

The Magician's Kiss

By Scribblesinink

Paul rested his forearms on top of the saloon doors and gazed out across the dusty street. He tried not to yawn. It was only mid-afternoon, but there was very little left for him to do at Callan's Bar & Saloon. He'd swiped a mop across the floor twice, organized the tables and chairs, lined up the stools, and the wooden bar's surface gleamed. On top of that, he'd taken inventory three times today, even though, without patrons, the liquor stock had dwindled little.

He lifted a hand and scrubbed it through his hair, absently glad of the shade of the porch awning that kept the hot summer sun from beating down on him the way it did on the hard-packed dirt of Main Street. But in spite of the heat holding the bustling frontier town in its grip, Paul's problem wasn't a lack of potential customers. No, ranchers ambled back and forth under the shops' awnings, wagons rattled to and fro, and families of settlers busied themselves with last preparations before the next wagon train set out west. Even as Paul looked out at the activity in front of his saloon, a half dozen cowhands—likely from one of the nearby ranches—trotted up, their horses' hooves throwing up puffs of dust. One of the hands flapped a hand in the direction of Paul's saloon, but the others shook their heads, laughing. Paul gritted his teeth, watching helplessly as the stockmen tied their animals to the rail across the street and joined the already sizable crowd in Georgia's to quench their thirst.

Georgia's place was packed, of course, even this early in the day: a cacophony of two dozen voices drifted out, occasionally marked by explosions of laughter or fragments of rowdy song. The first month after she'd opened The Jolly Longhorn, Paul had reckoned everyone only went to there because of the lure of something new. He'd been certain they'd be back in his place once the shine wore off. But now, two months on, people *still* preferred her saloon over his.

It just wasn't fair: he'd been working himself ragged to make Callan's a success after he took over the saloon from old man Cooper. And then Georgia had gotten it into her head she could do better than he did. Maybe, Paul thought, he shouldn't have—.

No. He stopped the thought before he finished it. *He* wasn't at fault; if anything, he was the wronged party here, not Georgia.

He cast another baleful look at the busy saloon across the street before turning away. Callan's was as empty as The Jolly Longhorn was packed: only a single man sat at the bar, dressed in a priest's black cassock, a coffee cup in front of him.

"Damned woman's gonna put me out of business," Paul grumbled. He snatched a rag and started scrubbing at the already spotless bar.

Father Calero lifted his gaze from contemplating the contents of his cup. "Language, Paul," he chided gently.

"Sorry, Poppi," Paul muttered, chastised. But whatever words he used, the facts didn't change:

if he didn't get people to start spending their hard-earned dollars at *his* place again instead of hers, and soon too, his beer would grow stale in its kegs and he'd be forced to shut up shop.

"Maybe—," Father Calero picked up his cup to take a sip, seemingly speaking largely to himself, "—you and Georgia should try and overcome your differences. I know for a fact she for her part would quite welcome that."

Paul whipped around to stare at the priest, feeling strangely betrayed. "You *talked* to her?" He couldn't manage to keep the hurt out of his voice.

The priest met Paul's gaze head-on. "Paul, I've known you and Georgia both since you were little. I'm not going to take sides in this... this squabble of yours."

"It's not a squabble," Paul protested, half to himself, as he turned back to rubbing the bar some more. He didn't want to explain any further to Poppi. *Squabbling* was what they'd done as children, when Georgia had told him he had his sums all mixed up and he'd denied he had, or when she'd wanted to come up into his tree house, and he'd said girls didn't climb trees. She'd tried, anyway, skinning her knees and ripping her skirt in the process, and Paul had gotten the blame.

He snorted a wry laugh at his own expense. Wasn't really that much different now, was it? Not when you looked at it closely—except, they weren't arguing about homework or secret hideouts this time. They were endangering people's livings. *His*, to be exact. While for Georgia, this was just a game. She was a beautiful woman; she could've had her pick of wealthy ranchers to marry and never have to pour another drink in her life.

Paul couldn't understand why she hadn't yet. Take Jeff Barker, for example. The man owned the largest cattle herd in a hundred miles and had made his interest in her very clear. In fact, Paul had watched them talking in the middle of the street, Georgia laughing at something Barker said to her, right before they'd had their terrible fight. Not that it hadn't been a bad day from the beginning: he'd been running low on whiskey; the supply wagon had been raided by bandits; and one of the beer kegs had sprung a leak, coating the store room in a puddle of heady-making foam.

He'd been cleaning up when Georgia had breezed in, full of cheer and energy. Paul had grumbled at her about Barker, and she'd turned cross, telling him to mind his own business. Before he'd had a chance to draw breath, they'd been arguing furiously—until she walked out, throwing back across her shoulder, "You think I can't do as well as you? Just you watch me, Paul Callan."

Two weeks after that, The Jolly Longhorn had opened its doors.

Now, three months later, Paul watched Father Calero put down his cup and pinch the bridge of his nose. "You're both too stubborn for your own good." He spoke just loudly enough for Paul to pick it up.

"I'm not the stubborn one." Paul dropped the rag and poured Poppi another cup of coffee. "She is. And she cheats."

The priest arched an eyebrow at him. "Oh? How's that?"

"She has a *drink one, have one free* scheme!" Paul exclaimed. "It's a complete rip-off, since she asks twice as much for the first glass."

Poppi clucked his tongue, lips twitching. "People like to be fooled, Paul. Especially in ways that make them feel smart, even when they aren't."

Paul frowned, searching for another argument, one that might convince Poppi to see his point of view. After a moment he announced triumphantly, "She has serving girls lure the customers in."

It was true; a week after she'd opened up, Georgia had hired Evie Santos, a pretty buxom Latina. Paul sometimes saw Evie leaning against the window sill when business was slow. It was never slow for long, though, once Evie showed herself outside The Jolly Longhorn.

"Nothing wrong with having a pretty face fetch you your whiskey."

"Oh, *pah*, there's no talking to you." Disgruntled, Paul turned his back on Father Calero.

Another round of noise drifted in from across the street. Paul tried to ignore it. There had to be a way to solve this problem. He just hadn't figured out what yet.

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Two weeks later, Paul decided he'd found his answer. The town had been agog with excitement for over a week, ever since the flyers went up on the telegraph office bulletin board, among the Wanted posters and the timetable for the railway, announcing the imminent arrival of *The Amazing Alva Keel, Magician, Soothsayer & Miracle Cures*.

"Who's Alva Keel?" Paul asked when he first saw the flyers. Mrs Gardner, standing next to him also reading the board, gave him an odd look.

"You don't know?" Her tone said she thought Paul was a fool for having no clue. He pushed back his irritation, and shook his head.

"No. Should I?"

Mrs Gardner puffed up her cheeks. "Well," she drawled, "Mr Keel's only the Most Famous Magician this side of the ocean." Paul could hear the capitals in the way she said it. She lowered her voice and added, "He's from *Scotland*, see?"

"Right." Paul wasn't sure what being from Scotland had to do with it, but he was happy to let it slide. "Thanks." He glanced at the poster again, which showed a dark-haired man with piercing eyes entralling a group of children by conjuring a rabbit out of a hat. Paul snorted, about to dismiss Alva Keel as a charlatan—the truly amazing thing was that intelligent people still fell for such tricks these days—but then Poppi's words echoed in his mind. *People like to*

be fooled....

That was when his plan had been hatched, and now he was attempting to put it in motion—so far, without much luck.

As of yesterday, Mr Keel had pitched up in town, along with his rabbits and a train of wagons which peddled everything from love potions to cures for boils. Paul had been trying to speak with him ever since, but hadn't been very successful: broad-shouldered bouncers had thwarted every attempt to approach Keel's wagon.

Paul thought he might stand a better chance to talk to Keel right before his first show. The magician's entourage had cordoned off a large area at the edge of town and lined it with rough-hewn benches around a make-shift stage. Although Keel wasn't scheduled to appear for another hour, a large crowd was already forming at the entrance to the arena, people slowly filtering through to find their seats.

Paul pushed through the throng toward the front until he reached the rope that marked off the arena. As he tried to move past it, a stern-looking man held him back with a hand on his elbow. "Ticket?"

"What?" Paul shook the man's hand off his arm. "What ticket?" Then it dawned on him: Keel charged a fee to those who wanted to see his show. "I don't have one. But I need to talk to Mr Keel."

"Right." The guard snorted. "Think I haven't heard that before? You buy a ticket, or you don't get in."

Paul's impatience grew. This Keel was proving to be more elusive than those bandits in the Wanted posters. He squared his shoulders. "I have a business proposition to discuss."

"Victor, it's alright. Let Mr Callan pass."

At the sound of the rolling accent, Paul glanced up. Keel had appeared on the step at the back of his wagon, which was parked next to the stage, and was beckoning Paul forward. Giving the guard a somewhat self-satisfied smirk, Paul slipped under the rope and headed over.

When he reached the wagon, he had to crane his neck to look up at the magician. Close to, Keel's eyes were as piercing as they'd looked on the flyer. "How did you know my name?"

Keel shrugged slightly. "It's my business to know things."

Paul frowned. He opened his mouth to reply, and then thought better of it. It didn't really matter how Keel knew his name, did it? As long as he was willing to come to the saloon.

"What can I do for you, Paul?" Keel was idly shuffling a deck of cards, his hands busy while his gaze never left Paul's.

Paul decided to cut straight to the chase. "I want you to perform at my bar." He pointed across

his shoulder in the general direction of Main Street. "Callan's." He said it not without pride: it had been the finest place in town until—well, until Georgia had wrecked everything.

"I see." Keel did something with the cards; the next moment, his hands were empty. Paul had no idea where the deck had gone, but Keel's next words stopped him from contemplating its fate any further. "And why, pray, would I do that?"

"I'll pay you well," Paul offered eagerly. "Money, free drinks for you and your crew." Heck, he'd even happily serve Victor as long as Callan's was back in business.

Keel nodded thoughtfully. He flapped a pale hand, and suddenly it held a rose. "As you can see, Paul," he gestured toward the buzzing arena with the flower, "I have nothing to complain about in that regard."

Paul looked around. Almost every seat was taken, men, women and children nattering excitedly at one another in expectation of what they were about to see. His brows drew down when he discovered Georgia among the crowd. She was sitting in the first row, a little to the side, her face lit up by a smile. Paul realized he hadn't seen her smiling in a while.

At least she's come alone, he thought glumly, noticing to his relief that Barker was nowhere in sight.

Georgia's smile faltered a little when she caught his gaze, and he quickly turned away. Not wanting to examine why seeing her here bothered him, he transferred his attention back to Keel, blowing out a breath. "Okay. Name your price." He prayed Keel wouldn't ask for something he couldn't give.

Keel tilted his head, pondering Paul in a way that made Paul uneasy. After a moment, a slow smile curled up the corners of the magician's mouth. "A kiss."

Paul blinked, shocked. "What?" Surely he must've misheard.

"Oh, you heard me right." Keel's smile widened, as if he knew what Paul was thinking. "A kiss, and my next performance will be in your bar. No fee, though my men would appreciate the drinks."

"No!" Paul took a step back without realizing it. "Are you out of your mind?"

Keel rolled his shoulders, his smile never wavering. "As you wish. If you change your mind, you'll likely find me at The Jolly Longhorn. I'm sure Miss Wilson over there will be more than agreeable to my price."

Paul felt the blood drain from his face. "G—Georgia?" he stammered.

Keel nodded. "Yes. She's very pretty, isn't she?" He dipped his head in her direction.

"No!" Blood thundered in Paul's ears at the thought of Georgia—. He told himself it was just fear that made the idea seem so terrible: if Georgia hired Keel to perform, Callan's really was

doomed. "Okay." He pulled in a shuddering breath. "Okay. I'll do it." Before he could think about it any further, or change his mind, Paul hopped onto the bottom step of the wagon and reached up and grabbed Keel's head. He pulled Keel down toward him until he could press his lips against the magician's, ignoring the sudden breathless hush that had fallen behind him.

After a few seconds, he pulled back and jumped back down, firmly resisting the urge to wipe his mouth with his shirt sleeve.

"You surprise me, Paul." Keel was grinning again, though Paul thought he detected approval in the smile now, not just smug condescension. "You may work it out yet."

Paul glared back. He had enough of Keel's vague, mysterious comments. "What are you talking about?" He waved a hand dismissively. "Never mind. Just be there tonight."

It wasn't until he'd arrive back at the bar that he discovered Keel had somehow managed to slip the rose into his jacket buttonhole.

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That evening, for the first time in months, Callan's was packed to the rafters. There wasn't a seat to be had and people were standing three deep along the walls. If Paul had let them, some of them would've climbed up on the bar for a better view. The bedlam of so many people in the small room was earsplitting, and the calls for beer and whiskey were coming faster than Paul could supply them.

He was in the back room, quickly gathering up another half dozen bottles of whiskey, when the muted noise of the bar growing louder for a second warned him someone had opened the door. "Be right there!" he called, grumbling to himself that people had no patience.

"Need a hand?"

"Georgia." Paul's head whipped up at the sound of her voice, and he nearly dropped the precious bottles he was holding. She looked stunning, wearing a red dress that complimented her dark hair and eyes. The freckles on her nose were more pronounced than Paul recalled: it had been a while since he'd seen her this close. Since they'd exchanged a word.

She was even more beautiful than he remembered.

"Quite a crowd out there, huh?" She nodded in the direction of the main room, before she cocked her head and studied Paul, her gaze curious. "Why'd you do it? Why did you kiss Keel?"

Paul felt his face grow hot. He'd tried to forget how half the town had witnessed the kiss, that *she* had been there to see it. "I... um...", he stammered, trying to find an explanation that wouldn't sound totally idiotic. "I didn't want you to kiss him," he blurted out at last.

Georgia's brow crinkled. "Me? Why?"

"Because... because *I* want to." Even as he spoke the words, Paul knew them for the truth. To be honest, he'd wanted to kiss Georgia for a very long time. He just never had the courage to make a move. They'd been friends for so long, and if she hadn't wanted him.... He been afraid of destroying that friendship.

He snorted inwardly. Yeah, that had worked out real well.... Turned out he'd wrecked their friendship over a dumb fight about how to run a bar instead. Maybe Poppi was right: maybe he *was* too stubborn.

Georgia gave a small shake of her head, as if she wasn't entirely clear. "*You* want to kiss *me*?"

Paul swallowed. Now that the cat was out of the bag, he'd have to live with it. "Yes." He peered back at her a little uncertainly, trying to read her face in the dim light of the storage room.

Her expression softened, and her teeth showed white as she smiled. "Then," she whispered, "maybe you should?"

For a long minute, Paul gaped at her, hardly daring to believe he'd heard her right. Apparently his hesitation lasted long enough that Georgia lost patience. She took the bottles from his arms and put them back on the shelf before tilting her face up invitingly. Paul didn't need any more encouragement. He dipped his head until his lips could capture hers.

For the longest time, long until after Paul lost count of the seconds, they stayed like that, ignoring the clamor for more drinks coming from the main room, even as it grew loud enough that the entire building seemed to shake from the force of the roar. At last, Georgia pulled away, and Paul felt the loss of her touch keenly.

"Maybe we should go back," she murmured, licking her lips. "Before they break down the place."

"Yeah." Paul didn't want to, but it sounded like things were close to a full-scale riot out there. Offering Georgia an apologetic little shrug, he grabbed the bottles a second time.

She preceded him back into the main room, holding the door open for him and giving him another smile that made his insides turn to mush. Perhaps, Paul decided, glancing over at the small stage where Keel was preparing to ply his craft, *this* magician wasn't a complete imposter. Perhaps Keel could indeed perform miracles.

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