

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.

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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.