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The Cast of a Giant's Shadow

~Angela Kay Steineman~

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Abstract

Adapting fairy tales and folklore has been an ongoing endeavor by storytellers and artists since the very first story was repeated. The evidence can be seen in the many versions of fairy tales like those of the sleeping beauty, from Giambattista Basile's "Sun, Moon, and Talia" to Walt Disney's *Maleficent*. However, unlike their European counterparts, adaptations of American tales outside of children's literature are not as ubiquitous. My writing rectifies this by adding to the resurging interest as seen in recent retellings like Matt Bell's *Appleseed: The Monstrous Birth* (2019).

In an effort to reframe the American tall tale and adapt these stories for the modern reader, I write from the points-of-view of secondary characters, many of them women. In my collection, Babe, Johnny Inkslinger, Slue-Foot Sue, and technology get the chance to escape the shadows of giants like Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, and John Henry; and the sycamore from the Jamestown Mother-In-Law Tree legend finally speaks of the role it plays in the unforgiving nature of a controlling mother. My adaptations will help keep American tall tales and folklore alive, similar to what the books of Angela Carter, Carol Ann Duffy, and Neil Gaiman do for European fairy tales.

This collection is dedicated to my family, especially Dan, McKenna, and Aidan. Your love, support, and patience are everything to me. I love you. Always.

Also, to Dr. Bess Winter, I will never be able to adequately express my gratitude for all that you have done over the past two years to help me improve my craft and be more confident as a writer. Nevertheless, please accept this dedication as my humble attempt.

And to the very first storyteller, thank you for sharing.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Bess Winter, Dr. Melissa Caldwell, and Dr. Woody Skinner for their encouragement and support of me as a student and a writer. Their belief and excitement in this collection were instrumental to me pursuing it as my thesis and give me courage to publish it when it is completed. I am honored they agreed to be on my committee and consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to study under each of them.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1-11
<i>Babe</i>	12-23
<i>The Servile Sycamore</i>	24-32
<i>Careful What You Wish For</i>	33-43
<i>Vs</i>	44-48
<i>Johnny</i>	49-84

In 1778, Lord Carlisle wrote to George Selwyn:

Everything is upon a great scale upon this continent. The rivers are immense, the climate violent in heat and cold, the prospects magnificent, the thunder and lightning tremendous. The disorders incident to the country make every constitution tremble. Our own blunders here, our misconduct, our losses, our disgraces, our ruin, are on a great scale. (Botkin 271)

Lord Carlisle was not describing American tall tales and legends, but his words are no less fitting in respect to them.

Introduction

Adapting fairy tales, folklore, and tall tales has been an ongoing endeavor by storytellers and artists since the very first story was repeated. The evidence can be seen in the many versions of fairy tales like those of the sleeping beauty, from Giambattista Basile's *Sun, Moon, and Talia* to Walt Disney's *Maleficent*. Be it a bedtime story or a painting in a museum, fairy tales and folklore have inspired artists to dream up their own interpretations. In her instrumental work on adaptations, Julie Sanders explains, "One of the reasons fairy tales and folklore serve as cultural treasuries to which we endlessly return is that their stories and characters seem to transgress established social, cultural, geographical and temporal boundaries. They are eminently adaptable into new 'other versions'" (106). Sanders agrees with Bruno Bettelheim that retellings of these stories are not only unavoidable, they are actually essential for the survival of the tales themselves. Bettelheim states, "Slavishly sticking to the way a fairy story is printed robs it of much of its value" (151).

Thankfully European fairy tales and folklore are numerous and continue to provide inspiration, and their adaptors include Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and modern authors like Angela Carter, Jane Yolen, Anne Rice, Neil Gaiman, and the up and coming British poet Nikita Gill. Yolen owns up to this in her statement, "we writers have been stealing from tradition forever" (286). In this collection, however, I seek inspiration in the tall tales, legends, and folklore of American giants. Unlike their European counterparts, adaptations of American tales (outside their origins as oral stories) in the modern sense are not as ubiquitous. While there are current retellings like Matt Bell's *Appleseed: The Monstrous Birth* (2019) and Alyssa Palombo's *The Spellbook of Katrina Van Tassel: A Story of Sleepy Hollow* (2018), I see this increasing

current interest as an excellent and exciting opportunity to add my contributions to the repertoire of literary adaptations.

As I wrote in my artist statement for English 5020 in the spring semester of 2019, “I feel that with American tales, the issue isn’t so much that the tales are changing but that they are fading entirely. Also, American tall tales and legends are difficult for the modern reader because they tend to center on American exceptionalism, and some include shameful aspects of American history. The latter has caused some of the tales to be forgotten entirely,” (Steineman). I found this to be true at the fall 2019 Nancy Hennings Memorial Poetry Reading where I read an abridged version of my Paul Bunyan adaptation, “Babe.” My short story begins with, “I’m not an ox. I’m certainly not a blue ox.” I then mention Paul’s first name, and I end the story with, “My name’s Paul. Paul Bunyan.” As I read the last line that evening, there was an audible sound of recognition as if I had finally shared a secret. I was amazed that more of the attendees had not picked up on the obvious references to Paul Bunyan at the beginning of my story. The lack of familiarity with what can arguably be considered the most recognizable tall tale indicates a need for a reintroduction, especially for the adult audience since retellings of American tall tales can primarily be found in children’s literature—such as Marybeth Lorbiecki’s *Paul Bunyan’s Sweetheart*, which is based off of a statue erected in 1991 and is not part of the original canon. My purpose as a writer of these adaptations is to not only preserve these pieces of Americana, but to engage adult readers to either remember the stories from their youth or to discover these giants for the very first time.

In order to adapt these stories for the modern reader, my stance is not meant to be one of revision only but also expansion. Sanders states, “Adaptations and appropriations, be they prequels, sequels, extensions, amplifications or alternatives, highlight often perplexing gaps,

absences and silences within the original. Many appropriations as a result have a deep political and literary investment in giving voice to characters or events which appear to have been oppressed or repressed in the original” (126). Some of the tales of Paul Bunyan can certainly be viewed as culturally and racially insensitive and would not have raised the eyebrows of the original audience of lumberjacks and those in the lumber industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s. For example, the story of Paul Bunyan skating with hams on his feet to grease his massive skillet is incorrect according to the earliest written pieces. The event is extremely racist and likely why that particular tall tale has been bowdlerized.

American tall tales, folklore, and legends are representative of the iconic people, history (both successes and failures), and nature of the United States: stories of fact, fiction, or a blending of the two. Though Jan Harold Brunvand argues in *The Study of American Folklore* that the creation and dissemination of these legends in American folklore are “the inventions of professional writers and public relations men (113), B. A. Botkin suggests that the authors of this “folk literature” are the “forgotten man” (xxii). Meaning, the first printed versions may indeed have come from published serials and advertisements as in the case of Paul Bunyan (Laughead), but their oral origins cannot be discounted. For example, according to Carl Sandburg, in *The People, Yes* regarding the origins of Paul Bunyan:

Who made Paul Bunyan, who gave him birth as a myth, who joked him into life as the Master Lumberjack, who fashioned him forth as an apparition easing the hours of men amid axes and trees, saws and lumber? The people, the bookless people, they made Paul and had him alive long before he got into the books for those who read. He grew up in shanties, around the hot stoves of winter, among socks and mittens drying, in the smell of tobacco smoke and the roar of laughter mocking the outside weather. And some of Paul

came oversees in wooden bunks below decks in sailing vessels. And some of Paul is old as the hills, young as the alphabet. (97-9)

The character of Paul Bunyan has been loosely linked to a living person, possibly a couple of different individuals, who over time morphed into the giant he is known as today. Two French-Canadian lumberjacks, Fabian Fournier and Bon Jean, are possible sources for Paul Bunyan, the latter of the two providing the potential for Paul's last name due to its French pronunciation (Pruitt). Pruitt claims in her article for History.com that the first printed story of Paul Bunyan was published by James MacGillivray in 1906. Other publications occurred in the years after, but it was W.B. Laughead's collection published in the form of an advertising pamphlet for The Red River Lumber Co. that included the first illustrations of Paul, making him the company's mascot (Pruitt). Though various sources list the date for Laughead's publication as 1914, 1916, and others, the actual pamphlet states 1922 (Laughead).

Understanding the origins of the story or character involved in the adaptation is not mandatory for creating a retelling, but it is beneficial for me in this collection as it provides insight into possible alternative points of view and how I might develop the plots. Christopher Castellani states in *The Art of Perspective*, "There is no more important decision the writer makes than who tells the story, because, whoever that narrator is, he will compel us to tell it his way," (8). Considering this collection's foundation is all about alternate perspectives and shifting the focus away from known to the unknown, my choice in narrators is indeed very important. Delving further into these tales, I found that there are plenty of interesting characters that an ambitious writer such as myself can use to create a compilation of retellings. For example, I long considered myself more than familiar with the escapades of Paul and Babe the Blue Ox, but I was surprised to learn as I began my research that there are many more secondary characters in

the lumberjack's universe such as Paul's accountant, Johnny Inkslinger. Once I decided on the characters, I imagined the leads (Paul Bunyan, John Henry, etc.) at the top of a hill; but rather than position my characters at the top of a different hill, I switched the point of view. A mountain looks different from the bottom than it does at the top, but that does not mean it is not the same mountain. There are familiar aspects of the tall tales that readers will hopefully recognize in my stories.

For "Babe," I knew that I would transform the animal into a woman who gives the reader her account of how she met the famous lumberjack. I was unsure of how I would write their meeting, but when I read Laughead's version, I decided that I would work with what he already wrote since he is also attributed with being one of the first to include Babe the Big Blue Ox as Paul's companion. Per Laughead, during the winter of the Blue Snow, Paul found and rescued Babe who was frozen in the storm, and that is why the famous ox is blue in color (Laughead). In order to place my Babe in the middle of a snowstorm, I created a scenario in which she would rather freeze to death than remain in her current situation. This would require her to be stubborn but also have incredible strength and resilience, like an ox. In *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, Janet Burroway instructs, "The primary point-of-view decision, which you as author must make before you can set down the first sentence of the story, is person" (153). This was an easy decision for me because the moment my character made herself known, I knew her story had to be told in first person, more specifically as a central narrator since she was "the center of the action" (Burroway 160). Positioning her story as the first in my collection expresses my goal to shine the light on these often overlooked figures; and by using first person, I want there to be no doubt that "Babe" and the stories that follow are about these characters and their place in these legends.

Johnny Inkslinger—the final character adaptation in the collection—immediately caught my attention when I first read about him, even though his actual story and presence in other stories is minute compared to Babe the Blue Ox and others. Paul discovers Johnny doing accounting on the side of a mountain. Johnny claims to have invented that form of math so Paul offers him a position as bookkeeper along with promises of never-ending paper (Botkin 218-22). In this version, Johnny is also a giant, but a quick internet search will find images of Johnny as a small lanky old man in glasses. I didn't feel that represented this gentle and quiet giant with an unwavering focus on his numbers. My Johnny is not a giant, but he does love his job. He is an immigrant pursuing the American dream, grateful to Paul's largesse but also weary of Paul's exaggerated boastings. In "Johnny," Paul is somewhat representative of America and its position on the world stage, though I hesitate to state this as that view changes depending on who holds it. For this story, Johnny and his relationship with Babe take center stage, and Paul is there ready to step in when needed. More importantly, my Johnny is a sweet romantic—opposite to the stereotype of people involved in STEM fields—who thought to lose himself and his sadness in the wilderness of rugged men. A woman interrupting that self-imposed lifestyle was unexpected yet very welcomed and needed. Admittedly, I have based Johnny a little off of my teenage son who was (and still is in some respects) bullied for being a "nerd," but who happens to be a big-hearted gentleman. Regarding the craft of writing fairy tales and fantasy, J.R.R. Tolkien stated, "...the facets which are necessary in a good fairy tale as fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation—recovery from deep despair, escape from some great danger, but, most of all, consolation. Speaking of the happy ending...all complete fairy stories must have it" (Bettelheim 143). Considering Tolkien's success, it seemed imperative to follow his lead for plot structure in my Paul Bunyan adaptations. Regardless if Paul and his men are lost in blizzards or fighting

Bedcats, there is a folksy air of joviality in the tall tales, and I wanted to honor that by giving Babe and Johnny a happily-ever-after as well.

In “The Servile Sycamore,” I depart from the world of tall tales and enter into the amazing field of lore that surrounds actual people in American history. On my first visit to Jamestown, VA, in the early 2000s, the tour guide told the story of a sycamore tree that continued to grow between the graves of a married couple. It pushed the wife towards her family, who were not happy about the marriage, and forced the husband away from his wife. This is fact. The lore comes into play because the deceased mother-in-law was blamed for cursing the tree to grow between her willful daughter and her unworthy spouse, who is actually a lauded Virginian as he was the first president of The College of William and Mary. Though the legend is said to have originated in the 1700s, it was made popular by tour guide Sam Robinson in the 1950s. This story stuck with me for almost two decades, and when I began working on this collection, I could not get the voice of the tree to quiet down. Initially, the tree lamented its fate, but as I wrote the story, the cursed wood took on more of a dutiful child (think *Psycho*) in contrast to the daughter who disobeyed the wishes of her parents and married a man not of their choosing. The sycamore tree—a la Renfield from *Dracula*—lives to serve its deranged mother and taunts the sister with its steadfast loyalty. I chose the first-person point of view because I wanted the reader to hear and feel the emotions of the tree. Its unique perspective offered the opportunity to take folklore that is based on fact and infuse it with its own tall tale and supernatural elements.

Castellani writes in *The Art of the Perspective* regarding vulnerability with first-person narration:

Vulnerability is what makes the first-person point of view well suited to the so-called unlikable narrator; ironically, it also makes her more likely to be considered unlikable in the first place. There’s an anxiety to even the most confident first-person narrator, talking

naked before an empty room, that readers simultaneously identify with and resist. When that narrator is recounting the cruel and unpleasant things she did, our moral judgement (which kicks in almost immediately) validates that anxiety and creates a comfortable distance. (84-5)

My hope is that even though the reader may be uncomfortable with the behavior of the sycamore tree, the tree's compelling nature is engaging enough to stay with through to the end of the story.

Many know the story of Pecos Bill to be one of a wild and talented cowboy who tamed the West, and much of that can be attributed to Disney's *Legends* cartoon. However, when reading original written accounts, I discovered that he was a truly unsavory character. I felt him so unredeemable that I planned on excluding Slue-Foot Sue's story from my collection. But as often happens with stories, Sue would not go away. In this era of "Me Too," I decided to play up Pecos Bill's malevolent nature. Unlike Paul Bunyan or John Henry, Pecos Bill is absolutely the villain in this piece. I titled it "Careful What You Wish For" as a warning for Sue, who naively believes that heroes and celebrities are always good, benevolent, and willing to share the limelight. The beginning of this story takes the imagery of Sue riding a giant catfish down the Rio Grande—a feat that impresses Pecos Bill enough to instigate a romantic relationship, and turns it into a more realistic scenario, one that the reader can see how it could have ultimately morphed into the tall tale. My Sue character is someone who wants her talents to propel her into the world of famous people like Pecos Bill, an equal place among men. This issue of fidelity to the primary story and my alteration of it is addressed by Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaption*:

"...their aim might well be to economically and artistically supplant the prior works.

They are just as likely to want to contest the aesthetic or political values of the adapted

text as to pay homage. This, of course, is one of the reasons why the rhetoric of ‘fidelity’ is less than adequate to discuss the process of adaptation...Like classical imitation, adaptation also is not slavish copying; it is a process of making the adapted material one’s own.” (20)

I did not choose first person for this story, but instead wrote it in limited omniscience. Burroway states in her chapter on point of view, “A further advantage of limited omniscience is that it mimics our individual experience of life, that is, our own inability to penetrate the minds and motivations of others, which can lead to the kinds of conflicts or struggles for connections that inspire much fiction” (156). It was important in this story that the reader be just as naïve as Sue when it comes to Bill.

The tale of John Henry does not offer up any obvious secondary characters in the traditional sense, and I knew that I did not want to write an adaptation from the viewpoint of his wife since Disney did that in *Legends*. I could not avoid this American giant, though, and so I came up with the idea to tell John’s famous and fatal competition from the voice of his competitor, technology. At first, the narrator was arrogant and angry, and I struggled with how to tell this story without being repetitive. In *A Treasury of American Folklore*, a large part of the section on John Henry is in the form of a ballad (235-9). In keeping with the tradition of songs and hymns sung by slaves (John was a former slave), I wrote this story in the form of a traditional hymn with a verse that repeats and a bridge in place of a refrain. The title, “Vs.,” is a play on the verses in music and the man versus machine conflict that constantly arises in fact and fiction. Technology can see things that John cannot, understands what John and his fellow railroad workers who cheer him do not, and knows that the race is futile considering that the idea of man vs. machine is really man against himself. Technology exists at the behest of man. The

irony is not lost on the technology character that John uses hammers, which are themselves a form of technology. The bridge portion of the piece highlights technology's feeling of superiority over man, even though it lost the competition with John.

The ultimate goal of this collection is to include more stories. For example, I hope to write an adaptation on Johnny Appleseed from the perspective of a wood sprite who falls in love with and devotes herself to protect Johnny from various dangers, including a puckwudgie from Native American lore. The Mississippi River is another viewpoint that I want to incorporate into the collection. The geographical features of the United States are just as big of characters as Paul Bunyan and John Henry, and they play an important role in American narratives. The iconic river begins small and pure, and as it meanders its way from north to south, it grows and changes as it divides and unites a country.

At a time when more than just a river separates many Americans, my adaptations have the potential to bring about a sense of unity through the use of emotional and entertaining stories of the characters who contribute to the tall tales and mythic legends of American giants. Heroes are celebrated and lauded for their deeds, but they rarely do it alone. There is always more to the story, and so I have pulled these little-known figures from the shadows so they may finally have their day in the sun.

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Babe

I'm not an ox. I'm certainly not a blue ox. I may be stocky and built like a curvy brick shithouse, but I'm not an ox. And the only thing blue about me is my eye color.

I'm Babe. Well, that is what Paul called me from the moment we met, and it stuck. That's one of the few things that did over the years. But I'm not an ox.

I met Paul one night during the winter of the Blue Snow outside a fledgling town in Minnesota somewhere between Duluth and Fargo. I was the piano player at the saloon that served girls and beer to the lumberjacks and whoever else stopped in while traveling between larger cities and jobs throughout the territory. I had been working at the saloon since earlier that spring when I had run away from my Aunt Mathilda's home. My dream was to play in a theatre or some other kind of performance hall out east like my parents did before they died.

The saloon wasn't the new Carnegie Hall, but at least I was earning my own money and was not an embarrassment to my Aunt Mathilda anymore. I wasn't married and attending tea parties and gossiping at the church socials on Sunday afternoons like she wanted me to be, but at least my unmarried state wasn't a constant reminder to her since I was no longer there. I lied in my letters to her and told her that I was in New York City. I would have made it there, too, if that nice-looking gentleman whom I let sit next to me in the passenger car hadn't taken my ticket and the rest of my money when I had fallen asleep. That's how I found myself kicked off the train and stranded outside the post office in a town I had never heard of before, looking across the street at the Axe Handle Saloon.

According to the deal I struck the day I met Mrs. Palmer, the owner of the saloon, I provided the music and she gave me a small salary, half of my tip jar, and a roof over my head. Thankfully, it wasn't my job to service the men as well, but that didn't keep them from staring and boasting about what they wanted to do to me. More often than not, a drunk lumberjack or traveling salesman would stumble over to me at the piano to request a song and try to reach his hand down the front of my dress. I could always count on one of the girls, who all treated me like a younger sister, to come over and distract him, leading him upstairs to let him finish on her what he tried to start with me.

Shortly after I started working for her, Mrs. Palmer offered to put up a big mirror right over the piano, so I could see behind me. It was for my protection she said. All that cracked mirror did was give the drunks a look at my face and a perfect view of my ample cleavage. I wanted to turn the piano around instead, but she told me that looking at my round ass and thin waist got the boys excited while they drank, played cards, and swapped stories of the giant lumberjack, Paul Bunyan, and his wild adventures.

On the plus side, my tip jar was fuller each night, even if Mrs. Palmer took most of it for herself. Her idea of half and my idea of half never matched up.

~

There was always a table or two of rowdy men spending their paychecks in the saloon when they probably had a wife and kids that were waiting desperately back home for the money. The night I met Paul, there was a group of men leering and pointing at me. Their bloodshot eyes

and rude gestures visible in my mirror. They motioned for Mrs. Palmer to come to their table. She leaned down so that she could hear them better, or maybe it was so they could see her nipples that were itching to escape the stained lace neckline of her skintight bodice. The pile of dull copper hair that she plopped atop her head threatened to fall down over her beady bird face.

One of the men at the table had the nerve when he caught my eye to lick his lips in a slow swirl. That must have worked on other women because he seemed *real* confident with that tongue, but it didn't work on me. After a short conversation, Mrs. Palmer rose and sashayed over to me. Her eyes gleamed as if I were a stack of Yukon gold. I wondered that as hard as she was swinging her hips, she didn't create a wind strong enough to blow all the glasses over on the tables.

I kept playing *Oh, Susanna* but I didn't take my eyes off of Mrs. Palmer. She stood next to the piano and put one arm up on the top. The placement pushed one of her breasts forward, almost freeing it from behind the scant ruffling of lace.

Without turning her face away from the men, she spoke low to me, "Those boys are prepared to pay a large sum to have you all to themselves tonight. I know that wasn't our deal, but groups pay more. I also know you're a virgin, so that's triple. In just one night, you could finally have enough money to catch that dream you're always going on about. And maybe I could finally break even on what you've cost me these past several months."

My fingers froze on the keys for a split second, but I quickly carried on to the next notes and stammered, "No, I—"

"I don't remember asking you if you wanted to do it. You *will* show them boys a good time by letting them do whatever they want to you. Hell, you may even enjoy it. Not that I care."

I glanced at the men and wondered just how much they had offered her. It was my virgin body they wanted, and I thought I deserved to know what it was worth.

“How much?” I asked.

“A lot, and that’s all you need to know for now,” she replied. I opened my mouth to object, but she quickly leaned down by my ear. “If you give me any trouble, I’ll whip you so hard you’ll have to play this piano standing up for a week,” she said. Mrs. Palmer didn’t make threats she didn’t intend to keep.

All of us girls have had our bodies marked at one time or another by Mrs. Palmer for something. Teaching us girls a lesson with an old riding crop was a special skill she had mastered. I should have left after the one time she whipped me for taking more from my tip jar than I was supposed to, even if I didn’t have enough money saved yet for a ticket. But I thought then better the devil you know.

She clenched her fingers that were drumming the top of the piano into a fist, and finally turned that demon smile of hers in my direction. Her message was clear. I didn’t have a choice unless I wanted to get beat again.

I didn’t, and Mrs. Palmer knew that.

She patted my head like a dog and said, “Good girl. Now finish up soon and go introduce yourself before you head upstairs to get ready for them.” With a wink, she left my side and made her way back onto the saloon floor.

The reflection of the men in my mirror blurred as images formed in my mind of how they would spend hours using me in all sorts of wicked ways. I knew what went on in the customer rooms upstairs. The girls shared their stories during the day. Some laughed as they described the men too drunk to get what they paid for, or they told of the men they couldn’t wait to have again.

Sometimes their tales didn't need to be told because the bruises and bloodied lips said more than words ever could. The only girl who never spoke was Marie.

Sarah—she and I shared a room—told me shortly after I arrived in town that Marie went crazy after her husband died in a farming accident. Most people knew it was really a lumber company that got rid of him so they could get their hands on his land. Sarah found her sitting behind the mercantile one day, staring off at nothing. Her pretty face was streaked with dirty tracks from her tears, and cockleburs and leaves matted her black hair. Sarah brought her to the saloon, asked the other girls to help clean her up.

But before anyone could get a word out of Marie, Mrs. Palmer caught her in her clutches. That monster took a broken woman and gave her liquor and empty promises of revenge. She convinced Marie that the best way to get back at those men was to use her body to take their money, the money they made from the death of her beloved farmer.

It was a strange sight, for sure, to watch Marie work. Just one look from Mrs. Palmer and she would slink off the barstool and slowly stalk her prey. She smiled seductively at the men, but her eyes glazed as if she didn't really see what was in front of her, kind of like she was hypnotized or something. Marie was a master at her job, but I never understood how the men could never tell that she was someplace else when she was with them. I asked Sarah about that one time, and she said that's how Marie was able to do the vile things she did with the men. Her soul died the day her farmer did, and Marie was just waiting for her body to catch up with her soul.

Well, I certainly wasn't going to let a bunch of dirty drunk lumberjacks put their hands or anything else on me, and I was damn sure I wasn't going to end up like Marie. I always thought I would have had more time to make money and leave before she decided I was worth more to her upstairs than I was at the piano. But it was finally time for me to run, whether I had enough money saved up for New York City or not.

When I finished my last song and closed up the piano, I went over to Mrs. Palmer and silently wished her soul to hell as she took most of my tips. She then jerked her head towards the men. There were four of them. Their lined faces smudged with dirt and sweat that made them look older than they probably were. I slowed as I neared their table. I glanced over at Sarah who was perched on a salesman's knee while his hand massaged her inner thigh.

She mouthed, "*I'm sorry.*" We both knew she and the other girls couldn't intervene this time. Mrs. Palmer would whip anyone who tried to help me. I was on my own.

My plan was to say a quick hello, give a smile, and tell them that I would be right back after I had changed. However, once I was close enough and before I could say anything, the man with the tongue grabbed me and pulled me onto his lap. I squirmed to get away, but he was strong from swinging an axe all day and I couldn't escape his vice-like hold. He reached around, grabbed one of my breasts and squeezed so hard I cried out. This only excited the other men who all laughed and egged him on. His wet lips pressed into my neck. I felt that tongue lick my skin and then a painful bite as he sucked hard.

I gasped and tried to move away from his mouth and off his lap, but my wiggling just emboldened him to do more. He pinched my nipple through the fabric of my shirtwaist. Hot tears of pain, anger, and embarrassment threatened to spill down my cheeks.

I thought it couldn't get any worse, but then I felt his hand go up under my skirt and his dirty fat fingers pressed between my legs. On impulse, I squeezed my thighs together, which only trapped his hand inside them. I didn't want to cry in front of those men—or anyone in the saloon that night—but some things happen even when we don't want them to.

I was so ashamed, but I had had enough.

I raised both of feet and kicked the man in his shins and brought my heels down hard on his toes. I didn't really hurt him, but it was enough for him to let loose, and that's when I elbowed him in the nose. He howled and let me go. As I jumped up from his lap, one of the other men caught me by my face and dragged me towards him. I bit his palm, but he only laughed and squeezed harder.

“We got ourselves a *feisty* one, boys!” he laughed. He jerked my head as punishment and my teeth cut into the tender flesh inside my mouth.

I raised my fist, but before I could punch him, Mrs. Palmer crooned from across the room, “Boys, boys. Save some for later. Let her go get cleaned up for you. She'll come down when she's ready for you all to join her upstairs.”

He released me and I stumbled back away from the table. As Mrs. Palmer made her way toward us with her arms spread, she smiled and spoke to the room, “Everything's all right. Just folks getting a little too excited about the fun they're going to have.”

Apparently not everyone liked what those men did to me, and Mrs. Palmer was worried some were offended. She didn't want to lose their money. She certainly wasn't looking out for me.

My chest tightened and my cheeks burned. I ran for the stairs.

"See how excited she is, fellas! Everybody, drink up!" Mrs. Palmer exclaimed. Nervous laughter and clinking glasses filled the room below me as I made my way up to my room.

Once inside my bedroom, I quickly packed up what I could fit into my ragged carpetbag. I made sure I took my money, my music sheets, and my two favorite books. I didn't have much in the way of clothes, just a lopsided shawl that Sarah had knitted for me. The only coat I owned wasn't made for the kind of cold that was out there, but I knew I would rather freeze to death than let those men near me again.

The doorknob jiggled behind me, startling me. I threw my bag and coat off my bed and scooted them under it with my foot just as the door swung open and Mrs. Palmer stomped into the room. She didn't stop till her face was right in mine. I smelled whiskey and it was like venom on her breath. I wondered if she could hear my heart pounding.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing down there? Those men have already paid half my charge for you. It's a good thing they're drunk, or they might've changed their minds."

I almost told her to go to hell, but before I even opened my mouth, she slapped me.

My head snapped back and I bit my tongue.

"Get changed, go downstairs, and bring them back up to the room Marie always uses. She's too drunk to work tonight anyway," she said. Marie was passed out at the end of the bar,

but Mrs. Palmer had been charging men money all night to fondle her breasts. And even though Marie didn't care what happened to herself, it was still disgusting to watch. I wanted to point out that Marie was still working, but my cheek stung something fierce from being hit.

I just needed the witch to leave so I could escape. I responded with a small nod.

Satisfied, Mrs. Palmer turned around and left my room, slamming the door on her way out. Her footsteps pounded down the hall and then down the stairs.

I bent down to grab my things from under my bed. I buttoned up my coat, wrapped the shawl around my neck and tucked it into my coat. I tiptoed to the door and peeked out into the hall. It was empty, but I could hear the ruckus downstairs. There was a set of stairs at the opposite end of the hall, away from the saloon, that led to a door that opened up to the back of the building. That was my only way out. I hoped that everyone was too busy to see me leave.

Moans came from some of the rooms as I made my way quietly down the hall. I climbed down the stairs, avoiding the ones that creaked. I made it to the door and opened it just enough for me and my bag to squeeze through.

The brutal wind and snow hit my face.

I knew it was now or never.

I could either die inside that whorehouse like Marie wanted to do, or I could die trying to live my own way.

I took a deep breath. That was a mistake as the icy air froze my lungs. I pulled some of the shawl over my mouth and nose and stepped out into the snow away from the Axe Handle Saloon.

As I walked behind the other buildings and made my way out of town towards the woods, I kept looking back to make sure that Mrs. Palmer or one of her men hadn't followed me. I knew she wouldn't wait too long before she came back up to see what was taking me so long. I hurried and tried to run through the huge snow drifts. The thought of being caught left me as breathless as my attempt at running did. Thankfully, the heavy snowfall quickly covered my footprints and the freezing temperature kept everyone inside. Mother Nature must have been on my side to help me out like that, but it could have also been she was trying to make sure it was years before anyone found my frozen body.

~

I walked for what seemed like hours. I could no longer see any lights from the town. I prayed I was finally far enough away and that it wasn't just the blizzard blocking the buildings from my view. My feet and hands were numb. I couldn't stop shivering. My lungs felt like I was breathing poison, they burned so badly. The cracked leather handles on my bag kept pulling apart and so I finally had to just carry it like it was a bundle of laundry. At least that kept the wind from blowing through my chest. Unfortunately, it took both my hands to hold it, and my balance was thrown off. At one point, I couldn't tell if I was walking on snow or ice. I kept slipping and falling, but I continued forward even if it felt like I hadn't moved an inch.

Eventually, I was covered in so much ice and snow that my legs felt like huge tree trunks. Each step was slow and clumsy. At some point, my right foot plunged deep all the way up to my thigh. I barely noticed. It was a small mercy that I couldn't feel the ice bite my skin through my

threadbare drawers. I used my other leg and my bag to pull myself out, but that leg sunk down, too. My skirt and coat bunched up around my waist

I was stuck.

I almost wished then that Mrs. Palmer had followed me and drug me back to the warm saloon.

Almost.

I laid my head down on my bag like it was a pillow and cried. My tears froze to my eyelashes and cheeks. I thought about my parents and I swore I could hear my father playing the piano and my mother's soprano voice. The moon was out, but only a dull glow appeared through the blistering snow. The little moonlight that there was cast a weird blue shine. If I hadn't been about to die, I know I would have appreciated the unusual color that bounced throughout the snow.

I don't know how long I had been stuck out there. I remember humming along with my mother and father as I drifted in and out of consciousness, waiting for that final sleep to take me to them.

The next thing I knew, I was lying on a cot covered in scratchy wool blankets. The heat coming from the small wooden stove stung my cheeks like a million tiny pin pricks. I was shaking so bad that I thought I would roll right off the bed. A sound like a dying animal broke the silence. I realized it came from me, but I couldn't stop moaning.

A shadow fell over me and then the tallest man I had ever seen squatted down beside me. His enormous hand gently covered mine.

“Shhh, Babe...you’re okay now,” he said. His voice was deep, and his smile was kind, even if it was mostly hidden by a full scraggly beard. I imagined little gnomes worked inside that forest of facial hair to keep it nice and tidy.

Gnomes? I had obviously left my mind out in the blizzard.

“Your lips are as blue as the snow outside, but we’ll get you warmed up real quick,” he said. His eyes were as warm as his breath. Both were a comfort.

“Where am I? Who are you?” I croaked between chattering teeth.

“You’re in my lumberjack camp. My name’s Paul. Paul Bunyan.”

The Servile Sycamore

I am here, Mother!

I am steadfast in my desire to please you!

I, alone, honor you!

Always.

~

Mother's anguish nourishes my roots, much like her breasts once did another daughter. But *I'm* the dutiful child now. I always answer to Mother, to make Sarah obey. Her bones do not heed Mother's call. But they cannot ignore me.

When James was finally laid to rest next to Sarah, their love proved relentless in its cruelty and mockery of Mother.

Heartless creatures, Mother!

She could not keep the two lovers apart above ground, but she would damn both our souls so she could separate them when they were beneath it.

But how far would Mother go to punish her unruly child? How long can bitterness and resentment truly last?

The answer is... forever.

Right, Mother?

~

Love was for fools.

Sarah was one of those fools.

William was a fine young man, rich, and the best husband Sarah could wish for. Mother knew it to be true. Sarah did not love William, though. Her heart was already given to an older man, a penniless reverend newly arrived from London with the mission of securing the Church of England in the colonies.

Of course, the godly man was good enough to include at socials and dinners, but he wasn't good enough for Sarah. A prosperous family desires a wealthy alliance, and so Mother secured Sarah's betrothal with William. But Sarah did not honor her mother and father. She married James instead.

Mother was furious.

She went to the council to have the marriage annulled, but the reverend was solidly backed by these powerful men. Her offering of money and favors were rebuffed. Coin, cows, or cunny could not sway them that time.

Mother would not be deterred. She knew there was more than one way for a woman to use her mouth, so she bemoaned Sarah's betrayal to every ear she could bend as she went about her daily errands.

"How could she do this to her family?" she lamented to the butcher.

“After all that we have given her! Why just last year didn’t we purchase her *two* new hats right here in your shop?” she cried to the milliner. “I had so hoped one of your masterpieces would grace her head when she wed sweet William.”

“Why would she want someone so much older than her between her legs?” she whispered to her friends at tea.

One spring afternoon, Mother and Sarah found themselves walking toward each other. Mother always went out of her way to avoid her ungrateful child and would snap at anyone who dared mention her name, so it was an unwelcomed surprise to come face to face with her. Sarah looked well and happy, much to Mother’s chagrin. The blissful bride’s sun-kissed cheeks connected by dainty freckles across her pert little nose bloomed with her contentment. Mother’s wrinkled cheeks, however, reddened in blotches and her lips pursed in disdain. Sarah had the audacity to reach her smooth youthful hand out to Mother in a greeting, as if she had not single-handedly crushed Mother’s heart with her defiance.

Mother turned up her nose and quickly stepped onto the street, right into a warm pile of horse manure. She kept on walking. Mother would rather ruin a favorite pair of slippers with shit than acknowledge Sarah.

As for poor William, he died within a year of Sarah and James’s wedding. Mother swore he died of a broken heart.

“Surely it was too painful for him to see them walking arm in arm through town. They care for no one’s feelings but their own,” she gossiped outside the churchyard after his funeral. “As a mother it shames me to think what Sarah offered to that man since we would not provide a dowry for her, not for a match we did not approve of and never will!”

Mother wanted to destroy Sarah, just like Sarah destroyed Mother's dreams of a union with William and his hundreds of fertile acres and deep coffers. In the New World, being landed gentry was as close to royalty as Mother could get. Being William's beloved mother-in-law would have made her a queen.

But Mother's threats and manipulations never marred the happy couple's union. They thrived in spite of her ill will towards them, and that further enraged Mother for she felt betrayed by everyone in town. Sarah and James were welcome in the homes of prominent families. James frequently attended meetings with town elders and even the governor; and his mission for the church was successful, all with the support of notable men.

The same men who no longer paid notice to Mother. Men who forgot how much they had craved the generosity of Mother's favors. Their treachery was a wound that festered deep inside her, creating a nurturing womb for me; the child who obeys.

The more she seethed, the larger I grew. She glowed, pregnant with her bitterness. That aura cloaked her on that late afternoon as she stood statuesque under a lone sycamore tree during the storm. She was a beacon for the lightning with her arms outstretched towards the volatile sky.

It is a curse of my kind to attract something that destroys from within, boiling us instantly that we snap and split. A fast death.

This is why Mother chose me.

When the lightning struck, her heart ceased its beats. Smoke rose up from her seared scalp. My form tattooed itself in welted branches across her breasts, down her arms, and onto each of her fingers.

They buried Mother with her scarred hands clasped over her stilled heart, protecting me until I could honor her sacrifice.

~

Mother's outrage was fueled by the lightning that brought about her necessary demise. She waited for the day her disobedient child would join her in death, spitting her venom until the inside of her coffin dripped with sanctimonious indignation.

When Sarah finally breathed her last breath and took her place a short distance away from the family, Mother spewed her unrelenting wrath at Sarah's weak spirit. No matter the stories Sarah tried to share with Mother regarding her husband's lauded place he now held in Virginian society, Mother's ire could not be calmed. What good was James's success now that Mother was forever trapped beneath the land she wanted to rule?

Sarah prayed through her eternal torment that her beloved James would be spared such a restless sleep for as long as possible. For thirty years, her prayers were heard by a fickle god who would hear the pleas of one but not another. Poor Mother's lamentations fell on deaf ears. Eventually the inconsistent god refused to answer Sarah.

James died, and I was born.

~

My kind are strong and massive in girth, and our roots can be destructive. My kind are also whispered to be a connection between the living and the dead, but *my* place is in between only the dead. I exist solely to tear apart.

This is why Mother chose me.

When the shovel penetrated the ground the day James was buried, a woeful wretched wail rattled the nearby bones. That eternal curse heralded my birth. I sprouted from Mother's decaying fingertips. My roots twisted in a loving caress around her sunken face and up to the top of her exposed skull where I formed a crown stronger than one made of gold. I pushed through the box that held her rotting body, and I made my way towards Sarah and James.

I was thrilled when I broke through Sarah's coffin and found her once supple skin was now waxen and putrefied. Her freckles were no longer visible, but I knew where each one had danced across her nose; and I used them as a map as I dug my roots into her withering face and tore off her skin in flaky layers. I rejoiced as my fresh green roots tangled in her dry dull tresses and yanked them from her scalp. I hurt her in death in ways Mother had dreamed of hurting her while alive.

I covered Sarah's body and spread towards James as he hurled feeble threats. He would know soon enough how feckless he was against me, against Mother. She would finally have her way.

A sapling looks innocent enough. Stretching like a newborn babe as it reaches for sunlight. I appeared the same at first. Easy to miss between two graves. Unaware by passersby of the havoc I was fashioned to wreak upon two souls who were together again after being parted

by death. I became the physical representation of Mother's promise to her daughter. I would do what she herself could not.

And so, I grew.

Taller and wider I extended up to the heavens. The resting place was eventually forgotten and abandoned, but Mother's anger was not. She moaned that she had to bear witness to her daughter's treachery.

"Surely, I have suffered enough at the hands of these two?"

"I will not incur an eternity of their dishonor!"

"To hell with both of you!"

Each foul utterance from Mother's lips was like running water, and I flourished in its abundance.

The bigger I became the further I separated Sarah and James. Their pitiful cries battered my roots and limbs, but they could not drown out Mother. I pushed James away from our family and Sarah closer to us. Mother's rage oozed around us all as I created a façade of family unity to cover up the brokenness. For centuries I stood sentry over their resting places. A sigil of Mother's vile vow.

~

Till one day when men returned again to the decrepit cemetery. The crumbling stones with faded names covered in lichen of greens and greys were just as tired as the souls below them. Mother's hate drained all, including me, but my decline did not rot and fell me. I stayed at my post.

Those familiar with James and his legacy sought out his bones. Appalled at the condition of the graves of such an esteemed man and his wife, they ripped my weary body from the earth with weapons that mocked me. I did my best to whip and scratch at their limbs when they tore through mine. I fought them from the first hack of the blade until I fell. The birds resting in my branches rose up in a screeching cacophony, giving voice to my suffering.

Mother! Help me!

The sting of separation burned. The men would have run if they had heard the keening wrenched from Mother's mouth or seen the thrashing of her spirit as she grasped to maintain hold of my roots.

"Fools! Bastards! You cannot stop me," she cried.

Mother!

If they had breathed in the agony that poisoned the air, they would have choked and clawed at their throats; ran away once again to leave us in peace.

But they did not, and footsteps sounded again on the banks of the James River.

The earth had not even settled around the repositioned graves before I was called forth by Mother, reunited with her once more. She would have her way. I would not rest as long as she needed me.

Do not forget you always need me, Mother.

I need you, too.

~

Over and over my leaves whistle the devilish tune of Mother. Her anger replenishes me each time I am struck down. Like an ox toiling daily in the field with the yoke upon his back, I rise each time, glorious with the weight of Mother's hate upon my limbs. Bearing the blessed burden of my birthright without question. The dutiful child who always obeys.

Always, Mother.

Careful What You Wish For

When Anna heard that Pecos Bill had set up his cattle drive camp along the Rio Grande not far from where she had been staying in El Paso, she knew that was her only chance to meet him. Her one shot to convince him to join her in a traveling show. She would even give him top billing to sweeten the deal.

She could see it now. Bold letters outlined in patriotic blues and reds.

An all-American team.



Pecos Bill & The Amazing Anna

Anna was fine being second to Bill as long as her name was also on top and just as big. She was done being lower than trained tigers and dancing bears on broadsides. She had it all planned out. His notoriety plus her showmanship skills along with both their talents at trick and bronc riding would bring the crowds in from miles around. She just had to make a memorable entrance to get his attention.

She waited until the sun was high enough in the sky to turn the water into a blanket of glittering ribbons; the perfect backdrop for her arrival to his camp. She didn't have elephants and acrobats for added excitement like traveling circuses did when they came to town, so the river and a small boat would have to do.

Anna walked over to the boat she had traded for the day before. It was partially submerged on the bank of the river.

Verdammt!

She should have known she'd be taken for a fool when she'd bartered with the smooth-talking old coot. She gave him one of her mother's quilts and a beaded belt for this useless vessel. The lying cheat probably didn't have a dearly departed mother who used to make similar quilts for him. Would she ever learn to think with her head instead of her heart?

Anna knew timing was everything, and she had to move, or she would lose the perfect sunlight. She gazed out across the river as the wind pulled strands of her hair loose from the pins. There was a large hollow log stuck in a tiny bend of the shore. It was covered in green moss and had two small limbs covered in dead leaves sticking out from each side. It looked like a troll from the fairy tale books her grandmother had given her. The log wasn't pretty, but it was big enough to hold her. She could ride it down the river just as well as she could a boat.

She dragged the log from the muddy clutches of the riverbank and over to where she could climb on when she was ready. She grunted from the effort, but it wasn't heavy enough to need Bruno's help. That was a small blessing since she had Bruno already in place to follow behind her along the river's shore. He would be far enough away out of sight of Bill's camp until she whistled for him to come to her.

Anna grabbed an oar from the boat to help her steer. Her deal wasn't entirely for naught. She stepped onto the log with her bare feet and pushed off with the oar. The river's current wasn't rough, but it was swift. She was on her way downstream towards Pecos Bill and what she hoped was the perfect partnership.

The leaf-covered branches kept Anna's speed from running wild, but they occasionally got caught up in whatever flora was hidden underwater. This caused the log to twist and bob. Anna had to use all of her strength to keep her footing as she shifted and moved with the log. It

wasn't easy, but she was a damn good bronc rider. She was happy she had kicked off her boots. Her toes gripped the rough edges of the bark for purchase.

Anna's bare feet made her think of Mother and how she chastised her for doing her chores without her sturdy boots, running the risk of stepping on fire ant hills or getting stung by scorpions. Anna often stubbed her toes on the many rocks that littered the worn path from their house down to the shaded creek that meandered through their ranch. Mother rolled her eyes whenever Anna came into the kitchen, skirt and crinolines soaked from the water that had spilled out of the pails she carried on a pole across her shoulders.

"Anna! Not again?" Mother scolded.

Thank goodness her mother could not see her as she rode barefoot down the Rio Grande on a log. Mother would have fainted on the spot if she saw Anna in a short white skirt that hit her at mid-thigh. A decorated corset accentuated her breasts. Anna was actually proud of her corset design. It wasn't just to entice the men in the crowds during her show. It also bound her ample breasts close to her chest so that it wasn't painful while riding Bruno. She thought of it as a win-win for everyone.

~

Bill's camp finally came into view. She steered the log closer to the shore. One of the branches caught on something below in the muck of the riverbed and came to a complete stop.

"Oh!" Anna yelped as the log submerged below the water.

She quickly shifted her weight; her legs spread wide with a foot on each end. She fought the current for control. Anna plunged the oar below the water to dislodge the log from its trap.

The log bobbed beneath the surface one final time before it righted itself. She paddled to the shore. One hand on her stomach, she took deep calming breaths. She patted her corset. It was still intact. She looked down. The wet skirt clung to her thighs.

“Verdammt,” she muttered.

Her outfit was ruined and revealed too much, even by her standards. The Texas heat wouldn’t dry it fast enough before anyone saw her.

Anna looked up towards Bill’s camp. A crowd of men stared back at her; mouths agape.

It was too late.

She wanted to make an entrance Bill wouldn’t forget. She should be careful what she wished for.

~

Anna couldn’t blame the group of dusty cowboys that made up Pecos Bill’s camp for staring agog at a half-naked woman floating towards them from the river. If they were educated gentlemen, they might have compared her to Botticelli’s “The Birth of Venus” with her wind-blown hair and hands straining to cover what the water had exposed.

But she didn’t think it likely that they were.

One lone whistle soon turned to many, peppered with cries of “Praise, Jesus!” and “I’ve died and gone to heaven, boys!”

No, not educated at all, she thought.

The last call came from a weather-beaten man with sandy blond hair, greasy from sweat and dirt. He sauntered forward. Anna hopped off the log onto the slippery riverbank. He didn’t

bother to extend a hand to help her, and his thick eyebrows shot skyward when she didn't land on her backside in the mud. She rolled her eyes, but then remembered that these were rough men with no need for manners.

He looked her up and down and yelled over his shoulder, "Why, we've got ourselves a real Slue-Foot Sue here, fellas!"

The whistles and snickers grew even louder. Anna cleared her throat as loud as she could, her chin raised.

"I'm looking for Pecos Bill," she said.

"Are you now? And just who might you be?" the man asked.

"I'm Anna, but you may know me better as 'The Amazing Anna'-the best female bronc rider this side of the Mississippi," she bragged.

She was pretty sure she was a better rider than Pecos Bill since most of the stories she heard about him were too far-fetched to be true. She added the word "female" to her show title to be on the safe side. She didn't want to ruin her chances before she even met him. Her dignity may have floated away on the river, but self-preservation hadn't.

The men were silent, and looked at each other, confused. Anna was embarrassed. They had never heard of her. She dug her toes hard into the riverbank and bit her bottom lip to keep it from quivering. Her plan was not going well, at all.

"Seems we're in the presence of greatness, boys! In that case, Sue, I'm the cowboy you're looking for. Pecos Bill. In the flesh. Maybe not as much flesh as you, now," Bill chuckled as he leered at her thighs.

She couldn't believe it. She was face to face with the notorious Pecos Bill.

Anna composed herself. She pulled at her skirt, hoping it would stop clinging to her. Bill was still looking at her like she was his birthday present. He made her nervous, but she couldn't back down before she had the chance to impress him with her riding. Oh, if only that damn boat hadn't sunk.

Anna put her fingers in her mouth and whistled. The sound of Bruno's rapidly approaching hoofbeats bolstered her courage. Bill and his men whipped out their guns; some even crouched behind large bushes. They all trained their weapons in Bruno's direction.

Anna, scared they would shoot him before they saw he carried no rider, ran up the riverbank just as Bruno galloped into the camp. He stopped right next to her. She reached up to pat his neck.

"Good boy," she whispered. He did exactly as she had trained him to do when she called for him with that piercing whistle.

The cowboys holstered their guns and looked at Anna. She knew they didn't know what to make of her or Bruno, but she thought they may have been impressed with her trick. Some of them nodded to each other and pointed at her.

Bill's eyes narrowed. His gaze flicked back and forth between Anna and his men. She saw a change come over him, like a cloud blocking out the sun. She got the idea that he didn't like being outdone in front of his men, but if he would just hear her out, maybe he wouldn't see her as competition.

"That's a pretty neat trick you taught your horse there, Sue," he said.

"That's not all I can do!" she replied.

This was her chance to finally show the great Pecos Bill her skills. She spun around up onto Bruno and gave a small tug on his mane. He reared up on his hind legs. Anna had taught

him to do that when she pulled on his mane in a certain way. Bruno took off at a gallop, bucking and kicking. Anna gripped him with her thighs and thrust both arms outward. She rode without a saddle, and now she was on a bucking horse and only holding on with her legs. She knew how she appeared to Bill and his men.

This trick drove the crowds wild.

Dirt and tumbleweeds flew around them as Anna showed how she maneuvered Bruno into fancy footwork and tight figure eights around two large trees. When she finished, she trotted Bruno back to the camp.

Some of the men began to clap and cheer. She smiled. She loved the applause.

“By God, that Sue can ride!” one man hollered.

“She sure can! Thought for sure she came ridin’ down the river on the biggest catfish I ever did see, all brown and green with its whiskers wavin’ out the side!”

Anna beamed at the praise of these hardened men. This was everything she wanted.

Almost.

Bill was noticeably quiet throughout her entire performance, and he seemed to withdraw further the more his men applauded her. She didn’t want to make an enemy of Bill. She needed him, and he needed her. He just didn’t know it yet.

Anna convinced Bill and his men to let her join them as they rode on to the next town west of El Paso. She had brought her own tent, and she was glad for it. She didn’t feel comfortable sleeping outside under the stars with the men. Bill had a tent as well. Father would

have fallen dead many times over if he knew she was the lone woman amongst a gang of notorious cowboys, but none of the men attempted anything inappropriate. They were crass and crude, and she blushed more often than she would have liked, but she had earned their respect that first day alongside the Rio Grande.

The one person she had trouble with was Bill. She kept trying to speak to him about her idea for her show, but he always shut her down.

“I don’t have time for fancy ridin’ and panderin’ to crowds,” he told her one afternoon as they were riding.

“Hear me out, Bill. This is something we could do in the off season of driving cattle,” she said. A seasonal show wasn’t part of her original plan, but she was willing to compromise.

“Bill’s too busy tamin’ cyclones and runnin’ with the coyotes when he’s not workin’ cattle, Sue,” one of the men shouted from behind them.

She stopped trying to correct them about her name. It was pointless. She had to admit she kind of liked it. They took turns telling the story about her ride down the river or how she rode sitting backwards on Bruno as they traveled during the day. The tales grew, and it became a favorite pastime of theirs to see who could tell the most outlandish Slue-Foot Sue story.

Bill sometimes joined in, but he mostly added sharp-edged barbs directed at her. Anna soon despaired of her plan ever happening.

The night before they arrived at their destination, Anna took Bruno out for an extra ride so they could practice their tricks. When she returned to the camp, she tied Bruno up next to Bill’s horse, Widow-Maker. She slowly walked up to him.

“There now, boy. That’s a good horse,” she crooned. Widow-Maker neighed and nuzzled his nose into her palm. He was a gentle horse. She patted his neck and scratched his ears.

“Whaddya doin’, Sue?” a voice growled in her ear. She jumped back, right into Bill’s chest.

“Oh, I’m just admiring Widow-Maker,” she responded and stepped away from him.

“I can see that.”

“He’s a beautiful horse, Bill.” She loved watching Bill do tricks as he rode Widow-Maker. Bill liked to use ropes, and it was something to see him skip rope while he rode Widow-Make around in circles. She included ropes in her act, too, but she wasn’t as good at it as Bill was. She wished he could see what a great duo they could be.

“He’s *my* horse, and don’t you forget it,” he said.

“Of course, I would never!”

“Good.”

Anna couldn’t figure out where Bill was coming from with his treatment of her. Did he think she wanted Widow-Maker for herself? She wanted to ride Widow-Maker, sure, but she would never dream of taking someone else’s horse from them. Mother’s threat to sell Bruno still hurt after all these years. Maybe this was why Bill was so mean to her? He was worried about losing Widow-Maker.

“Bill, I feel about Bruno exactly like you feel about Widow-Maker. I mean, I would love to ride Widow-Maker, but I know he belongs to you,” she said. He stared at her for a bit, and then laughed.

“Oh, Sue! You sure do beat all. You know that?”

Anna frowned. She hadn’t said anything funny.

“You want to know why I named him Widow-Maker?”

She nodded.

“I called him that because anyone else besides me who tries to ride him ends up with a broken neck. He’s left lots of pretty widows behind, Sue.”

“That’s interesting,” she said. She didn’t believe that for one second, but she knew better than to press Bill. His temper was short, especially when it came to his horse. And her it seemed.

Bill leaned in close to her neck. He sniffed behind her ear and sighed. She smelled beans and tequila on his breath. She was afraid to move. Bill hadn’t acted interested in her at all since he saw her almost naked in the river. She didn’t know what was going on, but she didn’t like it.

“You know something, Sue? I think you may be on to something about us being partners.”

“What?” she asked. “I thought—”

“I’m gonna need something more than just a business relationship, though. I think we oughta make it more permanent,” he said. He licked the outer shell of her ear. Slow, until he got to her earlobe. He bit down. Anna jerked away.

“I think you’re drunk, Bill. I’m going to go to my tent now before this gets out of hand.”

She ran from him. He didn’t stop her.

He laughed and yelled after her, “Think about what I said, Sue! How bad do you want your show?”

Anna didn’t stop till she was inside her tent. God, what had just happened? She couldn’t catch her breath. She was sure Bill was drunk. There was no other way to explain his behavior, was there? He wasn’t a good man. She knew that. But just how *bad* was he?

She heard the men talk about Bill killing all the outlaws in the Southwest just so he’d be the only bad guy left, but those were just stories. Weren’t they? Still, she wondered if he was

serious about what he said regarding her plan. Would she be willing to sleep with him or even marry him? Could she stand his mouth and hands on her body whenever he wanted her?

Anna barely made it to the opening of her tent before she fell to her knees and vomited. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve. She heard Bill laugh, and she looked up towards his tent.

He was leaning against a pole, watching her. He tipped his hat to her and laughed again. She scrambled back inside and crawled beneath her blankets. Anna had dreamed of her name in big letters, being the star of the show, ever since she was a young girl doing tricks with Bruno in her family's pasture. She was so close now to making that dream come true.

All she had to do was make a deal with the devil.

Vs.

I. The race between the famed steel-driving man and me, the new-fangled machine, was touted far and wide; and bets were placed by ignorant men who thought money was the only thing at stake. Was it John's pride and ego that slung his hammers down onto the spikes and later into the side of the mountain that day? Could he not see that my nuts, bolts, and iron belly filled with hissing steam were no different than his hulking arms and hammers of wood and stone? Can pride and ego not be easily exchanged for progress and greed, a hammer driven by an arm for a hammer driven by a machine? Blood for fire?

Is there a difference between man and technology who are both slave and master to the other?

The men who watched the pounding of steel and shattering of rock thought so. A hero wielding a hammer with his hands was nobler than the one who rolled in with promises of change. Change *they* had demanded amidst broken bodies and families. How could I ignore their pleas for me to ease their burdens? Oh, but they rued those moments of weakness when they saw my seductive shine.

Fooling only themselves, they shouted and whooped for John, with his twenty-pound hammers and fighting spirit. He was fueled by their hopes, a hundred-dollar bill, and that perpetual place on the pedestal where legends preside.

MAN VS. MACHINE!

The steel-driving man
with a twenty-pound hammer in each hand
against me
fueled by progress and ingenuity.
A race to the finish, where winners and losers are one and the same.
It is all for naught when the prize is fortune and fame.
The mighty man, John Henry,
who dares to beat me.

II. Like soldiers at war, John and I battled down the C & O line. We crucified the earth with nails along the track up to the mountain that stood in our way. He reached the stone wall first; tired, hammers at rest. Sweat ran in rivulets down his broad back between the scars given by his former master. New blisters on his pale palms ate through years of callouses courtesy of his current one.

It is finished, he whispered.

The arrogant man thought the contest was over. His money won. A song of jubilation echoed like a crown of glory over his head; as close to royalty he could get in a land that fooled itself into thinking it had no use for kings.

When I wheeled up beside him, he grinned. I repositioned my hammer so that it faced the mountain side, pistons and gears squealing with the effort. His eyes widened in shock when I pulled back and slammed into the ancient rock. My mission was set whether there was a man determined to beat me or not.

Who was mighty now?

MAN VS. MACHINE!

The steel-driving man

with a twenty-pound hammer in each hand

against me

fueled by progress and ingenuity.

A race to the finish, where winners and losers are one and the same.

It is all for naught when the prize is fortune and fame.

The mighty man, John Henry,

who dares to beat me.

III. Soon, the rock next to me trembled and John's moans and grunts accompanied each swing of his hammers. We were neck and neck inside the mountain. It was dark and stifling beneath the surface. My steam heated up the air in the hole I created, but I was too deep for it to escape. The oppressive temperature put enormous pressure on my weakening system. Smoke choked my pipes and valves.

Maybe not so different from man after all?

My metal carcass pushed until it burst. Bolts pinged off the stone walls in the explosion.

A shower of oil rained from the roof of the tunnel. My steam hissed a lament.

I was *finisssssshhhhed*.

John did not stop. His mettle was not my metal. The difference had to do with our makers.

The crowd roared when John broke through the other side. His hammers were molten red and scorched the earth where he dropped them. Pride goeth before the fall, but not for John. He crumbled in a heap, dead, next to his hammers.

Maybe not so different from me after all, John?

MAN VS. MACHINE!

The steel-driving man
with a twenty-pound hammer in each hand
against me
fueled by progress and ingenuity.

A race to the finish, where winners and losers are one and the same.

It is all for naught when the prize is fortune and fame.

The mighty man, John Henry,
who dares to beat me.

IV. The king is dead! Long live the king!

I reign supreme over man.

I, who struck the first fire. I, who struck the first killing blow between brothers.

I enslave men and free them. I create plagues and cure them.

I offer up the world to man in a bounty of blessings.

I suffer his curses when he turns those gifts into misfortunes and lays them at my feet.

Ungrateful beasts!

Songs were sung and a statue was erected to honor the mighty steel-driving man.

Where are my ballads?

When will my name be chiseled in stone?

John Henry!

But what was he without his hammers?

Without me?

MAN VS. MACHINE!

The steel-driving man

with a twenty-pound hammer in each hand

against me

fueled by progress and ingenuity.

A race to the finish, where winners and losers were one and the same.

It was all for naught when the prize was fortune and fame.

The mighty man, John Henry,

who dared to beat me.

Johnny

Alphonse heard Paul's booming baritone voice well before the large man stomped up the wooden steps and flung open the office door. Paul was speaking to someone, but Alphonse paid him no mind and buried his nose back inside his ledgers. Paul was always telling tales to anyone who would listen. If Alphonse had bothered to look out the window as Paul approached, though, he would have noticed the beautiful young woman long before she and Paul were standing right in front of his desk.

In his haste to stand up to greet Paul and his guest, Alphonse tipped his inkwell over. His hands collided with the lady's as they both reached to try to stop the bottle from tumbling.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said.

"Verdammt," Alphonse uttered at the same time, then immediately realized he had sworn out loud. Vater would have boxed his ears on the spot if he had heard. Alphonse had been too long in the middle of nowhere with Paul and his lumberjacks. His manners with the opposite sex were rusty.

"I...I'm so very sorry, Miss—," he said.

"Babe! This here's Babe," Paul interrupted. Alphonse frowned as he looked from Paul to her. Babe was an unusual name, to be sure, but she didn't bother to correct Paul. She actually smiled at the towering timberman the way one smiled at a harmless old grandpa who always said the wrong thing but meant well.

Alphonse reached out his hand towards Babe to introduce himself, "Hello, my—"

"And this is Johnny Inkslinger, Babe," Paul said. "He does the numbers for my logging business. He invented bookkeeping and is the best there is at numbers!" Babe glanced back at the

name painted on the window of the office door and turned, confused, back to Alphonse as she grasped his hand.

“Alphonse Gruenlah, at your service,” he said as he offered a little bow. Her eyes widened, and he wondered if she felt the same heat he did when their hands touched.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she replied. “I am so sorry about your ink.” Alphonse released her hand so that he could pull out his handkerchief to wipe up the black puddle on his desk.

“No need to apologize. The fault is entirely mine,” he said.

“Johnny’s got plenty more where that came from, Babe. Why, he’s got a hidden lake full of ink somewhere ‘round here that keeps his pen ready to go. Hooks it right up to a barrel so he don’t ever have to stop. One of the best days ever was when I found him doing his number magic on a rock on the side of the road and offered him a job right on the spot,” Paul explained. Alphonse rolled his eyes at Paul’s exaggerations.

“You are very good at finding people, Paul,” Babe said. Alphonse frowned at the relief he heard in her voice. There was more to her story, and he found himself wanting to know everything about her. This was a first for him. He only ever felt this way about numbers.

“Pardon my forwardness, but we do not see women here at the logging site. Where...how did Paul *find* you?” Alphonse asked. Babe opened her mouth to answer, but Paul’s laughter stopped her before she could respond.

“Now, Johnny, it’s the craziest story yet,” Paul exclaimed.

“I have no doubt,” Alphonse muttered.

“I found her a few weeks ago frozen in snow up to her waist. I almost didn’t see her ‘cause she was as blue as that damn snow.”

“Is that so,” Alphonse said. He couldn’t help the skepticism that colored his words. He was used to Paul’s tall tales, and he knew the truth had likely been stretched. However, it was those same tales that made Paul’s lumber more sought after than other lumber companies. It seemed customers enjoyed a good yarn about the giant and his mighty axe, if the ledgers were to be trusted. Which they were because Alphonse was one of the best in his line of work. Paul had not exaggerated that, at least.

“It’s true,” Babe said, and Alphonse was surprised to hear her agreeing with Paul. “I lost my way in the blizzard. I don’t remember much after that until I woke up in Paul’s tent shivering so hard that I didn’t think I would ever stop. I’m ever so grateful that he rescued me that night. I would surely be dead if he hadn’t.” Babe trembled and pulled her poorly knitted wrap tightly around her shoulders. Alphonse wished he could reach out to her and hold her, to comfort her. She looked so scared in that moment.

Paul wrapped one his massive arms around her. “I don’t want you to think any more about that, Babe,” he said. “You’re safe now.” She leaned into Paul’s side. Her shoulders came up only to his waistline, and her cheek rested against his muscular arm.

Alphonse’s jaw clenched as a pang of jealousy unexpectedly rose up within him.

Why should I care? he thought. He had just met her. And as he kept his eyes on the two, he realized Paul behaved more like a protective older brother rather than a man who had romantic inclinations. He relaxed but was not sure what to make of the unexpected feelings this woman stirred in him.

“Okay, I’m going to take Babe over to the chow hall to meet Olaf and some of the other boys,” Paul said as he moved towards the door. “Oh, Babe! Young Johnny here has a fancy piano I’m sure he’d let you play. Part of his bargaining with me when I offered him a job was

that his momma's piano had to come with him. We had a helluva time cartin' that beast up here!"

Babe's face lit up. "Oh, I would love to see your piano and even play it if you would allow!" Alphonse didn't play the piano and he had never let anyone else play it either, but he couldn't deny her anything.

"I would be honored if you would come back and play. Come whenever you like," he said.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Gruenlah."

"Please. Call me Alphonse."

"Thank you, Alphonse." She turned to leave, but not before he noticed a blush had pinkened her cheeks. Had he embarrassed her by being so informal or was she pleased by his request? He never knew what to make of women.

"See you later, Johnny," Paul said as he winked at Alphonse and followed Babe out the door.

Alphonse dropped back into his chair and stared out the window at their retreating figures. She wasn't a small or frail woman, but she looked tiny walking next to Paul. Later, when the sun began to set, he realized he had forgotten all about his ledgers. He shook his head and chastised himself for losing his thoughts over a female. He would have to work late into the night to catch up. He picked up his pen and dipped it into the inkwell before realizing he forgot to refill it. The memory of holding her hand, if only for a moment, filled his mind. The heat he was aching to know if she had felt as well still lingered. Alphonse blinked hard to clear his head and dipped his pen in the inkwell again.

Verdammt!

Over the next week, Alphonse saw Babe in passing moments as she followed Paul around the small town that served as the home base for Paul's logging company. When Alphonse had arrived at the camp based near the Whistling River, there were just tents placed in circles around Paul's giant crude lean to. He convinced Paul and the others to build permanent structures near the river for housing the men, storing supplies, and even a large dining hall. Once the buildings were finished, the men noticed they couldn't hear the river whistle any longer. Paul told them that the river was so loud it would prevent him from thinking and working on his ledgers, and so he straightened it out. Alphonse knew the truth. The buildings blocked more of the noise of the surrounding flora and fauna. But the men loved Paul, and Alphonse quickly learned that these harmless stories kept lonely men entertained and loyal.

As a reward for his ingenuity and fixing the chaotic accounting books, Paul built Alphonse a place of his own, painted a bright yellow—Mutter's favorite color. Alphonse's office and his home were in the same building, but he made a point to eat most of his meals with the men. He wasn't the only immigrant in Paul's employ, and he enjoyed speaking with others from his homeland. Mealtimes in the hall were usually lively and loud and offered a nice break from the solitude of his work.

Alphonse hoped he would have a chance to speak with Babe, but since she was the only woman in residence, her company was highly sought-after by all the men. Plus, Paul always seemed to be with her. If one of the men tarried a little too long when speaking to her, Paul made up a task for him and sent him on his way. Alphonse was confident Paul's feelings were not

more than what he initially thought, but he couldn't explain Paul's defensive behavior towards her. There was something the two of them were hiding, and he needed to find out what that was. What Alphonse didn't want to think about was *why* discovering Babe's secrets was so important to him. He was certainly better off keeping to his numbers, but every time she walked by his office, he watched her until he could no longer see her and thought about her long into the night.

One day at lunch, Alphonse saw Babe finally sitting alone. She wore the same misshapen shawl, but today she had her long brown hair down around her strong shoulders. Though she looked younger, she did not appear weak. There was a strength about her that Alphonse admired, even envied. But she always seemed alert, as if she was prepared to run at a moment's notice. He thanked the lord for the opportunity to converse privately with her, but he was nervous that she would not feel the same. Still, he bolstered his courage and came up beside her table, hoping she wouldn't decide to run away from him.

"Good afternoon," he said. She had just taken a bite and smiled up at him around a mouthful of stew. He cursed himself for his awkward timing.

"Hello, Alphonse," she said after she swallowed. He noticed the movement of her throat and imagined placing a kiss there. There was nothing to be done. He was becoming a blackguard when it came to her.

"May I eat with you?" he asked.

"Yes, I would love that," Babe replied.

Alphonse sat across from her. He took a bite of his stew. He was stalling.

Get it together, man, he chastised himself.

"Umm, so, Babe...how are you finding—,"

Unfortunately, a couple of the other men sat down next to them. Alphonse glared at them, but they ignored him.

“Hello,” she said to them. She glanced over at Alphonse, smiled, and winked. She knew he wanted to be alone with her.

“Gentlemen, if you’ll—,” he began.

“Babe, did we ever tell you about the time Paul dug Lake Michigan?” one of them interrupted.

“No, I’ve not heard that one,” she replied.

“He needed a watering hole big enough to mix up the cement to make the Rocky Mountains. He couldn’t find one, so he dug a scoop of earth with one hand and squeezed a cloud dry with the other to fill the hole with water!”

“Oh, my. That is amazing,” she chuckled. They continued to regale her with more stories. Alphonse was irritated at their intrusion. However, he was more mesmerized watching Babe throw her head back and laugh as she heard about the giant flying bugs with stingers on both ends that Paul had to float down the Mississippi River so he could drown them in the Gulf of Mexico. Alphonse thought the tall tales that the lumberjacks liked to share around the oversized dining table and the campfires were too much sometimes, but he discovered he didn’t mind them when he saw the way they made Babe smile.

All of the men treated her as if she were royalty, though he was certain she wasn’t that highborn. She was definitely educated, but she wasn’t a lady in the strictest sense. She didn’t speak in the cultured manner of the upper class, but she obviously came from somewhere that made her current state of living in a remote logging camp somewhat scandalous. She was a

mystery, and Alphonse observed that whenever any of the men asked her something personal, she quickly changed the direction of the conversation.

The next day, Alphonse was lost in his ledgers when he heard a soft knocking on his door. He looked up and saw Babe. He stood and called for her to come inside.

“Good evening, Alphonse,” she said.

“Good eve—, wait. Evening?” he stammered. He had been so busy that he hadn’t noticed the day was almost gone. Numbers did that to him sometimes. It was easy for him to get lost in the rows and columns and the joy of making everything on the page balance out just right.

“Yes, evening,” Babe smiled. “I hate to bother you, but I came by to ask if I could play your piano?” In her hands she held a small stack of music. “But if you are still working, I can come back another time.”

“No!” he blurted out. She jumped in surprise and almost dropped the well-worn pages. “I mean, no, do not come back a different time. I mean, yes, you may play my piano now.” He sounded like a madman.

“Thank you so much,” she said. She didn’t move, though, and Alphonse realized she was waiting for him to take her to the piano. He had been staring at her. He felt very much like he had lost his mind.

“Please, come with me. It’s just through this door over here,” he finally said. She followed him into his private residence. His home consisted of just one large room that was connected to his office. A heating stove filled one corner. It warmed the room when needed but also served as a cooking stove for his morning coffee and the occasional meal when he didn’t eat with the others. In another corner was his parents’ old rope bed. He had a new stuffed mattress, but the colorful quilts on top were faded and tattered. They were the ones his mother had packed

in her large trunk when they came to America several years ago. Her piano was on the wall to the left of the door. On top of the piano was one of her lace shawls and a picture of his parents. On the right side of the door was a tall chest of drawers he had won in a card game against Sven, one of the lumberjacks. Sven was a talented woodworker and had carved intricate Scandinavian motifs on the drawer fronts. Aside from his mother's piano, it was now one of his most-prized possessions. In the center of the room was a small settee. The deep blue velvet was slightly worn, but it was still comfortable to sit on while reading one of the books that he displayed on top of the dresser.

Alphonse watched Babe's face as she took in the meager contents of his home. He didn't know why, but he desperately wanted her to like it.

"It's nice and cozy in here, Alphonse," she said. He released the breath he hadn't realized he had been holding in.

"Thank you. I try my best to feel at home out here in the wilderness. Though, admittedly, I do miss people. I mean, society. I mean..." He spread his palms upward to convey his loss for words.

"I know what you mean. I hope to get to New York City someday myself." Babe pursed her lips. Alphonse got the feeling that she had not meant to share that with him. He took that to heart. He wanted her to feel safe with him.

"My father and I landed in New York City when we arrived in America. It is a very busy place with tall buildings. Like ants scurrying between their dirt towers. It's alive in a way that is so different from out here. Enchanting yet frightening all at the same time," he said.

"It sounds amazing! I hope you'll tell me more about it sometime," she said as she looked longingly at the piano.

“I certainly will, but first, please feel free to sit and play. I hope you don’t mind if I leave you for a moment to tidy up my desk to prepare for tomorrow’s work. I promise to come back, and I hope you will not mind if sit and listen to you?” he asked as he lit an extra lamp he had and placed it on top of the piano.

“I would like that, Alphonse. Very much.”

He offered her a bow and went out to his office. He had just begun organizing the ledgers on his desk when he heard the most beautiful music coming from the next room. It took his breath away and he closed eyes and imagined for one quick heartbeat that it was Mutter playing. Bringing the piano with them had depleted much of his parents’ savings, but she refused to leave it behind. Alphonse thought it was ironic that his mutter’s beloved instrument had made it to America, but she did not. She grew ill during the journey and died aboard the ship. Unable to pay for her body to remain onboard for a burial on land, Alphonse and Vater had had to watch as Mutter’s body was given to the sea after a solemn but brief funeral.

He composed himself and wiped away the lone tear that had slipped down his cheek. He tried so hard to not think of the past, which was why he found solace in numbers. They never broke his heart, and he had complete control over them in his ledgers. However, the music that drifted from beyond the door of his humble room pulled at him. He dropped the papers onto the desk and walked back into his home.

He stood in the doorway and watched Babe’s fingers float over the piano keys. Her eyes were closed; she was in ecstasy, unaware that he stared at her. Before he could stop himself, he imagined that same look on her face, but instead of the piano, it was him beneath her. The strong feeling frightened Alphonse, and he felt so ashamed at his ungentlemanly thoughts. He quickly sat down and picked up the book he had been reading.

He didn't know how long Babe had played. He had read the same sentence over and over until he finally gave up and watched and listened to the beautiful young woman who very much looked like she was meant to sit forever at his mother's piano. By the time she had finished, Alphonse knew he was lost.

"Oh, Alphonse! This was wonderful! I have missed playing so much. I apologize for taking up your entire evening. It was...well, it was just so nice to be able to play without having to worry about..." Babe paused and looked down.

"Worry about what?" he asked. She continued to look down. He could tell she was at war with herself as to whether or not she would tell him more. He walked over to her and crouched down in front of her, but he did not touch her. For some reason, he knew she did not want to be touched just then. "Worry about what, Babe?"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Cecilia," she exhaled.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand," he said.

"My name's Cecilia."

"Cecilia?"

"Yes. My parents were musicians." She smiled and shrugged. "They died when I was little girl. My aunt came to Chicago to bring me back out West to live with her. All I want is to go to a big city like New York where I can play in a real theater like my father did. But my aunt wanted me to marry a man I didn't love and spend my days hosting teas and spreading gossip. It was a life I didn't want, so I ran away. And...now I'm here."

Alphonse noted she spoke a little too brightly, almost rushed, and felt she hadn't told him everything, but he didn't press her further. He gently placed a hand over hers, just the lightest touch. She flinched, but she didn't rebuff him.

“I am so glad that you are here, Cecilia,” he said. She shook her head in agreement, but he wasn’t sure it was in response to him. “I hope that you know you are welcome to play my piano any time you like. It is so good to hear its voice again. My mutter was the last to play, and she has been dead these past five years. A piano should never be silent for that long.”

Cecilia moved one of her hands on top of Alphonse’s and lightly squeezed. “Thank you for this evening and for being so kind to me,” she said. Alphonse reluctantly removed his hand and stood. Cecilia stood as well and gathered her music. He followed her out of his room and into his office. He opened the door for her, and as she walked past him to leave, she lightly grazed her fingers against his hand. He noticed the pink tinge on her cheeks again, and his chest tightened.

“Good night, Alphonse,” she said with a shy smile and left. He watched her walk across the rutted road to the dining hall where Paul had given her one of the spare rooms on the top floor.

“Good night, Cecilia,” he whispered.

Over the next couple of months, Alphonse and Cecilia were often seen together whenever he wasn’t busy in his office or meeting with customers. The weather had been warming up so Alphonse opened his windows while she was playing so that everyone could hear the music as it floated all the way out into the forest that surrounded the logging village. His favorite moments besides listening to Cecilia play were the talks the two of them had, either sitting on his settee or walking along the river. She spoke of her dream to play in New York City, and he regaled her

with what he remembered of the bustling metropolis the short time he had lived there until his father passed away from a broken heart less than a year after they arrived. He left New York and swore he would never go back, but he now wondered what it would be like to live there with Cecilia. He envisioned a life filled with more than just numbers and ledgers.

One afternoon while they were picnicking on the riverbank, he learned more about her parents and her life with her aunt.

“Aunt Mathilda was kind, but she didn’t agree with how my parents earned a living. She blamed my father for making my mother, her youngest sister, work. Aunt never understood that music was my parents’ passion. It wasn’t work to them. She thought Mother should have stayed home with me and Father should have earned a living in a more respectable way,” Cecilia shared.

“But she allowed you to continue to play the piano?” Alphonse asked.

“Yes, but I would not have stopped even if she hadn’t. She knew that, and so we compromised. Classical music every day but Sunday. On Sundays, it could only be hymns.”

“Mutter played all sorts of music every night after dinner. When I was at University, I was so busy with my studies that I often stayed late at the library so that she would not disturb me. Now? Now I wish I hadn’t missed one evening.”

“You are lucky to have had so much time with your parents,” Cecilia said.

“I am.” He turned towards her. She was staring out at the river. Her eyes filled with tears, and Alphonse immediately regretted what he said.

“Cecilia, I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine. I know you didn’t. You would think after all these years that the pain would lessen, but—”

“It doesn’t, though, does it? You have had more years without your parents than I have, but the loss is no greater or no less. It is just...emptiness. And I think we feel it most with those who filled up so much of our lives with their presence and their love,” Alphonse said. She reached over and grabbed his hand.

“Thank you,” she said.

“For what?” he asked.

“For being kind and understanding, never making me feel that there is something wrong with me. For not forcing me to...to,” she replied and shook her head.

“Cecilia, there is nothing wrong with you. And I would never force you to do anything.”

“Not all men are like you, Alphonse.” She frowned, and her grip tightened on his hand.

“Does this have anything to do with the man your aunt wanted you to marry?” he asked.

“George? Yes,” she hesitated but continued, “he played the part of a gentleman around Aunt Mathilda, but whenever she allowed us to be alone, he turned into a slimy snake. I had bruises on my arms from him holding me so tight, to keep me from squirming away from his kisses. I would tell him to stop every time, but he said he had a right to sample the goods he was going to buy. He didn’t care that I refused every one of his marriage proposals.”

Alphonse wanted to find George and pummel him for the liberties he took with Cecilia. He wasn’t typically prone to violence, but there was something visceral in his need to protect and defend this brave woman. He also felt terrible because he had imagined kissing Cecilia from the moment their hands touched over the toppled inkwell. Alone in his bed at night, he imagined so much more. He wasn’t very different from George, and that thought shamed him.

“Alphonse?”

“What? Um, sorry. I’m listening,” he replied.

“You looked so angry just now. You must think I am a loose woman for letting a man kiss me.”

“No! Never, Cecilia. You are not to blame. In fact, I was just thinking about how I wish I could choke the life out of that scoundrel. How dare he hurt you!” He held both of her hands and brought them up to his mouth. Without thinking, he kissed the knuckles of each hand. He looked up at her then, expecting a much-deserved slap.

It never came. She just stared wide-eyed, lovely mouth slightly opened as if she wanted to speak but couldn't.

What was wrong with him?

His responses to Cecilia were not like him. He was usually logical, practical, and reserved. He had to be. His work required him to focus. Cecilia made him forget all of that and just...feel...alive.

Alphonse let loose of her hands, but before he could apologize, she leaned forward and kissed him. Her lips were soft like a feather on his, and he held as still as a statue. Afraid that if he moved, he would break whatever spell they were both under.

Her kiss deepened, and her hands came up around his neck. His muscles were so tense from trying to maintain control, but he finally let loose when her fingers moved to his hair. He pulled her closer to him, his hands splayed across her back.

He took control of the kiss, but never made it seem like she could not break their embrace at any moment. Months of pent-up frustration spurred him on, but he would never make her feel like George did. He groaned, broke their kiss, and pressed his forehead to hers.

“Thank you,” he sighed.

“For what?” she asked. They both laughed at having the same conversation from earlier.

“For not slapping me,” he finally responded.

“Oh, Alphonse. I’ve wanted you to kiss me for so long. You are such a gentleman, and I couldn’t wait any more.”

“I’m not a gentleman. I’m a fool.”

“If you are, then so am I.”

“Well, we make a fine pair, no?” he asked.

“We certainly do,” she responded.

Alphonse could not believe how blessed he was. What were the odds that this angel would come to him in the deep woods and want him? Compared to the other burly men around, how could she choose him, an average man with a mop of black hair on his head and a funny accent? The numbers didn’t add up, and for the first time in his life, Alphonse believed in luck.

~

“Hey, Johnny. How’s the numbers lookin’?” Paul asked as he barreled into Alphonse’s office.

“Even better than last year,” he replied. He reluctantly put down his pen and looked up at Paul.

“I just want to make sure we are all on top of things. That nothing gets overlooked since we might be preoccupied with all the extra *work* we have,” Paul said with a pointed look.

Late spring was a busy time for everyone, including Alphonse. Paul liked to get the logs out early while the river was high from the melting snow, and the town was full of new men to

help with the overflow of orders. This was nothing new for Alphonse since it happened every year, but something seemed different with Paul and he worried it had to do with Cecilia.

“Everything is running smoothly. Books are in order. The new men seem to be fitting in and working hard. So far, nothing to worry about,” he said. “Unless you are referring to something other than logging, Paul?” Alphonse normally didn’t challenge Paul, and it wasn’t just because the man was practically a giant. Paul was his boss, and Vater and Mutter instilled a respect for authority in him that ran deep. He respected Paul, but he didn’t care for the tone he heard in Paul’s voice.

“Did I ever tell you about the night I found Babe?” Paul asked.

Alphonse frowned. The question wasn’t what he expected.

“It was the worst night of the Blue Snow,” Paul continued.

“Yes, you mentioned that the day you brought her here,” Alphonse interrupted. Paul raised his eyebrows as a warning.

“As I was sayin’, it was the worst night of the Blue Snow. I was chasin’ a Bedcat when I saw somethin’ stickin’ out of the snow. I thought it might have been one of the fellas we lost when Pink-Eye Martin accidentally blew up Sourdough Sam’s stove, but I remembered that was during the Black Snow. So, I got closer and that’s when I heard her. She was frozen blue like an iceberg, but she was hummin’ a tune. I couldn’t believe it! I pulled her out and brought her back to my tent at the outpost we had set up. It was like carryin’ a statue, all hard and stiff. I had Ole’ Pete help me get her out of her clothes and into something dry before we put her in my cot and stoked the stove as hot as we could get it.”

Alphonse clenched his fist at the image of Paul and Pete removing Cecilia’s clothes. He was certainly becoming a violent man since falling in love.

Wait. Love?

“Now relax, Johnny. You’re growling like a bear at me.”

Had he really growled? Alphonse needed to compose himself.

“Please continue, Paul,” he said.

“We made sure to cover any private areas as we went along, and Ole’ Pete can’t hardly remember what he had for breakfast today so no need to get feisty.”

“Can we move beyond the part where you removed *Cecilia’s* clothes, please?” Alphonse asked through gritted teeth. Paul laughed.

“Sure, sure. Anyway, we got Babe warmed up. She eventually began shakin’ so bad I thought she was gonna roll right off the cot.”

Alphonse closed his eyes. He tried not to think of her like that. She must have been in so much pain. He wanted Paul to stop, but he also needed him to finish. Cecilia hadn’t shared any of this with him. Maybe she didn’t remember what happened?

“I knelt down next to her,” Paul continued, “and she opened her eyes, asked me who I was and where we were, and I think she said somethin’ about gnomes, but her teeth were chattering fierce so I’m not sure. Well, when I mentioned the lumberjack camp, she jumped up like a hell cat all screachin’ and lashin’ out. She tried to run away, but I grabbed her and put her back under the covers. Boy, she didn’t like that none too much. It was like tryin’ to pin down an ox, she was so strong and bullheaded!”

Alphonse didn’t like the thought of Paul’s hands on her either, but he kept his mouth shut. “Why do you think she tried to run away?” he asked.

“Well, I’m not exactly sure, but after she fell back to sleep, she kept sayin’ the name ‘Mrs. Palmer’ and yellin’ ‘No, don’t touch me!’ The only Mrs. Palmer I know in these parts owns a saloon a ways over,” Paul said.

Alphonse couldn’t help but assume this Mrs. Palmer was one and the same. He didn’t know how or even if he should ask Cecilia about her. Whatever happened, it wasn’t something she wanted to discuss, and he promised her he would never force her to do anything she didn’t want to do.

“Has Babe been actin’ funny since the new men came on board?” Paul asked. “She was lookin’ forward to seeing the logs floatin’ like a big raft down the river, and today she told me she doesn’t want to head out with me and the boys anymore when we bring the logs down.”

Alphonse nodded. He had noticed that Cecilia preferred to stay indoors rather than be outside in the fresh air or sit with the men in the dining hall listening as they spun even more yarns about Paul. He figured her desire for privacy had to do with their relationship and wanting to be with only him. He preferred to be with just her as well, so he hadn’t thought anything unusual about her behavior.

Until now.

Since his workload had increased, he was unable to go for afternoon walks every day with Cecilia. She usually read in her room while he worked and waited for him to come get her for dinner.

“I’ll see if I can get her to talk,” Alphonse said.

“I want you to do more than that, Johnny. I don’t want you to let her out of your sight,” Paul demanded.

“I’ll do my best, Paul, but I won’t force her to do anything. She might run if she thinks she’s being watched. She may feel trapped.” *And I don’t want her to leave.*

Paul narrowed his eyes and nodded. “Well, I’ll keep an eye on her, too, until I have to leave in a few days to head upriver.”

It was settled. Now all they had to do was make sure Cecilia didn’t catch on to them.

~

The day before Paul left, Alphonse worked tirelessly in an effort to finish early for the day. Cecilia had mentioned the night before while she played the piano that she wanted to take a walk the next day to pick bluebells for both of their rooms. He told her he would go with her, but she had insisted that it wasn’t necessary. She knew how busy he was, and that she wouldn’t head too far into the woods.

Still, he planned on going with her, so he was surprised when he looked up and saw her walking into the woods with an empty basket swinging from her arm. She hadn’t come by his office to say goodbye, and he knew she didn’t because she didn’t want to bother him. She was determined to go on her own. Paul was right. The woman was bullheaded.

Alphonse quickly entered a few more figures in the ledger and closed up his office. As he locked his door, he saw one of the new lumberjacks heading in the same direction as Cecilia. That was odd since Alphonse knew all the men should have been down at the river with Paul, preparing for the next day’s trek. He frowned as he watched the man step into the woods and out of his sight. The nagging sensation that something was not right filled him with dread, and so he ran as quickly as he could for the trees.

Alphonse did not have to go too far into the woods before he heard Cecilia shouting. He ran until he found them. She and the lumberjack were both on the ground in a twisted tangle of skirts and muddy boots.

“Get off me!” she yelled. The man was considerably larger than her, and he pulled her skirts up to her waist. Alphonse was going to kill him.

“I knew I recognized you from the saloon,” the lumberjack jeered.

“Stop!” Alphonse yelled and grabbed the man’s shoulders. Cecilia took advantage of the distraction, raised her leg and slammed it into the lumberjack’s crotch. He rolled over, clutching between his legs. She quickly moved to her knees and punched the man in his throat. Alphonse watched as the hell cat Paul spoke of possessed her.

“You son of a bitch! Never put your hands on me ever again,” she screamed as she repeatedly pummeled the man’s face. Alphonse heard bone crunching and felt sick to his stomach as blood covered the man’s face and her knuckles. He feared she had injured herself. The man stopped moving, unconscious from Cecilia’s blows, but she kept punching.

Alphonse dragged her off and away. She turned and hit him in the chest and arms, anywhere she could reach. She was so strong, but he didn’t release her.

“Cecilia, it’s me. Alphonse. It’s okay. I’m here. It’s okay,” he said as he tried to embrace her. She stopped, looked wild-eyed up at him, and sagged against his chest. He held her as she sobbed and keened.

“Shhh...you’re okay. It’s me,” he murmured into her hair.

God, he hoped she was okay.

“What in the hell is goin’ on here?” Paul boomed from behind them. Alphonse turned to see him come barreling towards them with his massive axe at the ready. Paul saw the man on the ground.

“Johnny. Babe. What happened?”

“This man attacked Cecilia.”

“That son of a bitch! Are you all right, Babe? You were supposed to watch her, Johnny!”

Paul admonished. He turned her around so he could look at her. Her left cheek was swollen and turning purple. Alphonse hadn’t noticed the bruise before. He couldn’t remember ever being so angry. Angry at himself most of all.

Paul was right.

He should never have let her out of his sight. Guilt slammed into him. He lunged towards Cecilia’s attacker, but Paul held him back.

“Let me go!” Alphonse cried.

“I got this, Johnny,” Paul said as he stomped toward the man. He stood over him, nudged him with his giant boot, and raised his axe. The man came to and screamed as Paul swung the blade down until its sharpened edge rested against the man’s neck. He fainted, and blood beaded along the slight cut on his neck.

“Coward,” Paul snorted. “Not such a tough guy now, huh? Take Babe back, Johnny. I’ll take care of this animal.” Alphonse nodded. Paul reached down and grabbed one of the man’s legs and dragged him like a ragdoll back towards town.

“What are you going to do with him?” he asked Paul as he and Cecilia followed behind.

“He made a deal, didn’t he? To work for me? So, I’ll bring him upriver like he was supposed to. It’s pretty dangerous work, so if he’s good, he’ll live. But he doesn’t look like he

knows what he's doin', so I'll be surprised if you see him back here again," Paul said. Alphonse guessed the man would meet an unfortunate accident before Paul and his men ever made it to the site upriver. He wished he could go along, to take care of the bastard himself, but when he looked down at Cecilia who was pale as a ghost, he knew he couldn't leave her.

Not now. Not ever.

~

When they made it back to his home, Alphonse helped Cecilia to the settee and then heated water on his stove so he could clean her cuts. He looked back at her as she stared blindly at Mutter's piano. His heart broke for her, and that pain warred with the rage he still felt when he thought of that man on top of her.

He loved her. He couldn't deny it, and that thought no longer frightened him.

The past several months, spending every day with her, was like the sun had finally burst through the clouds that hung over him the moment Mutter breathed her last breath. He had buried himself in work, in the safety of his numbers, to forget the pain of losing his parents and the dream of the new lives they had planned to build together in this land of opportunity. Could it be possible he could find that dream with Cecilia?

Once the water was warm enough, he poured it in a bowl, and sat next to Cecilia. He gingerly cleaned her dirt-streaked face and soaked her bloodied knuckles. He wrapped some ice in a towel and gave it to her to hold against her bruised cheek. She let him gently check her over to make sure nothing was broken. And then, he waited.

“I can’t believe it was him,” she said after what seemed like an eternity. Alphonse tucked a loose strand behind her ear. He deliberately slowed his movements, so he didn’t frighten her. His strong Cecilia seemed so fragile now.

“Do you know that man, Cecilia?” he asked.

“Not really. He was a customer at the saloon I worked at before Paul found me. I was the piano player, but the owner decided I needed to start earning money the way the other girls did.” Her rushed words stunned him, and he was sure he had heard her correctly.

“Saloon? Girls?” Alphonse gently tilted her chin up so he could look into her eyes. “Talk to me, Cecilia.” She was quiet, and he worried she wouldn’t say any more. She surprised him when she raised her hand and cupped his cheek. He leaned into it, loving the heat that was always there whenever they touched.

“After I left Aunt Mathilda’s, I told you I was headed to New York City,” she said. He nodded, not speaking for fear she wouldn’t continue if he interrupted. “Well, a man stole my money and train ticket after I had fallen asleep, and so I got kicked off at the next stop. I didn’t have enough money to purchase another ticket, so I headed across the street to the Axe Handle Saloon to get something to eat and maybe find a place I could sleep for the night. There, I met Sarah, one of the prostitutes, and she introduced me to Mrs. Palmer.”

Alphonse remembered Paul had mentioned that name. He had an idea where Cecilia’s story was going, but he just listened, even if it would kill him to hear the words he was afraid she would speak.

“She and I made a deal. I would play the piano at the saloon for a small fee, and she would give me room, board, and half of my tip jar every night. I had been there for a little over six months when she decided she wanted me to do more.”

“More?” he asked. He couldn’t help himself. The words were out before he could stop them. His imagination and burning anger were wreaking havoc on his usually rational mind. He felt her trembling hand tightly grip his. He pulled her into his arms, rested his chin on her head, and willed his strength so that it could support and calm both of them.

“There was a table of four men,” her voice sounded distant and he knew she was back in that night. “They apparently took a liking to me and offered Mrs. Palmer enough money for her to break our deal. I tried to tell her I wouldn’t do it, but Alphonse, she beat us girls. All of us. And she threatened me that night that she would whip me so hard, and so I said nothing and acted like I would do it. But I was already planning a way to escape.”

Tears streamed down her face, and Alphonse added Mrs. Palmer to the list of people he wanted to kill.

“You don’t have to—” he whispered.

“No, I need you to know. I don’t want any secrets between us,” she said. “Instead of going straight to my room to pretend like I was getting ready, Mrs. Palmer said I had to introduce myself to the men first. When I got close to their table, one of the men pulled me down into his lap. He groped and pinched and squeezed and...and...he...” Gulping sobs broke her words and Alphonse no longer held back his own tears.

“He reached up under my skirt and touched me...there,” she cried.

“Oh God, Cecilia. I am so sorry,” he said.

“It was him, Alphonse. The man today. It was him.”

“I should have broken his neck when I pulled him off of you,” he lamented. “I should have grabbed Paul’s axe and separated his head from his body. I should have—”

“Shh, it’s okay,” she said. She was comforting him now, and he was ashamed of himself. “I hurt him that night. Not as bad as I did today. I think I would have killed him if you hadn’t stopped me. I want to thank you for that.”

“You cannot possibly be thanking me. He laid his hands on you! Again! I never should have let you out of my sight. I saw you and wanted to follow you. If only I hadn’t entered just a few more figures before I closed up, I would have reached you before he did. Can you ever forgive me?” he asked.

“Alphonse, stop. It’s not your fault. I was worried that those men might be among Paul’s new hires and that’s why I had been keeping inside. After several days, I hadn’t seen them, so I thought I was safe. I should have told you what had happened. I was just scared you would think me a wagtail,” she said.

“Never. You are so brave, Cecilia.”

“I don’t feel brave. I run every time I feel trapped,” she said. She looked so defeated, and his heart hurt for her. He wanted so badly to make all of her nightmares to go away. He was used to having control over everything in his world. Numbers fit easily into columns and there were rules to keep them in order. With Cecilia, he felt fragmented, but he didn’t care because not being with her was an unacceptable answer. He understood now the pain Vater felt after losing Mutter.

“I love you,” he whispered.

Had he said those words out loud? They both stilled. Alphonse wasn’t sure he even breathed as he waited for her to say something, anything, to slap him even, for he likely deserved it for his poor timing.

Cecilia laid the ice pack down and cradled his face in her palms. And to his great relief, she smiled.

It had been a month since Cecilia's attack, and Alphonse finally felt like things were getting back to normal. As Paul promised, the man was not good at being a lumberjack and perished moving logs on the river. The other men were mostly mum about what happened, but Alphonse overheard some of them laughing about spinning logs easily snapping a man's neck when he fell between them. He wished he could have been there to see it.

He and Cecilia were inseparable now, except for at night. It was getting harder for him to leave her at her door when he walked her back to her room after spending the evening at his home talking, reading, playing the piano, and dreaming about the future. He was going to ask her to marry him, but he wanted to talk to Paul first to ask for his blessing. The giant man wasn't her family, but he was the closest she had to one out here in the woods and Alphonse was compelled to honor as many traditions as possible. He wanted it to be as close to perfect for her as he could make it. He was working in his office when just the man he wanted to see bounded through his door.

"Paul, I've been wanting to speak with you," he said as he stood up. Paul looked down at the piles of ledgers on the desk.

"Everything okay with your figures, Johnny?" he asked.

"Absolutely. You know I am never wrong on those. You can always count on me."

Alphonse wasn't sure why he sounded like a salesman. He and Paul knew he was the best at what he did, but ever since the attack, Alphonse felt like he needed to prove himself to Paul. Cecilia implored him to quit blaming himself, but he didn't think he ever could.

"You are indeed the best, Johnny," Paul said as if he read his mind.

"Thank you. Umm...there is something I want to ask you. I mean, ask your permission. Not your permission so much as your blessing," Alphonse stammered. He was bungling this up something good.

Paul laughed, and extended his large hand across to Alphonse.

"You have it, Johnny. Not that you needed to ask me, but I am honored that you did."

"Wait, what? How do you know what I am talking about?" he asked Paul.

"You know, for someone who pays such close attention to details with his numbers, I'm surprised you never noticed that all of us here can see what is goin' on between you and Babe. Boy, you must be smitten for sure! We may be dumb lumberjacks, but we aren't blind. Well, Ole' Pete is close to it, but he can still spot a Bedcat a mile away," Paul joked.

"Thank you, Paul," he said, and he grasped Paul's hand.

Just then, a commotion of shouts and wagon wheels sounded from outside. Alphonse heard Cecilia and pushed past Paul as they both made their way out the door.

Ole' Pete was driving a wagon and next to him sat an older woman with the most ridiculous hat Alphonse had ever seen. The wagon stopped in front of his office.

"Whaddya got there, Ole' Pete," Paul asked. His eyes narrowed on the woman the elderly lumberjack was helping down from the seat.

"Well, Paul. I was on that errand you sent me to take care of and this church bell here talked her way onto my wagon insisting I take her to see Babe."

Alphonse looked at Paul. He didn't know that Ole' Pete was on an errand or for what purpose. Alphonse usually kept track of those things in a book for Paul. Paul actually looked sheepishly at Alphonse before he turned back to the woman who was now standing in front of them.

"Aunt Mathilda!" Cecilia shouted as she came running across the road. Alphonse's jaw dropped open. He couldn't believe it. His first instinct was to step in between the two women so he could protect Cecilia, but he waited to see what she would do.

"Cecilia! You're here!" her aunt cried as Cecilia ran up to her aunt and the two women embraced each other. Alphonse's chest tightened as he watched as shock and something else passed over Cecilia's face when she was in her aunt's arms. Was it relief? Did Cecilia finally feel safe? He couldn't blame her after everything that had happened to her since she left her home. Though he felt confident that Cecilia returned his love, she had yet to say the words back to him. Now her aunt was here, and that was a variable Alphonse had not calculated into his plans for a future with Cecilia.

"Aunt Mathilda, why are you here? How did you find me? I wrote to you that I was in New York City."

"My dear. You may be a wonderful musician, but you are terrible at subterfuge. The postmarks on your letters gave you away. Admittedly I didn't notice at first, but George did when I finally let him read one of your letters," she said. "He has been such a dear to me this past year since you left."

Cecilia tensed at hearing George's name, and Alphonse moved to stand beside her. Aunt Mathilda eyed him as he reached down to hold Cecilia's hand. Her lips pursed in disapproval,

and Alphonse didn't care what this woman thought, but he hoped Cecilia wasn't upset with him for his presumptuous behavior. Thankfully, she squeezed his hand.

"Aunt Mathilda, I am so sorry that I ran away. I explained everything in my letters to you. I don't want the life you want for me. I am happier than I have ever been," she said and looked up at Alphonse. Her smile warmed him. "I want to introduce you to Alphonse Gruenlah, Aunt."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Ma'am," he said and offered a curt bow. Aunt Mathilda looked him up and down, curled her lip, and looked back at Cecilia. Alphonse felt the snub to his bones.

"I'm Paul Bunyan. I own this town and lumberjack business. You've already met Ole' Pete. Johnny, here, is my right-hand man of business. Invented bookkeeping, he did," Paul boasted. Alphonse cringed at Paul's exaggeration even if he was grateful that Paul had his back, but tall tales would not impress someone like Cecilia's aunt.

"Mr. Bunyan, I thank your man for offering me a ride to your..." she looked at the buildings around her with contempt, "rustic village. I would like to ask for one more favor of him and that is to take Cecilia and I back so that we can catch the train tomorrow. I am taking her home."

"No!" This came from both Alphonse and Cecilia.

"I am *not* going back with you, Aunt, and I most certainly am *never* going back to that town. That place with the saloon. That's where..." she struggled. Alphonse put his arm around her. Her aunt could take her pinched face to the devil for all he cared.

"Now, Ole' Pete," Paul interrupted. Alphonse had forgotten the old lumberjack was still there, just silently watching. "Were you able to take care of that errand I sent you on?"

“I sure did,” Ole’ Pete smiled and winked at Paul. “That’s when I met this here church bell.”

“*Please* refrain from calling me that, sir. It’s rude,” she demanded. “Mr. Bunyan, I met your man when I arrived in the town fresh off the train. There was a funeral being held for a prominent woman. A Mrs. Palmer, I believe you said her name was.” She looked directly at Ole’ Pete.

“Yes, that was her name,” Ole’ Pete replied. Alphonse felt Cecilia sag next to him as her legs gave out. He caught her just in time and held her up until she was able to stand on her own. He looked from Paul to Ole’ Pete and saw the smiles pass between the two lumberjacks.

“This errand, Paul—” Alphonse began.

“Nothing you need to write down in any book, Johnny. This one was personal. For all of us,” he said with a pointed look at Alphonse. He realized the lumberjacks had taken care of Mrs. Palmer so that she would never hurt another person ever again. My God, Cecilia was turning them all into raging murderers. He was relieved, though, because thoughts of killing Mrs. Palmer took up more space in his head than he would ever admit to anyone. He nodded his thanks to both Paul and Ole’ Pete and was rewarded with a cheeky wink from the elder logger.

“Now, Cecilia. Get your things. We must be on our way,” Aunt Mathilda said.

“I told you, Aunt. I’m not going back.”

“But you must! George has said he will look past your antics. He still wants to marry you.”

“No! Aunt, you are not listening. You never have.”

“I’ve bought you a new piano! A *grand* piano! Consider it a wedding present.”

Aunt Mathilda's gift made Alphonse nervous. He knew how important music was to Cecilia, and he could not offer her such a fine instrument as a new grand piano.

"I already have a beautiful piano to play, Aunt," she said. Cecilia looked at Alphonse, and he saw the question in her eyes. He smiled at her. He had been silent long enough.

"Yes, she does. And she will not marry George because she is going to marry me," he said. He held his breath as Cecilia gasped and grabbed both of his hands.

"Do you mean it, Alphonse?" she asked.

"Yes, but I wanted it to be more romantic than this. And certainly more private," he replied. Could he do nothing right?

"That is so sweet of you, but all I care about is that you want me to be your wife!"

"More than anything I have ever wanted in my entire life. Will you marry me, Cecilia?" he asked. He didn't get down on one knee, but he wanted to ask her directly. Behind him, he heard sniffing. Ole' Pete was wiping at his eyes with a dusty handkerchief.

"Yes, yes, yes!" Cecilia squealed. He pulled her to him and kissed her in front of everyone. Whoops and hollers filled the air as the rough town full of gruff woodmen celebrated.

"That is enough!" Aunt Mathilda yelled, but Alphonse ignored her. No one, not even...what had Ole' Pete called her? Church bell, yes. Not even that old church bell was going to ruin this moment.

Cecilia jerked back from him, and he saw that her aunt had grabbed her arm and tried to pull her away.

Verdammt, this woman was relentless. But she was right about one thing. It was enough.

“You will unhand my betrothed, Ma’am,” he ordered her. His accent was strong the more upset he was, but it only made him sound more menacing. Her aunt cowered, and Cecilia moved back to stand next to him.

“Aunt Mathilda, please let me go. I promise you. I’m happy,” Cecilia said. Her voice softened in one final attempt to get her aunt to listen. Alphonse hoped the old woman would hear her niece and wish them well.

“You are *just* like your mother! I tried to raise you properly, but to no avail. Fine, then! Stay here in this scandalous town, but I will not remain for one second longer. Mr. Pete! Take me back to the town so I may make tomorrow’s train,” she bellowed.

“You heard her, Ole’ Pete. Better get her back to where she came from,” Paul laughed.

“Happy to do so, Paul,” he replied. Ole’ Pete took hold of Aunt Mathilda’s hand to help her up into the wagon, but her foot got caught on her voluminous skirts and she fell backwards. Before she landed on Ole Pete’s head, Paul caught her by her bottom and hefted the woman up in the air and she plopped down hard onto the seat.

“Well, I never!” she cried.

“I never have either, and I hope I never have to again,” Paul said. Everyone laughed, except for Cecilia’s aunt of course, and Alphonse swore he would never forget the look on the church bell’s face when Ole’ Pete climbed up next to her and winked at her.

“Are you okay?” Alphonse asked Cecilia as she watched her aunt disappear out of town.

“Yes, I am. I wish she would have understood, but she did the same thing to my mother and father. I don’t think she will ever change how she feels, but that’s not for me to worry about. I have you now. I love you, and I am so happy to be your wife,” she said. Hearing her finally say those words made his heart beat hard inside his chest.

“I love you, too. You have made the happiest of men, Cecilia. I want to give you the world if I can.”

Alphonse meant it, too. He would do whatever and go wherever she wanted. He knew her dream of going to New York City was still a strong one, and he was determined to make it come true for her. He would talk it over with Paul as soon as he could.

“I sure hate to lose you, Johnny. No one does figurin’ like you do,” Paul said as he hefted another trunk into the back of the wagon. “And Babe. I will never be sorry enough for what happened to you. I promised you would be safe here, and I failed you, my little blue friend.”

Alphonse tightened the ropes holding the piano upright. He looked at Paul, and saw that his eyes were slightly red. Had the giant been crying?

“It’s not your fault, Paul,” Cecilia said, and reached up to give him a hug. “I should have told you everything that happened to me when you rescued me.” Paul lifted her off her feet and hugged her back. She was swallowed up by his huge arms.

“Thank you, Paul, for helping us with the wagon and well...for all that you have done for me these past few years. I will never forget you,” Alphonse said. Paul lowered Cecilia to the ground and pulled Alphonse in for a quick hug. Alphonse couldn’t breathe from Paul’s vice-like arms, but he didn’t mind. He was going to miss his boss—his friend—and all the other men that welcomed him here in the backwoods, but he wanted a new start and a new life with Cecilia.

“You two be safe headin’ east,” Paul said. He patted Alphonse on the back and then released him.

“We will,” Alphonse said. He took Cecilia’s hand and helped her up into the seat of their wagon. He took one last look back at his office and home. He was grateful for all the memories this place held for him. But it was time to move on, and so he climbed up, settled next to Cecilia, and snapped the reins. The wagon jerked forward and slowly made its way out of the logging village.

“Goodbye, Paul,” he said as he looked one last time at his giant friend.

“Goodbye, Johnny.”

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“Think he’ll remember us?” Cecilia asked after one last wave to Paul before he was out of sight.

“Oh, I think he will. He probably has a tale or two already, and if he doesn’t, the men will,” Alphonse laughed. He never thought he would miss those outrageous stories, but he knew he would. He should write them down. Maybe his children would like to read them. And it would be something for his grandchildren to read to their children after he was gone. It was a sad thought, but more a happy one as he envisioned his future with Cecilia and growing old together. Something his parents did not get to do.

“I wonder what he will say about me?”

“You? You will probably be some flaming goddess that slayed all the evil men in the Northwest with her beautiful music,” he mused. Alphonse looked forward to the music she would play for their children someday.

“I like that,” she chuckled. “But I will probably end up a stubborn mule or something. Or maybe even a Bedcat!”

“Paul wouldn’t dare,” he replied.

But Alphonse knew that Paul most certainly would.