Untitled Klondike Project

Pilot Episode

"The Claim"

"Do not follow where the path may lead. Go, instead, where there is no path and leave a trail."

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

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5.30.12

ACT ONE

EXT. FROZEN WILDS - DAY

Camera looks skyward from under a frozen sheet of ice. Tracking. Finding above: boots, legs, finally the whole of a man. One BILL HASKELL, 20s. Bearded and freezing to death.

He's lying prone atop a frozen river in the wickedest of blizzards. Nothing but whiteness and death out there. His breaths come slow. Near death. Calmly, in v.o.:

BILL (V.O.)
You're looking at a rich man.

A long beat as his life starts to ebb before our eyes...

BILL (V.O.)
I wasn't that once.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MIDDLE CLASS HOUSE - NIGHT

--young BILL HASKELL, 10. Middle class house. Standing before a mirror in his bedroom, clad in Sunday's finest. He's looking uncomfortably at himself as he holds a tie before his throat. You get the impression the child's never even seen a tie before.

Chyron: "*Windham County, Vermont, 1887*."

Camera drifts over, reveals through the window, coming up the driveway, a HORSE & CARRIAGE. Something unsettling about that to young Bill...

INT. MIDDLE CLASS HOUSE / FOYER - CONTINUOUS

His father, BENJAMIN HASKELL, on the first floor, has an entirely different response. He straightens his own tie, eyes the coming buggy, calls anxiously to his WIFE:

BENJAMIN HASKELL
Look prim, Elizabeth. Is our boy ready? First impressions are everything. Everything dominoes from that first impression. I want him in a tie if he's not already--
(calling upstairs)
William!

ANGLE. WILLIAM. In his room. This all too much, too officious...

ANGLE. FATHER. Surveying the glimmering appointments of the buggy through the window:

BENJAMIN
Good God, look at that buggy. What do you think something like that costs?

ANGLE. BILL'S MOTHER--ELIZABETH--ascending the stairs, calling out to Bill--

ELIZABETH HASKELL
William, Mr. Chandler's here--

Following her as she steps into Bill's room. It's empty.

ELIZABETH HASKELL (CONT'D)
William?

Her eyes falls across the window. It's open...

EXT. VERMONT COUNTRYSIDE - NIGHT

FIND Young Bill, running off through the darkness. Sans tie.

Running. Running. Til he finds a familiar haven. A towering oak over a river. He knows this tree well. Where the footholds are. He climbs deftly.

Finds respite in the boughs. Sits there. Catches his breath.

We are with him for a beat. This place: his hideout, refuge. And whatever was back there...was *not* what he wanted.

After a moment, he senses a presence. Someone else in the tree. A few boughs up. Silhouetted there: another boy. Young BYRON EPSTEIN, also 10.

They sit there in silence together. You get the sense they've done this a <u>lot</u> over the years. Finally:

YOUNG BILL
They're sending me to boarding school. I didn't think they were actually going to do it--

YOUNG EPSTEIN
What's at boarding school?

YOUNG BILL
They keep saying it's gonna get me manners.

YOUNG EPSTEIN
You got a shit-ton of manners.

YOUNG BILL
They say it's gonna get me prepared for preparatory school.

YOUNG EPSTEIN
Isn't that what prep school's for? To prepare you? For whatever it is you're supposed to be prepared for?

YOUNG BILL
College.

YOUNG EPSTEIN (INCREDULOUS)
You're 10.

YOUNG BILL (SURVEYS RIVER)
Doesn't matter. Everyone's doing it earlier and earlier now. And my dad, if there's one thing he hates, it's being left behind.

YOUNG EPSTEIN
But it's not about him--

Bill gives him a knowing look.

YOUNG BILL
It's not about *me*.
(considers the night)
Feel like I'm in a box. Locked up in my own life. Without a key.

YOUNG EPSTEIN
No way. Me and you...we're free. Look at us. They can put you in school for a bit, but that ends. Me and you, the world can't hold us. Anything we wanna do, anywhere we wanna go...when we're older, we can do it. Me and you.

YOUNG BILL
Not *anywhere*...

YOUNG EPSTEIN
Yes anywhere. Like there. We could go there.

Said with a nod up at the <u>full</u> <u>moon</u>.

YOUNG BILL
No we couldn't.

YOUNG EPSTEIN
You just gotta think you can. That's the point.

YOUNG BILL
Even if there's no chance we could ever get there. The moon.

YOUNG EPSTEIN
Way I see it, if you aim for it, and you don't get there...I bet you still get somewhere interesting. Somewhere you never woulda thought--

He’s interrupted by the appearance of a lantern, bouncing toward them in the darkness--

BENJAMIN HASKELL
William! Get down here!

Bill eyes Epstein in the moonlight.

YOUNG BILL (CRESTFALLEN)
Coming.

As he dutifully descends the tree--CUT TO--

EXT. VERMONT COUNTRYSIDE - MOMENTS LATER

Bill's Father, hurriedly ushering him back toward the house. Epstein follows at a small remove--

BENJAMIN HASKELL
I have saved every penny I have to afford you this opportunity. You will not embarrass your mother and myself--

His eyes fall across MR. CHANDLER--the spitshined buggy driver--in the yard.

BENJAMIN HASKELL (CONT'D)
Mr. Chandler! So sorry. A small indiscretion. My profound apologies-

As he hastens forward to shake Chandler's hand, camera lingers behind with Bill & Epstein...

This is it. Goodbye time for best friends.

YOUNG EPSTEIN
Me and you. We shoot for the moon. Got it?

YOUNG BILL (DUBIOUS)
Even if we've got no chance of getting there...

Epstein nods with a grin. Exactly the point.

YOUNG EPSTEIN
Even if we've got no chance of getting there.

A final wan smile between them. Then they separate, cutting off toward their respective houses. Linger on Young Bill--

BILL (V.O.)
My whole life: planned out for me. Fast-tracked to get me to the Promised Land. My father told me not to complain, because guys like Byron Epstein...didn't have that same sort of opportunity...

And we see: Epstein's house--as he moves for it--slightly better than a <u>hovel</u>.

INT. UNIVERSITY - DAY

Quick hits: tracking from other students reading math texts, business texts....to a COLLEGIATE BILL flipping through “travel lit”, 1890’s-style--Bret Harte’s accounts of the California Gold Rush, W.L. Stevenson’s south seas stories--

BILL (V.O.)
They prepared me, all right. For 10 years, I read every book under the sky.

EXT. BIG CITY - DAY

Quick hits: Epstein in the broad-shouldered industrial world of American cities in the 1890s...

BILL (V.O.)
And while I was reading...Bill was living. He saw the world. The unvarnished one that was not in books.

Epstein: exiting a Loan Shop with a turn-of-the-century version of a payday loan in hand--PROPRIETOR emerging behind him, watching him go with the eyes of a shark...

BILL (V.O.)
The one filled with bank failures, with families being tossed out of homes, 4 million men wandering the continent looking for work...

As Epstein stands in an impossibly long unemployment line:

BILL (V.O.)
This couldn’t be it. There was no possibility in it. There had to be more. A place where there was nothing <u>but</u> possibility.

INT. BALLROOM - DAY

A banner fills frame: <u>CONGRATULATIONS</u> <u>CLASS</u> <u>OF</u> <u>1897</u>! Camera booms from this down to a coat-and-tie affair. A bit stiff, if we may call a spade a spade. It’s “*<u>May</u> <u>1</u>, <u>1897</u>*.”

We find Bill here, newly graduated, being introduced to various movers-and-shakers by an enthusiastic COLLEAGUE.

COLLEAGUE
Captains of industry everywhere you look. Guy over there’s in the horseless carriage game. Guy over there: telephones. Supposedly he’s figured out how to lower rates so the common man can afford it. And if the common man can afford it...sky’s the limit. Those are the games we wanna be in.

While all of this is going on, we are with Bill: amicable, if uncomfortable. These people: the 1%. Not, at the end of the day, his people. Colleague, noticing:

COLLEAGUE (CONT'D)
I'm not detecting ambivalence am I?

Misinterpreting Bill's silence:

COLLEAGUE (CONT'D)
God, of all people, *you* shouldn't be nervous. Your dad's been pulling strings with all of these people. Candidly, I'm a bit jealous...

Bill's demeanor changes when he *does* spot one of his people. Arguing with the Concierge at the door.

A scruffy guy with a poor suit. Epstein.

BILL
Excuse me.

Before Colleague can respond, Bill excuses himself, pardons his way through the crowd to Epstein & the Concierge.

BILL (TO CONCIERGE, REASSURING) (CONT'D)
It's okay. He's with me.

Concierge relents. Bill and Epstein step inside the party. Epstein's got a shit-eating grin. Bill, pleased as hell to see him:

BILL (CONT'D)
See you wore your finest.
(re Epstein's natty wool suit)
Are there actually *moths* in there?

EPSTEIN
This coming from a guy who looks like a constipated penguin.

They embrace with a sincere pat on the back.

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
Congratulations, brother.

They separate. Colleague has appeared.

BILL
Richard. Meet Byron Epstein.

Colleague nods affably, but you can tell the man's a bit confused about Epstein's low-brow presence here.

COLLEAGUE (TO BILL)
Come over. I want you to meet the telephone guys.

Bill meets eyes with Epstein. A knowing look there.

BILL
Actually, we've got a train to catch.

A waiter passes. Epstein procures two glasses of champagne. As he hands one to Bill:

COLLEAGUE
Where're you headed?

EPSTEIN
West.

COLLEAGUE
West? Why west?

BILL (WRY)
Because that's where every young man goes...

COLLEAGUE
Yeah, but what's out there?

BILL (SUBTLE GLEE)
I don't know.

EPSTEIN
And that, my friend...
(swallows champagne)
...is <u>exactly</u> the point.

As Bill and Epstein clink glasses--CUT TO--

EXT. URBAN TRAIN STATION - DAY

--the duo moving quickly through the bustling downtown station. Around them, the advanced urban sprawl of 1897 America. They reach the train just as it's set to depart. As they climb aboard, settle on the steps--

EPSTEIN
Can still back out. You did, after all, have more opportunity back in that room than most human beings will have in a lifetime.

BILL
Wouldn't be on my terms.

EPSTEIN
(invigorated)
All I know is you may be high-falutin school-boy, and all that, but soon as we hit on that train, and we're about 2000 miles <u>that</u> way, that diploma of yours won't be anything more than a piece of paper. Just be us, a couple of men on the land.
(MORE)

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
And damn if it's not gonna be me with the idea that makes us rich.

BILL
We wanna bet on this?

EPSTEIN
1000 bucks.

BILL
You don't got 1000 bucks.

Epstein unfurls a cocky grin.

EPSTEIN
Not yet I don't.
(puts a hand out)
1000 bucks. I'm the guy the comes up with the idea that makes us rich.

Bill's eyes, though, are on the COMMUTERS hurrying by in the station with their suits and valises. Brow-furrowed, stressed-out ants, all of them.

BILL
What if I say it's not about getting rich for me?

EPSTEIN
Then I'd say you're full of shit.

The train chugs to life. Begins to leave the station. Epstein gazes into Bill challengingly.

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
We got a bet or don't we?

As Bill meets his gaze, shakes his hand with a knowing smile--

EXT. FROZEN WILDS - DAY

We are back in the frozen wild. Bearded Bill's near-frozen lips curl a half a percent in bemused, wizened reminiscence.

BILL (V.O.)
1000 dollars. Seemed like a million then. Like something that actually...mattered.
(beat)
But even then, whether we knew it or not, the bet wasn't about the money. It was about the bet itself.

Around him in the whiteness...shouts, euphoric, unbridled...

INT./EXT. TRAIN - DAY

Various shots of Bill & Epstein, young men emancipated upon the land:

· Hanging heads out the window, shouting exultantly out at the passing America landscape.

BILL (V.O.)
Epstein wanted to prove he was the dog with the runny nose, the poor man that society couldn't keep down. And to him, even though I was his best friend...I <u>was</u> society.

Camera drifts back to Bill in the window behind him--

BILL (V.O.)
Thing he didn't get was that was the last thing I wanted to be. All I wanted was to get away and find my own thing. Something that was real, bare-boned...

CUT TO--BILL & EPSTEIN--in the back of the dining car, tossing dice and drinks with negro porters and cooks.

BILL
A place to set up shop...and carve out my future with my own two hands.

INT. TRAIN - LATER

<u>CASH</u>--being tossed into a hat. Widen. Bill & Epstein--forming a "kitty" for their coming endeavor.

BILL
That's all of it. 350. Every cent I got for graduation.

EPSTEIN (CONSIDERING CASH)
(mild disappointment)
Huh.

BILL
Huh what?

EPSTEIN
Thought it'd be more, that's all.

BILL
Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, brother. I'm putting all that into the kitty.

It's then that Epstein unfurls his <u>own</u> <u>wad</u> <u>of</u> <u>cash</u> and tosses it into the kitty.

EPSTEIN
Just...I got, what, 400 here. Thought it'd be me that'd be the one light on the contribution.

BILL (INCREDULOUS)
What, you rob someone?

EPSTEIN
Funny. That there is legally acquired tender, *brother*. Which I prefer to call capital investment, if we're going to be business men about things.

BILL (COUNTING)
So we're looking at...750.

EPSTEIN
Ain't much of a nest-egg, but it's something.

BILL (NODS)
Who we kidding. It's nothing.

EPSTEIN
Makes the story all the more beautiful though, doesn't it? When we're millionaires...we can say we started with nothing.

Bill nods. Liking that.

BILL
Here's to nothing, brother.

Epstein smiles. Nods.

EPSTEIN
To nothing.

Off their smiles, CUT TO--

EXT. TRAIN - DUSK

--the DUO, sitting topside, the wind in their hair, looking out at an illimitable sunset over the Buffalo-swollen prairies of middle America.

BILL (V.O.)
In that moment, we were one of the most potent and foolish forces in the world. Two men shooting for the moon...even if they didn't have a chance in hell of getting there.

INT. BAR - DAY

"*Colorado Springs, Colorado. May 7, 1897*." Bill & Epstein idle over beers, the latter reading classified ads in a paper.

EPSTEIN
Thought the west was supposed to be about opportunity. Ain't seeing Jack for opportunity. It's all menial stuff.

BILL
Don’t mind menial. If that’s where we gotta start and work our way up...

EPSTEIN
Always amuses me how the rich man romanticizes the menial life. Thinks it’s closer to the earth. Like it’ll deliver him.

BILL
I am *nowhere* near rich.

EPSTEIN
All I’m saying is, I’ve *lived* the menial life, brother. Ain’t nothin’ romantic about it.

BILL (RE NEWSPAPER)
How ‘bout you stop sermonizing and start telling me what you’re seeing in there.

EPSTEIN (READING)
Let’s see...they’re looking for cowherds.

BILL
Don't know about the first thing about animals.

EPSTEIN
Railroad men.

BILL
Coulda done it back home.

Epstein orders 2 more beers, returns to the classified.

EPSTEIN
We could be soldiers, go to the Philippines...

BILL
Got no interest in dying anytime soon.

EPSTEIN
Not for a dollar a day.

The new beers come. Bill moves to pay for them.

BILL
What do I owe you?

Bartender nods up the bar.

BARTENDER
Our man down there’s fronting drinks til closing time.

And it's here we meet a crucial figure in our story. A man the end of the bar: The One Who Kept Going. An impossibly weathered veteran of the gold fields. Call him BECKETT.

Bill & Epstein cross to him.

BILL
Wanted to thank you for your generosity.

BECKETT
It's only generous if it hurts. And buying drinks...ain't no pain in that for me ever again. Sorta beyond that phase, if you get me.

BILL
Thanks all the same.

BECKETT
Telling you, thanking a rich man for a nickel's like thanking the sky for air. Drink up. Take a coupla bottles with you.

Bill and Epstein meet eyes. The man’s clothes bespeak a hard life. The only thing currently with him is a rusting coffee tin on the bar before him.

EPSTEIN
Mind us asking what sorta business you're in--?

In answer, Beckett produces a gold nugget, drops it on the counter before them.

This is a big moment. The first time we see gold in the series. And goddamn if it isn’t beautiful.

The size of a man’s thumb. Radiant with a deep luster native only in the purest of gold.

Bill’s putting two and two together in his head. Ah...

BILL
Colorado. That’s right. They been saying in the papers for a while now miners’ve been pulling all sorts of gold out of the ground...

BECKETT (KNOWING SMILE)
If it’s in the newspaper, it’s over.
(beat)
Colorado’s panned out. Has been for a long time. Just like Black Hills and California before that.

EPSTEIN
Then where were you?

BECKETT
Just like anything else, if you really wanna be the trailblazer, you go as far as everyone else does...then you keep going.

BILL
And that gets you where exactly?

Beckett mulls, finally nods.

BECKETT
The Yukon.
(beat)
Placer fields have been locked beneath permafrost for thousands of years. Only now are people starting to realize what's down there.

He finishes his beer. Nods knowingly.

BECKETT (CONT'D)
But...you gotta get there before the newspaper does.

He hefts his coffee tin, moves to leave.

Epstein & Bill quickly realize the man's left that beautiful nugget on the counter.

EPSTEIN
Forgot something, boss.

Beckett looks back. Shakes his head with a subtle smile.

BECKETT
No. I didn't.

He lifts the lid off the coffee tin. Revealing within, crammed all the way to the top, more gold nuggets. Bigger and more beautiful than the first one. A knowing smile from him.

BECKETT (CONT'D)
Keep it.

Then he's gone.

EXT. COLORADO SPRINGS TRAIN STATION - DAY

Bill & Epstein sit on their satchels. Consider the nugget. Mulling the man's advice.

BILL
Just so you know, technically, if we were to go up there, and were we to strike it rich, it's wouldn't have been your idea. It was his. So don't think you're getting the thousand.

Epstein hefts the nugget Beckett gave them.

EPSTEIN
We land coffee cans full of this...I'll give exactly half a damn about a thousand bucks.

Off that nugget, glinting in the sunlight--DISSOLVE TO--

EXT. ALASKAN STRAIT - DAY

...foam dancing in the wake of a ship. Rise to find Epstein & Bill on dock. Looking out at yet another world: black cliffs with jagged peaks, coastline shrouded in fog. We are a long way from anything they've known.

This is "*The Lynn Canal, Alaska, June 2, 1897*".

As Bill considers the foreboding allure of the landscape, he turns his attentions to the curious assortment of other passengers. A diverse ship of fools and aspirants. A fat SOCIETY LADY in tailored garb. Drinking tea being served to her by a SERVANT.

A priest (later, FATHER JUDGE, 40s), with a rifle slung over his shoulder. Consorting with a young native HAN WOMAN in Western clothes. The woman, an early example of the local population being "civilized". Their relationship, seen in pantomime, is a head-scratcher. What exactly *are* the terms?

As Bill absorbs it all in contemplative silence...he notices a snaky little pickpocket (later, SOAPY SMITH, 30s), trying to get into the Fat Lady's purse while her back's turned.

Yet every time he's about to consummate the nab, she shifts just enough to almost notice him and he retreats. This happens 2 or 3 times, Soapy being silently and humourously frustrated...then...

STEWARD (O.C.)
DY-E-A!

Everyone turns their gaze to the shoreline ahead. What materializes from the mist is technically a 'town', but one about as far removed from civilization as you can get. Dyea.

EXT. DYEA STREETS - MOMENTS LATER

Bill & Epstein disembark amongst the others, regard the foreboding end-of-the-world town.

Visible in the streets, a surprising amount of MINERS. Hastily rigging sleds, gearing up. Almost like one might expect to see before the start of a modern Iditarod.

Bill nears Father Judge, who's some ways ahead of them, investigating the commotion.

BILL
What's going on?

FATHER JUDGE
Evidently, the Pass has been locked up for last 4 weeks with storms.

Said with a nod to the imposing mountain range behind town. The Chilkoot Pass climbs up through a narrow shoot. It's heavy with snow. Impossibly steep. Intimidating.

FATHER JUDGE (CONT'D)
This is apparently the first window they've had in the weather. So now everyone's heading out. Trying to get over before the next storm hits. Which, by the look of it...
(he considers his portable barometer...)
...won't be long.

EXT. DYEA STREETS - MOMENTS LATER

Bill & Epstein, moving through the miners--

BILL
Obviously, we wait.

EPSTEIN
What do you mean? Obviously we go. Remember what our boy back in Colorado said. *Get there first*.

BILL
You don't get anywhere first if you die on the way.

Epstein nods to a nearby VENDOR, hawking provisions & gear.

EPSTEIN
What's it cost to kit up?

VENDOR
300'll get you a sled, provisions, shelter, clothes. Cover you for the next six months.

EPSTEIN (PROFFERS MONEY)
Sign us up--

Bill coolly guides Epstein aside--

BILL
No, no. Hold up. We've got to think about this. I'm serious.

EPSTEIN
So am I. You wanna wait here til it's summer, be my guest. But I'm buying that kit, even if I got to separate out my own money to do it.

BILL
Oh don't do that. We're doing this together. That was the agreement.

EPSTEIN
Then you better put on your climbing shoes. 'Cause I am going up that, today.

Said with a nod toward Chilkoot. Upon which a thin river of ascending miners can be seen.

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
Every miner up there stakes a plot ahead of us. First guy chooses the best claim, second guy the second best...all the way down the line til we get there. You really want the hundredth best claim? The thousandth?
(to Vendor)
I'll take the kit.

Bill simmers. Knowing he can't stop Epstein's impulsiveness--

BILL (TO VENDOR)
We'll take half the kit. For 150.

EPSTEIN
'Hell you talking about? Now's not the time to be *saving money*--

BILL
Full kit's gonna slow us down. And if you want to go up that...we're gonna have to hustle our ass. Less time we're on that mountain, better chance we have at actually living.

He shakes his head. More to himself than anyone else:

BILL (CONT'D)
Goddamn I don't believe this.

EXT. CHILKOOT PASS - LATER

XCU...the skids of a sled, as it's slowly dragged up a snowy slope. Very slowly dragged. Widen. Find Bill & Epstein straining to pull their heavy kits up the mountainside.

BILL
You're a son of a bitch, you know that.

EPSTEIN
If it weren't for me, You'd be sitting behind a desk somewhere, selling stocks. Getting old and cynical before you ever even lived.

BILL
And if it weren't for me, you'd be dragging that crap up the mountain.

Said with a nod ahead to the Society Lady and her Servant, the latter struggling mightily to coax the heavy fully-kitted sled up the mountainside.

BILL (CONT'D)
Sitting goddamn ducks for the storms.

EXT. CHILKOOT PASS - DAY

More strain. More struggle. Bill & Epstein have left a number of the more heavily-kitted groups behind. Ahead, they spot Judge and his female colleague. Putting up a tent in the shelter of a solid rocky crag.

BILL (RE TIME OF DAY)
Folding up early there, Father.

FATHER JUDGE
You put a month's worth of snow up on that ridge, sooner or later it's coming down. Heat's sinking into it by the hour. Best travel at night. When the snow's frozen back up. Less likely to come roaring down on you.

Bill & Epstein smile, continue onward.

EPSTEIN
See you on the other side, Father.

FATHER JUDGE
Assuming that's the ridge you're talking about.

A nod and a smile as Bill & Epstein move on.

EXT. CHILKOOT PASS - NIGHT

A string of lights is distributed sparsely up the mountainside. Hikers, climbing at night according to Judge's logic. Come in on one of those lights...the lantern clasped in Bill's hand. Epstein's gassed by the cold and altitude.

EPSTEIN
I'm shot.

BILL
Keep moving. Every hour we move is an hour sooner we're off this mountain.

As they move on, someone comes into view, appearing at the peripheries of their lamplight. A HALF-MAD MINER, blackfaced and ghastly in the night. His tattered kit beside him. Rubbing something again and again over that blackened face.

BILL (CONT'D)
You all right there?

Miner looks up. Sees the looks of consternation.

HALF-MAD MINER (RE HIS FACE)
Charcoal. And I'd do it too if I were you. 'Less you wanna lose your lips and nose to the cold.

EPSTEIN
Get the sense you been out here for a while, boss--

HALF-MAD MINER
Shh...
(beat)
Hear that?

EPSTEIN
Hear what?

HALF-MAD MINER (REVERENCE)
The sound of <u>life</u>.
(beat)
The sound of <u>nothing</u>. And that's exactly what you wanna hear on Chilkoot. Nothing. Soon as you hear a rumble up there in the darkness, you got about 10 seconds til you're dead. You gotta listen. Otherwise the mountain'll eat you in the night.

BILL
Sure you're all right?

HALF-MAD MINER
Sooner you shut up and start *listening* I will be.

He glares at them. Bill nods. He & Epstein move on.

EXT. CHILKOOT PASS - DAY

"*<u>June 13, 1897. Chilkoot Pass</u>*."

Beneath a cluster of rocks, Bill & Epstein's tent. The latter inside, stirring uncomfortably in his sleeping bag.

EPSTEIN
Goddamn half-kit. Coulda had real blankets. Instead, I'm an ice cube in an old wet sock. I'm serious, Haskell. This is a deal-breaker for me.

Bill's outside. Eyeing the train of ascending miners below.

BILL
You're the guy that wanted to get there first. I'd say on that front...we're doing a pretty good job.

He turns his gaze then from the miners to the sky. To the sun burning brightly there.

Lastly, he turns to look up at the cornice high on the ridge above. It looms there, wind-swept, way-too-steep and high. Off it, glistening in the heat...

EXT. CHILKOOT PASS - NIGHT

"*June 20, 1897. Chilkoot Pass*."

The slope: now a near-impossible 45 degrees. Bill & Epstein: persevering, their faces frozen constellations of beard, charcoal, and snow.

Below, the ever-present string of lights in the night, connoting the other miners as they climb.

Bill's eyes are on the sloping darkness above. *His ears, per earlier wisdom, are trained on the silence.* It's different out here in the wilderness. Illimitable. Behind him:

EPSTEIN
10 days we been on this hill.
(beat; off Bill's look)
And you thought I couldn't count.

BILL (DISTRACTED)
Nope. Yesterday you told me it was 9. Day before that, 8. You're a counter.

EPSTEIN
Feel like that Greek king--the one pushin the boulder up the hill for eternity--what's his name--
Syphilis...

BILL
Sisyphus.
(eyeing mountain above)
Difference is we chose to be here. For him it was punishment--

EPSTEIN
Sure as shit feels like punishment about now, Haskell--

BILL (LISTENING TO DARKNESS)
Shh....

Epstein pauses. Sees Bill listening...

BILL (EAR UPSLOPE) (CONT'D)
Hear it?

EPSTEIN
Hear what--

And then it comes. The rumble.

Half-beat. No doubt about. Something above. Roaring down toward them unseen in the darkness. Something massive.

Epstein turns to run downslode. Bill, though, spots, 15 feet above, a rock outcropping--

BILL
Not down. Not down!

EPSTEIN
What?!

BILL
UP! UP!

RUMMMMBLLLLEEEE!

EPSTEIN
You outta your head--

Bill yanks Epstein upward. They scramble up toward the rock outcrop--

--JUST AS THE AVALANCHE HITS. A HUGE WAVE OF SNOW ROARS PAST--CRESTING OVER THE ROCK OUTCROPPING--

It just gets a hold of Epstein's shoulder, spins him away--

BILL
EP!

But for a moment, all he can do is press himself against the outcropping--

--then it's past.

Bill leaps into action. Pushes downhill through the swirling mist, his light refracting eerily in the snowy haze.

Epstein's visible--his legs are, anyhow. Half-buried.

Bill descends on him. Feverishly begins digging...

BILL (CONT'D)
Ep...Come on, Ep....!

And out comes Epstein, gasping, shocked.

EPSTEIN
Jesus Christ...Jesus Christ!

As he catches his breath, the mist settling, Bill holds up his lantern, looks downslope. Epstein follows his gaze.

Below, where seconds before there had been a trail of lights connoting the miners...there is only darkness.

No lights. Not a single one.

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

EXT. CHILKOOT PASS - DAWN

Death.

The rising sun illuminates the aftermath of the avalanche: bodies--already in rictus--being pulled from the snow by those lucky enough to survive. Townspeople, working their way up to the torn, pockmarked slope.

And Bill & Epstein--assisting--seeing familiar faces being pulled from snowy tombs--the Fat Society dame, her Servant...

Epstein can barely speak. Aside, to Bill:

EPSTEIN
If we'd still been down here...
(..we'd be dead, but...)
You and your goddamn half-kit,
brother.

He looks to Bill. That small choice likely saved their lives.

EPSTEIN (HEARTFELT) (CONT'D)
Thank you.

EXT. CHILKOOT PASS - LATER

Bill & Epstein move through the carnage--bodies being loaded onto sleds once designed to carry these people and their dreams to the promised land--now conscripted to carry them downslope to their grave.

Bill watches as Father Judge says prayers over the half dozen or so fallen. Epstein, sensing the thoughts behind Bill's ashen demeanor:

EPSTEIN
You're not thinking about quitting,
are you?

Bill doesn't respond.

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
It ain't gonna bring them back.
It's not.

Epstein turns, looks up at the ridge. They're that close. Bill looks to him, then back down at the dead...

EXT. CHILKOOT PASS - LATER

The slope, a near-impossible 45 degrees. Bill & Epstein strain against gravity as they pull their sleds ever higher.

Behind Bill's goggles: eyes hollow, haunted, on auto-pilot.

He presses on, ever harder--the ridge just above--the mud and rocks calving beneath his feet.

Below, Epstein senses Bill's dogged drive:

EPSTEIN
Go easy, brother. Maybe you oughta slow it down...

But Bill presses on--

EXT. CHILKOOT RIDGE - DAY

--and moments later crests the ridge. As does Epstein beside him a moment later. Both men pulling away their goggles from their blackened faces. Tears come to Bill's eyes. A near-broken man. But unbowed.

Both men look ahead, o.s., with astonishment...

EXT. CHILKOOT RIDGE - CONTINUOUS

Camera rises behind them, revealing on the other side, a chasm in the clouds, allowing the sun's full radiance to fall on the basin on the other side.

Everything is visible: the splendor of far-off snow-capped mountain ranges. The fluid magnificence of the caribou herds. A string of frozen lakes like diamonds on the land.

It is nature unfettered. So sublime it seems incapable of the raw fury it unleashed just pages earlier.

For a long time, they just behold it.

EXT. CHILKOOT RIDGE - LATER

Epstein, peering down the far side of the ridge. A long, steep pure slope of snow slants away toward the valley floor below. 100 years later, this is a snowboarder's dream. A long, untrammeled ride...

EPSTEIN
Takes us almost 2 weeks to get up...what do you reckon it'll take to get down?

BILL
If we walk it, few days...

EPSTEIN (NODS TO HIS SLED)
And if we sled it?

Bill considers his sled, then the steep slope.

BILL
10 minutes. If we don't break our necks.

EPSTEIN
Maybe we walk it then.

Bill eyes the black-diamond slope again.

BILL (WEARY)
Goddamn am I tired of walking.

EPSTEIN
Hoping you would say that.

They share a look. Ease their sleds toward the cornice.

And for the first time in 3 weeks, let gravity claim them.

Two sleds & two men drop down onto the slope. And in moments are roaring valley-ward...

It's a short-cut. A thrill-seeker's move. Simultaneously an adrenaline rush and horrifying...

Down they go, white-knuckled, runnels of tears streaming from their wind blown eyes--

EXT. FROZEN LAKE / MAKESHIFT COMMUNITY - MOMENTS LATER

CRASH! A few beats later, Bill's sled finally careens, catches an edge, and flips, spilling him onto the snow in a tumble.

He's at the bottom, though. Flat land. For a moment, he just sits there, a smile threatening to cross his lips for the first time in days. The mountain, in that moment, beneficent...

Then a pair of <u>boots</u> appears beside him in the snow. Shiny, well-polished Balmorals. Delicate. A woman's.

He looks up to see something so wholly anomalous upon this landscape that he can scarcely process.

A woman. SABINE, 20s. Good-looking, too.

SABINE
I trust you had a good ride.

Bill stands. Fresh off 3 weeks of blizzard, fatigue, and near-delirium, he's wholly unprepared for witty rapport.

BILL
I, uh, I did.

Bill quickly takes in the surroundings, a couple other prospectors are visible, bivouacked for the day.

Bill fumbles a bit, both with his tongue and the glove he tries to remove to shake her hand:

BILL (CONT'D)
Bill, uh...Bill...

You get the sense that Sabine's accustomed to this. Men fumbling before her beauty. Playfully:

SABINE
Nice to meet you Billa Bill.

He finally gets his glove off. Shakes her hand. There's a great asymmetry here--she in her fineries, he looking like he's just returned from polar exploration--

BILL
It's Haskell, actually. Bill Haskell.

SABINE
Sabine.

There's a half beat in which they meet eyes with enough mutual appreciation that we think this might be the start of something--down the road, perhaps--then--

EPSTEIN (O.S.)
Lady, you are either a dream or a mirage.

Reveal Epstein, a weather-beaten abomination like Bill, tramping across the snow toward them. He thrusts a mitt toward her.

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
But either way, I'm going with it. Byron Epstein.

As she clasps his hand, nodding politely--CUT TO--

EXT. FROZEN LAKE / MAKESHIFT COMMUNITY - LATER

Along the river, a makeshift camp: two dozen people, toiling to build boats--essentially from scratch--along the shoreline...

Bill & Epstein follow Sabine through it all.

SABINE
Heard about the avalanche.
(it's a shame)
Third one this year.
(knowing exhale)
Can only reckon you two're bound for Dawson City like the rest of us. "Paris of the North".

BILL (SURPRISED)
Wouldn't expect a Paris anywhere up here.

SABINE
There's a lot of things up here you wouldn't expect.

Said as they pass the first of the many self-styled entrepreneurs they will encounter going forward--a weathered vet--call him BOATSELLER--

BOATSELLER
Got a vessel: tarred, sealed; proven workhorse that's already made the journey up and back.
(MORE)

BOATSELLER (CONT'D)
Put a hundred in my hand and I'll give you the oars.

As they pass, to Sabine--

BILL
100 bucks. Boat's worth 5 tops!

SABINE
Not if it gets you upriver first and you get your hands on that *million dollar* claim.

Bill's intentions are of course elsewhere--

BILL
If you don't mind me saying, miss--I wouldn't've expected to find someone so...*cultivated*--this far north.

SABINE (PLEASED)
Cultivated. That's got more syllables and sentiment than anything I've heard in months. Thank you.
(wry smile)
But...I'm as derelict as the rest of you, trust me. Come this ridiculous long way to make a whole bunch of money in a very short while.

She nods to a compatriot across the way.

SABINE (CONT'D)
Nice meeting you Billa Bill. Byron.

She smiles warmly at them, heads off. Bill watches her go. Epstein looks over at Bill. Sees the fixity of gaze he's following Sabine with.

EPSTEIN
Oh don't go gettin' *that* look.

He moves off. Leaving Bill there, cool as a cucumber, but smitten nevertheless...

EXT. FROZEN LAKE / MAKESHIFT COMMUNITY - LATER

Bill & Epstein, moving through the workers, surveying the fairly impressive progress they've made on the boats--given that the wood's not milled and their tools are limited.

EPSTEIN
How in the hell we gonna build a <u>boat</u>?

BILL
Just like everything else, I reckon. You start...and you don't stop til you're done.

They're interrupted by a familiar face. Soapy Smith.

SOAPY SMITH
Gentlemen. S. Rochester Smith. Enchanted to make your acquaintance.

Bill & Epstein meet eyes.

SOAPY SMITH (CONT'D)
I am not a mincer of words, and as such, will get to the point. I can safely assume that you two men are bound for the Paris of the North.

A nod from Bill.

SOAPY SMITH (CONT'D)
Well then, I'm here to tell you that, land-wise, it is feedin' frenzy up there. Fortunately, I am a representative of the only certified real estate company up there at present. I have on offer gen-yine deeds to prime real estate, as well as claims to millionaire-making mining concerns on the creeks in the Yukon.

Soapy: diminutive, dumb as a log, though convinced he's a mover like none other. He presses DEEDS into Bill & Epstein's hands. Bill & Epstein consider them. Written there, in big letters, "Lawson City..." It's such an oversight, it's almost laughable.

BILL
Think you might mean 'Dawson City' here, boss.

Soapy gives the deeds a gander, quickly comes to realize he's made a rather big mistake here.

SOAPY SMITH
Well, Alackaday. That is a grade-A head-scratcher, ain't it?

Epstein crowds him.

EPSTEIN
And brother, you are grade-A lucky there ain't a woodshed around here. 'Cause if there were, my partner and I'd be obliged to take you 'round back and give you a princely ass-whooping.

Soapy, in life preservation mode, makes a realist plea--

SOAPY SMITH
It's nothing personal--

EPSTEIN
And how is that--

SOAPY SMITH
I don't you know either of ya's from Adam. And if that's the case...think about it. How could it be personal?

Bill & Epstein meet eyes again--is this guy *kidding*--?

SOAPY SMITH (CONT'D)
It's just how it goes up here, you understand? It's the Game you're in now.

EPSTEIN
Ain't seeing nothing about this that's a game.

SOAPY SMITH
Then boy, you don't know people. Up here, the mask is off. You're either gittin', or you're gittin' *got*.

Epstein slowly lets go of him.

EPSTEIN
Try to rip us off again, and I'll build that woodshed myself, got me?

A big, dumbass Labrador smile from Soapy--

SOAPY SMITH
No, we're boys now. We're boys. We understand each other. Right?

He pats both men on the shoulder, quietly tucks the deeds under his arm, retreats.

Bill looks to Epstein. Both men quietly shake their heads. Soapy's dirty as they come. But strangely, in his stupidity, without malice.

EXT. FROZEN LAKE / MAKESHIFT COMMUNITY - LATER

ON FATHER JUDGE & THE 'SQUAW'--arriving at the encampment. Bill, seeing this. Curious couple, these two. As he sorts, re-packs his gear--

SABINE (O.S.)
Guess that's it for me.

Bill turns to see Sabine standing there. She nods to her compatriots, loading their newly constructed boat.

SABINE (CONT'D)
They're telling me she's sea-worthy.
(smiles)
Maybe we'll see each other.
(MORE)

SABINE (CONT'D)
Supposedly, up there, for such a big place, it's a small world.

BILL
Hope so.

They share a smile, She turns to cross to her boat. As Bill watches her go, he takes notice of something else, a few yards downriver from her boat. Epstein, haggling with the earlier Boatseller.

ON BILL--crossing to Epstein--hearing--

BOATSELLER
Hundred's the price.

EPSTEIN
You think I'm going north of eighty, you are one shithouse loon--
Eighty...

As Bill moves to intercede--

BOATSELLER (TO EPSTEIN)
Put eighty US in my hand right now and we're dutch.

Epstein quickly does so before Bill can arrive.

EPSTEIN
Gimme the oars.

BILL
Wait--

But the Boatseller takes the cash, presses the oars into Epstein's hands before Bill can do anything. As he turns to other business, Epstein turns to Bill, sees the look of anguish on his face.

EPSTEIN
What's that look for? We got a boat. We're in the game--

BILL
You gotta stop pissing our money away--we make these decisions together, always--

EPSTEIN
Yeah, no shit--

BILL
We're gonna be living here indefinitely, and we're down already, what, half our money?

EPSTEIN
Ah, once our stake's up and rolling--we'll be fine--

BILL
We are in the middle of the Yukon, brother. We run outta money we are <u>dead</u>.

Epstein gives him a look. Yeah, no shit. Like I don't know that? Bill puts out his hand.

BILL (CONT'D)
I want it. The money. I'm treasurer now.

EPSTEIN
Says who?

BILL
Says logic. Of the two of us, who's just a tad less likely to run off and spend it than the other?

Epstein rolls his eyes. Fine. Whatever. Hands him the cash.

BILL (CONT'D)
Is that all of it?

Epstein nods. Yes! Bill folds it up, puts it away.

EXT. FROZEN LAKE / MAKESHIFT COMMUNITY - LATER

As Bill & Epstein slide their new purchase into the shallows of the river--

EPSTEIN
And don't act like you're secretly not happy. Imagine us sitting here for a month trying to figure out how to carve a boat out of that goddamn forest. Then getting upriver and finding out the claims are all full. You know what you would've said to me then?

BILL (GOOD-NATUREDLY)
"We shoulda bought the boat."

EPSTEIN
You're goddamn right.

The men smile, of one mind again. As they lay the boat into the shallows--CUT TO--

EXT. RIVER - DAY

"<u>*Yukon River, June 27, 1897*</u>."

MONTAGE: the men, navigating downriver. Around them, the majesty of the Yukon Territory in summer. An illimitable riot of jagged topography and color. Sky, land, and water teem with life.

As the boat glides along, camera looks down at it, finds it ensconced in a sea of salmon, massive like they were 100 years ago, spawning tenthousandfold from bank-to-bank.

Bill's absorbing it all like a silent, awed pilgrim.

He pauses then. Up in the trees, people. The Tlingit. Watching them as they move down river. A couple of the tribesmen, faces partially painted, shadow them through the trees 40 feet away on the shoreline. Their faces impassive, ancient.

BILL
Ep.

Epstein looks up. Sees what Bill sees. In the tribesmen's hands...weapons.

EPSTEIN
Sonofabitch. Why didn't I buy a rifle?

BILL
Just wave.
(doing so)
Make nice.

Both men wave. Smile. But the Tlingit, reaching a crop of boulders that impede their movement, stop, just stand there, watching with their dark, impassive expressions.

Then the raft's around the bend and they're gone from view.

But the feeling they've left in the pit of the men's stomach remains.

For a long time, Bill & Epstein say nothing.

EXT. RIVER / RAPIDS - DAY

Class 4 rapids fill frame. A nasty, deadly white water roller coaster. Camera rises to find, upstream: Bill & Epstein's boat approaching. *"July 1, 1897."*

ON BILL--spotting the rapids ahead. Coming on fast. Over the roar of rushing water:

BILL
We gotta portage!
(beat)
Portage! Get to the side--!

They scramble like hell, rowing madly, trying to get out of the current--

--but they're too late.

The churn claims them. They fight to keep the boat balanced--

--but there's a stomach-turning drop--the boat clips a rock, spins, lurching from the water at 45 degrees--

--dumping Bill into the icy water.

ON BILL--struggling against the churn beneath the surface--it's like being inside of a washing machine on 'spin'--

ON EPSTEIN--the boat miraculously slamming back down, rightside up, with him still aboard. He tries to arrest its progress as it races out of the chute, at the same time trying to spy Bill in the frothy water--

He accomplishes neither. Before he knows it he's 100 yards downriver, hopeless in the intense flow, yelling back:

EPSTEIN
Bill! BILL!

His POV--that wicked churn, diminishing upriver by the second--the water's surface there belying no sign of his friend...

CUT TO:

--BILL, gasping, pushing through the surface, slamming into rocks, reaching for anything, any purchase--

--his fingers barely seize hold of a heavy boulder. He pulls himself into the shallows. Look downriver in vain for Epstein. Nothing visible--

BILL
Ep! EP!

Nothing. Just him, the river, and the stream of blood that runs from a gash over his eye.

He spots something then, eddying briefly before him before cascading away downstream. One of the $10 bills he'd pocketed earlier. A couple more are visible quickly coursing away. Bill quickly turns out his pockets. Empty.

Their money's gone. All of it. Lost to the river.

He takes stock then, considers the foreboding wilderness around him. He may have far more immediate concerns...

EXT. RIVER BANK - LATER

ON BILL--shaken, trying to negotiate his way downriver along the banks. But the shoreline's an impassible tangle of rocks and foliage. No choice but to go inland and around...

As he pushes through the dense greenery, rain starts to fall. This is the first time we've seen Bill alone on the land, without human company or equipment. It's a sobering thing.

He thinks Tlingit thoughts. Discomfiting. He presses on, the rain blending with the blood coursing from his head wound...

CUT TO:

...Bill, pressing ever onward. Exhausted. Shivering in the falling rain. The sound of the river has diminished here. He tries to push back toward it, but it's difficult.

He stops. Listens for the river. The falling rain's not helping on this account. Everything is hissing whispers and susurrations. An auditory maze.

And night is starting to fall.

CUT TO:

Bill, moving ever onward. Listening...

Sounds distinguish themselves from the falling rain.

It's not the river, though. It's something else. At first he thinks it's the Tlingit...but soon realizes it's something *bestial*.

Bill stops. Sees, barely--through the darkness and downpour and foliage--the rain-slickened form of a GRIZZLY, sniffing the air...

An icy wall of fear slams into Bill. He tries to move away.

The Grizzly looks up, aware...olfactory nerves locking in...

ON BILL--the forest labyrinthine around him in the darkness. He's reduced to feeling his way through. He can't see the bear anymore. Is instead reduced to listening to the darkness behind him...

THE GRIZZLY--though it's not yet lain eyes on Bill--seems to know unfailingly where he's going. Sniffing the air. Smelling...the blood?

And it goes on this way, a game of blind man's bluff...neither using sight...but the bear grows ever nearer...

Bill can hear him now. The snorts. The heavy footfalls. Those claws on the rain-slickened rocks...

Bill breaks out into a flat, panicked run...pushing everything out of his way--

--the bear hears this of course--

--and a few beats later, Bill wends through the forest, and sloshes down into a summer-thawed marsh. *Swamp*'s a more apt description. All mud and standing water.

The mud locks up around him. He struggles. Can move no more than a few inches at a time--

He turns. Behind him, the Grizzly comes into view. For the first time laying a direct sightline on Bill.

It’s not the roar that you’d expect that comes out of the Grizzly’s mouth, but instead a gnashing of teeth. Hungry. Feral. Razor sharp.

Bill struggles. The Grizzly comes down into the marshwater. Begins trudging powerfully and inexorably toward Bill.

Bill yells at him. A primal bit of nonsense that does nothing but unsettle himself all the more.

The bear, 10 feet away...8 feet away...

Bill yells again. Tries to get ‘big’. Which only incenses the bear. 6 feet. 5 feet...

A shot rings out in the night, filling the surrounding terrain like thunder. The bear roars, hit.

Bill spins. Sees a darkened shooter in the trees. Another muzzle flash--

--another bullet slams into the bear.

But the bear keeps coming for Bill. Bill tries to back up. Good God, what does it take to stop one of these things?!

A third shot strikes home. The bear keeps coming. Scant feet from Bill now, a blood thing delirious with pain and fury.

Then a fourth shot rings out, and the bear goes down for good. Splashing in the mud right before Bill.

Bill looks up, shocked...

The shooter circles around the edge of the marsh. Holding a hooded lantern up. In the radiance, we see Father Judge, rifle in hand.

Judge extends Bill a branch. Bill reaches it...pulls himself up out of the swamp.

Off Bill--collapsing with muddy, shocked gratitude at the priest’s feet--

END ACT TWO

ACT THREE

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Judge guides the shaken, bloody Bill back through the trees.

FATHER JUDGE
Heard a boat'd gone over.
(beat)
Lucky I was able to get through to you.

Bill: still collecting himself.

FATHER JUDGE (CONT'D)
What's the matter, boy? That bear take your tongue?

BILL
Just...don't know if I'm more shocked to be *alive*...or seeing a man of the cloth with a *gun*...

We get our best look at Judge yet. The priest: definitely no mountain man. Patrician, wire-rim glasses, a slight build.

FATHER JUDGE
I of course don't agree with Darwin on much...but up here, there's a certain credence to his idea of survival of the fittest.
End of the day, you can't negotiate with nature. You either best it, or it bests you.

Hefting his rifle ever so slightly:

FATHER JUDGE (CONT'D)
However that may be.

EXT. RIVER BANK - LATER

ON JUDGE & BILL--reaching the shoreline an hour later. Sun's coming up. Judge's boat is visible, with the Han woman waiting stoically. Downriver, across the flow, there's an elated whoop:

EPSTEIN
Son of a bitch!

Visible on the opposite bank: Epstein & their boat. Epstein looks like he's going to piss himself with happiness at the sight of Bill.

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
Son of a *bitch, you made it*!
(re language in Judge's presence)
Sorry, father!
(to Bill)
How are you, you old halfass?!
(MORE)

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
(to Judge)
Sorry again, father!

Bill gives Epstein a wave. I'm good. I'm good. You just work on shutting up. To Judge:

BILL
I don't know how to repay you...

FATHER JUDGE
Just pay me a visit at my chapel sometime when you're in Dawson.

BILL (IMPRESSED)
You got a chapel in Dawson?

FATHER JUDGE
Not yet. But I'm fixing to.
(knowing smile)
Man's gotta have a dream, doesn't he? Otherwise...what in God's name'd any of us being doing up here just a chip shot away from Hell?

Off their shared smile--CUT TO--

EXT. RIVER BANK / RAFT - MOMENTS LATER

Bill boards the raft. Epstein embraces him.

EPSTEIN
Thought I lost you.

A nice moment for Bill. But he's troubled.

BILL
Got an admission to make. Maybe I shouldn't've been treasurer.

EPSTEIN (SURVEYS HIM)
You didn't.

BILL (NODS)
I did. Lost it all when I was in the river.
(shakes his head)
I don't know if we've got to sell the boat and head back...but without cash, we can't get gear, can't get a stake...I'm sorry, brother...I was just being, I don't know, righteous, thinking you were the untrustworthy one.

EPSTEIN
Well...you were right about that.

He sits back. Smiles. Digs into his sock.

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
And God Bless me for it. God Bless both of us.

From his sock, he withdraws a small "reserve" wad of bills.

BILL
You sneaky son of a bitch--

EPSTEIN
Only a fool gives all his money away.
(looks up into rain)
Never know when a rainy day's coming.

Bill embraces him again, both chagrined and relieved.

BILL
You sneaky son of a bitch.

EXT. RIVER - DAY

--rain. Relentless. The landscape is brutally beautiful around the boat. Bill shivers. His clothes, unable to dry in the unrelenting downpour, are clammy and wet. Epstein's erected a makeshift shelter with his oilcloth parka, has built a small fire in a coffee tin, but Bill's failing. Shivering, fetal.

"*Yukon River, July 7, 1897*."

Bill's spirits: shot. Epstein: trying to buoy him.

BILL
Be a shame...to come all this way just to die.

Epstein shakes his head confidently.

EPSTEIN
You ain't dying.
(beat)
Know why?

BILL
Why?

EPSTEIN
You're too damn responsible.

BILL
How's that figure into things?

EPSTEIN
See, if you die, then it's just me out here on this river. Million miles from home. No clue how to mine for gold, no clue how to get back once the cash runs out.
(shakes head)
(MORE)

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
Bill Haskell I know...wouldn't screw a man like that.

Bill smiles at the sentiment.

BILL
Hang around long enough, I just might.

EPSTEIN
Nah. You're not gonna die. All you need is a nice, warm bath.

BILL
Now you're just being an asshole.

Epstein's eyes are on the river ahead. Philosophically:

EPSTEIN
I acknowledge I'm not exactly the reading type, but if I'm not mistaken...that *does* say "Bath" doesn't it?

Bill weakly looks up. Incredulity washes over his face.

Reveal ahead, massive letters painted on the side of a building. **HOT BATHS - 5$.**

Around it, a visage so welcoming it verges on impossible...

A CITY. With wharves. A mainstreet. Saloons. Brothels. Electric light in places.

It's a chunk of civilization carved impossibly out of the foreboding landscape.

It's Dawson City. Paris of the North.

Off the music and laughter, the people in clean clothes moving back and forth on the sidewalks--and Bill & Epstein's faces, regarding it all in dumbfounded amazement--

END ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

EXT. DAWSON CITY STREETS - DAY

BILL & EPSTEIN--coming up from muddy wharves into the main artery of Dawson City. Everywhere is signage, every thing and service imaginable for sale. Around them, a babel of languages: Russian, German, French.

They pass a REALTOR touting a lot in the middle of the block.

REALTOR
This is prime real estate, my fellow pilgrims! Location, location, location. You open your concern here, you will have no more 'concerns'! More foot traffic here than anywhere in the entirety of the Yukon Territory.

HECKLER
Not 6 months ago that chunk of mud couldn't even sell for 5 bucks!

HECKLER #2
And not only that, it's next to a whorehouse!

Which, Bill & Epstein see, is true. A brothel, right there.

REALTOR (UNFAZED)
Finest views in all of the northwest territories, gentlemen!

There's raucous laughter all around.

Bill & Epstein pass by, absorbing the aforementioned views: COURTESANS, advertising their wares from balconies and windows of the brothel.

Like that first glimpse we got of the gold earlier in Colorado, there is something so beguiling about these women--seen as they are through the eyes of men that have long been in the field--they are in a word, like that gold, sumptuous.

Off Bill & Epstein, as mesmerized by the women as they are by the high-strung energy and possibility of the town--CUT TO--

--a POV of them--from a window across the street...

INT. BUILDING - DAY

Reveal BELINDA MULRONEY, 30. Stolid. Prepossessing. Watching their arrival with silent consideration. With eyes that overlook nothing--or anyone--that comes to Dawson...

INT. DAWSON CITY HOTEL - DAY

Epstein & Bill enter. Approach the CLERK.

EPSTEIN (GOOD MOOD)
Room and a bath.

An uncomfortable beat as the CLERK surveys Epstein.

CLERK
No Jewboys.

EPSTEIN
What?

CLERK
You want a room, go tent up with the niggers outside of town.

Epstein & Bill look at him incredulously. He's a big nasty bastard. A hardened Yukon vet. He turns away from them to other business, as if they don't exist.

CLERK (CONT'D)
Go on now. Get out of here.

Epstein, incensed, produces a fisftul of cash. Insistent:

EPSTEIN
My friend wants a bath.
(beat)
He's a god-fearing Catholic...pretty sure he won't sully your water.

Bill gives him a look--don't be a spendthrift--

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
Not a word, squeaky pockets.

The clerk begrudgingly takes the cash. Epstein grits his teeth, looks to Bill.

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
I'll be in the saloon.

He exits. Bill looks back to the Clerk. No love lost there. His eyes say: Jew-lover. But his hand begrudgingly slips Bill a set of keys.

INT. DAWSON CITY HOTEL ROOM - LATER

ON BILL--standing unmoving in his room. Simultaneously miffed by the Clerk and in a state of disbelief over the amenities he stands amidst.

A TLINGIT WOMAN, slave-like, finishes filling the bath with buckets of heated water. Departs.

Bill slowly unpeels the wet clothes he's worn for 6 straight days. Slips into the water. To say it's exquisite is an understatement. It's tremulous, skin-prickling as his flesh hits the water...

EXT. DAWSON CITY STREETS - DAY

Epstein moves through the streets. Still fuming. He considers his wallet. In his anger, he's probably plopped down a little more money than he should have. His wallet's looking *very* light...

Across the street: a loan shop. Off Epstein--CUT TO--

INT. LOAN SHOP - MOMENTS LATER

Epstein enters.

EPSTEIN
What's it take for a loan?

The PROPRIETOR eyes him. Coolly, simply:

PROPRIETOR
Collateral.

Off Epstein--CUT TO--

EXT. DAWSON CITY STREETS - MOMENTS LATER

--Bill, emerging out in the streets, cleaned up, rejuvenated.

EPSTEIN (O.S.)
Hey. Hey!

He turns to see Epstein motioning him excitedly from the saloon. *Get your ass in here*!

INT. SALOON - MOMENTS LATER

A veritable zoo in here. Gambling. Drinking. Whores. Burlesque show. Epstein pulls Bill through the crowd.

EPSTEIN
I have never been to Paris, but this has <u>gotta</u> out-Paris Paris...

BILL
Hey, about that guy back there--

EPSTEIN
What? You think I'm gonna let some anti-Semite piss on *this* parade--?

He stops, finding the guy he was looking for--an excitable, impressionable 19-year-old--JACK LONDON--

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
Hey Bill, I want you to meet my new buddy--
(forgetting)
W...what was your name again?

JACK LONDON
Jack London.

Bill & Epstein share a look. Kid's apparently dead serious about 'branding' himself.

EPSTEIN
By the looks of you, I wouldn't peg you as the formal type. How 'bout tossing in your middle name while you're at it?

JACK LONDON
Jack, you won't remember. London, on the other hand, that's indelible.
(drinks)
Fair number of men'll come out of here rich, but only a handful will be *remembered*.

A good-natured chuckle from Epstein.

EPSTEIN
Right on, you nut.

JACK LONDON
Give it a chuckle if you want, but you are looking at a walking, talking novel here.
(re environs)
A shelf full of novels. Penwright there: dumber'n a crate of turnips. Goes on a drunken bender upriver at 40 Mile, sobers up a week later and he's stakeholder to the hottest claim on El Dorado Creek. No clue how he got it. But he's sitting on a half million in nuggets and it hasn't even been a month yet.

BILL
El Dorado Creek. That's the place then.

JACK LONDON
Sure. Only if you don't wanna get rich. El Dorado's already panned out.

BILL
Already panned out--

JACK LONDON
Staked anyhow. So unless you're gonna jump someone, I wouldn't put any mud on your boots heading up that way.

London: fully immersed in all that he says. He's a junkie for the hardscrabble Yukon life. A prodigious drinker, too, though at 19, it's yet to show a downside. Instead only fuels his excitement. Epstein, meanwhile, can only be interested so long, and gets distracted by a courtesan across the way.

EPSTEIN (RE COURTESAN)
She's giving me the love-eye. I'm telling you. That right there is the love-eye.

London nods in another direction--to an elegant-looking 40-year-old GERMAN man with a retinue around him.

JACK LONDON
Take the Count over there: German nobility. Got all the equipment, the men...and they've been pulling nothing but mud for almost 6 months. Not a spot of color. Just goes to show...Yukon's the only place in the world where a dumbshit can be a king and a king can be a dumbshit.

He decides he likes that last line. Scribble it on the back of a scrip of paper.

BILL
So if it's not El Dorado Creek, where is it?

JACK LONDON
Bonanza.

BILL
Where's that?

JACK LONDON
Oh, Bonanza's easy: just go looking for the cloud of smoke...

He pauses as a FRIEND comes over, whispers something to him.

JACK LONDON (CONT'D)
No...

Friend gives him an enthusiastic, silent nod. *Yes*...

London stands. To Bill & Epstein--

JACK LONDON (CONT'D)
C'mon.
(off their looks)
Swiftwater Bill is here.

EPSTEIN
Swiftwater who?

JACK LONDON
Swiftwater Bill. Richest prospector in all of north America. Maybe the world. Spends it faster than he makes it. And they're telling me he's got a girl upstairs.

EPSTEIN
There's girls down here.

London swallows the rest of his drink. Grin.

JACK LONDON
Not in a tub of champagne there's not.

INT. SALOON / UPSTAIRS - MOMENTS LATER

FOLLOWING LONDON, BILL, EPSTEIN as they crest the steps--

EPSTEIN
And what do you mean a 'girl', by the way?

JACK LONDON
A courtesan. A whore. A hooker. One that *hooks*--

Ahead: men clamor, trying to get into a room, get a view of the spectacle.

London pushes past with Bill & Epstein in tow.

Buoyant music cranks from a phonograph. People are dancing, drinking, laughing. Very much the penthouse crowd, Dawson-style. SWIFTWATER BILL, 50s, holds court. He's a rugged, low IQ, high-enthusiasm, high-net worth Zorba of the North. He's passing around champagne:

SWIFTWATER BILL
Drink up. Drink up before the bubbles escape!

He pours for everyone--even Bill, who accepts it with ready enthusiasm--

Bill pauses, seeing Swiftwater's next stop. The girl in the bathtub who becomes visible as the crowd shifts.

Swiftwater Bill pours her a drink. Bill beholds, for a moment caught up in the strange burlesque elegance of it.

Seen from behind, she's a dorsalist's dream, the way the champagne and water hang on her bare back. A courtesan evidently, she seems perfectly comfortable nude amidst the drunken masculinity around her. Her carriage: confident...

Then she turns. And meets eyes with Bill.

Bill dies a bit.

It's Sabine.

INT. SALOON - NIGHT

Bill, crestfallen, descends the stairs with Epstein in tow. Epstein, though, doesn't have intentions of hanging around. His eyes fall across his earlier COURTESAN. She of the love-eye. He claps Bill on the shoulder.

EPSTEIN
Think I'm gonna go do some prospecting.

He peels off. Bill returns to the bar. Orders a drink from the bartender (later, JOE MEEKOR). Beside him:

BELINDA MULRONEY (O.S.)
Dawson City. Where naivete comes to die.

Bill looks up to see Belinda there. Imposing despite her stature. It's the confidence. The gun strapped to her leg. She swallows a mouthful of booze, eyes the place.

BELINDA MULRONEY (CONT'D)
Everybody comes a saint, and leaves as something less than that.
(off Bill's silence)
Give him another, Joe. Man's tongue's still too tight.

Meekor serves up Bill a drink. Bill nods politely.

BILL
Thank you, ma'am--

BELINDA MULRONEY
Don't "ma'am" me. I'm still south of 30. Despite what these northern climes have done to my otherwise youthful, pearly skin.

BILL
Thanks all the same.

BELINDA MULRONEY
Belinda Mulroney.

BILL
Bill Haskell.

They shake hands. She eyes him.

BELINDA MULRONEY
You labor or management, Haskell?

BILL
How's that?

BELINDA MULRONEY
Only two types come up here: the guy with the shovel and the guy with the business plan. Shovel guys, they're welcome. One thing Yukon's not short on is dirt to dig in. Boys wanna be boys and play in the big old sandbox, that's up to you. Guy with the business plan, on the other hand...Dawson's full-up.
(MORE)

BELINDA MULRONEY (CONT'D)
We got more middle-men and business-men and hucksters than we know what to do with. Blight on the landscape, if I can be perfectly honest.

BILL
Nope. Shovel guy. Looking to get into the sandbox. And pull out a future.

BELINDA MULRONEY
You keep believing that, and you and me are gonna be just fine.

BILL
How's that?

BELINDA MULRONEY
'Tween the two of us--and not to rain on your parade in advance--there's no money in gold.

She nods to the revelry around her.

BELINDA MULRONEY (CONT'D)
Soak it up, Haskell. How much of that gold being pulled up out of those hills is ending up in their pockets?

She motions vaguely to the elegant BURLESQUE DANCER on stage. Exquisitely lit. Spellbinding.

BELINDA MULRONEY (CONT'D)
Gold's a whore, Haskell. Just like her up there. More beautiful than the rest. Can't take your eyes off her. But she gets passed around. And that's the thing about whores: you may lust after them--you may even think you love them--but you don't <u>need</u> them.

Said as she draws a toothpick from her mouth. Considers it.

BELINDA MULRONEY (CONT'D)
This, on the other hand...you need.

Bill looks to her curiously. The way she holds that tiny, 2" span of wood.

BELINDA MULRONEY (CONT'D)
And when you need something up here, there's nothing you won't do to get it. No price you won't pay.

She turns it in her fingers slightly so the wood's fibers buckle slightly. In XCU we see *wood like we have not before. Like the gold and courtesan before, sumptuous, elemental...*

BELINDA MULRONEY (CONT'D)
To build a fire so you can survive the winter. To build these precious buildings. To melt the permafrost so you can get to your gold in the first place.

She looks to Bill.

BELINDA MULRONEY (CONT'D)
Without wood, there's no Dawson City. And if there's no Dawson City, there's none of you boys foraging out there in the dirt for your future.

BILL
And you're telling me this why?

BELINDA MULRONEY
I own the mill, Haskell. Everything in Dawson comes through me.

Bill smiles inwardly. Of course.

BELINDA MULRONEY (CONT'D)
You stay out of the wood business, I'll stay out of your sandbox, how's that strike you?

She smiles at him when she says this. But the implicit threat is clear. Bill isn't cowed. He returns the smile.

BILL
Strikes me fine.

Belinda nods to herself like she's gotten what she wanted. She nods to Meekor for 2 more drinks.

BELINDA MULRONEY
Then you and me, Haskell...we might be copacetic yet.

As they drink--CUT TO--

EXT. SALOON / BACK HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

--Epstein and the Courtesan, slamming up against the wall, hot and heavy.

As they're getting into it--both of them harebrained, excited-

EPSTEIN
Just so you know...I can't pay.

COURTESAN
That's okay.
(kisses)
For the ones I like, I'll go gratis.

A little more escalation--

COURTESAN (CONT'D)
You are a rabbit. I must really like you...'cause I don't even give it to my boyfriend for free--

Which makes Epstein take pause.

EPSTEIN
You got a boyfriend?

Seeing him regard her dubiously--

COURTESAN
Sorta yes. Sorta no.

EPSTEIN
There's no sorta. It's one or the other.

She kisses him again. And damn is she hard to say no to.

INT. SALOON - CONTINUOUS

Bill--finishing his drink--Belinda, wrapping up too--

BILL
Say I wanna stake up on Bonanza. How do I go about doing that?

BELINDA MULRONEY
Like anything else up here. You just go up and do it. Then come back, drop a few bucks at the Recorder's office, and you're official.
(beat)
Word of warning, though. There's no law up there, Haskell. And you leave a bunch of men alone to their own devices, and there's money involved, suddenly they aren't men anymore.

BILL
You get a gun, you only end up using it.

Belinda moves as if to respond--but they're interrupted by--

--a gunshot--somewhere in back.

Everyone looks up.

A moment later, Epstein runs out, pulling his pants up. As he nears Bill, excitedly:

EPSTEIN
Think I jumped someone's claim!

Belinda eyes him, darkening. To Bill:

BELINDA MULRONEY
Best get him out of here.

EXT. DAWSON CITY STREETS - NIGHT

Bill & Epstein spill into the street--

BILL
Just had to go get into it, didn't you--

EPSTEIN
I didn't *know*!

Screaming behind them. A Russian pimp, known locally as TOLSTOY, comes out of the saloon, a stream of others in tow.

He discharges a double-barreled shotgun into the air, freezing Bill & Epstein in their path.

They turn to see Tolstoy reloading. He's drunk, fingers coursing with booze and adrenaline as they fumble to slide 2 new shells into the shotgun.

TOLSTOY
I will kill you once, then kill you again, son of a bitch!

All around them, people materialize from buildings. Keep a safe distance, but watch the spectacle with interest. Epstein, still buckling his pants, looks ready to bolt. Bill though, is strangely calm:

BILL (TO EPSTEIN, QUIETLY)
Go easy.

Epstein gives him a look--*the hell you talking about*--?!

BILL (CONT'D)
He put that one in the sky when he coulda put it in your back. He's trying to scare you.

Tolstoy: cursing, reloading, spittle flying--

EPSTEIN
He's doing a hell of a job.

Epstein almost bolts again--Bill seizes his arm--

BILL (SOTTO)
Do not run.

Epstein looks back at him. Bill, aware of all the eyes:

BILL (CONT'D)
Only one chance to make a first impression, brother. And we got all of Dawson looking at us.

Tolstoy's fingers, getting those shells in. Closing up the shotgun. Growling. Approaching.

EPSTEIN
So does he.

BILL (COOLLY)
All bark, no bite. Trust me.

Tolstoy snaps the shotgun to his shoulder. He's scarcely 10 feet from them. Gun leveled right at their chests.

Around them, the whole town bristles.

Tolstoy bristles, fingers uncertain on the trigger--

There's subtle commotion to their left. Bill & Epstein turn to see--along with Tolstoy--Father Judge stepping forth calmly from the crowd.

Sitting down on the steps nearest them, as if to get the best seats in the house.

A beat as everyone looks at him incredulously. He shrugs to Tolstoy, as if apologizing for the interruption.

FATHER JUDGE
Proceed. Please.

A chuckle or two emanates from the crowd.

Tolstoy dithers. Discomfited by the nearness of a priest to his homicidal intent.

Does he really want to gun two men down in the street? In front of a man of the cloth?

The crowd begins to laugh, knowing what his intent will be before he does.

Finally, Tolstoy lowers the gun.

People erupt into laughter, jeers, cheers. The public arena: tickled, as always, by spectacle.

As everyone begins to disperse, Tolstoy lingers briefly. Gives Epstein the stink-eye.

TOLSTOY
God looks after you, does he?
(pure spite)
But even God, one day, must turn his gaze elsewhere...then you'll be in God's blind spot, my friend...God's blind spot...

He retreats with a glare. Epstein breathes for the first time in about 3 minutes. Bill looks appreciatively to Judge sitting there calmly.

BILL
That's twice you've saved us.

Judge shrugs, stands.

FATHER JUDGE
Saving a man's hide's not saving him.

He smiles, bleeds away into the crowd. Leaving Epstein and Bill there in the street. Epstein looks to Bill.

EPSTEIN
What'd he mean by that? Saving a man's hide isn't saving him?

Off Bill, faintly bemused--CUT TO--

EXT. DAWSON CITY STREETS - LATER

--Bill, tossing Epstein a satchel.

BILL
We'll get the rest of our kit once we've staked.
(beat)
Best we put Dawson in our wake...and get on with the business we came here for.

As they head out into the dawn landscape, shovels and gear clanking from their packs, a handful of people watch from sidewalks and windows. People aware of them now before of that earlier drama in the street.

A few we don't know. But a few we do. Not the least of which is Soapy Smith, who's apparently made town. He considers the young men with his usual opportunistic eye.

A few windows down, up in window, is another: a bleary-eyed Tolstoy, watching. He gives them a twice-over, then closes the curtains, turning in after the long night. Saving his ire, and intentions apparently, for later.

Off the boys--oblivious to this--disappearing into the landscape--

END ACT FOUR

ACT FIVE

EXT. LANDSCAPE / “BONANZA CREEK” - DAY

The men move through the early morning swampy landscape, fording rivers across fallen logs.

Bill surveys the landscape ahead. A knowing look on his face.

BILL
“Just look for the cloud of smoke.”

Reveal, ahead: the sprawling madness that is Bonanza.

10 miles of back-to-back claims. It’s a strange marriage of the industrial and the primitive: windlasses, sluices, a permanent haze hanging over everything from the ever-burning fires thawing the permafrost. Dried food hanging in trees, litter of empty tins. In microcosm, we are looking at Man, butchering the land in search of resource...

EXT. BONANZA CREEK - LATER

FOLLOWING THE PAIR--further upriver--passing a claim. A familiar face there. The Clerk from the hotel, visiting who’d appear to be his brother.

Both men, no fans of the Semite, scowl at Epstein.

Bill & Epstein press on.

Everywhere, though, men look at them with gaunt, distrustful eyes. A foreboding pervades. To these men, they are competition. And they are not welcome.

Bill’s got the geology book in his hand, dog-eared by now from travel and study.

BILL
Look for alluvia. Natural dams. All gold needs is a calm spot to rest. Swiftwater’ll carry it for a bit, but gold, I’ve learned, is 19 times heavier than water, and as such, it’s gonna wanna rest. And all it takes is that calm little spot...
(beat)
That’s all we’re looking for, brother. That calm little spot.

EXT. “BONANZA CREEK” / UPRIVER - LATER

Many hours later, Bill & Epstein arrive at the end of the claims. It’s less than ideal. No more flatland. Just steep rising knuckles of granite and scree.

The LAST CLAIMANT beside them, a bitter man hardened by too much time work and too little reward, eyes them darkly. His eyes survey them. Their nearness to the tattered string he’s erected to demarcate the limits of his claims. Might as well be the Great Wall of China.

THE LAST CLAIMANT
You come to do some vulturin' off my claim, you ain't welcome.

BILL
Trust me. We respect the sanctity of your claim. Which lies, if I'm not mistaken, everywhere within that finely expressed bit of string you got there.

Motioning to their side of the string:

BILL (CONT'D)
Here now, if I'm again not mistaken, is No Man's land. Staked by no one and thus available.

Bill turns his eyes to the jagged land, surveying.

THE LAST CLAIMANT
Flap em all you want. Doesn't matter no how, 'cause there's no creek left anyhow. Not unless you wanna haul up 100 tons of equipment and do some lode mining up in them cliffs!

Said with a motion up the impossibly steep slope beyond them.

THE LAST CLAIMANT (CONT'D)
Do everyone a favor and go back to the Outside, you jackholes.

He goes back about his business. Epstein shakes his head. Bill's eyes, though, are intent upon what he was looking at earlier.

He quietly guides Epstein's gaze to a faint *undulation* in the creekbed just upriver from the Last Claimant's site. At the foot of the escarpment. It's...

BILL
...a carve-out. Like there's a turn in the creek there...

EPSTEIN
Even though there isn't...

BILL
Unless...there <u>is</u>.

He traces the carve-out in the streambed with his finger, the way it arcs *across* the creek's flow, as if joining the creek at a 90 degree angle from an unseen source...

Both men's eyes rise up the far bank...to the massive field of scree there, sloping down from the high palisades above.

Unclaimed space. By all appearances worthless.

BILL (CONT'D)
If there's a flow under those rocks, and we can get to it, we'd be upriver from everyone else. With God knows how much unexposed creekbed waiting for us. Untouched for God knows how many years.

Epstein looks at the daunting field of scree.

EPSTEIN
If we can get to it.

EXT. "BONANZA CREEK" / UPRIVER - LATER

Hours later. Bill & Epstein, toiling. Struggling to clear the sizeable chunks of scree. Back-breaking work, this. Last Claimant casts a constant glare at them.

As they work, Bill's thinking aloud:

BILL
Figure, what, 100 years ago, 1000 years ago, there's a landslide. Covers the creek. Which by the looks of it is pretty damn near its source. And if run-off's slowly pulling gold out of the mountains over the century...depositing it along the creek...there are all sorts of obstructions here...be first stop for a lot of that gold...gold'd sit right here, in that calm little spot, waiting for a couple of halfasses like us to come around and show it the light of day...

EPSTEIN (STRAINING)
You're. Just. Guessing.

Bill nods downriver to the primitive-industrial string of claims.

BILL
We're. All. Just. Guessing.

EPSTEIN
Ain't exactly a convention of academics, is it?

BILL
Which means, couple of halfasses like us...

Bill moves a final stone, then peers down into the darkness between the stones below.

BILL (CONT'D)
...might just have a chance.

He reaches down between the thick stones...stretches...and we're with his hand in that moment, straining into the darkness, away from the light...fingertips just barely reaching...

...wet, unadulterated sand.

He slowly pulls it up into the light. It scarcely covers the tips of his fingers. But it's beautiful and pure in the light. A promise there might indeed be creekbed below. He meets eyes with Epstein.

BILL (CONT'D)
We may just have creekbed down there, brother.

They clasp hand, that bit of wet paydirt sliding down between their palms. Genuinely excited, though not exactly sure what it all means just yet.

Nevertheless, Epstein looks around at the incredible amount of scree around them.

EPSTEIN
Creekbed or not, we're gonna need a locomotive to move all of this.

EXT. DAWSON CITY - DAY

Bill & Epstein move back through town, their excitement palpable. Both men checking their wallets--

BILL
What do you got?

EPSTEIN
Cobwebs.

BILL
I'm sittin' on a fiver. Which should just get the claim recorded.

EPSTEIN
Gonna wrap a few things up. Meet back in 20?

A nod from Bill. He steps into the Recorders Office.

Epstein peels off.

We follow him. Up the street.

To the Loan Shop. As he steps inside--CUT TO--

EXT. DAWSON CITY STREETS - LATER

--Bill, emerging from the recorder's office with claim in hand. That piece of paper: empowering, legitimizing. He looks up, sees Father Judge on the sidewalk.

BILL
Wanted to thank you again, Father.

Judge nods. Bill hefts his claim:

BILL (CONT'D)
I'm in business.

Judge smiles knowingly:

FATHER JUDGE
So am I.

Said as he nails a sheet of paper to a pole in front of that primo plot of land mid-street, next to the brothel.

"*Future Site of St. Mark's Catholic Chapel*."

Bill eyes the declaration, the brothel, then Judge.

BILL
You bought it.

FATHER JUDGE (PLEASED)
Got thoroughly ripped off, too.

An appreciative chuckle between them.

FATHER JUDGE (CONT'D)
We come with different yearnings. But perhaps we're equally foolish in our ambition.

They share a smile. Bill looks up.

BILL
You seen my friend anywhere?

Judge shakes his head.

BILL (CONT'D)
I'll come see you when you're up and running. And I'll promise not to look at your neighbors when I do.

FATHER JUDGE
First part, I believe. Second part, I don't believe for a minute.

He smiles. So does Bill. Bill peels off.

FOLLOWING BILL--surveying the streets for Epstein. No sign of him. A brief sense of anxiety burgeons...

Then Epstein comes into view. Rounding a corner. He's got a wide, proud smile.

EPSTEIN
Meet our Locomotive.

As he slowly guides a meek-looking BURRO into view--CUT TO--

EXT. DAWSON CITY / MILL - LATER

--'LOCOMOTIVE'--harnessed now with a wagon. Bill & Epstein load milled wood into the wagon-bed.

Bill crosses to Belinda, who's considering his claim document.

BELINDA MULRONEY
It's official. Which mean's you're official now.

BILL
You say that like it's a bad thing.

BELINDA MULRONEY
Not necessarily. People know where to find you, that's all.

She produces a REMINGTON ROLLING BLOCK RIFLE. Slips it into his wagon. Off Bill's look, she nods over to Epstein:

BELINDA MULRONEY (CONT'D)
Your friend here bought it.

BILL
We ain't gonna be doing the firearm thing--

EPSTEIN
After the things I seen, brother...I'm not taking any chances. We can do it with *my* money or *our* money, but either way I'm buying it.

BELINDA MULRONEY (NODS)
Hundred.

Epstein pays her out as Bill eyes her.

BILL (WAY TOO HIGH A PRICE)
Hundred.

BELINDA MULRONEY
Suppose you're gonna tell me it's grand larceny.

BILL
It is.

BELINDA MULRONEY
Not if it saves your life it's not.

BILL
It's just the good samaritan in you, is it?

BELINDA MULRONEY
Nope. I just stock the things desperate men need. And watch 'em shell out ungodly amounts of money to get them. It's up to them to say no.
(to Epstein)
You saying no there, mister?

Epstein shakes his head. He's all good. Bill eyes her a moment longer, then climbs aboard the wagon. As he & Epstein head out, Belinda watches.

BELINDA MULRONEY (CONT'D)
Good luck.

Something not insincere in that. As if she's watching yet another young troop go to war, unaware of what's about to hit them...

EXT. THE CLAIM - DAY

A week later. "*August 2, 1897*." Bill & Epstein's fledgling claim is coming together. Loco's methodically moving away stones, revealing the first hints of prime alluvial creekbed beneath the scree.

Bill's midway through building a cabin. He senses eyes, however far away, on him.

He looks up, sees high on the ridge, spectral forms in the treeline. The Tlingit. Pushed to the peripheries by all the prospecting. For a moment, he locks distant gaze with them. Their faces, impassive.

He turns then, looks down Bonanza's expanse behind him.

The permanent haze. The fires burning. The denuded hillsides. The equipment and detritus cast about. White Man, and his industry, has definitely staked its claim.

He turns then, looks back at the Tlingit, but they're gone.

EXT. THE CLAIM - NIGHT

For Alaska, a 'pleasant' evening. Bill and Epstein, idling before the campfire. Epstein, introspective:

EPSTEIN
Tell me again why you came up here.

BILL
Told you. Just trying to find a piece of something that's mine. Carve out my future with my own hands.

EPSTEIN
I got a different take.

Bill gives his an inquisitive look.

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
Think you did it for me.

Bill smiles. Absurd.

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
I'm the halfass here, we both know it. A man of no prospect. You on the other hand, sky's the limit. And you knew, guy like me, only way he was gonna come out this way and make something of his life, is if you went with him.

Bill smiles. There's truth there, even if he didn't fully realize it at the time. He nevertheless coolly demurs:

BILL
I like my theory better.

They share a knowing smile.

EPSTEIN
Thank you all the same, brother.

It's as sincere as we'll ever see him. He's genuinely moved by Bill's friendship.

Bill nods. You bet. Epstein hefts his cup.

EPSTEIN (CONT'D)
To aiming for the moon.

Bill hefts his own.

BILL
Even if we don't have a chance in hell of getting there.

Off them, clicking cups--CUT TO--

EXT. THE CLAIM - LATER

--Bill, later, going out into the creek for ablutions. He rinses his mouth. Washes his face.

Standing ankle deep in the creek, he pauses. Looks down.

A glint there in the dark water.

He squats to get a closer look. Realizes it's not *below*...but instead a reflection on the water of something <u>above</u>.

Camera pivots as he slowly looks up--Dear God what a show--

The Northern Lights. Flickering into existence across the night sky.

And for a moment we revel in it along with Bill. It's staggering.

If only for a moment, alone worth coming this entire way...

BILL(V.O.)
It's hard to describe. The feeling of arrival, of accomplishment, of having come this whole way and staking a small piece of the world for yourself, however tiny that stake was. It was <u>ours</u>. Down to the center of the earth, we'd <u>earned</u> that plot of land. It gave you a sense of potentiality that was as vast as the sky itself. If you could do this, what else could you do? And perhaps in that was the real wealth to was gained: The sense that nothing in the world could stop us.

We linger with Bill, his wonder at that sky above...then...

A <u>gunshot</u> rings out.

Bill wheels, sees that FLAMES are starting to kick up around their cabin.

He races back across the creek, but before he can get to the cabin, he finds <u>Epstein</u>, mortally wounded on bank before him.

Epstein struggles to say something, but he can't. Bill simultaneously tries to stem the flow of the mortal wound and scan the surrounding for the assailant.

Nothing. Only darkness.

Around them, flames lick up the cabin's timbers, consume their fledgling sluice.

Epstein struggles, fading. As a last act, he reaches up, seizes Bill's hand, the one he's attempted to stanch the blood's flow with.

In those hands, that scant beats before together held the promise of newfound paydirt, now only blood.

Then Epstein expires.

Bill, horrified, scans the environs again.

He scrambles across the dirt, grabs the Remington. Returns to Epstein's body.

OFF BILL, a tiny man with his friend dead in his arms, a gun unfamiliar but necessary in his hands, surrounded by the illimitable expanse of night and all its unseen threat...

<u>END PILOT</u>