

Three Hours

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PART ONE

*And you? When will you begin that long
journey into yourself?*

Rumi (1207–1273)

9.16 a.m.

A moment of stillness; as if time itself is waiting, can no longer be measured. Then the subtle press of a fingertip, whorled skin against cool metal, starts it beating again and the bullet moves faster than sound.

It smashes the glass case on the wall by the headmaster's head, which displays medals for gallantry awarded in the last World War to boys barely out of the sixth form. Their medals turn into shrapnel; hitting the headmaster's soft brown hair, breaking the arm of his glasses, piercing through the bone that protects the part of him that thinks, loves, dreams and fears; as if pieces of metal are travelling through the who of him and the why of him. But he is still able to think because it's he who has thought of those boys, shrapnel made of gallantry, tearing apart any sense he'd once had of a benevolent order of things.

He's falling backwards. Another shot; the corridor a reverberating sound tunnel. Hands are grabbing him and dragging him into the library.

Hannah and David are moving him away from the closed library door and putting him into the recovery position. His sixth-formers have all learnt first aid, compulsory in Year 12, but how did they learn to be courageous? Perhaps it was there all this time and he didn't notice it; medals again, walked past a hundred times, a thousand.

He tries to reassure them that even if it looks bad – he is pretty sure it must look very bad indeed – inside he's okay, the who of him is still intact but he can't speak. Instead sounds are coming

out of his mouth that are gasps and grunts and will make them more afraid so he stops trying to speak.

His pupils' faces look ghostly in the dim light, eyes gleaming, dark clothes invisible. They turned off all the electric lights when the code red was called. The Victorian wooden shutters have been pulled shut over the windows; traces of weak winter daylight seep inside through the cracks.

He, Matthew Marr, headmaster and only adult here, must protect them; must rescue his pupils in Junior School, the pottery room, the theatre and the English classroom along the corridor; must tell the teachers not to take any risks and keep the children safe. But his mind is slipping backwards into memory. Perhaps this is what the shrapnel has done, broken pieces of bone upwards so they form a jagged wall and he is stuck on the side of the past. But words in his own thoughts grab at him – *risks, safe, rescue*.

What in God's name is happening?

As he struggles to understand, his thoughts careen backwards, too fast, perilously close to tipping over the edge of his mind and the blackness there; stopping with the memory of a china-blue sky, the front of Old School bright with flowering clematis, the call of a pied flycatcher. His damaged brain tells him the answer lies here, in this day, but the thoughts that have brought him to this point have dissolved.

Hannah covers Mr Marr's top half with her puffa jacket and David covers his legs with his coat, then Hannah takes off her hoody. She will not scream. She will not cry. She will wrap her hoody around Mr Marr's head, tying the arms tightly together, and then she must try to staunch the bleeding from the wound in his foot, and when she has done these things she will check his airway again.

No more shots. Not yet. Fear thinning her skin, exposing her smallness. As she takes off her T-shirt to make a bandage she glances at the wall of the library that faces the garden, the shuttered windows too small and too high up for escape. The other wall,

with floor-to-ceiling bookcases, runs alongside the corridor. The gunman's footsteps sound along the bookcases as he walks along the corridor. For a little while they thought he'd gone, that he'd walked all the way to the end of the corridor and the front door and left. But he hadn't. He came back again towards them.

He must be wearing boots with metal in the heel. *Click-click click-click* on the worn oak floorboards, then a pause. No other sounds in the corridor; nobody else's footsteps, no voices, no bump of a book bag against a shoulder. Everyone sheltering, keeping soundless and still. The footsteps get quieter. Hannah thinks he's opposite Mrs Kale's English classroom. She waits for the shots. Just his footsteps.

Next to her, David is dialling 999, his fingers shaking, his whole body shaking, and even though it's only three numbers it's taking him ages. She's worried that the emergency services will be engaged because everyone's been phoning 999, for police though, not for an ambulance, not till now, and maybe they'll be jamming the line.

When I am Queen . . . Dad says to her, and she says, *When I am Queen there'll be a separate line for the police and ambulances and fire service*, but she can't hear Dad's voice any more, just David's saying, 'Ambulance, please,' like he's ordering a pizza at gunpoint, and now he's waiting to be put through to the ambulance people.

It was the kids who started the rush on 999 calls, not only directly but all those calls to mothers at work, at home, at coffee mornings, Pilates, the supermarket, and dads at work, mainly, but some at home like hers, and the parents said: *Have you phoned the police? Where are you? Has someone phoned the police? I'm coming. Where exactly are you? I'm on my way. I'm phoning the police. I'll be right there. I love you.*

Or variations on that call, apart from the *I love you*; she's sure all the parents said that because she heard all the *I love you too-s*. Dad said all that. She'd been in the English classroom then, where phones are allowed. Not allowed in the library, left in a basket outside, switched off. David is using hers.

She's trying to rip her Gap T-shirt to make a tourniquet for Mr Marr's foot, but the cotton is too tough and won't tear and she doesn't have scissors. She only wears this T-shirt in winter under something else because everyone wears Superdry or Hollister, not Gap, not since lower school, and now she's in front of loads of people, including the headmaster, wearing only her bra, because her clothes have had to turn into blankets and bandages, and she doesn't feel any embarrassment, just ridiculous that she ever minded about something as stupid as what letters were on a T-shirt. She wraps the whole T-shirt around his foot.

Click-click click-click in the corridor. The door doesn't have a lock. She goes to join Ed, who's pulling books out of the bookcase nearest to the door, FICTION w-z, and piling them up against it.

Why's he just walking up and down the corridor?

She tries not to listen to the footsteps but instead reads the titles of the books as they use them to barricade the door: *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh – *click-click* – *The Time Machine* by H. G. Wells – *click-click* – *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, *Godless in Eden* by Fay Weldon, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. She imagines bullets going through the books, leaving splashes of purple, a wrecked time machine, a smashed lighthouse lamp, and everything going dark.

She returns to Mr Marr while Ed continues adding more books to the large heap against the door. As she kneels next to him, Mr Marr's eyes flicker and catch hers. Before he was shot Mr Marr told her love is the most powerful thing there is, the only thing that really matters, and as she remembers this she digs the palm of her hand into her T-shirt bandage covering his foot to staunch the bleeding.

But the word *shot* lodges in her mind, cruel and bloody, making her nauseous. *Shot* isn't written down or spoken so she can't cover it up with her hand or shout it down and she wonders what a mind-word is if it can't be seen or heard. She thinks that consciousness is made up of silent, invisible words forming unseen sentences and paragraphs; an unwritten, unspoken book that

makes us who we are. Mr Marr's eyes are closing. 'You have to stay awake, Mr Marr, please, you have to keep awake.' She's afraid that if he loses consciousness the silent invisible book of him will end.

The footsteps sound louder again alongside the library wall, coming back towards them. She has to try to be calm, has to get a grip. Dad says she's resourceful and brave; George in *Famous Five*, Jo in *Little Women*. Never a pretty girl, especially not a pretty teenage girl, she has developed a sturdy character. Rafi says she's *ya amar*, like the moon, but she doesn't believe him.

Ed has moved on to FICTION S-V, trying to stay out of the line of fire if he shoots, throwing books on to the pile from the side. There's many more books at the bottom, new ones sliding down from the summit to the base.

The footsteps get to outside their door and stop. She holds her breath, hears her heart beating into the silence, then the footsteps walk past.

* * *

Daphne Epelsteiner, the fifty-five-year-old drama teacher, has loved the school theatre since it was built five years ago for its practical beauty and sensitive aesthetic. Designed to look as if it's an organic part of the woods surrounding it, it's formed of two connected cedar boxes. The larger box houses the generous stage, auditorium and foyer; the smaller one has a rehearsal room, dressing rooms and two props rooms.

Now she loves the theatre because it is safe. There are no windows for the bastards to shoot through. The walls are only faced with cedar, beneath is mortar and concrete; a budgeting and fire issue. There are fire-exit doors at the back leading directly out into woodland, but the headmaster was concerned about vandals and thieves breaking in from the woods so the fire doors are exceptionally strong and robust. (Thank the Good Lord for vandals and thieves and budgeting and fire issues and the headmaster.)

Teenagers are hiding under the seats in the auditorium, a few

under the stage itself. She can hear them talking to one another and doesn't silence them, not yet. They don't need to be quiet until she gives the signal.

Five teenagers are hiding in the barricade left over from last year's performance of *Les Misérables*, because no one knew what to do with it and Daphne couldn't bring herself to throw it out. It looks finished on the outside, but in the cavernous interior rough-sawn wood and half-hammered-in nails scrape at them; they breathe in dust and flecks of old paint. Twelve others are hiding behind a theatrical forest, saplings felled last week from the woods around the school and stored four deep backstage.

Just over half an hour ago a police car was shot at near the gatehouse, they think he was firing from the woods. Then three minutes ago they heard two shots in Old School. So there must be two of them, maybe more.

Old School is linked to them by a corridor, which ends in doors to their foyer. She has left these doors open and feels their openness as a coldness on her back, a terrible vulnerability. But what else could she do? The theatre is the safest place in the school, virtually unassailable, like a huge panic room. The children and teachers in Old School must get here and be safe too; then she'll lock the doors. But leaving them open might be jeopardizing the safety of her students here in the theatre, which is why she must hide them, as best she can, until everyone in Old School can join them – or until it's clear that they are not able to – and only then will she lock the doors.

Something might well go wrong. The thought nags at her, throbs inside her chest. What if she doesn't reach the doors in time? She could be shot, a decent chance that she will be. She's pretty sure that the doors are impregnable once you lock and bolt them, like the ones at the back, they are security doors, but they're not likely to be bulletproof. She just hopes she'll be shot after, not before, she's locked them.

Her young colleague Sally-Anne, all corkscrew auburn curls and pink cheeks, is acting as lookout in the foyer and will let her

know by WhatsApp the moment that their colleagues and students – or the gunmen – are coming their way. Although mobile reception in the theatre is patchy, every part of it gets Wi-Fi.

‘Okay everyone in the barricade?’ she asks the kids in the *Les Mis* prop, her voice sounding extraordinarily jolly, she thinks, as if she’s calling out something in a panto. There are some valiant yes-es. For a moment, she remembers the barricade last year in the triumph of a production, Enjolras holding his red flag aloft, the students on the barricade so courageously idealistic and heart-breakingly naive. It stabbed you in the solar plexus when the parts were played by genuine teenage students, rather than adults in a West End production.

‘You’re doing brilliantly,’ she says to them.

She is missing four students: Dom Streeter, Jamie Alton, Rafi Bukhari and Tobias Fern. She’s least worried about indolent Dom, who texted her at 8.20 saying he was running behind, most probably from beneath a fuggy duvet. She imagines him idly pedalling his bike along the road and seeing police cars at the turning to the school; not allowed any further.

Jamie Alton was here earlier this morning but left at 8.15 to get the witches’ cauldron from the CDT room in New School, which means he’s safe, surely it does, because New School is right next to the road, easy as pie to evacuate everyone in New School, so no need to panic about Jamie.

Rafi Bukhari didn’t turn up at all this morning and he hasn’t texted. She has a huge soft spot for Rafi, nearly all of them do; everything he’s been through, and that smile and quick intelligence. Those liquid dark eyes, like a gazelle. Extraordinary, kind, beautiful boy. But he’s survived a boat in a storm and people smugglers; he has survived Assad and Daesh and Russian bombers, for heaven’s sakes; of all these children, the adults too, he knows how to look after himself.

But Tobias Fern. Anxiety for Tobias feels heavy and unwieldy, like a squirming toddler refusing to be put down, a feeling that

is the opposite of Tobias himself: tall and slim, self-contained and private, a boy who only just tolerates being touched. Tobias sometimes loses track of where he's meant to be and has been found wandering around the school campus with his noise-cancelling headphones. But he was looking pale yesterday, she commented on it to him, urging him to get a good night's sleep, so she can allow herself to hope that his mother's kept him home today and in all the chaos her message hasn't got through.

No WhatsApp message from Sally-Anne in the foyer.

She goes backstage to check on the kids hiding behind her forest. Some are covered by evergreen spruces and are surprisingly well camouflaged, but others are sheltering behind deciduous leafless trees and their clothes and pale faces shine through.

'Birnam Wood! You need to have make-up. Dirty faces, please.'

The woodland parts. Saplings are laid on the floor.

She hands out make-up cases. 'Make each other's faces grubby; browns and greens.'

They hurriedly put make-up on each other's faces, fingers clumsy. Joanna starts on her friend Caitlin, neatly using a brush. Daphne thinks about telling Joanna just to slap it on, this is not the Make-up Design module of a GCSE drama exam, but suspects this is how Joanna is coping so will leave her be.

'You're in a safe place here,' she says to them all. 'There's no windows and the doors are extra strong. There's no way they will get to us.'

'But you haven't locked the doors to the corridor, have you?' Luisa asks. Her twin brother, Frank, is in the library in Old School.

'No,' Daphne says. 'I haven't locked them. Right, once your make-up's done, put on your costumes.'

Their costumes for *Macbeth* are brown hessian tunics, which are used pretty much for every production in some form or another. For *Macbeth*, they're tied with rope round the waist as tunics. They'll blend better behind the trees than colourful hoodies and T-shirts.

‘Are we going to rehearse?’ Joanna asks.

Mother of Mary, is Joanna even on this planet?

‘Maybe later,’ she says to Joanna.

‘Are Anna and Young Fry safe?’ Josh asks. ‘Have you heard?’

Seven-year-olds Anna and Davy, nicknamed Young Fry, are playing the Macduff children but weren’t due to be here till before their cue, in over an hour’s time.

‘They were doing art in New School this morning,’ she says. ‘So they’ll have been evacuated.’

‘You’re sure, Daphne?’ Josh asks her.

‘Yes, easy to evacuate New School.’

They all call her Daphne, which started when they were much younger because her surname is long and complicated, so they called her ‘Miss Daphne’, and then as they got older they dropped the ‘Miss’, and for heaven’s sakes, what does it matter what they call her? But it does. It’s like they trust her not to be separate from them, to level with them.

‘What about everyone else in Junior School?’ Antonella asks.

‘There will be a contingency plan,’ Daphne says, making it up as she goes along, not levelling with them, because what possible contingency plan can there be for everyone in Junior School, a remote building at the end of the drive, a mile from the road and help? She’s tried ringing colleagues in Junior School but nobody has answered. Focus on these children right now, because they’re the only ones you can help.

Boys and girls are changing in the same room, which wouldn’t normally happen. A few are clearly embarrassed and she’s heartened because they can’t be that afraid if they’re able to be self-conscious; though teenagers can probably be self-conscious in any situation.

‘Once you’re changed I want you behind the trees again. Become Birnam Wood! Method act a woodland!’

A few smiles. Brave kids.

She helps the last few camouflage their faces, the ones whose partner’s hands were shaking too much to do it.

‘Won’t be long now till the police are here,’ she says, because surely the police will help them soon. ‘This is just me being ultra-cautious; my OCD kicking in.’

She hides them behind the rows of saplings, then goes to the props rooms. The first one is locked and Jamie Alton has the key but the second larger one is unlocked and filled with more saplings. She drags them backstage. The bark splinters into her hands and they’re heavy. Last year, when their house was flooded out, Philip had called her a trooper and now she’s acting out that part because she doesn’t know what other part she can play that will be of any use to the children.

They are well hidden behind the trees, surprisingly so. There’s a good chance that if her plan goes wrong and the gunmen come in and just have a quick look, they won’t be seen. A really good chance.

She goes from the auditorium to the foyer. This evening, two students were meant to stand by the auditorium doors, handing out *Macbeth* programmes to parents and staff.

There’s a bar area in the foyer and security doors to the glass corridor that links to Old School. A hundred feet long, the corridor goes through the woods and was designed so that people could come and go from the theatre to Old School without getting wet, and she’d been snarky about it – *has no one ever heard of an umbrella?* – but now it means escape and safety.

She’d hoped to see children and teachers running along the glass corridor through the woods to the sanctuary of the theatre. But the corridor is deserted, snow falling all around it. There are no lights shining at the other end from Old School; the door shut and the school in darkness.

There’s just Sally-Anne standing watch at their open doors holding a nail gun. She doubts a gunman will allow Sally-Anne near enough for her to fire nails at him but admires her pluck. Good grief, she’s using her grandmother’s war words; there’s a whole vocabulary to go with this new character she’s playing, although she’s starting to feel that this is her most real self; that

how she has been to this point was a just a read-through for who she is now.

‘Anything?’ she asks Sally-Anne.

‘No. How are our kids doing?’

Daphne wonders if she imagined the stress Sally-Anne put on ‘our’, signalling where Daphne’s responsibilities should be; pointing out that the safest thing for their kids would be to lock the doors of the corridor their end and block off the means of escape for everyone in Old School. Sally-Anne could be holding the nail gun not because she’s plucky but because she’s protecting herself with the only available weapon. She’s worked with Sally-Anne for nearly four years, but you don’t know a person, she realizes, including yourself, not until the everyday is stripped away. Sweet young Sally-Anne could be anyone at all; colleagues who’ve worked together for years, friends, can be turned into strangers with one another.

‘Do you think the theatre is really that safe?’ Sally-Anne asks.

Because if the theatre isn’t ‘really that safe’, then they cannot offer a haven to the other teachers and students and so can lock their doors without any guilt.

‘Yes I do,’ she replies.

‘Good,’ Sally-Anne says. ‘We’ll wait then, as long as we have to.’

‘Birnam Wood have make-up on,’ Daphne says. ‘I wanted them to splodge on some camouflage but Joanna made up Caitlin like a wood nymph.’

Sally-Anne half laughs.

‘You think a nail gun will do any good?’ Daphne asks.

‘We can always hope. Might slow them down. I thought we should rig up the brightest lights and if we see the gunmen shine the lights in their eyes. It’ll blind them for a bit; buy us a few more minutes.’

Daphne likes the symbolism of blinding with light and feels ugly for doubting her.