

Forty Mile, March 22nd, 1896

Dearest Ma,

As I sit by the fire, scribbling on this tattered piece of paper, the snow drifts heavily outside, and the howling wind threatens to extinguish the flame. I've been stationed at Forty Mile for nigh on six months now, and the cold is as unforgiving as the earth that lies beneath my feet. I've seen it all, Ma – men who came with dreams of striking it rich, only to return to Seattle with nothing but a tale to tell. Others, who clung to their claims with a fierce determination, despite the harsh realities that awaited them.

I've seen the sun rise over the frozen tundra, casting a golden glow over the snow-covered trees, and I've seen it set behind the endless expanse of white, a fiery orb that promised warmth but delivered none. I've walked the icy riverbanks, my boots aching from the cold, as I searched for any sign of the elusive gold that I've come to crave. And I've lived among men who, like myself, have given up everything for this promise of a new life.

The camp's a bustle of activity, Ma – the sound of hammering on metal, the smell of woodsmoke and cooking fires, and the constant chatter of men who, like me, are driven by the hope of finding that one big strike. I've met some fine folks here – Doc Anderson, who tends to our medical needs with a kindness that's as rare as the gold we seek; Mrs. Jenkins, who cooks up a storm in her little cabin, feeding us hearty meals that give us the strength to face another day; and young Tom, who bakes the most wonderful bread this side of the Yukon River.

But it's not all sunshine and rainbows, Ma. The work's backbreaking, and the pay's scarce. I've seen men freeze their faces off, their fingers numb, their spirits crushed. And I've seen the gold, Ma – oh, I've seen it! – in glints of sunlight on a frozen creek, in the rich soil that yields to a pickaxe, and in the shimmering dust that dances in the air. It's a siren's call, Ma, and I'm as helpless as a moth to its flame.

I know you worry about me, Ma, but I'm as safe as I can be. The men here are good sorts, and we look out for one another. And I've got my dreams to keep me going – the dream of striking it rich, of returning home with a smile on my face and a pocket full of gold.

I'll write again soon, Ma, with news of my progress and a tale or two to share. Until then, know that I'm thinking of you, and that I'll be home before you know it.

Your loving son,

Jack