



NINETEEN MINUTES

a novel

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JODI PICOULT

INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Nineteen Minutes

Jodi Picoult

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Nineteen Minutes

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*For Emily Bestler,
the finest editor and fiercest champion
a girl could ask for, who makes sure
I put my best foot forward,
every time.
Thanks for your keen eye, your cheerleading,
and most of all, your friendship.*

PART ONE

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

—CHINESE PROVERB

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

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

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

More importantly—will I miss you?

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

March 6, 2007

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

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

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

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

In nineteen minutes, you can get revenge.

As usual, Alex Cormier was running late. It took thirty-two minutes to drive from her house in Sterling to the superior court in Grafton County, New Hampshire, and that was only if she speeded through Orford. She hurried downstairs in her stockings, carrying her heels and the files she'd brought home with her over the weekend. She twisted her thick copper hair into a knot and anchored it at the base of her neck with bobby pins, transforming herself into the person she needed to be before she left her house.

Alex had been a superior court judge now for thirty-four days. She'd believed that, having proved her mettle as a district court judge for the past five years, this time around the appointment might be easier. But at forty, she was still the youngest judge in the state. She still had to fight to establish herself as a fair justice—her history as a public defender preceded her into her courtroom, and prosecutors assumed she'd side with the defense. When Alex

had submitted her name years ago for the bench, it had been with the sincere desire to make sure people in this legal system were innocent until proven guilty. She just never anticipated that, as a judge, she might not be given the same benefit of the doubt.

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

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

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

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

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

“And you shouldn’t be smoking cigarettes.”

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

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

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

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

“What’s on the docket today?” Alex said.

“Unit test. What about you?”

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

“Catalysts.” Josie rubbed her temples. “Substances that speed up a reaction,

but stay unchanged by it. Like if you've got carbon monoxide gas and hydrogen gas and you toss in zinc and chromium oxide, and . . . what's the matter?"

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

"Coffee," Josie said.

"Coffee doesn't count."

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

Alex weighed the costs of being even five minutes later, or getting another black mark against her in the cosmic good-parenting tally. *Shouldn't a seventeen-year-old be able to take care of herself in the morning?* Alex started pulling items out of the refrigerator: eggs, milk, bacon. "I once presided over an involuntary emergency admission at the state mental hospital for a woman who thought she was Emeril. Her husband had her committed when she put a pound of bacon in the blender and chased him around the kitchen with a knife, yelling *Bam!*"

Josie glanced up from her textbook. "For real?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Whether or not people *see* it, I'm still expected to dress . . . well, *judiciously*."

A cloud passed over Josie's face, and she busied herself over the stove, as if Alex had somehow given the wrong answer. Alex stared at her daughter—the bitten half-moon fingernails, the freckle behind her ear, the zigzag part in her hair—and saw instead the toddler who'd wait at the babysitter's window at sundown, because she knew that was when Alex came to get her. "I've

never worn pajamas to work,” Alex admitted, “but I do sometimes close the door to chambers and take a nap on the floor.”

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

“I still don’t get why *I* have to eat breakfast if *you* don’t,” Josie muttered.

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

Josie met her gaze. “Promise.”

“Then I’m headed out.”

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

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

She lifted her face to the spray of the shower—water she’d made so hot it raised red welts, stole breath, steamed windows. She counted to ten, and then finally ducked away from the stream to stand naked and dripping in front of the mirror. Her face was swollen and scarlet; her hair stuck to her shoulders in thick ropes. She turned sideways, scrutinized her flat belly, and sucked it in a little. She knew what Matt saw when he looked at her, what Courtney and Maddie and Brady and Haley and Drew all saw—she just wished that she could see it, too. The problem was, when Josie looked in the mirror, she noticed what was underneath that raw skin, instead of what had been painted upon it.

She understood how she was *supposed* to look and *supposed* to act. She wore her dark hair long and straight; she dressed in Abercrombie & Fitch;

she listened to Dashboard Confessional and Death Cab for Cutie. She liked feeling the eyes of other girls in the school when she sat in the cafeteria borrowing Courtney's makeup. She liked the way teachers already knew her name on the first day of class. She liked having guys stare at her when she walked down the hall with Matt's arm around her.

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

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

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

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

Before leaving her room, though, she hesitated. She sank down onto her bed and rummaged underneath the nightstand for the Ziploc sandwich bag that she'd tacked to the wooden frame. Inside was a stash of Ambien—pirated one pill at a time from her mother's prescription for insomnia, so she'd never notice. It had taken Josie nearly six months to inconspicuously gather only fifteen pills, but she figured if she washed them down with a fifth