

Perfect Chemistry Study Guide

Perfect Chemistry by Simone Elkeles

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Plot Summary

Perfect Chemistry is a novel by bestselling, young adult author Simone Elkeles. In this novel, Brittany Ellis is the daughter of wealthy parents from the right side of town. She appears to be a girl who seems to have it all. Alex Fuentes is a poor Mexican boy from the wrong side of town who became a member of the local gang to protect his mother and two little brothers. When Alex and Brittany are forced to become partners in their chemistry class, they find themselves on a path that will lead both to discover that looks are not all they appear to be. Perfect Chemistry is a romantic novel that is similar to West Side Story, a novel of misunderstandings and miscommunications that work to keep two lovers apart until finally love propels them past all obstacles.

Brittany Ellis has worked hard to appear perfect in order to make her mother happy. However, Brittany is far from perfect. Brittany worries about her older sister, Shelley, a woman trapped in a useless body inflicted with cerebral palsy, because Brittany seems to be the only one who cares what happens to Shelley. At the same time, Brittany has to keep up appearances at school as the captain of the pom pom squad and girlfriend to the football captain. When Brittany is forced to partner with Alex Fuentes in Chemistry, it seems that her dreams of perfect grades and admission to Northwestern will go up in smoke.

Alex Fuentes is the son of a widow. His father was shot when Alex was only six years old during a drug deal. Alex has joined the local Latino Bloods in order to protect his family in his father's absence. However, Alex dislikes the gang life and dreams of someday going to college. When Alex is forced to partner with Brittany Ellis in Chemistry, while his dreams of a good grade are not changed, his reputation seems to be placed in danger when a friend bets him he cannot get Brittany into his bed in two months.

Alex begins to flirt with Brittany, attempting to seduce her so that he will not lose his precious motorcycle in the bet. However, over time Alex begins to realize that Brittany is not as perfect as she pretends to be. In fact, Alex comes to recognize that he and Brittany have a great deal in common in that they both put forth a façade for the world, hiding their true characters. In time, Alex begins to fall in love with Brittany despite her mule faced boyfriend and her wealthy background.

At the same time that Alex begins to get to know Brittany, Brittany discovers the person that Alex is beneath the tough gangster attitude. Brittany tells Alex that she is in love with him, but that she wants to hide their relationship from her friends and family to protect them both from prejudices. However, Brittany quickly discovers that she does not really care what her friends think of her. Brittany shows off with Alex proudly at a local night club, unaware that by taking Alex into rival gang territory she is placing his life in danger.

Even as Alex and Brittany are beginning to find their way to one another and dream of a life together, Alex finds himself drawn deeper into the gang. One of the gang leaders



wants Alex to do a drug deal, but he hesitates. It was drugs that ultimately killed Alex's father. On the night of the deal, Brittany seduces Alex to keep him from the deal until his friend Paco can take his place. However, when Alex follows Paco to the drug drop, he discovers it was a trap to kill Alex. Paco is dead and Alex is confronted with his father's killer, fellow gang member Hector. Alex is shot, but Hector is killed when police arrive.

Alex scares Brittany away, afraid of losing her too. However, Alex soon realizes he cannot live without Brittany. Alex quits the gang and lives with the consequences. Alex then gets his GED and is accepted to the same school Brittany has chosen to attend, the University of Colorado. Alex promises to never leave Brittany again and to ask her to marry her when their college education is done.



Chapters 1-7

Chapters 1-7 Summary

Simone Elkeles is a writer of young adult romance novels. Simone Elkeles grew up in a town similar to the fictional town of Fairfield where this novel is set.

In Chapter 1, when Brittany is ready for school on the first day of her senior year, she must endure her mother's critical inspection. Brittany then goes to say goodbye to her sister, Shelley, who is in a wheelchair, causing her to get a spot on her shirt. Brittany covers it with a scarf before running out the door.

In Chapter 2, Alex is awoken by his brother on the first day of school only to find himself refereeing a fight between his two younger brothers. Alex quickly dresses and has a quick breakfast with his mother and brothers before rushing off to school with Carmen, his ex-girlfriend and fellow gang member.

In Chapter 3, Brittany goes to park her new BMW in the school parking lot, only to discover the spot she thought was empty actually contains Alex Fuentes motorcycle. Frightened, Brittany struggles to get the manual transmission into reverse to get out of the way. Alex confronts Brittany in front of the school, but she manages to stand up to him.

In Chapter 4, Alex is called into the principal's office by the new principal, Mr. Aguirre, because of the incident with Brittany. Alex feels he was called in because of his affiliation with the Latino Bloods.

In Chapter 5, Brittany is happy to discover her boyfriend, Colin, is in her Chemistry class. However, when the teacher enters the classroom she forces everyone to sit in alphabetical order, making Alex Fuentes Brittany's seatmate and partner for the big senior Chemistry project. The teacher instructs the students to learn something about each other and introduce their partners to the class. Brittany gives Alex her notebook and tells him to write down detail about himself. She is shocked by what he has written.

In Chapter 6, Alex finds it funny how Brittany gets through his introduction even though all he wrote in her notebook was an invitation to have sex. Alex retaliates by giving a similar introduction on Brittany, causing the teacher to punish them after class.

In Chapter 7, after school Brittany goes to pom pom practice where she learns that Carmen Sanchez, Alex's ex-girlfriend, wants to confront her. Isabel, one of the girls on the pom pom squad, tells Brittany she should not worry about Carmen. Brittany rushes home afterward even though her friends are all hanging out because her sister has a new caretaker. When Brittany's parents arrive home there is tension.



Chapters 1-7 Analysis

These first chapters introduce each of the main characters. The author has chosen to write her novel in the first-person point of view, alternating the narrating character between Brittany and Alex. Brittany is a golden child, the child of wealthy parents who seems to have it all on the outside. However, the reader discovers that Brittany's home life is tense because of her sister's physical and mental disabilities and her mother's inability to deal with the stresses of daily life. For this reason, Brittany finds herself taking control of her sister's care much more than she should probably have to. At the same time, Alex is the son of a widow who is struggling to provide for her family. For this reason, Alex not only joined a gang to protect his family, but also works in the evenings to help support his mother and two little brothers. Alex worries about his brothers and does not want to see them end up in a gang like him, therefore he is willing to sacrifice his chances to go to college and make something of his life in order to see his brother's succeed. In this way, Alex and Brittany have a great deal in common.

The conflict of the novel is the fact that Alex and Brittany, two people from two completely different backgrounds, are forced to be Chemistry partners with one another. This forces them to either get along or face the possibility of failure. The reader can see the hostility between these two different sides of town and the difficulties each of these characters must overcome to succeed. It leaves the reader wondering how working together will work for two people who are so completely different.



Chapters 8-15

Chapters 8-15 Summary

In Chapter 8, Alex acts as a collector for the Latino Bloods, taking a boy's car because he cannot pay a debt. Alex does not like this, but prefers it to dealing drugs. A week later, Alex is having lunch with some of his friends at school when the talk turns to Brittany Ellis. Brittany is one of the most beautiful and most popular girls at the school. One of the boys claims that Alex could never get Brittany into bed. This leads to a bet between Alex and the boy, Lucky. If Alex can get the girl in bed, he wins Lucky's car, but if he does not, he loses his motorcycle.

In Chapter 9, Alex and Brittany are given their senior Chemistry project, hand warmers. Alex is not impressed. When one of Alex's friends comes to the door, he stands to leave, but the teacher will not allow him to leave with his books or his gang colors. This forces Alex to reveal a large stain on his pants.

In Chapter 10, Alex, Brittany, Colin, and Mrs. Peterson are in the principal's office because of the disruption they caused in Chemistry class that day. Most of the blame seems to fall on Alex, but he is impressed when Brittany is forced to take some of the blame as well. Afterward, Mrs. Peterson tries to talk to Alex, assuring him she is on his side. However, Alex has been burned often enough to take her assurances with some caution.

In Chapter 11, when Brittany arrives in the gym locker after her meeting in the principal's office, she is confronted by Carmen. Carmen threatens Brittany and it seems like she is about to beat Brittany up when Isabel comes in and confronts Carmen. Carmen backs down when the gym teacher walks in.

In Chapter 12, Alex is at work when he learns from his cousin Enrique that Hector, one of the leaders of the Latino Bloods has been looking for him. A group of Bloods comes into the garage looking for a hiding place because they just committed a drive-by shooting. After the cops leave, the guys tell Alex that his friend Paco is about to be in a fight with a rival gang. Alex rushes to Paco's aid only to discover one of the other gang members has a knife.

In Chapter 13, after being absent for a week, Alex finally returns to school. The Chemistry class goes into the library to do research on their project. Alex flirts with Brittany and tries to get her to kiss him when he proves she is wrong about some of the details on their project. Brittany tricks Alex by only kissing his hand.

In Chapter 14, Alex teases Brittany and she hits him on the arm, unaware that she has just hit him where he has been cut in a knife fight. Alex begins to bleed. Brittany escorts him to the nurse's office, having a nervous breakdown as she worries about what her



mother will say when she finds out. In the nurse's office, Alex's wound is dressed. Alex makes a date with Brittany that weekend to work on their project.

In Chapter 15, Brittany goes out with Colin on Friday to what was supposed to be a dinner and movie, but turns into a baseball game. All through the game Colin talks with the partners of a law firm where he hopes to get an internship at the end of the year. Colin ends up taking Brittany home late, causing her to get into a fight with her mom. On Saturday Brittany wakes up to hear her mother yelling at Shelley. When Brittany tries to help, Shelley pulls a chunk out of her hair.

Chapters 8-15 Analysis

Alex makes a bet with his friends that he can get Brittany Ellis into bed in two months or less. Alex could lose his motorcycle over this bet, therefore he is determined to win. However, when Alex begins to flirt with Brittany he discovers that it will not be as easy as he thought at first. In fact, Brittany seems very resistant to him due to her relationship with football player, Colin Adams. However, their flirtation leads to some playful teasing that seems to break the ice between these relative strangers.

As Alex begins to focus on Brittany, he finds his own life creating challenges of its own. Alex is a member of the Latino Bloods in an attempt to protect his family, but his role of gangbanger has consequences in all aspects of his life. At school Alex finds himself often blamed for things he did not do. In his home life, Alex finds himself being drawn deeper and deeper into the violence of the gang. Eventually Alex knows he will have to begin dealing drugs in order to keep his position in the Bloods safe. This is something Alex does not want to do because it was drugs that caused his father's death.

At the same time Alex is struggling with pressures in the gang, Brittany is struggling with her responsibilities at home. Not only does Brittany take the brunt of the work involved with her sister, but she also feels the need to be perfect for her mother, a woman who feels as though everyone must be perfect. Added to this pressure, Brittany is also getting pressure for her boyfriend to have sex. Brittany is not ready to have sex with Colin and does not know how to handle his constant pressure.



Chapters 16-24

Chapters 16-24 Summary

In Chapter 16, Alex waits at the library for hours for Brittany to meet him. Finally Alex goes to Brittany's house and is angered when her mother treats him badly.

In Chapter 17, Brittany feels bad about standing Alex up. Brittany calls Alex, but he is not home so she leaves a message.

In Chapter 18, Alex goes to the warehouse where the Bloods hang out and drinks too much. Alex later finds himself out on the beach with Carmen even though he no longer wants to be involved with her because she cheated on him. However, Alex is so angry at the way Brittany and her mother treated him that he allows Carmen to seduce him with her body and her drugs.

In Chapter 19, Brittany is on the beach with her friends and Colin. However, when Colin begins to push her to have sex and then accuses her of being a tease when she refuses, Brittany walks off down the beach. Drunk now, Brittany walks too far and finds herself on a section of the beach where the Bloods are hanging out. Alex sees her and protects her from his friends.

In Chapter 20, after Brittany becomes sick and passes out, Alex carries her back to where his friends are and asks Isabel to help him take her home.

In Chapter 21, Brittany wakes in the morning and discovers that Alex has taken her to Isabel's house. Brittany finds Alex sleeping on the couch. After retrieving her cell phone from Alex, Brittany begins to call for a cab when Isabel offers to take her home. Alex insists he will take her home, but Brittany chooses Isabel, causing Alex to leave the house angrily. When Brittany gets home, she finds her parents discussing a facility in which they want to place Shelley.

In Chapter 22, Alex is angry with Brittany for not wanting him to take her home, but glad to find she had tried to call him the day before. Alex goes to play soccer with his friends and sees his brother with Wil, the son of one of the Blood's recruiters. Alex is angry and nearly starts a fight with one of the soccer players. Alex calls Brittany and orders her to meet him at the library.

In Chapter 23, when Brittany arrives at the library, Alex takes her keys and drives off with her car. They end up at an old airport where Alex begins to teach Brittany how to drive the manual transmission. Afterward, Brittany asks Alex why he feels the need to be seen as a bad boy.

In Chapter 24, Alex tells Brittany how his father was shot and killed in front of him when he was six. In return, Brittany tells Alex about her sister. They speak honestly for a



while, then Alex drives them back to the library. Brittany throws Alex's keys into the grass in retaliation for him stealing her car.

Chapters 16-24 Analysis

Brittany stands up Alex at the library unintentionally. When Alex goes to find out what happened and Brittany's mother treats him bad, it seems to highlight the differences in their lives. For this reason, Alex becomes angry and he does some stupid things. At the same time, Brittany is struggling with the continuing collapse of her family structure and the pressure her boyfriend places her under. Brittany makes a similar mistake, finding herself at Alex's mercy. Alex proves his character in this circumstance by taking Brittany to safety and not taking advantage of her.

Brittany is slowly learning that Alex is much more than she ever gave him credit for being. If Alex were the gang-banger that she believed him to be, he never would have been so kind to her. Alex also would not have admitted to Brittany about his father's death. The reader sees this and begins to realize that Brittany and Alex have a great deal in common and that this commonality is beginning to draw them together.



Chapters 25-33

Chapters 25-33 Summary

In Chapter 25, Brittany goes to her friend Sierra's house the next day to talk about Alex, but she changes her mind, afraid her feelings for Alex will be broadcast all over school. Instead, they simply hang out for the day. At home, Brittany learns her parents have decided to send Shelley to a home in Colorado.

In Chapter 26, in order to retaliate, Alex throws Brittany's keys into the pool on Friday. At home, Alex speaks to Carlos about his relationship with Wil after discovering him with a gun. Alex takes the gun away and makes Carlos promise to stay away from the Bloods.

In Chapter 27, after being late to the football game because of Alex's trick, Brittany is demoted from pom pom captain. That night Brittany goes to a party with Colin. Colin once again pressures Brittany about sex. Brittany agrees, but before anything can happen, Colin's friend Shane walks in on them. Embarrassed, Brittany goes home.

In Chapter 28, there is a test in Chemistry. Alex does well, but a depressed Brittany barely even reads the questions. After school, Alex finds a pink bell on his motorcycle. Alex goes to Brittany's to confront her. Brittany reluctantly allows him into the house.

In Chapter 29, Alex meets Shelley and is kind to her, even playing a game of chess with her. Brittany is impressed since Colin usually ignores Shelley. When Alex goes to leave, some of Brittany's friends appear in front of her house. Brittany claims they were only studying.

In Chapter 30, Alex is accused of vandalizing the school gym. Someone painted a Latino Blood's symbol, but got it wrong. Mrs. Peterson stands up for Alex when he points this out and he is allowed to go.

In Chapter 31, Mrs. Peterson returns the tests from Monday and Brittany is shocked to discover that Alex switched their tests. When Brittany confronts Alex, he insists that she go home with him to see what his life is like. Brittany is shocked by the poverty in which Alex lives.

In Chapter 32, after studying with Brittany for several hours, they kiss. Brittany is horrified when Alex's mother and brothers walk in on them. Brittany insists the kiss cannot happen again because she must be perfect to make up for her sister's disabilities.

In Chapter 33, at school, there is a fight between Brittany and Colin when Colin sees Brittany and Alex in the cafeteria and he becomes jealous. Later, in Chemistry, Brittany asks Alex what she should do and he leaves it up to her. Brittany decides to end her relationship with Colin.



Chapters 25-33 Analysis

As Brittany's relationship with Colin begins to disintegrate and her relationship with her parents falls apart over Shelley, Brittany finds herself drawn more and more to Alex. Alex seems to be the only person who is looking out for Brittany, who cares what happens to her. This is a difficult situation for Brittany because she has always focused on how her life appears to other people, not what is really going on in her life. Alex goes against everything Brittany has always tried to project to the people around her, causing her a great deal of confusion. In the end, however, Brittany begins to see that something has got to change in her life.

Brittany's relationship with Colin has always been about how it appears to the people around them. Once this was okay for Brittany, but she is quickly realizing that she needs more in her life, she needs someone who cares about the person she really is, not the person people think she is. For this reason, Brittany finally breaks up with Colin, leaving the reader wondering what this might mean about her relationship with Alex.



Chapters 34-45

Chapters 34-45 Summary

In Chapter 34, Alex is under the impression that Brittany has chosen Colin over him, so he goes to hang out with the Bloods. On his way home, Alex is pulled over and arrested for carrying a concealed weapon. In the jail cell, Alex knows the only person he can call is Hector even though it means he will owe Hector.

In Chapter 35, Brittany is concerned about Alex and she asks Isabel about him when he does not show at school. Isabel gives Brittany an address where she can find Alex. Brittany goes to the garage where Alex is working to get back his motorcycle from impound. Brittany tells Alex that she cares about him and wants to be with him, but that they have to keep it secret. Alex agrees and invites Brittany to his cousin's wedding.

In Chapter 36, Hector comes to the garage and tells Alex he wants him to deliver a drug shipment on Halloween. Alex tries to refuse, but realizes it is not an option.

In Chapter 37, Brittany meets Alex at the garage and he drives them to the wedding in his cousin's car.

In Chapter 38, at the wedding, Alex begins to introduce Brittany to all his family members.

In Chapter 39, after the wedding ceremony, Brittany goes to speak to Alex's mother while he dances with the bride. When Alex's mother confesses concern for Alex in his relationship with Brittany, Brittany is overwhelmed with the concern she hears from Alex's mother and she lacks in her relationship with her parents. Brittany locks herself in the bathroom and cries. First Alex, then the bride, then the groom join Brittany in the bathroom and coax her out.

In Chapter 40, Alex sees Hector speak to his mother at the wedding. Alex begins to intervene because it appears that his mother is upset, but then sees her laughing with Hector. Alex then takes Brittany back to the garage. They make out in his cousin's car and Alex worries he might have taken it too far when Brittany rushes away.

In Chapter 41, Brittany goes home and fights with her mother, then fights with Sierra when she refuses to tell her the truth about Alex. Finally Brittany calls Isabel.

In Chapter 42, Alex goes home and confronts his mother about Hector. Alex's mother warns him to stop asking questions about his father's murder. Later, Alex talks to his brother Carlos about the dangers of the gang and the mess their father found himself in before his death. After that, Alex's mother comes to speak to him and warns him about getting too involved with Brittany.



In Chapter 43, Brittany, Sierra, and Doug pick up Alex at the school parking lot for a trip to Lake Geneva. Doug and Sierra are not comfortable around Alex at first. However, when Alex fixes a wheel on Doug's car, the two boys find something in common and seem to relax around one another.

In Chapter 44, Alex is annoyed when Brittany drags him into an art gallery and an artist mistakes him for a waiter. Alex storms out of the gallery when Brittany suggests Alex apologize for a rude comment he made about the artist's art. Later, Brittany and Alex make up and have some quiet time at Doug's family cabin.

In Chapter 45, Brittany hangs out with her friends after a football game and sees Colin and Darlene together. Brittany decides she no longer cares what people think of her and invites Alex dancing at a local club with her. They have fun until Brittany realizes she has brought Alex into rival gang territory.

Chapters 34-45 Analysis

Alex is arrested for the first time, placing him in a position to be even more dependent on his leaders in the Latino Bloods. This forces Alex to agree to a drug deal despite his hopes to avoid such dealings as a Blood. At the same time, Alex has been asking a great deal of questions about his father's death. This causes Hector, a leader in the bloods, to threaten his mother in order to force him to stop. Hector's act only makes Alex more curious about his father's killer, suggesting to him that Hector is protecting a fellow Blood. This situation not only foreshadows possible danger to Alex, but it also shows how deep in the Blood's he has sunk and how hard it will be for him to eventually leave.

Alex and Brittany grow closer, finally deciding to enter into a relationship despite all the differences between them. At first Brittany wants this relationship to be kept quiet, but eventually she decides she no longer cares what people think. Therefore, despite Brittany's own hang ups and the differences between them, Alex and Brittany appear destined to survive, leaving the reader wondering what the rest of the plot will bring for this young couple.



Chapters 46-57 and Epilogue

Chapters 46-57 and Epilogue Summary

In Chapter 46, Paco tries to convince Alex not to do the drug deal.

In Chapter 47, Paco comes to Brittany's house and tells her about the drug deal that Alex is preparing to do and asks her to help him convince Alex not to do it. Brittany agrees, leaving her house despite her parents' protest. Paco takes Brittany to the warehouse where the Bloods hang out. Alex becomes angry and punches Paco.

In Chapter 48, Alex takes Brittany away from the warehouse and tries to convince her to stay away from the Bloods. Brittany and Alex make out and Brittany tells Alex she loves him. However, when Alex refuses to drop out of the Bloods or stop the drug deal, Brittany breaks up with him.

In Chapter 49, Brittany cries on Sierra's shoulder.

In Chapter 50, Alex and Paco make amends.

In Chapter 51, Brittany goes to the garage with the intention of seducing Alex on Halloween Night. Alex accepts Brittany's apologies and they begin to flirt.

In Chapter 52, Alex and Brittany make love. Afterward, Alex rushes to get to his drug deal on time. Outside the garage, Alex discovers that Lucky has learned of Brittany's attempts to seduce Alex and shown up to see if Alex won the bet. Alex sends Brittany away before she can learn about the bet. Alex goes home and decides not to do the drug deal. Instead, Alex decides to confront Hector over his father's death only to discover Paco stole his gun.

In Chapter 53, Brittany arrives back at Sierra's house where she has been living the past few weeks only to find her parents waiting there. Brittany and her parents talk, coming to some kind of resolution of the differences between them.

In Chapter 54, Alex rushes to where the drug deal was to take place only to discover that Paco has been shot in his place. Hector confronts Alex and admits not only to killing Alex's father for trying to leave the Bloods, but to killing Paco in a mistaken attempt to kill Alex. Hector and Alex begin to fight and the police arrive, but not quick enough to save Alex from being shot.

In Chapter 55, Brittany gets a call from Isabel about Paco and Alex. Brittany rushes to the hospital and waits all night to learn if Alex will be okay. When Alex wakes and finds Brittany at his side, he tells her about the bet and makes her leave.

In Chapter 56, Mrs. Peterson comes to visit Alex in the hospital and tries to convince him not to give up on life. After he leaves the hospital, Alex goes to Mexico with his



family, but realizes he cannot get Brittany out of his system. Alex returns to Illinois and tells the Bloods new leader, Chuy, he wants out. The gang ties Alex up, beats him, and brands him for turning on the Bloods.

In Chapter 57, in the spring Brittany is confronted by Colin in the school halls. Isabel and several of Alex's other friends defend her. Five months later, Brittany is in Colorado to attend school and to be near her sister. When Brittany goes to the facility to see Shelley, she finds Alex there playing chess with her. Alex tells Brittany that he is attending the University of Colorado as well and that he wants to marry her in four years when they graduate.

In the Epilogue, Mrs. Peterson has Brittany and Alex's son in her senior Chemistry class.

Chapters 46-57 and Epilogue Analysis

In these chapters, Alex gets closer and closer to the day he must do his first drug deal. Although Alex does not want to do the deal, he insists that he must even when Brittany threatens to break up with him. In the end, Brittany and Paco team up to save Alex, but Paco ends up losing his life and Alex turns from Brittany to prevent himself from the pain of loss that he already feels with Paco. It is a surprising twist in a plot that had become somewhat predictable.

Alex is safe from the Bloods living in Mexico, but he knows the only way that he will be happy is if he faces the Bloods and is free to spend the rest of his life with Brittany. Alex shows his true character when he quits the Bloods only to face their wrath. Alex survives and promises to marry Brittany in the near future. It is a bittersweet ending to a bittersweet romance.



Characters

Brittany Ellis

Brittany is the daughter of a wealthy computer company owner. Brittany appears to have it all at school. Brittany is rich, the captain of the pom pom squad, and dating the captain of the football team. However, at home things are very different. Brittany's sister suffers from cerebral palsy and is developmentally delayed. Brittany's mother is embarrassed by Shelley's condition and therefore places pressure on Brittany to be perfect to make up for her disabled sister. Not only this, but Brittany's parents seem reluctant to take on the role of caretaker for Shelley, forcing Brittany to take responsibility for her older sister.

Brittany is a senior in high school and looks forward to a time when she can go to college. However, Brittany has chosen a college close to home so that she can continue to look after her sister. In order to get into this college, Brittany must do well in her classes, therefore she is angry when she learns that gangbanger Alex will be her chemistry partner. Brittany sees Alex as a loser, as someone who is just biding his time until he is arrested or moves higher up the hierarchy of the gang.

As Brittany gets to know Alex, however, she soon realizes that he presents as much of a façade to the world as she does. Brittany and Alex have a great deal in common and soon find themselves falling in love. However, as many things as they have in common, they have things that are destined to keep them apart.

Alejandro 'Alex' Fuentes

Alex is a member of the Latino Bloods because he needed to join the gang to keep his mother and little brothers safe. If it were up to Alex, he would not be a member of the gang but be working toward his goal of going to college. Alex knows that it is only a matter of time before he ends up dead like his father, another member of the Bloods who was killed during a drug deal. Alex swears he will never deal drugs, but if he goes against the Bloods he will be beaten or killed.

As Alex falls in love with Brittany Ellis, he finds himself dreaming more and more of running away and going to college. However, the deeper Alex becomes involved with Brittany, the more his involvement with the gang comes between them. Finally Alex leaves the gang and suffers a beating at their hands so that he might be with Brittany.

Colin Adams

Colin Adams is the son of a successful lawyer. Colin wants to be a lawyer as well. Colin and Brittany are the golden couple of Fairfield High. Colin went away during the summer before their senior year and now is placing a great deal of pressure on Brittany to have



sex. Brittany eventually learns that Colin had sex with a girl over the summer and this is part of the reason he has been pressuring her so much. Brittany once thought that her destiny revolved around Colin, but soon learns that Colin is more shallow and uncaring than she would like her future lover to be.

Paco

Paco is Alex's best friend. Paco lives with his father. Paco's father is a drunk who often beats his son when he is drunk. This leaves Paco with a great deal of anger and frustration that he uses his membership with the Latino Bloods to work out. However, Paco can see that Alex is much smarter and does not need to be in the Bloods to survive. Paco takes Alex's place in a drug deal, unaware that the deal is a setup to murder Alex. Paco is killed when he is mistaken for Alex.

Isabel 'Isa' Avila

Isa is a friend of Alex's. Isa and Alex grew up together and treat one another like siblings. Isa is also a member of the pom pom squad. From the start of the school year, Brittany makes an attempt to draw Isa into the squad's social circle and make her feel a part of things. At the same time, as Brittany and Alex grow close, Isa becomes something of a reluctant friend to Brittany.

Carmen Sanchez

Carmen Sanchez is Alex's neighbor and ex-girlfriend. Carmen cheated on Alex, causing him to break up with her during the summer before senior year. Carmen is still in love with Alex, however, and continues to chase him. In fact, when Carmen becomes aware of Brittany's sudden interest in Alex, she attempts to frighten Brittany off with the threat of physical violence. However, even Carmen comes to realize that Alex truly loves Brittany and she tries to tell Brittany the truth about Alex despite all that Brittany has learned about Alex.

Shelley Ellis

Shelley is Brittany's older sister. Shelley suffers from cerebral palsy and developmental delays. Shelley often becomes frustrated from her inability to communicate better and as a result often throws things or pulls hair. Brittany makes it her responsibility to often care for Shelley, a burden that soon proves very difficult for Brittany. However, Brittany loves Shelley a great deal and feels that someone must make sure that Shelley always feels loved.



Patricia Ellis

Patricia Ellis is Brittany's mother. Patricia is a self-centered woman who worries constantly of what people think of her and her family. For this reason, Patricia places a great deal of pressure on Brittany to be perfect. This pressure finally forces Brittany to rebel against her mother during her senior year, actually moving out of the house for a time in order to escape her parents. In the end, Brittany and her mother come to an understanding, but it is not enough to save the relationship.

Hector

Hector is a leader of the Latino Bloods. Hector bails Alex out of jail and forces him into a drug deal as payback. Hector, however, turns out to be the one who killed Alex's father. Hector killed Alex's father to keep him from leaving the Latino Bloods. In the end of the novel, Alex figures out what Hector did and confronts him moments before the police gun Hector down as he draws on Alex.

Mrs. Fuentes

Mrs. Fuentes is Alex's mother. Mrs. Fuentes was only a teenager when she became pregnant with Alex and convinced his father to move to America. Alex's father joined the Latino Bloods to protect his family, much as Alex did. Mrs. Fuentes has known all along who killed her husband, but never told Alex in fear for what Alex might do. Mrs. Fuentes loves her children deeply and only did what she thought was necessary to protect them.



Objects/Places

Tiffany Bracelet

Colin gave Brittany a tiffany bracelet for their first anniversary.

Designer Clothes

Brittany wears designer clothes that the kids from the south side of town think she wears to show off her wealth. In truth, Brittany wears the clothes to make her mother happy and discovers that half the time she fails to do so.

Keys

Brittany throws Alex's motorcycle keys into the grass to get him back for stealing her car. Later, Alex throws Brittany's keys into the school pool.

Pink Bicycle Bell

Brittany places a pink bicycle bell on Juan to retaliate against Alex for throwing her keys into the school pool.

Hand Warmers

Brittany and Alex's senior chemistry project is to create hand warmers. Several months after Alex disappeared from her life, Brittany finds a pair of hand warmers in her locker.

Warehouse

There is a warehouse behind an old train station where the Latino Bloods hang out.

Juan

Alex calls his motorcycle Juan after the uncle who helped his parents move to Illinois.

BMW

Brittany drives a convertible BMW her father gave her for her eighteenth birthday. However, Brittany's father never taught her how to drive the manual transmission, so Alex has to teach her.



RX-7

Alex wins Lucky's RX-7 in a bet they made. Alex was to get Brittany into bed before Thanksgiving and successfully slept with her on Halloween night. Alex never collects on the bet.

Lake Geneva Cabin

When they first begin dating one another, Alex and Brittany go to Doug's family cabin at Lake Geneva. It is nearly a disaster because Alex does not feel as though he fits in in Brittany's world.

Fairfield, Illinois

The novel takes place in the fictional suburb of Chicago called Fairfield.

Chicago, Illinois

The novel takes place outside of Chicago, Illinois.



Themes

Diversity in Racial and Economic Inequality

On the first day of school, the new principal at Fairfield High School tells Alex that he wants the students to build a bridge between the different races. In Fairfield, the wealthy live on the north side of town and the poor live on the south side, but both sides send their children to the high school. This creates a situation in which many of the students divide up into groups and refuse to let members of the other groups into their own groups.

When Alex is forced to partner with Brittany Ellis in chemistry, he finds the situation amusing, but does not believe that anything will come of it beyond a decent chemistry grade. However, Alex's friends bet him that he cannot get Brittany into bed. Alex sees this as a challenge and begins to flirt with Brittany. For this reason, Alex begins to get to know Brittany better and comes to understand that her life is not as perfect as it might appear. Despite their economic differences, Alex learns that he and Brittany are much the same.

This book plays with themes of diversity and/or racial and economic inequality in an attempt to show that no matter where a person lives or what their economic background might be, all people are the same underneath all the shallow facades they chose to show the world. For this reason, diversity is a theme of the book.

Gang Activity

Alex is a member of a gang in the south side of Fairfield called the Latino Bloods. As a member of this gang, Alex often participates in fights and enforcement, as well as other illegal activities. Alex is against illegal drugs and does not participate in the selling of drugs, but he knows that the longer he remains in the Bloods he will eventually be forced to participate.

As the novel progresses, Alex finds himself in a situation in which he is forced to finally confront the illegal drug aspects of gang life. Alex is forced to agree to make a drug drop. Alex agrees because the leader of the Bloods, Hector, threatens his family. When Brittany asks him not to do it, Alex tells her that he has no choice. There is no way out of a gang and refusing a direct order from a gang leader is as good as asking to leave the gang. Alex has no choice.

In the end, Alex finds himself forced to call the police on his own gang in order to protect himself and his family from Hector. Afterward, Alex asks to leave the gang and is badly beaten and branded in order to receive his request. Unlike many men before him, Alex survives and is free to live his life as he wishes, but will carry many scars for the rest of his life. This is why gang activity is a major theme of the novel.

Love

In addition to the many themes that fill the plot of this novel, there is the theme of love. This novel is essentially a romance story. Alex and Brittany are from two different sides of town and two different worlds, but like Romeo and Juliet, they fall in love despite the differences that should keep them apart. As the plot reaches its climax, Alex and Brittany learn what it is like to try to live separately, only to find themselves drawn together once again.

Even though the main theme of love revolves around Alex and Brittany, there are other aspects of this theme as well. First is the love Mrs. Fuentes has for her children. Brittany is so overwhelmed by the love Mrs. Fuentes shows for Alex that she falls into a crying jag because it is love exactly like this that Brittany feels she is missing from her own parents. At the same time, Alex loves his brothers so much that he has joined the Latino Bloods to protect them and to keep them from ever having to join a gang.

Finally, the theme of love is evident in Brittany's relationship with her sister. Brittany loves her sister so much that she is willing to sacrifice everything in her own life to be perfect, to stay near Shelley, and to be sure that Shelley is well cared for. It is Brittany's love for her sister motivates her every action at home throughout the plot of the novel. For this reason, and the ones mentioned above, love is an important theme in this novel.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is first person. The author uses two characters to narrate her story and therefore she marks each chapter with the name of the character narrating so that the reader will not grow confused. In using the first-person point of view, the author creates an intimate relationship between the reader and the two main characters, giving insight into the plot that the reader might not have with another point of view.

The point of view of this novel works well with the plot because it gives the reader insight into the main characters and their motivations that might not be obvious with another point of view. The author has written a plot that hinges closely on the feelings and actions of her main characters. For this reason, it is very important for the reader to understand the motivations and emotions that make each character behave as they do. Therefore, the first person point of view is the ideal point of view to help the reader develop a desire to see the main characters reach their desired conclusion.

Setting

The novel takes place in Illinois in a fictional suburb of Chicago. This town is divided into two sections, the wealthy part of town and the poor side of town. The two sides of town rarely mix except at the local high school. In the wealthy part of town, most of the people own their own business or have successful careers in high paying jobs, drive expensive cars and wear designer clothing. In the poor section of town, most of the people work endlessly at low paying jobs and many of the young men are forced to join the local gangs in order to protect themselves, their families, and their neighborhood.

The setting of this novel is important for several reasons. The setting creates a world in which two very different types of economic backgrounds exist within miles of one another. In the south, the kids are all poor and many of them belong to gangs while in the north many of the kids have grown up with everything they could ever want and wear diamonds on their ears. The kids in the south cannot imagine what it is like to be so wealthy while the kids in the north cannot imagine what could be so bad to make kids join a gang. These two worlds collide when Brittany and Alex begin to date. For this reason, the setting of this novel is of great importance to the plot of the novel.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written for young adults and therefore most of the language is simple English. However, one whole group of characters in this book are kids who were born in Mexico or have Spanish-speaking parents. For this reason, many of these kids speak in Spanish or use Spanish phrases or nicknames to get their point across. Most of these



phrases or words are self-explanatory, but some a reader not accustomed to this language might not understand.

The language of this novel is simplistic, in keeping with the young teens who populate the novel. There is little slang in the novel, however, implying that many of these teens are well spoken and intelligent even though the plot does not always support this conclusion. The Spanish in this novel is often explained within the text by its use or with simple translations. However, there is some Spanish in this book that is either misused or not well written for reasons beyond the reader's understanding. However, much of the language of this book does support the main characters of the novel and the situations present in the plot.

Structure

The novel is written in fifty-seven chapters with an epilogue. Most of the chapters are fairly short. Each chapter begins with the name of the main character who is narrating the chapter because the point of view of the novel is first person and this allows the reader to understand who the current narrator is. The novel is written with both narration and dialogue, showing a story rather than telling one.

The novel contains two main plots and includes multiple subplots. The first main plot of the novel follows Brittany as she struggles to maintain her façade of perfection in front of her peers and her parents. Brittany begins to fail at this façade, however, and the fallout is not as horrible as she suspected it might be. The second main plot follows Alex, a young gangbanger who is attempting to protect his family from gang violence as well as avoiding some of the darker pitfalls of gang life. A subplot in the novel follows Brittany and Alex's growing relationship. Another subplot follows Brittany's relationship with boyfriend, Colin. Each of these plots comes to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"Everyone knows I'm perfect. My life is perfect. My clothes are perfect. Even my family is perfect. And although it's a complete lie, I've worked my butt off to keep up the appearance that I have it all." (Chapter 1, p. 1).

"To Luis, it's a bandana. To me, it's a symbol of what is and will never be." (Chapter 2, p. 7).

"I knew I'd be called into the new principal's office at some point during the year, but I didn't expect it to be on the first day of school." (Chapter 4, p. 18).

"If she thinks I'm a threat to her relationship with Alex, the rumors that are sure to spread today could prove deadly." (Chapter 9, p. 61).

"Being high and drunk makes me confused. And when the image of Brittany and Colin with their arms around each other at school yesterday form in my head, I pull Carmen's body closer." (Chapter 18, p. 109).

"I'm having a nightmare that a thousand little Oompa Loompas are in my head, hammering my skull." (Chapter 21, p. 125).

"I'm not ashamed of my sister's disability. But I don't want Alex to judge her. Because if he laughs, I couldn't take it." (Chapter 29, p. 177).

"I sit back, staring at the closed door, and wonder if I have it in me to do a drug deal. If I want to keep my family safe, my choice has been made for me." (Chapter 36, p. 224).

"I can tell Jorge and Elena are madly in love with each other and it makes me wonder if I'll be as in love with my future husband." (Chapter 39, p. 235).

"I'm scared because with Alex, it feels too raw." (Chapter 41, p. 248).

"Unfortunately, I can't run from my heart. It hurts, deep inside my body. And I know I'll never be the same." (Chapter 55, p. 333).

"Wow. The solar system is finally in alignment, and I got my Do Over without even asking for it." (Chapter 57, p. 355).



Topics for Discussion

Who is Brittany? Why does she feel she must be perfect? Why does she feel it is her responsibility to care for her disabled sister? Why does Brittany's mother often criticize the way Brittany looks? How does Brittany feel about this? Why?

Who is Alex? Why is Alex in a gang? What does Alex see for himself in the future? Why does Alex not want his brothers to join a gang? How does Alex's mother feel about all of this? How did Alex's father die? Why does Alex begin asking questions about his father's death? Who does Alex eventually learn killed his father? For what reason? What does this imply for Alex's future?

Why is Brittany unhappy when Alex is made her lab partner in chemistry? What does Brittany have against Alex? Is her main concern her grades? Explain. Who is Colin? Why does Brittany want to be Colin's partner in chemistry? What is a DOD? Why does Brittany want a DOD that first day in chemistry? What might she change? What might have been changed had Brittany gotten her DOD?

Where was Colin during the summer? What has this changed in his relationship with Brittany? Why is Brittany originally worried about the changes that might take place between she and Colin? Does this happen? Why does Brittany later realize that something has indeed changed between she and Colin? What are Colin's priorities in life? What are Brittany's? Are they the same or different and in what ways?

Why does Brittany not want anyone to know when she first begins to date Alex? What is Brittany the most afraid of? Why is Brittany afraid of this? What is Brittany's relationship like with her mother? What impacts it the most? What does Brittany's mother admit late in the book that explains her attitude toward Shelley? Brittany? Does this fix the relationship between Brittany and her mother? Why or why not?

Why does Alex turn to Hector when he is arrested? Why did Alex not call Brittany? What does Hector want as repayment for bailing Alex out of jail? Why does Alex not want to do this one thing? Is it inevitable that Alex will have to deal drugs as part of the Bloods? Why does Alex not leave the Bloods? What is Alex afraid of? What really happened to Alex's father?

Why does Brittany go to college in Colorado rather than Illinois? Who is in Colorado that Brittany wants to be close to? Why? Why does Brittany not just leave her past behind her? Who surprises Brittany by showing up in Colorado? How does Brittany feel about this situation? Why? What does the epilogue suggest about the relationship between Brittany and Alex? What do Brittany and Alex eventually do in their careers that is revealed in the epilogue?