

Where the Heart Is
Chapter 1
Joe Bruner

The morning we left New York was beautiful, just like the day dad died, though the last signs of winter were melting, and summer was just starting to emerge. 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 mild 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 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.

Where the Heart Is
Chapter 2
Joe Bruner

I had my seat reclined, and was staring out the window, at the countryside rushing by. We had been driving for about five hours by this time, and just pulled out from lunch. The big ugly office buildings and hotels crammed around the highway entrances receded into the distance. Soon I was staring at idyllic green fields rolling by, one after the next, underneath a effervescent blue sky, filled with thick, full clouds – thicker than sheep wool.

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. For some reason, the comment really irked me.

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

“Like Dad? Will THAT be ok?”

My mom didn’t say anything.

“This whole fucking semester hasn’t been ok. Ever since Dad died in January, you’ve been pretending everything is all right. I’ve been struggling to put two and two together in my calculus class, and Evan hasn’t given a crap about anything. The only one here who’s been doing anything about this is Sarah, and she’s trying to get me and Evan back together.”

“Chase, please.” My mom sounded like she was about to start crying. She was gripping the steering wheel so tightly, her knuckles were completely white. “This whole semester I’ve been trying to keep it together for your sake.”

I fell silent and stared straight ahead out the windshield. Now I felt like crap. I wasn’t sure what to say.

The sun was much higher in the sky now. According to the car clock it was quarter past noon.

“Do you want to stop for lunch?” she asked her voice back to its usual cheerful tone.

“Yeah.”

“I know a great little diner in the next town coming up here. We used to stop there whenever we’d go up to Maine. Back then it was owned by Anthony, and now it’s owned by his daughter Amy.”

A few minutes later we were pulling off the highway, and driving into the tiny parking lot of the diner. Stiffly climbing out of the car, I stood up and stretched. I felt like I should be trying to touch the sky as I stretched. Even then it probably wouldn’t feel like enough.

The inside of the diner was cozy. Instantly I felt like I was walking into a time bubble, trapped in the 1970s. The floor was checkered black and white, and there were turquoise padded, silver chrome stools lined along the bar. In the back, a row of booths padded with the same turquoise leather were up against the windows.

“Welcome to Amy’s Diner,” a short, cheery woman said. She was very bright red, from her short hair to her lipstick to her shoes.

“Hello Amy,” my mom said perking up.

“Why hello dear!” She sounded like they were long lost friends. “It’s been a while now, hasn’t it?”

“A couple years since I’ve last been here,” my mom said.

“Good gracious. That long? Well, come on in. Take a seat wherever you’d like. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

We made our way to the back to pick a private booth, though no one else was in the diner so it didn’t really make a difference.

“What can I get you dears to drink,” she asked, placing a menu in front of each of us.

“I’ll start with an iced tea,” my mom said.

“I’ll just have a root beer,” I said, folding my arms and leaning on the table.

“Coming right up,” she said.

I glanced around the diner again. The place was spotless. The chrome stools glinted in the sunlight streaming through the windows.

Amy returned with our drinks, and took our orders. As she walked away with the menus, I turned back to my mom.

I tapped my fingers on the glass, and took a sip from the straw. The awkward silence lay thick between my mom and I. We exchanged glances a few times, but every time I opened my mouth, the words got stuck.

“You seem like you want to ask me something,” she said finally.

I took another sip from my root beer. “Why Maine?” I waited briefly, “I mean, you’ve told me about this cottage and all, but why are you going back?”

She sat back, her face taking a thoughtful pose. “Well, my childhood friend Rachel still lives up there. She’s moved in next to our cottage, or as close as next door can be in that town. She has a son, Nathan, who’s about your age. The cottage has been left in a mess, and with everything we’re bringing up, it’s not going to get any better. I was hoping they might help us clear out all that junk that my parents left.”

“Why haven’t I ever met them?”

My mom’s face fell. “We fell out of touch for a while, until dad passed away.” She didn’t say any more, and I didn’t ask.

Amy came back with our food, and that was the last of our conversation.

When we walked out of the diner, the sun was significantly lower in the sky, indicating it was well into the afternoon. I sighed, I just wanted to be there already.

“We’ve only got a couple hours left,” my mom said, though I could tell she was starting to feel the exhaustion as well.

Most of the drive back was silent. I entertained myself with timing how long it took us to go from one telephone pole to the next. We usually hit about 6 seconds. When I got bored of that, I started trying to watch out for stars. The sky was starting to lose light, and we pulled off towards a rest stop exit.

“Sorry,” my mom said, “I have got to stop for the restroom. We’ve still got about 45 minutes left or so.”

I groaned, but got out of the car when she parked. My mom raced to the restroom, but I slowly strolled up the windy path to the visitor center.

There was a gentle warm breeze you could see in the lawn that looked like it hadn’t been mown for a couple weeks. The sky was now dark blue, though not quite black. Stars were popping out. The gently 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 decided to also use the restroom.

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.

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?”

“Yessiree! But before we go in there, and see how bad the damage is, let’s walk down to that cabin over there, across this valley to that other hill. That’s where Rachel lives with Nathan.”

We didn’t even have to knock. Rachel through open the door, and I was immediately struck at how similar she looked to my mom. They could have been twins, even in their mid-thirties.

“Debbie?” The excitement in her voice 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. “Come in, come in, both of you. Make yourselves at home.”

We stepped into the house, and it looked homely. Framed photos of Rachel, and who I presumed to be Nathan hung on the wall near the door. Some of the photos included another girl,

probably about Nathan's age, and she had long hair reaching down below her shoulders, and it was filled with bright blue highlights.

Rachel came out from the kitchen with three mugs of tea. She saw me looking at the photos as she handed me a cup. "That's my son Nathan, and his childhood friend Stella. They've been friends since they were born. Basically."

I took a sip, scalding my tongue.

As we all sat down, I heard the back door open.

Rachel leaned forward. "Nathan? Is that you? Come into the living room will you? Our neighbors, the Silvermans arrived."

A moment later Nathan and Stella came in. Nathan had much shorter, cropped hair, and had clearly been working out since the photos had been taken. Stella's hair shimmered with a quality that clearly had not been caught on camera.

Nathan stepped forward and held out his hand. "Hey there Chase. I'm Nathan. And this is my friend Stella." We shook hands.

Stella turned towards him and whispered something.

"We're going to be upstairs if you need us mom," Nathan said.

Once they were upstairs, I settled back comfortably in my seat and held the hot cup of tea to warm my hands.

About an hour later my mom stood up and put her empty tea mug on the lamp table. "Well, Rachel, it's been good catching up. And we'll talk a lot, but it's time Chase and I got home so we can get to bed. It's been a long day for us."

Rachel stood up as well and gave her a hug.

“Good night Debbie!” She said as we walked out. “And it was nice to meet you Chase!” she said, smiling.

My mom sighed contentedly as we walked back. “Well that was wonderful. I’m sorry if you were bored out of your mind. Maybe next time Nathan will stay around.”

I shrugged, and then jumped as my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was a call. I scrambled to take it out, but then froze when I saw the name. Evan Morrow.

My mom glanced over. “You need to take that call?”

“No,” I said, hitting the power button to send it to voice mail. “It’s not important.”

Where the Heart Is
Chapter 3
Joe Bruner

My face felt warm, almost hot, and when I opened my eyes, sunlight was shining directly through the windows. Damn windows, I would have get out the curtains at some point, and before too long.

I stood up, and walked into my new personal bathroom. The view of the ocean from my shower was unbelievable. Opening the window, I listened to the constant wave crashes as I soaped up. The sun glinted off the curl of the waves, striking an odd contrast of white and blue in the water. As I dried myself off, my body dropped what felt like ten degrees when the wind breezed through the open window. I neatly draped my towel on the metal wrack on the sliding shower door, and walked over to the mirror. My comb lay on the counter, and as I flattened my hair, I noticed my eyes were a striking blue today. Sometimes they change from vivid blue to a dull bluish-grey. I wished they would just pick a color and stay that way, but Evan would always tell me they were so beautiful the way they are. A lump formed in my throat as I put the comb down and went back into my room to get dressed.

After getting as far as putting my pants on, I sighed, and sat down on my bed. The sight of my room depressed me. Boxes upon boxes were stacked against the walls. It would take me weeks, if not months to get through all of them. Some had been opened, books and newspaper and packing paper and wads of used tape all littered the floor. The walls were barren, an ugly off-white that showed off its cracks.

Finally I stood up and put my shirt on. I walked down stairs to the dining room. My mom was at the table with a plate of toast and cup of tea.

“Did you sleep well,” she asked, when I stumbled in.

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing my eyes. “The sun woke me up though. Where are the curtains?”

“Down here. I guess we didn’t think to put them up last night. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it later today. Do you want breakfast?”

I stared at the toast. “No, I’ll get food later when I’m hungry. I think I’m going to head out and walk around a bit.”

My mom seemed surprised, but she didn’t say anything.

I grabbed my sunglasses off the table and walked out. The fresh sea air was almost instantly rejuvenating. The sky was totally clear, and the hill our cottage was perched on a vibrant green. Standing at the top, I felt the freedom of the ocean in front of me, the sky above me, and the wind and waves calling out to me. I took a deep breath of the warm, salty air.

Taking my phone out of my pocket, I turned it on, and the first thing I saw was that Evan had apparently texted me after trying to call. *We need to talk...soon*. I grimaced and ignored it. I flipped through my contacts until I found Sarah Coyle. I hit the call button.

It rang twice before she picked up. “Chase! I’ve been waiting for you to call. How are you? What’s it like out there?”

I smiled at the sound of her voice. “It’s nice to hear you too,” I said. “This place is sweet, I’m not going to lie. Our cottage is quite literally on the shore.”

“That’s awesome. So you can, like, hear the ocean waves all night long and everything?”

“If I keep my windows open.” I could almost feel her excitement over the phone.

“That’s so cool. Look, I don’t know if you’ve heard from Evan at all—”

“He texted me last night.”

Silence. I sighed and waited. Slowly, I made my way to the beach, and trudged, one step at a time, through the sand.

“He did? ... What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

She sighed. "Are you going to say anything? Or are you going to continue this insistence that you don't want to talk to him?"

The bitterness in her tone caught me off guard. I said nothing. I sat down on the sand and stared across the ocean, watching the waves crash in front of me, one after the other, never ending. I tried to swallow several times, before I succeeded.

"Hello? Chase? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here," I finally managed to whisper. "And for the record, I do."

"You what?"

"I do want to talk to him. I want more than anything in the world to just sit and laugh and talk with him again."

"You still love him." She said it as a statement, not a question.

"I hate him. I hate him so much," I whispered, a tear escaping me.

"But you also love him."

I said nothing.

"Then what's the fucking problem? He even texted you! He couldn't have made it easier for you."

"Easy? I am 600 miles away. I am not coming back. There is nothing easy about it. He had his chance. He missed it. It's that simple."

"Look, he finally made the move. Now the ball is in your court. You better make it before it's too late."

I shivered. Then I shook my head. "I'm done talking about this. I'll talk when I'm ready. I'm not right now. That's just the way it's going to be. I need to go."

"Alright then, good bye. I want to hear from you again soon."

I simply hung up without saying anything. I chucked my iPhone into the sand and wrapped my arms around my bent legs.

“Things not going so great back at home?”

Nathan’s voice startled me a little, but I didn’t turn around. A moment later, he and Stella both sat down next to me.

“Moving is hard on everyone,” I said.

“I wish I could say I know,” Stella said.

I looked over at her. The blue highlights in her hair were quite vivid in the sunlight, and the way her hair spread over her shoulder was quite beautiful.

“No you don’t,” I said smiling. “I appreciate it though. The two of you have lived up here your whole lives?”

They both nodded.

“Born and raised here,” Nathan said matter-of-factly.

“Is it a good place to live?”

Nathan and Stella glanced at each other. “I say yes,” Nathan said. “It’s quiet, you get to know everyone – who is very friendly by the way – and you’ve pretty much got everything you could possibly want.”

“But don’t you get bored, without a big city nearby that you can just go to?” The thought of not having New York just minutes away still scared me.

“Psh, we’ve got the stars and the ocean,” was Nathan’s response.

I laughed.

“Who were you talking to on the phone?” Stella asked me.

I looked down at my hands clasped around my knees. “Just my old neighborhood friend, Sarah.”

“Anything you want to talk about?”

I stood up, and brushed the sand off my shorts. “Not really. You know, I think I’ll go and get some breakfast. Have you two eaten yet?”

Where the Heart Is
Chapter 4
Joe Bruner

The setting sun had sunk low in the horizon, and its harsh golden glow was softened through my newly placed curtains, giving the room a sea-green tint now. I sat on the edge of my bed, looking at the stacked boxes. Finally I pulled one labeled “Personal Books” aside, and sliced through the tape with my knife. Inside was a mixture of my high school and free reading books. Sighing, I grabbed books, five at a time, and placed them haphazardly on my shelf. Dickens, Knowles, Hawthorne or Emerson, it didn’t make any difference.

When I got to the bottom of the box, I found a coil bound manuscript of my work. It was the portfolio of my work for the introductory creative writing course I had taken my sophomore year. I pulled it out, and sat back on my bed. Flipping to the first page, I started grimacing immediately. The poetry was awful, and my one act play was, if anything, even worse. I continued to read however. I chuckled at the memories, like the memoir essay I wrote about the time I had put a frog in my teacher’s water bottle.

I continued to read until the sun no longer shone through the window, but instead the sky was filled with a deep navy blue. Suddenly there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I called, closing my portfolio.

It was Nathan. “Hey Chase, how’s it going? You got any of that unpacking done this week you said you needed to?”

“Ha! No, I got distracted and started reading instead. What’s up? Is Stella here?”

“She’s working at the bakery tonight, so I thought since I was bored out of my frickin mind I would drop by and see what’s up. See if you got any unpacking done.”

“Nope, I just was reading my sophomore creative writing portfolio from high school.” I slid it under my covers.

“Can I take a look?”

“Hell no.”

“Why not?”

I stared at him. “It’s embarrassing. That’s why. Besides, I was just about to head into the den anyway, and see if I might be more successful unpacking there.”

“Liar.”

I grinned, but stood up.

He led the way out, and turned down the hall towards the upstairs study, which was supposedly going to be a den instead.

“So what have you been up to this week?” I asked.

“Not much. Just hanging out, working in the bakery, spending time with Stella.” We paused when we made it to the den door.

“Brace yourself,” I said. I gave a large breath when we walked into the room.

Boxes were strewn in every direction, some were in half-assed stacks, but mostly they were in a chaotic mess all over the place.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding. The den really is a mess right now.”

I nodded. There were no words to express it. We sat down on the sofa, and I pulled a couple boxes towards us. Upon opening them, it was clear they were from the attic. Both boxes were filled with documents. I groaned as I stood up to grab a couple plastic crates and file folders. “All documents are supposed to get filed away, until my mom has the time to go through all of them and decide what she wants to keep.”

“Sounds good. Hey, is this you?” He asked, pulling out an old photo of me.

It was a photo of me when I was six years old. It was a vacation to San Francisco, and my parents had gotten me standing next to a Redwood.

“Give that to me,” I said, snatching the photo. “But yes, it was me when I was six. We were in San Francisco.”

He grinned. “You were a cute six year old.”

“Are you hitting on me, when I was six?” I turned to stare at him.

“No.”

“Good, because somehow I don’t think Stella would appreciate that very much,” I said, placing the folder in a red file.

He chuckled. “Hey, what’s this?” he asked. He scooted closer to show me another photo. This one had three people in it.

I turned on the second lamp in the den, filling the room with a cozy light. “That’s... my family. That’s me with my mom and my dad.”

We sat in silence, as we both just stared at the photo. “You don’t talk about your dad,” he said. “Where is he?”

“Your mom didn’t tell you?” I asked, legitimately surprised. “I thought our moms told each other everything. I would’ve thought you’d have heard by now.”

“Heard what?” He put the photo down and turned towards me.

“My dad died in January.”

That shut him up. We just sat there in an awkward silence. With the window opened just a crack, I could hear the faint crash of the ocean waves in the distance. “Wow,” he finally said. “I’m so sorry.”

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. It was my mom. “Dinner’s ready. You coming down?”

I nodded.

“You staying, Nathan?” I glanced at him.

He shrugged and grinned. "Sure, if you're offering."

We all walked down stairs to the kitchen. Surprisingly it was mostly clean, and the counters were finally clear of boxes. "You've been busy," I said, impressed.

"And you haven't?" She asked.

"Touché."

Dinner that night was salad and lasagna, with a glass of lukewarm Sprite. For a few minutes, the only sounds were of chewing and slurping soda.

"You boys seem awfully quiet tonight. Something on your minds?" My mom carefully laid her fork and knife across her plate.

Nathan looked over at me.

"Not really," I said. "We were just unpacking the den. That's all."

She nodded.

After a few more minutes of silence, I finally decided to get up. Nathan followed me, and I walked out to the ocean. I stood with my feet buried in the cold sand, just out of reach of the waves. The sky was black, and the stars glittered in the night sky, hard and cold in the absence of the moon.

"You want to talk about it?" Nathan came up on my right, and then sat down.

"About what?" I said, sighing as I sat down as well.

He glanced at me.

I stared back. "Is it that obvious?"

He nodded.

I scooped up sand in my hand. I stared at the foam racing up to my ankles. Then I flung the sand into the ocean. "When he died, I felt like the world had come to an end."

"Were the two of you close?"

“Yes.” I flung more sand into the ocean. “You know, when I turned ten, to celebrate my ‘double-digits’ my dad took me to go skiing for the first time. We got caught in a snow storm that night however, and couldn’t start driving home. We checked into the resort hotel, where my dad then proceeded to buy us hot chocolate and popcorn from the resort concession. We holed up in our room, and watched It’s a Charlie Brown Christmas.”

“Sounds like a cool dad.”

“That is one of my favorite memories I have of my dad.”

Nathan smiled. “That’s really cool. I’m jealous of that. My dad... he’s always away on some business trip. He’s gone this whole summer to Europe for business.”

“You two aren’t that close, I take it.”

“No, not at all. He wasn’t even home for my high school graduation.” He sighed, and leaned back on his arms.

Suddenly I heard a buzz, and Nathan checked his phone. “Oh, that’s Stella. She’s out of the bakery now,” he said, standing up. “You want to join us?”

“No thanks,” I said, smiling. “You two go hang out and have fun. I think I’ll stay in tonight.”

“Your choice.” He shrugged. Then he held out his arms.

I returned the hug.

We slowly trudged our way back up towards the house.

“See you tomorrow?” He asked.

I nodded. When I made it up to my room, I put my phone down on my bed, but it almost instantly buzzed. It was a text. From Evan.

“Where are you? Why won’t you respond? We need to talk. Soon.”

I deleted the text.

Where the Heart Is
Chapter 5
Joe Bruner

One Month Later: Mid-July

The rain was crashing down in torrents that threatened to wipe out the town, and I was in the street, making my way to the bakery in a rain coat so useless that my clothes were sopping wet. With each step, I could feel the squish of excess water squeeze out of my shoes. My hair was plastered to my skull. I could hardly see where I was going, but recognized the blurry bakery sign, and more importantly the aroma of freshly baked bread.

When I got inside, George was standing at the counter, organizing the pastries, “Chase! You’re soaked!” He rushed from behind the counter to help me get my coat off.

“Not in the back today?”

“I’ve left it to Stella for the morning. She should be out in a few minutes.” He handed me a towel, which I gladly used to dry my hair. He then handed me a dry shirt. “You might as well get as comfortable as you can. Sorry I don’t have dry pants for you.”

I laughed. “I appreciate it. So you trust Stella in the back now?” I turned away quickly as I changed shirts.

“Her work is good. And she’s a smart girl. If no one else shows up, she may end up running the place when I’m gone.” He returned to the counter.

“Thinking of retiring soon?”

“Maybe. Not really. But one never knows, does he?” He asked, with a smile.

Then Stella walked out from the back, her apron covered in flour. She sighed and took off her chef’s hat. “Hey Chase, I’ll be with you in a minute.” She untied her apron and rushed to the restroom.

I sat down at a table and looked out the window. The rain was so thick it obscured the buildings across the street from view. Thick rivulets of water raced down the curbside, and pooled at the grated drains near the intersections. I swept my hand through my hair, and shook out a few more drops. I had gotten a text from Stella that she wanted to talk. It perplexed me. I knew she and Nathan hung out a lot, but I personally hadn't been around her too much. What could I possibly offer her?

Stella then came back out and sat down at the table.

"I got your message. I'm here. What did you want to talk about?"

She pulled out her phone and checked the time.

Before she spoke, George came by with two blueberry scones. "It's on the house," he said with a wide smile.

"Thanks," we said simultaneously.

I glanced back at her, taking a bite out of my scone.

She looked down, and cleared her throat. "Have you... have you ever been in love?" She fidgeted with her phone.

I took a deep breath and turned towards the window. "That's a strange question to ask," I said. "Why do you ask it?"

She continued to avoid making eye contact with me. "What has Nathan told you about the two of us?"

"Nothing. He hasn't said a word," I said as reassuringly as possible.

She nodded, looking like she was about to cry.

"Damn it Stella, tell me what's going on. Why are you asking me these things?" I slid my now empty plate off to the side. "What's wrong?"

She smiled and nodded. “You know, I used to think Nathan would probably be the guy I would end up marrying.” She wiped a solitary tear.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Really? Your husband?”

She laughed as well. “Well, maybe that sounds strange to you, but it is small town here. Not a whole lot of people end up leaving, so often we meet our partners as we grow up.”

“Are you saying you love Nathan?”

Stella sighed. “I did. Once upon a time. Recently... I haven’t been so sure.”

“Why not? The way you two always hang out, this whole time I assumed you were dating. Or at least flirting.” We both smiled.

“I don’t know. It’s just our relationship never changed. Whenever we would go on a date, or I guess what I always thought of as a date, we eventually ended up talking about the same things.”

“Does he know how you felt?”

“He probably picked up on it, but we never talked about it. I was pretty close to letting go of it, until recently.”

“You’re having feelings for him again?”

She took the last bite of her scone. “Well, it’s probably more jealousy than anything else. Probably not sustainable. I’ve seen the way he looks at you. There was a time I would have given anything for him to look at me like that.”

“Pssht.” I shook my head. “You’re imagining it. He’s not gay.”

She smiled shrewdly. “No he’s not. But I’m surprised he hasn’t told you. He is bi, and he’s known it for years.”

Now it was my turn to look out the window, and avoid meeting her gaze. That fact disturbed me. Nathan was bi, and he already had long since identified as such. Of course the first

thing my mind jumped to was the intimate moments we had shared. The hug, the glances, the smiles. Did he think they were more than that? I glanced outside the window. It looked like the rain was starting to ease up a bit. “You know, when you asked me if I’ve ever been in love, the answer is yes.”

She looked up sharply. “Really? What was her name?”

I swallowed. “His name was Evan.”

“Ah... He’s the friend you had a falling out with?”

“The same.”

George came by with a couple cups of hot chocolate. “I’m drying your shirt in the back, Chase. It should be ready soon.”

“Thanks so much,” I smiled.

Stella accepted her coffee with a nod. “So, you and Evan...”

“What do you want to know? We were boyfriends. Childhood friends since we were born practically. And then, then we had a falling out.”

“About what?” She took a sip of her hot chocolate.

I took a shuddering breath. “He told me I was the reason my father died. I couldn’t forgive him for that.”

“Wow.” We sat in an awkward silence. Outside, the rain was no more than a slight drizzle. The clouds were beginning to thin. “If you don’t mind my asking, what made him say that?”

“Because maybe,” I said sighing, “I did kill my father.”

Stella leaned forward and gave me a half glare. “Really. So what makes you say that? Evan getting to your head?”

“Well, the last night I saw him, we got into this massive fight. He and mom were arguing about my college plans. I took mom’s side, said some pretty nasty stuff. Dad stormed out of the house.” I swallowed, and struggled to keep myself together. “We didn’t hear from him again. Early morning, at 4:13, the police knocked on our door to inform us that dad had been killed in a car accident.”

“So how did Evan conclude you were guilty?”

I sighed. “He was bitter. Dad’s death hit me hard, and I was depressed the rest of the semester. I kind of withdrew from a lot of things. He... didn’t handle that well. Finally, towards the end, he snapped. He called me a selfish bitch, and that I was the reason that my father died.”

She tilted her head, “The way you talk about it, you sound like you think he’s right. And yet you’re still angry.”

“Just because he’s right, doesn’t excuse him saying it.”

“No it doesn’t. But why is he right?”

Looking outside, there was weak sunlight shining through the trees near the road. “Maybe if I hadn’t gotten into the fight, dad might not have left. Might not have crashed. Might not have died.”

Stella shook her head. “Maybe anything I say now won’t matter, but that’s bullshit. You didn’t kill your father. People fight. It’s what they do. Fighting doesn’t kill people.”

I couldn’t think of what to say, after all she was right. It wasn’t like I could just believe her.

“I think,” she said, taking the last sips of her hot chocolate, “you need to talk to Evan. He’s the only one who has answers for you.”

I glanced out the window and saw Nathan coming in the distance. “Not you too.” I sighed. “That’s what I was arguing with my friend Sarah back a while ago. Still argue with her in

fact. But Stella, do me a favor. Not a word to Nathan. He's a good friend, yes, but I'm not interested in another romance. Hating one person is enough, I don't want--"

"To take that risk again?"

I shrugged.

Suddenly the bells on the door jingled. Nathan walked in. "Hey guys! What's up?"

"Well, I should head out," Stella stood up. "I'll see you boys later." She tossed her paper cup out as she left the bakery.

Nathan looked at me. "What was that about? Was it something I did?"

"No. Don't worry about it. We were just having a conversation."

"About what?"

"The past."

"Huh. It seems that's the topic going around these days. I found something that I figured you'd probably want to see. I went over to your house, but your mom said you were at the bakery with Stella. So here I am."

"Let me get my shirt, and then I'll be ready." I turned to George who went to the back to retrieve my shirt.

"Here you are Chase, perfectly dry now."

"Thanks so much for everything." We shook hands. I changed, and then turned to Nathan. "Ready to go."

He led the way out. Now the sky was mostly cloudy, though patches of blue sky were here and there. The sun's weak light shimmered through the clouds, catching in the puddles of water sitting on the sidewalk. Raindrops trembled on pine trees until they grew ripe and fell off, landing on the pavement with a definitive splash. With the dust and grime swept into the drains, the whole town glistened with vibrant colors, refreshed from the morning's rain.

“What’s the thing that you wanted to show me?”

He pulled out a photo from his jacket. “This is a photo that my mom had lying around the house.” We stopped underneath a pine tree and street lamp at the corner. The photo had four people in it. They looked to be older teenagers perhaps.

“Wait a minute. That’s my mom. And dad. And that’s...”

“My parents as well.”

“Wait, all four of them knew each other?”

He grinned. “Not only did the four of them know each other, they all grew up together.”

“How did I not know this? Did you know this?”

He shrugged. “I knew my parents had met here in this town. They’ve always told me that I would probably meet my own partner here.”

“Stella.”

Nathan sighed, and looked up and around. “So that’s what you two were talking about this morning.”

“Anything you want to say?”

“No, not really. There’s nothing much to say anyway.” He took the photo back and glanced at it again. “No, I did not know that my parents knew yours. I didn’t even know you existed a couple months ago.”

“Same. I asked my mom why I hadn’t heard about you and Rachel, if they were childhood friends. She told me that they had fallen out of touch for a while, until my dad passed away. That was all she said.” I took the photo back and stared at it again. The four of them looked so happy with wide grins on their faces. “Do you mind if I take this with me?”

“Go for it.”

“I want to go talk to my mom for a bit. See you later this afternoon?”

Nathan nodded.

“Great.” I turned around and started walking towards my house, trying to figure out what I was going to say. When I arrived there, my mom was out front, watering the garden.

“Chase, how was your chat with Stella?”

“Enlightening,” I said, trying to keep the bitterness from my voice. “And then I ran into Nathan. And he had something interesting to show me.”

“Really? What was that?” Her voice was quite convincingly innocent. Her eyes gave her nervousness away though.

“This photograph.” I handed her the picture. I noticed the mud on her knees and hands while she looked at it. It looked like she had been out since the rain stopped.

“What is this? How did you get this?” She looked up directly at me.

“It’s you mom. And dad. And Debbie, and Nathan’s dad. The four of you knew each other. The four of you grew up together.”

My mom turned away.

“What are we really doing here? Why the hell did you come back? And why the hell did I not know about Nathan’s family.”

Suddenly she stood up right and turned towards me. “That’s none of your damn business,” she snapped.

I breathed heavily, trying to swallow my rage. “Look mom. I’ve tried to be nice here. I’ve asked you why we’re coming here, and you ducked my answer. I respected that. But now I know that this is where you met dad. You knew coming back here would only be more painful than leaving the place he died. I want to know why.”

My mom refused to meet my gaze as I spoke.

“He might have been your husband,” my voice rose higher and higher, “but HE WAS MY DAD! I THINK I DESERVE TO GET SOME ANSWERS!”

She wiped a tear away as I fell silent. After standing and looking out into the distance, she finally met my gaze. “Be careful Chase,” she whispered, “the deeper you dig, the less you want to know. Some bodies are meant to stay buried.” Then she turned away and slipped into the house.

I shook my head and took a deep, shuddering breath as I walked down to the coast. I couldn't tell you why I got so angry. I wanted to know, and she had never kept any secrets from me before. I had always considered her one of my closest friends, until now.

As these thoughts swirled around in my head, I looked across the ocean. The storm was clearly moving out across the water, the wind and the waves choppy, almost in sync, as if in a complicated dance with each other. On either side of the horizon, I could see the ends of a rainbow, though the top was obscured by the storm clouds.