

# Nineteen Minutes



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JODI PICOULT

Jodi Picoult was born to a secular Jewish family on Long Island. She wrote her first story at the age of five, and graduated with a BA from Princeton in 1987, where she studied creative writing. She went on to earn a master's degree in education from Harvard. She published her first novel, *Songs of the Humpback Whale*, in 1992, and since then has gone on to publish two dozen more. Her novels are often inspired by current events, especially timely social problems facing American society, including racism, euthanasia, and the death penalty. *Nineteen Minutes* was the first of her books to debut at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller's list. She is married and has three children; she says that *Nineteen Minutes* was partially inspired by witnessing the problem of bullying via her children. She lives in Hanover, New Hampshire.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The most important historical phenomenon connected to the novel is, of course, school shootings. While school shootings are not unique to the U.S., they occur at a much higher rate there than any other country, triggering an ongoing debate about whether attacks on schools (as well as other mass shootings committed on civilians) should be taken as grounds to implement gun control laws. Some of the most high-profile school shootings that have taken place in recent years include the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 and the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018. Yet while the number of school shootings taking place in the U.S. has escalated rapidly since 2010, *Nineteen Minutes* was written in 2007, and two shootings that most directly inspired the novel both took place in the late 1990s. These events were the Heath High School shooting, which took place in Kentucky in 1997, and the Columbine High School massacre, which occurred in Colorado in 1999. Other historical events connected to the novel include the terrorist attacks of September 11, which are described in the novel as occurring when the main characters, Peter and Josie, have just started middle school. These attacks led to increased anxiety in the U.S. about public safety and security. The rise of the internet and the problem of cyberbullying and online radicalization also prominently feature in the novel.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A classic novel about bullying, mob mentality, and the violent capabilities of teenagers is William Golding's [Lord of the Flies](#),

which depicts the disturbing realities lying beneath the veneer of childhood innocence. Stephen King's *Carrie*, meanwhile, is another story of a student who is tormented and humiliated by bullies only to decide to seek revenge. King also wrote a novel about a school shooting (originally published under the pseudonym Richard Bachman) called *Rage*. (It is worth noting that, chillingly, this novel is known to have inspired several real-life shooters.) Due to the ongoing prevalence of school shootings in the U.S., many young adult novels have begun addressing this topic in recent years. These include Todd Strasser's *Give a Boy a Gun*, Jennifer Brown's *Hate List*, and Walter Dean Myers' *Shooter*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Nineteen Minutes*
- **When Written:** 2006-2007
- **Where Written:** Hanover, New Hampshire
- **When Published:** 2007
- **Literary Period:** Twenty-First Century American Fiction
- **Genre:** Popular Fiction
- **Setting:** The fictional small town of Sterling, New Hampshire
- **Climax:** During Peter's trial, Josie confesses that she shot Matt.
- **Antagonist:** Peter Houghton; Matt Royston, Drew Girard, and Peter's other bullies
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Limited

### EXTRA CREDIT

**The Family That Writes Together.** Picoult has co-written two young adult novels with her daughter, Samantha van Leer.

**A Literary Universe.** Several of Picoult's characters recur in several distinct novels she's written, including Jordan McAfee and Patrick Ducharme.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Alex Cormier is rushing to her job as a judge, while her daughter Josie, a "pretty, popular, straight-A student" drinks coffee. Yet beneath this exterior, Josie is miserable, and keeps a bag of Ambien taped to her dresser to use in case she decides to kill herself. Her boyfriend, Matt, arrives to take her to school, and for a moment Josie forgets all her troubles. Later that day at school, a student named Zoe Patterson leaves Mr. McCabe's math class early in order to go to an orthodontist appointment. While she is waiting on the school steps, she hears an explosion.

Patrick Duharma, the town of Sterling's only police detective, gets reports of a shooter at Sterling High School. Running through the school, Patrick finds Josie lying next to Matt's dead body and carries her out.

Seventeen years earlier, Alex and Lacy Houghton meet in a prenatal class that Lacy, a midwife, is teaching. Alex is 24 and considered terminating her pregnancy, but now seems to want to have the baby. Alex is a public defender; the father of her child is her married law professor, Logan Rourke. Alex gives birth with Lacy as her midwife.

Hours after the shooting takes place, Lacy arrives at Sterling High to check on her son, Peter, only to hear someone say that he is the shooter. Peter is in custody, having been arrested by Patrick. Ten people have been killed in the shooting, nine students and one teacher, Mr. McCabe. Josie is in the hospital and can't remember anything; she believes she was in a car accident. Peter's father, Lewis, contacts Jordan McAfee, a lawyer who is initially hesitant about representing Peter, but then agrees to do so.

The novel jumps back twelve years. Peter is so excited for his first day of kindergarten that he can't sleep. Lacy makes her elder son Joey promise that he will look after Peter, but as soon as they get on the bus Joey abandons him. Almost immediately, another kid makes fun of Peter's lunchbox and throws it out of the bus window, but Josie says she will share hers with him. Peter continues to be bullied; although he initially hides this from Lacy, she soon finds out the truth. Josie gets in trouble for beating up Drew Girard in defense of Peter. One day, Alex comes to pick Josie up from a playdate at Peter's house only to find the two of them playing with Lewis' gun collection. Alex is horrified, and this causes a fight between her and Lacy.

The day after the shooting, Josie comes home from the hospital. The police remove a trove of suspicious items from Peter's room. Josie goes to Matt's funeral service, where she is overcome by an urge to approach his casket, only to break down in front of everyone and feel mortified. Lacy goes to visit Peter in prison. Patrick watches the surveillance footage from the day of the shooting, and is disturbed to see Peter sit down to eat a bowl of **Rice Krispies** in the middle of his murder spree.

The novel flashes back again. On Peter's first day of middle school, Drew pushes Peter and calls him a "retard." The September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center take place, and Alex and Lacy pick up their kids from school, both reeling. Peter befriends another awkward, nerdy kid forced to play soccer by his parents, Derek Markowitz, and the two quickly form a bond. Meanwhile, in social studies Josie is partnered up with one of the popular girls, Courtney Ignatio. Although Josie is initially horrified by this, she and Courtney end up becoming friends. Peter and Lewis go hunting together; Joey stays at home because he can't stand the sight of blood. As Josie becomes closer with the popular kids, Peter accuses her of being fake.

Back in the present, Principal McAllistar notes that, because Sterling High is still the scene of an ongoing criminal investigation, school will resume in another location. Jordan's wife, Selena, who also works as his investigator, questions Lacy about Peter. Meanwhile, Patrick speaks to Natalie Zlenko, the president of Sterling High GLAD, wondering if Peter's attack might have been motivated either by homophobia and/or Peter's concerns about being gay himself. Natalie says Peter came to one GLAD meeting and never returned.

Jordan goes to the jail to see Peter, who reveals that Joey was killed by a drunk driver. Peter states that—because Joey tormented him and set unrealistically high expectations for his own behavior—Peter is glad his brother is dead. Jordan decides to argue that Peter was suffering from battered woman syndrome, a psychological state caused by ongoing exposure to abuse, which can lead the victim to commit acts of violence against their abuser. Meanwhile, Patrick examines a computer game Peter designed that is set in a school and whose main objective is killing jocks in a violent manner. The game is called **Hide-n-Shriek**. One of Peter's victims was a special-needs student called Kaitlin Harvey; her mother, Yvette, kills herself while pretending to examine a gun at a gun store.

One year before the shooting, Josie happens across an article about her father, whom she has never met, in the *Boston Globe*. The article states that he is now dean of students at Harvard Law School and is running for district attorney. Peter and Josie end up both working at the town copy shop, QuikCopy. Josie has now assimilated into the popular crowd to the point that Peter doesn't recognize her. At work, Peter shows off his computer hacking skills, and Josie asks him to find Logan's address for her. Shortly after, Peter gives a presentation about popularity in math class in which he cites Josie as a "bridge," someone who can easily move between social groups. Josie is humiliated and tells Peter never to speak to her again. Shortly after, Peter sets fire to a dumpster at work in an effort to force Josie to "rescue" him from the flames. She does, but reports him to their boss, Mr. Cargrew, who promptly fires Peter.

Around this time, Matt drives Josie to Logan's house. However, Logan doesn't want to see her and gives her \$300 to stay away from him. Peter goes to a gay bar in order to figure out if he's truly gay as his bullies claim. An older man named Kurt becomes sexually aggressive toward him and Mr. McCabe rescues him, admitting to Peter that he is gay (although he remains closeted at school). Back at school, Josie and Peter get stuck in an elevator together and play games to pass the time. During a game of "Truth or Dare," Josie admits that the reason why she is on crutches is because Matt hit her, causing her to break her leg.

A month after the shooting, Patrick goes to visit Ed McCabe's partner Philip, who tells Patrick that Ed did not think Peter was gay. A journalist named Elena Battista writes to Peter in jail, claiming to be a college student and a survivor of bullying.

Jordan goes to see Dr. King Wah, a forensic psychiatrist and expert on battered woman syndrome, to ask him to evaluate Peter for the trial. Elena comes to interview Peter for a paper she is writing about bullying, and Peter is excited by how attractive she is. However, it is soon revealed that Elena is actually a journalist who only pretended to be writing a paper for college, and was actually writing a tabloid article about Peter entitled "Inside the Mind of a Killer." Jordan furiously reprimands Peter for communicating with someone on the outside without notifying him.

Alex and Patrick run into each other at a Chinese restaurant and strike up a conversation. When Patrick mistakes Alex's mentor Whit Hobart for her date, he feels deeply disappointed even though he knows it should be none of this business. Alex recuses herself from serving as the judge for the shooting case due to her personal connection to it. In jail, Peter beats up his new cellmate, who appears to be cognitively impaired. A romance begins between Alex and Patrick.

The month before the shooting, Matt tries to persuade Josie to have sex without a condom. Peter writes Josie an email confessing his love for her; Courtney reads it while Josie is in the shower and sends it out to the whole school. Josie is terrified by the realization that she is pregnant. At school, she is humiliated by the revelation that everyone has read the email Peter sent her. Courtney tricks Peter into believing Josie likes him back. The truth is then brutally revealed, and Matt pulls down Peter's pants in front of the whole cafeteria. Soon after, Peter steals two semiautomatic guns from his neighbor, a retired cop named Mr. Weatherall. Josie has a miscarriage, potentially as a result of her own efforts to terminate the pregnancy using natural remedies.

Five months after the shooting, the jury for Peter's trial is selected. Alex and Patrick's relationship is going strong, and although Alex is still trying to keep it secret from Josie, Josie reveals that she knows what's happening. The trial begins, and in his opening speech Jordan argues that Peter was suffering from PTSD when he committed the shooting.

Various people provide witness testimony; Jordan intensively interrogates Drew about his history of bullying Peter. On the stand, Derek explains that—even though he and Peter designed and played *Hide-n-Shriek* together—he was shocked and horrified that Peter actually committed a mass shooting in real life.

On the morning of the shooting, Peter gets on the computer to see if any users have uploaded comments after he shared *Hide-n-Shriek* in a forum, but his computer freezes on the email he sent Josie, and he is overwhelmed with shame, panic, and horror.

Back at the trial, a forensic psychiatrist and expert in school shootings named Dr. Curstis Uppergate concludes that he does not think Peter was mentally ill when he committed the attack;

after, King Wah gives the opposite view, arguing that Peter suffered from battered woman syndrome and PTSD, and was dissociating at the time of the shooting. Lacy gives her testimony, followed by Peter himself, who deviates from what he planned to say and comes off in a decidedly unsympathetic manner.

Horrified at the bad turn the trial has taken, Jordan decides to call Josie as a witness as a last-ditch attempt to elicit sympathy for Peter. On the witness stand, Josie confesses that after fleeing to the locker room with Matt, they were found by Peter, who accidentally dropped a gun that Josie picked up. At first she pointed it at Peter, but ended up shooting Matt in the stomach. Peter then shot Matt in the head.

Following Josie's confession, the courtroom erupts in chaos. Peter is ultimately convicted of eight first-degree murders and two second-degree murders. He is sentenced to life in prison, but kills himself almost immediately after the trial by stuffing a sock down his throat. Josie is charged as an accessory to second-degree murder and is sentenced to five years in prison. At the end of the novel, a year after the shooting, Patrick and Alex walk through Sterling High, which now has a memorial to the murdered students. Alex is pregnant.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Peter Houghton** – The main character in the novel and the perpetrator of the school shooting around which the narrative is centered. He is 17 years old when he commits the shooting and 18 when he is tried in court, yet due to the nonchronological nature of the narrative, the reader also gets glimpses into Peter's life from infancy onward. Peter is a weak, sensitive, and troubled boy—this is true even as a baby, when he has difficulty sleeping. It is never properly explained why Peter struggles where others—notably his older brother, Joey—find life easy. Peter is subjected to intense bullying from his very first day of kindergarten, and this has a significant impact on his personality. He is desperate to be accepted but finds that he is automatically disliked by pretty much everyone he meets. The one exception to this is Josie, the daughter of his mother Lacy's friend Alex. As children, Peter and Josie are best friends, and Josie defends him from bullies. However, once they get to middle school and Josie is accepted into the popular crowd, she realizes that being friends with Peter is a liability, and they drift apart. Peter is devastated and resentful about this turn of events. In high school, after a period of questioning his sexual orientation due to constantly being called slurs for a gay man, Peter comes to realize that he has a crush on Josie and confesses his love for her in an email that Josie's friend Courtney sends to the whole school. Shortly after, Peter is "pantsed" in the cafeteria by Josie's boyfriend, Matt, which is

the final straw in triggering him to commit the mass shooting. After killing 10 people and wounding 19 more, Peter is captured and imprisoned. He is found guilty and sentenced to life in prison, but he kills himself soon after the trial by stuffing a sock down his throat.

**Josie Cormier** – Peter’s former best friend and the other main character in the novel. Josie is the child of a single mother, Alex, and grows up not knowing her father (Logan Rourke). She is smart and hard-working, and as a child she has a strong sense of right and wrong, which is conveyed by her willingness to stand up to Peter’s bullies. However, as she gets older Josie struggles to handle other people’s perceptions of her and the social pressures to fit in. After befriending one of the popular kids, Courtney, Josie drifts away from Peter. When he behaves in a way that scares and humiliates her, she cuts him off and begins dating a hockey player, Matt. Her relationship with Matt is perceived as ideal, and Josie falls deeply in love with him. However, Matt is also controlling and possessive, and he eventually becomes physically abusive. Josie ends up feeling trapped between her love for Matt (and her knowledge that by dating him, her social position is safe) and her concern over the way he treats her. She feels unable to talk to anyone and even fantasizes about suicide. The reader knows from the beginning of the novel that Josie is in the locker room with Matt when he is killed during the shooting, but in the aftermath she repeatedly insists that she doesn’t remember exactly what happened. However, at the very end of the novel, during Peter’s trial, Josie dramatically confesses to having shot Matt herself. Despite the fact that Josie seemed to have been suffering from PTSD and battered woman syndrome, she is sentenced to five years in prison.

**Alex Cormier** – Josie’s mother and the youngest judge in New Hampshire. On the outside she is a hard-working, formidable woman who maintains a pristine reputation and finds it easy to fit in with a vast variety of social groups. However, inside Alex is plagued by uncertainty, particularly when it comes to her competence as a mother. Alex became pregnant with Josie at the age of 24 as the result of an affair with her married law professor, Logan Rourke. On discovering that Alex is pregnant, Logan encourages her to have an abortion, but Alex ends up keeping the baby and raising her as a single parent. While Alex lacks many of the skills traditionally believed to be “maternal,” such as cooking, she is a devoted mother who would do anything to protect Josie. After the shooting, Alex initially takes on the case as a judge, despite the fact that she has such a close connection to it and thus could be accused of bias. Under pressure, she eventually decides to recuse herself. Throughout this time she develops a romance with Patrick Duharma, a police detective also working on the case. At the end of the novel, Alex is pregnant with his child.

**Lacy Houghton** – Peter and Joey’s mother, Lewis’s wife, and a professional midwife. Lacy is a much more traditionally typical

mother than Alex, with a maternal, nurturing personality. She adores her job and loves to see the innocence in the faces of newborn babies. Although she is a devoted mother who loves her family, over the course of the novel Lacy is forced to confront the fact that both of her son’s lives ended up going wrong, and that she never fully understood them. In the case of her eldest son, Joey, who is killed by a drunk driver, this involves realizing that Joey was a heroin user and that he viciously bullied Peter. Meanwhile, she must face the fact that her other son, Peter, committed a school shooting and murdered 10 people. A profoundly moral and reflective person, Lacy does not shy away from the intense self-scrutiny that these events provoke. While at times she is overly harsh on herself and blames herself for everything that went wrong in her sons’ lives, overall she comes to realize that it is not really her fault, even if she wasn’t the perfect parent. She comes to believe that there is value in loving a person everyone hates (namely Peter), but also admits that there is part of her that hates and fears her son.

**Jordan McAfee** – Peter’s lawyer, and Selena’s husband. Jordan is a smart, dedicated, and talented lawyer who decides to take on Peter’s case when he realizes that Peter—like everyone—is somebody’s child. His commitment to getting Peter a fair trial and hard work at ensuring this happens (despite extraordinary odds) make him an admirable character. Yet at the same time, his motivations and methods could also be perceived as a little suspect. At times, it seems as if he cares more about his own career and reputation than he does about delivering justice or helping the Sterling community heal in the aftermath of the shooting. His wife, Selena, also works as his investigator, and together they have a baby boy, Sam. (Jordan also has another son from his first marriage, who is a college student.) Jordan’s devotion to his family is a big part of what motivates him to work hard for Peter, even when he faces vicious backlash from the Sterling community for defending a “monster.”

**Selena** – Jordan’s wife, who also works as his investigator. Like Jordan, Selena is smart, talented, and hard-working. However, while her husband sometimes lacks a degree of empathy and care, Selena brings a more human touch to their work together. She cites her experience as a black woman as a reason why she can understand how someone who has been bullied their whole life—like Peter—can come to feel trapped and powerless. She and Jordan are the parents of a baby, Sam.

**Matt Royston** – A hockey player at Sterling High and Josie’s boyfriend. Matt is part of the popular crowd and has a high social status at school, although he is not particularly smart and sometimes makes Josie do his homework for him. He exhibits traditionally masculine behavior, acting tough, taunting those he perceives as weak, and being possessive and controlling of Josie. Indeed, this possessiveness is eventually revealed to be a sign of abuse. In many ways, Matt is a typical abuser: he wants to control every aspect of Josie’s life, is irrationally jealous,

punishes her when he believes that she has embarrassed him in front of others, claims that he only abuses her because she makes him (and because he loves her too much), and threatens suicide the only time she tries to leave him. Matt dies in the shooting—at first the reader believes that Peter kills him, but at the end of the novel Josie confesses that she shot Matt in the stomach, before Peter shot him in the head.

**Patrick Duharne** – The only police detective in Sterling and Alex’s romantic interest. Patrick is skilled and dedicated to this job, and he has a deep sense of justice. He is also a devoted romantic partner to Alex, as he is kind, chivalrous, and charming. After saving Josie during the school shooting he develops a particular attachment to her, which causes him to constantly worry about her. He is also the only adult who manages to get through to her during the traumatized aftermath of the event. Toward the end of the novel, Patrick begins to suspect that someone else shot Matt, and realizes this conclusively just before Josie makes her confession. At the novel’s conclusion, he and Alex are expecting a child.

**Lewis Houghton** – Joey and Peter’s father, Lacy’s husband, and a professor of economics at Sterling College. He is an expert on the economics of happiness and is the first person in the world to devise a formula for happiness, R/E (Reality divided by Expectations). Lewis is a somewhat distant father who always had an easier time connecting to Joey than he did to Peter. The one way in which he and Peter bond is over hunting, and Lewis has a firm belief that if he teaches Peter to “respect” guns, he will never misuse them. This obviously doesn’t end up being the case, and Lewis is forced to confront his failures as a parent. Unlike Lacy, he doesn’t visit Peter in prison after the shooting, citing the fact that the rage he feels at the drunk driver who killed Joey makes him understand the rage other parents feel toward Peter. Eventually, Lewis apologizes to Peter for being somewhat distant his whole life. After Peter’s trial, Lewis begins conducting academic research on school shootings.

**Joey Houghton** – Peter’s older brother. At the time the shooting takes place, Joey is already dead, having been killed by a drunk driver, and he only appears in the narrative incidentally. Joey was known as a “golden boy” who had every possible positive characteristic—he is smart, talented, charismatic, athletic, and beloved by everyone. However, beneath this perfect exterior Joey was hiding several secrets. He bullied Peter viciously and was one of the main instigators of Peter’s torment at school. He was also a heroin user, a fact that Lacy only learns after his death.

**Mr. Ed McCabe** – A math teacher at Sterling High. He is gay but closeted at school. When Peter goes to a gay bar in an attempt to see if he really is gay, Mr. McCabe saves him from a predatory older man; however, Peter rejects Mr. McCabe’s offers of support. He dies in the shooting, killed by Peter while trying to protect his students.

**Logan Rourke** – Josie’s biological father and Alex’s law

professor. During his and Alex’s affair, Logan actively seduced her and promised that he would leave his wife for her. However, when Alex became pregnant, he pressured her to have an abortion; when she didn’t, he left her. Later in life, he becomes dean of Harvard Law School and runs for district attorney. Josie goes to his house and introduces herself to him, but he doesn’t want to have anything to do with her and gives her \$300 to stay away from him.

**Angela Phlug** – A student who was formerly in Peter’s French class, and who moves school after the shooting in order to deal with her trauma. She writes Peter a letter while he is in prison, explaining how she’s been affected by the shooting and saying that, before it happened, she’d actually wanted to be his friend.

**Curtis Uppergate** A forensic psychiatrist who appears at the trial. While being questioned, he says that he believes Peter was not suffering from mental illness on the day of the shooting, and that there is evidence he deliberately planned the attack. He also claims that, while Peter was evidently bullied, school shooters tend to exaggerate their experience of bullying. However, Jordan points out that Uppergate hasn’t even met Peter, and so his evaluation is baseless.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Courtney Ignatio** – The “alpha female” of Sterling High. Courtney is the queen of the popular girls, and she is widely idolized. She is cruel and repeatedly tries to embarrass Josie despite the fact that they are nominally friends. She is killed in the school shooting.

**Brady Pryce** – The male half of the “Brangelina” of Sterling High. Brady is a popular boy and a devoted boyfriend to Haley. When Peter shoots Haley, Brady steps in front of the bullet but survives.

**Haley Weaver** – Brady’s girlfriend and a former two-time homecoming queen. Haley is facially disfigured in the shooting and testifies at Peter’s trial.

**John Eberhard** – Another member of the popular crowd, who is injured in the school shooting and ends up with brain damage.

**Drew Girard** – Another member of the popular crowd who also survives the school shooting. One of Peter’s main tormenters.

**Maddie Shaw** – One of the popular girls who is killed in the school shooting.

**Emma Alexis** – Another popular girl, who ends up in a wheelchair after the shooting.

**Derek Markowitz** – Peter’s best friend in high school. Like Peter, Derek is awkward, nerdy, unathletic, and a computer whiz. Derek is always subject to merciless bullying. He and Peter build and play the game **Hide-n-Shriek** together, but when Peter actually acts on their fantasies of revenge, Derek is shocked and horrified.

**Diana Leven** – A lawyer who serves as the prosecution during Peter’s trial. She has a professional rivalry with Jordan, and this seems to extend into a personal hatred.

**Dr. King Wah** – A forensic psychiatrist whose evaluation Jordan uses as evidence in Peter’s trial. Dr. Wah is an expert in battered woman syndrome and determines that Peter had post-traumatic stress disorder comparable to an abused woman at the time he committed the shooting.

**Michael Beach** – An unpopular student who narrowly avoids being killed by Peter in the school shooting and watches his friend Justin die in front of him.

**Justin Friedman** – A nerdy student whom Peter kills in the shooting.

**Nadya** – A client whom Alex represents during her time as a public defender. Nadya is a victim of domestic violence and an impoverished single mother.

**Dr. Guenther Frankenstein** – The state medical examiner and a former Mr. Universe.

**Whit Hobart** – Alex’s mentor, who originally encourages her to apply to become a judge.

**Liz** – The “whole property maintenance department” at the Sterling courthouse. Befriends Alex.

**Sam McAfee** – Jordan and Selena’s baby son.

**Dr. Ervin Peabody** – A professor of psychology at Sterling College who once co-authored a paper on school shooters and is cited as an expert in press coverage of the Sterling High shooting. Dr. Peabody runs a grief counseling session for the whole town.

**Natalie Zlenko** – The president of Sterling High GLAD.

**Coach Dusty Spears** – An athletic coach at Sterling High, who was a jock (and, it’s implied, a bully) as a teenager.

**Topher McPhee** – One of the students Peter kills.

**Whit Obermeyer** – Another student Peter kills.

**Grace Murtaugh** – Another student Peter kills.

**Principal Arthur McAllistar** – The principal of Sterling High. He claims to have a handle on the problem of bullying but is clearly inept.

**Kaitlyn Harvey** – A special-needs student that Peter kills in the shooting.

**Yvette Harvey** – Kaitlyn’s mother. She kills herself soon after the shooting takes place, seemingly due to grief.

**Selma** – A police technician.

**Carnivore** – An inmate at the maximum-security jail where Peter is incarcerated before his trial. He is accused of raping and killing a waitress but maintains that he is innocent.

**Hugh Macquarie** – Chair of the economics department at Sterling College.

**Kelly** – A mentally disabled patient of Lacy’s who becomes pregnant as a result of gang rape.

**Dolores Keating** – A transfer student to Peter and Josie’s middle school, who gets her period in class. Peter (accidentally) points this out, leading to Dolores becoming the target of intense bullying.

**Mark Ignatio** – Courtney’s father, who yells abuse at Jordan during the grief session held by Dr. Peabody.

**Mr. Cargrew** – Josie and Peter’s boss at QuikCopy. He watches bestiality porn on his work computer and fires Peter after he sets fire to a dumpster.

**Joe Urquhardt** – A comically grotesque Canadian lawyer whom Liz sets up Alex with on a date. Alex finds him horrifying and cancels the date within seconds of meeting him.

**Mrs. Sandringham** – Peter’s English teacher.

**Kurt** – A predatory older man who aggressively tries to seduce Peter at a gay bar.

**Philip O’Shea** – Mr. McCabe’s partner.

**Elena Battista** – A journalist who poses as a college student and bullying victim in order to interview Peter for a tabloid article.

**Dee Dee Markowitz** – Derek’s mother.

**Mr. Weatherall** – Peter’s neighbor, a retired cop from whom the Houghtons often borrow gas for their snowblower. Peter steals Mr. Weatherall’s two semiautomatic guns, which he keeps inside a sugar canister.

**Judge Wagner** – The judge who presides over the school shooting case after Alex recuses herself.

**Zoe Patterson** – The first person Peter shot during the attack. She testifies at his trial.

**Jada Knight** – A student who Peter shoots. She survives but is left traumatized.

**Jada Knight’s Mother** – Jada’s mother. After the second day of Peter’s trial, she tells the press about Jada’s trauma and expresses a desire for Peter to receive a harsh punishment.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### VICTIMS VS. PERPETRATORS

By depicting a main character, Peter Houghton, who is severely bullied and goes on to kill 10 people at his high school, *Nineteen Minutes* explores the

often blurred line between victim and perpetrator. One of the key questions the novel asks is whether Peter's history of being victimized by others mitigates his responsibility for his crime. The same question applies to Josie Cormier, another student at Peter's school who shoots her abusive boyfriend, Matt Royston, amid the chaos of Peter's attack. Overall, the novel shows that the binary between victim and perpetrator isn't absolute—people who are victims of bullying or abuse can also be perpetrators of violence. At the same time, it also emphasizes that committing violence and cruelty against others is not an inevitable or excusable outcome of being victimized oneself.

The book shows that Peter has been bullied to a harrowing degree, and in this sense is the quintessential example of a victim. To a certain extent, this makes questionable the extent to which Peter can be blamed for murdering 10 people at his school. From his very first day of kindergarten right up until the point that he commits the school shooting in high school, Peter is subjected to relentless abuse. Among his many torments, he is taunted, beaten up, called names, and forcibly stripped in front of his schoolmates. As a result, Dr. King Wah, the forensic psychiatrist who examines Peter during the trial, establishes that he is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. This indicates that the abuse Peter suffered has actually changed his brain chemistry and decreased the control he has over his own actions. Furthermore, Peter's lawyer, Jordan McAfee, hopes that Dr. Wah's diagnosis will help persuade the court that Peter should receive a more lenient sentence.

The idea that Peter's victimhood decreases his blameworthiness for the shooting is further conveyed by Jordan's decision to use "battered woman syndrome" in his defense argument. As Jordan explains to his wife, Selena, the battered woman syndrome argument has historically been used by lawyers defending women who kill their abusive partners. As the narrator explains, "Monsters didn't grow out of nowhere; a housewife didn't turn into a murderer unless someone turned her into one. The Dr. Frankenstein, in her case, was a controlling husband. And in Peter's case, it was the whole of Sterling High School." This idea suggests that Peter only becomes a perpetrator because he was originally a victim. Without being bullied, Peter likely would have never become violent and killed people himself. This means the shooting could arguably be considered an act of self-defence, which theoretically decreases the blame that ought to be placed on Peter.

Jordan's use of the battered woman syndrome defense links the book's exploration of Peter's victimhood to that of Josie. Throughout the novel, it remains unclear why Peter spared Josie during the shooting and what exactly happened when Josie's boyfriend, Matt, was killed. At the same time, over the course of the non-chronological narrative, it is revealed that Matt is abusive toward Josie. He is highly controlling, cruel,

manipulative, violent; he breaks her leg and pressures her into sex without a condom. Toward the end of the novel, Josie is called as a witness during Peter's trial and ends up confessing to having shot Matt herself. The novel never fully exposes Josie's thought process in the moment she shoots Matt; instead, it suggests that her decision is an almost instinctive reaction triggered by the confusion, panic, and terror of the shooting. In this sense, Josie herself betrays signs of both post-traumatic stress disorder and battered woman syndrome. Having been victimized by Matt (and, once the shooting starts, Peter), Josie becomes cut off from her own thoughts and loses control of her actions. Importantly, this is a contrast to Peter, whose decision to perpetrate the mass shooting is premeditated. Furthermore, while Josie experiences immediate and palpable regret after shooting Matt, Peter doesn't exhibit much remorse for the murders he commits.

Although the novel does make it clear that perpetrators of cruelty and violence are often themselves victims, it also does not entirely exonerate those who harm others simply because they have been victimized themselves. This is reflected in the sentencing of both Peter and Josie: despite Jordan's efforts, Peter is sentenced to life in prison, whereas Josie is sentenced to five years (which is actually a comparatively light sentence considering that in the real world, many women who kill their abusive partners also receive life sentences). As these verdicts show, being victimized is generally not seen as an excuse to commit violence against others in the eyes of the law.

The book also refutes the idea that victims should be forgiven for perpetrating violence by emphasizing that pretty much everyone in the world is simultaneously a victim and perpetrator, and that everyone contains a capacity for enormous cruelty within them. Disturbingly, the fact that Peter has been bullied does not stop him from bullying others. In middle school, he taunts a classmate named Dolores Keating for getting her period because it momentarily creates a sense of belonging between him and the other kids (although he does stop once she starts crying). Later, in prison, Peter is assigned to share a cell with a boy who appears to be a "special needs kid." Peter stamps on the boy's glasses for no reason, demonstrating that he can be just as senselessly cruel as the bullies who tormented him at Sterling High. This suggests that there is no such thing as people who are entirely victims or entirely perpetrators. In reality, all people have a mix of both within them, and it is up to them whether they use their experience of victimhood to be more empathetic toward others or to perpetrate further abuse.



## VENGEANCE VS. JUSTICE

*Nineteen Minutes* is a story of revenge: it depicts a teenager, Peter Houghton, who murders 10 students at his school in a shooting spree after a lifetime of bullying. The book makes a strong case that

vengeance isn't effective because, although it might superficially appear to bring about justice, this isn't how things usually work out in the end. The result of Peter's act of vengeance is that innocent lives are lost, the underlying problem of bullying remains unresolved, and Peter himself ends up being sentenced to life in prison, where he quickly commits suicide by stuffing a sock into his mouth. Yet while the novel cautions against vengeance, it also doesn't portray the criminal justice system in a particularly positive light, either. Ultimately, the story indicates that neither vengeance nor the legal system can be trusted to deliver justice.

Because Peter feels powerless to defend himself from the relentless bullying to which he is subjected, he turns to dreams of vengeance. While his lawyer, Jordan McAfee, tries to frame the mass shooting Peter commits as an act of self-defence, it is clear that Peter didn't want to merely protect himself—he actively wanted revenge. This is demonstrated by the video game he designs, **Hide-n-Shriek**, which is set in a high school and involves shooting “jocks.” Describing Peter's thought process when he designs the game, the narrator observes, “What if you took the prey... and made *them* the hunters? [...] He'd create a computer game that was *Revenge of the Nerds*, but updated for the twenty-first century. A fantasy world where the balance of power was turned on its head, where the underdog finally got a chance to beat the bullies.” In designing the video game, Peter turns to fantasies of revenge in order to cope with being bullied. Yet as the novel indicates, even such fantasies can be dangerous, because they pave the way for very real acts of violence.

Peter's fate after the shooting makes clear that vengeance isn't just bad because it harms others, but also because it harms the person enacting the revenge. Part Two of the novel opens with a Chinese proverb, which states: “When you begin a journey of revenge, start by digging two graves: one for your enemy, and one for yourself.” Peter's fate is a literal manifestation of this proverb, which summarizes the novel's message about vengeance. While both the fantasy and enactment of revenge might be tempting—particularly for people who feel powerless against their tormenters—the reality is that vengeance can only lead to more destruction, including the destruction of the person seeking it. This idea plays out when Peter is given a life sentence and kills himself in prison.

The novel also features many characters involved in the criminal justice system, and through them explores the extent to which this system can truly be said to deliver justice. These characters include Alex Cormier, a judge; Jordan McAfee, a lawyer; Patrick Ducharme, a police detective; and Dr. King Wah, a forensic psychologist. All these individuals are well-intentioned and dedicated to the mission of bringing about justice. However, both Peter and Josie arguably receive unfair sentences. The court discounts Jordan and Wah's arguments that Peter was traumatized by the bullying to the point that he

had diminished responsibility for his actions; meanwhile, Josie is sentenced to five years' imprisonment for killing Matt even though Matt was violently abusive toward her.

Despite their terrible crimes, Peter and Josie are driven to commit violence by the abuse that they themselves suffer, so imprisoning them is arguably an unfair or ineffective punishment. This idea is emphasized when Peter kills himself, which means in a way he “escapes” his sentence and also never has a chance to properly reflect on his crimes or reform himself. Indeed, the novel indicates that—despite its repudiation of Peter's act of vengeance—the legal system may operate according to principles of vengeance more than it does true justice. This is emphasized when the mother of one of the students at Sterling High whom Peter shoots but doesn't kill (Jade Knight) tells reporters outside the courtroom, “This has ruined her whole life; why should Peter Houghton's punishment be any less?” While the novel helps the reader to see why Jade's mother's pain might lead to a desire for vengeance, it also indicates that this desire won't actually help anyone in the long run. Furthermore, the novel highlights an important—and disturbing—similarity between the sentiment expressed by Jade's mother here and Peter's own desire for revenge. Indeed, in the aftermath of the shooting many people in the town of Sterling demand a vengeful punishment for Peter, and are opposed to the idea of him having a fair trial. This is ironic, considering that Peter's shooting was itself an act of vigilante justice. In this sense, the novel suggests that desires for revenge are everywhere, and they are always pointlessly destructive.



## EXPECTATIONS AND THE FAILURES OF FAMILY

*Nineteen Minutes* is full of characters who have been misunderstood, let down, and actively harmed by their families. Indeed, because the novel focuses on the many problems faced by teenagers, it is especially attentive to the ways in which parents fail their children, particularly during the middle and high school years. Alarming, the novel shows that families fail even when they are full of love; one of the story's key messages is that love is not enough to understand, support, and protect someone. Even worse, too much love can actually be damaging, for example when a parent only sees an idealized version of their child and misses the truth of who they are. Yet by depicting families that manage to remain loving despite going through horrific circumstances, the novel does show how familial love and support can be powerful and transformative. Crucially, the best familial relations are shown to be those where there are no expectations, only a willingness to see the person for exactly who they are.

The most important character in the novel's exploration of the failures of family is Lacy, Peter's mother, whose world is turned upside down when Peter commits a mass shooting at his high

school. Lacy is a loving parent and a kind-hearted person—her job as a midwife emphasizes her nurturing side. Lacy’s capacity for unconditional love is demonstrated by the fact that, even though she is horrified by Peter’s crime, she still loves him and treasures the memories of the person she thought he was. The extraordinary nature of Lacy’s love for Peter is demonstrated by her own reflection that “true character showed when you could find something to love in a child everyone else hated.” Although it takes time, Lacy is also keen to interrogate the role she played in creating a situation in which her son murdered 10 people. She ends up shouldering a large share of the responsibility, reflecting, “Children didn’t make their own mistakes. They plunged into the pits they’d been led into by their parents.” The fact that she comes to believe she is to blame for what Peter did further emphasizes the idea that Lacy is a devoted, self-sacrificial mother. Yet this, in turn, suggests that even loving parents like Lacy can raise children who commit terrible wrongs.

The novel suggests that the reason why even parents who love their children still fail them is because of the hopes and expectations that parents tend to have. Peter himself articulates this problem when he observes, “Everyone wants their kid to grow up and go to Harvard or be a quarterback for the Patriots.” As Peter notes, the reality is that it’s much more likely for children to grow up to be unsuccessful, unpopular, and unhappy, yet parents are ill-equipped to deal with this due to their own hopes and expectations. Rather than facing the sad truth that their children have failed to live up to these expectations, parents often avoid confronting reality. This is true of Peter’s parents, Lacy and Lewis, who are ignorant of the fact that Peter’s smart, successful, and popular brother, Joey, was a heroin user. It is of course also true when Lacy and Lewis ignore the signs that Peter is isolated, miserable, and planning to seek revenge against the people who bully him.

Lacy expresses the uncanny possibility of not knowing one’s own child when she thinks, “How could you change a boy’s bedding every week and feed him breakfast and drive him to the orthodontist and not know him at all?” This sentence, which is about Peter, captures the way in which even loving families fail. Precisely because Lacy was so devoted to Peter and dedicated to ensuring that he had a positive, happy life, she refuses to see the reality that he has become a hateful, violent person. Indeed, Lacy herself reflects that it is the very nature of expectation itself that creates this problem. In a flashback, when she realizes that Joey stole money from her wallet, she thinks, “No matter how spectacular we want our children to be, no matter how perfect we pretend they are, they are bound to disappoint.”

Although the novel mostly focuses on the way parents fail their children by having high expectations, it also considers how the reverse can be true through its depiction of Alex Cormier and her daughter, Josie, who feels she can’t live up to her mother’s

picture-perfect persona. Alex and Josie have an intense relationship due to the fact that—having become pregnant with Josie by a married man, Logan Rourke, who wanted her to have an abortion—Alex is a single mother who must juggle her parenting with the enormous demands of her work as a judge. The novel describes how Alex puts pressure on herself to have a pristine public image due to the nature of her job. Yet this doesn’t just affect her role in the community—it also affects Josie, who at one point becomes exasperated about her own inability to live up to the example set by her “perfect” mother. This is yet another way in which the novel explores how even close-knit families can misperceive and misunderstand each other. While parents often misunderstand their children due to their high expectations of them, children can also misunderstand their parents due to the high esteem in which they regard them. These interrelated issues suggest that the nature of families—which prevent relatives from fully seeing each other, and encourages them to have unrealistically high hopes and expectations for each other—can make family members alienated from each other, even when they also love each other deeply.



## LOST INNOCENCE

As a novel that depicts the terrible things teenagers endure and do to each other, *Nineteen Minutes* is concerned with the idea of lost innocence. This is theme primarily explored through Peter, who as a result of bullying (as well as other issues, from romantic rejection to violent video games) transforms from an innocent child into a mass murderer. It is also explored through Josie, who is a similarly sweet and innocent child before social pressures lead her to enter a cruel group of friends and an abusive relationship. Somewhat unexpectedly, the novel also explores the theme of lost innocence through the adult characters, who—despite their relatively advanced age—still struggle to cope with their own problems as well as the issues faced by the younger generation. Ultimately, the novel suggests that even teenagers and adults still contain the innocent versions of themselves, and that it is important to recognize this part of a person in order to treat them with kindness.

In order to depict Peter’s transformation from an innocent child to a mass shooter, the novel utilizes a non-chronological structure that juxtaposes stories from Peter’s childhood alongside the events that directly lead him to commit the shooting. As children, Peter and Josie are best friends; on their first day of kindergarten, Josie supports him as he is bullied by the other kids. However, over time, both Peter and Josie lose their innocence due to social pressures at school. Peter loses his innocence after being repeatedly tormented by bullies, which eventually leads him to violent thoughts of revenge. Meanwhile, Josie realizes that if she remains friends with Peter she will also be bullied, and thus loses her innocent inclination

for kindness in order to protect herself.

When Peter commits the mass shooting in high school at 17, it is obviously hard to view him as still “innocent,” but small hints of his former innocence do emerge in the midst of the chaos. For example, in the interrogation room directly following the shooting, he whispers, “I want my mom.” This is a reminder that underneath the violent and vengeful killer Peter has become, there still lies a vulnerable child. When Peter’s trial is taking place, Josie’s mother, Alex, makes a gesture of kindness to Peter’s mom, Lacy, by indicating that she remembers the innocent boy Peter once was: “He used to like the peanut butter on the top half of the bread and the marshmallow fluff on the bottom [...] And he had the longest eyelashes I’d ever seen on a little boy.” Alex’s words not only convey that she remembers Peter’s innocence, but also suggest that she believes that on some level, that innocence is still an important part of him.

The novel’s depiction of its adult characters further emphasizes the idea that all people, no matter how old, still retain some of their childhood innocence deep inside them. This is represented by the pain, despair, and confusion that the adults feel regarding issues in their own lives as well as the ones facing their children. Indeed, the fact that the adults seem so ill-equipped to help the teenagers face the problems plaguing them suggests that throughout their lives, people remain “innocent” in the face of issues such as bullying, intimate partner violence, drug addiction, and abortion. Adults and teenagers are equally bewildered by and terrified of these issues—the only difference is that adults have to pretend they know how to cope. This idea is conveyed during one of the flashback episodes in the novel, which describes the terrorist attacks of September 11th that occur when Peter and Josie are in middle school. Speaking to Lacy, Alex observes that their children are “old enough to understand what’s happening.” Yet in response, Lacy says, “I’m not old enough to understand what’s happening.”

The novel presents the fact that innocence inevitably collapses into bitterness, coldness, and cruelty as one of the tragedies of human existence. The heart-wrenching nature of this process is conveyed by Lacy’s reflections on the babies she helps deliver as a midwife. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator notes that “Newborns reminded [Lacy] of tiny Buddhas, faces full of divinity. It didn’t last long, though.” During Peter’s trial at the end of the novel, Lacy echoes this statement: “When you look into your baby’s eyes [...] you see everything you hope they *can* be... not everything you wish they won’t become.” Lacy’s words highlight the terrible potential that innocent babies will grow up to commit terrible deeds. Yet the novel also shows that something of that early innocence remains in everyone—no matter what evils they commit—and that is important to remind oneself of this fact.



## APPEARANCES VS. REALITY

As a novel that depicts the cruel realities of the high school social world, *Nineteen Minutes* considers the (often huge) gulf between appearances and reality.

Nearly every character in the novel feels pressured to have an outward appearance of happiness, success, and popularity. Yet even for the characters who have the most convincing outward appearance, this belies a much darker reality. The novel’s exploration of this theme is rather bleak, suggesting that the demand to put on a good appearance can’t ever really be escaped. At the same time, it also proposes that it is perhaps a mistake to believe in a true, authentic self lying beneath a person’s fake exterior.

The disparity between appearances and reality is thoroughly explored through the character of Josie Cormier, who manages to gain acceptance in the popular crowd at Sterling High only to discover how incredibly miserable life among these people is. Josie is presented as a kind, thoughtful person who chooses to become friends with the popular kids, who cruelly bully other students, because it will protect her from being bullied herself. She is able to successfully adopt the appearance of a popular girl and fit in among the others, changing the way she dresses and behaves, including by dating a popular boy named Matt Royston. Yet this does not make her happy, in part because the changes to her appearance can’t change the way she actually feels about herself. This is conveyed early in the novel, when she stands in front of the mirror overwhelmed by feelings of self-hatred. In this moment, Josie notices, “what was underneath that raw skin, instead of what had been painted upon it.”

Josie’s new life among the popular kids is supposed to be the pinnacle of social achievement and happiness in high school. However, despite the fact that the popular group is framed as being the most likable and desirable, in reality their lives are characterized by fear, misery, and cruelty. Josie observes that the popular kids don’t actually have friendships with one another, only “alliances.” They are cruel to one another, and lack any genuine trust or affection. Furthermore, while on the surface Josie’s relationship with Matt is framed as an ideal romance, in reality Matt is abusive: he controls Josie, physically hurts her, and coerces her into unwanted sex. The fact that Josie is perceived as having a perfect life doesn’t make the grim reality any better—indeed, the gap between appearances and reality makes her feel even *more* alienated and alone, to the point that she routinely thinks about committing suicide.

Josie is far from the only character in the novel who suffers from the pressure to have a positive outward appearance, even if this belies an entirely different reality. Her mother, Alex, feels that she must have a pristine public persona due to the fact that she is a judge, and this leads her to exercise tight control over her behaviour: “*You don’t stop being a judge just because you step out of the courthouse*, [Josie’s] 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.” Meanwhile, Peter pretends to be happier and more successful in school than is actually the case in order to hide the truth from his family that he is isolated, bullied, and considered a loser. In each of these cases—as in Josie’s case—the pressure to don a fake appearance of happiness and success is deeply traumatic.

Yet while the novel is emphatic about the negative consequences of “fake” outward appearances, it also calls into question whether the binary between one’s fake appearance and the true reality is actually that simple. When Peter accuses Josie of being “fake” with the popular kids, Josie replies, “There’s different kinds of real.” While this might just sound like an excuse, Josie says it in the context of Peter’s complaint that she acts differently with the popular kids than she does around him. Josie rightly indicates that Peter might be wrong to assume her behavior around him is necessarily authentic, whereas her behavior around the popular kids is fake. In reality, perhaps they are both “different kinds of real.” Yet while arguing this may help Josie make sense of her own situation, it does not mitigate the confusion created by these different levels of reality. Indeed, when thinking about how Alex can fit in anywhere (like a chameleon), Peter’s mother, Lacy, observes that this can be somewhat unnerving: “It struck Lacy that she didn’t really know what color a chameleon was before it started changing.” All the characters in the novel—and particularly Josie and Alex—shift their outward appearance in order to fit in, but the consequence of this is that they lose all sense of any reality lying beneath.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## HIDE-N-SHRIEK

Peter’s fantasies of taking revenge against his bullies escalate when he designs a video game called *Hide-n-Shriek*, which comes to symbolize the dangers of vengeance. Although Peter gets average grades in school, he is a smart kid and has a particular talent as a computer programmer. Yet the ends to which he puts this talent are highly suspect. The game is disturbing for several reasons: it is set in a school that looks just like Sterling High, features a protagonist who resembles Peter, and is defined by the aim of killing as many “jocks” and “bullies” as possible. Designing the game is clearly a stepping stone toward the acts of violence Peter commits in reality, as illustrated by the similarity between *Hide-n-Shriek* and the actual school shooting. In this sense, the game is taken by many as evidence that Peter was not suffering from PTSD and dissociation when he committed the shooting,

but rather was a deliberate, cold-blooded killer.

At the same time, there is also an argument to be made that the game doesn’t prove that Peter deliberately planned the shooting. Firstly, he doesn’t build and play it alone, but does so alongside his best friend, Derek Markowitz. Derek doesn’t seem disturbed by the game, and even encourages Peter to make it. Yet Derek himself does not anticipate or participate in the shooting, and is horrified when Peter does so. *Hide-n-Shriek* thus also becomes a symbol of anxiety around video games and the cultural glorification of violence. It raises the question of how seriously revenge fantasies should be taken, and the dangers of ignoring them altogether. The game suggests that even fantasies of revenge can be highly dangerous, as they may lead to action taken in reality.



## RICE KRISPIES

In the midst of the school shooting, after having already killed several people, Peter sits down in the blood-filled Sterling High cafeteria and eats a bowl of Rice Krispies, before getting up and continuing with the shooting. The Rice Krispies are understood by many in the novel to symbolize Peter’s monstrous lack of compassion and remorse, and his ability to think about himself in the midst of committing unimaginable acts of violence. The fact that Peter eats a children’s breakfast cereal, of all foods, is also significant. For a novel so concerned about the loss of innocence during the transition from childhood to adulthood, Rice Krispies symbolize the innocence of childhood, which makes them an especially jarring choice for Peter to eat in the middle of a school shooting. Indeed, the Rice Krispies serve as a reminder that, despite being a mass murderer, Peter is also still a child at the same time.

During his trial, the prosecution’s lawyer, Diana Leven, holds up the Rice Krispies box as evidence that Peter committed the act of shooting in cold blood, and that he showed a chilling lack of compassion and mercy for his victims. Yet on the other hand, the forensic psychiatrist called by the defense, Dr. King Wah, uses the Rice Krispies as evidence that Peter was dissociating as a result of PTSD while he committed the shooting. Dr. Wah claims that there is no other explanation for how a person could calmly sit down and eat cereal in the middle of perpetrating mass murder. Due to these two wildly different interpretations of their significance, the Rice Krispies also come to represent the ways in which people tend to believe what they were already inclined to believe, rather than responding to evidence in an open-minded, balanced way. Those who think Peter is a monster see the Rice Krispies as evidence of that, while those who believe he was a traumatized victim cite the Rice Krispies as evidence of the opposite.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Washington Square Press edition of *Nineteen Minutes* published in 2008.

## Part 1, Chapter 1: March 6, 2007 Quotes

☝ 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.

**Related Characters:** Alex Cormier (speaker), Josie Cormier

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 9

## Explanation and Analysis

While she is getting ready for school, Josie Cormier looks in the bathroom mirror and reflected on how miserable and alienated she feels at school. Although she has a solid place within the popular crowd, to her this feels more like a prison than anything else. In this passage, the narrator compares Josie's distress over her public appearance to that of her mother, Alex. Due to her role as a judge, Alex must maintain a pristine public image at all times. This means that she is cut off from her true feelings, in the same way that Josie fears all her own faking means she doesn't know how to be "real" anymore.

This passage also explores how the expectations society puts on people like Alex and Josie are related to the expectations that arise within the parent/child relationship. Alex is proud of everything Josie has achieved, but what she doesn't realize is that Josie's accomplishments come out of a place of terror of not living up to a perfect ideal. This demonstrates that they both live within a toxic social environment in which everyone is afraid of not living up to the high expectations of others.

## Part 1, Chapter 2: Seventeen Years Before Quotes

☝ Everyone broke up in laughter, as Lacy watched. Alex, she realized, could fit anywhere. Here, or with Lacy's family at dinner, or in a courtroom, or probably at tea with the queen. She was a chameleon.

It struck Lacy that she didn't really know what color a chameleon was before it started changing.

**Related Characters:** Alex Cormier, Lacy Houghton

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 37

## Explanation and Analysis

After meeting in a prenatal class Lacy teaches, Alex and Lacy become close friends. Alex relies on Lacy's support, particularly as she approaches facing motherhood as a single parent. However, when Alex invites Lacy on a "girl's night out" with her friends from work, Lacy is reluctant about the idea of spending an evening with a group of lawyers. There, she notices that Alex fits in perfectly with them because she is a "chameleon" who can fit in anywhere. In this passage, Lacy marvels at this ability of Alex's while also musing that it may be evidence of having no solid, authentic self underneath.

Lacy's observations here show that the social hierarchies, cliques, and pressures that exist in high school sadly do not end there—rather, they continue throughout life. Lacy's self-consciousness and envy of Alex prefigure the jealous feelings that her son, Peter, will have about Alex's daughter Josie's ability to fit in among different crowds. Similarly, Lacy's thoughts that Alex doesn't have an authentic self beneath her ability to fit in foreshadows Peter's accusation that Josie is a "fake."

## Part 1, Chapter 3: Hours After Quotes

☝ How could you change a boy's bedding every week and feed him breakfast and drive him to the orthodontist and not know him at all?

**Related Characters:** Peter Houghton, Lacy Houghton

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 59

## Explanation and Analysis

Here, Lacy has discovered that Peter has been identified as the shooter at Sterling High. Her husband Lewis assures her that there must have been some kind of mistake, but Lacy remains terrified. In this passage, she reflects on the strangeness of having her own son be revealed as a stranger to her. Lacy examines how—through the care of mothering—she knows Peter intimately, or at least feels like she does. However, the reality of what he’s done reveals that one can intimately care for a person and still not really know them.

This is one of the most disturbing ideas in the novel. The implication that it is impossible to truly know anyone is extremely frightening, particularly given the extent of the crime Peter commits. If one’s own family member is capable of perpetrating a mass shooting, how is it possible to feel safe in the world? Of course, the sad truth is that Lacy’s experience coheres with the perspective of the families of real-life shooters. In most cases, the families of mass shooters are stunned by the idea that their relative could perpetrate such a terrifying and brutal crime. The idea that family members know each other intimately could be considered illusion. In Lacy’s case, her relationship with Peter was clouded by her own hopes and expectations for her son.

This passage shows that Peter has still not properly owned up to what he has done. While he knows that he committed a mass shooting that killed 10 people, he seems to believe that this act was justifiable, presumably because it was an act of revenge after a lifetime of bullying. Peter thus believes he is “innocent” not in the sense that he didn’t commit the crime, but in the sense of being morally unblameworthy. This is an important point, as it highlights Peter’s disturbing lack of remorse while also illuminating something important about the nature of fallen innocence. While Peter’s case is a horrifying tale of the loss of innocence, it also reveals the way in which people carry an idea of themselves as innocent even when this starkly proven to be untrue. In a way, one could think of this as Peter’s connection to his “inner child.”

“The town of Sterling would analyze to death what she had done to her son—but what about what she would do for him? It was easy to be proud of the kid who got straight A’s and who made the winning basket—a kid the world already adored. But true character showed when you could find something to love in a child everyone else hated.”

## Part 1, Chapter 5: The Day After Quotes

“Did everyone in jail think they were innocent? All this time Peter had spent lying on the bench, convincing himself that he was nothing like anyone else in the Grafton County Jail—and as it turned out, that was a lie.”

**Related Characters:** Peter Houghton

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 121

### Explanation and Analysis

Peter’s arraignment has taken place; to no one’s surprise, he was not granted bail. Inside his single-occupancy cell, he talks to another inmate named Carnivore, who explains that he has been accused of raping and killing a waitress. As they talk, Peter realizes that, contrary to his initial assumption, maybe everyone in jail thinks they are innocent. Like many people with limited experience of the criminal justice system, Peter seems to have a simplistic view of prisons and prisoners, believing that most inmates are both guilty and believe this to be true. In reality, Peter realizes, most people in jail are like him, and do not think they deserve to be there.

**Related Characters:** Peter Houghton, Lacy Houghton

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 126

### Explanation and Analysis

Lacy has come to see Peter in jail. She brought homemade muffins, books, and magazines, but these were all taken by the correctional officer. When she asks Peter why he did what he did, Peter tells her that she “wouldn’t understand.” In this passage, Lacy thinks about the fact that everyone in Sterling will judge her as a parent, and find ways to blame her for Peter’s crimes. However, she believes that there is actually something noble in still finding a way to love her son even after the rest of the world decides he is a “monster.”

Lacy’s thoughts are provocative, representing the book’s unusual approach to the subject of mass shooting. She expresses the belief that there is value to be found in loving anyone, no matter how bad of a person they are. In other words, every life is valuable, and all people are deserving of love and forgiveness. This perspective is also specific to the particular social context in which Lacy and Peter live, a competitive and judgmental environment in which popularity and success are everything. Indeed, this focus on achievement is so powerful that even the parents of

unsuccessful, unpopular children are framed as having difficulty loving them.

Everyone wants their kid to grow up and go to Harvard or be a quarterback for the Patriots. No one ever looks at their baby and thinks, *Oh, I hope my kid grows up and becomes a freak. I hope he gets to school every day and prays he won't catch anyone's attention.* But you know what? Kids grow up like that every single day.

**Related Characters:** Peter Houghton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 136

### Explanation and Analysis

Jordan has come to see Peter in jail, and Peter immediately complains about being there, saying that it is unfair seeing as *he* is the victim. Jordan asks Peter about the bullying to which he is subjected, and Peter talks about it briefly. He then asks if Jordan has kids, and when Jordan responds that he does, Peter delivers the short speech quoted here. While much of what Peter has said thus far is immature and even delusional, here he makes a surprisingly insightful argument.

According to Peter, parents harm their children through their desire for them to be popular and successful. While ordinarily this desire might be considered a good thing—indeed, it is a central feature of American culture—here Peter argues that it is actually highly damaging. By having high hopes and expectations for their kids, parents set their children up to fail. Kids who are not happy and successful end up feeling that they have let their parents down, and may not believe that their parents truly love them. Indeed, Peter even suggests that many parents of unsuccessful, unpopular, and isolated children may not actually love their children—or at least love them far less than they would if they were different.

## Part 1, Chapter 7: Ten Days After Quotes

She buried her face in her pillow. She didn't know what the hell was wrong with her. It was as if, *after*, there were two Josies—the little girl who kept hoping it might be a nightmare, might never have happened, and the realist who still hurt so badly she lashed out at anyone who got too close.

**Related Characters:** Josie Cormier

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 179

### Explanation and Analysis

Because Sterling High is still the scene of a criminal investigation, the rest of the school year will take place in a nearby disused elementary school called the Mount Lebanon School. Alex tells Josie that she doesn't have to go back yet, and although Josie is horrified by the idea of being in school again, she also wants to be around other people who understand what she's going through. The morning before her first day back at school, she snaps at Alex, and in this passage the narrator describes Josie's horror at the two versions of herself she feels have been living inside her ever since the accident.

Josie's thoughts here advance the novel's message that hidden within each person is an innocent version of themselves—their inner child. This self exists in tension with the hardened, often cruel version of the person that is created by maturity, trauma, and pain. There seems to be part of Josie that wishes she was *only* the little girl who has a more innocent, naïve view of life, yet she cannot control the fact that the other version of her is also present.

Monsters didn't grow out of nowhere; a housewife didn't turn into a murderer unless someone turned her into one. The Dr. Frankenstein, in her case, was a controlling husband. And in Peter's case, it was the whole of Sterling High School. Bullies kicked and teased and punched and pinched, all behaviors meant to force someone back where he belonged. It was at the hands of his tormentors that Peter learned how to fight back.

**Related Characters:** Peter Houghton

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 188

### Explanation and Analysis

Jordan had been hoping to use Joey's death as a way of gaining sympathy for Peter; however, once he finds out that Peter hated Joey, he realizes that this won't work. Later that evening, while talking to Selena, Jordan has the idea to use "battered woman syndrome" in his defense of Peter. Usually, this syndrome occurs in women who are in physically abusive relationships, and in this quotation Peter describes

how some women in this position end up committing violence themselves. He compares these women's sense of their own powerlessness to Peter's feelings after a lifetime of bullying, and argues that in both cases, the perpetrator of violence was driven to harm others by being first being harmed themselves.

This is a challenging and provocative understanding of Peter's actions. It is one of the main ways in which the novel questions the binary between victims and perpetrators. In many ways, Peter's years of torment—which included physical violence—do seem analogous to the experiences of a woman abused by her partner. At the same time, some might disagree with the extent to which Jordan is implying that Peter lacked agency in committing the shooting. By using the analogy of Dr. Frankenstein and his monster, Jordan argues that Peter's actions were essentially created and controlled by someone else, yet the novel also highlights that Peter is at least somewhat to blame for what he did.

## Part 1, Chapter 8: One Year Before Quotes

Logan Rourke wasn't her father, not any more than the guy who'd taken their coins at the toll booth or any other stranger. You could share DNA with someone and still have nothing in common with them.

**Related Characters:** Josie Cormier, Logan Rourke

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 221

### Explanation and Analysis

After accidentally coming across an article about her father, Logan Rourke, in the *Boston Globe*, Josie gets Peter to find his address online and then asks Matt to drive her to his house. However, her conversation with Logan doesn't go well; he clearly doesn't want to have any relationship with her, and is nervous about her presence ruining his run for district attorney. He gives her \$300 in an attempt to make her stay away, and in this quotation Josie realizes that despite the biological attachment between them, Logan is not her father in any real sense.

This is an important moment in the novel's reckoning with the failures of family, as it shows that there is nothing inherently special or powerful about familial connections—at least, not in a biological sense. Being genetically related to someone doesn't mean that you love

or care about them, or even really know them. At the same time, this is difficult for people like Josie, because society emphasizes that there is something special and important about biological relations. Josie has expectations of what Logan will be like and how he will feel about her—expectations that are brutally dashed when he demonstrates that he has no interest in knowing her, and actually wants her to stay away from him.

What if you took the prey... and made *them* the hunters?

Peter got out of bed and sat down at his desk, pulling his eighth-grade yearbook from the drawer where he'd banished it months ago. He'd create a computer game that was *Revenge of the Nerds*, but updated for the twenty-first century. A fantasy world where the balance of power was turned on its head, where the underdog finally got a chance to beat the bullies.

**Related Characters:** Peter Houghton

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 222

### Explanation and Analysis

After Josie tells their boss that Peter set fire to the dumpster at QuikCopy, Peter is fired. Josie is also refusing to speak to him due to the way he humiliated her in his presentation about popularity, and recently Matt, whom Josie is now dating, beat Peter up. In this passage, the narrator describes the thought process behind Peter's invention of a game wherein nerds and other bullied students kill bullies. (The game will eventually be called *Hide-n-Shriek*, though at this point Peter has not invented this name yet.) This passage makes clear that after a lifetime of bullying, Peter retreats into fantasies of vengeance. Not only does he find this soothing on a personal level, but he believes it will appeal to commonly-held investment in the "underdog" and desires for revenge.

Peter's invention of this game is one of the most disturbing aspects of the book, and a plot point that makes it particularly difficult to sympathize with him. While it is obvious that Peter has gone through unbearable trauma, his desire for revenge is nonetheless morally dubious. Even if the reader doesn't agree with the maxim to "turn the other cheek," the sheer brutality of Peter's revenge fantasies makes it hard to see how he is any better than those who bully him. Furthermore, the extended period Peter spends

thinking about, designing, and building the game shows that the mass shooting he commits is not a spur-of-the-moment act of insanity, but rather a chillingly deliberate and calculated act.

## Part 1, Chapter 9: One Month After Quotes

Like Peter, Derek Markowitz was a computer whiz. Like Peter, he hadn't been blessed with muscles or height or, for that matter, any gifts of puberty. He had hair that stuck up in small tufts, as if it had been planted. He wore his shirt tucked into his pants at all times, and he had never been popular.

Unlike Peter, he hadn't gone to school one day and killed ten people.

**Related Characters:** Derek Markowitz, Peter Houghton

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 277

### Explanation and Analysis

As Peter's trial approaches, Jordan has decided to call in the help of King Wah, a forensic psychiatrist who specializes in battered woman syndrome. Meanwhile, Patrick has called Josie into the police station for more questioning. This quotation, which opens a new section of the chapter, examines the similarities between Derek and Peter, who became best friends at the same time as Peter's friendship with Josie dissolved. Derek's similarities to Peter mean that he also has a difficult time in school and is on the receiving end of bullying. The reader already knows that this means Derek shares Peter's fantasies of revenge; the two used to discuss Peter's revenge computer game, *Hide-n-Shriek*.

Yet as this quotation makes emphatically clear, there is a crucial point of distinction between Peter and Derek. Whereas Derek may have fantasized about getting revenge on his bullies, he never actually went through with it. In a sense, Derek's role in the novel is to challenge the sympathies for Peter the reader may have been developing. Although it is clear that the immense trauma Peter suffered was a major factor in leading him to commit the shooting, Derek serves as a reminder that plenty of people are awkward, unpopular, and subjected to terrible treatment in high school. The fact that the vast majority of these people don't end up committing mass murder surely indicates that those who *do*, like Peter, need to be held responsible for their actions.

Children didn't make their own mistakes. They plunged into the pits they'd been led to by their parents. She and Lewis had truly believed they were headed the right way, but maybe they should have stopped to ask for directions.

**Related Characters:** Peter Houghton, Joey Houghton, Lewis Houghton, Lacy Houghton

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 286

### Explanation and Analysis

After discovering that Lewis has been lying about going to visit Peter in jail, Lacy follows him to figure out where he's really going. She watches him go to the florist, then the cemetery, and lay flowers on the graves of the people Peter killed. At first she is angry that Lewis is tending to these graves rather than going to visit his son, but she and Lewis both end up lapsing into despair thinking about the guilt they feel over their sons' fates.

Some readers might interpret Lacy as being too harsh on herself in this quotation. While parenting obviously significantly shapes a person, it seems obvious that other factors—namely, Peter's experience at high school—were more significant in leading him to commit the mass shooting than the failures of his parents. Furthermore, Lacy is arguably wrong to suggest her two sons' fates are equally bad. Murdering ten people in a mass shooting is certainly one of the worst things a person can do; the fact that Joey was a heroin user, while perhaps indicating that he was unhappy or struggling, is not a moral wrong and arguably not something Lacy should feel overly guilty about.

At the same time, while she emphasizes that she and her husband are guilty, Lacy also notes that they did not have bad intentions, and that the main problem was that they were misguided about how to be good parents. This indicates that, while parents are supposed to have all the answers, in reality they can be just as lost, confused, and in need of support as teenagers.

## Part 2, Chapter 1: Five Months After Quotes

When you begin a journey of revenge, start by digging two graves: one for your enemy, and one for yourself.

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 331

### Explanation and Analysis

Part One of the novel ends with several events that indicate the imminent approach of a climactic conclusion: Peter has been humiliated in front of the whole school when Drew shares his email confessing his love to Josie and Matt pulls his pants down in the cafeteria. In the aftermath of these events, he steals Mr. Weatherall's handgun. This quotation is listed as a Chinese proverb that serves as an epigraph to Part Two of the novel. (Note that, like many "Chinese proverbs" that circulate in Western culture, the origins of this phrase are dubious—though it is often attributed to Confucius, most scholars agree that the philosopher never actually said this, and the saying may not be Chinese in origin at all.)

Regardless of its provenance, however, this quotation usefully summarizes the book's position on revenge. By this point, the reader certainly sees how Peter has been tormented and traumatized by the bullies at Sterling High, and can likely sympathize with his desire to get revenge. Yet at the same time, because of the book's non-chronological structure, the reader already knows that Peter's attempt at getting revenge will not lead to triumph or relief, but will harm him as well. Although Peter's trial is yet to take place, it is almost certain that he will spend the rest of his life in prison, and Peter has already decided that he would rather die instantly than experience this fate. In this sense, Peter quite literally dug his own grave when he chose to kill his "enemy."

☝ Maybe it was our own damn fault that men turned out the way they did, Selena thought. Maybe empathy, like any unused muscle, simply atrophied.

**Related Characters:** Selena

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 343

### Explanation and Analysis

Selena has been reflecting on the gender differences between boys and girls, even as infants. Thinking about Sam, she has concluded that girls have it "easier," because they are socially permitted to express emotions and vulnerability, whereas boys aren't. In this quotation, she wonders who is to blame for male behavior. Although she doesn't specify what she means by "turned out the way they did," one can assume that she means tough, reserved, and reluctant to

communicate their feelings. She proposes that it might be "our fault," with the word "our" remaining ambiguous. It could mean people in general, indicating that gender roles are a problem created by society as a whole.

On the other hand, Selena may also be suggesting that it is women's fault that men end up feeling isolated and misunderstood, which in turn makes them behave in a cold, cruel, and sometimes even violent manner. While women may not have created the gender norms that encourage men to act tough and uncommunicative, perhaps—as Selena suggests here—they end up feeling less empathetic toward men because men don't express vulnerability. This in turn causes men to behave in a colder, crueler manner, creating a vicious cycle. Whether or not the reader agrees with Selena's thoughts here, it is clear that to some extent this cycle has played out in Peter's life and is part of what led him to commit the mass shooting.

☝ Dorian Gray had a portrait that grew old and evil while he remained young and innocent-looking. Maybe the quiet, reserved mother who would testify for her son had a portrait somewhere that was ravaged with guilt, twisted with pain. Maybe the woman in that picture was allowed to cry and scream, to break down, to grab her son's shoulders and say *What have you done?*

**Related Characters:** Peter Houghton, Lacy Houghton

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 357

### Explanation and Analysis

The morning of Peter's trial has finally arrived. Lacy dresses all in black, as if she is going to a funeral. Before leaving the house, she goes into Peter's room and takes a book from the shelf—*The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In this quotation, she dreams that there is a portrait out there of her, which expresses the true, messy emotions that lie beneath her innocent exterior. This quotation drives home the novel's message about the difficulties of living up to other's expectations and the pressures to have a perfect outward appearance. Unsurprisingly, Lacy is falling apart on the inside, yet she feels like she can't show this to anyone lest they judge her even more harshly. Furthermore, she is worried about jeopardizing Peter's chance at a fair trial.

Lacy's thoughts here highlight that it was not just Peter who lost his innocence in the process of becoming a mass

murderer; Lacy lost hers, as well. This quotation seems to suggest that it would be better if everyone dropped their performance of perfection and allowed their true emotions, messiness, and vulnerability to show. This would take the pressure off everyone, and allow people to deal with their emotions in a more direct and honest way.

“He used to like the peanut butter on the top half of the bread and the marshmallow fluff on the bottom.” Alex smiled a little. “And he had the longest eyelashes I’d ever seen on a little boy. He could find anything I’d dropped—an earring, a contact lens, a straight pin—before it got lost permanently.”

**Related Characters:** Alex Cormier (speaker), Peter Houghton

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 386

### Explanation and Analysis

On the first day of Peter’s trial, several students have been called to the witness stand, alongside the Sterling High gym teacher, Dusty Spears. At the end of the day, Alex and Lacy run into each other in the courthouse bathroom. Alex tells Lacy she’s sorry that she’s going through this, and in this quotation, lists memories she has of Peter as a little boy. In a way, Alex’s gesture is strikingly similar to the kind of thing people do when someone dies—offer happy memories in order to assure their loved ones that although the person is gone, they are not forgotten.

Of course, there is a strong sense in which Peter *has* died. Not only will he almost certainly spend the rest of his life in prison, but the person that Lacy, Alex, and everyone else though they knew appears to have disappeared. It is also important to consider the fact that all the memories Alex lists convey Peter’s innocence. It can seem unfathomable that Peter was once a sweet, innocent child—and that relatively speaking, this wasn’t actually that long ago. Alex’s words demonstrate that in the midst of grieving, it is important for those who were close to Peter to remember this innocence, which—as the final words of this quotation evoke—is now “lost permanently.”

## Part 2, Chapter 3: Five Months After Quotes

“My daughter won’t go to school this year until eleven o’clock, because she can’t handle being there when third period starts,” the woman said. “Everything scares her. This has ruined her whole life; why should Peter Houghton’s punishment be any less?”

**Related Characters:** Jada Knight’s Mother (speaker), Jada Knight

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 397

### Explanation and Analysis

On the second day of the trial, Patrick is called to the witness stand. He is asked to describe his experience of the shooting, as well as to explain the surveillance footage of the school from the day of the attack, along with evidence such as the Rice Krispies box and the handguns Peter used. At the end of the day, the press rush to interview parents as they exit the courtroom. In this quotation, the mother of a girl named Jada Knight, who survived despite being shot by Peter while running, expresses her desire for Peter to suffer like her daughter is suffering.

Jada’s mother’s description of Jada’s post-traumatic stress disorder, which certainly seems to have “ruined her whole life” and prevented her from engaging even in the most basic daily activities, is moving. Yet at the same time, the novel encourages skepticism around the demands her mother makes as a result. After all, wasn’t Peter’s act of violence itself a kind of vengeful justice directed at the people who bullied him and gave him PTSD? In a way, there are similarities between what Jada’s mother is suggesting here and what Peter was seeking to do when he committed the shooting in the first place. And as the book has shown, this kind of vengeful attempt at justice cannot heal wounds, instead only leading to more destruction.

“Was there ever anything in Peter’s personality that led you to believe he was capable of an act like this?” “When you look into your baby’s eyes,” Lacy said softly, “you see everything you hope they can be... not everything you wish they won’t become.”

**Related Characters:** Lacy Houghton, Jordan McAfee (speaker), Peter Houghton

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 419

**Explanation and Analysis**

At this point, several witnesses have been interviewed, including student survivors of the shooting, the Sterling High gym teacher, and Patrick. Lacy is now on the stand, and has told Jordan about how she always had a special bond with Peter, who was more “sensitive” than her eldest son, Joey, and who suffered at the hands of bullies. In this quotation, Jordan asks if Lacy ever saw evidence indicating that Peter could do perpetrate an act of violence like the mass shooting. Lacy’s response is a poignant meditation on many of the novel’s most important themes. In one sentence, she highlights the issues of parental expectations, lost innocence, and the difference between appearance and

reality.

Lacy’s answer clearly conveys the depth of her love for Peter. Yet at the same time, it also shows that even devoted parental love can actually end up being harmful. This is because her love for him—and in particular, the hopes and expectations this love produces—create an image of who she wants him to be that makes her unable to see who she actually is. Given the crime Peter ends up committing, the consequences of this are certainly bad for the wider world. Yet they are also bad for Lacy and Peter themselves, because although Lacy loves Peter, she doesn’t really *see* him (an accusation Peter directed at her earlier in the novel.)



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PART 1, CHAPTER 1: MARCH 6, 2007

Part One opens with the Chinese proverb, “If we don’t change the direction we are headed, we will end up where we are going.” Following this is a handwritten note in which the writer says that they “hope to be dead” by the time what they are writing is read. The writer claims that the reader will cry at their funeral, but it is unclear whether either of them will actually miss the other.

The narrator lists all the things that can be done in nineteen minutes, from the mundane (mowing the lawn, getting pizza delivered) to the sinister (exiting the world and getting revenge). Alex Cormier is running late to her job as superior court judge, a position she has held for just over a month. At 40, she is the youngest judge in New Hampshire. She goes into the kitchen where her daughter, Josie, is looking at a textbook. Alex scolds her for drinking coffee, and Josie replies by scolding Alex for still smoking cigarettes, something she’s been trying to keep quiet.

Josie is “a pretty, popular, straight-A student” who, at least on the outside, seems to be the fulfilment of a parent’s hopes and expectations. However, ever since Josie started high school, the “tunnel of communication” between her and Alex has closed. Concerned that Josie hasn’t eaten breakfast, Alex starts cooking some eggs and bacon, even though she is not a very skilled chef. Josie takes over, and Alex asks her to promise that she will eat all of it. Josie promises, and Alex leaves. As soon as her mother is gone, Josie scrapes everything from the skillet straight into the trash.

Josie often feels as if her life is a room without doors or windows. Everyone is jealous of her for being in the room, but that doesn’t change the fact that Josie can’t get out. Getting out of the shower, she looks in the mirror and wishes she could see what other people do. She knows that, on the outside, she looks the part of a popular girl, and she enjoys feeling other people’s eyes on her. Inside, though, she feels like “a fake who had nearly forgotten what it felt like to be *real*.” She can’t talk about these feelings with any of the other popular kids at Sterling High, because doing so would immediately jeopardize her social position.

*The novel never fully clarifies what the handwritten sections are extracted from or who wrote them. This first extract reads like a suicide note, but it is also possible that it could be taken from the diary of a teenager who was fantasizing about their own death, but not planning suicide.*



*The fact that Alex Cormier is a judge introduces the theme of justice. Even in this early passage, it is clear that—like many families—Alex and Josie personally clash over issues of fairness. This is demonstrated when Josie points out that it isn’t fair for Alex to scold her for drinking coffee, when Alex has a vice herself: cigarettes.*



*Like many teenagers, Josie keeps secrets. Alex wants her to start the day with a substantial breakfast, but Josie—perhaps worried about her weight, although it could be for another reason—refuses to eat the breakfast Alex makes. Perhaps she throws it away in secret because she doesn’t want her mom hassling her. On the other hand, she might be trying to preserve an innocent, dutiful imagine of herself in Alex’s mind.*



*Through Josie’s character, the novel explores the ways in which being popular, attractive, and high-achieving do not feel as great as one might assume. Josie knows that other people wish they were in her position, but rather than feeling satisfied and happy, she feels anxious and fraudulent. High social standing doesn’t get rid of anxiety—in fact, it arguably increases it.*



Josie also can't talk to Alex, because Alex has the same problem of having to preserve a perfect public image. Just before leaving her room for school, Josie checks on a Ziploc bag of Ambien that she has carefully saved up and taped underneath her nightstand. She doesn't have a specific plan to kill herself, but when the time comes, she wants to be prepared. Down in the kitchen, she finds her boyfriend Matt waiting for her, having let himself in. Josie assures him that she wanted to see him last night, but she needed to study. He embraces her, telling her, "I wouldn't act as crazy if I didn't love you so much." In that moment, Josie feels lucky and content.

Patrick Ducharme is the only detective on the Sterling police force. One of the patrol officers remarks on the nail polish Patrick is wearing, which his four-year-old goddaughter painted on him. Patrick goes to check his email. As a small-town detective, he has an incredibly wide range of tasks. He is always assured that his work is meaningful when he encounters victims in need of help, yet he remains troubled that he is a detective who doesn't "detect anything."

It is March, the first warm day of spring. Josie sits in the Sterling High parking lot and thinks about the fact that soon, she will be a senior. Matt suggests they ditch school, but Josie points out this would jeopardize his position on the hockey team. Brady Pryce, a football player, and his girlfriend Haley Weaver walk past and wish Matt luck on his hockey game that day. Mr. McCabe, their math teacher, also walks past, and when Matt asks how he did on the recent test, Mr. McCabe says it's lucky Matt has "other talents to fall back on."

Alex rushes into the courthouse, past a man who shouts at her flirtatiously, and she quickly dons her robe before briefly reviewing the docket. As she walks into the courtroom, all eyes watch her closely. The first defendant is called, and Alex notices that it's the same man who shouted at her earlier. She decides to take it in stride and makes a joke about it. Meanwhile, Lacy Houghton, who is a midwife, is helping a woman through her sixteenth hour of labor. The mother pushes her new baby out, and Lacy hands her the baby to hold. Lacy thinks newborn babies have faces "full of divinity," but this perfect innocence never lasts long.

Peter, Lacy's son, is waking up. Lacy has left him a bowl of cereal and a note wishing him a good day at school like she always does. As soon as he gets out of bed, Peter gets on the computer and sees something on the screen that he'd hoped he'd never see again. He tries to exit, but it is too late.

*The Ziploc bag of Ambien Josie keeps just in case she wants to commit suicide indicates that this novel explores the full, dark reality of what teenage life can be like. It is especially disturbing to see the contrast between Josie's outwardly "perfect" life—including her adoring boyfriend—and the fact that, underneath, she is so terrified and miserable.*



*It is not just teenage girls like Josie whose behavior is scrutinized by others. As this passage indicates, grown men like Patrick are socially "policed" too. One way in which this occurs is through comments on what is perceived as deviance from gender norms.*



*Sterling High is presented as a typical high school, with typical social figures and groups. Matt and Brady are both athletes, perhaps not the brightest (as indicated by Mr. McCabe's comment about Matt's math test) but popular, with girlfriends in tow.*



*This passage introduces another important theme: the innocence of youth. Lacy witnesses the most extreme version of this idea by delivering babies, who are the very definition of innocent due to being totally untouched by the world. Yet, as Lacy points out, this innocence is inevitably doomed to expire. Does the fact that innocence doesn't last forever make it even more precious?*



*Lacy is evidently a caring, nurturing mother. Yet the juxtaposition of the breakfast she leaves and the horrible thing Peter sees on his computer reminds readers that she can't protect him from the bad parts of the world: innocence inevitably fades.*



Everyone in Sterling knows each other. In some ways this is nice, because it makes the community like a family; however, it also means that no one there can escape the past. Josie is standing in the cafeteria next to Courtney Ignatio, “the alpha female of Sterling High,” whose tray features only a bottle of water and a banana. Josie observes the different groups in the cafeteria: the geeks, the art freaks, the skanks, the druggies, and the misfits. Josie’s own group all dress in the same preppy style, and Josie fits in perfectly. Her outward appearance expertly conceals her inner confusion.

The girls at Josie’s table discuss a freshman who was just sent to rehab for doing cocaine. Her dealer is the leader of the Sterling High Bible study club. Matt greets Josie, and on seeing the French fries on her tray asks if she’s really going to eat them. Matt hands some of Josie’s fries to another boy, Drew, then kisses Josie and says, “Let’s get out of here.”

In gym class, two nerdy freshmen, Michael Beach and Justin Friedman, sit on the sidelines, fantasizing that an unexpected event will get them out of class. Meanwhile, Lacy wanders around her empty house. When her two boys were young, her husband, Lewis, an economist of happiness, asked what would make Lacy happy and she replied that she dreamed of being in her own empty house with nothing to do. Lacy passes Peter’s room and makes his bed, something he refuses to do himself.

Zoe Patterson sits in math class while Mr. McCabe makes jokes. She is supposed to meet her mom outside the school at 10am, and as she walks out, she thinks about the mechanics of kissing a guy without hurting him with her braces. Just as she sees her mom’s car in the distance, she hears an explosion.

Patrick sits in his car, waiting to bring a vial of cocaine that he seized from the Bible study dealer to be tested, when he hears reports on his radio of shots being fired at Sterling High. The dispatcher announces, “Signal 1000,” which means every available officer must head to the high school immediately. When Patrick arrives there, he is greeted by a scene of total chaos. He realizes that waiting for the SWAT team to arrive will result in far more kids being killed, and thus, ignoring instructions, he heads straight into the school. Running through the school, he tries to ask the frantic, crying teenagers around him who the shooter is, and how many there are. A boy replies, “It’s a kid... he’s shooting everyone.”

*This passage continues to paint the portrait of Sterling as a typical high school. Josie and Courtney are both members of the popular crowd, and as a result they feel pressure to perform a certain image to the outside world, which includes being slim. On a deeper level, the lack of food on Courtney’s tray might signal that she doesn’t have desires or needs.*



*Josie doesn’t just control her own behavior—others police her behavior, too. Clearly, Matt thinks it is his place (and even duty) to monitor what Josie eats, a sign that he is controlling and possibly abusive.*



*There is a sense in which Lacy’s life does not seem to belong to her—between her demanding job as a midwife and her role taking care of her family, she fantasizes about time to herself. At the same time, when she has this time, she uses it to go into Peter’s room, suggesting that, even if she sometimes dreams of solitude, her family will always be the most important thing in her life.*



*The contrast between Zoe’s innocent, typically teenagerish thoughts and the violence of the explosion sets up the disturbing scene that is to follow.*



*By this point, the scene described here will, sadly, sound very familiar to almost all readers of the novel. Yet bear in mind that “Nineteen Minutes” was published in 2007. While school shootings—including the famous one at Columbine High School—happened before this date, the vast, vast majority of shootings have taken place in the period from 2010 to the present day.*



Patrick runs through the school. He can see blood, smell urine, and hear gunshots in the distance. He dashes into the gymnasium, where there are bodies lying on the floor. Following the sound of another shot, Patrick runs into the locker room, where he sees two bodies on the floor and a thin boy with glasses. He asks the boy where the shooter is, but the boy then pulls out a pistol and points it at his own head. Patrick raises his gun and demands that the boy drop the pistol, and he does so. Patrick asks if there are other shooters, and the boy says it's just him.

As other officers take the boy away, Patrick looks at the two bodies lying on the floor. One is a boy wearing a hockey jersey; the other is a girl bleeding from the head. Weakly, the girl asks Patrick to help her, and he immediately does so. She tells him her name is Josie, then asks what happened. Patrick picks her up and carries her out of the school.

*By putting the most dramatic scene in the novel—the scene around which the whole rest of the narrative will be centered—right at the beginning, Picoult forces the reader to have the same sense of bewilderment as those who witness the shooting. No one knows what's going on and why—only with time will everything be explained.*



*The fact that the boy lying next to Josie is wearing a hockey jersey indicates that it is her boyfriend, Matt. From the brief impression provided in this scene, it seems like he is dead.*



## PART 1, CHAPTER 2: SEVENTEEN YEARS BEFORE

Lacy is teaching a prenatal class in the first week back at work after her own maternity leave. Earlier in life she had considered training to be an OB/GYN, but after realizing that she had trouble stopping herself from feeling her patients' pain, she decided to be a nurse-midwife instead. A woman standing at the back wearing a black suit says that she's sorry, but she has to leave early. She hands Lacy the forms each member of the class is required to fill out, and Lacy sees that her name is Alex Cormier. Alex, meanwhile, is currently representing a repeat offender who recently committed a brutal assault against a drug dealer.

Lacy expected her second son, Peter, to be a “golden boy” like Joey, her first. Instead, Peter is a difficult baby who cries, refuses to breastfeed, and resists going to sleep. Lacy's husband Lewis is famous for having devised a mathematical formula for happiness: R/E, which means “Reality divided by Expectations.” Right now, Lacy tries to assure herself that she doesn't feel happy only because she is so exhausted, and that really, her life is wonderful. After Peter falls asleep, she finds herself hoping that he will grow up to be like Joey.

*Recall that the narrator said that everyone in the town of Sterling knows each other and has always known each other, like a family. Here, it becomes clear that Lacy and Alex knew each other as new mothers, indicating that their children may have grown up in close proximity, too.*



*At this point, it remains unclear whether Joey and Peter's differences as babies will translate into similar differences when they grow up. After all, just because someone was a “difficult” baby hardly means that they are going to grow up into a troublesome adult. At the same time, a baby's personality can set the tone for how their parents view them later in life, too.*



The next time Lacy sees Alex—who, at 24, is younger than Lacy initially assumed—Alex explains that she is a public defender. Alex also explains that she doesn't plan on keeping the baby, but that she's already missed her abortion appointment twice. Lacy tries to be supportive, asking if Alex's partner also wants to give the baby up for adoption, but Alex replies, "There is no partner." The father of Alex's baby is her trial advocacy professor, Logan Rourke. Logan used to flirt with her, and Alex idolized him. He made her believe that he was in love with her and that his marriage was already over. However, he soon lost interest, and when she became pregnant, Logan told her to have an abortion. When Alex accidentally missed both her appointments, she decided to interpret this as a "sign."

Alex spots Lacy at the courthouse paying a parking ticket, surprised to see her carrying a baby of her own. The women agree to get coffee, and while they sit and talk, Lacy breastfeeds Peter. Alex asks if motherhood is difficult, and Lacy replies that it takes some learning, but that compared to Alex's job, "motherhood is probably a piece of cake." They discuss Alex's plan to give up the baby, and Lacy gently points out that there is never really a good time in life to have a child. At one point, Lacy quickly hands Peter to Alex so she can go to the bathroom. Peter starts crying, and Alex panics. However, he soon quiets down, and Alex feels stunned by how "easy" motherhood suddenly seems.

Months later, while Lacy is attending a birth, she gets a message on her pager saying that one of her patients is insisting on seeing her—it's Alex. Ordinarily, Lacy would assign someone else to see Alex, but she senses that something is wrong with Alex and thus, after delivering twin daughters, she goes to see Alex herself. When she arrives, Alex explains that she's experienced some bleeding. After checking, Lacy explains that the baby is fine, which is a huge relief to Alex, who says she was worried she was having a miscarriage. Lacy points out that Alex's anxiety indicates that she might want to keep this baby after all.

That night, Alex burns all the assignments she ever did for Logan and vows that her baby will be entirely hers. Within the next five weeks, she and Lacy become best friends. When Alex asks Lacy to go on a "girls night out" with her friends from work, Lacy accepts begrudgingly, horrified by the idea of spending the evening with a group of lawyers. One of the women asks Lacy about her opinion on aliens, and after Lacy gives a long answer about Area 51 and government conspiracies, the woman clarifies that she meant *illegal* aliens. Alex quickly intervenes, changing the subject and making everyone laugh again, and it occurs to Lacy that she is a "chameleon" who can fit in anywhere.

*Alex is far from a stereotypical character. She gets pregnant at a somewhat young age while she is not in a relationship, and she is also remarkably high-achieving in her career, with a law degree under her belt already at the age of 24. Perhaps her focus on her career is part of the reason that she doesn't want to keep the baby. At the same time, her decision not to keep it doesn't quite seem to be her own, and seems more to be the result of pressure exerted by Logan.*



*Lacy's comment about motherhood being "a piece of cake" compared to Alex's job as a public defender highlights how these two wildly different skillsets cannot actually be compared. One cannot be said to be more difficult than the other, simply because they are so different. Alex's fears about being mother seem to revolve around the fact that motherhood is not something that one receives formal training or instruction for—rather, it largely operates according to instinct.*



*Alex is one of many characters in the novel—her daughter Josie being one of the most significant among them—who experience confusion about their own desires. This is often the result of feeling torn between trying to live up to the expectations of others and figuring out what one wants beneath all that, which can be especially difficult after a lifetime of trying to please others.*



*Note that, while Alex envied Lacy's relaxed, natural aptitude as a mother, Lacy envies Alex's ability to move between multiple worlds. This frames Lacy as a grounded, instinctive person who has a clear sense of who she is, but who can feel self-conscious about not being smart, glamorous, or impressive enough. Alex, meanwhile, is much less sure of herself, but this lack of certainty also has upsides, as she can behave as a kind of chameleon.*



During Alex's prenatal exam, Lacy informs her that the baby is breech. She might need a caesarean, but they will try other options in hope of avoiding this. After, Alex gives one of her clients, a single mother named Nadya whose abusive husband doesn't pay child support, a ride to court. Nadya had shoplifted an outfit from Walmart so that her five-year-old son had something to wear to school. When Alex finds Nadya crying because her period has started and she can't afford tampons, Alex drives her to Walmart and buys her three giant boxes of Tampax, along with clothing and food. She spends \$800 in total, all the while knowing that public defenders are not supposed to do this. In her head, she can hear Logan accusing her of being too soft.

During the birthing classes that Alex and Lacy attended together, Alex said that she wanted to have a natural birth. However, now that Alex is actually in labor, she is in so much pain that she thinks she will have to kill herself rather than endure it. Lacy assures Alex that she will be fine; she knows that labor is especially difficult for women like her who like to be in control. Alex makes Lacy promise not to tell the baby that at first Alex didn't want her. For a while, Alex is fine thanks to the epidural, but when the baby starts coming she frantically tells Lacy that she is not ready to have a baby. However, at this moment the baby emerges, and Lacy hands her to Alex, saying, "She's all yours."

## PART 1, CHAPTER 3: HOURS AFTER

A handwritten note meditates on the inevitability of bad things continuing to happen forever. Yet the writer also wonders if the purpose of all this "bad" is to remind people to recognize the good.

The shooting at Sterling High is the worst sight Patrick has ever witnessed in his career. He sees EMTs crouch over a girl whom he recognizes because she works at the video rental store. She has been shot in the shoulder. All over the school, officers are working at a frantic pace. The cafeteria looks as if everyone who had been sitting there, eating their lunch like on any other day, has suddenly been abducted, leaving only their belongings behind. Patrick hears a noise and for a brief second believes it is another shooter; he puts up his gun, but finds that it is only a terrified lunch lady.

*In this passage, Alex seems to be embodying the warning that if a person cares too much for others, then they might be left unable to take care of themselves. This is conveyed through the combination of her generosity to Nadya and her baby being breech. Although pregnant mothers themselves do not cause babies to be breech, it is clear that—while for some women, pregnancy becomes a time to focus on themselves and their baby—Alex remains totally committed to serving others in her community, particularly the less fortunate.*



*This is the very first moment when Alex expresses fear about what her child will think of her, an important concept in the novel. Almost all of the characters are fixated on how other people perceive them. As Alex and Josie's relationship will show, this includes parents, who—perhaps counterintuitively—can worry about the judgment of their own children. Of course, on one level Alex is right to worry about Josie thinking she didn't want her—yet the end of the passage indicates that this all changes after she gives birth.*



*This is quite a common way to philosophically justify the existence of evil in the world. It is possible to persuasively claim that, without evil, no one would know what good is.*



*Here the novel makes an important point about who is affected by a school shooting. The answer of course, is everyone. While students caught up in the shooting are obviously traumatized, this intense trauma also extends to Patrick, who struggles to cope with what he has seen despite the fact that, as a police detective, his career involves witnessing disturbing and brutal incidents.*



In court, Alex is listening to the bizarre story of a woman who had just purchased a tropical fish from a pet store and, distracted by it rolling off the passenger seat, hit a pedestrian with her car. At this moment, a bailiff enters and writes a note to Alex that there has been a shooting at Sterling High. She immediately announces that court is adjourned. At Sterling, John Eberhard—who has been shot—manages to drag himself across the art supply room. He remembers Courtney sitting opposite him in the cafeteria just before the shooting happened. He watched a “flower” of blood blossom on her chest. With difficulty, he hoists himself up to the window and ends up crashing through it, remaining teetering on the ledge.

*The contrast between Alex’s comically mundane experience in court and the chilling horror of Sterling High in the aftermath of the shooting conveys how unexpected an event like a school shooting is in the town of Sterling. Sterling is a close-knit community with a seemingly low crime rate. This is conveyed by the quirky story about the woman and the tropical fish. However, the serene, harmonious nature of the town is of course about to change dramatically.*



John tries to shout for help, but he cannot form any words. Someone sees him and a fireman tells him to wait, but John can no longer control his body and he tumbles down onto the ground two stories below. Meanwhile, Patrick shows Diana Leven, who works at the attorney general’s office, through the gymnasium. He explains that ten people have been confirmed dead, but the number of wounded is still unknown. After leaving the school building, Diana is immediately swarmed by reporters asking questions. She hates this part of her job, and she tells the reporters that she can’t give them any information at the moment.

*While Patrick reveals that the shooting has left a terribly high number of students dead, the description of John trying to shout for help and falling out of the window shows that the damage inflicted by the shooting far surpasses the number who were killed. John’s inability to form words could be the result of shock, or it could (as will be revealed later) be caused by a head injury.*



Due to the enormous number of people there, Lacy has to park six blocks away from Sterling High. She prays that, having lost one son, she is not about to lose the other. The last time she spoke to Peter, they had an argument about the fact that he hadn’t taken out the trash. As she walks through the crowd and hears snippets of conversation about the shooting, she hears someone mention Peter’s name. When she approaches the girl speaking, explaining that she is Peter’s mother, the girl looks shocked and explains that Peter is the shooter.

*While Lacy approaches the high school, she likely believes that she is experiencing every parents’ worst nightmare—the prospect of losing their child in a violent attack at school. At the same time, when someone indicates that Peter was not a victim but the shooter, it becomes clear that this might actually be even worse.*



Alex goes to look at the list of wounded, which has been posted by the hockey rink. She sees Matt’s name on the list, then Josie’s. She almost drops to the floor, but instead pushes her way through the crowd in a daze. Meanwhile, Lacy has arrived at the police station, still wearing her scrubs. Patrick notes that she doesn’t “look like a person who’d created a monster.” Lacy says she wants to see Peter, but Patrick replies that she can’t, as he’s in custody. At 17, Peter is legally an adult, and thus he must request his lawyer himself—even though, as Lacy points out, he might not know how to do this. Patrick says that he hopes he will be able to talk to Lacy later about what Peter did, then he leaves to talk to Peter himself.

*Patrick’s thoughts that Lacy doesn’t “look like someone who’d created a monster” reveals some of the misconceptions that exist around school shooters. While they commit monstrous acts, many shooters—like Peter—come from loving families with devoted, ordinary parents like Lacy. This fact is of course very chilling, as it reveals that shooters can be hard to identify and their actions hard to predict.*



In the cell where Peter is being held, Patrick offers him coffee. Peter is crying softly. When Patrick asks if he wants food or anything else, Peter replies, "I want my mom." Gently, Patrick says that he'd like Peter to explain what happened and asks that Peter let him help. However, Peter won't say anything. Once Patrick has left the room again, Peter whispers to himself, "They started it."

Dr. Guenther Frankenstein, the state medical examiner, is a former Mr. Universe. He and Patrick are friendly, and they occasionally hang out over beers. Now, Guenther crouches over the body of a girl whom Sterling High's principal, Arthur McAllister, identifies as Kaitlin Harvey, a kind-hearted "special-needs kid." Together with Principal McAllister, Guenther has already identified five other victims: Courtney Ignatio, Maddie Shaw, Whit Obermeyer, Topher McPhee, and Grace Murtaugh. A student who is an Eagle Scout has been attempting to stop the blood pouring from Mr. McCabe. However, Guenther now gently informs him that Mr. McCabe is dead.

In the gymnasium, Guenther certifies the deaths of another two victims, both boys, then heads to the locker room. Viewing the male body lying there, Guenther observes that he is the only victim who has been shot twice. Patrick notes that the victim had four guns: one was in his hand, one on the floor, and two more in his backpack. Guenther speculates that the victim in the locker room may have been the kid Peter hated most. At this moment, an officer informs Patrick that "the makings of another pipe bomb" have been discovered in Peter's car.

At the hospital, Alex has discovered that Josie fainted during the shooting and now has a mild concussion. From the news, she knows that Matt is dead, and she worries that Josie was with him when he was killed. She sits beside Josie, who is still unconscious, filled with regret about the things she hasn't done and wishes she did, including keeping Josie home from school that day. Silently, she makes promises to Josie about everything they will do together once she wakes up. At the same time, Alex is also thinking about how the trial for the school shooting will take place in her courtroom. When Josie wakes up, she is confused and can't remember what happened. Alex assures her that she is ok, but Josie immediately asks about Matt.

*It is striking—and disturbing—that in this passage Peter is behaving like a little boy. Although he may have just killed ten people, there is still some of that childish innocence left within him.*



*Here, the number of dead becomes more human, as Guenther begins to list their names. The fact that the Eagle Scout is trying to save Mr. McCabe's life is deeply moving. It is not uncommon for teachers to die in school shootings, often in an attempt to protect their students—and here, one student tries to return the favor.*



*Recall that, in the earlier chapter, Picoult hinted that the kid lying in the locker room was wearing a hockey jersey and was next to Josie, thus indicating that it is Josie's boyfriend Matt. The fact that Matt could have been the student that Peter hated most helps to begin to build the social map of Sterling High School.*



*Like many teenagers, Josie is deeply in love with her high school boyfriend. Teenage romance can be so intense in part because it is usually the first time a person has been in love, meaning that everything is new and extra overwhelming. Furthermore, because teenagers tend to have (relatively) fewer responsibilities and things to worry about, they can throw themselves into love with single-minded intensity—as Josie does when she wakes up and her first question is about Matt.*



Lewis has called a lawyer and assured Lacy that there has obviously been a mistake and that everything is going to be alright. Lacy wants to be comforted, but she is also troubled by the knowledge that it was Lewis who taught Peter how to hunt. Lacy is stunned by the idea that, having cared for Peter his whole life, she may not really know him at all. She thinks about the families of the victims and immediately starts to cry, but then she pulls herself together. Walking into Peter's room, she feels determined to "fix" the situation. She immediately finds the materials Peter used to make the pipe bombs and throws them in trash bags. The doorbell rings; it is a large group of police officers. One of them produces a search warrant, ordering the rest to search the house.

*One of the main questions that the novel asks is whether Lacy is a perpetrator or a victim. Her inclination is to remain loyal to Peter, although this is out of motherly devotion rather than a belief that what Peter has done is right. (Indeed, it rests on Lacy and Lewis refusing to believe that Peter committed the shooting at all.) Lacy is clearly suffering from the prospect of her son being a shooter, but perhaps her denial also makes her complicit on some level.*



Jordan McAfee, a lawyer, is watching the news coverage of the Sterling High shooting with his wife, Selena. Selena also works as Jordan's investigator; they have a young baby, and Jordan also has a son from his first marriage, who is currently a sophomore at Yale. Jordan is on the phone to someone else when Lewis calls, asking if Jordan will represent Peter. Jordan is shocked; he looks at the baby in Selena's arms and thinks about how the shooter at Sterling High is "someone's son." Wanting the shooter to get a chance at a fair trial, he immediately agrees.

*The narrator's detailing of Jordan's family life is important, because it shows that he is able to relate to Lacy and Lewis as a parent. Not many people would understand the particular and unique pain of realizing that one's own child committed a terrible act, and the conflicted feelings of wanting to protect their child while also beginning to process the horror of what they did.*



Having overseen all the initial work that needed to take place at Sterling High, Patrick drives over to the medical center and asks a nurse if he can see a girl named Josie, admitting that he doesn't even know her last name. The nurse points him to Josie's room, and he finds her sitting with Alex, whom Patrick knows as Judge Cormier. When Patrick greets them, he tells Josie that he was the one who carried her out of the school, but Alex explains that Josie doesn't remember anything, and mistakenly believes that she was in a car accident. Hesitantly, Patrick explains that Josie was actually the victim of a school shooting, and that Matt was killed in it. Josie wails and immediately starts thrashing.

*This story highlights one of the most difficult parts of working in the emergency services: delivering bad news and, in cases like these, forcing traumatized victims to relieve their trauma when they had previously been trying to psychologically suppress it. For Josie, this moment constitutes a major loss of innocence, a point from which she will not return.*



Outside in the hallway, Patrick feels overwhelmed by horror. Alex comes out and curses him for telling Josie about Matt. Gently, Patrick reminds her that Josie is "one of the lucky ones." Stunned by this awful truth, Alex apologizes. Patrick explains that he'd like to talk to Josie later, but for now he just came because he wanted to be certain that she was alright.

*Patrick is clearly the kind of person whose job is more than just a job. The fact that he came to check on Josie just to see if she was alright shows that he has a great capacity for care and empathy, despite all the horrors he's likely witnessed in his career.*



## PART 1, CHAPTER 4: TWELVE YEARS BEFORE

On Peter's first day of kindergarten, he is so excited that he wakes up at 4:30 in the morning. Having watched his brother Joey ride away on the school bus for years, he is thrilled that it is finally his turn. Lacy makes him his favorite breakfast of chocolate chip pancakes. She hands him his turtle-shaped knapsack alongside a special surprise: a Superman lunchbox. When it is time for them to leave, Lacy tells Joey to look after Peter, but when they get on the bus, Joey abandons him. Josie shouts his name, telling him she saved him a seat. While Peter shows her his lunchbox, another boy grabs it, calling Peter a freak and asking if he wants to see Superman fly. The boy throws Peter's lunchbox out the window. Josie takes his hand, saying they can share her lunch.

While Josie is at her first day of kindergarten, Alex is speaking to a 19-year-old she is representing who has committed a robbery. Alex's former boss, a man named Whit Hobart who became a surrogate father figure to her, calls her and suggests that she apply to the two judgeships that have recently opened up in the local area. Alex is shocked and tells Whit that she is "so not the right person for that job." Alex believes this based on the fact that her father was a superior court justice. As a last gesture of persuasion, Whit points out that judges work regular hours, which will help Alex take care of Josie.

In the Houghtons' kitchen, Lacy expresses her frustration that Peter has lost his lunchbox three times within his first month of kindergarten. She points out that Joey never did anything like this, and Peter can feel his parents' disappointment over the fact that he is not Joey. Meanwhile, one of Alex's former clients—a man she helped evade domestic violence charges after he got in a drunken argument with his wife—proudly shows off an enormous dead bear he brought for her as a present. Shocked, Alex thanks him but explains she doesn't eat meat. At that moment, her secretary calls out to her, saying that Josie's school has called to say that Josie just "beat the crap out of a boy in the playground."

Alex drives Josie home, eyeing her dirty, torn-up outfit. At home, Josie quietly explains that a boy named Drew bullies Peter, and that she wanted to turn it "the other way around." Alex explains that you can't always do what's best, but rather must settle for what's "rightest." She admits that, while she wishes Josie hadn't beaten up another boy, she's proud of her for standing up for Peter. In this moment, she decides to apply for the judgeship.

*The contrast between Peter's initial excitement and optimism about kindergarten and the pointless cruelty immediately directed at him by other kids is heartbreaking. It is a reminder that most children initially see school as exciting—a place of fun, wonder, and new adventures. Yet for so many students like Peter, the reality turns out to be more like a nightmare.*



*Despite all that she has achieved in life, Alex seems to doubt her own competence and suitability for authority. This is perhaps a gender issue; as a woman, she may not have seen too many examples of female judges. Furthermore, women tend to be encouraged to underestimate and underplay their own accomplishments.*



*The beginning of this passage is a reminder that adults often misperceive and misunderstand the true nature of what is happening in their kids' lives. Peter has likely lied to his parents about why his lunchbox is missing, and instead of further questioning if this is likely to be true, they take his story at face value. As such, they miss the terrible reality of what Peter's life has become and seem to implicitly blame him for his suffering.*



*Alex's statement about what's doing "rightest" over what's best is an important idea in the novel. It shows how people often avoid acting in the most just manner because this can contradict social laws and norms. Of course, it is debatable whether this is actually a good thing or not.*



At the elementary school, Peter's very young-looking teacher tells Lacy that, unfortunately, certain kids are singled out and bullied by others. In Peter's case, his sensitivity and attachment to Josie make him an easy target. The teacher assures Lacy that if another kid is ever seen picking on Peter, they are immediately sent to the principal's office. However, this becomes a problem because the kids then start to blame Peter when they get in trouble. The teacher says she is trying to encourage Peter to stand up for himself, which Lacy finds shocking, but the teacher replies that this is simply the only way to stop getting bullied.

Outside, Lacy finds Peter and tells him she loves him. She adds that she knows about everything going on with Drew, Josie, and the lunchboxes, and she makes Peter promise her that next time, he will stand up for himself. She feels horrible doing this, deliberately spoiling Peter's innocence. Reluctantly, she tells him that if he doesn't stick up for himself next time, he won't be allowed to have any playdates with Josie for a month. The next day at recess, Peter tells Josie that he wants other people to like him, not just her.

While Alex is completing the application to become a judge, she realizes she does actually want the job, which surprises her. The night before her interview with the 12-person commission that will draw up a shortlist of candidates, she was up late with Josie, who had a nightmare. While she is giving her answers, Logan shows up unexpectedly. Alex is momentarily thrown, but she quickly resumes talking. Peter gets new glasses and is thrilled by the fact that he can finally see clearly. However, his happiness soon fades when it becomes clear that, at school, his glasses are just another excuse for bullying. Even worse, he can now see the mocking disdain in people's eyes when they look at him.

At Open School Day, Alex and Lacy sit chatting about Alex's application to become a judge. They are both supposed to write down a word that summarizes what they love about their child for a "love collage." They are interrupted by their children, who explain that they are pretending to be married. They play house; Josie acts out going to work as a judge, while Peter makes dinner. Their teacher comes over and tells Lacy and Alex that Josie and Peter love to play house together. For her love collage entry, Lacy writes down "Tender." Alex writes down "Mine."

*One recurring motif in the novel is the ineptitude of teachers when it comes to tackling the problem of bullying. While Picoult identifies that many teachers are simply ill-equipped to handle this difficult problem, she doesn't lay all the blame on teachers themselves. As Peter's teacher points out here, often when a teacher intervenes in bullying it often ends up becoming worse for the child being bullied.*



*Recall that Lacy has been framed as a natural parent who has strong emotional instincts. In this passage, she contradicts these instincts in a way that makes her feel horrible. However, she does this because she is desperate to protect her son and concerned that her previous approach was not working.*



*The trajectory of Peter's life involves a horrible pattern wherein whenever one good thing happens to him, several bad things happen as a result. This pattern brings to mind the handwritten section that opens this chapter, in which the writer muses that perhaps the reason why there is so much bad in the world is to make people aware of the good. Is that writer Peter? It seems very plausible, although the book never resolves this issue for certain.*



*Josie and Peter's close friendship is a little unusual, in part because—as depicted here—it defies gender norms. While this is excellent for Josie, who has clearly been inspired by having a high-achieving mother to have big ambitions herself, for Peter it means being in a feminine role. Boys being perceived as feminine very often becomes victims of bullying.*



Soon after, the fifth-grade boys throw out Peter’s lunchbox yet another time, and Peter sadly tells Josie that he can’t come over for a playdate. Alex is shortlisted for the judgeship and meets the young female governor. The two of them get along well. However, in order to secure the role she needs to convince an Executive Council featuring five Republican men that they should nominate her. At this interview, the council members ask her who she thinks has a right to judge others. Alex replies that while no one has a moral right to judge others, in a legal sense acting as a judge is a “responsibility.” They then ask her for her opinion on firearms; although she is in favor of gun control, Alex replies, “Legally [...] I am pro-firearms.”

Having been successfully nominated as a judge, Alex is at the Houghtons’ house to pick Josie up from a playdate. After initially being unable to find their children, Alex and Lacy discover them in the basement. To their horror, Josie is holding a rifle, which Josie explains Peter retrieved from a safe. An argument ensues between Lacy and Alex, and Alex finds herself thinking that Josie needs to make other friends. Coldly, she tells Lacy they are leaving.

Ever since the gun incident, Alex and Josie can’t stop fighting. During an argument in the grocery store, Josie screams that she hates Alex and that Alex is “the worst mom in the world.” Alex panics, keenly aware of her new public role as a judge. She speaks to Josie calmly, which clearly surprises her daughter. She wonders if devoting one’s whole life to caring about other people’s opinions will leave her like a mask with no face beneath it. At the same time, she notices that Josie has calmed down from her tantrum. On her first day as a judge, Alex is terrified. She thinks about her father, wanting him to be proud of her even though he is dead.

Later that morning, when Alex tries to make her own coffee, an attorney intervenes and makes it instead. Alex accidentally spills the coffee, and is puzzled when the attorney herself apologizes, rushing to clean it up. Alex goes outside, where she finds a woman smoking a cigarette. After the woman introduces herself as Liz, explaining that she takes care of property maintenance, Alex explains that she’s the judge, but she asks Liz to forget that and treat her like anyone else. Liz agrees.

*Featured in part to show the challenges Alex has to overcome in order to secure her judgeship, the detail about the five Republican men grilling her about gun rights arguably has a more important purpose. It reminds the reader that the novel is set in New Hampshire, a libertarian-leaning state where the right to own a gun is fiercely protected. This is important considering the way in which the issues of gun legislation and school shootings are so closely connected.*



*The juxtaposition between Alex’s interview and this scene brings the abstract issue of gun legislation (very) close to home. The fact that children may access firearms in their homes—even if they are locked away in a safe—is one of the main factors often cited in arguments in favor of gun control.*



*Again, while Lacy is the kind of mother who bases her behavior on her own emotional instincts, Alex instead chooses to act based on others’ perceptions and expectations of her. This may not seem like a good strategy for parenting, although in the supermarket scene it does actually happen to work.*



*Recall that Lacy perceived Alex as being comfortable in any situation, happily moving between different groups of people. Here, however, it becomes clear that this outward appearance of comfort does not necessarily reflect how Alex feels underneath. The stuffiness and authority of her new role actually freaks her out.*



Peter, who is grounded, hears a noise coming from the basement and goes down to see what it is. Lewis is cleaning a gun, and he asks Peter if he wants to help, explaining that he thinks Peter should learn how to “respect” guns. Lewis shows Peter the gun, explaining how all the different parts work, and he promises that one day they will go hunting together. Peter is overwhelmed with excitement at this prospect. Lewis asks Peter to try pulling the trigger, explaining that it’s safe and nothing can happen. He adds that people who are horrified by guns don’t really understand them, saying, “If you know them, you can handle them safely.”

*Nineteen Minutes is not an overtly political book; people with a wide range of political views would likely feel that their perspective was represented and confirmed by the narrative. At the same time, one thing that the book does make emphatically clear is that Lewis’ argument about learning to “respect” guns is wrong. Here he believes that if Peter learns to interact with guns in a proper manner, he won’t misuse them. Of course, the reader already knows how untrue this is.*



## PART 1, CHAPTER 5: THE DAY AFTER

A handwritten note meditates on the question of free will versus fate. The writer speculates that some people will say those who died in the shooting were just “in the wrong place at the wrong time,” and that the same could be said for the writer themselves.

*Although the writer’s identity is never revealed, there are hints that they are probably a teenager who is considering many of the philosophical questions that dominate one’s mind while entering adulthood.*



On his sixth Christmas, Peter got a fish as a present. Even as a child, he was disturbed by the fact that the fish spent its whole life confined to the same bowl. Now, sitting in Grafton County jail, Peter thinks about the fish, trying to remember its fate. He is on suicide watch, which means he doesn’t have a mattress or pillow, just a wooden bench. A correctional officer comes to tell Peter that he has a visitor. Suddenly, he remembers that—horrified by the fish’s captivity—he decided to flush it down the toilet, sending it (he believed) to freedom. After he told Joey this, Joey informed him that he’d actually killed the fish.

*There are many clues that Peter was an exceptionally conscientious, sensitive child. Indeed, perhaps this was the reason that he was a target for bullies in the first place. The fact that someone can grow from having a pure and enthusiastic sense of right and wrong into a school shooter is terrifying, and it shows that the events of Peter’s teenage years must have changed him significantly.*



When Jordan (Peter’s lawyer) arrives at the jail, he struggles to get any of the guards’ attention—they are all glued to the news coverage of the shooting. The news broadcast explains how Ed McCabe threw himself in front of his students. Lewis, meanwhile, misses a lecture for the first time in his career as a professor at Sterling College. He and Lacy watch helplessly as police carry all of Peter’s belongings out of the house. Lacy asks if Lewis thinks they’re to blame, and Lewis wonders if they mollycoddled him, or if they should have paid more attention to what he was reading and watching. He thinks about how, as parents, he and Lacy have “failed miserably. Twice.”

*It is normal for parents to worry about having done the wrong thing and (inadvertently) caused damage to their child. However, most parents do not face this kind of incontrovertible evidence that something in their child’s life has gone terribly wrong. It is no wonder that Lewis and Lacy are racked with guilt, regret, and confusion.*



Lacy asks Lewis about Hitler's mother. Lewis recalls memories of Peter, and thinks that Peter is still his son, even if he has committed an unthinkable crime. He starts having a panic attack, and at this moment an officer comes over. He asks if the firearms from the basement belong to Lewis, and then asks him to check and see if all his guns are present. Lewis looks, and tells the officer that some are missing. At the jail, Jordan tells Peter that he will be arraigned tomorrow, and that he won't get bail. The next morning, they will go over the charges together. He asks Peter if he has questions, and Peter initially doesn't reply. Then, just before Jordan leaves, Peter asks, "How many did I get?"

Dr. Ervin Peabody is a professor in the psychology department of Sterling College who once coauthored a paper on school violence. A reporter interviews him, asking about warning signs of school shooters, and Ervin lists social isolation, fantasies of self-harm and harming others, and poor discipline in school. Seeking reassurance, the reporter asks if there is a typical profile of a school shooter. Ervin replies, "You could make that argument." Back at the Houghtons' house, Lewis pauses outside Peter's room, where he usually says goodnight to his son every evening before bed. He hears the sound of talking and finds Lacy watching the news on TV. She says, "They keep calling him a man [...] but he's only a boy."

Josie has been listening closely to discussions in the hospital in order to make a "mental list of the wounded." Those wounded from her social group include Drew Girard, Emma, and John Eberhard. Among the other people she knows are Natalie Zlenko, Coach Spears, and the "golden senior couple," Brady Pryce and Haley Weaver. There are also others whom Josie doesn't know, but with whom she's now "linked forever." It is difficult to find out who is killed, although she thinks she's heard that Mr. McCabe and Topher McPhee are both dead. It still doesn't feel real that Matt is also gone.

At 7 a.m., Alex enters and, with a "fake smile," asks if Josie is ready to go. Josie feels annoyed with Alex and her offers of support, which she does not want to accept. Josie has been crying so much that she doesn't even notice it anymore; now, her mother promises that she'll feel better when they get home. As Josie leaves, she spots a clipboard outside one of the other patients' rooms that reads HALEY WEAVER. Haley is a senior and has been homecoming queen for the past two years in a row. She and her boyfriend Brady are "the Brangelina of Sterling High." The other students are always discussing the romantic intensity of their relationship, although Josie knows that most of the stories are "bullshit."

*The final, chilling words of this passage illustrate that—while Peter may have once been a sensitive child with a strong sense of justice—he has transformed into a frighteningly merciless, vengeful adult. His question also calls to mind video games wherein the aim is to shoot as many people as possible. This connection will become important later in the novel.*



*This is another important moment in which to recall that, at the time the novel was published, there was less research and public knowledge about school shootings and how a teenager becomes a mass murderer. While in the present day many questions remain unresolved (or hotly debated) around this issue, the increased prevalence of school shootings mean that more money, time, and effort has gone into analyzing their causes.*



*Josie's perspective of witnessing the aftermath of the shooting from the perspective of one of the popular kids is significant. In high school, popularity can often be framed as a kind of invincibility, wherein the optimism and confidence of youth is magnified to an unusually intense degree. As the shooting reveals, however, no one is truly invincible.*



*Here the theme of appearance and reality in the context of teenage romance emerges once again. The narrator's explanations of the way Brady and Haley are perceived illuminate the extent to which teenagers scrutinize each other and idolize certain people as having a perfect life. Everyone believes that Haley and Brady are the perfect couple—yet this is inevitably only a form of speculation, as no one except them has insight into the true nature of their relationship.*



Haley's parents move away from the door, and Josie catches a glimpse of Haley, who has bandages across her face and whose hair has been shaved. Through tears, Haley tells Josie that Peter killed Courtney and Maddie, and that he tried to kill Haley but Brady stepped in front of the gun. Haley asks Josie to honestly tell her if her face has been ruined, but Josie lies, saying it hasn't. Walking away, Josie wonders if her whole life is now going to be "a string of lies." Meanwhile, Sterling High has been turned into a "spiderweb" of white lines. Patrick steps over them, thinking about gathering the testimony of the crime's 1,026 witnesses.

Having put Josie to bed, Alex briefly watches the news coverage of Peter's arraignment, before turning it off to preserve her own objectivity. She knows some people will say she shouldn't work the case simply due to the fact that Josie attends Sterling High. At the same time, in this small town, it is common for judges to encounter people they know in the courtroom. Alex herself feels convinced that her input will be essential to delivering justice. Unexpectedly, she finds Josie in the kitchen, fresh from the shower and asking if she looks alright for the arraignment. Alex says she can't go, and when Josie asks Alex to come with her Alex explains that she also can't, as this will be her case.

In this moment, Alex wishes she was more like Lacy, who she feels is a gentler, more natural mother. She suggests that they make pancakes, or chocolate chip cookies, and Josie asks if she is "on crack." Alex then suggests scrabble, but Josie also refuses.

Patrick falls asleep at a traffic light, immediately having a nightmare that he is a student caught up in the shooting. When he arrives at the technicians' lab, his favorite tech, Selma, accuses him of "napping." Selma shows him the results of their tests, which indicate that the fingerprints on all the guns match those of the suspect, except one, Gun B, which features "partial" fingerprints that have not been identified. Selma says that Gun B appears to have been fired, and that the bullet from Matt's stomach could have been from Gun B or another gun. Patrick thinks it's unlikely Peter would have switched guns to fire a single shot.

*The fact that Brady stepped in front of the bullet Peter was directing at Haley indicates that perhaps all the speculation about their relationship is true. Brady was willing to die for his girlfriend, indicating that the love he had for her was deep and authentic.*



*Again, the fact that the narrative takes place within a small town environment is important. Usually, it is assumed that in order for justice to be carried out, there must be objective arbiters present who don't have a personal connection to the crime. Yet in a place like Sterling, no such objective, detached person exists—everyone is interconnected and affected by the shooting, and the town must therefore try to deliver justice without objectivity.*



*Josie's horrified reaction to her mother's attempts at nurture would be comic if the situation surrounding them weren't so tragic.*



*Unlike some crimes, the shooting at Sterling High isn't a mystery in the sense that there is uncertainty about who the perpetrator is or what (generally) happened. At the same time, however, questions remain, including why Peter committed the shooting, how the particular victims were selected, and so on. It is thus important that Patrick figure out all the small details of the event, even though the broad picture is beyond dispute.*



On the news, a reporter announces that it has been revealed that Peter was a fan of a punk band called Death Wish. Violent lyrics from a song called “Judgment Day” are shown onscreen. Although Peter doesn’t feel like he sleeps that night, he is awakened by correctional officer entering his cell and giving him a bulletproof vest to wear to court. Later, Jordan arrives and tells Peter that he’s been charged with ten counts of first-degree murder and nineteen of attempted first-degree murder. He says that they are going to enter not-guilty pleas to all, and he asks that Peter say nothing during this process. Although Peter agrees calmly, Jordan sees that his hands are shaking.

The narrator lists items that the police removed from Peter’s bedroom, including video games, posters from gun manufacturers, a *Bowling for Columbine* DVD, and a Sterling High Yearbook. In the yearbook, several faces are circled. Josie’s face has been circled but then crossed out, and the words “LET LIVE” are written beneath. When Peter arrives in the courtroom, Diana is surprised by how young he looks. Cameras from four different news networks are all trained on him. Jordan announces that he waives the reading of the charges, and that he is entering not-guilty pleas for all. Judge Albert mentions the charges in passing, which pleases Diana, and tells Jordan that Peter will not be granted bail. Peter is taken back into custody.

Diana immediately speaks to the reporters, assuring them that she is “prosecuting this case vigorously.” Jordan then speaks, expressing condolences to the victims’ families, but reminding everyone that “what you see is not always what it seems to be.” Shortly after, the governor of New Hampshire gives a press conference, expressing his own condolences and saying that the students of Sterling High are “all our children.” Back at home, Josie has learned that she can get Alex to leave her alone by announcing that she wants to take a nap. She lies in her room with the curtains drawn and touches the bag of pills she keeps under her drawer.

Josie thinks about how stupid she’d been to think of suicide as a statement and to assume that, if she killed herself, she’d be able to “watch everyone else’s reaction.” She tries to make herself swallow five of the Ambien, but ends up spitting them out and flushing the rest. Hearing her daughter crying, Alex comes upstairs and rubs Josie’s back. Meanwhile, Yvette Harvey—Kaitlyn’s mother—speaks to a producer from the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. She tells the producer that, while everyone has been saying Peter had no friends, in reality this was true of Kaitlyn, not him. Kaitlyn was truly an outsider, whereas Peter is “just evil.” The grief counselor told her that Kaitlyn was shot first, but Yvette soon became aware that the counselor had been telling all the parents that.

*Discussions of the causes of school shootings can often turn into debates about the way that culture and media—particularly violent music, film, TV, and video games—affect teenagers. Many people argue that this is completely irrelevant, as it is not as if every punk fan commits (or even considers committing) mass violence. At the same time, recent shootings have shown that media, and particularly the internet, does play a significant role in causing school shootings.*



*The book provides an important insight into the nature of the criminal justice system. In particular, it illuminates how the American legal system operates on the principle that everyone—no matter how terrible a crime they have committed—is entitled to high-quality representation. Indeed, the narrative explores how someone like Jordan, who is a good person who obviously condemns Peter’s actions, still fights on Peter’s side in the interest of justice.*



*The governor’s words are typical of a politician in the sense that they call for unity and support for Sterling while being somewhat vague and skirting over the underlying issues. Indeed, one of these issues is inadvertently conveyed by his statement that Sterling students are “all our children.” This evokes a collective outpouring of love and support for the children. But does that mean that Peter is everyone’s son, too?*



*Yvette Harvey’s experience reveals a level of denial and dishonesty in the way that people—even trained professionals—cope with tragic events. Some might argue that it is a kind gesture to lie and tell every parent that their kid died first. After all, what use is it for a parent to know that their child suffered from horror and fear just before they died? At the same time, dishonesty can distort the grieving process and feel like a further violation to those who are bereaved.*



Soon, everyone in Sterling gets used to the constant presence of the media and the fact that every day brings a new funeral. At Matt's service, a group of Sterling students attend wearing hockey jerseys with his number, 19. Josie and Alex sit at the back, and Josie wonders if it is possible to grieve when she can't even remember what happened. She finds Alex's dotting sympathy disturbing. Last year, when they had been studying the death rituals of the Ancient Egyptians, Matt promised Josie that when he died, "I'm going to take you with me." Matt's father starts talking, and before she knows what she's doing, Josie gets up and approaches the casket.

Matt's father asks if Josie is ok, and if she wants to say anything about Matt. Josie starts crying and apologizes. Alex immediately comes to her side, and Josie accepts the Kleenex her mother offers her. Meanwhile, in his cell in maximum-security jail, Peter hears someone murmur, "I know what you did." When Peter replies, the voice introduces himself as Carnivore and tells Peter to stop being a "fucking baby" and crying. Carnivore says that he has been in prison for ten months, and that his trial is next week. He explains that "they say" he raped and killed a waitress. Peter is shocked by the idea that maybe everyone in prison thinks they are innocent. Carnivore keeps talking, but Peter ignores him.

When Patrick arrives at Alex Cormier's door, he is surprised by how young she looks. Frostily, Alex tells him that Josie doesn't remember anything, but he says he has to speak to her himself. Josie takes Patrick into the kitchen and requests that Alex stay with them, but Alex says she can't. Once Alex goes, Josie accuses Patrick of faking interest in her wellbeing, but Patrick insists he really does care.

Josie tells Patrick that the whole day of the shooting has been blanked out in her memory; Patrick knows that this is a normal response to trauma. He asks why Peter didn't like Matt, and Josie replies that everyone teased Peter, not just Matt. She mentions that she used to work with Peter at the copy store in town, and that once, after he lit a fire at work, Josie told on him and he got fired. Patrick asks if the two of them were friends before his incident, and Josie says they weren't.

*The intensity of Matt's love for Josie is certainly high, although already there are small hints that it might not be very healthy. He appears controlling, and his statement that he wants to take her with him when he dies betrays an all-consuming, possessive form of love. This may in turn cause Josie to have conflicted feelings, perhaps including relief, in the midst of her grief.*



*Carnivore is a stereotypical, even cartoonish version of a criminal, right down to his name. The fact that he sees himself as innocent significantly changes the way Peter views justice and criminality. Carnivore—like Peter himself and everyone else in prison—is a human whose perception of themselves likely doesn't match how society views them, particularly given that attitudes toward prisoners are often dehumanizing.*



*Alex at times doubts her abilities as a parent, but her fierce defense of Josie indicates that her parental instincts may be more robust than she gives herself credit for.*



*One consequence of the mass shooting is that everyone is forced to confront the issue of bullying. Whereas before, the bullying Peter was subjected to was largely ignored on the basis that it was perceived as a personal problem, in this moment it becomes relevant to the whole Sterling community.*



Lacy brought homemade muffins, books, and magazines to give to Peter in jail, but all of this was confiscated by the correctional officer. A frightening-looking man with a swastika tattoo approaches Lacy, before greeting the woman sitting next to her as “mom.” Lacy thinks about the fact that “Everyone [...] is somebody’s son.” When she sees Peter, she smiles, attempting to conceal her horror at the situation. They hug until a correctional officer tells her to let go. Peter asks if the police came to his house, and he is angry that Lacy let them take his things. When she mentions the guns and the bombs, he tells her, “You wouldn’t understand.” He accuses of her of not even being able to look at him, then starts crying.

Lacy thinks about the way that everyone in Sterling will judge her parenting, blaming her for what Peter has done. She thinks that while it is easy to love a popular, successful kid, there is something noble in loving someone whom everyone else hates. She embraces Peter, determined not to let go until the officers wrench her away from him. Meanwhile, Patrick watches the surveillance footage from the shooting and is horrified to see Peter sitting down to eat a bowl of **Rice Krispies** after shooting kids. His ex-girlfriend calls him, asking how he is doing.

The FBI’s investigatory report on school shootings identifies certain patterns among the “family dynamics” of shooters. There is usually a “lack of intimacy” at home, and no restrictions on TV or computer use. Shooters tend to behave poorly at school, watch violent movies and video games, consume drugs and alcohol, and leave clues suggesting that they are fantasizing about committing mass murder.

Lewis likes to stick to a routine, believing that this is an important component of happiness. For this reason, he returns to work soon after the shooting. Yet when the chair of the Economics department, Hugh Macquarie, sees him on campus, he is taken aback and urges Lewis to take more time off. When Lewis replies that he thinks it will make him feel better to be at work, Hugh rephrases his statement, saying that Lewis cannot be at work.

Patrick goes to see the tech workers whose job it is to search computers for criminal activity. One of them tells Patrick that Peter was a skilled programmer who made his own computer games. He would post these games onto forums for others to use and he had the username DeathWish. In one of Peter’s posts, he complains about a craft festival occurring in Sterling and promises to hide behind bushes and use the festival attendees as “target practice.” The tech worker also explains that Peter hacked into the school’s computer system. When the first bomb went off, every computer screen in the school displayed the message, “READY OR NOT... HERE I COME.”

*The lesson that “everyone is someone’s son” is one of the central—yet most difficult—issues raised by the book. It evokes the fact that everyone was once an innocent child, and that almost everyone has (or at least used to have) people who loved them. Yet the implications of this universal truth are unclear. What are the limits of the sympathy that should be extended to people based on the fact that they were once an innocent, beloved child—and might still appear that way to their families?*



*The juxtaposition between Lacy’s fierce determination to love Peter and the surveillance footage that reveals Peter eating a bowl of Rice Krispies in the middle of committing his shooting spree is eerie. It draws attention to the difficult—and perhaps unwise and unethical—nature of Lacy’s commitment to her son.*



*This report shows that there is a fair amount of knowledge about the background and traits of school shooters. At the same time, the features listed here are incredibly common, which obviously has very disturbing implications about who is capable of becoming a shooter.*



*Clearly, the consequences of Peter’s actions are incredibly wide-ranging. This passage provokes the question of whether Peter’s family should be implicated and punished for his crime. While it is perhaps understandable that in the immediate aftermath of the shooting Lewis is excluded from work, it’s not clear if that is fair.*



*This passage illuminates a problem that has become even more widespread in the present day, when social media use is practically universal: How seriously should comments like Peter’s statement that he wants to use the Sterling craft festival attendees as “target practice” be taken? In some ways, there is no good answer to this question. In Peter’s case, it was obviously a warning of terrible things to come. Yet plenty of people post similar things and never commit acts of violence.*



Jordan goes to see Peter, and Peter immediately complains about the fact that he is in jail, which he believes is unfair. Peter explains that he's being punished for having been bullied by others. Jordan realizes that Peter is lucid about his actions, but still believes that he is the victim. Peter accuses Jordan of not really caring about him, which Jordan confirms is true, though he also says that it is his job to get him out of jail. Peter expresses confusion about why anyone is sad that "those jerks are dead." He says that they bullied him every day of his life, simply because ganging up on someone else made them feel better about themselves. Peter notes that the kids also cyberbullied him, for example by sending a personal email he wrote to everyone in school.

When Jordan asks further questions about the email, Peter says he doesn't want to discuss it. Jordan finds himself thinking about the struggles his elder son had trying to fit in during middle school. Peter asks if Jordan has kids, then says that he must understand. Every parent wants their child to grow up to be successful, but far more kids end up unliked and bullied. Jordan is momentarily speechless, lost in thought about his own sons.

## PART 1, CHAPTER 6: SIX YEARS BEFORE

The anonymous writer of the handwritten notes argues that misfits develop supernatural abilities to perceive other people staring at and talking about them. They can barely remember what it was like to be "normal."

On the first day of middle school, Lacy gave Peter a Superman binder, something that would have been cool three years earlier but now "doomed" him to being a social outcast. Josie, whom Peter never sees outside of school but is still his best friend in school, saves Peter by making a cover of duct tape for the binder, which he can take off when he is at home. At lunch, Drew pushes Peter, calling him a retard and making him drop his tray. A teacher weakly intervenes, but all the other kids are already laughing.

*At times Peter expresses the "normal" emotions readers might expect him to, such as fear, sadness, and regret. Yet in this passage, the sentiments he expresses are disturbing, indicating that he may have a pathological lack of empathy. In particular, he seems unable to escape the binary that the people he killed were the perpetrators of violence and that he was the victim. Of course, the fact that they are dead does not automatically absolve them of violence they committed while they were alive—yet they are also very much victims of Peter.*



*This passage shows that, for all his disturbing beliefs and actions, Peter also possesses profound insight into the world. In particular, he understands how the high expectations of parents—even if born out of love—can end up harming a child.*



*What the writer frames as "supernatural abilities" seems more like an excessive and paralyzing form of self-consciousness.*



*Both the adults mentioned in this story make an effort to make Peter's life better, but neither of them actually help him. Indeed, in both cases they arguably only make the situation worse. This reiterates the idea that adults tend to be ill-equipped at solving the problem of bullying.*



In court, Alex finds herself face-to-face with a defendant barely older than Josie. The girl has been charged with receiving stolen property, a \$500 necklace from her boyfriend. Alex reads her her rights, but the girl remains confused. Observing the evidence, Alex says that it's obvious the girl knew the necklace was stolen, and that she will accept a guilty plea. Still confused and visibly upset, the girl says, "I did it." Meanwhile, in class, Josie receives a note from Peter joking about hating math. Josie smiles, even though she actually enjoys math. Josie's perfect grades mean that she can't be accepted among the popular crowd, although she knows that she is not exactly unpopular, either.

Suddenly, Josie's teacher starts crying and tells the class, "Something terrible has happened." All the students are brought into the media center, where the principal informs them about a terrorist attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. They all watch the news coverage on television. Horrified, Josie nudges Peter and points out that there are people jumping from the tower. When the building collapses, Peter feels a strange sort of relief.

Lacy and Alex find each other outside the middle school, where they have both come to pick up their kids. When Alex finds Josie, she realizes that she has to pretend to have knowledge and control over the situation, even though in reality she is terrified. When she sees Peter, she is shocked by how tall he has become. Peter plays soccer on the middle school team—which allows anyone to participate—even though he hates it. He particularly dreads getting changed into his soccer clothes, and the other kids routinely use this as an opportunity to taunt him and give him wedgies.

On one particular day after soccer practice, Matt is in the shower and angrily tells Peter to stop looking at his penis, while Drew calls him a "fag." Peter replies that he can't see anything, which Drew uses as an opportunity to tease Matt for having a small penis, although Peter quickly explains it's because he's not wearing his glasses. However, Matt still strangles Peter and throws his towel under the running water. Peter starts crying and thinks about the possibility that he is really gay. He doesn't have any particular feelings about men or women, but he knows that "you couldn't be *neither*" gay nor straight.

*One question the novel raises is how much lenience should be granted to young people who commit wrongdoing. Many people argue that—because the brain keeps developing until well into a person's 20s—children and teenagers should not be judged in the same way as adults, because they have not yet developed the skills to make good decisions.*



*9/11 is one of the few historical events directly mentioned in the novel. Although not explicitly linked to the narrative and the issue of school shootings, there are actually important points of connection. 9/11 brought increased fears of foreign terrorists while also increasing anxiety about violence taking place on U.S. soil.*



*Although it is of course a much larger-scale event, 9/11 foreshadows Peter's school shooting—including the scene of worried parents arriving to pick up their children from school, and the pressure on adults to seem confident and in control when they are in fact bewildered and terrified. Also like 9/11, the shooting is an act of violent revenge in which innocent people lose their lives.*



*The details of the manner in which Peter is bullied illustrate how much bullying revolves around issues of gender and sexuality. For Drew and Matt, it is important to perform a hypermasculine, heterosexual ideal. This includes being strong, athletic, aggressive, and having a big penis. Their accusations that Peter is a "fag" and the way they single him out for being weak could reflect their own anxieties about the pressures of masculinity.*



Lacy hears the screams of her patient, a 21-year-old mentally disabled orphan named Kelly who became pregnant after being gang raped. Rushing into Kelly's room, Lacy is horrified to discover that the doctor has chosen to induce her labor. She fights with the doctor, arguing that this was the wrong decision, then tells him to get Kelly an epidural. Although the doctor says this is not safe, he eventually agrees to do so. Lacy tries to calm Kelly down.

*As a nurse, Lacy has less authority than doctors in making decisions about patients (there is also arguably a gendered dynamic involved in her interaction with the doctor here). Yet as this passage shows, Lacy's lower status belies the reality that she knows what's best for her patient.*



It is Josie's 12th birthday and, against her wishes, Alex is taking her out for dinner. Josie doesn't want to spend the evening around people fawning over Alex, who is "a celebrity in the town of Sterling," but she doesn't have a choice. At the restaurant, the chef sends them complimentary caviar, and after Josie complains that this is disgusting, Alex scolds her, noting that Josie must help her preserve her reputation. As Josie has grown up to look more and more dissimilar from Alex, she has found herself wondering about what her father is like. Josie doesn't have many friends, and she knows that she is shunned by the other girls in her grade because she is always defending Peter from bullies.

*While Josie is overall a well-behaved girl and hard-working student, she rebels against Alex because she resents the demand that she help preserve Alex's public reputation. Yet the reader already knows that when Josie grows up, she has a similar (arguably even more intense) fixation on how she is perceived by others. This indicates that people cannot help following in their parents' footsteps, even when they actively don't want to do so.*



Derek Markowitz tells Peter that his mother forces him to play soccer because she is a nutritionist who's "nuts about fitness." At home, Peter lies and tells his parents that soccer practice is going well so they will believe that he is a successful athlete like Joey. Yet as Peter and Derek become friends, Peter finds himself almost looking forward to practice just so they can hang out. One day, Lacy comes to practice—which in itself is humiliating enough—and asks the coach why he never plays Peter. Peter begs her to stop, but Lacy continues. Afterward, the other players laugh and call Peter "Mama's boy" and "homo." In the locker room, Derek tells a joke to make Peter feel better.

*Considering that later in life Josie becomes popular while Peter remains socially ostracized, it is intriguing that he is the first of them to make a friend outside of their duo. This is important, as the fact that Peter is socially ostracized and bullied seems to be the reason he commits the school shooting. Yet as the reader sees here, he does have friends, leading to the question of whether friends are enough to mitigate the trauma of bullying.*



Courtney Ignatio is what Josie calls a "spaghetti-strap girl"; she is the first kid in seventh grade to have a cell phone. To Josie's irritation, the two of them are paired up in social studies, and Courtney invites Josie to her house to work on their project together. Josie is stunned by Courtney's elaborately-decorated room. Courtney explains that her mom is an interior decorator and thinks that this room is a teenage girl's fantasy, although Courtney herself doesn't really like it. Fascinated by Courtney's makeup, Josie tries on some lipstick. Catching this, Courtney first seems annoyed, but then smiles and says it suits Josie.

*Although Josie understandably doesn't realize it at the time, this is evidently a turning point in her life—the moment when her transition from isolated and unpopular to social elite begins. The non-chronological nature of the narrative gives the reader many insights into turning points in the novel that the characters can't see themselves. This helps the reader piece together how the shooting actually became possible.*



Joey is more popular, charismatic, talented, and academically successful than Peter. In Peter's eyes, Joey's only weakness is that he faints at the sight of blood. For this reason, Lewis and Peter go hunting alone. It snowed the night before, which is perfect for deer hunting. When Peter attempts to shoot the deer, he misses, but Lewis gets it instead. As soon as he sees the animal go down, Peter vomits. He feels crushed by his own disappointment, even as Lewis says they will have better luck next time.

Dolores Keating is a decidedly ordinary girl who transferred into Peter's middle school that year and sits in front of him in French. One day, Peter notices a pool of blood on her seat, and in shock he exclaims, "Dolores has her period!" Everyone turns to look. Peter remarks, "Keating's bleeding," and the rest of the class repeats it, turning it into a chant. Peter is thrilled by the novel feeling of acceptance and belonging. At lunch, Drew even asks Peter what happened. Dolores stays out of school for a while, but when she comes back the other student take turns handing her tampons. When Dolores starts crying, Peter tells them to stop; the other students simply push him away. Josie also hands Dolores a tampon and goes to stand next to Matt after doing so.

One day, after waiting for Josie to walk away from "Courtney & Co.," Peter approaches her, giving her a fright. He accuses her of being fake in front of her new friends, to which Josie replies, "There's different kinds of real." She then tells Peter that she can't hang out with him and walks away from him forever.

## PART 1, CHAPTER 7: TEN DAYS AFTER

In this scrap of handwriting, the writer describes the experience of being stared at. They admit that they used to be confused by what other people saw, until one day they looked in the mirror and it all made sense, as they finally hated themselves.

Josie waits until Alex is asleep, then sneaks out of bed, just like she once did to go and see Matt. She manages to find the DVD she wants—a home recording of her sixteenth birthday. Courtney, Haley, Maddie, John, and Drew are there, and as soon as the camera turns to Matt, Josie starts crying. On this birthday, Matt gave her a gold locket. Pausing the DVD, she takes off the gold locket and stuffs it inside one of the couch cushions.

*The innocuous fact that Joey, like many people, is afraid of the sight of blood is actually more significant than it seems, as it illuminates the reality that most people have a natural aversion to violence. This in turn raises the question of why some people find violence naturally abhorrent and others can commit it with seeming ease.*



*This passage is key. It highlights how people do not always commit acts of bullying due to malicious intent. Instead, bullying can happen almost by accident, or—as is probably true in the vast majority of cases—due to a desire to be accepted by others. Indeed, in the vicious social environment of Peter and Josie's school, it seems as if there is only one choice facing students—bully or be bullied.*



*Josie's statement that "there's different kinds of real" could be interpreted as an excuse for her own lack of moral courage, or it could be seen as containing surprising wisdom. Perhaps authenticity is an illusion.*



*This sounds like something Peter might say, but the fact that it could also be by someone else suggests that his experiences are more universal than one might assume.*



*Another consequence of the nonchronological nature of the narrative is that the effects of grief—where it becomes difficult (and traumatizing) to distinguish between vivid memories of a person and the fact that they are now gone—are recreated for the reader.*



While Lacy is buying milk at the gas station, she notices a coffee can with the words *Memorial Fund for the Victims of Sterling High* on it. The cashier sees her looking at it and remarks on the horrific nature of the tragedy, mentioning that the shooter's parents must have "known." Shaking, Lacy cannot speak. She empties all the money in her wallet into the can and leaves without taking the milk. Meanwhile, Ervin Peabody runs a grief session for the whole of Sterling at 7pm that evening. An enormous number of people show up, representing all ages. People voice their horror at the way Sterling—which they always trusted to be a serene, tight-knit community—has turned out to be anything but.

Someone asks if the kids are going to go back inside Sterling High, and Principal McAllistar explains that because the building is still a crime scene, the rest of the school year will be completed in another location. When someone mentions that their daughter has nightmares every night and could never go back into the school building, Courtney Ignatio's dad Mark tells them to feel lucky that their child is alive to *have* nightmares. At this point, Mark turns toward Jordan and asks, "How the hell can you sleep at night, knowing you're *defending* that sonofabitch?" Patrick intervenes, calming Mark down.

Alex's mother died when she was five, and thus she was raised by her distant and unemotional father. In order to win his attention, she excelled at school. He died during her second year of law school, and Alex didn't cry, feeling like this was "what he would have wanted." Now, Alex doesn't know how to handle Josie's grief. She goes into Josie's room and tries to get her to go outside, but Josie refuses. She then brings up Peter, asking if Josie ever had any inclination he could do something like this. Alex brings up the incident with the rifle, but Josie dismisses this, saying they were just "little" and "stupid."

Josie eventually agrees to go out somewhere with Alex, and the two of them drive to the diner. However, as soon as they get out of the car, another car speeds past and Josie, panicking, falls to the floor. Horrified by what she sees as her own foolishness, Alex rushes to Josie, telling her they will go straight home. Patrick, meanwhile, goes to see Ed McCabe's sister Joan, who mentions that Ed was gay. She says that he was closeted at school, because he was "afraid of backlash." Patrick notes that another victim, Natalie Zlenko, had been president of Sterling High GLAAD; he wonders if Peter was homophobic.

*The scene at the gas station is heartbreaking, and it confirms that—despite Lacy's devotion to Peter—she is deeply horrified by what Peter did and wants to make amends. However, the fact that she is the subject of so much scrutiny and shame ironically limits how much she can actually get involved in the healing efforts, only being able to do so under the protection of anonymity.*



*It is up to the reader to decide what they make of the grieving parents' aggressive condemnation of Jordan, the Houghtons, and other characters associated with Peter. While the parents' pain and rage is clearly understandable, directing this anger at scapegoats (who did not actually commit the crime themselves) seems unhelpful, and similar to vengeance, which the book warns against.*



*This passage illuminates another parallel between Josie and Alex: they are both the children of single parents, and their parents were both judges. Moreover, both of them struggle to connect with their parents and they pour their energy into academic work as a result. This emphasizes how, despite efforts to the contrary, people often end up repeating their parents' mistakes and passing down the same problems through multiple generations.*



*The fact that Ed McCabe was gay is significant in light of the fact that, as previously mentioned, so much of the bullying that takes place at Sterling High revolves around gender and sexuality. Not only does this affect the students, but it affects the teachers as well, leading Ed to remain closeted in his workplace.*



Selena goes to see Lacy in order to gather information for Peter’s defense. Her questions begin at Lacy’s pregnancy and Peter’s babyhood. When she asks about Peter’s relationship with Joey, Lacy explains that Joey was killed in an accident a year ago, run over by a drunk driver. Lacy explains that Peter “adored” Joey, and that because he was Joey’s brother, everyone had high expectations of him. After Joey died, she says that Peter supported his parents; yet when Selena asks if Peter had any romantic partners to “lean on” himself, Lacy admits he didn’t. Selena then asks about the music, video games, and websites Peter was looking at, and Lacy explains that they had a conversation about safety on the internet.

When Selena asks about weapons, Lacy admits that Peter knew where the key to shotgun cabinet was, but that she doesn’t know where he got the pistols from. Lacy says she thinks it’s important to give kids privacy. She then confesses that after Joey died, she found heroin paraphernalia in his room, although she has never told anyone this—not even Lewis. When Selena keeps asking about Peter’s computer use and his attitude toward his mother, Lacy gets defensive, and Selena knows that this is the point to stop asking questions. Lacy begins crying and Selena hugs her, telling her it’s not her fault.

Patrick asks Natalie if Peter ever came to a GLAAD meeting, and Natalie says he did, just once. He didn’t say anything, and he never came back. She explains that some people come to a meeting once because they are not ready to come out, whereas others come maliciously, to find out who in the school is gay. Patrick asks which category she thinks Peter would fall into, and Natalie replies that Peter was getting bullied long before he ever came to the GLAAD meeting.

Trying to get his baby son Sam to sleep, Jordan puts him in the car to go for a drive, but immediately realizes his tires have been slashed. Selena gets back and tells Jordan about Joey’s death. She expresses pity for the Houghton family and the immense distress they’ve been through. However, Jordan smiles, saying, “Our client’s just become sympathetic.” Meanwhile, Sterling High moves into the Mount Lebanon School, a former elementary school that is no longer in use. Alex tells Josie that she doesn’t have to go back yet. Although Josie doesn’t *want* to go, she also craves the feeling of being among people who understand what she’s going through.

*Once again, this passage shows that Lacy’s love for her son does not enhance her ability to understand him—in fact, it perhaps does the opposite. Because Lacy adored Joey, she assumes that Peter did too, but there are signs that this is not true. Furthermore, the end of the passage suggests that—like many parents, particularly in 2007—Lacy had a somewhat limited understanding about the internet, digital media, and popular culture, and how they could affect teenagers.*



*The revelation of Joey’s heroin use—and Lacy’s decision not to tell anyone about it—further emphasizes that parental love and expectations can actually prohibit parents from seeing their children for who they really are. Joey was seen as a “golden boy” both by the wider world and his own family—yet there was evidently a different story lying beneath that appearance, one that Lacy missed until after Joey’s death.*



*Natalie’s answer about Peter is ambiguous, perhaps because she doesn’t believe it’s her right to speculate about Peter’s sexual identity. Yet her answer also raises the point that the problem of Peter’s bullying was separate from the issue of whether he was actually gay or not. He was perceived as weak and different, which is why he was targeted.*



*The ostracization Jordan faces from the town of Sterling recalls another famous story about a lawyer who defends a hated individual in the midst of small-town hostility—Atticus Finch in “To Kill a Mockingbird.” While there are palpable differences between the two narratives—the most important being that anti-black racism does not play a role in Peter’s case—the connection between them highlights the theme of the importance of justice for all.*



Josie snaps at Alex and feels horrified by the two versions of herself that are simultaneously inside her: the innocent little girl still clinging to the belief that everything that's happened is just a nightmare, and the cynical, cruel adult. She hears a car in the driveway and for a brief second thinks it's Matt, who always drove her to school. Instead it's Drew, who still has one arm in a sling. Alex says that she will take Josie to school, but Josie replies that she'd rather go with Drew. Inside the car, they discuss how their parents are behaving in a suffocating manner. Drew says he feels guilty for having survived at all. When they arrive at school, Drew gives Josie Matt's baseball cap. Both of them begin to cry.

At work, Alex finds herself distracted, obsessively wondering if Josie is ok. She calls an hour-long recess and goes outside to smoke a cigarette. She finds Patrick there, who speaks to her in a surprisingly flirtatious manner. She notices that he has a white streak in his hair, which he explains is caused by albinism. Although their conversation is casual, Alex is horrified to find herself crying, and she pretends to Patrick that she isn't. In school, there are a host of new rules to heighten security, and Principal McAllistar announces a moment of silence at the beginning of the day.

At the jail, Jordan asks Peter about Joey, and Peter replies, "He got his golden boy straight-A self rammed by a drunk driver." Jordan points out that there's no way to live up to a perfect person who's killed in a tragedy, and Peter immediately agrees. Peter then says that Joey used to drop him half a mile away from school so no one would see them arrive together. He adds that Joey was often the instigator of his bullying, and that he used to tell Peter he was adopted. Peter concludes that he's "glad he's dead." At home that night, Jordan laments that he won't be able to use Joey's story to make Peter seem sympathetic, because Peter hated Joey.

Selena accuses Jordan of wanting Peter not to be acquitted because he's scared of him. She says that Jordan doesn't understand what it's like to be marginalized. She does because she is black, and she explains feeling trapped by the injustice of the world. Suddenly, Jordan has an epiphany. He's realized that Selena is echoing his defense of a woman who killed her husband, wherein he claimed she was suffering from "battered woman syndrome." Women who experience intimate partner violence feel trapped, and when they become violent themselves they see it as a necessary act of self-protection. This is also how Peter thinks. Like these women, he has post-traumatic stress disorder.

*Like most teenagers, Josie feels like only her peers can understand her, not her parents. However, in her case there is another layer to this, which emerges from the fact that she has endured a traumatic experience with all her peers that her mother cannot even begin to imagine.*



*This is the first moment in which there is an inkling of a spark between Patrick and Alex, evidenced by his flirtation and the fact that she notices the white streak in his hair. Of course, it is hard for Alex to even fathom this new possible romance, because she is so distracted by her daughter's profound trauma.*



*While it initially appeared as if Peter resented Joey simply because Joey was perceived as "perfect," which set high expectations, here it emerges that the truth is much more sinister. Peter seems to have suffered at the hands of his brother, yet the fact that he says he's glad that Joey is dead is still disturbing—particularly for the way it echoes his confusion over why people were mourning the "jerks" he shot at Sterling High.*



*This passage shows how Jordan is inspired by his wife and perhaps doesn't truly listen to her. While she is sharing a personal and painful experience, trying to get him to understand, his thoughts immediately return to the trial and he does not express any sympathy for her. This reiterates the idea that focusing too much on one's career—particularly when one's job involves high emotional intensity—can be detrimental to family life.*



Selena points out that no one has applied battered woman syndrome outside of the context of an abusive relationship before. Jordan confidently replies that he will be the first to do so. Meanwhile, at the police station, Patrick is playing the computer game that Peter created. It is set in Sterling High, and each room contains weapons that the player must retrieve. The aim of the game is to kill “the jocks, the bullies, and the popular kids.” Each time the player does so, they accrue points, and enough points allows them to destroy the entire school with a nuclear missile. The game is called **Hide-n-Shriek**.

Jordan goes to visit Peter in jail and tells him they are going to waive the probable cause hearing. Peter is annoyed about this, but Jordan promises that it’s the right move. When the judge announces to the court that Peter has decided to waive, the members of the press sigh, disappointed to be robbed of “spectacle.” After, Lewis angrily asks Jordan why he isn’t doing his job properly, but Jordan again explains that this will work out better for Peter. Meanwhile, Patrick races to a gun shop in Plainfield, where he finds the owner sitting outside, crying. He explains that Yvette Harvey came into the shop, asked to look at a gun, and immediately shot herself.

Jordan is at the jail talking to Peter and fantasizing about dropping the case altogether. He asks Peter about Josie, and why he wrote the words “LET LIVE” next to her yearbook picture. Peter asks if Josie is ok, but he is evasive in answering Jordan’s questions. Jordan likes Alex, who he thinks is a “tough, but fair” judge. Tension rises between Jordan and Peter, and Jordan warns Peter that all the evidence is making him look like a “cold-blooded killer.” Peter says that it’s true he deliberately planned the whole thing, but that the ten people who were killed “got in the way” of his true target—himself.

## PART 1, CHAPTER 8: ONE YEAR BEFORE

The Houghtons’ dog, Dozer, whom they’ve had since Peter was three, is sick with kidney failure. The whole family has arrived at the vet to have Dozer put down. Lacy suggests they all share their best memories of Dozer, but the rest of the family is unenthusiastic. After the vet administers the injection, she leaves the room to let the family say goodbye. Suddenly, Peter shares his best memory, from when Dozer was still a puppy. Grateful to have such a sensitive son, Lacy embraces him and wishes he would never grow up.

*Jordan believes his decision to invoke battered woman syndrome is inspired, and his explanation for why it applies in Peter’s case is persuasive. However, the juxtaposition between this scene and Patrick discovering Hide-n-Shriek undermines Jordan’s argument. Based on the game, Peter seems less similar to a battered woman than a sadistic, cold-blooded killer.*



*The fact that Yvette Harvey is presumably so ravaged by grief that she decides to kill herself further illuminates the extent of Peter’s crime. Not only has he taken the lives of ten—and indirectly, now eleven—innocent people, but he has completely destroyed the lives of their families. Some wounds, such as the experience of losing a child to a violent death, are too much for a person to bear.*



*Peter’s statement that he was the real target of his killing spree is somewhat incongruous with the views he expresses in the rest of the novel. While it is highly plausible that years of bullying created a deep-seated sense of self-hatred in Peter, other evidence (notably Hide-n-Shriek) indicate that his targets were the students he killed. Furthermore, many school shooters do kill themselves, but Peter didn’t do this even though he had the chance.*



*The fact that initially no one will acquiesce to Lacy’s request to share their best memory of Dozer suggests that the Houghton men all struggle to express their vulnerability and emotions. Indeed, of the three of them Peter is the exception, and it makes Lacy happy to know she has a sensitive child. At the same time, this sensitivity will prove a liability when Peter grows up.*



Growing up, Josie is the only person she knows who has never met their father. She has always been curious about him, and this curiosity intensifies now that she is taking biology and learning about how traits are passed down genetically from parents to children. She's learned only a few facts about him, including his name, the fact that he was a law professor, and that he is ten years older than Alex. In bio lab, Josie and Courtney are partners. She is supposed to be looking up humane animal research online, but she accidentally stumbles on an article in *The Boston Globe* about how Logan Rourke, dean of students at Harvard Law School, is running to be district attorney.

At school, Peter only ever uses the stalls to pee. Back in English, his class is doing a pop quiz. He dreads the look of disappointment in his parents' eyes if he fails. Just before he leaves the stall, he hears two athletes pretending to look for him and calling him a "fag." After he steps out, he sees that one of them is Joey, who immediately tells him, "Get lost, freak."

In court, Alex is adjudicating a dispute between two neighbors who hate each other. She goes out to smoke a cigarette with Liz, who can immediately tell that something is wrong. After listening to Alex list her sources of stress, Liz says she thinks Alex needs to have sex and decides to set her up on a blind date. Meanwhile, Peter has an after-school job at QuikCopy, which he hates. He is saving up money to buy a new computer for the game design he's been doing with Derek. Peter was terrified when his boss, Mr. Cargew, told him he was hiring another high school student and shocked when he discovered this student is Josie.

Josie looks so different now that sometimes Peter fails to recognize her. They haven't properly spoken since sixth grade. After they start working together, weeks pass when they barely speak, only discussing work matters. However, at one point they end up playing a word association game. Josie appears to be enjoying herself, but then Matt walks into the store and she blushes, looking frightened. Matt says that their friends are hanging out at Drew's that night, flirtatiously suggesting that Josie should come. Before leaving, he calls Peter a "homo." Peter tries to resume his game with Josie, but she seems distracted and doesn't join in.

*The fact that Josie doesn't know her father is arguably less significant than the fact that she is the only person she knows who doesn't know their father. This helps give a sense of what kind of community Sterling is: a stable and affluent one, where deviations from social norms are unusual and thus, presumably, subject to extra scrutiny.*



*The fact that Peter's own brother is so cruel to him, combined with the mention of Josie's absent father Logan, emphasizes the failures of family. Just because people are biologically related doesn't mean they are truly "family."*



*Although Nineteen Minutes is a realist novel with an almost sociological way of depicting a plausible small-town community, there is almost something mythical about the way that Peter and Josie are connected to one another, almost as if their fates are intertwined. No matter how hard Josie tries to escape Peter, she can never quite do it. Yet rather than magical and romantic, this could also be seen as the nightmarish result of living in a small town.*



*The transition that began when Josie and Courtney were assigned to be lab partners is now complete—Josie is a bona fide popular girl and has assimilated into the elite crowd to the point that she doesn't look like the same person. One of the main questions the novel asks in regard to her character is if, beneath the superficial change, she is indeed the same person, or if her inner self transforms along with her appearance.*



Peter asks if Josie has a crush on Matt, which she denies. He then asks what it feels like to be “at the top,” and Josie replies, “Like if you take one wrong step [...] you’re going to fall.” Peter takes Josie into Mr. Cargrew’s office and shows her that he has been watching bestiality porn on his computer. Josie is horrified, but impressed with Peter’s ability to “hack into” the computer and she asks if he can access anything else, such as someone’s address. She leans close to him and he wonders why he doesn’t feel attracted to her, worrying that it means he is gay. Josie wants to look up the address of someone called Logan Rourke, though she doesn’t answer when Peter asks who that is. Peter successfully finds his address.

Thus far, Lewis has discovered that people earning a higher income are generally happier, but the correlation weakens above a certain point. There are happiness disparities between men and women, black people and white people, those who are married and those who are widowed or divorced. Sometimes Lewis feels that his life is too good to be true, although he also knows that people tend to be happiest in early life and old age, and that he is currently in what is statistically the least happy stage of a person’s life.

In Josie’s math class, Mr. McCabe sings and makes jokes. Matt pokes Josie flirtatiously. They are learning about graphs, and each student has to present a graph showing a particular correlation. Peter’s is on popularity; he has placed everyone in their math class at different points based on how popular they are. Peter explains that it is also possible to be a “bridge [...] A person who can fit into more than one category.” He cites Josie as an example. Everyone turns to look at her, and Josie is mortified. At that moment, the bell rings. As they are packing up, Drew and John tease Josie about being a “bridge.”

Josie tells Peter to never speak to her again. Matt tells Josie that he thinks Peter is right about her, and at first Josie thinks he’s taunting her. However, Matt then continues that he sees Josie as a bridge because “bridges take you from one place to another [...] And that’s what you do to me.” Matt leans into kiss her, and Josie feels electrified. After, she nervously explains it was her first kiss. Later, at home, Josie remarks on the fact that Alex is wearing mascara, which is unusual. Alex eventually admits that she’s being set up on a blind date. Josie helps Alex apply lipstick, and Alex finds herself staring at her daughter, thinking of how beautiful she has become and almost feeling jealous.

*In this passage, both Josie and Peter harbor secrets that trouble them deeply, yet which they try to hide from others at all costs. In Peter’s case, it is his worry that his bullies could be right about his sexuality; in Josie’s, it is her curiosity about the father who abandoned her. The juxtaposition of these two secrets shows how everyone carries around issues that make them feel ashamed, confused, and scared, yet they cannot receive support because they keep these issues secret.*



*Again, due to the nonchronological nature of the narrative, the reader has insights into the terrible trajectory of Lewis’ life that Lewis himself does not. This creates dramatic irony when Lewis thinks that his life is almost too good to be true.*



*While Peter largely appears to have been selected as a target of bullying through no fault of his own—simply because he is a little awkward, physically weak, and sensitive—here it emerges that Peter also doesn’t help himself when it comes to the way others perceive him. Presenting on popularity in math class is a surefire way to draw unwanted attention from the popular kids—not only to himself but also to Josie.*



*Josie’s decision to tell Peter to never speak to her again shows how seemingly minor things can come to have overblown, dramatic proportions when one is a teenager. Although Matt teases Josie about being a bridge, even he doesn’t fixate on what Peter meant, instead turning the comment into the basis of a rather corny romantic statement. However, for Josie being labelled a “bridge” is absolutely mortifying.*



Alex's date is a Canadian banker named Joe Urquhardt. When he arrives, he makes a cringey, vulgar joke, and Alex immediately pulls Josie aside to express her horror. She returns to Joe and tells him that a case has come up, and she has to go back to court. She immediately feels relieved at the prospect of having a night to herself. Meanwhile, Josie gets ready for her own date. Alex wants to offer to help her get ready, but she is too worried about Josie saying no to even ask. Becoming Matt's girlfriend has rescued Josie from the damage to her reputation caused by Peter's presentation. She refuses to be friendly with Peter again, remaining cold at work.

One day, at work, Peter sets fire to the trash inside a metal dumpster. As the fire spits and grows, Josie pulls him away, insisting they call 911. After, Peter admits that he started the fire because he knew she'd rescue him. Josie informs Mr. Cargrew, telling herself she is just being a "responsible employee." However, there is also part of her that wants revenge—and she gets it when Peter is fired. Josie enjoys the social protection that comes with being Matt's girlfriend, although she also remains terrified that one day he is going to determine that she's not actually attractive or cool and is just a "fraud."

While waiting for Matt after school, Josie is horrified to find that Peter has approached her. He asks her to say something to Mr. Cargew in order to help him get his job back. Josie wants to tell him to leave her alone, but she also feels guilty about cutting him off. She doesn't want to be a bad person or a bully. Just as Josie is feeling torn, deciding what to do, Matt comes over and tells Peter to get away, calling him "homo." Peter tells Matt to go fuck himself, and Matt immediately starts beating him up. A crowd gathers, and Josie weakly shouts for Matt to stop. Eventually he does.

While they are walking away, Josie hesitantly asks why Matt targets Peter. Matt says Peter started it, and when Josie keeps asking, he gets angry. He says, "If there isn't a *them*, there can't be an *us*," then makes an allusion to Peter's presentation, which humiliates Josie. They keep walking, and Josie doesn't look back to check if Peter is ok.

*It's noteworthy that Matt and Josie start dating around the same time as Peter makes his graph. While Josie comes to deeply love Matt, it seems her initial reasons for wanting to date him lie in the positive impact that this will have on her social standing. Although this might arguably make Josie seem shallow, in the cutthroat world of Sterling High, perhaps she is just doing what she can to protect herself.*



*Peter's decision to start the fire—although fairly innocuous—could be read as a sign of the ease with which he will commit acts of violent destruction later in life, in the same way that serial killers sometimes begin by torturing small animals. Indeed, Peter exhibits an eerie lack of fear or concern about the consequences of starting the fire, focusing only on his goal of making Josie save him.*



*The fact that Josie feels guilty about getting Peter fired even though starting the dumpster fire was incontrovertibly dangerous (and incontrovertibly his fault) suggests that Josie is still a moral person underneath her new exterior. At the same time, the crowd with whom she associates—including her boyfriend—is so cruel that one starts to question whether Josie can still be thought of as moral at all.*



*This is yet another example of Josie making a minor effort to stick up for Peter, only to be reminded of what is at stake for her and backing down, abandoning her support for her old friend.*



Josie is in Lincoln, Massachusetts, an affluent suburb of Boston. Matt has driven her there, eager to use his newly-acquired driver's license. She's told Matt the whole story about finding Logan in the newspaper. When they pull into Logan's driveway, she is shocked to see a toddler's firetruck there. She goes up to the house alone; it is Logan who answers the door. He immediately recognizes her, but he seems uncomfortable and closes the door behind him. He says it isn't a "good time," because he's running for office. He gives her \$300 from his wallet and suggests they could have lunch after the election. Josie is horrified. She realizes that, although they are biologically related, Logan is not really her father.

Logan asks Josie her name, and she tells him it's Margaret. On her way back to the car, she lets the money fall from her hand onto the floor. Meanwhile, Peter comes up with the idea for a video game in his sleep. He dreams about hunting with Lewis, but instead of shooting deer they are shooting people. This gives him the idea to do a contemporary remake of *Revenge of the Nerds*, where the aim of the game is for bullied students to kill bullies. Taking out his yearbook, he circles the pictures of Drew, Matt, John, and Josie.

On the way back from Logan's house, Josie breaks down and Matt comforts her. They start making out and touching one another, and though Josie is initially hesitant—as they are parked on the side of the road—Josie realizes that she wants to keep going. Matt gets out a condom, and they have sex. This causes Josie extreme pain, though Matt doesn't notice and assumes she is enjoying herself. She wonders if it will hurt every time she has sex, and if "pain [is] the price everyone pay[s] for love."

Peter's English teacher Mrs. Sandringham pulls him aside at the end of class and tells him that he got an A on his latest essay. In the essay, he wrote about getting fired for setting the dumpster fire, although he left Josie out of it. Mrs. Sandringham says it really seems as if Peter has learned his lesson from the fire, and that she would trust him "in a heartbeat." Peter imagines how proud Lacy would be if she found about his A. However, this would mean telling her about the dumpster fire, and thus he throws his essay straight in the trash.

*The fact that Josie feels able to tell Matt her secret about Logan suggests that there is a depth to their relationship and that it's not all a matter of social protection. The fact that Josie has a romantic partner to lean on is certainly a good thing now that she is finally being confronted with the full extent of her biological father's callousness and cruelty.*



*This passage compares responding to harm with dignity and seeking revenge, indicating that the former is, unsurprisingly, the better option. When Logan tries to bribe Josie to leave, she reacts with dignity, lying about her name and leaving the money he tried to give her. Peter's response to his ongoing bullying, meanwhile, is less dignified—and much more sinister.*



*This passage starts out in a moving way, but then becomes more sinister. Although it is not stated explicitly, it seems as if Matt uses Josie's emotionally vulnerable state to have sex with her. At the same time, the reader shouldn't ignore the fact that Josie wants to have sex with Matt, too. The problem lies in the fact that he isn't a very sensitive or thoughtful partner.*



*This scene may elicit some sympathy for Peter, but this sympathy will likely be mitigated by the fact that setting the dumpster was not only his fault—it was done in an attempt to manipulate Josie into showing affection for him. This kind of behavior, while it might be framed as an act of love and desire, is unacceptably coercive.*



Courtney, Maddie, Josie, Matt, Drew, and John are watching a “teen sex comedy” at Maddie’s house. Josie and Maddie are also playing with a Ouija board. Suddenly, Matt yawns and announces that he and Josie are leaving. Josie protests, saying she’s having fun, and Drew teases Matt for being “pussy-whipped.” They have an argument, and Josie reluctantly agrees to leave. Once they are out of sight of the others, Matt pins her against the wall and demands that she never make a fool of him like that again. Terrified, Josie apologizes, and Matt instantly softens, saying that he only gets angry because he loves her so much. It is the first time either of them have used the word “love.”

In gym class, Peter and Derek discuss what Peter should name his game. While everyone else gets picked ahead of them, the boys talk about how much Michael Jordan gets paid now even after he has retired. They conclude that while this is impressive, it is only a fraction of what Bill Gates is paid. Just before Thanksgiving, there is a huge snowstorm, and school is cancelled. Alex wishes she didn’t have to go to court either, but unfortunately this isn’t the case. While she and Josie are lying in bed together before Alex has to leave, Josie asks why Alex never married Logan. Alex is taken aback; when she asks if Josie has contacted him, Josie says no.

Eventually, Alex explains that Logan wouldn’t leave his wife. She then apologizes for the fact that he wasn’t in Josie’s life when she was growing up, although Josie replies, “You did the right thing.” Alex says she’s not sure, then tries to change the subject. Meanwhile, Peter goes to a gay bar, and he is surprised when he isn’t even asked for ID. He’s treating his trip there as an “anthropology experiment,” to see if this is where he belongs. He looks at men kissing and feels intrigued, but not “excited.” An older man offers to buy Peter a drink, and when Peter refuses, he gives him poppers instead. The man, who introduces himself as Kurt, then asks if Peter wants to play a game of pool.

Peter offers to put down \$5 on the game, but Kurt replies, “How about if I win, I get to take you home. And if you win, you get to take me home.” Peter says he doesn’t want to play, but Kurt gets aggressive. At this point another man intervenes to save Peter—Mr. McCabe. Peter is shocked, and HE feels that he and Mr. McCabe “share the same secret.” Mr. McCabe offers him a ride home. The drive is an hour long, and the two of them try to keep the conversation casual. Just as they near Peter’s house, Mr. McCabe explains that he’s not out at school, however he also says that Peter is welcome to come and talk to him whenever he wants. Peter insists that he’s not gay, and he gets out of the car.

*This is the point at which Josie and Matt’s relationship takes a much darker turn. Whereas previously there were only hints that Matt was controlling and cruel, in this passage it becomes clear that these hints are actually signs that he is an abusive partner. Both here and later in the novel, Matt displays classic traits of an abuser, including retaliating against Josie when he feels that she has embarrassed him in front of others.*



*It is intriguing that—even after her disappointing encounter with Logan and her severing of any hope for a relationship with him—Josie remains interested in his and Alex’s relationship. Perhaps Josie’s interest lies less in Logan as a person and more in her mother’s experience. Given what Josie herself is going through, she may be seeking to understand how to know if you are dating a bad partner.*



*The sincerity with which Peter approaches the prospect of investigating his own sexuality is surprising, and even moving. Whereas many kids—including kids who were actually gay—would suppress all thought of queerness, Peter makes the bold and quite courageous move of going to a gay bar to figure it out for himself. The word “experiment” shows that Peter’s boldness is the result of his rather literal, logical, and even scientific way of thinking.*



*The fact that Peter essentially rejects Mr. McCabe’s support and kindness demonstrates the extraordinary power of shame, which often makes people behave in a self-destructive manner. Even if Peter wasn’t gay, it might still be useful to turn to Mr. McCabe for support in general (after all, Mr. McCabe would likely be able to understand and sympathize with being constantly bullied and called a “fag” and a “homo”). But Peter’s shame prevents him from accepting this help.*



Josie, Emma, Courtney, and Maddie are having a slumber party at Maddie's house. It is 3 A.M. and they are bored. Courtney calls Matt, putting him on speakerphone, and confesses that she likes him. Matt immediately realizes that Courtney is pranking him and that Josie is with her, then asks to be taken off speakerphone so he can say goodnight to Josie. Before hanging up, Josie and Matt tell each other they love each other. After, Courtney says they make her nauseous, but Maddie says that Josie is "so lucky."

In December, Peter starts a new job at the Sterling High library. He likes it, because none of his bullies spend any time there, leaving him safe. One day, Peter is moving a projector in an elevator when Josie comes in on crutches. The elevator stops, and—realizing it is stuck—Peter presses the emergency button. Peter says he doesn't know how long it will be until they are found, and Josie begins to panic, explaining that she's claustrophobic. Peter helps her to the floor, asking how she got hurt. Josie says she fell on ice. Peter suggests they play a game to distract themselves. First they play Twenty Questions, then a geography game. Hours pass. Josie suggests they play Truth or Dare.

They ask each other if they hate each other; Peter says he "sometimes" hates Josie, but Josie says she doesn't hate him back. Prompted by another "Truth" question, Josie admits that she was lying about falling on ice. She and Matt were having a fight and he hit her, causing her to fall to the floor. Peter dares her to kiss him and she does, lightly kissing the corner of his mouth. Soon after, the janitor lets them out of the elevator. Matt is standing there, looking relieved that Josie is ok, which Peter can't understand considering he knows Matt hit her. When Peter gets home that night, he finds Lewis in tears. He embraces Peter, telling him that Joey is dead.

## PART 1, CHAPTER 9: ONE MONTH AFTER

In a handwritten note, the writer explains that no kid admits to wanting to be popular, even if in reality they want it more than anything else in the world. They reflect on how strange it is to have your whole life be shaped by what other people think of you.

*This scene illuminates two important facts about Josie's social world, the first of which is that her friends are more like "frenemies" (and certainly not people she can trust or be vulnerable in front of). Moreover, it also demonstrates how other people's perceptions of her relationship with Matt are wildly different from the reality.*



*Once again, Peter and Josie are drawn back together, either by fate or by the simple reality of going to the same school and living in a small town (depending on how the reader chooses to interpret it).*



*It is unclear why Josie chooses to confess the truth about how she got injured. "Truth or Dare" is, after all, not a binding contract. Josie obviously revealed the truth because on some level she wanted to. Perhaps she feels like she can trust Peter more than her current friends. At the same time, his dare for her to kiss him suggests a small betrayal of this trust. While Josie has confessed something deeply vulnerable to him, he remains fixated on finding out whether he has any desire for her.*



*The book suggests that, while the particular fixation on popularity created by the enclosed social environment of high school doesn't last forever, focusing on other people's opinions sadly can.*



Diana reviews the logistics of the mass shooting yet another time, getting ready to give her statement. She wonders if the Houghtons ever expected Peter to do something monstrous when he grew up. Diana is shocked to see that one of the injured students is Alex Cormier's daughter, and she assumes that Alex will recuse herself, as Alex couldn't possibly be objective. Alex herself, meanwhile, stops at a temporary memorial created for the Sterling High victims on her way back from court. There is a cross for each victim, and when she gets to Matt's cross she starts crying, looking at a picture of him and Josie together. She thinks about how close she came to losing Josie.

Someone had put a cross there for Peter, too, but people took it down. Alex reflects on the unlikely but true fact that someone out there considers Peter to be a "victim." Lacy, meanwhile, has delivered three babies since the day of the shooting, but in each birth she managed to do something wrong. Lately, she can't help but think that if she had never become a mother, her life would be better—"easier." Today, she hears one of the patients refuse to be treated by her, because she doesn't want her baby "delivered by a woman whose son is a murderer." Although the OB nurse tries to defend her, Lacy immediately says it's alright.

Lacy wishes she had the opportunity to tell the world that she was just as shocked and horrified by Peter's actions as they were. She feels that she "lost" her son and doesn't know it is possible to still love the boy she knew while hating the person he's become. At that moment Jordan approaches her, and she is embarrassed that he notices she's crying. She asks him, "Why is it so easy for people to point a finger at someone else?" Jordan explains that people crave scapegoats and struggle to actually believe in the idea of "innocent until proven guilty."

Patrick is visiting Philip O'Shea, Ed McCabe's partner. He asks Philip if Ed ever mentioned Peter, and Philip explains that Ed noticed that Peter struggled to fit in and he thought that Peter was wondering if he might be gay. However, Ed himself was sure that Peter was straight. When Jordan goes to see Peter that day, Peter is angry, but Jordan doesn't have any patience for this. He asks how Peter learned how to make explosives, and Peter explains that instructions are easily available online. Peter says he's started going to church because it allows him to leave his cell. It's made him think about the souls of "the ten kids who died." Jordan points out that this phrasing implied their deaths were natural, like Peter didn't cause them. Peter indicates this is intentional.

*This passage introduces the idea that Alex probably shouldn't take on the Sterling High case as a judge. While she has justified this gesture as being normal within a small town, Diana's reaction suggests that—for an event of this scale and severity—it actually isn't. Perhaps Alex has other reasons for wanting to work the trial herself, inspired by the intense emotions of having almost lost Josie in the incident.*



*The question of whether Peter is a "victim" is one of the most important issues raised within the novel. Peter was certainly a victim for most of his life, before he decided to seek revenge. Does his act of violence eliminate his status as a victim, or make him both a victim and a perpetrator? The latter option seems to be more true, in the same way that Peter's victims didn't stop being perpetrators of violence just because they themselves were killed.*



*This is another key passage in the novel. Overall, Picoult is careful to balance not making excuses for Peter with taking a critical look at the ways in which people use scapegoats in order to make themselves feel better and preserve a more straightforward idea of morality. Nothing makes what Peter did okay, but scapegoating and being overly judgmental are not okay, either.*



*It is striking and almost funny (albeit also somewhat tragic) that after Peter spends a lifetime of being bullied by straight people for being gay, an actual gay person determines very simply and casually that he believes Peter is straight. In a way, this shows that the accusations of Peter being a "fag" and a "homo" have almost nothing to do with gender or sexuality at all. They are simply a way to assert that Peter doesn't belong.*



Haley and John are still recovering from the injuries they sustained in the shooting, and with Matt, Courtney, and Maddie dead, Josie's friend group only consists of Drew, Emma, and Brady. Right now, the four of them are watching a movie. Although it's a dumb comedy, it makes Josie think about how it is possible to die at any moment, from any kind of freak event. Telling the others she needs "some air," she gets up and goes outside. Drew follows her, and Josie pretends to be fine. Drew offers words of comfort and hugs her, and Josie replies, "I don't think I can do this." When Drew replies that he still thinks she belongs to Matt, Josie pretends that that is what she originally meant, too.

When Peter was a child, his parents sent him to sleepaway camp. Although Joey loved this camp, Peter immediately called and begged to be taken home. Lewis and Lacy decided to make him stay the full two weeks, thinking it would build his confidence. When he returned, Peter no longer seemed like he could trust Lacy. Now, in prison, Lacy tries to bring up happy childhood memories, but Peter is sour in response. She then apologizes for not picking him up from camp, but he brushes it off. After snapping at Lacy, Peter apologizes and says he's grateful that she comes to see him, unlike Lewis. Peter asks if she wishes he died instead of Joey; Lacy says no, but Peter says she's lying.

Diana is shocked to learn that Alex is indeed sitting on the Houghton case, and she immediately goes to see her. Jordan is pleased to see Diana looking so flustered. When Diana asks Alex about her bias considering the fact that Josie was involved in the shooting, Alex calmly points out that there are thousands of students at Sterling High, and that many people working on the case in various capacities are parents of these students. When Alex asks if Diana is planning on calling Josie as a witness, Diana says she isn't. Jordan thinks about the fact that Josie does seem to have a special connection to Peter and thus to the shooting. However, he doesn't say anything.

At Mount Lebanon, Josie thinks about the future of the survivors of the shooting, imagining an article in *People* magazine entitled "Where Are They Now?" Drew strikes up a conversation with her and says that Peter isn't "crazy." He says he remembers looking into his eyes and seeing that everything he was doing was calculated. Josie replies that the jury will decide whether this is true or not, and Drew accuses her of defending Peter. However, they both quickly apologize, and the tension between them dissipates.

*Although Drew means it in a kind and respectful way, saying that he feels like Josie belongs to Matt highlights the sexist social norms that exist within their friend group. In reality, Josie doesn't belong to anyone—she is her own person, and this was as true when Matt was alive as it is now. Yet the possessiveness and extreme control Matt exerted over her while he was alive was clearly produced by toxic social norms.*



*Lacy fixates on the sleepaway camp moment as a turning point in Peter's life, blaming herself for not acting in a more merciful and caring way. Yet according to the narrative of Peter's life that's been presented to the reader, this incident was not particularly important. The major factors that seem to have led to Peter becoming a murderer are almost all centered around school—even Joey's cruelty mostly took place at school, rather than at home within the sight of their parents.*



*In a way, Jordan is the one who should be more worried about Alex being the judge for this case, considering he is serving as the defense. Theoretically, the fact that Alex has a daughter at Sterling High would make Alex less sympathetic to Peter (if it affects her at all). Perhaps Diana is worried about other people perceiving Alex as biased against Peter, which might undermine Diana's own work.*



*Perhaps there is still an extent to which Josie's former friendship with Peter makes her suspicious in the eyes of her friends. At the same time, the speed with which Drew apologizes suggests that he doesn't really view Josie this way at all, and that the tension between them was just the result of the charged situation in which they find themselves.*



In court, four television cameras are set up, filming Alex reading the charges against Peter. When she reads the name of one of the people Peter killed, Grace Murtaugh, a woman screams, “Do you remember Grace?” She slams a framed photograph in front of Peter, shattering it. Peter doesn’t turn to look at her. Gently, Alex asks Grace’s mother to be quiet. Remembering that she needs to demonstrate her own lack of bias, Alex tells the bailiffs to remove her. She then asks Jordan to make Peter show his hand, revealing a shard of glass from the frame. Embarrassed, Jordan thanks Alex, who finishes reading out the charges. Jordan then announces that Peter is claiming not guilty to all of them.

Alex tells her secretary to clear her schedule for two hours and she drives straight to Mount Lebanon, where she asks the school secretary to pull Josie out of class, claiming it is for an orthodontist appointment. When Josie gets in the car, she skeptically asks Alex why she is there. Eventually, Alex confesses that after seeing bereaved parents in the courtroom, she felt an urgent need to see Josie. As she speaks, she starts to feel self-conscious and regrets being so emotionally vulnerable. Alex then says that she wanted to check that Josie was alright with her presiding over the case, and to emphasize that Josie should still feel free to talk to Alex about anything to do with the shooting.

Josie asks about Peter, wanting to know how he looks and if he will be given a life sentence. Josie then asks if he will be allowed to talk to people on the outside, indicating that she might want to talk to him herself. Concerned, Alex tells Josie that there are other people looking after Peter. Josie requests that they drive back to school. At 2 A.M., Jordan and Selena are up with Sam, and—to Selena’s annoyance—Jordan is once again talking about the case. Jordan expresses concern about Alex’s impartiality, but Selena says it would be better for him to do nothing and wait for Diana to request that she be removed from the case.

Peter is slowly becoming accustomed to the dull brutality of life in jail. He has even started exercising, even though he hates it, because he doesn’t want others to perceive him as weak. However, he no longer goes outside during exercise hour, because the smell of fresh air is too painful. Today, a correctional officer delivers Peter’s mail. One letter is from his mother, who writes to him three or four times a week but never says anything particularly consequential. The other is from someone called Elena Battista, whom he has never heard of before.

*Peter’s decision to take the shard of glass in his hand is ill-advised and rather creepy. It also suggests that—even while he is literally appearing in court for committing an act of violence—his violent tendencies haven’t left him. At the same time, there is also a chance that Peter planned to use the shard of glass to hurt or kill himself, not someone else.*



*Though it is understandable that seeing bereaved parents up close made Alex desperate to see Josie, her attempt to connect with Josie backfires. In a way, Alex’s decision to pick Josie up from school was somewhat selfish. She wasn’t thinking about what was best for Josie, but only acting based on her own emotional instinct. Although this is hardly an unforgivable offense, it shows why Josie can get frustrated over the way her mom behaves.*



*Everyone in the novel finds that the shooting infuses their whole lives. Those working on it can’t manage to distance themselves from the case, and those trying to conduct normal personal lives find that their entire world has been turned upside down.*



*Peter may be getting physically stronger and tougher, but this belies the fact that inside, he is still immature and totally ill-equipped to deal with the extraordinarily difficult situation he finds himself in. This does not absolve Peter from accountability, of course, but it brings into question what role prisons actually serve in delivering justice.*



Elena writes that she feels connected to Peter because she was also bullied in high school, and she is now writing her undergraduate thesis on the effects of bullying. She says she wishes they'd known each other when she was in school. Violating Jordan's advice that Peter shouldn't communicate with anybody, he decides to write back. Selena, meanwhile, goes to speak to Arthur McAllistar. She asks him about the school's bullying policy, and he explains, "We're completely on top of it." Yet he adds that when the administration intervenes in bullying, it usually makes it worse for the victim. He claims that the reasons behind the shooting have been misconstrued, and that prior to it happening, Peter got into trouble twice for fighting in the halls.

*One of the most direct critiques Picoult makes in the novel regards the failure of schools and teachers to properly address bullying. (Note that in interviews, she has stated that her depiction of bullying was inspired by the experiences of her own children, suggesting that the frustrations expressed in the novel regarding these failures may be personal). Selena's conversation with McAllistar suggests he is unable or unwilling to even see the full extent of the problem, let alone tackle it.*



While defending an abused woman who murdered her partner, Jordan called upon a forensic psychiatrist named Dr. King Wah, who specializes in battered woman syndrome. Now, at King's office in Boston, he is told that King is booked up for the next six months. Jordan claims to be King's adopted brother, and his secretary skeptically buzzes him in. King greets him warmly, joking, "how's Mom doing?" When Jordan initially asks King to evaluate his client, King reiterates that he is booked for six months. But after Jordan gives details, King is intrigued and suggests they get lunch.

*This passage provides a somewhat jarring reminder that, even though Jordan is personally invested in the case, this is still also his job. He can joke around with Dr. Wah even as the issue that has brought them together—abused women who murder their abusers—is one of the darkest topics imaginable. This contradiction becomes almost normal when one works in such a field.*



Patrick has called Josie to the police station to ask her "a few more questions." Josie is nervous, and Alex immediately tells Patrick that Josie doesn't remember anything. However, Patrick says he needs to talk to Josie himself, promising that it won't take long. Josie panics when she realizes that Alex won't be accompanying her. Patrick makes her a cup of coffee, then leads her into a conference room. After announcing that he'll record their conversation, he notes that Josie has the same eyes as Alex, although Josie notes that they are a different color. When Patrick asks her, Josie tries to remember what happened in the locker room on the day of the shooting. She can't remember anything but the color red—the red of "anger" and "blood."

*Patrick's comment about Josie's eyes further confirms that he's attracted to Alex and also suggests that, even amidst the chaos and trauma of the shooting's aftermath, he is still unable to take his mind off her. While it is perhaps a little strange for the police officer interviewing her to be subtly conveying his crush on her mother, there is also something moving about how Patrick and Alex are brought together in the midst of tragedy.*



When Josie emerges from her conversation with Patrick in tears, Alex feels furious. Yet when Alex tries to comfort her daughter, Josie snaps, "None of you understand." To their surprise, Patrick has followed them out of the police station, offering a sweater that Josie left behind. He puts an arm on Josie's shoulder and promises that everything will be alright. Josie nods, and Alex is surprised to see her looking calmer. She wishes that she'd been able to reassure Josie herself.

*It might be easy to assume—especially if one is not a parent oneself—that parents feel confident in their own role. Even if they are aware of the flaws in their skills, parents are supposed to feel a natural sense of authority, as if they are the right person for the role. Alex's feelings in this passage show how untrue this can be.*



The narrator lists the similarities between Peter and Derek, while also pointing out the major difference: that Derek never killed anyone. Selena is interviewing Derek at his house, while his mother, Dee Dee, watches “like a hawk.” Derek is distraught, wondering if everything is his fault because he heard the clues that Peter was planning an act of violence and never did anything about it. During the interview, Derek mentions Peter’s former friendship with Josie. Immediately, Selena excuses herself, calls Jordan, and tells him that Peter and Josie were once best friends.

When Elena comes to visit Peter in prison, he is pleasantly surprised to see that she is “hot.” He fantasizes about them getting married. She gets out a notepad, explaining that while she was being bullied as a teenager, she used to fantasize about suicide. She asks Peter about the kinds of things his tormenters subjected him to, then asks if Peter intended to kill them. Peter smiles, hoping to look “seductive,” and tells her, “Let’s just say it need to stop.” Weeks later, Jordan is at the dentist, flipping through magazines in the waiting room. He finds an article about Peter with the headline “Inside the Mind of a Killer” and he is so horrified that he immediately leaves the dentist’s office, bringing the magazine with him.

Jordan goes straight to the prison and immediately demands to see Peter, whom he yells at for talking to the press. Peter explains that Elena was his “friend,” but Jordan replies, “You don’t get to have any friends.” Jordan calms down, asking Peter more gently to tell him if anyone contacts him in the future. A silence settles between them. Eventually, Jordan strikes up a conversation about computer games. Meanwhile, Alex’s secretary informs her that Diana is requesting that Alex recuse herself from the case. Alex is horrified; it would have been alright to recuse herself at the beginning of the case, but doing so now would have a seriously negative impact on her reputation. However, she feels like she has no choice but to go ahead with the hearing Diana has requested.

As Alex opens the fire door to go outside for a cigarette, it accidentally hits Patrick. She asks him, “off the record,” if Josie seemed okay when Patrick interviewed her. Patrick replies that, “off the record,” he once investigated a case involving the son of a woman he loved. He learned the hard way that, although he’d convinced himself he would be the best person for the job, the opposite was actually true. This is because when someone you love is directly impacted by a case, it no longer becomes work but “revenge.”

*It is surprising that the fact of Peter and Josie’s previous friendship—which at this point is obviously evident to the reader—is revealed as news to Selena and Jordan for the first time here. This highlights that within a small town, things can become secret not necessarily because anyone is hiding them (although Josie does actively pretend she was never friends with Peter), but because they are common knowledge and thus go unspoken.*



*Peter’s comment about Elena being “hot” is significant, and it may read differently to contemporary readers than it did when the novel was first published. In the present day, it is widely acknowledged that many (although not all) mass shooters are men who feel unfairly rejected by women. There are some indications that Peter also feels this way; on the other hand, he is perhaps just thinking like a normal teenage boy.*



*Ultimately, it is Peter himself who undermines his own success with repeated (if inadvertent) acts of self-sabotage. He fails to express much remorse about what he has done, acts carelessly by picking up the shard of glass in court, and lets himself be tricked by a woman purely out of lust. At the same time, the reader is arguably encouraged to feel a small sliver of sympathy for Peter due to his intense social isolation, which is harshly driven home by Jordan’s statement that he doesn’t get to have friends.*



*There are many examples throughout the novel of the dangers of mixing one’s professional and personal lives. Yet at the same time that the novel presents these dangers, it also questions whether it is possible to ever separate the two in the first place. Every worker is also human, after all, and no one can totally cut themselves off from their own background and emotions at work.*



Lewis has been telling Lacy that he is visiting Peter in jail, and now that she knows this is not true, she decides to follow him. She watches him go into a flower shop, and wonders, horrified, if he's having an affair. Lewis then drives to the cemetery, with Lacy still following. It is raining hard. Lacy watches as he lays flowers at the graves of each of the people Peter murdered. He tells Lacy he knows she's there, and she replies with anger that Lewis is coming here but not visiting his own son in jail. Lewis explains that he feels that, because he took Peter hunting, he might be responsible for the murders. He breaks down, and Lacy embraces him. She feels a horrifying sense of guilt for her sons' fates.

Lacy says that Peter needs them, but Lewis says he can't go to see him. He thinks about the burning rage and desire for vengeance he feels against the drunk driver who killed Joey, and he feels too much sympathy for the parents who feel that way about Peter. Meanwhile, Jordan is meeting King after his interview with Peter. King immediately announces that Jordan's strategy of using battered woman syndrome will work, as there are substantial similarities between Peter's mindset and that of an abused woman. King also notes that "a single incident of bullying in childhood can be as traumatic to a person, over time, as a single incident of sexual abuse." Furthermore, almost everyone can relate to being bullied, because everyone has experienced it.

Alex is looking for a skirt Josie borrowed and never returned. While searching Josie's closet, she's found a "trove of treasures," mementoes from across Josie's life. On Wednesday night, Patrick is at the Golden Dragon, waiting for his usual takeout order when he spots a woman alone at the bar. He tries to buy her a drink, and she turns around and he realizes that it's Alex. She says they shouldn't even be seen talking to each other. Patrick mentions that he doesn't have kids, and Alex asks if he was ever married. He tries to avoid the subject, but eventually admits the woman he was in love with was already married to someone else. Alex says the same was true for her.

Suddenly, an older man who has "lawyer written all over him" approaches them, greeting Alex and introducing himself to Patrick as Whit Hobart. He feels horrified that this is who Alex is dating, even though he knows it's none of his business, and he leaves in a bad mood. Meanwhile, Jordan and Selena are watching the evening news, which has a report about the hearing which will determine whether Alex will stay on the case. Suddenly, Jordan decides that he will use Josie as a witness, which will both provide crucial support for Peter and force Alex to step down. Selena applauds his brilliance, and Jordan suggests they have sex. However, Selena ruins the vibe by asking if he feels anxious about their kids.

*Like Lacy dumping out her whole wallet into the collection for the Sterling High memorial fund, Lewis pays tribute to the victims in secret, leaving flowers anonymously. This moving and heartbreaking scene suggests that people should be more forgiving to Lacy and Lewis, who clearly feel a deep sense of guilt, shame, and remorse for what Peter has done, yet can't even express this publicly because people have already judged them so harshly.*



*Depending on one's knowledge and experience of bullying, King's statement that even one incident of bullying can be as traumatic as sexual abuse might be quite shocking. Bullying is such a common experience that its effects are perhaps underplayed. One of the purposes of Nineteen Minutes is to draw attention to the truly horrifying nature of bullying and illuminate the connection between this issue and the problem of school shootings.*



*This moving moment shows how a painful part of a person's life can be redeemed, or at least partially healed, by connecting with someone who experienced something similar. Although they have known each other for a while, this is the first time that Alex and Patrick have interacted outside of a work environment, and they immediately realize that they have something very important in common.*



*Jordan is not presented as a morally bad character, but he is a lawyer through and through. As such, he is willing to pull out all the stops in order to enhance his defense of Peter, including using Josie as a prop and potentially subjecting her to further trauma. While the ethics of such a move are debatable, they are a common and inevitable part of the legal system.*



Alex goes into court, preparing to recuse herself from the case. However, she then sees a note on her desk saying that Jordan is planning on calling Josie as witness. Alex is furious, desperate to protect her daughter from the pain this would cause. Meanwhile, Patrick overhears that an officer is planning to go to the courthouse and offers to drive them, because he wants an excuse to see Alex. When he gets there, he finds her sitting in her car and crying. He walks up to her and asks if she's okay, offering to buy her coffee. Although Alex is resistant, she eventually relents. They go to the Golden Dragon.

Alex confesses that she sometimes struggles with the expectation that, as a judge, she should always be perfect. Patrick offers words of support, saying everyone experiences similar struggles and that Alex shouldn't be afraid of being "human." Alex also confesses that she's worried about Josie being traumatized by being called as a witness, and she doesn't know how to support her. While they are talking, Alex notices Patrick's kindness, but she is also suspicious of it. Later, Alex goes to Jordan's house, where he had been playing with Sam. Alex greets Sam warmly, but then turns to Jordan more sternly and asks if he called Josie as a witness on purpose, in order to get her removed from the case. Jordan refuses to answer.

The narrative is interrupted by a quote about popularity taken from the handwritten section preceding this chapter; the implication is that Josie has written it in her notebook. There is a knock on Josie's bedroom door; it's Alex, who announces that she has recused herself from the case, then tells Josie she might be called as a witness. Josie instantly becomes upset and tries to make Alex promise she'll stop her from being called, and Alex indicates she'll try. After Alex leaves, Josie lies on her bed and murmurs Matt's name.

On Peter's birthday, a correctional officer brings him a "present"—a new cellmate. It is a young man, with the "glassy-eyed, gum-lipped look of a special-needs kid." The kid asks if Peter has a dog, and Peter immediately grabs the kid's glasses and stamps on them, causing him to shriek. Peter is immediately handcuffed. Contemplating the punishment that will inevitably follow, Peter wonders if he himself believes in Jordan's "bullied victim syndrome" argument. He wishes he could kill himself quickly rather than spending the rest of his life in prison.

*Patrick is taking on the role of hero in Alex's life, (literally) playing the "good cop" who does everything he can to protect and support her. One could argue that he is using her emotional vulnerability as a way to get close to her—just as Matt did with Josie—but based on what the reader knows about his personality, it seems as if his intentions are more noble than that.*



*Of course, while it is completely understandable for Alex to be worried about Josie (and suspect that Jordan seems to be using her in order to force Alex to drop the case), there is also an extent to which Alex has unrealistic expectations about Josie's rights. As someone who (literally) witnessed the shooting at such close range, it is—unfortunately—not outrageous to suggest that Josie be called in as a witness, despite the further trauma this may cause.*



*Some readers will interpret this scene as undeniable evidence that it is Josie, not Peter or someone else, who is the author of the handwritten sections (which are presumably extracts from her notebook). While this certainly seems likely, Picoult's choice to not reveal the author's identity for certain is deliberate. It serves as a reminder that the issues the writer discusses are universal.*



*This scene arguably confirms that Peter is an unforgivably cruel, violent, even evil person. The fact that he lashes out at someone who is obviously disabled (and who did not attack him in any manner) is horrifying. At the same time, some might argue that the experience of being in prison so long has itself turned Peter into a more brutal person.*



On Saturday morning, Alex goes back to Jordan's house, this time with Josie in tow. She suggests that Jordan could ask Josie the questions he wants to know now. Jordan is resistant. When Selena joins them, Alex implores that she has come to them not as a judge, but as a parent, and Selena suggests they invite Alex in for coffee. Jordan questions Josie about her friendship with Peter. When he asks what Peter's relationship with Matt was like, Josie begins to cry. At this point, Alex suggests that Josie go wait in the other room. She then addresses Jordan "parent to parent," promising she can get an affidavit signed by Josie that officially states she doesn't remember anything. Mindful that his main goal was always getting Alex's recusal, Jordan agrees.

Now that Alex is home all day, she and Josie have started cooking together. At first Josie did this simply because Alex's culinary skills were scarily bad, but now she finds herself enjoying the time they spend together. The doorbell rings unexpectedly, and when Josie goes to answer it, she panics at the sight of Patrick. However, to her surprise he is holding a bottle of wine—and to her even greater surprise, she notices that Alex is "blushing." Josie immediately runs up to her room, saying she needs to do homework. She turns the music up loud and thinks about when Matt used to come over while her mother went upstairs to give them privacy.

Downstairs, Alex and Patrick initially speak in a warm, flirtatious manner. However, Alex asks Patrick to describe the state Josie was in when he found her on the day of the shooting. He describes seeing her lying with Matt in a pile of blood, and the euphoric feeling he had when he noticed her move. Alex calls him a "hero," but Patrick brushes this off. He kisses her, and after a moment of hesitation, she kisses him back.

## PART 1, CHAPTER 10: THE MONTH BEFORE

Like all couples, Josie and Matt have a "pattern," a particular choreography of movement they always follow when they are together. However, on this particular occasion, Matt breaks the pattern by not pausing like he usually does to put on a condom. Josie protests, and although Matt tries to persuade her, he eventually gives in and gets a condom out of his wallet.

*Josie's tears at the sound of Matt's name could of course be triggered by the memory of her boyfriend and her grief at his passing. On the other hand, considering the context in which Jordan mentions Matt, perhaps Josie is crying out of guilt, or fear about people discovering the extent to which Matt bullied Peter.*



*The blossoming romance between Alex and Patrick is essentially the only redemptive, uplifting narrative arc in the whole novel—a reminder that silver linings can emerge even amidst total horror. Furthermore, the almost teenagerish excitement and nervousness both Alex and Patrick have about their romance suggests that people never fully stop growing up, which also means that innocence never completely disappears.*



*There is a bright side to the fact that tragic circumstances have brought Alex and Patrick together. Instead of superficial attraction, they are drawn to each other for the right reasons, and they also reliably know how the other would react in crisis, which often doesn't come until much later in a relationship.*



*Matt's abusive behavior toward Josie is, sadly, not unusual. Many teenage girls find themselves pressured into things like having sex without a condom, and—out of a mix of love, fear, and shame—often agree even if they don't want to.*



Lacy has taken to leaving corn on the lawn in order to feed the deer during winter, hoping to “cancel out” Lewis’ hunting. Today, to her surprise, Peter follows her out onto the lawn, wearing only a t shirt and vest. He has barely left his room in months. Lacy gives him the bucket of corn to help, and he asks if it’s true that she was the one who asked out Lewis, not the other way around. Lacy smiles and says it’s true. They met at a pro-choice rally, where Lacy struck up a conversation. They’d become separated in the crowd, but Lewis dropped a piece of paper that had his name and position at Sterling College on it, and Lacy contacted him.

When Peter keeps asking questions about how Lacy asked Lewis out, Lacy asks if he likes someone, and he immediately turns red. He admits that his feelings are “one-sided” and that “she barely even registers my existence.” Unfazed, Lacy says it’s up to Peter to change that, encouraging Peter to tell the girl how he feels. She concludes, “It worked for me.” Meanwhile, Josie and Matt are naked on the floor of her living room, both a little tipsy after drinking beer at Drew’s house. This time Matt is much more aggressive than he usually is, and it hurts Josie. She says, “Wait,” but he puts a hand over her mouth and keeps going until he comes. After, he tells her he loves her and Josie says the same, although she won’t look at him.

Peter has decided to send Josie an email confessing his feelings. He writes and rewrites the message, cringing at what he’s saying. After finally coming up with something, he manages to read it over once before hastily pressing send. Meanwhile, Courtney is at Josie’s house, feeling bored. She’s tried to quiz Josie for details about the sex she’s been having with Matt, but Josie refused to reveal much. Now Josie is in the shower. Suddenly, the email alert on Josie’s computer beeps, and Courtney goes to check it. She is stunned by what she sees, saying aloud, “This is too fucking good.” She forwards it to Drew, telling him to send it to “the whole wide world.” When Josie comes back from the bathroom, Courtney pretends she was checking her own mail.

That night, Josie can’t sleep. She is panicking over the fact that her period is three days late. On Tuesday afternoon, Josie is at Matt’s house, writing a social studies essay for him. Matt and Drew are lifting weights and taunting each other. Drew makes a joking reference to there being “competition” for Josie’s heart. Josie is confused, and immediately feels anxious. Matt shows her the email, which he’s printed out, and Drew and Matt recite lines of it which they’ve memorized. Josie is horrified and humiliated. She is also upset that one of her friends must have shared the email from her account. She realizes that “popular kids d[on’t] really *have* friends; they ha[ve] alliances.”

*In many ways Lacy inhabits a rather traditional feminine role, both via her profession as a midwife and her doting persona as a mother. Yet this passage reveals that there is another side to her too. She is also an actively feminist woman who believes in reversing gender roles (at least under certain circumstances).*



*There is an important contrast between the innocence of Peter’s questions to his mother and the cruelly aggressive and even sexually violent behavior that Matt exhibits toward Josie. Of course, given what the reader knows about Peter’s future, he is unlikely to come across as an innocent, nonviolent person, but in this passage he appears to be far kinder and more considerate than Matt.*



*Courtney’s decision to forward the email to Drew (and the rest of the “whole wide world”) is primarily an act of cruelty toward Peter—but it also betrays her total lack of care and consideration for Josie. It is fair to say that checking someone’s email account without their permission is already not a sign of a good friend. The fact that Courtney forwards it without even telling Josie or asking her permission shows that she doesn’t care about Josie’s feelings, and may actively want to embarrass and hurt her.*



*Clearly, this is a catastrophic moment for Josie. Not only is she possibly pregnant, but the whole school has read a personal email Peter sent her confessing his love for her. While some might wonder why Peter’s email should be considered embarrassing for Josie (after all, she didn’t write it), the book has frequently emphasized that at Sterling High, unpopularity is treated like a contagion. Simply being associated with an unpopular person can make their bad reputation rub off on you.*



In order to save face, Josie forces herself to act casually about the email, calling Peter a “total loser.” She gets to work on Matt’s essay, and he kisses her hand in gratitude. Meanwhile, at school, Courtney confronts Peter in the rush between classes. She says that she has something to tell him—Josie likes him. She pretends to disapprove because it’s “social suicide,” but adds, “I guess that’s what people do for love.” Peter replies with skepticism, but he is also blushing. In the cafeteria, Josie disobeys the unwritten rule about what popular kids are supposed to eat and loads her plate with Tater Tots. Courtney touches the grease on Josie’s tray and exclaims, “Gross.”

Josie rummages around in her bag for an apple, and at that moment Peter speaks to her from the next table, asking if she’d like to join him for lunch. She tries to ignore him, but her friends immediately start teasing them both, making references to Peter’s email. Peter realizes that he’s been tricked. Matt gets up and, in one quick movement, pulls Peter’s pants down, exposing his naked body to the whole cafeteria. After Peter runs out, Josie picks up his abandoned lunch, telling herself she will give it back to him, even though she never does. Peter, meanwhile, bangs his head against his locker, then opens it and removes a picture of him and Josie he’d been keeping in there. He runs to the bathroom, puts the picture in the toilet bowl, and pees on it.

Josie feigns illness so she can stay home from school. After Alex leaves for work, she Googles the word “abortifacient.” She doesn’t want to tell Alex about the pregnancy and have her take her to Planned Parenthood. She has even considered calling Logan, assuming he would be in favor of helping her have an abortion. However, she eventually abandoned that idea, too. Most of the herbal remedies Josie finds seem strange and disgusting, but she eventually sees that Vitamin C can also induce a termination. She retrieves some from the cupboard, then does the pregnancy test she’d bought the day before, which produces a positive result.

Peter is clearing his driveway with a snowblower when the machine runs out of gas. He decides to go to the house of his neighbor, Mr. Weatherall—who is a retired cop—in order to get more. Mr. Weatherall invites Peter in, telling him to wait while he gets the gas from the basement. While Mr. Weatherall is down there, Peter pokes around the kitchen, and finds the handgun that he used to carry when he was a police officer inside one of the sugar canisters. When Mr. Weatherall comes back up the stairs with the gas, Peter hastily puts the gun back in the canister.

*The fact that Peter believes Courtney’s claim when she is so obviously a malicious and dishonest person could be interpreted as a sign of Peter’s desperation to believe there is a chance Josie loves him. On the other hand, perhaps he just suffers from general gullibility, a disposition likely exaggerated by the fact that Peter himself is a rather direct, sincere, and literal person.*



*This is a climactic and pivotal moment in the novel. While under different circumstances it could just be yet another example of the daily abuse and humiliation that Peter has suffered his whole life, here it becomes the final straw—the moment at which Peter’s passive endurance of his bullying turns into a decision to actively seek revenge.*



*Josie’s decision to keep her pregnancy secret and her efforts to perform an abortion on herself at home are, again, sadly very common. Lack of proper information about sex and reproduction combine with social stigma, lack of access to reproductive health services, and financial issues to mean that many girls like Josie feel they have no other choice.*



*It is chilling that Peter’s discovery of the guns that he eventually uses to commit the shooting happens totally by accident. The fact that the guns are semiautomatics is also key; Peter would have been able to shoot far fewer people with his father’s hunting rifles alone, and he may have been apprehended much quicker.*



Matt comes over after school to tend to Josie, who he also believes is sick. He brings her chicken soup and comics, because they are what his mom brought him when he was sick as a child. He says he hopes she feels better in time for the party Drew is throwing on Friday night, and at this point Josie reveals that she is pregnant. Matt ignores her, then tells her she is “overreacting.” Eventually, he tells her that they are “in it together,” and that he would never leave even if she wanted him to. A few days later, Peter goes back to Mr. Weatherall’s house, claiming to need even more gas. As soon as Mr. Weatherall goes downstairs, Peter puts the gun inside his jacket.

Josie has a vivid dream that she is flying. Yet instead of falling to the ground, she seems to fall into water. When she wakes up, she finds a pool of blood on her sheets, and realizes with euphoric relief that she is miscarrying. Meanwhile, an employee at the gun shop Lewis sometimes goes to calls to say his hollow-point bullets are ready to be picked up. Lewis is confused, and he tells the man he never ordered them. After hanging up, he tells Lacy it was a wrong number. Matt has an away game, and Josie comes to see him in the locker room beforehand, something he hates. He makes a vulgar joke at her expense, and the rest of his team laughs. In coded language, Josie tells him she isn’t pregnant. He picks her up and kisses her.

## PART 2, CHAPTER 1: FIVE MONTHS AFTER

Part Two opens with a Chinese proverb about revenge. The handwritten section preceding the chapter describes how Sterling is a mostly crime-free city, which is part of why everyone was so shocked that the mass shooting occurred there. Yet, as the writer observes, “How could it *not* happen here? All it takes is a troubled kid with access to guns.” The writer denounces the way in which Sterling residents choose to dig their heads in the sand rather than confront the problems in their community.

The jury for Peter’s trial is being selected, a difficult task considering that all members need not only to have been unaffected by the shooting, but also to not have been exposed to much media coverage of it. It is August and extremely hot; everyone is exhausted. The next potential juror is called up, a decidedly “normal” man who doesn’t know too much about the case. After grilling him, Jordan and Diana tell Judge Wagner that they are satisfied with him.

*Picoult takes care to depict the contradictions that tend to define abusive relationships. Matt is not cruel to Josie all the time—in fact, he can be capable of great tenderness and care. Furthermore, his love for her seems to be deep and sincere. Yet none of this mitigates the fact that he behaves in a violent and abusive way toward her.*



*Regardless of whether Josie’s termination was the result of her efforts or if it would have happened anyway, her reaction is important: she feels pure relief. This contrasts with Alex’s feelings when she was pregnant with Josie—while Alex scheduled several abortions, she missed the appointments and ultimately decided that she was ready to have a child. Josie clearly is not ready.*



*While it is true that some regions have high crime rates whereas others don’t, in a way this actually creates a misleading impression of the way that crime works. The truth is that people commit immoral acts everywhere, including in “safe,” stable, and affluent communities. However, in these communities the police and prison system are less likely to be involved.*



*Again, this passage reiterates how difficult it is to achieve judicial neutrality considering that Sterling is a small town and the case is so high-profile. However, this begs the question—are neutrality and objectivity always worthy goals? Or is there some value in subjective, personal connections to an event?*



Alex and Patrick have now been dating for four months, and Alex feels as if he has entered her life via “osmosis.” This morning, after waking up at Alex’s, Patrick realizes that he’s late for work. As he gets ready to go, Alex realizes that Josie will see him on the way out. Patrick suggests that it might be a good time to tell Josie about their relationship, but Alex is hesitant. Although she doesn’t say this, she’s not worried about what Josie thinks—she’s actually concerned with protecting her own heart from getting broken. Josie shouts up from the kitchen, asking if Alex wants pancakes. Patrick suggests that this presents a perfect opportunity for Alex to distract Josie so he can sneak out.

Once Alex is down in the kitchen, Josie reveals that she knows Patrick stayed over. Alex says she will break up with Patrick if Josie doesn’t want them to be together, but Josie replies that Alex shouldn’t care what other people think. When Josie asks if Alex loves him, she lies and says she doesn’t—another self-protective gesture. Alex hears Patrick trying to sneak quietly down the stairs, and she calls him into the kitchen for pancakes. Selena, meanwhile, is thinking about the differences between infant boys and girls. She thinks that life can be easier for girls, because they are socially permitted to express their emotions and vulnerability where boys aren’t. She wonders who is to blame for this.

Josie is pretending to have a summer job as a volunteer tutor teaching math to elementary and middle school kids. Every evening she tells Alex stories about the kids she tutors, all of which are invented, because she is not really tutoring at all. Instead, she spends her days at the cemetery, where she sits by Matt’s grave and talks to him. Lacy, meanwhile, has driven to Boston to buy an outfit for Peter to wear during his trial. A sales assistant comes to help her, saying she knows how Lacy is feeling because when her “son went away,” she felt like she was “going to die.” For a second Lacy thinks she also has a son in prison, but then realizes the woman is talking about college. Lacy says her son is going to Harvard.

Josie is just about to leave the cemetery when she runs into Patrick. He points out that Alex thinks Josie is tutoring right now, but he says that he is there because he wants to talk to Josie himself. Patrick says that part of his job is constantly wishing that he could turn back time and stop a terrible thing from happening, so he knows how Josie feels. Although this is exactly how she feels, she snaps back that they have “nothing in common.” Patrick says he wants to talk to Josie about the fact that he is dating Alex, but Josie says that Alex doesn’t care what she thinks. When Patrick emphasizes that Alex cares about this more than anything, Josie suddenly finds herself crying. She eventually admits she’s jealous.

*The idea that Patrick and Alex have been turned into teenagers via their romance is further confirmed here, when Alex suggests Patrick sneak out so that Josie can’t see him—a comic role reversal of child and parent. At the same time, Alex’s concerns about Josie finding out about the relationship are understandable, particularly considering what a sensitive period this is for her.*



*Just as teenagers are often not as good at hiding information as they want to think they are, Alex has failed to keep the truth of her relationship secret from Josie. In a way, Josie is perhaps particularly equipped to see through Alex’s attempt at secrecy because she is still an actual teenager and is thus used to pulling this kind of trick herself.*



*This passage provokes the question of whether it is wrong for Lacy to lie and say her son is going to Harvard rather than admit that the suit she is buying is for his trial. Given the amount of judgment and hatred directed at her, Lacy can hardly be blamed for not wanting to reveal the full truth to a sales assistant who makes a wrong assumption. The fact that she claims that Peter is going not just to college but to Harvard indicates that she wants to momentarily experience a glimpse of a different world, even though she knows it’s false.*



*Josie and Alex clearly love each other very much, yet still manage to misunderstand each other. Alex struggles to connect to Josie in the way Patrick does here, whereas Josie has the misperception that Alex doesn’t care about her opinion (when, as the reader knows, the opposite is true). This emphasizes the way in which even parents and children who are very close tend to experience major challenges to their relationships during the teenage years.*



Lewis has come to see Peter in jail for the first time in months. When he sees Peter he apologizes, not just for not coming to visit him, but for neglecting him for his whole life. Peter is moved by this, but gets angry in response, telling his father, “Fuck you.” Lewis admits that he’s so distraught that he’s been unable to function. Then, unexpectedly, he and Peter end up joking around a little, and Lewis is overwhelmed with happiness to see Peter smile.

Patrick and Diana discuss the guns Peter used to commit the shooting. Diana tells Patrick that Jordan will ask him why Peter switched between the two handguns—Gun A and Gun B—in the locker room for no apparent reason. Patrick suggests a few possible reasons, all of them inconsequential. Drew arrives; like Patrick, Diana is also preparing him for questioning. Diana asks how Drew is doing, and he says that his shoulder is better but that he’s been told he’ll never play hockey again. He had been counting on getting an athletic scholarship to college, and he wants to prove the doctors wrong. Diana asks Drew to describe what happened on the day of the shooting, which he does.

When Diana asks about Drew’s relationship with Peter, Drew says that he knew Peter “forever,” and that they were neither friends nor enemies. When Diana asks if Drew bullied Peter, he says he didn’t. Patrick feels angry at this obvious lie. On Diana’s subtle signal, he puts his hand around Drew’s throat, addressing him as “you little fuck,” and telling him that they know he bullied Peter. He warns Drew not to try to protect himself, or he will end up in jail. Calmly, Diana repeats her question.

Alex has made “barbecued lasagna” for Josie and Patrick, who examine the meal suspiciously. Alex enthusiastically explains that she burned the lasagna, but decided that this added “an extra, charcoal sort of flavor.” Gently, Patrick mentions that it is a good idea to follow recipes, whereas Josie claims to not be hungry and runs up to her room. It is the night before the beginning of the trial. Alex runs after Josie, and Josie admits that she feels conscious of how, unlike everyone else, she can’t seem to return to normality. Alex recalls a time when, at a Fourth of July party, Josie had ended up at the bottom of a swimming pool. Josie said she was looking for mermaids, and Alex asked that next time, she take Alex with her. Josie collapses into her mom’s arms, sobbing.

*Peter and Lewis struggled to connect with one another even before Peter committed the shooting—the only time they ever seemed to substantially interact was when they went hunting. Yet here, they unexpectedly manage to laugh together, perhaps thanks to the low expectations on which this interaction is grounded.*



*This passage shows that Peter’s act of violence achieved what he hoped it would—it disrupted the life of success and achievement that Drew and the other popular kids believed was waiting for them. Drew’s dreams of being a college athlete are over—as may be his dreams of going to college at all. Peter has succeeded in taking revenge, even if he has brought himself down along with his enemies.*



*Again, it may be seen as somewhat surprising that Diana wants Drew to tell him the truth about the bullying, considering she is the prosecution and thus the idea that Peter killed innocent people should work in her favor. Yet in reality, she needs Drew to be honest so it won’t seem like he is lying during the cross-examination.*



*There is a striking contrast between the previous scene in which Patrick violently threatens Drew and this scene of serene domestic harmony. Yet just as Matt could behave violently toward Josie one minute and be sweet the next, the recurrence of violence throughout the novel suggests that it is never too far away, even from the most tranquil, secure-seeming situations.*



When Alex comes back downstairs, she tells Patrick that she's going to attend the trial. She asks him why Josie is still alive, how she escaped being shot by Peter. Patrick says there are some things he can't understand, and Alex feels deeply reassured by his presence. That night, unable to sleep, Josie goes out and lies on the front lawn. Due to being a witness, she won't be able to attend the trial, even though she wants to.

On the morning of the trial, Lacy dresses in black, as if she were going to a funeral. She doesn't know if Lewis is coming; he has been sleeping in Joey's room. Going into Peter's room, Lacy gets a copy of [The Picture of Dorian Gray](#) from the shelf. She imagines a portrait depicting a version of herself who expresses all her suppressed emotions. Lewis comes in, wearing his special suit. He and Lacy hold hands, unable to speak. Meanwhile, Selena has left out a bowl of Cocoa Krispies for Jordan, the meal he always eats before "battle," along with a note saying "GOOD LUCK." His eldest son calls from college, also wishing him luck.

When Peter is brought from his cell, he realizes that no one has given him a bulletproof vest this time. He almost asks about it, but then stops himself. Meanwhile, Josie announces that she is going to the trial, too. She knows she won't be allowed in the courtroom, but she says she can wait with Patrick because he is also sequestered. When Jordan gets to court, he sees a man in the crowd holding a sign reminding people of the fact that New Hampshire has the death penalty. He then sees another man holding a posterboard with pictures of Kaitlin Harvey and her mother, Yvette. The sign reads, "NINETEEN MINUTES." Jordan catches the man's eye and mouths, "I'm sorry."

There is also another crowd chanting messages of support for Peter. They identify themselves as the Bullied Victims of America, and Selena reveals that she encouraged them to come to the trial. Inside, Peter looks weak. Jordan hands him a pair of thick tortoiseshell glasses to wear instead of his usual wire ones. He says it will help if Peter doesn't look like he has the aim to shoot ten people. He encourages Peter to "look pathetic." Peter has already begun to cry, and Jordan comforts him. Diana begins her opening presentation, setting the scene of Sterling High on the day of the shooting. She shows pictures of the school looking ordinary, then clicks to a gruesome picture of Ed McCabe's dead body.

*Alex's question to Peter is more than just an expression of survivor's (or mother-of-survivor's) guilt. It also raises an important point—why did Peter choose not to shoot Josie, and did they interact before he spared her life? So far this has remained unclear due to Josie's traumatized amnesiac block.*



*This passage emphasizes the starkly different meanings the trial has for different characters in the novel. Lacy and Lewis approach it as a mournful occasion, a symbolic funeral for the son they thought they had and a ceremonial way of saying goodbye to Peter's future.*

*Jordan and Selena, meanwhile, see it as a battle, primarily viewing it through the lens of Jordan's career rather than the shooting itself.*



*Some of the people in the crowd seem to be there out of a vicious and spiteful desire for vengeance, such as the man whose sign is about the death penalty. On the other hand, the man holding the sign memorializing Kaitlin and Yvette—who is presumably Kaitlin's father and Yvette's husband—has a more noble goal: making sure that the victims of the shooting are foregrounded in people's minds during the trial.*



*The fact that Selena called in the Bullied Victims of America shows the somewhat extreme lengths to which she and Jordan are willing to go in order to make Peter seem sympathetic. Indeed, this point is driven home when Jordan gives Peter the thick glasses to wear. Yet bear in mind that neither Jordan nor Selena think that Peter is going to be declared innocent or given a light sentence—what they are seeking is a hint of lenience, less for Peter than for what this would do for their careers.*



Peter tells Jordan he's going to be sick, but Jordan instructs him to swallow it. Diana describes how Peter brought four guns to school and shot several of the victims before sitting down in the cafeteria to eat a bowl of **Rice Krispies**. He then got up and shot the rest. She explains that Peter shot the last victim, Matt Royston, twice—once in the stomach and once in the head. She says that while the whole episode lasted only “nineteen minutes,” its consequences will go on forever. She concludes that by the end of the trial, she knows that everyone present will be convinced that Peter deliberately murdered ten people, and tried to murder nineteen others.

In his own opening speech, Jordan argues that when Peter walked into Sterling High on the morning of the shooting, he didn't want to murder people but rather “defend himself from the abuse he suffered for twelve straight years.” He describes how this abuse began on Peter's very first day of school, and how it continued in many different forms over the course of Peter's life. Jordan mentions that he will be calling Dr. King Wah as a witness, and that Wah has diagnosed Peter with post-traumatic stress disorder. He explains that children suffering from PTSD “can't distinguish between an immediate threat and a distant threat.” Jordan explains that “self-defense” doesn't just refer to immediate threats, but also broader, ongoing ones. He characterizes Peter as “a very scared boy” who never got the help he needed.

Zoe Patterson is on the witness stand. Diana asks her to explain how she left Mr. McCabe's math class early to go to her orthodontist's appointment. She describes hearing the explosion while waiting for her mother on the school steps, then seeing Peter approach, point a gun at her, and shoot her in the leg. Zoe explains that she tried to run, but couldn't. She got an infection from the bullet wound and still needs a cane to walk. She had to quit the soccer team. Diana concludes her questions, and Jordan begins his. He asks Zoe to clarify that Peter wasn't running toward her, then observes that it seems as if she was “in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Another Sterling High student, Michael Beach, observes that it's strange how all the witnesses, from the most popular kids to “losers” like him, are waiting in the same room together. Emma—one of the cool girls, who is now in a wheelchair after becoming paralyzed—asks to share his doughnut. When Michael is called to the stand, Diana asks him if Peter said anything when he ran into the school, and Michael says that Peter asked the jocks to step forward. A senior tried to tackle Peter, but Peter shot him. Michael explains how Peter held the gun to his head, but he was saved because in that moment, Peter needed to change the cartridge.

*Picoult's choice to represent the trial in such detail provides an opportunity for the shooting to be described in a coherent narrative, rather than the glimpses through which it has appeared thus far. At the same time, while this narrative may be coherent, it is not necessarily fully accurate—Diana, of course, cannot know the whole truth, and she will also likely be representing what she does know in a way that benefits her argument.*



*Given everything that has happened thus far, the outlook doesn't exactly look good for Peter, but Jordan's argument is very persuasive. He makes a compelling case regarding the similarities between Peter and women who have suffered intimate partner violence, and he points out the powerful effects of PTSD. Yet it is worth pointing out that, even if the jury were to buy the battered woman syndrome argument, they may still not be lenient. Countless abused women have been sentenced to life in prison and even death for killing their abusers.*



*Jordan believes that the idea that Zoe was not actually a target but was simply “in the wrong place at the wrong time” will work in his favor, by convincing the jury that Peter was deliberately seeking revenge against those who harmed him and shot others almost by accident. Yet the notion of shooting someone by accident could also be interpreted as careless, conveying a disturbing lack of respect for human life.*



*The fact that at least one student tried to fight back against Peter is moving, as it reveals the courage people can possess even in the most extreme, horrifying circumstances. The senior who tried to tackle Peter gave his own life trying to save everyone.*



Michael saw his friend Justin's face as he died, an image that haunts him to this day. When Diana asks if Michael and Justin were popular, Michael replies that they weren't at all. When she asks if he has been bullied, Michael replies, "Who hasn't?" Meanwhile, Lacy thinks about the moment she realized it is possible to hate one's own child. Lewis had invited an esteemed economist from London for dinner, and Lacy was making an extra effort to get the house ready. The morning of the dinner, Peter rudely protested that he had no clean underwear. While he was at school, she did three rounds of his laundry in addition to finishing cleaning the house.

Yet when Peter got home, instead of thanking Lacy he complained that he would have to put the folded laundry away. A huge fight ensued, and when Peter told Lacy he hated her, Lacy replied, "I hate you, too!" Later, Lacy apologized, although Peter did not respond and did not join the dinner with the economist. The next morning, Peter's room was spotless, and they never spoke of that moment again. Back in the present, when Haley Weaver goes on the witness stand, Peter can barely recognize her. Her face is disfigured, covered with scar tissue. When she explains that she was homecoming queen, she starts to cry. Judge Wagner calls a recess.

The witnesses are technically not allowed to talk to one another, but no one really monitors their activity in the courtroom cafeteria, where Josie has been spending most of her time. She is moved to see the way Brady protectively holds Haley's hand and looks at her as if she appears the same as she always did. While Josie is speaking to Drew, John walks over and introduces himself to Josie as if they've never met. When she says her name, he struggles to pronounce it. Patrick comes to check on Josie, pulling her away from Drew and John. Patrick admits he hates "the waiting part." Back in the defense's room, Josie is planning to read when she sees Lacy. When Lacy expresses surprise at Josie being in this room, Josie replies, "Peter's my friend."

On the witness stand, Drew describes how he, Matt, and Josie headed to the locker room to hide, but that Drew was shot on the way. When Diana asks if Drew and Peter were friends, Drew admits they weren't. When asked if he ever bullied Peter, Drew says he did occasionally, but that he was just "kidding around." Jordan then questions Drew, raising specific things Drew did to Peter like shoving him in a locker. He then brings up the moment when Matt pulled down Peter's pants in the cafeteria, and the email Peter wrote to Josie. Drew admits that he sent the email out to the whole school and Jordan asks, "Well, Drew? [...] Was it a good joke?"

*It is striking that Lacy compares the moment she listens to teenagers describe being attacked by her son with a gun to a moment when Peter was lazy and rude about his laundry, establishing a strange link between these drastically different incidents. While plenty of teenagers are selfish and ungrateful, few become mass murderers—yet for Lacy, it was the more mundane of the two events that produced feelings of hatred for the first time.*



*Haley's tears over her lost beauty might seem shallow, but in this context, the question of appearance is more than just trivial. Given what has happened to Haley, her former beauty comes to symbolize her previous innocence and the happiness and optimism that existed before her life came to be defined by trauma.*



*Of the popular kids who survived the shooting, each has lost something—whether in the form of the mental disabilities or facial disfigurement suffered by John and Haley, Drew's loss of athletic ability, or the more general trauma affecting them all. Again, this emphasizes that Peter was successful in his desire for revenge. Even for the popular kids who survived, their lives will never be as they once were.*



*Drew's interrogation over his behavior toward Peter draws attention to the fact that bullies are rarely made to confront their crimes, let alone face justice. Bullying is something that many people accept as a natural and inescapable (if unfortunate) part of life, which is extraordinary given how terrible the consequences can be.*



Drew is sweating, feeling a burning hatred for Diana for leaving him up there to be grilled by Jordan. However, at this moment Diana gets up again and asks if Drew has bullied anyone other than Peter. Drew admits that he has; that he has called people names, pantsed them, and even sent out other people's emails. Diana asks, "Any of those folks ever shoot you?" and Drew replies that none of them have. Dusty Spears, the Sterling High gym teacher, was once a jock and a bully like Drew. It is now his turn on the witness stand, and when Diana asks if he ever saw Peter being bullied, Dusty replies it was just "the usual locker room stuff." He also confirms that Peter never asked for help.

Jordan then questions Dusty and makes him read the bullying policy from the Sterling High teachers' handbook. Jordan asks Dusty to find instructions for teachers regarding what to do if they witness someone being bullied. After reading, Dusty admits there's nothing there. Derek is then called to the stand, and Diana quizzes him about his friendship with Peter. She asks him to describe **Hide-n-Shriek**. She also asks about the day of the shooting, and Derek explains that he'd gone to his car to retrieve a doctor's note that would excuse him from gym based on his asthma.

While Derek was in the parking lot, he saw Peter getting something out of the back of a car and went over to say hi. However, Peter then looked at him strangely and told him to go home. When Diana asks if Peter ever said anything like that before, Derek admits that a few weeks before the shooting, while the boys were playing **Hide-n-Shriek**, Peter said, "When this really happens, it's going to be awesome." Derek says he thought Peter was joking. He also didn't take Peter's words seriously on the day of the shooting, and he went back into school. After hearing the explosion, Derek saw a message on the school secretary's computer screen, which read, "Ready or not... here I come." The secretary hid herself and Derek in the principal's office, where the computer displayed the same message.

Diana then pulls up a television monitor with **Hide-n-Shriek** playing on it. The avatar is a boy that looks like Peter, who gets to select a weapon from a vast array of choices. After a weapon is selected, the same message appears: Ready or not, here I come. When Jordan questions Derek, he asks Derek to provide details of the ways in which he and Peter were bullied. Derek describes the abuse as happening daily; he explains that there was nothing he could do to stop it, so he just let it happen. Diana gets up to question Derek again, and she asks if Derek ever sought violent revenge himself. Derek replies he hasn't, adding, "But sometimes I wish I had."

*The detail about Dusty Spears having once been a jock is important. It reminds the reader that just because people grow older doesn't necessarily mean that they mature and leave behind juvenile ways of thinking. Dusty clearly never faced consequences for the bullying he did to others, and as a result he does not believe that it is a serious issue, trivializing it as "just the usual locker room stuff."*



*This passage drives home the point that schools are failing young people by not having proper policies on bullying. Indeed, Picoult shows that, even when teachers show incompetence on this matter, it is not necessarily their fault—they should receive clear instructions and support from the school in order to know how to handle bullying.*



*Like many characters in the novel, Derek can perhaps be accused of being somewhat complicit in Peter's act. While he didn't exactly encourage Peter, he did help him design, build, and play Hide-n-Shriek, which Peter could have taken as an endorsement and encouragement of his violent plans. Yet most people would probably agree that there is a significant difference between this kind of fantasy and acting in reality. Furthermore, Derek seems genuinely horrified and remorseful.*



*This is the first time that Peter's talent as a computer game designer is properly exposed, and it provides a glimpse into the life he could have had if he had channeled these energies into something less sinister and destructive. Meanwhile, Derek's final comment that he sometimes wishes he'd sought revenge against the bullies is significant. It shows that, as horrified as he may be by Peter's actions, there's a part of him that understands and sympathizes with Peter—and perhaps a tiny part that even admires him.*



Lacy is thrown by her encounter with Josie, whom she holds partially responsible for the bullying Peter endured. She is impressed with what a kind, eloquent, and beautiful young woman Josie has become, and she is moved by Josie's questions about Peter. However, she suspects that Josie is just being kind to Lacy herself, rather than actually being interested in Peter's wellbeing. At the end of the first day of the trial, Lacy runs into Alex in the courthouse bathroom. Alex tells Lacy she's sorry and shares her memories of Peter as a little boy. Lacy is moved to tears and leaves before she has a breakdown in front of her old friend.

On the drive home, Alex mentions that in court, the email Peter sent confessing his crush to Josie was read aloud. Josie cringes, reliving the humiliation of the whole episode. Josie worries that in court, everyone is going to place blame on her, but Alex assures her this isn't happening. She asks why Josie stopped hanging out with Peter and Josie replies, "I didn't want to be treated like him." Back in jail, Peter thinks about how none of the other inmates cast looks of judgment and shame in his direction. Reflecting on the day in court, he thinks about how—despite the injuries they have sustained—his old bullies still have the same social power as they always did.

*Lacy's encounters with both Alex and Josie indicate how much easier the past few months might have been if she'd had people around to support her, rather than being so isolated. Unlike the Sterling residents who hurl judgments at Lacy, Alex and Josie understand the nuance of the matter through having known Peter as a child. They thus provide vital sources of mercy, kindness, and support.*



*Peter's belief that his bullies have the same social power as ever is interesting. It may simply be an illusion, based on the fact that Peter still feels as intimidated and frightened by his bullies as he always did. On the other hand, perhaps there is a way in which the popular kids' status survives whatever trauma, injury, and disfigurement they suffer, suggesting that it is a very powerful force indeed.*



## PART 2, CHAPTER 2: 6.30AM, THE DAY OF

Lewis wakes Peter up; after seeing how cranky he is, he leaves his son in peace. Peter gets out of bed and goes straight to his computer to see if anyone on the forums has feedback on **Hide-n-Shriek**. However, instead the email he sent Josie comes up on the screen. Horrified, he tries to close it, but the computer is frozen and he is taunted by his own words. In the next section, which is another handwritten extract, the writer recalls pouring salt on slugs when they were a child. They reflect on the nature of *schadenfreude*, the experience of finding joy in watching other people suffer.

*This passage provides key information about the immediate events that caused the shooting. Although it is not stated explicitly, it seems that Peter didn't necessarily plan for the shooting to happen on that particular day—if he had, one would imagine the first thing he did after waking up would be some kind of acknowledgment or preparation. Furthermore, it was seeing the email that triggered his actions.*



## PART 2, CHAPTER 3: FIVE MONTHS AFTER

While Patrick is giving his testimony, he is forced to relive "the worst day of his life." Diana pulls up the surveillance footage from the day of the shooting. It shows Peter coming into the cafeteria and shooting, eating the bowl of **Rice Krispies**, reloading his gun, and leaving again. In the courtroom, Diana holds up the Rice Krispies box, and Patrick explains that he found it in the cafeteria. Diana then shows the two handguns Peter used to commit the shooting, Gun A and Gun B. She plays footage of Matt lying on the ground of the locker room with half his head blown off. Diana asks about the fingerprints on the guns, and Patrick explains that the prints on Gun A match Peter's.

*The role of Patrick's testimony is to provide expert analysis of the technical aspects of the shooting: the angle of the shooting, the fingerprints on the gun, and the bullets left behind. While this testimony may seem inconsequential (particularly given that there is no doubt about who perpetrated the crime), details like these can end up taking on surprising importance.*



Patrick explains that there is a partial print on Gun B that is inconclusive; it might belong to Peter, but there is no way to tell for sure. He then explains that it is clear that Gun B was fired, but that the bullet has never been recovered. After Patrick gives his testimony, court is done for the day. The press rush to interview parents on their way out. In order to avoid the crowd, Patrick sits down in the empty courtroom, where Alex finds him. They embrace. Jordan, meanwhile, is having a distressing day. His cross-examination of Patrick revealed that on the day of the shooting Peter cried and asked for his mother, as well as the fact that Peter claimed, "They started it."

A forensic psychiatrist named Curtis Uppergate is the next to be interviewed. He is highly esteemed, with three Ivy League degrees. While being questioned by Diana, he explains that he's worked with the FBI on other school shooting cases, including Columbine. He believes Peter was not suffering from mental illness on the day of the shooting, and that there is evidence he deliberately planned the attack. He also claims that, while Peter was evidently bullied, school shooters tend to exaggerate their experience of bullying. When Jordan questions Uppergate, he points out that Uppergate hasn't even met Peter, which makes his evaluation baseless.

While they are on break, Jordan brings Peter a sandwich that Peter says he doesn't want to eat, because he doesn't like turkey. Peter asks how much Jordan is paid, then asks if he will be paid the same regardless of whether Peter wins or loses. He then accuses Jordan of not caring about winning the trial. Jordan responds that such reasoning would make Peter a good lawyer. Back in court, King Wah is called to the stand. He explains that he spent ten hours interviewing Peter in order to make his evaluation; he also spoke with Peter's parents and examined Peter's school and medical records. He also examined MRI scans of Peter's brain, which reveal that he is less mature than similar adolescents his age.

All this indicates that Peter is not yet capable of making particularly rational, calculated decisions. While interviewing Peter, Wah was struck by his lack of emotion. He notes the vast and brutal extent of the bullying to which Peter was subjected and adds that it was difficult to deal with the expectations that came with being Joey's brother, particularly after Joey's death. Wah says he is certain that Peter is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and that he was in a dissociative state when he committed the mass shooting. He argues that this was triggered by seeing the email that he connected with the traumatic memory of having his pants pulled down in front of the whole school.

*Again, although Jordan hopes that the evidence that Peter cried and asked for his mother will work in his favor, his statement that "they started it" could be interpreted in either direction. One could see this as evidence of childish immaturity and painful desperation to stop the bullying—or a chilling lack of remorse and an inability to acknowledge that he actually killed people.*



*Like Jordan, Diana has called on the testimony of a forensic psychiatrist herself. Uppergate's evaluation that Peter was not suffering from mental illness due to the fact that he meticulously fantasized about, planned, and prepared for the shooting is convincing. In a sense, it doesn't matter whether Uppergate has met Peter or not, as the evidence of this planning stands regardless. At the same time, Jordan does somewhat undermine Uppergate's authority.*



*While expert testimonies often carry a lot of weight when it comes to public opinion about complicated issues, in the case of a school shooting it is difficult to see how much an expert could actually turn people's minds away from their initial gut reaction. To most people, the horror of knowing a teenager killed his peers in cold blood exceeds any possible explanation.*



*Again, Wah presents evidence that he believes exonerates Peter to some degree, yet it would actually be possible to interpret this evidence in multiple different ways. For example, while Wah believes that Peter's lack of emotion is caused by PTSD, it could be cited as evidence of lack of remorse, carelessness about human life, or perhaps another form of psychological disturbance such as psychopathy.*



Wah explains that the computer was supposed to be a “safe haven” for Peter, which is why this incident was particularly horrifying. He also notes that PTSD can be triggered by seemingly minor, innocuous events. He compares Peter’s state to battered woman syndrome, and he says that Peter was probably accustomed to dissociating while being bullied. On the morning he committed the shooting, he dissociated after being triggered by the *memory* of being bullied. Wah argues that the fact that Peter ate the **Rice Krispies** proves he was dissociating and barely aware of the fact that he had killed and injured many of his classmates. This also explains why he shot random people, not just his bullies.

Wah says that Peter only returned to a somewhat normal state after he was taken into custody, when he cried and asked for his mother. Finally, Wah also places some blame of the culture of violence in which Peter—and everyone present—lives, a culture in which violence is often glorified in music and video games.

Although no one knows, Josie once broke up with Matt. They were at a party, and Josie had gone to the bathroom when a boy spilled his drink on her. The boy helped her clean up, but Matt immediately appeared and punched him in the face. Matt then dragged her out to the car and, as he was backing out of the driveway, asked if she wanted to stay at the party and “be a slut.” He drove in a fast and erratic manner, and when they got to Josie’s house she told him she wanted to break up with him. He replied that he didn’t want to date a “fucking whore,” and Josie went inside. At 3 A.M., Matt called and told her he couldn’t live without her.

Josie immediately cycled to Matt’s house, where she found him next to a bottle of Tylenol and a bottle of Jim Beam. She clung to him and apologized, yet felt trapped. Back in the courthouse, Diana is now questioning Dr. Wah. She suggests that Peter could have lied in his interviews with Wah, and she raises doubts about the fact that Wah’s entire opinion is based on things that Peter himself told him. She asks why—if Peter was indeed suicidal—he didn’t kill himself on the day of the shooting. Diana continues to interrogate him, poking holes in his argument. After she is done, Jordan briefly questions Wah, but Diana then gets up again. She points out that each place Peter went on the day of the shooting was a location in which he’d been bullied.

*Again, what is true of Peter’s lack of emotion is also true of the Rice Krispies. Those inclined to believe that Peter was dissociating as a result of profound trauma will likely read him eating Rice Krispies as evidence of a profoundly disturbed mental state. Yet those who consider Peter remorseless and evil will believe that it is proof that he felt no compassion or guilt about what he was doing.*



*Wah’s argument that the cultural glorification of violence affected Peter becomes less plausible when one remembers that everyone lives in this same culture, yet few become mass murderers.*



*The fact that Josie tried to break up with Matt is significant, because it suggests that she admitted to herself that his behavior toward her was unacceptable (and perhaps realized that it was abuse). Many people in abusive relationships do not even reach this level of clarity, and thus it warrants marking. Furthermore, Josie had much to lose from trying to break up with Matt—not only her first love and social reputation, but also her safety.*



*Threatening suicide is a very common way in which abusers manipulate their partners into staying with them after they try to leave. Juxtaposing this scene with Diana’s question about why Peter didn’t kill himself raises the question of whether Peter also threatened suicide as a form of manipulation. Perhaps he later pretended that he was suicidal in order to seem less guilty, such as when he claimed to Jordan that the shooting victims got in the way of his true target, himself.*



Back in jail that night, Peter is given a letter from one of the students he shot, Angela Phlug. She explains that she couldn't bear to stay in Sterling anymore, and thus has moved to Minnesota. She says that she doesn't feel like a person anymore, outside of her status as a victim. She is depressed and suffers from insomnia. She says she thinks Peter should go to prison, because it would be "fair." She says she used to sit behind him in French and always liked his smile. She ends her letter by saying that she "would have liked to be [his] friend." Peter reads the letter all night, until he has it memorized.

*Angela's brave decision to write to Peter could be read as an example of the opposite of vengeance. Rather than stewing in her hatred of Peter, she approaches him in a direct manner, asking him questions and explaining to him in a calm way how his actions affected her life. While this could be seen as a model for how to respond to violence and cruelty, it seems obvious that it would not have worked on Peter's bullies.*



Lacy dresses in a way that Peter likes or that reminds her of him somehow. When she sees him in court, she kisses his forehead before going up to the witness stand. When Jordan asks her about her relationship with Peter, she explains that he is the more "sensitive" of her sons, but that she feels she has a special bond with him, whereas Lewis was closer to Joey. She says she knew that the very qualities Peter was bullied for would be assets when he became an adult, yet she was helpless to accelerate Peter's life to that point. She describes how Joey was charming, popular, and adored, and how this created unimaginably high expectations for Peter to meet.

*Lacy's answers show that she has spent time intensely reflecting on her family, thinking about the ways in which she failed as a parent and how the circumstances of Peter's home life might have helped turn him into a killer. At the same time, it is also evident that her love for both her sons still prevents her from seeing the full truth.*



Lacy explains that when Joey died, she and Lewis were too absorbed by their own grief to support Peter. When Jordan asks if Lacy ever imagined Peter could be capable of committing the act he did, Lacy explains that she didn't, as all she could see was her own love and hopes for him. She admits that after Joey died, she "wanted [Peter] to be a child forever." At this moment, a man who soon reveals himself as Maddie's father gets up and shouts, calling Peter a "monster" before being dragged out of the courtroom. Lacy breaks down in tears. At the next recess, Jordan tells Judge Wagner that he wants to move for a mistrial based on Maddie's father's outburst. Wagner doesn't grant it.

*After all the effort that both Jordan and Diana have put into crafting their cases, it may be that the protest signs and uncontrolled outbursts of members of the Sterling community actually have a greater impact on the outcome of the case than anything. Again, this hints at the limits of objectivity. While objectivity may be a nice idea, is it really possible to stay neutral when facing the cries of a bereaved parent? And furthermore—is it desirable?*



Selena, meanwhile, tries to comfort Lacy before she has to go back on the witness stand for the cross-examination. Alex joins them, bringing Lacy coffee. Alex tells Lacy to look at her for reassurance during the cross-examination. She also observes that, although people fixate on making mistakes in youth, she doesn't believe that people make fewer mistakes when they get older. Meanwhile, Jordan tries to reassure Peter, who remains pessimistic. He says that, considering he is going to spend the rest of his life in prison, he would like to be able to first tell his version of what happened. Diana decides not to cross-examine Lacy, and after she announces this, Jordan calls Peter to the stand.

*Peter's announcement that he wants to tell his side of the story before going to prison for life raises the question of what the purpose of this trial actually is. There was never any realistic chance that Peter was not going to be found guilty, at least on most of the charges—and even a fraction of them will give him a life sentence. Perhaps there is a sense in which the trial's purpose is less to decide Peter's punishment and more for the town to process what happened.*



Peter admits to all the acts that he stands accused of, and when Jordan asks why he committed them, Peter says, “They started it.” Jordan asks if Peter intended to kill ten people; they have planned for Peter to say that he didn’t, but now Peter says, “When I did it in the game [...] I won.” Horrified, Jordan notes that it’s clear now there aren’t any “winners,” but Peter replies, “The game’s not over yet, right?” Jordan panics, realizing that Peter is once again being brought down by his fatal flaw—his total lack of understanding about how he appears to others. He ends his questioning, and Diana gets up to begin hers. However, she then decides to announce that she has no questions.

That night at home, Jordan expresses his horror to Selena that the case is ending this way. In desperation, he proposes calling Josie as a witness. Jordan had previously promised not to call Josie because she didn’t remember anything, but he now realizes if she can say even one kind thing about Peter, it would be the last hope of a different outcome. Selena informs Alex that Jordan has subpoenaed Josie to testify. Josie immediately panics, but Selena gently says she has no choice; Jordan will be calling on her. Patrick observes that this is Jordan’s last-ditch attempt to save the case.

When Josie and Alex go to see Jordan, he apologizes for what he’s doing. At this moment Sam’s diaper bag falls and Josie breaks down again, reminded of the moment that one of the guns dropped out of Peter’s bag. She says that Matt tried to fire at Peter and missed, and this is when Peter shot Matt. Jordan realizes that she’s a perfect manifestation of the argument he’s been making—that the most minor things can trigger PTSD. Later, when they are alone, Alex asks why Josie never admitted that she *did* have memories of the shooting, and Josie replies that she didn’t want to testify in court and “see Peter again.”

That night after Josie falls asleep, Patrick comes over and Alex explains that Josie revealed that Matt shot at Peter first in the locker room. Patrick assures Alex that Josie will be fine, that she is a “survivor.” He then says he has to leave because he has some work to do. Alex knows that Patrick will have to tell Diana the new detail of Matt shooting first. Yet he is also troubled by the fact that, if this were true, there would have been a bullet in the locker room, and there wasn’t one. He scrutinizes Josie’s new story, turning over every part in his mind, and feels that it doesn’t add up. He calls Diana and tells her not to let the trial start the next day.

*Jordan’s observation that Peter’s fatal flaw is his ignorance about how he appears to others is key. Not caring what other people think of you is often cited as a good thing, a sign of confidence and self-assuredness. Yet in Peter’s case, it means that he ends up continually committing acts of self-sabotage, often acting in a manner that has the totally opposite effect of what he intended. It also leads him to commit immoral acts. While obsessing over other people’s opinions is bad, the opposite might be even worse.*



*Jordan’s decision to call Josie to the witness stand even though the case is surely beyond saving could be read as selfish. Peter is going to spend his life in prison either way, and thus the only thing Jordan is “saving” is his own reputation—and retraumatizing a vulnerable teenager in the process.*



*When Josie finally starts to give some details about what happened and admits that her memory isn’t completely blank, it starts to seem strange that, throughout the novel, she’s managed to avoid discussing what happened at all. While it is true that amnesia can result from trauma, it is intriguing that when Josie claimed not to remember, everyone took her word for it rather than questioning her.*



*Patrick is now in a difficult position, torn by his role as Josie’s pseudo-stepfather and his job as a police detective, both of which he evidently takes very seriously. It seems that he hopes that by investigating the matter himself and holding up the trial, he will be able to negotiate any tensions between his desire to protect Josie and his desire to ensure that the full truth is revealed at the trial.*



The next morning, Diana requests that the session not begin until Patrick can get there, as he has important evidence to add to the case that may be “exculpatory.” She admits that she’s called him, but he’s not picking up. Jordan insists on pressing ahead, surprising Diana by calling Josie to the witness stand. Alex squeezes Josie’s hand, telling her everything will be alright as long as she tells the truth. Jordan begins by asking the same simple questions he asked all the witnesses, such as Josie’s age and her grade in school. Then she describes the moments leading up to when Peter murdered Matt, including when Peter shot Drew as he was trying to escape.

*In the moments leading up to the climax of the narrative, it is clear that the competing interests at play between Diana, Jordan, and Patrick create a chaotic situation in which the trial presses on without anyone realizing exactly what is about to be revealed.*



## PART 2, CHAPTER 4: 10.16AM, THE DAY OF

In the locker room, Matt forces Josie to get down on the ground, then positions himself in front of her. He tells her he loves her, and Josie starts crying, convinced that she’s about to die. Peter enters and points the gun at Matt; at this point Josie screams and, startled, Peter drops his backpack. A gun falls out and flies across the floor. Josie picks it up and points it at Peter. Matt urges her to shoot him, yelling, “Are you fucking stupid?” Peter tells Matt not to speak to her that way, but Matt ignores him, calling him an asshole and demanding that Josie shoot. She does—but instead of aiming at Peter, she shoots Matt in the stomach.

*This passage contains the novel’s major twist—when faced with the choice of whether to shoot Peter or Matt, Josie shoots Matt. While at first her actions seems counterintuitive and inexplicable, recall the whole argument that Jordan and Dr. Wah have been making about Peter during the trial. It is arguably Josie, not Peter, who is suffering from battered woman syndrome and who kills her partner as a result.*



Josie instantly runs to Matt, trying to stop the blood gushing from his wound. She demands that Peter help her, but when he walks over, he shoots Matt in the head. Peter asks her not to tell and Josie agrees.

*Josie’s instant regret further confirms that she may have dissociated in the moment she shot Matt.*



## PART 2, CHAPTER 5: FIVE MONTHS AFTER

This chapter is preceded by another handwritten section, this time reflecting on how life is supposed to be like an exciting feature film, but is actually more like a dull, infinitely repetitive piece of surveillance footage. Back in the main narrative, chaos has struck the courtroom following Josie’s shock confession. Judge Wagner calls a fifteen minute recess. Alex’s secretary grabs her, telling her she’s “not safe here right now.” In this moment Patrick arrives; he sees Alex trying to get to Josie and wants to help, but he is interrupted by Diana. He explains that he figured out that Peter couldn’t have possibly shot Matt, and Diana tells him that Josie just confessed to doing it.

*The fact that Josie has confessed to shooting Matt does not change the basic facts of the case, which is that Peter planned a shooting spree and killed many students at his school. However, Josie’s confession shifts blame away from one individual, forcing everyone present to consider abuse, violence, and trauma as a broader issue, not just something that can be ignored via a scapegoat.*



Jordan, meanwhile, tells Peter that if he had been honest about what Josie did from the outset, the trial could have ended very differently. Yet Peter replies, smiling, “You don’t break a promise to a friend.” Meanwhile, when Alex finally gets to talk to Josie, Josie explains, “I loved Matt. And I hated him. I hated myself for loving him.” She accuses Alex of being “perfect,” and thus unable to understand. Josie says that everyone in the world is faking in some way, either by maintaining an appearance that will please others or trying to disappear altogether. Alex reflects on the wisdom that her daughter just expressed, and she takes Josie’s hand.

Peter is convicted of eight first-degree murders, though in Matt and Courtney’s case this is diminished to second-degree murders. Although he isn’t sentenced right away, there is no way that, with this many first-degree murder charges, he will ever leave prison. Speaking to Jordan after the verdict is announced, Peter thanks him for his effort. He gives back the glasses Jordan asked him to wear, and Jordan puts them on himself. After the trial, Lewis starts researching communities where school shootings have taken place, trying to see if they ever go back to some semblance of normality. He has started work again at Sterling College. One of his students is named Peter; forcing a smile, Lewis tells him, “You remind me of someone I used to know.”

Weeks pass after the trial before Lacy finally manages to enter Peter’s room. She tidies his things and thinks about how powerless her love is, since it could not save her son. She decides to treasure all the moments in Peter’s life aside from the nineteen minutes on which everyone else fixates. One month after his conviction, Peter waits until lights out, then stuffs a sock into his mouth. As he begins to lose consciousness, he dreams about his first day of kindergarten. He is 18 now, but he is still on the school bus holding his Superman lunchbox. He is the only one there, and feels a profound sense of peace.

## PART 2, CHAPTER 6: MARCH 6, 2008

Sterling High has been transformed. A plaque on the outside of the building reads, “A SAFE HARBOR.” Later today, on the one-year anniversary of the shooting, there will be a memorial ceremony. All students wear IDs around their necks, which doesn’t make much sense considering “the threat was always from the inside.” Josie was charged as an accessory to second-degree murder; she accepted a plea of manslaughter and was sentenced to five years. Now that she goes to visit a daughter of her own in prison, Alex decides to become a public defender again, feeling a sense of kinship with her clients.

*Peter’s loyalty to Josie does not mitigate the severity of what he has done, but it does provide a final reminder of the deep complexity of the situation—and of Peter’s character. After all, just because a person is capable of committing tremendous acts of cruelty and violence doesn’t mean that they are incapable of good, or that there doesn’t remain some innocence within them.*



*No one ever truly recovers from the shooting, but people still find ways to move on. Peter’s act of thanking Jordan suggests that he has gained a measure of maturity, whereas Jordan’s decision to wear the glasses hints that he ended up feeling empathy for Peter. Meanwhile, Lewis attempts to understand the terrible events of the past months through research, and he is at least able to return to the job he loves. Framing his son as someone he “used to know” perhaps also helps him process everything.*



*Peter’s suicide highlights the simplicity of his desires in a heartbreaking manner. All he wanted was to live his life in peace, and there is some mercy in the fact that he finally manages to do this, even if it is only for a few moments before death. Of course, this doesn’t change what Peter has done, but it does remind the reader that he is a human being who had an innocent kindergartener within him right until the end.*



*The beginning of the final chapter does not provide the reader much solace. Josie is in prison, which—considering the fact that she was the victim of abuse—is arguably not a fair sentence. Meanwhile, Sterling High has changed drastically in the wake of the shootings, but the pointless ID cards suggest that there is still a lack of understanding of the true causes lying behind the shooting.*



In Sterling High, there are ten chairs bolted to the floor as a memorial to Peter's ten victims. Alex is pregnant; she and Patrick are at the school for the ceremony. She observes how the school doesn't look the same as it used to, and Patrick reflects that this is "necessary." They look out at a soccer match being played on the field. The minutes click past, minutes when, one year ago, Peter was committing the shooting. Alex looks at the leaves blooming on a nearby maple tree and takes Patrick's hand.

*Ultimately, the lesson of the end of the book is that life involves neither happy endings nor straightforwardly terrible ones. Instead, no matter what happens, life just keeps going one way or another.*





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