

*Charlene*

*Cantwell, Alaska*

*3.30pm*

Sure, I called Jim. Of course I did. What would you have done? I only can't believe I didn't do it sooner. Seeing Isaac sitting in that strange pick-up with his face all battered and bruised, hiding there like he didn't want me to notice. And after what I'd seen the night before and the state Jim was in when I called it quits... I should have put two and two together right away.

Obviously, that man's got a problem with drink. I've always known that. Don't take me wrong – Jim's no alcoholic. Not yet. But when he does hit the bottle, he hits it hard, and more often than not it brings out the worst in him. It loosens his tongue like it does most anybody's, I guess. And when he's telling his stories and playing a crowd it's the sweetest thing you ever saw. He's just so funny with it. Funny and straight up – that's why I love him. Hell, everyone loves him for it. But sooner or later, it's almost inevitable, he'll go and say something to rile someone up the wrong way, and then out it all comes. All the anger. All the bitterness. Something from his past that didn't go down right. That he's still digesting. And it's like whoever he's up against ain't even there, like he's talking to a ghost. And whoever it is, well... they don't know jack about life. Or they're all talk and no action. Or they're just like every other woman he ever met – as twofaced as the Queen of Spades. No compromise – that's Jim's philosophy. But that's just his problem, heaping all his high and mighty expectations on top of everyone. Everyone except himself, that is.

People cope with hurt in different ways. Some people don't cope at all.

Whatever's eating Jim deep down, when I finally called, I didn't exactly know Isaac was in any kind of trouble. I just had a feeling I ought to say something. I'd already passed two

cars broken down in the snow, and when the storm warning came over the radio I thought: *Jim Greene, you stupid, selfish man – nursing a hangover while your son's out hitching rides with strangers and a blizzard blowin' in!* So I pulled in at the next stop to call and tell him what a jackass I thought he was. That's when they told me at the diner how the highway was being closed. Well, I was almost twice as mad then. But when Jim finally picked up the phone, I could tell from his voice right away that something was wrong.

'Woman, where you at? I need my goddam truck... now!'

'Well, I can't help you there, sugar,' I told him. 'I'm half-way to Fairbanks and the highway's closed in both directions. And you got some nerve sending your child out in this weather to get you coffee. Did you actually tell him to hitch a ride into town, cowboy, or does he just take after you?'

For a second Jim didn't say anything. Then it was like everything I'd been saying hit home at last.

'What are you talking about? You mean you've seen him?'

'Yeah, I seen him. Riding shotgun in some godforsaken pickup, outside Headersville store.'

Suddenly he wanted to know everything, though he wouldn't answer any of my questions. I could tell he was starting to panic, so I explained from the beginning how I'd seen Isaac sitting there slumped down. How he said he was out buying coffee to help his old man sober up. But Jim swore straight up that he never asked Isaac to go anywhere or buy anything.

'Did he have his pack with him? Did he say anything else?'

I told him I didn't notice any backpack, but that he looked like he was trying to avoid me. I said he seemed real shy, but then given the state of his face I wasn't exactly surprised.

'What do you mean? What was wrong with his face?'

‘It’s like I tried telling you last night, Jim – you’re too hard on the poor kid. You can’t go treating people that way, least of all your own son. Problem is, when you start up drinking...’

‘Jeez, woman! Talk some sense. I never touched the boy’s face. He tripped over the sled and that’s his own stupid fault...’

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, but there was no use trying to talk sense into him. Jim just got it into his head right away that the driver of that yellow pick-up was the one to blame. But on that front, I wasn’t much help. I couldn’t say what make of vehicle it was or which way it was headed. All I remember is that the driver looked like he might have been Alaska Native... that he had on a green jacket... and might have had a beard... and that’s about all. I was still pretty upset myself, at the time.

Then Jim told me about the email Isaac had been writing – how he seemed to be planning to get to the airport and back home to San Diego. Well, I told Jim then and there he needed to call the State Troopers, but he kept saying it was too early for that and how he needed somehow to figure this out by himself.

Maybe he was still hung over. I think he was scared. Really scared. And when people get scared, they don’t think straight. I said he should borrow a vehicle from someone in town, but he didn’t like that idea either. He kept on about how no one needed to know just yet. I wasn’t to mention any of this to anybody. This was a family matter, and he needed to figure it through for himself.

I knew there was no use arguing with him, so instead I tried putting his mind at ease a little. I said, ‘Now don’t do anything stupid, Jim. Isaac’s no fool, whatever you might think. It sounds to me like he’s thought this through pretty well for himself. For all we know he’s completely fine and on his way to Anchorage. He might even be there by now – why don’t

you call the airport?’

‘What about this blizzard? You say they’re closing the highway?’

I told him everything I knew, which wasn’t a lot. But at least if the highway was closed, they couldn’t get far. I told him again to try the airport if he was too stubborn to call the troopers. In fact, I gave him every reason I could think of to stop panicking and to start thinking straight. I even promised to get the Chevy back just as soon as the road reopened...

But he’d already hung up.