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PICOULT

*Nineteen Minutes*

  
ALLEN & UNWIN

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a girl could ask for, who makes sure  
I put my best foot forward,  
every time.  
Thanks for your keen eye, your cheerleading,  
and most of all, your friendship.*



# PART ONE

*If we don't change the direction we are headed,  
we will end up where we are going.*

—CHINESE PROVERB





*By the time you read this, I hope to be dead.*

*You can't undo something that's happened; you can't take back a word that's already been said out loud. You'll think about me and wish that you had been able to talk me out of this. You'll try to figure out what would have been the one right thing to say, to do. I guess I should tell you, Don't blame yourself; this isn't your fault, but that would be a lie. We both know that I didn't get here by myself.*

*You'll cry, at my funeral. You'll say it didn't have to be this way. You will act like everyone expects you to. But will you miss me?*

*More importantly—will I miss you?*

*Does either one of us really want to hear the answer to that question?*



*March 6, 2007*

**I**n nineteen minutes, you can mow the front lawn, color your hair, watch a third of a hockey game. In nineteen minutes, you can bake scones or get a tooth filled by a dentist; you can fold laundry for a family of five.

Nineteen minutes is how long it took the Tennessee Titans to sell out of tickets to the play-offs. It's the length of a sitcom, minus the commercials. It's the driving distance from the Vermont border to the town of Sterling, New Hampshire.

In nineteen minutes, you can order a pizza and get it delivered. You can read a story to a child or have your oil changed. You can walk a mile. You can sew a hem.

In nineteen minutes, you can stop the world, or you can just jump off it.

In nineteen minutes, you can get revenge.

As usual, Alex Cormier was running late. It took thirty-two minutes to drive from her house in Sterling to the superior court in Grafton County, New Hampshire, and that was only if she speeded through Orford. She hurried downstairs in her stockings, carrying her heels and the files she'd brought home with

her over the weekend. She twisted her thick copper hair into a knot and anchored it at the base of her neck with bobby pins, transforming herself into the person she needed to be before she left her house.

Alex had been a superior court judge now for thirty-four days. She'd believed that, having proved her mettle as a district court judge for the past five years, this time around the appointment might be easier. But at forty, she was still the youngest judge in the state. She still had to fight to establish herself as a fair justice—her history as a public defender preceded her into her courtroom, and prosecutors assumed she'd side with the defense. When Alex had submitted her name years ago for the bench, it had been with the sincere desire to make sure people in this legal system were innocent until proven guilty. She just never anticipated that, as a judge, she might not be given the same benefit of the doubt.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee drew Alex into the kitchen. Her daughter was hunched over a steaming mug at the kitchen table, poring over a textbook. Josie looked exhausted—her blue eyes were bloodshot; her chestnut hair was a knotty ponytail. “Tell me you haven’t been up all night,” Alex said.

Josie didn’t even glance up. “I haven’t been up all night,” she parroted.

Alex poured herself a cup of coffee and slid into the chair across from her. “Honestly?”

“You asked me to tell you something,” Josie said. “You didn’t ask for the truth.”

Alex frowned. “You shouldn’t be drinking coffee.”

“And you shouldn’t be smoking cigarettes.”

Alex felt her face heat up. “I don’t—”

“Mom,” Josie sighed, “even when you open up the bathroom windows, I can still smell it on the towels.” She glanced up, daring Alex to challenge her other vices.

Alex herself didn’t have any other vices. She didn’t have *time* for any vices. She would have liked to say that she knew with

authority that Josie didn't have any vices, either, but she would only be making the same inference the rest of the world did when they met Josie: a pretty, popular, straight-A student who knew better than most the consequences of falling off the straight-and-narrow. A girl who was destined for great things. A young woman who was exactly what Alex had hoped her daughter would grow to become.

Josie had once been so proud to have a mother as a judge. Alex could remember Josie broadcasting her career to the tellers at the bank, the baggers in the grocery store, the flight attendants on planes. She'd ask Alex about her cases and her decisions. That had all changed three years ago, when Josie entered high school, and the tunnel of communication between them slowly bricked shut. Alex didn't necessarily think that Josie was hiding anything more than any other teenager, but it was different: a normal parent might metaphorically judge her child's friends, whereas Alex could do it legally.

"What's on the docket today?" Alex said.

"Unit test. What about you?"

"Arraignments," Alex replied. She squinted across the table, trying to read Josie's textbook upside down. "Chemistry?"

"Catalysts." Josie rubbed her temples. "Substances that speed up a reaction, but stay unchanged by it. Like if you've got carbon monoxide gas and hydrogen gas and you toss in zinc and chromium oxide, and . . . what's the matter?"

"Just having a little flashback of why I got a C in Orgo. Have you had breakfast?"

"Coffee," Josie said.

"Coffee doesn't count."

"It does when *you're* in a rush," Josie pointed out.

Alex weighed the costs of being even five minutes later, or getting another black mark against her in the cosmic good-parenting tally. *Shouldn't a seventeen-year-old be able to take care of herself in the morning?* Alex started pulling items out of the refrigerator: eggs, milk, bacon. "I once presided over an

involuntary emergency admission at the state mental hospital for a woman who thought she was Emeril. Her husband had her committed when she put a pound of bacon in the blender and chased him around the kitchen with a knife, yelling *Bam!*”

Josie glanced up from her textbook. “For real?”

“Oh, believe me, I can’t make these things up.” Alex cracked an egg into a skillet. “When I asked her why she’d put a pound of bacon in the blender, she looked at me and said that she and I must just cook differently.”

Josie stood up and leaned against the counter, watching her mother cook. Domesticity wasn’t Alex’s strong point—she didn’t know how to make a pot roast but was proud to have memorized the phone numbers of every pizza place and Chinese restaurant in Sterling that offered free delivery. “Relax,” Alex said dryly. “I think I can do this without setting the house on fire.”

But Josie took the skillet out of her hands and laid the strips of bacon in it, like sailors bunking tightly together. “How come you dress like that?” she asked.

Alex glanced down at her skirt, blouse, and heels and frowned. “Why? Is it too Margaret Thatcher?”

“No, I mean . . . why do you bother? No one knows what you have on under your robe. You could wear, like, pajama pants. Or that sweater you have from college that’s got holes in the elbows.”

“Whether or not people *see* it, I’m still expected to dress . . . well, *judiciously*.”

A cloud passed over Josie’s face, and she busied herself over the stove, as if Alex had somehow given the wrong answer. Alex stared at her daughter—the bitten half-moon fingernails, the freckle behind her ear, the zigzag part in her hair—and saw instead the toddler who’d wait at the babysitter’s window at sundown, because she knew that was when Alex came to get her. “I’ve never worn pajamas to work,” Alex admitted, “but I do sometimes close the door to chambers and take a nap on the floor.”

A slow, surprised smile played over Josie's face. She held her mother's admission as if it were a butterfly lighting on her hand by accident: an event so startling you could not call attention to it without risking its loss. But there were miles to drive and defendants to arraign and chemical equations to interpret, and by the time Josie had set the bacon to drain on a pad of paper toweling, the moment had winged away.

"I still don't get why *I* have to eat breakfast if *you* don't," Josie muttered.

"Because you have to be a certain age to earn the right to ruin your own life." Alex pointed at the scrambled eggs Josie was mixing in the skillet. "Promise me you'll finish that?"

Josie met her gaze. "Promise."

"Then I'm headed out."

Alex grabbed her travel mug of coffee. By the time she backed her car out of the garage, her head was already focused on the decision she had to write that afternoon; the number of arraignments the clerk would have stuffed onto her docket; the motions that would have fallen like shadows across her desk between Friday afternoon and this morning. She was caught up in a world far away from home, where at that very moment her daughter scraped the scrambled eggs from the skillet into the trash can without ever taking a single bite.

Sometimes Josie thought of her life as a room with no doors and no windows. It was a sumptuous room, sure—a room half the kids in Sterling High would have given their right arm to enter—but it was also a room from which there really wasn't an escape. Either Josie was someone she didn't want to be, or she was someone who nobody wanted.

She lifted her face to the spray of the shower—water she'd made so hot it raised red welts, stole breath, steamed windows. She counted to ten, and then finally ducked away from the stream to stand naked and dripping in front of the mirror. Her face was swollen and scarlet; her hair stuck to her shoulders in

thick ropes. She turned sideways, scrutinized her flat belly, and sucked it in a little. She knew what Matt saw when he looked at her, what Courtney and Maddie and Brady and Haley and Drew all saw—she just wished that she could see it, too. The problem was, when Josie looked in the mirror, she noticed what was underneath that raw skin, instead of what had been painted upon it.

She understood how she was *supposed* to look and *supposed* to act. She wore her dark hair long and straight; she dressed in Abercrombie & Fitch; she listened to Dashboard Confessional and Death Cab for Cutie. She liked feeling the eyes of other girls in the school when she sat in the cafeteria borrowing Courtney's makeup. She liked the way teachers already knew her name on the first day of class. She liked having guys stare at her when she walked down the hall with Matt's arm around her.

But there was a part of her that wondered what would happen if she let them all in on the secret—that some mornings, it was hard to get out of bed and put on someone else's smile; that she was standing on air, a fake who laughed at all the right jokes and whispered all the right gossip and attracted the right guy, a fake who had nearly forgotten what it felt like to be *real* . . . and who, when you got right down to it, didn't want to remember, because it hurt even more than this.

There wasn't anyone to talk to. If you even *doubted* your right to be one of the privileged, popular set, then you didn't belong there. And Matt—well, he'd fallen for the Josie on the surface, like everyone else. In fairy tales, when the mask came off, the handsome prince still loved the girl, no matter what—and that alone would turn her into a princess. But high school didn't work that way. What made her a princess was hooking up with Matt. And in some weird circular logic, what made Matt hook up with her was the very fact that she was one of Sterling High's princesses.

She couldn't confide in her mother, either. *You don't stop being a judge just because you step out of the courthouse, her*



mother used to say. It was why Alex Cormier never drank more than one glass of wine in public; it was why she never yelled or cried. A trial was a stupid word, considering that an attempt was never good enough: you were supposed to toe the line, period. Many of the accomplishments that Josie's mother was most proud of—Josie's grades, her looks, her acceptance into the "right" crowd—had not been achieved because Josie wanted them so badly herself, but mostly because she was afraid of falling short of perfect.

Josie wrapped a towel around herself and headed into her bedroom. She pulled a pair of jeans out of her closet and then layered two long-sleeved tees that showed off her chest. She glanced at her clock—if she wasn't going to be late, she'd have to get moving.

Before leaving her room, though, she hesitated. She sank down onto her bed and rummaged underneath the nightstand for the Ziploc sandwich bag that she'd tacked to the wooden frame. Inside was a stash of Ambien—pirated one pill at a time from her mother's prescription for insomnia, so she'd never notice. It had taken Josie nearly six months to inconspicuously gather only fifteen pills, but she figured if she washed them down with a fifth of vodka, it would do the trick. It wasn't like she had a strategy, really, to kill herself next Tuesday, or when the snow melted, or anything concrete like that. It was more like a backup plan: When the truth came out, and no one wanted to be around her anymore, it stood to reason Josie wouldn't want to be around herself either.

She tacked the pills back beneath her nightstand and headed downstairs. As she walked into the kitchen to load up her backpack, she found her chemistry textbook still wide open—and a long-stemmed red rose marking her place.

Matt was leaning against the refrigerator in the corner; he must have let himself in through the open garage door. Like always, he made her head swim with seasons—his hair was all the colors of autumn; his eyes the bright blue of a winter sky; his

smile as wide as any summer sun. He was wearing a baseball hat backward, and a Sterling Varsity Hockey tee over a thermal shirt that Josie had once stolen for a full month and hidden in her underwear drawer, so that when she needed to she could breathe in the scent of him. “Are you still pissed off?” he asked.

Josie hesitated. “I wasn’t the one who was mad.”

Matt pushed away from the refrigerator, coming forward until he could link his arms around Josie’s waist. “You know I can’t help it.”

A dimple blossomed in his right cheek; Josie could already feel herself softening. “It wasn’t that I didn’t want to see you. I really *did* have to study.”

Matt pushed her hair off her face and kissed her. This was exactly why she’d told him not to come over last night—when she was with him, she felt herself evaporating. Sometimes, when he touched her, Josie imagined herself vanishing in a puff of steam.

He tasted of maple syrup, of apologies. “It’s all your fault, you know,” he said. “I wouldn’t act as crazy if I didn’t love you so much.”

At that moment, Josie could not remember the pills she was hoarding in her room; she could not remember crying in the shower; she could not remember anything but what it felt like to be adored. *I’m lucky*, she told herself, the word streaming like a silver ribbon through her mind. *Lucky, lucky, lucky.*

Patrick Ducharme, the sole detective on the Sterling police force, sat on a bench on the far side of the locker room, listening to the patrol officers on the morning shift pick on a rookie with a little extra padding around the middle. “Hey, Fisher,” Eddie Odenkirk said, “are you the one who’s having the baby, or is it your wife?”

As the rest of the guys laughed, Patrick took pity on the kid. “It’s early, Eddie,” he said. “Can’t you at least wait to start in until we’ve all had a cup of coffee?”

“I would, Captain,” Eddie laughed, “but it looks like Fisher already ate all the donuts and—what the *hell* is that?”

Patrick followed Eddie’s gaze downward, to his own feet. He did not, as a matter of course, change in the locker room with the patrol officers, but he’d jogged to the station this morning instead of driving, to work off too much good cooking consumed over the weekend. He’d spent Saturday and Sunday in Maine with the girl who currently held his heart—his goddaughter, a five-and-a-half-year-old named Tara Frost. Her mother, Nina, was Patrick’s oldest friend, and the one love he probably would never get over, although she managed to be doing quite well without him. Over the course of the weekend, Patrick had deliberately lost ten thousand games of Candy Land, had given countless piggyback rides, had had his hair done, and—here was his cardinal mistake—had allowed Tara to put bright pink nail polish on his toes, which Patrick had forgotten to remove.

He glanced down at his feet and curled his toes under. “Chicks think it’s hot,” he said gruffly, as the seven men in the locker room struggled not to snicker at someone who was technically their superior. Patrick yanked his dress socks on, slipped into his loafers, and walked out, still holding his tie. *One*, he counted. *Two, three*. On cue, laughter spilled out of the locker room, following him down the hallway.

In his office, Patrick closed the door and peered at himself in the tiny mirror on the back. His black hair was still damp from his shower; his face was flushed from his run. He shimmied the knot of his tie up his neck, fashioning the noose, and then sat down at his desk.

Seventy-two emails had come in over the weekend—and usually anything more than fifty meant he wouldn’t get home before 8:00 p.m. all week. He began to weed through them, adding notes to a devil’s To Do list—one that never got any shorter, no matter how hard he worked.

Today, Patrick had to drive drugs down to the state lab—not a big deal, except that it was a four-hour block of his day that

vanished right there. He had a rape case coming to fruition, the perp identified from a college face book and his statements transcribed and ready for the AG's office. He had a cell phone that had been nabbed out of a car by a homeless guy. He had blood results come back from the lab as a match for a break-in at a jewelry store, and a suppression hearing in superior court, and already on his desk was the first new complaint of the day—a theft of wallets in which the credit cards had been used, leaving a trail for Patrick to trace.

Being a small-town detective required Patrick to be firing on all cylinders, all the time. Unlike cops he knew who worked for city departments, where they had twenty-four hours to solve a case before it was considered cold, Patrick's job was to take everything that came across his desk—not to cherry-pick for the interesting ones. It was hard to get excited about a bad check case, or a theft that would net the perp a \$200 fine when it cost the taxpayers five times that to have Patrick focus on it for a week. But every time he started thinking that his cases weren't particularly important, he'd find himself face-to-face with a victim: the hysterical mother whose wallet had been stolen; the mom-and-pop jewelry store owners who'd been robbed of their retirement income; the rattled professor who was a victim of identity theft. Hope, Patrick knew, was the exact measure of distance between himself and the person who'd come for help. If Patrick didn't get involved, if he didn't give a hundred percent, then that victim was going to be a victim forever—which was why, since Patrick had joined the Sterling police, he had managed to solve every single case.

And yet.

When Patrick was lying in his bed alone and letting his mind sew a seam across the hem of his life, he did not remember the proven successes—only the potential failures. When he walked around the perimeter of a vandalized barn or found the stolen car stripped down and dumped in the woods or handed the tissue to the sobbing girl who'd been date-raped, Patrick couldn't help but

feel that he was too late. He was a detective, but he didn't *detect* anything. It fell into his lap, already broken, every time.

It was the first warm day of March, the one where you started to believe that the snow would melt sooner rather than later, and that June was truly just around the corner. Josie sat on the hood of Matt's Saab in the student parking lot, thinking that it was closer to summer than it was to the start of this school year, that in a scant three months, she would officially be a member of the senior class.

Beside her, Matt leaned against the windshield, his face tipped up to the sun. "Let's ditch school," he said. "It's too nice out to be stuck inside all day."

"If you ditch, you'll be benched."

The state championship tournament in hockey began this afternoon, and Matt played right wing. Sterling had won last year, and they had every expectation of doing it again. "You're coming to the game," Matt said, and it wasn't a question, but a statement.

"Are you going to score?"

Matt smiled wickedly and tugged her on top of him. "Don't I always?" he said, but he wasn't talking about hockey anymore, and she felt a blush rise over the collar of her scarf.

Suddenly Josie felt a rain of hail on her back. They both sat up to find Brady Pryce, a football player, walking by hand-in-hand with Haley Weaver, the homecoming queen. Haley tossed a second shower of pennies—Sterling High's way of wishing an athlete good luck. "Kick ass today, Royston," Brady called.

Their math teacher was crossing the parking lot, too, with a worn black leather briefcase and a thermos of coffee. "Hey, Mr. McCabe," Matt called out. "How'd I do on last Friday's test?"

"Luckily, you've got other talents to fall back on, Mr. Royston," the teacher said as he reached into his pocket. He winked at Josie as he pitched the coins, pennies that fell from the sky onto her shoulders like confetti, like stars coming loose.

\* \* \*

*It figures*, Alex thought as she stuffed the contents of her purse back inside. She had switched handbags and left her pass key at home, which allowed her into the employee entrance at the rear of the superior court. Although she'd pushed the buzzer a million times, no one seemed to be around to let her in.

"Goddamn," she muttered under her breath, hiking around the slush puddles so that her alligator heels wouldn't get ruined—one of the perks of parking in the back was *not* having to do this. She could cut through the clerk's office to her chambers, and if the planets were aligned, maybe even onto the bench without causing a delay in the docket.

Although the public entrance of the court had a line twenty people long, the court officers recognized Alex because, unlike the district court circuit, where you bounced from courthouse to courthouse, she would be ensconced here for six months. The officers waved her to the front of the line, but since she was carrying keys and a stainless steel travel thermos and God only knew what else in her purse, she set off the metal detectors.

The alarm was a spotlight; every eye in the lobby turned to see who'd gotten caught. Ducking her head, Alex hurried across the polished tile floor and nearly lost her footing. As she pitched forward, a squat man reached forward to steady her. "Hey, baby," he said, leering. "I like your shoes."

Without responding, Alex yanked herself out of his grasp and headed toward the clerk's office. None of the other superior court judges had to deal with this. Judge Wagner was a nice guy, but with a face that looked like a pumpkin left to rot after Halloween. Judge Gerhardt—a fellow female—had *blouses* that were older than Alex. When Alex had first come to the bench, she'd thought that being a relatively young, moderately attractive woman was a *good* thing—a vote against typecasting—but on mornings like this, she wasn't so sure.

She dumped her purse in chambers, shrugged into her robe, and took five minutes to drink her coffee and review the docket. Each case got its own file, but cases for repeat offenders were rubber-banded together, and sometimes judges wrote Post-it notes to each other inside about the case. Alex opened one and saw a picture of a stick-figure man with bars in front of his face—a signal from Judge Gerhardt that this was the offender’s last chance, and that next time, he should go to jail.

She rang the buzzer to signify to the court officer that she was ready to start, and waited to hear her cue: “*All rise, the Honorable Alexandra Cormier presiding.*” Walking into a courtroom, to Alex, always felt as if she were stepping onto a stage for the first time at a Broadway opening. You knew there would be people there, you knew their gazes would all be focused on you, but that didn’t prevent you from having a moment when you could not breathe, could not believe you were the one they had come to see.

Alex moved briskly behind the bench and sat down. There were seventy arraignments scheduled for that morning, and the courtroom was packed. The first defendant was called, and he shuffled past the bar with his eyes averted.

“Mr. O’Reilly,” Alex said, and as the man met her gaze she recognized him as the guy from the lobby. He was clearly uncomfortable, now that he realized whom he’d been flirting with. “You’re the gentleman who assisted me earlier, aren’t you?”

He swallowed. “Yes, Your Honor.”

“If you’d known I was the judge, Mr. O’Reilly, would you have said, ‘Hey, baby, I like your shoes?’”

The defendant glanced down, weighing impropriety against honesty. “I guess so, Your Honor,” he said after a moment. “Those *are* great shoes.”

The entire courtroom went still, anticipating her reaction. Alex smiled broadly. “Mr. O’Reilly,” she said, “I couldn’t agree more.”

Lacy Houghton leaned over the bed railing and put her face right in front of her sobbing patient's. "You can do this," she said firmly. "You *can* do this, and you will."

After sixteen hours of labor, they were all exhausted—Lacy, the patient, and the father-to-be, who was facing zero-hour with the dawning realization that he was superfluous, that right now, his wife wanted her midwife much more than she wanted him. "I want you to get behind Janine," Lacy told him, "and brace her back. Janine, I want you to look at me and give me another good push . . ."

The woman gritted her teeth and bore down, losing all sense of herself in the effort to create someone else. Lacy reached down to feel the baby's head, to guide it past the seal of skin and quickly loop the cord over its head without ever losing eye contact with her patient. "For the next twenty seconds, your baby is going to be the newest person on this planet," Lacy said. "Would you like to meet her?"

The answer was a pressured push. A crest of intention, a roar of purpose, a sluice of slick, purpled body that Lacy quickly lifted into the mother's arms, so that when the infant cried for the first time in this life, she would already be in a position to be comforted.

Her patient started weeping again—tears had a whole different melody, didn't they, without the pain threaded through them? The new parents bent over their baby, a closed circle. Lacy stepped back and watched. There was plenty of work left for a midwife to do even after the moment of birth, but for right now, she wanted to make eye contact with this little being. Where parents would notice a chin that looked like Aunt Marge's or a nose that resembled Grandpa's, Lacy would see instead a gaze wide with wisdom and peace—eight pounds of unadulterated possibility. Newborns reminded her of tiny Buddhas, faces full of divinity. It didn't last long, though. When Lacy saw these same infants a week later at their regular checkups, they had turned into ordinary—albeit tiny—people.



That holiness, somehow, disappeared, and Lacy was always left wondering where in this world it might go.

While his mother was across town delivering the newest resident of Sterling, New Hampshire, Peter Houghton was waking up. His father knocked on the door on his way out to work—Peter’s alarm clock. Downstairs, a bowl and a box of cereal would be waiting for him—his mother remembered to do that even when she got paged at two in the morning. There would be a note from her, too, telling him to have a good day at school, as if it were that simple.

Peter threw back his covers. He moved to his desk, still wearing his pajama bottoms, sat down, and logged onto the Internet.

The words on the message board were blurry. He reached for his glasses—he kept them next to his computer. After he slipped the frames on, he dropped the case onto the keyboard—and suddenly, he was seeing something he’d hoped never to see again.

Peter reached out and hit CONTROL ALT DELETE, but he could still picture it, even after the screen went blank, even after he closed his eyes, even after he started to cry.

In a town the size of Sterling, everyone knew everyone else, and always had. In some ways, this was comforting—like a great big extended family that you sometimes loved and sometimes fell out of favor with. At other times, it haunted Josie: like right now, when she was standing in the cafeteria line behind Natalie Zlenko, a dyke of the first order who, way back in second grade, had invited Josie over to play and had convinced her to pee on the front lawn like a boy. *What were you* thinking, her mother had said, when she’d come to pick her up and saw them bare-bottomed and squatting over the daffodils. Even now, a decade later, Josie couldn’t look at Natalie Zlenko with her buzz cut and her ever-present SLR camera without wondering if Natalie still thought about that, too.

On Josie's other side was Courtney Ignatio, the alpha female of Sterling High. With her honey-blond hair hanging over her shoulders like a shawl made of silk and her low-rise jeans mail-ordered from Fred Segal, she'd spawned an entourage of clones. On Courtney's tray was a bottle of water and a banana. On Josie's was a platter of French fries. It was second period, and just like her mother had predicted, she was famished.

"Hey," Courtney said, loud enough for Natalie to overhear. "Can you tell the *vagitarian* to let us pass?"

Natalie's cheeks burned with color, and she flattened herself up against the sneeze guard of the salad bar so that Courtney and Josie could slip by. They paid for their food and walked across the cafeteria.

Whenever she came into the cafeteria, Josie felt like a naturalist observing different species in their natural, nonacademic habitat. There were the geeks, bent over their textbooks and laughing at math jokes nobody else even *wanted* to understand. Behind them were the art freaks, who smoked clove cigarettes on the ropes course behind the school and drew manga comics in the margins of their notes. Near the condiment bar were the skanks, who drank black coffee and waited for the bus that would take them to the technical high school three towns over for their afternoon classes; and the druggies, already strung out by nine o'clock in the morning. There were misfits, too—kids like Natalie and Angela Phlug, fringe friends by default, because nobody else would have them.

And then there was Josie's posse. They took over two tables, not because there were so many of them, but because they were larger than life: Emma, Maddie, Haley, John, Brady, Trey, Drew. Josie could remember how, when she started hanging around with this group, she'd get everyone's names confused. They were *that* interchangeable.

They all sort of looked alike, too—the boys all wearing their maroon home hockey jerseys and their hats backward, bright thatches of hair stuck through the loops at their foreheads like

the start of a fire; the girls carbon copies of Courtney, by studious design. Josie slipped inconspicuously into the heart of them, because she looked like Courtney, too. Her tangle of hair had been blown glass-straight; her heels were three inches high, even though there was still snow on the ground. If she appeared the same on the outside, it was that much easier to ignore the fact that she didn't really know how she felt on the inside.

"Hey," Maddie said, as Courtney sat down beside her.

"Hey."

"Did you hear about Fiona Kierland?"

Courtney's eyes lit up; gossip was as good a catalyst as any chemical. "The one whose boobs are two different sizes?"

"No, that's Fiona the sophomore. I'm talking about Fiona the freshman."

"The one who always carries a box of tissues for her allergies?" Josie said, sliding into a seat.

"Or not," Haley said. "Guess who got sent to rehab for snorting coke."

"Get out."

"That's not even the whole scandal," Emma added. "Her dealer was the head of the Bible study group that meets after school."

"Oh my God!" Courtney said.

"Exactly."

"Hey." Matt slipped into the chair beside Josie. "What took you so long?"

She turned to him. At this end of the table, the guys were rolling straw wrappers into spitballs and talking about the end of spring skiing. "How long do you think the half-pipe will stay open at Sunapee?" John asked, lobbing a spitball toward a kid one table away who had fallen asleep.

The boy had been in Josie's Sign Language elective last year. Like her, he was a junior. His arms and legs were skinny and white and splayed like a stickbug; his mouth, as he snored, was wide-open.

“You missed, loser,” Drew said. “If Sunapee closes, Killington’s still good. They have snow until, like, August.” His spitball landed in the boy’s hair.

*Derek.* The kid’s name was Derek.

Matt glanced at Josie’s French fries. “You’re not going to eat *those*, are you?”

“I’m starving.”

He pinched the side of her waist, a caliper and a criticism all at once. Josie looked down at the fries. Ten seconds ago, they’d looked golden brown and smelled like heaven; now all she could see was the grease that stained the paper plate.

Matt took a handful and passed the rest to Drew, who threw a spitball that landed in the sleeping boy’s mouth. With a choke and a sputter, Derek startled awake.

“Sweet!” Drew high-fived John.

Derek spat into a napkin and rubbed his mouth hard. He glanced around to see who else had been watching. Josie suddenly remembered a sign from her ASL elective, almost all of which she’d forgotten the moment she’d taken the final. A closed fist moved in a circle over the heart meant *I’m sorry*.

Matt leaned over and kissed her neck. “Let’s get out of here.” He drew Josie to her feet and then turned to his friends. “Later,” he said.

The gymnasium at Sterling High School was on the second floor, above what would have been a swimming pool if the bond issue had passed when the school was in its planning stages, and what instead became three classrooms that continually resounded with the pounding of sneakered feet and bouncing basketballs. Michael Beach and his best friend, Justin Friedman, two freshmen, sat on the sidelines of the basketball court while their Phys Ed teacher went over the mechanics of dribbling for the hundredth time. It was a wasted exercise—kids in this class were either like Noah James, already an expert, or like Michael and Justin, who were fluent in Elvish but defined *home run* as

what you did after school in order to avoid getting hung up on coat hooks by your underwear. They sat cross-legged and knob-kneed, listening to the rodent's squeak of Coach Spears's white sneakers as he hustled from one end of the court to the other.

"Ten bucks says I get picked last for a team," Justin murmured.

"I wish we could get out of class," Michael commiserated. "Maybe there'll be a fire drill."

Justin grinned. "An earthquake."

"A monsoon."

"Locusts!"

"A terrorist attack!"

Two sneakers stopped in front of them. Coach Spears glared down, his arms folded. "You two want to tell me what's so funny about basketball?"

Michael glanced at Justin, then up at the coach. "Absolutely nothing," he said.

After showering, Lacy Houghton made herself a mug of green tea and wandered peacefully through her house. When the kids had been tiny and she'd been overwhelmed by work and life, Lewis would ask her what he could do to make things better. It had been a great irony for her, given Lewis's job. A professor at Sterling College, his specialty was the economics of happiness. Yes, it was a real field of study, and yes, he was an expert. He'd taught seminars and written articles and had been interviewed on CNN about measuring the effects of pleasure and good fortune on a monetary scale—and yet he'd been at a loss when it came to figuring out what Lacy would enjoy. Did she want to go out to a nice dinner? Get a pedicure? Take a nap? When she told him what she craved, though, he could not comprehend. She'd wanted to be in her own house, with nobody else in it, and nothing pressing to do.

She opened the door to Peter's room and set her mug on the dresser so that she could make his bed. *What's the point*, Peter

would say when she dogged him to do it himself. *I just have to mess it up again in a few hours.*

For the most part, she didn't enter Peter's room unless he was in it. Maybe that was why, at first, she felt there was something wrong about the space, as if an integral part were missing. At first she assumed that it was Peter's absence that made the room seem a little empty, then she realized that the computer—a steady hum, an ever-ready green screen—had been turned off.

She tugged the sheets up and tucked in the edges; she drew the quilt over them and fluffed the pillows. At the threshold of Peter's bedroom she paused and smiled: the room looked perfect.

Zoe Patterson was wondering what it was like to kiss a guy who had braces. Not that it was a remote possibility for her anytime in the near future, but she figured it was something she ought to consider before the moment actually caught her off guard. In fact, she wondered what it would be like to kiss a guy, period—even one who wasn't orthodontically challenged, like her. And honestly, was there any place better than a stupid math class to let your mind wander?

Mr. McCabe, who thought he was the Chris Rock of algebra, was doing his daily stand-up routine. "So, two kids are in the lunch line, when the first kid turns to his friend and says, 'I have no money! What should I do?' And his buddy says, ' $2x + 5!$ '"

Zoe looked up at the clock. She counted along with the second hand until it was 9:50 on the dot and then popped out of her seat to hand Mr. McCabe a pass. "Ah, orthodontia," he read out loud. "Well, make sure he doesn't wire your mouth shut, Ms. Patterson. So, the buddy says, ' $2x + 5.$ ' A binomial. Get it? *Buy-no-meal?!'*"

Zoe hefted her backpack onto her shoulders and walked out of the classroom. She had to meet her mom in front of the school at ten o'clock—parking was killer, so it would be a drive-pickup. Mid-class, the halls were hollow and resonant; it felt

like trudging through the belly of a whale. Zoe detoured into the main office to sign out on the secretary's clipboard, and then nearly mowed down a kid in her hurry to get outside.

It was warm enough to unzip her jacket and think of summer and soccer camp and what it would be like when her palate expander was finally removed. If you kissed a guy who didn't have braces, and you pressed too hard, could you cut his gums? Something told Zoe that if you made a guy bleed, you probably wouldn't be hooking up with him again. What if he had braces, too, like that blond kid from Chicago who'd just transferred and sat in front of her in English (not that she liked him or anything, although he *had* turned around to hand her back her homework paper and held on to it just a *smidgen* too long . . .)? Would they get stuck together like jammed gears and have to be taken to the emergency room at the hospital, and how totally humiliating would *that* be?

Zoe ran her tongue along the ragged metal fence posts in her mouth. Maybe she could temporarily join a convent.

She sighed and peered down the block to see whether she could make out her mom's green Explorer from the conga line of passing cars. And just about then, something exploded.

Patrick sat at a red light in his unmarked police car, waiting to turn onto the highway. Beside him, on the passenger seat, was a paper bag with a vial of cocaine inside it. The dealer they'd busted at the high school had admitted it was cocaine, and yet Patrick had to waste half his day taking it to the state lab so that someone in a white coat could tell him what he already knew. He fiddled with the volume button of the dispatch radio just in time to hear the fire department being sent to the high school for an explosion. Probably the boiler; the school was old enough for its internal structure to be falling apart. He tried to remember where the boiler was located in Sterling High, and wondered if they'd be lucky enough to come out of that kind of situation without anyone being hurt.

*Shots fired . . .*

The light turned green, but Patrick didn't move. The discharge of a gun in Sterling was rare enough to have him narrow his attention to the voice on the dispatch radio, waiting for an explanation.

*At the high school . . . Sterling High . . .*

The dispatcher's voice was getting faster, more intense. Patrick wheeled the car in a U-turn and started toward the school with his lights flashing. Other voices began to transmit in static bursts: officers stating their positions in town; the on-duty supervisor trying to coordinate manpower and calling for mutual aid from Hanover and Lebanon. Their voices knotted and tangled, blocking one another so that everything and nothing was being said at once.

*Signal 1000, the dispatcher said. Signal 1000.*

In Patrick's entire career as a detective, he'd only heard that call twice. Once was in Maine, when a deadbeat dad had taken an officer hostage. Once was in Sterling, during a potential bank robbery that turned out to be a false alarm. Signal 1000 meant that everyone, immediately, was to get off the radio and leave it free for dispatch. It meant that what they were dealing with was not routine police business.

It meant life or death.

Chaos was a constellation of students, running out of the school and trampling the injured. A boy holding a handmade sign in an upstairs window that read HELP US. Two girls hugging each other and sobbing. Chaos was blood melting pink on the snow; it was the drip of parents that turned into a stream and then a raging river, screaming out the names of their missing children. Chaos was a TV camera in your face, not enough ambulances, not enough officers, and no plan for how to react when the world as you knew it went to pieces.

Patrick pulled halfway onto the sidewalk and grabbed his bulletproof vest from the back of the car. Already, adrenaline



pulsed through him, making the edges of his vision swim and his senses more acute. He found Chief O'Rourke standing with a megaphone in the middle of the melee. "We don't know what we're dealing with yet," the chief said. "SOU's on its way."

Patrick didn't give a damn about the Special Operations Unit. By the time the SWAT team got here, a hundred more shots might be fired; a kid might be killed. He drew his gun. "I'm going in."

"The hell you are. That's not protocol."

"There is no fucking protocol for this," Patrick snapped. "You can fire me later."

As he raced up the steps to the school, he was vaguely aware of two other patrol officers bucking the chief's commands and joining him in the fray. Patrick directed them each down a different hallway, and then he himself pushed through the double doors, past students who were shoving each other in an effort to get outside. Fire alarms blared so loudly that Patrick had to strain to hear the gunshots. He grabbed the coat of a boy streaking past him. "Who is it?" he yelled. "Who's shooting?"

The kid shook his head, speechless, and wrenched away. Patrick watched him run crazily down the hallway, open the door, burst into a rectangle of sunlight.

Students funneled around him, as if he were a stone in a river. Smoke billowed and burned his eyes. Patrick heard another staccato of gunshots, and had to restrain himself from running toward them blindly. "How many of them?" he cried as a girl ran by.

"I . . . I don't know . . ."

The boy beside her turned around and looked at Patrick, torn between offering knowledge and getting the hell out of there. "It's a kid . . . he's shooting everyone . . ."

That was enough. Patrick pushed against the tide, a salmon swimming upstream. Homework papers were scattered on the floor; shell casings rolled beneath the heels of his shoes. Ceiling tiles had been shot off, and a fine gray dust coated the broken

bodies that lay twisted on the floor. Patrick ignored all of this, going against most of his training—running past doors that might hide a perp, disregarding rooms that should have been searched—instead driving forward with his weapon drawn and his heart beating through every inch of his skin. Later, he would remember other sights that he didn't have time to register right away: the heating duct covers that had been pried loose so that students could hide in the crawl space; the shoes left behind by kids who literally ran out of them; the eerie prescience of crime-scene outlines on the floor outside the biology classrooms, where students had been tracing their own bodies on butcher paper for an assignment.

He ran through hallways that seemed to circle in on each other. “*Where?*” he would bite out every time he passed a fleeing student—his only tool of navigation. He'd see sprays of blood, and students crumpled on the ground, and he did not let himself look twice. He pounded up the main stairwell, and just as he reached the top, a door cracked open. Patrick whirled, pointing his gun, as a young female teacher fell to her knees with her hands raised. Behind the white oval of her face were twelve others, featureless and frightened. Patrick could smell urine.

He lowered his gun and beckoned her toward the staircase. “Go,” he commanded, but he did not stay long enough to see if they did.

Turning a corner, Patrick slipped on blood and heard another gunshot, this one loud enough to ring his ears. He swept into the open double doors of the gymnasium and scanned the handful of sprawled bodies, the basketball cart overturned and the globes resting against the far wall—but no shooter. He knew, from the overtime detail he'd taken on Friday nights to monitor high school ball games, that he'd reached the far end of Sterling High. Which meant that the shooter was either hiding somewhere here or had doubled back past him when Patrick hadn't noticed . . . and could even now have cornered him in this gym.

Patrick spun around to the entrance again to see if that was the case, and then heard another shot. He ran to a door that led out from the gym, one he hadn't noticed in his first quick visual sweep of the area. It was a locker room, tiled white on the walls and the floor. He glanced down, saw the fanned spray of blood at his feet, and edged his gun around the corner wall.

Two bodies lay unmoving at one end of the locker room. At the other, closer to Patrick, a slight boy crouched beside a bank of lockers. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, crooked on his thin face. He was shivering hard.

"Are you okay?" Patrick whispered. He did not want to speak out loud and give away his position to the shooter.

The boy only blinked at him.

"Where is he?" Patrick mouthed.

The boy pulled a pistol from beneath his thigh and held it up to his own head.

A new rush of heat surged through Patrick. "Don't fucking move," he shouted, drawing a bead on the boy. "Drop the gun or I will shoot you." Sweat broke out down his back and on his forehead, and he could feel his cupped hands shifting on the butt of the gun as he aimed, determined to lace the kid with bullets if he had to.

Patrick let his forefinger brush gently against the trigger just as the boy opened his fingers wide as a starfish. The pistol fell to the floor, skittering across the tile.

Immediately, he pounced. One of the other officers—whom Patrick hadn't even noticed following him—retrieved the boy's weapon. Patrick dropped the kid onto his stomach and cuffed him, pressing his knee hard into the boy's spine. "Are you alone? Who's with you?"

"Just me," the boy ground out.

Patrick's head was spinning and his pulse was a military tattoo, but he could vaguely hear the other officer calling this information in over the radio: "*Sterling, we have one in custody; we don't have knowledge of anyone else.*"

Just as seamlessly as it had started, it was over—at least as much as something like this could be considered over. Patrick didn't know if there were booby traps or bombs in the school; he didn't know how many casualties there were; he didn't know how many wounded Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center and Alice Peck Day Hospital could take; he didn't know how to go about processing a crime scene this massive. The target had been taken out, but at what irreplaceable cost? Patrick's entire body began to shake, knowing that for so many students and parents and citizens today, he had once again been too late.

He took a few steps and sank down to his knees, mostly because his legs simply gave out from underneath them, and pretended that this was intentional, that he wanted to check out the two bodies at the other end of the room. He was vaguely aware of the shooter being pushed out of the locker room by the other officer, to a waiting cruiser downstairs. He didn't turn to watch the kid go; instead he focused on the body directly in front of him.

A boy, dressed in a hockey jersey. There was a puddle of blood underneath his side, and a gunshot wound through his forehead. Patrick reached out for a baseball cap that had fallen a few feet away, with the words STERLING HOCKEY embroidered across it. He turned the brim around in his hands, an imperfect circle.

The girl lying next to him was facedown, blood spreading from beneath her temple. She was barefoot, and on her toenails was bright pink polish—just like the stuff Tara had put on Patrick. It made his heart catch. This girl, just like his goddaughter and her brother and a million other kids in this country, had gotten up today and gone to school never imagining she would be in danger. She trusted all the grown-ups and teachers and principals to keep her safe. It was why these schools, post-9/11, had teachers wearing ID all the time and doors locked during the day—the enemy was always supposed to be an outsider, not the kid who was sitting right next to you.

Suddenly, the girl shifted. “*Help . . . me . . .*”

Patrick knelt beside her. “I’m here,” he said, his touch gentle as he assessed her condition. “Everything’s all right.” He turned her enough to see that the blood was coming from a cut on her scalp, not a gunshot wound, as he’d assumed. He ran his hands over her limbs. He kept murmuring to her, words that did not always make sense, but that let her know that she wasn’t alone anymore. “What’s your name, sweetheart?”

“Josie . . .” The girl started to thrash, trying to sit up. Patrick put the bulk of his body strategically between her and the boy’s—she’d be in shock already; he didn’t need her to go over the edge. She touched her hand to her forehead, and when it came away oily with blood, she panicked. “What . . . *happened?*”

He should have stayed there and waited for the medics to come get her. He should have radioed for help. But *should* hardly seemed to apply anymore, and so Patrick lifted Josie into his arms. He carried her out of the locker room where she’d nearly been killed, hurried down the stairs, and pushed through the front door of the school, as if he might be able to save them both.