

Choosing Hope: Moving Forward from Life's Darkest Hours

By Kaitlin Roig-DeBellis, Robin Gaby Fisher

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"[S]tirring...a bold, inspiring and ultimately hopeful book."
--Arianna Huffington, co-founder and editor-in-chief of The Huffington Post and author of the *New York Times* **bestseller** *Thrive*

Kaitlin Roig-Debellis is the first-grade teacher at Sandy Hook Elementary School who saved her entire class of fifteen six- and-seven-year-olds from the tragic events that took place on December 14, 2012, by piling them into a single-occupancy bathroom within her classroom, mere feet from the brutal and indiscriminate massacre taking place outside the door. Since then, despite the unimaginably painful experiences she endured, she has chosen to share her experience with others, in the hope that they too can find light in dark moments.

Choosing Hope is a lot of things. A written witness to a tragedy that will never be forgotten. A gripping firsthand testament to the power of good over the power of destruction. An inspirational memoir by a brave young woman whose story is one of courage, heroism, faith, and resilience. And a celebration of all the people who make the choice to pass along their hope and positivity to young ones—parents, mentors, and especially teachers. There is no moving on, but there is always moving forward. And how we move forward is a choice.

"[M]oving" -Wally Lamb, New York Times bestselling author of *We Are Water* and *She's Come Undone*

"[B]rave" -Karen Armstrong, New York Times bestselling author of *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* and *The History of God*

"Although now I have witnessed the worst of mankind, instead of feeling bitter or regretful I have chosen to embrace gratitude. I believe in the power of kindness, the influence of educators and mentors, faith and God, and most of all I believe in humanity. Bad things happen to all of us, things that test us and impact us and change us, but it is not those moments that define us. It is how we choose to react to them that does." —Kaitlin Roig-DeBellis

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Editorial Review

Review

“Heartfelt . . . [a] courageous and inspiring book from a genuine hero.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

"The memoir not only dramatically conveys how swiftly an 'ordinary' life can change, but also probes the depth of the struggle to rise from despair to hope."—*Publisher's Weekly*

"Heartfelt...[a] courageous and inspiring book from a genuine hero."—Kirkus Reviews

“*Choosing Hope* is a moving account of how Roig-DeBellis returned to normalcy by promoting generosity and accessing faith and positive thinking."
—Wally Lamb, *New York Times* bestselling author of *We Are Water* and *She’s Come Undone*

“A brave book by a courageous woman that reveals the healing power of compassion.”
—Karen Armstrong, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* and *The History of God*

"*Choosing Hope* is a stirring memoir, capturing not only the brutality of the Sandy Hook tragedy but the incredible heroism, resilience and grace that emerged in its wake. Kaitlin Roig-DeBellis’s deep love for her students makes this a bold, inspiring and ultimately hopeful book."
—Arianna Huffington, co-founder and editor-in-chief of The Huffington Post and author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Thrive*

"For anyone who has despaired at the human condition, at the horrors we perpetrate onto each other, Kaitlin Roig-Debellis tells a story that shares our heartbreak and then, just as persuasively, offers us the only possible way forward."
—Amanda Ripley, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Smartest Kids in the World* and *The Unthinkable*

“Teachers rescue children every day by teaching them the skills they need to succeed in life. But no teacher expects to have to rescue her students from a deadly attack. Kaitlin Roig’s quick thinking and swift action saved her students’ lives. In her book, *Choosing Hope*, Kaitlin honors the memory of the children and educators whose lives were lost on that sad day.”
--Mrs. Laura Bush, *Former First Lady of the United States*

"In *Choosing Hope*, Kaitlin Roig-DeBellis shows what being tough, courageous, and compassionate is all about. In the face of unspeakable tragedy and horror, she gives us a beautiful portrait of the power of hope and love in the healing of a person, a community, and a country."
—Gabrielle Giffords, *Former Congresswoman* and *New York Times* bestselling author

"A beautifully written book that demonstrates the power of the human spirit."
—Adam Braun, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Promise of a Pencil*

"It is a book that parents and teachers will connect with deeply."
—Jay Mathews, education columnist, *Washington Post* and bestselling author of *Work Hard. Be Nice.*

“What a fantastic, straightforward and authentic book. All readers—especially teachers, parents and those in emergency professions—will find much to stimulate their thinking in *Choosing Hope*. I’ll be recommending it to all of my colleagues.”
—Professor Isaac Ashkenazi, International Expert for Crisis Management & Leadership, Ben Gurion University of the Negev

“Every day teachers go beyond the call of duty, touching children’s lives….Kaitlin is proof of that in so many ways.” —Otha Thornton, president of National PTA

"*Choosing Hope* is an inspiring story of a young teacher’s triumph over the unimaginable tragedy of the Sandy Hook school massacre. It is also a cautionary tale about school administrators who don't listen. There are many more Kaitlins in our classrooms than we know. We must cherish them."— Tony Wagner, author of *The Global Achievement Gap* and *Creating Innovators*

“Intensely moving.”—*New York Daily News*

“*Choosing Hope* is part memoir, part testimonial, and all heart. Ms. Roig-DeBellis witnessed the absolute worst of mankind and survived; in its aftermath, she chose to move forward—and she implores readers to do the same, regardless of their circumstances. By choosing hope over pessimism, love over hate, and compassion over ambivalence, we choose to live within light even when darkness threatens to descend. That’s a lesson entirely worthy of learning, and sharing—and there’s nobody better to teach it.”—Examiner.com

About the Author
Kaitlin Roig-DeBellis is the founder of the nonprofit Classes 4 Classes, Inc and an inspirational speaker for teachers and organizations across the country. Previously, she was a first-grade teacher at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Roig-DeBellis contributes to a biweekly educational blog for *The Huffington Post* and has been honored as a *Glamour* magazine Woman of the Year and chosen as a “L’Oréal Paris Women of Worth.” In 2013, she received two honorary doctorate degrees and the Dedicated Teacher Award from The Chicago International Conference on Education.

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Prologue

“It’s no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then.” Alice, to the Cheshire Cat, in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*
—Lewis Carroll

I live every day wishing I could go back to December 13, back to who I was, who my kids were, back to our school with those who were taken on that day and the life I would have never in a million years have changed.
Sometimes I wonder how all of this happened. How, after finding myself in the midst of such abject darkness, in a place where breaking free seemed unlikely, if not impossible, I was finally able to get to the light. Did my strong faith play a role in my passage from that unimaginable tragedy? Yes, it did. Did the love of my family and friends and the support of a caring community bolster me as I attempted to put one foot in

front of the other in the days and weeks afterward? Of course. But what saved me, when I dropped to my lowest point and wandered aimlessly between feelings of sadness and fear and maddening frustration over not being able to answer the “Why?” of what happened, was the moment I realized I had a choice. I could allow the actions of a monster to crush my spirit and, for the rest of my life, have that terrible day in Newtown define me. Or I could decide that, even in the wake of such unspeakable malice, I could live a purposeful life by choosing hope.

The Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre was the worst mass murder of school children in the United States since the Bath School bombing in 1927, and a mournful chapter in our country’s narrative. I’ll leave it to others to write the historical account of that day. I’ve agreed to tell my story, but on my terms. I will not be exploitative: anyone who is looking for that should reach for a different book. I will bear witness to the trauma my students and I suffered, and, even more significantly, the acts of heroism that day, and the generosity of others that poured into our broken community afterward. I leave it to readers to decide whether they even want to read about what we endured in the section titled “My Darkest Hour.” You need not read those particular pages in order to capture the message of hope that I intend to convey with this book. I write about my personal experience for the purpose of clarity and perspective. It is that which led me to the path I walk today.

Six of my colleagues and twenty first-graders—six- and seven-year-olds who were still learning to tell time, and count to 120, and spell 100 words—were murdered that morning. Teachers and administrators and support staff and children who acted with great courage in the face of death. By the grace of God, my students and I survived. When the shooting began and the killer stalked down the hallway toward our classroom, leaving a trail of devastation in his wake, I stuffed my frantic students into a first-grade bathroom that was too tiny for one adult and told them to stay perfectly quiet. I was certain we were going to die.

I won’t say the shooter’s name. I never have. The only names that need to be memorialized are the innocent children and educators whose lives he took. To this day, I believe the killer came into our classroom, which was the first one in the hallway, and, thinking it was empty, moved to the next classroom, and the next, shooting everyone he saw. I’ll never know for sure.

When you hear the whisper of death, life takes on a different meaning. Not a moment passes when I don’t recognize that it could have been us who didn’t make it out of the school that day. That all of my students and I did get out alive is, in my mind, nothing short of a miracle. I honor that miracle by not taking anything for granted. Not a beautiful sunset, or the gentle sensation of a loved one’s hand reaching for mine, or the sweet sound of a child’s voice, or a kind word from a stranger. Not for a second.

Because we survived, I must live up to my responsibility to those who were silenced by using my voice to share what I have learned from standing at the precipice of death and, in doing so, making sure that day is not forgotten. Had it been my kids and me who were taken, I would have wanted someone to use his or her voice for good and to carry on the legacy of love and benevolence that, before evil visited, was the story of Sandy Hook.

In the weeks after the shooting, I waded through my sorrow, wondering if I would ever feel joy again. I spent every day asking myself, *Why our school? Why innocent children?* When the answers wouldn’t come, I became increasingly frustrated and angry. Until, one day, I realized I would never answer those questions and I needed to concentrate on the ones I could answer, for the sake of both my students and me. Only then could we begin healing. Two questions guided me: How do I make sure that the deeds of a madman do not prevent us from moving forward to live good and meaningful lives? And how do we gain back the sense of control that he took from us? Those two questions led me in everything I did. Rather than consuming myself with the horror of what happened, I began focusing on the good that could be done, and how I might take part in our collective healing.

When I changed my thinking, opportunities began to present themselves. I founded a nonprofit called Classes 4 Classes, a concept to teach students everywhere the importance of kindness and caring for others. In my capacity as a survivor, I was asked to speak to a group of educators, which I reluctantly accepted. I started my presentation by sharing my story of hope and saw the impact it had on the audience. One speaking

engagement led to dozens. Following every appearance, people came up to me to share their personal struggles—"I was just diagnosed with cancer"; "I lost my husband"; "My son is going through a difficult time"—and to thank me for inspiring them to focus on the possibilities rather than the negativity in their lives. They would often begin by saying things such as "I know this is nothing like what you've been through" or "My struggle can't compare with yours," and I would stop them each time and say, "Pain is pain and sadness is sadness and loss is loss and we are all connected in this."

After a few of these encounters, I decided that if, by sharing my personal story, I could help even one person through his or her darkest hour, then that was what I needed to do. I quickly realized that helping them was healing me. Sharing my message of hope became my calling. So when I was approached about writing a book, something that had never crossed my mind, I decided to seize the opportunity to be able to reach even more people.

The Sandy Hook Elementary School I knew closed its doors for good after the shooting. Our beautiful school is dust now, razed to the soil because what it came to represent was too painful for a community to bear. And while teaching is at the core of who I am, my new classroom is wherever life takes me—to elementary schools, and teacher conferences, and college commencements, and anywhere else I am asked to speak.

In my travels and, now, with my book, my purpose is to convey the importance of gratitude and endurance and, most of all, the power of choice. Yes, especially that. I know now that how you deal with life's challenges, even those that may seem unbearable or hopeless, is your choice to make. Bad things happen to all of us, things that test us and impact us and change us, but it is not those moments that define who we are. It is how we choose to react to them that does. You can give in and give up or you can decide to live your life with intent and love and compassion for others and for yourself. You can choose hope, even in the darkest hour, and in that choice you will find light. We have that power. I do. You do. Everyone does. That is what I believe.

Ever since I was a little girl and my mom introduced me to Robert Frost, I have loved the poem "The Road Not Taken." In that poem, Frost famously wrote,

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

When I reached a crossroads in my journey back from that terrible day in 2012, I chose hope. And that has made all the difference.

My name is Kaitlin Roig-DeBellis and this is my story.

December 14, 2012

The morning sun rising over Long Island Sound on December 14 was even more breathtaking than usual. That big, red ball, pitched against a cloudless blue sky, was so striking that I stopped on my way out of the house, dropped my lunch bag and car keys on the kitchen counter, and grabbed my phone to snap a few pictures. My step had a skip as I pushed out the door and walked to my car to head to school. Could life get any better? I was twenty-nine years old, engaged to the man of my dreams, and working in a job I would have done for free, I loved it so much.

As I pulled out of the driveway to begin the drive to Newtown, my thoughts returned to the previous weekend when my mom and I traveled from Greenwich to Westhampton to make wedding preparations. It had been a magical weekend.

First, we'd met with a florist and chosen all white roses and dahlias and hydrangeas for the flower arrangements, then we'd gone to the beach and booked the date for the following August at a beautiful place

called the Oceanbleu. The restaurant is built high on the dunes and, standing there, looking out over the water, I had pictured my dad and I taking that long walk down the beach to where Nick and our guests would be waiting. The following day, we'd met Dad and Nick for our annual Christmas brunch and gone over all our plans. I could hardly wait for summer to come, but first we had the holidays to look forward to.

The drive to Sandy Hook took fifty minutes on a good day on I-84, and that day traffic was light. Taking exit 10 off I-84, as usual, I meandered through the Newtown countryside, excited to start the day. As I turned onto Dickinson Drive, I glanced at my dashboard clock. It was 7:45. I parked my car in the teachers' lot, reached for my pile of books and papers, and proceeded to the school's main entrance, through the double doors, past the main office, and across the hall to my classroom. Dropping my books on my desk, I went right to work. Our reading specialist was coming to observe my class and I wanted to make sure everything was ready for her visit. The year before, Sandy Hook had adopted the Reading Workshop program, which gives students the tools they need for more independent reading and comprehension skills. The reading specialist was scheduled to arrive at 9:45 and spend an hour or so monitoring how the program was working, specifically, whether the students were engaged in what they were reading and thinking critically about what they had read. It was an important day for my students and me, and I wanted to make sure everything was in order. For instance, that their reading bins had the proper material, and that the lesson I'd prepared for the workshop was comprehensive enough. I was so busy that I hadn't even taken the time to greet a group of my coworkers as they walked back and forth between the main office and a nearby conference room where a meeting was being held. By the time the buses arrived and my students filed into our classroom, a few minutes before nine, I felt ready for the day. At 9:10, like clockwork, the announcements came over the PA system, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance and a moment of silence.

"Good morning, Fantastic Friends!" I said, just before taking attendance.

"Good morning, Miss Roig!" they replied.

Only one of my students was missing—a boy who was away skiing with his family. After attendance, my students settled in to do their morning work until I played the song to signal morning meeting. They gathered around my chair, excited to get started. I picked up a pile of cards, each one with a different greeting written on it, and fanned them out the way a magician does a deck of playing cards before a magic trick. The cards said things like *¡Hola!* and *Bonjour* and *High Five!* One student picked a card from the deck, and whatever was written on it was the day's greeting. The student with the card then greeted the classmate seated beside him or her, and then that child greeted the next child in the circle, and so on. I always reminded my students that when they were greeting one another to look their classmates in the eyes, speak kindly, and offer a firm but not too hard handshake.

That morning, the card chosen was *Ball Roll*, a special card and one of the kids' favorites, which meant they got to roll a ball to one another as they said their good mornings. The student seated next to me was always excited about being able to greet the teacher. That morning, it was the little girl with cascades of brown curly hair who always wore pink. "Good morning, Miss Roig," she said, in her tinkling first-grade voice. I loved that moment. You can't help but be happy after looking into the eager eyes of a sweet, smiling first-grader.

After that, we moved on to sharing time, a few minutes when the students got to share personal stories with one another. Because the Christmas season and Hanukkah were upon us, the theme that day was "Our Holiday Traditions." One of my students, a rambunctious boy with chestnut-colored eyes and foot-long lashes, smart as a whip, had been chattering about Christmas since September, and now it was just eleven days away. He was wild with anticipation. He told the story of his cousins coming to spend the holidays, squealing as he spoke. (For the last three months, when it was his turn, he told the same story, but his classmates didn't seem to mind, or, if they did, they were kind enough not to say so!) As was our routine, three students got to share stories and the others were expected to make comments and ask questions. The others talked about making cookies, and visiting Santa, and listening for reindeer, and lighting the menorah, and visits with family members and friends. At the end of each presentation the storyteller addressed his or her classmates, saying, "Thank you for my comments and questions." It was an important way of instilling in the children the appropriate way to share and speak with their peers.

Next on the schedule was Morning Message, a time when we discussed what the day was to bring. That day, of course, we talked about the visit from our reading specialist and how important it was for us to impress her with our reading skills. “Let’s get excited about today!” I said. “You’re going to shine!” It was 9:30, fifteen minutes before the “big test.” The students were eager to show off their reading skills and the books they had tucked in their bags, ready to read.
But we never got that far.

First comes the initial blast of gunfire, then the sound of shattering glass. The hair on my arms stands up. I know right away what I am hearing. Columbine is happening in the place we called Pleasantville. How can it be? Someone with a weapon is shooting their way into our perfect school. My classroom is the first one in the building. *We are in grave danger*, I think, *sitting targets.* I jump up, run to the door, pull it closed, and switch off the lights. Thank God for the piece of dark blue construction paper I taped to the door window months ago in preparation for a lockdown drill and forgot to take down. Someone shouts, “Shooter! Stay put!” Is that our principal? The school nurse? Another teacher? The sounds are too muffled to tell. I can’t lock the door. My keys are clear across the room, on top of my desk, and there’s no time to fetch them. For what? A locked door is no match for a magazine of bullets. If we’re going to live, we have to find a hiding place. Fast. I look around the classroom. My students don’t seem to understand what is happening. One, the little girl I call our fashionista, because she wears things like leopard prints and leggings, stands there smiling. I can’t tell if she is somehow oblivious to the sounds or scared frozen. The windows don’t open wide enough for a first-grader to climb through, and who knows what or who is waiting outside? Evil is coming for us and there’s nowhere to go.
Where can we hide? Where can we hide? There’s only one place. The bathroom—a tiny, tiny first grade–sized lavatory with only a toilet and a toilet-paper dispenser inside. Its dimensions are about the size of two first-grade desks pushed together. Maybe three feet by four feet. There is so little space that the sink is on the outside, in the classroom. I have never even been inside of the bathroom before. An adult wouldn’t fit comfortably. How in God’s name will I get sixteen of us in there? It is our only chance. The impossible will have to become possible.
Everything is happening so quickly. We are under siege. I turn to my students, who look up at me with pleading eyes. “Into the bathroom! Now!” I say.
At first they protest. “In there?” “How?” “Why?” “What do you mean, Miss Roig?”
“Bathroom! Now!” I say, repeating myself. They understand that the teacher means business. I rush them toward the back of the classroom. Shots are being fired outside our classroom door. There’s no time.
“Hurry!” I say, pushing them into the tiny space with the toilet in the center. “Hurry!” But I know that no matter how quickly my students respond, it will still take two or three minutes to get everyone inside, minutes I feel sure we don’t have.
We all push into the bathroom, and when there isn’t a millimeter of space left, I begin lifting my students and piling them inside. I place one student, then two, then three on top of the toilet and hoist up my littlest girl and sit her on the toilet-paper dispenser. We are all crushed together with not even enough room left to take a deep breath. I reach out to pull the door closed, but the door isn’t there. Oh my God. In my rush to try to save us, I didn’t even notice. The door opens into the bathroom. We are blocking it with our bodies. I feel myself beginning to panic. Here we are, stuffed into a room, with a madman bearing down on us, and the door that is supposed to hide us is obstructed by us and can’t close.
My heart pounds against my chest, but I cannot afford to lose my composure, not if we are to have any chance of getting out of this alive. First-graders model their teacher’s behavior. If I panic, they’ll all panic, and we’ll be dead. One by one, I pick up the students who are blocking the door and move each one behind it until I am finally able to push it closed. But just before I do, I reach outside for a large storage cabinet on wheels that is nearby and pull it as close as I can to the front of the bathroom door, hoping that maybe it will conceal the door. “Now,” I say, “we have to be absolutely quiet. We can’t say a word.” I can’t help but wonder if, by trapping us in the bathroom, I have just sentenced us to certain death. What if the shooter

realizes that the storage cabinet is a ruse and shoots right through it?
Then, ear-splitting, rapid-fire shots, like a machine gun—*di-di-di-di-di-di-di-di-di-di-di-di*—over and over and over. We hear shouting. Loud moaning. My students stay perfectly quiet. First-graders are black-and-white. They understand that someone very bad is searching for us and in order for us not to be discovered they stay perfectly quiet. In our silence, we hear voices, although whose is unclear. They are muffled voices. People are pleading for their lives. “No! Please, no! Please! No!” If my students are to keep even relatively calm, they must not know that my insides are shaking and I’m sure we are all about to die. It’s a very difficult thing, putting on a cool front in the midst of what I know is life and death. With the inescapable sounds of carnage happening all around us, my little ones are feeling desperate. “What is happening?” one of them whispers. My fashionista begins to cry. I cup her face in my hands and look into her teary eyes. “We’re going to be okay,” I promise. I never make promises I can’t keep, especially not to children, but this is a matter of life and death. The boy who straddles the top of the toilet is shaking so hard that he accidently flushes. Once, then again. We all hold our breath. *Shhhhhhhhh!!!!! Did the shooter hear?* I look at the boy and his face says it all. *I’m scared and I’m sorry and I don’t know what to do.* “Miss Roig, I don’t want to die today,” one of my students whispers. “I just want my mom,” another one says, fighting tears. “I don’t want to die before Christmas,” says my student who has been talking about the holiday for months. We are squeezed together like fingers in a tight fist. My kids want out of this sweltering, sealed-up box we’re in. “I’ll lead the way!” one of the boys whispers. “I know karate,” says another boy. Hadn’t it been only moments ago that he told us the story of finding a dollar under his pillow for his two front teeth? “No,” I say gently. “There are bad guys out there and we need to wait for the good guys to come.” I can’t bear to think that their last moments will be spent this way: in fear. I must reassure them, even though I don’t believe my own words. “It’s going to be okay. We’re going to be okay,” I say. Then, because I believe that death is imminent and I want to do whatever I can to make them feel safe, I tell them how much they have meant to me. “I need you to know that I love you all very much,” I say. In comforting them, I have also brought comfort to myself. “Anyone who believes in the power of prayer needs to pray right now,” I say, “and anyone who does not needs to think really happy thoughts.” I put my hands together and start to pray. The kids are too crammed together to move their arms, but most of them close their eyes and I assume they are following my instruction. The shooting continues. Now I am prepared to die.

It’s been quiet for a while now. Eerily quiet. How can a school that I know had been full of people this morning be absolutely silent now? *Where is everyone?* It seems like just my students and me are left in the building. I feel isolated and profoundly alone. I wonder if the gunman is lurking outside our door, waiting for us to feel safe enough to come out of the bathroom and fall into his trap. So much time has passed that it feels like forever. I worry that we may run out of air. *If the good guys were coming, they would have been here by now, wouldn’t they? Why is it so deathly quiet?* I think about my beloved fiancé and all the plans we’ve made for our future together. He suffered so much when he lost his mother, and I’m not sure he can survive the tragedy of losing me. Nick needs me, and so do my loving, devoted parents. I worry that they will not be able to handle my death. I think about my students’ parents and the unimaginable grief they will suffer because I was powerless to save their children. My worst fear is that I will see my class murdered before I die and I won’t be able to stop it. All we can do now is wait.
An eternity passes. The bathroom is stifling and my armpits are soaked with sweat. Some of my kids are becoming impatient. “I’m hot, Miss Roig,” one whispers. “Can we please get out?” asks another. Several say they need to go to the bathroom. For the most part, though, they are quite content to be quiet if it means the bad guy can’t find us. I wonder what is happening outside. Does the silence mean the shooter is gone? Or is he preparing for his next move? Then, from the other side of the wall, come the voices of people who are barking orders. I hear them clearly. “Don’t look up.” “Don’t open your eyes.” “Walk quickly.” *Oh my God. Is there more than one shooter? Are they kidnapping people? What is going to happen to us? My heart races in my chest. My kids look up at me*. “Shhhhhhhh,” I say. We have been in the bathroom for a very long time. At least forty-five minutes. The heat is becoming unbearable. We can barely take a deep breath.

A knock comes at the door and we all stiffen with fear. I put my index finger to my lips. I fear that if we make any noise, the shooter will realize that the teacher has hidden her whole class in here. “Ask who’s there,” I whisper to one of my students. I don’t want the shooter to know that there are 16 terrified people huddled together behind the bathroom door. “Who is it?” my little guy asks. I can hear the quiver in his voice. “Hey, little fella,” someone replies. The man sounds kind, but I am unconvinced. “We’re here to help you,” he says. “Unlock the door.” *No way,* I think. Why in the world would I trust the words of a faceless stranger? No way am I going to risk opening the door for a killer. Now, I speak. “If you really are the police, I need your badge,” I say. Seconds pass. A badge is slipped under the door. I pick it up and examine it. It looks fake, like a play badge that one of my students might wear. I desperately want for it to be real, but I’m not convinced. “This doesn’t look real,” I say. “I don’t believe you.” I look around at my kids and I know they are thinking what I am. *Please let this be the good guys.* One little girl is choking back tears. I take her face in my hands and smile. If she starts to cry, the others will cry. I can’t let that happen, not until I find out who is on the other side of the door. “If you are the police and you’re here to help us, then you should have the key to this door. Or you should be able to get it,” I say. A few more minutes pass before I hear the rattle of keys. I hear the scraping sound of a key going into the lock. It doesn’t work. Another key, another failed attempt. Then five and six and seven tries. My stomach churns with each twist of the lock. My students’ eyes are wide.

The tenth key works. The knob turns and the door pushes in. I see an army of uniforms—people dressed in black and wearing helmets and carrying big guns, peering in at us. A SWAT team is in our classroom. The good guys are here. I am flooded with feelings of relief and gratitude. They look as surprised to see all of us as we are to see them. I think they were expecting to see one child, not the teacher and her entire class. I’ve never been so happy to see anyone in my life.

They pull us out of the bathroom, at first, one by one, until there is enough room for us to move on our own. Our heroes lead us out of the classroom and guide us in the opposite direction of the bodies in the hallway and the bloodstained floor. I grab the hands of the two students closest to me and follow the instructions to “go. Fast.” We rush the students down the hall and out of the building. “Where is the bad guy?” I ask as we make our way to the firehouse. *Is he still lurking here, somewhere, ready to hurt us?* They assure me that we are safe. I say “Thank you” over and over. “Thank you for finding us in that tiny bathroom.” “Thank you for being the good guys.” “Thank you for saving our lives.”

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