

CHAPTER ONE

Lily

She slipped through the empty halls, invisible and silent except for her heart, which clattered like a tin can against the school's metal lockers. *This is wrong. This is sinful. You will burn in the holy fires of hell for this.* But it also hammered for him. His feathery voice in her ear. His fingertips on her wrist. The thread of his pulse on her skin. The only boy who ever paid attention to her. He was her salvation.

They would burn together.

Down the stairwell, through the east corridor, her shadow broke over shafts of morning sunlight on the floor. It was a beautiful October day. The worst things always happened on the most beautiful days.

Whistles screeched out of the gymnasium. Freshmen's sneakers thumped and squeaked. Poor freshmen. She paused, her palm flat on the cinderblock wall, and thought of her sister, Violet. Next year she'd walk these halls of pretension, mockery, delusion, torment . . . No, Lily thought. He would stop it. He would shut them up. And he promised no one would get hurt—just scared. He'd scare the arrogance out of them.

He promised.

She pushed up her glasses and moved forward, past the cafeteria's warm, yeasty smell of baking rolls and the long-faced janitor mopping the sticky breakfast floor. She had to pee but couldn't stop, couldn't be late. When she flitted past the outer wall of the auditorium, sweat beaded along her hairline. Her breath came in spurts. The auditorium was where her complete humiliation had happened. Her cries and their laughter still echoed. Her parents would be so dishonored if they knew what she had done. She smashed her hands over her ears and scurried like a mouse away from the excruciating memory.

Finally, she reached the double steel doors. Each one had a crash bar—emergency exit only. They couldn't be opened from the outside. No one used this exit except drama kids after late rehearsals. No cameras monitored these doors. Lily checked her watch. She was two minutes

early. Two minutes. Not enough time to go to the bathroom, but time enough for second thoughts.

Her back fell against the cinderblock wall. Her knees bent, and she slipped down to a chair position. She closed her eyes and forced deep breaths to her belly. *This is wrong. This is wrong.* Her leg muscles tightened like they wanted to run. Run, run, run away from this madness, away from this pain. But where could she possibly go? Not to her strict parents. Not her sister or a teacher or minister. She had no real friends. There was only him.

She opened her eyes, checked her watch again: 9:21. Almost. Across the hall, a folded piece of paper caught her attention. She scooted over, snatched it up, and unfolded it. A flyer for the fall play: *Rockwell High School Theatre Department proudly presents Almost, Maine. It's love. But not quite.* Notes were scribbled on the back—a phone number, a to-do list, a list of props: ice skates, mittens, suitcase. Important stuff. Someone from drama must have dropped it. It belonged to her now. She refolded it and tucked it in the pocket of her khakis.

It was time. She peered through one of the rectangular windows, past her dark-haired reflection to the parking lot. *Where was he? He changed his mind.* No, no, there he was, her knight in ripped jeans and black hoodie plodding toward the building. His ski-type sunglasses reflected prismatic colors. A duffel bag hung over his shoulder. Her eyes lingered on the bag. Something seemed off. Why was it so big?

Hair raised on her arms. Her legs squeezed together with the urge to pee.

This is wrong.

This is wrong.

She remembered his voice and shivered. *"I promise."* She placed both hands on the cold metal bar and pushed.

Keisha

Keisha Washington stood in Alex Robinson's first-floor guidance office holding the book of essays he'd just given her. He wanted her to understand the power of passionate writing. She got that. Authentic writing, he called it. For

just a second, the color of his eyes distracted Keisha. She'd heard other girls gossip about her young college advisor's looks and charisma, their mouths twisted into little grins, but that wasn't the point of her visit. She snapped herself out of this momentary slip. Achieving her goals—that's the reason she went to see him. And she didn't need coaching.

"Write your heart out," he said. "Don't worry about demonstrating how smart you are. They'll see your grades and test scores. Write about something that matters to you."

Keisha glanced at the book titles on the shelves behind him, all exploring the theories of educational psychology. His framed master's degree hung on the wall behind his chair; it was meant to impress her, but her mother had an MD as well as a couple of other letters required for a pediatric oncologist and could run circles around anyone in this building.

A small silver-framed photo of Mr. Robinson with a woman smiling up at him sat on his desk. Keisha assumed the woman was his wife. They looked happy with each other. On one wall hung Rockwell High's blue and gold school pennant, featuring the prancing wild mustang which once boosted her school spirit, but now in her fourth year, tested her patience. A bank of bland metal cabinets held the records of the school's thirteen-hundred students. *How does he even know who I am? He must know; that's his job. At least he knows I'm the senior class president.*

She touched the crown of tight braids on her head and rolled her shoulders to loosen the tension she felt. Her face reflected in the open door's window—high arch of an eyebrow, high cheekbones, full lips. *Pharaonic, like Hatshepsut, just as Mom said.* Keisha stood straighter.

The bell rang, followed by the cacophony of hordes of teenagers moving between classes. Lockers ticked open and slammed shut. Sneakers squeaked on the polished floor. "Shut the fuck up!" a male voice yelled over the low rumble. The extra-strong scent of body spray wafted into the room. It reminded Keisha of her friend Samantha, who smelled like a fresh mango. Sam would be waiting for her at her locker; they always walked to the third period together. She had to wrap this up.

Although she generally respected Alex Robinson, Keisha felt a little annoyed that this man thought he could tell her anything about how to communicate powerfully, just because he was a man and the counselor. He stood for a box she had to check to get what she wanted.

Keisha put her hand on her hip. “Well, I want to present myself in the best light right away.” She lifted her chin the way she did during a debate when she scored a point.

Mr. Robinson smiled at her, not like he was laughing at her but like he cared. Maybe he wasn’t so far off the mark. Maybe she should listen to him.

“You have everything going for you, Keisha. You don’t have to work so hard. Relax a little bit. Enjoy yourself.”

She couldn’t do what he said, though. She knew what had to happen. High school was about preparation, not enjoyment. At seven years old, when asked by doting adults what she wanted to be when she grew up, Keisha always said she would be president of the United States. Not wanted to, intended to be. She didn’t smile when she said it. It wasn’t a wish. She was certain. Adults laughed and patted her head, astounded by her high seriousness. She ignored them and organized her life to make it happen.

Mr. Robinson sat on the edge of his desk, his handsome face serious. “The point is, you’re not arguing a case the way you do on the debate team; you’re—”

A sound like thunder echoed off the corridor’s walls. Stunned, they both turned toward the open door. “What was that?” they said at the same time.

Feet pounded across the floor. The school’s alarm system blared. A body knocked into a locker. Screams erupted. More blasts echoed off the walls. Doors slammed. The sound came closer, louder. Glass crashed onto the corridor floor. Another scream. *Bup bup bup bup*.

Taking two long strides from his desk to the door, Mr. Robinson put his hand on the knob to close the door and lock it—the drill they had practiced a thousand times. “Get down,” he said. “Get under the de—” The muzzle of a black gun stopped the door from closing.

Keisha froze. She didn’t have time to move. She saw the hand holding the stock. A face, pale and contorted with fury. Shiny, reflective sunglasses.

Alex Robinson stepped back from the door, directly in front of Keisha, and faced the gunman. He held up his hand. “Let’s talk.”

The sound of the blast, a grunt from Mr. Robinson, and then he sank against her, and she fell under his weight, clutching him. Blood seeped from his chest. Keisha wanted to yell, to say something, but all the words clogged in her throat. She closed her eyes and opened them. The gun barrel pointed at her. In her head, she yelled, *stop it, stop it, stop it*, but no sound came from her lips. Play dead, she thought and closed her eyes.

Sofia

Before biology class even started, Sofia Hernandez had her eye to the stereoscope counting fruit flies. Her best friend since middle school, Caitlyn Moran, sat cross-legged beside her. A ragged run in her tights went from her heel and disappeared under her skirt hem. She perched on a lab stool, swinging her leg, holding her clipboard and a nibbled pencil to tally the numbers of red- versus white-eyed flies.

Without even telling her, Cat had adorned her hair with a swath of pink color—her new fashion statement. Sofia was supposed to get a blue stripe, but she was probably going to chicken out. Sometimes Cat was too daring for her, but she longed to be that bold. She *had* to be that bold to keep up with her friend. But was it in her?

Caitlyn leaned over and whispered in Sofia’s ear. “Guess what was delivered yesterday?”

Sofia looked up from the scope, knowing immediately what Cat meant. “Oh, my God, I hope you brought it to school; I can’t wait all day to see it!”

“Yes, I stuffed it in my locker. You’re going to love it.”

“Did you wrinkle it?”

“The piece of magic that’s going to make us famous? Of course not. It’s folded up in a fat envelope.”

A distant booming sound made the table tremble. Sofia froze in place. More booms. Then popping sounds moved closer down the hall, like people were smashing the lockers with hammers. Caitlyn dropped her clipboard. Their teacher, Mr. Johnson, yanked a skinny boy from the hall

into the room and slammed the door, locking it and flicking off the lights.

“Not a drill!” Mr. Johnson shouted, “Get down, getdown!”

The wrenching sound was on them, visceral. Sofia knew the steps they had practiced since kindergarten, but she stood paralyzed. *Hide . . . get away from the door, out of the sightline. No, no, no.* The door splintered. Caitlyn flew off her stool. Sofia squealed as someone yanked her to the floor. She pressed her hands to her ears. Shiny red dots splattered across her arms. *Oh, my God. Caitlyn’s blood.* Someone stepped on her foot. The firecracker sound kept going, banging, reckless and absorbing. It moved down the hall. The sound throbbed in her ears.

Caitlyn lay with her cheek on the floor. Sofia crawled to her and lay beside her. A strand of pink hair fell over Caitlyn’s closed eye. *Is she alive?* Sofia brushed it aside. Caitlyn’s wet skirt smelled like iron.

Mr. Johnson was shrill. “Stay down!” He slipped in the bright red blood pooling from Caitlyn’s leg. His knee hit the floor.

“Caitlyn, get up.” Sofia sobbed and dragged her friend to the wall, away from the gaping door.

Mr. Johnson’s coffee breath wafted over Sofia as he leaned down to check Caitlyn’s leg. With shaking hands, he pulled off his belt and wrapped it around her thigh, tightening it to try and stop the blood loss. Then he crawled away to check the next kid who was hit. His heavy breathing scared her even though his voice droned, “Stay calm.”

Caitlyn opened her eyes and looked past Sofia.

“Cat, can you hear me? I’m here. I’m here.” Sofia shook Cat’s shoulders. *Look at me, please, look at me.*

Chair legs scraped as whimpering kids tried to huddle together. A kid held a phone up. It glowed white.

I have to call Papi. Sofia jammed her fingers into the back pocket of her jeans and pulled out her phone. Her hands shook as she texted her father. Caitlyn moaned.

Sofia cupped Caitlyn’s cheek. “Don’t die.”

Caitlyn

I'm on the floor with Sofia. Did my head hit the table? The door was smashed in. Something heavy hit my thigh.

Sofia's face leaned close, black eyes scared. Mascara smudged her cheeks. *Sofia never did figure out how to put it on. I'll have to show her again how to do it. That day when I first put it on her, "Blink," I said, steadying my hand on her cheek, and she laughed.*

"Can you move?" Sofia asked.

She tried to sit up. "Oh, God, it hurts."

"I thought you were dead," Sofia said. Her lips trembled.

Caitlyn remembered a sound, but she couldn't tell what it was. Her leg was on fire. The next thing she knew, she was looking down from the ceiling at Sofia lying next to her on the waxed floor. The pain had stopped.

She slipped into the hall following a thumping noise. A hooded figure spewed bullets from a long gun. She went around to the face. Dark glasses covered pale skin. His temples glistened. The boy's jaw clenched. He stumbled but kept his balance. The gun tucked against his shoulder swayed and didn't stop. Caitlyn moved away. Shadows huddled in the hall. A soul moved through her, confused, broken.

A girl with dark hair sat on the hard floor, head in her hands. She wasn't scared. Not like the others. *I want to touch her, but I have no fingers.* Caitlyn moved out of the building, away from all that terrible noise. It was nice out here. Up. She longed to go up where a prick of light pierced the sky. It was day, yet she could see stars and the most beautiful blue. It pulled her. Calmed her. The blue filled her with a euphoria where nothing else mattered. But then it disappeared, and she was on the hard floor, the pain unbearable.

Sofia touched her face. Heaviness confined Caitlyn. A stench swirled around her.

She turned her cheek into Sofia's palm. *I don't want to leave her, but the blue . . . it didn't hurt there.* Her eyes burned.

"Don't die," Sofia said.

I'll stay for you.

Joe

The call came over the squawk box while Patrolman Joe Hernandez was noting down the license plate of a jacked-up car missing a back tire: *Active shooter. Explosions and gunshots. Rockwell High. All units report.*

His blood pressure spiked. Rockwell High—his daughter Sofia’s school. She was inside where the shooter was, and he was too far away. The skin on his face tightened. Instant pressure behind his eyes made him feel as if he were seeing through broken glass. He flipped on his lights and siren, clenched the steering wheel of his county police vehicle, and yanked the car into a U-turn. His foot slammed the gas pedal.

It took ten minutes to get to the school using the highway to avoid the five towns, dozens of suburban neighborhoods, and hundreds of retail stores between him and Rockwell High. Ten minutes of holding his breath, dodging cars, praying to his dead wife. *Protect her, Emilia, keep her safe.* His phone bleeped. He ignored it.

Police vehicles had pulled up on the grass and sat sideways on the half-circle drive in front of the brick school building. Several glass doors led to a grand two-story entry atrium. All the windows were dark. Joe scanned the blocks around the school for the glint of a gun from one of the single-family houses set back on wide lawns. Everything looked eerily still. He leaped out of the vehicle and ran to the sergeant in charge.

“Assign me. I’ll go in. Tell me where to go.”

Sergeant Davis, a friend since they met at the county police academy eighteen years ago, put a restraining hand on Joe’s chest. Even from outside the building, they could hear the sound of a semi-automatic rifle reverberating off school walls. Inside, gunfire would sound like a cannon. The rumble kept going and going like some crazed energizer bunny. Joe imagined children dying. He pictured blood everywhere.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He didn’t have time for that. “My daughter’s in there. I’ve got to go in.”

Davis grabbed Joe’s shoulder. “No, man. No one’s going in till the chief gives the order.”

For a second, Joe succumbed to Davis' authority, looking in the direction he pointed for him to stand. An image of his daughter rose in his mind. She'd looked up from her cereal this morning, her face luminous in the morning light filtering through the kitchen window, and blew him a kiss. She was the spitting image of his late wife.

He twisted away from his friend's grip. "Fuck that. I'm going in."

He ran to the school's main door and pulled on the handle. It was locked. He tried the adjacent door. Also locked. He shook his head. *I'm an idiot. They're in lockdown.* No one else could get in the building. In case—*God, don't think about it*—in case the shooter had accomplices. He couldn't help thinking about it—two maniacs with guns roving the halls, shooting everyone. His heart rammed against his chest.

Joe banged on the door window. He pointed to the shining badge on his navy-blue county police uniform and waited for school personnel to buzz him in. Nothing. He couldn't see anyone in the office. They were probably hiding under their desks the way they were supposed to. Panic choked him. The windows were webbed with wire. No point in trying to break them.

His phone beeped again. He grabbed it from his back pocket as he ran around the building looking for an entry. Halfway down the right side of the building, he spotted a door that had been left slightly ajar. *Someone went in or out of that door. Is that how the shooter got in? Did someone open the door for him?* When he was in school, kids used to leave a door open for friends who were sneaking in late.

Joe ignored his crime scene training. He had two goals: Find the shooter and stop him. Save his daughter. He sprinted toward the door. It was propped open with a rock. He thought again about accomplices, pressed his back flat against the brick wall, and drew his gun. He couldn't rescue his daughter if he were dead. The phone beeped. Sweat stinging his eyes, he gave into the phone and looked at the screen. He had three texts from Sofia.

There's shooting in my class. I'm ok

Cat's hit bad

I love you

The last text nearly broke him. His face twitched. He flipped off the safety on his gun with his thumb, grabbed the door, kicked away the rock, and spun into the building. He was in a utility area with concrete floors and cinder block walls. The school alarm clanged in his ears. An orange door right in front of him led to a first-floor corridor.

He listened for gunfire to pinpoint the shooter's position. It was coming from the right, around the corner. The gunman had already passed this exit. His gun moving out ahead of him, Joe yanked open the door and sidled into the corridor. The acrid smell of gunpowder filled his nostrils. Back against the wall, he visually checked all directions. It was quiet. *That asshole's reloading.*

A sound of whimpering came from the classroom nearest to him. The window on the door was smashed. That's how the shooter got in, Joe thought. The teacher must have had time to close and lock the door by the time the shooter got to this corridor. The shooter probably blew out the window, reached in, and unlocked the door. Joe looked down the corridor in each direction again. No gunfire. Maybe he could get these kids out. He pulled open the door and moved into the room, gun first. He heard them suck in their breath together. Someone sobbed.

"Don't shoot us," a girl's voice said, quavering but determined.

A boy, covered in blood and groaning, lay on the floor. Kneeling next to him, a girl used her t-shirt to staunch the blood flow. The teacher was sprawled across her desk. Joe felt for the pulse at her neck. *Dead.* The kids looked at him. He suppressed his own panic. *What is the protocol?* He couldn't remember. All he could think was to get these kids out of harm's way. He had cleared the corridor to this point. The exit was clear. They could get out. *I don't give a damn if I do it wrong, and they live.*

"Come on. Those of you who can walk, you're getting out. Come on. Stand up. If you can't walk, stay hidden. EMTs will come to help you."

Students pulled themselves off the floor. Faces frozen, eyes wide, they watched the door. Some wrapped their arms around each other. Most were weeping.

“Leave all your stuff,” Joe said. “Move fast but don’t run. Turn left out of the room. Stay near the wall. Take the exit door immediately to the left and go outside. Walk to the front of the building with your hands above your heads. There are policemen there. They’ll tell you where to go and what to do.”

He turned his face to his shoulder microphone and pressed the button. “Sergeant Davis heads up. I’m sending out students from a classroom on the right side of the school. The shooter has already been here. One dead, one wounded in the room.”

He turned to the kids. “What classroom is this?”

“Two-sixteen,” they said in a chorus. “Mrs. Brown’s science class.”

“They’re from classroom two-sixteen,” Joe said into the mic. “Coming from the right side of the school. We need EMTs in here.” He didn’t wait to hear Davis yell at him for not following orders.

He swallowed to keep his voice from trembling. “Don’t run,” he reminded the students. “When you’re outside, walk together with your hands above your heads. Don’t leave the grounds.”

He thought about the count, about missing kids, dead kids, about parents not knowing where they were. *Sofia, where are you?* “Go now.”

Joe held the classroom door open and covered them as they fast-walked to the exit. When the last kid made it to the exit door, he went the other way down the hall. He slid along the wall, swiveling his head to stay aware of anything coming his way. Gunfire started again around the corner. *Too close. It’s not over.* He waited until the last student would have rounded the corner outside for one second, two, and then he went back to hunting the shooter, to saving his Sofia.

Lily

She sat in a puddle of water and her own urine. The sprinklers rained down on her, soaked her white oxford, and matted her hair to her head. Her hands rested palms-up at her sides, her head tilted slightly to the left. Her mouth was

open, still wanting to scream but somehow unable. The high-pitched, rhythmic screech of the fire alarm—three slow blasts and a pause—along with its flashing strobe light had hypnotized her and left her paralyzed there on the floor. She had been there ever since she heard the first shots. She had expected the thunderclaps from the bombs. First in the auditorium, then the cafeteria and gymnasium. *Boom . . . Boom . . . Boom.*

But she didn't expect gunfire.

That wasn't part of the plan. The memory of his convincing voice echoed between the alarm: "No one will get hurt. We'll just scare the shit out of them. Burst their privileged suburban bubble. All you have to do is open the door. I'll take care of the rest."

Sirens blared outside. Smoke billowed into the hall and caught in her throat. She coughed. Her eyes burned. Kids screamed past her. One tripped over her foot and landed with a splash. The kid looked at her—a girl, her face a plate of shock. Tears streamed down her cheeks. The girl scrambled to her feet and ran through the doors into the bright day.

He said school shooters were uncreative pussies.

He lied to her.

She pictured his face on a pillow, so close to hers their noses almost touched. His blue eyes. His words. *You are my universe.* She hadn't seen his eyes when he came into the building. He never took off those stupid sunglasses. He didn't say a word, not when she tried to speak to him, not when she latched on to his forearm, pleading, "Wait, wait, wait." He shook her off and continued down the hall. A robot. An eyeless, programmed robot.

He deceived her.

Now his figure appeared through the smoke. He set the long rifle on the floor and pulled a handgun from the waistband of his jeans.

Her body burned with rage. Yes, she thought. *Yes, please end me now.* But he didn't move. He still wore the sunglasses—she couldn't see his eyes. He'd ceased to be human. She didn't know who he was, didn't want to know him or his explanation. She only wanted all of it to be over.

Her mind splintered. The hall tilted and warped. She couldn't form words. A Korean sound came to her.

She screamed it: "*Hae!*"

The word came again, exploding from her gut. "*HAE!*"
Do it.

He raised the gun to his temple. *No. He doesn't get to die and leave this on me.* Fury raised her off the floor. She took a step forward. "NO—"

A bright yellow object flashed through the air. Her body flinched. She blinked, and he was on the ground. The handgun spun across the floor and landed at her feet. A janitor fell on top of him.

"Run," the janitor yelled at her. "Run!"

Sofia

Two police officers stood at the front of the biology lab. "You all have to go right now," one of them said, his voice urgent. All around her, kids stood and formed a line at the door.

Sofia crouched next to Caitlyn. "I can't leave my friend."

The policewoman insisted, pulling on her arm. "It'll be okay. Help is coming. You have to go with us now."

Her hands were sticky with Caitlyn's blood. Sofia gave her phone to the policeman. He slipped it into a bag along with the others.

Where is Papi? Sofia stood. The room whirled. Fear streaked her classmates' faces. Caitlyn's new boyfriend grasped Sofia's sleeve. The police wouldn't let him near Caitlyn either. Her mind blanked. *What is his name?* "Eric, I—"

"Hands up, kids, over your heads, please. It's okay; we're moving you out of here," the policewoman said. She spoke into the device strapped to her shoulder.

Her classmates interlaced their fingers behind their heads. The police gave orders. Sofia obeyed. "Stay in a line, don't run, keep your hands on your head." Obedient, like Papi had taught her. But her mind fiercely stayed with Cat.

At the classroom door, Sofia and Eric turned back to check on Caitlyn. A silver tarp covered her body and partially concealed her face. Sofia's teeth chattered. Her body

felt empty. Dark footprints stained the floor where they had walked through Caitlyn's blood.

Mr. Johnson went with the students, his hands on his head, now quietly trying to comfort the kids near him. The policewoman came with them, leading them through the smoke-filled wreckage of the hall. A lone girl in a purple t-shirt slumped against the lockers, her backpack still strapped to her motionless body. Sofia could hear her phone *buzzing, buzzing*.

Caitlyn, don't die.

Then they were outside on the sidewalk she had walked on this morning so long ago. The air bumped with helicopter blades and pulsed against Sofia's neck. The policewoman kept them moving toward a parking lot. Sofia listened to her, followed, and trusted her. The uniform was a beacon in the confusion. She looked down, wanting her father, following Eric's frayed cuffs. In all the drills before today, Cat was in front of her, glancing back to say, "This is dumb." Sophia chewed on her hair to keep herself from crying. Behind her, someone whined, a low-pitched wail she had never heard before.

The line of kids crossed the parking lot, and they were allowed to release their hands as they sat on the grass. Sofia looked around for Eric, but he was gone. Then she felt a familiar hand at her back. She stood and threw herself into her father's arms. Her cheek pressed against the dark fabric and the metal badge, she sobbed. Papi caressed her head and looked down at her. His thumbs brushed her tears away. He kissed her sweaty forehead.

"Sofy, *mi hija*."

"Papi, I had to leave Caitlyn. They made me. She's hurt bad." Sofia choked.

"Look." Papi pointed to a gurney pushed by medics. Sofia could see the pink hair. Her father wrapped his arm around Sofia's shoulders. If she were bold enough, she would jump into the ambulance and be with Cat. Papi held her tight, but it wasn't tight enough to make her feel safe again.

Charmaine

Charmaine Robinson reviewed the discharge instructions with the mother whose four-year-old came to the emergency room with a broken arm, another trampoline injury. She pushed back the curtain to the ER bay and vowed—not for the first time—*I swear, when Alex and I have kids, they are never getting a trampoline.*

The Tri-County Hospital emergency room typically saw cases like this: childhood falls, allergic reactions, an occasional heart attack or stroke victim, and just this morning, a man who had correctly self-diagnosed his appendicitis. Not the gang knifings and drive-by shootings she might have seen had she and Alex settled in the urban district where he grew up, and his parents still lived. She was so happy when he accepted a job at Rockwell High School, just a few safe suburbs away from her own parents. Growing up there, she never missed an episode of *ER* on television. The black nurses and doctors on the program inspired her to become an RN. When she first met Alex, she thought he looked like *ER*'s hot Dr. Peter Benton. She pictured Alex at breakfast that morning, talking about the students he advised, one young woman named Keisha in particular. He was so good with those kids.

A commotion at the Station 1 desk interrupted her memories. “What’s going on?” she asked Lori, a fellow ER nurse.

“School shooting,” Lori replied. “The ambulances should arrive any minute.”

“What? What school?”

Sprinting toward the Med room, Lori didn’t answer. Charmaine struggled to comprehend, her mind suddenly frozen by fear. She hoped it wasn’t Alex’s school. She retrieved her phone and sent him a quick text: *Shooting at your school?*

“Get ready,” ordered Dr. Ryan McGann, the attending in charge of the emergency department. “Clear the treatment area.” The doctor didn’t look like a miracle worker, with his unruly red hair and wiry build, but Charmaine knew he was. She usually worked on McGann’s team with Lori. That was one of the things she liked about being an ER nurse, being a respected member of a team. That and the pace,

the excitement of never knowing what was going to happen next.

The paramedics rushed in with a young boy on a gurney. “GSW to the back, BP fifty over thirty-five. He’s barely holding on,” they said. The boy appeared too young to be in high school. *So, Alex would be okay.*

Dr. McGann waved them toward a bay. “I’ll take him. In here.” The boy looked like a black tag to Charmaine, a patient who had already died or had no chance of survival, but she knew Dr. McGann would try to save the boy anyway. In the trauma bay, when they lifted him from the gurney to the ER table, she saw the gaping hole in his back, the size of an orange. *Oh, my God, what could have caused that? An explosion?* She wasn’t the least bit squeamish, couldn’t be to work in the ER, but she had never seen anything like that before, not in all her training or in her three years as an RN.

She started to set up a transfusion, but Dr. McGann said, “Hold it. He’s stopped breathing.” The doctor tried CPR but got no response. He called it: “Time of death 10:22.”

The next ambulance had already arrived. Charmaine quickly checked her phone. No word from Alex. She texted him again: *Are you ok?*

“How many more victims? What kinds of injuries?” Dr. McGann asked.

“Dozens more, mostly glass cuts and abrasions,” the ambulance driver answered. “They haven’t found all the victims inside the school yet. There’s an EMT triaging at the scene. He’ll call in to let you know what’s coming.”

Charmaine looked down at the gurney and saw a girl with a pink stripe in her hair, definitely high school age, shot in the leg. She was conscious but obviously in shock. The paramedic had started an IV and packed bleeding control gauze into the hole the bullet made in her thigh.

“What school?” Charmaine asked the paramedic.

“Rockwell High.”

Her stomach lurched as if she’d also been shot. For a moment, she thought she was going to be sick, but she took a deep breath and focused on the patient. If she thought about Alex now, she knew she would collapse.

In the trauma bay, Dr. McGann took one look at this new shooting victim and barked, “Red tag,” the emergency department’s code for a critical patient. “Start a transfusion. Page Dr. Bakshi and get the patient to surgery, stat. The sooner she gets on the operating table, the better her chances.”

Charmaine retrieved a bag of O-negative blood—the universal donor. There wasn’t time to type blood. This was the “golden hour,” the short period after trauma when prompt medical treatment might prevent death. The girl moaned.

“You’re going to be all right, baby girl,” Charmaine whispered in her ear. When she leaned over her to insert the IV needle into the girl’s arm, the image of Alex’s sister, who died at about the same age in a shooting, flashed through her mind.

As the orderly wheeled the patient to the elevator, Charmaine asked Lori the girl’s name. She wanted to check on her status later.

“Who knows? She didn’t have her school ID or a driver’s license on her. Probably too young to drive.” Lori shook her head.

An hour later, a young man approached them. “I’m looking for my girlfriend, Caitlyn Moran. She was shot at school. Is she here? Is she okay? I don’t have a photo because they took our phones. She has a pink stripe in her hair.”

Lori and Charmaine exchanged looks. They remembered that pink stripe on the girl they had sent to the OR.

Lori directed the boy to the admissions desk while Charmaine checked her phone again. *Why hadn’t Alex texted her?*

“Any word from Alex?” Lori asked.

Charmaine shook her head. “He probably left his phone in his office when they evacuated the school.”

“Don’t worry,” Lori said. “He’ll be fine.”

Before she could reply, another ambulance arrived.

Mike

Mike Moran turned sharply into the hospital parking lot, his brakes screeching, as he pulled into the first empty

parking space he spotted. He ran to the emergency room entrance without stopping for breath. The doors swished open. In two steps, the next set of doors complied with his unspoken command.

“Caitlyn Moran,” he barked to the lobby receptionist before she could greet him. “She was shot at Rockwell High School today. My wife is already here. Where is she?”

The middle-aged woman’s welcoming smile vanished as she lowered her gaze to her computer and typed in Caitlyn’s name. “Your daughter’s in surgery, sir,” she replied. She didn’t raise her head to look him in the eyes. “The waiting room is on the fifth floor.”

He took the elevator and found Lisa, his wife of twenty-five years, hunched over in a chair with her arms folded in front of her stomach, rocking back and forth. She stood when she saw him and rushed to him. He enfolded her in a protective embrace as she leaned against his chest and sobbed softly.

He comforted his wife with pats and shushes. Mike, a retired U.S. Army colonel, glanced over her head at the others in the waiting room. Ever on the alert to assess any situation, he saw two men in the opposite corner, probably father and son. The older man stared straight ahead; the younger fiddled with his phone. A heavysset woman paced the room as she argued in an ever-louder voice on her phone about an insurance company’s coverage. *More victims, just like me and Lisa.*

Lisa’s sobs diminished, and they sat down. “Did you get in touch with the boys?” he asked. Connor, their oldest, served as a first lieutenant in the army stationed in Germany. Patrick was a senior at the state university.

“Yes,” she answered. “Patrick’s driving home now. Connor’s going to put in for emergency leave. The news of the shooting has already reached Germany.” She retrieved a tissue from her purse and wiped her eyes.

“Have you talked to the doctors?”

“No. She was already in surgery when I got here. All I know is that she was shot in the right leg and has a concussion.” She twisted the tissue in her hands like the candy cane cookie dough she made every Christmas.

“Caitlyn will be all right. She’s a tough kid.” He put his arm around her, and she leaned against him.

A television mounted on the opposite wall blared breaking news. “. . . the shooter used an AR-15. We’re now learning the casualties at Rockwell High could be as high as ten dead and many more injured.”

The heavysset woman walked past them and gestured to the TV. “Horrible, isn’t it?” she said as she left the waiting area.

Mike studied the TV screen. The reporter stood in front of the high school Caitlyn attended. Yellow police tape fluttered behind him. Mike recognized the walkways leading to the front doors, the green side lawns, and the statue of a mustang, the school mascot, rearing up on its hind legs. He couldn’t believe this was happening here. For a brief time, he’d wondered if the Sandy Hook shooting in Newtown, Connecticut had ever occurred, or if it was a sham, fake news as some conspiracy theorists believed. Now the same tragedy had struck his family. This was real, as real as war. Lisa covered her eyes and cried again.

Mike spotted the TV remote on a corner table near the two guys. He walked over to them. “Mind if I change the channel? The news is upsetting my wife.”

“Sure.” The younger man reached for the remote and handed it to Mike.

“My wife never likes to watch bad news,” the older man said, “especially if there are children involved.”

Mike thanked them and flipped through the channels. The shooting at Rockwell High dominated every local and cable news channel. Finally, he settled on ESPN.

“Okay with you?” he asked.

“Fine,” the older man said. The younger guy never looked up from his phone.

Lisa stopped crying when he sat down again. “How long do you think she’ll be in the operating room?”

“Shouldn’t be long now.”

Her eyes bored into him. “Do you think Caitlyn will make it?”

Mike pondered his wife’s ashen face. He saw hope there and fear too. She had aged ten years since he left the house

this morning. He couldn't imagine how she would survive if her daughter didn't.

"Yes," he told her. He hoped he was right about that. Experience told him the odds were in her favor. During two tours in Iraq, he'd seen automatic weapons shred human bodies. If Caitlyn had caught a bullet anywhere in her torso, there wasn't much hope. She was young and strong, but so were the soldiers who came home in body bags. Being shot in the leg was no picnic. She could lose her leg, but he couldn't think about that now. He just wanted her to live.

A young man dressed in scrubs entered the waiting room. Mike hoped he wasn't Caitlyn's doctor—he looked far too young. The father and son duo rushed to greet him, and the doctor began to speak in a low voice. Mike couldn't hear what he said, but he did hear the younger man say, "I told you Mom was going to be all right, Dad," as the two left the waiting room. Now he and Lisa were the only occupants.

He held Lisa's hand, and they sat quietly, awaiting the surgeon's news. He couldn't imagine life without his daughter, their surprise baby. When Caitlyn was born, he was totally unprepared for the joys a daughter would bring, the hugs and kisses she bestowed while saying, "I love you, Daddy." She was his princess, and he wasn't ashamed to admit that.

She entranced him when she twirled around the room to show off a new outfit and bewildered him when she fussed over her hair, things her brothers never did or even thought about doing. She also had a bit of a tomboy streak and knew how to throw and catch a football. Not quite the girly-girl Lisa preferred, but with two older brothers, what did his wife expect? He spoiled his daughter, he admitted. She was his salvation whenever wartime flashbacks threatened.

Just hours ago, when he was rushing out the door to work, she'd handed him a coffee mug, that ridiculous pink hair falling over her eye.

"Here you go, Daddy. Three sugars, no cream, just the way you like it." She pecked his cheek and danced away from him. "Love you."

Did I say I love you back? Please God, tell me that I said it.

The door to the surgical suite banged open, and an Indian doctor with jet black hair approached them. They stood to face him. “Mr. and Mrs. Moran? I’m Dr. Bakshi, the chief orthopedic surgeon.” The doctor looked to be around his own age, which pleased Mike. He didn’t want an inexperienced surgeon operating on his girl.

Lisa inhaled and held her breath. Neither of them said anything.

“Your daughter suffered major injuries to her femur, but we were able to save her leg. We cleaned the wound, removed several bone fragments, and put in a steel rod to hold her damaged femur in place. She’ll be in traction for awhile, and we’ll have to monitor her, but she should be fine.”

Lisa leaned against Mike. He grabbed her around the waist and held tight, fearing she would collapse.

“She also suffered a head trauma that caused a brief lack of consciousness,” Dr. Bakshi said, “but a CT scan showed no swelling or bleeding.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Mike shook the surgeon’s hand. His shoulders sagged as every muscle and tendon in his body simultaneously released the tension he had clutched until now. The doc said Caitlyn was going to be fine. For the first time that day, he didn’t hold back tears.

Later in the ICU, Lisa gasped when she saw her daughter in traction, her leg raised and pins sticking out of the cast. Mike gripped his daughter’s hand. “You’re going to be fine, Caitlyn. You’re going to make it.” He smiled for her sake to hide his anguish at what had happened to her.

Caitlyn let out a soft groan. Her mouth moved, but Mike couldn’t hear her words. He brought his face closer to hers. Her eyes fluttered open.

“I saw him, Daddy.”