

‘Powerful and beautifully told. The paths of three women intertwine as they battle for survival at the frontier of Canada’s gold rush. Beth Lewis captures the savage beauty of this natural landscape, as well as the men’s feverish race to strike it rich or die trying – but most importantly, she gives a voice to the women, whose near-forgotten life stories glisten with hidden gold. Brilliant writing, essential reading’

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*The Rush* is my top read of this year’

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‘An expansive and gloriously thrilling book told with such authenticity. Beth Lewis employs a rich palette to immerse the reader in the lives of the Klondike women.

Masterful storytelling’

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‘Beth Lewis brilliantly captures the perilous allure of the Yukon gold rush, weaving a tale of three women’s intertwined destinies with rich authenticity and suspense. A compelling journey into the heart of human resilience’

**Joanna Wallace, author of *You’d Look Better as a Ghost***

# THE RUSH

BETH LEWIS



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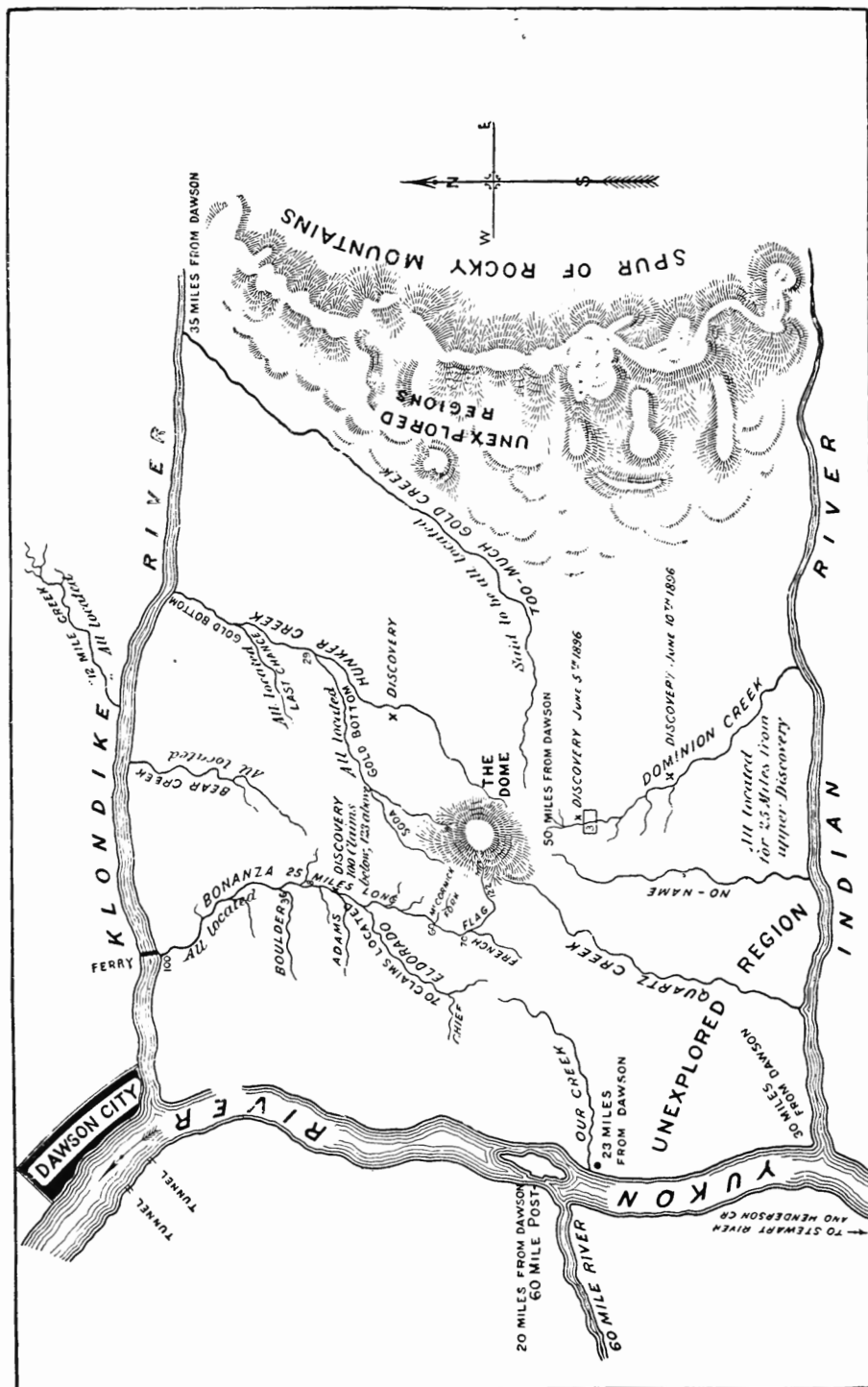
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For my wife



THE KLONDIKE GOLD FIELD.

# KATE

SKAGUAY, ALASKA, LATE APRIL 1898

I stepped off the dock and my boots sank to the laces. Skaguay stretched out before me, a flotilla of tents in a sea of mud, stampedeers buzzing like flies on dung. I expected such a sight from the reports, but words on newsprint can't prepare a woman for this place. The stink of it. The rush. This edge of the world where civilisation ends and the indifferent wilderness takes over. I loved it immediately.

I was to meet a man here who would take me on the White Pass Trail. It was arranged by Mr George Everett, my financier back in Kansas, yet no man had so far made himself known.

My dog, Yukon, nuzzled my hand, searching for a treat I did not have. A hound of unknown blood, brindle and warm, but with a bite. He was a gift from George Everett's hired man, to keep me company on the journey. Now, just three months on, he was my shadow.

A bustle of men pushed past, knocking my shoulder and almost toppling me. Yukon growled, but the men paid no attention. They hauled canvas-bound bundles, crates of cans

and tools, cages full of howling sled dogs. A year's worth of supplies for each man to be carried to the gold fields. It made my back ache to see them, the endless chain of boxes and bags appearing from the hold of the steamer, carried to the waiting sleds and horses.

Gunderson was the man I was to meet. A tall Swede, known to Mr Everett through a riverboat venture some years back. Trustworthy, Mr Everett said, but the muddy water soaking into my boots told another story.

When in doubt, my father said as he kissed me goodbye in Kansas, find a saloon and a woman to help you.

I whistled to Yukon and pulled my feet from the quagmire. I paid deckhands to carry my belongings from the ship to the Pullen Hotel and made for the drier boardwalks that lined the buildings of Skaguay, the gateway to the Klondike.

It was a short walk, but every step I was stared at, laughed at in my muddy skirts, jeered by drunks who all, in their way, said I did not belong. Yukon trotted faithfully beside me as I let those insults slide off me like snow from a pitched roof. I had travelled this far; I would not be put off by words.

'These skirts just will not do,' I muttered to Yukon.

He sniffed at the sodden hems and shook his head so hard his ears slapped against his cheeks.

'How can any woman live up here in petticoats?'

The dog yawned.

The town of Skaguay rushed about me. I wasn't the only woman, I was pleased to see, but there were ten men to every lady at least and most of those ladies were of the working sort, if you catch my meaning.

Men ringed the edges of the muddy roads, smoking, eating, bartering for guides, wares, passage. Horses stalked through the mud, laden to the brink with supplies, pulled



by determined souls. A horse was refusing to move, its back almost breaking beneath the weight of its load. A large man in furs yanked on a rope, whipped the horse's flank bloody. Another man – more civilised, cleaner, as if he'd just arrived on the same boat as I – stood beside him.

‘Come on, man!’ the clean one shouted. ‘We must get moving.’

The furred one cursed and spat. ‘Your wife will keep. These horses’ll break a leg in this mud.’

‘I’m paying you to guide, not talk. Hurry it up!’

Something about the clean man was familiar. As if I’d seen his face in a photograph once, slightly out of focus. I could not place him, though I knew him, somehow.

The furred man whipped the horse afresh and the crack of the leather, the scream of the horse, broke my memory. The poor animal finally moved and the clean man was gone in the fray.

I put the thought aside, for it was all but impossible for me to know a man in this place; perhaps I had simply seen him on the boat. Thousands upon thousands had already moved, and were still moving, through Skaguay. Thousands from every corner of the country, even from the world. For me to see someone I knew would be like finding a drop of salt water in a raging river.

A hand grabbed my wrist and pulled me around. ‘Good morning, Miss,’ said a spritely, small man in a buttoned-up suit.

I wrestled my hand free as Yukon growled. The man put his hands up in surrender, a wide smile under his moustache.

‘You mistake me – I am here to help,’ he said. ‘The name is Picket. Terence Picket. I own the Grand Hotel just at the edge of town, near the head of the trail. I have room and

board for only sixty dollars a night. Fifty-eight to you, Miss.'

I knew the type. In Kansas we called them corn-oil salesmen. 'Thank you, but I have lodgings.'

Arranged by Mr Everett, or so I hoped.

'Where might they be? I can assure you, no other establishment in Skaguay has cleaner beds than the world-famous Grand Hotel.'

'I don't need a room. But you may still help me. I'm looking for a man named Gunderson. Lars Gunderson. Do you know him?'

He brightened. 'I do. I surely do.'

And offered no more until I crossed his palm with a five-dollar bill.

'He drinks at the Soak Inn, just a few minutes' walk this way. I believe I saw him enter this morning.'

'Thank you, Mr Picket. You have been most helpful.'

To my surprise, the man tipped his hat to me and went on his way. Yukon relaxed, his tail wagging as he looked up at me expectantly.

'We'll eat when we find Mr Gunderson.'

He lowered his head and walked as if I'd scolded him. A dramatic hound, if ever I knew one.

The Soak Inn was where Mr Picket said it would be. A simple wooden building with a bright white shingle out front, newly painted for the season.

Inside, it was smaller than I expected and pleasantly full. The room was portioned off with an interior wall. Chalk signs offered baths for four dollars or a measure of gold. Two dollars if you didn't mind sharing the water. The smell of the place overwhelmed. A damp mould from a hundred spilled baths, alongside the sour stink of the unwashed waiting their turn.

Yukon and I went to the bar, where a man in a grimy apron was pouring whiskey.

‘Help you, Miss? You after a soak?’

‘Not today. I’m after a man named Gunderson. He was meant to meet me at the dock.’

The bartender nodded to the far corner of the room, where a man slept on a bench.

‘Him?’

‘You’ll need this,’ the bartender said and handed me a glass of water.

I squared my shoulders and moved between the tables to the bench. A guttural snore erupted from Mr Gunderson. Yukon waited behind my legs. I cleared my throat to announce myself.

Mr Gunderson snored on. It was as if the entire room held its breath, watching me.

I kicked the bench, to no avail.

‘Fine,’ I muttered and poured the water on the sleeping man’s head.

He reared up with a cry, rubbing his wet face, hair splayed and flying in all directions. Yukon tensed at my leg as I took a few steps back.

‘What in hell? Who’s waking me?’ he shouted, eyes squinting against the dim light, spinning round, fists clenched, looking for the fight.

‘Mr Gunderson?’

His whiskey-filled gaze landed on me. ‘Who in hell are you?’

‘My name is Kate Kelly. Mr George Everett sent word of my arrival. You were due to meet me at the dock to escort me along the White Pass Trail.’

He blinked, suddenly calm but frowning, staring at me, awaiting the spark of recognition. He was a mess of a man, long blond hair in greasy strings, an almost-white beard

stained brown by chewing tobacco, with durable, hardy clothes torn and caked in mud and perhaps blood. His hands shook as he ran them through his hair to tidy it.

‘Miss Kelly,’ he said with a booming, accented voice. ‘I am to take you to Dawson. You going to write stories about the miners?’

The room let out its breath and eyes turned back to their cards and glasses.

‘I am a journalist, sir. I will report on the conditions of the camps, the towns and the people for my readers back in Kansas and Missouri. For Mr Everett too, should he wish to start a mining venture here.’

‘Oh, oh. You’re a long way from Kansas, Miss Kelly.’

‘Don’t I know it,’ I said, as I took in the man before me.

‘But don’t worry that pretty head. Lars Gunderson keeps his word, and I gave my word to George I would get you to Dawson City.’

Relief came over me, and my shoulders let out an inch of their tension.

‘This your dog?’ he asked, kneeling, hand out.

‘This is Yukon,’ I said.

The dog stared up at me, as if awaiting permission, then padded over to the Swede. Mr Gunderson ruffled his fur and nuzzled his face against Yukon’s snout. Yukon’s tail began to fly. He was smitten, I could tell, and I believed him to be an excellent judge of character.

‘A good dog is worth more than gold up here. Bad people will soon as steal a good dog for sledding or fighting. Keep him close.’

I rested my hand on Yukon’s head. ‘I intend to. When do we leave, Mr Gunderson? I am keen to get on the trail.’

Mr Gunderson stood and looked out of the grimy window

at the sky. He really was tall. Had he been wearing his hat, it would have brushed the beams.

‘Tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow? But it’s still so early. We could make good time if we left immediately. I must get to Dawson, do you understand?’

He cocked his head and looked at me as if I was a curiosity, a city girl who understood little of this place.

‘The day is too far gone,’ he said. ‘See the clouds? Heavy dark. Rain later. We get too much rain on the White Pass and whoop! Off the trail we go and *crrrk*.’ He drew his thumb across his throat.

I would be no good to anyone dead. ‘Fine. Tomorrow.’

‘Good. You have rooms for tonight?’

‘I do.’

‘Then let’s have us some dinner, courtesy of George. He sent you with dollars, yes?’

I sighed at the delay. ‘Yes.’

‘Then we will have a meal in the finest place in Skaguay.’

My stomach sank at the thought, given the state of this place. Mr Gunderson took me out into the streets and they were suddenly not so unfriendly, now I stood beside a man. The looks and jeers stopped as if I was off-limits to their thoughts. It exhausted me, sometimes, being a woman in a world of men. Up here in the wild north the men were slowly losing their civility, if they had any to begin with, and it meant danger for a woman alone. As much as I despised the thought, it was good to have a man – a tall, well-known one at that – to escort me.

We ate a meal of meat pie and ale and he procured a bone for Yukon to gnaw. I thought the meat was cow, perhaps horse, but Gunderson corrected me.

‘Black bear.’

The chunk of meat in my mouth felt suddenly heavy and too big.

‘They come down from the mountains after their big sleep, *pop-pop-pop*, easy to kill. Tasty, right?’

I forced my jaw to work. It was sweet and soft, in some kind of gravy. Good even.

‘I never thought I’d eat bear,’ I said, pushing the remains around my plate. ‘Seems wrong to eat such a fierce predator. Upside down, you know?’

Mr Gunderson laughed and sprayed flakes of pastry over the table. ‘You’ll see. Upside down is right way up here. Everything goes the other way. You wait until you try beaver tail.’

I smiled and we settled into a companionable silence.

The inn was busy, as was all of Skaguay, with a queue out the door for the pies. Men bought them wrapped in wax paper to take back to their camps, handing over a pouch of gold for the payment to be measured out. A trusting method of doing business; I suspected those scales were weighted in the establishment’s favour.

I found my gaze drifting to the window and the shadow of the mountains beyond. I felt them calling to me. I had read stories of wild places like this since I was a child, sitting alongside my sister, beneath the blankets to stay warm.

The winters here, so I read, were harsh, dark times when a man could freeze to death in an hour. Stories spread of bodies found against trees, so peaceful they could be sleeping, or frozen into the river ice after falling through. Even here, now the thaw had come and the sun returned, Mr Gunderson told me of a pair of brothers found near the trail. They’d attempted the journey at the start of winter and were not found until the end.

This was not a land to take risks in, yet each man risked everything just to be here.

We left the inn and Mr Gunderson walked me to my hotel. We passed the wooden buildings, hurried up over days or weeks to accommodate the stampedeers, and I caught a glimpse of the canvas city on the flat land to the west. Tents as far as I could see, hemmed in by sharp, rising mountains on either side.

The gateway to the interior, the steamer brochures had said. What struck me, as I moved through Skaguay beside Mr Gunderson, was how I had expected a lawless, frenzied atmosphere. But the place was ordered, loud with its industry and little else, as if each man was looking only to his journey ahead, his supplies and how he would transport them, rather than be distracted by vice and drink. Even the working ladies looked largely unbothered.

Despite the hour, the town was alive with trade: the hardware shop, the outfitters, the wagons jostling each other for space, the men hauling and loading, the tired horses. I thought mostly of the money that must change hands in a place like this. Here was the fortune – not some metal locked in the frozen ground a thousand miles away.

Mr Gunderson left me at the Pullen Hotel, with a tip of his hat and a promise to see me there an hour after sunrise. He had some business to attend to and I realised, as he departed, that I had no idea what that business was. Or anything else about this man I was trusting to take me along hundreds of miles of treacherous trail.

Yukon and I went into the hotel, but found sleep difficult.

I was so eager to get moving. Get on the trail. I re-read Mr Everett's letters of instruction. I filled my first page with notes, and I thought of my sister.

My dearest Charlotte. Up here somewhere.

I opened her letter, received a month ago now, and read the words that had brought me here. Which had me rushing to Mr Everett's door suggesting he finance a trip to the Klondike. Which would carry me through these mountains, to Dawson City.

*This may be my last letter. He has finally found me and there is nowhere left to run.*



# ELLEN

BOULDER CREEK, KLONDIKE, LATE JUNE 1898

There is beauty here. Beyond the tents and sluice boxes. Away from the men and their tools. I like to stand outside and face the mountain. Before the camps wake and the noise begins, in the pre-dawn when the cold bites bare skin and leaves a mark.

Snow clings to the peaks. The ice is breaking on the wide rivers now and the mud thickens with snow-melt. I breathe in the crisp air and it hurts my chest. The mountains here tower and stretch, layering over themselves like a collage. The creek, glacial and milky blue, flows knee-deep over tumbled rocks. I could only love it more if I'd chosen it.

Sometimes I hear wolves in the trees beyond the camps. They search for weakness. There is plenty. A dog was carried off by a wolf last month. I heard the howling until I didn't.

Standing outside, I remember life before this place. I met Charles as a girl of nineteen and he already twenty-five. My father approved and my mother was dead, so said nothing. The Rhodeses were a good family, if not especially wealthy,

with growing interests in shipping and rail. His father owned a horse ranch and bred racehorses on the side. Seattle-born, with cold north-western blood.

His mother supported suffrage and his father enjoyed brandy. They were fine people, in their way. We married a year later. I wore lace from Europe, flowers in my hair and around my wrists. I said my vows in front of God and thought I meant them. It was what a girl did. Court, marry, tend a house, bear children. I didn't know I was meant to be happy about it as well. I accepted my lot with grace and good humour, but in truth, in my midnight thoughts – those that are just for me – I would have been happier alone.

Growing up motherless, with a father more interested in his business than his daughter, my own happiness was not something I nurtured. He was never cruel, never raised a hand to me in anger, but rarely one in kindness, either. He did his best.

They say a girl ends up marrying her father. I look at Charles, snoring in the bed he'd had made in Dawson and paid four men to carry here. My father would never fall so low.

The cold gets too much. My toes and fingers disappear. I've seen men lose them entirely in the chill. They turn black and all but snap off. I stay outside until the tips of my fingers turn blue. Tomorrow I will stay longer.

Inside, I go about the actions of a dutiful wife. Feed the fire, set a kettle to boil, sweep. When the light hits the back window, I am to wake him. Until then, I cherish the time.

We had been married a year when Charles heard rumours of gold in the north. It was the summer of 1894 when his contacts in Seattle and Juneau began whispering of fortune beneath the frost.

We must go, he said. It will be the adventure of a lifetime. I

wish to make my own way, Ellen, and not rely on my family's wealth.

He said he refused it when his father offered, but I always suspected his father was the one to refuse. I knew now, too late, that Charlie was not a safe investment. He promised we'd make enough in one summer to live like kings for the rest of our lives. Perhaps too, in mountain air, we would be blessed with a child.

As '94 turned to '95, Charlie – on a tip he'd heard in a bar from Skookum Jim himself – staked two claims on Boulder Creek, never having set foot on the land or washed a pan of its dirt. It was as secure a bet as any man could make, so he said. Our claims, wide strips of land on the bend of a river, were just a few miles upstream from Skookum Jim's own Bonanza claim. We would be rich as soon as the ice cracked.

He wakes, the day begins. He eats and is gone to dig with barely a word. I watch him through the window and remember his promises. He believed them. So did I. More fool me. In our three years here, I've watched every inch of the riverbank be claimed. Tents and cabins put up, men and precious few women fill the gaps, find little and fade away, replaced by more. And still we stay. Still he digs. Still I wash and clean and cook. Beans. Bacon. Pork. Potatoes. Bread. And again and again. The same day over and over. The only bright spots are the trips to Dawson. I go once a month. He goes once a week. Stays the night sometimes. I imagine he has a whore. I imagine my father's money pays for her.

The sun wanes and Charlie appears in the doorway.

'Smelling good, Ellen,' he says of my cooking. Up here, in this wild, untamed place, he's become another one of them. Prospectors. Face more dirt than skin, beard grown long, hair stringy beneath a scuffed hat. They are all just Man now. He

was Charlie once. With thick, clean hair, brown as chestnuts. I married him too young.

‘Salt pork and potatoes. Same as always,’ I say.

‘Always good, though.’

‘It’s been waiting. You were meant to be back by five. You break your watch?’

‘Don’t be sore, Elly, I got into the gravel by the creek. Gravel hides gold. I had to keep digging.’

‘And did you strike?’

‘Tomorrow. I can feel it.’

Always tomorrow.

He eats with his boots on. Sleeps with his coat on. Shotgun by the bed.

‘Claim-jumpers ain’t no joke, Ellen,’ he says, ‘I got to protect what’s mine.’

He never talked like that in Seattle. *Ain’t. Got.* His gentleman’s tongue is turning foul inside his mouth. Dirt under his nails. Cuts on his hands. Back and neck bent from working a shovel. I didn’t marry a common man. A workman with rough hands and rougher manners. I married Charles Rhodes. A man with prospects. Now look where we are.

We were one of the first up here. Trekking through the winter. Choice land. A large claim. But so far, only flakes. Not enough to survive. It’s my father’s money that keeps us in pork.

I decided long ago to make the best of this place, this life, the fortune it is sure to bring, but my husband, his failures and vices, makes it difficult.

As the day ends, I watch him sleep, his animal snores fill the cabin.

I lie down beside him, but sleep does not come for me. It rarely does.

I feel something. A change on the wind. Perhaps the end

of all this. Perhaps the beginning of the life I should have had. The shotgun shines in the moonlight. Winter is over, the snow is melting and the rush is coming.

# MARTHA

DAWSON CITY, KLONDIKE, LATE JUNE 1898

'I'm a common woman turned uncommon lady,' I said to the gent leaning on my bar, 'but you can call me Martha.'

He's got eyes for me. Been in Dawson a day, already half-emptied his pocket in here. I gave up trying to warn them to keep some back, he'll need it for the passage home to whatever prairie state he came from, but there's no telling a man with gold on his mind.

'Have a drink with me – I'll be rich in a month and I'll marry you,' the prospector drawls. That's my whiskey working. Heard it all before. Believed it only once.

'You come back when you're rich and I'll sell you a bath and a private dance from one of my girls.'

'How about with you, Martha?'

Being polite, I smiled, but I didn't have patience this morning. 'You can't afford me. Now I recommend you head over to the Aurora Café for a hot meal. Tell Tom that Ma sent you and he'll knock a penny off.'

The man lingered, those soft, drunk eyes on my corset and

waist.

I lifted my chin to Harry, standing watch by the door. The big man, in his clean shirt and buttoned-up collar, came right over, hauled the prospector up.

'Time to go, fella,' said Harry and the man's eyes went wide as a fish.

'I'm goin', I'm goin'.' He pulled away and stumbled to the door. Laughing like these idiots do, he shouted, 'A month! I'll be back in a month and then you're gonna marry me.'

I cleared his glass and Harry went back to his post.

A drunk slept on the card table, but I left him there; otherwise the Dawson Hotel, *my* hotel, which I'd built timber by timber with my own hands, was empty.

'Keep an eye,' I said to Harry.

I balled up my apron and climbed the stairs. Twenty rooms. Two dormitories. Six bathtubs. A dollar for a cold soak, five for hot. A dollar to sleep on a blanket on the floor. Thirty dollars a night for a bed in the dorm. Hundred for a room. Two hundred for a private with one of my girls. Two thousand for a month, and I had three gents already booked up through to winter. I had a claim up at Forty Mile that helped pay the bills, but only a fool looks for riches in gold up here.

I knocked at room three and went in without an answer.

Molly was still sleeping in the gent's bed. He'd been up at dawn to hunt down a claim. I'd made him breakfast and sent him off with a tip to check Goose Neck Creek near the Yukon River. He'll be gone three days and come back poorer. They always do.

I pulled the blanket off Molly and slapped her bare backside. 'Up.'

'Is he gone?' she said, looking to the door.

'First light. It's past nine. You got chores, my girl.'

She groaned and righted herself. Weren't no modesty in this place. I seen it all before. Except those bruises.

'He do that?' I brushed my hand over her shoulder, over the red-purple welts.

She winced. 'No. Not him.'

'Who then?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'I won't have men hurting my girls – you tell me who.'

She looked down at her knees. 'I was clumsy. You know what I'm like after a gin.'

'I know you don't get soused enough to lie to me. I got rules in my house, you know that. No lying and no moonlighting or you're out on your ear. Talk.'

Molly huffed, like a child, but she weren't a child. She was in her twenties. Married once even, widowed now. But she had a clean white face, not ravaged by pox or scars like so many, was small enough to be dainty and knew how to play the lady. Made her popular with men looking for a taste of high society. Made her valuable to me. Made her a target for Bill Mathers, who wanted her for his own place, though he was convinced he loved her, tried to charm her over to him more than once, but she knew his like and was happier here, with me. Though, of course, this weren't a brothel – not like those shacks in Klondike City. My girls were dancers and entertainers, finest in the Yukon. Just so happened they sometimes gave private shows to wealthy miners, and the Mounties looked the other way.

'Tell me, Molly.'

'Leave it, Ma. It's only a bruise, I'll put some powder on it.'

I watched her get up, pull on her dress and pin up her hair.

'I got rules,' I called, but she was out the door.

I pulled and balled the sheets with an anger building in



my chest. I righted the pillows and opened the window. Did the same in the next room. Went about my duties quick and quiet, seething at Molly's disregard. After everything I'd done for her.

In the next room, Giselle was getting dressed. She hushed me as her man was still snoring, buck-naked, sprawled in the middle of the bed.

'You gave him a good time, I see,' I said as we stepped out to the landing.

'Old bastard passed out after one pump. Had to roll him off me. Got his arm over me though, didn't he, so I had to stay there.'

I laughed. 'Easy night.'

Giselle clicked her teeth. 'You hear that snoring? I'm half-deaf!'

I bent to pick up the sheets and a pain shot through my gut.

'Ma,' Giselle was at my arm. 'You all right?'

The pain went as fast as it came. Always did. Nothing but trapped air, I guessed. I waved away Giselle's worry. 'Fine, fine, just my old bones. There's bacon in the pan. Get yourself fed.'

Giselle moved past me, but I took her by the arm. 'You keep an eye on Molly for me, you understand?'

The girl, who weren't a girl either, frowned. 'This about the bruises?'

I cocked an eyebrow. So it wasn't a secret. 'What do you know?'

'I don't know who done it,' she said, realising she was caught.

'Tell me, Giselle.'

She looked around, lowered her voice. 'She's been seeing a man. Off the books. Least, off your books. Might be love, you never know. She came home, night before last, moving a bit slow, you know? Like she was hurting. She said she was tired,

but she wasn't using her left arm much. Told me she took a fall. Had too much to drink. You know what she's like.'

I knew. 'Thank you, Giselle.' I gave her a few coins for her trouble. 'If you hear anything else about this man . . .'

She took the coins and kissed my cheek. 'My lips to your ears, Ma.'

'Go on now,' I said, and she trotted off down the stairs.

I watched her from the landing. Molly appeared from the kitchen with two plates. The pair of them were full of talk of their evenings. Molly laughed between mouthfuls and I could only think Giselle was telling her about her sleeping cockstand.

I watched them with a darkness growing in my heart. I'd built this place from the ground up. Knew every board and nail, could read the history of fights and fires in the wood grain. Helped dozens of girls get on their feet and get out richer. This was my home and, like any, I had rules.

No lying, snooping or moonlighting. I offered my girls a safe place to work, room and board, gents vetted by me, money up front, protection from ending up in Klondike City: the mud and louse-filled shacks full of desperate women hanging out their doors. These girls came up here for the same reason as all of us – to find their fortune. And women only got a few options open; one of them is the oldest profession in the world. If they're going to do it, I'd have them do it somewhere safe. And I only took half the fee for my troubles. A better deal than they'd get anywhere else in the Klondike. Hell, better than anywhere in the country, I reckon. But I wasn't to be taken for a fool. If they broke that rule, they would be out. Molly knew that, same as the rest.

My hands gripped the railing, nails digging crescents into the wood.

Relationships are like ice out here. They form quick and strong, but can break just as easy. Molly had been here close to a year, survived a winter, but now at the dawn of summer she was still a mystery to me, had secrets in her as deep as the Yukon River. A good worker, but choosy with her men and careful about finding herself in the family way, which I appreciated. Kept an eye on the others too, especially the new girls; gave them pennyroyals and made sure they were using their sponges. But now she was lying and seeing a gent on the side, two things I couldn't forgive.

I felt a wave wanting to crash over me. Holding itself back, frozen in mid-air, awaiting the thaw. Something dark was cresting over the mountains. The rush of change coming again.

# KATE

SKAGUAY, ALASKA, LATE APRIL 1898

Dawn came and, with it, an excitement and trepidation I'd not felt since leaving Topeka. Yukon snuffled on the bed beside me. Today we would embark on a journey that had killed dozens, if not hundreds, and forced hundreds more to turn back. These were men, strong and prepared, and what was I to that? A woman with muddy skirts, already tired from the journey.

Yukon woke and jumped around the bed, tongue lolling, tail pumping. He licked my face and whined for food.

I opened a can of meat and let him make a mess of it. I looked at my dress, my shoes, my bonnet. The tideline of mud, the water soaked up to the knee. I lifted the dress and the weight of it astounded me. I would be carrying enough up that trail. I could not carry half of Skaguay's mud with me too.

'These won't do, will they, Yuke?'

The dog paid no attention.

I had an hour before meeting Mr Gunderson and would make the most of it. I dressed quickly, ensured my bags and

trunk were packed and labelled, then whistled to Yukon.

Skaguay was quieter than it had been yesterday, but still the town was alive with people. Lines of laden horses and donkeys were being checked and packed. Men were tying down loads and hollering to their partners to move quicker. Always quicker.

I went to the outfitters across the street. One of the bigger buildings, doing a brisk trade even at this hour. A high counter dominated the room and a woman stood behind it. It instantly put me at ease. Snowshoes hung on a wall. Another wall was all hats. In the centre of the room, a stack of crates with a fully built rocker box for washing dirt. Hessian sacks, gold pans, hand-tools. Behind the counter, neat piles of clothes went to the ceiling. There were picks, shovels, axes, signs declaring 'dynamite sold here'. I was somewhat in awe of it all. Here was everything a man – or a woman – would need to pull riches from the earth.

'Help you, Miss?' asked the lady behind the counter. She looked at me with a wary eye and I didn't blame her.

'I need pants. Sturdy boots. A coat, a hat. Skirts have no place on the trail.'

The woman raised her eyebrows and a smile broke over her face. 'Right you are.'

In twenty minutes I was kitted for the trip. I threw in a gold pan for good measure, as I was sure Mr Everett would be keen for a first-hand account of the conditions and methods of mining.

I changed into the corduroy pants and suspenders in the back room and the woman whistled when I appeared. Yukon yawned from his place in the corner. The leather boots were second-hand, worn in but not worn out, and I chose a wide-brimmed felt hat to keep the sun off.

Beneath a glass case on the counter were knives. One in particular caught my eye. A long, slender blade with a wooden handle carved with roses. A woman must have protection, my mother always said. She meant a husband, but I would rather have a blade.

‘That too.’

I paid and strapped the knife around my waist. I felt like a Klondiker, prepared and eager to be on my way. The equal of any man in this place. I hefted on the coat – a green woollen frockcoat – and bid farewell to the woman.

‘Good luck, darlin’,’ she called.

I was away, into the streets of Skaguay, suddenly invisible against the tide of similarly dressed men. I still had time before meeting Mr Gunderson, so I strolled about the town, taking it all in, wondering what Charlotte had thought of it when she came through this way. It shocked me still that my sister – the more proper of us – had made this journey. I longed to hear of it. Had she taken the Skaguay road or the Chilkoot Pass from Dyea? Had she travelled alone or within a group? When I found her, I would question her on every detail.

I passed by a dozen more outfitters and general stores, a circulating library, a doctor, a saloon, a gin parlour, a barber, all calling out their trade. I passed smaller stands: a man with a single table selling shoes for a dollar. Another selling lucky gold pans. Another selling hammers and picks.

‘Penny for your future,’ came a strangely quiet voice. I turned to see a woman standing in the doorway to a tent, which was painted with all manner of symbols and colours. She was old, with kohl eyes and red lips, and wore gold coins on a purple shawl around her head.

‘Penny a reading,’ she said and opened her arm as if to usher me inside.

The thick smell of incense wafted out as she moved. Sandalwood and cedar and something else. Inside, I could see red patterned carpets, with a table and two chairs in the centre. Not a hint of mud.

‘Thank you, but I am due to meet someone,’ I said.

The woman smiled and nodded. ‘Come back, should that change. I see death in your future.’

I let out a small laugh. ‘Aren’t you meant to tell people you see riches and love?’

The smile was gone. She held my gaze with those black-rimmed eyes. ‘I tell men what they want to hear. But I tell women what they need to know.’

Her tone unsettled me more than I liked to admit. Something about this woman didn’t seem to fit with this place. As if she’d appeared with the dawn and would disappear with the dusk. Yukon whined beside me, pushing himself into my legs. I listened to my dog and walked away. I felt her eyes on me every step until I rounded a corner and made my way back to the Pullen.

Mr Gunderson was waiting outside and I got to within an arm of him before he knew me. He pulled off his hat, as I did mine, and laughed.

‘Good Lord, Miss Kelly! You are fit for the Klondike and no mistaking.’

‘Good to see you, Mr Gunderson. I trust you slept well.’

‘Well enough. I had your bags taken to the horses.’

‘How long until we reach Dawson?’

Mr Gunderson rocked his head from side to side. ‘If Lake Bennett and the Klondike are thawed, less than two months, I’d say. If the ice is still there . . . only God can say.’

My insides shrivelled. ‘Two months?’

Did Charlotte have two months?

‘Yah. It’s a long road. Perhaps we can be quicker if Mother Nature stays on our side.’

‘Then let’s not waste a moment.’

We had seven horses. Two for riding, four for carrying our things and a seventh carrying bales of hay. Yukon ran alongside them. As I wasn’t coming here to prospect or to mine, I wasn’t obliged to bring the requisite year’s worth of supplies and nor, as he was technically a packer, was Mr Gunderson. He had minimal belongings upon his second horse. We would be swift and, I hoped, would reach Dawson City in half the time. The mounted police who weighed each man’s provisions and granted passage saw my papers and nodded us through.

My hope kept me going as we rode along the streets of Skaguay, following the same path as thousands of others. The line of horses stretched from the town into the mountains – I saw no end of it. Ahead would be the White Pass Trail, forty-five miles through a treacherous canyon not built for horses, up to a freezing summit and down a muddy, loose slope, then across a boggy valley floor to Lake Bennett. But at least it was not the Chilkoot. Just looking upon the Scales and the hellish snow-covered mountain pass was enough to turn back the hardiest of prospectors.

I believe Mr Gunderson saw the worry writ on my face as we began our journey, for he took my hand and offered a warm smile.

‘I will look after you,’ he said. ‘So will that hound of yours.’

Yukon bounded ahead, tongue hanging out of his mouth, happy to run after so long stuck in a ship and a hotel. He ran back and forth to us and did not snap at the horses.

I let myself smile. ‘Thank you, Mr Gunderson.’

But the fortune-teller’s warning rang in my ears. She saw death ahead.



*I tell women what they need to know.*

I looked at Mr Gunderson, at the long road before me, and I thought of my sister waiting in Dawson City for me, fearing for her life. Did the death the woman spoke of lie there? Or on the trail before me? Or in the man beside me?

I felt for the knife on my hip and steeled myself for the wildness to come.

# ELLEN

BOULDER CREEK, KLONDIKE, LATE JUNE 1898

The day wears on and while Charlie digs, the man comes. He is the same man we've seen in Dawson. The same one who has come here before.

Checking in on old friends, he calls it.

His name is Croaker and he doesn't knock. He calls from outside and I am to come running. I don't run to my husband and shall never run to this man.

Croaker is large. Built for intimidation. His hair is black and barely a scrap of skin shows between beard and hat.

'Ahoy there to the cabin,' he calls and I close my eyes and breathe.

I open the door. 'Hello, Mr Croaker. My husband is working the claim right now. Can I offer you a drink?'

He takes off his hat as a gentleman might and comes closer. I see the sores on his cheeks beneath the hair. See the black tooth that won't fall out.

'Oh, mighty kind of you, Mrs Rhodes. I'll take a whiskey.'

I already had it on the table when I heard his horse. I pour

and hand over the glass and don't invite him inside. I stand at the door like I'm enjoying the view, looking anywhere but at him. He sips and strolls, glancing at the cabin, our two horses in their pen, sniffing and spitting as he goes.

'You've made yourself a nice home,' he says.

'Thank you, we try our best.'

'Got some missing shingles. Broken window. Your outhouse there could do with some new boards.'

'It's been a tough winter for us all.'

He sucks his teeth, makes a sound that turns my stomach.

Down the valley I hear picks and shovels, the sound of a wagon bumping over rails and of water washing rocks. Men sing their work.

'Quiet up here, huh? Struck yet?'

I don't answer. He doesn't expect me to.

'Seems all those folks down there are having better luck than Charlie. Why is that, you think?'

'I couldn't say.'

'Uh-huh.' He shakes the pole holding up the porch, checks its strength. 'Your Charlie staked these two claims a time ago, ain't that right? One in your name, one in his, as is the law. Way he tells it, he was pointed up here by Skookum Jim.'

'That's right.'

'Fine story. Makes for good talk over a drink.'

*But . . .* I feel he wants to say. But it's not true? Cold doubt creeps over me and I suddenly want this man gone.

'Is there something else I can do for you, Mr Croaker?'

He leans against the porch pole, sipping his whiskey and looking at me in a way I don't care for, but have got used to in this place.

'Charlie is a lucky man. Fine woman such as yourself don't belong up here with us rough types.'