

# Chain Letter Study Guide

## Chain Letter by Christopher Pike (author)

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# Plot Summary

Christopher Pike's "Chain Letter" is a thriller that begins when a group of friends receives a menacing chain letter threatening to reveal their one sinful night to the world. The sinful night is recounted in detail in Chapter 3, where we learn that the seven teens accidentally run over a man in a drunken car accident and then buried him in a shallow grave by the side of the road. His death was never discovered or reported.

Forced to choose between exposing themselves as unthinking criminals and following the embarrassing demands of the letter's author, who calls himself the Caretaker, the group of seven chooses to obey. Those who choose not to obey must suffer the horrifying consequences, and when the second round of the chain letter's demands begin, the friends know their commands and corresponding punishments are not child's play. The group is riddled with paranoia as they begin to suspect each other and it becomes apparent that the Caretaker is intimately familiar with their personalities and conversations.

As the friends begin to disappear and one among the seven, Neil, is killed, the race is on for the remaining teens to figure out who is sending the letters and what is motivating him or her. The final two chapters suddenly reveal the situation to be much stranger than any of the teens could have imagined. As it turns out, Neil has faked his death using the corpse of the man they ran over as a dummy for himself, and he has been the Caretaker all along. Terminally ill with cancer, Neil has come to identify closely with the man he and his friends killed, and has been burdened with guilt to the point of insanity. His hasty burial weighs on Neil's conscience, and his strange machinations are a way of making his friends feel similarly guilty. Neil is about to take the five friends he has trapped in an abandoned house to the man's gravesite in order to kill them when a final confrontation with his best friend, Tony, restores his sanity and leads him to release his friends before dying one week later from his terminal cancer.

The dramatic events surrounding the chain letter form the core of the novel, but we also follow the budding romance between Tony and Alison, and this romance provides some of the tension that lays behind Neil's vindictive actions. Because Neil had a crush on Alison, Tony's pursuit of Alison is interpreted as a betrayal, and it is only Tony's ministrations to Neil at the end of his life that prove to him that Tony is a genuine friend. The book closes with Tony and Alison embracing the day after Neil's death.



# Chapters 1 and 2

## Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Chapter 1 opens with Alison Parker and Brenda Paxson helping their friend, Fran Darey, haul the set she is designing for a school play into her garage so she can work on it over the weekend. As they make their way toward the house, Alison notices a strange purple envelope in Fran's mailbox, and when she goes back outside later, she offers to get the mail for Fran. Back inside, the girls sit around eating Twinkies and gossiping until Brenda starts pressuring Fran to open the strange letter that has no return address.

Brenda eventually grabs the letter from Fran when she resists Brenda's pressure to open the letter and Fran, enraged, jumps at Brenda to get the letter back. The two girls get into a physical brawl and Fran emerges victorious, the letter in hand. When Alison, whom Fran inexplicably idealizes, says that she is also curious about the letter, Fran agrees to open it.

The letter turns out to be a menacing chain letter from someone who calls him or her self The Caretaker. The Caretaker announces that he or she has watched Fran from the moment she entered the world and knows every one of her hopes and transgressions. The letter announces that it is time for Fran to be punished, and threatens to reveal what happened on a particular sinful night if Fran should discuss the letter with anyone other than the six others listed on the letter. She is instructed to complete a task that she can find in the classifieds section of the Times and then remove her name from the top of a column of seven names on the letter and put it instead at the bottom of the second column. She is also instructed to send the letter to the person whose name is immediately under hers in the first column.

The three girls, all of whom are listed in the letter, begin to discuss the threats and the sinful night to which the letter alludes. It becomes clear that they, along with four others (Joan, Kipp, Neil, and Tony) were involved in an incident last summer in which they buried a man they presumed dead. We are given no further details of the incident at this point.

The girls check the Times and find a classified ad directed at Fran in which she is instructed to replace the head of the school mascot image on the gym floor with a goat's head. Because Fran originally painted the mascot on the gym, she knows she has the skill to accomplish the task, which the letter calls a small act of obedience, and the three start planning how they will get the job done.

In Chapter 2, Tony and Kipp have already been told about the letter by Alison and Brenda. They are in Tony's bedroom awaiting Neil's arrival so they can discuss their options and speculate on the letter writer's identity.



Kipp, who has a 4.0 GPA and will attend MIT in the Fall, argues that the easiest explanation is that one of the girls leaked information about last summer's incident, and that someone essentially harmless is trying to scare them with the threatening letter. Neil, a sensitive Southerner dogged by health problems, wonders if instead the responsible party is among the seven who were involved in last summer's incident. This suggestion is particularly disturbing to Tony, but he notes how quick Kipp is to dismiss it, and wonders if it is the case. The boys agree to have one of the girls question Fran, who they think is the most nervous and most likely to have leaked information. They also agree to help Fran repaint the mascot in the gym so they can buy some more time to come up with a plan. After the others leave, Tony falls asleep still clothed and dreams that he is digging a grave that will never be deep enough.

## Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

We jump immediately to the book's structuring drama: the chain letter. We see from the beginning that Fran is jumpy and nervous; she does not want to open the letter in front of her friends, but relents when Alison, whom she admires, comments that she, like Brenda, is curious about the letter's contents. After all the three girls read the ominous letter, Brenda is quick to dismiss its significance. She is impulsive and flippant, and it is only the gravity with which Alison and Fran regard the letter that eventually leads her to take the threats it contains more seriously. When Fran finds the classified ad addressed to her, she quickly decides to comply with its command to repaint the school mascot in the gym. She is not particularly circumspect about doing so, asking Alison immediately if she knows what time the janitors leave the building. It is clear that Fran is motivated by fear and is ready to complete the tasks laid out by the so-called Caretaker if they will prevent her secret from being exposed to the world.

What we learn about last summer's incident in these chapters is little, but telling; we know that there was some question about a man's being dead or alive. We know that a group of seven (3 boys and 4 girls) deemed him dead and buried him, presumably because they were in some way involved in his death. We know also that these events occurred in the desert outside Los Angeles, where Alison's family recently relocated because of her father's new job. Knowing what we do, it becomes clear that the group in question is likely to go quite far in following the letter's demands before consulting with the police. They have a great deal to lose if their incriminating secret is revealed; Kipp is the school genius, poised to go to MIT. Tony is an all-star athlete, and Neil a sensitive and well-respected young man. Alison and Brenda are aspiring thespians, and Fran an artist. They are all engaged and active students whose reputations would be destroyed by news of their involvement in a man's death. They are likely to obey the letter's demands until the demands become more threatening, and more gruesome, than what they have already done.

The most psychologically interesting moment in these two chapters comes when Neil suggests that perhaps the letter was written by one among the seven who are listed in the letter. He notes that the letter threatens punishment separately from its threat of revelation. The Caretaker will reveal the secret only if the letter's recipients speak to



anyone outside the group of seven. This suggests that the Caretaker has some vested interest in being able to punish the group while keeping the events of last summer a secret. Neil's suggestion unsettles Tony and creates a tense air of paranoia; were the group to remain open to that possibility, cohesion would be destroyed and no collective planning could occur.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

In Chapter 3, we get an account of the incident one night last summer that is referenced in the chain letter.

Tony, Joan, Kipp, Brenda, and Neil are leaving a Beach Boy's concert at the Swing Auditorium outside Los Angeles. Kipp and Brenda are thoroughly drunk, having had beer after beer on the way to the concert. Tony and Joan are both a little high from the marijuana smoke at the concert. Only Neil is not drunk, and it is Neil that leads them back to Kipp's car in the giant parking lot. Kipp is at the wheel and is still drinking as they wait in a long line of cars to leave the parking lot. As they wait, Alison comes up to them and tells them that she and Fran, who were also at the concert, are having car trouble and need help. Joan rudely tells them to call the auto club because she needs to get home in time to avoid the reprimands of her father. Tony tells Joan, who is his date for the night, that he is going to check out Fran's car, and Kipp pulls his car out of the line of cars. Tony finds that Fran's starter is shot and decides that all seven will pile into Kipp's car since an auto club will be unable to replace a starter in the middle of the night.

Tony insists on driving even though he has had a few beers because he is at least less intoxicated than Kipp is. Alison suggests a shortcut to the highway that turns out to be wrong, and soon Tony finds himself driving through desolate fields, completely lost. Kipp begins to tell a story about the time he and Tony broke into their coach's house to steal his kitchen sink, but inadvertently caught the coach in a sexual act with a teenager from the high school. Joan doesn't believe Kipp, and demands to hear the tape with a recording of the incident, as Kipp claims to have found a tape recorder under the bed where he was hiding.

The tape is a masterful imitation carried out by Kipp, and he has framed Joan as the teenager in question. Joan grows furious and demands that they turn the tape off, but everyone is in hysterics. In her anger, Joan reaches over and turns off the headlights of the car, leaving Tony in darkness in the middle of an attempt to avoid a tumbleweed. The car begins to swerve out of control and Tony struggles to get to the right of the road. He suddenly realizes that there is a big drop-off on the right and swerves to the left instead. Eventually he breaks and sends the car spinning, though it is not totally out of control. During this mayhem, they all feel the car hit something large, soft, and fragile. When the car finally comes to a stop, Kipp and Tony want to hurry home rather than go back to check for damage.

Simply by saying Tony's name, Neil expresses his disapproval, and Tony, who takes Neil's opinion very seriously, gets out of the car with a flashlight to see what he hit. Several yards behind, he finds a man lying on the ground with a trickle of blood coming out of his mouth, seemingly dead. The others come out and a debate ensues about



what to do, and whether the man was already dead. Eventually the group of teenagers decides to bury the man in a grave they dig by the side of the road. Neil places a crucifix he has around his own neck around the deceased man's neck, and they drive away.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

In this chapter, we learn the details of the incident last summer which burdens the seven teenagers and which they believe the chain letter is alluding to. We see that Tony attempted to be responsible though he, like the others, did not have the presence of mind not to drink in order to drive safely. Kipp and Brenda are particularly reckless, having downed many beers before even arriving at the concert, even though Kipp was driving.

Throughout the chapter, we see Joan always acting selfishly and thinking only of herself when others have problems or concerns; she tells Alison and Fran to call an auto club because she wants to be home early. She rejects Tony's idea that they take the man's body to the authorities because she is afraid of the legal consequences. And she is also the one responsible for turning of the car's headlights in a moment of indignation.

All the teenagers, however, are responsible in some way for what happened on the night recounted in this chapter, and it should be noted that Alison and Tony are among the first to take responsibility actively.

Note also how immature the teens' final decision is. Rather than either calling the police or fleeing the scene, they act with a mix of fear and respect, burying the man in an incriminating act, rather than either distancing themselves from the act altogether or alerting the police. Because they act so irrationally and immaturely in this case, we can expect them to be similarly immature when it comes to dealing with the chain letter.





# Chapters 4 and 5

## Chapters 4 and 5 Summary

In Chapter 4, the Alison and Brenda are at an early-morning rehearsal for the school play, *You Can't Take it With You*, when a freshman interrupts the rehearsal to announce that everyone should come see something. It is not until Brenda and Alison make it to the gym that they realize what is going on. The school's mascot head has been replaced with a grotesque goat head.

Later, Fran and Alison are talking about the chain letter, and Fran insists to Alison that she has never told anybody about it. Alison believes her, knowing that she is good at keeping secrets. While they are talking, Joan comes up to them looking for Neil and Tony. Alison is sassy with her, and Joan warns her harshly to stay away from Tony.

Tony and Neil appear soon after Joan leaves. While they are talking to Fran and Alison, the school principal comes up to them and says he wishes to speak to Fran. He tells her that he is very sorry about what happened to the school mascot, and that he is hoping to get the board of supervisors to approve paying Fran to redo the mascot. Fran agrees to do so, and goes to the principal's office to sign some paperwork.

Neil excuses himself, leaving Alison and Tony alone. Alison wonders aloud whether Neil is chasing after Fran, who has a crush on him, and Tony says that he isn't, and then changes the subject to the chain letter. Alison tells him that, in her opinion, Fran did not leak anything about last summer's incident, and then asks if the boys had come up with any more plausible explanations about the letter. Tony then asks Alison if she wants to have lunch with him at the mall, and after awkwardly saying no, she says yes and the two go off.

In Chapter 5, Tony, Neil, Brenda, and Kipp are hanging out in the parking lot by Kipp's car after school. It has been seven days since Kipp got the chain letter and corresponding order in the classifieds of the paper. He was instructed to fail his next calculus exam, but ignored the instructions and got an A.

Neil, who had walked into rehearsal for the school play that morning, compliments Brenda on her acting, and Kipp compliments Alison. This makes Brenda upset, and she starts complaining about how she does not have the starring role in the play. Kipp suggests they discuss it on the way home, but Brenda says she will not be dropped off by Kipp today, even though that is what they usually do, and Kipp is her boyfriend. Neil asks for a ride from Kipp and the two get in the car and drive away.

Joan comes out of metal shop and crosses the parking lot to talk to Tony. He is disappointed to see her because he has been replaying in his head for days the lunch he had with Alison. He was delighted by Alison's wit, and the way she regarded him as an ordinary person rather than a superstar, unlike Joan. While they are talking, they



hear a loud crashing noise. Tony runs toward the parking lot exits and finds Kipp's car slammed into a brick wall. Neil and Kipp are basically uninjured, though both are frazzled. Tony checks the brakes and confirms that they were tampered with. Kipp runs off to the bathroom, and Tony helps Neil limp to the bathroom too, as he has wet his pants. As they walk down the hill, Neil says it's a good thing that Brenda did not in the car. This comment prompts a sudden thought in both boys, and they look at each other.

## Chapters 4 and 5 Analysis

The tension between Alison and Brenda is palpable in these two chapters. During the early morning rehearsal that opens Chapter 4, Brenda overplays her part as a kind of frustrated retaliation against the fact that, in her eyes, she has an unflattering and unsuitable part. She wishes she had been given the part of Alice, which is Alison's to play, and it is clear that she resents the fact that Alison has been given what she considers the better role. Alison notes to herself, however, that Brenda's quirky role really highlights her strengths as an actress.

We learn in Chapter 4 that Fran is unlikely to have leaked information about the incident to anyone outside the group. She is too secretive and careful to have done so, as Alison knows from the fact that Fran has closely guarded the secret that she painted a nude portrait of David Bowie.

The tension between Alison and Joan is also very clear in Chapter 4. Joan and Alison each know that the other likes Tony, and neither is pleased. Joan has been described as gorgeous but also as crude and harsh, and it is clear from her threats to Alison that she is willing to resort to open hostility—and perhaps even to violence—to ensure that Alison stays away from the object of her desire.

We do not hear about how Alison and Tony's lunch goes until Chapter 5, in which we learn that Tony has not been able to get Alison out of his head since that day, and that he was charmed by her wit and her down-to-earth demeanor. Though she started with the usual tiresome words of adulation, Alison soon transitioned to treating Tony like an ordinary person, something to which he is not accustomed.

Chapter 5 is brief but dramatic. Kipp has decided to tempt The Caretaker by refusing to obey his or her orders, and after seven days the group has begun to relax a little bit since no misfortune has befallen Kipp. This soon changes when he crashes into a brick wall after his breaks were tampered with. Neil remarks on the fact that Brenda refused to ride in the car with Kipp that day, and his remark prompts—we are left to assume—suspicion from both himself and Tony. Why would Brenda refuse to get in the car even though she customarily rides with Kipp? She and Kipp had just argued over her abilities as an actress, but was this simply a cover-up?

These two chapters function primarily to build in the reader's mind a list of suspects and motives. There is tension between Kipp and Brenda, between Brenda and Alison, and between Joan and Alison. Could any of these tensions be the source of the resentment

that is fueling the chain letter and its violence? Or is it perhaps something less obvious that lies behind the ominous letter?



# Chapters 6 and 7

## Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

Brenda gets her orders from the Caretaker in Chapter 6. She is to tell Mr. Hoglan, the teacher who is directing the school play, that he is the worst director in the world, and she is to do it in front of everyone. Brenda stretches provocatively during the rehearsal when her character is supposed to be doing limbering exercises. This prompts Mr. Hoglan to tell her to do the exercises as she has done them in the past, and Brenda takes the opportunity to unleash a torrent of insults on Hoglan. She goes well beyond what is required of her by the Caretaker, until Hoglan demands that she stop and tells her that she will no longer play a part in the play.

The day after Brenda's incident with Hoglan, Tony asks Alison out on a formal date. He picks her up at her house 35 miles from the school, and then they drive all the way back to a restaurant near the school, where they have a fancy dinner. Afterward, they fly a kite in the dark at a park across the street from the school.

When Tony drives up to Alison's house to drop her off at the end of the night, the two sit in the car for some time before Tony makes a move to kiss Alison. They kiss again, and continue to hold each other until Tony alludes to some reason that they should not be together. Alison guesses that it is Joan, but Tony says that it isn't. Tony tells Alison that he really likes her, and they part for the night.

In Chapter 7, Neil gets his directive from the Caretaker. He must get sick in class, and Neil decides to faint from a faked diabetic episode in Coach Sager's algebra class before lunch. He does the job very convincingly, and when his mother arrives to see him after he has recovered, she is in tears. Neil feels very guilty for having worried her, but, like the others, fears the recriminations of the Caretaker.

Joan's command is next. She is instructed to wear a Bozo the clown costume to school. She refuses, and calls a meeting of the seven, who are to meet for the first time since last summer's incident. They gather at Fran's house since her parents work and they will have privacy there.

Joan tells everyone that the night before, a loud crash woke her up, and she sat up in bed to find herself covered in shattered glass; her window had exploded. As she walked gingerly to the light switch, she felt something on her leg and lunged toward the light, only to discover that her room was filled with cockroaches. Horrified, she was up for much of the night killing them with a carbon dioxide fire extinguisher. At the meeting, Joan showed the group the bloodied scratches on her arms from the glass.

When the group begins to discuss the fact that the Caretaker knew that Joan had a particular phobia for bugs, they speculate again that the Caretaker might be among them. Kipp notes that every order from the Caretaker has taken aim at a particular



weakness. Kipp was the school braniac, and he was asked to flunk a calculus test; he loved his car, and his car was destroyed. Fran was proud of the mascot she had painted on the gym floor, and she was forced to paint a goat's head on it. Brenda hoped to earn a thespian scholarship after her performance in the play, and she lost her part in the play as a result of the Caretaker's commands. Neil is bothered by the fact that he is so sickly, and he was asked to create a health scene. Joan cherishes her street girl image, and she was told to dress like a clown.

Alison wonders whether Joan is telling the truth about last night's incident, and she asks if Joan cut her foot while going to the light. Joan says she did, and shows that she has a bandage on her foot. Alison asks to see the actual cut, and Joan, affronted, refuses. The conversation moves on, and Neil begins to talk about confessing to the police, but Tony says it's too late.

## Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

After Kipp's incident with his brakes, Brenda and Neil are quick to follow the instructions they find from the Caretaker in the classifieds. Though both are difficult orders in their own ways—Brenda must lose her part in the play and Neil must worry his mother needlessly—neither is truly dangerous or deeply problematic. When in Chapter 7 the group meets for the first time since last summer's incident, Kipp notes that the commands are united by a pattern which is clearly aimed at humiliating or hurting each of the seven.

The group speculates that the commands come from someone who is familiar with their weaknesses, but they note that these weaknesses are, for the most part, widely known. Fran recalls seeing Joan react violently to a spider just days before, and Alison wonders whether Joan was taking pains to make this fear evident so that her punishment would fit the pattern while still occurring in the privacy and obscurity of her bedroom at night. For this reason, Alison suspects Joan of being the Caretaker, but she is unable to coerce Joan into showing her the supposed cut on her foot. When Joan does wear the Bozo costume after the incident of her exploded window, we begin to doubt Alison's suspicions and believe, once again, that the Caretaker is unlikely to be among the seven, or at least among the five who have thus far been asked to perform their minor acts of obedience.

We have seen, throughout the book, the developing romance between Tony and Alison. In Chapter 6, the two go on their first formal date. It goes as well as their first informal date at the mall, and they kiss at the end of the night. But Tony ends the night with an awkward and vague admonition that they are not really supposed to be together. Alison is left to wonder what he means, especially after he denies that he is referring either to the Caretaker or to Joan. The astute reader will recall that Tony's close friend Neil has a crush on Alison, and that Tony is likely to feel guilt for having taken Alison from him, especially since he had previously vowed not to pursue Alison for that very reason.



# Chapters 8 and 9

## Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

In Chapter 8, Tony is instructed to come in last at the track meet. He decides to ignore the Caretaker's commands, and prepares for the race as usual. Neil is on the sidelines with a cooler of Tony's favorite beverage during track meets: small cartons of lemonade available only at drive-through dairies. Neil worries before Tony takes his first sip of lemonade that perhaps the drink has been laced with something, and he takes a sip himself. He says the lemonade tastes sour, but Tony laughs at him and gulps it down. He wonders whether he senses an after taste, but dismisses the idea as having been elicited by mere suggestion.

Tony assumes his position on the track for the quarter mile race. He is confident that he will defeat the strongest runner there, an undefeated black student from another high school. Tony does his usual long slow breaths before the race, so that he will be mildly hyperventilated for the race. He does not feel quite himself, and struggles intensely to keep up with the other runner, eventually winning, but only by throwing himself at the finish line.

Neil urges Tony to rest in the shade after his first race, and before the half-mile race. Tony finds an isolated spot in the shade, and Alison comes over to give him encouragement. She tells him to go home, and is shocked to learn he has another race to run. She asks him who he is trying to impress and he responds that it is Alison herself he is trying to wow. Alison tells him she doesn't care how many races he wins, and Tony is touched, but nonetheless insists on attempting the half-mile.

During the half-mile race, Tony realizes with shock that he has fallen behind the pack and that he will get last place. Determined to finish the race, he keeps going, only to collapse suddenly on the track. Concerned bystanders rush toward him at the end of the chapter.

In Chapter 9, we arrive at the last name in the column from the chain letter: Alison. She is told to flub her lines on opening night, and decides to suffer the Caretaker's consequences rather than do as she is told. Alison is nervous before she goes on stage, and keeps reliving the incident at Tony's track meet. When she hears her cue, she slips into character and does marvelously throughout the first act. At the end of the first act, however, she leans against a set wall as part of her acting and falls straight through it. The structural damage from her fall makes a set of theater lights fall directly down upon her, and when she realizes what has happened, her hands are bleeding heavily.

## Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

Tony's performance at the track meet is a testament to his remarkable will power. Though he was heavily drugged with the potent painkiller codeine, he still compelled



himself to run the half-mile. His collapse during the race left half the school wondering whether he was still alive, and a large number of students appeared at the hospital to learn what had happened.

Though the medical team was able to determine that he had been drugged, and Neil mentioned the suspicious lemonade, when the stadium was searched, the ice chest that had held the lemonade cartons was found empty.

Alison, too, chooses to ignore the Caretaker's demands. Frightening as the prospect of another retaliation is, Alison is too mortified at the thought of flubbing her lines to choose safety over success. It hardly comes as a surprise, then, when she is badly hurt by falling theater lights. We are left to wonder about the nature of Alison's accident, however. We know that Fran was responsible for making the set, and we also know that Fran is exasperated with Alison for being a bit of a diva and for being insufficiently appreciative of her artistic efforts with the set. Might Fran herself have been responsible for weakening the wall that Alison fell through?

What we see at this point in the book is that Pike is building a complex set of possible motives and suspicious incidents. As we progress, we have more and more reason to point to each character as potentially being the Caretaker, and, as with any good mystery, the wealth of possible motives disorients the reader.



# Chapters 10 and 11

## Chapters 10 and 11 Summary

The Monday after the incident with Alison during the play, Fran receives another chain letter, this time with all their names in the second column, waiting to be moved to the third column. The names are in the same order as they were in the first chain letter. The Caretaker cautions that the tasks will be more dangerous this time, and that the corresponding punishments for failing to complete the tasks will also be more dangerous. The Caretaker also says that he or she knows they have been discussing the possibility that the Caretaker is one among the group, and says that he or she is not one of them.

Fran's orders in the classifieds tell her to streak naked during the school lunch. Fran is horrified at the thought, and takes Alison's suggestion to go stay with her grandmother in Bakersfield until everything blows over. Fran fears that the Caretaker will find out where she is, but Alison promises not to tell anyone, including Tony.

At Alison's mention of Tony, Fran grows angry and unsettled. She asks Alison whether she likes Tony very much, and Alison then accuses her of thinking about going to the police and blaming Tony for the incident last summer. Fran responds very angrily to Alison's accusation, showing a fierce side of herself that Alison has never seen before.

In Chapter 11, Tony and Alison are necking in Tony's car before meeting up with the others to discuss the chain letter. Tony tells Alison that they need to discuss the situation between themselves before meeting up with the others, since their group meetings are always plagued by petty distractions.

Tony and Alison go through each of the other five members of the group, describing what they know of them and stating their possible motives. Alison wonders, half-jokingly, whether it is all of them together, in the manner of Agatha Christie's *The Orient Express*. Tony notes to himself that the Caretakers claim that he is not one of them still leaves open the possibility that he is two of them.

The group includes everyone but Fran, who is with her grandmother. Kipp is casual as usual, even though he has decided to disobey the Caretaker's instruction to say that he cheated on the SAT, which would certainly force a forfeiture of his admission to MIT.

Brenda asks where Fran is, and when Alison tells her that she is in hiding, Brenda lets slip that she knows Fran has gone "up" somewhere. After Alison reacts to Brenda's apparent knowledge, Neil notes that Bakersfield isn't exactly north anyway, and Alison is shocked. She asks Neil how he knows and he reveals that Brenda told him. She says that Fran's parents told her, but that she feigned ignorance in order to please Alison.





Tony asks Alison to go to a nearby payphone and call Fran's grandmother. Alison returns quickly, and tells the group that Fran's grandmother found Fran missing this morning.

## Chapters 10 and 11 Analysis

Kipp and Neil have crashed into a brick wall, Tony has been dangerously drugged, and Alison has had electrical lights come crashing down on her. Grave injury has already been sustained, yet the Caretaker promises a round of punishments even more serious than the first. It is remarkable, then, that Kipp and Fran should choose to defy their orders to streak naked through the school and admit cheating on the SAT, respectively.

Alison suggests that Fran go see her grandmother in Bakersfield, and promises to guard her secret closely in Chapter 10. She is totally shocked to learn that Neil and Brenda both know where she has gone, though Brenda's explanation is believable enough, as she claims to have called Fran and been told of her visit by her parents.

The web of suspicions has grown thick, and Tony hesitates before confiding even in Alison. He decides, ultimately, that if she is the Caretaker he is already in trouble anyway, and proceeds with their conversation, but the hesitation is telling. Each person is capable of suspecting any of the others, and the group conversations are becoming increasingly muddled and paranoid.

The interpersonal tensions between the group's members predate the chain letter, and these tensions continue to be felt. Tony is nervous about Joan seeing him necking with Alison. He is even more nervous about hurting Neil's feelings with his budding relationship. Brenda is as much Alison's rival as she is her friend, and their near-argument over Fran's stay in Bakersfield evinces the rivalry and tension that is always latent in their interactions.

We learn that Tony has gone to the newspaper in an attempt to gather information about the person who has been placing the classifieds ads with orders, but when the editor insists on getting information from Tony about his reasons for inquiry, Tony backs off, knowing that anything he revealed would be incriminating.

We see then, that the group has less and less recourse to strategy. They are overwhelmed by the network of suspicions and increasingly afraid of being exposed. What they will do about Fran's disappearance then, remains unclear.



# Chapters 12 and 13

## Chapters 12 and 13 Summary

Chapter 12 opens with a nightmare Alison is having. She dreams that she is awakened by a loud pounding on the door of her house. She makes her way downstairs in a daze, guided by a strange dull glow coming from the walls of her house. Downstairs, she realizes her parents are gone and that the knocking is on the back door rather than the front. She goes to the front door and turns the handle, but the door will not open. Her hand sticks to the handle, and she hears that the pounding, which was being done with a blunt heavy object, has stopped. She fears that the person has made it in and is coming for her. Suddenly, she hears a soft voice at the door. She asks who it is, and the voice says that she already knows, and has always known. Alison feels the door start to open when she wakes from her nightmare with a start.

The start that wakes Alison up is her ringing phone. It is Tony, and he tells her that Kipp has been injured and is in trouble. He also says that the police are at Kipp's house. Alison sneaks out of her house and drives the long distance to Kipp's house, where she waits in her car a few houses down until Neil approaches her, startling her. She gets out of the car and has an intimate moment with Neil. The two exchange fears, and Alison hugs him as he hobbles on one leg.

When Tony meets up with the two of them, he explains the situation. Kipp's mother woke up when she heard a loud noise outside. She found Kipp's bedroom empty, the mattress soaked with a large quantity of blood. Kipp was dragged out his window and into a car which then drove off.

Tony was called by the police because he and Neil were the last to see Kipp. They had decided, after the group's meeting at the park, not to leave Kipp alone, as he was in danger. They hung out with him in his bedroom for much of the evening. Brenda came over with beer at one point, and the boys drank to much and forgot that their primary task was to protect Kipp. When Kipp asked them to leave so that he could go to sleep, they obliged, thinking that Kipp was safe in his bedroom.

When Tony found out what happened to Kipp, he was set to tell the police everything, but found a letter from the Caretaker in his car warning him to keep his mouth shut with the threat that his disappeared friends would otherwise be killed.

In Chapter 13, Brenda is told by the Caretaker to tell every teacher in school to go to hell. She is daunted by the task, but is so shaken by what happened to her boyfriend Kipp that she carries it out with gusto. When she tells off the English teacher Miss Fogelson, the class bursts into hysterics, delighted as they are by the scene Alison has created. When Alison mouths off to Coach Sager, however, he quickly and aggressively leads her to the administrative office for punishment.



## Chapters 12 and 13 Analysis

Alison's guilt overcomes her in Chapter 12. She is haunted by nightmares involving last summer's incident, and she is not alone. When she talks to Neil about it, he confides that he, too, has been tormented by bad dreams. The two share a tender moment as they confide in each other. Recall, however, that Neil has a crush on Alison and that he knows Alison is dating Tony. His feelings in this moment must be charged and difficult.

What has happened to Kipp is unclear, but it seems evident that it is serious, and that he may be near death. The quantity of blood left behind in Kipp's bedroom indicates grave injury, and Kipp's mother was so shaken by the manner of her son's disappearance that she had to be sedated and taken to the hospital. Brenda's reaction to Kipp's disappearance is also one of tremendous grief; her grief is so palpable that it convinces Alison that Brenda is not the mastermind behind the chain letter.

Hearing about Kipp's fate is enough to prompt Tony to unveil the truth to the police. He is set to do so without consulting anyone else in the group, and the only thing that stops him is the menacing letter indirectly threatening death for Fran and Kipp if Tony should go to the police.

The situation the remaining five members of the group find themselves in is serious. Now that they have failed to expose themselves to the police when they had the chance, they seem to be in a double-bind that will force them to obey every command of the Caretaker or else endanger those the Caretaker has already taken.



# Chapters 14 and 15

## Chapters 14 and 15 Summary

In Chapter 14, Neil is ordered to burn down the school. He and Tony discuss the situation; Tony concocts a plan to burn the school down in the middle of the night, but Neil refuses, and instead asks Tony to supply him with a gun from his father's gun collection for protection from the Caretaker.

Tony notices that Neil looks particularly frail, and wonders if the only thing wrong with his knee is cartilage damage. Tony asks Neil if he has saved up enough money to have the leg surgery he needs, and Neil says that he gave his mother his savings so that she could visit her brother in Arkansas.

Tony tells Neil that he would have turned himself in to the police on the night of the incident last summer if Neil had told him to do it at the time. Tony makes clear that he is not blaming Neil, but that he takes Neil's opinion very seriously. Neil asks Tony if he has ever thought about the man they killed—whether he had children, what he hoped for, what kind of music he liked. Tony says that he has not thought about the man in that way. Neil notes how sad it was that, after the man's death, no notice appeared in the newspaper. Apparently nobody even noticed or reported his disappearance.

When Neil and Tony part, Neil tells Tony he will never forget him, as if it is their final parting. Then he asks Tony to do him a favor, though we are not to learn what his request was until the next chapter.

In Chapter 15, we learn that Neil is dead. His house burned to the ground and the fire spread so quickly that Neil, who was asleep in bed, had no time to escape. Tony and Alison attend the funeral, though none of the other seven do. Afterward, Neil's mother, Mrs. Hurly, asks to speak with Tony and Alison. She tells them that Neil had cancer, not diabetes and cartilage damage. Neil had lied to his friends because he did not want them to worry about him, but he was near the end. His mother sees his untimely death as a kind of blessing in disguise, as her son would not have to suffer a slow death from cancer.

As they walk away after talking with Mrs. Hurly, Tony gives Alison the charred remains of the emerald ring that belonged to Neil and which Alison had admired once. Neil had asked Tony that he give it to Alison. Tony tells Alison that she was Neil's love, and that he saw her as a goddess. Alison is moved and shocked by the revelation, and is hurt when she remembers that Neil asked her out and she refused. Tony tells Alison that Neil was never jealous of the two of them.



## Chapters 14 and 15 Analysis

The narrative in these two chapters takes a decidedly serious turn. Fran and Kipp have disappeared, but until Chapter 15, we have not encountered a confirmed death. Neil's death was fiery but, thankfully, quick and painless. The revelation, at his funeral, that he was dying from cancer is deeply moving for Tony and Alison, who are amazed at their friend's selflessness and ability to mask his own suffering.

One rather odd moment occurs at the end of Chapter 15. After Tony has given Alison the emerald ring that Neil entrusted him with, Alison asks Tony whether he checked with Neil's mother before giving away the ring. He says that he did, and that Neil's mother didn't even know that Neil had the ring. Alison is a bit surprised, saying she thought the ring was a family heirloom. She does not remember why she thinks this is the case, but the astute reader will remember that, several chapters earlier, Neil had said as much when Alison asked to try on the ring during the group meeting at Fran's house. Why would Neil lie?

One clue to the ring's identity lies in Chapter 14. When Neil asks Tony whether he ever thinks about the man that they killed—whether he wonders about the man's life and loved ones, Tony says that he doesn't. We are told that Neil was tugging on the emerald ring as he talked about the man. Is it possible that the ring belonged to the man? We are left to wonder.

The intensity of the emotions depicted in this chapter is somewhat at odds with the tenor of the book up to this point. Though our characters are teenagers given to flippant expressions of sexual attraction and engage more in witty banter than ardent declarations, Tony tells Alison that Neil thought of her as his one love and as a sort of goddess. Neil's mother talks about Neil's death as a blessing in disguise as it meant that Neil would not continue to suffer the deep pain of advancing cancer. Chapter 15 certainly takes the emotional world of the novel to a new level of near-histrionics.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

Chapter 16 opens with Alison alone at home waiting for Joan and Brenda to come over. It is night, and her parents have gone to New York, leaving her alone. Alison's mother almost cancelled the trip, being jumpy after Fran and Kipp's disappearance and Neil's death, but went ahead with it when Joan and Brenda offered to spend the night with Alison.

Alison watches "The Wizard of Oz" as she waits for the two to arrive. There is a thunderstorm, and the electricity goes out intermittently. Alison calls Tony but gets no answer. She goes upstairs to take a warm bath to calm her nerves. After bathing for some time, she hears the phone ring and gets out of the bath to answer the phone. She gets the phone on the fifth ring but the person on the other line hangs up. She stands by the phone naked and dripping, until she has the odd feeling that she is being watched and she closes her window, dries off, and dresses warmly.

She hears static from the television downstairs and wonders how it got turned back on. When she goes downstairs, she notices that the back door is not dead bolted, and she makes sure to lock it. She calls Tony again and, again, gets no answer. Alison then goes to the garage to get her father's gun. While in the garage, she hears a knock at the door.

Alison goes to the front door and, terrified, turns on the porch light and looks through the glass by the door. There is nobody there. With horror, she realizes that the knocking is coming from the back door. She retraces her steps to the garage to get the gun, but on her way realizes the knocking is coming from the wooden shutters on the back windows. Relieved, she secures the shutters.

The phone rings, and Alison assumes it is Tony. She rushes to the phone but hears only ragged, faint breathing. She hangs up and calls the security guard for her housing complex, but he does not pick up. She calls the police, but before she has even given her name, the phone goes dead.

She goes back to the garage, frantically searches for ammunition, and loads two bullets into her father's gun. She hears the back door being knocked down and decides to slip out the front door and drive away. She finds the front door jammed and, growing more and more panicked, breaks the glass on the door with the butt of the gun and sticks her arm out to dislodge the hairpin that is jamming the lock. Somebody grabs her arm and she rips it free only after her own copious blood causes her assailant to lose his grip.

Alison runs upstairs to her bedroom where she waits, the gun aimed at her bedroom door.

She is convinced that Joan is the Caretaker, and remembers her warning when she told Alison to stay away from Tony. She warns Joan to back away when she hears the



intruder in front of her bedroom door but, getting no response, shoots. She lays, dazed from the recoil, for some time on her bedroom floor before opening the door. She expects to find a body but finds nothing, and is terrified to realize the Caretaker is still at large.

The phone rings. It is the Caretaker. He tells her to come to him for her final task. Alison runs outside to her car, but finds that it has been tampered with and will not start. She notices a lit up house with music wafting out and is relieved. Though her housing tract has been completely uninhabited except for her own house, she thinks there may have been a new move-in.

Alison hears many voices coming from the house, and thinks there is a party going on. She puts her gun down outside and walks in, only to find the place empty. A hand grabs her around the neck, but Alison fights back and punches the Caretaker in the nose. Struggling free, she backs out the door and grabs her gun. The light illuminates the Caretaker's face. It is Neil. She aims the gun at him, but as she fires, Neil closes the door on her, causing the barrel to tip upward and the shot to go toward the overhanging roof. Alison falls to the ground from the recoil and passes out from the blow against the brick floor.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

Chapter 16 is the longest and most gripping chapter in the book to this point. It begins with Alison waiting for Brenda and Joan to come over and keep her company at home while her parents are away on a trip to New York, and ends with the revelation of the Caretaker's identity. The chapter is fueled by suspense; at every turn Alison's fate hangs in the balance, and she is forced into some quick thinking and physical danger as she attempts to evade the Caretaker, who seems bent on killing her.

Note Pike's masterful weaving of real and imagined danger throughout the chapter. Alison imagines the first knock at the back door; it is, in fact, only wooden shutters slapping against themselves. We are taken from a sense of horror to one of relief as she realizes her error and begins to dismiss her fear as paranoia. Soon, however, there are some very real and very threatening blows to the back door, and we realize that Alison's fear is grounded.

Again and again, Pike takes the danger to a fevered pitch before offering Alison escape in which she and the readers place all their hope before it proves, ultimately, to be futile. This pattern of excitation and temporary relief means that, by the end of the chapter, the reader has been worked into something of a panic. This lends the chapter's final revelation all the more drama.

The Caretaker's identity is made clear by his reference to Alison as a goddess. Neil's name is not used, but we know now that it was he who was responsible for the many grotesque punishments of the Caretaker, and, immediately, we turn back to the many points in the narrative that indicated his guilt. Discrepancies in his behavior and odd

insistences suddenly crystallize into a picture of a dying teen desperate to lay some claim on life and to avenge the death of an unwanted man whose death he has come to identify with.





# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

Tony drives out to the gravesite of the man he and the others killed last summer. Armed with a flashlight and shovel, he begins to dig at the ground where he remembers burying the man. Because the grave they dug was shallow, he expects to find him quickly, and begins to wonder whether he's chosen the right place when he has dug waist deep and found nothing. But when Tony finds the small gold crucifix that Neil placed around the man's neck, he knows he found the right place. The body, however, is not there. Tony realizes that it is buried in place of Neil at the Rose Memorial Lawn.

The reason Tony went out to the gravesite was to confirm his suspicions. He had reexamined the classified ad that had directed Fran to streak through the school naked and noted that the extra letters in the code were themselves an encoded message instructing Tony to go to the police in order to spare Neil's life. Tony had also noticed the discrepancy in Neil's account of the emerald ring after he gave the ring to Alison. He concluded that the ring had belonged to the dead man, and that Neil had used the dead man's body as a decoy for himself in his burned house.

We return to the house where Neil is keeping his friends hostage. Everyone is alive and well; Kipp's kidnapping was not as bloody as it appeared, though they are all in the dark as to where Neil got the human blood to stage Kipp's bloody kidnapping. The others tell Alison that Neil has frequently muttered her name, both in a positive and a negative way. Alison asks where Tony is, and Neil, who has appeared at the door, answers that he is dead. Alison pleads with Neil to tell her the truth about Tony, and Neil insists that Tony killed himself.

Alison begins to talk to Neil with care and support. She tells him that he is important to her, and tells him that hurting his friends will not help bring back the man they killed last summer. Alison attempts to maneuver her way through caring statements and careful counseling into a situation where she can grab the gun from Neil's belt. Neil has a bottle of medicine, a needle, and cotton balls. He is preparing to sedate the group in order to take them to the site of the man's death.

Alison begins talking about the night of Kipp's kidnapping, when she and Neil had shared a tender moment talking about their dreams. She asks Neil to confide in her about his dreams, and when she indicates that he come closer to whisper into her ear, he does. She grabs the gun and points it between his eyes, demanding the keys to their hand and leg cuffs. Fran shouts out not to shoot Neil. Neil seems unthreatened by the gun. Alison is overcome with pity for Neil, and tells him that she will show him that she cares by returning the gun to him. She does, but he plunges the needle with sedative into her leg anyway.



We return to Tony's perspective. He is in his car, leaving the gravesite, and it is raining heavily. He thinks about going to the police or Mrs. Hurly, but neither option seems right. He remembers Neil talking about Alison's beauty rhapsodically, and realizes that he must be pursuing her now. He drives to Alison's subdivision and is horrified to find her house in shambles, with signs of a bloody encounter everywhere. He remembers feeling watched when he and Alison first kissed in his car, and suddenly he realizes that the only other house that is lit in the neighborhood was the place from which he felt watched then.

Tony walks over to the house and enters; by a makeshift bed he finds Neil's tape recorder and a set of miniature keys. He pockets the keys and walks upstairs toward the sound of voices. He hovers outside the room where he sees the others, and, hidden, listens to Alison's attempt to trick Neil and grab his gun. He realizes that Neil's gun must be unloaded, and only intervenes when Neil has plunged the needle into Alison's leg.

When Neil sees that Tony has entered, he produces a switchblade that he holds to Alison's throat. When Tony says he will go to the police about last summer's incident, Neil says that it's too late and begins a rant about his own sorry position compared to the artistic, athletic, and academic successes of his friends. Neil goes to Fran and unlocks her cuffs with the keys he found. He tells her to go to Alison. Because Fran has always been kind and caring to Neil, when she tells him to let Alison go and hold her instead, he believes her, and releases Alison.

As soon as he has been softened by Fran's care, Neil's madness suddenly dissolves. He asks that they all leave and it is clear that he intends to commit suicide. Tony insists that he will stay with him and Alison begs him not to kill himself for her sake. Neil drops the switchblade, and Tony catches him as he collapses.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

The shock that comes at the end of Chapter 16 gives way to the strange dialogue in Chapter 17, which puts Neil's character under the spotlight. The image of Neil as a crazed, vindictive, and murderous psychopath jars with what we know of him from the rest of the book. Both Tony and Alison have been struck by his compassion and his abiding sense of justice and righteousness. That he would go to such lengths to punish his friends for the death of an unknown man is strange, to say the least.

The group of trapped friends speculate that Neil's illness is responsible for his behavior; the tumors in his brain, they hazard, are directing his actions more than he himself is. But for Alison, this explanation rings hollow. There is something more at play than cancer pathology. Neil is deeply frustrated by the fact that he has cancer and envies his friends their successes. Perhaps even stronger than the envy he feels, however, is the sense of indignation Neil feels on behalf of the man they killed and buried on the side of the road. In his near-death, marginalized, and diseased state, Neil has come to identify with the stranger, and he regards him as his friend. He wants to kill his friends so that they can all be with the man. The reasoning is strange, but at the heart of this thought



process is not hatred or pettiness; Neil is truly compassionate, but desperation and irrationality have led him to take the bizarre approach he has taken. Note that the friends still basically have sympathy for Neil. Though they have all been kidnapped and harshly treated by him, they still see him as a basically good person.

It is only by trading on their genuine affection for Neil that the group is eventually able to dissuade him from carrying out his plans. Tony realizes that Neil will be most vulnerable to Fran's suggestions because, among them, Fran really has the greatest measure of affection and respect for Neil. We are told that Neil is a master of interpretation; he can tell when a person is being sincere and when they are being artificial, and Fran's sincerity is what makes Neil snap out of his maddened state and release Alison.

By the end of the chapter, he has returned to his normal self and collapsed into Tony's arms. Dissuaded from suicide, Neil has nonetheless a short while to live, and Tony has taken on the task of caring for his dear friend. Though the task is a difficult and sad one, Tony is here getting a second chance to be with a friend he already thought dead. Neil's resurrection of sorts is a painful one—for his friend had to see him in a maddened and violent state—but it is nonetheless one which affords the two friends another chance to bond and find something redemptive in their friendship before Neil's passing.



# Epilogue

## Epilogue Summary

In the epilogue, we see new neighbors moving into the house next to Alison's on the previously uninhabited tract of houses. Tony is helping the new neighbor, Mr. Hague, move his heavy belongings into the new house. The house happens also to be the same one Neil inhabited during his crazed days as the Caretaker.

Alison tells Tony about the various excuses each member of the group made upon their return. Fran claimed to have been kidnapped by a deaf and dumb old man who forced her to draw obscene pictures of him all day. She said she escaped when the man wasn't listening. Kipp made up an even more outlandish story, claiming to have been taken by three beautiful girls who drove him around in a van for two weeks performing all kinds of outrageous acts on his body. Tony and Alison laugh at their friends' stories, and then Alison hands Tony his diploma, which she accepted for him at their high school graduation.

Tony was unable to attend his graduation because he was with Neil at a cabin in the mountains the two had rented to live out Neil's final days. Tony and Neil had passed the time happily and peacefully until Neil's passing the day before. Tony comments on the impossibility of going to the police with information from last summer. In some sense, Neil did them all a favor by using the dead man's body as a dummy for his own. No evidence of the grave remained, and, because nobody ever took note of the man's death, it would be difficult to explain and provide evidence for the incident.

The epilogue ends with Alison resolving to be less stuck up and more aware of those who have crushes on her. She asks Tony to take Neil's place as her greatest admirer, and he says he will try as he embraces her.

## Epilogue Analysis

There is a strange sense of resolution in the epilogue to "Chain Letter". Particularly odd is the way in which Tony and Alison shrug off the possibility of going to the police with the events of last summer. They are thankful to Neil for having eliminated the evidence of the man's body, and are happy to let the case rest there. It seems that, having passed through the violent gauntlet that Neil as the Caretaker prepared for them, they feel their consciences sufficiently purged to think no more of the man they killed.

Alison's reaction to the affair is similarly unnerving. She promises to be less stuck up, feeling guilt for having ignored Neil's advances. Yet, just one day after his death, she is flippantly asking Tony to take his place as her greatest admirer. There is a real egotism in this request that belies her resolutions to be less self-involved.

The scene of the Hagues moving into the house where Neil had executed his role as the Caretaker is also strange. They are welcome addition to the neighborhood, but they have no idea that the house they are moving into was home to such a devious and perverse set of events.

In the end, the book is a thriller, and its attempts at sentimental resolution are a structural formality in a narrative that is above all about shock and suspense.



# Characters

## Alison

Alison is one of the seven involved in the car accident referenced in the chain letter. She is an actress and is aspiring to get a thespian scholarship to college. She is beautiful and has been cast as the main character in the school play, much to her friend Brenda's chagrin. Alison is caring but sometimes self-centered, and her refusal when Neil asks her on a date contributes to Neil's vindictive and wounded actions. Alison is rivals with Joan, the school beauty who has been associated with Tony, who is Alison's crush. Alison goes out to lunch with Tony to discuss the chain letter, in which they are both mentioned, and their first informal date then leads to a formal date at the end of which the two kiss at length. It is later revealed that Neil, who is not only an admirer of Alison's but is also Tony's best friend, was watching from the window of an empty house nearby, and this, too, fuels his strange behavior.

Alison is friends with Brenda and Fran. Fran looks up to Alison and respects her opinion. Brenda has a certain rivalry with Alison, whom she envies as an actress, being herself an aspiring thespian.

Alison's first order from the Caretaker is to flub her lines on the opening night of the school play. She refuses to do so, and as a result, a chain of lights falls on her from a great height on stage, badly wounding her hands. She never receives her second set of orders. Before she can, the Caretaker pursues her in her home and, after a bloody encounter, drags her to a nearby house where she is kept with the other five disappeared friends.

Alison is responsible for Neil putting down the switchblade he is threatening to kill himself with in the final episode of Chapter 17. She asks Neil to live a while longer for her, trading on her importance to Neil to compel him to abandon the thought of killing himself.

At the end of "Chain Letter", Alison asks Tony to take Neil's place as her greatest admirer.

## Tony

Tony is the school's star athlete. He is among the seven involved in the man's killing. Tony is revered by everyone in the school, particularly the girls, most of whom have a crush on him. He has dated Joan, who is known for being promiscuous and provocative. He found her too fast, and is more attracted to Alison, who sees him as an ordinary person rather than a superstar.

Tony is best friends with Neil. Tony is rarely strong enough to make the right decision on his own, and relies on Neil to guide him and force him to listen to his own conscience. It



is only because of Neil that Tony went to see what had happened after he hit something in the dark during last summer's car accident. Tony, who was driving at the time of the incident, would have preferred not to find out what he had hit, but when he saw that he had killed a man, was quick to opt for calling the police. Pressure from the others, however, dissuaded Tony from calling the police.

Tony pursues Alison even though he knows that Neil is interested in her. He does so unthinkingly, and later reveals the fact to Neil, who seems forgiving. It is only after Tony realizes that Neil is the Caretaker and hears Neil angrily talking about Tony that he understands the gravity of what he has done in disregarding his friend's feelings. Tony, like his girlfriend Alison, is forced to contend with a selfishness that they didn't even know they possessed until Neil's anger forced the issue.

Tony's first command is to come in last at a track meet. He refuses to do so, and even before he has run the races, the Caretaker drugs him with codeine in his lemonade. This makes it clear that the Caretaker knows their decisions before they even make them, as Tony was punished even before his planned defiance had been made actual.

At the end of the novel, Tony rents a cabin in the mountains and keeps Neil company until his death one week later. When he returns, he promises Alison that he will try to be her greatest admirer, just as Neil was.

## Brenda

Brenda is Alison's friend and rival. She is attractive, but in an ordinary way. She is dating Kipp, the smartest student in school. Brenda is very outgoing and, at times, brash. When Fran first gets the chain letter, Brenda grabs it from her in order to read it. She is often abrasive and sarcastic. Brenda is cast as a side character in the school play and resents Alison for getting the lead part. They are both vying for a thespian college scholarship. Unlike the others in the group, Brenda relishes her commands from the Caretaker. The first has her tell the play's director, Mr. Hoglan, that he is the worst director in the world. Brenda performs her task with relish, going further than she must and thus getting herself replaced in the play. Brenda's second task is to tell every teacher in the school to go to hell. Though she is terrified at first, she knows she must perform the task, as it follows on the heels of Kipp's bloody disappearance. Once she starts telling teachers off, Brenda begins to enjoy the task and she creates a scene in an English teacher's class when the students in the class side with Brenda as she hurls insults at the teacher. Brenda is kidnapped by Neil on her way to Alison's house in Chapter 16, though the scene is not included in the novel.

## Fran

Fran, along with Brenda and Alison, forms the main trio of girl friends in the novel. She is a talented artist, and was responsible for painting the school's mascot on the gym floor. She is the first to receive the chain letter, and her name is on the top of the letter's two lists. She performs her first task dutifully, painting over the mascot's head with a



grotesque goat's head. Her second task is to streak naked through the school during lunch, and the task so mortifies her that she goes away to see her grandmother in another town for several days in order to avoid the Caretaker's retribution. She is, however, kidnapped from her grandmother's home and taken to the abandoned house where Neil collects each of the members of the group before the show-down in Chapter 17.

## Joan

Joan is the school beauty and is known for her promiscuity. She cultivates a tough street reputation with her manners and dress. Though she is beautiful, she talks crudely and is very aggressive. She is the only girl in metal shop. Joan is interested in Tony, and the two have dated and have gone far physically. Joan, however, admires Tony for the same reason everyone else does: his athletic prowess. This fact makes her less attractive to Tony than Alison is, because Alison regards Tony like an ordinary person. The first talk demanded of Joan is that she wear a Bozo the Clown costume to school. She refuses to do so, and as a result claims to have had a jar of cockroaches thrown through her bedroom window in the middle of the night. When she recounts the incident, Alison suspects her of lying and asks her to show the group the wounds inflicted on her by the broken shards of glass. Joan's arm is badly cut and her foot has a bandage on it.

Joan is Alison's chief rival for Tony, and Tony's interest in Alison deeply angers Joan. Joan threatens Alison when she learns that the two have gone on a date, and she seems to promise a painful punishment if Alison does not stay away from Tony. Joan's second task assigned her by the Caretaker is to spread a rumor that she is gay. Again, Joan refuses, but this time, retaliation does not come until she is kidnapped on the way to Alison's house. After the group is released by Neil, Joan plays no further role in the novel.

## Neil

Neil, along with Tony and Alison, is one of the book's three central characters. He does not, at first, seem to play so prominent a role as the two others, but as the narrative tempo escalates in the book's final chapters, he takes center stage as it is revealed that he is the Caretaker.

Neil claims to have diabetes and weakened cartilage in his knee, but he is actually terminally ill with cancer. He is a southerner with religious tendencies, and when the man is killed in the car accident, it is Neil who insists on burying him and who places a crucifix around the dead man's neck. He comes increasingly to identify with the dead man, to the point of concocting the chain letter as a way of roping his friends into his guilt and, eventually, of taking them with him to be with the dead man in his grave.

In order to conceal his identity as the Caretaker, Neil assigns himself tasks just like everybody else on the chain letter's list. His first is to feign illness in class, and to oblige, he fakes a diabetic fainting episode. His second task is to burn down the school, and he





refuses and then fakes his own death by burning his house down along with the dead man's corpse, which is burned with the house to the point of being mistakable as Neil himself.

It is only at Neil's funeral that Tony and Alison learn from his mother that he was terminally ill with cancer. This revelation causes Tony and Alison to admire Neil even more than they did before. And when Tony tells Alison that Neil considered her his love and left an emerald ring for her, Alison is both shamed and flattered.

Neil's character develops great complexity in the book's final two chapters when we learn that he is the Caretaker and see him deal with his friends with a mix of violent envy, righteous indignation, and genuine care. It becomes clear in these final chapters that Neil has been driven to his insane actions by his guilt and his retaliation against his own death. He is not ready to die and give up the possibility of flourishing in the many ways he sees his friends flourishing. He envies their success and vitality, and curses their lack of morality in their willingness simply to forget the man they killed last summer.

Much of Neil's insanity focuses around Alison. He is in love with her and resents Tony for having pursued her despite knowing how he felt. He chooses a house across the street from Alison's as his base of operations, and a pair of binoculars by a window that faces Alison's bedroom reveals that he has been spying on her. Neil lures Alison to this house after a violent pursuit in Chapter 16 that leaves her arm mangled. When Alison tries to soothe Neil and lure him to her by expounding on how much she cares about him and expertly counseling him, Neil succumbs to her, and Alison is able to wrest his gun from him. He is unfazed, however, because the gun is not loaded, and he registers her actions as a serious betrayal. Nonetheless, after Tony comes on the scene and frees Fran, Neil is still susceptible to genuine caring, and he listens to Fran when she tells him to let Alison go.

In the final scene of Chapter 17, Neil threatens to kill himself but is prevented by Tony and Alison's actions. Once his madness dissipates, Neil is cared for by Tony, who rents a cabin in the mountains where the two spend Neil's last week before death together.

## Kipp

Kipp is one of the seven involved in the car accident and chain letter. He has a 4.0 GPA and has already been admitted to MIT, where he plans to study aeronautical engineering. He is dating Brenda, though the two are often sarcastic and rude with each other. The two other boys turn to Kipp to give a logical analysis of the situation the first time they gather to discuss the chain letter. Kipp immediately dismisses Neil's idea that the Caretaker could be among them, a fact which later casts him as suspicious.

Kipp's first task is to fail his calculus exam, but he refuses to do so. A few days after he gets an A on his exam, his brakes go and he crashes into a brick wall. When Tony examines Kipp's breaks, he sees that they have been tampered with. Kipp was wearing a seatbelt at the time of the crash though he usually never wore a seatbelt, which also



prompts suspicion from Tony later. Neil was also in the car with Kipp which makes his identification as the Caretaker even more difficult.

Kipp's second task is to claim that he cheated on the SAT, thereby having his admission to MIT revoked. He again refuses to follow the Caretaker's orders, and a few days later he is kidnapped from his bedroom. Though the scene of his departure is bloody and the police are able to confirm that the blood is human, we later learn that Kipp was drugged with codeine and not hurt at all. We never learn where Neil got the human blood used in the ploy.

## **Mr. Hoglan**

Mr. Hoglan is the school play's director. He casts Brenda as a kooky sister to Alison's main character. Brenda resents Mr. Hoglan saying that she does not have the right look to play the star of the show, and when the Caretaker directs her to insult him, she does so with relish. Mr. Hoglan responds to the insults by removing Brenda from the play altogether. We learn at the end of the novel that Brenda is asked to sing at the school graduation and is accompanied on piano by Mr. Hoglan.

## **Miss Fogleson**

Miss Fogleson is the English teacher on which Brenda unleashes her fury when the Caretaker tells her to tell every teacher in school to go to hell. Because Miss Fogleson is a particularly irksome teacher, Brenda goes further than she must, and when her insults are met by the general approval of the class, Miss Fogleson becomes hysterical. She does nothing, however, when Brenda leaves the room.

## **Coach Sager**

Coach Sager is Tony's coach for the many sports and events he competes in. He is also the school's Algebra II teacher. When the seven students get into the accident that kills the man, they are listening to a fabricated tape which Kipp made portraying Coach Sager in a sexual act with Joan. Kipp's impersonations of Coach Sager and of Joan are so convincing that Joan flies into a rage when he refuses to stop the tape, and turns off the headlights of the car. Neil fakes his fainting spell in Coach Sager's class, and it is Coach Sager who takes Brenda to the principal's office after she tells him to go to hell.



# Objects/Places

## Chain Letter

A chain letter is the central device of the novel and its title. The book opens with Fran's receipt of the letter and it is the commands made and punishments threatened by the letter that structure the narrative. The chain letter is written by an entity who calls himself or herself the Caretaker. We learn only near the end of the novel that Neil is the Caretaker. The chain letter instructs its recipients to check the classifieds section of the "Times" for the act of obedience that they are to perform. It also instructs its readers not to tell anyone about the letter outside the seven involved in last summer's incident, or face severe punishment.

## Emerald Ring

Neil wears an emerald ring that we learn about when Alison admires it one day during a group meeting at Fran's house. Alison asks to try on the ring, which is far too large for the emaciated Neil. She asks Neil whether it is a family heirloom, and he nods affirmatively in response. Just before Neil fakes his own death, he asks Tony to give Alison the ring after his death. At Neil's funeral, Tony gives Alison the ring, which was badly burned and distorted in the fire that was supposed to have killed Neil. Alison is honored to have the ring and asks Tony whether he asked Neil's mother if it was alright for her to have the ring. When Tony replies that Neil's mother did not even know about the ring, Alison finds it odd because she thought it was a family heirloom. Though she does not remember the conversation with Neil in which he assented that it was, Tony does, and this is his first clue that Neil was hiding something. We soon learn that the ring belonged to the deceased man, and that Neil took it before he was buried.

## Crucifix

Neil, who is of religious persuasion, is wearing a crucifix at the time of the accident. Before the group covers the shallow grave they have dug for the man they killed, Neil places his crucifix around the man's neck. It is this crucifix that allows Tony to identify the gravesite later when he goes and finds it devoid of a body.

## Theatrical Set

Fran is responsible for creating the set for the school play. She is a talented artist and puts a lot of effort into the task, even taking it home early in the process to work on it. It is this set that is responsible for Alison's injury after she refuses to follow her first command from the Caretaker. Alison leans against the set during her first performance, in which she refuses to flub her lines, and the wall she leans against gives way, sending



her flying backward and propelling a set of electric lights from the ceiling onto Alison's face, which she protects with her arms.

## **Kipp's Maverick**

Tony is driving Kipp's Maverick when he loses control of the vehicle and kills the man whose death is to burden Neil's conscience to the point of insanity. Kipp is unable to drive that night because he is too drunk, as are the rest of them to varying degrees. Kipp's Maverick is totaled when his brakes are tampered with and he crashes into a brick wall while living the school parking lot.

## **Rural Area Outside Los Angeles**

The group is lost and driving on country roads outside of Los Angeles when they hit the man. They are attempting to return from a Beach Boys concert but are unable to reach the highway and find themselves wandering rural roads amidst darkened fields.

## **Bakersfield**

Fran goes to visit her grandmother in Bakersfield in order to avoid the retribution of the Caretaker after she refuses to follow his second command to her, which is to streak naked through the school during lunch. Alison suggests the trip to Fran, and she is outraged when she learns that both Brenda and Neil know Fran's secret even though she has told no one. Brenda reveals that Fran's parents told her, and that she told Neil. Fran is kidnapped by Neil from Bakersfield.

## **Fran's House**

Alison, Fran and Brenda are gathered at Fran's house when they first read the chain letter. It is also at Fran's house where the group of seven meets for the first time to discuss the letter because they know they are assured privacy in her house since both her parents work.

## **Alison's House and Subdivision**

Alison lives in a new development 35 miles away from the school. Her house is the only inhabited one in the housing tract and she is frightened by the expanse of empty houses when she goes for her walk every evening. She has a strange sense of being watched there, which turns out to be justified when she discovers near the end of the novel that Neil has been camping in one of the empty homes and spying on her. It is in this empty house that Neil gathers his kidnapped friends and it is here that Tony finds him and engineers his release from his own madness.

## Track Stadium

Tony's first command from the Caretaker is to come in last in a track meet where he is to run the quarter-mile and half-mile races. At the Stadium, Tony drinks his usual pre-game drink: lemonade. Neil provides the cooler with lemonade that turns out to be drugged with codeine. Tony collapses during the half-mile race at the stadium and from there is taken to the hospital, where his stomach is pumped and he recovers.



# Themes

## Guilt and Retribution

It is really Neil's conscience and the way that he manages his guilt that is at the core of the novel's narrative structure and meaning. Neil is plagued by a deep sense of guilt after he and his friends were responsible for a man's death, but failed to take responsibility. After the incident, Neil scoured the papers looking for news about the man's disappearance, or even the discovery of his grave, which was shallow and close to the road. When no news surfaced, Neil was left to surmise that the man was not cared for by anyone, since nobody even noticed or alerted the authorities about the man's disappearance. This realization adds to Neil's guilt. Neil himself is a person afflicted and lonely in his affliction. He chooses not to tell his friends that he is struggling with terminal cancer, and though he does so with the best of intentions, the consequence of his silence is an isolation so agonizing that he is driven to deal with his guilt in a perverse and violent fashion.

We are told early in the novel that Neil is a southerner and that he is a religious person. We know little of his faith, but we notice early on that he wears a crucifix, which he leaves around the neck of the deceased. There is, then, for Neil a powerful sense in which guilt and retribution are more than feelings; they are metaphysical realities. The purgation of sin through suffering looms large in Neil's mental landscape and it is this dialectic that he seeks to enact through the horrors of the chain letter that are meant to bring his friends to the point of confession and reconciliation.

It is interesting that Neil should choose to take the act of retribution upon himself. He appears from everything we learn of him to be, at essence, humble and unaffected. Though he has a powerful conscience and a righteous sense of justice, he does not overpower the will of others. He leaves it to Tony to decide what to do on the night of the man's death. He prompts the others to confess to the police but never goes himself or names others to the authorities. This apparent humility could be interpreted as something more like cowardice; after all, Neil was himself involved in the incident and has not gone to the police to confess. We can see, however, that Neil has distanced himself from the events of that summer night. He says in the letter in the guise of the Caretaker, quite earnestly, that he is not one of the group. Though he was in the car at the time of the man's death, he does not see himself as fully responsible, or perhaps even remotely responsible for the man's death. There is, then, a disconnect between the extent of Neil's righteous indignation on the man's behalf and the extent to which Neil is willing to take responsibility for the man's death. It is somewhere in this disconnect that Neil's insanity emerges and allows him to become the executor of a twisted plan to bring his friends to moral rectitude and relieve the loneliness of the deceased.

Whether Pike is trying to comment on the inherent sanity or insanity of schemas of guilt and retribution remains beyond our interpretive ability here. Though guilt and retribution



is perhaps the novel's central theme, Pike himself does not make a clear judgment through his narrative about the utility or correctness of these notions. In fact, though this theme looms over the text, it is really not a work which preoccupies itself with moral questions. The theme is inherently one that has to do with morality, but it is thematically important not for that reason, but because it is a preoccupation of one of the novel's central characters. And it is in questions of character that Pike's thematic interest lies. In form and content, the novel is a thriller and a horror story of sorts. In style, however, it can be read as a kind of rich character study after fashion of Agatha Christie mysteries.

## Trust and Group Cohesion

As mentioned above, Pike is fascinated with depicting complexities of character, and nowhere do such complexities become more evident than in interpersonal dynamics under stress. From the moment that Neil suggests to Kipp and Tony that the Caretaker may be among them, a seed of suspicion is planted that will bear fruit of dissolution. Group meetings among the seven are few, but when they do occur, they are marked by tension and dissension. At their first, Alison demands that Joan show her wounds in order to prove that her story of punishment is not a concoction. When Alison and Tony run through each member of the group to discuss their possibly incriminating actions, they find a reason to suspect every person in the group. It is clear then, that rational calculation is not possible among the seven because everything that each person says or does is just fodder for another subset of the group to imagine a set of motives and perverse schemes on their part. The only subgroup that we see remain intact throughout the novel is that consisting of Alison and Tony.

The two teens, who are growing to be very much in love, confide in each other and depend on the other in times of distress. At no point does Alison suspect Tony, and when Tony wonders whether he should confide in Alison the first time that he does, he quickly answers his own question and confides everything in her. He only grows slightly cold when Alison expresses suspicion toward Neil, who is Tony's beloved best friend.

The tension that is created by the ever-present possibility of betrayal and the looming air of distrust is a tension that adds a great deal to the novel's power. Without it, the events of the chapters leading up to the final two would perhaps seem formulaic. But because every command from the Caretaker and every corresponding punishment for an unfulfilled command is so telling and so given to interpretation, the narrative is never boring. By creating a thick background of tension and distrust, Pike is able to elevate his scenes of true horror to a greater level of psychological intensity. When Alison is confronted by the Caretaker in her own home, we as readers are confronted not only by the horror of the unknown, but also by the horror of the friend as enemy and the familiar as stranger. There is a perversity and abject horror that is added to the scene by the knowledge, almost sure at this point, that the Caretaker may be one of Alison's close friends or acquaintances. When it turns out to be Neil, the very boy who was supposed to be so infatuated with her, we as readers are left stricken by the revelation.



## Egotism and Self Awareness

The end of "Chain Letter" is fascinating in the way that Pike seems at once to redeem and mock his central characters. Alison chides herself for having been haughty and too self-important to notice Neil's affection for her when he first expressed it. She resolves to be more sensitive to the feelings that others have for her, and yet is not this resolution itself an expression of a certain self-absorption? Should she not be resolving to notice the needs and hopes of those around her that have nothing to do with their feelings for her? Should she not be more attuned to the aspects of her friends' lives that are disconnected from concerns for her? It is clear that even in this moment of supposed self-awareness, Alison is every bit as self-absorbed as she has ever been. This is not to say that her character is unsympathetic or that her level of self absorption is even remarkable. It is only to say that Pike seems to be pointing obliquely at the theme of egotism and its corresponding lack of self awareness. It is not a theme that makes itself felt until the final two chapters of the novel, when Neil, who can be understood as the victim of Alison's and Tony's self-absorption makes his indignation known.

At Neil's funeral, Tony was quick to dismiss the idea that Neil was jealous of his relationship with Alison. Neil, Tony seems to suggest, was far too noble for such base sentiments. And yet, is there not in Tony's idealization of Neil a strategy of self-indulgence on Tony's part? By making of Neil a saint in his own mind, he is able to excuse the impact of his own insensitivity on his friend. Alison, herself, feels a modicum of guilt for having refused Neil when he asked her out. We enter her mind occasionally, and we see that she does not think as highly of herself as it sometimes appears. But here is where Pike has managed to create a character more layered than one might expect in a young adult thriller. For though Alison debases herself in her thoughts and seems to have low self-esteem, at the same time she is thoroughly preoccupied with herself to the exclusion of others, as we see, for example, in her response to Brenda's questions about her set during the first performance of the play. What we have then, in Alison's character, is a union of self-deprecation and self-absorption which is actually a very typical combination of personality traits. By being self-deprecating, Alison is able to ease her conscience and continue to be as self-absorbed as always.



# Style

## Point of View

"Chain Letter" is written from a third-person point of view. The narrator may or may not be omniscient, but he does not reveal that omniscience to the reader. It is characteristic of mysteries and suspense stories that the narrator is a kind of conniving and subtle guide to the mystery's resolution. We are given ample clues throughout the novel as to the identity of the Caretaker but those clues are often misleading. When it is noted, for example, that Brenda refused to ride with Kipp on the day that he crashed into a brick wall, we are being guided to suspect Brenda. These kinds of clues, which are really coincidences, are never explained away. They simply become insignificant when the truth is revealed. Occasionally, the narrator takes us into the thoughts of two of the central characters: Tony and Alison. We are privy to Tony's thoughts as he digs at the gravesite looking desperately to see if Neil has taken the body of the deceased, and we hear Alison's ominous thoughts as she attempts to escape the Caretaker's pursuit in her home. Note, however, that we never enter Neil's thoughts, though he is the third central character. For obvious reasons, we cannot be privy to Neil's machinations, but even at the end we do not take a trip into his thoughts. In this way, Pike is able to preserve a sense of mystery around Neil, who remains ultimately obscure to us as readers. We come to know his motives through his words and actions, but never through his own thoughts, and for that reason we are unable, in the end, to either sympathize with or despise his character. He exists somewhere on the boundary between sanity and insanity and by refusing to take his point of view, Pike keeps that line blurry and suspenseful.

## Setting

The novel is set in Los Angeles and its surrounding suburbs. Few places feature prominently in the story, however, outside of the high school and the students' homes. The most noteworthy setting is the housing division in which the book's final chapters play out. Alison's family has moved to a housing tract 35 miles away from her high school in the suburbs of Los Angeles. The division is comfortable and large but largely uninhabited due to financing issues. Alison enjoys the neighborhood and its isolation at first, but soon comes to feel strange and watched in the lonely subdivision. The setting is well suited to the book's final scenes, in which we are left with the sense that Alison really has nowhere to turn. She is in the middle of nowhere, and the subdivisions drunkard security guard is not answering his phone. Her phone line goes dead and at that point, anything could happen. There is something inherently eerie about this setting and this eeriness is put to good effect in those final chapters.

The setting of the car accident which leads to the man's death is also noteworthy. The teens have been out to a Beach Boys concert and have lost their way back to the highway. They have no idea where they are, and know only that it is a relatively rural



and dark area far outside Los Angeles. The setting, then echoes the features of the man whose death they cause. Featureless and unknown, like the landscape, the man remains anonymous to the end. We never learn who he was or why nobody noticed his death, and his shallow grave is eventually a distant memory as well, after Neil burns the man's body. The anonymity of the setting, however, does not keep it from being memorable for a time. Tony knows exactly how to get back to the site of the accident, and he does so when searching for the man's body. With the erasure of the grave, however, the setting is allowed once more to sink into anonymity.

## Language and Meaning

The language in "Chain Letter" is largely simple but its characters' dialogue shows that they are capable of complex constructions and have a wide vocabulary. Pike's narrative is about equally divided between third person description and dialogue. The dialogue tends to be realistic in its lack of undue description, and the narrator jumps in to provide us with information when necessary. What distinguishes this novel from lesser young adult novels is really the realism that Pike achieves in the division of information between dialogue and third-person description. Because he is comfortable leaving dialogue vague and filling in the gaps with third-person narration, we are not subjected to tediously unrealistic dialogue that points out or makes explicit elements of the characters' environment that they would have no need to refer to when speaking with each other.

## Structure

The book is divided in 17 chapters and an epilogue. Most of the chapters are rather brief, with the exception of the 3rd, 16th, and 17th. Note that Pike withholds information about the sinful night to which the chain letter alludes until the third chapter. In this way, he builds suspense while saving the account for a point in the narrative when he can step back and recount the incident in the detail that its importance in the narrative demands. The book's final two chapters cover a relatively short span of time, but it is in those two chapters that the narrative tension finally comes to a head and is eventually resolved, so the space devoted to this time span is well warranted. With the exception of the third chapter, the novel is narratively linear and is therefore quite easy to follow. The most important structural element of the book is its withholding of information until the end, as discussed in the section on point of view. By keeping Neil's thoughts hidden from the reader and leaving the many clues dropped throughout the novel unresolved, Pike is able to build a feverish tension by the last two chapters, so that the readers are poised and ready to be frightened and excited as Neil pursues Alison through her house and then holds her captive with the others before backing down and collapsing at the end of Chapter 17.



## Quotes

"You do not know me, but I know you. Since you first breathed in this world, I have watched you. The hopes you have wishes, the worries you have feared, the sins you have committed—I know them all. I am The Observer, The Recorder. I am also The Punisher. The time has come for your punishment. Listen closely, the hourglass run low." (Chapter 1, p.7)

" 'Someone in the group might be out to hurt someone else in the group,' Neil said. 'Or maybe everyone in the group. The Caretaker could be right in front of us.' " (Chapter 2, p.19)

"They carried the body fifty paces into the field, the skeletons of the sun-baked bushes grabbing for them like the claws of the cursed. They did not have a shovel. They used the bar that undid the wheel bolts, a large screwdriver and their bare hands to dig with. The ground was hard. The grave was shallow." (Chapter 3, p.41)

"He seemed so much in command, it was hard to believe he was ever scared. On the other hand, he had been driving and stood the most to lose. It occurred to her then that, although she had watched Tony Hunt for four years, she knew absolutely nothing about the way his mind worked." (Chapter 4, p.51)

"The front tires were totaled but he would be able to see if the rear brakes had been tampered with. At first he was confused—relieved, in a sense—to see that the screws that bled the brakes had not been loosened. Then he noticed the dark red fluid smeared over the lines themselves. A closer inspection revealed that they had been minutely punctured. The saboteur had been clever. Had the screws simply been loosened, the fluid would have run out the first time Kipp had pumped his brakes and he would have become suspicious." (Chapter 5, p.57)

"At first the empty area had spooked her, the way her steps echoed like pursuing footfalls, how her words called back to her as they rebounded off the silent walls. But now the lack of humanity was outright weighing on her soul. More and more, she felt she was being watched." (Chapter 6, p.63)

"Neil's 'small token of obedience' was demanded and carried out without injury or insult to anyone. The Caretaker wanted him to get sick in class." (Chapter 7, p.68)

"Tony took the carton back and downed it quickly. Reaching for another container, he hesitated. Was that an aftertaste in his mouth or what? He decided he was the victim of suggestion. He didn't, however, take any more." (Chapter 8, p.77)

"Some of you have sought to defy me. From experience, you have learned how uncomfortable that can be. As your tasks will now be more exciting, your punishment, should you choose to be stubborn, will be equally exhilarating. Remember, you have



been told. It has come to my attention that you suspect I am one of you. Let this be made painfully clear: I am not." (Chapter 10, p.93)

"Tony leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. The worst thing was this waiting and doing nothing...no, that was the second worst. Neil's refusal to blame him ate at him more than anything the Caretaker had dreamed up." (Chapter 14, p.121)

"Neil had cancer. It started in his leg. Those weeks when he was out of school, that's when he was receiving chemotherapy. That's why he lost so much weight. The doctors tried, but it just spread everywhere. The last X rays they took showed tumors in his brain." (Chapter 15, p.128)

"She held her tongue. In spite of his words, she could see that he wanted to believe her. His madness and sickness aside, he was just like everyone else. He wanted to know his love had not been wasted on someone who couldn't have cared less." (Chapter 17, p.164)



## Topics for Discussion

We get two very different impressions of Neil in the "Chain Letter". One is of a gentle and sensitive teen hiding his cancer from his friends in order to spare their suffering. The other is of Neil as the crazed and murderous Caretaker. Do you think Pike creates a convincing enough character that these two aspects of Neil's personality can be reconciled? If not, what do you think is lacking?

Alison claims to have learned a lesson in humility and sensitivity at the end of the book. Does this lesson follow from what she has undergone throughout the novel, and do you think her transformation is a dramatic and genuine one?

It is Fran who is responsible for talking Neil down in Chapter 17, sparing Alison's life. Do you think this is a convincing scene? Has Fran's affection for Neil been sufficiently developed to make the scene realistic?

"Chain Letter" is a thriller, and we are left in suspense almost until the end of the novel. Describe three ways in which Pike creates suspense and tension.

At the end of the novel, Tony talks about Neil's burning of the deceased man as a kind of funny and convenient end to the group's saga with last summer's incident. What does this resolution tell us about the characters involved?

What motivates Neil to create the chain letter, and does he achieve his purpose?

Create an alternative ending to "Chain Letter" that makes use of the misleading clues that Pike scatters throughout the novel.