

## Arbiter of Judgement

By Evel Slania

I loved my hometown, Chicago, and never pictured myself leaving. In the 1850s, I watched the city rapidly expand and fill with new people daily. The railroad industry had brought opportunity and wealth to our folks. I was a blossoming lady at the time, the world captivated my every interest. When I was sixteen, I met James, who swept me off my feet. He worked with my father at the railroads and was charming and fit. How could I say no when he proposed? My parents already loved him. Soon after the wedding, James was ready to leave the state for the allure of California gold. “We will make it rich Lucy! Just you and I. Won’t be a need to compete with all the people like it is here.” He’d proclaim. *Just you and I* would echo in my head as we packed our bags and made our long journey west.

Tombstone, Arizona was dry and red for miles; a stark contrast from Chicago. I saw one side of the settlement to the other. Taking in the surroundings, the mayor came out to introduce himself. James smiled and shook his hand firmly, locking eyes, and establishing confidence. A chuckle let out here and there from the two of them. The mayor was satisfied with James' performance and brought us to our lodging. The shack had housed plenty before us. James grinned, dropped our luggage to the ground, and left me to unpack. He walked out the door and I did my duties.

That night he came home slurring his speech. He had been at the saloon all day making friends with the locals. It wasn’t long before he passed out, snoring like a bear. *Just you and I...*

That morning as I prepared breakfast, I asked him how his night had gone as he rose from our bed, groaning.

“Shut the hell up!” he yelled, throwing his boot in my direction. Startled, I knocked over the pot of water I was boiling on the stove. It splashed down my arm and leg.

I screamed out in pain. Realization coming over him, he stumbled towards me, picked up the pot, and put dry cloth on my burns.

“Darlin’ I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten ya’. I just have a headache s’all,” he spoke gently, and I could smell the alcohol on his breath. “I met some folks down at the saloon, them were Mark, Jerry, And Tom. Said they’d have work for me and we’d be rich in no time! Don’t that sound nice?”

I hesitated, still reeling in pain, but forced a smile and nodded. Kissing him on his cheek, “Why don’t you go get washed up? I’ll fix my mess, yeah?”

He smiled something wicked and left to clean up.

Over the next couple of months, I felt frozen in time. I stayed home while James left for work. My burns slowly healed from one of the only green desert plants out there. I only left the house to do laundry and bathe. I saw the other town women then. We’d exchange pleasantries, but when they saw my burns, it was as if I had the mark of the beast.

One evening when James returned from work, he was different, like when we first met. He approached me from behind, swaying to and fro, twirled me even. I leaned into him, feeling his warmth, craving it. We made love for the first time since our arrival in Tombstone. I smiled.

Then he held my hand, and looked me deep into my eyes, “We’re going to be rich Lucy,” he whispered, “I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything”

“We have some tools left out in our old mining spot. A new group took over the area, but we need our supplies back. We’re going to go back there tomorrow to retrieve it. Could you be

our lookout? That way if someone sees you, they won't suspect nothing, just act lost. When you ask for help, that'll be our signal. Whaddya' say?" James' eyes begged. At the time, I didn't think anything of it.

"Sure, I could do that."

James smiled and fell asleep. I lay awake, nervous, yet excited to see something new.

The next day James left and I did my duties as usual. When the sun went down, I paced waiting for what felt like hours for the men to arrive.

James rolled up driving the carriage and the men sat in the back of the covered wagon. I was instructed to sit in the front alongside James. It was silent as we made our way into the desert. We stopped alongside a large boulder. After the men got out, James told me where to go, and went off in the direction the other men did.

It wasn't long before I saw a light coming from the darkness in my direction. This group didn't look like miners, they were travelers. I didn't even have a chance to speak before it happened.

Within moments of the travelers approaching me, war cries echoed around us, bouncing off the walls of the boulders. It was like the distorted symphony of the coyotes heard on a hunt. James, Mark, Jerry, and Tom sprang from the shadows wielding pickaxes. They had become animals on the hunt and I was their bait. Screaming came from every direction in fear and aggression. The traveler's horses bucked amid the chaos, breaking free from the wagon and running off. I tried to shield myself, not knowing where to go or what to do.

Suddenly, everything fell silent and everyone stopped, feeling our hearts pound in a wave of dread. The hair on my arms rose on end and I began to sweat. No one dared to move. It was as if all color was drained from the world.

It was the men who moved first. They dropped their weapons, fell to their knees, and began to plead through sobs. The smell of burning flesh and oil filled the air, my eyes watered and I choked. Hearing the sound of horse hooves approaching between the men's weeping, the entity came before us. The apparition was of a man on horseback as if created by pure gun smoke. He stopped and stood before James and his men. Silver eyes like moonlight, the only distinguishing feature, staring through the hearts of the men below him. A low vibration was sent through the air as the entity drew his pistol, the smoke swirling of his being intensifying. He pointed it at James and with a flash and a bang, everything went black.

When I woke up the next day, my head was pounding, and I was lying in the shade of a boulder. The sun was just rising. Suddenly remembering who I was and where I was, I scrambled to my feet. Before me were the scattered remains of the men I came here with. All except for my husband, who was still in one piece, aside from his chest cavity having been ripped open. I didn't stay around long enough to look real close. However, my burns were now healed. The travelers were gone. The chaos of the previous night's horrors was spread out before me and I was numb. I was left with a canteen of water, a horse, and a path; those would at least get me to town. This time I really was lost and alone; mentally wounded for certain. But, now I was free, no longer was it "Just you and I".

I went back home to Chicago as fast as I could. I told my parents that James died in a mining accident and no one seemed all that surprised or bothered. "I'm sorry sweetheart, but mining is a dangerous gig, no doubt." my father would say.

In the darkness of the night, I think back on that night and that entity; the arbiter of the desert. Was I really worth saving that night? He came for blood, yet spared my own. My savior is the darkness; horrific, and wild, reaping the souls of the wicked, a silhouette among the stars.

If you're headed west, I wish you the best, because the Reaper's in Arizona.