

JUDGEMENT OF THE MOUNTAINS



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SUMMARY

Set in the wild, lawless frontier of Barberton during the South African gold rush, *Judgement of the Mountains* is an epic tale of survival, vengeance, and redemption. At the heart of the story is Johan Grimbeek, a skilled and relentless tracker wrongfully accused of murder and robbery. With a warrant for his arrest, Grimbeek flees into the rugged mountains, determined to clear his name by capturing the elusive Black Prince, a legendary wild horse that holds the key to proving his innocence.

But Johan's mission is far more than just survival, it is a quest for justice. Driven by a personal vendetta against Mario Perreira, a ruthless tyrant and murderer, Johan faces enemies both human and untamed as he hunts the man responsible for devastating crimes against his family. Meanwhile, Magda du Preez, a courageous and determined young woman, harbors her own secret vendetta against Perreira. Her journey collides with Johan's, and together they must navigate the dangers of the mountains, facing betrayal, violence, and the unyielding forces of nature. As Johan wrestles with fever, betrayal, and relentless pursuit by both Perreira's men and the law, he is torn between his thirst for vengeance and his growing bond with Magda. Amidst breathtaking adventures, dangerous encounters, and the ghosts of their pasts, the pair unearth secrets that reveal the depth of Perreira's treachery and corruption.

In a world where every step can mean life or death, *Judgement of the Mountains* captures the rugged beauty of the South African wilderness and the human spirit's capacity for love, survival, and sacrifice. Will Johan succeed in proving his innocence and avenging the lives shattered by Perreira? Can Magda achieve her goal without losing herself in the pursuit of revenge? Filled with action, romance, and mystery, this riveting tale will keep readers on the edge of their seats until the final page.

EXTRACT

Magda takes off her gloves, interlocks her well-groomed and white fingers, and with her blue eyes she looks deeply into the eyes of the man in front of her. His pale hair, with gray patches here and there, grows wildly down his neck. He has laid his floppy wide-brimmed hat down next to him. His eyes are watery and small, but there is a light dancing in them that betrays his sly tricks to any connoisseur. Some of the liquid that he quickly slurps out of the glass clings to his mustache.

“I don’t particularly want to talk to you about horses, but considering you are so horse mad and will steal the two stallions sooner or later if I don’t give them to you as a gift, you can just go and get them...”

There is all kinds of life in the old horse thief’s face.

“Thank you, Magda, but you mustn’t talk about stealing, I don’t steal anymore,” comes apologetically from Botes.

“Nor any less,” is Magda’s apt and sarcastic answer. “But there is a condition, you don’t get it completely free of course. You must first do me a favor.”

“You all have conditions. You know I’m crazy about horses,” he grins, proud of his reputation that he would give his soul to the devil in exchange for a beautiful horse.

For a moment, Magda gets the smell of his brandy breath. She loathes it.

“Which other people have promised you horses then?” she interrupts him.

3. JUDGEMENT OF THE MOUNTAINS

CHAPTER 1

When she climbs out of the car and has to lift her long, elegant dress slightly to get to the step, there are one or two men on the hotel porch and the sidewalk who hastily look away, because they know it is indecent for a man to see more than an inch or so of a lady's ankle. But a few impudent ones actually turn their necks to stare at the unusually attractive girl.

The shy men are three fellows, two of whom have bushy beards. They stand aside and chat. The other two, who look neater, stand away from them by a porch pillar.

"Well, well! What man can remain calm," is the comment of one of the blatantly staring ones. The other one laughs softly at his mate's remark, as if he thinks it's a bit far-fetched to talk so loudly, because the girl who climbed out of the car and is about to enter the hotel, is clearly a decent lady who will take offense if she should hear them. She has gleaming reddish-brown hair under a small, almost ridiculous hat, and her lithe, muscular but agile female body is dressed in a very neat dress. The two fellows who quickly turned their bearded faces away and pretended they didn't see anything, glare at the brazen fellow who dared to be so brutal as to make a remark about the lady that she could have heard. They are not yet accustomed to the new conditions here, because they have been away in the wilderness for months. As recently as 1884, a woman was almost an unknown being in these parts. Only men, and only of the most hardened types, dared to venture through the mountains here.

If they came with trek oxen following the lush pastures of the Lowveld, they had to guard the cattle practically day and night against vermin and other robbers. As a result, there was no place and time for women. And even less so if they were after gold and had to mix with adventurers from the wild parts of the world.

That girl walks up the porch steps. There is a slightly shy expression on her face because of the staring men's eyes. For a moment, she looks hesitant, but then she goes through the front door.

A young man with a revolver at his side, had just now rushed forward

when she wanted to get out of the car and offered to help her with her luggage. He had gallantly extended his hand to help her out of the car, but she said curtly. "No, thank you."

He now walks towards the other two fellows.

"I know her," it comes hesitantly but with a kind of pride in his voice when he comes to the others.

"But she treated you rather badly!" is the remark of a neatly dressed middle-aged man who is slyly sucking on a pipe.

"The poor girl is sometimes so withdrawn and curt these days," he explains with importance. "I know her from Moordfontein. Her boyfriend, one Robert Viljee, to whom she was engaged, was recently shot dead in a fight there in the heart of Niemandland."

"Aha," the short-built fellow says indifferently, "then one can make a move again there, or what?"

Magda du Preez goes into the hotel. She inquires from a native servant who walks through the hallway where she can speak to the owner. The black man says she must wait a while and he will call the hotel owner. He is a stout, round-faced foreigner, of which nationality Magda cannot immediately determine. He seems surprised to see such a clearly decent Afrikaans girl before him who wants to book a place for herself in the hotel. It is no ordinary occurrence to see a decent girl of this type alone at a hotel in these parts. And he wonders for a while what the reason for it may be. However, he eventually attributes it to the fact that his cobbled together shack of a hotel has undergone a considerable improvement in the recent past.

"Yes, yes, certainly, Miss," he says. "Come this way, please."

Things are really starting to get better here in Colts Creek, he thinks to himself as he walks towards one of the four rooms on the newly built upper floor of the stone-and-wood-and-zinc hotel. Six months ago, few decent women, even if accompanied by their husbands, would ever have thought of taking a room here, but these days even an important person who represents financial interests abroad, comes and stays for a day or two. Last month, even a "Sir" from England and his party had a meal here and lingered for a while in the bar-lounge in the late afternoon, probably more out of curiosity than anything else, but still. He keeps the upper new bedrooms only for rich visitors of this nature,

but for a pretty girl like this...

He suddenly stops and looks sharply and suspiciously at Magda du Preez. Could she perhaps be one of those “other kind” of women of whom quite a few have recently arrived here? They are indeed “good business” because they get the men to come here, but one does not give them one’s best rooms.

However, he quickly comes to the conclusion that this girl is definitely not one of that kind, and with a friendly smile he continues on.

A while later, after Magda has had the luggage unloaded and the car taken to the backyard of the hotel, she closes the door of the hotel room and sits down with a sigh on the bed. She is glad that she is finally here... but she suddenly feels so terribly alone and forlorn. She gets up and looks out of the small, square window at the dusty, unattractive pioneer village and the beautiful mountains behind it. Then she sits down on the bed again and suddenly falls forward onto the pillow and bursts into sobs. The sobs tear from her chest and shake her body.

She takes the pillow in her hands and presses it tightly against her face as if to prevent herself from continuing to cry. She stifles her own sobs and after a while she calms down. Then she gets up, pours water from the washbasin into the bowl and washes her face. It makes her feel much better and when she closes the curtain in front of the window and starts putting on another dress, there is a completely different, a firmer and more determined attitude to be detected in her.

She opens the curtain again and in front of the small mirror she adjusts her hair. In her blue eyes flashes an unwavering intention for a moment and there is almost a trace of cynicism around her mouth. She has come here with a purpose and she is not going to shy away from it, no matter what it costs her to achieve it. Just now she is going to walk down and whatever the manager or other people may think, she is going to sit in the public lounge of the hotel and inquire with the women there, and even with the men if necessary, and gather information. She knows that such a public lounge is no place for an ordinary woman, especially if she is alone, but she is simply not going to allow that thought to deter her from the course she has embarked on.

When she walks down the creaking stairs a little later, that cold determination is still to be read in her eyes. She is not as elegantly

dressed now as when she arrived here, because she deliberately wanted to make a good impression on the manager because she had heard that hotels sometimes refuse to take in single girls and women if they are not known to him as being of impeccable character.

This lounge is just one of the most attractive novelties that has made the Hotel Royal the leading hotel of Colts Creek at the moment. It is furnished according to the latest American method, with a long arc of a bar counter on one side. In the far corner, a small platform has been installed for a concertina orchestra that comes over from Barberton once a week. Tables and chairs are scattered all over the large floor. Coloured waiters walk around among the guests and serve them with strong drinks or coffee or whatever.

Magda du Preez has come here with the aim of gathering information about where Mario Perreira is nowadays. She has learned that some of the men he works with are often seen here in Colts Creek and although she has not yet met anyone who has seen Perreira himself here, that information has made her decide that it is the best place to come looking for him. In Magda's heart only one desire burns, she wants to ask Mario Perreira certain questions, get certain information about herself and her past from him, and then she wants to get very close to him, no matter under what pretense, and then she will pull out the long sharp knife that she will keep hidden in her bosom and repeatedly stab it into his body. She thinks of this cold lust for revenge in her heart when she steps into the lounge. She still remembers the day when the news reached her that Robert Viljee, her fiancé, had been shot dead in the field like a dog. The man who did it had disappeared without a trace and a story was spread that Robert Viljee had met the man in the field and had an altercation with him that led to a shooting. Robert's revolver was in his hand when they found him, and two places in the cylinder magazine had empty casings in them. From there it was inferred that he had died in a fight. However, Magda does not believe for a moment that this is the case. Those bullets were fired by the murderer precisely with the aim of creating such an impression.

Magda knows that he was shot dead on the orders of that mysterious tyrant who was formerly known as the Mask of Niemandslan.

Magda lingers in the middle of the lounge. There are quite a lot of

people in the place and many eyes follow her the lustful eyes of men who watch the supple movements of her body, and critical eyes of women. She mostly hears foreign languages and she notices that it is a low, cheap company. She is surprised that she adapts so well to the environment because she walks apparently without self-consciousness to a small table in the corner.

An English-speaking waiter rushes towards her and she orders a glass of lime juice. She slowly drinks it away while looking around at the people further. At a table near her are three men in the company of a flirtatious, cheap foreign girl. One of the men plays guitar and the other one takes the girl by the waist and starts dancing around with her on the floor. A waiter brings a tray with a huge mug of beer for each man and a glass of liquor for the girl.

At the bar counter, which is fortunately quite a distance away from the table, she sees men in rough clothing busy satisfying their thirst for drink. A middle-aged man with leering eyes and a thin black mustache stands looking attentively at Magda and she is startled when she sees him approaching. She turns her face away and pretends she doesn't see him, but she notices that he is still coming closer. He is going to stand at an angle in front of her.

He is a Scotsman and it seems to Magda from his pronunciation that he has had rather too much to drink.

“Good afternoon, Miss,” he says. She pretends she doesn't hear him. But an icy feeling goes down her spine. The man apparently regards her as one of these other kind of women.

But that's what she was looking for, she thinks cynically to herself. This is not the time to back down. Still, she cannot muster the courage to take notice of the man. It is now quite clear to her that the fellow is not sober.

However, the next moment he says something that makes her involuntarily look at him.

“You are from Moordfontein's world, aren't you? You are Miss Du Preez, aren't you,” he says, as if to himself. When Magda's head gives a jerk and she involuntarily looks at him, he quickly comes closer and makes a bow next to her.

“Good afternoon, Miss Du Preez,” he says grinning. “You probably

don't know who I am?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't," comes icily from Magda. She looks away again.

"Well, well, well, it is pleasant to see acquaintances," he says and without her encouraging him, he pulls a chair closer and takes a seat at her table.

"The name is Murdoch," he says. "Will you not have a glass of wine or gin with me on good old Niemandslan?"

She does not answer.

A while later he says chattily.

"Today I also happened to run into two other Niemandslanders here, Johannes van Dyk and old Botes, the horse thief. They are just around the corner there in the bar."

Magda's heart suddenly beats faster when she hears this.

Old Botes, the horse thief! He is one of the men who used to work for that mysterious tyrant known as the Mask, the man whose identity was reportedly only recently revealed.

The mysterious brute was in another part of the Lowveld, exactly where Magda does not yet know, in a clash with other people, and then, according to what she heard, it came to light that he was a renegade Portuguese, Mario Perreira, a man who sometimes poses as a farmer, sometimes as an Englishman, but in reality was originally a Portuguese huckster who later became one of the greatest and most powerful villains in the Lowveld. A few months ago, this old Botes was often in Moordfontein and Magda knows with certainty that he sometimes did work for Perreira.

She now turns to Murdoch.

"What are so many people from Moordfontein doing here today?"

"No, I don't know. Just out on the 'spree'. I didn't really talk to old Botes and Van Dyk, because you see, I don't really count them as my class. Besides, they are both far gone."

Then I must get Botes in my hands, Magda suddenly thinks.

She gets up from the table, offers a half-mumbled excuse to Murdoch and walks away.

She goes out the door and walks along the wide porch to a bench where she sits down so that she can watch the front door from her. After a

while, she sees Murdoch come out and saunter down the street. She waits a little longer and then goes back into the revolving doors of the lounge and bar. When she looks over her shoulder, she sees old Botes standing at the counter.

The other men at the bar counter see her and they look at her a little surprised, because it is not really a place there right by the bar counter where women linger long. Old Botes also looks around and his almost toothless mouth smiles broadly.

Magda beckons him to come closer. When he obeys, she notices that his gait is unsteady. He extends a wrinkled hand towards her.

“My world, old daughter, what brings you to Colts Creek, old sister? How about a drink?” comes the invitation lispily.

“Sure, Botes. Let’s find a quiet corner in the lounge. I want to discuss urgent matters with you,” says Magda. “I heard you were here...”

The older man looks at her quickly, questioningly, then he pats her carelessly on the shoulder and with his glass in his hand they walk to the table in the farthest corner of the lounge.

“I only talk about horse matters. What about it, Magda, don’t you want to give that gray and sorrel to me yet? I’ll give you a good price,” he starts excitedly.

Magda takes off her gloves, interlocks her well-groomed and white fingers, and with her blue eyes she looks deeply into the eyes of the man in front of her. His pale hair, with gray patches here and there, grows wildly down his neck. He has laid his floppy wide-brimmed hat down next to him. His eyes are watery and small, but there is a light dancing in them that betrays his sly tricks to any connoisseur. Some of the liquid that he quickly slurps out of the glass clings to his mustache.

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“You all have conditions. You know I’m crazy about horses,” he grins, proud of his reputation that he would give his soul to the devil in exchange for a beautiful horse.

For a moment, Magda gets the smell of his brandy breath. She loathes it.

“Which other people have promised you horses then?” she interrupts him.

Botes does not answer immediately. He stares at the glass in front of him and there is a withdrawn look in his eyes. All of a sudden, the half-drunk Botes has forgotten his surroundings. He grins, shaking his head over something he is thinking about, and Magda studies his face with an expert look. It is as if the old, wrinkled face brightens, or the man suddenly looks younger.

Magda’s words have set his imagination going again. The blood courses faster through his veins. He sees the horse again in his imagination. Who has not yet heard of the muscular, cunning and clever, fast animal in the mountains?

And now that horse is going to be his, his!

When one sees that coal-black stallion, with his sparkling shiny skin, one is left breathless. It is as if Botes is now spying on him again from his farm through the binoculars, his head proudly in the air, the beautiful neck, the trembling life in the muscles under his skin, the powerful but slender and agile legs. It is as if he can hear him neighing again in his imagination a challenging neighing that echoes through the ravines and that suddenly causes the other horses in the area to raise their heads and snort bewildered.

The black stallion is a legend to some, a terror to people who trek with horses nearby, a mysterious kind of ghost horse to the blacks. One never gets very close to him and no one has ever been able to catch him. He, Botes, has tried several times with a lasso and on one of his fastest horses. He has already chased him into a ravine a ravine that he knows ends in a narrow passage. But the stallion of the mountains is too clever, each time he outsmarts a person. You think you have him, but the next moment he thunders in front of you in the ravine, twists snorting through the bushes and then you race past him, while he has fled stealthily behind a high rock and sends his sharp whistling neigh into

the ravines a neigh that sounds like a mocking laugh to Botes.

He plays with his pursuers like a cat with a mouse. Botes now sees him through the binoculars, high above him on a rock plate, head butting, pawing the ground with his forelegs, with a proud, defiant posture. Botes can't stop dreaming about the animal, to relive the day over and over in his imagination when that wild, untamed horse will be his the black ghost horse of the mountains, as wild and beautiful as the bushes and mountain world where he neighs. He, Botes, has given him the name Black Prince.

The horse is the last remaining one of a group of wild, ownerless horses that farmed there in the wild mountainous world on the border of Swaziland. No one knows exactly where they come from. Some people believe they are still descendants of a group of Voortrekkers who were murdered by wandering blacks during a hunting trip.

During the past few years, all the other horses have been caught one after the other. Only Black Prince has still thwarted the attempts of his pursuers.

He is simply too smart and too incredibly fast and agile to be trapped. "You haven't answered my question yet, Botes," Magda interrupts his flight of fancy.

But he doesn't hear her. His heart swells when he thinks that Perreira, Mario Perreira himself, has promised him that he, come hell or high water, will get the horse caught for him. He will send a number of men especially and they will catch the horse for him in exchange for certain services.

"Botes, I thought you were going to order a drink for me? I am thirsty. Please go and get me a mug of beer and a stiff tot of brandy for you," comes indifferently from Magda. Even if she has to get Botes drunk in order to help her, she will do it.

"Oh yes, that is true, but speaking of horses, let me tell you that one of these days I will be the owner of the Black Prince of the mountains, the wild thing..." Botes is as excited as a child.

"The wild horse! I have already heard of him... and how will you become the owner of that?"

"Perreira is going to catch him for me. Mario Perreira. He said so." Suddenly Botes breaks off. He has probably thought that Magda might

know who and what Perreira is. His eyes widen slightly and then he walks away quickly. He almost stumbles to the counter and soon returns with a glass of brandy and a mug of beer. He almost spills the liquid on the girl's pretty smock when he puts it in front of her and he gulped down his drink in two swigs without diluting it with water.

"Yes, my little darling," he now spoke in a hoarse whisper, as if wanting to tell her a great secret, "let me tell you," and his wrinkled hand clasped Magda's smooth, delicate hands. She let him carry on. "The other day I saw Perreira. He is somewhere here in the mountains, I don't know where. You've probably heard of him, haven't you?" he said with a wink. "He's a fellow who does things when he says he will! Often people think they can get the better of him. Take for instance that fellow Grimbeek. You know him, don't you? Oh yes, that's right, he actually used to work for you there in No Man's Land."

"Yes, Botes, what about him?"

Magda suddenly put her beer mug on the table. Her hands started to tremble with excitement.

Grimbeek! The name had a magical sound to it. Months ago, she had had the honor of being helped by the miracle worker who bore this name. He had risked his life for her. He and she had become good friends... but then one day he was gone on his white horse. There was a trace of sadness on his face, a longing for rest and peace, but also a trace of bitterness and determination. He had a task he had to complete, he had said. And he went off into the immeasurable bushveld, alone with only his faithful steed as a companion.

Magda quickly swallowed a bit of beer and leaned forward attentively. Her heart was pounding fast.

"What about Grimbeek, Botes?"

The old man cackled. He stroked his mustache. The last drink was quickly going to his head.

"I'm telling you, there are people who think they can get the better of him, I mean Perreira. People like Grimbeek. And now Perreira has got Grimbeek like this." He held his hand up and clenched his fingers together. "Yes, old thing, that's how we have him, Perreira and I..."

"Really? That sounds rather interesting!"

"Yes, we have him cornered. And all I have to do is testify in Barberton