

*The
Curse
of
Guadalajara
Rose*©

part 2 of 5

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Part Two- *The Guadalajara Rose*

Justice shoved his gun back into the holster, reached for the first body and dragged it over to the door. "I'll use the bodies to barricade the front door. Long Rifle, get his pants and boots on him, then you take him out the back way. I'll stay here and look for the gun."

The shouts from outside were getting louder, the sounds of running feet, and Justice could hear the horses begin to stamp and blow. It would be a mistake for a stranger to try and sling a leg over the back of one of those beasts, but men made mistakes, after all, the same ones, over and over. The glass in the front window smashed, shards flying, and the barrel of a rifle slid forward. Before Justice could drop the body and draw his pistol, he heard the thud of an iron-shod hoof strike soft flesh, then a hollow thump, a melon, or a human head, cracking on the hard-pack dirt of the road outside.

Long Rifle grabbed Billy Steel's boots and jeans from the corner of the cage. Justice looked at him kneeling on the dirt floor, his back slashed to pieces, dripping blood. Billy Steel was a hard man, but his moral compass pointed true north, always. Long Rifle lifted him up, helped him slide the jeans up his legs. "If those fuckers had ruined my Levi's, I would have had to lay this town to waste."

Long Rifle lifted him into a chair, knelt at his feet and slid his boots on. "I believe

you. Billy, where's your horse?"

"I don't know. The dickhead saw the silverwork on the bridle, tried to buy it. When I said no he tried to take it. That's when things got ugly between us. Too bad. Up until then we were getting along just fine."

"The dickhead? Is that the Spaniard with the whip? And the slaves?"

"Yeah. He owns a silver mine." Billy looked down at the body. "He owned a silver mine, and lots of Navajo slaves as silversmiths. We need to find the boy who made the gun, the Guadalajara Rose."

Long Rifle helped him stand, looked into his face. "Why, Billy?" His mouth was dry, lips cracked and bleeding. They hadn't bothered to give a dead man water.

"The gun's cursed." Billy looked around. "The Spaniard, he sells the gun, then he watches what happens. There's always some blood, some death to feed his hunger. That's why he does it. But the curse is still alive, even if he's dead. We've got to fix it, figure out what..." Long Rifle reached down, picked him up as he fell, eyes rolling back in his head. He slung Billy Steel over his shoulder, belly down.

"We're going. Meet us by that stand of saguaro about a mile down the road, the one with the owl's nest." Long Rifle tossed the Henry over to Justice. "You might need this."

"Be safe, brother."

Justice heard Long Rifle out back, whistling for his horse, then the shout of men

as they gave chase. He ducked down, opened the cabinets that lined the back wall of the room. Some old irons, heavy keys, some broken pieces of stirrup and spurs, a half-empty bottle of mescal, milky white. This wasn't it. He looked around the room. He didn't see anything, no trunks, no locked cabinets. That must mean... He walked into the cage, looked down at the Spaniard. The man's eyes were rolled up in his head, and the beatific expression on his dead face reminded Justice of an old woman he'd seen once, claimed to have seen a vision of the Blessed Virgin. Well, a lot of men had looked into Long Rifle's face just before they died, but this was the only time Justice could recall seeing this look on a dead man's face. Justice reached down into his gold silk brocade waistcoat, then into the pocket of the fine buckskin trousers. There it was. He had a gun in his pocket? He didn't reach for it, he had a Henry rifle shoved into his belly?

The gun was smaller than he expected. It fit neatly in his hand. He leaned over, looked more closely. The gun's grips were made of silver with gold inlay. The silver design was heavy, sand cast, and looked like a woman's back. Her hair was tumbling down past her waist, and lost in the silver was a fall of roses in three colors of gold, bright yellow, coral pink, white. The metal was heavy, the design dense and thick, and Justice stroked the woman's hair with his thumb, wondering. Billy had called the gun the Guadalajara Rose. Was that the woman's name, or did they call it that because of the beautiful golden roses? And who was the boy Billy said they needed to find? There was a tenderness to the design, almost worship. Looked to Justice more like a boy's pic-

ture of his beloved mother than a man's portrait of a lover. How could this beautiful thing be cursed? And had Billy Steel really shot and killed his mother with this gun in Nogales?

He smelled the barrel. Gunpowder. Justice stuck it down into the pocket of his duster. He needed to get gone before the good men of Nogales realized that they were chasing a horse that couldn't be caught. He pushed open the back door to the jail, and his horse was standing there, looking interested. And a boy was standing there, holding the reins.

"Don't go in there, son." Justice took the reins out of the boy's hand, slung a leg up over his horse. "There's nothing in there you need to see. You know a Spaniard? Wears a gold silk brocade waistcoat? Owns the silver mine?"

The boy turned and spat into the dirt. "He's Patron over Nogales. Cristobal Del Torro."

"Is he a good Patron?"

"He's a slaver. Brings Navajo and Apache across the border, makes them work in his mines. That's a nice horse." He reached his hand up, stroked the soft neck, and the horse leaned his head over and blew into his hair.

"You must be something special, this horse likes you. Better not stay around here, boy. There's trouble coming."

The boy nodded, gave a formal little bow. "If you need some help, you can call on

me. I'm Emilio Francisco, and I live out at the Patron's house. My mother works in his kitchen."

Justice grinned down at him. His dusty black hair was in need of a trim, bare feet in ragged canvas trousers, bright, intelligent eyes. Who was this child going to be? Someone special. Maybe a man he would meet again. "Be careful," he said again. "I'll come find you if I need some help." He stopped, turned back to the boy. "You know my friend?"

"The man with the crazy blue eyes? The one they're going to hang? I know his horse."

"Is that horse out in your stables?" The boy nodded. "My friend, he'll be needing his horse back before long."

"I saw the woman's body. The one he shot."

Justice turned, let the animal lead him away from the road, down into the tumbled sandstone and cactus of the Sonoran desert. It took him an hour, riding across country, until he could see the stand of saguaro where he was to meet Long Rifle and Billy Steel.

Billy Steel was asleep, or unconscious, lying on his belly on a thick bedroll of horse blankets. Long Rifle had poured some water over his back, was sitting next to Billy on the ground, waving the flies off the torn flesh. "Justice, we need a healer. Some salve or something to go on the cuts."

"Don't worry about me." Billy Steel sounded like he could use a shot of mescal to

kill the pain. "Just let me put a shirt on and let's get out to the mines. Justice, did you get it?"

"Is this it?" He pulled the gun out of his pocket. Billy turned his head, stared at the gun, then a shudder ran through him and he pulled away.

"Yeah. That's it. Find some cloth, something, wrap it up. Don't hold it in your hand. Don't let it touch your skin for too long."

"Okay, Billy." He exchanged a look with Long Rifle. Too soon to tell if Billy's mind had become unhinged with pain, grief, or if they were dealing with some new evil, or some old evil, manifested in new ways. He pulled a shirt out of his saddle bag, wrapped the gun up and stowed it away. "What's going on? We heard you were going to hang, Billy. The story going around is that you shot a woman. That you shot your mother. And what boy were you talking about, that we needed to find?"

"He's a slave out at the silver mines, a Navajo silversmith. He made the grips of the gun. Just a boy, maybe nine or ten."

Justice stared at him. "A boy made that beautiful thing? That's amazing. I've never seen anything like it."

"He's not a normal boy, Justice. He's a conduit, something, I don't know how to say it. It's like he's a prism, a crystal tuned to focus the grief of the world. It flows into him, all of it, from everywhere, and it flows out of him, too. Into the silver, and the gold. The gun, it's cursed, deadly. And he's getting better at the things he makes. He's

not evil, Justice, but we have to stop him, figure out how to... switch him off. Before he makes something that could destroy the world."

"I don't understand, Billy. How is the gun cursed?"

He moved, restless on the bedroll, started to sit up. He made it to his hands and knees. "Long Rifle, put that shirt on me. I'm cold." Long Rifle slipped the thin cotton over his head, helped him raise his arms one after the other. "The gun, it's a conduit, like the boy. You hold it long enough, every sorrow, ever anger, every affront, comes back to you, echoes in your mind, growing bigger and bigger, until you think you're going crazy, until you can't feel anything but your pain. But that's not the curse. The gun, it only kills the people you love."

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