

*The
Curse
of
Guadalajara
Rose*©

part 1 of 5

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Part One- The Road to Nogales

Outside Tombstone, October, 1880

Long Rifle had his head propped on his saddle, staring up at the night sky. Justice leaned back, studied the stars. "The stars are so thick and bright tonight, looks like somebody poured buttermilk in the sky."

"So many shooting stars." The heavens were putting on quite a show. "I wonder what it means. Something good coming? Or is there evil walking the earth?"

Justice sighed, pulled his buffalo felt Stetson off his head and set it against his bedroll, then sat down next to the fire. "There's always evil. I think..."

"What?"

"As long as we've been chasing him, I don't think we'll ever stop him, or burn evil off the face of this world. Maybe all we can do is keep close behind. Wear him down. Make him keep running."

"We'll do what we can do, Justice."

The night was cool after the blistering heat of the southern Arizona desert. Justice fed another piece of juniper wood into the fire. "You want some coffee?"

Long Rifle smiled at the stars above him. "I could drink a cup."

Justice settled the battered metal coffeepot down among the coals of the campfire, and they sat together in the dark, watching the sky, smelling coffee boiling and the desert wind, sage and juniper berries and wood smoke. Justice heard a horse picking his slow way over the tumbled sandstone, and Long Rifle sat up, reached for the Henry Rifle propped next to his saddle bags. "Justice, it sounds like Jacob's roan."

"Hello the camp." The man slid off his horse, walked forward holding the reins

until they could see who he was in the firelight.

Justice stood up, shook hands with the man they had been working for. He was a rancher named Jacob Lee, had asked for their help in the range wars that were burning up the west. The bloody detritus of the War Between the States had spilled across the Mississippi, spread to the lands of the Comanche, the Navajo, the Shoshone, the Blackfoot. Too many people and too little land, greed and racial hatred, the willingness to kill. The eagerness to kill, the pleasure in the pain-it left a rancid, burned smell, like brimstone, in the clean air. The Horsemen had seen it before, different ways in different places, different times, but it was always him, their brother, the fourth one of them. He rode a pale horse, and death rode with him.

When they'd had a choice, he was the only one who had chosen evil over good. And as long as he rode, spreading the seeds of destruction in this fertile western soil, Justice, Long Rifle, and Billy Steel rode after him, chopping down the evil vines that sprouted, tearing up the roots.

They had come to Tombstone because someone had asked for help to stop the killing. And it had stopped, for now. But evil was like a brush fire, liable to flame up again when your back was turned. "Jacob? What is it? Is there more trouble?"

The old man shook his head. Long Rifle thought he had a bit of Native blood--something in his face, in his dark eyes. His gray hair fell to his shoulders, curled around his collar, and he wore an old straw Stetson that was brown as his eyes. "I heard something in town. Thought I better let you know. It's about Billy Steel."

Billy Steel was the third Horseman, and he had taken a jaunt down into Old Mexico after some toy he'd heard about, a gun with pretty silver and gold inlaid grips called The Guadalajara Rose.

"Somebody down at the hotel just came back into town from Mexico, told this

story about a man with white hair and strange silver-blue eyes, rode a fine black stallion with a fancy silver bridle. This man was about to hang down in Nogales for shooting a woman. Strange thing about it was they said she was his mother, the woman he shot." Justice pulled the coffee pot from the fire, and Long Rifle collected three tin mugs. Neither of them spoke.

"I would say Billy Steel is one crazy son-of-a-bitch, but I can't believe he would kill a woman. And his mother, I mean, that's just..." Jacob Lee rubbed a tired hand over his forehead. "Nogales, that's a town where they make it easy to hang a stranger. So I thought I would go on down there and see about helping him out. You boys have helped me plenty. I..."

Justice handed him a cup of coffee, then poured another for Long Rifle. They looked at each other for a long moment over the deep red glow of the fire. "We thank you for bringing this information out here to us. I think the best thing would be if Long Rifle and I went on down to Nogales to see about Billy Steel. You're a strong man in a fight, Jacob Lee, but maybe you better stay close to your ranch and family. I'm not entirely sure we've cleared the trouble out of Tombstone."

"It's been quiet for weeks. I'm sure all those boys have gone west to California, Justice. Or back east to Texas. But you don't worry about me. Just go on after your boy, get Billy Steel out of trouble. I wouldn't want any man hanging in Nogales, and Billy, he's..." Jacob bent over his cup, took a sip. "I admit when I first saw you three, I was not sure things hadn't just got worse. You looked a lot tougher than honest men generally let themselves get to be. I've never seen a man with red hair like yours. Sometimes you look like your head's on fire, Justice. And Long Rifle, he's got that black hair down his back and a nose like a hatchet-he looks like an Indian!" He glanced at Long Rifle's dark face. "Sorry, Blackfoot. But you know what I mean. This just

doesn't seem to be a good time for people of different races to be getting along. But then Billy Steel sat down at my table, ate enough stew and biscuits for three men, told my wife what a good cook she was. It was a little thing, just a bit of courtesy, but it made my Jenny feel good, because she could tell he meant it. She told me that first night the three of you were gonna help, I wasn't to worry. I sure wish there was something I could do, help him out of this trouble."

"It was a help, coming out to tell us. We've been taking care of Billy Steel for a long time, and him of us. You don't worry now. And remember, Jacob Lee, you can call us anytime you need us, just like you did last time."

"I don't rightly know how I called you, tell you the truth."

"You said a prayer. For peace."

Justice and Long Rifle took less than ten minutes to break down the camp and saddle the horses. Long Rifle checked their weapons, stashed extra ammunition close at hand, and Justice filled up the waterskins down at the creek. Any trip down into Mexico, and a smart man would have extra weapons and extra water strapped to his horse. They started riding west, into the darkness.

Long Rifle brought his horse alongside Justice's. "What do you think Jacob meant, about Billy Steel's mother being the woman he shot?"

Justice shook his head. "I wish I knew. Billy Steel is not the kind of man who can keep anything important a secret. If his mother was alive, and living in Nogales, he would have been driving us crazy talking about going down to see her. Unless he didn't know she was there. Unless he didn't want to see her. In which case he wouldn't have

gone down to Nogales after that little gun." Justice shrugged. "I don't know. I seem to have the impression that she died when Billy was fourteen, but I don't know why I think that. I've been trying to remember if he said something."

"There's only one thing that makes any sense. It's him, and he's lured Billy Steel into this trouble by whispering in his ear about this magical gun, the Guadalajara Rose. It never misses, they say, and it's so beautiful, like holding the heart of your woman in your hand, men will sell their souls to own it." Long Rifle leaned across his horse and spit into the sand, as if he were trying to get a bad taste out of his mouth. "Isn't that what that old man said the gun was called, the Guadalajara Rose?"

"I wish I could speak to that *cabron*." Justice looked south, then turned his horse. "Here's the road to Nogales. But my guess is that he's no longer in Tombstone."

Dawn was breaking when they rode into the quiet streets of Nogales. The sky was a pretty gold and lavender, and the air was cool and clear for a few quiet moments, until the sun came boiling up out of the sky, turned everything bloody. There were several young women at the well in the town square, filling up clay pots of water and talking softly to each other, their eyes drawn irresistibly to the green-wood gallows that was standing on the far edge of the square. The rest of the town was still asleep, or safely tucked up in their houses. Justice and Long Rifle climbed down off their horses, looped the reins over the hitching post outside the jail.

Billy Steel was still alive. There were some upstanding citizens watching the show. He was stripped, his wrists pulled brutally tight above his head and tied to the metal

bars of the cell. His chest and face dug into the metal. The man in the cage with him, the one with the whip, had a beautiful Spanish face, long and elegant, with a silky black moustache that drooped over his chin. He raised the whip and slashed across Billy's back, once, twice, the sound a searing whistle and pop, then the slap of human flesh tearing, the sound of rawhide splashing in blood.

The men were enjoying the spectacle. They seemed to know something of wealth and power, if their boots were anything to go by. They appeared to be the men in charge in Nogales. One man had pock-marked cheeks and a reddish tint to his hair, was eating a tortilla rolled around a clump of refried beans, and he shoved the food into his mouth, nearly choked because he was laughing so hard at the sounds the prisoner was making. Justice thought that Billy Steel was trying to bite off his tongue to keep from screaming, or begging, in front of these men. Long Rifle swung his Henry up and pressed it against the man's temple, fired, and the tortilla fell out of his mouth and landed in the dirt.

Justice kicked over a chair, and the man sitting in it landed face down on the dirt floor. He never felt the bullet that lodged deep inside his brain, never smelled the burning gunpowder that filled the room like brimstone. Justice turned to the third man. His eyes were slick and wet with the enjoyment of the torture. Justice stared into his face while the man fumbled at his belt for a gun he wasn't wearing. Then Justice raised his gun, pressed it hard into his forehead, and pulled the trigger.

Long Rifle was in the cage, the Henry deep into the middle of the Spaniard's back. "Drop the whip and untie my friend. You may get to live another minute. Or maybe not."

The man turned, and his eyes got hungry when he saw Long Rifle. His face was pale, like a fever burned inside him, and he licked his mouth, his tongue suddenly dry.

"I know you. Don't I know you? I think once you belonged to me. Do you remember when you were my slave? This one is not your friend. He's a killer, meat for the gallows. But you know me, boy. I'm your father."

Billy turned his head just enough he could speak. His back had been whipped into a bloody mess. "Long Rifle. Kill him. Hurry. He's dangerous."

Long Rifle stepped back, and the man turned toward him, his arms raised as if in an embrace, the whip still in his hand, and the rapture on his face didn't change when the bloody flower bloomed in his chest, and he dropped to his knees. Long Rifle raised his foot, shoved the man over until he lay on his back in the dirt.

Justice pulled at the rawhide tying Billy Steel's wrists to the bars, but it was swollen and tight with blood, so he got out his knife, sawed through as best he could without slashing any arteries. "Billy, can you ride? They'll have heard the shots. We need to get gone."

"Justice, you've got to get the gun. The Guadalajara Rose. It's important," he gestured toward the Spaniard on the floor, "and then we've got to go find the boy." Billy Steel slipped down to his knees, and his head fell forward until it rested in the dirt. "We can't leave."

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