Chapter 1

The next night, we seemed to be busier than ever, if that was even possible. It was July of 1898 and the entire world was caught in the grip of Klondike gold fever. Thousands upon thousands of people had arrived in Dawson over the previous weeks, and still, they came by every sort of watercraft available. Keep this up and it might require building an extension onto the Savoy Saloon and Dance Hall. The question was, where would it go? The buildings along Front Street, tossed up virtually overnight with little thought to aesthetics, safety, or permanency, stood cheek-to-jowl. Out the back, beyond the alley, was another row of stores, including a mortuary and a dry goods shop.

Neither of which lacked for custom.

The days were hot, the nights long and warm, and people had come through so much hardship simply to get here that they seemed almost desperate to spend what money they had as fast as possible. The lucky few who’d found gold, such as my favourite barfly Barney, didn’t know the meaning of the word restraint.

All the better, because I myself know perfectly well the value of a dollar — and what it’s like not to have one.

It was shortly after midnight when I saw him.

So tall, so thin. So unwelcome in my bar and in my town.

The first round of dancing had just begun. He was with Lady Irénée, the most popular dance hall girl in Dawson. She acted Lady Macbeth or Hamlet in the plays, sang a few songs, and closed the stage show with a languid, sensuous dance performed in yards and yards of multi-coloured chiffon. Not a Lady, nor even christened with the fancy French name of Irénée, she was plain old Irene Davidson of somewhere in the Midwest. As a headliner, she wasn’t required to remain after her performance to dance with the men, but Irene knew her enormous popularity depended in large measure on her approachability. Besides, she loved attention, soaked up every bit of it, basked in it. She also basked in the money they threw her way. Last week as she took a long languid bow in the one remaining length of chiffon wrapped around her once-white shift, an old sourdough threw a gold nugget the size of my fist onto the stage at her feet. She scooped it up fast enough and gave the man a wave and a cheeky wink.

I wondered if that’s where the rumour got started: they say that Klondike gold lay at one’s feet, waiting to be scooped up. The only people I ever saw collecting nuggets like windfall apples were dancers.

Irene wasn’t pretty, at least not in the way that actresses in the big cities of the east might be. She looked like what she was, a tough farm girl who’d taken a chance and climbed the Chilkoot Trail. The Yukon was not a place for delicate women.

Irene had recently, much to my displeasure, taken up with Ray Walker, my business partner and half-owner of the Savoy. I knew things about Irene she wouldn’t want to be made public, and thus I knew why she was suddenly enamoured of Ray, whom she had consistently discouraged until last week.

It’s not my job to guard the morals of my employees nor to save my business partner from having his heart broken.

But it was my job to keep the Savoy the most popular dance hall in the Yukon, and I feared dissent amongst the employees as much as I feared running out of liquor.

I was on the balcony floor above the dance hall. Tables and chairs were set up so the better-heeled customers in the boxes could observe the dancing below. Men were quaffing champagne — at forty dollars a quart — straight from the bottle, dancers balanced on their knees. Betsy, dressed in a rather ugly shade of mustard, was throwing back her head and laughing heartily at something her companion had said. He lifted the bottle of champagne to his mouth and took a long drink. He belched heartily and wiped his mouth with the back of his right hand. His left hand was under Betsy’s dress.

My employees are not prostitutes.

Some of the other dance halls don’t try too hard to disguise the fact that their girls are available for additional forms of entertainment after the show, but mine know if I find out they’re whoring on the side, they’ll be out of a job. Being unobtainable helps to keep my dancers popular.

I gave Betsy a warning look, but she avoided my eyes. Betsy had been stepping out with Ray (and I had no doubt there was more staying in than stepping out involved), but he’d thrown her over the minute Irene batted her stubby eyelashes in his direction. If she didn’t keep her resentment to herself, she’d be out on the street fast enough.

I glanced over the railing to the crowded room below. Irene was dancing, laughing and smiling at her partner, who towered above everyone in the room. He was extremely tall and thin, looking much like a lodgepole pine with a filthy mop of hair and scraggly beard glued to the top of it.

My stomach clenched.

I made my way down the stairs in record time, not even bothering to smile at men as I shoved them out of the way.

I ran through the gambling room, scarcely noticing the piles of chips and bills and gold dust in front of the poker players.

Ray worked behind the bar, his scarred and chapped hands moving as he poured drinks, his eyes moving as he watched for trouble.

I pushed my way through the crowd. The men were always happy to see me, but for once I ignored them. “Ray,” I shouted. “Come here.”

“I’m busy, Fee,” he replied. Ray hailed from the back alleys and shipyards of Glasgow. His accent could be almost undecipherable to the uninitiated. A Scotswoman myself, even I had trouble understanding him sometimes.

“Get over here,” I said. “I have to show you something.”

I rarely spoke to Ray in such a tone. He managed the bar and the male employees; I supervised the women and kept the accounts. We were a good team.

He must have read something in my face and my voice. He put down the bottle of whisky, told one of the other bartenders, the fellow I call Not-Murray, to take over and came out from behind the long mahogany counter.

“Problem, Fee?” he said.

“Might be. I think I recognize someone.”

I led the way to the dance hall at the back. It was after midnight, but this far north in early July it was still daylight outside. The windows were small and dirty, so kerosene lamps were lit throughout the building.

“You can’t miss him,” I said. “The one dancing with Irene. Please tell me it’s not who I think it is.”

Irene was by far the best-dressed of the dancers. Almost as well-dressed as I. Which didn’t particularly please me. We had shared a dressmaker for a short while, until that business most-abruptly shut down. With my blue evening gown unfinished, I might add.

Tonight, Irene was in jet-black silk with flashes of scarlet in the skirt panel and folds of the sleeves. The percentage girls, employed only to dance with the men after the stage show, wore their street clothes to work, and most of them were a muddy brown or practical homespun. Irene stood out like a peacock. She wasn’t the most popular dancer hall girl in the north for nothing. Like all great pretenders, she believed she was what she wanted to be, ergo she was.

For once, Ray didn’t have eyes for Irene. He sucked in his breath at the sight of the man holding her in his arms. He was about six-foot-five and might have weighed a 150 pounds if his pockets were stuffed with gold dust. He was dressed in a tweed suit — nothing out of the ordinary. His waistcoat was threadbare around the edges, his bow tie had seen better days, and his hat and jacket could use the attention of a laundry maid.

The music stopped in mid-note and the dancers skidded to a stop. They pushed past us as the girls led their partners to the bar. Many of the men tipped their hats to me, some slowed as if to stop and talk, but their partners dragged them away. At a dollar a minute, time was definitely money.

The tall man’s hand was pressed against the small of Irene’s back. She said something to him, he nodded, and they began to move toward the bar.

The floor between us was momentarily empty, and the man caught sight of Ray and me watching.

His face split into a huge grin. He was missing most of his teeth and what remained were cracked and discoloured.

“It’s him all right,” Ray said. “Paul Sheridan. Goddamnit, Fee. Do ye ken he’s here on his boss’s business?”

I let out a long breath. “Why else?”

“Mrs. MacGillivray. Fiona, my darling.” Sheridan extended his arms, as if about to wrap me in a hug. I put my own arm out to stop him. “You’re looking even more beautiful than I remember. Walker, how ya doin’? You’re as ugly as I remember.” He laughed heartily. Irene looked baffled as neither Ray nor I returned the man’s greetings.

“Ye’re not welcome here, Sheridan,” Ray said. “Get out.” He signalled to one of his men to join us.

“Is that a way to greet an old friend? Fiona, are you going to let him talk to me like that?”

“Get out, Paul,” I said. “Irene, find someone else to dance with.”

“He hasn’t paid ...”

“I’ll cover it.”

Irene walked away.

“Not only out of my establishment, but I suggest you get out of town as well. Do the Mounties know you’re here?”

“No need. I’ve left my former life behind. I’m going straight, Fiona. And that’s why I’m so glad to see you.”

Ray and his bouncer each took one of Sheridan’s arms. They began walking him toward the door. He didn’t resist, but continued talking to me over his shoulder. “See how agreeable, I’m being, Fiona. No trouble. I have an offer to make you. Supper tomorrow?”

I didn’t bother to answer. They reached the door, and Ray shoved Sheridan into the street.

The man stumbled a few feet, then turned and touched the brim of his hat. “Shall we say seven o’clock. You can suggest the restaurant.” He kissed the tips of his fingers, extended them to me, and then turned and walked. A spring was in his step.

“I’ll have a word with Corporal Sterling tomorrow,” I said.

“Aye. The Mounties’ll want to know Soapy Smith’s arrived in Dawson.”