

Gold Digger:
A Klondike Mystery
by
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Chapter 1

“Bloody hell,” Angus said.

For the first time in his life, I didn’t reprimand my son for swearing.

He had been in his room, sitting up in bed, concentrating on his school book, when I’d knocked and entered. I tried not to notice the penny-dreadful concealed in the folds of the geography tome.

“I have to go to the Savoy,” I said, as he stuffed the book under his pillow. “I might have made a mistake in the ledger, and I want to check.”

“Can’t it wait until tomorrow?”

“It can. But I can’t. Do you want to come with me?”

“Sure.”

In this town, I didn’t need a protector to walk the streets after dark (or at least what passed for dark), but I wanted my son’s company. He’d been distant of late. Growing up,

probably. It had to happen, someday, but I intended to hold the forces of nature back as long as humanly possible.

Angus took my arm as we walked. It was a Sunday in June of 1898, and the town of Dawson, Yukon Territory, was as orderly as an orphanage expecting an imminent visit from Lady Bountiful. The streets were quiet; most people were at home resting after their evening meal. If they were lucky enough to have a home. And a meal.

I opened the front door of my business, and we walked in. The floorboards creaked beneath our feet. The Savoy saloon and dance hall, my pride and joy, the self-proclaimed “Finest establishment West of London, England”, was as silent as the grave. It looked rather sad, empty and abandoned. In a moment of excessive fantasy, I imagined the boards of the stage wondering where the dancers with their stomping feet had gone, the rows of whisky bottles complaining to each other that no one was enjoying them, and the roulette wheel twitching under the forced inaction.

I called to the watchman. “Hello. It’s only me! Mrs. MacGillivray.”

The front windows were small and always dirty, despite Mrs. Saunderson’s attempts to keep them clean. Outside it was daylight, but in the saloon the shadows fell long and deep.

“Light the lamp,” I said to Angus. “That watchman had better be around here somewhere. Hello?”

An oil lamp flared into life at the same time as the watchman stumbled out of the room off the bar that served as a kitchen and broom closet. He fastened his belt with one hand, wiped sleep out of his eyes with the other, and tried to stifle a yawn. I had recently taken the man on only because he was such a tough looking fellow, complete with broken nose and bulging muscles and tattoos running up his arms. The rest of the week he hired himself out for manual labour.

“Seems to me as if this would be a nice job you have here,” I said now. “No customers to please, no heavy lifting. Earn an extra day’s pay over a Sunday.”

“Yes, M’m,” he mumbled, finding the notch in his belt at last.

“My partner, Mr. Walker, or I will be dropping by every Sunday. I expect you to be checking us out before the door is fully opened.”

“Yes, M’m.”

“Good. I’ll be upstairs for a few moments.”

“M’ m?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.” He shuffled off to the back rooms.

Angus watched him go. “Why didn’t you fire him, Mother? You know he was asleep.”

“He won’t be sleeping on the job again. I’ve put the fear of God, or at least of myself, which is probably just as good, into him. I’ll mention it to Ray tomorrow. Between us we’ll drop by a few times over the next couple of Sundays.”

Angus lifted the lamp. Shadows danced off his cheekbones. I started for the stairs.

A door crashed open with so much force it almost came off its hinges. A chair fell over, and the loud snap of the breaking of a wooden leg echoed through the room.

I whirled around to see the watchman standing in the doorway to the gambling rooms, bent half-over, holding his stomach and gasping for breath. As Angus and I stared at him, he vomited.

“Bloody hell,” Angus said.

“Don’t swear, Angus.”

The man raised his head and wiped his hand across his mouth. His eyes were wide and frightened. Avoiding the lumpy brown and yellow puddle, swallowing my gag instinct, I grabbed him by the shoulders and tried to straighten him up so he could look at me. “What’s the matter with you?”

He pointed behind him and, with a low moan, vomited again. Fortunately, there wasn’t much remaining in his stomach, and I was able to dance out of the way.

I ran through the door, aware of Angus following me. Nothing in the gaming room. The roulette wheel stood still, the poker table deserted.

The dance hall was a big room with no windows. The corners were full of shadows cast by the dim remnants of light coming in from the street, through the saloon, then the gambling room, and into the dance hall.

Angus lifted his lamp higher. I sucked in my breath.

“Bloody hell,” Angus said, and I did not reprimand him.

A dark shape lay across the stage. It had form and substance and weight.

We took a step forward. It didn’t move.

Angus reached out one arm to stop me. “No, Mother. Don’t go any closer.”

“This is my property, dear, I have to.”

The man lay on his back, leaning slightly to the right side. He was neat and properly dressed with short red and grey hair. A streak of dried blood, resembling lip rouge applied by a nearly-blind dowager countess momentarily abandoned by her lady’s maid, dripped from the corner of his mouth, across the side of his face, coming to rest in a dark pool on the wooden boards of the stage.

Why does he have a red silk ribbon wrapped around his throat? I thought.

My brain soon cast off the uncomprehending fog thrown up by my protective unconscious. And my gaze travelled down the body, avoiding the empty, staring eyes and the viscous gash across the neck. The front of his suit, the neat waistcoat, the place where the pocket watch used to be, was dark with blood. But the blood was no longer running, and there wasn’t a great deal of it, much less than had dripped across his throat and splattered into the boards of the stage.

“Mother. Mother. Look at me, Mother.”

I looked. My son’s beautiful face stared into mine. He had lowered the lamp, and more dark than light filled the space between us. “Are you all right, Mother?”

“Go for the Mounties. I’ll wait in the saloon.”

We clutched hands and backed out of the dance hall together, not wanting to turn our backs on the thing lying on the stage.

“Someone murdered Mr. Ireland,” Angus said. “That can’t have been an accident.”

I’d also recognized the face: Jack Ireland, who’d caused me nothing but trouble since the moment he’d arrived in town. The Mounties would have their job cut out for them: once they’d eliminated the handful of people who didn’t particularly want Ireland dead, they’d be left with the majority of the population of the Territory.