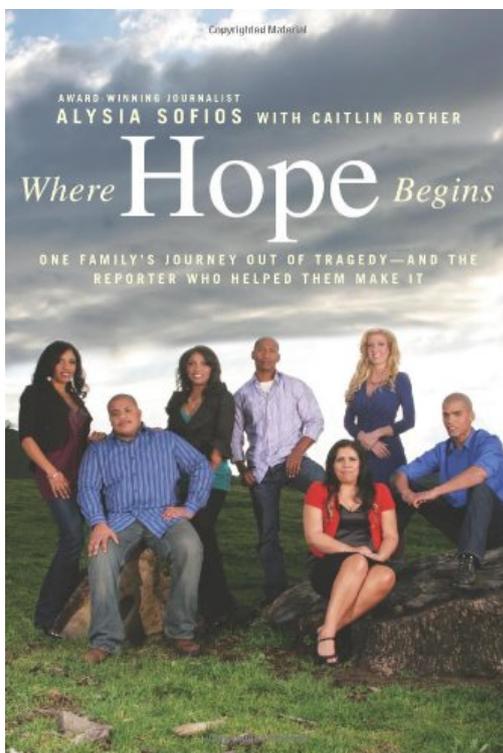


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# Where Hope Begins

ONE FAMILY'S JOURNEY OUT OF TRAGEDY—AND THE  
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"Please pick this book up and read it.It is well-written and it is an inspirational story of courage."

--Dr. Phil

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## About the Author

Alysia Sofios is an award-winning journalist who is known in the Fresno area for her exclusive stories about the Marcus Wesson murders. She was the first reporter to hear about the story from police and the only reporter to obtain interviews with most of Wesson's family. She majored in journalism at Michigan State University, and in 2000, she became a reporter and anchor at a FOX affiliate in Lansing, Michigan. She was recognized by the Michigan Association of Broadcasters for her work covering the local impact of the Iraq War. She later accepted a reporting position in Fresno, California, where she remains as a reporter. She has covered the Scott Peterson and Marcus Wesson trials. Several of her stories have appeared on FOX News and CNN.

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One

Elizabeth knew something was wrong that Friday afternoon. There was tension in the air. Yvette kept shooting her furtive glances while whispering into the cordless phone at Ruby's apartment. Elizabeth didn't know who her nephew's girlfriend was talking to, but it felt like she was the topic of conversation. She wanted to go home.

"I need to leave now," she said, walking toward Yvette on her way to the front door.

"Wait," Yvette called out. "Here, talk to her," she said, shoving the phone at Elizabeth.

"Hello?" she said in her soft, childlike voice.

"Aunt Lise, it's Mary."

"Oh," Elizabeth said cautiously. "What's wrong?"

Mary, the girlfriend of a different nephew, sounded anxious and jumpy, immediately confirming Elizabeth's suspicion that something was going on. Nonetheless, she wasn't prepared for Mary's answer.

"We're all at your house," Mary said. "The girls came back to get their kids."

Mary was referring to Elizabeth's nieces Ruby and Sofia, who had lived with the Wesson family but had left their two children behind several years ago, when Ruby ran away and Marcus kicked Sofia out of the house. A dozen nieces, nephews, cousins, and friends had gathered at Ruby's just an hour ago. What were they doing at Elizabeth's?

"They are talking to Marcus right now and -- "

"What?" Elizabeth interrupted.

Sofia and Ruby had said they were going to the store to buy food for a barbecue, but it was clear now that they'd left Yvette behind to keep watch over Elizabeth while they snuck off to try to take their seven-year-olds, Jonathan and Aviv, away from Marcus.

"It's okay," Mary said, trying to reassure her. "Now you can get away from Marcus, too. You'll be safe now."

But Elizabeth knew that no one would be safe, not with the whole group of them going toe-to-toe with Marcus.

"What have you done?" Elizabeth said, dropping the cordless phone to the floor and frantically searching through her purse for her keys. "Oh my God, no!"

In her own way, Elizabeth had spent most of her life trying to protect her children from her husband. Although she'd always accepted his claim that the beatings he regularly dealt out were necessary discipline, she tried to intervene when he went too far, begging him to stop before he killed them. Marcus wouldn't hand the children over to their mothers without a fight. She was the only one who could reason with him. God only knew what he would do without her there.

Elizabeth ran out of the apartment. Her ears were ringing, and she could hear her blood pulsing as her heart pounded. In the parking lot, she finally got ahold of her keys and yanked them out of her purse, scattering tubes of lipstick and loose receipts onto the asphalt. Her hands were so shaky and slippery with sweat, she could barely get the key into her car door.

How could Ruby and Sofia do this? Please, God, let me get home in time.

Marcus hadn't allowed Elizabeth to get her license until she was thirty-one and he was in jail for welfare fraud, so she'd gotten into the driver's seat later than most. She had never speeded before; in fact, she habitually drove so slowly that motorists glared at her as they passed by.

But this was different. This was about saving the babies.

Never even glancing at the speedometer, she flew home on surface streets, blowing through several red lights. Ruby's place was only a few miles away, but the trip seemed to take forever.

She made a sharp left turn onto Hammond Avenue, where she could already see about twenty people gathered in front of her house on the corner. She gasped when she saw two patrol cars parked across the street. It was even worse than she'd thought.

The tires of her Toyota Echo squealed as she made another sharp turn into the driveway, pulling in next to the yellow school bus Marcus had retrofitted to drive their enormous family around.

When she'd left the house, two hours earlier, everything had seemed so normal. Marcus, Kiani, Sebhrenah, and Rosie had been repairing the bus and packing it up for a trip to Seattle, while seventeen-year-old Lise was inside home-schooling the seven little ones.

Their roughly one-thousand-square-foot house had formerly been occupied by a law firm, so it was zoned for commercial use in the middle of an otherwise residential, working-class neighborhood, and their driveway was actually a small parking lot in front of the building. The city had left repeated notices on the door about the Wessons' zoning violations, so Marcus had decided it was time to relocate the clan once again.

Elizabeth looked more closely at the group clustered in the front yard and realized there weren't any children.

Where are my babies?

The car was still rolling when she shoved the gearshift into park. Her hands shook as she turned off the ignition, the keys rattling against the steering column. She didn't take time to remove them before she pushed the door open and jumped out.

As she ran to the house, she could see the imposing bulk of Marcus's three-hundred-pound body blocking the doorway. Two of her children, Kiani and Serafino, were standing just behind him with Rosie, her sister Rosemary's daughter. Marcus had trained his sons, daughters, and nieces to be soldiers, warning them that this day would come.

Elizabeth ran over to Marcus to ask what was going on, but he spoke before she could get a word out.

"I need the keys, Bee," he told her calmly, using the pet name he'd given her when she was eight and he was twenty-one. His use of the endearment now struck her as odd, given the circumstances.

"Where are the keys?" he pressed. "I need the keys right now."

Elizabeth knew it was a bad sign when Marcus was calm in a stressful situation. But after having done his bidding for nearly four decades, she felt she was in no position to stand up to him. She ran back to the car to retrieve the keys and, clutching them against her chest, obediently delivered them.

Afterward, she wondered why he would need her car keys and why the house was so quiet inside, but she didn't dare ask. She didn't think anything bad had happened -- at least not yet.

Rosie, Kiani, and Serafino stood tall behind Marcus, their shoulders back, on alert and at attention, their expressions stern.

A uniformed police officer stood silently off to the side of the house, a few feet away. There were two more officers across the street.

Elizabeth knew her whole family was in danger. The police presence only made the situation more volatile. Marcus had always said one day they would go to war with the government or Child Protective Services (CPS), but this was as close as they'd ever come.

Marcus remained calm while he made his case for keeping custody of his children. He'd been fooling the police and the social workers for years with that calm exterior of his, but Elizabeth knew what he was truly capable of. She knew the situation could blow up like a powder keg with just the slightest spark of provocation.

Elizabeth burned with anger. She wanted to yell at someone. She knew she couldn't scream at Marcus, so she decided to confront Ruby and Sofia. She wanted answers, and she knew she wasn't going to get them from her husband.

SOFIA AND RUBY had known that Marcus would put up resistance, but they were determined to keep their children from suffering any more of the abuse and incest that had been going on for years. So they brought along a posse of family and friends to surround Marcus while they grabbed Jonathan and Aviv.

But things didn't go as they'd hoped.

For the first fifteen minutes, the family members argued and called one another names inside and outside the one-story house as Sofia and Ruby demanded that Marcus give up the two children he'd fathered with them.

"I'm not leaving without my baby," Ruby declared.

When Marcus accused the mothers of trying to kidnap the children, Kiani jumped to her father's defense.

"You have no rights to these children. You are surrogate mothers," she said. Marcus had told his daughters and nieces that they should bear his children for the Lord because Elizabeth could no longer do so.

Marcus told Ruby and Sofia that they could come back and visit the children if they agreed to leave the house peacefully, but they knew the family was moving out of town, so they didn't believe him. If Marcus took the family away, the two women might never see their son and daughter again.

Around 2:15 p.m., about forty-five minutes after their arrival, Sofia was in the living room talking to Marcus when he whispered something to Rosie, Kiani, and Sebhrenah. Sofia grabbed her son's hand but started to panic when Rosie took him from her and walked him into the back bedroom, where the older girls had gathered the other children.

Sofia recalled the suicide pact that Marcus had made with them when they were growing up. If the police or CPS tried to bust up their family, the children had been given a plan "to go to the Lord." The plan changed over time, but essentially the older ones were to shoot their younger brothers and sisters, then turn the gun on themselves. Sofia had almost carried out the plan herself years before, when the family was living on a boat in Tomales Bay. She had loaded twelve bullets into a gun, but Marcus had stopped her just in time.

Sofia and Ruby hadn't planned to call the police today because they knew Marcus still kept that gun in the house; they didn't want to risk anyone getting hurt. But as soon as it became clear they needed outside intervention, Sofia desperately called out for someone in their group to get the police.

Mary called 911 and reported the incident as a domestic dispute. When the police didn't show up, she called again and again, trying to convey to the dispatch operator that this was no ordinary custody dispute; this was a matter of life and death.

IN FACT, THE police didn't seem to be taking it seriously. After about five of Mary's calls, the California Highway Patrol dispatcher...

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