

Impulse Study Guide

Impulse by Ellen Hopkins

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Plot Summary

"Impulse" is a free verse novel by Ellen Hopkins and focuses on the recovery and second chance of three suicidal teenagers to make their lives right. The novel begins with Conner being admitted to Aspen Springs, a recovery hospital. Conner has attempted suicide following his breakup with his girlfriend, Emily. Tony and Vanessa are two teenagers already in residence at Aspen Springs. Tony attempted suicide by overdosing on Valium after the death of someone named Phillip; and Vanessa has attempted suicide by cutting her wrists following a breakup with her boyfriend. Vanessa also secretly worries that she may have inherited her mother's psychotic tendencies.

Over the following weeks, the three teenagers become friends with one another and they learn more about each other. Apart from the breakup with Emily, Conner's pain comes from his parents who are perfectionists and who expect nothing less than perfection from Conner. Conner relates how he never had a close relationship with his mother, and was molested as a child by his nanny, Leona. Furthermore, Emily, Conner's former lover, was a teacher twice his age. Tony relates how when he was young, he was raped by his mother's boyfriend, and was sent to prison for shooting and killing her boyfriend. In prison, to survive, Tony exchanged sexual favors with other males to get by. Vanessa's father is overseas, serving in Afghanistan, leaving Vanessa's grandmother to cope with her daughter-in-law, Vanessa, and her little brother, Bryan. Vanessa finds her mother has attempted to overdose one day, but doesn't call for help. Vanessa, reeling from a breakup with her boyfriend Trevor, and unstable following an abortion Trevor induced, is driven to suicide.

The culmination of their time in recovery is a wilderness survival camp. Conner, Vanessa, and Tony attend at the same time. By the end of the novel, Tony discovers that is actually not gay, because he and Vanessa have fallen in love with one another. Vanessa discovers that there are medications to control her mental disorder, and that her father has been granted a stateside stationing. But Conner's parents don't change. He steps off a cliff to commit suicide.



Chapter 1-6, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 1-6, Conner to Vanessa Summary

The novel "Impulse" by Ellen Hopkins focuses around three suicidal teens who are attempting to reorient their lives at a psychiatric hospital.

In Chapter 1, Conner arrives at Aspen Springs psychiatric hospital, where he will be staying in the Redwood Room. Conner has been committed to the hospital for attempting to kill himself by shooting himself in the chest. Conner's mother found him before he died, and saved his life. The one overwhelming feeling Conner has is that of pain.

In Chapter 2, Tony - Tony watches Conner get checked in, realizing that Conner's room will be across from his own. Tony spends his days in a medicated consciousness, saying it is the only way to make it through the day in a loony bin. Tony recounts how he tired using weed to handle his pain, and then resorted to heroin. Tony recounts trying to kill himself by taking half a bottle of Valium, passing out, throwing all the pills up, and being found by the police, who bring him to the hospital and then to Aspen Springs.

In Chapter 3, Vanessa Angela O'Reilly thinks about the idea of memory, about how some events that are remembered are clearer than others. She tries to remember the last time she saw so much snow. Vanessa feels as if sometimes she exists, and sometimes she does not. She is on Prozac, having been committed for attempting suicide by cutting her wrists. Vanessa recalls how her little brother, Bryan, found her in her grandmother's bathtub, and screamed.

In Chapter 4, Conner looks over his new room. It is small with two beds, no phone or television, and a chair near a window that doesn't open. Conner wonders why he was admitted to Aspen Springs for wanting to die. He doesn't understand how it equates to losing his mind. He reflects on his mother, who always dressed him and made sure he looked his best; the suicide attempt made making sure that others reacted to Conner, for once. Yet Conner also reflects on how his clothes made him popular, especially sexually with girls.

In Chapter 5, Tony explains how after one has attempted suicide, the first thing the professionals do is lock you away in a room by yourself. Every fifteen minutes, someone checks in on you. Tony recounts that this makes him mad, so that by the time he talks to his shrink, he just says he is mad at everyone, rather than simply the nurse's aide, who does the routine check-ups. This occurs for two weeks. Tony remembers his best friend, Phillip, who never lied to Tony or tried to hurt him. This contrasts with Tony's distant, uncaring mother, who was primarily concerned with getting laid. Tony says his mother has no idea how this affects him. Furthermore, Tony was an unexpected and unwanted child.



In Chapter 6, the author describes Vanessa's life again. Not only did Vanessa's eight year-old brother discover her, but Vanessa's grandmother is a nurse, who wrapped up her arm and called 911. Vanessa's grandmother rides to the hospital with her in the ambulance. Vanessa apologizes for staining the new tub, and her grandmother tells her not to even think about it. Vanessa reflects on a boy named Trevor, with whom and for whom Vanessa says she did things she would never confess because she loves him. Paul, one of the staff, brings Vanessa her morning pill and tells her that if she joins group therapy that afternoon, she will be awarded Level One and can begin school.

Chapter 1-6, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

The stage for the plot of the novel is set between the first and sixth chapter. Conner is brought into Aspen Springs, a psychiatric hospital to which Tony and Vanessa have already been committed. Immediately, their paths cross as they notice one another and pick up on pieces of conversation. Each one of them is damaged in some way, and each of them has attempted suicide for various reasons. For Conner, it was a self-inflicted gunshot; for Tony, a Valium overdose; for Vanessa, a blade to the wrist. The presentation of their suicide attempts is inclusive, focusing on the three major ways that individuals attempt suicide. Each one of them fails for different reasons: For Tony, his system simply rejected the Valium, during which time he was found by a police officer. For Vanessa, her little brother Bryan found her bleeding. For Conner, it was the timely arrive of the medics.

Each one of them is lost and alone upon their arrival. Each one of them feels isolated, and feels as though there is no way to handle their pain except for death. As each of the teens settle in, the reader follows their thought patterns and follows the small amount of information the teens offer up about themselves initially. Conner seems cold and distant; Tony appears rough-and-tumble from living on the streets; and Vanessa is soft, warm, and sad. Each one of them feels, as well, beyond help or hope.

The reader is also briefly introduced to the system of recovery, which exists in levels. Each level brings new privileges and challenges, and places the patient one step closer to being able to leave Aspen Springs. Tony and Conner are, as well, initially hostile to the efforts of the staff at Aspen Springs to help them.



Chapter 7-12, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 7-12, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 7, Paul arrives in Conner's room to see if he is settled in. Paul also brings gray sweats, which Conner will wear everyday except for Sunday services or when his parents visit. Conner is then brought to Dr. Starr, whom Conner describes as a bulldog. Dr. Starr asks why Conner thinks he is at Aspen Springs. Conner lies that he was simply fooling around with the gun. Dr. Starr is unimpressed, and says if Conner thinks it's a game, she can play better.

In Chapter 8, Tony's life again takes center stage. It was Tony's father who paid for Tony to get into Aspen Springs. Tony wonders why his father never thought of him until then after having left his mother years before. Tony's father lives at Tahoe, has his own insurance office, and does well. Tony's mother never leaves Reno except to work at a hooker ranch. Tony's full name, he reveals, is Anthony Ceccarelli III. Tony heads to group therapy in Conference Room 3, where Dr. Boston -who most guys consider hot -is presiding. But Tony says she's a user, like everyone else. Tony also describes the other people in group therapy -Schizo Stanley, who tried to kill his little brother; Lowball Lori, a depression case; Do-Me Dahlia, who uses sex instead of money; Jesus-save-me Justin; Toot-it-all Todd; and a pretty new girl named Vanessa.

In Chapter 9, Vanessa enters group therapy. Dr. Boston tells her to take a seat, but Vanessa wants to run away. Yet she sits. Tony introduces himself. Tony is gay and Vanessa thinks he's pretty cool. Justin expects Armageddon to happen at any time, and Todd has lost too much of his mind to crystal meth. Stanley speaks about torturing insects.

In Chapter 10, Conner feels displaced and lonely. Dr. Starr tells Conner they have a lot of work to do, and dismisses him for the day. He is escorted back by Stephanie, who is tall and strong, but who has compassion in her eyes. Conner believes he can end up using Stephanie to his advantage. Conner hints at his downfall, which was a girl who made his grades plummet and resulted in his being removed from first string.

In Chapter 11, Tony asks Vanessa why she's in Aspen Springs. She holds up her bandaged arm. Tony wonders whether she's into self-mutilation, or seeking deliberately to kill herself. Stanley wants to know how much blood there was, which causes Dr. Boston to turn white and dismiss the group for the day. As Vanessa leaves, Tony thinks she is something special, something different. But he doesn't know why he cares.

In Chapter 12, Vanessa wonders if she could be friends with Tony, but considers that her military father would disapprove. Her father also told her that when you're a hostile presence in a hostile land, you have to do what you have to do to stay alive. That is how Vanessa now feels. She also reveals that she is a manic-depressive, a disorder given to her by her mother.



Chapter 7-12, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

The characters undergo treatment at Aspen Springs in various ways. Conner begins speaking with Dr. Starr about his issues, but Conner relates to the reader that he considers Aspen Springs an annoyance to be overcome as quickly as possible. Conner wants to play the game of getting through therapy and recovery, just so he can get out. Conner believes he can manipulate people, the staff, and events to his advantage. His narcissism is apparent, and challenged by Dr. Starr. While Conner continues to be cold and distant toward others, only letting them see as much of him as he needs to let them see, he privately confesses to feeling displaced and hopeless.

In terms of the teens being committed to Aspen Springs, the reader learns that the families of each of the characters made sure they would attend. Tony's long-absent father has interceded in his son's life, to make sure his son recovers. Vanessa's grandmother, a nurse, made sure she would attend Aspen Springs. And Conner's parents made sure he would attend. Each one of the teens feels as though they are in Aspen Springs because people think they are crazy rather than depressed; and each one of the teens is determined to do whatever they have to do to get out of Aspen Springs. The thought they need to get better doesn't cross their minds. All they want is to get out.

Vanessa and Tony begin speaking to one another, which physically connects the two. Prior, they had seen one another in passing, but personal contact intertwines their lives officially. Clearly, Vanessa and Tony are on a different level than someone like Stanley, who enjoys torturing insects and causing problems; and Todd, a drug user who has seriously damaged his mind. This sets apart Conner, Tony, and Vanessa from the others in the mind of the reader -beyond the fact that each of them narrate chapters.



Chapter 13-18, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 13-18, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 13, Conner reflects on Emily, whom he fell for hard. He says he would be with Emily now, if she had given him the choice. She was too worried about what others would think. Conner is from California, and is a twin brother to his sister Cara. Yet both siblings are different as night and day. Where Cara is more confrontational, Conner is more laid back. Conner recounts how it took him a long time to talk to Emily, who jogged past his house every day. The first morning they talk, he tells her she is beautiful.

In Chapter 14, Tony continues thinking about Vanessa. He also thinks about moments of love and lust, when patients begin short-lived romances because they need to feel loved and needed. Yet Conner, for the first time in a long time, doesn't want to have sex, mainly because of what started the events that brought him to Aspen Springs.

In Chapter 15, Vanessa heads down to eat dinner. She reflects on family and friendship, and how her father tried to take care of her mother. Their grandmother volunteered to take care of Vanessa and Bryan to help, but Vanessa feels bad for her grandmother because her grandmother didn't know about Vanessa's disorder. Vanessa also recalls her mother's bouts with manic-depression, including talking to the air.

In Chapter 16, all that Conner can really do with his time is read and remember Emily. He also believes he is going to seduce and manipulate Dr. Boston. He reflects on a previous session where they talked about Emily, and about heartbreak. Conner recalls how Dr. Boston turned her chair, and unbuttoned part of her blouse, telling him that he needs to trust her.

In Chapter 17, Tony reflects on being in juvenile detention, and learning to use sex to his advantage -something he learns from his mother. Eight years previously, Tony was raped by his mother's then-boyfriend, Larry, but Tony's mother didn't believe him. He also remembers when his father left, having to be escorted by a policeman to get his things so Tony's mother wouldn't attack him.

In Chapter 18, Vanessa's grandmother comes to visit her. They embrace and talk about Bryan. Dr. Starr then proceeds to speak with them. Vanessa apologizes for being crazy, but her grandmother tells her she is not. Vanessa's grandmother has also received a letter from her father, an Army Ranger, serving in Afghanistan. Vanessa asks if her father knows about her mother.

Chapter 13-18, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

Conner's manipulative personality and narcissism continue to shine through. The reader discovers that Conner initiated contact between himself and Emily; and the reader also discovers that Conner wants to seduce and manipulate Dr. Boston, who reminds him of



Emily in certain ways. Vanessa, meanwhile, harbors terrible remorse that her grandmother didn't know Vanessa had inherited her mother's unstable mental capacities. Vanessa reflects on her own time with her mother, who scared her by talking to invisible people. Vanessa also begins to occupy more and more of Tony's thoughts, and Conner and Tony have each attracted Vanessa in their own ways.

Tony reveals his childhood, full of sexual abuse, and a distant, uncaring, selfish mother. His mother's penchant for sexual favors served as model for Tony while he was in prison -the reason for which is not yet explained.

Vanessa's grandmother comes to visit her as well -a requirement of all committed teens, that they visit their parents- and the reader discovers just how close Vanessa and her grandmother are. There is no shortage of familial love between them. The root of Vanessa's problems appear to stem from her ex-boyfriend, the absence of her father, and the psychosis of her mother. Yet there is something about Vanessa's mother that is important enough for her to mention to her grandmother that Vanessa has not yet revealed to the reader. It is clear that whatever Vanessa's mother's current condition is has also greatly weighed on her heart.



Chapter 19-24, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 19-24, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 19, Conner goes to see Dr. Boston again. She is wearing a suede outfit that shows off her figure. She tells Conner that when she was his age, she also had sex with a teacher.

In Chapter 20, Tony heads down the hall to see his father, but runs into Vanessa first, who is crying. She confesses seeing her family makes her want to curl up in a little ball. Tony then sees his father for the first time in eight years. He refuses to hug his father. They meet with Dr. Bellows. Tony's father apologizes for not being around. Tony thinks about how he needs to get out and get release.

In Chapter 21, Vanessa reflects on how seeing her grandmother makes her want to go home and see her family. She also sees Conner in the hallway, whom she calls gorgeous in her own mind. It makes her remember Trevor, who left her because of her mood swings. She also recounts how she found her mother on the floor, lying beside an empty bottle of pills. Instead of calling the police, Vanessa leaves the room.

In Chapter 22, Dr. Boston reveals that after Conner tried to kill himself, Emily spoke with the authorities. Dr. Boston wants to know why Conner went after a woman twice his age. Conner reveals that his relationships were more than just about sex, that they were about lack of caring and compassion.

In Chapter 23, Tony wants to beat up his father more than anything in the world at that moment, but does not do so. Both Tony's father and Dr. Bellows are making Tony angry. Tony reflects in his mind on the day that he scattered Phillip's ashes at a fishing hole on the Truckee River, so an elusive fish will never forget him. Tony's father wants to make him his son. His father says he can forgive everything, from the drugs to the men. But Tony lashes out, demanding to know where his father was for eight years.

In Chapter 24, Vanessa's life is the focus of the chapter. Thinking about her mother always depresses Vanessa. She eats dinner, listening to Stanley asking about death and what people's sisters look like. Tony appears, red-eyed, and Stanley asks him why he looks that way. Tony tells him to shut up, and it appears as if the two will get into a fist fight, but they do not. Stanley says he is only joking around, and Tony tells Stanley if he screws with him again, he'll be dead.

Chapter 19-24, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

Dr. Boston drops a bombshell for both Conner and the reader, that she knows that Conner has had sex with a teacher -something Dr. Boston also claims to have done. Emily is revealed to be a teacher and to be twice Conner's age. Conner is stunned that not only does Dr. Boston know about Emily, but that Emily confessed their relationship



to the police and the other proper authorities. It also makes Conner miss Emily even more. Here, Conner faces a defeat: one of his innermost secrets has been publicized, causing the reader to reflect on Conner's assumption that Aspen Springs is a game, but it is a game that those working at Aspen Springs play better.

That Vanessa's mother is further at the root of Vanessa's problems is also expanded upon: Vanessa, finding her mother in a comatose state on the floor, slips out of the room and does not call the authorities, because her mother looks peaceful at last. She feels both guilt and anxiety about the incident. The impression that Vanessa has made on Tony is also clear: he continues thinking about her, and considers her a friend, telling Stanley previously that if he messes with Tony or Tony's friends, he will end Stanley.

Tony's character also continues evolving, and his character becomes more and more complex. The appearance of Tony's father, and Tony's intimations toward Phillip also further add to the complexity of Tony's story. His father has been gone for eight years, so Tony finds it tough to believe that his father would suddenly want to come back into his life. Yet his father seems sincere enough. Needless to say, the first meeting in eight years between father and son does not go well. In fact, the meeting affects Tony to such a degree, that Tony ends up breaking down and crying -totally surrendering his exterior to his father and Dr. Starr.



Chapter 25-30, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 25-30, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 25, Conner is awarded Level One for opening up to Dr. Boston. But Conner reveals to the reader it is part of his game to make Dr. Boston think he trusts her completely. Conner also reveals his full name to be Conner Aaron Sykes. Conner arrives at dinner in time to see Tony warning Stanley against messing with him or his friends. Conner decides they need to be friends and sits near him. Vanessa also appears and introduces herself. Conner finds her attractive.

In Chapter 26, Tony considers Vanessa an angel and he likes the idea of Vanessa trying to figure him out. Tony and Conner talk, during which time Tony understands that Conner is smart, strong, and in control. Tony wishes he had remained in control in front of his father.

In Chapter 27, Vanessa reflects on how her grandmother has indeed let Vanessa's father know about her mother. Vanessa also thinks about Conner. Lori and Dahlia think he is cute. Vanessa doesn't like how the girls look at sex like a commodity. Vanessa thinks about how she and Trevor had sex to have a chance at love. Trevor's declarations of love to Vanessa were false.

In Chapter 28, Conner finds something appealing about Tony, but not in a sexual way. Tony confesses he is gay. Conner lies and says he doesn't have a problem with it, and that some of his best friends are gay. Conner also makes a mental note of wanting to get closer to Vanessa.

In Chapter 29, Tony realizes Conner is not gay, but that he has eyes for Vanessa. Conner confides in Tony that he used Dr. Boston to his advantage, which prompts Tony to say that players are often played by better players. As dinner ends, Tony watches Conner whisper something in Vanessa's ear, who in turn, blushes.

In Chapter 30, Vanessa is impressed by Conner's confidence. Conner tells her she lights up the room, and while she knows it is a line, Vanessa says it makes her feel hot. She feels desirable. That night, she uses a paper clip to cut herself.

Chapter 25-30, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

Each of the teenagers begin advancing through the levels. Conner, Tony, and Vanessa all make Level One. Conner becomes a larger force in both the lives of Tony and Vanessa, as each of them begin talking to Conner more frequently. Something along the lines of friendship is clearly developing between the three, but real connections, due to mutual, natural distrust and fear of revealing the self, prevents each of the teens from making any real connections thus far. Yet, their minds are working: Tony considers Vanessa to be an angel, and Conner finds Vanessa sexually appealing. Yet despite their



personal advances, Tony and Conner still consider Aspen Springs to be nothing more than a game.

In the same way that Conner and Tony find Vanessa appealing, Vanessa finds each of them appealing or attractive in some way. Vanessa is initially attracted to Conner sexually, for she finds him to be confident, cool, and collected. She does view Tony as something of a friend, and continues to wonder about having a gay friend. These ruminations about Tony and Conner also cause Vanessa to reflect on her ex-boyfriend, Trevor, who only ever wanted to sleep with her, lying to her about loving her. Indeed, Vanessa finds she enjoys feeling desirable to Conner, but the lack of love inherent in that desire also stirs up the memories of Trevor, which in turn all lead to Vanessa cutting herself once more.

Yet, Vanessa's character is more complex than one merely seeking sexual gratification. She seems to revile the idea of talking about others sexually, the way that Lori and Dahlia do. Vanessa also relates to the reader that she doesn't like the idea that some look at sex as nothing more than a commodity, and this sets Vanessa apart from the others.



Chapter 31-36, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 31-36, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 31, back in his room, Conner wonders why Emily confessed everything about their love affair. Because Conner is sixteen, Emily doesn't go to jail, but her teaching career is over. He finds it underhanded that the same sex for him doesn't even earn him a suspension, while it ends Emily's career. Conner also recalls how most of his childhood was overseen by Leona, the nanny.

In Chapter 32, Sunday rolls around and Tony prepares for church. He reflects on how Phillip gave him his first taste of God and feeling safe in church. Tony asks Phillip if God cares they are gay, but Phillip believes God cares more about how you treat others.

In Chapter 33, Vanessa only ever became afraid of church when her mother attempted to introduce her to the air angel she was speaking to. Vanessa also secretly worries she is schizophrenic. Despite Tony being gay, Vanessa notices how caught up in the services Tony is.

In Chapter 34, Conner is surprised at mandatory church services for Level One. Conner is an atheist, but thinks his mother could be Satan's sister. During the service, Conner notices Vanessa's fresh cuts. After the service, Tony says hello, and also sees the fresh cuts.

In Chapter 35, Tony knows that all he can do about Vanessa cutting is to tell someone, but the someone would be those in charge, which Tony considers the enemy. He reflects that he wouldn't want someone ratting him out if it was him. Conner asks about the Levels. Level Two means playing games and watching television, Level Three is getting to do weekend visits, going out on supervised trips, and so on, until Level Four which is a wilderness camp called Challenge by Choice. Completing camp means Level Five, and getting out for good.

In Chapter 36, listening to the talk about levels makes Vanessa want to get out of Aspen Springs as fast as possible. Vanessa hates how every step of her life is micromanaged at the psych hospital. She also begins classes. She discovers that Tony is both book and street smart, never realizing the two could go together. Mr. Hidalgo is the teacher, and instructs the students they will be writing essays about supporting or opposing the Patriot Act. Conner questions Mr. Hidalgo whether or not the people at Aspen Springs have any sort of liberty or due process.

Chapter 31-36, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

Conner broods over Emily, wondering how she could betray him the way that she did. Conner also presents, through his memory, the character of Leona, his nanny, who oversaw most of his upbringing. Conner's parents continue to evolve as characters as



well: at first it may appear that Conner's understanding of them as distant perfectionists is a jaded perception, the way that many teens exaggerate their parents. Yet as time goes on, the reader learns that Conner's parents are indeed as cold, distant, and every bit the perfectionists he portrays them as.

Each of the teens are also further explained with concept to their faith: Tony finds it amusing that he is a gay theist, that he believes in God and finds comfort in church despite the understanding that homosexuality is not normal. Vanessa is a fearful believer, who has been afraid of church ever since the invisible person her mother spoke to she claimed to be an angel. Conner is, simply put, a nonbeliever, who does believe that if attending Sunday services helps him get out of Aspen Springs, he'll definitely attend.

The religious outlooks of each of these teens is also especially important, because their religious outlooks directly affect, and are influenced by, their lives. Tony finds warmth and comfort in the Heavenly Father, in large part because his earthly father was never present. Tony's introduction to God comes through his gay friend, Phillip, who also found love and comfort in God. Vanessa's fear of church is also reflective of her fear of herself, her condition, and everything around her. She has not yet found hope or warmth the way that Tony has. Conner, whose parents are cold, distant, and narcissistic, is also cold, distant, and narcissistic. His parents believe church is more of a social obligation than a voluntarily moral or religious participation, and this in turn influences Conner. Conner is likewise cold and distant, as well as narcissistic, and he views church as something that can be used to his advantage.



Chapter 37-42, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 37-42, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 37, Conner admits to asking Mr. Hidalgo about due process because he likes to find out what makes teachers tick. In his essay, Conner writes about liberty and questions why the Constitution doesn't apply to kids under eighteen. Tony's essay has to do with how laws protect and enslave.

In Chapter 38, Tony reveals that Phillip was actually a college professor. Phillip succumbed to AIDS after telling his wife he was gay. She filed for a divorce, and took their son. Tony writes about how he wants everyone to stop living in fear.

In Chapter 39, Vanessa struggles with her essay, because her father is defending America and her grandmother is a nurse who values patient privacy. Vanessa has no problem with increasing security to protect the country, but she wonders how it will be decided who poses a threat.

In Chapter 40, six weeks into therapy, Conner says he is making progress, but wants to see Emily to find out what has become of her. Now a Level Two, Conner is working like mad to get to Level Three. He just has to get past Dr. Starr, who wants to talk about Cara.

In Chapter 41, the police conduct a search of the rooms led by dogs and escort Todd out in handcuffs. Tony reflects on Vanessa, beginning to wonder if he isn't in love with her.

In Chapter 42, Vanessa talks to Tony while the search goes on. She says it is sad that people give their lives to meth use. They talk about how there must be something better after all of this. Suddenly, a fight between Flea and Stanley is stopped by Paul and another staff member, Kate. Vanessa begins crying, and Tony holds her to console her.

Chapter 37-42, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

Each of the teenagers continue to grow personally, and their thoughts and ideas are brought to the fore through the essays that Mr. Hidalgo has them write. In their essay about the Patriot Act, for example, each of them reveal political assumptions. Conner appears to be something of a left-leaning libertarian, questioning why Constitutional laws (and laws in general) apply differently to different people (e.g., the fallout from the sexual relationship between Conner and Emily). Tony appears to be a liberal, wanting people to stop living in fear of one another. Vanessa appears to be more conservative, believing that security is not a bad thing so long as it is done properly and doesn't impinge freedom.



During a scuffle between Stanley and the staff, Tony holds Vanessa to console her, and stop her from crying. Here, a serious physical milestone is accomplished: there is genuine love and affection being passed between Tony and Vanessa, a sort of attraction that is not sexual and purely emotional. It is an incident that moves both of them.



Chapter 43-48

Chapter 43-48 Summary

In Chapter 43, Conner reflects on how he and Cara always struggled for their father's attention. The session is interrupted by the take-down, and the drug bust. Dr. Starr goes running down the hall, with Conner behind. Tony fills Conner in on what has happened.

In Chapter 44, Tony reveals that Todd's brother was supplying him with drugs, which Todd hid in a hollowed-out toothbrush. Tony talks to Vanessa and Conner, all of whom are poised to make Level Three pending successful meetings with their parents.

In Chapter 45, Vanessa has been at Aspen Springs for seven weeks. She reflects on how Tony is becoming something more than a friend to her. Vanessa also reflects on the last time she saw her father, at Christmas, where he gave Vanessa and Bryan MRE (Meals Ready to Eat), Hershey bars, and bullet casings, because her father's men were also getting the same thing.

In Chapter 46, Conner sleeps in, but Kate wakes him up, telling him that if it wasn't visitation day, he would be dropped down a level. Conner sees his father, who hugs him hesitantly. Conner's mother is also there, who disapproves of his care for his clothing. Conner calls her a bitch, and his mother retorts that even dogs want their puppies to be clean.

In Chapter 47, Tony notices that Vanessa sits by herself, as if she's bottling up pain. Tony remembers how his parents used to fight, and how Tony knew before his father that his mother was cheating on him. The second session with his father is better. Tony is angry at his father because he is wasn't around when Tony needed him; Tony's father wasn't around because he couldn't stomach the guilt.

In Chapter 48, Vanessa's cuts have healed, and she reveals to the reader she managed to take a soda can tab during the scuffle the day before. Dr. Starr, at the meeting with Vanessa's grandmother, asks why Vanessa never revealed she has bipolar disorder, because it is treatable.

Chapter 43-48 Analysis

More of Conner's family life is revealed in the form of a sibling rivalry for the attention of their father, who appears to be less cold and less distant than their mother -but whose affections are still as difficult to attain. This leads the reader to suspect that Conner's only true source of emotion during childhood may have come through his nanny, Leona.

Six weeks have now passed since the beginning of Conner's stay at Aspen Springs. As the time has gone on, Vanessa discovers that she is becoming more and more attracted to Tony, and not just on a friendship level. Just as Vanessa is thinking more and more



about Tony, Tony is thinking more and more about Vanessa. He sees how she bottles up pain, and refuses to sit with others when she eats. This can also be viewed by the reader as a physical manifestation of Vanessa's fear of herself, and of church. But a great beacon of hope appears when Dr. Starr tells Vanessa that her condition is treatable. Vanessa doesn't have to be afraid of it.

Tony's character also grows. His second meeting with his father goes much, much better, leading both father and son to admit they missed having the other around, and to admit that their life decisions were influenced by events beyond their control. For Tony's father, it was his wife cheating on him. For Tony, it was his mother's boyfriend raping him.



Chapter 49-54

Chapter 49-54 Summary

In Chapter 49, Conner's parents remind Dr. Starr that they want Conner to maintain good grades to get a law degree. Likewise, Conner's mother is horrified he'll have to take prescription medication, valuing the family's reputation above Conner's health. They leave a few moments later, and Dr. Starr upgrades Conner to Level Three.

In Chapter 50, Tony's father apologizes for not being around more, and speaks to God, asking for forgiveness. God works through Tony's father, telling him that first he needs to ask Tony for forgiveness. Tony says he'll think about it. Tony says letting a decade of anger go is a really hard test.

In Chapter 51, now that Vanessa's mental condition has been outed by her grandmother, Dr. Starr presses to get everything out in the open, saying that progress cannot be made until everything is open. Vanessa continues to hide the cut on her arm. She must now take Lithium. Back in her room, Paul barges in with the pills while Vanessa is only half-dressed.

In Chapter 52, Conner gets his Level Three supervised trips. He intimates to the reader that he has forgotten what a nag his mother can be. Conner still wants to see and talk to Emily, and wonders if she'll want to see and talk to him.

In Chapter 53, Conner and Tony eat dinner together. They commiserate about the dinner food, spaghetti and meatballs.

In Chapter 54, Vanessa feels raped by Paul's eyes as he hands her the medication. Vanessa then heads to dinner. She begins lightly insulting Dahlia, making the other girls laugh.

Chapter 49-54 Analysis

Whereas Tony's father and Vanessa's grandmother reach out with love, Conner's mother and father maintain their high expectations of Conner, refusing to come down from their positions as perfectionists, and further betraying their narcissism. This is especially apparent when Conner's mother is horrified as to what others will think when they discover Conner is on medication. The three teens are promoted to Level Three, meaning they can now leave Aspen Springs on supervised visits.

Another important milestone in the relationship between Tony and his father is made: Tony's father has spoken with God, and understands that to find God's forgiveness, he must first seek Tony's forgiveness. Tony, during their first meeting, shut his father out. Tony says that he will consider his father's request, implying that he is open to reestablishing a relationship between them.



Chapter 55-60

Chapter 55-60 Summary

In Chapter 55, Conner finds Vanessa's bravery in the face of Dahlia, attractive. Conner questions Tony about his sexuality, wondering if he ever slept with a girl, or if he was born gay. Tony doesn't know, because all of his sexual experience -willing and unwilling- has only ever been with men. Conner finds it nice to know that other people have problems, and some, like Tony, have the biggest.

In Chapter 56, Tony reveals he was in juvenile hall for beating up his mother's boyfriend. Tony is testing the waters to see if he can fully trust Conner.

In Chapter 57, in the bathroom that night, Vanessa overhears Dahlia and Paul in one of the stalls.

In Chapter 58, heading into class, Conner runs his hand over Vanessa's back, who doesn't shy away from the touch. She moves something inside of him, Conner relates. A guest speaker, Ms. Littell is to give a talk about writing poetry. She wants the students to write poems about their happiest memories. Conner begins to write about Emily.

In Chapter 59, Tony finds it amusing that Ms. Littell wants them to write about their happy memories. Tony imagines Vanessa would write about cutting.

In Chapter 60, Vanessa writes about how her happiest memories have yet to be made. When Vanessa begins to think about Conner's hand on her back, she shakes and drops her pencil. Vanessa rushes to the bathroom and gets sick.

Chapter 55-60 Analysis

The sexual attraction between Vanessa and Conner persists, as does the emotional connection between Tony and Vanessa. Taken together, Conner and Tony present a complete man and the completion of what the reader believes Vanessa needs.

Whereas the characters express difficulty in articulating their words through verbal communication, they find it much easier to relate their thoughts through the written word. This is the case during Ms. Littell's poetry exercise, when she encourages them to write about their happiest memories in verse. Vanessa's poem is absolutely beautiful, and expresses to the reader that Vanessa, who appears hopeless, nevertheless is actually hopeful. She is hopeful of better and happier memories that have still yet to be made, meaning she holds out real hope for her future. This is a significant breakthrough for her character's development, though she doesn't yet realize it or recognize it.



Chapter 61-66, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 61-66, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 61, Ms. Littell reads Vanessa's poem while she is gone, and the poem is beautiful. Conner wonders why Vanessa got sick, Ms. Littell then makes Conner read his poem aloud, about Emily.

In Chapter 62, Tony applauds Conner's poem. Tony reads his poem next at Mr. Hidalgo's insistence. Tony writes about hope. Tony did not write about Phillip because he considers it a private memory.

In Chapter 63, Kate finds Vanessa in the bathroom, and is genuinely concerned. The nausea was a side-effect of the lithium, and Vanessa wants to quit using it. Kate says they will readjust the dosage until her body adjusts to the lithium.

In Chapter 64, Dr. Starr finds it hard to believe Conner does not want to go home for Easter. She says Conner's parents must forgive themselves, but Conner finds it a joke. Conner blames his father for his strive for perfection,

In Chapter 65, Tony and Conner do not go home for Easter, though most of Aspen Springs is empty. Carmella, one of the staff, comes to sit down with Tony and Conner to watch television. She is twenty-three and has been given permission to take them out the next day. They consider going out to see a movie the following day.

In Chapter 66, Vanessa feels like she is at home with her grandmother. Bryan is excited that she is home. Bryan also inadvertently stops Vanessa from cutting herself more than once, by begging her to dye Easter eggs with him. She sees how normal everything is in the kitchen -her grandmother washing eggs, Bryan beginning to work on them -and she is determined to fit back in.

Chapter 61-66, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

Vanessa's poetry demonstrates her hope for a better future. Tony writes about hope being a happy memory, which reveals to the reader that Tony, like Vanessa, is not a foregone conclusion in terms of hopelessness. That there is hope residing within Tony and Vanessa also evidences the understanding that there is a possibility of change, as well. The reflective essay of writing poetry also brings out Conner's happiest memory, which is being with Emily.

This activity of self-reflection also steels the resolve in each of the teens in different ways. Reflecting on Emily, and then out of necessity, his home life, compels Conner to remain at Aspen Springs through Easter. Being away from his parents is as relieving and comforting as it is agonizing, because Conner knows his mother lacks affection. Tony, who is not yet sure of returning to a relationship with his father, nevertheless



remains at Aspen Springs, needing more time to think and understand things. Vanessa returns home, is happy to be with her grandmother and her brother, and wants to be able to fit back in, and be normal.

Interestingly enough, the assertions by Conner and Tony, that their stays at Aspen Springs are nothing more than games, have disappeared. Their antagonism toward others is disappearing, as they learn to trust not just their fellow teens, but also the people working at Aspen Springs. Dr. Starr and Dr. Boston are genuinely concerned with helping them, and not just simply carrying out a job. This is especially important that the teens begin to learn how to trust, and want to change certain things about themselves. Tony is leaning towards wanting his father back; Vanessa wants to return to normalcy at home; and Conner wants his parents to love him.



Chapter 67-72, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 67-72, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 67, Dr. Heather Boston is also accompanying the movie outing with Carmella and Tony. Conner and Tony must sign papers, saying they are aware of their rights and if they cause the slightest offense, their privileges will be suspended. Dahlia also goes along. At the theater, Conner runs into his ex-girlfriend, Kendra, whom he ditched for Emily.

In Chapter 68, Tony sees something is bothering Conner, and so does Dr. Boston, who moves her knee over so that it touches Conner's. Conner later explains to Tony and Dahlia who Kendra is.

In Chapter 69, Vanessa and Bryan's father is home for Easter. That night, Vanessa hears her father apologize to her grandmother for leaving her with everything while he was away fighting.

In Chapter 70, Conner, Tony, Carmella, and Dr. Boston get McDonald's on the way back to Aspen Springs. Conner is reflective on the way home, believing he'll always live in the shadow of his parents, and that no one will ever truly love him.

In Chapter 71, Tony finds Conner in the bathroom Easter morning, getting ready for the day. Carmella, Paul, Tony, Conner, and Dahlia go to church. But it is the church that Conner's family attends.

In Chapter 72, Vanessa's father takes her into his confidence, telling her that he can't lose her the way he lost her mother, and that Vanessa will be a fine woman. Vanessa is moved, because it is a side of her father she rarely sees. Vanessa, her father, Bryan, and Vanessa's grandmother go visit their mother. Thinking about her mother makes Vanessa want to cut herself because of guilt.

Chapter 67-72, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

While they are out, Conner's past comes back to haunt him in the form of his ex-girlfriend, Kendra, whom Conner left for Emily. Vanessa's father returns home, bringing up more memories of the past, but her father's attitude has changed considerably. Whereas beforehand he was a caring, but traditional father more emotionally removed from the family, he is now kinder and is reaching out more to his family. This begins with Vanessa's father apologizing for leaving Vanessa's grandmother with so much to handle. Indeed, a genuine display of affection between father and daughter occurs, with Vanessa's father telling her that he can't lose her the way he lost her mother. This reinforces in Vanessa's mind that she does have the love and support of her family, something that Conner does not have.



Tony's aversion to church except as a useful social obligation continues, up until he finds that everyone wants to attend the same church that his parents and sister are present at. This deters Conner, who suddenly feels overwhelmed. Indeed, in a rare moment of self-honesty, Conner admits to himself -and to the reader- that he doesn't believe anyone will ever love him. This is a heart-wrenching confession, one which the reader hopes will not be true.



Chapter 73-78, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 73-78, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 73, as the snow melts and the weather warms, Conner begins running outside. Tony runs with him. Tony has gone to visit his father, a requirement for wilderness camp. The visit went well enough, and Conner dreads going home to his parents. Tony asks about Conner's political affiliation, and Conner decides he's a Democrat. Tony applauds him.

In Chapter 74, though his father did his best to make him feel welcome, Tony recalls feeling as if he was alone in Tahoe. At group therapy, Dr. Starr asks the kids what they will do when they leave Aspen Springs. Stanley says he will find a girl, and exposes himself. Everyone is shocked. Vanessa steps between Stanley and Dr. Starr, and Stanley threatens to take out Vanessa. Then Conner positions himself between Vanessa and Stanley, as Tony approaches to help.

In Chapter 75, Conner takes out Stanley. Paul and Kate arrive to bring Stanley to isolation, and to call juvenile hall. Dr. Starr asks to talk to Conner, and Vanessa lingers. The heroic actions of Conner makes Vanessa sexually fantasize about him. Dr. Starr thanks Conner, and Vanessa is further attracted to Conner.

In Chapter 76, Dr. Starr says Conner is strong enough to go home for a weekend. Conner brushes up against Vanessa, realizing she has the same things in mind as he does. Conner also notices a slightly jealous look from Tony.

In Chapter 77, three days later, Stanley -at the financial insistence of his parents -returns. Six kids are now eligible for the wilderness challenge: Tony, Vanessa, Conner, Dahlia, Justin, and Lori. Tony seeks out Vanessa to sit with her, and kisses her hand lightly. She is slightly confused, but smiles. Tony confesses he hopes his lifestyle will change when he gets out of Aspen.

In Chapter 78, Vanessa tells Tony she loves him, and he says he loves her. She knows there is some sort of attraction between them. She asks Tony to tell her about Phillip. Tony tells her, and then he and Vanessa talk about Conner, about how he is difficult to read. Vanessa notices as well that she and Tony have been holding hands the entire time. They both talk about there being a place both of them can be, where they belong.

Chapter 73-78, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

Tony's father continues trying to build a relationship with his son, and Tony at last consents to a weekend visit, which goes well enough, but doesn't cure Tony of his loneliness. Nevertheless, progress is being made, and change is finally, truly possible. Yet the affection missing in Tony's life and Conner's life can be found in their willingness to defend one another, including Vanessa. Vanessa has also come to understand that



the staff at Aspen Springs are genuinely seeking to help them, and so through this understanding and respect, she puts herself between Dr. Starr and Stanley. Conner and Tony both make their way to put themselves between Stanley and Vanessa, and between Stanley and Dr. Starr.

Tony and Vanessa continue to grow closer as the two of them, as well as Conner, become eligible for the wilderness challenge. The wilderness challenge is the final step before being released from the Aspen Springs recovery program.

What is more, Tony and Vanessa say they love one another, leading the reader to begin to wonder if something beyond friendship is at work between the two of them. Conner also notices that there is something in Tony's face that betrays feelings greater than friendship for Vanessa. Conner, for his efforts to defend Vanessa and Dr. Starr, is finally told he must head home for the weekend.



Chapter 79-84, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 79-84, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 79, Conner goes home for the weekend, and reflects on his house being more like a hotel than a home. His mother lays down regulations, from no cell phone use to banning his medications. Conner discovers that Emily has moved out of the neighborhood at the insistence of Conner's parents. Conner is infuriated, and sad.

In Chapter 80, orientation for the wilderness challenge commences. Sean, a camp counselor, explains that water will be limited, food will be in MRE packages, and they'll stink before the week is over. Raven, another counselor, is the strongest woman Tony has ever seen. Raven explains that everything physical, from hunger to thirst, originates in the brain as something mental. Sean and Raven leave behind some manuals and school work about the coming challenge.

In Chapter 81, Vanessa finally speaks to Dr. Starr about her mother. Vanessa reveals that her mother's disorder was not identified until years after the fact, when Bryan was in kindergarten.

In Chapter 82, the following day, Conner and the others will head to Black Rock Desert for the camp. Dr. Boston worries that Conner will play the hero, even in dire circumstances. She worries how he'll be when he leaves for good. They talk about Conner's childhood, and Leona sexually assaulting him. Dr. Boston explains that the need for warmth and love can blur the line between affection and perversion.

In Chapter 83, Tony flirts with Vanessa on the way to the camp, while Conner appears distant and cold, staring out through the window of the van. Raven talks about how the challenge will teach them respect for the land, and for themselves.

In Chapter 84, Raven, Sean, Conner, and Vanessa stop for lunch, in the last town before the desert. Vanessa eats every crumb of her burger and fries, as Raven and Sean explain they will have to catch what they want to eat, such as fish. Vanessa tries to get Conner to talk about the weekend, but he doesn't want to. He seems much different than he did -no long self-assured and confident. Vanessa wants to kiss him, but can't because of everyone in the van sitting around them. Vanessa instead tells him that she feels strongly for him.

Chapter 79-84, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

Conner's visit home changes nothing. His parents carry on as if nothing has happened. Indeed, they look at what Conner has been through as more of an annoyance and social stigma than anything else. Conner's mother also bans him from taking medications, considering it more of a social stigma. He also discovers that his parents forced Emily to move away.



Tony, Vanessa, and Conner also prepare for the wilderness challenge, meeting Sean and Raven, who will be their counselors at the camp at Black Rock Desert. Before Conner leaves for camp, Dr. Boston confronts Conner about his childhood, and the fact that Leona had sexually assaulted him. Conner is shaken by this, for he had always believed what he had done with Leona was really about love. Dr. Boston explains to him that the intense need to feel love can blur affection and perversion.

As they head to wilderness camp, Vanessa takes Conner into his confidence, telling him that she truly does feel strongly for him. But Conner -between his visit home and the sexual revelation with respect to Leona -is inconsolable.



Chapter 85-90, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 85-90, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 85, Conner doesn't know if he is ready to go home. That his parents made Emily move demonstrates the incredible control they have. Raven explains that to use the bathroom in the wilderness means burying it, so mountain lions don't detect the scent.

In Chapter 86, Tony and the others make camp for the night. Raven shows them how to build shelter, gives them sleeping bags, and just enough clothing for the next three weeks. Everyone gathers around the fire for a light dinner, except Conner, who remains by himself.

In Chapter 87, except for medication, no vices or bad habits are permitted. Vanessa looks at the stars and how beautiful the landscape is. Raven and Sean explain that they are there to help the kids, but that they will have to rely on each other and teamwork.

In Chapter 88, Conner decides he wants to cleanse his system of his medications to prove he can do it on his own. Conner realizes his attempts to please all the women in his life were because he never had affection from his mother.

In Chapter 89, after breakfast, Raven and Sean hand out wilderness supplies, and assign partners. Raven and Lori team up, Vanessa and Dahlia team up, and Conner and Tony team up. Justin and Sean also team up. Tony is worried about Conner flushing the meds out of his system.

In Chapter 90, Vanessa and Dahlia talk about Vanessa's grandmother, who is very physically fit and enjoys hiking. The goal for the day is ten miles by nightfall.

Chapter 85-90, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

Wilderness camp begins and already, the teenagers have evolved in profound ways. Conner, who has heretofore been seeking the affections of his mother, has come around to decide that he's not sure if he's ready to go home. His ambivalence about home -and the things, like love, that home traditionally means -demonstrates the morphological changes in his thought pattern and his emotions -a despondency. This despondency will have serious effects on Conner in later chapters.

Conner also is determined to rid his system of medications, not because his mother hates him for it, but because he wants to prove to himself that he can do it. By setting a goal for himself, and by fulfilling that goal, demonstrates that Conner is seeking some sort of approval, some sort of accomplishment, beginning with the self.



Chapter 91-96, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 91-96, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 91, Conner relates to the reader they have now been hiking uphill for three days. Conner has had difficulty sleeping, but is still managing to keep up. Conner reveals, during a conversation about man and God, that he is afraid of truth.

In Chapter 92, Tony learns how to start a fire using flint and steel, and feels accomplished. Vanessa congratulates him, and Tony puts his arm around her waist, telling her he doesn't want to lose her. Tony is surprised at how much light Vanessa has brought into his life. Dahlia's discovery of a blister on her foot brings Raven and Vanessa to her side, and Tony begins thinking he wants to make love to Vanessa. Tony explains this to Conner, who tells him that he should be with Vanessa, to see if it answers his questions about his sexuality.

In Chapter 93, Vanessa believes she is in love with Tony. Vanessa also reflects on how she hasn't considered cutting herself except once or twice in all the time during the camp. Sean announces then that they will be crossing a gorge on a rope bridge.

In Chapter 94, Conner and the others hike toward the gorge, seeing wild horses along the way. Sean demonstrates how to cross a rope bridge, which consists of one rope for feet and two ropes for hands. Conner, who becomes dizzy, crosses the rope bridge, and then the others make it across successfully.

In Chapter 95, Tony asks Conner if he's okay. Conner says he became dizzy, and Tony attributes it to a lack of sleep. Conner explains that he is sticking to his anti-meds plan, though it might not have been the best time during camp to stick to it. They make it to the gorge, and to another bridge.

In Chapter 96, Lori volunteers to cross first. One by one, they cross successfully. Tony kisses Vanessa before she crosses.

Chapter 91-96, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

As the teens work through wilderness camp, they accomplish things individually and together, creating a sense of trust between them, and creating a sense of community between them. This can be seen in the way in which the teens are opening emotionally to one another, with each step forward they make in the process. This can be compared with the physical camp activities, from learning how to climb and start fires. Each of these critical elemental tasks is metaphorical to the critical, elemental tasks of trust and companionship between the teens.

Yet as the others draw closer together, Conner seems to be distancing himself from everyone. The absence of the medication in his system, his lack of sleep, and his



emotional distress between facing reality and being at Aspen Springs is wreaking havoc with his physical capabilities. Conner, who once appeared to be the calmest and most confident of the the three teens, now appears to be the weakest and the most vulnerable.

As Conner struggles with his own inner demons, Tony and Vanessa kiss for the first time, making both of them feel alive. They have crossed the line between friendship and something much more. Tony is amazed at how much Vanessa has come to mean to him, and he wonders whether or not he is gay at all. Conner urges Tony to explore his feelings for Vanessa.



Chapter 97-102

Chapter 97-102 Summary

In Chapter 97, Conner relates how everyone feels accomplished for crossing the rope bridge. Conner at last begins talking with Tony and Vanessa. Conner gets Tony to talk about Phillip, and about how they met. Tony explains they met in the park after Tony had run away from home. Phillip became a gay father figure to Tony.

In Chapter 98, Tony explains to the reader that most people think he's totally gay, so the fact that he didn't sleep with Phillip isn't necessarily expected. Tony also reflects on the idea that unwanted homosexual contact can influence a person later on in his or her life. Vanessa tells Tony she loves him, regardless as to whether he is gay or bisexual or straight, and it makes Tony feel alive. Vanessa says she won't know what real love is until she makes love to Tony.

In Chapter 99, Vanessa is surprised by her boldness, especially in front of Conner. Vanessa also says she believes that only love can make her stop cutting, and Tony desperately wants her to stop. Conner then talks about his love affair with Emily.

In Chapter 100, Conner explains that what Tony doesn't understand is that love is like oil and water to Conner. Conner has learned that sex and love are not the same thing. Vanessa confesses to Tony and Conner that she became pregnant by Trevor, thinking it would grow their love -but Trevor forced her to have an abortion. She begins crying, and Tony wraps her up in his arms. Conner confesses that the contact between himself and Leona was something he lived for, until he found out she had a real boyfriend, and threatened to tell his parents, but he told her boyfriend instead. Leona then drove into a brick wall.

In Chapter 101, Tony at last confesses to Conner and Vanessa that he didn't just beat up Larry, but actually shot him in the face, and killed him. As the call to go to sleep comes, Vanessa tells Tony she still loves him. Conner tells Tony that he doesn't think Tony is gay at all. As Tony goes to sleep, he prays and talks to Phillip, telling Phillip he would like Vanessa.

In Chapter 102, even lithium doesn't help Vanessa's depression, brought on by thoughts of the baby. She thinks about Conner and the psychological damage Leona may have done to him; and the damage done to Tony. Yet Vanessa resists the urge to cut herself. The next day, they learn how to rappel.

Chapter 97-102 Analysis

Trust has come full circle between Tony, Vanessa, and Conner. The three of them -now friends- confide the darkest parts of their lives to one another. Phillip wasn't a sexual friend to Tony, but a father figure. Vanessa has had an abortion. Conner's outing of

Leona leads to her taking her own life by crashing into a brick wall. Tony also reveals that he shot Larry, which is why he went through jail.

The shocking confessions do not turn the friends away from each other, but actually draw them in closer to one another. But despite this, Conner is still distancing himself to a degree because of his emotional state, and severe self-doubt. The confidence that Conner began the program with has disappeared. False confidence or not, the real confidence meant to come from the Aspen Springs program has not materialized, and the reader is beginning to wonder if Conner will gain some form of real confidence, or not.



Chapter 103-108, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 103-108, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 103, both Conner and Tony rappel. Conner wonders why he rebels against love. Tony also speaks about Vanessa, calling her "my girl". They then head to a new campsite, where Raven and Sean hand out letters from their parents.

In Chapter 104, Tony recalls that the only letters he ever received were from the state of Nevada. Vanessa and Tony sit beside one another to read their letters. The earthy smell of Vanessa turns Tony on, who reflects that has never really, truly been turned on by anyone. Tony's father begins his letter by asking him about forgiveness. His father tells him he is proud of him after everything he's been through. Furthermore, Tony's father wants him in his life, and wants the chance for Tony to get to love him.

In Chapter 105, Vanessa thinks her letter will be from her grandmother, but it is from Vanessa's father. Vanessa's father explains that her mother will likely be in a catatonic state for the rest of her life, and that he wants a better future with his family. His request for a stateside transfer has been granted, and he will be home for good. He looks forward to her coming home, and asks if she will show him around Black Rock one day. Tony and Vanessa hold hands and kiss each other, full of longing, love, and desire.

In Chapter 106, Conner's letter contains no affection at all. His mother compares him to his sister, who has been accepted to Stanford, and tells Conner he must double his efforts to graduate on time. Conner wants to feel love, but knows nothing will change when he goes home. Nothing in his life will change, the way it has in Vanessa's life and Tony's life. Conner folds the letter into a paper airplane, and throws it away.

In Chapter 107, Tony says Vanessa is the most incredible person he's ever known. Tony notices how everyone's mood has improved the following morning, except Conner. The following day, they will be rappelling into, and climbing out of, a cave. So they need to continue practicing.

In Chapter 108, Vanessa comes to discover she loves the thrills that come with adventuring outdoors. And it is a thrill unlike those she experiences cutting. She feels completely grounded. She and Tony also make plans to keep seeing each other after Aspen Springs.

Chapter 103-108, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

Two pivotal events occur between Chapter 103 and 108. The first is that the teens receive letters from home. In each instance, the teens -the main characters Tony and Vanessa, and the others- receive letters of hope, love, family, and the promise of a better future together. Conner's letter contains no such promises, and no such affection from his mother. She compares Conner to his sister, tells him she expects him to do



better, and tells him that he has a reputation to uphold. This cripples Conner, who reels from the loss. He turns the letter into a paper airplane and throws it away.

The second pivotal event is that Tony discovers he is truly not gay at all. His relationship with Vanessa begins, and the two of them agree to keep seeing each other after they get out of Aspen Springs. Both of them stand upon the precipice of new, happier lives. Both of them feel changed and more accomplished, and both of them realize how important they are to each other.

This, coupled with the fact that Tony is indeed going to build a relationship with his father, and that Vanessa's own father will return home to take care of her and her family, is important because both teens will now have a firm family foundation from which to launch their lives in the future.



Chapter 109 - 111, Conner to Vanessa

Chapter 109 - 111, Conner to Vanessa Summary

In Chapter 109, Conner begins his practice climb. As he climbs, he imagines his parents constantly berating him for not being good enough, for always being less than perfect. When Conner makes it to the top, he steps back off.

In Chapter 110, both Raven and Sean rush to save Conner, but he is already dead. Tony prays that God accepts him into Heaven, despite suicide. Tony and Vanessa console one another. Vanessa tells Tony that it was not his fault, but that Conner opened up to him. Tony thinks he should have made sure Conner took his meds, wondering if that was the cause of suicide. Tony says he will remember it for the rest of his life.

In Chapter 111, Vanessa realizes love is about connection. She and Tony wonder if Conner's parents will miss him. Vanessa tells Tony that part of her would die if she ever loses him. She and Tony wonder why he would kill himself. Then the wind blows a small paper airplane near them, which Vanessa goes to retrieve.

Chapter 109 - 111, Conner to Vanessa Analysis

Despite everything positive that has happened to Tony, Vanessa, and the others, Conner never finds the same happiness. The letter he receives is, in a respect, the last straw. Hoping for a sliver of affection in the letter, Conner is totally let down and finally does commit suicide. Tony blames himself, but just as Tony has been there for Vanessa, Vanessa comes through to console Tony. Despite the trust between them, Conner never revealed to Vanessa and Tony just why Conner was so cold and distant, seeking love, but believing he would never find it. Whereas Tony and Vanessa have second chances at life, Conner has refused -rightly or wrongly- to take his second chance.



Characters

Tony Anthony Cekarrelli III

Tony Cekarrelli is a patient at Aspen Springs psychiatric hospital, having been committed there after attempting suicide by ingesting an overdose of Valium. Tony is presented initially as gay and street-smart. Yet through his interactions and the blossoming friendship with Vanessa and Conner, Tony is able to trust and speak about his life and comes full circle by the end of the novel.

When Tony is younger, he discovers his mother is having an affair and his father leaves soon after. Tony's mother goes on to use sex as a commodity, and her boyfriend, Larry, rapes Tony. For eight years, Tony is without a real father figure. In response, Tony shoots and kills Larry, after which time he is imprisoned. In prison, Tony takes after his mother's example, trading sexual favors to get by.

When Tony is released from prison, he is protected and supported by Phillip, a former professor who is gay. Phillip becomes a father figure to Tony, and introduces Tony to God and to religion. From Phillip, Tony takes great comfort and happiness in God and religion. Phillip, who has AIDS, dies two years later. In distress, Tony attempts suicide by overdosing on Valium, but after he passes out, throws up. He is found by a police officer, who sends him to the hospital.

Tony's father resurfaces in his life and pays for Tony to begin therapy at Aspen Springs. Tony begins meeting with his father, ultimately agreeing to build a relationship with him. At the same time, Tony falls in love with Vanessa, discovering that he is actually not gay at all. He also befriends Conner, and tries to help Conner, who ends up committing suicide during the wilderness challenge. Tony says he will remember it for the rest of his life. He also agrees to continue seeing Vanessa once they leave the challenge.

Conner Aaron Sykes

Conner Aaron Sykes is a patient at the Aspen Springs psychiatric hospital, having been committed by his parents after attempting suicide. He is handsome, well-groomed, and wears good clothing. He comes from a well-to-do family, and he enjoys his upper social status in school. Conner is selfish, narcissistic, and overconfident when he begins his time at Aspen Springs.

There, he meets Tony and Vanessa, and finds himself sexually attracted to Vanessa. Conner begins his treatment believing he is in control, and can manipulate anyone and everything around him, just like he had in school. But as time goes on, Conner begins to break down. His attempt at suicide by shooting himself in the heart comes following his break up with Emily, a teacher twice his age.



It is also revealed through the course of the book that Conner had suffered sexual abuse as a child, being molested by his nanny, Leona. It is further demonstrated that Conner's desire for sexual activity with older women is to compensate for the lack of genuine emotional affection at the hands of his mother. Indeed, both of Conner's parents are cold, calculating, and distant. Throughout the course of the program, Conner maintains his own coldness and distance, and never fully comes around to trust anyone else. Indeed, Conner wonders if he will ever be loved genuinely. He also commits to clearing his system of medications, to prove to himself he doesn't need them.

During wilderness camp, the teens receive supportive letters from their parents. Conner's letter contains no affection. Between his detox, his emotional instability, and his sadness, Conner commits suicide by jumping off a cliff.

Vanessa Angela O'Reilly

Vanessa is a seventeen year-old patient at Aspen Springs after having attempted suicide by cutting her wrists. Vanessa has bipolar disorder, and her family life is difficult. She and her brother, Bryan, live with their grandmother. Their father is an Army Ranger, fighting over in Afghanistan. Their mother is a schizophrenic.

Vanessa is terrified of church, and terrified of her mother, who sees people she says are angels. Having found her mother overdosed, Vanessa refuses to call the authorities, seeing her mother at peace in a comatose state. Her mother will remain that way for the rest of her life.

Vanessa is desperately seeking love. She dated a boy named Trevor prior to the book, who only told her he loved her to sleep with her. Hoping to get closer to him, she became pregnant by him, after which time, Trevor told her to have an abortion and broke up with her. This pushes her over the edge to commit suicide by cutting.

Through Aspen Springs, Vanessa meets Tony and Conner, opens up to them, and begins to build confidence in herself and her relations. She discovers that bipolar disorder can be treated, and therefore, does not have to be afraid of herself. She also falls in love with Tony, who discovers he is not gay. Tony and Vanessa accept one another, all of their faults included. A letter from Vanessa's father further strengthens her resolve to find happiness, telling her he loves her and he will be home soon for good.

After Aspen Springs, Tony and Vanessa agree to keep seeing one another.

Conner's Mother

Conner's mother is a cold, calculating, and distant person. She is a perfectionist and demands nothing less than perfection from her son. Irreligious, Conner's mother considers church more of a social function than a voluntary religious participation. Though she saves her son's life, Conner's mother views the suicide episode as an



embarrassment, and Conner's medication as a social stigma. Her letter to Conner at the end of the novel reinforces her high expectations of her son, revealing no emotion whatsoever.

Tony's Father

Tony's father has been absent from his life for ten years. Tony's father, discovering that his son is suicidal, pays for him to go to Aspen Springs, where he begins to build a relationship with his son once more.

Tony's father had walked out on Tony and his mother when he discovered Tony's mother was having an affair. He now wants to bring his son back into his life, seeking his son's forgiveness, and God's forgiveness in the process.

Vanessa's Father

Vanessa's father is an Army Ranger, who politically is conservative, and paternally is a traditional, strict father. Yet, there is a warm and caring side to him. He supports Vanessa and cares for her, telling her he is sorry for being gone for so long, and that he will do everything in his power to help her. He even requests a stateside transfer so he can take care of his family once more.

Because Vanessa's mother was bipolar, her parents had a troublesome relationship. Vanessa fears that her relationship with her father might be the same, but her father is convinced he will not lose Vanessa the way he lost her mother.

Vanessa's Grandmother

Vanessa's grandmother is a kind, sweet woman, who works as a nurse. When she discovers Vanessa has attempted suicide, she calmly takes charge, wraps her wrist, and calls an ambulance. Vanessa's grandmother also continues to love, care for, and support Vanessa through her stay in Aspen Springs.

Bryan

Bryan is Vanessa's eight year-old brother who discovered her suicide attempt, and alerted their grandmother. When Vanessa comes home for Easter, just as she is about to cut up her arms, Bryan interrupts her, stopping her, to get her to decorate Easter eggs.

Dr. Starr

Dr. Starr, referred to as "the bulldog," is a resident doctor at Aspen Springs psychiatric hospital. She challenges her patients, yet she also cares for them by helping them to work through their toughest issues.

Dr. Boston

Dr. Boston is an attractive thirty-something doctor at Aspen Springs psychiatric hospital, and has caught the eye of Conner. Among the patients she helps, she explains to Conner that the desire for love can blur the line between affection and perversion.



Objects/Places

Aspen Springs

Aspen Springs is a psychiatric hospital located twenty miles away from Tahoe in Nevada. It is where the majority of the novel "Impulse" occurs, and where Tony, Vanessa, and Conner begin to get their lives back on track.

Perimeter Track

The perimeter track extends around Aspen Springs psychiatric hospital. It is used by Conner and Tony to go running in the spring when the snow melts.

Dining Room

The dining room is where Tony, Vanessa, and Conner begin to socialize and eat their meals. It becomes something of a common ground between the three of them.

Redwood Room

The Redwood Room is located at Aspen Springs psychiatric hospital. It is the room in which Conner stays.

Black Rock Desert

Black Rock Desert is a beautiful desert landscape where Aspen Springs has a wilderness camp program, the final stage before patients are released. It is where Tony and Vanessa declare their love for one another, and where Conner commits suicide.

Paper Clip

A paper clip is what Vanessa steals in order to cut herself.

Razor Blade

A razor blade is what Vanessa uses to cut herself at home, and what she attempts to use to commit suicide.



Wilderness Camp Guides

Wilderness camp guides are given to Tony, Vanessa, and Conner by counselors Sean and Raven. The guides are meant to be studied in preparation for wilderness camp.

Poem

Poems are what Ms. Littell has the patients at Aspen Springs write, focusing on their happiest memories. These poems get each of the characters to reflect and open up about themselves.

Letters

Letters from parents and family members are what are given to the teens who are going through wilderness camp. The letters are meant to be supportive, encouraging, and full of affection. Yet the letter Conner receives is not, propelling him to ultimately commit suicide.



Themes

Friendship

Friendship is a major and dominant theme in the novel "Impulse" by Ellen Hopkins. The idea of friendship touches upon every single aspect of the lives of the three main characters in the novel, each in different ways. Friendship proves to be the launching ground for each of the characters to attempt to rebuild their lives.

Conner arrives at Aspen Springs believing he is in control and that he will manipulate people and events around him as needed so he can get out of Aspen Springs as fast as possible. He meets Tony and Vanessa and is attracted to each of them in different ways. Vanessa is sexually appealing, Tony is friendly and caring. Through the course of the next several weeks, Conner lets down most of his defenses, reaching out to confide in Tony and Vanessa about the dark parts of his past. In turn, he steps up to defend Vanessa against Stanley, proving to be something of a hero. Yet, for all of his trust in Tony and Vanessa, he will not open up completely, which in turn helps lead to his suicide.

Tony, whom Vanessa describes as street-smart, is cautious about making friends, but not closed to the idea. He is worried his homosexuality will deter most people, but it does not. He becomes friends with Conner and Vanessa. Over time, Tony comes to fall in love with Vanessa, and views Conner as something of a best friend. This allows Tony to find acceptance and confide in others.

Vanessa arrives at Aspen Springs as a sweet, kind, compassionate, yet troubled girl. She is seventeen and is looking for normalcy. She insists her best memories have yet to be made. She meets Tony and Conner, and finds both of them attractive to her, each for different reasons. Tony at first proves to be an object of emotional support, while Conner is viewed sexually. Slowly, the friendship between Vanessa and Tony transforms into romance. Her friendship with, and trust in, Conner and Tony, allows her to finally open up her heart to them to tell them about the things in her past that she has told no one else.

Family

Family is a dominant undercurrent in the novel "Impulse" by Ellen Hopkins. The understanding of family, what it means, and how it affects each of the characters differs to various degrees.

For Conner, family is a platonic, hellish thing. Conner's parents are perfectionists, and Conner's sister Cara is competitive. Conner's parents have exceptionally high expectations for their children, especially Conner, whom they want to go to law school. Conner's mother is the core of Conner's own emotional instability, for he desires genuine love which he has never been able to find. Indeed, Conner's mother views his



suicide attempt as an annoyance, and Conner's need for medication a social stigma. When it comes time to offer emotional support through written letters at wilderness camp, Conner's mother's letter has none at all. For Conner, his family proves to be a prison rather than a launching ground for his life.

Tony's own familial experience is one of strife. Tony's mother, cheating on his father, causes his father to leave. Following his mother's example, Tony uses sexual favors to get by in prison. He is taken in by a gay ex-professor named Phillip who becomes a surrogate father figure for Tony, introducing Tony to the wonders of God and religion. When Phillip dies, Tony attempts suicide and goes to Aspen Hills, which is paid for by Tony's real father. Over the course of the novel, Tony begins growing a relationship with his real father once more. His father tells Tony he is proud of him, and will be there for him for the rest of his life. This, coupled with Tony's relationship with Vanessa, makes him feel as though he will have a good life.

Vanessa's familial life is one of dual strife and love. Vanessa misses the influence of her father, who is away fighting terrorists; yet, her grandmother steps in to care for Vanessa and her little brother, Bryan. When Vanessa's mother overdoses and becomes comatose, Vanessa is fraught with guilt and horror. Coupled with her breakup with Trevor, Vanessa attempts suicide, but her little brother Bryan discovers her, alerts their grandmother, and the two together save Vanessa's life. Vanessa's grandmother continues to visit Vanessa at Aspen Springs, giving Vanessa love and support. Vanessa's father also does the same. Usually strict and firm, Vanessa's father insists he can't lose Vanessa like he lost her mother, and will do everything in his power to make her happy.

Personal Growth

Personal growth is a major theme in the novel "Impulse" by Ellen Hopkins. It touches the lives of all of the teens who pass through Aspen Springs to some degree. Personal growth is a timeless theme of character evolution, and usually entails a character proceeding from a low, dark point, to a place of hope, light, and personal success and assurance. Likewise, a character's values, morals, attitudes, and beliefs change and grow stronger and better.

Tony is the greatest example of personal growth in the novel. He is introduced as a character without a family, believing himself to be homosexual, and without real friends. His only real comforts come from God and religion. Yet, by the end of the novel, Tony discovers that he is in fact not gay, for he begins dating Vanessa. He also finds that forgiveness is important, and necessary if one is to live one's life. In understanding the importance of forgiveness, Tony is able to begin a new relationship with his father. He is also able to find peace with himself, and begins to truly respect himself.

Vanessa is also privy to personal growth in the novel. Her desire to rely on cutting herself for happiness is supplanted by her friendship with, and later love for Tony. Her



proclivity for cutting is likewise eclipsed by a renewed and improved relationship with her family, especially her father.

If there is one character who does not completely grow personally, it is Conner. Though Conner arrives at Aspen Springs, a narcissist and overconfident, by the end of the novel, he has been broken down. He is able to admit he is looking for genuine love, and is worried that he may never find it. Indeed, he never does. While he does grow personally, he does not grow personally enough -nor does he grow strong enough- to be able to deal with his loveless family and his mother's expectations of perfection. This in turn causes Conner to actually commit suicide in the end.

Style

Point of View

Ellen Hopkins tells her novel "Impulse" in the first-person perspective, narrated by each of her three main protagonists, Tony, Vanessa, and Conner. This is done because the themes and subject of the novel are vastly personal, and the best way to tell the story Hopkins tells is to let the character tell it themselves. This enables the reader to not only establish personal connections with the characters, but to also understand the evolution of their thought patterns and how the characters grow and change. Furthermore, in a novel where the characters do not always reveal their innermost secrets to one another, the reader is still privy to these secrets, as well as to the motivations and understandings of the characters.

Setting

The setting of the novel is cold, blustery country near Tahoe, at Aspen Springs psychiatric hospital. This works very well as the setting of the novel, for the passage of time is marked not just in the words and deeds of the characters, but in the seasons changing. As winter turns to spring and the snow melts, so too do the defenses of the characters, who begin to warm up to one another. Nearby Black Rock Desert, which is the setting for the wilderness camp, also serves the novel well, for it proves to be a metaphor for challenge. Each activity at camp is physically metaphorical for the emotional challenges that the characters undergo. Just as they struggle to trust one another, they struggle to cross bridges and climb up caves.

Language and Meaning

Ellen Hopkins tells her novel "Impulse" in language that is usually simple and straightforward. This is done because the main characters are teenagers, and the novel is told from their perspective. The simple language makes the story more believable. In Vanessa's case, the language used is more poetic and romantic, because Vanessa is sweet and thinks about things on a deeper and more personal level than the other characters do. This also allows the reader to easily switch between narrators without any disruptions in language.

Structure

Ellen Hopkins divides her novel "Impulse" into 111 chapters. Each chapter is told by one of the three main protagonists and the events portrayed are chronological, though characters recall memories from time to time. This allows the story to move faster without dragging the reader down to one character.



Quotes

"Play the game, I instruct myself, give a little taste of what she wants to hear" (Conner, p. 45).

"One cut or more? That's the first thought to grab hold of my brain and give it a rattle. Was this charming little thing into self-mutilation, or shopping for a coffin" (Tony, p. 67).

"Those days, her hugs and kisses were warm as summer rain, washing away the hurt. The hurt was sure to fall again. We just couldn't guess exactly when" (Vanessa, p. 92).

"Players are easily played by better players, someone, for instance, of Conner's caliber" (Tony, p. 175).

"Just another day, trying to keep my head above water -the azure water I'm sliding down into now" (Vanessa, p. 269).

"See, I asked the man upstairs for forgiveness. He told me I had to ask you first. Forgive me, son, for not being a better father to you" (Tony, p. 300).

"My happiest memories are sun-streaked afternoons in the cinnamon arms of my Emily" (Conner, p. 350).

"The greatest thing about today is how normal I feel -like totally mainstream" (Tony, p. 405).

"Think how people must have loved each other when all they had was each other" (Vanessa, p. 506).

"I really am in love with her, yes. She makes me feel like no one ever has" (Tony, p. 554).

"Same old Mom. Some ugly comparisons between Cara and me. Same expectations" (Conner, p. 633).

"Losing you would kill a part of me -the part that has learned what love really is" (Vanessa, p. 663).



Topics for Discussion

Compare and contrast the religious perceptions and relationships to God that Tony, Conner, and Vanessa have. In what ways do their lives influence their religious outlooks? In what ways does religion influence their lives?

Discuss the theme of friendship in the novel "Impulse" by Ellen Hopkins. In what ways do Vanessa, Tony, and Conner demonstrate friendship for one another? Is there truly friendship between them? Why or why not? Provide evidence to support your claim.

Discuss the theme of personal growth in the novel "Impulse" by Ellen Hopkins. In what ways do each of the teens - Conner, Vanessa, and Tony - grow as people? Do any of them not grow at all? Why or why not?

Why does wilderness camp matter so much to the three teens - Conner, Tony, and Vanessa - in the novel "Impulse" by Ellen Hopkins? How does it help them grow as people? What experiences and feelings and changes do they come away from camp with?

Discuss the theme of family in the novel "Impulse" by Ellen Hopkins. Compare and contrast the family situations of Conner, Tony, and Vanessa at the beginning of the novel. Do these familial relations change over the novel? Why or why not?

Whereas Tony and Vanessa have second chances at life, Conner has refused to take his second chance by committing suicide. Why does Conner commit suicide?