

DUTCH

by Brian D. Ratty
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Chapter One: The Trailhead

My gut had said no, and my head and heart had agreed, so why was I on this dismal trail? Lost in the remote recesses of my mind I knew the answer: family.

Dirty gray clouds drifted across the landscape, changing shape as they traversed the blue-gray mountains and billowed across the tree tops. What lay underneath this dingy canopy was my unpredictable fate.

Relieved that I had started, but upset that I had given in, I was blindly following my unforgiving trail. At least the next year would bring closure to this foolish family notion.

A solitary eagle flew above me. Its high-pitched shriek piercing the morning silence with needlelike shrillness that seemed to tell me to get off its trail, turn around and go back. The magnificent bald eagle reminded me that I was an intruder in its habitat, a visitor at best. As it flew over trees in the distance, I became aware of all the sounds around me. The breeze moving through the trees as it tried to push the clouds from the tops. The sounds of my animals as we moved down the narrow game trail, the rhythm of their hooves striking the solid ground, the breathing of my horse and the two pack mules that followed. The swishing and scraping of the dew-covered underbrush as it snapped across my chaps and then against the packs of the mules behind. Loud yet muted, these rich sounds reminded me of the lonely silence that was to come.

The morning was cool, damp and steel-gray, with diffused sunlight filtering through billowing clouds that hung low in the eastern sky. There was no rain yet, but it looked like it might start any time. One thing I knew I could count on, over the next year, was rain, drizzle and more rain. This was no surprise, as it was springtime in Western British Columbia. Whatever Mother Nature had in store for me, I had made provisions, or so I hoped.

Tugging on my watch chain, I reeled the cool, gold case into my hand. As I did so, my fingers brushed the engraved back, giving me solace. It opened with a solid *click*.

The time was 8:11 a.m. I'd been on the trail just over two hours. With dawn backlighting my Uncle's tweed overcoat, I had said goodbye to Roy in front of the old hotel and café in Firvale. Uncle Roy had traveled along to see me off at that small, isolated logging village, serviced only by the Canadian Pacific Railroad.

As I turned to leave he simply said, "Dutch, life is full of tests and I guess the trail before you is one of yours. Keep the wind to your back and the sun on your brow. May the wings of providence bring you home safely...see you this time next year."

Shaking his leather-gloved hand, I nodded my sad agreement and started the long ride towards my destiny. Somehow, it didn't seem possible that had happened only two hours before, and I had a foreboding sense that the year ahead of me could be longer than expected.

Shaking ferns some sixty yards ahead of me was Gus, also affectionately known as "the dog." He was mostly out of sight because of the tall underbrush, but every now and then he ran back down the trail, just close enough to see me and make sure I was still coming toward him. Without knowing a thing about it, he seemed to relish this adventure, as he'd spent the first couple of hours barking out a staccato cadence to our steps. Now he was noisily breaking trail for my little pack train.

I had found Gus, and all my other animals, in New Mexico. He had been an uninvited ranch dog, half wild, with only the name of "dog." He was a beautiful animal. I guessed his breed as half German shepherd and half wolf. His ears, nose, chest and three legs were dark brown, while the rest of his body was light caramel. His eyes were bright and alert, his speed and agility brutally powerful. I named him "Gus" from one of the few Latin words I could remember after two years of high school Latin: "Augustus," which means "of stature."

I didn't consider him to be my dog, as Gus had little use for people and less use for any animal that crossed his path. He was one dangerous and tough creature. I placed his age at about four years, which I couldn't confirm as he wouldn't let me touch him, let alone check his teeth. The folks at the ranch told me that he had appeared there about three years earlier. They guessed that he'd been abused as a pup and then abandoned by his owner.

For some reason, Gus and I had formed a bond of sorts, back in New Mexico. The cowboys at the ranch had been surprised when “the dog” started following me around, and Gus had astonished all of us by jumping into the trailer as I loaded it with my other animals to leave. He was not part of my original plan, but I knew I wouldn’t have to care for him, as he hunted for his own food and found his own water. I figured, why not? He would be better off with me than on that dusty, dry rangeland.

As I moved my little caravan up a steep slope, I became aware of steam coming from my horse’s nose in the cool morning air. This, too, was a proud and magnificent animal. His name was Blaze. I’d been told that he was five years old and had been a saddle pony at the ranch for the last two years. He was a gelding, half quarter horse and half appaloosa, sixteen hands tall, of a gentle but determined nature. He had a white stripe on his face, and two white stockings on his hocks. His mane and tail were dark and his body a light chestnut with a few darker spots on his rump. The appaloosa in him made him sure-footed; the quarter horse gave him great stamina and strength.

Blaze was indeed a muscular and intelligent animal. But I hadn’t picked him out of the herd, he picked me! One of the ranch hands was showing me an older sorrel, as the cowboys felt that an older horse would be more dependable, more sure-footed. Standing with my back to a group of younger horses, I was examining the mare when Blaze came up behind me and gave me a hard nudge in the middle of my back. Almost falling to the ground, I spun around to find him staring at me with a curious look on his face. I’m sure he’d smelled the carrots in my back pocket, but I like to think that it wasn’t just the carrots he was after. Perhaps both Blaze and Gus knew that I was preparing for an experience that was not to be missed. These two remarkable creatures would prove to be the most memorable animals of my life.

Twisting in the saddle I looked to the rear, if Blaze and Gus were unforgettable, I would soon forget the two mules, Harry and Harriet, or as I liked to call them, Dumb and Dumber. Their good points, and there were few, were that each carried four trail bags and a bag saddle, with a combined weight of over 250 pounds. They were strong animals, each gray to light gray in color, standing about fourteen hands tall. Their bad points, and there were many, were that they were stubborn, dumb and smelled bad. Another thing: when a horse “whinnies,” its sound has dignity; when a mule “whinnies,” it sounds like

an old woman cackling. And cackle they did, over miles and miles of trail. It about drove me crazy.

The path on which we traveled was a rough game trail that seemed to point in the general direction I wanted to go, which was north-northwest. The trail itself snaked through thick undergrowth but was pretty much out in the open, as the area had been logged off, some years before. There were hundreds of large, old-growth stumps scattered on the hillside. The old forest had not been replanted, but over the years it had started to grow again on its own. Here, new trees ranging from knee-high to over twenty feet could be found, but mostly the forest floor was littered with tall, heavy underbrush.

A stiff morning breeze had come up, blowing the low-hanging clouds higher in the brightening sky. Visibility improved and soon I could see my first objective: Thunder Mountain, some ten miles ahead. Its peak was over 6,500 feet and still had snow showing near its summit, which was in and out of view due to the moving clouds. Below the mountain's peak was a dense rain forest. That was to be my first obstacle.

After Thunder Mountain and a long trail northwest, I would turn south to cross another mountain. Comet was 6,300 feet high, and along the way I'd traverse three major rivers and many streams and creeks to get to my final destination, Nascall Valley. It would take all of six or seven days to travel those 90 miles. Had I been able to travel "as the crow flies," it would've been just a little over 50 miles.

It was May 15, 1941, the first day of what my Grandfather called my "mission" or what I called, among other things, a stupid family legacy. I was to spend one year, totally alone, in the wilderness of my choice, taking only what I could pack in. There were to be no boats, no planes, no modern conveniences, just what a horse and two pack mules could carry.

In this way, my family hoped that I would find my inner self, my destiny, or as Uncle Roy had said many times, "Maybe, just maybe, this adventure will clip that chip off your shoulder."



Sea Legs - 1937

Bang!

The green, foamy water thundered across the wheelhouse with such a force that I thought the windows would explode. There were two gray-painted iron pipes running across the ceiling of the little compartment, and both my hands were wrapped around them, hanging on for dear life. All I could see through the smeared windows were mountains of white/green water, all rushing towards me. The boat was rolling in every direction, first up, then to the right, then down. Other than the dim light coming from outside, a single bare lamp burned above Captain Skip, who stood calmly at the helm. Next to him, on the other side, Jack was holding onto the pipe with one hand and drinking coffee with the other. Jack's casual posture reminded me of someone chatting at a church social. Both men were wearing yellow rain coats and hats. Outside, on the rear of the boat, Tony was checking to make sure the gear was lashed down securely.

I'd met all three of these guys just a few hours before, when we'd pulled out of the Ketchikan boat basin. It had been a wet, miserable day when we'd departed, and it had only gotten worse.

The boat rose in the air, twisted to the right, and crashed headlong back into the raging sea. Water again covered the wheelhouse with such a force that the door next to me flew open, spraying all of us with cold, salty seawater. Reaching over with one hand and using the weight of my body, I got the door closed again. My heart was in my mouth and I was scared.

Captain Skip looked over at me. "Well, boy, how do you like fishin' so far?" Both he and Jack laughed out loud. Then Skip turned to Jack and asked, "How's that barometer doin'?"

"Still fallin', skipper," Jack replied.

Another big wave broke across our bow, and this time the boat twisted almost 45 degrees. Turning to Captain Skip, I shouted, "Do you think we should get life jackets on?"

Both men laughed out loud again.

"Look, son, you can put one on if it makes you feel better, but the facts are that you wouldn't last two or three minutes, floating in the cold waters up here. Only way to stay alive in weather like this is not to fall in. Right, Jack?"

"You got that right, skipper. Hell, there's more danger in having a little fun in the sporting houses of Ketchikan than in these waters!"

Captain Skip spun the wheel to turn the boat into a large wave coming from the right side. Its green foam spread again across the wheelhouse. The sound of its crash was almost deafening, and its force shook the whole boat. The little windshield wiper in front of the skipper's window stopped, in the weight of the water, and then began again.

Skip replied, "Come on, Jack, the boy just came aboard and you're already talking badly about our little fishing village. Why don't you go astern and see if Tony needs help?"

"Sure. Why not? There'll be plenty of time to show the boy how we live up here!"

Jack took a big slug of the last of his coffee, put the mug in a holder, and looked out the window for a few seconds, to time his exit with the waves.

Skip turned his head toward me for just a moment and said, "Look Dutch, there's nothing to be afraid of. I've been in weather like this a hundred times, and the *Pacific Lady* is made of some of the finest timber man has found. She wouldn't let us down. You go below and get some rest. I put your gear in the forward cabin. Your bunk is the port side."

At first, I didn't know what to say. I wasn't sure I could let go of the pipes above me, and I certainly didn't know what "port" meant.

Skip looked over again. "You can make it. Just go slowly and hang on, and you'll have your sea legs in no time. By the way, port is left, starboard is right. With this weather, it'll be hours before we start fishing. I'll call ya if and when we start fishing, or sinking."

A broad smile crossed his weather-beaten face. Forcing a smile back, I nodded my approval. Then, slowly, I turned and climbed down the rolling gangway ladder at the rear of the wheelhouse and lurched my way up a dimly lit passageway to the forward cabin. There I found my suitcase sliding back and forth on the floor next to a V berth.

Closing the cabin door, I looked around the small compartment. The only illumination inside the cramped quarters came from four small portholes above me. I was sure I wouldn't sleep but I crawled into the left bunk anyway. Here, I could feel the front of the boat lift itself out of the water and then crash down again. Each time, I'd hang on to the sides of the bunk. Sometimes my whole body would become weightless as I was bounced into the air. Then I'd fall back into my bunk with a thud.

Damn! This was not how I'd envisioned fishing, when Uncle Roy had told me about Captain Skip and working up here in Ketchikan, Alaska. Maybe, as much as I would have hated it, I should have stayed with Grandfather in Fairview for my sixteenth summer.

There was another wave, another loud crash. Then, for some unknown reason, I was asleep in a few minutes.

The next thing I heard was the muffled sounds of the boat's diesel engine as it pushed the Pacific Lady through calm waters. My eyes flew open, and I saw sunlight coming from the small portholes above the cabin. Hopping out of my bunk, I stood on my toes to look out through one of the small, round windows.

The ocean was flat, the sun low in the sky, seagulls flying around the boat as it cut cleanly through the water. There was a rocky shoreline, with tall trees growing between the rocks right down to the shore. The boat was slowly moving north, with none of the pitching and rolling of the day before.

Looking at my watch, I saw that it was 6 a.m.; I'd slept almost 10 hours! My legs were wobbly, but it was time to get moving. Swinging open the cabin door, I swayed down the passageway like a drunk. As I passed the gangway leading up to the wheelhouse, I saw Jack's legs behind the helm.

Just astern of the gangway, I entered into a small, smoke-filled salon with small windows above. This cabin served as a galley, with a diesel cooking stove on one side, which made the whole room smell of diesel, and a small eating booth on the other side. There, sitting behind the table, were Skip and Tony. They both greeted me with big smiles on their faces.

Tony said, "Hey, bait boy...good morning! I heard you wanted a life jacket

yesterday. Here, you can have mine!"

He threw an orange life jacket across the cabin as he laughed.

Catching it in mid-air and turning to Captain Skip, I said, "Thought you were going to call me sir. Sorry for all that sack time."

Skip looked up. "We didn't sink, and we're still a couple hours from where we'll start fishing. Thought a good night's sleep would help ya. When we get into the fishin' waters, there won't be sleep for any of us."

Seating down on the corner of one of the benches of the booth, I was still a little bewildered.

"Help yourself to the coffee, and there's food on the stove. After you've eaten, I'll give you the first lesson on being a bait boy," Skip said.

The coffee was strong and black, and I poured a full mug. At the stove, I lifted the lid on a large, black, cast-iron skillet. Mixed in the grease from bacon and sausage were two cold, hard, fried eggs. The sight and smell of this mixture made my stomach turn and I knew I was going to throw up. Turning, I staggered out of the cramped salon as fast as I could.

As I made my hasty departure, I heard Tony say, "Gee, skipper, we won't need any bait on this trip. Looks like the bait boy will provide all we need."

Captain Skip soon joined me at the rail. "Don't worry about it, Dutch. It will take some time to get used to all the smells and rolling of a fishing boat. Let's get to work. It'll get your mind off it. I'll show you all about being a bait boy."

Even though I remained seasick for the next five days, that's exactly what he did. He showed me how to remove the barbs from the large hooks we were using, and how to take a file to sharpen those hooks. He explained that, if the barbs were left on, the fish would be hard to remove from the hooks.

As he helped me file my first few hooks, I saw him really for the first time. He was a tall, thin man in his late forties, with jet black hair and graying temples. He was part Eskimo and part French, which gave him a love for the environment and the temper to back it up. His face had strong features, and his hands and arms were robust and thick. When he smiled, which he did a lot, he showed teeth that were white and straight.

I took to him immediately. He was genuine with his instruction and had a lot of patience for all my questions. Next, he showed me how to put the bait on the barbless hooks, how to handle the lines, where to throw the fish, and other tips for a landlubber turned bait boy.

My bond with Captain Skip came easily, and I worked hard for him. It was important to me to do a good job for him, and I never made the same mistake twice. On a working boat, you need to think ahead of the boat's needs, and I took pride in being prepared to always fill those needs. There was no job I wouldn't do, no job I wouldn't try. My goal was to please him and the rest of the crew. I slept when they slept, worked when they worked, and joked when they joked. In time, I'd explored every nook and cranny of the boat. There was no part of that boat I didn't learn about, and no piece of gear I couldn't operate. It was hard work, as hard as anything I had done in my life, but there was something I loved about it. It was the sea, the fishing, the rugged beauty of the Alaska wilderness and, most of all, my mates. By the end of this first trip I had my sea legs and was never seasick again. I carried my weight and was by now a full-fledged member of the *Pacific Lady*'s crew, and damn proud of it.

Between our five-to-seven-day fishing trips, we'd spend a day or two docked at the Ketchikan boat basin. Here, we'd sell our catch, refuel, re-supply and re-rig for the next trip. Captain Skip allowed me to stay aboard the *Pacific Lady* while he, Jack and Tony went home to their families. During these times, for the most part, I'd read, write letters and write in my journal, which was never far from me. I loved to walk the streets of this unique, rough, and picturesque little fishing village. At the time, the only way in or out of Ketchikan was by boat or floatplane, so all the food and supplies were barged in, mostly from Seattle. Here, a nickel Coke cost a dime, a newspaper from the lower 48 that cost two cents was a nickel, or you could buy a hamburger and fries and pay almost two bits. The only thing that seemed to be cheap was the beer. Anyhow, it must have been, because there was a bar on every corner and a drunk on every sidewalk. Jack and Tony had asked me to go out on the town with them a few times, but I always found an excuse to say no. At sixteen, I might have a smoke every now and then, but going to those bars and what they called 'sporting houses' just didn't appeal to me.

That first summer, I met Captain Skip's family only once, and that was when his

wife had me to dinner, the night before I returned to the east. They lived in a small house in the hills, overlooking the village and its bay. His wife was a small blonde-haired Norwegian lady named Louise, who cooked one of the best meals I'd ever eaten. The menu was simple – what she called seafood stew. While I can't remember exactly what kind of seafood she used, I remember telling myself it had been the best meal ever. At the dinner table that night were their two daughters. Laura, 17, was about to leave for college in Seattle, and Nancy, 20, was about to marry a sailor down in San Diego.

The next day, as Skip walked me to the ferry, he told me that while he'd miss "his gals," Ketchikan was no place to raise a family, and that most young people got out as soon as possible. Later, as the ferryboat moved slowly past the city, I stood by the railing, looking out at the little fishing village. I felt sorry that Skip and Louise would be without their daughters, as I'd found this little hamlet so unique and picturesque. But then, I didn't have a family to raise here. With my pockets full of money and my head full of memories, I left Ketchikan for the first time. I knew I would return.



As we moved through a small gully, I glanced up, watching the last of the clouds whisk away from the top of Thunder Mountain. Stopping my little caravan, I reached into my saddle bags for my binoculars. Through the glasses, I got my first really good look at that gigantic granite monolith.

What I saw frightened me, and for the first time in my life I tasted fear in my cotton-dry mouth. What loomed before me was a forbidding, unforgiving, massive wilderness that could swallow up my little party in one quick gulp. The trail ahead was pitted with dangers, and I knew that I could count on no one but myself. Replacing the binoculars in my saddle bag, I cursed myself for looking. Why didn't I have a spine? Why had I agreed to this adventure? Grandfather and I were utterly different, fire and ice. I never measured any man by his pocketbook. I never expected anything from others that I wasn't willing to give back, and I never judged others, only myself. How had I turned out so completely my grandfather's opposite? Maybe, just

maybe, I was more like my father, after all.

