

## The Gunslinger's Guilt

With their heads bowed in the ultimate portrayal of both genuine grief contrastingly blended with the most uncomfortably evident hypocrisy, every tear-soaked face turned towards the back of the church, where the doors had opened and banged loudly against their corresponding walls.

Silence.

Mouths hung agape and eyes grew wide with shock. It was as if the accumulated fear was suspended in the air along with thick, asphyxiating tension.

The only noise to disturb the taciturnity was the striking of his spurred boots against the cherrywood floor. His presence enraged the family and friends of the deceased, but no one dared protest, aware of its little value until he were to try fixing for trouble.

Opinions didn't matter to him. His stubborn attitude had made that clear enough long before he'd come.

He made his way to the polished casket, one hesitant step at a time. Despite the mistaken presumptions that were forming in the minds of those who were gathered that evening, his tinted glasses weren't hiding guiltless eyes of vindictive intent, but the bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes of true remorse.

Upon having finally approached the dreadful box that was soon to be buried under the desert dirt, he nearly collapsed. The sight was almost unrecognizable.

Gone was the vibrant blush of a generous spirit. What used to be a healthy color was replaced with a pale grey tone. He cringed at the caked layers of makeup that failed to fully cover her prominent wounds, serving only to smother her complexion even further. Her hair was robbed of its luster, appearing as dry as her lips that, he knew too well, were smooth and moist, nothing like their current state. A million thoughts were racing through his own mind, things he couldn't admit to anyone. Since her death, he's spent every day and night debating whether what he has done was justifiable, only to end up deciding that it was completely inexcusable.

Slowly, he reached into his coat pocket and produced a lopsidedly-folded dark red rose.

He said nothing as he laid the rose atop the closed lower cover of the casket. He took one last look before turning around and walking out.

He took careful steps towards the back of the church. As he proceeded along the pews, he didn't stop to talk to anyone or take his glasses off to stare down those with their eyes glued to him. Even after all he'd just seen, he didn't regret paying her the final visit. After all of the sobs he strained to keep back, his expression softened at the most unforgettable image forever instilled in his memory.

She was buried with her gun poised in her hand.

It was comforting for him to have seen that the statement she stood for would continue long after she perished. Some of the guilt weighing him down was eased off for him while his eyes rested on the sight of her delicate fingers wrapped round the handle of her Colt single action army revolver. He wasn't surprised upon seeing how she was poised to be remembered, and in all

honesty, it brought a smile to his face and warmed his heart. She might have been holding an intricately engraved weapon, but make no mistake, she was no proponent of violence, no matter how much pain anyone dare to introduce to her. She was simply a gun right's activist, seeking the freedom to exercise her right to use her gun for recreational aim practice. She shot targets with expert precision and encourage gun safety. For her, guns symbolized courage and self-defense, not tragedy or aggression.

He seemed to have been the only one who wasn't taken aback by her parent's decision towards how to have her buried. She was a brave and strong girl-no, *woman*-and she deserved to be recognized for having put up with so much.

He continued to walk towards the double doors of the church, deep in . Knowing she'd been accepted into the kingdom above into the Lord's embrace at the time of death provided an unusual feeling of solace for him. The thought of her being free from what ceaseless torment he inflicted upon her flooded him with relief. Having finally reached the doors, he sucked in a deep breath and exited for good.

Years later, he can still remember the dreadful occurrence crystal clear as he kicked through a screen door. While his fellow officer handled the man inside of the trailer, he gently took a woman's hand and led her away from her attacker and to a safer environment.