairs yet. Mrs. Camp suggests they might be sick and tells May that Pete has been in his room since getting home the day before.

May arrives at work to find the coffee shop packed with a church group. Nell makes May do odd jobs and May realizes she knows about Pete. Nell tells May that she told their boss that May changed her shift and she is fired. She tells May she knows about Pete, May figures they are even. She turns in her uniform, clocks out and leaves early. She apologizes to Nell and tells her it wasn't intentional.

May decides to go to Pete's. He opens the door and she asks if they can go to the glider in the back yard and talk. Pete isn't ready to forgive her, but he goes. She sits in the glider and he sits on a bench staring at her. May tells him that she was scared and didn't know what to do. She apologizes. Pete tells her that their dating was a bad idea and to forget it was talked about. May tells him she doesn't think it is a bad idea. Pete's mom comes out and notices the silence between them. May tells her she is leaving and she tells Pete that she has to go because she is in trouble. Pete follows her to the front yard. He tells her that her father talked about her all the time and that Brooks and Palmer weren't his favorites. She tells him that she is waiting for someone to tell her that it is ok to be normal again, Pete tells her it is ok. May feels like he has forgiven her and she begins to cry. She runs to Pete and kisses him, he kisses her back. She leaves on her bike. When she looks back at him she thinks he is smiling.

May arrives home to find her mother and sisters in the living room watching TV. Her mother is crocheting and her sister is flipping the channels. She wonders if this is what life will be like for them from now on. Casually, Palmer tells her mother they took the car to Camden Yards to dump their father's ashes on the field. Mrs. Gold freezes. May and Brooks brace themselves for an explosion. Their mother leaves the room.

It is one in the morning and it is too hot for May to sleep. She goes to the kitchen and finds her mother there. Her mother is curled up on a kitchen chair looking a little lost. She tells May that she can relate to her, but she isn't sure how to talk to Palmer and Brooks. She tells May that they are more like their father. She also tells May that her



father was so proud of her and in awe of her. May sees her father's love clearly now and wonders why she ever thought he didn't love her as much as her sisters. Palmer and Brooks come into the kitchen. Mrs. Gold tells them that they are amazing girls, but they are still in trouble. She admits that she didn't know what to do with her husband's ashes so she hid them away.

The four Gold women go to sleep on the living room floor where the window air conditioner is keeping them cool. They share blankets and May asks Brooks if she seems different, less predictable. Brooks says she does and May tells her thank you. They all fall asleep huddle together under blankets on the floor.

July: 15 - 17. Analysis

In Chapter 15, Palmer can't sleep and is still overcome with anxiety/panic attacks, however she is no longer able to wander the house at night. She has confidence that her sister, May, can help her with her problems, but she offends May when she comes into her room and asks about Pete. Palmer is awkward and unsure of how to behave at times. She isn't good at expressing herself, however, she is good at watching and understanding the behavior of others.

Chapter 16 is the climax of the book. May is angry and she is ready to release the pent up feelings she has had since the beginning of the book. Being in the driver seat of the car gives her a confidence and sense of control that she hasn't had before. She is scared to move forward in her relationship with Pete and intentionally tries to anger him and make him leave her. She is upset with her mother and finally expresses her feelings. She is upset that her mother has been absent in their lives since the death of her father, and she is upset that her mother is harder on her than on Brooks.

The girls need closure in their father's death. They also need to pull together again to have the relationship they once did. Scattering their father's ashes accomplishes both of these things. The girls feel that they are a team again. The releasing of Mr. Gold's ashes at the stadium shows that the girls love their father and knew him well. They acknowledge the symbolism of Camden Yards in their lives and in their upbringing and the importance of family time at the games to their father.

In Chapter 17, all the subplots find their resolution in this final chapter. Nell gets revenge on May for stealing her boyfriend, May and Pete resolve their conflict and the Gold women all come together again as a family. Each of the Gold sisters has grown as a result of their personal and collective journeys. They are ready to move forward as a family; they are also ready to grieve for the loss of their father.



Characters

Maysie Gold.

Also known as May, Maysie is the 16-year-old middle child of the Gold family. She is not athletic, like her sisters. May is a smart girl who attends private school and hopes to receive an academic scholarship to college. May feels that her mother and father favor her sisters because they are beautiful and athletic. May is in love with Pete, a family friend who teaches her to drive. Throughout the book May is working on passing her driver's exam. May doesn't see her driver's license as freedom, she sees it as a burden. May is the caretaker of her family and her mother's helper. When May receives her license she is expected to run errands and drive her younger sister around. May resents her older sister and feels that her younger sister isn't mature.

Brooks Gold.

Brooks Gold is the oldest of the Gold sisters. Brooks is a talented softball player who has a shot at playing professionally. Brooks begins to drink and use drugs after the death of her father. She quits the softball team and begins to date a small time drug dealer. Brooks is heartbroken when her boyfriend cheats on her with her friend. Brooks is the first of the Gold family to drive the Firebird after Mr. Gold's death; she takes out the car and is arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol. Brooks gets May drunk for the first time on the family camping trip.

Palmer Gold.

Palmer Gold is the youngest of the Gold sisters. She plays softball and puts all of her focus on the game and practice. Palmer watches what her sisters are going through, but she is too young to help them. Palmer is confused by what is happening in her family and often doesn't understand the complex nature of their issues. It is Palmer who finds their father's ashes hidden in the closet and convinces her sister to spread his ashes on the pitcher's mound at Camden Yards.

Mrs. Gold.

Mrs. Gold is Dutch. She used to be a punk when she was younger. She loved her husband and is having a hard time making ends meet without him. Mrs. Gold works long hours as a nurse. She depends on May to take care of the other girls while she is gone. Mrs. Gold turns a blind eye to what is happening in her home with her daughters. She doesn't know how to handle Brooks and Palmer.



Peter Camp.

Pete is the same age as Brooks and is a long time friend of the family. Pete and May have always played jokes on each other, since they were little. Pete likes May, but doesn't think he likes him in return. Pete dates May's co-worker and offers to teach May how to drive.

Dave Vatiman.

Dave Vatiman is a small time drug dealer and a bad boy. Brooks likes Dave and does things to impress him. Dave never really tells Brooks he likes her, but he does lead her on. Dave cheats on Brooks with their friend Jamie.

Jamie.

Jamie is Brooks's friend who hangs out in Dave's crowd. Jamie has an alternative and edgy look. She is beautiful and promiscuous. Jamie knows how Brooks feels about Dave, but steals him away from Brooks the night of Dave's party.

Nell Dodd.

Nell Dodd is May's annoying co-worker at the coffee shop. Nell is an artistic person and likes to tease May about her name. She begins to date Pete and gets May fired when she finds out that May and Pete made out.

Mrs. Camp.

Mrs. Camp is a close friend of the family and Pete's mother. Mrs. Camp understands that the family is having financial difficulty and tries to give things to Mrs. Gold to help out. She always tries to make her gifts look as if they are unplanned. Mrs. Camp comes to the house to babysit the girls after they are discovered coming home from Camden Yards.

Mr. Gold.

Mr. Gold is May, Brooks and Palmer's father. He is a loving father who enjoys baseball. He encourages two of his daughters to play softball and is proud of May for being so smart. Mr. Gold dies of a heart attack while getting out of his beloved Firebird after work.



Objects/Places

The Firebird.

The Firebird symbolizes Mr. Gold and his loving family. The girls each have good memories of the Firebird. After Mr. Gold dies, it is a year before anyone drives the car again. The Firebird represents freedom to May, who is able to drive the car when she gets her license. It is a symbol of rebellion for Brooks, who takes it out for the first time since her father's death and gets caught by the police. It is a symbol of comfort for Palmer, who gets into the car to think.

Driving Lessons.

May and Pete's driving lessons are a way for May to learn to drive and a way for the couple to spend time together. As the lessons go on, May becomes more comfortable with driving. She and Pete develop a relationship that goes beyond immature teasing, they become friends while spending time together for lessons. The lessons are Pete's attempt to spend more time with May.

Dave's House Party.

Dave's House Party is the place where Brooks realizes that being drunk and drugged is not as fun as she thought it would be. Dave and Jamie begin a sexual relationship in front of Brooks while they are all at the party. Brooks realizes at the party that she doesn't have a real place in Dave and Jamie's world.

The Camping Trip.

The Camping Trip in the borrowed RV is when the Gold sisters are forced to spend time together with their mother. None of the girls want to go on the short trip, they all have too much going on in their lives, but their mother insists. The trip backfires when Brooks gets May drunk and May calls Pete and tells him she loves him. Palmer returns home from the trip even more lost than she was before, not only is her oldest sister falling apart, but now she feels like May is falling apart too.

The Driver's Exam.

The Driver's Exam represents both freedom and entrapment for May. She will be able to drive and take herself places, but the minute she has her license she will be responsible for even more around the house. Mrs. Gold wants May to have her license so she can run errands and take her sisters places. May fails the exam the first time. Her need to pass the exam is what leads Pete to offer her driving lessons.



The Urn.

The Urn is where Mr. Gold's ashes are kept. Palmer finds the urn hidden in her mother's closet. Mrs. Gold has kept them there because she wasn't ready to let go of her husband and she didn't know what to do with his ashes. Palmer considers herself the unofficial keeper of the urn.

Softball.

Softball is a game that the entire family is a part of. Both Brooks and Palmer are excellent athletes. They were able to bond with their father over softball. May always felt distant from her father because she couldn't play softball. When Brooks decides to rebel, it is softball that she quits first.

Camden Yards.

Camden Yards is the baseball stadium in Baltimore. Home of the Baltimore Orioles, Mr. Gold's favorite team. Each year the Golds and the Camps go to Camden Yards on a fun filled family trip. The year after Mr. Gold dies, the trip isn't taken. The girls decide to spread their father's ashes at Camden Yards because he loved it there and it is the center of so many happy family memories.

Baltimore Orioles.

The Baltimore Orioles are Mr. Gold's favorite team. He names each of his girls after baseball greats. The Orioles play at Camden Yards.

Polaroids of Pete.

The day of their father's death, the Gold sisters arrange to take naked pictures of Pete as payback for a joke he played on May. It is the last time the sisters function as a team until they spread their father's ashes. The girls ogle Pete's butt in the pictures and wonder about other parts of his anatomy. After May and Pete fight, May pulls out the pictures and looks at them.



Themes

Family Bonds.

Family Bonds are the main theme in the book. The Gold family is a close knit and loving family, but their bonds are tested after the death of their father. Mrs. Gold is filled with grief and forced to work overtime to make ends meet. The financial stress, as well as the stress of losing a parent, really tests the sisters' bonds. The girls begin to resent each other for the same reasons they once loved each other.

May resents having to be responsible for her sisters. She loves them, but she doesn't want to be forced into the role of caretaker. The change in the dynamic of their relationship causes problems between the sisters. May also has to become her mother's keeper; taking care of the house so that her mother can bury her feelings in work.

Brooks is forced to change her role in the family. She has always been spoiled and resents that she may have to change now that their family structure has changed. However, after seeing May drunk, Brooks realizes that she is a part of a larger family and is responsible to them.

Palmer is in a unique position. She is too young to carry any weight or responsibility for the family. But she is forced to watch as the people she loves turn on each other. It is Palmer who ultimately reminds her sisters and mother that they are a team and a family unit bound together always.

Loss and Grief.

Each member of the Gold family deals with the loss of Mr. Gold in a different way. Even the Camps are dealing with his loss as he was a large part of their life. No one knows how to grieve, even though they try the best way they can.

Mrs. Gold doesn't deal with the loss of her husband. Symbolically, she puts his urn in a box and hides it from sight. She overworks herself and neglects her family, justifying her absence by saying that the family needs the money.

May becomes angry with her father for not taking better care of his health. She tells Pete that she is just waiting for someone to tell her it is okay to be normal again.

Brooks turns to drugs and alcohol to lessen the hurt of her grief. She quits softball because it is a reminder of the bond she shared with her father.

Palmer begins to have panic attacks at night after her father's death. She also throws herself into softball. Palmer feels shut out of the family and doesn't know how to communicate how she feels.



Pete, his mother, and his father are also dealing with the loss of Mr. Gold. Pete tries to help the girls, Mrs. Camp tries to help the family financially. When May visits Pete's house she realizes they have not cooked on the grill at his home since her father passed.

Love.

Family, friendship, and romance can't be talked about without love. Love is another central theme in the book.

Mr. Gold was very much loved by his family and friends. His larger-than-life personality is discussed by May in the book. The absence of his love is what starts his family on a downward spiral.

May loves her sisters and she loves Pete. She struggles with her feelings for Pete and is unable to face them.

Brooks loves her family and is angry that she doesn't feel loved by them in return. Brooks felt a close bond with her father and isn't sure where she fits in with her mother and sisters now that he is gone.

Palmer loves her family and Pete and just wants things to be the way they were. She doesn't like seeing the people she loves fall apart. It is Palmer who enacts the ultimate act of love when she convinces her sisters to spread their father's ashes at Camden Yards.

Style

Point of View

The Key to the Golden Firebird is recounted in the third-person and limited perspective. However, the person who is the focus of the chapter changes from section to section. May is the central figure of the story and it is her thoughts and feelings which are focused on the most. Brooks and Palmer are also focused on in sections. When they are the focus, it is only their thoughts, feelings, and point of view which are discussed. The alternating points of view allow the reader to intimately know each character. It make the reader able to understand the actions each girl takes and their motivations. The reader is able to understand more about the Gold family dynamic by reading each sister's point of view. What one sister doesn't see or understand about the family, another sister does. The alternating points of view allow the reader to see the misconceptions that the sister hold about each other even though the sisters themselves don't understand their own wrong impressions of each other.

Setting

The story is set in Pennsylvania, just outside of Philadelphia. Much of the action between the girls happens inside the Gold's home, a suburban family home. Most of the action between May and Pete happens in Pete's car as he teaches May to drive. Pete's car is the place where May is able to work through her anger, realize her emotions, and be vulnerable. The car helps to move May and Pete's romantic relationship forward. May's job at the coffee shop is also focused on in the story. May's co-worker, Nell, provides the conflict necessary for May to realize she has feelings for Pete. Most of Brooks's point of view takes place during parties: prom and Dave's party as examples. Most of Palmer's thoughts take place during softball or at the house. Camden Yards is a major setting in the book, but the characters never actually visit the stadium until the climax of the story. Like the father, Mr. Gold, Camden Yards is often discussed and referred to even though the characters aren't there.

Language and Meaning

The girls use language suited for 14 - 18 year olds. Their hopes and dreams are will articulated. Their situations, experiences, and feelings are easily expressed through the lens of the teenage mindset. The author does a good job describing scenery, but the scenes are secondary to the rich descriptions of the characters. The characters are seen through the eyes of others as well as shown by their own inner thoughts. The interactions and conversations which take place at Dave's house party are extremely well written and provide a vivid image of a high school party and the immature actions of drunk teens. There are many references to baseball and softball in the story, including



the origins of each girl's name, these references lead to the appropriateness of the climax taking place at Camden Yards.

Structure

The story is told in 17 chapters and 3 parts. The story is told in the first person from the perspectives of: May, Brooks, and Palmer. However, it is May who is the main character of the story.

"Before" focuses on events leading up to Mr. Gold's death. It is the introduction section.

"Next May" takes place the following year and consists of Chs. 1 - 5.

"June" consists of Chs. 6 - 11.

"July" consists of Chs. 12 - 17 and is where the climax and resolution take place.



Quotes

"Right from the beginning, May had been the unwilling straight man in Pete's ever-evolving comedy routine" (Before, p. 4).

"And of course Pete would know to look for her here" (Before, p. 18).

"But Palmer was too old for that now, and her mom didn't have time or energy to think about how things should be - she only knew how they were" (Chapter 1, p. 29).

"In Palmer's eyes, Brooks had given up everything and left her alone" (Chapter 3, p. 75).

"She suddenly wanted out of this place, to get away from all of these people" (Chapter 8 p. 141).

"'A lot of things seem like that,' she said. 'They build you up and build you up, and it's...a bell in a shed'" (Chapter 8, p. 147).

"In the last minute or so, it seemed like the world had utterly transformed in May's eyes" (Chapter 11, p. 193).

"Normally Brooks' idea of bonding with her sisters was shooting straw wrappers at May's face and snickering with Palmer" (Chapter 12, p. 212).

"She needed to do something with it, or she was going to go crazy" (Chapter 15, p. 234).

"Maybe it was because she was in the driver's seat now, but May felt a sudden urge to say exactly what she thought" (Chapter 16, p. 240).

"For one of the only times in her life, May felt like she and her sisters were truly together, on the same page" (Chapter 16, p. 269).

"The adrenaline of last night had worn off, and there was too much ugly stuff outside that she had to face now" (Chapter 17, p. 274).



Topics for Discussion

How does May's role in the family change after the death of her father? How does she feel about these changes? How do her sisters react to the changes?

Why does Mrs. Gold seem to depend more on May than Brooks or Palmer? How are they alike? How are they different? Is May right when she accuses her mother of turning a blind eye to Brooks's behavior?

How are each of the girls dealing with their father's death at his 1-year memorial? How is their mother dealing with things?

How does Brooks change from the beginning of the book to the end? What are some of the critical moments in the story which changed Brooks? Is she more mature at the end of the story? Why or why not?

Is Brooks right, was Palmer head-hunting when she hit the girl with a wild pitch? Why do you feel the way you do? Why might Palmer's pitch have been off? How do the girls react to Palmer's fear?

How does spreading Mr. Gold's ashes at Camden Yards bond the girls together? Why is Camden Yards an appropriate place to spread his ashes? How does their mother handle the news?

At what point does Pete begin to have feelings for May? At what point does May begin to have feelings for Pete? When does May finally realize she has feelings for Pete? Why is May so reluctant to become involved with Pete?