

# Finding Hope

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*"Get in the car," my mother growls at me. This car is not ours, will never be ours. I want to speak up, but I know they won't hear me. My mother pushes me into the car door and I taste blood. I don't want to, but I get in.*

*"Drive," someone mumbles and we're moving. Where we're going? I have no idea. Seconds turn into minutes that turn into hours.*

*"Okay, stop here," the voice says again. I am shoved out of the car door and onto the sidewalk. My mother stares at me, like I am a bug, a new specimen.*

*"Victoria, we have to go. Now," the voice demands. "Are you going to take her or leave her?"*

*"I don't want her," my mother states. She has never wanted me, not when I was born, not now. I watch her back as she stalks away. How can she leave me? I am her child. I was born to her. I lie on the sidewalk, hearing the sirens approaching. I am not wanted in this world.*

I jerk awake in a room that resembles an office. I am lying on one of those beds you find in doctor's offices, with the paper on it. The air smells like vanilla. *It was just a dream*, I reassure myself. But it wasn't just a dream, and I know it never will be.

"Finally, sleeping beauty awakes!" A bright voice bursts into my thoughts. "Mariana Westbrook, I take it?" I nod sub-consciously. *How does she know my name?*

"Well, I'm Vanessa, and I'm going to be your social worker until we find you a foster home."

"Okay," I mumble. This isn't happening. Foster homes are always bad. Always.

"Any questions, honey?" Vanessa asks, like she is waiting for me to ask her something, anything.

"Uh, yeah. Where am I?" I respond.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, dear. You're at the Turner Foster Clinic, in North Carolina," she smiles at me.

"North Carolina?!" I sputter. "But - I was just..."

"Yes, you were asleep for five hours and thirty-eight minutes, about as long as the drive from West Virginia to North Carolina."

"Oh-h, okay," I choke out. *Seven hours?* Suddenly an iPhone ringtone floats through the air.

"Yes?" she says to the phone, as she holds up a finger and winks at me. "I see." I fidget through a long pause. "Two kids? Okay... Could you please repeat your phone number? 517-459-6757? Got it. Thanks! I'll get back to you soon!"

"Who was that?" I ask.

"That was Claire Whitmore," Vanessa explains. "It looks like she and her family will be housing you until we find you a home." I sit back on the bed, dumbfounded. *Already?*

"I know it's fast, but the sooner the better!" she says matter of factly. She looks excited to get rid of me. Who wants a Mariana dragging them down? "And she has two kids!"

"Two kids?" I repeat.

"Yes!" she responds enthusiastically. "First there's Milo, he's two. Or maybe three. I forget. Then Scarlett, who's fifteen." Another smile. Why are there so many smiles?

I slam the door shut. Vanessa's car is stiflingly hot, so the ride from Raleigh to Jackson feels much longer than one hour and thirty minutes. Standing in front of a yellow house is a woman and two kids.

"Welcome!" the woman calls out to us. I walk to the house and stand in front of the woman.

"Hi," I respond. "I'm Mariana."

"I'm Claire Whitmore," she says. "And these are my children, Milo and Scarlett."

Scarlett has bright red hair and piercing dark eyes. She is leaning against the side of her house, her arms crossed. I can tell she has attitude. I'm sure she argues with her mom anytime she can. Scarlett is the spitting image of her mother, except for the hair. And those eyes. Claire's eyes are subtle, more of a deep sea blue. But Scarlett's... You can tell she's won a number of arguments with those eyes. Her eyes and hair are probably from her dad.

Milo looks incredibly different from his sister and mother. He has dark brown hair, green eyes, and small, plump lips that have probably gotten him into and out of trouble a number of times. I know right away that he's adopted. What else would explain his looks?

"...that's all you need to know," Vanessa finishes.

"Scarlett, show Mariana her room," Claire instructs. Scarlett starts to get up from her position leaning on the yellow house, then thinks better of it and puts her hands on her hips.

"You know what? No!" Scarlett shouts at Claire. "You always tell me what to do, and you never ask me what *my* opinion is when you're making decisions for our family. You didn't ask me about Milo and you didn't ask me about her!"

"Young lady," Claire hisses, her eyes iron. "Show our guest her room. Now." Scarlett scowls and stalks inside. I follow her, wondering if I have to enter this strange yellow house. I look to Vanessa for help. She nods encouragingly and off I go, into the unknown.

"That's your bedroom," Scarlett nods to a room on the left. The walls are a deep blue, with white drapes and a white wicker bed with a blue and white striped comforter and lots of throw pillows. The room is bare, with nothing on the walls, but I can tell someone used to live in here. Maybe Milo? Suddenly Claire pokes her nose around my doorway. I stare at her, not saying anything. She breaks the silence by asking me, "Are you getting unpacked?" I nod, still silent. "If you need any help, just ask me." I nod again. She looks upset that I'm not saying anything, so I add, "When's lunch?"

"About thirty minutes," she responds, looking relieved. "I'll call you!" She leaves me and I'm back to my silent room with only memories. I unzip my bag and fold the clothes that I brought with me. Fold, put away. Fold, put away. On and on, until I zone out, staring at that deep blue of the walls.

*I'm home late tonight. I went out for ice cream and came home to find the house empty. This isn't the weird part. My mother's never home on Fridays. The weird part is that silver minivan outside. I don't know how it got there, but it looks wrong. Suddenly the door opens and Arson, my mom's boyfriend, steps over the threshold.*

*"She's not here," I say quietly.*

*"I know. She's waiting at...a location," Arson replies. "But you're here. And you're coming with me," I shiver. His voice reminds me of oil, slip-sliding down his throat. He bewitched my mother with that voice, and I won't let him do the same to me.*

*"Come on," he grabs me by the arm, tight. I'm stuck. He makes his way to the van, dragging me behind him. When he gets there, he opens the door and pushes me in. Arson climbs into the front seat and starts driving. He goes over potholes and runs red lights. I don't say a word. I never say a word.*

"Mariana!" Claire calls, interrupting my memories. Right now I'm glad Claire's loud. "Lunch!" I run downstairs and plop into a chair just as Claire drops a grilled cheese sandwich on my plate.

"Yum, looks delicious," I compliment her. Milo nods, but Scarlett just rolls her eyes. Claire shoots her a look and she stops, but her attitude is the same. Milo, on the other hand, keeps getting cheese in his hair.

"Really, Milo?" Claire scolds teasingly. I smile. *So this is what I missed out on. Family.*

"Oh, Mariana, you'll be going to school with Scarlett tomorrow," Claire informs me. Suddenly my stomach plummets.

"School?" I whimper.

"Yes, school," she smiles. "Don't worry, Jackson High is amazing." *Sure. That's what they all say.*

"Mariana!" Scarlett shouts. "Time for school." I groan and lift myself out of bed.

"Coming!" I call back to her. I bound down the stairs, only to run into Claire, who's packing a pink backpack, probably for me.

"Sorry, this is all we've got," she apologizes. I take it from her hands and fling it onto my back.

"It's fine," I reassure her. She smiles at me, and then turns around to face Scarlett.

"You're going to be late!" she scolds Scarlett, and turns back to me. "Mariana, Scarlett will show you where everything is. Right?" Scarlett ignores Claire and I sigh. *It's going to be a long day.*

"Everyone, this is Mariana," Ms. Turner, says. "She's new here at Jackson and I'm sure all of you will help her find her way around." Someone snorts. A girl stares at me, reminding me of my mother. I keep my head down as I return to my seat and try to listen to the teacher drone on about I don't know what, until I finally can't take it anymore...

*My mother pushes me to the ground, hard. I hold my breath and keep the pain inside. One one thousand, two one thousand... It hurts. She shoves me into the kitchen table and I scream. Loud. My hand hovers on my hip and when I pull away, there is blood on my hand. My feet carry me out the door. I run, for who knows how long. I finally stop, panting. My side is*

*still throbbing. I raise my head, and realize I am in front of a park. I enter and find a bench. As soon as my head touches the wooden boards, I fall asleep.*

Suddenly the bell rings. "Alright, go to your next class!!" Ms. Turner is already grading papers. I don't want to face the hallway, but what else can I do? I push the door open and walk to my locker, number 307, and undo the lock. I hear whispers behind my back and I know they're about me. Just as I start to take my books out of my bag, I hear footsteps behind me. I turn on my heel and stare at a pretty girl, probably a queen bee.

"Hey guys, look," she giggles. "It's Jilt, the foster girl!" A crowd has formed around us. Did Scarlett tell her? I blink back tears. *She has no idea what that's like, to live in a house where you don't feel safe.*

"Aw, is the orphan gonna cry?" Another girl has stepped into the circle. I wipe my eyes. The first girl pushes me into the locker and I fall to the ground. I groan and pick myself up from the floor. *This has to stop.*

"Stop," I demand. "Just stop." Queen Bee smiles.

"Oh," she smirks. "You're standing up for yourself?" I try to look as confident as I can. She puts her arms out, about to push me to the ground again, but I see a flash of red hair and someone pushes her away.

"You –" Scarlett's voice is icy, "are a stuck-up, popular girl who doesn't care about other people's feelings." I grin inside. The circle starts to disappear, until it's only me, Scarlett, and Queen Bee.

"Shoo," Scarlett hisses, and right now, she's so much like her mother it's scary. Queen Bee scrams and Scarlett helps me up. I smile at her and she grins back.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"It's okay," she shrugs. "It'll get better."

*Hopefully, I think.* I watch Scarlett's back as she heads to her next class. I know the bell has rung, but I don't hear it. I used to think that 'Don't judge a book by its cover,' quote was nonsense. Now I don't know what to believe. But friends are worth keeping and maybe Scarlett is a friend. Maybe this foster home won't be as bad as I thought.