

Lock and Key Study Guide

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Plot Summary

When Ruby is five, her father leaves and her mother, suffering from alcoholism, a lack of self-esteem, and abandonment issues, begins a series of dead-end jobs, erratic moves, and abuse. Ruby's sister Cora stands between Ruby and her mother, literally, for the next two years until Cora turns eighteen and goes away to college. She initially calls but the girls soon lose touch. A series of erratic moves and a number of sub-standard rent houses along with her mother's abusive behavior becomes the core of Ruby's life for the next years. Then, just six months short of her eighteenth birthday, Ruby's mother disappears. She holds her life together for a short time but her landlord discovers that her mother is missing and child services steps in, sending Ruby to live with Cora and her husband, dot-com millionaire Jamie Hunter.

Jamie grew up with the idyllic life of a close-knit family and traditional holidays and he wants to share that with Cora and Ruby. Ruby however knows that it is best not to trust anyone other than herself and decides to run away as soon as Jamie and Cora have gone to bed the first night. She makes it as far as the back fence and is in the process of trying to hop over when the family's dog, Roscoe, alerts everyone to her plan. On the opposite side of the fence, Ruby encounters a boy about her own age. Nate is handsome, smart, and popular and becomes Ruby's ride to school. Ruby pledges that she'll keep her distance but soon finds herself indebted to Nate, then to a fellow student named Olivia, and then to a child prodigy named Gervais. As she learns to accept friendship, she discovers that others also feel the need to remain aloof. While she understands it in others because she deals with it herself, the situation becomes impossible when Ruby discovers that Nate is being physically and verbally abused by his father.

Meanwhile, Ruby learns that Cora also harbors some scars from their shared childhood. Cora had tried to keep in touch but their mother had insisted that Ruby didn't want to talk to Cora. She'd believed Ruby chose not to attend her wedding, only discovering that Ruby believes she hadn't been invited when the two begin comparing notes. When Ruby slips back into her old habits of drugs and alcohol, Jamie is disappointed in Ruby's decisions but Cora understands and reaches out. Ruby, not sure if it's the right thing, goes on instinct and takes Cora's proffered hand, healing the bond between the two.

With a nice home, Nate safely away from his father, and a bond with Cora and Jamie, Ruby graduates high school, learns that her mother is in a rehab clinic, and sets out for the next stage of her life - a college degree she hadn't even dared dream about until Cora and Jamie stepped in.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

In chapter one, Jamie Hunter is showing Ruby her new bedroom. Ruby's sister, Cora, is standing silently nearby. Jamie is Cora's husband. Ruby hasn't seen Cora in about ten years, since Cora left home for college. She hadn't even known Cora was married. Outside her balcony, Jamie shows Ruby the outline of a pond he's planning that will be a complete eco-system.

Ruby recalls her life before Cora had picked her up earlier that day. Ruby and her mother move often, eventually into a rundown yellow house that's somewhat secluded. Ruby is at home one day when the landlords, Ronnie and Alice Honeycutt, arrive to "check in." Ruby's mom immediately recognizes the visit for what it is - an effort to keep an eye on their new tenants. Ruby's mom is often gone and when she is at home she seldom greets the Honeycutts, leaving that to Ruby. Because she's seldom seen, Ruby's mom is gone for two full months before the Honeycutts notice. They stop by one day, purportedly to replace some slats in the porch, and see that Ruby has a makeshift clothesline stretched across the kitchen because the dryer isn't working. They go inside and find "everything else," then contact the authorities. The authorities pick up Ruby. When a social worker asks where Ruby's mother is, Ruby admits that she doesn't know.

Back at Cora's house, Ruby imagines how the house looks and is desperate to return. She checks the duffel bag and finds a few of her possessions inside though her good clothes had been hanging on the line in the kitchen. Ruby spends a little time in her room alone and by the time she's called to supper she has plans to run away as soon as Jamie and Cora are in bed for the night. At the table, Jamie announces he'll be taking Ruby to register at Perkins School. Ruby is upset that she won't be attending Jackson where she'd begun her senior year. With the promise they'd talk about it the following day, they finish supper.

Cora and Jamie have a small dog named Roscoe who has peed on the floor several times after Ruby's arrival. That night when Ruby decides it's finally safe to slip out, she finds that Jamie hasn't gone to bed but is actually walking Roscoe. Ruby dashes around the house as Jamie walks to the front of the house. Ruby tosses her bag of clothes over the back fence and is attempting to make the jump over when she realizes there's someone in the pool in that yard. Just then Roscoe sees her and begins barking, bringing Jamie to see what's causing the commotion. Just when Ruby believes there's no way to explain, the boy from next door - Nate Cross - steps up to the fence and tells Jamie that Ruby was just alerting him to the fact that his music is too loud. Jamie accepts the story and heads back inside. Ruby is about to follow when Nate catches her attention and returns her bag. Back at the house, she stashes the bag with plans to pick it up as soon as everyone is asleep. When she returns, she finds the bag in plain sight and knows Jamie wasn't fooled.



Chapter 1 Analysis

There is a great deal of information included in the way Cora and Ruby interact initially. Ruby admits that she doesn't know anything about Cora because of their long separation. She expects to find the bedroom she'll have covered in appliqué and pinks but is pleasantly surprised to find it's creams, straight lines, and open. As she's thinking about this, she reveals that her philosophy is to simply expect the worst of every situation. This is a serious statement indicating that Ruby has suffered greatly at the hands of her mother.

From the beginning, Ruby indicates she doesn't know where her mother has gone. At one point she admits that she hopes her mom is on a boat on the Florida coast with a boyfriend. She also can't help but worry about her mom and it seems reasonable that, given her mom's inability to hold a job or maintain a stable home, she might have fallen into a bad situation and been hurt or killed. Neither turns out to be the case. In truth, Ruby's mom has abandoned Ruby. It seems reasonable to believe that Ruby's mom knew Ruby would leave home as soon as she'd turned eighteen, just as Cora had done. Ruby's mom left so she could be the one leaving rather than being the one left behind. She will turn up near the end of the book at a rehab in Tennessee.

The house has some serious issues by the time Ruby's mom leaves. The water pipes burst in the kitchen and Ruby doesn't have running water except in the bathroom. She's apparently carrying water sometimes to the kitchen but has quickly allowed the dishes to get out of hand. The kitchen is a mess and is obviously unsanitary. At the time, Ruby insists she's fine. She hates the social services report that refers to the fact that the minor child was living without running water, but that report is essentially true. What's interesting is that Ruby is just six months short of her eighteenth birthday. She has planned for ages to leave as soon as that date rolls around. She believes she can take care of herself, but when she's faced with the need to care for herself, she isn't capable. While the situation is difficult, it would have been possible for Ruby to keep the dishes washed and to keep the house at least moderately clean. She was the one dirtying dishes but couldn't be bothered to wash them. It seems possible that her drinking and drug use are a serious problem and probably contribute to her inability to accomplish what she needs to accomplish at home.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

In chapter two, Ruby returns to thoughts of her mother who always hated work and held a series of dead-end jobs paying little more than minimum wage. Just before she'd vanished, she had landed a job at Commercial Courier, a company that delivers luggage lost by the airlines. Ruby goes with her every night from the beginning of her mom's shift at five o'clock. Until her mom's disappearance was discovered, Ruby had continued to hold the job. Ruby says the short-term plans changed when she was taken into protective custody but her long-term plans have not.

Ruby arrives downstairs the following morning to find Jamie engrossed in a phone call. She sees he has a laptop open to a social networking site called UMe.com and is amazed when he gets dozens of pings, indicating new messages, while they're at the table. Cora notices that Ruby's sweater is too small and insists she change into something of Cora's. While they're in Cora's room, Ruby says she was doing fine on her own but Cora disagrees.

On the way to school, Jamie says Cora is a lawyer for the public defender's office. At the school, Ruby meets the principal, Mr. Thackray, who thanks Jamie for the financial donation to build the soccer field urging Jamie again to allow public recognition for the gift. Jamie again denies. During their conversation, Ruby discovers that Jamie is the owner of UMe.com.

Ruby thinks back to her childhood. She'd been younger than Cora by ten years. After her parents divorced, Ruby's mom had become an alcoholic and abusive. Cora would slip down to the kitchen with Ruby after their mom was passed out to make them something to eat. If they were caught, she'd stand between Ruby and their mom, taking the brunt of the abuse.

Then Cora graduated high school and made plans for college. The dynamics in the household begin to change and on the day Cora leaves for college, she goes back inside for a brief talk with her mother. She leaves with a friend and promises Ruby they'll stay in touch. They do for a few weeks then Ruby and her mother move and she stops hearing from Cora. Ruby says it's only when she's looking back at it that it seems strange that she and Cora lost touch so completely because Cora didn't move that far away and Ruby and her mom never left the area. However, Ruby understands the mindset. Cora had finally escaped their unhappy home and Ruby could understand the decision to never go back.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Ruby has heard the story of her mother's life only from her mother. In that version, Ruby's mom was a pretty teenager with a bright future that included college until her



boyfriend's parents made them break up. In despair, she was at a party, met a man and became pregnant with Cora. Ten years later Ruby was born and believes she was a last-ditch effort to save the marriage though it ended when Ruby was five. This version of the story will become suspect when Ruby and Cora begin sharing notes on their lives after Cora's departure for college. When it's learned how much their mom lies about other things it seems entirely possible that she's lied about this as well.

Ruby remembers back to the day Cora left for college. Their mother hadn't come outside and had nothing to contribute to Cora's plans. Just before Cora is to leave, she returns to the house and talks to her mom but only for a few minutes. Ruby later asks Cora about their conversation. Cora says she'd warned their mother that she'd return and take action against her if she discovered Ruby was being physically abused.

It's interesting that Ruby and her mother move after Cora leaves. There is no mention of Ruby's mother working while they lived in that house. It seems possible, given later information, that Ruby's father had been making house payments and even some sort of maintenance payments. Ruby's mother seems to make the decision to move only in an effort to keep Cora and Ruby apart.



Chapter three

Chapter three Summary

In chapter three, Ruby is welcomed into her first class, literature. She is in time for a project assignment. She's supposed to come up with what "family" means to her. There's a black girl next to her named Olivia who is assigned the same project only with the word "money." Olivia says it's fitting that the person who has the least experience with money would get that assignment. Olivia and Ruby talk for a couple of minutes and discover they both attended Jackson High School prior to moving to Perkins Day.

Between classes, Ruby encounters Nate Cross. She notes that he's even more of the all-America jock type in the daylight than he had been in the dark. After class, Ruby goes to a local convenience store and calls Marshall. Marshall and Ruby have a loose relationship. Though Ruby objects to anyone saying Marshall is her boyfriend, she spends time with him. She says that if one of them spends time with someone else, the other studiously ignores the situation then retaliates. Marshall indicates he's wondered what happened to her and his concern is almost Ruby's undoing. She fights back tears, talks only for a minute, and promises to call when she can. She next calls her friend Peyton and asks for a ride. Peyton says her parents are being very strict at the moment and that she can't come. Ruby tells Peyton she's staying at her sister's house but doesn't give Peyton Cora's number, saying she'll call back later.

The convenience store turns out to be a gathering place for students and Ruby sees Nate there. She's already turned down his offer of a ride but comes up with a plan. She sets out walking, betting that he'll offer her a ride again. He does and she initially acts reluctant but gives in. She says she isn't headed home and he agrees to take her to "a friend's house" rather than having her take the bus. Ruby arrives at the yellow house and believes she sees a curtain move in the bedroom window. She rushes in, expecting to find her mother at home, but the house is empty. She sees it as it really is with dirty dishes piled in the sink and the smell of rotting food permeating the house. As she's looking around, Nate walks in. She's suddenly ashamed of the house and demands that he wait outside. He does. Ruby leaves without taking anything.

The ride back to town begins awkwardly. Then Nate gets a phone call, says he'll be in town in ten minutes and explains to Ruby that his father owns a business called "Rest Assured." They provide services to busy people, including the little details like picking up dry cleaning and dropping off meals. Nate stops off at the mall where he picks up boxes to be shipped from a woman named Harriett. By the time he drops Ruby at Cora's house, his father has called as well.

Ruby arrives at Cora's house to find that no one is home yet. Jamie gave her a key when he dropped her at school that day so she lets herself inside. In the kitchen she finds a note from Cora instructing that the lasagna be put in the oven. Ruby turns on the oven and discovers that Roscoe is acting frantic. She calls Jamie, saying she's worried



about the dog but Jamie says Roscoe is afraid whenever the oven or any other household appliance is turned on. After awhile, Roscoe settles beside Ruby and calms down when she puts her hand on him.

Chapter three Analysis

Marshall is a boy Ruby knows through her drug dealer, Rogerson. Ruby says they have a loose relationship and that is largely undefined. Ruby seems to need Marshall's companionship though she denies it.

Nate offers up a hint about his relationship with his father when he's telling Ruby about the business his father operates. Nate says working with his father is sometimes "intense" but doesn't elaborate. Only later will Ruby find out that his father is verbally and physically abusive.

Ruby isn't comfortable with Roscoe. When he barks at her as she's trying to climb the fence, she tries to shush him, apparently without realizing that would only make him bark louder. When Roscoe comes to her, shaking because of his fear of the oven, she can't help but try to soothe him.

When Ruby discovered what the social workers had brought her from home, she's annoyed. She says her "good stuff" was hanging on the makeshift clothesline in the kitchen and the social worker didn't pick up any of that. On the day she goes back to the house with Nate, she intends to pick up some of her clothes. When she starts to gather the items on the line, she realizes they're moldy and horrible. She still won't admit that she was living in squalor to anyone else, but accepts it herself at that point.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

In chapter four, Ruby wakes Saturday morning to the sound of a backhoe digging the pond Jamie has planned for the backyard. Ruby announces her intention to refuse Nate's offer of a ride to school, saying she'd rather take the bus. There isn't a Perkins bus in the mornings though one runs in the afternoon for those students with after-school activities. Ruby says she'll use the city's bus system but Cora points out she'll have to be up much earlier than if she just accepts Nate's offer. Jamie suggests they buy a car but Cora refuses, saying Ruby can either take the bus, accept Nate's offer, or borrow Jamie's car. Ruby intends to take the bus but she oversleeps the first morning and has to accept Nate's offer. When she gets in the car she discovers a twelve-year-old boy in the backseat. His name is Gervais and he is extremely rude from the very beginning. Nate says that Gervais is "accelerated." He attends Perkins as a senior in the morning and attends the university in the afternoons. The second day Ruby oversleeps and rides with Nate again. Gervais points out that Ruby's shampoo stinks which prompts Ruby to turn and stare at him until he looks away and is silent for the rest of the trip.

Ruby notes from the first day riding with Nate that he pays special attention whenever Heather arrives on campus. Nate and Heather had been dating and had broken up only a short time before. One morning Ruby tells Nate the worst thing he can do is to let Heather know he's still interested. The next morning he studiously ignores her arrival.

Ruby sits beside Olivia in literature. Olivia is always making rude comments while the other students are talking. One day Olivia literally throws her hands into the air when another student struggles to define "blue collar." Ruby finally asks Olivia why she's attending Perkins if she hates the school so much. Olivia is hostile, saying she doesn't know why Ruby is asking, but says her father sent her to Perkins for a better education than she could get at Jackson.

Back at home one Saturday while Jamie is working on the pond, Cora says she wants to get Ruby into a routine and wants her to see a therapist. Ruby objects to both. Cora says she has an appointment but gives Ruby two hundred dollars and sends her to the mall to buy some new clothes. Jamie is talking to a man outside who turns out to be Blake Cross, Nate's father.

Chapter 4 Analysis

As of Saturday when Jamie begins work on his pond, Ruby has still not unpacked her clothes and other items from her bags. There is a closet and dresser in the room but she hasn't utilized any of it. She says it gives her a slight feeling of control to have everything in the bags though she looks more ruffled for it.



Ruby notes that Perkins is a "complete culture shift" from Jackson High School. Jackson is the largest high school in the county, is a public school, and is understaffed and funded. From the beginning she notes the differences between the two schools. Not only are there computers and other advantages at Perkins that weren't available at Jackson, the halls are much less crowded.

Ruby notes that she could easily have stepped into the group of outcasts at Perkins - stoners and art freaks who had joined forces because there were so few of them. Ruby sees the crowd, recognizes the drug use, and knows she would be accepted if she approached them. However, she doesn't. This is an example of one of the important themes of the book - friendship. Ruby believes she doesn't need friendship and that her only defense is her ability to remain apart from others. She believes she can survive by depending on no one. Ruby herself admits that there may have been other factors figuring into her decision. She knows she won't be attending Perkins long though she hasn't made any plans for leaving. She goes on to admit that it could be because she's been given a second chance. No one at Perkins knows her from Jackson and she seems unwilling to step into the group of outcasts, labeling herself as one of them.

Jamie makes it clear that he believes Cora and Ruby were going shopping together. Actually, Cora begins sharing her thoughts with Ruby regarding the need for a routine and for Ruby to see a therapist and Ruby objects, saying she isn't a baby that Cora has to try to raise. Cora is suddenly withdrawn from the conversation and announces she has an appointment. In actuality, Cora is trying desperately to get pregnant and Ruby's comment hurts her though Ruby has no way of knowing this.

Ruby's first encounter with Blake Cross occurs when Blake and Jamie are talking in the yard while builders are constructing the pond. Mr. Cross openly asks Jamie how much he paid for his house then guesses it to be a million. Mr. Cross is pleading with Jamie to allow him to oversee Jamie's investments pointing out that the pond is a waste of money. Jamie is trying to escape.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

In chapter five, Ruby arrives at the mall by foot but immediately takes a bus to the apartment Marshall shares with Rogerson, the boy who supplies drugs to Ruby. They spend some time together and when Ruby is getting dressed Marshall hands her the house key which has fallen out of her pocket. The key is on a small fob with the words "Wildflower Ridge" on it, the name of the subdivision where Cora and Jamie live.

Ruby leaves Marshall's and goes to the mall though she wants desperately to pocket the two hundred dollars for a time she might really need the money. She knows that Cora would be furious if she does so she heads out and buys herself some new clothes. As she's leaving the mall she sees a jewelry kiosk with a "help wanted sign." Ruby stops and asks for a job. The woman at the kiosk is Harriett, the woman Nate had stopped to help when he and Ruby were returning from the yellow house. Ruby reminds Harriett where they'd seen each other before. Harriett says she's not really looking for help but a man at a vitamin kiosk, Reggie, says she is. Harriett says she can only offer a few hours and those would be erratic. Ruby says she doesn't mind. After some more back and forth, Harriett agrees to give Ruby a trial.

Ruby spends two hours with Harriett learning about the kiosk and learns that Harriett is a "complete control freak." Eventually, Harriett leaves to get coffee but promises she'll be able to hear Ruby call out if she needs Harriett. Nate arrives and Harriett returns. Nate suggests to Harriett that she make arrangements for automatic bill pay for his services. He says his father has that capability and Harriett says she'll think about it. After Nate leaves, Harriett talks about him, saying she "really likes" Nate.

When Ruby arrives at Cora's, she discovers there's a party in progress. Ruby tries to slip quietly to her room but overhears a conversation going in on Cora's room. Two of Cora's friends are in the room with her and they are encouraging her to continue the process she's begun in an effort to get pregnant. When Ruby and Cora come face-to-face, it's obvious Cora has been crying. When the other two women rejoin the party, Cora asks about Ruby's shopping trip. She reveals the job and Cora isn't pleased, saying she wants Ruby to focus on school. Ruby asks that they talk about it later and Cora seems surprised that she doesn't continue to argue.

Ruby goes downstairs later and they hear Roscoe barking, indicating he must have gotten out of the yard. Ruby offers to go find him and discovers he's on the Cross's side of the fence. She sees that Blake Cross is looking for him as well because Roscoe tore into his trash. Mr. Cross doesn't see Ruby at first but does get his hands on Roscoe. He seems furious beyond reason and Ruby believes he's about to kill Roscoe with his bare hands. She makes some noise to announce her presence and steps out. Mr. Cross releases the dog but tells Ruby to relay the message that Roscoe has been in his trash.



Chapter 5 Analysis

Harriett's hesitation to hire Ruby - or anyone else - to help run the kiosk stems from her own fear of giving up any control of her business. She admits this to Ruby who can completely understand both the need to remain in control and the fear of depending on someone else. Harriett's decision to give in on this point is a big step for her and Ruby will take the same kinds of steps later as she begins to allow friendships to form.

Reggie obviously likes Harriett and she seems to like him as well. When Ruby appears for the first time, Reggie and Harriett are arguing over a bet. Reggie had encouraged Harriett to give up caffeine and Harriett has a cup of coffee in her hand. She initially tries to say it's herbal tea but when Reggie calls her on it, she admits it's coffee and says he should put the ten-dollar bet "on my tab."

When Ruby returns to the house after getting Roscoe from Mr. Cross, she encounters two of Cora's friends. They seem to know Cora very well and begin to talk about her in a way that makes Ruby realize she hardly knows Cora at all. They say the myriad of people attending are mostly there because they want to be near Cora. Ruby had assumed the majority of those people were Jamie's friends. Ruby shouldn't have been so surprised at this side of Cora. Cora had stood between Ruby and her mother while they were all three living together and it seems reasonable that this side of her personality would continue to manifest as an adult.

Ruby realizes she hasn't spent a great deal of time worrying about her own mother and she wonders if, once the escape from her mother's house is complete, it should be this easy to stop thinking about her. Back at the beginning of the story, Ruby says her mother had often taken off for a few days at a time. She said her objective was to teach Ruby independence though it's apparent that she was really looking for time to herself. When those situations occurred, it was easy for Ruby to keep the fact hidden because she simply never allowed anyone to get close enough to her that her mother's absence would be noticed. However, now her mother has been gone for weeks. The reader will likely continue to wonder if Ruby's mom is dead but that doesn't seem to really occur to Ruby or Cora. They'll later discover she was arrested in Tennessee and forced into rehab.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

In chapter six, Ruby talks about how annoying Gervais is. She says she's tried to think of a way to actually hit him but knows she can't because he's a kid and he wears braces with headgear, meaning there's not a large exposed area to hit. She says he's very immature and thinks farts and burps are very funny. One morning he isn't in the car and Nate says he has a doctor's appointment. Ruby reveals her annoyance with him and Nate says Gervais obviously likes Ruby. He says that Heather had ridden with them for awhile and Gervais never said anything to her at all. Ruby is surprised, saying she's not friendly in return but Nate disagrees. He says she's reserved but that's different from being unfriendly. Ruby points out that Nate is overly friendly and he says it's a compulsion.

Ruby has been at Perkins Day for two weeks now and has given up on the idea of running away. She hasn't settled in but has admitted it's in her best interests to stay with Cora and Jamie. She still washes and dries her clothes, staying in the room and folding them immediately before taking them back to her room. She doesn't leave any of her possessions lying around either. Cora had given in on Ruby's job, allowing her to work through the Christmas holidays with a promise to "reconvene" the discussion after that. Ruby says she's suddenly missing her mother more than she had in the beginning and can't explain why. She hasn't made headway on her literature project defining family.

One day in literature class, Ruby and Olivia talk about people at Jackson. Olivia has a boyfriend there and Ruby remembers him. Olivia says she's hearing rumors that he's seeing someone else and describes the girl. Ruby comes up with the girl's name, Melissa West, and the opinion that Melissa is "a total skank." That afternoon, Jamie is at school to pick up Ruby. She's immediately wary. Ruby believes Jamie is going to say that the arrangement isn't working out and she suddenly realizes she doesn't want to leave. Then Jamie says he wants Ruby to apply for college. She says it's not possible and he argues that it is. He says she's somewhat late in the application process but believes she can still be accepted. He asks her to try, saying she'll have the option after graduation even if she decides she doesn't want to go.

Jamie then takes Ruby with him to buy fish for the new pond. He says he wants her to pick out one of her own and she's incredulous. She discovers that Heather is working in the store and knows a lot about fish. The conversation turns to Nate and Ruby expects Heather to be bitter but she says she's glad Nate has Ruby for a friend. Ruby and Jamie arrive home and release the fish as Heather instructed. Ruby's fish is the only white one.

That night Peyton arrives, obviously high. Jamie is initially pleased that Ruby has a friend but Cora realizes Peyton's condition and warns Ruby not to let her come by again.



Chapter 6 Analysis

Peyton's arrival at Ruby's house is a complete surprise to Ruby. Ruby has only talked to Peyton one time on the telephone since she left Jackson and she doesn't remember having told Peyton where she was staying. Peyton insists Ruby did tell her. When Ruby was at Marshall's house, she dropped her key and the name of the neighborhood is on the fob attached to the key. Marshall saw it and that's actually how Peyton knew where Ruby was living. She says when she got to the neighborhood, she simply drove around until she found someone who knew Ruby - Nate.

Cora's reaction to Peyton's visit seems somewhat over the top. She tells Ruby that she's not to have unannounced company again and Ruby objects, saying she didn't know that Peyton was coming. It will later be revealed that Cora's guardianship of Ruby is dependent on several conditions, including that Ruby abstain from drug and alcohol. The social workers had discovered the drugs and liquor at Ruby's house when she was taken into state custody, prompting the conditions. Cora fears having Ruby taken away because of the drugs and sees Peyton as a means for Ruby to be drawn back in.

The fact that Jamie buys a fish that's to be Ruby's personal fish in the pond seems a minor point but it will actually become something of a symbol to the fact that she belongs.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

In chapter seven, Ruby continues to work for Harriett and discovers Harriett is seldom able to actually leave the kiosk while Ruby is working. One day Ruby points out that Reggie obviously likes Harriett, a fact she insists isn't true.

One day Ruby arrives home and discovers that Jamie has bought a blue shirt each for himself, Cora, and Ruby, and one for Roscoe complete with a little red bow. He says they will wear them for their Christmas card photo. Ruby and Cora aren't enthusiastic but Jamie says he wants to make Christmas special for Cora and Ruby because they missed out on those traditions as kids. With that comment made, neither Ruby nor Cora can bring themselves to object.

One day Olivia tells Ruby that she's verified that her boyfriend was cheating with Melissa at Jackson. Olivia feels indebted although Ruby says that's not the case. Olivia is hurt that none of her friends shared the information though they obviously knew. Ruby discovers Nate quit the swim team. Ruby realizes she's allowing Nate to walk with her into school each day and slows down when he gets held up by friends so that he can catch up.

Jamie reveals a new ad campaign for UMe.com that includes a photo of his extended family. Ruby likes the ad but Cora says Jamie's family might not appreciate their photo being made public. There's a comment about Jamie and Cora's wedding and the conversation dies. Later that morning, Cora assures Ruby she isn't angry that Ruby chose not to attend but Ruby counters, saying she wasn't invited. Cora says she had given a wedding invitation to their mother. Cora points out all the times Ruby and her mom had moved, how they'd used false names to get utilities turned on and used false addresses on Ruby's school records. Ruby's mom had said it was to keep creditors from tracking her down but Cora says it was to keep her from finding them. Cora says she continued to talk to their mom until the wedding. Nate arrives and Ruby rushes out though Cora pleads with her to stay. On the way to school, Nate warns Gervais to stop with the burps and farts, indicating he'd just talked to Gervais' mom about it. Ruby realizes Nate is trying to make their rides better for her.

At school, Ruby encounters Olivia who is leaving campus. Ruby asks for a ride and Olivia agrees to give her one if they meet off campus.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Nate says he quit the swim team because he's so busy but it later turns out that he quit because his father made such a scene at the swim meets. Nate's father is verbally and physically abusive and didn't hide his verbal abuse well at the meets. Nate is obviously

embarrassed at his father's outbursts and quits the swim team in an effort to eliminate the situation. He says it's because he's so busy with his father's business.

After Ruby leaves the house with Cora's version of events, she has to admit that it makes sense. Ruby remembers an invitation to Cora's graduation and her mother's statement that it was "sent automatically by the school." It's interesting that both Cora and Ruby were willing to accept their mother's word. She told Ruby that Cora didn't want anything to do with them and wasn't in contact. She told Cora that Ruby didn't want anything to do with Cora and had refused the invitation to Cora's wedding.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

In chapter eight, Olivia picks up her friend Laney who has hurt herself running. Ruby asks to be dropped at a clearing near Jackson. Olivia is skeptical but gives in. She finds Peyton's friend Aaron there and expects to find Peyton. Aaron has liquor and they share a bottle of vodka and some marijuana. Ruby becomes very drunk and when Peyton doesn't appear, she decides to walk through a path to Marshall's house. Marshall's roommate, Rogerson, answers the door. Ruby says she needs to see Marshall and heads down the hall to his room. She finds Peyton and Marshall on the bed together. Marshall's reaction indicates he doesn't care that Ruby saw. Peyton jumps up and chases Ruby. Peyton says that Ruby always insisted Marshall wasn't her boyfriend and she shouldn't be surprised at this situation. She also says she'd tried to tell Ruby the night she showed up at Cora's house. Ruby rushes back to the clearing. Aaron is still there and looks at Ruby. She passes out on the ground.

When Ruby comes to, she's in Nate's car. She's sick in a bag lying at her feet. Nate says Olivia had told him where she'd left Ruby. He says when he arrived, Ruby was alone and that those aren't her friends if they'll leave her alone in that situation. He says the friends are the ones who come get her. When Ruby arrives in the house, Cora and Jamie are home because Cora had a doctor's appointment that day. Both are furious with Ruby and Jamie is very vocal about his disappointment. Cora steps between Ruby and Jamie and holds out her hand to Ruby. She doesn't really know why, but she takes it.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Peyton's attitude about Ruby's relationship with Marshall is an indication of the kind of friend she really is. Peyton was kicked out of a private religious school for drug use. She has apparently spiraled completely out of control since then. Her spending time with Marshall is probably based on their mutual drug habits. Peyton says that Ruby should not be surprised to find Peyton and Marshall in a relationship because Ruby has always insisted that she is not in a relationship with Marshall. Peyton is right to a degree and Ruby realizes it. However, the two girls were supposedly friends while Ruby was at Jackson. Peyton can't know about the argument with Cora but it's obvious that Ruby is hurting when she leaves Marshall's house. She says they've all made the short walk from the clearing near Jackson to Marshall's apartment and Peyton is bound to know that's where Ruby is headed when she leaves Marshall's. Peyton follows her outside but doesn't follow her on to the clearing. Aaron sees her pass out but doesn't stick around to be sure she's alright. Nate points out to Ruby that he and Olivia have acted more like friends than any of her other "friends" that day.

Ruby spills her story to Nate on the way home. She tells him about being abandoned by her mother and seems to expect that Nate will understand. He doesn't condemn her but it will later be revealed that Nate has problems of his own and is outwardly coping much better than Ruby.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

In chapter nine, the following morning, Ruby realizes that Jamie isn't speaking to her. Cora says it's because he's disappointed in her actions but Cora seems more understanding about Ruby's motivations. She does, however, point out that a condition of Ruby staying with them is that she not use drugs or alcohol and warns that it can't happen again. Cora says that Jamie doesn't understand people "like up" who run away and return drunk. Cora reveals that she feels guilty for having left Ruby behind. She says looking back at it, she could have rented an apartment and taken care of Ruby when she went away to college. Ruby says that's ridiculous because Cora was only eighteen. Ruby realizes they've come full circle with her again depending on Cora as she had when she was a kid. Ruby asks Cora about her final conversation with their mother on the day Cora left for college. Cora says she'd told their mother she'd involve the authorities if Ruby were mistreated, and that she'd be returning for Ruby as soon as she could. Cora says she'd believed it at the time.

Ruby wore Nate's sweatshirt home the night before and when it's clean she goes to his house to return it. She finds him in the pool house stuffing items into bags for a realtor's open house. Ruby thanks him for coming to get her, saying there's no telling what might have happened if he hadn't. Nate asks if he can ask Ruby a question and she expects one of several but is surprised when he asks what it was like to live on her own. She says it was more difficult than she'd expected though it was a relief because living with her mother had been tumultuous.

Ruby always wears the key to the yellow house on a chain around her neck. At the jewelry kiosk one day a boy and girl arrive looking for a gift the boy will give to a special girl. The girl suggests a key like the one Ruby is wearing and asks if there are any among the jewelry at the kiosk. The boy is skeptical but the girl says the key represents "possibilities." The boy is finally convinced and Ruby sells them a chain, directing them to a key-kiosk nearby for the key. Harriett is impressed with her initiative.

That afternoon, Ruby is nearing the house when she sees a big heron flying over. She remembers Heather's comment that the fish are hardy and will survive a lot other than birds. Ruby runs and finds the heron perched in the edge of the pond. She yells at it, making it fly away. Ruby realizes Jamie is standing nearby and she says she'd chased the heron out of the pond before it could catch any of the fish. She then tells him she's sorry, obviously referring to getting drunk, and he says it's okay.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Cora's version of the final conversation with her mother before leaving for college explains a great deal of the rest of Ruby's life. Cora says she'd told their mother she'd



involved the authorities if Ruby were mistreated, and that she'd return to take Ruby away as soon as she could. That threat prompted the dozens of moves and Ruby's mother's efforts to keep the two girls separated.

Ruby is continuing to work on the literature project defining family. She's called on various people, asking for their definitions of family, and has gotten several answers. Harriett has an interesting take on families and one that captures the attention of Reggie. Harriett says families are about "not speaking." She explains that in her family, someone is always mad at someone else and so the two are not speaking. However, later there will be some different argument so the two have to make up in order to band against someone else. Harriett seems to believe this is typical of families and Reggie says this explains a great deal about Harriett. His own thoughts about families are very different. He talks about shared history and beginnings. As they laugh at each other's thoughts, they both realize they are considered the black sheep of their respective families. Ruby will later come to discover that shared traits and situations are important to families and friendships.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

In chapter ten, Ruby visits with Olivia at her job at Vista Ten, a movie theater. Ruby says her dad is the manager and she's taking tickets when Gervais arrives. Ruby thanks Olivia for telling Nate where she'd gone when she passed out in the clearing. Olivia says the change to a new school had been horrible for her as well.

Ruby says everyone has a weakness that eventually does them in, and that hers is calculus. She's struggling to study one day when Nate arrives, having just taken Roscoe to the vet for Jamie and Cora. Nate convinces Ruby to leave the calculus and spend the day with him, running errands for his father's business. They pickup cats at one house that's overrun with the felines, dropping several at the vet's office. Nate says the woman takes in those without hope and Ruby encounters one who is dying of cancer. The owner says she needs to know from the vet if there's something else to be done or if she should just keep the cat as comfortable as possible. Ruby is struck by the woman's kindness. They stop at an apartment to deliver dry cleaning. Nate says the apartment is always vacant, that he picks up and drops off a duvet cover every couple of months, and that he knows nothing about the owner. There's a root beer cap on the counter that Nate says he left there weeks earlier as an experiment to see if it would be moved. They note that there are no photos or other indications that anyone lives in the apartment.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Ruby tells Olivia that she "isn't like that," referring to her drunken foray to the clearing near Jackson. This is interesting in that Ruby feels the need to explain to Olivia. Obviously, Ruby is worrying that Olivia might think less of her for her actions that day. Olivia isn't judgmental and their friendship is already cemented though neither realizes it yet.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

In chapter eleven, Olivia says everyone believes there's a budding relationship between Ruby and Nate. Ruby denies it but notes that Olivia has somehow become her friend, comfortable enough to interject opinions about Ruby's personal life. Nate has noted that Gervais is being less annoying and has recently begun combing his hair. Ruby also realizes that Gervais seems to be always watching her at lunchtime.

Thanksgiving is approaching and Cora is fearful that the dinner, which she's hosting, will be a complete disaster. Jamie assures her it will be alright but she's completely stressed over her role in the holiday. On the day Jamie's family is to arrive, Ruby's job is to answer the door. She discovers a hole in her sweater and rushes to her closet to change only to discover that Roscoe - who often finds refuge for the things that disturb him - is in the closet. This time, however, Cora is also there. Cora invites Ruby to join her and she does. Cora says she feels the need to provide the perfect Thanksgiving for Jamie's family and that she has no experience of her own to create that. She also feels that Jamie's family is judging her because they haven't yet announced that they're having a baby. Ruby asks Cora if she remembers Thanksgivings at their house and both admit that they don't.

Ruby had gone that morning to Nate's house to put pies in the oven. Their own oven was full because of the turkey and the Crosses had agreed to lend their oven for the pies. There, Ruby discovers Nate and his father have a full day of deliveries and errands for the business. Mr. Cross warns Nate to be sure he has all the keys he needs and Nate says he does. He and Ruby connect in the kitchen for a few minutes and at one point Nate puts one of the keys in Ruby's hand, then leaves it on the kitchen counter. Nate tells Ruby he isn't particularly interested in holidays. He says his mother had remarried and was more interested in his stepsisters than in Nate, so had sent him to live with his dad. Mr. Cross and Nate leave for their errands and Ruby puts the pies in to cook.

When it's time for dessert, Ruby realizes she's left the pies at the Cross house. She'd set the timer so the pies aren't overcooked. When she arrives, she hears voices and noises from the garage. She steps to the door just in time to see Nate picking up an overturned shelf. Mr. Cross is screaming at Nate over a forgotten key and says Nate is disgusting. Ruby hides from Mr. Cross but is in the kitchen when Nate appears. It's obvious Ruby saw the scene and Nate says his father has a temper but that it's "hot air." When Ruby says she knows otherwise, Nate points out that Ruby remained with her mother until her mother left, even though that situation was volatile as well. Nate says he'll be gone in six months, as soon as he graduates.



Chapter 11 Analysis

While putting the pies in to cook at the Cross house, Ruby steps into the bedroom she knows is Nate's. She expects to see the room of a typical teenage boy with mementos and photos mingled with his possessions. Instead, the room is sterile. There's little indication anyone is living in that room at all. Ruby is initially confused then realizes it's exactly like her own room at Cora's house.

During dinner, Jamie plans to announce the new ad campaign for the UMe.com site. He says he has an announcement and everyone seems to immediately suspect that Cora might be pregnant. Jamie hurriedly gets into the ad campaign, saying he hopes the family won't sue him for using their photo. Jamie is obviously upset because he knows Cora will be hurt by the assumption. Later, Cora and Ruby are discussing the meaning of family and Cora says the meaning isn't static. She says family changes, being a child in his parents in the beginning and evolving to include friends, spouses, in-laws, and children of their own.

When Ruby discovers that Nate is being physically and verbally abused, she's upset. What's interesting is that she realizes she's changed. She knows that had this happened a few months earlier, she'd have simply left the house without confronting Nate. She'd have ignored what she saw and gone out of her way to be uninvolved. That's no longer a possibility because Ruby has become dependent on Nate's friendship. However, there's another interesting twist to Ruby's thought process. She says that Nate is right in his statement that six months isn't that long. She then adds, "I'd been left enough." This seems to indicate that Ruby might have intervened on Nate's behalf or urged him to do so if she wasn't aware that to do so would probably mean Nate would leave.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

In chapter twelve, Ruby arrives at the jewelry kiosk before the mall opens on the Friday after Thanksgiving to discover Harriett has created a new line of jewelry based on Ruby's key. The designs vary with some encrusted with jewels and others very plain. Harriett is anxious for Ruby's approval and she gives it. They sell several that morning. Harriett offers one to Ruby but she declines, saying she'll hold onto the key she has. She admits to herself that it's the key to the yellow house but has become a symbol of the life she led prior to her mother's leaving.

In December, Ruby spends a lot of time working with Harriett, focusing on calculus, and running errands with Nate. One day Ruby is with Olivia as she shouts for her friend Laney to "pick up the pace." Olivia says Laney has taken on a project she can't possibly complete and that she should have begun with a lighter running program before training for a race. One day Ruby and Olivia are talking about friendships. Olivia says no two people are going to see things the same meaning if you find someone to share a couple of things with, you should hold onto them as friends.

On Christmas Eve, Jamie dresses in a Santa costume with plans to walk around the neighborhood handing out small gifts. Ruby discovers she's to dress as an elf and accompany him. When she looks to Cora for help, Cora says she did it the previous year and Ruby gives in. When they've handed out all the gifts, Jamie suggests Ruby stop by the Cross house. There, Nate answers the door, won't let Ruby in, and is obviously in distress. Ruby battles herself, trying to decide what to do, but obeys Nate's pleas to just leave.

Chapter 12 Analysis

While Ruby is involved in emerging friendships with Olivia, Nate, Cora, and Jamie, she's also becoming friends with Harriett and Reggie. There is a great deal of good-natured teasing going on between the three of them at the mall. Reggie runs a vitamin kiosk near Harriett's jewelry kiosk and there is always some banter between them, often with Reggie fussing at Harriett for her poor eating habits. Ruby suggests to Harriett that Reggie likes her and Harriett is surprised by the idea but their relationship will eventually move to a new level and they'll begin dating. It's not clear how much Ruby has to do with the change but it seems that she's the catalyst.

After Ruby discovers that Nate is being abused, she is more observant to the signs of abuse. When she stops by on Christmas Eve and sees that Nate is in obvious distress, she battles with her need to do something and her need to obey Nate's request to do nothing. Ruby almost tells Jamie as they're walking home that night but doesn't. An interesting point here is that Ruby knows Nate is going to be leaving as soon as he

graduates and says that's one reason she should distance herself from a relationship with him, but she doesn't heed her advice.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

In chapter thirteen, on Christmas day the family opens gifts. Ruby has a new laptop and some other items. On that day, Cora discovers she's again not pregnant. Cora tells Ruby she knows she should be happy with her life. Jamie is a wonderful husband and they have a wonderful house, but she admits that she really wants a baby. Ruby's understanding is unexpected and brings the sisters closer together.

On Christmas day, Ruby answers the door to find Gervais on her steps. He says he knows she is struggling to pass calculus and that a great deal of her grade rests on the results of a test in March. He proposes to tutor her for free and in return she'll help him spend some time with Olivia. Gervais says he isn't looking for a girlfriend but says that Olivia is the only person at school who's nice to him and he wants to be her friend. Ruby says she won't be part of that but proposes that Gervais bill her for his tutoring and if they happen to talk at lunchtime and Olivia is there, he'll have his opportunity to make friends.

Cora and Jamie host a party and Ruby finds a minute to be alone in the laundry room. Ruby is worried about Nate, having not seen him since Christmas Eve. Ruby tells Cora she's running a little low on holiday cheer and Cora commiserates, saying the holidays with Jamie is something of an endurance trial. Nate arrives and gives Ruby a sweatshirt with the words "U Swim" on it. Ruby tries to ask about Nate's situation and he says the holiday are always a problem but that it's "ancient history."

Ruby receives gift cards for clothes but doesn't use them until one day when Cora takes her shopping. Cora says that accepting things from other people doesn't make her weak, even though she understands that was their mother's attitude. The conversation continues and Cora says their mother even refused help from their father after their divorce. Ruby had believed her mother's version, that their father had walked out and refused to pay anything, even child support. Ruby asks if Cora knows where their father is. Cora says she doesn't and has thought about searching for him but fears what she might find.

Chapter 13 Analysis

There is a woman named Barbara Star at Cora and Jamie's party. Cora introduces her to Ruby and it's obvious the woman is already well on her way to being drunk. Ruby and Cora immediately connect on how to handle the situation. Cora suggests that Ruby get Barbara a refill and takes her glass. Ruby leaves with it and does refill it but Cora has Barbara moved on to talking with someone else by the time Ruby returns. It seems a practiced move on Cora's part and probably was. What's interesting is that Ruby hasn't



had much practice intervening with her mother's drinking habits. Ruby seems to have simply stayed out of her mother's way when she was drinking.

Nate has a sweatshirt of his own with "U Swim" on it, apparently a sweatshirt from the University Swim Team. He tells Ruby the words are his motto and Ruby says she doesn't understand. Nate says the alternative is "U Sink."



Chapters 14 and 15

Chapters 14 and 15 Summary

In chapter fourteen, Valentine's Day is approaching and Ruby wants to tell Nate she's worried about him but can't bring herself to do so. He announces big plans for their evening but has to skip school that day to help his father with errands for the business. He doesn't show up that evening at the appointed though Ruby knows he and his father are at home. When he appears two hours late, Ruby refuses to let the situation drop. She says she's worried but Nate counters, saying that what happens between him and his dad is private. Ruby touches his shoulder and discovers a large bruise and welt, just beginning to rise and discolor. Ruby then puts the situation to an ultimatum, saying that Nate has to open up to her or their relationship has to come to an end. He leaves.

In chapter fifteen, Harriett is interviewed by a local reporter about her new line of jewelry, KeyChains, based on Ruby's key. Ruby and Reggie talk about Harriett. Though Reggie is obviously disappointed that his relationship with Harriett is not progressing, he says that it's often necessary to be content with whatever level of friendship someone can offer. Ruby considers that she's now miles apart from Nate. One day Ruby and Heather talk and Heather says she sometimes wishes she had forced the issue with Nate, revealing that his abusive home life and his effort to hide it were also behind their breakup.

Gervais is spending lunchtimes with Ruby and Olivia and Ruby discovers that Olivia is very smart. Ruby has applied to three colleges though she's behind the curve on time and isn't certain she'll be accepted at any of them.

Ruby arrives home one day to discover Cora has learned their mother was arrested in Tennessee and forced into rehab. They consider that rehab is good though it would have been better if she'd chosen to go on her own. Jamie assures Ruby that nothing will change and Cora says any contact with their mother will be Ruby's decision, but Ruby is skeptical.

Chapters 14 and 15 Analysis

Ruby's decision to call for a showdown with Jamie is not fully explained. It's not clear why she chooses Valentine's Day to demand that he let her help him with his crisis at home, or what she plans to do. The worry over him being two hours late is probably the catalyst. An interesting angle to this situation is Nate's determination to put on a brave outward face. Nate is nearly an adult and he's athletic. He could fight back but doesn't, and he is determined that no one know about the abuse. This is typical of an abusive relationship.

Ruby's reaction when she discovers her mother is in rehab is initially one of relief because she's alright and being cared for. Cora seems to immediately realize that Ruby



will be worried about her own future now that her mother might be involved in her life again. Cora counters, assuring Ruby that any decision to see her mother will be Ruby's alone. Ruby's reaction is fear but not because she's so afraid that her mother will reclaim her. Ruby says her mother is the one thing in her life against which Ruby has always measured herself. It seems that Ruby has identified with her mother as the only constant in her life for so long that she has trouble finding another way. She says that all the time her mother was simply missing, she'd felt as if she were floating without the ability to settle anywhere at all. Now that her mother was found, Ruby feels that will change. It seems more likely that Ruby has felt the living arrangements with Cora and Jamie have been temporary pending her mother's return. Ruby has settled in to some degree but has been holding back because she's probably always expected that she'll be returned to her mother. Now that her mother is found, Ruby will have no choice but begin to make decisions about her life and her willingness to accept Cora into it.



Chapters 16 through 20

Chapters 16 through 20 Summary

In chapter sixteen, Ruby is at the mall kiosk one day when Harriett asks her to pass a message to Nate to have Mr. Cross call her. Harriett has handed over access to her bank account to Mr. Cross and says the balance isn't what she'd thought it should be. When Ruby gets home that day, she discovers that Cora is cleaning up after Roscoe. Cora says they generally lock the doggie door while they're gone and that Nate usually walks Roscoe, but apparently didn't on this particular day.

In chapter seventeen, Ruby is making a final push to prepare for her calculus test. Gervais says his method is proven and guarantees an A if Ruby follows his advice. She's skeptical but agrees. At the mall, Ruby encounters Olivia. There's a 5K race in progress though most of the contestants have already finished. Olivia is waiting for her friend, Laney, who is nowhere in sight. After the announcers are already packing up to leave, Laney appears and Ruby and Olivia cheer her on to the finish line. Ruby discovers that Harriett has accepted Reggie's offer for dinner.

Ruby questions her situation with Nate. She realizes Nate had been her friend before she'd know what a friend was or that she needed one. She knows that all he'd asked for was her understanding and she hadn't given it, choosing instead to run away rather than risk being hurt. At home, she hears Mr. Cross saying that he hasn't heard from Nate and that Nate had skipped out on errands he was supposed to run.

In chapter eighteen, Ruby is to take her calculus exam. Jamie gives her the keys to his car in honor of the big day. In class, Ruby follows Gervais' instructions and believes she's done well. As the class ends, she suddenly realizes she knows where to find Nate. She leaves campus and goes to the apartment building where Nate had said no one was ever home. She finds the apartment door unlocked and goes inside.

In chapter nineteen, Ruby convinces Nate to return with her to Cora and Jamie's house. Cora is quickly involved and sets out to make alternative living arrangements for Nate. He stays with them for several days while a plane ticket is booked for Arizona. He's to live with his mother until graduation. As Ruby is dropping Nate at the airport, she has a sudden inspiration. She pulls Jamie's house key from her pocket and strings it onto the chain that held the key to the yellow house, giving the key and chain to Nate. Ruby later receives a photo of Nate in front of the lifeguard stand. Though he has a whistle around his neck, he is also wearing the chain and the key. Ruby says they keep in contact by phone and UMe.

In chapter twenty, Cora calls to Ruby that it's time to go. Ruby is in her cap and gown, ready for graduation, and is taking a moment to reflect on her life while she looks at the pond. She recalls the day her acceptance came from the university. Ruby is allowed to send a letter to her mother but can't decide what to say and eventually just mailed her



acceptance to the university. Ruby pulls the key to the yellow house from her pocket and tosses it into the pond. As she does, she sees her white fish dart across the pond.

Chapters 16 through 20 Analysis

Ruby is struck by Olivia's friendship to Laney. When Laney is the last one making an appearance to finish the race, Olivia is the only one still at the finish line. She's cheering Laney on and Ruby realizes that Laney didn't need the crowd remaining to cheer for her. Instead, she just needed Olivia.



Characters

Ruby

Ruby is seventeen when her mother vanishes. Ruby believes she can hold out for the few months remaining until she turns eighteen but her landlord catches on to the fact that she's living alone and turns the situation over to officials. Ruby is taken into custody and handed over to her sister, Cora, who she hasn't seen in a decade. Ruby is a self-confident but misguided. Ruby believes she doesn't need anyone and that the only way to protect herself is to remain distant from anyone who offers friendship. That changes slowly and Ruby says she isn't certain how it comes about. She finds herself becoming friends with fellow students Nate and Olivia, then with a child prodigy named Gervais. Ruby discovers she's not the only one who has trouble accepting friendships when she learns that Nate is being abused by his father. Ruby is frustrated when she reaches out to Nate but he refuses her help. Ruby also opens up to Cora and discovers that her mother's lies kept them apart when it needn't have been that way. Cora feels guilt for having left Ruby behind when she left but Ruby realizes that guilt is unfounded. Ruby's attitude changes as she discovers that living without connections is not living at all. Ruby comes to depend on the friendships and family connections and finds faith that she can attend college and make something of her life.

Nate Cross

The boy who lives next door to Jamie and Cora, he meets Ruby when she's trying to sneak across the fence of the Hunter house to run away. Nate is the same age as Ruby and has many of the same problems though he puts on a public face that means most people don't realize his problems. Nate desperately wants to hide the fact that his father is abusing him with the idea that he can leave as soon as he graduates and simply never return. Nate is handsome and popular at school. When his father becomes abusive on the sidelines at his swim meets, he's banned from the dock but remains equally verbal from a distance. The actions of his father prompt Nate to quit swimming, a sport he'd loved and excelled at and that was going to provide Nate a college scholarship. Nate gives up a great deal to help his father's business, even skipping school to help with deliveries and errands on Valentine's Day. When Ruby discovers the abuse, Nate tries to make light of it but the abuse becomes evident when his father leaves visible marks. Nate had been forced to move from Arizona by his mother who no longer wanted him to live with her. Nate is desperate for friendship but fears the possibility of allowing someone to help him with his problems.

Cora Hunter

Ruby's older sister, Cora left home when she started college and completely lost touch with Ruby. Cora carries guilt over leaving Ruby though she was only eighteen when she



leaves home. Cora is an attorney and is very serious about most things. She desperately wants a baby.

Ruby's mother

Mother of Ruby and Cora, she is an alcoholic and an abusive parent. Ruby's mother suffers greatly from self-esteem issues and blames others for the fact that she didn't achieve any of her own dreams. She takes that out on those around her. She never recovers from her husband leaving her and leaves Ruby before Ruby has the opportunity to leave her mother.

Jamie Hunter

Cora's husband, Jamie grew up with a wonderful, large, close-knit family and hates the fact that Cora didn't. He spends a lot of time and energy trying to help her enjoy holidays and to recreate the life he grew up with. Jamie is very wealthy.

Blake Cross

Nate's father, he is rude and controlling. Blake is obviously living beyond his means and begins to steal from clients. He has a violent temper and releases it on Nate often.

Harriett

The woman who owns a jewelry kiosk in the mall, she makes all the jewelry she sells. She is fearful of allowing Ruby a role in the business though she desperately needs the help. When a girl sees Ruby's key on a chain, Harriet realizes the potential and begins a line of jewelry based on the idea of a key on a chain.

Olivia

A girl who attends Perkins Day but who had attended Jackson, she feels at a disadvantage because of her family's economic standing. She attends Perkins Day because her father wants her to have a better education. She exhibits true friendship when her friend decides to run a marathon and Olivia remains at the finish line until her friend finishes the race, long after everyone else has returned.

Gervais

A child prodigy, he's a twelve-year-old genius who attends school at Perkins Day. Gervais is annoying when he and Ruby first meet but eventually reveals that he wants to be friends with Olivia. He helps Ruby pass her calculus test.



Peyton

A girl who befriends Ruby while attending Jackson High School, she is heavily involved in drugs. Peyton seems to be Ruby's best friend until Ruby is forced to live with Cora. Ruby calls on Peyton for a ride to her old house but Peyton refuses, a fact that hurts Ruby greatly. Peyton later shows up at Cora's house unannounced and obviously high. The visit remains unexplained until Ruby discovers Peyton is sleeping with a boy who had been involved in a relationship with Ruby.

Heather

A girl who had been Nate's girlfriend, Ruby comes to understand Heather better after discovering that Nate is being abused by his father and refuses to allow anyone to help him with the situation. Heather tells Ruby that she believes she could have done more to help Nate.



Objects/Places

UMe.com

This is the social media network founded by Jamie Hunter.

Perkins Day High School

This is the school Jamie attended and that Ruby attends after she moves in with Cora and Jamie.

Jackson High School

This is the school Ruby attends prior to moving in with Cora and Jamie.

Roscoe

This is the Cora and Jamie's dog. He discovers Ruby trying to jump the fence the first night she's at Cora's house and barks, alerting Jamie to the fact that Ruby is trying to run away.

The Key to the Yellow House

Ruby wears it around her neck so she won't lose it. It becomes a symbol of the life Ruby wanted and that was ripped away from her. It also becomes the inspiration for Harriet's new line of jewelry.

The Mall

This is where Ruby goes to work at Harriet's jewelry kiosk.

Commercial Courier

This is the company Ruby and her mother work for delivering bags lost at the airport.

Rest Assured

This is the business owned by Blake Cross. The company provides services such as picking up dry cleaning, stuffing bags for an open house, and frosting cupcakes for a party.

Wildflower Ridge

The exclusive neighborhood where Jamie and Cora live.

Vista Ten

Vista Ten



Themes

Abandonment

Abandonment and abuse go hand in hand as themes of this book. Cora and Ruby are abused by their mother though Cora gets the majority of the physical abuse while the girls are both still at home. The moment she can, Cora leaves the family and the communication is soon brought to a complete halt by their mother. The girls should have known their mother would interfere with their continued relationship but don't seem to recognize that. Each believes her stories about the other. Ruby believes that Cora cut communication and didn't try to keep in touch. Cora believes that Ruby had declined an invitation to Cora's wedding. Both felt abandoned by the other, feelings that were not addressed until Cora tries to exonerate Ruby from any guilt she might feel for refusing to attend the wedding. It's during that conversation that Ruby discovers Cora feels guilty for leaving Ruby behind with their abusive mother. Ruby realizes that Cora was only eighteen when she left and that she wasn't capable of taking on the responsibility for Ruby. Ruby's mother suffers from abandonment issues from an early age. She reportedly was in a committed relationship with a boy about her age and the two had planned to go away to college together. When they break up, Ruby's mother allows herself to be seduced by an older man and winds up pregnant. It's obvious that her self-esteem had taken a blow, making her stoop to this act. She marries and has the two daughters but the marriage fails. It's obvious that she suffers greatly from her husband's decision to leave her. She begins to drink a great deal and is abusive to the girls. Ruby's mother fully believes that Ruby will leave the moment she turns eighteen, just as Cora had. In an apparent effort to avoid that pain, she abandons Ruby a full six months before Ruby's eighteenth birthday. Ruby in turn suffers from the combined loss of Cora and her mother though it seems Cora's leaving affects her more than her mother's. Nate deals with abandonment issues as well. His mother turns her attention to her new family and doesn't want to deal with Nate. It seems his hurt over this abandonment prompts him to deal with his father's abuse more than he otherwise might have.

The effects of abuse

Cora, Ruby, and Nate are all suffering the effects of abusive parents and all three are dealing with the issues in their own way. In some ways, the abuse Nate suffers is more detrimental to Nate than the abuse of Cora and Ruby. Nate's father is violent. Ruby senses the situation when she finds Mr. Cross trying to strangle the Hunter's family pet, Roscoe. Mr. Cross gets control of his actions, releasing the dog, only when it's obvious that Ruby is watching. Mr. Cross's abuse of Nate is so serious and public that Nate drops off the swim team though that sport was Nate's ticket to a scholarship. Mr. Cross's verbal abuse goes to the extreme when he says Nate is "disgusting." While Ruby might have felt she could stand by without intervening over the verbal abuse, she feels compelled to act when she witnesses the physical abuse. That physical abuse was prevalent in Ruby and Cora's lives when they were young. When their mother stops



caring for them, leaving them too often on their own without regular supervision or even meals, Cora steps in, taking on the role of mother to Ruby. When their mother becomes physically violent, Cora literally steps between their mother and Ruby, accepting the physical violence on herself but largely protecting Ruby from it. Interestingly, Cora never actually witnesses Mr. Cross's abuse of Nate but she senses it. Jamie notes that Cora doesn't like Mr. Cross though she has no real foundation for her feelings. Ruby, who by this time has seen Mr. Cross's abuse, knows that Cora senses it even though she can't put her dislike into words.

Friendship

The need for friendship and the boundaries of friends make up an important theme of this story. When Ruby is forced to move to a new school, she intends to stay out of sight and "under the radar" so that she will remain alone. The initial point of friendship is her carpooling with Nate and Gervais. Ruby soon finds herself the topic of conversation because she's with Nate who is very popular and well-liked. Ruby then finds herself caught up in a budding friendship with Olivia, another student at Perkins who is something of an outsider as well. Ruby notes that she has friendships available. She could have interjected herself into the "outcast" crowd and would have been accepted. It's not the fact that she wants friends that prompts her friendship with Olivia, Nate, and Gervais so much as the fact that she needs friends. Gervais is another example of this theme. Gervais is only twelve but blooms under the bit of attention he's paid by Olivia. Olivia realizes that life for Gervais must be difficult because he's only twelve but is attending school with high school students. Ruby feels that her friendship with Nate should include helping him escape his abusive home life. She grows angry when Nate objects and won't let Ruby in. Olivia is another example of this theme. Olivia spends almost all her time on the phone with friends from her previous high school until she and Ruby become friends. Both Olivia and Ruby discover their friendships from their previous high school aren't true friends and both are betrayed.



Style

Point of View

The story is presented in the third person from the limited perspective of Ruby. This limited perspective is vital to the presentation of the story. Ruby believes that Cora made the decision to cut off contact after Cora moved out to attend college. She harbors resentment for what she sees as Cora's abandonment and bases her feelings only on what her mother has told her. Ruby also believes that their father ran away in an effort to avoid paying child support. The reader is left to believe these things as well until Cora sets the record straight. It's only then that Cora realizes her own beliefs - that Ruby had chosen not to attend Cora's wedding - were also based on their mother's lies. The fact that the story is limited in perspective also means that Nate's home situation is a surprise. The reader doesn't learn until Ruby does that Nate's mother kicked him out or that his father is verbally and physically abusive. The reader has a picture of Nate as a popular, spoiled son of a wealthy business owner until Ruby learns the truth. This provides the author with an opportunity for a twist that keeps the reader's interest but there seems to be a second motive as well. The majority of people who have no direct knowledge of abuse have the impression that abuse is easy to spot. It seems impossible to some that Nate could be the popular student who is clean, handsome, and well-liked and still be the person who is being abused by his father. The use of the limited perspective means the author has the opportunity to surprise the reader.

Setting

The story is set in two unnamed towns that are fictional and unnamed but is believable. There are various specific settings including the Perkins Day High School, the home of Cora and Jamie, the home of Nate Cross, and the mall. The high school is described with a fair amount of detail as Ruby is comparing the school to the Jackson High School she'd attended before moving in with Cora and Jamie. Other settings are also described in sufficient detail. The home of Jamie and Cora becomes an important setting because it is also such a complete contrast to the house where Ruby was living with her mother. That house - described as the yellow house in a fairly secluded area - was important to Ruby because it represents Ruby's dream of being completely self-sufficient without the need to depend on anyone else. He Hunter's home is in an affluent and exclusive neighborhood. The various settings are described so that the reader can imagine them. The story is set in the modern day as evidenced by the technology available. Olivia is constantly on the cell phone and Nate depends on his as well. Another important indicator of the time setting is seen with the source of Jamie's wealth, a dot-com social media network he founded.



Language and Meaning

The story is written in a straightforward style and the action moves along fairly quickly. The author occasionally becomes bogged down in description but the majority of the story is written with an obvious effort to keep the reader engaged. There are a few curse words in the story and some readers may be disappointed in this, though the language seems reasonable to the story and the character. The story makes reference to drugs and drug usage that some readers may find unfamiliar. For example, there is a reference to a "bong" that is a piece of drug paraphernalia commonly used by marijuana users. The majority of the scenes are described in adequate detail. A notable exception is seen in the scene in which Ruby has sex with Marshall. In that scene, the reader has to come to the conclusion this is what happened based on the fact that Ruby is getting dressed afterwards. The reader with an average vocabulary will probably not encounter many unfamiliar words. The overall tone of the story is one of hope though there is a darker undercurrent of abuse and abandonment. There are few real surprises in the book other than the fact that Nate is being abused by his father. Even that could be somewhat expected. In some ways, the action of the book is overly predictable and few readers will likely find the "happily ever after" ending a surprise.

Structure

The book is divided into twenty chapters of widely varying lengths. For example, chapter twelve is thirty-one pages in length while chapter nineteen is only six pages. The remaining chapters vary in length though several of them are eight to twelve pages. The chapters are titled by the word "chapter" followed by the written word. There are clues as to what the reader can expect in that particular chapter. The chapters are subdivided with three gray asterisks. These appear only as a sign that the action or scene is about to change. The basis of the story line is presented in chronological order though there are flashbacks that are an important part of the story. For example, the story opens with Ruby in the home of her sister and brother-in-law, Jamie and Cora. Jamie is showing Ruby her room and Cora is very quiet. Ruby seems to believe Cora's silence is disapproval and that seems a reasonable assumption. The reader then gets a flashback to explain how Ruby came to be moving in with Cora and why she expects that Cora isn't happy about the situation. The book covers about a six-month period in the lives of Ruby, Cora, and those around them. Focusing on Ruby, there are a number of characters introduced that play major roles in Ruby's changing attitude and emerging maturity. The flashbacks are not differentiated from the normal text but typically have a lead-in that makes it clear this is a flashback. For example, when Ruby begins to explain how she came to be reconnected with Cora in chapter one, the flashback begins with the words, "Before one o'clock that afternoon, when she showed up to claim me, I hadn't seen my sister in ten years."



Quotes

"So close, I thought. A shorter fence, a fatter dog, and everything would be different." (Chapter 1, p. 30).

"The only trick was never giving more than you were willing to lose. With Marhsall and me, it was like a game called I Could Care Less." (Chapter 3, p. 75).

"Sure it meant the little bit of stuff I had was that much more wrinkled, but rolling over every morning and seeing all my worldly possessions right there beside me made me feel somewhat in control of my situation. Which I needed, considering that everything else seemed completely out of control." (Chapter 4, p. 100).

"But now here I was, too far gone to be a stranger, not ready to be friends, the little acquaintance we had made still managing to be, somehow, too much." (Chapter 5, p. 139).

"Ruby, we want to do this for you, okay? You don't have to make things harder than they have to be just to prove a point." (Chapter 5, p. 144).

"I could not prove it scientifically. But I was pretty sure Gervais Miller was the most annoying person on the planet." (Chapter 6, p. 154).

"Diseases, genetics, hair, and eye color. It's like they're part of your blueprint. If something's wrong with you, you can usually trace it back to them." (Chapter 6, p. 163).

"'She left you,' she finished. 'Left you alone, in that filthy house, before you could do the same to her.'" (Chapter 7, p. 201).

"'She left you,' she finished. 'Left you alone, in that filthy house, before you could do the same to her.'" (Chapter 7, p. 201).

"When I turned around, he said, 'Hey, and for what it's worth? Friends don't leave you alone in the woods. Friends are the ones who come and take you out.'" (Chapter 8, p. 222).

"'Whoa,' I heard a voice say. It was muffled slightly by my hair, and my arm, which I locked around my head in an effort to keep my brain from seeping out." (Chapter 10, p. 253).

"The moment he opened the door, I knew something was wrong. It was just the look on his face - surprised, even alarmed - followed immediately by the way he eased the door a bit more shut, the same move I'd once mastered with the Jehovah's and landlords." (Chapter 12, p. 326).

"Who was this person in these fancy clothes, at this expensive school, with a for-all-intents-and-purposes boyfriend who she was actually worried wasn't opening up to her



enough emotionally? It was like I'd been brainwashed or something." (Chapter 14, p. 349).

"I could understand where Harriett was coming from, though. Whenever something great happens, you're always kind of poised for the universe to correct itself." (Chapter 15, p. 376).



Topics for Discussion

Describe Ruby, her life, and her family. What are her strengths and her weaknesses?

What is Ruby's attitude toward friends? Why does she have this attitude? Is it reasonable? Why does she think so? How and why does her attitude change?

Who is Nate Cross? How does he become acquainted with Ruby? What does he have in common with Ruby? What are his strengths? What are his weaknesses? What happens to him?

Who is Peyton? Who is Olivia? What do the two girls have in common? How are they similar? How are they different? Provide examples.

Describe Cora. How is she similar to Ruby? How is she different? What do the two have in common? What is the guilt Cora feels about Ruby? What does Ruby learn about Cora?

Who is Harriet? Marshall? Reggie? Marshall? Rogerson? How are each connected to Ruby?

What do you consider the most important theme of this book? Why? Give examples to support your statement.