



the **MASKED**
RIDER
Wild West Tales

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Volume One

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THE MASKED RIDER

“Raid on Granite Gap”

by Eric Jones

“**G**et yer nightclothes on, Betsy, go on, now.” Will Daniels shooed his eldest daughter toward the back room of the small cabin. “You too, now, Sally. Yer brother’s all ready for bed, an’ you two still makin’ such a fuss!”

“I’m not ready for bed, yet, Pa!” protested Betsy, her hands on her hips and her jaw set. “I’m almost twelve, why can’t I stay up with you and Ma?”

“Pa! I’m ten, if she can stay up so can I!” Billy’s voice was petulant, and Betsy gave her brother a scathing look.

“Don’t backtalk your Pa, Betsy. You either, Billy,” said Liz, Betsy’s mother and Will’s wife of thirteen years. She took Betsy by the shoulders and turned her toward the back room with a gentle shove. “We won’t be up much longer, either, and we’ve got grown up business to attend to. Scoot on back there and get ready for bed, and you can read the Bible verse tonight.”

Betsy relented with a “harrumph,” and led her younger sister into the back room, pulling the curtain behind them. Billy curled up near the hearth, arranging his toy soldiers quietly.

“We’ve almost cleared the south plot,” said Will as Liz joined him at the low wooden table. “A few more days work an’ we’ll have ‘er ready for planting next season. Irrigation ditches are goin’ in smooth, an’ we managed to hit water at two more of the well sites.” He grinned, but it almost immediately faded to a creased frown. “I’m worried about the cattle, though. The scrub in the pasture’s not much to keep ‘em chewin’, and without some rain, it’s not likely to get much greener.”

“So we’ll have to buy more feed is all, Will,” replied Liz with a shrug. “We knew it wasn’t going to be easy when we settled here. We’ll make

do.”

“I suppose so,” said Will, rubbing his eyes wearily. “We got enough put back to pay the hands and still buy seed and feed?”

Liz glanced down the row of numbers in the ledger book in front of her. “With the payment for the water shipment to the mine tomorrow, just enough. It’ll be close, but if we can make it through a couple of months until the cattle fair, we’ll finally be able to prove our stake.”

“Should be able to last,” said Will, leaning back in his chair with a sigh. “You ever regret me carryin’ ya’ off from yer nice little city life to come out here and live in the dust and sun? It’s been a long few years, that’s for sure, but pretty soon we can finally...”

Shouts from outside interrupted Will’s words, and he leapt to his feet. He ran to the door and yanked it open. Off in the distance, near the barn, he could see his hired hands running back and forth, and his first thought was that there must be a fire. But two quick gunshots rang out, and two of the running figures fell to the ground and lay still.

“Mr. Daniels!”

The cry came from Dave Shockley, Will’s chief ranch hand. Dave was running full tilt toward the cabin, as if the hounds of hell were following close behind.

“Bandits! Mr. Daniels, it’s the Tanner...”

Another shot rang out, and Dave Shockley fell dead at Will’s feet.

Without another thought, Will slammed the door and slid the bar home.

“Liz, get the kids out the back, hurry!”

Liz didn’t hesitate, scooping up ten year old Billy and rushing into the back room.

“Betsy, Sally, no questions, just do as you’re told,” she cried as she ran to the opposite side of the room. A crash came from the front of the house, and she heard Will shouting, and another man’s voice. The sound of a scuffle made her ache to go to her husband’s side, but she knew she couldn’t leave the children alone. Throwing open the window, she pushed the terrified Billy through to sprawl in the dust outside. “We’ve got to get to the hills and hide! Come on, now!” She took Sally in her arms and started to lift her through the window as well when a pair of rough hands grabbed her from behind.

“Not so fast, there, missy,” said a harsh voice, and she was yanked back roughly by the hair. “We’re all gonna’ go inta’ the other room an’ have a little chat with the boss.”

Liz was helpless in the rough grip, and before she could even attempt to struggle, she found herself flung to the floor of the main room, her daughters thrown down roughly beside her on the dirt floor.

“Well, now, it’s nice we could all get together like this for a little chat,” said a high, nasally voice. Liz raised her head, choking back her fear, and saw a tall, slender man enter through the front door. He wore a fine suit with a silk vest, and a pistol slung low on his hip. His eyes were narrow above a hawk nose, and his thick lips propped up a thin mustache. He pulled off his hat and batted the dust off it absently.

Will growled at the man from the floor, a burly thug’s boot planted firmly in the small of his back. The slender man motioned to the thug, who lifted Will to his feet and held him firmly in an iron grip.

“Why are you doing this, Tanner?” he said. “We never done you any harm!”

“Well, now, that’s not precisely true,” replied the slender man. “Didn’t I come by here a month ago and quite nicely suggest that you should stop shipping water to the mine?” He smiled evilly. “I think I did. And I think I stopped in two weeks ago, and repeated my very civil request. Do you remember that, Will?”

“I won’t be bullied, Tanner,” said Will, struggling against his captor. Liz twisted her neck to look up into her husband’s eyes. She saw no fear there. “They need the water at the mine, and I need the money. It ain’t got nothin’ to do with you!”

Micah Tanner snorted, his lip curling into a sneer. With a slow, deliberate motion, he pulled his revolver from its holster and held it close to Will’s face.

“Do you know what this is, Will? Hmm?”

“I know what it is, and I ain’t scared of guns,” said Will, still defiant.

“This isn’t just a gun,” said Tanner with a chuckle. “This is a LeMat Revolver. A Grapeshot Revolver, Will. Do you know what that means?” Will didn’t reply, and Tanner continued.

“See, this little stubby barrel under the main one here, it’s extra special. It can fire all kinds of things; slugs, grapeshot, rock salt, pretty much anything. Got it primed and ready tonight with buckshot.” He looked Will straight in the eye, pressing the stubby barrel of the LeMat up against the rancher’s chin. Will simply glared back, hatred in his eyes.

“Don’t worry, Will, I’m not going to use the buckshot on you. I just wanted to ask you a question. I wondered if you had any idea what this load of buckshot would do...” Suddenly, he whipped the gun away from

Will and pointed it directly at Liz. "...to your wife's pretty face."

"Stop!" shouted Will, struggling again to get free of the man holding him. Liz's heart pounded as she stared into the barrel of the LeMat. "No! Please, stop, Tanner, you win!"

The slender man turned back to face Will, but he kept the gun leveled at Liz. He chuckled softly at first, and then louder, finally breaking into raucous laughter. Slowly he knelt, grabbing a handful of Liz's hair and pulling her head back, the LeMat never straying from her face.

"You got it all wrong, Will," said Tanner. "You think I'm here with a few threats to give you another chance to stop the water shipments." He shook his head, still laughing. "Sorry to disappoint you, but you're out of chances. You're done in, Will. You're over." He gave Will a quick shrug and a wink. "It's just, I'm like a cat, Will. I like to play with the mice a little before..."

When the first shot rang out, Billy Daniels cringed in fear under the window ledge. When a second shot followed, and a third, he found himself running with no memory of how his legs got started. He made it around the side of the cabin where he skidded to a halt, pressing himself against the side wall as the fourth shot echoed through the night air, and then all was quiet. He leaned to the side and peered toward the front door, dreading what he might see.

"Drag the bodies outside," he heard the nasally voice call out as the front door of the cabin banged open. "Pile them up over by the well with the rest and light 'em up. Ought to send a pretty strong message." Billy saw the slender man in the fine suit stepping outside, a handkerchief in one hand as he wiped at the red spatters on his coat. "Put a torch to the house."

Billy crouched down, pulling back as far as he could without losing sight of the bandits. He choked back a sob as he saw the burly men dragging out... it was too awful! He jerked his head back around the corner and pulled his legs up to his chest, one hand over his mouth to stifle a moan that he couldn't hold back.

"Wait a minute," he heard the nasal voice say. "Wait just one minute. There's one missing."

"Them's all that was in the house, boss."

"No, no. The boy. Daniels had a boy, nine or ten years old. Where's the boy?"

Silence answered.

“Where in hell is the boy!”

“Weren’t no boy in there, boss! Swear to god, them’s all that was there!”

There was a slap and a thud, and Billy peeked around the corner once more. One of the bigger thugs was sprawled in the dirt, Tanner standing over him with fury on his face.

“Dammit, I want the boy! I don’t play halvesies, I want the whole damn lot of ‘em gone! Fan out and find him! I want him on the pile with the rest!” Tanner turned and stalked to his horse, the reins held by another of his flunkies. He mounted, then turned on his men with a snarl. “Find him, or don’t bother coming back in tonight!” And he savagely kicked his horse into a gallop, dust billowing in the night as he rode away.

Blue Hawk rode toward Granite Gap, planning on riding through the night to make up for lost time. Señor Morgan would likely arrive in the morning, having come in by a different route after they split up, and Blue Hawk had intended to be waiting for his friend to arrive. But the supply run had taken quite a bit longer than he’d expected, and he was running more than a day behind.

It all came down to keeping up the act. Playing the uneducated, unsophisticated, stupid Mestizo for the shopkeepers and townspeople was wearing on him. Uneducated, perhaps, but unsophisticated was a matter of opinion. And stupid didn’t even approach Blue Hawk.

And some of the towns he’d ridden through had been downright hostile to him. Or at least to “his kind”. That was one reason he was anxious to meet up with Señor Morgan. It wasn’t often that a man like Blue Hawk found a friend like Señor Morgan. They’d been together, fellow travelers, for years, and Blue Hawk just naturally assumed that one day, hopefully a distant day, Señor Morgan would be by his side when Blue Hawk went to join his ancestors.

And so Blue Hawk found himself driving a supply wagon across the countryside on what could certainly not be called a road, but almost earned the title of dirt trail. Moonwind, his sorrel mare, trailed behind, her reins secured loosely to the wagon’s rails. The trail had been long, and not at all pleasant for a lone traveler, but he knew that by morning, he could find a bed in Granite Gap and enjoy the company of the rough frontier folk who dominated the dry land of New Mexico.

Blue Hawk was startled out of his reverie by the sound of a gunshot. It was distant, but the sound carried over the arid land, and he quickly reined

in the wagon horses. More shots rang out in the distance, along with faint shouts and screams.

Pistol shots in the dark of the evening were rarely a welcome sound on the frontier. Blue Hawk set the brake and jumped down from the wagon, carefully pulling his Winchester from beneath the seat. He checked to make sure it was loaded, then grabbed a box of shells and dropped them into the pocket of his long coat when he saw there were only three shells in the rifle. He untied Moonwind's reins from the wagon rails and mounted, riding through the night in the direction of the shots. He climbed through the low hills and rocky outcrops, the sounds of gunfire and shouting coming clearer. Then the sounds stopped, and the night grew quiet. Blue Hawk topped another low rise, to find a ranch sprawled out below him, nestled between two hills and somewhat protected from view. He took in the panorama, the bodies scattered around haphazardly, and he shook his head in disgust. He was too late.

Filthy raiders. It often happened out in the untamed lands. Bandits and outlaws seeing easy pickings in the innocents who were trying to scrape by on the land. This group seemed to be fairly large and well organized for such a band, considering the size of the ranch and the number of dead they had left behind, but even that was not unheard of. Blue Hawk grunted, and then spat on the ground as he turned to go. But a hint of motion caught the corner of his eye, and he returned his attention to the scene below.

A small figure climbed over the lip of the well down in the courtyard. Blue Hawk couldn't make sense of it at first. The figure was too small to be a bandit. A survivor, then? A child, by the size? Blue Hawk slipped quietly and invisibly down the incline, edging ever closer to the main yard, seeking a better look at the figure cowering in the well. He crouched down behind a rock, gazing down at the yard intently.

Most definitely a child. A young boy. He was peeking his head timidly over the mouth of the well as the remaining bandits searched for something. Survivors, thought Blue Hawk. They're looking for this boy.

Blue Hawk trembled, hoping beyond hope that they wouldn't find the boy. He watched in mute silence as the thugs got ever closer to his hiding place. The boy peeked his head up over the edge of the well again, only this time at just the wrong moment. One of the thugs exclaimed triumphantly as his hand darted out and into the well. He pulled his arm back, the small boy struggling in his grip.

Blue Hawk couldn't clearly hear their words over the roar of the fire below, but the outlaws' intentions were clear. The burly man flung the

boy to the dirt at his feet and casually drew his pistol. The old Mestizo couldn't sit by and allow this to happen. He brought his Winchester to bear and ripped off a shot quicker than he could even think about it. A splash of blood and the thug's head snapped backward. He fell to the ground, limp, as the other man shouted in alarm. Diving to the side, the remaining outlaw ripped his gun from the holster and rolled behind the well. He rose up and fired six shots in quick succession before ducking back behind the well to reload.

"Stay down, boy!" shouted Blue Hawk as the boy scrambled back over the lip of the well to crouch inside. "Keep your head down!" He checked his Winchester to make sure there was a round ready and quickly rose up, firing two shots into the dirt at the edge of the well to keep the bandit from poking his head out too far. His last round spent, the Mestizo ducked back down behind the rock, reloading quickly. Another shot rang out from the yard below, and Blue Hawk ducked lower as the bullet ricocheted near his head. He rolled quickly to his left and scrambled to his knees as he brought the Winchester up for another shot. He grunted in satisfaction as the outlaw fell to the ground and lay motionless. The Mestizo began to rise, but was taken by a sudden wave of dizziness. There was a heavy pressure on his chest, just to the left of the Winchester's butt had been braced.

He groaned as he twisted his neck to see blood flowing freely from his chest just below the collar bone, and his vision began to swim.

Billy huddled below the lip of the well, his eyes shut tight, his fists trembling. The small ledge just inside the well was barely wide enough to hold him. When the first shot had rung out, and the evil man had fallen in a shower of blood, Billy had thought for sure he was saved. But the other evil man had dived behind the well and started shooting toward the hill above, and Billy's elation had vanished. Then the voice shouted from the hillside to keep his head down, and it had seemed like excellent advice. Even though the shots had stopped, and no one had come to the well to put a bullet in him, Billy was determined to stay exactly where he was.

"Boy!"

Billy cringed lower, tears streaming down his face as he whimpered.

"It's safe enough, boy. You can come out."

It was the voice from the hillside, the one that had told him to stay down.

"I would like it very much if you would come out, boy," called the voice, slightly closer now. "I need... *necesito... por favor, ayudame.*" The

voice sounded different. Weaker. "*Ayudame*. Help me, boy."

Billy screwed up his courage and peeked over the rim of the well. The bodies of the two outlaws lay on the ground, blood pooling in the dust of the yard. Billy climbed out of the stone well, his entire body trembling, unable to tear his eyes from the two dead men. But when he managed to turn away, his eyes fell on the flames on the far side of the well, and the stench of burning flesh reached him. He could see enough in the greasy smoke to make out the forms of his sisters, and his father and mother. He felt rooted in place, unable to move, unable to release the cry of anguish that seized his chest.

"Boy! I need you!"

Blue Hawk lay sprawled on the hillside, his vision swimming. The wound was a bad one, he knew, worse than any he'd taken before. The stars seemed to spin above him as his blood flowed away on the dusty hillside.

"Are... are you okay, mister?" came a timid voice, and Blue Hawk turned his head toward the sudden sound. Everything went black for a moment, and when sight returned, he saw a young boy crouching a few feet away. The boy from the well.

"I am hurt badly, *nino*," said Blue Hawk, struggling to sit up. "I need... will you help me?" It pained Blue Hawk greatly to have to ask this child, this poor boy who had been through so much, to help him. But there was no choice.

The child stood motionless, staring at the Yaqui warrior, tense, ready to bolt at any second. But finally, he took a timid step forward, and then another. He crouched at Blue Hawk's side.

"What do you want me to do, mister?" he said, his voice soft.

"I need you to bind the wound," said Blue Hawk. "Got to... got to keep my blood inside me where it belongs."

The boy nodded, tearing a strip off Blue Hawk's shirt and bunching it into a wad to press over the bleeding hole. He held the wad firmly, looking around for a moment, then turned back to Blue Hawk.

"I need somthin' to bind it with, mister," he said. "This won't hold much."

"Take this," said Blue Hawk, reaching into his pocket to pull out a wide bandana. "Tie it across my chest, over the wound." He thrust the bandana toward the boy, who took it without a word. "I am Blue Hawk. What is your name, *nino*?"

“Billy, sir. Billy Daniels.”

Billy began winding the cloth over the wound, bunching up Blue Hawk’s shirt beneath the bandana to pad it a little.

“Mister, this ain’t gonna’ be good enough,” said the boy when he finished. “It ain’t like I’m a doctor or nothin’, but I live on a farm and I know how to take care of a hurt here or there. But yer bleedin’ like crazy. You need help.”

Blue Hawk chuckled as he sat up.

“First, I need shelter, *nino*,” he said. Struggling, he rose to his feet. “Come with me. My horse is just behind the ridge, and there is a wagon of supplies a mile or so beyond that. Do you...” Blue Hawk swayed, his vision darkening, and Billy moved quickly to support him.

“Thank you, Billy,” said the grizzled warrior. “Do you know a place that could provide us shelter for the night? Caves, way-stations nearby?”

“Yes,” said Billy simply.

“Take me there, *nino*. Come. My horse is this way.”

Billy rocked back and forth at Blue Hawk’s side, his knees pulled up to his chest. Once they had recovered the man’s horse, and then the wagon, Billy had been forced to take charge. Blue Hawk had collapsed into the wagon bed, delirious.

Billy had brought them to a cave a few miles from the ranch. The countryside was filled with caves, old mines, and sink holes, and Billy was familiar with many of them. Once they had arrived, he had half dragged the delirious Blue Hawk into the cave. Then he set about lighting a fire, laying out the man’s bedroll, and bundling him into it as best he could.

But Blue Hawk wasn’t getting any better. Billy had sat by his side all through the night and into the false dawn. The man had lapsed in and out of consciousness, speaking Spanish and sometimes a language Billy didn’t recognize, but he hadn’t said anything understandable.

He was dying.

Billy had to do something. Blue Hawk had saved his life. Billy had to return the favor, somehow. He leaned close to Blue Hawk as his eyes fluttered open once again.

“Mister, you need more help than I can give ya’,” he said. “I need to go get help. I’m gonna’ take your horse, and I’m gonna’ ride into Granite Gap. I’ll bring back help. Okay?”

“Granite... Gap...” murmured Blue Hawk. “Help. Morgan.”

“Who? What did you say, mister?” But Blue Hawk had faded into

unconsciousness again.

Billy rose, determined, and strode outside. He mounted Moonwind silently and rode off toward Granite Gap as fast as the mare would take him.

Wade Morgan stopped his gray roan, Cutter, on the hilltop. He looked down over the town below with a sigh of disappointment. Pulling the battered brown Stetson from his head, he wiped the sweat from his brow, and then spurred Cutter into a trot down the hillside in resignation.

Suffice it to say, Granite Gap wasn't what he'd expected it to be. He'd hoped for a larger town, perhaps something with a telegraph office, but the tent city below him seemed to only have one permanent structure. A narrow, three story building near the front gate to the town, obviously the local tavern or saloon. Well, that's what it looked like it was trying to be, at least; the structure wasn't finished, still needing the sheathing tacked up on the exterior walls.

The wall around the tent city gave Wade a moment's worry. The townsfolk had obviously put some work into it, unimpressive though the pitiful defense might be. A six foot high wall of logs with a wide, unfinished gate didn't inspire much confidence in the defenses. But why would the town need defenses? Indian raids weren't a danger in the region, and Wade hadn't heard of any trouble in his recent travels.

Then again, he'd been on the trail for six weeks, and fairly well out of touch. It had taken three weeks to ride down the gang of rustlers outside of Las Cruces, where Wade had parted company with his trail partner, Blue Hawk. The loyal Mexican-Yaqui warrior was to purchase supplies in Las Cruces and then travel on to meet Wade here, in Granite Gap. From here, they had intended to travel on to a small town near the coast where there had been reports of a man trying to set himself up as the so called King of California, regardless of what his intended "subjects" might think about it.

Judging from the hasty defenses thrown up around Granite Gap, though, deposing a would-be-monarch might have to wait. It looked like Granite Gap needed some poking around.

Wade guided Cutter down the road toward the wide gate set into the wall around the tent city. He was within a hundred feet when three men rose up from behind the wall, two rifles and a pistol aimed at his chest.

"That's far enough, fella," one of the men called. "State yer business!"

Wade quickly raised his hands into the air, his eyes wide.



“Wade quickly raised his hands into the air...”