
Absolutely loved this book. From the beginning, I was drawn into this fascinating story and couldn't put it down! Heather masterfully reveals pieces of the puzzle as the tale unfolds—a story of a mother's love, God's guidance, and friends' kindnesses. . . . In Hana, Isaac, and the other characters, we are blessed with the reminder that God never leaves us nor forsakes us.

Karen Sue Murdy, clinical exercise physiologist and motivational speaker

A tender story of failure, forgiveness, and relationships all wrapped up in a mother's love for her special needs son and a heavenly Father's care for His precious children, both young and old.

Kim Marxhausen, educational psychologist and author

In a gripping, soul-searching style, Kaufman shows deep sensitivity to the life of a special child and his mother. What a gift it can be to develop the trust of an autistic child like Isaac! In scenes that will stick in your memory, the author demonstrates the power of openness and forgiveness. . . . It is amazing how a Christian community can help heal the brokenness within us all.

David Ludwig, psychologist, co-author of *Christian Concepts for Care*

Kaufman does not shy away from difficult topics. She realistically portrays the difficulties of dealing with autism—everything from the misguided advice of strangers to the strain on marital relationships. But in the midst of the stress, she never loses sight of the intense love and joy that can be found. . . . She paints a portrait of hope and love, and by letting us know and understand Isaac and how he sees the world, she gives dignity to those who have this condition.

Cynthia A. Graham, author

Timely and relatable. You will feel the emotions of the characters as it sends a strong message in a gentle way. Kaufman's writing skills capture your attention and create a sense of actually being in the story! This narrative gives insight to real pain, deep hurt, and God's amazing love that turns everything for our good and His glory. . . . A tender reminder of seeking God first and patiently coming alongside one another in love.

Kim E. Bestian, author of *Blueprints for Children's Ministry*

A touching story of resilience and a reminder of God's providence. It will capture the heart of anyone who can identify with a child who is "different" and the challenges that may come along with that. Through rebuilding of faith, instilling of hope, and the love of a special friend, the main character shows that one can rise from the ashes of a broken life to one of newfound joy, happiness, and peace.

Laura Montgomery, Director of Educational Resources,
Lutheran Elementary School Association

Christ's love for His people and His Church is woven throughout this story and each of our stories. . . . Kaufman's characters are real—living, breathing, forgiven, and grace-filled people. She accurately depicts the joys and challenges of parenting a child with special needs—the joy in small victories, the isolation, the stress of worrying if you've done enough, the difficulty in finding a church home to embrace your child—all while reaffirming Christ's love for His hurting children.

Karen Wittmayer, Assistant Director,
Lutheran Association for Special Education

"So now faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13). Kaufman artfully portrays these themes in telling the impactful life stories of Hana, Isaac, and Pastor Matt. . . . This inspiring story reminds us of God's presence in everyone, as our faith leads us to hope and the overwhelming power of His love.

Karen Scuito, Director of Development,
Lutheran Association for Special Education

I was hooked by the third paragraph. . . . Hope Lutheran Church is peopled by folks we all know—or wish we did. Kaufman masterfully integrates biblical truths and sprinkles insights about autism and human nature throughout this lovely book.

Lenore Buth, author and blogger

A beautiful story that grabs you at the first page and won't let go until the end. . . . In the story of Hana and Isaac, we see how lives can be changed when we love and care for our neighbor without judgment. . . . A fantastic reminder that our heavenly Father is always with us, no matter how tumultuous life may seem.

Clarion Fritsche, missionary and homeschooler

Loving Isaac will broaden the perspective of readers who seek to reach out and be inclusive faith communities for all people who are hurting. . . . The novel explores relationships and their complexity in the context of real-life challenges—loss, change, abandonment, family turmoil, and the yearning for trusted others to rely upon. It is the story of healing, hope, and new life.

Mary R. Jacob, EdD, co-author of *Christian Concepts for Care*

Kaufman ushers us into the unpredictable and often confusing life of someone on the autism spectrum. . . . You might find yourself in these pages as church members show us what to say, and not say, when interacting with a special needs child and his mom. This is a compassionate, inside look at autism and the challenges and joys of loving someone on the autism spectrum. . . . A must-read.

Ruth N. Koch, MA, NCC, Mental Health Educator

LOVING ISAAC

—
A NOVEL
—



Heather Kaufman

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For Isaiah and my brave family



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So now faith, hope,
and love abide, these
three; but the greatest
of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13

Part I



Faith



Hello, Sweetie,

We saw you today for the first time, your daddy and I. You were just a little blob on a screen, and it was hard for me to believe that it was really you. How could something so small be making me so sick? But then they pointed out your little stub arms and we heard the thump, thump, thump of your heart, and it all came crashing in on me—the realization that you are here, right now, inside me, alive and growing and waiting to meet me.

Your daddy was holding my hand and staring so hard at you, like you were a puzzle he was trying to figure out. “There’s our guy.” (Your daddy is convinced you are a boy.) “He’s cute as a button!”

So that is what I’m going to call you: Button. We can’t wait to meet you, sweetie. You are loved so much already.

XO

Mommy



I



The sun glinted off the water and threw flashes of light into Hana's face, which made it hard to keep an eye on her son. She shifted in the lawn chair and shaded her eyes, finally making out Isaac's squatted form by the water's edge. "Ten more minutes," she called and then slid deeper into her seat and tilted her head back, offering her neck to the sun.

It was nice—this heat, this unthinking heat. Sweat pooled at her lower back, and her thin shirt clung to her body. If she closed her eyes and focused only on the sensation of the sun hitting her skin, she could trick her mind into thinking, for a few minutes, that she was at the beach.

As happened all too often, however, whenever she closed her eyes for too long, the memories came back, shoving into her consciousness like uninvited guests. Screams, pained and piercing, ripped through her propped-up images of the beach, leaving them in shreds. Hana jerked her eyes open and blinked rapidly in the glare of the sun until her breathing slowed. Her eyes sought and found her son, who was still happily huddled by the creek. She leaned back, breathing easily again, her eyes wary slits, sentinels in charge of staving off the memories.

"Aunt Hana, Mom says to tell you dinner is almost ready." Preteen Clementine, whose wild red hair looked like it had

just caught fire in the unforgiving Oklahoma sun, stood before Hana, her arms akimbo.

“Okay, thanks, sweetie.”

“Isaac, dinner is ready!” Clem shouted in her cousin’s direction.

“It’s okay, I’ll get him. You go inside and help your mom.” Hana stood up and watched her niece tramp back through the dry, brown grass. “Isaac, it’s time to go inside.” Hana approached her son, watching as he settled deeper into his squat. His sandy brown hair was shaggy and spilled over his ears. She’d have to force him into a hair salon soon.

“But there may be turtles.” Isaac mumbled his reply and kept his eyes trained on the water. “You said ten more minutes.”

“I know, but your aunt Kara made a nice dinner for us, and it’s ready for us to eat now. We can come back outside after, and you can look for turtles again.”

“But maybe—then—maybe I will miss the turtles.” Isaac shook his head, his voice catching in his distress, staring determinedly at the small creek.

It wasn’t a scene—not yet. Hana knew she could engage in several more minutes of conversation before it became one, but she didn’t have the patience right now and so skipped ahead to what she knew would work, even if it made her feel guilty. “Maybe you will see a turtle inside, Isaac.”

That got his attention. He looked up at her briefly, his gray eyes hopeful, meeting hers fleetingly before jerking away. “But turtles don’t live inside.”

“Rocky does.”

“But Rocky is my turtle.”

“Yes, and Rocky told me his friends might be coming for a visit.” She knew she wasn’t really fooling her son, whose knowledge of turtles and their habits far surpassed her own, but she also knew that even the mere suggestion of seeing a turtle indoors was enough to niggle at his mind and prompt him to action. Sure enough, Isaac cocked his head, listening to her intently but still watching the creek.

“You know how we’re visiting Aunt Kara? Well, maybe Rocky has family who will come visit him too.”

Isaac stood and half turned toward her, his lanky frame swaying slightly with his hesitation. “Rocky’s family is probably all over the place. How will they come here? What if they don’t?”

“Then you can come right back outside after you eat, okay?”

“Okay, and maybe there will be turtles inside.” She heard the wistful tone in his voice and could tell he didn’t really believe her but wanted to badly enough that he was willing to come inside—just in case. “Maybe they will be there. Can that happen?”

“Yes.”

“It *can* happen?”

“Yes, maybe it will happen.”

“We *will* see turtles inside?”

“Yes, it’s possible that we will see turtles inside.”

Isaac nodded and finally walked up to her. Hana was taken aback again at his recent growth spurt. He could almost look her in the eye and he was only seven—*seven!* When did that happen? Granted, Hana wasn’t very tall, but still it was unnerving how quickly Isaac was shooting up.

She walked quietly beside him toward the squat ranch-style house, her feet crunching through the brittle grass. It was going to take a while to get used to all the brown. This corner of the world could be summed up in three words: brown, dry, and flat. She would never have chosen to be here if she’d had any other option. They reached the back door, and Hana let Isaac go through first. The quietness of the backyard was quickly broken.

“Aunt Hana, Mom says you should get the drink orders.” Alex entered the dining room carrying a platter of burgers. At fourteen, he was already taller than Hana.

“Okay, hon, I’ll start with you. What do you want to drink?” Hana ruffled his bright red hair.

“I’ve got mine already, thanks.” Alex grinned at her. *Such a sweetheart.*

“Can you take me to see Rocky?” Five-year-old Charlie came bounding into the room and tugged on Isaac’s arm. His hair was a duller red than his siblings’, but still shone in the evening light streaming through the window.

“Okay, but don’t be long,” Clem ordered as she entered the room behind her younger brother. Seven years separated the two, and Clem had embraced her role as big sister with both arms, adopting an authoritative tone and posture that communicated in no uncertain terms that even though they shared a mother, she, Clementine McCauley, was Charlie’s “other mother,” and he’d better listen.

“He’s just in the other room. We’ll be *right* back.” Charlie rolled his eyes as he dragged Isaac away.

“What do you want to drink, Clem?” Hana asked her niece.

“Apple juice, please.” Clem plopped down into her seat and whipped out her phone. “And Charlie will take milk—the vitamin D kind because he needs to add weight. The doctor says he’s too skinny,” she informed Hana in a matter-of-fact voice.

Hana chuckled as she entered the kitchen. “I have one apple juice and one vitamin D milk,” she called to her sister, who was bent over checking the corn on the cob in the oven.

“Glasses are in the cabinet above the dishwasher.” Kara nodded in the right direction.

As Hana retrieved the glasses and began rummaging in the fridge for the correct beverages, she glanced at her sister out of the corner of her eye. Ever since Hana and Isaac had arrived yesterday, Kara had kept a busy distance. She’d been kind and effusive over the phone, offering up her home to Hana quickly and assuring her repeatedly that they could stay until the new home in Richmond was ready for them, but Hana knew how easy it was to communicate sisterly solidarity from long distance. Up close and personal was another matter entirely. Was it concern over Hana’s feelings that kept Kara distant or regret for opening up her home? Whatever the reason, the silence was unsettling—and annoying.

“That smells great,” Hana commented as she poured apple

juice. “Do you have some off the cob for Isaac?”

“No, I didn’t remember that he won’t eat it on the cob,” Kara sighed as she placed the pan of corn on the stove a bit too forcefully, causing some of the foil-wrapped pieces to skid into one another.

“It’s not a big deal. I can cut some up for him.” Hana finished pouring and moved in her sister’s direction. Kara was three years younger, but the two had always been confused as twins growing up, Kara shooting up early and reaching her full height by grade school while Hana lagged behind. They stood side by side now, Hana methodically stripping corn off the cob for Isaac while Kara stirred the baked beans. They both had the same sporty, petite build, barely reaching five foot one. Their hair was the same light brown and currently pulled back in ponytails, Kara’s curling at the ends and Hana’s shorter locks spiking out like a starburst. Their biggest difference was in the eyes—Hana’s were dark brown while Kara’s were green. Hana glanced at her sister, noticing how Kara didn’t turn toward her but kept her focus fixed on the beans. Talking hadn’t come easily for them in years, so why was she so surprised by this strained silence?

“Hey, honey.” Hana felt a hand on her back and turned around with a grin.

“Oops, sorry!” Troy laughed and ducked his head, moving to his wife and wrapping an arm around her waist. “You two are impossible to tell apart sometimes!”

Hana laughed, thankful for the levity that broke the tension between her and her sister and happy to see Kara finally smiling, even if the smile was not directed at Hana.

“Can you round up the kids?” Kara asked.

“Alex definitely takes after Troy,” Hana observed as Troy left to do his wife’s bidding. “Well, they all do, what with all that red hair, but Alex really does. It’s sweet to see.”

“Yes, I wouldn’t be surprised if he surpasses him in height.” Kara flicked a smile in Hana’s direction. “Isaac’s much the same way. He’s getting so tall, he must get it from—” She stopped abruptly. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

“No, it’s okay.” Hana smiled and tried to sound casual. “Yes, Isaac gets his height from his dad. Certainly not from me!” She tried a laugh, but it didn’t stick.

“Have you heard . . . is he . . .” Kara’s eyes lost some of their guardedness as she turned toward Hana and looked her full in the face for the first time since they’d arrived.

“Aunt Hana, Isaac wants to bring Rocky in the dining room.” Charlie tugged at Hana’s shorts. “No pets at the table, right, Mom?”

“It’s okay, sweetie, he can put him on the china cabinet.” Kara guided her youngest into the next room while balancing the baked beans. “Hana, can you bring the corn?” she shot over her shoulder, the moment broken.

Silence finally reigned in the McCauley house as they gathered in the dining room and settled into their seats. Rocky presided over the meal, appraising the family through squinty box turtle eyes from his perch in his aquarium on the china cabinet.

“Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let Thy gifts to us be blessed.” Troy led them in prayer before they began passing the burgers, corn, and beans.

“Where’s my burger?” Isaac shouted.

“I forgot to let Aunt Kara know.” Hana turned to her sister. “He doesn’t like his burger on a bun.”

“It’s okay, we’ll just take it off.” Kara separated a burger and offered the meat to Isaac.

“No!” Isaac yelled, hitting his aunt’s hand, dislodging the patty from her grasp, causing it to hit the table. “I want my burger!”

“I’m so sorry, he doesn’t like any cheese on it.” Hana grabbed the burger from the table and wiped up the greasy smear it’d left behind. “Isaac, you do *not* hit your aunt, do you hear me? Apologize to her.”

Isaac grunted, frowned, and shook his head.

“It’s okay, really,” Kara quickly jumped in.

It wasn’t okay, but Hana didn’t feel up to forcing the issue. “I’m going to go fix it, Isaac. Calm down. I’ll go fix it, and

you can have your burger.” She tried to keep her tone even in front of the rest of the family, but her words came out snippy anyway.

Hana left the table without looking anyone in the eye and made her way to the kitchen, where she ran the faucet and began scraping the melted cheese off the burger. Inexplicably, she felt her chest seize up and her breathing shorten, the signs of a panic attack that had become all too familiar in the past year. Silly, really, this was an easily fixed hiccup, one that Isaac would quickly recover from. He’d eat his clean burger, go back outside to the creek, and be happy. Still, she curved her body over the sink and turned the faucet on high to muffle her sharp gasps for breath. Her sister understood. Troy understood. She hadn’t seen a lot of them, with Troy being in the Air Force and them moving every two to three years, but they’d visited one another enough for them to be familiar with Isaac. She needed to get control of herself. Hana willed herself to breathe evenly as she placed the newly washed burger back on Isaac’s plate. She paced the kitchen, hands on hips, focusing on her breath until she calmed down enough to rejoin the family in the dining room. Her heart was still pounding uncomfortably, but it wasn’t anything she couldn’t manage in front of the others.

The family was all talking happily, and Isaac accepted the burger, as she knew he would, yet Hana couldn’t suppress a mounting sense of dread. It was one thing to be understanding, but it was another to have Isaac in one’s home. How long before they outstayed their welcome?



Isaac spotted one turtle after dinner and so submitted himself to bedtime preparations without complaint. It had taken a lengthy walk along the creek to find one, but it’d been worth it. Kara had given the two of them complete rein of the finished basement—a bedroom, bathroom, and family room all to themselves. Hana was overwhelmed by the generosity, but it also added to the feeling that she was

intruding. She tucked Isaac into the air mattress on the floor in the bedroom, turned on his sound machine, and turned off the light.

“Rocky wants to be next to me.” Isaac’s voice sounded small in the darkness.

“Okay, sweetie, I’ll move him.”

“I’m not sweetie; I’m Isaac.”

“Yes, you’re Isaac. I’ll move Rocky next to you.” Hana placed the small aquarium on the floor next to the air mattress. “Goodnight, Isaac. I love you.”

There was no response. Isaac was curled on his side, staring at Rocky. Hana left the door open a crack so the nightlight in the hall would shine through, then crept through the family room and back up the stairs to the main floor.

Troy was playing video games with Alex in the living room. They’d had to move the PlayStation up from the basement, and even though the basement television was twice as big as the one in the upstairs living room, neither had complained. Hana watched their avatars go on a dangerous mission for a couple of minutes, then moved to the smaller family room at the front of the home. Clem was curled up on the love seat with her phone. “Where’s your mom?”

“Giving Charlie a bath.”

Hana sat next to Clem and propped her feet on the coffee table. A surreptitious glance told her Clem was on Instagram. She felt like she should engage her niece somehow, but the words failed her. Instead she leaned back and stared at the ceiling, wishing she’d remembered to grab her book from her bedroom before tucking Isaac in.

“Do you miss Cincinnati? Do you ever miss *him*?” Clem asked abruptly. Her fingers still scrolled through the photos on her screen, her eyes flicking to keep up, but she’d shifted slightly in Hana’s direction.

Hana looked uneasily at her niece. “You mean Zeke?” Saying his name aloud was harder than she thought it’d be. Fear rose in her chest as she thought of his face the last time she’d seen him—closed, furious, hard, his eyes boring into her as

if truly seeing her for the first time and despising what he saw. It was a face that had become all too familiar. But then there was before. Hana let herself remember the before face with the winning smile, bright eyes, engaging laugh, and she swallowed hard before replying, “Well, it’s complicated, sweetie. Yes, I do . . . sometimes.”

“You’re staying for the whole summer, right?”

“Yup. We’re moving into our new home in August.”

“Oh, good; I like having you here.” Clem finally looked up from her screen, her wide green eyes meeting Hana’s with uncomplicated honesty.

Hana found herself fighting tears. “Thank you, honey, that’s so nice of you.” She put an arm around Clem and drew her close.

“I guess Uncle Zeke was a jerk? At least, that’s what Mom says. Is that true?”

Clem’s question was like a stone tossed into the water, the ripples expanding in lazy circles, eventually knocking against the wall Hana guarded inside, the wall that contained the giant that was her past. She stared at her young niece and debated how to answer. She wasn’t sure what Kara had told her children, what explanation for Hana and Isaac’s sudden stay, but she didn’t think she should be the one to discuss it with them. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“I’m sorry.” Clem turned back to her phone.

“Yeah, me too, sweetie, me too.” Hana kissed the top of Clem’s head and didn’t say another word.



Kara poured them glasses of red wine, and the sisters took their drinks out to the back patio. The fireflies were out in abundance, their shiny bottoms reference points in the surrounding darkness, the drone of crickets their accompaniment. Hana decided to start talking first, to just jump in and break the tension suspended between them. “The kids seem well adjusted. How long have you all been in Altus? Has it been a year yet? Are they missing Michigan?”

“Almost a year.” Kara leaned back and swatted at a bug. “It’s okay; we’re all adjusting fine. I much prefer the West Coast, though. Even while we were in Michigan, I missed the West Coast.”

“The climate here seems like an acquired taste.” Hana glanced around the dry backyard. “Not to mention the nearest town with anything interesting in it is forty-five minutes away.” She’d meant it as a joke, but Kara wasn’t laughing. Hana couldn’t make out her face in the dark. Nervously, she sipped her wine. “I imagine that even though you’re not on base, you can still hear the planes? Charlie must like that.”

“Hana, how are you doing?” Kara cut through the small talk, her disembodied voice reaching out swiftly and softly through the dark. Hana could feel her sister’s eyes on her.

“I’m—I’m okay,” she lied. “I just hate feeling like I’m putting you out.”

There was a pause. “No, don’t feel like that. We’re family. We’re going to be there for each other no matter what. You’re doing the right thing, you know—starting over somewhere else.”

“I probably should have done this a year ago,” Hana sighed. “I never should have let it go on as long as it did. I just didn’t want to shake Isaac up any more than necessary.”

“You didn’t know Zeke would react the way he did. You couldn’t have known. You were just taking things one step at a time.”

“I suppose so . . .” Hana leaned back in her seat and stared at the dark silhouette of a nearby tree. She didn’t really want to keep talking about Zeke. The twin images of him from her earlier conversation with Clem still crowded her mind, and she felt like she was being watched all over again, his presence palpable, even from so far a distance.

“So this job in Virginia . . . you’re teaching freshman Algebra. Right up your alley, I’d say.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I think that’s great!” Kara said a little too enthusiastically. “I’m so proud of you for getting that job back in Cincinnati,

after . . . just, you know, getting back on your feet the way you did. And now with this new job in Richmond.”

The compliment was clumsy and haltered. Hana knew what Kara was trying to do. She’d always been a glass-half-full kind of person, but her words sounded forced. Hana told herself to take it as a compliment and move on.

She had stayed home with Isaac before circumstances had landed her back in teaching a year ago. Kara had also stayed at home after her kids were born, but she’d always done it better than Hana. Her children were constantly being appropriately enriched through carefully crafted activities that were then photographed and shared. Hana’s efforts had paled in comparison, and she’d lived with a guilty sense that she was never quite doing enough for Isaac as a result. Kara was built for motherhood, plain and simple.

The tension between them, however, had begun well before they’d entered motherhood. It’d begun back in college when Hana had called her sister and said, “So I met this guy . . .” It’d been downhill from there, Zeke remaining a sore spot between them. Kara disapproved of his demeanor, his interests, the way he talked. And then Kara had met Troy, a tall, red-haired cadet with freckles and an engaging laugh. He was the sun and the moon and the very definition of manhood. Kara’s dislike of Zeke had amped up as she insisted Hana find someone like Troy. The first bitter seeds of comparison had been sown, and there they were left to germinate over the years.

“In Richmond, I can be close to Dad and still be as far away from Cincinnati as possible,” Hana commented. She hadn’t really wanted to go back to Richmond. She hadn’t lived there since high school, and any roots or connections she’d once had would have to be reformed. But with their mother gone and their father in an assisted-living facility there, it was the logical place to go once it’d been obvious they couldn’t stay where they were.

When she’d left Zeke a year ago, she’d let him have the house. She didn’t want any part of the place that contained

their old life together. She'd found an apartment for her and Isaac and left everything else behind. And now she was doing it again. She could hope that Richmond would feel like home after all, but really it'd been so long since she'd been back that it would be just like starting over. From scratch. Again.

"I'm sure Dad will enjoy that—having you close. I just wish Zeke hadn't made Cincinnati impossible for you all."

"Just as well," Hana said, a little more sharply than she'd intended. Zeke had been the one to receive a job promotion that took them to Ohio in the first place, and now any connections she had there also connected her to Zeke. She turned her head away from her sister and took a large gulp of wine. "It's just as well." She wished they could talk about the future without mentioning the past, but the past was dictating Hana's present and future plans, no matter how badly she wanted to wall it off, to keep the giant at bay, to pretend that part of her was done and over. Still, she pretended; if only for her own sake, she pretended.

"And the new house—do you have any pictures?"

Hana pulled out her phone and opened her photo album, handing it to Kara. "It's a small ranch. We'll be renting. I didn't want to deal with buying—at least not right now."

Kara swiped through the pictures, making the appropriate ooing and ahing sounds as she did so, even though Hana well knew there was nothing spectacular about the house.

"It's an answer to prayer, isn't it?" Kara looked up, her face awash with light from the phone. "You finding this house and your new job."

Was she trying to evangelize her? They'd grown up in church together, but Hana's attendance had trickled down to nothing over the years while Kara's commitment had remained steady. At the mention of answers to prayers, Hana felt a mixture of guilt and sadness fill her. She'd tried praying again, when she was at her lowest, and look where it'd gotten her. "Yeah," she managed around the lump in her throat. "It wasn't easy taking Isaac out of a school he was just getting used to, but I'm hopeful he'll make strong connections in his new school."

“Yes, absolutely, I understand what it’s like to be in transition—to have your kids hop from school to school. It’s not easy.”

No, you don’t understand. It’s not the same. You can’t possibly understand. You have a wonderful husband and marriage, and three perfectly normal, healthy children. How can you possibly understand? Hana tried to uproot the ungracious reaction, but once there it held fast and festered. Kara had her life put together just right, and it’d happened effortlessly and without her even searching for it. She’d had Alex right away, while Hana had tried for years before finally getting pregnant. She never had to worry about money, while Hana had gone through many a lean year. Kara’s was a prettily packaged life, the kind with ribbons and a bow that catches your eye. Hana’s was a banged and dented UPS box left on the wrong doorstep.

In her darkest moments, Hana wondered if Kara was glad for the current situation, since it proved her belief all along that Zeke was no good. *She’s giving us a home.* Hana tried to breathe through her angry thoughts. Her sister hadn’t actually done anything to warrant this reaction. But that was always the way with Kara. She’d never come right out and *say* anything hurtful—but somehow what was left unsaid just piled up and up, a compost heap, enriching those bitter seeds planted long ago.

The sisters finished their drinks in silence. Hana’s eyes followed a lightning bug across the yard, watching the progression of light and realizing it was a beat out of sync with the crickets. Blink, chirp, blink, chirp. She smiled at the observation and turned to make a comment to Kara but found that her sister was no longer there.



Hana entered the bedroom quietly. She’d gotten ready for bed in the bathroom next door and only needed to slip silently between the sheets. The sound machine was set to rain, its soothing shushing noise filling the small room. In the

dim light from the hall, Hana could see Isaac spread-eagled on the air mattress, one hand resting on Rocky's aquarium, his mouth agape. He hadn't asked once for Zeke, although that didn't really surprise Hana. She doubted if he'd ask for her should the roles have been reversed. Gently, she knelt by Isaac and watched him for several moments. She grew braver and reached out a hand to slowly stroke his shaggy bangs. Her throat caught as she reached the small bald patch at the temple, where Isaac had pulled out his hair. He didn't let her touch him like this when he was awake. She couldn't remember the last time she'd gotten a hug out of him. A hug would wake him, so she contented herself with softly stroking his hair, his cheek, tracing his eyebrows.

The comfortable full bed stood ready only feet away, but Hana lingered. She stretched herself out on the floor, parallel to her son, staring at his peaceful face. He was so anxious all the time. So anxious. No hugs, no endearments, no touching. But in sleep—she loved how peaceful he looked. Hana lay next to her son, softly tracing his features and murmuring to him, “I love you, Button.”