

"Sharply intimate...fresh as a new wound." —MARISA DE LOS SANTOS,
New York Times bestselling author of *Love Walked In*, *Belong to Me*, and *Falling Together*

For three women,
the twelve-hour
countdown has begun.



The
far end of happy

a novel

KATHRYN CRAFT

reading group guide

1. Do you relate to Ronnie's determination to honor her marriage vows and stay with Jeff despite the challenges of their relationship? How did she cope? What makes a vow worth breaking?
2. How do Ronnie, Beverly, Janet, and Corporal McNichol differ in the way they respond to the stresses of the standoff?
3. In her voice mail on the day of the standoff, Ronnie's therapist says, "Don't worry about being strong for others. Be strong in yourself." What do you think she meant by this?
4. In what way do you think Ronnie's and Jeff's characters are an outgrowth of their mothers' issues, and how did they each differentiate themselves from their mothers?
5. Where do you see Ronnie, Janet, and Beverly five years beyond the end of the book? Who do you think will have the hardest time adjusting to Jeff's loss, and why?
6. At one point, Janet makes a crack that she doesn't believe in genetics. The genetics are bleak for Will and Andrew: on one side, their grandfather and great-grandmother received electroshock therapy for depression and their father committed

suicide, and on the other, their grandfather committed suicide. Do you think these children might go on to lead emotionally and mentally healthy lives? What factors beyond genetics might influence their development?

7. Tension between the three women feeds on secrets kept and truths revealed. Even Ronnie, who thrives on the truth and who suffered from secrets kept, sits on some information. How do you feel about others withholding information to protect you? What might influence your decision to withhold information from others?
8. “If a horse went lame, [Jeff would] be the one with his arms around its neck, whispering in its ear, while Ronnie would be the one out by the hydrant, morning and night, cold hosing its leg and bandaging.” What do Ronnie’s and Jeff’s differing approaches to the care of animals say about the way they loved other people? How do you think each would define love?
9. Discuss the role that setting plays in this story. In what ways do Ronnie and Jeff’s house, New Hope Farms, and the firehouse social hall contribute to the story? How do these settings play a different role for Ronnie and Jeff?
10. Corporal McNichol says that fixing Jeff’s problems is not Ronnie’s responsibility. In what ways do you think this is or isn’t true? Did you find it relatable that Ronnie picked up Jeff’s slack as his drinking and depression worsened? At what point does “helping” start to hurt? At what point must you allow a loved one to face the consequences of their actions?
11. In his final suicide note, Jeff asks Ronnie to teach the boys that he loved them. If you were in this situation, would you be

able to teach this message to your children? How would you go about it?

12. Beverly and Janet concocted a family story about Ronnie—dressed like Shirley Temple, she climbed on Jeff’s lap to command his attention—and have told it the same way for so long that they’ve changed the family’s collective memory. Ronnie uses a similar technique when she recounts the kitten story for her sons to replace the horror of the suicide. Has your family ever told a story in a way that bent it over time, while also capturing an essential truth?
13. Janet consciously decided not to tell Ronnie that Jeff had pulled a weapon on his first wife. If it was your son, and you saw how happy this new woman made him, would you give her this information before the wedding? Or would you, like Janet, think your son deserved the right to try to mature and be happy?
14. In what way does Ronnie’s story complicate the well-intentioned notion that we should be more compassionate toward people who are depressed and get them the help they need? In what ways did the system let Jeff and Ronnie down, and what can be done about it?
15. In response to her final attempt to get him help, Jeff wants to strike a bargain: he’ll try rehab if Ronnie is there for him as his wife when he gets out. Do you think she should have tried this additional measure? Why or why not?
16. By the end of the standoff, Ronnie wonders whether she had ever really known Jeff at all. Do you think we can ever really know another person? What did Ronnie’s marriage teach her about relationships—and about herself?

17. Several times in the book, a character signs a legal document authorizing an action that will have a significant impact on another character. Ronnie commits Jeff to a psych ward; Jerry signs for Janet to have fetus-threatening surgery; Ronnie authorizes the police to break her windows with canisters of Mace while Jeff is inside the building. Discuss these decisions. Would you have made the same ones? Have you ever had to authorize help for someone else, and how did it feel to take responsibility for that decision?
18. At several points, Beverly compares her relationship with Janet to a marriage. Do you have friendships that sometimes feel that way? What are the benefits and challenges of maintaining such a close relationship with a friend during life-changing events?
19. Ronnie and Jeff were deeply in debt. Although Jeff was in charge of the family finances, in what ways was Ronnie culpable for the state of their financial affairs? Did she deserve to pay this price for her mistakes?
20. Ronnie and Jeff, Beverly and Janet: both couples have a substantial age difference. In what ways do you think this feeds and/or challenges the relationships?
21. *The Far End of Happy* takes place over only twelve hours. In your opinion, which character exhibits the most significant growth arc, and why?
22. Throughout the day, the big challenge for the characters is to try to sustain some sort of hope. Do you think the story ends on a hopeful note, despite the obvious tragedy? Do you, like Beverly, think it's possible to hold extreme pain and extreme joy in your heart at the same time?