

THE SECRET JOURNEYS OF JACK LONDON





**THE SECRET JOURNEYS
OF JACK LONDON**



**BOOK I:
THE WILD**

**BY CHRISTOPHER GOLDEN
& TIM LEBBON**

**WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
GREG RUTH**

HARPER

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forces in the wilderness that seem to have taken a special interest in him.

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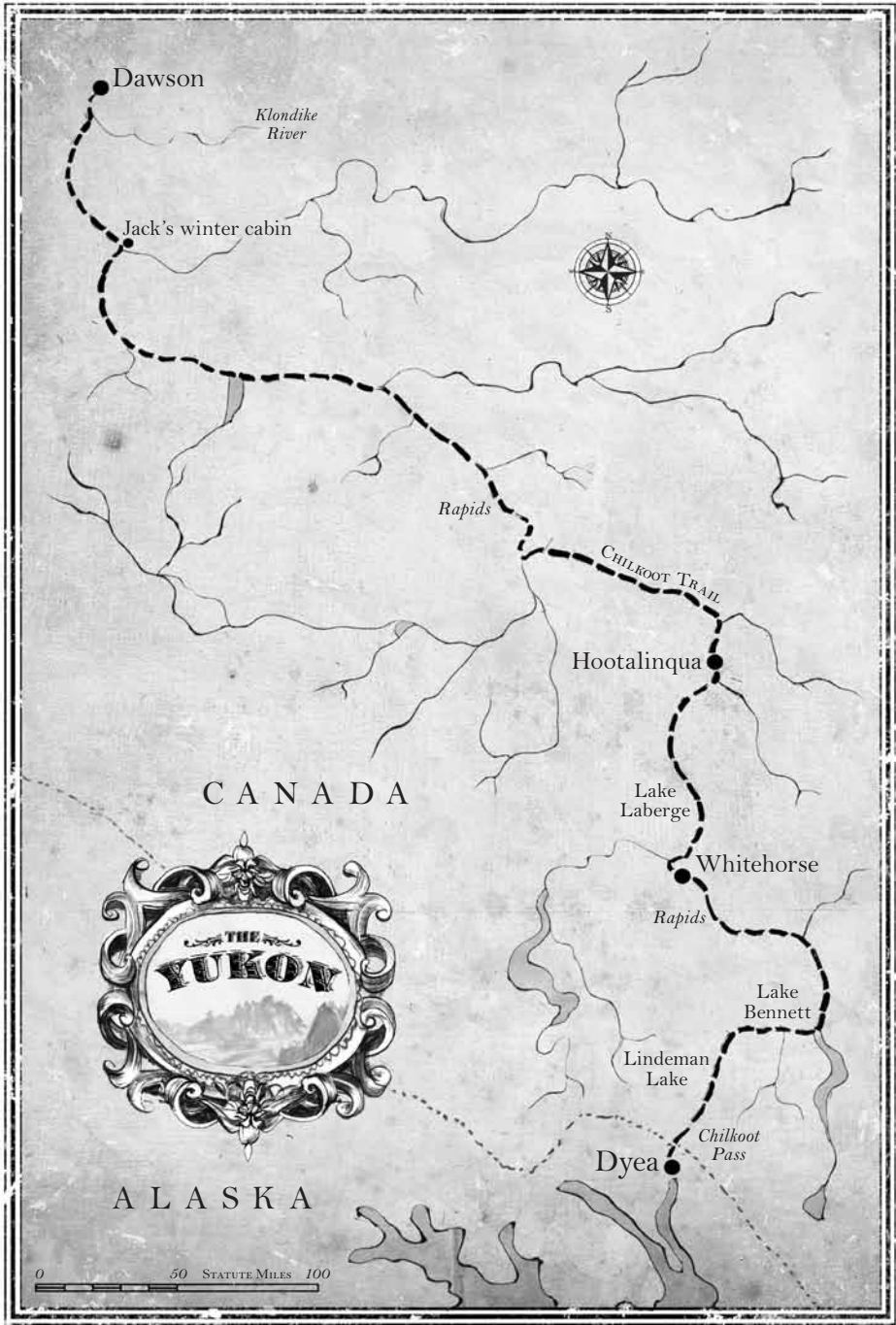
*For our children, Nicholas, Ellie, Lily, and Daniel.
Life is a wild adventure. Hear its call. Have no fear.*

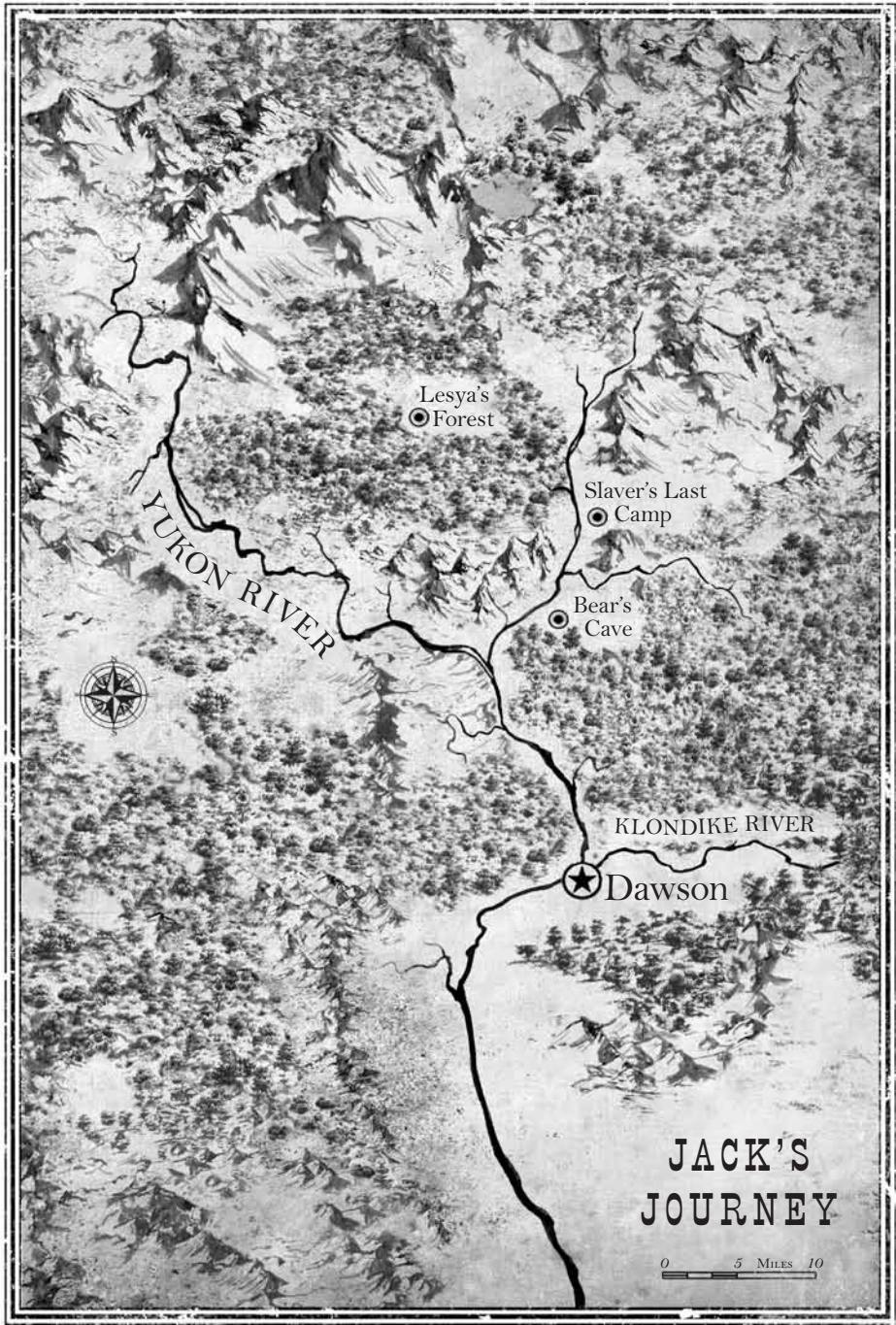
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The function of man is to live, not to exist.

—Jack London





I've never been much of a writer, but I've always been able to tell a tale. Got Jack London to thank for that. He made me realize that stories are all about heart and soul, not words and spelling, and he had heart and soul aplenty.

Jack saved my life many times. Once, he did it for real, beating off two evil men who were ready to kidnap me and take me off into slavery. There were other times down through the years, and for most of them he wasn't even there. It was the thought of Jack that helped me. The idea of his courage, his outlook, his philosophy that life is for living, not just existing. And his conviction that there are so many unknown things that can never be fully explored in one single life. Some of them are wondrous, some terrible. Jack saw both.

I became an explorer because of him, of the spiritual as well as the physical. And I like to think that in some small way, I helped him in his own journeys.

It's well known what became of him. One of the greatest writers we've ever had, he could spin a yarn like no one else, and imbue it with a power that was almost . . . well, supernatural. But much as some thought what he wrote about was the life he'd lived, I knew the truth all those years, because he'd told me: He could never, ever tell of his real adventures. They were too personal for him to put down on paper, and much too terrible. Some of the things he saw just weren't for human eyes.

But he never told me I couldn't tell.

Jack died far too young, but in his forty years he lived the lives of many men. And he died knowing there's more here in this world than we can or should understand.

That's part of the reasoning behind me writing this down at last. I'm an old man now. Who will it hurt to learn the truth? Will anyone even believe? In these modern technological times when the fantastic doesn't seem quite so fantastic anymore, and the wilds aren't quite so wild, I think these stories, terrifying though they are, need telling.

They're a warning, and I think we need reminding.

These, then, are the true stories of Jack London.

His secret journeys.

Hal Adner

San Francisco

June 1962

CHAPTER ONE

INTO THE WILD

JACK LONDON STOOD on the deck of the *Umatilla* and looked out upon the docks of San Francisco, wondering how long it would be before he saw the city again. He had been born with a wandering heart, and he embraced adventure, unafraid to face the dangers often presented by journeys into unknown places. When the *Umatilla* sailed out of the port of San Francisco, he would be bound for the Yukon, leaving civilization behind for the wilds of the frozen north, where rumor claimed vast quantities of gold awaited discovery and any man could become King Midas.

Yet gold represented only one part of the Yukon's allure for Jack. Given the chance, he'd have gone purely for the sake of going, dared all for the sake of daring. And there was the idea in his adventure-yearning heart

that those northern wilds were waiting for him.

Now he leaned against the *Umatilla's* railing and breathed in the smells, took in the sights, and listened to the sounds of chaos and excitement around them. Never had he seen such a mixed group of people. Every race, every nationality, every creed was represented here. Even with the scent of the ocean so strong, dozens of other odors drifted on the breeze. On the dock, a vendor sold roasted nuts. A man at Jack's shoulder reeked of cheap whiskey. Others gave off the strong smells of spices or smoke or food, and several stank from need of a bath. Jack had been a tramp, oyster pirate, and convict, and had been friends with men who hadn't bathed properly in decades, but he shuddered to think what the ship's quarters would smell like by the time they reached Alaska.

He'd heard whispers that the steamer had twice as many passengers as it was licensed to carry, and he could well believe it. Having stowed their equipment in the ship's hold themselves, Jack and Shepard, his aging and ailing brother-in-law, had shouldered their way through a bustle of gold prospectors, from sailors and rough-handed laborers to the sons of the wealthy elite who were setting out to seek their own fortunes.

Now, from the ship's railing, they prepared to bid farewell to San Francisco.

“No need for good-byes,” said Shepard. “It’ll still be here when we get back, same as ever.” He looked side-long at Jack, and his usually glittering eyes seemed wan and empty. “Do you think we’re going to change?”

Jack thought of the hardships ahead of them. He’d lived seventeen eventful years, and for him the future was a vastness of opportunities, calling to him with a voice like the wind across the desert, or the echo that sang through trees heavy with the weight of a blizzard’s snowfall. He thought of that voice as the call of the wild, and it set Jack’s heart pumping like nothing else.

“We’ll change, James, but only in a good way,” he replied at last. “Adventure makes a man grow.” He refrained from voicing that other possibility: *Adventure can kill a man*. But he could see in Shepard’s eyes that he knew the brutal truth of things.

James Shepard was a big man made small by sickness. His eyes still held the vigor of youth, but his body betrayed the cruelty of time, lined and worn by successive assaults and currently defending against this one final attack. His heart was weakening, but his mind remained as strong as ever. Jack had always liked the gray-haired, gray-eyed Shepard; though much older than Jack’s sister, Eliza, the man seemed to make her happy. Eliza’s happiness meant everything to Jack.

And though Jack knew the dangers inherent in Shepard's making this journey—and he knew that Eliza knew, as well—the older man held all the finances. Jack hated staining adventure with the taint of money, but that was the stark truth. Besides, embarking upon this journey, Shepard seemed more alive than he had in a very long time. That could only bode well for all of them.

Leaving port at last, waving madly at the well-wishers on shore, Jack had never been so excited. Ahead of them lay sixteen hundred miles of ocean, wild rivers, snow-covered mountains, treacherous passes, and some of the most inhospitable country known to man.

He was embarking upon the greatest adventure of his life.

But to achieve greatness, one must sometimes risk pain.

The voyage from San Francisco took eight days, and despite the overcrowding aboard the *Umatilla*, the time passed quickly. Jack kept a close eye on Shepard and was pleased to see that the man lost none of his resolve during the journey.

When they approached Dyea, sailing toward the breathtaking views of mainland Alaska, rather than seeming worse for the trip Shepard shone with a new vitality. His heart might no longer be pumping blood with its former vigor, but its essence remained strong.



He was embarking upon the greatest adventure of his life.

The two men jostled for space at the railing as the ship came into port. One of the reasons Jack had been so pleased with the *Umatilla* was that it could actually land them at Dyea, thanks to having a shallower draft than some larger ships. Most had to settle for docking in Skagway, near the entrance to White Pass, which could be even more treacherous and time-consuming than the perilous route Jack intended to follow.

“Where are the docks?” Shepard asked. He coughed into his fist and then spat a wad of phlegm over the side.

At Jack’s tender age, most young men tended to ignore the cautions of their elders. Impulsive and quick-tempered, he had never been an exception. But where this trip—and gold—were concerned, Shepard behaved more like an excitable boy than Jack himself. So when he heard that wary tone, Jack frowned and studied the shore.

The crew began to drop anchor with no dock in sight. Jack could see the beach from here, and smoke rising from chimneys in the town beyond, but nowhere for them to put in. Small boats were already heading out toward the *Umatilla*, locals intent upon earning a little money helping to off-load the ship.

“Excuse me!” Jack said to a grizzled crewman—a pale, drawn figure about thirty years of age—who tried to hurry by even as Jack accosted him. “Where’s the dock?”

The man tugged his arm from Jack's grasp. "No docks in Dyea, kid. You'll land on the beach."

Shepard cleared his throat, sounding like an angry bear as he clamped a firm hand on the crewman's wrist. "Now hold on. That's lunacy! It'll take hours to get all the supplies out of your hold, sorted, and off the beach before the tide comes in."

A dangerous glint had appeared in the crewman's eyes, and he glanced down at the grip Shepard had on him.

"James . . . ?" Jack began, looking around to make sure no one else would jump into the fight. He reached around to the small of his back, where he'd tucked a small, sheathed knife.

Shepard released the man's hand but did not back off.

The crewman smiled. "If you're worried about the tide, you'd better hurry."

With that, he rushed off through the crowd, many of whom appeared to have been aware of this little detail, though others were only just now learning. A chorus of complaints rumbled across the deck, but there was nothing any of them could do about it. They'd come too far and spent too much money to turn back now.

If Jack had thought the preparation for the journey a breathless scramble, it seemed nothing in comparison to

the chaotic rush as the *Umatilla's* more than four hundred passengers attempted to get their supplies and equipment onto the beach, and from there to higher ground. Would-be prospectors, who'd been dubbed "stampeder" by the press, cursed one another and fought for space aboard the many small boats ferrying goods and people ashore.

Many of the men and women must have become lethargic during the voyage, and some already seemed to be having second thoughts about the journey they'd set out upon. Jack, on the other hand, felt as though he might burst into song as he and Shepard sat in a small rowboat, clinging to packs full of their most vital belongings. Though only late August, it was already growing cold up here, but Jack was warmed by the thrill of adventure.

During their last few days in the city, he had used Shepard's money to buy equipment and provisions. Adequate clothing was a necessity: heavy mittens, hats, fur-lined coats and trousers, warm underwear, boots with thick grips and straps to seal them against the ingress of water and snow. He purchased tools with which they could chop trees and construct boats and cabins, a year's supply of food in sealed containers—dried, preserved, and pickled. Camping equipment was vital, and Jack had the money to buy two of everything, including tents and blankets, shovels, ground-sheets, and the Klondike stoves that would keep them warm

whilst camping, cook their food, and give them light.

He had also packed his all-important books. Jack never traveled without at least some work of Melville's, and *Moby-Dick* rode in his pack now.

He breathed in the Alaskan air, caught the scent of the wild, and after eight long days aboard ship, felt ready to run the Chilkoot Pass. All of the preparations here in Dyea would only make him more anxious to begin. If he could have set off that very day and left all the supplies behind, he would have done so, and eagerly. But though he had come to the northlands to dare much and would not be discouraged by whatever obstacles might be put in his path, only a fool took unnecessary risks.

Best to be cautious, and smart. There was a lot riding on this expedition.

A grin stretched his lips as the rowboat slid onto the shore of Dyea Beach. Jack took two steps—quite used to the sway of the surf by now—and then stood on dry land for the first time in more than a week. He turned to watch Shepard climb out of the boat and nearly offered his brother-in-law a hand before realizing the man would never take it. To do so would be a sign of weakness.

Once on land, though, Shepard threw his head back and breathed deeply. Jack expected another of his ragged coughing fits to follow, but it did not come. An auspicious

sign. Shepard peered up the beach toward the smoke rising from the town's chimneys and nodded as if to himself.

"Let's get to work, boy," Shepard said.

Boy. That dreaded word. Yet today, Jack did not object. Perhaps it was merely a term of endearment, or the way the old soldier chose to remind himself and his young wife's stepbrother which of them was in charge here. It didn't matter. Jack would not be broken by the frozen north, and certainly, despite his often quick-draw temper, he would not allow himself to be irked by a single word.

And so they set to work.

With Jack as the runner and foreman and Shepard as the paymaster, they quickly corralled a group of willing locals. As their equipment began to arrive on the beach in crates and packs, those enterprising Tlingit Indians carried them to higher ground and arranged them neatly in a spot Jack had chosen. Trusting no one but themselves, Jack remained on the beach with their equipment while Shepard oversaw its safe delivery.

The tide came in fast that afternoon, and three large crates were partially dampened by the encroaching surf. Jack exhorted the men to work faster or they wouldn't be paid a dime, and the last crate he half dragged several feet to avoid having the contents swamped before it, too, was finally hauled away to safety.

Halfway through the job, the price changed. The Indians charged twenty dollars an hour when the tide was low—already an astronomical sum—but as the waves grew closer and the tide rolled in, the price went up to fifty dollars an hour.

“They ought to have been pointing guns at us, asking that price!” Jack fumed, indignant, as the men raced away to enrich themselves from the plight of some other passenger.

Shepard seemed barely to have heard him. The man wore a smile Jack had never seen on him before, not even in his most tender moments with Eliza.

“I’ve sent a boy ahead to secure rooms for tonight,” Shepard said. “We’ll depart at first light.”

Then he noticed Jack studying him.

“What are you staring at?” Shepard demanded.

“You look well,” Jack told him, surprised. “Ready for adventure?”

Shepard appeared to give the question a moment’s thought. Jack had expected a lighthearted reply, a rallying moment before they set about engaging more Indian porters to carry their equipment into town, but his brother-in-law seemed apprehensive.

“I’m sixty-one years old, boy, and God gave me a weak heart.” Shepard gazed at the packs and crates piling up all

along the beach. "At night, I dream of gold. It might be the only thing keeping me alive."

Jack nodded. "Fair enough. Let's go find some."

Having engaged Indian porters to carry their supplies and equipment to the hotel—and paid handsomely—Jack and Shepard shouldered their packs and walked from the rocky beach up toward Dyea proper. The word *town* was generous. The single main street and few outlying homes and buildings were more a settlement than anything remotely permanent. Coming upon it from the coast, Jack had a queer moment of disconnection and felt as though they had found themselves not in Alaska but in Deadwood, during that town's run of gold fever.

The sky had been a crystalline blue when the *Umatilla* dropped anchor, but on the shore a light mist seemed to hang permanently above Dyea, and the plumes of chimney smoke from the settlement only added to the gauzy veil that obscured the eastward view. They could see the outline of icy hills in the distance, but as they started along the main street, their focus remained on the town.

On the right they passed a row of nearly identical barnlike buildings, each with a small window just below its peaked roof and with a shop entrance below. Jack glanced at the signs: YUKON TRADING POST, U.S. POST OFFICE,

COUGHLIN-LANDRY HARDWARE, DUTCHER BILL'S SALOON.

The left side of the street seemed more familiar, with a brightly painted façade on a stand-alone structure whose sign read only DANCE HALL. Beyond that stood Hayley's Hotel, a big box of a building—clapboard like all the others—with its sign painted right on the side wall.

“Looks like it's about to fall down,” Shepard muttered.

“I've slept in much worse,” Jack said, thinking about railroad sidings and jail cells. “It'll be nice to have a soft bed for a night, especially since it's going to be a long while before we encounter another. And a bath wouldn't go amiss for either of us.”

Shepard grunted in amusement. After eight days at sea, they both stank. “First we have to get there.”

It was an excellent point. The entire street was a muddy mess of hoof- and boot prints, and furrows cut by wagon wheels. In some places the dirt had dried and hardened into ridges, and in others water filled the crevices.

As they navigated the runnels and potholes, mud sucking at their boots, Shepard's breathing grew labored under the weight of his fifty-odd-pound pack. Jack gave him a surreptitious glance and saw that rather than glowing red with exertion, his brother-in-law's face had paled. Before long, Shepard would be unable to carry his own pack.

“You doing all right?” Jack asked.

"I'll manage," Shepard muttered.

They'd been amiable traveling companions all through the voyage, but now a growing tension enveloped them. In all the world there was no one Jack loved as much as his stepsister, Eliza. She had practically raised him, and against her wishes, and with full knowledge of the man's deteriorating health, he had plotted with her husband to embark upon this adventure, knowing that Shepard was able and keen to finance the entire journey himself.

Perhaps Jack had been selfish, but there was nothing to be done for it now. Besides, Shepard was a willing and insistent partner.

Jack tried to assuage his guilt by considering the other purpose for this adventure: to aid his mother. On the day of their departure, Eliza had revealed to him that their mother was close to losing her home. She had relied on Jack's income for a long time, and his recent month-long absence—a stretch in jail for vagrancy, though none of his family knew of it—had caused her to fall deeper into debt. She had even returned to conducting séances and other rituals as a spiritual medium, an absurdity that she touted as the truth and that made Jack distinctly uncomfortable. He had persuaded himself that it was nothing more than a charade and a fraud. So though the woman had little love in her heart—all the nurturing he had needed as a boy he

had found in Eliza—still she was his mother. If he found gold, she would be able to keep her home, and to abandon the charlatantry of spiritualism. Yet that seemed a distant concern right now; it was Shepard who worried him most.

But Shepard had his own mind. He was a man, not some sickly child to be coddled, and Jack believed that every man must be master of his own fate. Nevertheless, he dreaded having to deliver the news to Eliza should calamity befall her husband.

Eyes front, chin high, Jack marched across the muddy ruin of Dyea's main street toward the boardwalk in front of Hayley's Hotel. Only when he had stepped up onto the wood and kicked mud from his boots did he glance back to check on Shepard's progress.

The man had stopped a dozen feet back.

"James?" he said.

Shepard's face had gone slack and he stared eastward with wide eyes, bent slightly forward to manage the weight of his pack. He'd been pale before, but now he looked dreadfully sick. He blinked, coughed lightly, and then set off into a deeper fit of coughing that bent him double. The old soldier let his pack slip from his back and fall into the mud.

Jack dropped his own pack on the boardwalk and ran to Shepard's side.

"What is it, James?" he asked, gripping the man's

elbow. "You're all right. Try to catch your breath."

Shepard was shaking, his skin hot, and blood freckled his lips and chin. He'd been ill almost ever since Jack had known him, but he had never seen the older man looking so frail.

"James?" he said again, softly.

James nodded and took several long, steadying breaths. He stared to the east, wheezing and coughing some more, eyes watering the entire time. Still bent double, hands on his knees, he gestured with a nod.

"Is that it, boy? Is that the pass?"

Jack turned to see that the mist had thinned, providing a clearer view of the nearby hills. It might be August, but they were in Alaska, and to the east white walls of ice rose up from the land like the forbidding landscape in a dream of endless winter. The gap in the ice, visible only as a shadow from here, was the Chilkoot Pass. The trail that would take them to Dawson City began at the foot of those frozen cliffs.

Even from this distance Jack could make out the dark line of men and horses trekking up the Chilkoot Trail toward the forbidding pass—men with dreams of gold, and the Tlingit Indians making their own fortunes just getting the stampede and their gear over the mountains.

Shepard started coughing again, and this time when he wiped at his lips, Jack saw a larger smear of blood.

It did not bode well. Dark thoughts of resentment and frustration flitted at the edges of Jack's mind, but he pushed them away. They had made a pact, the two of them, and Jack London always kept his word.

He put a hand on Shepard's shoulder. "I'll help you every step of the way. I'll get you there, so help me God, or else we'll share an icy grave. And I don't mean to die, so that means we'll both have our stake on the Klondike come spring, and bring back a pile."

At last able to breathe evenly, Shepard gently pushed Jack's hand away.

"I've been a fool," he said, words burning with a fury obviously reserved for himself. "I won't allow you to become one."

"James," Jack said, "you've come all this way."

"Yes, and now I have to go all *that* way." He looked again at the pass, eyes wide. And even as he watched, Jack saw James's expression change from fear to resignation to sorrow and regret.

Shepard slowly stood upright. He shouldered his pack, taking deep breaths. And finally he turned his back on the frozen mountains.

"I've got to get back to the beach before the *Umatilla* sails for home," Shepard said. "I'll bring your love to Eliza and your mother."

Jack said nothing. Shepard would clearly brook no argument.

"I've invested a great deal in this journey," the old soldier went on. "More than money, you understand? Every wish I've ever made. I'm leaving them all here with you, and I expect you to carry them to Dawson and beyond. Don't let me down, boy."

Jack shook his head. "Of course I won't."

"See you don't," Shepard said. And with that he left, trudging back through half-frozen mud toward the shore, leaving Jack with all their supplies and equipment and enough determination for both of them.

Jack watched him go and hoped he would make it home in good health, so that Eliza would not have to grieve. He found himself untroubled by the idea of making the journey alone, for most of his life's journeys had been undertaken as solo ventures, even when he was surrounded by others pursuing their own paths.

Shepard walked to the edge of town and vanished on the road down to the beach without once turning to look back. The moment he was out of sight, a huge grin broke out on Jack's face. He felt a strange elation growing within him. Freed of his obligations to and concern for Shepard—and, yes, shorn of the guilt he'd been feeling at bringing the older man along—he felt more confident than ever in

his course of action.

He turned to look up into the mist at the Chilkoot Pass. He felt it drawing him almost physically, and he was tempted to run there now and climb it all tonight, supplies or not. Throughout the voyage they had heard tales of men who had died on the trail, and thousands who had faltered and turned back. Shepard had wilted at the mere sight of the ominous terrain.

Not Jack. The frozen north would not defeat him. Only death could stop him now.

CHAPTER TWO

MARCH OF THE DEAD

THE WORD AROUND DYEAL was that a man with no destination could have camped on the Chilkoot Trail for months without wanting for anything. Warm clothes, dried and salted meats, canned beans, guns for hunting, tents . . . the trading post and the hardware store down in Dyeal would have gone out of business if the stampedees landing by the thousands on the beach had but known that they could pick up all the supplies they needed right on the side of that trail. Especially on the westward side, making the climb up to 3,500 feet, where frigid winds buffeted travelers even in late summer, abandoned gear lay everywhere.

And if the desire was for fresh meat, the cruel terrain of the Chilkoot Trail provided that in ample supply. Horses collapsed of exhaustion, broke their legs in crevices, or

fractured their spines falling backward when the trail became too steep. Some were put down to end their misery, while others were left to die in agony by hard-hearted men who stripped them of their saddles and went on, not wishing to waste a bullet.

Without Shepard accompanying him, Jack made the decision to travel light. Opening crates, he sorted through food stores and put aside essentials. Much of what they had brought on the voyage he sold to the proprietor of Hayley's Hotel. Shepard's clothes he traded to a burly, bearded fellow named Merritt Sloper, whom he'd met on board the *Umatilla*. Sloper had a particularly fine skillet and several bags of coffee with which he was willing to part, provided Jack wouldn't refuse him a brew if their paths crossed on the trail.

The deal struck, Jack took an extra blanket from Shepard's supplies and then went through his own clothes. By the time he fell asleep that night, he had set aside, sold, or given away three-quarters of what they had brought with them. More confident than ever, contentedly exhausted, he fully expected to sleep through to dawn.

When he woke in the middle of the night, disoriented, he sat up and breathed in the darkness. *I'm in Hayley's Hotel in Dyea*, he thought, and then heard a groan.

Jack held his breath. He had never been afraid of the

dark, but he had learned to respect it.

The groan came again: a floorboard, protesting under a weight that should not be there. Whoever walked tried to do so quietly.

“Who’s there?” Jack whispered.

A door drifted open where he did not remember seeing one before. He was so unsettled that it took a few seconds before he saw the hand splayed flat against the wood, and a few seconds more before he followed it back along the arm, across the shoulder, and to the face hanging behind it in the gloom.

“Mother?” he asked. With recognition came the familiar smells of home—stale cooking and incense.

“There will be doom,” his mother said, but not in her own voice. The tone was flat, cool as ice, almost disinterested. “Doom in the north, a cry of death in the great white silence, and the spirits will bear witness.” She entered the room, and Jack caught his breath. *That’s not my mother*, he thought, and though the idea was ridiculous—the woman standing before him *was* his mother, with her hair, face, and nightdress—he could not shake the idea. There was something disquieting about her appearance, as if a stranger hiding beneath her skin was trying to force itself out. She was dreadfully stiff, skin almost translucent and the shade of freshly fallen snow.



There was something disquieting about her appearance, as if a stranger hiding beneath her skin was trying to force itself out.

He had seen something like this before. She had told him it was her spirit guide speaking through her. He had never before believed a word of such foolishness, and he hated her false spiritualism. She fooled people with it, preyed on their suffering, and—

Is she fooling me now? Am I here, or am I at home? He thought he was dreaming, but such knowledge usually granted the dreamer control. Here, *he* was the one being controlled.

“Get out of my room,” he whispered.

“Something follows,” his mother said, smiling. It was a sickly expression, and it did not touch her voice. “Yet still you’ll die in the snow, cold . . . and almost alone.” Then she turned and left.

It was a few minutes before Jack could leave his bed, but when he approached the door, he found a blank wall. He touched it, and it was only wood. *I’m awake now for sure*, he thought, and after returning to bed he could not return to sleep. He watched dawn cast its cleansing light over Dyea.

Unsettled by the nightmare, yet determined to let daylight blanch it away, Jack was the first to leave town that day on his way toward the Chilkoot Pass.

He’d left Dyea with two horses carrying his kit, his own pack twenty pounds lighter than it had been the day before.

His shoulders were padded so the straps did not cut into him, and he'd set off at speed as the sun rose over the white peaks, the crack of Chilkoot Pass gleaming on the horizon.

That had been four days ago.

Now his eyes watered at the stench of rotting horseflesh beside the trail, and he kept as much distance as possible from the others jostling for position as they climbed. He'd been making excellent time, outpacing most of the white men and even some of the Indian carriers, who were used to the terrain and the climate.

He kept his focus fixed on the mountaintops, his goal in sight, and kept to himself. Several times fights had broken out, and he'd had to guide his two horses around the stinking combatants as well as others who had slowed to exhort them on, grateful for the distraction of potential bloodshed. Jack had never been one to shy away from a fight, but he could already feel a cold bite in the air as he climbed higher and higher, and feared winter would arrive sooner than any of them had bargained for.

The debris of surrender littered the sides of the trail. He passed men who had given up and were making their way back to Dyea, eyes downcast in defeat. They had failed and were ashamed, and Jack vowed that he would never be one of them. Such failure must be hard to live with, and there was no sense of relief in their bearing, even though

their physical hardships were behind them.

As he walked on, the trail rising higher, the going steeper, memories of his dream flashed across his mind. He often dreamed of his mother, sometimes fancies of the perfect relationship they had never had, more often interpretations of her lovelessness and occasional cruelty. She could be a stone-hearted woman: When Jack was a boy she had often exhorted his stepfather to beat him when he misbehaved, and the only affection she gave to Jack came on days when he managed to bring a paycheck into the house. And there were those times when she'd made him lie on the kitchen table during a séance and called upon the spirits of the dead to damn him for some boyish wrongdoing. Even back then he'd never really believed, but she'd done her best to ensure that the process scared him.

"The spirits are closer to you than you think," she'd say. "And if you're bad, I can *invite them in*."

For days after these séances he'd be angry and resentful, sad at his mother's treatment of him. And come sunset and bed, alone in the dark, he'd also be terrified that perhaps she was right. Now he could hardly bear to think of it. And yet despite all this she was still his mother, and he loved her.

Such musings confused Jack, and he became angry at those confusions.

He cursed and led his horses to the side of the trail. He had crested the top of the pass whilst buried in introspection, and that moment of success had passed uncelebrated. Damn these melancholy thoughts—they would not do here!

He decided to make a brew and let the hot coffee mark the moment the rest of his journey began.

“Just the man I was hoping to run into,” a voice said.

Settled into a windbreak he’d built by piling up his pack and hauling boxes and satchels down from his horses, Jack looked up from his small fire into the ruddy-cheeked, smiling face of Merritt Sloper. The man had frost in his ginger beard and a thick cap pulled down over his ears, so he looked like some deranged Father Christmas.

“I suppose you want a cup of coffee,” Jack said. He could not hold back a small smile. He was comfortable in his own company, but right now he welcomed the company of another, even someone he knew only vaguely.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“I hope you brought your own cup,” Jack told him. “I’ve only got the one.”

Sloper grunted as he settled onto the ground beside Jack, shucking off his own pack. He banged his gloved hands together, pulled the gloves off, and held his palms out to the small fire. Primarily, however, his attention was on the

small black coffeepot that Jack had propped beside the fire.

Sloper dug a tin cup from his pack. As Jack poured him half a cup of strong coffee, another man approached, this one holding the tether of a horse.

“Damn it, Merritt, you could have waited for me!” the man chided. Thin and bespectacled, he had the air of a fussy schoolmaster gone to seed.

“The smell of coffee drew me on, friend Jim,” Sloper replied with mock penitence, hanging his head. “Do not curse me for my one indulgence.” Then he shrugged an apology, sipped his coffee, and let out a loud sigh of contentment, settling more comfortably on the crusty snow, closing his eyes.

“You left me with the horse,” Jim began, then lowered his voice. “Those two fellows from Texas have been eyeing our supplies ever since the last of their own horses died, and you—”

“Besides!” Sloper said, eyes springing open. “We made it over the top! Despite all your doubts, my friend, here we are! I hadn’t the energy for a victory dance, but a cup of coffee is celebration enough.”

Rolling his eyes, Jim gave up. He led his burdened, exhausted horse over beside Jack’s two, knocked a peg into the snow with the heel of his boot, and tethered the beast to it.

Then he held out a hand, leaning over the fire. “Jim

Goodman. I believe we arrived on the same ship.”

Jack smiled and shook. “Jack London. I remember you.”

A rush of good feeling filled him. Odd as they were, here were two men hardy enough to crest the Chilkoot Pass, to face the challenge and not turn back. In the short time since he had set out from Dyea, he had seen enough failure and breathed in enough death to last him a lifetime. Now he found the companionship of these two men very welcome indeed.

“I don’t suppose you have another cup of coffee,” said the morose Goodman.

Jack shook the pot. “Only a drop, I’m afraid. Merritt took the last of it.”

Goodman’s shoulders drooped. “Of course,” he said, as though used to being left out.

Suffused with this new feeling of bonhomie, Jack reached for his pack. “Actually, there’s more where that came from. I’ll fix us another pot.”

“Really?” the two men said together, both raising their eyebrows in surprise.

“Why not?” Jack replied. “We made it to the top, boys. We’re in this together now.”

After almost a week spent climbing the Chilkoot Trail, Jack’s bones ached and his muscles burned, but he felt alive

in a way he believed few people would ever experience. Unshaven, unwashed, he nevertheless perceived himself as clean, somehow purified by the icy mountain air and his own backbreaking efforts. Away from his mother and her spiritual charlatanism—but more important, away from every job he'd ever had, every version of himself he'd ever tried to create—at last he could strip away the world's expectations and find the man within.

Who is Jack London? he wondered, certain that this journey would bring him the answer.

Seen from the top of the pass, the remainder of the trail seemed like a gift. It leveled out and then began a gentle descent toward distant canyons.

“How far to Lake Lindeman?” Sloper asked.

Jack cocked an eyebrow at Jim Goodman, for he himself had heard varying estimates.

Goodman did not hesitate. “Nine miles.”

“We'll be all right,” Jack said, gesturing around them. “Nobody's turning back after making it through the pass.”

And it was true. The traffic all trudged in the same direction now. There were still bits of abandoned equipment on the sides of the trail, and looking ahead, Jack could see at least two dead horses—poor beasts that had handled the worst of it but couldn't go a step farther—but for the most part, the prospectors were getting on with it.

“But we need to hurry,” he said.

The laconic, gloomy Goodman seemed to come awake at that. “Hurry? I’m just happy to be alive.”

Ahead of them were two men, German by the accents he’d heard, who slowed down a bit as if to eavesdrop. Holding the leads of his horses tightly, Jack slowed his own pace, and Sloper and Goodman followed suit.

“Maybe there’s enough gold for everyone,” Jack said. “Maybe the whole of the Klondike is El Dorado. But I look at every man on this trail as competition, and you’d do well to think the same way.”

Merritt Sloper scratched at his thick ginger beard. His normally jovial expression had faded into an almost child-like sadness. “Even us, Jack? Are we competition?”

Jack grinned. “You sure are, boys. But with us, it’s a friendly competition. And listen, there’s another reason we need to hurry. Winter’s coming on.”

Goodman scoffed, pushing his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. “Winter! Jack, in case you hadn’t noticed, it’s always winter up here.”

“You know what I mean. It’ll all be frozen soon. If we don’t get to Dawson before the rivers freeze, we may never make it.”

“It’s barely September,” Sloper said.

“I talked to a fellow on the climb up, a Tlingit tribesman,

who told me the signs were pointing to an early freeze. He said that once, when his grandfather was a boy, the rivers froze in the middle of August.”

Goodman tutted, gripped the lead of his weary horse, and picked up the pace again. “Impossible.”

Sloper, though, gazed at Jack with worry creasing his brow. “Is that the truth?”

Jack loosened his grip on the leads and followed Goodman, with Sloper beside him and the horses behind. “I mean to survive this adventure, Merritt. Survive, and go back to California with a mighty pile. You visit an inhospitable land, you have to rely on the wisdom of the people who make it their home. Besides, can’t you feel it? The wind makes my teeth rattle.”

Sloper nodded at this, and when the trail widened a bit, the three men walked abreast. They spoke of home and of their dreams, of books and adventure. Jack entertained them with stories of his time as an oyster pirate, and of riding the rails with hoboes and brawling on the docks. He chose not to mention his thirty days in prison.

His two companions managed to surprise him, however, when he discovered that neither was much older than Jack himself. Sloper, a stonemason, was twenty-five, a decade younger than Jack had presumed, while Goodman—who actually *was* a schoolteacher—had recently celebrated his

twenty-second birthday. The two men hailed from Illinois, not far from Chicago, and had become acquainted due to a long friendship between their families. While their personalities could not have been more different, Sloper and Goodman had the rapport of lifelong friends, yet they easily and willingly incorporated Jack into their dynamic.

They camped that night in the shelter of a copse of trees, stacking their belongings around three sides to try to protect themselves from the worst of the wind. After tending to his horses first, Jack sat with his two new friends around the campfire. They shared coffee and dried fruit, cooking a weak stew that tasted better than it had any right to taste, and then Jack felt exhaustion overtaking him. He fell asleep blinking up at the stars, imagining the time to come when he would spend his days panning for gold.

At some point this daydreaming slipped away, and he was adrift in his own subconscious. The relative peace with which he imagined the prospecting passed away also; men were killed for the best claims, and wild creatures came from the forests to snatch away the unwary, leaving behind only bloody red smears in the snow. But such a mundane dream death did not stalk Jack.

There was something else.

He dreamed himself working upriver from the main strike in Rabbit Creek, existing on his own with little more

than a campfire and a torn, tattered tent. He panned by day and read by firelight at night, and all the time something lurked at the edges of the flickering illumination of the campfire, watching. It followed him across the landscape, one day observing from the heights of a great mountain, the next day spying on him from the darkness beneath the trees. He could never make out what it was, but the sense of foreboding was terrible.

And it was only at night that he saw it. Eyes like fallen stars stared at him from the shadows, waiting for the opportunity to pounce.

In the late morning of September 8, the three men came at last to the shore of Lake Lindeman. Goodman's horse had collapsed the night before, and it was Sloper who put the animal out of its misery. With the echo of the gunshot ringing out along the trail and across the green-black mountain slopes, Merritt Sloper finally lost his smile.

Nor did it return the next morning when they came in sight of the lake. The scene ought to have been beautiful. Lake Lindeman sat nestled in a basin surrounded by white-capped mountains whose foothills were thick with dark pines and powdered with a light snow. Around the lake grew scrub grass, and at other times animals must have come to the water to drink and nibble at what little

vegetation grew there.

But a vast swath had been cut out of the pine woods around the shore of the lake. Stampeders worked like an ant colony, cutting trees and sawing timber. Men unwilling to go farther had set up a nice business for themselves building boats and rafts and selling them at outrageous prices.

“We’ll be flat broke before we even get to Dawson if we pay that,” Goodman said, anxiously cleaning his glasses with a kerchief he kept in his front pocket.

The three of them stood with Jack’s two horses, now carrying the additional weight of Sloper’s and Goodman’s equipment, and watched the buzz of activity on the lake-shore. There were planks and boat frames everywhere, and a couple of acres’ worth of sawdust that covered the ground like snow, the sweet smell of pine in the air.

Thunderous hammering and the ragged sound of saws on wood resounded, along with shouts and laughter and the crash and crack of more trees being felled. They watched a new boat set off across the lake, and it immediately began to leak.

“We’re not paying that,” Jack said.

Sloper scratched his red beard and glanced nervously at Goodman. “You don’t mean to walk around the lake, Jack? We’d be better off turning back.”

Jack shot him a harsh look, raising his chin. "I set myself a goal, Merritt. I mean to keep it. My whole life, I never turned back from anything, and I won't start now."

He opened a long satchel that hung from the saddle of the gray mare he'd bought in Dyea. From within he drew out a leather case, and from the leather case an ax.

"Besides, I don't think you boys were listening to the stories I told you. I've been on boats my whole life. Why, I spent so much time at the docks and out on the bay that they used to call me the Sailor Kid."

Jack slung the ax over his shoulder and took up the horses' tethers again. "Now you go and talk to the men who already have boats, the ones who are putting them in the water. See if you can't buy us another ax or two, and a saw. That'll cost a lot less than a boat. Then come and find me. I'll get started felling some pines."

Goodman slipped his glasses back on, fixing them as though not quite sure if he could see Jack clearly.

"Are you suggesting that we build our own boat?"

Jack tipped him a wink. "You catch on quick, Jimmy."

Sloper had taken his jacket off and hung it over his arm. The sun felt warm today, at least by comparison to what they'd grown used to. It would be a long while before they were truly warm again.

"If you say you know boats, then I believe you, Jack,"

the burly stonemason said. "And I'm not afraid of a little work. But you were worried about the winter coming. Won't this delay be costly?"

"I won't lie to you, Merritt," Jack said. "This is an unfortunate complication. But the boatbuilders down there on the shore have a long line of customers ahead of us. If we work hard and don't make mistakes, building our own boat might actually be faster than waiting for them to make one for us."

With that he left them to their own tasks, walking toward the line of trees with the horses behind him, whistling happily with the ax slung over his shoulder. He could see in his mind the boat he would build, every plank and joint. And he knew what he would name her.

The Yukon Belle.

First the lake, then Thirty Mile River, and if they wanted to make it to Dawson before the big freeze, they'd have to shoot White Horse Rapids as well. He'd chosen not to mention that to his companions, however. The word was that most men who'd attempted to ride the rapids had died or at least half drowned and given up. No need to frighten them before they got there.

After all, as Jack had told them, he'd been around boats all his life. A little rough water didn't scare him.

How bad could it be?