

*Dad*

*Greenvale Kennels*

*Six Days Earlier*

He sits at the desk in his office, cradling a photo of his wife and son in his lap. He's there too, in the photo, arms wrapped around the others, grinning. You never saw a happier man. You can tell the picture was taken in summer by the grass on the ground and leaves on the trees – so green you'd swear they were hand-painted, the sky like something from a cartoon. The boy and his mother are smiling too – the child snuggled in close with his head in her neck, while the look on her face is, well... just plain happy.

He wonders now if it was all for the camera, if beneath those smiling brown eyes she hadn't already decided to leave. To high-tail it back to someplace more predictable. Taking their son with her.

The photo was taken outside the house where he sits now – the family home he worked hard to get built, in spite of the endless setbacks. Greenvale Berry Farm was to be a refuge, a place to get away from all the worldly ambitions and broken promises they'd left behind. A place where they could learn what it means to really live, and to achieve something actually worth achieving. He still holds to that idea, even though she couldn't. It's their loss, he tells himself, now and again. Some cold comfort.

In the photo the boy and his mother are sitting on a pile of logs he'd picked up second-hand for the build. The logs are still out there now, buried under six foot of snow. And where the frozen trees leave off and the pale sky begins is almost impossible to tell. After months of winter, it becomes hard to picture the world any other way, and he wonders at the promise of it ever bursting back to life – the vivid blues and greens freeze-framed in the family photo.

His wife would laugh at those un-used logs. Take them as proof she was right all along. She never did understand.

He hangs the picture back up on the wall and returns to the computer monitor. He reads through the email he's been working on – another half-finished message he knows he'll never send. Full of bold reassurances and wistful reminiscences. Another half-hearted attempt to broker some kind of a reunion without putting his ex-wife on a guilt-trip or playing his own son for a pawn...

Swearing under his breath, he saves the email to Drafts and shuts down.

He checks the clock and decides he'd better get moving if he wants to make it to the airport in time to meet his son – at least if he's going to swing by the bar first.

He changes his shoes, collects his jacket, and takes one last look around the house; it seems emptier than usual. Quiet, too. Like it's waiting for an answer. It's probably no quieter than usual, but he can't help reading something into it, so steels himself again to prove he's up for what lies ahead. Like he assured her he was.

Not that there's any doubt, mind you. He's got everything under control, right? Everything's ready – the spare room made up, the fridge stocked to high heaven with gallons of milk, cans of soda, hotdogs, ice-cream... everything a kid could want. Reassured, he slaps on a hat, heads out the door and trudges over to the Chevy with his normal quiet confidence. Or so it would seem to anyone watching. Deep down he's trying to ignore the twisting coil that's been haranguing his gut the past few days. Truth is, he's as excited as a kid at Christmas about seeing his boy again, and as scarred as hell about proving his ex-wife right. Not that he'd admit to either fact.

A short drive later he pulls up outside the Headersville Hotel, heads on in and sidles up to the bar, still wearing his confidence like a cloak. It's only 10am but he gets a rowdy

welcome from the small gathering of local boozers. For some of them the bar isn't even a second home; they're always here. 'Nailed to the floor,' he says of them, and they take it for a compliment.

'Hey, Jim Greene, you drunk bastard, didn't you just leave?'

Everyone laughs at the taunt from Hank Rogan. He's a foul-mouthed rogue (Rogan by name, rogue by nature!) but as funny as they come and a good friend in a scrape. Jim and Hank are practically the local double-act on Fridays, with Jim's mushing stories and Hank's filthy brand of beer-fuelled commentary keeping everyone in high spirits. It was Hank who first introduced Jim to the world of mushing, and whose legendary status at the bar helped lubricate the path towards Jim's acceptance as a Headersville local. Back then, Hank had a knack for balancing work and drink, but when his old lady passed away and the inheritance came through he gave up mushing and sold the business to Jim – no looking back. Though it wasn't long before the bar became his new office.

'No, Rogan...' Jim replies with a smirk. 'Been at least two days. Unlike some, I actually have a life outside this den of iniquity.'

Hank laughs. 'What life? I thought she pissed off years ago. Or have you had your nose in a book with that librarian o'yours?'

'No, no, she flew south too. Took all her baggage with her, thank Christ.'

'Well, you still got us,' Hank soothes, draining his glass. 'Now what'll it be?'

'Usual, Jim?' asks the woman behind the bar.

'Naw, just a single thanks Vik.'

Viki takes down a clean shot glass and reaches for the bourbon. 'You got a bet on?' she asks, nodding towards the game in play on the big screen opposite.

‘Nope. Not today. Can’t afford it now with an extra mouth to feed. Heading down to Anchorage any minute.’

‘So, today’s the day, huh?’ She smiles with a knowing affection as she pours him his drink.

‘Something like that.’ He downs the shot in one gulp.

‘Hey!’ calls Hank. ‘You be sure to bring that boy o’yours in here to meet all us nice folk.’

‘You’re shittin’ me, right?’ Jim shoots back. ‘I’m not bringing my son within a mile of a piss-faced deviant like you!’

It’s the usual Jim and Hank banter, delivered with a grin. Of course, he’ll bring his boy in to meet them all – first opportunity he gets. But one step at a time. To make good his promise to the boy’s mother that he’s up for playing Dad, he’s first got to get to the airport on time. Then he’ll have to actually remake his son’s acquaintance after all these years – be sure to get off to a good start. Three weeks may not sound a long time, but he’s been hanging out for this chance and he doesn’t want to blow it. Of course, he could never share any of that with Hank, or Viki, or anyone else at the bar, even though he’s thought of nothing else for days.

His stomach starts to churn again. He puts it down to indigestion. Whatever it is, the bourbon seems to help.

He checks his watch and makes some quick calculations: two hours to Anchorage, three until the boy’s plane touches down... On reflection, he decides he’s going to need all the help he can get:

‘What the hell, Vik... make it one more for the road.’

There's a holler of appreciation from the other end of the bar, and Jim flips Hank the bird in reply.

He gets to the airport with time to kill and so busies himself by making some calls – one in reply to a new tour query, one to his mushing outfitter checking the price on some new harnesses, and a laugh-a-minute social call (disguised as business) to the dizzy redhead who processes orders at the salmon cannery. It's mostly meaningless chit-chat, but it's all he can do to keep from downing more bourbon at the bar to help steady his nerves. It wouldn't do to greet his boy smelling of drink, now, would it?

Eventually, the arrivals monitor shows the plane has landed. He makes his way to the gate as casually as he can – cap pulled down low over his brow, hands jammed in pockets. The milling crowd of happy families isn't exactly his scene, so he props himself against a vending machine some way off. From there at least he'll have time to pick out his son when he comes through the gate. Apart from a few photos via email, he realizes he's hardly seen his son since the boy was ten years old. They sent him a yearbook after he graduated from elementary school, but that was almost two years ago now, and the picture was small and grainy. He recalls it vaguely as showing a slightly thinner, goofier looking version of the huggable round child he once knew – the one in the family photo. Same eyes, same smile. But a lot can change in two years, and now faced with the task of picking him out of a crowd he's suddenly aware that he hardly knows what the kid looks like.

Kid? Is that even what he is? How old now... fourteen? Nearly fifteen. Jeez! Suddenly the fridge full of ice-cream and wieners waiting back home seems like a joke. Here he is worrying about smelling of drink when the boy's almost old enough to see his old man under

the table. Not that he'd allow it, mind you. But if the memory of himself at fifteen is anything to go by...

He scans the passengers carefully as they file through the gate, but his mind has gone to shit at the thought that it's no mere child he's here to collect. His boy's become a young man without his realizing it. And that changes everything.

Then he sees him.

It's unmistakably him. That is to say, it's unmistakably his ex-wife's son: the pale skin and high cheekbones, the chestnut tinge to the hair when it catches the light. Lean, lanky, he walks like a teenager – like a pain in the ass. His mind starts to reel. How does a father greet a boy that age? With a hug? A handshake? And what's going on with that woolen sweater? Some daft idea of his mother's, no doubt.

It's too late to call the whole thing off, even if that's how he feels. And then the young man recognizes him – half-raises a hand and starts edging his way through the crowd. And as he stands there watching his son approach, the years of absence suddenly stretch out between them, making his role as father seem utterly pointless: like an apology that forms on the tongue, but goes unspoken.