

Glint

by Amber Fenik

The little bell above the door chimed a cheerful warning as Silas crossed the threshold of Dawson City's General Store. Striding to the front, he placed a tin of tobacco and a sturdy shovel on the counter, ignoring the storekeeper's grimace as he handed over his tarnished coins.

Silas felt the brush of something soft against his back and turned to see Miss Amelia Dove walking down the aisle, assorted tools and dry goods stacked high on either side. Her pale shapely form was wrapped tightly in a heavy fur coat, no doubt a gift from one of her many admirers. She nodded a greeting to the storekeeper, but did not acknowledge Silas' presence. Her son trailed along behind her, staring up at Silas' face, his own mismatched set of eyes – one icy blue and the other coal black – meeting their duplicates with a curious expression.

Feeling suddenly and strangely self-conscious about his shabby appearance, Silas smoothed down his threadbare wool coat with grimy hands, grabbed his purchases and made a hasty retreat.

Out on the boardwalk, Silas lit his pipe, protectively cradling the faint ghostly curl of smoke against the rising wind with one scarred hand. His footfalls sounded heavier than usual, echoing on the wooden planks behind, as if spirits from his past were chasing after him. He shook his head to clear it of bad memories and continued on his way.

Miss Amelia remained the same, always, looking exactly as she did the first time she danced across his vision. He wondered at her evergreen beauty, her sweet face with cheeks flushed rosy-pink from the frigid winters and pale waning sun. She had been born a wildflower, thriving no matter what harsh and unforgiving climate her roots anchored into, like a handful of

seeds absent-mindedly cast into the wind by an undiscerning palm. Whether performing atop a dim saloon bar or a brightly lit stage, her voice was as strong and clear as a nightingale's.

An old tarnished memory slipped unwillingly into his mind, like a moth fluttering relentlessly against an impenetrable pane of glass: the two of them wrapped in a warm pile of quilts, next to the comforting crackle of a woodstove, her long lustrous hair tangled around his arms, as if binding her body to his own. Together, they had glowed like embers in the pitch-black night. He sold her whispered promises in the dark in exchange for her love.

He ruminated on Miss Amelia's ability to flourish, how this place changed most people who had the courage or foolishness to venture here. The way the unforgiving landscape shaped people, twisting them into something unfamiliar, unpredictable like the wind-battered trunks of nutrient-starved trees up along the mountain-side. The shimmering surfaces of the rivers and tributaries acting as mirrors that reflected who you truly were on the inside, not who you prided yourself on being in good company.

They'd been so young, so unprepared.

He'd travelled up from Toronto, a modern metropolis of concrete and glass, whisked away on a fantastical whim fed by dreams of riches pulled directly from the earth. You could plunge empty hands into rushing glacial waters and break the surface laden with hefty piles of glimmering golden nuggets. Or so he had once believed.

Rich men went bust from spending every last dollar on supplies and equipment that yielded nothing but dirt, and poor men's lucky strikes made their fortune in a single moment. Silas had stumbled into a party of eclectic characters along the trail, subsumed into camps of dreamers, mad men, and thieves: Captain Claude, who shot anything that moved, sewing the hides into a strange patchwork cloak he wore jauntily about his shoulders; little Tig the runaway,

who lived off of scraps and professed to be sixteen but in truth was no older than twelve; and Scoundrel Jack who had a travelling dentist smelt his nuggets and cap all his teeth with his bounty because he didn't trust banks. "You can't steal what you can't lay hands on." He'd said, clacking his teeth together. The gold glint of his clever smile flashed in the flickering light cast by the campfire's flames, twisting his features into an unsettling mask.

This place uncovered the corruption in some men's souls, like the corroding artifacts abandoned along the trails and shorelines from those who had given up the chance for a better life, soured devotion into obsession. You would begin to see it in their eyes, a hard sliver of greed, jealousy and covetousness. *Auromania*, a doctor he'd shared a bottle of strong whiskey with once had called it.

He ignored the townsfolk as they crossed to the other side of the road, wading through thick wet mud, staining their finely tailored hems with horseshit in order to avoid him. They glared in his direction or refused to meet his gaze, gossiping behind gloved hands at the audacity he had to emerge from his empty isolated shack beyond the tree line and cast his long shadow on their city. *Desperate* they said, *stricken with The Fever*.

Scoundrel Jack had been killed in a bar fight, not over his gold-laden teeth, but a game of cards gone bad between friends-turned-foes. They'd buried his body together on the mountain-side, where the warmth of the sun could never quite seem to reach. Captain Claude delivered a gin-soaked sermon full of blatant exaggerations of the quality of the dead man's character. Tig had gripped the cuff of Silas' sleeve, sniffing his way through the eulogy, occasionally wiping at his tears with a ragged kerchief.

Captain Claude had drowned, his heavy coat soaking up the rushing river's frigid water, pulling him below and whisking him downstream in its rapid current. They'd found his battered

blue bruised body cast up on the jutting rocks weeks later, engorged and nibbled on by unknown creatures, like the river had a taste and didn't care for his bitterness.

Tig, who followed Silas around like a stray puppy, had succumbed to pneumonia soon after, during a particularly harsh winter. "Hold on," Silas had entreated the frail, emaciated little boy, "just a little longer and I'll find gold. We'll soon have the means to make you better. Medicine, treatment from the finest doctors." Another prayer wasted, another promise broken. Tig passed, shivering in the night, before spring could thaw the ice floes jamming up the Klondike River, and the tributaries that flowed from it like veins.

He paused at a high ridge outside of the city limits, a lookout point with an unending panoramic view of the rugged beauty that stretched out endlessly before him. He sat for a moment on the gnarled trunk of a fallen spruce, resting his tired limbs, grown weary with exhaustion and the unrelenting and unforgiving passage of time.

"I will build us a fine cabin here." An oath he had sworn aloud to Miss Amelia, his cooing dove, nestled tightly in his embrace. He had meant it then, believed it to be a possibility. A vision of happily ever after they would share, in perpetuity, until nothing remained of them but dust, blown away by the tempestuous ever-changing winds. "And each morning we will watch the sunrise illuminate this breathtaking wilderness together." She had gazed up at him then, in a way that no one had since, with an expression of genuine awe, admiration, and pure unadulterated affection.

Silas exhaled the last of the bittersweet tobacco smoke from his lungs, where it disappeared into the glowering clouds that gathered, grey and threatening, along the skyline. There was no hint of the day that had once been; the time when he still had the chance to hold Miss Amelia close to his heart.

Leaving the beaten path he disappeared into the woods, branches grasping at his sides like ghastly fingers, a warning willfully ignored. He walked over the fallen gate of the rickety wooden fence that bordered the forgotten burial ground, a lonely and little-known place, where they had once buried unknown strangers, the poverty-stricken, and those of ill repute.

He paid his respects at the graves of his former companions, Tig and Captain Jack, no impressively carved and elaborately inscribed headstones of granite or marble to mark their resting places.

He'd begun to spend every waking moment searching, digging, panning, eschewing companionship, camaraderie and society. Covered in soot, dust and soil, he slept on the ground in the woods and along the rocky shores, growing thin and gaunt in his single-minded pursuit. Leaving Miss Amelia wondering, longing, waiting for him to return...but not forever.

Silas wandered further, finding Scoundral Jack's grave towards the back. He gave his excuses to the man's spirit in case it grew restless, provided explanations and arguments in his mind for the action he was about to take. *I have a greater need*, he thought, *than a mouldering pile of old bones*. Raising his newly purchased shovel, he began to plunge it into the earth, tossing piles of soil aside. Reaching the rotten wood coffin, he pried open the lid and extracted his friend's skull from the gaping hole.

The golden teeth glinted at him in the sudden burst of sunlight that pierced the storm-laden clouds above. The gleaming incisors, canines, premolars and molars were easily wrenched free. He tossed the empty skull back into the pit, quickly forgotten now that it was no longer needed.

Silas' fingers trembled as he stared down in disbelief at the heavy handful of riches and a slow smile spread across his face, now that he finally had what truly mattered in his grasp.