

*The
Curse
of
Guadalajara
Rose*©

part 3 of 5

by Sarah Black

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Part Three- *The Silversmith*

They rode in silence toward the silver mines, Billy up behind Long Rifle on his horse. Justice looked at the two of them, Billy Steel holding Long Rifle's long black hair in his fist to keep from sliding off, his forehead resting against his back. The gun only killed the people you loved. If that was true, then the two men in front of him were the only people in the world in danger right now. He felt Billy Steel's words like ice spreading deep into his chest. What strange curse was this?

The two men in front of him, and he made three. Time was, there had been four of them, and in his heart he could admit he had loved the fourth Horseman, his brother, more than he loved the stars in the night sky. When Justice was feeling alone, like now, and full of sorrow, he pondered again what he could have done, what he had failed to do, that had lost them the most beautiful, the strongest of them all. Lost him to evil. He shook his head. No time now to dredge those old wounds up, not with the dust of a posse on their tail not a mile behind.

A couple of hours west, and they came to the outskirts of the mines, the land owned by Cristobal Del Torro. It was scrubby desert land, tumbled rock and juniper, pinion pine and cactus and sage. The main house was a low adobe, the walls plastered with ochre mud. Out behind was a stables

and barn, and beyond that a small compound, the stick and mud huts low, with no windows, the whole surrounded by a fence. These must be the slave quarters. Up against a sheer spill of yellow sandstone a half mile away was the entrance to the silver mines. They could see mules and wooden wagons, a track going down into the dark earth. It was quiet, still too early for the slaves to have started work.

“Long Rifle. We need to get Billy’s horse. A boy in town told me it was in the stable. Then I don’t know. Should we just snatch the boy and ride?”

“I think so, Justice.” He looked behind him, studied the dust. “The posse, they’d have had to stop, water their horses. But they must also know by now exactly where they were going. They won’t delay coming out to tell the people of this ranch what’s happened to their Patron.” He climbed down off the horse, gave the reins to Justice. Billy Steel sat up, but Justice didn’t think he’d be able to ride on his own.

“Billy, did you see this boy when you came for the gun? What will he do, we snatch him up and ride off with him?”

“I don’t know, Justice. He’s more than half-crazy. Just handle him gentle. When they took him off Navajo lands, they tied a rope around his neck, dragged him behind the horse for a bit to quiet him down.” Billy gestured to his neck. “Something broke inside. He can’t talk right. Just be gentle.”

Justice could see they were being watched, dark heads peeking around corners, out the windows, men leaning up against the doors to the stables, watching but not moving, their guns resting in the holsters. They looked afraid, but like fear was their habit. Justice rode forward, set the Henry Rifle up on his thigh. He spoke loud enough all the watchers could hear him. “We don’t mean to cause any harm. You just give us the road, nobody else needs to die. All we came for is the horse and the boy. We want the silversmith who made the Guadalajara Rose.”

Long Rifle came out of the stables with Billy Steel’s horse behind him. Justice watched the slave quarters. A couple of women came out of one of the huts, women with hard hands and heavy arms, dragging a small boy. He was keening, a horrible scratchy rough wail. The women pulled him forward, his feet in Navajo moccasins trying to find some purchase in the dirt.

Billy Steel gave a low whistle, and his horse lifted proud black ears, skittered a bit. Long Rifle dropped the reins, and the horse picked up a gallop, ran to where Billy Steel was climbing down from Long Rifle’s horse.

Long Rifle turned toward the women, and the boy, reached down and scooped him up in his big arms. He spoke to him, soothing quiet words, but the boy was frightened beyond the ability to listen, frightened the way men were when they tried to do themselves harm, and he struggled, his thin arms

tearing at Long Rifle's hair. Justice looked behind him. The cloud of dust that signaled the posse was dangerously close. "No time now, Long Rifle. Just take him and let's ride."

Long Rifle shook his head, walked back toward the slave quarters. His voice echoed off the sandstone cliffs surrounding them. "Listen to me. You are slaves no more. Your Patron is dead. You belong to no one but yourselves." A young boy stuck his head out of one of the huts, stared at Long Rifle. He looked Apache, with long, tangled black hair and a skinny body marked with the lash. Long Rifle pointed at him. "You want to go back to your homelands? You want to return to your family? Then go. Start walking north. There is no one here who can stop you."

"How do you know he's dead?"

"I killed him."

The boy shouted, a hoarse cry of triumph and rage, and the children came pouring out of the huts. The boy shouted again, "El Diablo is dead! Dead! Dead!" He shouted the word until his young throat grew scratchy and rough. And when he turned, the mob of scarred, starving children behind him, Justice felt ice down in his belly at the look on his face.

"Oh, shit. Long Rifle, come on, leave it now, get on your horse."

The boy started running toward the house, and the children followed him. He reached down,

scooped up a stick, swung it over his head like a club. The children were looking for sticks, picking up rocks, their collective voice a howl of rage, of insanity. The adults watched them coming, then they turned and ran.

Long Rifle came with the boy, climbed on the horse. They could hear the screams of women coming from Cristobal Del Torro's house, the sound of breaking glass, and a thin wisp of gray smoke trickled into the air.

Justice looked at the men who had been leaning up against the stables. They had done nothing to stop Long Rifle, just watched him silently, but now they were pulling horses out of the stables and climbing on them bareback. They rode quickly away from the children who stormed out of the house, dragging heavy velvet curtains that were on fire. The children threw the velvet into the stables, flung the curtains into the piles of hay, stood watching as the fire started eating the walls. The children came out of the house, stood at the door to the stables now, staring into the fire, watching silently. The flames roiled up the walls, pouring black smoke out of the upper windows. Justice turned to Long Rifle. "The stables, is that where he would take them..."

"Let's go, Justice." Long Rifle wheeled his horse around, set off at a gallop, the boy clutched in his arms. Billy stuck his foot in the stirrup, slung his leg over the saddle and fell forward, his cheek

resting against the pommel. He grabbed it with both hands, and his horse moved out. The horses struck out north, across country, heading for the border.

They rode for a couple of hours before the faint trail of pursuit drifted into the desert air and disappeared. The boy was still in Long Rifle's arms, not moving, his forehead pressed against his chest. Justice studied the land, pulled his horse up under a cluster of pinion pine that would provide them some shade. He unhooked the water skin, helped Billy Steel slide off his horse. "Let's take a break, drink some water. Billy, can you eat anything?"

Billy Steel shook his head, but he took the water, drank, and handed it back to Justice. Long Rifle slid down, the boy's stick arms wrapped around his neck. He knelt next to Billy. "You remember any Navajo?"

Billy nodded. He turned to the boy, spoke some words in the strange, guttural language of the Dine. Billy had learned Navajo talking women out of second helpings of fry bread and stew. The boy lifted his head. "Justice, let him have the water skin."

Justice passed the water to the boy. He kept one arm in a stranglehold around Long Rifle's neck. He was so thin and small, his legs dusty and dark, with sores like insect bites that had been scratched and never healed. He had a strange face, dark skin with high cheekbones, but it was his eyes

that bothered Justice. He had a gone look to his face, stared off into the brush as if they weren't there, like he couldn't see them, or like he was listening for something. The boy took the water skin, lifted it to his mouth.

Justice listened, too, heard the quiet hoot of an owl that should have been asleep in the heat of the afternoon. He stepped over to his horse, lifted the Henry Rifle. The boy was whistling back now, the shy flute of a whippoorwill. Long Rifle slid a hand over his mouth. Justice looked over at Billy Steel. He was on his knees, one hand down on the ground to keep his balance, but he had his pistol out and leveled.

A boy stepped out of a stand of Organ Pipe Cactus five hundred yards to the south, his horse behind him on a lead. It was the boy from the jail.

He raised his hands. "I brought you some food and water, and some salve for the man's back." Justice walked forward, looked at the tracks behind the horse. It looked like the boy had come alone.

"What's your name again?"

"Emilio Francisco."

"Tell me again, boy. What are you doing here? And tell me all of it this time."

Emilio stepped up, his chin raised. "I'm going with you. He's my friend. I want to make sure he

gets home, and he gets to a hand trembler. He needs a ceremony.”

“What’s he need a hand trembler for?”

“He’s sick.” Emilio lowered his voice, and the boy hid his face in Long Rifle’s neck. Long Rifle wrapped his arms around him, stroking his back, and his sheet of black hair slid forward and covered him. “Infected. With the chindi.”

Justice nodded. “That story is gonna have to wait. Did you see any men? Heading this way?”

Emilio shook his head. “I saw three men from town riding out to the mines. That was all.”

“It’s still not safe. We need to get across the border, Emilio. Why don’t you go on home, and we’ll say thank you for the food and water. And the medicine for Billy Steel’s back.”

The boy’s face turned mulish. He turned back to his horse, stuck his foot in the stirrup and swung a leg over. “I’m going with you. You might need me. You never can tell when you need an extra gun in a fight.”

Justice looked over at Billy Steel, who was shaking his head. “He’ll just follow us, is my guess. We might as well keep him close by, keep him quiet. Boy, don’t you know the pygmy owl sleeps during the day?”

Emilio Francisco just grinned, rode up next to Long Rifle. “Cunish, you want to ride with me?”

Long Rifle shook his head. “I’ll keep him for now.”

Toward sundown a storm blew up behind them, the southern sky a sickly gray-green, and Justice could smell smoke on the wind. The news of Cristobal Del Torro’s death had ignited a tinder-box of simmering hatreds, and blood was being spilled. He wondered why Long Rifle had fanned those flames. Well, his brother would have his reasons. Had he been a slave? Had he felt the bite of a lash on skin that should have only known a mother’s tender touch?

They were a somber group, demons at war in their hearts. Justice looked over at Billy Steel. He was caught like a bug in a spider web, and the evil he had brushed up against, maybe the evil he had done, was twisting something inside him. Justice could see the pain in his eyes. It wasn’t all from the flayed skin of his back.

“Let’s make camp before it gets any darker. That storm may still catch us.”

Billy nodded, slid off his horse, and Long Rifle climbed down and unwrapped Cunish’s arms from his neck. Emilio came over to him, and they went behind a creosote bush together to pee. Long Rifle walked after them. “You boys gather us up some rocks, then get the fire started. It’s gonna be cold tonight.” He turned to the horses, started pulling the saddles off their backs. “Justice, there was

a creek down the arroyo. Did you see it?” Justice nodded. “I’m gonna take the horses for some water.”

Billy Steel was lifting the saddle from his horse. “Billy, why are you doing that yourself? I’m standing right here. My brother, you look like a man who needs to set his burden down.”

Billy shook his head, lifted the bedroll and laid it out. “Justice, there’s no laying this one down. I got to fix it. That’s all. Fix it where it never happens again.”

“Was this him?” They never spoke about the fourth Horsemen by name. But he was their reason, the reason for what they did, and he lived inside their minds, inside their hearts, something cold and black. He spread evil across the land, bloodshed, sorrow, hatred, greed, and they chased him across the beautiful land that was their home. Justice looked back at the storm boiling up on the horizon. It felt like him.

“Maybe. The Spaniard, he had this deal going. He would bring somebody down who’d heard about the Guadalajara Rose, show it to them, let them buy it. Then let them kill with it. He fed on the horror, Justice, you could see the pleasure on his face while he watched it. And then he would take the gun back, take a prisoner for the gallows, get his thrill with the whip. Let those men jerk off, watching. I don’t know how many he’s done this with. More than a few. He whips the slaves, too. Not for punishment. For pleasure.”

“But what about the boy?”

Billy looked over to where Emilio and Cunish were gathering pieces of downed juniper for the fire. “I think what was done to the boy was the Horseman. He recognized what the boy was, and he set him up to get hurt more than a person could stand to be hurt. After that, he just sat back and enjoyed the show. Justice, the boy’s got to be healed. He’s got to be healed or he’s got to die.”

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