

# **The Beginning of Everything Study Guide**

**The Beginning of Everything by Robyn Schneider**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">The Beginning of Everything Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-3.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 4-7.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 8-11.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 12-13.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 14-17.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 18-20.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 21-23.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 24-27.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 28-30.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 31-33.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>
<a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Settings.....</a>	<a href="#">41</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">43</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">47</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">50</a>



# Plot Summary

Ezra Faulkner believes that everyone has a personal tragedy and that their lives truly begin after that point. This tragedy sets the course of the rest of their lives. For his best friend, Toby, this happens during his twelfth birthday party. Toby, Ezra, and some of their friends are at Disneyland, which is located near their homes. Toby and Ezra sit on the very back seat of the ride. A boy in front of Toby stands up as the ride is entering a tunnel and his head is knocked off his body. Toby catches the head and has little choice but to hold it until the ride comes to an end. Ezra says this is Toby's personal tragedy.

After this event, Toby becomes something of an outcast. Ezra, who is good at sports, begins spending time with members of the tennis team. He is soon included in that group of students and the two boys, once inseparable, no longer spend time together at all.

By the time Ezra is a junior at Eastwood High School, he is very popular. In his mind, he runs the school. He is dating a cheerleader named Charlotte and is the envy of most of the boys in his grade. There's a party one night with lots of alcohol and Ezra attends. He discovers that Charlotte is missing and someone drops a hint that there's something he should see upstairs. By luck, he finds the correct room right away and discovers Charlotte involved with another boy. Ezra is crushed but makes a snide comment as he leaves the room, making it clear he wants nothing else to do with Charlotte.

Charlotte chases him but Ezra goes to his car, parked down the block. He pulls out onto the street just as a black SUV speeds around a blind curve and through a stop sign without even slowing down. The SUV crashes into Ezra's car and several people from the party rush out to take pictures of the wreck. The SUV doesn't stop and it takes Ezra a few minutes to realize that he is seriously hurt. His friends have all been drinking and they rush to get out of the neighborhood before the police arrive, leaving Ezra alone.

Ezra misses the final weeks of his junior year and endures surgeries on his knee and wrist. He's told that he'll never play sports again and he's devastated. None of his friends visit while he's in the hospital and he repeatedly turns down invitations after he's home.

When he returns to school for his senior year, he's still using a cane and going through physical therapy. He dreads the pep rally because he can't maneuver on the bleachers but Toby takes a seat beside him and the two are soon talking as if they never stopped being friends.

Over the coming days, Ezra finds himself included in Toby's group of friends. They are soon joined by a new girl, Cassidy Thorpe. Ezra is enamored with Cassidy and they begin dating. Cassidy urges him to express himself through new clothes and new experiences. Ezra had expected to be recruited by a college for his athletic ability but decides he'll probably just attend a local college. Cassidy pushes him to expect more of himself and he begins applying for out-of-state colleges.



Ezra and Cassidy plan to attend prom together but Cassidy stands him up. Without her, he struggles to make sense of his life and briefly rejoins his former friends. He finds their antics are juvenile and their attitudes ridiculous. Charlotte flirts with him and Ezra realizes he doesn't want to go back down that road, especially when Charlotte says everything would have been okay if Ezra had taken her to the prom like he was supposed to. Ezra reminds her that he was in the hospital during prom and that she didn't even wait with him for the ambulance to arrive.

Ezra decides that he has to push Cassidy into telling him why she broke up. She reveals that her brother had been driving the SUV that hit Ezra. Though her brother didn't seem to be hurt at the time, he developed an embolism and died a few days later. Cassidy says she'll never be able to look at Ezra without thinking about her deceased brother and the role he played in hurting Ezra.

Ezra believes that Cassidy changed him for the better and he tells her so. Cassidy points out that Ezra is confused about the timing. With Cassidy's prodding, Ezra realizes that he ultimately made the decisions to change his life though Cassidy often urged him to think about those choices. The next year, Ezra does go away to college. He leaves the warmth and sun of California for a colder climate.



# Chapters 1-3

## Summary

As the story opens in Chapter 1, Ezra Faulkner and his best friend, Toby Ellicott, are celebrating Toby's twelfth birthday. They are students at Westlake Middle School. Toby's mother has insisted he invite some friends and that they go to Disneyland, just a few minutes from their home town of Eastwood, California. Their first ride is Thunder Mountain Railroad, a roller coaster. Toby and Ezra sit in the back. A boy in front of Toby stands up as the ride is entering a tunnel, and is decapitated. Toby literally catches the head and has no choice but to hold it until the ride comes to a stop. Ezra says this is Toby's personal tragedy. After this event, Toby becomes something of an outcast.

Ezra's athletic ability soon appears and he begins spending time with others on his tennis team. By the time they are juniors in high school, Ezra is one of the most popular boys in school. Toby has a different group of friends.

As a junior in high school, Ezra is attending a party at the home of Jonas Beidecker, a boy he barely knows. Ezra is dating a girl named Charlotte Hyde. She is very popular and pretty, but she and Ezra argue a lot. Ezra is with some of his male friends, watching them try to drink beer poured through a pool noodle, when a member of the football team says that Ezra should go upstairs. Ezra senses there's something important and he goes without questioning it.

When he opens the first bedroom door he comes to, he finds Charlotte in a sexual situation with a boy Ezra doesn't know. Charlotte says she didn't think Ezra planned to attend the party. It's quickly evident that Charlotte has been talking about Ezra to the guy. Ezra walks out and heads for his car. Charlotte follows, insisting that Ezra will still take her to the prom that Saturday. Ezra ignores her. Just as he pulls his car onto the street, an SUV "barreled around the blind turn and blew through the stop sign." The SUV hits Ezra's car. All the students run away, fearing they'll be arrested for under-aged drinking. Ezra is rushed to the hospital alone. His mother arrives later, having apparently taken time to put on "her best jewelry" and her makeup before leaving the house.

In Chapter 2, Ezra has missed the rest of his junior year and the summer has passed. He'll soon be entering Eastwood High School as a senior. He has been told that he will never again compete on the tennis court but can't quite believe it. He goes to the courts one night and takes a swing. With that one action and the pain in his body, he realizes they are right. He says that his life has dramatically changed and that no one really seems to expect anything from him anymore.

In Chapter 3, there is a welcome back pep rally. Ezra dreads it because he is still dependent on a cane and knows he can't get up the bleachers. He takes a seat at the bottom, feeling horribly conspicuous and alone. Then Toby sits down beside him. Toby soon makes some comments that a teacher overhears and they are told to leave the



pep rally, which had been Toby's intention. As they wander toward their first classes, they can hear the sounds of the yells from the pep rally. Toby laughingly says it sounds like Disneyland. Ezra is surprised Toby mentioned Disneyland and asks if Toby ever returned. He makes a sarcastic comment that tells Ezra he hasn't. Toby then says Ezra could now use his cane to get through the lines faster. Ezra is surprised that he isn't upset at the comment. Toby says he wants Ezra to join the debate team. They haggle for a few minutes but Ezra agrees.

## Analysis

Ezra believes that every person has a tragedy in life, and that everything that happened before that tragedy is insignificant. In essence, he believes that event is the true beginning of a person's life. Ezra says Toby's tragedy is catching the severed head at Disneyland. The story is presented from Ezra's perspective and this means the reader knows only what Ezra believes is true.

As the story opens, Ezra talks about being friends with Toby as a youngster. They spend a lot of time together and don't have many other friends. As high school juniors, they have grown apart and don't spend any time together. From Ezra's perspective, this parting occurs because Toby catches the severed head. He says that sets Toby apart so that he never becomes popular. Toby will later tell Ezra that it was Ezra's choice to abandon their friendship. It's not until Ezra begins to mature that he can admit this is true. An interesting aspect of this is that Ezra isn't able to comprehend Toby's perspective until after Ezra suffers his own personal tragedy.

Not one of Ezra's friends remain with him after the wreck. They all run away for fear of being arrested for drinking. Even Charlotte, who was supposed to be Ezra's girlfriend until just moments earlier, runs away without checking on Ezra. What's even more unbelievable is that not one of them visits Ezra while he's in the hospital. This hurts Ezra tremendously and it gives an important look into his friendships at the time of the wreck. Friendship is an important theme in the book and Ezra later realizes that it's better to spend time with people who can truly be his friends than to spend time with a popular group of people who will abandon him in his time of need.

Charlotte is pretty and popular, but she's very self-centered. She is in a sexual situation with another boy when Ezra enters the bedroom at Jonas's house. It's immediately evident that Ezra will break up with her and it seems no surprise that he makes that clear then walks out of the room. What's incredible about the entire scene is that Charlotte seems to expect that Ezra will still take her to prom. She should have realized that Ezra isn't going to overlook her cheating and that she has hurt him. She excuses her action by saying that she didn't expect him to attend the party. Another important aspect of this scene is that she has obviously been talking to the other guy about Ezra. This means the guy knows that Charlotte is in a relationship and that he doesn't care.

Ezra and Toby pick up their friendship almost without missing a beat. Toby makes a sarcastic comment about Disneyland and about Ezra's cane. Ezra says he had



expected to be upset if anyone mentioned the cane, but he isn't offended. He realizes it's Toby's way of showing that he doesn't see Ezra as being different because of his handicap. This is an important part of the drama of high school, which is one of the themes of the book. Toby's teasing is obviously not meant to be hurtful and his relationship with Ezra is such that Ezra accepts it for what it is. Later, another student makes a rude comment and everyone is angry at him for it.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Describe Charlotte and her actions before and after the accident. Why doesn't she check to see if Ezra is alright?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Describe Ezra's idea about personal tragedies. Do you believe he's right?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is the tragedy that Ezra believes sets Toby apart? What is Ezra's tragedy?

## **Vocabulary**

derision, grotesque, stoically, peripherally, inexplicable, obscurity, irreparably, ascertain, catalyst, smugly



# Chapters 4-7

## Summary

In Chapter 4, Ezra has a class schedule that's different from most of the athletes. He has trouble with stairs but refuses to get an elevator key. Ezra is late for his first class. As he's leaving, a new girl approaches him, asking if Ezra can show her the way to the next class. Ezra, knowing he'll be late, refuses. In American Literature class, the teacher shows "The Great Gatsby." When the movie reaches the car crash scene, everyone stares at Ezra. He says his classmates seem "fascinated and terrified," and that he feels he no longer belongs.

Ezra avoids his former friends at lunch time and later says it's as if he's lost the part of him that liked being with them.

In Spanish, the students are paired up to interview each other. Ezra winds up with the new girl and learns her name is Cassie Thorpe. As Ezra interviews her, he discovers that she's traveled extensively, has recently been enrolled in a boarding school, and participated in a summer program at Oxford. Ezra says tennis is his favorite sport and he likes history.

When it's Ezra's turn, Charlotte makes a rude comment and Ezra realizes Charlotte is going to make Cassidy's life miserable. He makes up a boring story about her in the hope that Charlotte will lose interest. When it's Cassidy's turn, she says that Ezra "was prom king and he's the best tennis player in the whole school."

In Chapter 5, Ezra tries to spend a few minutes outside but his mother ushers him in. He is taking pain killers that make him sensitive to direct sunlight, meaning he is very pale. Ezra has a standard poodle named Cooper. The dog was inherited from his aunt and Ezra spends a lot of time with Cooper.

Ezra has dinner with his parents. His mother is very prim. His father has a home office as if he is too important to ever be away from his work. His dad asks how the new car is running. Ezra thinks the new car is much plainer than the car that was wrecked, but he doesn't say so.

In Chapter 6, Ezra stops at the coffee cart during his break. Toby's little sister, Emily, talks to him, giggling with her other freshmen friends. Cassidy joins him as he heads for class and apologizes for her rudeness in Spanish class. They head for debate together. Cassidy walks with him, even though it means they are both late. When Cassidy enters the room, it's obvious Toby knows her and is surprised by her presence. He says the situation is "epic." There's a sign-up sheet for an upcoming debate and Ezra discovers Toby has already signed him up with a note that makes Ezra laugh. Ezra then signs Cassidy up as well. As class is dismissed, Toby insists Ezra join him for lunch. Ezra





makes an excuse about meeting friends, but they all know it's not going to happen and Ezra gives in to Toby.

In Chapter 7, Ezra arrives at Toby's table and is introduced to several students who sit there. Luke Sheppard is president of the film club and Sam Mayfield already looks like he might be a young lawyer. Austin Covelli is a gamer and graphic designer. Ezra is surprised that these students are Toby's friends. He had expected "obscure honor roll students." They are soon joined by Phoebe Chang who puts a box of cupcakes on the table. She is amazed by Ezra's presence and calls it "the most historic lunch-table switch in the annals of the upper quad." She's referring to the fact that Ezra has left "the table" where the popular students sit.

Cassidy and Phoebe go to the bathroom and the boys discuss a weekend event and wonder why Cassidy has transferred to Eastwood High School. Toby says Cassidy was an excellent debater, won lots of prizes but never showed up to get them, and dropped out of finals just days before the event the previous year. He doesn't know why.

## Analysis

The first real meeting between Ezra and Cassidy doesn't go smoothly. Ezra is amazed at Cassidy's life. She's been to Transylvania and has many exciting stories to tell. By comparison, Ezra has led a very boring life. When it's his turn to answer her questions, he says that he likes tennis and history, ending his answers with that. Cassidy doesn't understand his comments. In fact, Ezra had been named prom king though he hadn't been to prom. When Charlotte makes it evident that she's focusing on Cassidy, Ezra tries to save Cassidy from the tormenting he knows will follow. What Ezra doesn't understand yet is that some people don't care about the opinions of people like Charlotte. Cassidy is one of those people. Instead of helping her, Ezra has hurt her, especially when he says she has a younger brother who likes soccer. It will later be revealed that Cassidy had an older brother who died. This rocky start is another example of the limited perspective and of Ezra's immaturity at this point, both themes in the story.

Ezra is dealing with depression though he's working hard at controlling it. When he arrives home on his first day of school, he goes to his room with his dog, Cooper. Cooper and Ezra are close and Ezra had often taken Cooper for a jog around the neighborhood. On this particular day, Ezra imagines that Cooper asks for a walk. Ezra pats Cooper's head and apologizes, and believes that Cooper understands. Then, for a moment, Ezra really struggles with the knowledge that he won't ever be taking Cooper for another jog.

On his first day in debate, Ezra listens as Toby presents an argument for participating in debate. Ezra is surprised to learn that Toby is a "decent public speaker." This shows that Ezra and Toby have each continued to grow and mature while they were apart. Ezra then wonders why Toby never sought a spot in student government, but then remembers the severed head. This shows that Ezra has not yet realized that the



severed head didn't change Toby as much as Ezra thinks it did. It also seems rather naive of Ezra to believe that Toby could achieve a spot on student government when he's not among the more popular students who would normally get the support of the student body.

It's obvious that Ezra and Toby have some history together despite the fact that they haven't been close friends in years. At one point, Ezra claims to have stopped someone from urinating in Toby's backpack years earlier. This seems to indicate that Toby was bullied and that Ezra made at least a token effort to stop it, though he didn't take Toby into his circle of friends. Toby responds that Ezra may have stopped the backpack incident, but that the boy then urinated in Toby's Gatorade bottle instead. Ezra seems to have forgotten that, indicating that it didn't make a big impression on Ezra. This is all part of their shared history and their different perspectives.

When the sign-up sheet for debate is being passed around, Ezra discovers that Toby has written Ezra's name at the top along with a comment that Ezra owes him for the Gatorade incident. This makes Ezra laugh and it quickly attracts the attention of the other students and the teacher. Ezra tries to hide his laughter by coughing and Cassidy tries to help by slapping him on the back, which triggers a real coughing episode. Ezra then writes Cassidy's name on the sign-up sheet as a joke. He knows that Cassidy holds records in debate but doesn't know any other details. It's not until later that Ezra realizes the depth of his mistake and how much it costs Cassidy to attend the debate.

By this point, Ezra has learned that a tennis player named Evan has been selected as captain of the tennis team, a position Ezra held before his accident. Evan is also dating Charlotte and Ezra can't help watching as they kiss during lunch. This is all part of the drama of high school, an important theme of the story.

Ezra is very pale because he can't tolerate direct sunlight due to a specific pain killer he's using. He has spent the entire summer indoors and it shows in his complexion. Phoebe points out that Ezra has moved from his previous friends' table to sit with a less popular group, that Ezra is moody and pale, and makes a reference to a popular series of books and movies, "Twilight." She doesn't refer to them by name, but says Ezra resembles a vampire and it becomes something of a joke among the group. Later, Ezra shows up at a party hosted by his former friends covered in glitter and wearing fangs. No one there gets the joke. This is another example of the difference between his current friends and his former friends, a theme of the story.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the mystery surrounding Cassidy's appearance at Eastwood High School?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe the friendship between Toby and Ezra. How has it changed over the years and how might it change again now?



## Discussion Question 3

Why is Ezra's decision to sit with Ezra's friends at lunch a significant event?

## Vocabulary

nemesis, perceptible, misnomer, labyrinth, arrears, festooned, ambivalent, obscenities, sheepishly, sauntered, epic, eccentrics



# Chapters 8-11

## Summary

Ezra is deeply hurt when he sees Evan and Charlotte hugging and kissing during lunch. He's also hurt by the fact that none of his friends visited him in the hospital. He has avoided all of them, refusing invitations over the summer. He says he couldn't have gone to play paintball or gone rafting with them even if he'd wanted to. There are rumors about Cassidy but Ezra's new friends never talk about them at lunch because there are plenty of topics to interest them.

Ezra has a meeting with his senior adviser and finds that he's angry at the idea of filling out college applications. He'd expected to be recruited to play tennis and now finds he's going to have to apply. As he's leaving, he encounters Cassidy. They talk and Ezra offers to give her a ride home. He manages to get her bicycle into the trunk of his car and they head for her gated community, Terrace Bluffs, which is adjacent to Ezra's gated community of Rosewood. They compare notes and discover they can each see the other's bedroom window from their own.

As they drive, they talk. Ezra discovers he's a little jealous to learn that Cassidy has spent time with Toby at debate tournaments. She knows a lot about him, including the severed head incident at Disneyland. Ezra realizes she's very pretty and knows she would never choose to be with him. As they reach Cassidy's house, she says she doesn't want to go home. They go to the park instead.

Cassidy talks about her life in general terms. She compares it to "Panopticon," which is a prison designed so that inmates can never be certain they are being monitored at any given moment. Ezra pushes her on the swing and Cassidy suggests they can escape Panopticon together. When the swing is at its highest, she jumps, but says they weren't even close to getting away. She leaves, saying her mom is probably worried.

In Chapter 9, Ezra recalls how he and Charlotte began dating. She is very pushy and Ezra says his life might have been very different if he'd made different decisions that night.

In Chapter 10, it's Friday and Ezra is somewhat surprised to learn that his new friends have plans for the weekend. Ezra and Cassidy are summoned to Mrs. Weng's room. She's the debate teacher and says she's happy to have them going to tournament. Cassidy is upset but Mrs. Weng says she's already registered both of them for the tournament. Outside the room, Ezra admits he signed Cassidy's name. He expects her to say it's okay, but she's too angry.

In Chapter 11, Ezra gets a message from Toby Friday evening, inviting him over. Ezra goes to the Walnut Ranch subdivision where Toby lives. It's one of the older developments of the area. Ezra is familiar with the neighborhood, having spent lots of



time there when he and Toby were best friends. Emily answers the door and Ezra steps into the living room to find Emily and several friends preparing for a slumber party.

When Ezra reaches Toby's bedroom, he sees a stack of homemade comic books. It's the "Superhero Academy" comics that Ezra and Toby began in fifth grade. Ezra is surprised to find that Toby has finished the series but Ezra is critical of his decisions toward the end. Toby is amazed that Ezra even cares.

Toby then asks if Ezra got an invitation to the Floating Movie Theater from Luke. Ezra remembers getting a piece of paper from Luke but forgot to look at it after class. He agrees to go. They arrive at the school and Ezra discovers that Luke has a set of keys to all the rooms in the high school. The students gather for movies in various rooms, always leaving extra things as a way of payment. On this particular night, they are watching "Rushmore" in the teacher's lounge. Ezra is surprised to learn that the Floating Theater is real and that he enjoys his evening.

At the end of the movie, he suggests they watch "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" in the nurse's office. Luke says he hasn't asked Ezra for suggestions. Ezra learns that Phoebe had a crush on Ezra and that Luke is jealous. Cassidy approaches Ezra, acting as if she hadn't been angry about the debate. She says she's going to teach Ezra all about debate before the tournament. Ezra says he thought Cassidy was mad at him. She counters, saying girls get mad and then get over it. Ezra feels there's something Cassidy isn't saying but he doesn't have the willpower to question her.

## Analysis

In Chapter 9, Ezra talks about the beginning of his relationship with Charlotte. Looking back, Ezra can see that she was pushy and self-centered, but he didn't see it at the moment. He remembers a book by Steinbeck in which the author talked about the way tide pools illustrate the fact that all of life is connected. Steinbeck wrote that a person should look from the tide pool to the stars and then back to the tide pool in order to appreciate the "wonder" of it all. Ezra says he didn't take time to look at the tide pools or the stars in the sky on the night he and Charlotte began dating. He said the stars that he saw that night "were wearing varsity jackets." This is an important indication of how limited Ezra's perspective is and how immature he is at this point. He matures a great deal over the coming year and eventually sees that his small world of high school friends is not that important compared to the rest of his life.

It's obvious that Cassidy is furious about being signed up for debate but the reason is not explained until later. Cassidy is a veteran of the debates and she seems to feel she can't back out because that would mean a public forfeiture. Toby says that would cause people to talk even more about Cassidy. She is probably aware of the rumors and that everyone is talking about her decision to drop out just days before the final tournament the previous year. It will eventually be revealed that she dropped out because her brother died and that she hadn't intended to debate again.



Ezra is amazed to discover that there is a group of students who gather for private movie screenings in the high school. He had considered himself “in charge” of the high school before his accident and seems to believe he knows about everything that goes on, even with other groups of students. It's a short-sighted view of his life and an indication that Ezra had believed himself more important than he really is. He is maturing dramatically, partly as a result of being with friends who challenge him and partly as a result of having to look more closely at himself as a person. This is typical of a coming-of-age story.

Ezra and Toby stop on their way to the Floating Theater to buy coffee filters. Ezra buys them and when he asks why, Toby says it's because Ezra has the money and Toby doesn't. This, along with their living conditions, seems to indicate that Ezra's family is wealthier than Toby's. The students always take items to leave after using any room in the building for their theater. While they are watching the movie, Toby asks Ezra if he's enjoying the movie and the “positive vandalism” experience. Toby is surprised to learn that he is enjoying it much more than he would have enjoyed spending the evening watching his former friends get drunk.

## Discussion Question 1

Compare Cassidy and Charlotte. Which is more likeable? Which is more believable?

## Discussion Question 2

What is Cassidy's reaction to the upcoming tournament? Why doesn't she just refuse to go?

## Discussion Question 3

Describe the Floating Theater. What does Toby mean when he says this is “positive vandalism.”

## Vocabulary

repulsive, offensive, petty, mandatory, presumptuous, nocturnal, chivalry, ineptitude, preposterously, clandestine, protege



# Chapters 12-13

## Summary

In Chapter 12, class is dismissed for a teacher training day. The others have plans, made weeks earlier. Cassidy says she has plans for Ezra for the day. He agrees to pick her up at 8:30 the following morning. He arrives and Cassidy directs him to the University Town Center. It's a shopping center across from the University of California Eastwood campus. Cassidy has a list of several classes she plans for them to attend. She says they'll take notes to be used in their debate tournament.

They attend a British history class and Ezra finds it dull. Cassidy takes them to the wrong classroom next and they sit through a chemistry class. Ezra is captivated and suddenly realizes that college is going to be much different from high school. He instinctively knows that what he learns in college will be worthwhile. They get sandwiches and have a picnic on the campus. They talk about their plans and Ezra says he will probably apply at this college and maybe some other state schools. Cassidy challenges the plan, asking if he's going to be happy if he never leaves his home town. Ezra knows that he doesn't have high expectations for himself because no one else has high expectations for him. He has not focused on where he wants to attend because he's been expecting to be recruited for a college tennis team.

Ezra tells Cassidy all about his accident and how his life has changed. He talks about hearing his father and tennis coach arguing outside his hospital room and getting the news that he would never play again. He talks about his former friends and how they never visited. When he finishes, Cassidy is silent for awhile. She then recites a few lines from a poem that basically ask what he plans to do "with your wild and precious life." They tease about options and Cassidy says Ezra will never "escape the Panopticon" if he continues to limit himself.

In Chapter 13, Ezra takes Cooper to a nearby cul-de-sac and plays catch with him. When his mother finds out, she's angry and says it was dangerous for Cooper to be in a street without his leash. Ezra tells her about the debate tournament and she worries about him spending a night away from home. She agrees that he can go but knows he'll need a suit. Ezra says he'll go shopping with Toby.

On Thursday, Cassidy and Toby go with Ezra and find a suit. They then go to Barnes and Noble and study before heading to a fast food place for dinner. There, they discover Charlotte and Evan are at a corner table with another student from their crowd named Jimmy. Ezra, Toby, and Cassidy discuss how they can get out of the restaurant. Ezra says his mother will have a fit if she smells hamburgers in his car so they decide they'll pick a table as far from the other three as possible. But the boy working behind the counter is another student, Justin Wong, and he takes their order to the corner table without asking. Ezra goes to retrieve their food but Charlotte invites them to sit. Evan says they should take a seat and they reluctantly do.





It's awkward and then Charlotte asks why Ezra isn't sitting with them at lunch time. Ezra wants to say that it's because none of them bothered to visit him and that he blames Charlotte for his wreck, at least a little. Toby steps into the awkward silence, saying Ezra has joined the debate team. Charlotte asks for a moment alone with Ezra. She demands to know why Ezra is acting as he is and says he has to return to their table. She says he can even bring his "snotty prep-school girlfriend." Charlotte says Ezra can have any girl he wants and that he should stop acting dramatic about his "sprained knee." She asks if he's coming to a party the next weekend and he says he's going to a debate tournament. When she challenges him, he says he's "serious as a car crash."

Toby insists on driving Cassidy home.

## Analysis

The reader is only beginning to see the deeper aspects of Ezra's relationship with his parents. His father seems to be always working and he seems to derive pleasure from making it evident that he can't be too far from his office and his work. His mother seems prim, controlling, and somewhat over protective. She always buys health food and would disapprove of Ezra eating a hamburger from a fast food restaurant. She fusses at Ezra about having Cooper off his leash and when Ezra says they were in a cul-de-sac where it was safe, she points out his "tone."

Ezra's brief time in a college classroom is something of a turning point. He isn't particularly interested in the history class they attend first but then they accidentally find themselves in a chemistry class. Ezra is very interested though chemistry isn't a subject that has particularly grabbed his attention in high school. He understands some aspects of the lecture and knows the answer to a question posed by the professor. Cassidy also challenges him to think about his future in terms of what he wants for himself rather than what other people expect of him. Ezra will use these lessons to make some important decisions for his future and he will wind up in a college far from home.

The scene at the burger place is another important look into the characters of Charlotte and Ezra, and also at the coming-of-age theme that is seen throughout the book. Charlotte, Evan, and Jimmy are seated in a corner booth. It's one of the larger booths in the place and they are taking up the entire seating. Ezra makes note of this and the fact that they act as if they are entitled to keep those seats for as long as they want. Charlotte's comment about Ezra's "sprained knee" indicates that she doesn't care about him at all. She is totally self-centered and is terribly jealous that Ezra seems to be connecting with Cassidy.

Another important aspect of this theme is seen when Charlotte asks why Ezra is no longer sitting with them at lunch. The fact that Charlotte asks this aloud in front of other people shows how completely indifferent she is to others' feelings. She doesn't care that she's creating an awkward situation or that she's putting Ezra on the spot. What's most interesting is that Ezra hesitates in giving an answer. He thinks about all the things he wants to say, including that he blames her for his accident, at least to some degree.





Charlotte cheated on Ezra the night of the wreck and that's what prompted him to leave the party early, putting him in the path of that SUV at that exact moment. If he and Charlotte hadn't argued, Ezra probably wouldn't have left the party. This is the first time Ezra has verbalized this idea but it seems that he's been thinking about it.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Describe Ezra's relationship with his parents.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Describe Ezra's day at college and why it is so important to him.

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why do you think Charlotte asks Ezra why he isn't eating lunch at their table?

## **Vocabulary**

gleaning, obsessing, albeit, imperialism, complexity, vapid, oracle, foray, gawked, optimal, residual, vehemently



# Chapters 14-17

## Summary

In Chapter 14, it's Friday. Toby tells Ezra that he insisted on driving Cassidy home because he wants to warn Ezra about her. He says she toys with boys, pretends to be serious, and then hurts them. Ezra spends his weekend doing homework. On Sunday evening, Cassidy uses a light to signal "hi" in Morse code. Ezra answers but the conversation dies there.

Members of the debate team practice with Cassidy and Toby critiquing. Ezra can't decide if she's no longer mad about being forced into the tournament or if she's just hiding it. Each night, Cassidy flashes the light to signal "hi." Ezra wants their relationship to grow but nothing changes.

In Chapter 15, members of the debate team travel to the San Diego Academy for the Performing Arts where the tournament is being held. When the debate assignments are posted, Cassidy rushes to get the room numbers for herself and Ezra. On his way, Ezra sees Cassidy talking to an "old lady coach" who seems to be comforting Cassidy while they talk. When Ezra asks, Cassidy says the woman seemed confused.

In Chapter 16, the team goes to their hotel rooms. They have two adjoining rooms with a door that connects them. Ezra wonders if Mrs. Weng will be checking up on them but Toby reveals that she lives with her parents and relishes the night away. They eat out and then Ezra discovers that everyone has "party supplies" in their overnight bags, including liquor and food. When Toby hands Ezra a glass of whiskey, he drinks it because he's "sick of being cautious." With his second glass, he realizes the combination of liquor and pain killers is hitting him fast. There are students from other debate teams and they spend the evening partying together.

When it's finally time for bed, Phoebe and Luke share a bed in one room. Sam and Austin agree to sleep in one of the beds. Cassidy and Ezra wind up in a bed together leaving Toby, as team captain, with a bed to himself. Ezra and Cassidy talk quietly for a short time and Cassidy, seeing Ezra's knee, asks if it still hurts. He lies, saying it doesn't. They fall asleep with Cassidy's head on Ezra's shoulder.

In Chapter 17, Toby catches Ezra alone and asks if he and Cassidy are now "together." Ezra says he doesn't know but silently admits he's in love with Cassidy, even though they haven't yet kissed. As they are preparing for the third round of debates, Cassidy tells Ezra she has changed places with him throughout the tournament, sending him to her debates while taking his. She gives a convoluted explanation for her action and Ezra agrees to follow through. Neither of them tells Toby and everyone is shocked that Cassidy doesn't make it to the finals. Ezra thinks about it and can't figure out why Cassidy didn't just do her best to win the tournament.



## Analysis

At the debate, Ezra faces off against a student who is very good. Ezra realizes he identifies his opponent as an enemy because he has become loyal to his team. The Eastwood debate team does not have a record of winning. There have been few wins in the team's recent history and it seems that in a perfect story, Cassidy and Ezra would somehow turn that around. That's not the case and the reader who expects Ezra to become the savior of the debate team will be disappointed.

Cassidy's reason for switching places during the debate tournament don't really make sense but it's clear that it's important to Cassidy. The debaters are assigned numbers and the judges don't really know who is debating because they judge based only on the numbers. This made it possible for Cassidy and Ezra to switch places without being caught by the judges. The fact that Cassidy wanted to is more difficult to explain. She says she felt that it would almost be as if she wasn't really here if she switched places with Ezra. It's still very clear that this is hurting Cassidy but she still won't tell Ezra why.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe the evening after the first day of debates.

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Cassidy lie to change places with Ezra?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Toby warns Ezra that Cassidy often expresses an interest in a boy for a short time then drops him?

## Vocabulary

dubious, mock, remedial, salacious, hooligans, rite, rivalry, sarcastic, flounced, suffrage, egregious, proverbial



# Chapters 18-20

## Summary

In Chapter 18, Ezra flashes Morse code and Cassidy asks for forgiveness. He says “always.” The next morning, his mother wakes him very early, announcing that he has company. He finds Cassidy downstairs, petting Cooper and asking if Ezra had forgotten about the team breakfast. Ezra knows there wasn't a team breakfast planned but plays along. Cassidy says they are eating at her house and suggests they take Cooper along. Cassidy takes Ezra on a geocache. It's a small capsule and the seeker has to solve puzzles to find it. There are sometimes small treasures inside, such as toys. Anyone who takes something is supposed to leave something in its place. They find the geocache and Cassidy signs “Owen” to the online log. She says that's her brother and that it's a game they used to play.

That evening, Ezra texts Cassidy and she agrees to go for a ride. He takes her to a diner parking lot where they can see the Disneyland fireworks. They kiss and then get into the back seat of the car.

In Chapter 19, Ezra begins driving Cassidy to school. Everyone soon figures out that they are dating. One day, Ezra, Cassidy, Toby, and Austin go to a shopping center where they are planning to participate in a flash mob. Each of them has their own music source with ear phones. When Ezra offers to give Cassidy a copy of his music, she says the point is that everyone will be dancing to their own music with no idea what anyone else is listening to. Ezra watches at first, self-conscious. Toby is doing some ridiculous dances that make him laugh. Austin is doing some techno moves. Cassidy is lost in her own music. Ezra soon loses himself as well, forgetting about the people videoing the event or the people participating. He opens his eyes to see Cassidy standing in front of him without her headphones. He removes his own and is amazed at how the mob looks without his music as a backdrop. The dancing goes on for half an hour. Ezra is exhausted and falls asleep while Toby drives home.

In Chapter 20, Cassidy and Ezra go to a vintage clothing store. Ezra has lost weight since the accident and he winds up buying some new outfits, including a leather jacket. They drive toward home and Cassidy says she wants to see Ezra's bedroom. His parents are shopping for new lamps so they are alone. Cassidy seems amazed to discover that there are no posters on the walls. Ezra says he wasn't allowed to put up posters, but there are some framed prints, including one of a sailboat. There's also an empty shelf where his tennis trophies had been. Cassidy says the room doesn't look as if Ezra lives in it.

They kiss and become involved in a sexual situation. At one point, Cassidy's bra becomes tangled with Ezra's wrist brace and he eventually tosses the garment on the floor. Afterward, they open the door and play video games in case Ezra's parents come home.



## Analysis

Cassidy briefly mentions her brother, Owen, while she and Ezra are searching for the geocache. She signs his name to the online log, indicating he'd found the geocache. When Ezra questions her, Cassidy says the "world tends toward chaos." She says that signing Owen's name is just her way of helping that chaos along. She points out that the people who come after her will just accept that Owen Thorpe found the geocache, and for them, that will become reality. For Cassidy, this holds a larger meaning. Her brother Owen is dead. By signing his name to the log, Cassidy knows that the next person to find the geocache will probably just assume that Owen Thorpe was alive and searching for the geocache.

Ezra doesn't know that Owen's dead. He says he doesn't like this line of reasoning and says he'll stick to the truth. Cassidy says she had believed Ezra wanted to escape from reality but he says "imaginary prisoners are still prisoners." Cassidy can see the logic in his thinking and they hold hands as they leave the park.

While they are in the vintage clothing store, Cassidy points out specific items of clothes that she wants Ezra to try on. Sometimes she's kidding, as is the case with the jacket covered with blue feathers. But she is also pushing Ezra to find a style that he likes. He admits to himself that he's still dressing like most of his former friends and that he can see Cassidy's reasoning. He no longer fits in with that crowd of people but he also doesn't have any clothes that express who he is. This is important because Ezra later attributes his changes to Cassidy, but Cassidy helps him realize that she has only challenged him to make decisions for himself.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Cassidy signs Owen's name to the geocache log? Why do you think Ezra refuses to make up a name to sign?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe the flash mob event. Would you participate in a flash mob?

## Discussion Question 3

Describe Ezra's room. Why is Cassidy critical of the room?

## Vocabulary

blearily, concocted, slathered, ballast, contorting, symmetry, nostalgia, antiquated, obsolete, subversive, rhetorical



# Chapters 21-23

## Summary

In Chapter 21, Ezra says he has come to realize that he is no longer “Ezra Faulkner, golden boy,” and that he can accept his new life. He has been so focused on the things that are wrong in his life that he's having to learn to look for what's right. One night, after going to a movie, Cassidy remarks that it's “creepy” to hear so many people saying almost exactly the same thing. Ezra promises that they will be different. He challenges her to tell him something from her childhood. She says she cried at her seventh birthday because someone else blew out her candles. She asks him for a story in return. He says he and Toby buried a bunch of Emily's plastic jewelry, thinking they could then dig up the “buried treasure.” He says they got in trouble. He explains that he and Toby have been friends since kindergarten.

They decide to go next to a nearby park but stop for candy on the way. In the grocery store, they see Conner, quarterback of the football team, with several of his friends. They are buying a ridiculous amount of cooking spray. Once outside, Ezra and Cassidy laugh about the encounter.

The park is deserted and they go to the castle where Ezra says he played as a kid. They climb into the turret and eat the candy. Ezra is about to kiss her when they realize someone else has arrived. They discover it's Conner and his friends. They are spraying cooking spray on the monkey bars. It's immediately clear that Conner could beat Ezra up and it seems that might be his reaction. Ezra has known Conner for years and knows that Conner is drunk but not violent. He tells Conner that a kid could get hurt because of the prank and Conner calls out to his buddies to stop. After it's over, Cassidy is angry. She says she was afraid for Ezra and demands that he not scare her like that again.

In Chapter 22, a young tennis player who was on the court near the park saw Ezra confront Conner. The boy tells everyone and Ezra finds himself the center of unwanted attention. Everyone at their lunch table demands that Ezra tell them about it. Ezra says he was never in any danger and insists that Conner was “a big drunk puppy.” Everyone is joking and laughing. Then Luke grumbles about one of Ezra's comments. Ezra makes a rude remark and Luke's retort includes the word “crippled.” Everyone at the table is immediately silent. Ezra realizes that his comment hurt in a way he hadn't really expected. Then Phoebe slaps Luke and walks away.

Cassidy says she'll go check on Phoebe but Ezra goes instead. He finds her seated near the swim complex. During their brief conversation, Ezra discovers that Phoebe is very insecure about her relationship with Luke. She says that Luke has often compared himself to Ezra, saying the two of them “ran things” at the high school and that Luke is now angry that Ezra has joined their group. Phoebe says Luke doesn't really care about anything other than making certain everyone does whatever he says.



Luke and Sam disappear from the lunch table for two days, then reappear as if nothing happened. However, Luke is wearing a purity ring and says he's "seen the error" of his actions. Phoebe is skeptical. There is now a divide with Luke and Sam on one side and the rest of them on the other.

In Chapter 23, a pep rally is held to name the homecoming nominees. Charlotte is among the girls. A girl named Anamica Patel is also among them and it's obvious that this is Charlotte's idea of a joke. Evan and Luke are among the nominees for the boys. Ezra's name is also called and he's horrified, thinking it must be a joke as well. Many students congratulate him over the course of the day. Later in the day, Ezra is seated by Anamica. He says "congrats" and she makes it clear she knows it's a cruel joke.

There's obvious tension from Luke at lunch. Charlotte arrives and asks Ezra to come to "the table" for a few minutes. She says there is a homecoming discussion and Ezra agrees to go. Luke stands as well but Charlotte says he isn't needed. At the table, several people are laughing about Anamica's nomination. A girl then rolls her eyes about Luke's nomination and Charlotte joins in that laughter. Evan says they are getting a suite at a hotel as a group and invites Ezra to join them for a party after the dance. Ezra declines and returns to his friends.

Ezra asks Cassidy to go to the dance with him and she agrees. Later, Ezra is talking to Toby who says Austin is taking a girl from his SAT class. Ezra makes a comment, indicating he had wondered if Austin and Toby were a couple. Toby says that's not the case and makes it clear that he isn't willing to admit to being gay, at least not yet. He then thanks Ezra for not being upset about the possibility.

## Analysis

Phoebe is not a prevalent character in the story but she does have some depth. She reveals to Ezra that she's insecure and she seems to feel that she's fortunate to be dating Luke prior to his remark about Ezra being "crippled." It's important to see that Phoebe chooses to stand up for her friend Ezra instead of going along with Luke. She sees that Luke's comment is wrong and she does what she thinks is right.

Luke's decision to wear a purity ring is never explained and it's not clear what purpose this plays in his character or the story. It seems possible that the author is just using this as another example of Luke's insincerity and his willingness to manipulate situations to his advantage.

It's interesting that Luke seems to believe he is as important in the high school hierarchy as Ezra had been prior to the wreck. The biggest difference is that Ezra has learned his true worth and is maturing much more quickly than Luke. Luke doesn't seem surprised to learn that he's been nominated to the homecoming court. It seems it might have done him some good to learn what the others are really saying about him but Ezra doesn't tell them.



The cruel prank of nominating Anamica might have been Charlotte's idea. She never claims responsibility but it seems possible. Ezra seems to think that he has been nominated out of pity. This is a misconception on his part but he is still working to learn to look at what he can do rather than focusing on all he's lost.

The conversation between Ezra and Toby regarding Toby's sexual orientation is important because it indicates that Ezra is willing to accept Toby as a friend regardless of his choices. It's not the first time the topic has been discussed in this book. Ezra's mother asks if Toby is gay and that may be the first time Ezra has really considered it, though he denies it's a possibility. Cassidy asks if Ezra thinks Austin and Toby are a couple. Ezra is more open to the idea by that time but still isn't certain. When Ezra and Toby finally talk about it, Toby says that he might be gay but isn't willing to face the consequences of making it public in high school. He says he has years ahead to figure it out and make his decision when the high school peer pressure won't play a role. From the conversation, Ezra is certain that Toby has been called names regarding his sexual choices. He presses Toby for details but Toby refuses. This is part of the high school drama that's a resounding theme throughout the story.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the reaction to Luke's comment about Ezra being "crippled?" Why is Ezra angry at Luke when he wasn't angry at Toby early in the book for Toby's comment about Ezra using his cane to get through the lines faster at Disneyland?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Ezra stand up to Conner and his friends? Why does everyone make such a big deal out of it?

## Discussion Question 3

What happens when the homecoming nominations are announced? What is Luke's attitude and how does it differ from Ezra's attitude?

## Vocabulary

pallor, contemplate, vivid, exhilarated, philosophically, emphasis, proclivity, disingenuous, clique, usurped





# Chapters 24-27

## Summary

Ezra and his friends make plans to attend the dance though they make fun of the entire ritual. They decide to have dinner at a Mexican restaurant called Fiesta Palace. When Ezra tries to make reservations for their six-person group, he's told they don't accept reservations. Meanwhile, Phoebe and Cassidy spend three afternoon shopping for their dresses. Ezra's mother is excited that he's going and asks several times what color Cassidy's dress will be. At school, Ezra decides not to vote for anyone for homecoming king and queen.

Just hours before the dance, Ezra goes to the florist's to pick up Cassidy's corsage. He has to wait a long time in line and he takes a photo of a hot pink lei, then texts it to Cassidy along with a message that says he's decided to buy this instead of the corsage. She texts back immediately but he is paying for her corsage by that time and doesn't immediately answer. She calls and he assures her he didn't buy the lei.

As they are talking, someone honks at Ezra and he cries out, startled. Cassidy urges him to be careful. Ezra says he'll get out of the way if he sees "a big black SUV" coming his way. She asks what he's talking about and he explains that it was a large SUV that hit him the previous year. Cassidy is silent and Ezra thinks it's because she's getting ready for the dance.

Ezra gets dressed for the dance a little early. His mother is hovering with her camera, anxious to take photos of Ezra and Cassidy before they leave together. When Cassidy doesn't show up on time, Ezra texts her. When she's a half hour late, Ezra pretends he's heard from her and that he's now supposed to pick her up at her house. No one answers the door. Ezra keeps calling but Cassidy doesn't answer. Ezra calls Toby who is already at the restaurant. Toby talks to Phoebe who says she also hasn't heard from Cassidy. Phoebe tries to call Cassidy as well, but she doesn't answer. He tells Toby and the others to go ahead with their evening, promising to catch up when he finds Cassidy. He waits a little longer but she doesn't call or come to the door.

Ezra is worried and tries to imagine where she might go. He drives around and decides to stop at the park with the castle playground. He finds her there and she isn't dressed for the dance. Cassidy begs Ezra to go away but he refuses. She says she doesn't want to talk to him and he insists on knowing why. She finally says she never had any intention of going to the dance with him. She says she has a boyfriend and was "amusing" herself by spending time with Ezra. She says her boyfriend has just gone to the nearby convenience store and will be back soon. She asks Ezra to leave to avoid a scene. When Ezra questions her, she says he has nothing to attract a girl. She predicts that he'll still be living in town in twenty years, coaching tennis and talking about his own short-lived glory as a tennis player. She says he takes her to movies and out for burgers when she likes more sophisticated evenings. Ezra says he's sorry and turns away, hurt.



When he's a few feet away, Cassidy calls his name. Ezra considers turning around but believes there can't possibly be anything more to say.

At home, he tells his mom that he's not going to the dance but doesn't explain. He goes to his room and ignores his phone. He thinks about how much he hates Cassidy.

In Chapter 25, Ezra spends the weekend at home, ignoring his phone. On Monday, he drives to school alone and fails a calculus test. Anamica is upset with Ezra, saying that he was supposed to walk her in for the homecoming crowning and that she had to walk in alone. It's only then that Ezra learns he and Jillian Nakamura were named homecoming king and queen. Ezra goes to his car to avoid talking to anyone. He wants to leave but knows the security guard will be at the gate. He spends some more of his time hiding in the library.

At lunch time, Evan McMillian calls out for Ezra to join them. Ezra thinks about it for only a few seconds before walking over to their table. Someone asks why Ezra wasn't at the dance. He says he and Cassidy had a fight. Charlotte asks if they broke up and Ezra says they did. A tennis player named Jimmy asks if Ezra wants to join them at tennis practice. Ezra accepts, knowing the alternative is to hide out in his bedroom. Ezra briefly takes to the courts with an injured player named Trevor but the coach says neither of them can be back on the courts unless they are qualified to play.

While at the tennis courts, students spot a coyote and talk about the fact that they are usually nocturnal.

Back at home, Ezra tries to keep his mother from worrying. He says he won homecoming king and his mom says Cassidy is probably sorry she broke up with him. Ezra doesn't tell her that's not the case at all.

In Chapter 26, Cassidy isn't at school again on Tuesday. That afternoon, Ezra has physical therapy and asks if he can try to navigate without the cane. The doctor grants permission but urges caution. Ezra goes by the college campus and looks around. He realizes that this isn't where he wants to go to college. He goes to the college library and is surprised when he's allowed inside. He begins spending a lot of time there, studying.

Cassidy is present for debate on Wednesday. Ezra takes his seat next to her but it's awkward. Ezra finds he has a lot of free time now that he's no longer spending time with Toby and Cassidy.

In Chapter 27, Ezra joins Toby and Phoebe at the coffee cart that Friday. Toby makes a snide comment about being "allowed" to talk to Ezra but they soon fall back into their previous friendship. Charlotte pushes her way in line in front of Ezra and he doesn't have the courage to tell her she can't.

In debate, Cassidy seems unwilling to sit next to Ezra and he moves to another seat. Toby arrives and pulls Ezra out of class. Outside, he says that Ezra is acting just like he did when they were twelve and Toby caught the severed head. He says that Ezra never



needed to abandon their friendship then, and that he doesn't need to now. Ezra accepts the truth of Toby's statement. He says that the breakup with Cassidy has him unbalanced and that he can't believe he thought she was planning on going to the dance at all. Toby says that Cassidy was planning to attend the dance. He shows Ezra a text with a photo of a dress and a message from Cassidy, asking if Ezra would approve of her choice. Ezra realizes that Cassidy had lied that night. Ezra asks Toby to help him figure out what's really going on.

## Analysis

As Ezra and his friends prepare for prom in Chapter 24, Ezra says he is storing up memories of Cassidy. He knows how she pronounces the word “vitamins” and that she wishes people wouldn't take too many paper napkins from fast food places. These are not important in the grand scheme of things but they are things Ezra will always remember about Cassidy. He then says it's as if he already knew “what was coming.” This is one of the few instances of foreshadowing in the book and it's the reader's first clue that things aren't going to work out perfectly.

The breakup between Ezra and Cassidy is an important scene in the book. Ezra accepts Cassidy's word that she has a boyfriend and that she could never have really been interested in Ezra. This hurts him and it's not until later that he questions the truth of her statement.

Ezra is hurt over his breakup with Cassidy and this pain seems to be what sends him back to his former friends. They seem to expect that he's simply going to step back into his place with them. Some of the girls seem superficially concerned about his breakup with Cassidy but Charlotte says it was time. This is yet another example of Charlotte's self-centered attitude. She will soon try to get Ezra to say they'll get back together.

Ezra accepts the invitation to go to tennis practice one day after school. There is a player who has been sidelined because of an injury and Ezra is invited to watch practice with this player. Ezra knows that the other player's injury is superficial and that he'll soon be returning to play with the team. It seems that Ezra, at least for a moment, is trying to escape the reality of his situation by stepping into a minor role with the team. The coach is not understanding when he catches Ezra on the court. Ezra has already had problems with the tennis coaches. He says early in the story that one coach was somewhat lenient with the tennis players in the classroom, but was simply harsh with students who were not part of the team. This is one of many losses in Ezra's life that have come as a result of the wreck.

Toby is mature about his relationship with Ezra even when Ezra is not acting like a friend. Toby accuses Ezra of “severed-heading me,” indicating that he's acting just like he did when they were twelve. At that time, Ezra moved away from his friendship with Toby by choice, though he blames it on Toby. When Toby points out that Ezra is doing the same thing now, Ezra is finally mature enough to realize that Toby is right. He also knows that Toby will help him figure out what is really going on with Cassidy. This is an



example of the true friendship that exists between Toby and Ezra, a theme seen in the book.

As Chapter 27 comes to an end, Ezra seems to make the decision to move forward with his life. He remembers Cassidy saying that Ezra will never leave town and her prediction that he will become a tennis coach at this high school where he can constantly remember his brief tennis career. But Ezra says that he won't be doing that. He does predict that Evan will take that path.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Describe the breakup between Cassidy and Ezra.

## **Discussion Question 2**

What does Toby mean when he says that Ezra is “severed-heading me?”

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why do you believe Ezra returns to the lunch table with his former friends and why does he then return to Toby's group?

## **Vocabulary**

engrossed, absolved, superficial, astute, conjured, mundane, swaths, recoil, debacle



# Chapters 28-30

## Summary

In Chapter 28, Ezra arrives home from school to find that his mother has pumpkins and carving knives ready. She believes Ezra will enjoy spending some time carving a pumpkin. Ezra realizes that he has to stop acting like he's depressed but he discovers that she's already made an appointment with his therapist.

That Friday, Luke has another Floating Theater event. Ezra doesn't feel he'd be welcomed so he attends a party held at Jill's house. She's one of Charlotte's best friends and the girl who was named homecoming queen. Everyone is supposed to be in costume and the boys are all supposed to be dressed as zombies. Ezra makes a last-minute decision to attend and just covers himself in glitter, going as a vampire. He knows Toby's friends would have understood but Charlotte doesn't see the humor. Ezra soon discovers that he's not having any fun and decides to leave. Charlotte asks for a moment alone with him.

They go into the laundry room and Charlotte says she's had another fight with Evan. She asks if they can get back together. Ezra remembers finding Charlotte in the bedroom a year earlier with another guy. He also remembers all the times she'd been angry or condescending at his choices, and refuses to consider it. Charlotte says everything would have been okay between them if Ezra had simply taken her to the prom the previous year, as planned. Ezra says he was in the hospital and Charlotte says it feels as if he blames her. Ezra says she wasn't concerned enough to even check on him. Charlotte tries to defend herself, saying she was too drunk to face the police. She then asks if Ezra is going to tell Evan about this conversation. He assures her he won't.

In Chapter 29, Ezra knows that he wants to go away to college, but doesn't know where. Coyotes are spotted again and the school hands out safety tips for avoiding them.

Ezra goes to his therapist's appointment and is surprised when Cassidy comes out of an office into the waiting room. She's obviously upset and tries to just leave. Ezra says he can't ignore seeing her in the therapist's office and wants to know what's really going on with her. He challenges her, saying he doesn't believe she has a boyfriend. Ezra keeps pushing but Cassidy doesn't give him a straight answer. She says she wishes they had never met and hurries to the stairwell, knowing Ezra can't follow her down the steps. Ezra is upset as well and reschedules his appointment.

In Chapter 30, another debate tournament is held. Sign ups were weeks earlier and Cassidy and Ezra had agreed not to go. Cassidy had attended Barrows School before transferring to Eastwood. When Ezra learns that Barrows will be participating in the debates, Toby agrees to see what he can find out about Cassidy. When Toby calls, he



has discovered that Cassidy's brother, Owen, died the previous year. They agree to meet when Toby gets home.

## Analysis

The scene at the therapist's office is important for two points. The first is that Cassidy manages to keep putting off Toby's questions without giving any information. When they finish talking, he still doesn't know why she's there and he has only his suspicions of the truth, including that she doesn't have a boyfriend. The second is that Toby makes a huge blunder, though he couldn't know it at the time. He says that no one has died. When he learns that Cassidy's brother died, he realizes that he couldn't have said anything worse. It's not until the final section of this book that Cassidy's motivations for keeping her secret become clear.

The scene between Charlotte and Ezra is just another example of Charlotte's character. She says she wants to get back together with Ezra and that she's going to break up with Evan. But when Ezra refuses, she asks if he's going to tell Evan. She says she isn't really going to break up with him and had only said that she would if Ezra would agree to begin dating again. It's typical of Charlotte that she doesn't want to be alone and is trying to manipulate the situation to get the best outcome for herself.

Ezra seems to be friends with Toby still but he's obviously not all that comfortable being around some of Toby's friends, which is why he decides not to attend the Floating Theater. However, he soon realizes that he no longer fits in with his former group of friends. He thinks the party is ridiculous and that there's nothing to recommend it other than a lot of liquor on the boat owned by the hostess's parents.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Ezra go to the party rather than attending the Floating Theater? Why does he decide to leave?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe the scene at the therapist's office. Why do you think Cassidy continues to refuse to answer Ezra's questions?

## Discussion Question 3

What are some of the literary devices used in this book? Could the mention of coyotes be a foreshadowing of some future event?

## Vocabulary

delusion, itinerary, pathetic, plausible, culminated, vestibule, lurked, emblem, cohesive, justified



# Chapters 31-33

## Summary

In Chapter 31, Ezra realizes that a lot of things about Cassidy make sense now that he knows about her brother's death. He knows that something about Owen caused her to change her mind about attending the dance. He imagines that she might have forgotten his birthday or something they always did together. He thinks back over their final conversation on the phone but can't figure out a connection. Ezra imagines that Cassidy had been too sad to pretend otherwise, and that she'd avoided Ezra because she didn't want to have to voice the truth – that her brother is dead.

One afternoon, Ezra's dad talks to him about dinner that night. He then asks what Ezra has been doing to stay busy. Ezra admits that he's filling out college applications. His father agrees that Ezra should attend the school of his choice but warns that Ezra's mother might be more difficult to convince.

After dinner, Ezra goes to Toby's where Toby pulls up an article about Cassidy's brother. He was attending medical school and died when he was 23. Ezra says he has to do something to make it right. He says he might take her some flowers. Toby says that isn't enough and Ezra comes up with a plan. The next morning, he sneaks out early and arrives home before daylight. He washes the paint off his hands and waits.

After daylight, Ezra prepares to go back to Cassidy's house. Cooper whines to go along and Ezra, remembering that Cassidy likes Cooper, takes him. He waits for awhile then calls Cassidy. She answers, obviously having been asleep. Ezra tells her to come outside. She appears in a few minutes to find that he's made a huge snowman out of tumbleweeds and painted it white. It's on her front lawn. She laughs and he's thrilled to see her happy for a moment. She greets Cooper and Ezra says Cooper made the snowman.

Cassidy says she'll help Ezra remove it. Ezra says he is trying to apologize for his comment in the therapist's office. Cassidy says Ezra has to drop it. Ezra says he knows why Cassidy broke up with him but Cassidy says Ezra has only found the question, not the answer. Ezra starts to walk away, saying he's "sick of riddles."

Ezra enters the park but Cooper growls and refuses to walk further. Cassidy yells for Ezra to run just before Ezra sees the huge coyote nearby. Cooper pulls his leash from Ezra's hand and is soon embroiled in a fight. The coyote gets the upper hand and then leaves. Ezra rushes to Cooper, holding his hand over the bloody, torn neck of his beloved Cooper. He gives Cassidy his keys and orders her to get his car. She reluctantly goes and then helps get Cooper into the car. Ezra drives to the veterinarian's office.





In Chapter 32, Ezra and Cassidy are waiting in the vet's office while the doctor works on Cooper. A receptionist suggests Ezra wash off some of the blood. He takes a long time in the bathroom and Cassidy checks on him. Ezra is feeling guilty, knowing that he shouldn't have taken Cooper out of the house because of the coyotes.

Back in the waiting room, Cassidy and Ezra talk. Ezra says he, Cassidy, and Cooper all seem to attract tragedy. Cassidy says he shouldn't try to make light of the situation. Cassidy says she doesn't really mind now that Ezra knows about Owen's death. She then tells her story.

She says her parents forced Owen to attend medical school and that he was struggling. He hated dealing with the corpses but was afraid to tell his parents he wanted to quit. Cassidy agreed that she and Owen would talk to them together. One night, Owen, Cassidy, and their parents were at a restaurant and her parents were drinking and arguing "over our entrees." Owen snapped. He took the keys to her parents' car and rushed from the restaurant. Cassidy says she should have tried to stop him, but she didn't. He had a wreck on the way home and claimed he hit a tree. He was driving her mother's Land Rover, a black SUV, and the scene of Ezra's wreck was on his route home. Cassidy now knows that Owen was driving the SUV that hit him.

When Cassidy was talking to Ezra on the afternoon of the dance, he told her that the car that hit him was an SUV and Cassidy figured out that Owen was the driver in that hit-and-run. She says he didn't seem to be hurt but died of an embolism a few days later, caused by the wreck. Ezra argues that there are a lot of SUVs, but Cassidy says the date, the time of night, and the route are all the same. She has no doubt that it was Owen and Ezra accepts that she's right.

Ezra says Cassidy has made his life better but she says that he had already made decisions to change his life before they met, including moving to another group of friends at lunch time. Ezra now realizes that Cassidy has created a Panopticon of her own because she feels she has to live up to expectations. Ezra says he doesn't want to lose her but Cassidy says he's better off without her, and that she doesn't want him to discover that while she's still there.

As she leaves, the vet calls Ezra into the office and hands him Cooper's tags.

In Chapter 33, Ezra keeps Cooper's ashes in his room for about a week. Then Toby goes with him to spread them in the park. Cassidy moves back to Barrows that spring and Ezra is able to move on.

Ezra goes away to college and says it's snowing outside his dorm room. He has a photo in his room, taken by Phoebe. It's Ezra and Toby on the Thunder Mountain Railroad. Toby is laughing at Austin and Ezra is smiling at Phoebe as the Disneyland park attendant yells at her to face the front.

Ezra says he doesn't know what happened to Cassidy but that he can imagine her telling stories about them when she returned to Barrows. He says he doesn't quite



forgive her but that she was right about a lot of things, including the fact that he had made many of those decisions for himself.

## Analysis

As Ezra comes to terms with the fact that Cassidy's brother died, he makes sense of some of her choices. She has changed schools, leaving her boarding school where everyone knows what happens to attend a school where no one knows about her past. She has sometimes worn boys' clothing which Ezra now assumes belonged to her brother. She signed Owen's name to the geocache log. She also chose to date Ezra, who is "broken" and knows how it feels to deal with loss. These are important aspects of Cassidy's character that are not revealed until now.

Ezra sees his cane as a symbol of his injury. He hates it and asks his doctor if he can stop using it early in the school year. The doctor agrees that he can but cautions Ezra to be careful. When Ezra and Toby are scattering Cooper's ashes in the park, Ezra has trouble with his cane in the soft ground. This indicates that he's using the cane again, just a short time after being allowed to stop using it. The reason is not explained but it might be that Ezra is accepting his loss rather than fighting against it.

There's a brief mention of Toby in the final chapter. He is also attending college, though not at the same university as Ezra. He is dating a boy and is now living an openly gay life.

In the final chapter, Ezra talks about a photo on the wall of his dorm room in which he and Toby are on the back seat of the Thunder Mountain Railroad roller coaster at Disneyland. This is where the book opened and it's significant that it's where the book ends. Ezra indicates that they'd ridden the roller coaster the summer after their senior year, before everyone left for college. This is the first time Toby and Ezra have returned to Disneyland and it symbolizes that they are putting the past behind them.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the secret Cassidy has about her brother and Ezra, and why do you believe she tried to hide it from Ezra?

## Discussion Question 2

Do you think Cassidy makes the right decision by ending her relationship with Ezra?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Ezra and Toby return to ride Thunder Mountain Railroad?



## Vocabulary

curdled, beckoning, scrutinizing, anguish, muddling, discreet, gingerly, picturesque, valiantly, eulogy



# Characters

## Ezra Faulkner

Ezra Faulkner is about to enter the seventh grade as the story opens. He lives in a gated subdivision in California just a few miles from Disneyland. Ezra believes that everyone has a “personal tragedy” and that the person's life begins only after that tragedy. For his best friend, Toby, that tragedy happened that summer when a boy is decapitated on a ride at Disneyland. Toby catches the head. Ezra soon drifts away from Toby, becoming an integral part of a group of students who are popular and athletic. He focuses on tennis and fully expects to be recruited to a respectable college after high school.

Ezra is dating a popular girl in high school and is constantly surrounded by people who consider themselves Ezra's friends. However, when he's seriously hurt in a car wreck, not one of those people stay with him until the ambulance arrives. No one visits while he's in the hospital or during his months of recuperation. When Ezra is back home, some of his friends invite him to various events but Ezra repeatedly refuses. While his friends seem willing to continue spending time with Ezra, he is apparently hurt by their rejection and doesn't want to spend time with them.

The group of popular students spend lunchtime at a specific table on the quad at Eastwood High School. On Ezra's first day back at school, he doesn't seem to even consider taking a seat at that table. This indicates that Ezra has decided to break away from that group and that he realizes that aren't really his friends. Ezra briefly returns to that table but quickly discovers he no longer belongs there.

Ezra begins making more decisions for himself and soon begins to change his outlook and his image. He believes a new girl in school, Cassidy Thorpe, is responsible but Cassidy helps him realize that he has been making these new choices all along, though Cassidy sometimes urged him to think about them.

## Cassidy Thorpe

Cassidy Thorpe is a high school senior when she's introduced in the story. Cassidy is a thoughtful person who is obviously struggling with some personal issues, though this situation isn't revealed until near the end of the book.

Cassidy meets Ezra on her first day at Eastwood High. She's a transfer student and needs help finding her next class. Ezra, who is on crutches and knows he'll be late for class, doesn't help her. Cassidy is soon attracted to Ezra but seems to hold back for a while. She keeps her home life and her past secret until Toby questions some students from her previous school.



Cassidy's brother died unexpectedly at a young age. His death has affected her greatly and it seems that her grief has played a role in her early maturity. Cassidy believes a person should be true to himself. She points out that Ezra's room is devoid of personality. She challenges him to make the room his own and to express himself in other ways as well. Cassidy takes him to new places and lets him experience things outside his normal realm. This includes sitting in on a couple of college classes. Ezra finds he is interested in the chemistry class and that college is very different from high school. This helps him eventually decide that he should attend a good college rather than just choosing a state school that's nearby with few demands.

As the story comes to a close, Cassidy ends her relationship with Ezra. She knows that she will never be able to look at Ezra without being reminded of her brother's death and of her brother's role in Ezra's injury. Cassidy is attracted to Ezra and a less mature person might have allowed those feelings to override her good judgment. Though Ezra doesn't want to accept her decision, he eventually has no choice.

## **Toby Ellicott**

Toby is just about to begin seventh grade when he has a birthday party at Disneyland. He doesn't want the party but his mother insists. Toby is on the back seat of a roller coaster when a boy in front of him stands up. The boy is decapitated and Toby literally catches the boy's head. Ezra believes Toby's life changes from that moment. The friendship between Toby and Ezra fades and by the time they are high school seniors they don't run in the same circles at all. Toby is involved with the debate team and Ezra believes Toby is unpopular and probably unhappy. The opposite is true. Toby has true friends who stand behind him and he is ultimately happy with his life. He is also mature and helps make other people happy.

## **Phoebe Chang**

Phoebe is one of the girls in Toby's circle of close friends. She is dating Luke early in the story. Phoebe is a kind girl who stands up for her friends. When Luke calls Ezra a cripple, Phoebe slaps him.

## **Charlotte Hyde**

Charlotte is a member of the "Song Squad," which is something like a cheerleader. She is self-centered and only cares about whatever will make her happy at this moment. She cheats on Ezra and he catches her. She then chases him, insisting that he honor their commitment to attend prom together. When Ezra is in the wreck, Charlotte runs away like everyone else. When Ezra shows up at a party, Charlotte asks him if he'd consider getting back together. She says that everything would have been fine between them if Ezra had taken her to the junior prom like he was supposed to. She seems to completely ignore the fact that Ezra was in the hospital during junior prom and had no choice in the situation.



## Evan

Evan is a student at Eastwood High School. He is on the tennis team and becomes team captain after Ezra's accident. Evan is typical of that crowd. He seems self-absorbed and shallow. He begins dating Charlotte after Ezra's accident as well and, in some ways, it seems as if he has stepped into Ezra's place among that popular crowd.

## Luke Sheppard

Luke is a member of Toby's group of friends. He is the president of the film club and is popular among his crowd. He and Phoebe are a couple. Luke seems somewhat insecure, especially when it comes to Ezra. He isn't as welcoming as most of Toby's other friends and Ezra learns that it's because Phoebe had a crush on Ezra. Luke makes a rude remark about Ezra being "crippled," which earns him a slap from Phoebe. He is largely unapologetic about the remark.

## Austin

Austin is another of Toby's friends. He is a gamer and knows a great deal about graphic design. Austin is with Toby, Ezra, and Cassidy when they go to the flash mob and he attends debate tournament.

## Ezra's Mother and Father

Ezra's mother is a prim, controlling housewife. She pushes Ezra and Ezra's father to eat healthier and she seems overly worried about Ezra in some situations while she seems almost unconcerned in others. Ezra's father is a businessman and he works almost constantly. He has a home office and often works even when he's at home. He's more lenient than his wife. He's supportive when Ezra says he might go out of state to college.

## Owen Thorpe

Owen is Cassidy's older brother. He is struggling in medical school and is very upset on the night he visits with his parents at a local restaurant. It's Owen who was driving the SUV that rammed into Ezra's car. Owen says he hit a tree but Cassidy figures out the truth. Owen doesn't appear to be hurt but dies later of an embolism, caused by the accident. He appears in the book only as Cassidy's memories.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Westlake Middle School

This is the school Ezra and Toby are attending when Toby's personal tragedy occurs. There is not much detail about the school but it seems to be a fairly typical school district.

## Eastwood High School

This is the school Ezra, Toby, and their friends attend. The quad is an important setting within the school. The school seems to be typical of high schools with the exception that there's a coffee cart. Ezra says it had been a beverage cart until the students petitioned for coffee.

## The Castle at the Park

There's a playground in Eastwood where Ezra played as a child and this is where he takes Cassidy one night. They climb onto the castle and spend some time making out there. This is where they are when members of the football team arrive and begin spraying cooking spray all over the playground equipment. Ezra confronts him, saying it's not funny and that some little kid could be seriously injured by the prank. This is also where Cassidy breaks up with Ezra by telling him she has a boyfriend.

## Cooper

Cooper is a standard poodle that was given to Ezra and his family years earlier. Cooper loves Ezra and often sleeps on Ezra's bed. Cooper is killed near the end of the story by coyotes that have begun roaming the residential area where Ezra lives.

## Rosewood

Rosewood is the gated community where Ezra lives. It's separated from Cassidy's community by a park. The houses are large and there is a cul-de-sac nearby where Ezra plays with Cooper one day after he's no longer able to take Cooper for a run. Ezra says his family moved to this community from an older one in the area. The house has six bedrooms and Ezra says every room in the house is painted the same shade of eggshell. All the houses in the neighborhood are similar and Ezra calls them "monstrosities."



## Terrace Bluffs

This is the subdivision where Cassidy lives. It's a gated community, like Rosewood, and the houses there are impressive. There's a gate with a guard who comes to know Ezra and soon begins to wave Ezra through without asking him any questions.

## Ezra's Cane

Ezra's cane is a symbol of his injury and he hates that he has to use it. At one point, he says that he's trying to look like he doesn't really need it, but he knows he does. He asks to be allowed to stop using it but then returns to it a short time later, without explaining why.

## Superhero Academy

This is a series of comic books Ezra and Toby begin as youngsters. Toby finishes them after he and Ezra drift apart. Ezra notes that the early volumes are very amateurish but the later volumes look fairly professional. Ezra is upset to discover the route Toby chose for the characters even though it was Ezra's choice to end his friendship with Toby.

## The Floating Movie Theater

Luke has a set of keys for most of the rooms in the high school and the students gather periodically for secret movies. They choose a place and show a movie there, but they always leave items appropriate to the room. When they watch a movie in the teacher's lounge, they leave several items, including coffee filters. This event is important to Ezra because it's the first time he's really understood that he doesn't know everything that goes on at Eastwood High School.

## Thunder Mountain Railroad

This is the roller coaster at Disney Land that Toby, Ezra, and their friends ride during Toby's twelfth birthday party. The boy in front of Toby stands up at an inopportune moment and his head is literally knocked off and into Toby's lap. Ezra considers this Toby's personal tragedy.





# Settings

## The Quad

This is a section on the Eastwood High School campus where students spend their lunch periods. The quad is important because there is a division between groups of students. The jocks, cheerleaders, and their closest friends tend to gather at a specific group of tables while Toby, Phoebe, and some of the other students involved in debate and other academics gather at another. There is a specific table where the most popular students sit and Ezra is part of that group until he is injured in the car wreck. After that, he feels he doesn't belong there. It's not until then that he sees the table for the senseless status symbol it really is.

## The University of California Eastwood

This is the college where Cassidy and Ezra go one day to attend several classes. They plan to attend philosophy and history classes to take notes they can use for upcoming debates. They mistakenly attend a chemistry class and Ezra is mesmerized. He suddenly realizes that this is nothing like high school and it piques his interest in choosing a good college. The campus seems fairly typical. There is a place nearby where Ezra and Cassidy have a picnic.

## Eastwood

Eastwood is a town near Disneyland where Ezra, Toby, and the other main characters of this story live. The town seems fairly typical of the area. There are several gated communities within the town and a large high school. The area also depends on agriculture. Toby passes strawberry fields on his way to school. There are workers picking fruit in the hot sun and this represents the huge gap between the lives of Ezra's family and the laborers. The town shares city limits with another town, indicating that it is largely urban developments.

## The Panopticon

The Panopticon is a prison in which prisoners can't ever be certain whether they are being watched at any given moment. Cassidy talks about being in a prison like this. When Cassidy and Ezra are in the park on their first evening together, Cassidy compares her life to the Panopticon. She leaps from a swing and Ezra asks if they have escaped. Cassidy says they haven't even come close to escaping. The prison is a symbol of Cassidy's life and the fact that she can't escape the pain of her brother's death. Her parents seem to pay little attention to her and it may be that she can't ever decide if they are watching over her or just ignoring her.



## Ezra's House

Ezra and his parents live in a gated community just a few minutes from Disneyland. The house is huge and Ezra points out that most of the houses in this community have five bedrooms. The house seems fairly typical. There is a laundry room, kitchen, and living room, and there's a room Ezra's father uses for an office when he's working at home. Ezra's bedroom is not that of an ordinary teenager. He has only a couple of framed prints hanging on his walls and no posters or other signs of what he likes. There is a shelf that held his trophies but Ezra packs the trophies away after his injury. When Cassidy points out the bland appearance, Ezra puts some books on his shelves though he doubts he'll ever read them.



# Themes and Motifs

## Ezra's Relationship with Cassidy

Ezra meets Cassidy almost immediately upon his return to school as a senior. He spends lunch with Toby and Toby's friends, and Cassidy joins them. Their attraction is almost immediate and they are soon spending time together. Cassidy is an important influence in his life. She takes him to several college classes in order to find material for their upcoming debates. When they attend a chemistry class by mistake, Ezra is mesmerized. This is the first time he fully realizes what college will be like and that he might seek out something more than a local state college.

Cassidy also encourages Ezra to think about his appearance. She takes him to a vintage clothing store where she challenges him to think about what he wants rather than choosing the least conspicuous clothing he can find. She takes that same tactic with his bedroom. She points out that the room is very generic and could belong to any teenager anywhere. Ezra has already decided that no one is expecting anything from him but he now realizes that Cassidy is right. He soon personalizes his room to a small degree and announces to his father that he's applying to some high-level universities.

In Ezra's mind, Cassidy has prompted him to make choices and to change his life. He believes she's responsible for this new level of awareness but Cassidy disagrees. She says that Ezra had already decided to leave his old group of friends in favor of Toby's group before she joined that group. She challenged and encouraged, but insists that Ezra was the one making choices and changes in his life.

The relationship hits a problem when Cassidy realizes that her brother was the one who hit Ezra. Her brother died a few days later and Cassidy knows she can never look at Ezra without thinking about her brother. She says she will also always think about what he took from Ezra. Ezra says he doesn't care but it's obvious that Cassidy will never be able to be happy with Ezra.

## Coming of Age

Ezra's story begins in middle school as the story opens but skips ahead to high school just a few pages into the book. As the book comes to a close, he is in college. Over the course of the story, he ages physically but he also matures.

In middle school, Ezra begins to show the athletic ability and this ability lends him a level of popularity that he might not otherwise have. He is young and is soon lured into being part of the popular students. When he reconnects with Toby, they have an honest conversation and Toby points out that Ezra chose to abandon their friendship. Toby's handling of the situation indicates that he is maturing much faster than most of their other friends. Ezra realizes that Toby is right, indicating that he is maturing to the point that he can accept the criticism and weigh it.



Another example of this theme is seen when Ezra and Cassidy are in the park. Several members of the football team arrive and begin spraying cooking spray on the playground equipment. Ezra calls them on the prank, pointing out that it's juvenile and that a little kid could be hurt. This shows a level of maturity on Ezra's part that the other boys obviously don't yet possess.

Cassidy is also an example of this theme. She has matured quickly, probably partly because of her brother's death. Cassidy doesn't talk about her brother's death, indicating that it's a very important part of her life and one that she doesn't want to share. If Cassidy had been less mature, she would probably have told others about her brother, inviting pity or understanding.

## Friendship

Ezra is very popular prior to his accident. If anyone had asked, he would have said he has many friends. He is dating a popular girl and the two of them are envied by most of the students. Ezra is at a party the night he breaks up with Charlotte and has a wreck that changes his life. As he is sitting in his car waiting for police and the ambulance, all his friends run away for fear of being arrested for drinking. Not one of these people remain with Ezra or check to be certain he's even alive.

Ezra spends time in the hospital and undergoes multiple surgeries. He learns that he will never again play sports because of the injury to his knee. Through all this, not one of his friends visits. Ezra notes that a group of them send him a card, but he is hurt that they don't visit. This indicates that the friendships Ezra had counted on were not true friendships. Over the summer, some of these people invite Ezra to various functions but he refuses them all. He doesn't really explain his reason but it seems that Ezra has come to realize that none of the people are really his friends.

Ezra and Toby were best friends until sixth grade and it's Toby who steps in to help Ezra on his first day back at school. Toby sits with Ezra in the lower part of the bleachers during a pep rally, knowing that Ezra feels uncomfortable there alone. He also invites Ezra to sit with his friends at lunch time and Ezra is soon accepted as one of the group. One day, one of the boys calls Ezra a cripple and a girl named Phoebe slaps him for his insensitivity. Ezra comes to realize that these are his true friends.

Ezra and Toby have a lengthy talk about how their friendship got derailed. Toby accepts that Ezra is athletic while Toby is not, and that their paths would naturally have parted to some degree as they aged. But Toby points out that Ezra made a choice to abandon their friendship. Ezra realizes that Toby is right in this evaluation and that he should never have missed out on the years of being Toby's friend, even if their interests were different.



## Loss

Loss is an important theme in the book with several of the characters dealing with specific instances of loss, each in their own way. Ezra is a high school junior as the story opens. He is very popular, a rising star on the tennis court, and seems to have everything going for him. His girlfriend is also popular and beautiful, and they are planning to attend the prom together in just a few days. Ezra catches his girlfriend in the arms of another man and that probably seems like a terrible loss. But just moments later, his life is forever changed when a car rams into him. His greatest loss in all this is when he is told he will never again be a competitor on the tennis court. Ezra has based most of his decisions and plans on being recruited to play for a university. That dream is dashed and Ezra suffers greatly from depression over that loss.

Cassidy is another example of this theme. Cassidy's brother dies just days after Ezra's wreck and it takes Cassidy some time to figure out that her brother was the one who hit Ezra's car. Cassidy has spent the previous months dealing with her brother's death. Her grief is deep and she is obviously suffering over the situation. When she finds out that her brother hit Ezra's car, she suffers another loss. She breaks up with Ezra, realizing she will never see him without remembering her brother and what her brother took from Ezra.

Yet another example of this loss is seen in Cooper's death. There have been coyotes roaming the neighborhoods and Cooper is attacked by one in the park between Cassidy's house and Ezra's house. Ezra and Cassidy rush him to a vet but Cassidy leaves Ezra alone there. He's in the waiting room when the vet gives Ezra Cooper's tags, indicating that Cooper has died. The depth of Ezra's pain over losing Cooper is seen with Ezra's speech as Ezra and Toby scatter Cooper's ashes.

To a lesser degree, Toby is also an example of this theme. Toby lost Ezra's friendship when they were twelve but he has coped with that loss much better than some of the other characters. Ezra is extremely hurt when his friends fail to visit and he feels he's lost his place with them. The reader doesn't see Toby's perspective in the years after his friendship with Ezra cools, but it seems likely that he was also hurt. Toby has had years to get past the pain but he is honest with Ezra when it seems that Ezra is returning to his former group of friends, pointing out that Ezra is making a mistake to give up true friendship in favor of the group of superficial friends.

## The Drama of High School

Ezra is a very popular boy in high school. Before the car wreck, he is constantly surrounded by friends and is always being invited to events. Just before that wreck, he is at a party. There are a lot of people there and many of them are drinking. He talks about their antics and how they see themselves. At this party, someone tells him that he should check out one of the bedrooms. Inside, he finds his girlfriend, Charlotte, involved with another man. Ezra is hurt and he makes it clear that he's through with Charlotte.



However, she chases him outside and demands that he take her to the prom as planned. This level of drama seems to be par for Ezra's friends.

After the wreck, Ezra attends another party. By this time, Charlotte has been dating another senior but she asks to talk to Ezra. When they are alone, she basically throws herself at him, begging him to take her back. Charlotte doesn't care that she's creating another drama by dumping her current boyfriend but Ezra hasn't forgotten that Charlotte is self-centered and thoughtless. He denies her, which makes her angrier.

Ezra struggles with his new role in the high school dynamics after the wreck. He initially refuses to attend any events with his former friends. One day, he allows some members of the tennis team to convince him to go to the courts during practice. He soon realizes that he doesn't belong there and that they weren't really trying to be friendly. He has a similar reaction when he attends a party. He realizes there's nothing fun about it and that the liquor is the only reason anyone attends.

While Toby is not that interested in creating drama, there is some drama among his group of close friends. A student named Luke has never really liked Ezra because of Ezra's popularity. Luke is not very friendly with Ezra even though the rest of the group welcomes Ezra in. One day, Luke makes a rude comment about Ezra being "crippled" and Phoebe, another member of the group, slaps him. Luke never apologizes and that relationship remains shaky.



# Styles

## Point of View

The story is written in first person from the limited perspective of Ezra Faulkner. Ezra seems to provide a reliable perspective most of the time. For example, he seems to usually tell the truth, even when it puts him in a bad light. An example of this is seen when he encounters Cassidy at their therapist's office. Cassidy doesn't tell Ezra what's happened to make her change her mind about him, but she does continue to insist that they can't see each other. Ezra becomes angry and makes a comment that "no one has died." Cassidy rushes away and it's only later that Ezra finds out her brother died. Ezra admits that he made the comment even though it was probably one of the most hurtful things he could have said to Cassidy.

However, Ezra's perspective is skewed by his own pain and his own evaluation of events. In Ezra's mind, Toby becomes something of an outcast after catching the head of the little boy at Disneyland. But Toby says that it was Ezra's choice to abandon Toby and to give up on their friendship. It's not until Ezra is a senior and sees his friends for what they really are that he realizes Toby is right.

Another issue regarding perspective is seen in Ezra's evaluation of his change. He believes that Cassidy is the reason he's made changes in his life. He thinks that she caused him to change but Cassidy says she merely pointed out that he can make choices in his life. Until Cassidy talks about it, Ezra doesn't realize that he had already stopped associating with his former friends before he met Cassidy. Once Cassidy makes him aware of the timeline, Ezra accepts it and his perspective comes back in line with the truth.

## Language and Meaning

The story is written in a straightforward manner. The action moves fairly quickly though some scenes are drawn out with extensive descriptions and dialogue. There are usually important pieces of information revealed during these scenes. For example, Charlotte talks to Ezra during a party near the end of the book. She basically begs him to return to their previous relationship but Ezra isn't interested. Charlotte says that everything would have been okay between them if Ezra had taken her to the junior prom, as he promised. She doesn't mention that she was cheating on him just moments before his accident or that Ezra was in the hospital during the prom. This gives the reader an important look at Charlotte's personality and her self-centered attitude.

The overall tone of the story is of hope and growth though there is an underlying tone of fear and depression. Ezra suffers a life-changing accident that leaves him struggling to figure out what he will do. All the plans he had are gone the moment he learns he will never again play competition tennis. It's natural that Ezra would struggle with



depression and that he would think he can now do nothing worthwhile. It's not until Cassidy begins to show him another world that Ezra recovers his hope for a productive future.

There are several scenes with drinking, sexual content, and sexual innuendo. These are apparently used to make the story more realistic, resembling the lives many teens' live today. Some readers may find them unbelievable or may be disturbed by these scenes and settings. It seems there is never a parent to discourage the under-aged drinking and it's never explained how these high school students get so much liquor.

## Structure

The story is divided into 33 chapters. These chapters are titled by number only, meaning there is no hint about the events the reader can expect in that chapter. The story flows in chronological order though there are months and years skipped in the information. Some information from these skipped time periods are presented in the form of memories or conversations.

As the story opens, Ezra says he believes everyone has a personal tragedy and that event is the beginning of their lives. That tragedy, according to Ezra, sets the tone for the rest of that person's life. Ezra's best friend, Toby, celebrated his twelfth birthday at Disneyland at his mother's insistence. They go on a roller coaster and the boy in front of Toby stands up just as the ride is entering a tunnel. The boy is decapitated and Toby catches his head. In Ezra's mind, this event sets the tone for the rest of Toby's life. This story also makes the reader expect that Ezra will suffer a personal tragedy as well. This foreshadowing comes true as Ezra is involved in a serious car wreck when he's a junior in high school. Both of these events happen in Chapter 1.

In Chapter 2, Ezra begins working on his recovery. In Chapter 3, he returns to school and reconnects with Toby. In Chapter 7, Ezra is trying to fit in at school and spends his first lunch period with Toby and Toby's friends. By Chapter 10, Ezra is fitting in with his new friends and beginning to feel comfortable. In Chapter 15, Ezra, Toby, Cassidy, and some other students attend a debate in San Francisco. The relationship between Cassidy and Ezra takes a big step during the trip but Ezra begins to realize that Cassidy is hiding a secret.

In Chapter 20, Cassidy and Ezra go shopping and Cassidy challenges Ezra to find new clothes that he likes rather than buying safe clothing guaranteed to fit in. In Chapter 24, Ezra, Cassidy, and several of their friends make plans to attend prom together but Cassidy doesn't show up and she breaks up with Ezra when he tracks her down. In the next few chapters, Ezra tries to figure out how to fit in, briefly returning to his former friends before realizing he no longer fit in there and wasn't happy.

In Chapter 31, Ezra has learned that Cassidy's brother died recently and he believes that has something to do with their breakup. It's in this chapter that Ezra learns Cassidy's brother was the one who hit Ezra's car, causing his injury. In Chapter 32,





Cassidy says good-bye to Ezra again and Ezra's dog, Cooper, dies after a coyote attack. In Chapter 33, Ezra is at college, as are most of his friends, and he's accepted his role in life.



## Quotes

I still think that everyone's life, no matter how unremarkable, has a singular tragic encounter after which everything that really matters will happen.

-- Ezra (chapter 1 paragraph 63)

**Importance:** Ezra is talking about the “personal tragedy” that he believes happens to every person. He believes Toby's tragedy was catching the boy's head on the roller coaster. He refers to the wreck as his own personal tragedy though some may say his breakup with Cassidy is more tragic.

I was supposed to pick up an elevator key from the front office; it came in a matching set with that little blue parking tag for my car, the one I was never, ever going to display.

-- Ezra (chapter 4 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Ezra is just returning to school and is trying navigate through the crowded hallways an up the stairs with his cane. He hates that he stands out and doesn't want to do anything to draw more attention to himself.

Over the course of the week, I went out of my way to avoid my old friends, as I'd done all summer, and they seemed baffled by it, and more than a little bit hurt. I couldn't figure out why they even cared.

-- Ezra (chapter 8 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Ezra is terribly hurt that his friends all ran away the night of his accident so they wouldn't be in trouble for drinking, and that none of them visited him in the hospital. He has trouble just getting around and they've been inviting him to ridiculous events, such as paintball and rafting.

For the first time, I was thinking that college might not be like high school, that the classes might actually be worth something, and then Cassidy started laughing.

-- Ezra (chapter 12 paragraph 66)

**Importance:** Ezra is just now realizing that there is a whole world outside Eastwood High School. This is an important first step to his decision to attend college out of state and to demand more of himself than anyone else is demanding.

I was fairly certain that most girls saw me and thought, That's the kid who almost died at Jonas's party. Used to be a star athlete, but he's, like, crippled now.

-- Ezra (chapter 13 paragraph 163)

**Importance:** Ezra has an image of himself and he is projecting that onto everyone else. He was really popular prior to the wreck and could probably step right back into that popular group but he's going to be better off for the change.



I was no longer Ezra Faulkner, golden boy, and maybe I hadn't been for a while, but the more time I spent with Cassidy, the more I was okay with it.

-- Ezra (chapter 21 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Ezra is leaving his old friends and his old pastimes behind. He's no longer a member of the student council or the tennis team, and he had expected that he would be really depressed over these losses, but he finds that it's not as important as he'd expected.

It felt strange, like all of those party invitations I'd turned down had been genuine, as though it didn't matter that I could barely handle the stairs and was dating a girl on the debate team and spent my weekends studying for AP classes with Toby Ellicott.

-- Ezra (chapter 23 paragraph 39)

**Importance:** Ezra believes other students will see these parts of his life – including spending time with Cassidy and Toby – as negatives. He's just been nominated for the homecoming court and he suspects it's a joke meant to embarrass him.

But then, that's how we always were. Outwardly mocking, but never quite to the point of not wanting to participate.

-- Ezra (chapter 24 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Ezra and several of his new friends are planning to attend prom. Ezra says they make fun of the event and make their own plans as ridiculous as possible, but they are certainly going to attend.

It was as though I'd gone off on epic adventures, chased down fireworks and buried treasure, danced to music that only I could hear, and had returned to find that nothing had changed except for me.

-- Ezra (chapter 26 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Ezra is beginning to accept that he is becoming a different person and this is part of the coming-of-age theme. He and Cassidy are no longer seeing each other and Ezra seems on the verge of understanding that Cassidy is not responsible for his new maturity though it will be some time before he can put that into words.

You act like that day at Disneyland was my big tragedy, but you're the one who lost your best friend. You're the one who started eating lunch with the popular jocks and forgot how to be awesome because you were too busy being cool.

-- Toby (chapter 27 paragraph 45)

**Importance:** Toby is talking to Ezra and he's pointing out the flaw in Ezra's logic. Ezra had always believed that Toby became less popular that day but Toby is making Ezra understand that he has made choices and that it was Ezra who changed.

You keep wanting to give me credit because you finally decided you weren't content with squeezing yourself into the narrow corridor of everyone's expectations, but you



made that decision before we'd even met, back on the first day of school when you shot your mouth off in AP Euro.

-- Cassidy (chapter 32 paragraph 64)

**Importance:** Cassidy is reminding Ezra that he had already left a pep rally and chosen to eat lunch with Toby's group rather than his former friends before he had his first real conversation with Cassidy. Ezra continually gets the chronology wrong, thinking that Cassidy is the reason he made those first decisions to change his life.

I can't say I forgive her for refusing to indulge the perhapsness of what we might have been, but I understand why she chose to do it, and she never asked for my forgiveness. She was right, though, in the end.

-- Ezra (chapter 33 paragraph 10)

**Importance:** Ezra is looking back on Cassidy's decision to end their relationship. An important point here is that Cassidy didn't ask for Ezra's forgiveness, which indicates her maturity and her determination to end their relationship, regardless of what Ezra wanted. Another important point is that Ezra realizes years later that she was right.