

## Cracked Bearings

“Let’s try there,” Jake said. He pointed to the billboard with blue neon lights ahead, Blue Flame Diner.

“We’re almost at the motel,” Mace said.

“Please.” Jake parted his coal black hair so Mace could see his eyes.

The truck’s wheel slipped through Mace’s hand as he turned towards the diner. Jake couldn’t help but watch Mace’s triceps bulge. The diner was squeezed between shrubs and its own slab of concrete. It didn’t look like much, a business that would shut down at the end of the year leaving the place alone, on a slab, just out of reach of the highway. It reminded Jake of home. He missed Jordan Valley, West Virginia, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell Mace.

Mace was different than the other truck drivers. Gale, Ron, and Phil had taken him off to back roads until the darkness swallowed them for at least a few hours. Whenever the sun came up they fled, dropped Jake off at some stop along a main road. Mace cared. There was something about Mace that made Jake want to ride-shotgun for the last four months.

When Mace killed the engines, Jake flung the door open and stepped out into what was left of the sunlight. Blue Flame needed a good wash. Bugs and bird poop clung to the cement walls and metal roof. The overhang above the front doors faded from blue to shades of white Jake knew hadn’t been named.

“Are you coming?” Jake’s head barely met the bottom hinge of the truck door. The hinges, larger than his hands, still didn’t seem large enough to counteract 65 MPH impact. Mace had told him differently. Called it scaled construction. Jake didn’t wait for Mace to head inside.

Inside, many of the tables sat empty. Mace caught up and stood beside Jake. Jake noticed a dime-sized scar on Mace's temple. He'd never noticed it before. Jake covered the scar with his fingertip and Mace responded placing his hand on the small of Jake's back. For a moment, it was just them. When a gray-haired woman pushed past them, her red lips pursed, Jake backed away, Mace's hand still weighing heavy on his back. Everything was happening too quick. Although Jake hated labels, he needed them. Acquaintances knew basic facts. Jake knew the folds of Mace's skin, the way his left love handle had more fat to grip than the right. How his birthmark hid between the skin where hipbone met torso.

"You okay?" Mace said.

"Yeah, just homesick." Homesick wasn't the right word, but it came out anyway.

"Stupid, right?"

Two waitresses walked by redistributing the weight of the plates on either side of their tray. Jake stepped left, to make room for one of the waitresses but Mace moved with him. The waitress stopped but didn't turn around. When Jake turned to ask for service, Mace slipped behind him into the first empty booth.

Jake to waved at one of the waitresses. The girl didn't look old enough to have a work permit. Blonde and thin; her nametag read Bridget. Go play, Jake thought. Explore. Her eyes were as bloodshot as his after spending three nights in the truck. Jake and Mace made temporary homes, moving from motels to hotels, and, sometimes, they just stayed in the truck. The nights in the truck were the ones Jake hated most, curled up on the flat mattress as hard as the dashboard that crushed Jake's knees. Apparently, mattresses in trucks were normal.

Economical.

"Can we get some water?" Jake asked.

Bridget sighed, her breath smelled of stale milk and cigarettes. Music crackled through the speaker, a few notes were sung before a large burst of sound interrupted, then, silence. Bridget sat their waters on the table just as Mace reached across for Jake's hand. Bridget bit her lip. Jake felt sick. He wriggled his wrist loose of Mace's grip, smoothing the wrinkles of the stained tablecloth.

"Stop caring," Mace said.

"It's easy for you," Jake said.

Mace scooted out of the booth to grab a salad, and a man in Khakis followed behind him. Jake dipped his straw in the water, placed his finger on the top of the straw, and lifted it out leaving the water suspended. Khaki guy, hair slicked back, stepped too close behind Mace. After Mace had touched the serving spoon, the man leaned in, untucked his shirt, and used it as a barrier. The burning pushed back through Jake's throat, up from the stomach until the burning flowed through his tongue. No matter how hard Jake tried, he couldn't swallow his anger.

"Did you see that?" Jake removed his finger-breaking the seal of the straw.

"Yeah. Not my problem." A crouton fell into the small puddle of water on the table.

When Jake got to the buffet, he touched every serving spoon while Khaki guy watched. That'll show him. Jake piled on spoonfuls of everything—lettuce, bacon, cheese, peppers, eggs, ranch dressing—knowing he couldn't eat it all. Jake scooted his arm across the table, his palm face up. After a few more bites, Mace placed his hand in Jake's. Everywhere Jake traveled, eyes turned his way. He fidgeted and snapped responses, anything to take the attention off of him. He reached over with his free hand and took a bite of Mace's salad. When Khaki guy came by, Jake smiled.

When Bridget brought the rest of their food over, Jake didn't wait for her to leave before eating. He ran his tongue over the chicken skin, the ridges smoothing out as it melted in his mouth. Steam hit his cheek. Across the table, Mace smiled at him, really smiled, the kind where the edges of the lips disappeared into the cheeks. Jake hadn't seen Mace smile like this since they met. Jake felt full. Safe.

Back on the road, brown grass and leaves coated the berm. Jake missed Jordan Valley; he loved how everything begged color eclipsing the swell of the mountains in the distance. He used to help his dad rake the leaves in the yard. Sometimes, his dad would lift him in the orange leaf bags and let him stomp and crush them. He liked the snap of the leaves. The way the sound rushed through his body. Now, he wished he could step outside the truck and let the leaves blow around him, grabbing them, then snap them clean in his hands. Jake pulled his knees to his chest, curled into the bucket seat until they pulled into the Red Roof Inn.

Every hotel room they stayed in looked the same, diamond patterned carpet and all white bedding. Jake tossed his duffle bag on the bed, collapsing beside it. The bed swallowed his body until he didn't want to move. He watched Mace unpack the suitcase tossing clothes over the mandatory bible in the drawer. Mace creased his shirts at each fold, running his hand over each side until he was sure the material wouldn't loosen. Jake tossed his backpack on the floor.

"How do you do this all the time?" Jake asked. "My neck is killing me."

Mace pulled Jake towards him. "I don't stress about the little things."

"I don't stress."

"Bullshit."

Jake sat up and Mace followed. For a few minutes, they listened to the footsteps in the room above them.

“Here,” Mace said, straddling Jake. Jake leaned into him. “You can’t worry what everyone else thinks.”

Mace’s hand-sweat clung to the fabric of Jake’s shirt, as Mace kneaded Jake’s skin. The movements were smooth, pulling Jake’s skin taut and then pushing it back together. He shivered, his skin going numb under Mace’s hands.

“Down a little,” Jake said. He pointed to the dime-sized mole where his neck met his back. Worrying ran in his family.

“You need to call them,” Mace said.

Since he left, Jake refused to call his parents. They didn’t care about him. If his parents cared, they’d have known he was struggling. “I will,” Jake said.

When Mace pulled away, Jake turned on his side, both of their legs tangled now in the white sheets. Through the slit in the blind, Jake could make out the espresso machines at the coffee shop. He could use a shot right now. Something to help him sort out his nerves.

“I refuse to be the next headline on the eleven o’clock news,” Mace said.

“Chill out.” A muscle spasm started in Jake’s neck. He applied pressure as if willing it to stop.

“You don’t have to worry about seeing your face plastered around on the news.” Mace threw up his hands. His crows feet deepened at the corner of each eye. For thirty, Mace looked young.

“They probably don’t even know you exist.” Jake left at night. The only person who he knew saw him leave with Mace was Ginny, the Citgo worker. Even though she knew his family, she was getting older.

“The longer you wait—”

“I know.”

Taking a deep breath, Jake brushed back Mace’s bangs, to look into his eyes. Mace’s left eye usually stayed bloodshot after staring at the road too long. Jake didn’t know where they were exactly, the green highway signs blurred together, as part of the landscape as the cold, cracked pavement that rushed beneath them. Not black or gray but something in between the two.

“I’m sorry. Just let me get my bearings,” Jake said.

Right before he left Jordan Valley, the mountains were leeches. He watched them encase his parents and suck them dry. Staying in the valley meant succumbing to the valley’s expectations, expectations carved deep into the mountainsides.

The door in the room beside them slammed shut; the TV came on. Jake couldn’t tell what their neighbors were watching, but he listened to the muffled sounds like he used to at home when he sat on the staircase, his parents together on the couch.

“I’ve been engaged twice,” Mace said. He unwove his leg from Jake’s and pulled it back under the comforter.

Jake moved to the edge of the bed. He traced the seam in the comforter, an upside down heart. At first the curve was hard to mimic but the more he ran his finger over the same seam, the more he understood how to trace it without going off course. “Twice?” Jake asked. The word was more of a squeak as if he were going through puberty again.

“To the same woman.”

When they first met, Jake didn’t care to know Mace’s history. All he saw was another driver who might leave him on the side of the road to fend for himself. The voices on the TV

came through the walls and the shower started, the water pounding against the plastic tub, a million raindrops falling at once.

“I proposed at our Senior Prom. Clare left me by Halloween and returned during her Christmas break. She said it was the idea of commitment. We were only together because everyone around us thought we’d make a good pair.”

Jake leaned away from the cinnamon spice body wash Mace had bought on the clearance rack at a gas station. It reminded Jake of the holiday dinners his mom would fix for the family, the four of them plus Colleen and her mom.

“Don’t,” Jake said. The word was soft.

He kept his eyes off Mace. Jake didn’t ask Mace to share his past with him; in fact, Jake had a don’t ask don’t tell policy. He didn’t care about Mace’s life, or at least that is what he told himself. But even he didn’t believe in it anymore.

“By New Year’s Eve I was kissing her brother at their parent’s party.” Mace laughed.

Jake gathered his clothes and walked into the bathroom. He didn’t recognize himself in the mirror anymore. The freckles underneath his eyes looked like they attacked one another forming a large blob of discoloration. He leaned over the large counter. Placing one finger at the corner of his eye, he tugged the skin outward as if by stretching it the freckles would go back to their designated spots. When they didn’t return, he let the skin slip from the pressure of his finger. He had grown used to the unforgiving fluorescent lights, the way they highlighted every pore and exposed blackheads that hid in the folds of his nostrils and his cheeks. The longer he looked in the mirror, the more his skin turned from pink to yellow.

Steam filled the small room, but Jake liked the fogginess. If he closed his eyes, it felt like he was home, stuck in the summer heat, breathless. The heat made him want to go swim in the

creek near his parents' house. He didn't know of any creeks nearby, just brick buildings and sidewalks planned out in perfect blocks.

"We're out of ice," Mace yelled.

A cool breeze snuck through the cracked door. Jake didn't open the shower curtain, but he could hear Mace pour what was left of the ice in the sink. If Clare was Mace's first love, and her brother was Mace's second, then where did he stand?

Jake remained silent, letting the steady beat of the water keep him company. Maybe his silence was childish, but how did Mace expect him to take the news of his past relationships? Mace was engaged twice by thirty. At eighteen, Jake didn't even know if he was capable of loving anyone outside his family.

He grabbed the body wash. City scum, exhaust, and oil clogged his pores. He massaged the soap into his skin, kneaded it in as Mace kneaded the kinks out of his back only an hour earlier. But even after he rinsed, he still felt dirty.

In the room, Jake tried out every seat. He moved from the bed to the chair at the table. He had exhausted the remote, clicking through the channels, watching one talk show then the next until the hosts' voices ran together. Lying on the bed, Jake closed his eyes, hoping that when he woke up Mace would be back and Jake could forget about Clare and her brother. Instead, he propped himself against the headboard and flipped the TV to *Maury*. The show was one he watched with his dad in the summer. His dad enjoyed the paternity episodes, calculating the shared genes between the small baby and the potential father. What Jake noticed wasn't the physical features of the baby, the probability of genes, but the unnoticed actions.



He turned up the volume, drowning out the hallway noise of families moving on to their next destination. Maury situated himself in his chair crossed his left leg over his right, moving his left hand towards the camera, as if to punctuate each word.

“Amanda, when people look at you and look at your fiancé do they ever question where your kids came from?” Maury said.

A split screen on the monitor appeared behind him showing Amanda, her fiancé Sam, and their two caramel colored kids between them.

“My family is naturally dark,” Amanda said. She brought her shoulders up with a dramatic sigh, the movement pushing her skin until her double chin was the most prominent part of her face.

Amanda’s skin was so pale even the stage make-up made her look washed out on the screen. She glanced away at the audience, shook her head, her chins on a two second delay, as the audience protested that her fiancé was, in fact, the father. The audience pointed at the screen behind Maury and shouted their conclusions.

“Idiot,” Jake muttered.

“Who’s an idiot?” Mace said. He opened the door, the ice bucket in one hand, a pizza in the other, and a USA Today he kicked in with his leather boots. Jake hadn’t seen those boots before.

When Jake didn’t respond, Mace sat on the bed and rolled the desk chair between them. Closing his eyes, Jake pretended to sleep, just like he’d pretend when his parents fought in the house. Most of the time, they didn’t bother to see if he was actually sleeping.

“I haven’t slept with no one else,” the woman said on TV.

“Were you really watching this?” Mace asked.

Jake moved slightly, turned his back to Mace, and wondered how long he could avoid talking to him.

“The results are in,” Maury said.

“Quit acting like a kid,” Mace said. He climbed onto the bed and Jake’s body slumped towards him. The body wash encased them both until Jake couldn’t tell where he ended and Mace began. Mace bounced beside him, and Jake bit his tongue to keep from backhanding Mace across the face.

“Stop moving,” Jake sat up.

“If you’re going to act like a kid, I am too.” Mace shifted around, his shirt riding up, his boxers peeking over his pants.

Jake moved again. *Not the father* was flashing in the corner of the TV. The studio audience was on their feet, chanting and screaming as if Amanda already didn’t feel bad enough. She disappeared from the main stage her fiancé’s face wrinkled in confusion. Suspecting someone had a life outside of their relationship was hard enough, but the pain came from knowing the truth.

Maury led Amanda’s fiancé backstage, the cameras followed them to a couch strategically placed in the hallway. “I wouldn’t have flown all the way here if I didn’t think he was the father,” she said. She buried her head in her hands.

“I’m still going to take care of them,” the fiancé protested, down on his knees in front of her.

Jake tried to understand why people flocked to Maury, mesmerized by Amanda and her fiancé and their ability to share their life with millions of viewers for years in syndication. Hell, any time he tried to share with Mace how he felt, about them, about their situation, he shut down

and walked away. He had grown used to shutting down; it's what his family did best. But he didn't want to, it's just what came easiest. The words were in his mouth. All he had to do was spit them out.

“What is this?” Jake finally asked. He buried his chin in his chest until his chest hurt.

Mace leaned against the headboard. The wrinkles in his shirt disappeared then stretched over his long torso. Mace sighed. Jake wondered if the sighs were Mace's way of looking for the right words.

Jake contorted his stiff torso and mimicked Mace's arched back. “What is this? What are we?”

Mace locked in on the brick building. “We're together,” he said.

Jake tried to find the same brick as Mace, but there were too many to choose. Instead, Jake placed his left hand on Mace's neck, where skull met spine.