

Gold Fever: A Klondike Mystery
By Vicki Delany

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Chapter 1

It was my habit to arrive home in time for supper with my son. I wasn't always successful, but today we had enjoyed a quiet afternoon. Quiet being a relative term, meaning that things weren't quite as hair-raisingly frantic as usual.

I left the Savoy Saloon and Dance Hall – my own private gold mine – at six o'clock and made my way west along Front Street. The streets were no more packed than usual for early evening, meaning there was a sliver of room along the boardwalks and across the duck boards.

In later years, what I would remember most about Dawson in this summer of 1898 was the mud. The town had been built with no thought for anything other than access to the gold fields. Inconveniences, such as being located on a flood plain on the flats where the rivers jammed during spring break-up, were inconsequential in light of the town's desperate need to be close to the Creeks, where lumps of gold waited to be found. Waiting, as some would say, to be plucked like potatoes in a well-tilled Ontario field, or apples hanging low in a New England orchard.

As long as there were men gullible enough to believe that, there would be women like me, happy to provide them with a bit of comfort when they realized all their dreams had come to naught.

I exchanged polite greetings with a good number of the men I passed on the street. I didn't know most of them from Adam, but they knew me and that I kept "the finest, most modern establishment in London, England, transported all the way to Dawson." My son, Angus, had recently come up with that slogan.

At the intersection of Front and York Streets, close to the mud flats and the swift-moving Yukon River, the most miserable of donkeys struggled to get the back wheels of a cart through the mud and up and over the duckboard laid across the street. The red-faced driver waved his whip about and screamed with so much vigour that I hoped, for the donkey's sake, that he'd drop dead with apoplexy.

"Allow me to assist you, Fiona." A hand touched my elbow.

"I am perfectly capable of crossing the street." It was my friend, Graham Donohue.

“I know you are. But imagine the prestige I’ll enjoy for a day if I’m seen escorting home the raven-haired beauty of the Klondike.” Our admiration was completely mutual. If I was (to heck with modesty – no *if* required) the most beautiful woman in the Territory, Graham was probably the most handsome man. A woman could easily drown in his dark eyes, with only the thick black lashes to hold her up. His face was thin, the cheekbones sharp underneath perfect skin. He laughed a great deal, as he did now, showing off straight white teeth. He was a bit on the small side, but I intensely dislike men who loom over me. I do not care to feel physically vulnerable.

I allowed Graham to take my arm. “Then you may assist me.”

The donkey cart driver was almost foaming at the mouth, but the poor beast at last managed to drag the cart over the duck board and plodded away down the street.

“Boor,” I sniffed.

“Anyone interesting been in the Savoy lately?” Graham asked.

I laughed. “So your gallantry is nothing but an ill-disguised attempt to extract the latest gossip?”

“You know I have no ulterior motives concerning you, Fee.”

I ignored the comment, because I knew Graham held feelings for me I was not prepared to reciprocate.

“However,” he went on, “if you have some good gossip to share...”

Graham Donohue was a reporter for a big American newspaper, always on the lookout for news.

“It’s been a fairly uneventful week, as far as Dawson goes,” I said. “Although we’ve been visited the last few nights by an interesting character.”

“Yes?”

“A professional gambler, I would imagine. An American. Flashy dresser. Plenty of money, at least that I can see. He’ll probably be back tonight. He seems rather fond of Irene.”

“Irene. Aren’t they all? You’re lucky to have gotten that one, Fiona.”

And I was. Irene – she pronounced her name in the French fashion *Ireneé*, although she was as American as Graham – was, for this week at least, the most popular dance hall girl in Dawson.

We walked up York Street in companionable silence and soon arrived at Mrs. Mann's boarding house on Fourth Avenue. It was a most unimposing dwelling – built of wood harvested too early and thrown up too quickly – with only one storey and two windows on either side of the plain front door. But in a town where a canvas tent was all the accommodation many families could find I was happy to live here. For now. I hadn't come to Dawson to live comfortably; the frantic days of the gold rush wouldn't last forever, and I intended to make my money and get out.

“Shall we see if Mrs. Mann has prepared enough supper for a guest, Graham? And then if you'd like a touch more prestige, you may escort me back to the Savoy.” Opening the door and stepping into the front hall, I tossed him a seductive smile.

If Graham owned a tail, he would have wagged it. But he was a man, so he bowed gallantly and said, “It would be my pleasure, Fiona.”

I was surprised to see that Graham wasn't our only dinner guest. A small brown-skinned woman sat at the kitchen table, hugging a steaming mug of tea. Mr. Mann was sitting in his usual place at the head of the table, scowling mightily (as usual) while Angus ferried cutlery and plates, and Mrs. Mann stirred the contents of her heaviest cooking pot. Beef and boiled cabbage tonight, by the smell of it. I hate boiled cabbage – I hate cabbage no matter how it is prepared, but after coming through a winter of near starvation, I ate whatever was put on my plate.

Angus didn't look up when Graham and I came in. Instead he ducked his head as though he were trying to hide behind a lock of too-long blond hair. He was only twelve years old but growing into a man too quickly for my liking. He would be passing my height of five foot eight soon, and his lanky, huggable frame would turn hard and firm.

This was a tough town for a boy without a father to learn how to be a good man.

As I plucked a pin out of my hat prior to taking it off, I realised the woman was wearing my dressing gown, my favourite one, made in the Chinese style of brilliant crimson silk with an elaborately embroidered gold dragon streaking across the back. A dressing gown I had bought in Vancouver and carried all the way over the Chilkoot Pass in order to have a touch of luxury for my private enjoyment only.

“What the...” I said, my hat half off my head.

“I brought her here, Ma,” Angus said.

“Why, it's Indian Mary,” Graham said.

“Not proper,” Mr. Mann said.

“More tea, you poor dear?” Mrs. Mann said.

“Angus,” I said, “what is going on here?”

“Are you all right, Mary?” Graham asked.

“Yes, Mr. Graham,” the Indian woman mumbled into her mug. She hadn’t looked at me.

“You know this lady?” I said, tossing my hat onto the wooden plank that served as a sideboard.

“I can explain,” Graham said.

“I can explain,” Angus said.

“Then explain.” I said.

Mrs. Mann snatched up the hat, tsk-tsking heartily. It was a plain straw affair, suitable for daytime, saved from total ugliness by a wide satin ribbon of startling midnight blue. “Don’t leave your hat there, Mrs. MacGillivray. It’ll get kitchen grease on it. Angus, take your mother’s hat to her room.” She shoved the offending headpiece into my son’s arms.

Angus blinked in surprise but took the hat.

Mary got up, not making a sound. Much too long for her, my dressing gown fell in a silken red puddle around her feet. “I’ll leave. Thank you for your hospitality, young Mr. Angus, Missus.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. Sit down and finish your tea.” I waved my hand. “Graham, tell your friend she needn’t leave on my account. Angus, put that hat in my cupboard.”

“Is not proper,” Mr. Mann repeated.

“Why the poor thing was half drowned,” Mrs. Mann said. She ladled up a big bowl of beef and cabbage. “You eat this, my girl. My mother always said there’s nothing like a hot dinner to put a man – or a woman – to rights.”

“Helga,” Mr. Mann said, his thick German accent falling heavily on the single word.

“Will Mr. Donohue be having supper?” Mrs. Mann asked, the ladling spoon held high in her hand. “We can probably stretch the meal to accommodate another. With enough bread.”

“No. Thank you, Mrs. Mann, but I’ve remembered an appointment. Most important, must dash. Perhaps I’ll stop by the Savoy later, Fee.” He tipped his hat to Mrs. Mann and disappeared with unseemly haste out the back, the door to the yard slamming shut behind him. How odd.

Angus said, “Mary fell into the river, and I happened by and helped her out. She couldn’t go home so wet, so I brought her here to get dry. Mrs. Mann hung her dress on the line, so I gave

her your robe to wear while she warmed up.” He stopped talking and looked at me. “Please, Mother.”

“I’ll be leaving. I don’t want to cause any trouble,” Mary said. A healthy helping of defiance filled her black gaze; defiance with a generous amount of contempt and perhaps a touch of fear lurking beneath. I remembered what it felt like, hating someone who, for no reason but a circumstance of birth, had power over you.

“Fell in the river, did you? Must have been dreadfully cold. That cabbage smells heavenly, Mrs. Mann, I’ve always loved cabbage. I am simply starved. Let me wash my hands, then you can tell me something about yourself over dinner. Mary, is it? I should be able to find a housedress you can wrap a belt around a few times to make reasonably respectable. It will do in a pinch. Angus, why is your hair wet?”

Angus MacGillivray instinctively touched his hand to his head. His hair didn’t feel wet. He patted down a slick at the back and avoided his mother’s questioning eyes.

He glanced at Mary, who was pulling the long sleeves of the dressing gown back to reach for a spoon.

Angus had found Mary in the river.

Someone said they’d seen a bear a couple of miles outside town, fishing in the river. Angus and his friends, Ron and Dave, were hoping to get a look at it. They’d been trying to walk carefully, without making any noise, but Dave could never stop complaining for long. He was telling them that that his father said the bear was dangerous and should be shot before it got closer to town. Guns weren’t allowed in Dawson: Dave’s father had a lot to say about that also.

Angus had been out in front, tired of Dave’s whining voice. He came to a stop so quickly the other boys bumped into him. “Shush,” he warned.

Something was in the river. Not big enough to be a bear. A dog perhaps, or a wolf - that would be almost as good as a bear.

Tendrils of long dark hair moved across the top of the brown water. A head bobbed to the surface, a wave washed over it, and when the wave passed, the head was gone.

The three boys ran to the bank. “A woman, I think it’s a woman,” Angus said.

They’d been warned that this spot got very deep, very fast. Without stopping to think, Angus MacGillivray jumped in the swollen river.

It was late June, after an exceptionally hot spring, but this was the Yukon River. The shock of the cold took his breath away. His boots, which he hadn't thought to remove, pulled at his legs, trying to drag him under. The water was over his head. But he was young and well-fed and a good, strong swimmer, and she was only a few yards away. In seconds he reached the churning water where the woman had been. Her skirts billowed up behind her, and she was easy for his reaching arms to locate. He hauled her to the surface and set off in a one-armed crawl back to shore. She was small. Even waterlogged, she felt like a doll in his arms. She fought him and cried out for him to let her go.

When they reached shore, Ron and Dave grabbed the woman by the arms and dragged her out of the water. Angus crawled onto the bank and collapsed onto his back, gasping for air.

While the woman retched up a goodly portion of the Yukon River, Angus struggled to his knees and crawled over to her. She was lying on her stomach where the boys had placed her. Ron and Dave sat on their haunches, wide-eyed, as unsure of what to do now as was Angus. He touched her back lightly.

She groaned and rolled over. "You stupid boy." Her flat nose and dark eyes were red, and her breathing was laboured. "Why did you do that? I'm not worth you risking your life." She began to cry.

The boys watched her. Eventually she struggled to her knees, then to her feet, and without another look at her rescuers, took a wobbly step toward the river.

"No!" Angus jumped up. "Nothing is as bad as that."

She looked over her shoulder; naked pain in her eyes. "What do you think you know about life, child?"

"I know I don't want to go swimming again," he said. "The water's cold."

Ron and Dave watched through wide eyes, saying nothing.

The edges of the woman's generous mouth turned up slightly. "Then not today. Not here. But there are other days, other places. And you won't be there, young boy." Her English was almost perfect, but a bit too stiff, too formal, as if she had been taught it in school, not in life. She touched the cheap cross hanging from a chain around her neck.

"Look," Angus said, "you're soaking wet; it's getting late. Why don't you come home with me? My ma'll have something you can...put on." He almost said "wear", but his mother

was so much larger than this slight figure nothing she owned could possibly fit. “Until your clothes dry, I mean.”

Her dark eyes travelled down his long, thin body. “You must be older than you look. You think I’m going to pay you in return for my life?” She raised her eyes to look directly at him.

Ron tittered, and after looking confused for a moment, Dave let out a bark of an embarrassed laugh. Angus flushed. The boys had been running unsupervised on the streets of Dawson long enough to know exactly what she meant.

“I don’t want you to die of chill, that’s all. My ma will be home soon, and if she isn’t, Mrs. Mann, our landlady, will be there.”

“Angus,” Ron said in whisper, “let’s go. It ain’t none of our business what she does.”

Angus half-turned away from the woman and tried to keep his voice down. “She might try it again if we walk away and leave her here.”

“You can’t take her home, for God’s sake!” Dave said, not bothering to whisper. “Your ma’ll tan your hide if you let her put a foot in the house.”

“Why would she do that?” said Angus, whose mother had never so much as paddled his diaper, never mind tanned his hide.

“She’s an Indian, you idiot. You can’t invite a squaw into a white woman’s house.”

“Indian?” Angus asked, feeling like a fool. When they’d come over the Chilkoot Pass last year, his mother had hired Indian packers to carry their goods. He’d seen a few women working as packers, but only from a distance. They’d all been heavy-set, muscular, bundled up in clothes suitable for the high mountain passes. This woman was tiny, frail almost, but the dark complexion, black hair, and flat cheekbones should have told him. Would it have made a difference if he’d known it was an Indian woman throwing herself into the cold Yukon?

He turned to face her. She had begun to slowly pick her way back towards town, dragging sodden skirts behind her, shivering with cold in her light blouse.

“Wait,” he shouted, running after her and catching her by the arm. “You can still come with me, at least long enough to get dry and warmed up. Our landlady always has lots for dinner, to make our lunches the next day, so she’ll have enough to set an extra place.”

She turned and smiled up at him. She had a nice smile, he thought, kind. And sad. Her face was wet, river water mingling with her tears. “You’re a nice boy.” She touched his cheek with one small brown hand. “You go home to your nice mother. She doesn’t need any trouble.”

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“It’s no trouble.”

“If you take me in, you’ll get a great deal of trouble from Mrs. LeBlanc.”

“Angus,” Dave called. “The squaw can look after herself. All that talk about supper’s makin’ me hungry. You comin’?”

Angus ignored his friends. “Mrs. LeBlanc? You mean Joey LeBlanc? Nothing my ma’d like more than to set Joey LeBlanc straight.” He held out his hand. “I’m Angus MacGillivray.”

She had not accepted his hand. “White people call me Mary.”