

"Kept me turning the pages until the very last secret was revealed."

—HALEY HARRIGAN, author of *Secrets of Southern Girls*

FRIENDS

& other

LIARS

A NOVEL

KAELA COBLE

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Imagine you are one of the crew listening to Danny's threatening letter. What do you do? Do you immediately tell the group your secret, or do you try to keep it hidden?
2. Secrets, and the many ways keeping secrets affect our lives, plays a major role throughout the book. How did keeping secrets affect the lives of each of the characters, as well as their friendships? How do you think their lives were changed when their secrets were revealed? How do the secrets we keep play a role in our own lives? Which member of the crew do you relate to the most: Ruby, Murphy, Ally, Emmett, or Danny? Why? Do you think you would've been able to keep their secrets? Whose perspective was most enjoyable to read? Who would you like to have heard more from?
3. Why do you think Danny set up this game? Was it because he wanted to bring his friends back together, or was something

more malevolent driving him forward? How do you think he would feel about the fact that none of them, at first, revealed their true secret?

4. Ruby St. James is the girl who got out of Chatwick. Do you think she is better off in New York City, or is she happier after returning to her hometown and confronting her past? Have you ever lived away from your hometown? How does it feel to return?
5. What do you make of the relationship between Ruby and her parents, particularly her mother? How do you think their relationship will change through Ruby's experience coming back to Chatwick?
6. Ally referred to Ruby and Murphy as darkness and light, respectively. How did this theme emerge throughout the story between them and other characters? Did it make sense to you that they did not end up together, or do you feel that their journey is incomplete?
7. We get the sense that Chatwick is the quintessential small-town America. What are the pros of living there? What are the cons? If you could move there, would you?
8. Describe Murphy and Ruby's friendship. Do you think it is a strong one? What do you think of Murphy when he chooses Taylor over Ruby after telling Ruby that he loved her? Do you think Ruby should forgive him?

9. Imagine yourself in Krystal's shoes. How would you react to Ruby returning to town? What if you were Ruby and you see that Krystal and Murphy have some sort of relationship? Do you think Krystal is justified to spill Ally's secret?
10. Who do you think has the biggest secret? What are the repercussions on the group?
11. Where do you think Danny's troubles began? Do you think his friends are partially responsible for his dark past or the way things ended for him? What could they have done differently?
12. How do you think Danny's letters affect each member of the crew? What do you think happens to each of them after the book ends?
13. Think of your closest or hometown friends. Do Ruby, Murphy, Ally, Emmett, or Danny remind you of any of them? In what ways? Do you think growing up with a group of friends makes them different from friends you meet later on in life? What is that bond like?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What was your inspiration for Chatwick? Is it at all like where you grew up?

I did grow up in a small town in Vermont, which Chatwick was inspired by. Like Ruby, I moved away for a time but drifted in and out over the years. It's a special place that has gone through many phases, including a recent major revitalization to the downtown area, and I've always considered myself lucky to have grown up there. My husband and I actually plan to move there soon!

Which character do you relate to the most?

I actually relate to all of the characters. It's hard not to when you write through their perspectives!

I perhaps relate the most to Ruby because we share some similar experiences. When I was a teenager, I was desperate to get out of my hometown, and now that I've done that, I'm desperate to go back and be a part of that community. Ruby also has this dichotomy between belonging to her group and feeling outside of it. She

feels different and dark and worries that if people really knew her, she wouldn't be loved or accepted. Who doesn't feel like that when they're in high school?

Which character was the most challenging to write?

Danny, for sure. Especially in the prologue, because I had to make him so mean to all the characters I love so dearly. But I had to show how angry he was at the people he used to count as friends in order to justify his behavior and the game he devised. A lot of people feel sorry for Danny—and, of course, he *was* a tragic character—but I was also frustrated with him because he consistently blamed others for his problems, many of which were of his own creation. And because he committed suicide, he didn't get to have that growth that the other characters got to experience throughout the book. I took tremendous creative license by having him experience this posthumously, but I just *had* to show that he had seen the error of his ways and became more loving and forgiving of the characters.

On the other hand, the most *fun* to write was definitely Ally. She is loosely based on a real person, but I amped her up about ten notches to be more of a Queen Bee type, and it was so fun to write through her perspective. When I read her back, she still cracks me up!

Your novel centers on the, at times, fragile but overall unshakable bond between these five childhood friends. While writing, did your own friendships serve as inspiration for these characters?

Yes. Like the town, the characters are also inspired by a group of friends I grew up with. As with Ally, I amplified everyone to create a more dramatic story, and I mixed and matched some qualities to

create common themes. What I really wanted to capture was the unique relationships we had between each other and as a group. It's very cool how our friendship has changed and evolved but always kept the same solid foundation. I gave them each a copy of the book before it was published, and thankfully, they were all supportive and still like me!

Do you think there is a difference between the friendships we make when we are young versus the friendships we discover later in life?

Absolutely. The friendships we form when we're young—particularly ones that endure through adolescence and beyond—are so much more intense than the ones we develop as adults. Our very identity in youth is often wrapped up in who we're friends with. We're dependent on our friends for acceptance and belonging in school and outside our family structure. Childhood friends have such an influence on you and who you become even later in life. That's not to knock the friendships we form as adults—those help shape us and get us through the hard times as well. But when we grow up, partner off, and have children and busy careers, our priorities tend to change, and we're not as dependent on them in our daily lives.

I dedicated my book to “my crew, for the family kind of friendship that endures through all the drama, that feels the same no matter the time or distance between meetings, and that loves even when it doesn't like.” I think that sums it up. I'm lucky to have the kind of friends who would drop anything to help and support each other, who have each other's backs, no questions asked.

Do you think Ruby gets a happily ever after once the story ends? Is it with Murphy or Jamie, or by herself?

Well, I certainly don't think I'm done with Ruby or any of these characters yet. I'm hoping I will get a chance to revisit them down the road, so we'll have to wait and see how Ruby's story continues... but I will say that I think Ruby is better off for having returned to Chatwick and unburdening herself of her secret to the people who really needed to know it. Murphy, of course, but also her mother, who she's had such a troubled relationship with. I think this revelation will help repair some of that damage and move them into the next phase of the parent/child relationship.

What do you think made Ruby and Murphy's relationship so complicated? Was it simply their youth or something more?

Oh goodness, what *wasn't* complicated about their relationship? I think they were originally bonded together by their shared secret with Danny about his stepfather's death, which is a lot for a couple of preteens to wrap their heads around. It was a somewhat tumultuous path to being best friends. Then, of course, whenever you introduce sex into a friendship, things get infinitely more complex. Murphy was Ruby's first love, which we all know is very powerful because it's the first time we experience such intense emotions, but it is compounded by the tie between Murphy and the baby she gave up (which she never allowed herself to process and move on from). They both have resentment toward each other—Ruby for being rejected and then later when she finds out Murphy knew she was pregnant and didn't reach out to her, and Murphy because Ruby didn't tell him about the pregnancy and because she took her friendship away as

punishment for him choosing another girl. We also can't be sure what Murphy's feelings are (or ever were) for Ruby, but clearly, there is still a strong connection and attraction. They attempt to unpack all this in their last scene alone together. But as in life, we don't always get a tidy resolution or closure with the people from our past.

What do you like to do when you're not writing?

Ha! That's a funny question, because lately I feel like all I do is write. I also have a full-time job and do career coaching on the side, so I am one busy woman! But when I do have time, I like to veg out with my husband and my dog. We just started golfing together (my husband and I, not my dog and I), and my husband is very patient while I swear and beat my clubs into the ground. And I like to spend time with friends and family. I have three nieces and three nephews who I adore.

It's very easy to relate to Chatwick and this friend group. In some ways, it feels like the universal hometown and high school experience. How did you craft such a realistic portrayal?

Well, as I said, the town and friend group are heavily grounded in my experiences, so you can't get more realistic than that! But I think it's probably so easy to relate to because we all have those friendships, those traumatic events, those heartbreaks, those feelings of being trapped but also afraid to move on. No matter where we go in life, no matter how successful we become, everyone still has that traumatized little high schooler inside of them that they either try to live up to or overcome (or sometimes both).

If you could go back to your senior year and give high school Kaela some advice, what would it be?

Oh my God—SO much advice that high school Kaela probably wouldn't have listened to. I think I would have told her: Don't be afraid to share things with the people who love you (even, or especially, the ugly bits). Don't be afraid to be vulnerable and ask for help when you're going through something major. Don't push everyone away just because one person hurt you. Don't go to Boston—you'll hate it. Study psychology and writing in college instead of PR—you'll hate that too, once you start working in it. And for God's sake, your hair is curly; ditch the hair dryer and get some gel!