

A SCHOOL LIKE YOURS

Sample Chapters from a Work in Progress

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CHAPTER ONE: ANGELA

Her heart pulsing in her ears, Principal Angela Sileo wondered how many people had actually been eaten by sharks. And did eaten mean consumed? What if it was only a limb? Bullets rippled in an adjacent hallway and her throat tightened, she could suffocate, she couldn't breathe, and she kept running past closed doors and pulled curtains. Her fingers curled around cold classroom doorknobs she prayed were locked; they wouldn't have time for her to find the right key.

It was finally happening, the moment she'd prepared for but not anticipated, because she knew the odds. More likely to be struck by lightning or eaten by shark. That's what Angela had told her students back when she was a teacher. Decades ago, now. They'd been preparing that long. Locks. Lights. Out of sight.

"Don't worry," she'd whispered as her teenage students crouched in the corner of another darkened classroom, "You're more likely to be struck by lightning or eaten by shark than for a shooting to happen at our school."

More bullets—too fast, they'd rip her apart—and she turned down the next hallway toward another set of rooms, more huddled bodies, the radio at her hip sliding on the thin belt of her dress. No one was calling on the radio anymore. She wished for sirens so she wouldn't be alone. She pulled the last corridor door

closed; urine trickled down her legs. A few more seconds, and she'd be back to the main office. She could make it.

Principal Sileo knew she was joining a new club today, like the people who'd been eaten or lit up in the middle of a storm. They were all about to be a statistic in a report, a picture flashed on the evening news, a hashtag if people were still using them.

She tripped on a tile the custodians were supposed to have fixed. Another round fired and her husband, Michael, fell back into her thoughts. She'd written him a note on a napkin before she left that morning. She was glad about that.

A hallway door creaked, the boys' bathroom ahead, near the gym.

Out walked Calvin.

What was he doing in the bathroom? Gym was over ten minutes ago. She had seen them line up. Was Coach not watching? She'd talked to him about this. He had to monitor. Why didn't Ms. Miller, his classroom teacher, know where he was? Hadn't she counted her kids? She should have said something on the radio.

Principal Sileo could hear the man's boots now on the tile, his ragged breathing. He'd step into the crossroads soon; he'd see them, and she had to get to Calvin, yet he stood unaware, still struggling with the button on his khaki pants. Untied shoes, unbuttoned pants, glasses tilted. Calvin never seemed to have all of his life together.

Calvin's face scrunched, his balled fists dropping to his sides. He was going to cry. Again. He was always crying, and Angela was tired of the constant consolation, knew she'd be consoling everyone forever now. After this. Maybe.

Calvin—she whispered, maybe screamed, gestured for him to come towards her. They needed to hide. But, no, the bathroom doors didn't lock; he'd find them perched on a toilet seat. A few yards ahead of Calvin, an open custodial closet; behind the door, maybe, if they can get there in time. Or closer, the narrow alcove for the water fountain that could shield but not conceal. She ran again; she was almost to him, a few yards, just over an arm's length away. She should leap, let her body fly with the bullets.

The man, his boyhood lost in the rifle slung across his shoulders, stepped into the intersection, his black clothes stark against the fluorescent light, the neon hearts on the bulletin board beside him. The barrel rose, pointed, soon bullets—could she still scream if her teeth were jetted from her skull—she should lunge in front of Calvin, reach to pull him behind her.

Smoke, sparks.

CHAPTER TWO: MADDIE

She hadn't heard gunshots in eight minutes but still Maddie Amador kept her students silent. Quiet, hushed, as still as first graders could be when they'd been trapped behind her desk through what would have been their PE time. Maddie shifted Bryan's head out from her underarm, her sweat on his forehead, and reached up to her desk to tilt her phone screen away from her students' faces. She couldn't put her usual smiley face emojis to obscure their identities. Not today.

Maddie's phone was still recording; she'd forgotten it in those first few moments, but she restarted the video once they were all settled on the floor. Glancing in the camera, she was comforted by the stillness of her face. She looked calm even if her heart pounded so strongly, she knew Sophia could feel it from her seat in Maddie's lap, her small head pressed into Maddie's chest. All around her students huddled, reaching for her with a hand or a leg, desperate for connection. Jonathan's wet palm slipped in and out of hers. Someone kept twisting the ends of her hair. Maddie's skirt bunched around her legs—this skirt was a little too short, but it hadn't mattered until now, didn't matter now, right? —while Ava and Casius draped over her bare legs. Together the sweat and fear of eighteen bodies mingled with the dust on the laminate floor.

If they hadn't heard the gunshots, she could have pretended it was a drill. They'd already done it once that year. They'd watched the cartoon video with the rabbit teacher and the bunny students. Locks. Lights. Out of Sight. She'd gone off script and added a signal word—*Lion's Den*, they were the Live Oak Lions—to make it more personal, more fun. She didn't want them to be afraid during the drills, so she made them her lion cubs, the back of her desk a cave in the savannah. She demonstrated how the students were to huddle close together next to the cabinets, away from the locked door. Lion's Den. They'd smiled as they raced behind her desk, the giggles of campfires and magic tricks when she turned off the lights.

Locks. Lights. Out of sight.

"Is this for real, Ms. Amador?"

"Can I finish this page first? I just got my colored pencils."

Maddie had been annoyed, not worried as she walked toward her open door. Maybe Ms. Sileo had forgotten to say it was a drill. It was too close to PE. She was going to lose some of her planning time. She was owed those 45 duty-free minutes. Even as a first-year teacher, she knew her rights.

Lion's Den, yes, now, Lion's Den now, no, friend, an adult checks the door.

Maddie screamed when she heard the gun shots, her hands flying to her side. Her kids began to shout her name—Lion's Den, now!—she pulled the door closed, confident it was locked, it was always locked, and flicked the lights, her skin prickling as she turned to count her students in the dark.

One, two, three, four, not now, sweetheart, five, six, seven, shh, shh, please sit down, eight through fourteen. I'm

coming to sit by you. The fear rippled through her throat, tainting her words. She tried to be softer, slower. If they panicked, they would be loud, and the shooter would know they were here. Shh, Shh, it's ok. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. Not eighteen. Not today. Max was still out sick with strep. Seventeen.

Scoot, scoot, she urged them, pushing them tighter into the corner of the room. They couldn't be seen through the small rectangular window in the door, but still, she wanted them as far away from it as possible. He's on my hand, it's ok, just move a little more, we're all ok, I'm right here. She imagined blood pooling underneath them—hadn't that one child covered herself with her friend's blood so the shooter would think she was dead—her knees buckled, sending her to the floor. She caught herself with one hand, settling onto her knees next to Dorian. She wouldn't look into his dark eyes, found she couldn't look at any of them too closely. Their humanity made her more afraid, more aware of what she could possibly lose.

Shots again, one, two, three, shh, shh, their yelps behind her hands, further away this time, the bullets, not as close, she didn't think. Maybe in the third-grade hallway, closer to the teacher's lounge. She put a finger to her lips, smiled, a stretch of skin across her face. A message popped on her phone—Is this real? What's happening? A message from another teacher in another room. Maddie wanted her mom; her hands on her face, stroking her hair, *mija, mi corazon*. Maddie had never considered her last words. *Te quiero mucho, Mami. Dios te Bendigo. Estoy siempre en sus manos. Estoy siempre contigo.* She sent a text to her mom and her sister, knowing that they wouldn't likely see the messages until after work. She hoped it would be all over by then, and she'd be able to add "I'm ok."

Maddie didn't stop recording. Trembles moved across the clustered limbs, and she stroked their arms and shoulders with her unsteady hand. As the silence stretched, the children began to shift, their muscles unable to hold the tension. Tears pooled in Sophia's eyes, her whimper building, and Maddie summoned her to her lap, the little girl's body warm against her, her sounds silenced with the rhythm of Maddie's palm on her shoulder. The others moved closer, then, shifting into Maddie's orbit. Here, together, they waited.

Maddie watched the timecode on her phone tick away the seconds of the worst moment of her life.

CHAPTER THREE: OFFICER LANG

Officer Lang's thumb slid across the dogeared corner, the slick of his saliva reinforcing the crease of page 213. His granny would have frowned, aghast that he would leave his presence on such a treasured item. Books were meant to be kept like a virgin on her wedding night, unblemished, untouched, the presence and pleasure of any others before her undetectable. The permanence of a fold was replaced with a bookmark of whatever nearby item his granny could find: a receipt, the torn edge of a takeout & delivery menu, the wrapper from a piece of gum which would leave a hint of peppermint on the pages.

Officer Lang pleased in the marked progression of his reading. He would never fold the pages of a library book nor one he borrowed from a friend. Instead, he bought books at the half price bookstore, returning milk cartons full every few months.

He had wanted to be a librarian since he was in elementary school although his schools as a kid rarely had one staffed, the library left vacant for the eager teacher or student to peruse. Jacob appreciated the silence of the library; his classrooms and shared bedroom were hubs of constant noise, the jokes and guffaws and screeches to listen and behave. Jacob always listened, and he always behaved. The path to police officer seemed clear from where he stood. A rule follower. Someone to follow and

enforce them but had any adult in his life tilted their head to shift their perspective of the quiet boy in front of them, they would have seen how easily he could have had a life full of books. Had he read more, he still wondered, a judgement he knew to be wrong but still felt, maybe he would have seen the path himself.

In the side pocket of his patrol car, he kept two books in rotation: the one he was currently reading and a back-up in case he decided not to finish or finished and needed another. The glove box always held a copy of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, the cover worn thin from the dozens of times he'd read it. He didn't want to risk an empty minute without the joy of reading.

When the call came—*activity of some kind at Live Oak Elementary, over, ten-four, copy*—he'd hesitate because that day's book was good. A popular selection from all of the best-of-year lists. He'd expected it to be overrated, the sentences bloated and the plot bare, but he was entranced. He'd been reading all morning, while he brushed his teeth and buttoned his uniform. It was only a few sentences more, and he finished the paragraph and pressed the page edge. Folded corners wouldn't diminish the popularity of this book on resale.

He flipped his lights—no siren, not then—and drove the few blocks to the fourth elementary school in his patrol area. Settled between the access road of a major highway and a high traffic corridor, Live Oak elementary had its share of incidents he'd been called to check out. Homeless straying from the bus shelter to the front steps of the school, a road rage argument that ended up in the school parking lot. Never anything serious. Never anything affecting the kids.

He pulled the patrol car into the school's back parking lot where the buses would line up in the afternoon. He wouldn't

bother any parents wanting to get into the front office. Wouldn't cause alarm. His radio crackled. Possible shots fired at Live Oak Elementary. Officer Lang jolted from the car, the door left ajar, as he ran toward the school.

The school was quiet, too quiet as he yanked open the back door, his hand on the pistol at his side. His head twisted right and left as he surveyed the hallways. A crumpled body up ahead, a boy, too young, the red pooling, eyes blessedly closed.

This is Officer Lang at Live Oak. We need EMS on the south side hallway. A juvenile victim is shot, no pulse. We have shots fired!

His fingers were sticky on the trigger as he stood, ran.

10-4, all units responding but he was alone in the hallway.

He never thought he'd use his gun. Most officers never do. He'd read that years ago during his training, the summer when the whispers of 'traitor' from his cousins became outright insults, and it had comforted him. He'd read so much before the moment he was running through the halls, articles on de-escalation techniques with children and news of a frog with a mushroom growing out of its flank. Fairytales and a name on a note that killed its reader and closed-door mysteries and the sports page so he would have something to say to his uncles.

We're locking down the school right now. Make sure there is no pedestrian traffic on Holly or Mason.

Officer Lang had so many books left to read on the stack on his nightstand and the shelves in his closet and the living room on the left side of the couch that was empty most nights anyway. *1984* and *Crime and Punishment*, he should have read that, as an officer who loved books, and *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* because the girls in his middle school passed it between their clutched arms like contraband.

Any description? I'm coming up on Holly, about to make that left.

Shots echoed, he was getting close, and someone would need to turn in his library books. Officer Lang knew it was unlikely he would live in this situation; duty called, in the line of duty, he'd seen the words, knew they would be his, because he was close now, his gun stretched out between his arms to get the bullets even closer, the milliseconds ready to save a life.

Stop, now, put your gun down, sir, please!

The hallway angled at ninety degrees, the shooter in the crossroads, young but not as young as he feared, but someone was on the other side of intersection. The young man's rifle pointed toward the silence that would soon fill with screams.

All other units go to Bravo.

Another gun in his left hand, and the man didn't turn at Jacob's voice. He was not commanded. He was not moved by his authority. His eyes still facing the horror Jacob was yet to see, two bodies on the ground, one child, another child, surrounded by pools of red. He nuzzled the barrel under his chin.

Jacob, relieved, to be a witness instead of a killer.

He would think back most often about the sentences he'd finished, the prose so precious, the seconds lost as he curved the corner of the page.