

Hope

Tara Piercey

"He's tiny," declared Kayla, pulling away from the glass of the incubator.

"He's a baby. He's supposed to be tiny," sighed Leah, looking up from her phone to where her little sister was observing her even littler brother.

"But he's extra tiny," insisted Kayla. "Do you think he's okay?"

Leah tried to think of an answer that wouldn't worry her sister more than necessary. Their brother, still unnamed, was far from okay. Born a month early, his essential functions – like breathing, for example – weren't happening as they should. Seconds after he was born, the nurse whisked him away to this incubator, where he went on a ventilator so he would survive. And no one even knew if he was going to live, despite the doctors using all their doctorly talent. "He will be," she decided to say. She was trying to convey the message, *No, he's not okay, and no one knows if he's going to be, but we hope that he will be.* Unfortunately, there wasn't much chance of a girl of five understanding that.

Kayla tapped on the glass. "Hi, baby brother," she said. "When are you going to wake up so I can play with you?"

"He's not a toy, Kayla. He's a baby." *A very weak baby with not much chance of living,* she added in her mind.

"I know that. I'm not an idiot."

"Well, why do you act like one, then?" It was rude, Leah knew. But right now, with her mother passed out, her brother half-dead, and her father AWOL, she didn't really feel like being nice anymore. Not that it was easy in the first place. Kayla protested, probably calling her older sister a meanie (that was the extent of her insult vocabulary), but the thirteen-year-old was already walking down the hospital corridor. Her sister chased after her. "Hey! Where do you think you're going?" she demanded, hair streaming behind her. "We were having a conversation!"

"Conversation, Kayla," corrected Leah, once again thinking about how different she was from her sister. Kayla had their mother's golden curls, blue eyes, rosy cheeks and tan skin. Leah, however, was deathly pale (from not spending enough time in the sun, her mother said, but Leah knew she had always been pale no matter how much time she spent outside), with deep green eyes and straight black hair, which she cut herself. The style never changed: shoulder length, with shaggy bangs falling over her eyes. Her mother hated it, saying that she should at least be able to see. That was one of the reasons why she kept them, even though they got irritating sometimes. It didn't really matter what her hair looked like, since she was always wearing her hood up. No one ever noticed Leah Hale, with her all-black outfit and small frame. No wonder she could leave her sister at her mother's room and slip out of a door marked EMERGENCY EXIT so easily, and take up a place in the narrow alley between hospital buildings which she had found by a lucky mistake.

She liked going there. She could read the graffiti on the walls, and think up stories about the people who had spray-painted their thoughts onto the dirty bricks. There were layers upon layers of paint, and each layer was a different person, another backstory to be created. Who had come here and sprayed *LET ME OUT* on the wall to the left of the door? Where had they gotten the blue paint? Had they bought it, borrowed it, or maybe stolen it? Why did they choose to write that? When had they written it? All these questions were for Leah to answer as she pleased. Maybe she would come here someday with her own can of spray paint, to leave a mark that someone who came out of the door in the future would see.

Leah dug into her pocket and brought out a plain black spiral notebook and a pen. The book was half-filled with all the people she imagined had come here, and their stories. Yesterday's entry was *WANDERER*, painted by a fifteen-year-old boy whose parents were always fighting. He spent as much time away from home as he could, walking all over the city to leave the word in as many places as he could. He was the wanderer, going from place to place and writing his name in a desperate hope that someday someone would remember him. Maybe not the most uplifting of stories, but those weren't Leah's forte. *LET ME OUT* seemed more urgent, a plea for release. Another boy, nineteen this time, Leah decided. He had gotten mixed up in one of the many gangs lurking around the city. At first all he could think of was how cool he was, a gangster. Then he realized the job description: gang fights, hurting people, maybe killing people. He couldn't leave, or he would die. So he left his plea on the walls where no one would see them.

As she finished her fifteenth depressing story in the last eight days, there was a scuttling noise behind one of the many abandoned boxes in the alley. Leah put her notebook and pen back in her pocket, creeping as quietly as she could toward the noise. Someone with sense would have backed away, but Leah was Leah. If it turned out to be a rabid dog and she got rabies and died, so be it. Maybe other people would care, but not her. She nudged the box a few centimetres to the side with her foot, and something behind it recoiled. A feline hiss came from the space. "Okay, so you're a cat," she said aloud. "Nothing to be scared of." She pushed the box away, revealing that it was indeed a cat. At first glance it looked well-fed, but then she looked closer and saw that its ribs were showing and the illusion of health was given by a bulging stomach. "Oh," Leah said, realizing that the bundle of dark fur was heavily pregnant.

The cat tried to get up, probably to run away from Leah, but fell back to the cold tarmac. She mewed pitifully. Leah swore, a possibility coming into her mind. She leant down and slowly reached toward the cat's abdomen. The cat fluffed up her dark grey fur and hissed weakly, but otherwise made no move to get away. She kept mewling, sounding pained. Leah laid her hand gently on the cat's stomach, waiting. It was only a few seconds before the telltale convulsing of the cat's muscles confirmed her suspicions that yes, the cat was giving birth. "Well. I can't really do anything, can I? So good luck, my lady." Leah stroked

the fur below the cat's ear as she, with a great amount of noise, gave birth to two tiny, wet kittens. The mother turned and started licking her offspring.

Leah sat on her haunches, watching the common yet beautiful display of nature taking its course. In that moment, it didn't matter that her brother was half dead, or that her father was a total and utter – well, a total and utter something you shouldn't call your father. All that mattered was this family of cats and the life that came to be in this cold, unwelcoming alley with dirty walls. If two kittens could be born here and survive, then surely a baby boy born in a warm hospital with everything he needed and more could, too.

Leaving the new mother and her babies, Leah slipped back inside and made her way to her mother's room. Her sister was there, merrily colouring a picture of some cartoon character that Leah didn't know and humming *The Wheels On The Bus*. Their mother was still sleeping, completely conked out by whatever was in the IV attached to her arm. The birth had been difficult, the nurse had told Kayla when she asked why her mother was still asleep. "Hey, Kayla," Leah said, leaning against the wall next to the door. Her sister whirled around, dropping her crayon on the floor. "Where did *you* come from?" she demanded, flouncing over to the older girl and hugging her. Leah wasn't a touchy person – another difference from her sister – but she bent down and picked up her sister.

"You look happy," said Kayla. Leah hadn't even noticed the smile that had appeared on her face. "I feel happy," she replied, and for the first time in who knew how long it was true. "You know, I've thought of a name that we can call our brother. Will you help me get Mom to call him that?"

"She wants to call him Simon," frowned Kayla. "Don't you like Simon?"

"Simon's a nice name," Leah agreed. "It can be his middle name."

"His middle name?"

"Yes, the name that comes between your first name and your last name."

"What's my middle name?"

"Your middle name," Leah said, putting her surprisingly heavy sister down, "is Ashley."

Kayla considered that. "I like it," she decided. "And your middle name?"

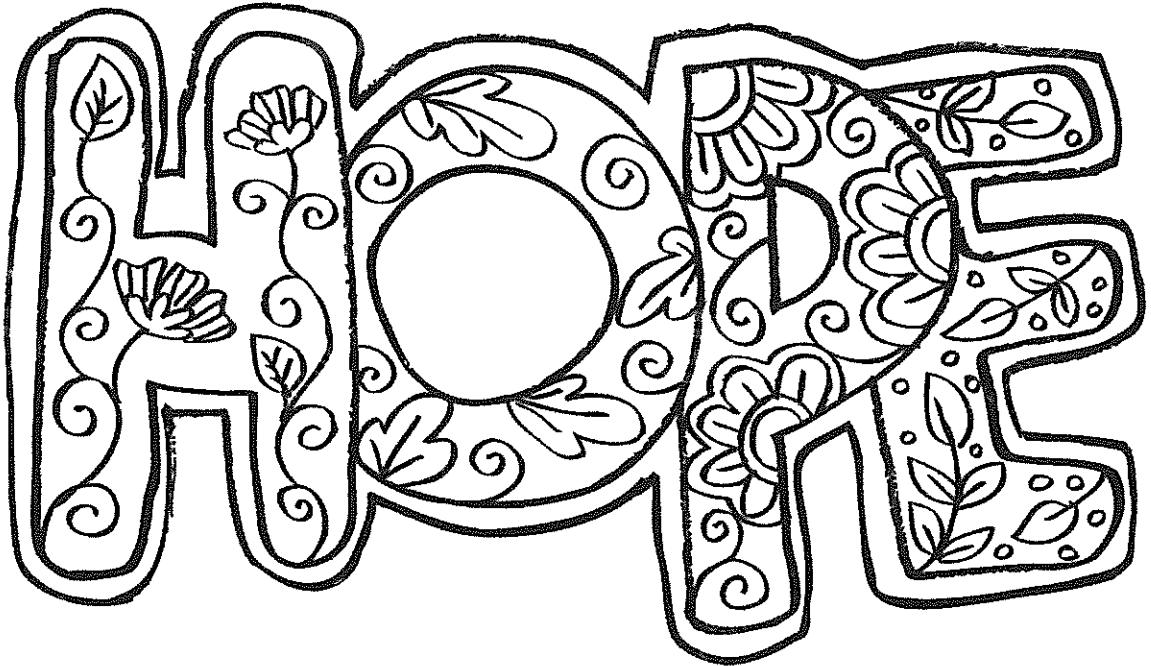
"Adrienne," Leah answered.

"Do you like yours?"

"Yes, I like mine a lot." Adrienne was an unusual name. Probably no one used it much because it meant *dark*. "Anyway, how do you like the sound of a baby brother called Dylan?"

Kayla agreed with much enthusiasm.

Three hours later, when their mother woke up, she was assailed with requests to call their brother Dylan, and many promises that Simon could still be his middle name. Leah stood smiling in the corner, knowing that she had named her brother *hope*.



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This is Tara's original work and typed by herself.

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