

Where the Heart Is
Chapter 1
Joe Bruner

The morning we left New York was warm and beautiful, just like the day dad died. The sunlight filtered through the overcast sky, the golden rays glinting in the dew drops that clung to the grass. Silence nestled comfortably into the neighborhood with its velvety coat.

I made my way to our koi pond, carefully treading on the centers of our stepping stones. Sitting down on my usual stone seat, I started dropping lettuce bits into the pond. The water's surface was calm, until the koi surfaced and began to eat the shreds of lettuce.

"Well boys, this is it." I said. "I guess this is goodbye." I sighed and looked up across the yard. The faint sunlight felt warm and pleasant on my face. "I'm really gonna miss you guys," I said, dropping a few more lettuce bits. I watched them eat the leaves, their mouths endlessly puffing open and closed. "Mom says we're going to move into this cottage right on the ocean shore that her parents owned. Apparently she would visit over summer holiday and go skinny dipping with her friends."

Glub, glub, glub.

I dropped a few more shreds of lettuce. "I know what you must be thinking. You didn't need to know that about mom."

The fish just continued to stare unblinking at me, while they ate the lettuce.

"I met the people who are going to move here. They seem like a nice couple, and apparently they love koi, so you'll be taken care of. Don't worry. And who knows, maybe I'll drop by and say hi sometime." I brushed the last of the lettuce into the pond. Once they had gobbled up all of it, the koi sank back to the bottom.

The sun had crept higher in the sky, and now I could feel it on the back of my neck.

“...he’s not in the house, so he must be out here.” I heard my mom’s voice on the back patio. “Chase!”

“Yeah?” I called. I stood up and looked behind me. As soon as I did, I wish I hadn’t. Sarah was back. No doubt here to apologize for Evan again.

“Sarah’s here. She wanted to see you before we left.”

I sighed.

“When you’re done talking, it’s time to go. The moving truck is all packed.”

I nodded, and then turned back towards Sarah. “7 am. It’s a bit early for you, isn’t it?” I crossed my arms and stared at her. She had her brown hair up in a ponytail, which with her sharp chin and ears, made her look rather elfish this morning.

“Chase, please,” she said, not quite meeting my gaze. “I’m not Evan.”

I looked down and unfolded my arms. My hands found my pockets instead. “Sorry. I know.”

She looked at me finally. “You’re really going, aren’t you? This is really it. Good bye.”

I sighed and looked across the yard again. “It’s not really good bye. I mean, there’s still Facebook. Skype. Cell phones.”

She smiled, but looked like she was about to cry. “I know.”

I opened my arms and gave her a hug. I could feel her shaking in my arms. “Besides Evan, you’re my oldest friend,” I said. “We won’t just stop talking.”

We just stood there in silence for a few minutes. I felt the sun intensify on the back of my neck, watched water drip from the rain spout. Birds were chirping from the trees, though I couldn’t figure out where they were.

Sarah wiped her eyes finally.

“Look,” I said, “I’ll call you when we get there. I’ll tell you what our new cottage is like. I’ll talk to you however long you like.”

“Deal,” she said. “And Chase...” I looked up at her again, though unwillingly. “About Evan...”

“Enough,” I cut her off. “If he wants to apologize, he should have come here himself. I’ve told you that all this week.”

We just stared at each other. After a second of silence, she said, “I was going to say, he loves you. I don’t know what it is he said, but the way he’s been living these past couple weeks, he’s going through hell.”

I was outraged. “He’s going through hell? HE’S going through hell? What does he think I’m going through then? First my father dies. Then he breaks up with me. And to top it all off, I’m moving for good.”

“If you would just tell me what he said –”

“No.”

Sarah just opened her mouth, and closed it without saying anything.

“Chase!” It was my mom again. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yeah, one sec,” I called back. I turned to Sarah. “Look, you don’t want to know what he said. It doesn’t matter. I know all that I need to.” I started walking over to the car. As I reached for the passenger door, Sarah grabbed my arm.

“Chase...” her tone was gentle.

I closed my eyes and turned around.

“I know you’re angry at Evan. But you don’t have to block me out too. Let me help. Just tell me what he said.”

I felt water rising in my eyes. I stared at her for a long second. "I can't. I just can't. It hurts too much. You don't want to know. He needs a friend, and I can't be it. He needs you." I gave her one last hug, and whispered, "Good bye." Then I climbed in the car. A minute later we were driving down the street. I looked back until I could no longer see Sarah or my old house, wondering if I had made the right choice. I just kept thinking that she didn't need to know he told me I was selfish, that I was the reason my father died.

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Chapter 2
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I had my seat reclined, and was staring out the window, at the country-side rushing by. We had been driving for about 5 hours by this time, and just pulled out from lunch. I watched the big ugly office buildings and hotels cramming around the highway entrances recede into the distance, to be replaced by long stretches of grass fields.

My reverie was broken by the crinkling of a Doritos bag as my mom ate the last chip. I sat up blinking and shaking my eyes, rubbing them.

“Have a good nap?”

“I wasn’t asleep.”

“Sure looked like it.”

I smiled, and brought my seat up again. “I was just thinking.”

“What about?” She glanced at me.

I sighed, and looked out the window again.

“It’s not healthy.”

“What?”

“Thinking about him that much. You and Evan both said what you did. Brooding this much about it isn’t going to change anything.”

I didn’t say anything.

My mom put her hand on my left thigh and rubbed it. “It’ll be ok.”

“I...I...” I wasn’t sure what I was going to say, so I just fell silent again and stared straight ahead out the windshield.

“You what?”

We glanced at each other.

“I don’t know. No clue what I was even going to say. I guess... I dunno. I keep reliving that afternoon. I just keep thinking there must have been something I could have done, something I should have seen coming.”

“There’s nothing you could have done. He clearly had something cooking for a while, and that was the day it all just broke out.”

“Thanks mom...” I said. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

She smiled. “Well, maybe not right now. But it’s not your fault. And the sooner you believe that the better.”

“Sure,” I muttered, looking out my window again.

She sighed. “Look, I think this move will do you some good. It’ll be good for you to get out of that place. It’ll be good for both of us.”

I watched a telephone pole zoom past the window. A couple of birds, crows maybe, were perched on the top. We had just pulled out of the latest suburban sprawl, and were now riding through farmland and forests again. “So... what is there to do up in Lemoine, Maine. It’s got, what, like 20 people?”

Mom smiled. “There’s a bit more than that. It has a little under a thousand in population. It’s a small coast town. There’ll be plenty to do there. I bet you could do ok selling your photography.”

I rolled my eyes. “I need some high quality stuff if I’m going to do that.”

“You’ve got your camera, what more do you need?”

“Printer... ink... paper... and good stuff at that. Need I continue?”

My mom laughed. “Well, give it a chance. You’ll find the people up there are really quite nice and very approachable. It’s one of those places where everyone knows each other, and most of all, it’s incredibly beautiful. You never know what might happen if you just give it a chance.”

“And what about our house?”

“What about it?”

“Where is it? Who are our neighbors?”

She smiled and glanced at me. “We’re right on the coast. We’ll be waking up to an ocean view every morning.”

“No effing way,” I said, unable to contain my smile.

“Yes effing way,” she said back, also smiling. “It’s really more of a cottage, or a cabin. It has two floors, two bedrooms and two bathrooms. A mini-dining room/kitchen combo and a living room. Apparently it’s also got a small study on the first floor and a den on the second floor. I think you’ll really enjoy it. And as for our neighbors, I have no idea who they are. I haven’t been in touch with them, so we’re going to find out together.”

I nodded.

“Bathroom break?”

I glanced at my watch. I had slept for the last 30 minutes. “I could stretch my legs.”

Mom turned on the turn signal and a moment later, we were entering the rest area. We got out and looked around. The sky was overcast now and a cool gust rustled the trees. The greenness was even more pronounced now, if that was possible.

“So what do you think of Maine?” she asked me.

“Oh, is this it?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She said, nodding. “We crossed the state line a couple minutes ago.”

“...It’s nice.” I made my way up the windy path to the visitor center. The sloping lawn was dotted with trees, and a row of thin-leaved shrubs bordered the doors. I passed the stands of colorful motel coupons and adventure advertisements in the vestibule between doors.

The lighting in the building was dim, and the benches were pocked with scratches and dents. I rushed to the restroom to do my business.

When I came out, my mom was in the lobby holding a bag of sour patch kids. “A last treat before we make it,” she said smiling.

“You’re the best,” I told her, taking it. “Thanks mom.”

We walked back to the car in silence, my mom taking deep breaths, and I plopping sour patch kids in my mouth, three at a time.

“How much longer?” I asked, finally.

“Not much,” she sighed, as we climbed in the car. “I’d say probably no more than an hour or so.”

I groaned.

“But then we’ll be there.”

We sat in silence, admiring the countryside as it passed us by. I saw enormous manors, with sprawling pastures dotted with enormous deciduous trees, oaks or maybe maples, I couldn’t tell from the car. Occasionally I would see cattle, or maybe a horse and its calf, but mostly it was just green fields, and forests of flowers.

I must have drifted off to sleep again, for what seemed like moments later, my mom was shaking me saying, “We’re here.” She smiled when I finally looked up, and then unbuckled to get out.

I brushed the sour patch bag off to the side, opened the door, and nearly collapsed on my first step, my legs were so heavily asleep. I let out an obnoxious yawn, stretched my arms and legs as far as they would go, and took in the sight.

We were parked on a single-lane cobble stone drive way, in front of perhaps the most picturesque cabin I think I had ever seen. It was a two story cabin, made of genuine wood – none of that fake wannabe stuff – with two windows peering over us from the second floor. The whole cabin was on top of a hill, and walking around to the back, I could see the ocean just a couple hundred feet below, at the bottom of a steep slope.

My mom came up behind me and wrapped an arm around my shoulder. “What do you think of it?”

I glanced at her. Her grin stretched from ear to ear. “This is fucking amazing. Are we seriously living here?”

“Uh-huh. And do you see down there, if you look past our drive way, up on that adjacent hill is another cabin?”

“Yupp.”

“Those are our neighbors. Hopefully we’ll meet them later tonight or tomorrow.”

“It looks like someone’s coming out right now,” I said squinting at the door.

My mom spun around and glanced. We watched the woman figure walk out, and make its way towards us. Suddenly my mom gasped. “Is that... no, it can’t be.”

“What?”

“Rachel?” She called out, as the woman approached.

“Debbie?” The disbelief in both their voices was evident. They both squealed and hugged each other. It was the first time I ever saw my mom behave like a high school girl greeting a friend, and I hoped that it would also be the last time.

My mom's friend certainly was very pretty. She was wearing a summer-yellow dress going down to her knees, and her face was surrounded by very curly, somewhat bushy red hair. Her gentle brown eyes and a few freckles on her face, gave her the appearance of a traditional 1950s country girl. She looked to be about the same age as mom, maybe in her mid-thirties.

"Rachel, I want you to meet my 17 year old son, Chase." My mom said, bringing us face to face. We shook hands, her tight grip catching me off guard.

"Hi Chase, it's so great to meet you," she said, pulling her hair back behind her ear. Seeing her smile, it was difficult not to smile back.

"Chase, this is Rachel, a childhood friend of mine. We would always romp around here together, whenever my parents brought us up. Rachel, I had no idea that you were still in the area. I would have called you if I had known."

"Actually I haven't been until recently. When I met David, we moved down to Florida, and I tried to sell this house, but never got any bids. I came back here a couple years ago when David and I decided to divorce. But you're probably not interested in hearing about all that. Come, I have cookies from the bakery and lemonade waiting for someone to eat them at my house. I figured you must be the new neighbors when I saw your car pull up, and wanted to introduce myself and invite you over."

My mom glanced at me. "You want to come Chase?"

I hesitated.

"Come on Chase, you'll probably get to meet Nathan, though he's still working at the bakery right now. He's your age, about to turn 18 in a month or so."

I perked up at the thought of having a friend who was my age up here, and so followed my mom and her friend, who were busily buzzing away, and wondering about this Nathan, imagining what he must be like.

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Chapter 3
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It was dark outside, only the sound of the waves crashing on the shore floated through my window. I had my floor lamp set up next to my door, which was the only source of light for the time being. The room was small, and felt fairly cramped with all the moving boxes inside.

The moving truck had arrived a couple hours later, and I had left Rachel's house to help bring everything in. Nathan hadn't shown up, which I guess wasn't too surprising. Rachel said he's been working later into the evening recently.

I stared up at the ceiling. Now that I didn't have anything to do, my mind started wandering back to Evan. I wonder what he was doing. Possibly getting ready for bed. Probably not. Maybe thinking about me. Maybe wishing the past could be undone, as badly as I wanted it to. I rolled on my side and let a tear escape. God, it still hurt so much to think about him. So I sat up and went to my now routine escape. Facebook. Sitting on my bed, I opened my messenger bag, and pulled my laptop out. Sure enough, Sarah was still on "web" with a bright green dot next to her name.

Sarah: Hey! Are you there yet?

Me: Yeah, we got here this afternoon, and met our neighbor who happens to be my mom's old childhood friend.

Sarah: No way! That's so cool. So what's the cottage like?

Me: It's really amazing. I've got this tiny little room with my own bathroom, with the den right next door. That's where we've put our sofas and TV. Mom wants to make it a really cool media room.

Sarah: That's awesome. I miss you already. :(

Me: Me too. I should go, I think I hear my mom coming. I'll call you tomorrow.

Sarah: Promise?

Me: Pinky promise.

I shut my laptop and looked up right as my mom entered.

“Hey hon, you getting settled in nicely?” She looked around at all the boxes.

“Well, I haven’t really started unpacking, but I think I will soon. I was just talking to Sarah over Facebook.”

“Oh? How’s she doing?”

“Ok, I think. She was excited to hear about the new house.”

“She’s always been such a dear. Tell her hi for me, when you talk again.”

I nodded, wondering what she would think of being called a ‘dear’. “Did you come up here for a reason mom?”

“Oh, yeah,” my mom said, shaking her head. “I want you to come outside and look at something. I promise it’s worth it to get up.”

I groaned and sat up. I slipped into my bright green crocs, and followed her downstairs. On the way out, she turned off the porch light.

“Wait for your eyes to adjust, and when they have, look up.” She led me to the edge of the hill overlooking the ocean.

I could barely make out the white foam of the waves, as they curled right before they crashed on the shore, but once I could see it more clearly, I looked up at the sky. It literally took my breath away.

I had no idea that so many stars actually existed that we could see from Earth. There were what looked to be massive *clouds* of stars. There were reds and blues; it was as if an artist had gone ballistic with dripping paint all over a black canvas. “It’s... unbelievable.”

“It’s unearthly, isn’t it?”

I looked down again and saw her grin. “What is this place?”

“Home. This is where I always felt the most at home.”

The next morning, I woke up, the sunlight streaming directly into my eyes. I glanced at my alarm clock. 8:00 A.M. Groaning, I sat up, and slipped into my crocs. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I took a shower, enjoying the fact that I had it all to myself. It only took a couple minutes to wash and rinse myself off.

Looking in the mirror, I studied myself as I combed my hair. I had blue eyes, which had received more compliments than I could count, and jet-black hair that was usually somewhat messy, though not as bad as Harry Potter supposedly had it. I sighed as I put the comb down on the sink countertop.

I had always looked very mousy, too much so for my liking, which was due to my being relatively short, at 5’6”. I also had a mole next to my nose on the right side. I used to hate it, and had looked at what options there were for removal, but now I kinda liked it. I felt like it added character.

After putting on my typical flannel button down, I head downstairs and found my mom sitting at the dining room table with a cup of tea and the newspaper.

“We get a newspaper here?”

“It’s yesterday’s. I needed something to entertain me while you were snoring away upstairs.”

“Huh.”

“What say you? Want to head into town, maybe go by the bakery where Rachel’s son works? See if we can meet him?”

“Sure.” It’s not like I had anything better to do. I led the way out, and walked over to the edge, looking out across the ocean.

“It’s marvelous, isn’t it?” My mom asked, coming up next to me.

“Yeah... but I miss my koi fish.”

“I know,” my mom said, putting a hand on my shoulder.

I reluctantly turned away from the ocean view, and we walked back down the hill to our car.

“I figure we’ll probably walk usually, it’s only about a mile until we hit the main road which goes through most of town, but perhaps not this morning.”

“Appreciated,” I said, and we got in.

It almost seemed a pity to drive though. Not even five minutes later we were at the bakery. The parking lot was one of those adorable lots, that has like three spots in front of the store itself and that’s it.

We walked in, and the door jingled to let them know we were in.

“Welcome to Tom’s Bakery, how are you folks today?” A teen, probably around my age, stood behind the counter, which was off to the right. I figured this must be Nathan, though he looked nothing like his mother. He was slightly taller than me, though probably not quite six feet, was fit but by no means muscular and had light brown hair.

“We’re good, thank you,” my mom said. She glanced at him, and then up at the menu.

“You folks aren’t from around here are you,” he asked, with a slight smile.

“No, we’re not. We just moved here yesterday from New York, though I used to spend my summers up here as a kid.”

“You’re our new neighbors, aren’t you?” He asked, his tone suddenly becoming much brighter. “My mom said I just missed you last night.”

“Yeah, we’re right up on that hill along Ocean View Drive, right next to you,” my mom said.

“Sweet! I’m Nathan,” he said, holding out his hand. We both shook it. “And you must be Chase,” he said.

I didn’t want to make eye contact, but something about his eyes kept me locked in. “That’s me.”

“So what can I get you folks today?”

“I think I’ll settle for a blueberry scone and an orange juice,” my mom said.

“I’ll second that,” I said, raising my half-curved right hand.

“Awesome! That’ll be \$11.63.”

Once paid, we sat down across from the serving counter, next to the window. I could see a section of the town. It was just a bunch of little stores, with cute little parking lots, one after the other. I couldn’t help but think that Evan would have loved to come up here. This was just his kind of place.

But then our orders came up, and I diverted my attention to my orange juice. We ate in silence, and I could feel Nathan’s gaze watching us the whole time, though he didn’t say anything.

I looked around the café. It had a very nice appeal to it, with colorful, abstract paintings on the wall with red-shaded lamps hanging down from the ceiling over every table. There was soothing piano music playing in the background, creating a comforting silence between us.

It only took a few minutes for us to eat our food.

“Ready to go?” My mom asked, glancing at my empty plate littered with crumbs.

“Ready.” I mostly just wanted to get out of Nathan’s stare.

“You folks leaving already?” he asked.

“Yeah, we’ve got a fair amount of unpacking to do,” my mom said.

“Of course. Well, I’m sure I’ll see you around,” he said smiling. “Take care.”

I left the shop feeling somewhat confused. It’s not that he creeped me out, but it had been unsettling. He was cute, no doubt about that, but surely he was no Evan. I shoved the possibility from my mind as I climbed back into the car.