

Billy the Kid



Michael Lappenbusch
www.perplex.click

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Dust in the throat

The dust eats into his lungs like cheap whiskey, which burns but doesn't warm. It's early morning, the sun still a red eye behind the hills, and Billy rides a skinny nag that's seen better days. The saddle creaks like an old drunk who can't hold his bones together anymore. Everything is dry, damn dry, and his tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth like old leather. A boy, little more than a brat, but with eyes that have already seen too much. Too much death, too much emptiness, too much cheap promise of the great West.

He spits into the dust, but even the spit is thin, as if his body had long since decided to waste nothing more. No water in sight, no stream, no well, just this damn wind stirring up dust, driving it into your ears, your nose, your mind. You can't think clearly with dust in your head. But maybe that's the trick: not thinking clearly, just carrying on until it blows up.

Billy remembers the night before. A few guys, older, tougher, were playing cards in the back room of a dilapidated saloon. They laughed too loudly, drank too fast, and one hit a woman who stopped crying after the first blow. Billy sat there, sucking air through his teeth, pretending to be invisible. Sometimes invisibility is the only weapon you have left before you have a Colt. He had one, but it lay under his jacket like a promise you can't keep. Not yet.

The roads in this country aren't roads, but tracks that the rain will eventually wash away. If the rain ever comes back. Billy knew he had to move on, that standing still here meant being eaten. Not by wolves, not by snakes, but by damned life itself. This life with its dirty cards, its fake friends, its empty bottles, its women who stay until they disappear, and its men who laugh until someone tilts the table and shoots.

He thinks of his mother. Briefly, fleetingly. A face, pale, sick, somewhere between the shacks of Silver City and the eternal void. She coughed until her lungs burst. No doctor, no priest, no damned god came to help her. Billy stood there, with his thin arms, and watched as the only thing he knew crumbled. After that, all that remained was the road. The road and the rage that had nested inside him like an ugly dog.

The horse stumbles over a rock. Billy pulls on the reins and curses quietly. He thinks about how easy it is to fall. One false step, and you're lying in the dust. Someone kicks you, someone takes your knife, your money, your honor—if you ever had any. In New Mexico, everything is dust. Dust in the throat, dust in the heart, dust in the dreams. No room for hope, only room for bullets.

He remembers an old drunk in Silver City who once told him, "Son, if you cough long enough, blood will eventually come. And when blood comes, you know you're alive." Billy never forgot that. Maybe because he knew he would cough up blood someday, not from his lungs, but from a wound someone else would inflict. There's no graceful death here, only the quick or the slow.

The wind picks up, carrying the smell of horse manure and old campfires. Billy laughs softly, a dry, young laugh that already sounds like that of an old man. He knows he has no plan. No great dream. Just a few bullets, a Colt, a stomach that growls empty, and a heart that refuses to soften. Maybe that's enough. Maybe that's more than most people here have.

And so he rides on, with dust in his throat, with the sun climbing higher, and with the suspicion that someone else is waiting around the next hill. Someone with maps, someone with a Colt, someone with a grin that can only mean two things: money or blood. And most of the time, it's both.

The sky was big, much too big, and it hung over him like an old, tired sheriff, watching you but no longer doing anything. Billy felt the sun before it was even really up. It burned not like fire, but like a memory you can't shake. He coughed, and the cough sounded like he had stones in his throat. He thought about how many people in this country have choked to death on dust without a shot ever being fired. Sometimes it's not the bullet that kills you, but the emptiness, the dryness, the damn breath that lingers.

He stopped the horse, dismounted, and simply let the reins hang. The animal stood there like an old friend who'd given up long ago, but still sat beside you because he had nothing better to do. Billy bent down, grabbed the dust, and let it trickle through his fingers. It was like time. Everything runs through your hands, everything ends up in the dirt, and in the end, you're left with nothing.

He sat down, right in the sand. A boy, but already with the face of a man who might be thrown into the pit too soon. His hands trembled slightly, not from fear, but because his body was fighting against life. He pulled the bottle from his jacket, shook it, and heard only a small gurgling sound. Whiskey, almost empty, but still worth more than the few silver pieces in his pocket. He took a sip, and it burned worse than the dust. But at least the burning was honest.

Once, he'd tried to cope with water. One day, somewhere near Fort Sumner. He drank from a barrel that stood next to an old merchant's house. It tasted of metal, of rust, of a stale life. He felt his stomach rebelling, but he drank

anyway, because he had to. Since then, he'd known: water lies. Whiskey lies too, but at least it lies louder.

Billy looked into the distance. No one, no house, just these damned hills and the sky laughing at you. He thought of all the men who had believed there was gold here, or luck, or some other nonsense they tell you in church or at the card table. They died just like the others. With dust in their throats, a hole in their stomachs, or a rope around their necks.

He remembered a guy in Tucson. The man's name was Harris, he wore a beard like a wild animal, and he had the eyes of a preacher who never believed in God himself. Harris told him over a card game, "Kid, you can have it all here—land, women, cattle—but the dust will take it all away. Always. It eats houses, it eats love, it eats your damn dreams." Billy just laughed at the time, a wry boy's laugh, but now the memory rang true. Harris was dead two weeks later. Three bullets in the back, no one cried.

The wind grew stronger. It tugged at Billy's shirt as if mocking him. He pulled up the collar, but the dust crept in anyway. You can't stop it. Dust always finds a way. He's worse than any bounty hunter, worse than any sheriff. He's the law here. The only law.

Billy closed his eyes and imagined what it would be like to be somewhere else. In a room with no windows, no wind, no sun. Just a bed, a bottle, maybe a woman who wouldn't disappear the moment the first gun was drawn. A stupid dream. He knew it himself. But he allowed it for a moment because he had nothing else to hold on to.

He awoke from the dream when the horse snorted. Somewhere in the distance, he heard a clang. Perhaps a hoof on stone, perhaps just his mind playing tricks on him. He reached to his side, felt the grip of the Colt. Cool, hard, honest. The metal was the only thing that didn't lie. No dust, no sun, no dream. Only this.

He stood up, dusted off his trousers, but the dust clung. Dust laughs at your gestures. It settles deeper, it moves in, it becomes a part of you. He went to the horse, swung himself up, and again the saddle creaked like an old man with bad knees. He looked back once, as if there were something left there that he might miss. But there was nothing. Only the trace of his hooves, which the wind would soon erase again.

So he rode on. Step by step, dust by dust. A boy with a Colt, a nearly empty bottle, and a throat that scratched like it had swallowed the whole damn country.

The sun was higher now, and the land began to boil like a rusty pan that no one cleans anymore. Billy had his jacket open, the Colt hitting his hip with every step the horse took. He felt the dust eating not only into his lungs but also into his thoughts. Sometimes it was hard to tell whether he was thinking about something or whether the dust was simply grinding his thoughts down from within.

After an hour, he spotted smoke. Thin, gray, a sign of people. He was tired enough to think about food, and stupid enough to go anyway. The horse trotted slowly up the hill, and at the top, he saw a small camp: two men, a fire, an old coffee pot.

One was bald, with a face like an open book full of lies. The other had a beard that looked like it had been rolling in dirt for months. They saw Billy, and their eyes grew small at first, then wary. Strangers were never welcome here.

"Morning," Billy said, sounding like someone who pretended he belonged there.

The bald man spat in the dust. "You're young, boy. Too young to be riding out here alone."

Billy shrugged. "Maybe. But I'm still alive."

The bearded man croaked. "Still. Sit down if you have anything left to share."

Billy dismounted and sat by the fire. He left his horse standing behind him. He pulled the bottle of whiskey from his jacket and held it up. "Almost empty, but better than your coffee."

The bald man reached for it, took a sip, and shook himself. "Tastes like old wood. Good stuff." He passed the bottle. The bearded man took a swig, wiped his mouth, and grinned with yellow teeth.

"What are you doing out here?" asked the bald man.

Billy looked into the fire. "I don't know. Maybe that's what everyone's looking for: a little happiness, a little peace, a little less dust in their throats."

The bearded man laughed again, harder this time. "Then you're in the wrong country, boy. There's nothing here but dust, bullets, and debt."

"Then it's fine," Billy murmured.

It was quiet. Only the fire crackled. Sometimes silence was worse than any screaming, because you never know if it's about to explode. Billy felt the Colt under his jacket, ready, but not drawn. Not yet.

The bald man leaned forward. "What's your name?"

"Billy."

"Billy what?"

Billy looked at him, a cold, young gaze. "It's enough if you know I'm Billy."

The men grinned, but not in a friendly way. It was the grin of people considering whether to rob you. Billy held his gaze. He had learned that sometimes a stare was worth more than ten bullets.

The bearded man broke the tension. "Do you have tickets?"

Billy nodded and pulled a small, worn deck from his pocket. The cards were old, dirty, almost see-through at the edges. The three of them sat down by the fire.

The sun blazed, the fire crackled, and the cards were sticky with sweat. It wasn't about the money—they all had none—but about the game itself. Something to do that would make them forget the dust for a few minutes.

"You're a smart guy," said the bald man after a few rounds. "But being smart won't help you here. You need luck. And luck is like women—it never lasts long."

Billy slid a card onto the table. "Maybe. But sometimes it's enough to be smarter than the other guy."

The bearded man grinned, but his hand twitched toward his belt. Billy noticed, but did nothing. Not yet.

It was quiet again. The wind was playing with the cards, as if it wanted to get in on the action itself. Billy looked at the two men and knew there were only two ways this could end: Either they played until evening and parted with blank expressions, or one of them would draw a gun.

"I'm fed up," Billy finally said, stuffing the cards back into his pocket and standing up. "Thanks for the coffee, thanks for the dust. I'm riding on."

The men looked at him. For a few seconds, the air seemed to crack like a taut string. But no one pulled. Perhaps because they were too lazy. Perhaps because they knew Billy wasn't as innocent as he looked.

"Get out of here, Billy," the bald man said quietly.

Billy nodded, grabbed the reins, and mounted. The horse snorted, as if it too were tired of company. He rode off without looking back. The fire, the men, the smoke—everything diminished until it was swallowed up by the dust.

He rode in silence for a long time. The wind had the upper hand again, whipping his face. He thought of the bald man's words: Happiness, women, debt. All fleeting, all dust. But the Colt at his side – it remained. And maybe, Billy thought, maybe that was enough.

The horse trotted on, the dust trailing behind it like a dirty blanket. Billy thought of the two guys from the campfire. They could have shot. Maybe they should have. But sometimes, when death comes along, it hesitates for a second, as if making sure it's really your turn. This time, it had hesitated.

Late in the afternoon, Billy reached a village that consisted more of planks than houses. A saloon, a blacksmith, a store with nothing in it, and a few shacks that looked as if they might topple over with the next gust of wind. But there were sounds: voices, laughter, the clinking of glasses. Life clinging to its own stench.

Billy tied his horse loosely and stepped through the swinging doors. The smell of whiskey, sweat, and old wood hit him like a slap in the face. Inside were five men, all older than him, with faces that looked as if they'd lain in the dirt three times before and gotten back up each time.

He went to the bar and tapped a few coins on it. "Whiskey."

The bartender looked at him, saw his young face, his smooth skin. He grinned crookedly and put down a glass, half-full, as if even the alcohol here was too good for children. Billy took a sip, burning it down his throat.

Then he heard it. Behind him. Laughter. First quiet, then louder. That laughter that doesn't laugh with you, but at you.

"Hey, look at that boy," one said. "He barely has a beard on his face, but he acts like he's one of us."

Another whistled. "Maybe he's still looking for his mom."

Laughter. Harsh, piercing. Billy felt his back heat up. He stared into the glass. Another sip. The fire in his stomach mingled with the fire in his head.

"Hey, Babyface!" the first one called again. "What are you even doing here? Did you get lost on the way to school?"

Billy put the glass down. Slowly. He didn't turn around right away. He breathed through the dust that hung in the air even here.

"Maybe he wants to play," said the second. "Cards, or maybe he wants to show us how good a kisser he is." More loud laughter.

Billy turned around. His gaze was cold, a boy with eyes like an old dog that's been kicked too many times. He said nothing.

The first, a boy with a scarred cheek, stood up and approached. "So, what's up? Did you swallow your tongue? Or are you waiting for us to take you home?"

The laughter grew louder. Billy felt the world shrink inside him. As if the dust in his throat were loading a gun.

The man put his hand on his shoulder. A mistake. A damned mistake.

Billy moved quickly, faster than anyone would have thought possible with such a thin body. The Colt was out before anyone could blink. A shot, right in the face. The laughter was stifled by the blast. Blood spurted, and the man fell backward like a sack of bones.

The others fell silent. For a few seconds, only the echo of the shot echoed through the room, then the scream of a woman from the corner.

The second man reached for his gun. Too late. Billy turned and fired. A bullet to the chest. The man pulled the table with him, fell onto it, blood running over the cards as if they'd been waiting for it.

The last three hesitated. One had his hand on his gun, but his nerves failed him. He stared into that young, beardless face, cold and empty, as if it had never belonged to a boy.

"Come on," said Billy, his voice rough with dust. "Try it. One at a time."

No one moved. Just heavy breathing, fear in their eyes.

The bartender ducked behind the bar, muttering a prayer. The smell of gunpowder now hung over everything, sharp, metallic, stronger than whiskey.

Billy slowly walked back to the bar, picked up his glass, and drank the rest in one gulp. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You will never laugh at my face again," he said quietly.

He put the Colt back and stepped outside. Outside, the sun was almost gone, but the dust remained. Always the dust. He coughed, spat blood into the sand. A boy with a young face, but with hands that were already red.

The horse snorted as if it had seen everything. Billy mounted and rode off without looking back. Behind him was a small town where stories would soon be told. Stories of a boy who laughed until he was laughed at—and then shot.

He knew it would always be this way. As long as he had that face, as long as he stayed young, they would irritate him. And every time, he would turn around. Right in the face. Right in the face. Bullets are the only answer they understand.

And the dust crept deeper into his throat, as if to remind him: There's no escape here. Not from the dust. Not from himself.

The sun was almost gone when Billy rode out of the dump. The wind had grown colder, but the dust remained the same. The dust always remained the same. Behind him lay a saloon full of blood, screams, men who no longer laughed. And yet it didn't gnaw at him. No guilt, no regret. Just the whiskey in his stomach, mingling with the gunpowder like two old friends who've always hated each other.

He rode a bit, then stopped. He dismounted and sat down on a rock at the side of the road. The horse was munching dry grass that really only looked like dead hair. Billy pulled out the bottle, took a swig, then another. Whiskey was the only friend you had left when everyone else either died or disappeared.

He thought of the men's faces. The laughter, the comments about his young face. How many more times? How many times would they call him "babyface" before he put a bullet in their faces? As long as he looked young, as long as he

remained beardless, they would irritate him. And as long as he did, he would kill. Period.

The whiskey flowed through him like an old, rusty river. He coughed, wiped his mouth, and grinned crookedly. "To you, you bastards," he muttered. "To your damn laughter."

He heard the clatter of hooves. Not far away. Two riders, heavy, slow, like men who thought the land belonged to them. Billy didn't get up. He sat there, Colt loosely in his hand, and waited.

The two emerged from the twilight. A fat, broad-shouldered guy with a vest covered in dust and sweat. Next to him was a gaunt one with long arms and a rifle across his lap. Both stared at him.

"Are you the boy from the saloon?" asked the fat man.

Billy took another sip, grinned, and lowered the bottle. "Depends on what you heard."

"That you shot two men," said the gaunt man.

"Wrong," Billy said calmly. "It was two men and a joke that went too far."

The two looked at each other. The fat one laughed briefly. "You've got guts, little one. Or you're just crazy."

Billy shrugged. "Both."

The gaunt man leaned forward. "You know they'll want to hang you if you stay here."

"Let them," said Billy, raising the bottle. "But not today. Today I'm drinking."

The fat man rode closer, leaning down in the saddle. "You know what, boy? I think you're just a pompous brat. With luck. Luck runs out eventually."

That was the sentence. Exactly that one. Again that damned put-down, just because of his face. Billy's finger twitched, the Colt fired. The fat man fell backward from the saddle, a hole in his neck, the dust turning red.

The skinny man raised his rifle and fired. Bullets whistled, dust sprayed. Billy rolled off the rock, landed hard, coughed, and felt the sand in his throat. But

the Colt was already up again, a shot, then another. The skinny man screamed, grabbed his stomach, and toppled from the saddle. The horse ran away.

Silence. Only Billy's breathing, his coughing, the whiskey gurgling in the bottle, as if it had seen it all. Billy stood up, walked over to the fat man, and looked into his dead face. No more laughter. Only dust in his teeth.

He went to the gaunt man, who was still wheezing. Blood was running from his mouth, his eyes wide open. Billy squatted down, took a sip of whiskey, then tipped the rest into the dirt next to the dying man.

"Not a drop for you," he said quietly. "Whiskey is for the living."

The man died with a burble that sounded like a final joke. Billy stood up, put away his Colt, and walked to his horse. He didn't feel proud. He felt nothing. Only the dust in his throat and the burn of the alcohol.

He mounted and rode on. Behind him were two bodies that would soon be visited by vultures and flies. In front of him, only dust, always dust.

He thought: Maybe he really was crazy. Maybe he was just a boy who didn't have a beard and that's why he killed anyone who reminded him of it. But then he took another swig from the second bottle he'd found deep in his pocket, and the thoughts faded again.

"Charles would have drunk like that," he murmured, and the dust responded with a dry cough.

When the wind carries the stories on, it's not the great heroics that stick, but the ugliness. In this country, ugliness is like burrs: they nestle in your tongue, your hands, your mind, and before you know it, they've carried your name on. So it began with a whisper at a bar, then it became a laugh in another saloon, and finally it was a shout in a settlement where the dogs had more sense than the men. "Billy the Kid," they said, first like a joke. Then like a threat. Then like a nickname you'd better not say if you want to breathe.

The name didn't suit him, Billy thought as he sat in his saddle, watching the dust settle like ash on the world. He wasn't a kid in the soft, forgetful sense people meant by the word. He was a hole with feet, wandering the land. A boy who was a thorn in the side of many people—because they teased him, because they filled his smooth face with scorn, because they showed him how to be a man by stealing his honor. And him? He paid cash. With lead.

The rumors began with a filthy bar owner who had too much whiskey and too few morals. He was the kind of guy who would sell his tongue for coins and entertain bribery thoughts for a rumor. One rainy afternoon—rain was as rare as decency—he stood at the bar, helping himself, and told a story about how a boy without a beard had sent five men to hell in a bar. The men at the table laughed, not genuinely, more reflexively. Then one said: "The boy has no beard, he looks like a kid." The landlord nodded, smacked his lips, and spoke with his mouth full: "Then we'll call him Billy the Kid. Why not? Sounds good, sells well." And so the name flew from mouth to mouth like a dirty bird.

Billy didn't hear it directly that day. He heard it later, in another town, in another bar, where the lights flickered so they turned the men's faces into demons. Someone said it, laughed, and another didn't know whether to chuckle for the punchline or in fear. "Billy the Kid," one repeated, in a tone as if he were speaking of a bad weather. The woman behind the bar flicked a fly off his shirt with the back of her hand, without raising her eyes, and muttered, "The boy's got more blood on his hands than years." Big laughter. Little shudder.

For Billy, the name change was like a bad suit someone had slipped on him because it looked good in the dark. He wore the name like one wears a mark: visible, indelible. Some people gave nicknames like medals, but here, nicknames were often harbingers of something bad—a bill one didn't want to pay. And Billy paid the bill, again and again, with bullets. He had never asked for this bill, but he had learned to read its numbers by heart: two shots, three shots, one dead. They were mathematical, precise, cold.

Time passed, and the name grew. Other guys, who had no stories of their own, tied the name to their teeth and spit it out to appear taller. "Oh, Billy the Kid? He got lucky. Two men, ha! If I were that young, I'd take after him." They said it with bravado, with the voice of a man who thinks arrogance is synonymous with courage. They proclaimed, they boasted, until they were alone again and the darkness laughed in their faces.

The laughs were always nasty. The kind that pulls the wool over your eyes. They made jokes about his lack of stubble, said he looked like a schoolboy who'd gotten into the wrong class. They said he had more goodness than blood in his body. That last one was especially stupid because it underestimated the darkness that lived inside him. When you teased a boy like that, when you hurled youth in his face as an insult, there were only two options: Either you learned to smile and played along like you had a tongue of steel, or you pulled out the device you always carried with you—in Billy's case, it was the Colt—and

you told the mocker where his place was. Most of the time, it ended in blood. Most of the time.

The time for sentimentality was long gone. Billy had never heard much about the great things: about honor, about patriotism, about heroism. He knew only the smell of burning wood, the taste of cheap whiskey, and the coldness of metal in his hand when the world became too small for him. He thought little, felt even less. His thoughts were like the songs a drunkard sings: short, repetitive, usually wrong. Sometimes he imagined that the people who laughed at him would get their comeuppance one by one. This wasn't noble revenge; this was brutality. And the brutality was honest.

In the saloons, people began to exaggerate his exploits. Stories thrive in dust, grow in bad taste. Two shots became twelve. One bar became two, then three, then four. A boy became a myth, and myths are thick as fly maggots: they burrow into open wounds. And once the myth had its stamp, card players began betting on him. "Say, bet Billy the Kid strikes again next month?" "Five cents for a knife?" The joke was cruel, and the quips were knives. He who laughed first thought he was safe. He who laughed last might never hear laughter again because someone had shut his mouth—with lead.

One evening, in a back room, sat a man with more scars than stories. He was half dead by any stretch of the imagination, but his mouth was still sharp. He spoke because he needed to, not because he had something to say. "Billy the Kid," he said. "Ha! Evil tongue. Boy, you make mistakes when you live for a word. Call yourself what you like—Kid, dog, bastard—it doesn't matter in the end. The world's one long, dirty joke, and you're the punchline." The men laughed, but it was more gnashing of teeth than enjoyment.

Billy heard the noise like one hears dust: everywhere, but never truly inside. He spat into the darkness, tasted blood and bitter whiskey. Then he stood up, his boots crunching, and went to the door. His horse was waiting outside, and the moon was a crooked silver. He climbed into the saddle, taking the name with him like a band around his neck—heavy, but not suffocating. He had grown accustomed to this name like old scratches.

"Call me what you will," he muttered, more to himself than to the shadows. "Call me Billy the Kid, call me shit, call me whatever you need to sleep." And then he set off, through the night, with the Colt warm at his side, the smell of whiskey on his clothes, and the men's laughter still echoing like a bad chorus.

The saloons would continue to spit out curses and jokes, and somewhere, a guy with too much courage would try to play the role of mocker. This guy would often fail. Those who didn't, later sat more quietly, and said nothing more about boys without beards. They pushed their money over and ordered another whiskey, because talking cost money and silence was cheaper. And as the rumor grew, something else grew too: a void that couldn't be filled. A void that often passed for a decision.

So the name began to live. Not because it was brilliant or just, but because people were stupid enough to keep drinking it and spreading it. And Billy? He did what he could: he drank along, rarely laughed, and when provoked, he fell into that same old, same old habit—the drawing, the shooting, the silence afterward. For in this country, words were merely the vanguard; those who weren't careful soon heard no words at all.

The next morning, as the sun rose again and spread the dust like a layer of tar over everything, a bartender across the street whispered, "Have you heard of him? Billy the Kid was here last night." And someone said, "Yeah, the kid without the beard. Tough guy, that one. Drinks like a devil." Another laughed, nasty, short. A third paid for his silence. And the dust? It absorbed it all as if it were nothing. It collected the names, the lies, the shots, and carried them on, as is its way—without mercy, without pity, ever further into the broken throats of this country.

Southern nights are cold as a grave, even when the day has grilled you like a piece of old meat. Billy lay on the ground, a blanket around his shoulders, his Colt at the ready as if it were his damned heart. Above him, the sky stared back, with a thousand little holes that looked as if someone had punctured eternity. He coughed, spat into the fire. The dust was still there, still in his throat. Dust, whiskey, blood—that was all he could taste anymore.

A coyote howled somewhere. Billy grinned crookedly. "Shut up, dog," he muttered, "you're not the only one who's hungry." He reached for the bottle, took a sip, and wiped his mouth. He didn't drink to forget—forgetting didn't exist here. He drank because there was nothing else. Water was for idiots. Whiskey was for men, or for boys you thought were kids until they put a bullet in your face.

He thought about the last faces he'd seen. They all looked the same when they died: surprised, offended, as if the world had just given them the kick in the ass they never expected. A man laughs at you, says "Babyface," and a second later

he's eating dirt. Billy thought that was funny. "Babyface, my ass," he growled. "Ask God what it tastes like when your teeth are full of sand."

In the saloons he left behind, they were already talking. They were always talking. Everyone had an opinion. "He's crazy." "He's dangerous." "He's just a kid." "He's the devil." All stupid talk. He knew words were worthless. Bullets were the only currency. Words fizzled out, bullets left holes. And holes spoke louder.

The next morning, he rode into another town. One of those clusters of boards, shacks, and shack heads. Even as he rode down the main street, he felt the stares. Men with hard eyes, women with thin lips, children who stared curiously until their mothers pulled them away by the arm. Someone whispered something. Billy heard it, even though the wind swallowed the rest: "Kid."

He dismounted and tied up his horse. The saloon was crowded: voices, smoke, and sweat. He went in, ordered whiskey, and it took less than three sips before someone opened their mouth. One at a time.

"Well, if it isn't the famous Billy the Kid," said a fat bastard with a face that looked like a tightly tied sack. "He doesn't look so wild. More like a schoolboy on his way home."

Laughter. That damned laughter again. Billy felt something crack inside him. His gaze remained on the glass, his hand on his Colt. Not yet. Another sip. Down the whiskey. Then.

"You want to prove something to us all, brat?" shouted the fat man. "Show us how fast you can pull your little toy gun."

Billy stood up. No announcement, no word. Just movement. A jerk, the Colt out, a bang. The fat guy fell over, a hole in his head, the laughter stopped. A second guy tried to jump up, Billy turned, shot him in the leg, then in the chest. Screams, chairs crashed. Whiskey glasses shattered.

The crowd scattered, women screamed, men cowered. Billy stood in the middle of it, young, beardless, with a still-smoking Colt. He laughed. A cold, sick laugh that surprised even him. "Babyface? That's my babyface," he growled, kicked the dead man in the ribs, and then sat back down at the bar as if nothing had happened.

The bartender wordlessly placed a new bottle in front of him. No prayer, no questions. Just whiskey. Billy drank while the bodies on the floor slowly fell silent.

The stories would continue, he knew. The dust would carry them, as it carried everything: blood, sweat, curses, screams. The men would talk, curse, bet, and somewhere outside, the next one would be waiting to open their mouth. And Billy knew how it would end. Always the same. Mockery, laughter, gunshot, silence. A damned pattern.

He took another sip, coughed, and laughed quietly. "Screw it," he muttered. "I'm Billy the Kid. Ask the dead if they thought it was funny."

Outside, the wind whipped dust through the street. Inside, it stank of whiskey, blood, and fear. Billy sat there, young, tired, with dust in his throat, and knew: The chapter had only just begun.

Whiskey before sunrise

The morning came not with a golden glow, but like a dirty joke after a night of heavy drinking. The sun peeped over the horizon like a red-eyed peeping Tom, and Billy woke up with whiskey in his stomach and dust on his lips. His throat dry as sandpaper, his head heavy as an anvil. He coughed, and it sounded like a rusty hinge was breaking from his chest. His first thought wasn't a prayer, a dream, or a "new day." The first thought was, "Where's the damn bottle?"

He found it, half in the dirt, half under his blanket. There was still a bit left. He took a sip, and the fire in his belly was more sincere than any greeting. Whiskey before sunrise—the only way you could even get up in this country. Water only made you sick, coffee only made you nervous. But whiskey... it made you forget that you'd shot too many men yesterday.

The horse stood a few feet away, listlessly chewing on dry grass. Even the animal looked tired. Billy grinned crookedly and spat. "Come on, horse. One more day, one more piece of dirt." The horse blinked lazily, as if to say, "Fuck you."

He rubbed his eyes, felt the skin beneath his fingers. Smooth, young, cursed. He knew the next person to call him "babyface" would go the same way as the last. It was like a curse he couldn't shake. Sometimes he wished he had a beard,

something to make him look older. But the whiskey grew inside him faster than any facial hair.

Billy stood up, slung his jacket over his shoulder, and stepped out onto the street. It was quiet. Too quiet. Only the wind, which drove the dust into the corners, as if mocking the last traces of blood. He walked to the saloon; the swinging doors creaked like an old man with hemorrhoids. Inside, a pile of faces from the evening were still sitting there. Faces filled with fear, with suspicion, with that look: "That's the boy who'll shoot you if you laugh."

The bartender cleaned a glass as if it were a sacred object. Billy nodded at him. "Whiskey. And fill the bottle."

"Already in the morning?" asked the innkeeper, his voice shaky.

"Tomorrow?" Billy grinned and sat down on the stool. "For me, there's no tomorrow. There's only whiskey. And I want it now."

The barman put down the bottle without another word. Billy poured himself a drink, took a sip, and the entire room held its breath. A few men were playing cards, but their hands were shaking more than the cards themselves.

One dared to break the silence. A thin man with thin lips that looked like two lines. "You're that Billy, aren't you? Billy the Kid."

Billy looked at him, eyes cold, young, but full of old rage. He took another sip. "Maybe. Maybe not."

The guy grinned crookedly. "They say you're crazy. A kid with a Colt. A bastard with no future."

Billy put down the glass. The clatter on the counter sounded like a gunshot. "They say a lot. And mostly they lie. Want to know if they're lying?"

The guy hesitated, but his pride overcame his reason. "Show me."

The cards paused. The innkeeper ducked. Billy's hand moved faster than a breath. The Colt cracked, the bullet went through the guy's neck, blood spurted over the cards. A scream, then silence.

Billy drained his glass and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "See, now you know."

No one laughed. No one moved. The dust outside swirled, as if it had gotten the punchline. Whiskey before sunrise—and already the first death. The day had just begun.

Whiskey in the morning never tasted different from whiskey at night. It burned, it lied, and it kept you alive for a few minutes. Billy was still sitting at the bar, the bottle in front of him as if it were his damned heart. The dead man on the floor lay in his blood, his eyes open, as if he still wanted to protest. No one protested. Not anymore. The other guests pretended they were invisible, as if death couldn't see them if they stared hard enough at their cards.

Billy grinned crookedly. "You look like priests on their first visit to a brothel," he said, taking a deep drink. "Nobody wants to see it, but everyone's excited."

No laughter. Just the creaking of wooden chairs and the rustling of cards.

A guy at the card table, a tall man with shoulders like a damned cupboard, finally raised his head. "You think you're a big man, don't you, kid?"

Billy put down the glass and half-turned toward him. "I don't think I'm anything. I drink and I shoot. That's enough."

"You're a shitty kid," growled the big one. "Not a man. Just a bastard with luck."

That was it. Always the same old jokes. Always the same old trash talk about his face, his age, his youth. Billy laughed dryly, stood up, and walked slowly over to the card table. The Colt hung loosely at his side, as if it were a dog just waiting to be unleashed.

"Say it again," he said quietly.

The big one spat on the floor. "You're a child. A shitty child."

The air ripped. Billy's hand jerked, the Colt fired twice. First in the leg to make the bastard fall, then in the head to make him stop. Blood spurted over the cards, the men at the table jumped back. One shouted "Jesus!" One ran out.

Billy stopped, looked at the dead man, and shrugged his shoulders. "Shitty kid, huh? Now you're just shit."

He went back to the bar, poured himself another glass, and drank. The trembling in his hand wasn't hesitation, just the adrenaline that always came when someone laughed and he had to silence them.

The innkeeper ventured back up. "Billy... you can't... you can't just..."

"Fuck you," Billy growled without looking up. "Bring me another bottle. Or I'll take you."

The innkeeper obeyed. Everyone obeyed. That was the law here: whoever shot louder was right.

Billy leaned back, drank, and laughed briefly to himself. He knew someone was already outside, running to spread the story. Tomorrow, maybe even tonight, they would talk again. "Billy the Kid shot two men. In broad daylight. Before the first cup of coffee." They would laugh, they would curse, they would bet on how long he would live.

He didn't know himself. Who cares. As long as the whiskey flowed, as long as the bullets landed, as long as he could silence the laughter—he was alive enough.

Outside, the sun rose higher. The day stank of gunpowder and sweat. Billy drank, coughed, spat into his glass, and drank some more. Whiskey before sunrise. Whiskey during the sun. Whiskey until the next bullet. Everything else was just dust.

The sun now hung in the sky like a rusty nail. The light was too bright, too harsh, as if it wanted to illuminate all sin. Billy stepped out of the saloon, the swinging doors creaked behind him, and immediately the dust hit him like a fist. He coughed, spat in the dirt, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and grinned. "Shitty weather, shitty day, shitty faces."

The horse was still tied up, snorting restlessly. Animals had a better nose for trouble than humans. And trouble was in the air. Billy saw them before they even found the courage to move: three figures at the end of the street. Two with rifles, one with a Colt. Men who looked like chewed bones in oversized boots.

The one in the middle shouted: "Billy the Kid! You've killed two men. It's time you paid!"

Billy laughed dryly, raising the bottle he was still holding. "Pay for it yourself, you jerks. Whiskey is expensive here."

The one with the Colt took a step forward. "We're not here for fun. The city wants you gone. We do too."

Billy took a sip, wiped his mouth, and slowly placed the bottle on the wooden step next to him. Then he spat. "Everyone wants to get rid of me. Stop talking so much bullshit. Just smoke."

The crowd that had gathered by now—women, children, men without balls—held its breath. Everyone wanted to see blood, no one wanted to get it.

The one with the Colt pulled. Too slowly. Billy's revolver barked twice, faster than a cough. The man fell backward, a hole in his chest, dust swirling.

The two with the rifles raised their arms, one fired, the bullet ripped open a board next to Billy's head. Splinters flew, he ducked, rolled, and fired back. One of the bastards got it in the leg and fell screaming into the dirt. The other was more nervous and missed, the horse neighed. Billy aimed, pulled the trigger, and hit him right in the neck. Blood spurted like a broken barrel, the man staggered and fell.

Silence. Only the screams of women, the whimpering of the wounded man in the dust. Billy stood again, smoking his Colt, his face cold as the grave. He stepped closer, looked at the man with the shot-up leg. He writhed, whimpered, and grabbed for the stock of his rifle.

"Leave it," Billy said quietly. "Or I'll leave you."

The man stared up, saw the Colt, and dropped the rifle. Billy grinned crookedly, spat at his feet, and put the gun away. "Good dog."

He went back and untied his horse. The crowd shrank back like cows before a wolf. No one said anything. A few women held their children, as if his gaze were contagious. The innkeeper stood in the doorway, pale, with a handkerchief in his hand.

Billy looked at him, picked up the bottle again, drank the rest, and threw it onto the street. It shattered, the whiskey mingling with blood and dust. "Here's to you, you goddamn hypocrites," he said loudly enough for everyone to hear. "Keep laughing. Laugh until you puke."

He mounted and rode off slowly, his Colt loosely in his hand. The village remained behind him—with three new stories, three new corpses, and a name that now hung even more heavily in the air.

People would start talking again, they'd spread the name like a disease. Billy coughed and grinned. "Billy the Kid, you assholes," he muttered. "Remember this. Whiskey before sunrise, blood afterward."

And the dust swirled up as if he himself had laughed.

The dust behind him never settled; it remained like a shadow following him. Every ride, every village, every bullet—everything left traces the wind couldn't wipe away fast enough. Billy knew it. Rumors travel faster than horses. Somewhere in the cities, where men with dirty coats and even dirtier souls played cards, someone had already spat on the table and said, "There's money on that boy. Billy the Kid. There's silver for his skin."

He rode with drooping eyelids, the sun blazing in his face, the whiskey pounding in his skull. His head felt like a barrel full of nails. He coughed, spat, and laughed softly. "If they want me, let them try. Shitty mutt."

Around midday, he reached a riverbed, half-dried, with only a thin strip of water. He dismounted and drank greedily; the water tasted of iron, dirt, and rusty nails. He didn't flush out the whiskey, only dust. Then he heard it: footsteps. Quiet, cautious, like snakes in the grass.

"I know you're here," he shouted. "Come out before I have to count."

Three men stepped forward. All with rifles, ragged coats, faces that looked like they hadn't slept in months. Bounty hunters. The kind who always realized too late that money was no substitute for a long life.

The first one grinned, showing black teeth. "So you're the little one. Billy the Kid."

"Call me what you will," said Billy, reaching for his bottle. "But don't call me small."

The second spat in the dust. "Your head's worth 30 pieces of silver. We'll bring you in alive if you're good."

Billy took a sip, grinned, the whiskey dripping down his throat. "Thirty silver pieces. Sounds like Judas. Did you three end up that shitty too?"

The third raised his rifle. "Enough bullshit. Get off your horse, boy."

Billy looked at her, eyes half-closed, like a drunk. But something clicked inside him. His hand was loose, the Colt wasn't asleep.

"You want me alive?" He laughed. "Then you should have sent your mothers. You three bastards will be dead before you know how to spell my name."

He moved. Fast. The Colt barked, once, twice. The one with the black teeth toppled backward, his chest open like a barn door. The second fired, hitting only the dust. Billy's bullet pierced his face, his nose exploding in blood.

The third man screamed, fired, and a bullet ripped Billy's hat off his head. Dust swirled. Billy rolled, fired from the hip. Hit. The man fell, clutching his stomach, wheezing like a broken bellows.

Billy stood, coughed, and walked over to him. The man whimpered. "Please... I..."

Billy pulled on his bottle and poured a swig in his face. "Whiskey isn't for cowards," he said, pressing the Colt to his forehead. One final crack, then silence.

The vultures would have their fill today.

He wiped his mouth and laughed softly. "Thirty pieces of silver, huh? For three bastards who thought they were God's disciples." He spat on the nearest corpse. "Now you're just fodder."

He saddled up, the dust sticking to his hair, the whiskey sticking to his throat. Behind him were three bodies, in front of him nothing but more dust, more rumors, more men foolish enough to try.

Billy tugged on the reins, rode off, and muttered, "Come on. I'll drink you all under the table and then shoot you in the face. Whiskey before sunrise, bullets afterward."

And the wind laughed with him.

The night was as black as a burned-down church. The sky was full of stars, but they didn't look romantic—more like holes in the roof of hell. Billy had built a small fire, no bigger than a rat, enough for a bit of light, not enough to lure anyone from afar. He lay on the blanket, his Colt beside him, the bottle half empty. Every sip made him heavier, but also lighter. Whiskey had that damned

double effect: It pulled you down like a stone and simultaneously made you float like you were already dead.

He coughed and laughed softly. "Maybe I'm already half dead," he murmured, "maybe I'm just drinking because I want to make things easier for the devil."

The horse stamped nervously, ears pricked. Billy stood upright. Animals don't lie. They smell trouble before you see it. He reached for the colt, placed it across his legs, and waited.

The cracking sound came quietly, cautiously. Footsteps. Several. Billy took another sip, hanging his head like a drunk, but his eyes were alert.

Four men stepped out of the darkness. Bounty hunters, another bunch of assholes with rusty rifles and greedy faces. They thought the night was their ally. They thought Billy was drunk enough to be easy prey.

The first one grinned. "Well, look at that. The famous Billy the Kid. Drunk and alone."

"I'm never alone," Billy said calmly. "I have whiskey. And my Colt. The only friends that remain."

The men laughed. One of those laughs that's too loud to mask fear. Billy slowly raised the bottle, took a deep swig, and let his throat burn, as if he were giving himself courage.

"Put down the gun, boy," another said. "We'll bring you in alive. Maybe. If you cooperate."

Billy put down the bottle and took a drag on the cigarette he'd just put in his mouth. Embers, smoke, coughing. He grinned. "You talk too much."

Then he moved.

The Colt barked twice, fast, hard. The first fell, a hole in his face, the second got a shot in the chest, flying back like a sack of potatoes. The other two raised their rifles and fired, but Billy was already moving. Bullets whistled past, hitting only the dust. Billy rolled, knelt, fired. One fell with a scream, the other staggered, hit in the shoulder.

"Shit! Shit!" screamed the injured man, crawling in the dust.

Billy slowly stood up, coughed, spat, and walked toward him. "Shit?" He grinned. "You're shit. Shit in the dust."

The man begged. "Please... I... I just wanted the money..."

Billy squatted down, pulled on the bottle, took a deep swig, and swirled the last bit of whiskey around in his mouth. Then he spat it right in the man's face. "Whiskey is for men. Not for little sons of bitches."

He pulled the trigger. A bang, his head fell back, the fire crackled, and the night was silent again.

Billy stood up, slid his Colt back into his holster, and reached for the bottle. Empty. He threw it into the fire, it shattered, flames licked up, sparks flew.

"Whiskey before sunrise," he muttered, "blood before midnight."

He lay down again, Colt in hand, the stars above him, the dead beside him. The dust settled over everything like a shroud. And Billy laughed softly, that dry, sick laugh that no longer needed a joke.

The next morning smelled of iron. Not fresh water, not hope, just blood, sweat, and old smoke. Billy woke up, coughing his lungs out, feeling the muscle cramp that comes with spending half the night sending men to hell. He reached for the bottle—empty. He laughed, a raspy, short laugh. "Well, dust for breakfast then."

The horse stood a few steps away, nervous, its nostrils flared. It smelled the dead lying in the sand like discarded dolls. Billy didn't even look at them properly. Four less. Four more. What does it matter? The vultures would take over breakfast.

He saddled up, rode off, and after just an hour, he encountered the first sights. A few settlers by the roadside, a trader with his wagon, a few children who were immediately pushed away by their mothers. Everyone stared. Everyone whispered. This was worse than gunfire. You could return gunfire. Not whisper.

In the next town, barely more than a dozen houses and a saloon, the air was filled with rumors before he even dismounted. Men looked at him, immediately lowered their gaze. Women pulled their children away. One muttered too loudly, "That's him... the Kid... Billy the Kid." The word flew through the street like a spit.

Billy stepped through the swinging doors and sat down at the bar. "Whiskey."

The innkeeper wordlessly placed the bottle down, as if handing the executioner's tools. Billy drank for a long time, letting the burning sensation eat through his body. He felt the stares on his back, heard the quiet whispering.

"He shot them all, four men in one night." "No, six. With his bare hands." "A child, I tell you. A child with the devil in its belly."

Billy laughed quietly, glass in hand. "You talk like you can taste shit. But no one dares to swallow."

A man stood up, tall, broad-shouldered, his face red with anger or fear. "You bring shame on this country. You're just a drunken bastard with a fast Colt."

Silence.

Billy finished his drink, put down his glass, and half turned around. "Maybe. But at least I'm not lying under the table drooling when someone laughs."

The man drew. A hint of movement, nothing more. Billy's Colt barked. A shot. The guy fell, his throat ripped open, wheezing like a broken pig. Blood ran across the floor, dripping into the dust blowing through the window.

Billy raised his glass and continued drinking. "Next?"

No one moved. No more laughter, just gasps and fear.

He stayed for another hour, drinking, listening to the murmuring of his name creeping through the air. Billy the Kid. Like a curse no one wanted to utter, but no one could stop.

As he left, the road was empty. Only the wind, only the dust. He mounted his horse, spat, and laughed. "Now they're talking about me like I'm a damn ghost. Maybe I am. A drinking, shooting ghost. Whiskey is my blood, the Colt is my breath."

He rode on, and behind him the walls whispered.

The sun hung low, but still burned like a red-hot iron. Billy rode into a town bigger than the last. More houses, more people, more loudmouths. And that was precisely the problem: the bigger the town, the bigger the mouth.

As he rode down the main street, he noticed it. Men who didn't look away, but stared straight at him. Hands resting on rifle stocks. Whispers that were no longer secret.

"That's him." "Billy the Kid." "The son of a bitch who shot four men in one night." "Someone says he got eight." "Whatever, he's here."

Billy grinned crookedly and spat in the dust. "Well, let's go, you assholes."

He tied up his horse and stepped through the swinging doors. The saloon was packed. Too packed. Men who never normally sat together at a table were crouching shoulder to shoulder, as if waiting for an entrance. Billy went to the bar, sat down, and slapped down some coins. "Whiskey. Leave the bottle."

The bartender trembled, put down the bottle, and no sooner had Billy poured than someone stepped out of the crowd. Tall, heavy, with a sheriff's badge that looked more like a tin toy than a law.

"Kid," he said loudly so everyone could hear. "Your time is up. We've had enough of you. Enough of your whiskey, enough of your corpses."

Billy took a sip, lowered the glass, and slowly turned around. "Enough? I haven't even started yet."

A murmur went through the room. The sheriff placed his hand on his Colt. "You're coming with me. No shooting today."

Billy laughed. A rough, dirty laugh that rolled through the saloon like an old dog who's found the last bone. "Without shooting? There's too many of you to all get out alive. So go ahead, pull your fucking things."

Silence. Then the first bang. No one knows who shot first—maybe Billy, maybe one of the stupid guys. But then all hell broke loose.

Bullets ripped through the air, glass shattered, men screamed. Billy ducked, rolled behind a table, and fired back blindly. A man screamed, fell over the table, blood spurting. Billy laughed, drank straight from the bottle, and fired again.

The sheriff came from the side, Colt drawn, sweat on his face. Billy raised the bottle and slammed it into his mouth. The glass shattered, whiskey spilled over both of them. A shot, and the star-bearer fell, gasping in his own blood and liquor.

The crowd scattered. A few ran out, a few fired in panic, hitting their own men. Billy advanced, step by step, like a ghost with fire in his hand. Anyone who looked at him stupidly got a bullet. No hesitation, no talking. Just bangs, screams, silence.

When the shots died away, the saloon was silent. Smoke hung in the air, thick and acrid. Tables overturned, glasses shattered, bodies everywhere. Some dead, some whimpering.

Billy stood in the middle, young, beardless, with a still-steaming Colt and a bottle that was nothing but shards. He coughed, spat blood, and drank the last of it from an intact glass he found somewhere.

"You all wanted me," he said hoarsely. "Now you have me. In your walls, in your filthy laughter, in your stories."

He stepped outside. The city was silent. Too silent. Women cowered, children wept, men didn't dare look him in the eye. The dust blew through the street, carrying the smell of blood with it.

Billy climbed up, looked back, and grinned crookedly. "Whiskey before sunrise. Bullets until midnight. That's how it goes, you sons of bitches."

Then he rode off, leaving behind him a city that would never laugh again when someone said "babyface."

First shooting

You never forget your first gunfight. Not because it was great, not because it brought you fame, but because it stinks. Of sweat, of blood, of burnt gunpowder, and of the shit the other guy shat in his pants when he realized he was about to die. Billy remembered it like it was yesterday, even though there was so much dust and whiskey in between that the memory sometimes felt more like a bad dream.

He was even younger, barely thirteen, fourteen. A kid who didn't know that soon no one would be allowed to call him that anymore. Beardless, thin, hungry as a mangy dog. In Silver City, on a corner that smelled more like a toilet than a street. He was with a boy who was bigger, older, stronger—a real bastard who liked to trample on the weaker ones. They called him McAllister,

but in Billy's memory, he was just the first son of a bitch who had made the mistake of irritating him.

McAllister laughed at him, as everyone else laughed. "You look like a girl, Billy. If you're lucky, they'll think you're pretty when you're dead." The others laughed along. There were three or four of them, all older, with dirty teeth and cheap knives. They were playing cards, they were joking, and Billy was only there because he had to sit somewhere.

The mockery grew harsher. McAllister pushed him off his chair and kicked him. "Come on, kid, bark like a dog." Billy scrambled to his feet, spitting out blood. And something inside him cracked. Not outwardly—inwardly. That cracking feeling when you know you either keep your mouth shut and fall into the dust, or pull the trigger and change everything.

His hand went to the Colt he'd owned for a few days—a rusty thing, used, too heavy for his fingers. But he raised it, held it wobbly, and aimed. The others laughed, thinking it was a game. McAllister kicked again, and that was the final mistake.

The shot ripped through the alley, loud and sharp. McAllister staggered, blood spurting, and he fell backward like a sack. The others fell silent. No one had laughed when the dust settled. Only Billy stood there, gun in hand, heart pounding like a forge.

Silence. Then the whimper of one of the others. "Jesus, he shot him..."

Billy's hands were shaking, but his eyes were cold. He still held the Colt up, turning it to face the other man. "Anyone else want to make jokes?"

No one answered. No one laughed anymore. They looked at him, saw the boy, the beardless bastard, and for the first time, they didn't see a child. They saw death.

Billy walked, slowly, step by step, the Colt still in his hand. His stomach was in knots, his throat dry, his throat filled with dust. But something inside him felt clearer than ever. Like a window had opened, and behind it, nothing but fire.

Later, in a back room, he found whiskey. He drank, puked, drank again. The taste burned, but it was more honest than the bastards' laughter. He sat there, his gun beside him, and knew: From now on, there's no turning back.

That was the first shootout. No heroism, no applause. Just blood, dust, and a new name he didn't yet know. But he knew he'd pull the trigger again. Again and again. Because laughter never stops until you smother it with bullets.

After the first shot, nothing was the same. Billy noticed it immediately. Not because he was proud—pride was for idiots who thought they'd won something. No, he noticed it in the faces. In the eyes of the others. They looked at him as if he were no longer a boy, but a ghost with a Colt in his hand.

In the beginning, there was this silence. Heavy, thick, as if someone had shot the air itself. McAllister lay in the dust, blood running from the hole in his chest, his face twisted in a final "That can't be." But it was. Billy had pulled the trigger. He, the beardless boy they'd laughed at.

The others backed away, like dogs suddenly realizing the little mutt has teeth. One stumbled over his chair, another drew his knife but immediately dropped it. "He's crazy," he stammered. "The brat is crazy."

Billy's heart raced, his stomach cramped, but his hand remained steady. The Colt wasn't shaking. That was the difference. His voice came out quietly but sharply: "Another one who calls me baby?"

No one answered. They ducked, looked away, as if he couldn't see them then. But he saw them. He saw their fear, and the fear tasted sweeter than the whiskey he later found.

He stepped out of the alley, slowly, the Colt still in his hand. People had heard the shot. Heads popped into doorways, curious eyes, frightened mouths. And then the whispering. That damned whispering, creeping through every crack like dust.

"The boy... he shot McAllister." "A kid, I tell you, a kid with a Colt." "Crazy. A devil's brat."

Billy felt the world around him changing. They still didn't know his name, his title. But they now knew that he was faster. Faster than laughter, faster than insults, faster than the knife someone was about to pull. And this knowledge frightened them more than the dead man in the dust.

He disappeared from Silver City that same night. With a bottle he'd taken from a drunk, and the Colt, which he now saw not as a rusty lump, but as a damned brother. He drank, coughed, vomited, drank again. The whiskey was sharp, it

burned his throat, but it was more honest than any word anyone had ever said to him.

On the street, he met a few men who asked him, "What happened? Why all the commotion in the city?" Billy just looked at them, grinned crookedly, and said, "Ask McAllister. Oh no, you can't do it anymore."

They stared at him as if they'd seen a ghost. One made the sign of the cross, another pulled his hat down over his face. That was the moment Billy understood: Death brings you more respect than any age, any beard, any damned authority.

He rode on, somewhere, without a destination, just away. But the whisper remained. "The boy with the Colt." "The little bastard who kills like a man." "The Kid."

And that night, as he lay under the open sky, dust in his throat, whiskey in his stomach, he laughed quietly. Not because he was happy. But because he knew they were right: He was crazy. And he was faster. Two things that meant everything in this country.

Fear was his cloak, but it itched like sackcloth. Billy soon realized that respect and fear were two sides of the same damn coin. Where one guy tipped his hat and lowered his gaze, another bastard would stand up, grinning broadly and wanting to prove himself. A kid, they thought, he's just a kid. If I'm faster, I'll be the man who beat the smile right out of Billy's face.

So it happened that barely three days after Silver City, he was sitting in another dump, dust still in his hair, whiskey in his stomach, when two guys eyed him like cattle at a market. One fat, with a sweaty forehead, the other skinny, with a face that looked like a donkey's ass. They were sitting playing cards, exchanging glances, whispering. Billy heard them, even though they thought he was too drunk.

"That's him," whispered the fat one. "The little bastard who shot McAllister." "Doesn't look like he could lift a chair straight," grinned the thin one. "We'll grab him, bring him back. People pay for this."

Billy raised his glass, half-turned toward them, and grinned crookedly. "If you assholes whisper that loudly, you don't need cards anymore. Better play with your fucking lives."

They laughed. Always the same thing. That laughter that wasn't funny, but sharp as a knife. The fat man stood up, staggered a few steps, his hand on his belt. "Come on, Kid. Show us how fast you can go. Maybe it's all just a fairy tale."

Billy put the glass down. The sound of it landing on the counter was like a gunshot. The Colt was out before anyone could blink. Two cracks. The fat guy flew backward, the thin guy grabbed his knife, screamed, ran—and fell, with a hole in his stomach that made him bleed like a sack.

The saloon fell silent. Cards fell from the table, whiskey dripped onto the floor. Billy took a deep breath, coughed, drank it, and wiped his mouth. "Fairy tales, huh?" He approached the thin man, who was still wheezing, and leaned down. "Now you're the punchline." One last shot, silence.

He went back and ordered another bottle. The barman trembled and put it down without a word. Billy drank straight from the neck and looked at the remaining men. "Anyone else think they're faster?"

No one answered. They only saw the face: young, smooth, beardless, but with eyes that had seen it all. Eyes that told you that laughing would be your last mistake.

And outside, on the street, it started again. The whispering. "The Kid." "Billy the Kid." "The little bastard is faster than the devil."

Billy laughed quietly, coughed, and took another sip. He knew: This was just the beginning. Every shot made him more dangerous. Every death made him bigger. And every time his name was spoken, it attracted the next bastard who wanted to test him.

The city smelled different. Not just of dust and horse shit, but of fear mixed with cheap perfume. More houses, more people, more stares. Billy rode down the main street, feeling the eyes scrutinizing him, the whispers running ahead of him like a dirty wind.

"That's him." "Billy the Kid." "The boy who shoots faster than he runs."

He grinned crookedly and spat on the floor. "Screw it. Let them stare."

Two men stood in front of the saloon. Not scoundrels. Not drunken cowboys. A sheriff and a deputy. Star on his shirt, rigid faces that acted as if they'd never

vomited. The sheriff was tall, with a gray beard and eyes like cold nails. The deputy was younger, nervous, his hand always too close to his gun.

"Billy the Kid," the sheriff said loudly, so the whole street could hear. "You're not welcome here."

Billy laughed, stepped off his horse, and let the reins dangle. "I'm not welcome anywhere. But I drink everywhere."

The deputy stepped forward. "You're coming with me. Too many bodies behind you. Time someone stopped you."

Billy pulled on the bottle he'd pulled from his saddlebag, took a long swig, and wiped his mouth. "Stop? Try it, brat. But hurry. I hate being kept waiting."

The crowd huddled together, whispering and gossiping. Women held back children, men held their breath. Everyone knew: Something was about to happen.

The sheriff stepped forward. "I don't want any trouble. Put down your gun, and we'll just do this."

Billy's grin widened. "No trouble? Brother, I'm the trouble."

The deputy's hand twitched, faster than his brain. The Colt came out—and Billy was faster. A shot, the boy flew back, blood splattered on the street. Silence. Only a scream from a woman.

The sheriff drew his gun now, serious, without hesitation. Billy rolled to the side, dust swirled, a shot ripped through the air but hit only wood. Billy's Colt barked twice. The sheriff staggered, a hole in his shoulder, one in his stomach. He fell to his knees, his face pale, but his eyes still defiant.

Billy stepped closer, coughed, and grinned. "So, Sheriff? Easy enough?"

The man spat blood and wanted to say something else, but Billy pulled the trigger. A bullet through his head, the sheriff toppled over, and dust settled over him.

The crowd screamed and scattered. The saloon was suddenly empty, except for Billy, who stepped through the swinging doors, sat down at the bar, and demanded the bottle.

The barman set it down, his hands shaking. Billy drank, poured a swig over his head, and laughed quietly. "So much for the law."

Outside, the sheriff lay in the dust, the deputy next to him. Two stars less in this dump. And now people knew that no law was faster than Billy's Colt.

He coughed, drank, and spat on the floor. "A child, they call me. A kid. But if the law falls, what are you then? Even less than children. Fucking fools."

Night came, and the town spoke only in whispers. But the name crept deeper now. Billy the Kid. The boy who wiped out the sheriff and deputy in one afternoon. The boy who laughed when the law fell.

The morning smelled of death. Not of fresh grass, not of coffee, but of ripped-open bodies, cold blood, and sweat from fear hanging on the boards. Billy woke up in the back room of the saloon, his bottle empty at his side, his head heavy as an anvil. He coughed, wiped his mouth, felt the dried blood in the stubble that still wasn't there. "Shit," he muttered, "I still look like a kid, and yet the men are dropping like flies."

Outside, it was quieter than usual. No children laughing, no women carrying water, no men playing cards. Just dust blowing through the street as if it wanted to bury the whole damn city. Billy stepped out, his Colt loose at his side, his eyes half-closed, his head full of whiskey.

The bodies were gone, but the stains remained. Dark circles in the dust where the sheriff and deputy had fallen. Men had dragged them away during the night, out into the field, probably buried them like dogs. But the smell still lingered. Iron, dirt, death. Billy grinned crookedly. "The law lies deeper than shit."

People watched him from a distance. Doors opened briefly, then immediately closed again. Women pulled their children back like puppets on a string. An old man stood on the corner, staring at him, shaking his head. Billy laughed, coughed, and spat in the dust. "What are you staring at, old man? Do you want another hole?" The old man disappeared without a word.

The saloon was empty. Only the bartender, pale, hands shaking, glasses clinking. Billy sat down and rapped on the bar. "Another whiskey. And not so stingy this time."

The barman put down a bottle and immediately turned away, as if the mere glance would kill. Billy drank, for a long time, letting the burning sensation sink deeper until the memory briefly blurred. But the voices didn't disappear.

"The boy... he shot the sheriff." "He wiped out the law." "Billy the Kid... faster than death."

It was like a song, an ugly song that never stopped. He could hear it on every corner, on every street, in every glance. It made him taller, but also emptier. Everyone who whispered his name was a new bastard who eventually found the courage to say it too loudly.

That afternoon, he sat outside on the saloon step, the bottle beside him, his Colt held loosely in his hand. A few men passed by, strangers. Bounty hunters, perhaps. They saw him, saw the Colt, saw the stains in the dust. No one said anything. No one laughed. They walked on, their eyes downcast, as if they'd seen the devil.

Billy grinned, raised the bottle, and drank. "That's exactly how I want it, you pissers. Look, whisper, shit yourselves. I'll drink you all under the table."

But as the sun sank lower, he felt it. The emptiness. The whiskey helped, but only briefly. Then there was only dust in his throat and this thought: Everything repeats itself. First they laugh, then they shoot, then they die. And he was left. Always him.

He laughed briefly, scratchily and bitterly. "Maybe I'm already dead and just don't realize it."

But then he heard the whispering again. From inside, from outside, everywhere. "Billy the Kid... Billy the Kid..." Like a prayer, but without God. And Billy knew: the next gunfight was already on its way. The dust always brought it.

Night came quickly, like a curtain torn down without warning. Billy sat in the saloon, alone with his bottle; the barman had long since shit his pants and retreated to the back. Only the flies buzzed over the sticky tables. Outside, the street was empty, too empty, as if the houses themselves were afraid.

Then he heard it: the clinking of spurs, the stamping of horses. Not one, not two—a group. Voices, muffled, harsh. Bounty hunters. He already knew the type: men who thought a few coins were worth more than their lives. Always the same song.

He poured himself another glass, drank it, and leaned back. "Come on, you bastards," he muttered. "I need a little entertainment anyway."

The swinging doors opened. Four men entered. Dusty coats, rifles slung across their chests, faces that had seen too many sleepless nights. The leader grinned, but his eyes were cold. "Billy the Kid. Finally."

Billy raised the bottle, drank, and let the whiskey run over his lips. "Finally, yes. You're late. The rumors were faster."

The leader stepped closer. "We'll bring you in. Alive if you're smart. Dead if you keep making jokes."

Billy laughed, a dry, ugly laugh that filled the entire room. "Alive? You really think anyone wants to see me alive? You're dumber than you look."

The second bounty hunter, a young bastard with too much zeal, stepped forward. "Shut up, kid. Put your gun down."

Billy took another sip and slowly put the bottle down. "Put down your gun? You have no idea how the game works."

Then he moved.

The Colt was out before the younger man could blink. One shot, the guy fell, blood splattered across the table. The leader raised his rifle, Billy ducked, the bullet hit the wall, wood splintered. Billy rolled, shot back, hit him in the shoulder, then again in the stomach.

The other two fired wildly, hitting only glass and air. Billy laughed, shot from the hip, and hit one in the neck. The man grabbed his throat, blood spurted between his fingers, and he fell to the ground, gasping.

The last one ran, panicking, trying to escape through the swinging doors. Billy aimed and fired. The bullet hit him in the back, and he flew forward, crashed through the door, and landed in the dust.

Silence. Only the cracking of wood, the smell of gunpowder, blood, and whiskey.

Billy stood up, coughed, spat, and went to the leader, who was still alive, whimpering, his hands bloody. "Why?" he wheezed. "Why are you doing this?"

Billy squatted down, pulled on the bottle, took the last sip, and let the burn sink in. "Because you're laughing. Because you're talking. Because you think I'm a child. But children don't kill men. I do."

He pressed the Colt to the man's forehead and pulled the trigger. One final bang, then silence.

Billy stood up, threw the empty bottle against the wall, shattered, and whiskey ran across the floor, mixing with blood. He laughed, scratchy, sick, but genuine. "Whiskey before sunrise. Bounty hunters for dinner."

The street outside remained empty. No one wanted to see, no one wanted to hear. But tomorrow the story would continue. Four bounty hunters less. Billy the Kid – faster than death again.

The next morning was gray as a rotten blanket. No bright light, no glimmer of hope—only dust swallowing the sun, and the stench of burnt gunpowder still lingering in the saloon. Billy woke up among broken chairs, shards of glass, and corpses. Four bounty hunters lay twisted like dolls someone had carelessly tossed into the corner.

He stood up, rubbed his eyes, and reached for his gun. His hand was steady. No trembling, no remorse. Just dust in his throat and the taste of whiskey on his tongue. "Shitty night," he muttered, "shitty life."

Outside, the street was empty. Too empty. No children, no women, no voices. Only doors half-open, like mouths that wanted to scream but couldn't. Billy stepped out, his Colt loosely in his hand. The dust blew as if trying to bury everything that had happened during the night.

The men who saw him immediately pulled their hats down over their faces. A woman grabbed her child by the arm and dragged him away as if Billy were the plague in flesh and blood. An old preacher stood at the end of the street, Bible in hand, trembling. He raised his voice, weak, shaky: "You're a child of the devil, boy!"

Billy grinned crookedly and spat in the dust. "Then go pray, old man. But pray quickly."

The preacher ducked and disappeared. No one wanted to speak anymore. Only whispers crept through the city, that eternal, accursed whisper that always preceded him.

"Billy the Kid..." "He shot them all..." "No one is faster..." "A demon in a child's face..."

Billy mounted his horse, the corpses behind him, the dust in front of him. The saddle squeaked, the horse neighed restlessly. Billy patted his neck. "Easy, old man. We'll keep riding. There are still more idiots out there."

He rode down the main street, slowly, as if trying to gather the fear. Every step the horse took was a punch to the city's throat. No one stood in his way. No one dared to stop him.

He stopped briefly at the edge of town and took a drag on the last cigarette he had. Smoke, dust, coughing. He grinned, cursed, and laughed briefly. "Whiskey, dust, and idiots who want to die. That's all there is here."

Then he rode on, out into the vastness, into the damned wilderness that kept swallowing him up. And behind him remained a city that would never again pretend that the law was stronger than death.

The name, his name, flew away in the wind, like ashes:

Billy the Kid.

No longer just a boy. No longer just a nickname. A curse.

Cards, cigarettes, blood

It was one of those afternoons when the sun wanted to burn your brains out. The dust clung to your skin, the whiskey stuck to your tongue, and Billy was back where he always ended up: at the card table in a saloon, cigarette in his mouth, hand on his Colt. Cards, cigarettes, blood—that was the order things usually went in.

The room stank of sweat and cheap tobacco. Men hunched over the cards, as if they might find answers in them that life denied them. Billy blew smoke into the air and grinned crookedly. "Answers? All you find is dirt and loss. But keep playing."

A man across from him—fat, with red cheeks like apples full of worms—threw cards onto the table. "I think you're cheating, kid."

Billy raised his eyebrows and took a deep drag on his cigarette. "Screw you? If I screwed you, you'd already be dead. Think about it."

Laughter at the table, nervous and brittle. The fat man blushed and reached for his glass. "You're a little bastard. Without your Colt, you'd be nothing."

Billy grinned, coughed, and tapped ash onto the table. "Without my Colt, you'd still be fat. So? Does that help?"

The atmosphere grew tense. One of the other players, a thin man with shaking hands, tried to change the conversation. "Leave it, Hank. This isn't going anywhere."

But Hank wasn't going to let it go. He stared at Billy, the veins in his neck throbbing. "I'm going to finish you off, kid. Here and now."

Billy took a slow drag on his cigarette, blowing the smoke in Hank's face. "Then get up. But get up quickly. I have no patience for slow bastards."

Hank jumped up, the chair crashing back. His hand reached for the revolver, but he was too late. Always too late. Billy's Colt blasted, a shot, right into his chest. Blood spurted across the table, across the cards, across the cigarette Billy still held in the corner of his mouth.

The smoke mingled with the gunpowder, the stench of blood with the stench of whiskey. The cards were sticky red, the men at the table stared, open-mouthed.

Billy took the last drag, stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray, and drained his glass. "Your turn, boys. Cards, cigarettes, blood. That's the game."

The shot still echoed in the rafters, and fat Hank lay gasping on the floor, his cards and chips sticking red. For a moment, everything was silent. Only the hiss of the cigarette, still half-lit in Billy's mouth, and the dripping of blood onto the floorboards. Then the chaos erupted.

One of the players jumped up, his chair clattered, cards flew. "Damn, he shot Hank!" – as if every asshole in the room hadn't seen that. Another raised a bottle and drank to wash down his fear.

Billy sat there, blowing out smoke as if he'd just been joking. "I told you, play fast. If you draw too late, you don't draw at all."

A young bastard, maybe nineteen, with too much courage and too little sense, reached for his knife. He leaped across the table, screaming, blade forward. Billy's hand was already on his Colt, and the bang tore the room apart. The boy stopped mid-movement, eyes wide, blood spurting from his chest, then he collapsed, directly onto the cards.

The cigarettes one of the men dropped in shock almost set the table on fire. Smoke, blood, whiskey—everything mixed together to create that disgusting perfume Billy knew better than any other.

The remaining players stepped back, raised their hands, begging without words. Billy grinned, coughed, took another cigarette, and lit it from the flame of an overturned lamp. "Come on, guys. Keep playing. Or do you all want to drop out?"

No one dared. They just stared at Hank, at the boy, at the blood staining the cards like a new bet.

One of the spectators, who had been standing silently in the corner, stepped forward. A tall man, scarred on his face, eyes like a caged animal. "You're a sick bastard, Kid."

Billy took a drag on his cigarette and grinned. "Maybe. But you'll be a dead bastard if you keep talking big."

The guy reached for his rifle. Too late. Billy fired, the shot ripped half his head off, the wall behind him splattered red. The screaming in the saloon was now hysterical; women ran out, men ducked, glasses shattered.

Billy slowly stood up, his Colt still warm, a cigarette in his mouth. He picked up the cards, which were stained with blood, looked at them, and laughed hoarsely. "Full house. Screw it, I'm winning anyway."

He threw the cards into the puddle, drank directly from the bottle, and spat on the ground. "Cards, cigarettes, blood. And in the end, everything is equally worthless."

The saloon smelled like hell, and Billy was right in the middle of it, like it was his living room.

The saloon stank of burnt wood, blood, and cold smoke. Billy stepped through the swinging doors, cigarette in his mouth, Colt loose in his hand. Behind him

lay cards covered in blood, screams, chairs on the floor, two men who never laughed again. The silence outside was as heavy as a sack of stones.

The street wasn't empty. A handful of men stood there, legs apart, faces hard, hands on their belts. They had heard the shouting and the gunshots. Perhaps brothers of the dead, perhaps just friends, perhaps just idiots who thought they had to prove they weren't cowards.

Billy coughed, spat in the dust, and grinned. "Well, what are you staring at? Do you want to play cards too?"

The first one stepped forward, tall, broad shoulders, the veins in his neck like ropes. "You shot Hank. You shot my brother, you little bastard."

Billy took a drag on his cigarette, exhaling the smoke directly into the air. "Your brother was fat and slow. I just did him the favor of not having to breathe like a pig anymore."

A murmur went through the crowd. The man reached for his revolver, but Billy was faster. Faster and faster. A shot, right in the chest, and the man flew back, dust and blood in the air.

The others moved, one after the other. Dust filled the street, bullets whistled, wood splintered from the walls of the houses. Billy laughed, coughed, fired back. One man fell to the ground with a hole in his throat, another got it in his shoulder and fell screaming into the dust.

Women screamed, children ran away. The dust made visibility difficult, but Billy moved like a shadow, fast, merciless. Another shot, another bastard lay in the dirt, his eyes fixed, his mouth open, as if he were about to curse.

Silence. The dust settled. Three men lay dead, one whimpering, clutching his shoulder, blood seeping through his fingers. Billy stepped up to him and kicked the gun out of his hand. "Revenge is like poker, friend. Sometimes you get a good hand, sometimes you get shit. And today..." – he laughed hoarsely – "you got shit."

The man pleaded, but Billy put the Colt to his forehead and pulled the trigger. Dust, blood, smoke. Silence again.

Billy turned to the crowd still hanging in the doorways and windows. "Anyone else? Or is that enough for today?"

No one moved. Only dust blew through the street, and the whispering began again, quietly, like a song no one wanted to sing, but everyone knew.

"Billy the Kid..." "Cards, cigarettes, blood..." "He laughs when he kills..."

Billy grinned, took another drag on his cigarette, spat in the dust, and reached for the bottle he always carried with him. "That's exactly how I want it, you bastards. Keep whispering. Keep whispering."

He mounted his horse and rode slowly out of the city. Behind him lay blood on the maps, blood in the dust, blood in the throats of the men who wanted to stop him. In front of him, nothing but more dust, more whiskey, more dead.

The next town was a different place, but the air smelled the same: of horse shit, cheap tobacco, and fear eating under people's skin. Billy rode in like someone with nothing to lose—because he had nothing to lose. The bottle rattled on the saddle, the Colt hung heavy at his side, and his face was still as smooth as a kid's. Only his eyes made it clear that the kid was long dead.

The saloon was packed: voices, laughter, cards on the tables. Men who thought today was a good day to lose money. Billy entered, sat down at the nearest free table, lit a cigarette, and grinned crookedly. "Hey, boys. Room for another addict?"

The men at the table—three strangers, none of whom looked strong enough to cause trouble—nodded, threw cards, and drank. One of them, a slender bastard with a narrow face, looked at Billy briefly and grinned. "New in town? Never seen him."

Billy took a drag on his cigarette and put down a few coins. "Maybe yes. Maybe no. You better keep playing. Talking doesn't fill you up."

Cards flew, whiskey flowed, smoke hung heavy in the ceiling. For a while, all was quiet, except for the clatter of chips, the snorting of horses outside, and the laughter of men too stupid to realize that the world could slit their throats at any moment.

But then the name was mentioned. It always comes up at some point.

At the next table, a few too many whiskeys in his stomach, a mouth too big: "Did you hear? Billy the Kid was here in the South. Killed three men, just like that, in the middle of the day. A beardless bastard, they say. Laughing while they die."

The men at Billy's table looked up. One stared at him longer than necessary. Billy just grinned and took a drag on his cigarette. "What are you staring at, friend? Do you see a beard anywhere?"

The laughter in the room died down. The skinny bastard in front of him swallowed, but the grin remained. "You're him, aren't you? The kid. The little son of a bitch who thinks he's a man."

Billy drank, put the glass down, slowly so everyone could hear the sound. "Cards, cigarettes, blood. I told you the order. Want to see how fast we can get through this?"

Silence. The room was still. The men at the table were sweating, one nervously reaching for his cards as if they could save him.

The thin man laughed uncertainly. "Maybe you're just a cheap imitation. A brat with a big mouth."

Billy's Colt was out before anyone realized it. A shot, right between the eyes. The skinny man toppled backward, cards flew, blood splattered across the table.

Chaos. Chairs tipped over, men grabbed for weapons, women screamed. Billy stood there, smoking, grinning, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. Another shot, a second man fell, this time from pure panic.

"Come on!" Billy shouted, coughing and laughing. "Who else wants to go? Who thinks they're faster than a kid?"

No one moved. They knew what was coming. They had heard it, and now they saw it. Blood dripped onto the cards, the chips swam in red.

Billy stepped forward, drank the rest of the bottle, and spat on the floor. "That's how it goes, you bastards. Cards, cigarettes, blood. You play, I win."

Then he put away his Colt, dragged on his cigarette, and stepped out into the night. Behind him was a saloon that no longer laughed. In front of him was only dust and the next town that would soon make the same mistake.

The next evening brought the same filth: smoke, whiskey, cards, laughter. But this time, there was someone sitting there who wasn't laughing. A thin guy with eyes like nails, hands steady, almost too steady. He played cards without

blinking, without trembling, and Billy realized after just two rounds: The bastard was no ordinary player.

The saloon was packed, the whispering in the background, as always: "That's him... the Kid..." "He shot three men last week, just like that." "Shit, he killed five." Always the same stories, always more exaggerated. Billy ignored it, dragged on his cigarette, drank, and played cards.

But the guy across the room didn't grin, he didn't mutter anything. He just stared. Cards, Billy, cigarette, Colt. Always the same look, always calm.

"Well, friend," said Billy, coughing and spitting into the ashtray, "are you playing cards or staring me to death?"

The guy laid down his cards slowly, as if he had all the time in the world. "I saw you, kid. In Silver City. In Lincoln. You're fast. But I'm faster."

The others' laughter immediately stopped. The air became thick, heavy, like before a thunderstorm. Billy grinned crookedly, took another drag on his cigarette, and blew the smoke into the air. "That's what everyone says. And most people are lying in the dust after two seconds. Want to see how it ends?"

The guy nodded. "That's exactly why I'm here."

Silence. No more clattering, no more dice rolling, no more giggling from the hookers in the corner. Everyone knew there was something other than cards on the table now.

Billy's hand rested on the Colt, loose, familiar. But the other one moved the same way. Calmly. No trembling. No sweat. This was new. This was dangerous.

"Tell me, Kid," he murmured, "does it feel good when they're all scared?"

Billy grinned, but his heart beat faster. "Better than being dead."

Then it happened. Both moved, almost simultaneously. Two Colts flashed, two shots ripped through the room.

Dust, smoke, screams.

Billy was still standing. The other one was too. A scratch burned on Billy's arm, blood dripping. For the first time, someone had touched him. Not deeply, not fatally—but close enough to make him realize he wasn't immortal.

The guy grinned coldly, a scar on his neck stretching as he spoke. "See, kid? You're not the only one who's fast."

Billy coughed, laughing hoarsely even though the pain made his arm burn. "Maybe. But I'm the only one who laughs when he bleeds."

Another shot. This time, Billy's bullet hit him right in the forehead. The guy fell, blood spurted across the table, and the cards scattered.

Silence. Only Billy's breathing, heavy and rattling, the crackle of the cigarette that was almost burned down. He reached for the bottle, drank, and laughed raspily. "Almost, bastard. Almost."

He saw the others at the table staring at him like an apparition. "Remember this: cards, cigarettes, blood. But in the end, there's only one winner. And that's me."

The shot had grazed him, but it burned like hell. Billy sat in the back room of the saloon, pulled up his sleeve, and saw the scratch on his arm. Blood, sticky, dry, but not deep. Not a fatal blow—just a reminder that he wasn't untouchable. He laughed, coughed, and drank straight from the bottle. "Screw it. As long as I can still drink, I'm not dead."

The hooker who was treating him looked at him as if she'd seen too many men die. "You should rest, kid. That arm..."

Billy blew smoke in her face and grinned. "Resting? Resting is for corpses. I play cards. I drink. I shoot. That's all."

She shook her head and roughly bandaged the wound with a dirty cloth. Billy took a deep drag on his cigarette, laughing as the pain shot through his arm. "Feels good. Reminds me I'm still alive."

Later, he sat at the table again. The same hell: cards, chips, whiskey, smoke. Men staring at him as if they were sitting with Death himself. He grinned, coughed, and threw cards.

"Kid," one muttered, "you really should stop. You're hurt."

Billy laughed, poured whiskey over the wound, yelled briefly, then grinned again. "There. Now it's clean. Your cards too."

The men looked at each other nervously, their hands shaking. One dared to joke: "Maybe I can get you back the bullet that hit you."

Billy's gaze turned cold. A shot, directly onto the table. The bullet ripped the cards apart, and the man jumped up, pale as chalk.

"One more line like that and you're the ticket," Billy growled, coughed, and drank. "I don't want jokes. I want blood or whiskey."

The night dragged on, the smoke hanging like a shroud from the ceiling. One by one, they got out, pissed off, and left their chips behind. In the end, Billy sat alone, his Colt on the table, his bottle empty, and blood on his sleeve.

He grinned, speaking softly, as if he were talking to the cards themselves. "You're like people. You lie, you cheat, you tear each other apart. But in the end... only the bastard who sits the longest wins."

He laughed, coughed, and spat into the glass. Then he tipped it out, stood up, and stepped out.

Outside, the street was empty, just dust, just wind. But the whispering was there again. Always there.

"Billy the Kid... shot... and he keeps playing..." "A devil in a child's face..." "Cards, cigarettes, blood..."

Billy laughed into the night, that sick, scratchy laugh that sounded more like a cough. "That's right. Keep whispering. Make me bigger. I'll drink you all under the table."

The night was already old, but the whiskey kept him awake. The smoke hung thick in the saloon, the cards stuck to the table, and Billy's arm throbbed from the wound. But he grinned, coughed, and kept playing. Cards, cigarettes, blood—it wasn't just a saying anymore, it was a damned law.

The table was full again. New players, new faces, strangers who had come from outside because they'd heard the name. Some wanted to see it, some wanted to test it, some were just too stupid to know they were about to die.

"You're really him, right?" asked one, a guy with a scarred face. "Billy the Kid. The boy who laughs when he kills."

Billy took a drag on his cigarette, grinned, and coughed. "Laughing is better than crying. And killing is better than being dead."

The laughter at the table was nervous, thin. Cards flew, chips clattered. But no one was paying attention to the game anymore. Everyone was staring at Billy's hands, at the Colt, at the smoke that hung around him like a second face.

Then came the sentence that always tipped everything over again: "You're just a kid. A beardless bastard with luck."

Silence.

Billy took a deep sip and put the glass down, very slowly. "Luck?" He laughed, a raspy, evil laugh. "You call it luck because you're too slow."

His hand moved, faster than smoke. The Colt fired, a shot, the guy with the scar fell backward, blood splattered over the cards. Chaos. Chairs tipped over, men grabbed for weapons.

Billy shot again, again, laughed, coughed, spat. One man got it in the stomach, collapsed, and screamed. Another fell with a hole in his throat, blood gushing, the cards swimming in red.

The hookers screamed and ran out. The bartender ducked behind the bar, perhaps praying, but no god heard him.

Billy stood there, cigarette in his mouth, Colt in his hand, laughing like a sick man. Bullets whistled, one almost ripped his hat off, another slammed into the table. He rolled, fired back, hit someone in the head, blood spurted like a broken pitcher.

Then silence. The smoke was so thick that the dead were barely visible. The ground was sticky, red, black, the stench acrid. Billy stood in the middle, breathing heavily, his cigarette glowing, his Colt steaming.

He stepped to the table, looked at the cards swimming in blood, picked up an ace, and laughed. "See? I always win."

The others who were still alive cowered, holding up their hands, begging. Billy waved them off, spat in the dust, and drank the last swig from the bottle. "Piss off. And keep whispering. Tell me how you saw the Kid, with cards, cigarettes, and blood."

They ran, stumbling over the corpses, out into the night.

Billy was left alone. Smoke, blood, cards, whiskey. He sat down, coughed, grinned, and tilted his head back. "A child, they say. A child. But in the end, you're the dead children."

He laughed, raspy and evil, until his cough almost choked him. Then he took a last drag on his cigarette and stepped out into the night, where the dust already bore his name far and wide.

Women who stay until they disappear

Women were like whiskey: They burned, made you dizzy, and left you thirstier than you were before. Billy knew this early on, though he never stayed with one long enough to remember her name. Names were superfluous anyway. What remained was the smell of sweat, of cheap perfume, of bodies that only gave off warmth until the sun came up.

The saloon he ended up in that evening was full of just such women. Their smiles were as thin as their skirts, their eyes as empty as the bottles behind the bar. They sat on his lap, they laughed fakely, they asked for money. Billy laughed back, coughed, and blew smoke in their faces. "You stay until you leave. And when you leave, I'll stay behind with the bottle."

One of them, black-haired, with lips as red as fresh blood, stayed longer than the others. She sat next to him, drank with him, and held his hand as if she didn't know that the fingers on that Colt had killed more men than she had seen suitors. "You're the Kid, aren't you?" she whispered.

Billy grinned crookedly. "They all say that. But no one stays long enough to find out."

She laughed, but it wasn't a real laugh. More like a sound that didn't reach the room. She kissed him, tasting of cheap tobacco and sweet liquor. For a moment, Billy thought maybe that would be enough. One body, one kiss, one sip of whiskey. That's all he needed.

But that same night, she disappeared. No trace, no note, nothing. Only the smell remained, mingling with the smoke. Billy woke up alone, as always, coughed, reached for the bottle, and laughed bitterly. "Women stay until they disappear. And I'm left behind."

He stepped outside and saw the city at dawn, empty, silent, dusty. A dog barked, a rooster somewhere. Everything was the same, always the same. Only the whispering didn't change.

"Billy the Kid... he was with a woman..." "She left him..." "He still laughs..."

Billy took a drag on his cigarette, spat in the dust, and laughed hoarsely. "Of course I'm laughing. What else am I supposed to do? Cry? Screw it. I drink, I shoot, I laugh. And if you think that's less real because no woman stays—then you don't know women."

He continued on, the sun on his neck, the whiskey in his stomach. Alone again, the same dust again, the same damned name again, flying through the land like a curse.

Maybe her name was Maria. Maybe not. Billy wasn't sure by the second evening. Names rushed past him like clouds of dust carried by the wind. But she was different, or at least she pretended to be. No hooker, no cheap smile for a dollar. She was the daughter of an innkeeper, eyes dark as burnt coffee, hands rough from working.

She brought him whiskey without asking for it. She sat while he played cards, watching him as if he were a secret she wanted to uncover. "You don't always have to drink," she said quietly one evening, almost like a prayer. "You could just sleep for once."

Billy laughed, raspy and coughing. "Sleep? I'll sleep when I'm dead. And until then, I'll drink, shoot, and get out of every city before they hang me."

She shook her head and smiled sadly. "There must be more. Women, a house, maybe children."

Billy took a drag on his cigarette, staring at her, his eyes cold and tired. "Children? I've already caused enough deaths. What am I supposed to do with the living?"

She flinched, but she stayed. Several nights, longer than any other. She laid her head on his shoulder, smelled of soap instead of cheap perfume, and for a moment Billy thought, maybe... maybe that could be enough. A body that doesn't disappear. A voice that doesn't whisper.

But it didn't last. It couldn't last. Billy was a shadow, a dust ghost, driven by the whisper that bore his name. One morning, when he woke up, she was gone. No

note, no goodbye. Only a look he still had in his mind: eyes full of hope that had bounced off him like a bullet against rock.

He laughed bitterly, picked up the bottle, and tipped it halfway down. "Women always think they can keep you. But I belong to only two things: whiskey and the Colt."

Outside, whispers were swirling again. Men whispered, women pulled children away. The name continued to fly, louder, harder. "Billy the Kid... he had a wife... she left him... he's left alone..."

Billy grinned, spat in the dust, and dragged on his cigarette. "Screw it. Women stay until they disappear. But whiskey stays until the bottle's empty. And the Colt—that stays until I'm not."

He laughed, coughed, drank. Alone again, on the move again, dust in his throat again.

Her name was Clara. At least, that's what she called herself. Maybe it was a lie, maybe it was just a name for the night, like the way women in saloons liked to paint their faces. But Clara fit. A name that sounded tough enough not to break right away.

Billy met her in a dingy bar that smelled more like a stable than a saloon. She was sitting there, alone, with a bottle she didn't want to share and eyes that had seen more than any human being should. She smoked, she coughed, she grinned crookedly as he sat down next to her.

"You're him, aren't you?" she asked without looking at him.

Billy laughed dryly, picked up her bottle, drank, and wiped her mouth. "Depends on who you mean."

She looked at him, those eyes like glass, brittle but sharp. "Billy. The kid. The little bastard who shoots faster than he pisses."

He grinned, coughed, and spat in the dust. "That's what they say. But you're the first person to say it to my face without immediately getting scared."

Clara laughed, a dirty, hoarse laugh. "Fear? I've seen too many men die to be afraid anymore. And most of them were too weak anyway."

That was the beginning. Two broken souls who wanted nothing but to drink, smoke, fuck, and forget. They ended up in the back room, throwing the bottles against the wall like bricks. They clung to each other, sweating, cursing, laughing, and sleeping on the dirty floor that smelled of urine.

In the morning, they sat outside, the dust blowing, both with cigarettes, both with whiskey in their bellies. Clara stared into the sun, barely blinking. "You know, Kid, we're the same. Two wrecks that just burn until they go out."

Billy grinned and put his arm around her, even though he knew he couldn't do that. "Maybe. But I burn faster."

She stayed a few nights. Longer than anyone else. She drank with him, laughed with him, even slapped him in the face once when he got too drunk. He slapped him back, they both laughed, they both bled, and they both ended up back in the dirt.

But Clara also disappeared. One morning, she was simply gone. No trace, no bottle, nothing. Only the smell of smoke and the imprint of her cigarette in the wood.

Billy found the cigarette, picked it up, and laughed hoarsely. "Women stay until they disappear. And the broken ones only disappear faster."

Outside, whispers sounded again. Always that whisper. "Billy the Kid... he was with a woman... both crazy... both broken... she's gone... he's staying."

Billy took a drag on his cigarette, drank it, and grinned crookedly. "Screw it. It was gone faster than my last shot. But I still have bullets. And whiskey."

He laughed, coughed, stood up, and stepped outside. Dust in his throat, blood in his thoughts, whiskey in his stomach. Alone again. Always alone.

Her name was Rose. Or rather, she called herself that. Her hair was blonde, almost too blonde, as if someone had poured lime on it, and her eyes were blue, but soulless. Billy met her in a saloon that was already falling apart, its boards loose, its ceiling filled with smoke. She sat there, legs crossed, cigarette in hand, a smile too slick to be real.

"You're the Kid," she said, as soon as he sat down. There was no fear in her voice, just curiosity. "The one everyone's whispering about. The one who moves faster than the devil."

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat into the dust. "And you're the one who stays until she disappears."

She laughed, and the tone sounded off, like a knife on glass. "Maybe I'll stay longer. Maybe I'll slow you down."

She drank with him, she smoked with him, she slept next to him, warm, soft, but without a heart. Billy noticed, but he was too drunk, too tired to take it seriously. Women disappeared anyway, whether after one night or three.

But Rose stayed. She stayed long enough to ask questions. "Where are you going when you're done here?" "How many did you really shoot?" "How much is your head worth?"

Billy grinned, smoked, and answered only in half-sentences. But the words stayed with her. She listened, too closely.

One night, Billy woke up, still half drunk, and heard voices. Men outside, quiet, tense. Rose stood at the window, whispering to them. "He's here. Tonight. You'll catch him easily."

Billy laughed quietly, coughed, and reached for his Colt. It was always the same game. Women stayed until they disappeared. Some vanished into the night, some into the dust. Rose would disappear with a hole in her head.

He stepped behind her, his Colt already raised. She flinched, turned around, her eyes wide. "Billy... I..."

He grinned coldly, spitting smoke in her face. "Screw your excuses. Women stay until they disappear. And you're leaving now."

The shot ripped the night apart. Rose fell, blood splattered across the floorboards, the men outside ran, stumbled, screamed. Billy laughed, shot through the window, two fell, one screamed, the rest fled.

Inside, it smelled of blood and cheap perfume. Billy stepped to the bottle, drank, and laughed hoarsely. "Damn it, Rose. You could have at least waited until the whiskey was finished."

The next morning, she was still lying there, cold, rigid. Billy stepped out, the dust blew, people whispered again. "Billy the Kid... he shot the woman... she tried to betray him... he's still laughing..."

Billy grinned, coughed, and took a drag on his cigarette. "Of course I'm laughing. Better than crying. And bullets don't lie, no matter how sweet your lips were before."

He rode on, his Colt heavy, his whiskey light, alone again. Women stay until they disappear. And if they don't want to disappear, he makes sure they do.

She was different. Not a hooker, not a gambler, not a fake blonde with cheap perfume. A widow, perhaps mid-thirties, dark dress, hair tied back tightly, but eyes that said more than her mouth would ever admit. Her husband had been lying in the ground for two months, shot in a land dispute, like most of the men here. Her name was Sarah. Or maybe not. It didn't matter to Billy—names were like smoke, carried away by the wind.

He met her in a store, not a saloon. She was standing behind the counter, selling beans, flour, and cigarette papers. Billy saw her hands—strong, from working—and her eyes—tired, but not empty. She saw him, too. Longer than most women looked at him. Not a whisper, not a tremble. Just a glance.

That evening, he was standing there again, in front of her house, his Colt loose, his bottle half empty. She opened it, looked at him, and instead of screaming or running away, she simply said, "You stink of whiskey."

Billy grinned, coughed, and stepped inside. "Better than being scared."

The nights with her were quieter than those with the others. No screaming, no laughing, no cursing. Just two bodies seeking warmth while outside the dust beat against the windows. Billy lay there, smoking, drinking, looking at her. "Why are you staying, Sarah?"

She pulled the blanket tighter around herself and looked at him, tired and honest. "Because I have nothing left to lose."

That was perhaps the only thing that connected them: loss. He lost everyone; she had already lost. For a few days, they were like two shadows walking the same path. He almost thought, maybe... maybe this could last.

But nothing lasts in this country. On the morning of the fourth day, her house was empty. She was gone. No news, no word. Only the smell of bread she had baked in the oven and the blanket that was still warm.

Billy sat there, drinking, staring at the embers. He laughed softly, raspily. "Women stay until they disappear. And even those who have nothing left won't take you with them."

Outside, people were whispering again. "The kid... he was with the widow... she's gone... he's left alone..."

Billy stepped outside, the sun harsh, the dust in his throat, the Colt heavy. He coughed, grinned, and spat. "Screw it. Widows, whores, liars—they all disappear in the end. And I'm left with the bottle and the Colt."

He rode on, and history rode with him.

Her name was Mary. Or Anna. Or something else. Billy knew he'd forget it anyway, but the night he met her, it seemed important. She wasn't a whore, a widow, or a gambler. She was simply a woman with a genuine laugh and eyes that weren't filled with fear. And that was precisely what made her dangerous.

He met her on a porch, somewhere between two shitty cities, the dust clinging to the air like a curse. She sat there, barefoot, a glass in her hand, and looked at him as if he were a person. Not a curse, not a demon, not a name wandering through the desert. A person.

"You're Billy," she said, as if it were nothing special.

Billy grinned, coughed, picked up her glass, and drained it. "And you're crazy if you stay sitting like that."

She laughed and leaned back. "Maybe. But you look more tired than I am."

That was the beginning. No wild nights, no broken glass, no screaming. Just conversations, whiskey, cigarettes, and this feeling that she wasn't running away. She stayed. Longer than anyone before her. Days turned into weeks, and Billy noticed how his heart beat slower when she was there. How the dust didn't seem so heavy when she laughed.

But that was exactly what made him nervous. Too nervous. He lay awake at night, his Colt beside him, his eyes on the ceiling, the whiskey in his throat, and thought: *If she stays, what happens?* He was no man for houses, no man for beds, no man for the future. He was death on a horse, and she was too alive.

One evening, it happened. They were sitting at the table, drinking, and she smiled. "You could stay, Billy. Here. With me."

He coughed, laughed, and spat into the glass. "Stay? I'm not staying anywhere. Nowhere. I'm faster than that, faster than any damn home."

Her eyes hardened, disappointed. "You're just a child. A child who's scared."

That was the word.*Child*. It cut deeper than any bullet. Billy's face twisted, his heart pounding. Before he knew it, he had drawn his Colt and slammed it down on the table.

"Say that again," he growled.

She looked at him, full of courage, full of defiance. "Child."

The shot came as if by itself. Smoke, noise, blood. She fell backward, her smile gone, her eyes wide open, empty. Billy stared, breathing heavily, coughing, laughing raspily, but it sounded wrong.

"Women stay until they disappear," he murmured, "and sometimes I help them along."

He drained the bottle and stumbled out into the night, the dust hitting his face. Outside, they were whispering again. "Billy the Kid... he shot the woman... she wanted him to stay... he still laughs..."

Billy spat, grinned crookedly, and coughed. "Stay? I'll just stay in the dust. And dust stays everywhere."

In the end, they were all the same. Whether they were prostitutes with cheap lips, widows with sad eyes, or the one who almost made him soft – they stayed until they disappeared. Some left quietly, others with a shot. But none stayed. Not one.

Billy sat in a rotten room, the floor covered in dust, the bottle empty, the smoke thick. He coughed, laughed, stared at the Colt lying beside him like a loyal dog. "You're the only one who stays," he murmured. "Women disappear. Whiskey evaporates. But you... you stay."

Outside, the whispers continued, that eternal song that haunted him. "Billy the Kid... he had women... they all disappeared... he remains alone..." Always the same words, always the same fear, always the same damned myth.

He thought of Maria, the widow. Of Clara, the madwoman. Of Rose, the traitor. Of Mary or Anna or whatever her name was—the one who had called him

"child." All the faces blurred in the smoke. Only the eyes remained. Eyes that looked at him until they died or left.

Billy tilted his head back, laughed hoarsely, coughed, and spat. "Screw it. Women, whiskey, bullets—all the same. Burns briefly, disappears, leaves only dust behind."

He stood up and stepped out into the night. The wind howled, the dust bit, the stars were so distant they meant nothing. He rode off, alone as always. Behind him a trail of smoke, blood, and women who were only shadows.

And somewhere in the cities they whispered again, their voices full of fear, full of fascination:

"Billy the Kid... he laughs when he kills... he stays alone..."

Billy grinned into the dust, dragging on his cigarette, the Colt heavy in his hand. "Exactly. I'll stay. Until someone beats me to it."

A Colt and a smile

A Colt and a smile—that's all Billy needed. No plan, no home, no friends. Just that damned gun that sang faster than any prayer, and the grin that made him look like hell even before he fired.

The men who knew him said, "The Kid pulls like he never hesitated." The women who knew him said, "He laughs when he bleeds." And the children who heard of him grew up with nightmares of a boy with no beard, whose grin was worse than any gallows.

Billy rode into a new town that stank like any other: dust, sweat, horses, cheap liquor. He sat by the saloon, cigarette in his mouth, Colt loose, and grinned. Always that damn grin. It made the men nervous before a shot was even fired.

"You're the Kid," said one, a broad bastard with hands like shovels. "And you think your smile won't put a bullet in your head?"

Billy coughed, took a drag on his cigarette, and spat. "Try it, buddy. But if you drag, your grin will be shorter than my shot."

The crowd laughed, but it was that nervous laughter that was more fear than courage. The big bastard reached for his revolver. Billy moved across the sky, faster than the sun. A shot, a crash, blood spurted, the guy fell with his mouth open.

Billy stood there, coughed, and grinned. "A Colt and a smile. That's all I need."

People scattered, women screamed, children howled. But Billy just laughed. That hoarse, broken laugh that sounded like a cough. The Colt smoked, the cigarette glowed, the dust swirled.

And again the city whispered, the moment the blood touched the ground:

"Billy the Kid... he laughed when he shot him... a Colt and a smile..."

Billy went back to the table, drank from the bottle, and grinned into the smoke. He'd known for a long time: the smile was worse than the Colt. Because it showed he didn't care about anything.

The smile drove them crazy. It wasn't a friendly, warm smile. It was the grin of a bastard who knew you were about to die, even as he blew the smoke out of his cigarette. It was precisely that grin that brought the men together, five or six, armed, heavy, determined to finally kill the Kid.

They were waiting for him outside the saloon. Billy stepped out, coughed, pulled up his collar, and spat in the dust. The sun was blazing, the street empty except for the idiots who thought today was their day.

"Billy the Kid," shouted the leader, a man with a scarred face and eyes as cold as steel. "Your grin ends here."

Billy took a drag on his cigarette, exhaled the smoke slowly, and grinned even wider. "If I grin, it means you're already dead."

The men laughed, hard and nervous. One spat, one cursed, one half-drawn his Colt. Billy stood there, hands loose, as if he were unarmed. Just that damned smile.

"Go now!" yelled the leader.

It happened quickly. It always happened quickly. Billy's hand was on his Colt before anyone could blink. One shot, the first one went down. Another, the

second one lay in the dust, blood in the sand. Two more drew, stumbled, one missed, Billy laughed, coughed, knocked them both down.

In the end, only the leader remained. His rifle was shaking, sweat was running down his forehead. Billy grinned, approaching slowly, his Colt loosely at his side.

"Well, friend," he said quietly, roughly, "do you still like my smile?"

The guy tried to aim, but Billy was faster. Faster and faster. A shot, the head flew back, blood spurted into the dust.

Silence. Only the wind, only the dust, only Billy's hoarse laughter.

The people in the houses, behind the windows, were whispering again. "He's laughing... he grinned as they died... a Colt and a smile..."

Billy put the Colt back, lit a new cigarette, drank from the bottle, and grinned into the dust. "You idiots. You'll never learn."

There were bullets that killed men, and there were smiles that killed cities. Billy had both. The smile clung to his face like dirt, and even when he didn't show it, people swore they saw it. Children woke up in the night, screaming, because they dreamed of a boy without a beard, laughing while blood stained the dust.

Women held their children tighter when his name was mentioned. "Billy the Kid..." someone whispered in the saloon, and everyone flinched, as if the word itself had a trigger.

A woman in Santa Rosa said she'd never seen him, but she swore she knew exactly what his smile looked like. "It's the smile of a child who never learned what love is," she murmured, "only the Colt taught him."

And men, tough as leather, said that seeing his grin was worse than seeing his Colt. "When he grins," one said, "you know you're already dead. Even if you're still standing."

Billy himself knew what he was doing. He grinned when he drew his Colt. He grinned when he lay bleeding in the dust. He grinned when he drank alone because the women were disappearing. That grin was more than just an expression—it was his mask, his weapon, his second Colt.

Once, in a dusty little town, he stood on the street facing a boy—maybe sixteen, maybe younger, trembling, with a revolver too big for his hands. The boy wanted fame, wanted to be able to say he shot the Kid.

Billy grinned. Just grinned. No movement, no shot. The grin alone was enough. The boy dropped the gun, fell to his knees, and cried before Billy could even lift a finger.

Billy laughed hoarsely, coughed, and kicked the gun away. "You're already dead, brat. You just don't know it yet." Then he left him there, rode away, and the boy talked for the rest of his short life about the smile that had broken him.

The grin became legendary. Some said he had two Colts—one made of iron, one of teeth. And both killed with equal speed.

The sheriff came to town like a preacher who thinks he can wash away sins with words. A broad man, a gray beard, hard eyes, a badge on his chest that gleamed in the sun. He'd heard that Billy laughed in the saloon while men died. He'd heard that the smile was worse than the Colt. And he'd decided to drive the grin out of town.

Billy was sitting at the card table as usual, cigarette in mouth, whiskey in hand, cards covered in dirt. He was grinning, because he always grinned. When the sheriff entered, the saloon fell silent. No more cards, no more laughter, just the creaking of the door and the clinking of his spurs.

"Billy the Kid," he said loudly, clearly, so everyone could hear. "I know your name, I know your face. And your grin brings no respect here. It only brings death."

Billy took a drag on his cigarette, blew smoke into the air, and grinned even wider. "Death brings more respect than you, Sheriff."

A murmur went through the room. The sheriff stepped closer, his hand close to his Colt, but he didn't draw. "You're just a boy. A child. Without a beard, without a conscience. Your grin is nothing but a cheap trick."

Billy laughed, coughed, and spat into his glass. "Cheap? Ask the bastards lying in the dust if it was cheap."

The sheriff narrowed his eyes. "I won't let you spread fear any longer. Not here. Not today."

Billy slowly stood up, his Colt loosely in his hand. The grin stuck to his face like blood to cards. "Then draw, Sheriff. But when you see me still laughing while you're dying—then you'll know your law was worth less than my cough."

The air was thick, heavy, every breath sounded like a gunshot. The sheriff hesitated, his hand on his Colt, sweat on his brow. He wanted to draw, but he saw the grin. That damned grin that spoke more than a thousand words.

And then he knew. He knew he was too slow. That the smile had already shot him before the Colt did.

Billy moved, quickly, coldly. A shot, the sheriff fell, his badge still glinting in the dust, blood seeping from beneath.

Silence. Only Billy's laugh, hoarse, broken, but genuine. "A gun and a smile, Sheriff. That's all you need. Your law is dust."

The town fell silent, people looked away. Only the whispering began again, louder, harsher, inescapable. "Billy the Kid... he shot the sheriff... he was grinning as he did it..."

And Billy stepped out, cigarette in mouth, Colt smoking, a smile on his face. The devil didn't need horns. Just a grin.

It wasn't just a sheriff, not just a few men with oversized Colts. This time it was an entire damn town. They'd had enough of his grin, enough of the stories that swept through their streets like a plague. "Billy the Kid... he laughs when he shoots... he smiles when you die..." The whispers had worn them down until they decided: The bastard must fall.

They planned it like a hunt. One offered him cards, one put the whiskey on the house, a woman smiled as if she hadn't already been bought. Billy knew immediately. He smelled betrayal like others smell sweat. But he played along, grinned, coughed, took a sip. "You think you've caught the devil in the bottle. But you're just thirsty."

The saloon was packed, too packed. Men at the tables, men at the bar, men at the window. All armed, all nervous. Billy sat in the middle, cigarette in his mouth, Colt loose at his leg. The smile was plastered to his face, broad, mocking, deadly.

One of the men stood up, a fat bastard with sweat on his forehead. "Billy the Kid," he shouted, "your grin ends today. You're not getting out of here."

Billy laughed, scratchy and full of smoke. "Your mistake, guys. You invited me."

Then there was a crash. Shots from all sides, the wood splintered, bottles shattered, dust filled the air. Billy rolled to the side, pulled, shot. One man fell, one screamed, one smashed through the bar.

It was a massacre. Billy's Colt sang, his smile burned, and the city that wanted to capture him died of its own fear. Men fell, blood spurted, whiskey ran across the floor like fire.

When the smoke cleared, Billy was still standing. Coughing, bleeding from his shoulder, but grinning. Always grinning.

He stepped over the corpses, grabbed a bottle, drank, spat, and laughed. "A city for a Colt and a smile. Shitty bet."

The woman they'd sent after him lay shivering in the corner. Billy stepped up to her, grinning, his face close to hers. "Tell them outside what you saw. Tell them that no damn village, no damn city can stop my grin."

She nodded, wept, murmured prayers. Billy stepped out, his Colt smoking, the sun hot, the dust biting.

And they whispered again, those who had survived, those who had heard: "Billy the Kid... he grinned as he shot down the whole town... a Colt and a smile..."

Billy coughed, laughed, and took a drag on his cigarette. "Exactly. And that's enough."

The grin stuck to his face like dried blood. Sometimes he didn't want to, sometimes he wished he could just sit still, smoke, drink, without people staring at him. But it was no longer possible. His smile had become a mask, harder than the Colt at his side.

He sat alone in a filthy room, the mirror in front of him blind with dust. He wiped his hand across it, saw his face, young, beardless, and the grin. It was there, even when he didn't want it to be. It was there when he was tired, when he was bleeding, when he was vomiting. Always that damned smile.

He slammed his fist against the mirror, shattering the glass, and blood dripped from his hand. He laughed, coughed, and spat. "Shitty mask. You're sticking tighter than my skin."

Outside, people were whispering. He heard them, always, no matter where he was. "Billy the Kid... he grins even when no one's looking... he grins when he sleeps... he grins when he dreams..."

He reached for the bottle, drank, and wiped the blood from his chin. "Maybe I really don't have anything left except the Colt and that dirty face."

Once a boy, no more than ten, came and stood in the doorway, staring at him. "Mister... why are you always laughing?"

Billy grinned, unable to help himself. "Because you bastards all think it's a laugh. But it's just a cough."

The boy ran away, screaming. The people outside whispered again. "He's grinning at children... he's the devil..."

Billy stepped out into the dust, his Colt heavy, his smile even heavier. Men looked at him, women turned away, children cried. He coughed, laughed, and took a drag on his cigarette.

"Screw it," he muttered, "if the mask's already stuck, let it stick. A gun and a smile. That's all I have. That's all I need."

He rode on, the sun burned, the dust bit, and the smile remained. It always remained.

The gallows yard smelled of fear and old wood. Men stood huddled together, women clutched their children, preachers murmured as if a few words could sweep dust from heaven. And in the middle: Billy. His hands bound, the rope already around him. But on his face—that damned grin.

The crowd murmured, whispered, and gasped. "He's laughing... he's still grinning... even here..." One shouted, "You're finally going to hang, Kid! Your smile ends today!"

Billy coughed, laughed, and spat into the wood beneath him. "My smile never ends, you bastards. Even when I'm dancing on a rope, I'll laugh in your face."

The sheriff—a different one, more foolish than those who had fallen before him—stepped closer, trying to break him with words. "Aren't you afraid, boy? Your Colt won't help you here. Your smile won't save you."

Billy grinned wider, his teeth yellow from the smoke, his lips dry from the whiskey. "Scared? I'm scared, Sheriff. And my Colt is in here—" he nodded toward his heart, "—just like my grin."

The noose tightened around his neck, the wood creaked. The crowd held its breath. But Billy laughed. Loud, hoarse, full of coughing and blood. "Do you hear? This isn't a laugh. This is my cough, this is my life. A Colt and a smile — that will stay, even if I hang."

Then chaos broke out. Shots rang out somewhere in the crowd, a few men—perhaps old friends, perhaps just crazy people—pulled down the guards. Bullets flew, dust swirled, screams rent the air.

Billy took advantage of the commotion, kicking, tearing, and falling from the platform before the rope was even tightened. Blood in his throat, dust in his eyes, but always that damned grin. He grabbed a Colt that fell from a dead man's hand and fired, laughing, coughing.

When the smoke cleared, the gallows was empty. Only the whispering remained, louder, wilder, unstoppable.

"Billy the Kid... he laughed in the gallows yard... he grinned with the noose around his neck... a Colt and a smile..."

Billy rode out that same night, the wind biting, the dust singing. He laughed, a sick, raspy laugh that sounded more like a cough. "A Colt and a smile," he murmured. "That's all that remains."

Law without law

Laws were for men with houses, wives, children, and this stupid idea that the world could be fair. Billy had none of that. No house, no wife, no child. Just dust in his throat, whiskey in his stomach, bullets in his gun. And that was enough.

He rode through deserts, through villages, through cities that looked as if God had forgotten them. Everywhere the same: men with laws they didn't keep, sheriffs who drank faster than they thought, judges who lied more than the whores in a saloon. Billy laughed, coughed, spat in the dust. "Law? I am the law. My law. Bullets make the rules."

In a town – some little village, name not important – there was a sign:**No guns.** Billy stepped through the swinging doors, Colt in his belt, cigarette in his mouth. The bartender stared at him, nervous, sweat on his forehead. "Kid... the law applies here... no guns."

Billy grinned, coughed, and knocked the sign off the wall with a shot. "Now my law applies."

Men grumbled, one reached for his rifle, thinking he was a hero for five seconds. Billy shot, the man fell, blood spread across the ground like a new law. No one grumbled anymore.

That was it. Wherever Billy went, only his rule applied:**Move fast or die.**No paragraphs, no signatures, just dust, smoke and iron.

People whispered, as always. "He laughs at the law... he makes his own... law without law..."

Billy drank, grinned, and coughed. "Exactly. And my law never ends. Not as long as I find whiskey and have bullets."

The judge came to Lincoln, broad as an ox, with a Bible in one hand and a law book in the other. Black coat, white collar, that voice that wanted to sound like order, but tasted of dust. He spoke of law, of order, of justice. And the people who had long known that out here only the Colt made decisions listened to him anyway. Perhaps because they wanted to convince themselves that there could be such a thing as justice.

Billy sat in the saloon, cigarette in mouth, whiskey in hand, a grin on his face. He heard the speeches, he heard the roars. "Billy the Kid is an enemy of the law! We'll judge him! We'll hang him! Here! Today!"

The crowd cheered, but it wasn't real cheering. It was fear in disguise. Everyone knew the Judge couldn't move faster than death on two legs.

That evening, he came to Billy. All alone, his coat flapping, his Bible and law book under his arm. He stood right in front of the table where Billy was playing cards. "Boy," he said, "you're no bigger than the law. You're a child who thinks the world belongs to him. But the law will break you."

Billy blew smoke in his face, coughed, and laughed. "Law? All I see is a fat bastard with two books that aren't even good for cover."

The judge blushed and slammed his fist against the book. "I am the law!"

Billy grinned wider. "Wrong. I am the law." The Colt flashed, a shot fired, blood splattered over his clean, white shirt. The law book fell, the Bible flew, and the judge slumped to the ground like a wet sack of flour.

The crowd outside heard the shot and ran over. Billy stood there, coughing, grinning, his Colt still warm. "There lies your law. Laws don't have bullets. Mine does."

Silence. No one moved. Then they whispered again, those damned voices, always running faster than he did.

"Billy the Kid... he shot the judge... he laughed while he did it... law without law..."

Billy drank, spat, and stepped over the dead man. "Your law is dust. Mine remains as long as I live."

The desert has its own courts. No judges, no pleadings, just sun, wind, and people with too little patience. When you stand there and your shadow is longer than your name, you know that someone, somewhere, has decided to pay you. They're called bounty hunters, but they're just businessmen with guns and too few morals. They do their job like butchers, with a clean hand, no questions asked. And if you're stupid, you'll be the next victim on the counter.

Billy smelled the money in the air before he even saw the men. Money has a stench, a sweetness that masks other smells—the smell of silver coins, the smell of lies. He rode through a dry riverbed, the sun beating down on his brain, his throat dry as an old bone, the bottle almost empty. He felt it: tracks. Hoof prints, too many for one lone rider. Bounty hunters had a habit of running in packs, less because they had courage than because they thought together they could bring down a legend.

They appeared like dark dots at the edge of the heat: three, four, five figures with smeared coats and gleaming eyes. You recognized the kind—the kind whose hands smelled of silver and anger. The leader was tall, with a face that looked as if the sun had been slapped in his face and nothing was left. He held up a letter that fluttered in his pocket like a prayer: a bounty, old and sticky, the name on it like a reward for death.

"There he is," said the leader, smiling, an expensive smile that looked like an executioner's bill. "Billy the Kid. His skin's worth a lot of silver."

Billy leaned back in the saddle, reins loosely in his hand. He took a final swig, shaking the bottle empty on the ground as one pours out a final act of regret. "Silver, huh? I hope it glitters nicely when you're dead," he murmured. His voice was dry, like the land around them.

The men moved closer, in a line, like driving cattle. They thought they could corner him, like cornering a mouse. But here, in this vastness, you quickly learn: a corner is just another word for the horizon. Billy laughed softly, a cough, a laugh that sounded like a knife scraping against bone. "Come closer," he said. "You look like you need a little dust in your lungs."

The first shot. It sounded wrong in this desolation, a harsh note against the hum of the heat. The bullet whizzed past Billy, only raising the dust. He drew slowly, almost bored, aimed his Colt, and the song of his Colt was short and final. The man fell, his face ripped open with shock, his hand groping for silver, his eyes wide as he tried to understand what had just happened.

The others cursed and fired, but the desert plays such games. Bullets flew like stones. Billy rolled off his horse, spat, stood, drew, aimed, fired. He moved like an eye in the heat—slow for the observer, fast enough for the bullets. One hit after another. The men fell to the ground, some whimpering, some bleeding, some just a sack with a name.

One of the bounty hunters had the nerve to laugh out loud before Billy hit him. "That pile of silver can't escape you, boy!" he shouted. Billy paused, the sun catching in his eyes like a mirror on a shotgun. "Silver's just paper with a shine, brother," he said. "It might buy you a good coffin." Then he shot. The man was no longer laughing.

When the last one fell, the light was so harsh that the shadows cut across the ground like knives. Billy stood in the middle of the sea of sand, his boots covered in blood, his hands sooty from shooting. He walked over to the dead, looked at their faces—not out of pity, but out of curiosity. Like every face you see along the way, it was just a wagon with a name. Some of them had families, sometimes they were just names on old papers. Out here, money lured the foolish, like rats to cheese.

He ripped open the corpses' pockets, took the silver—an ugly pile of coins and hopes—and didn't count it, because counting is boring when you're used to counting people, not coins. Then he crushed the letters, letting them fly like white birds that are already dead. "Your law," he murmured, "is paper."

But the law without law that he lived made demands. Every shot was a signature; every corpse, a confirmation. The desert takes and takes, and eventually it asks for more. Billy saddled up, the horse snorted, its hooves covered in blood, not only on the ground but also in the air, like a bad dream. He spat into the void and laughed, a short, sharp sound. "There's more to come," he said. "More silver, more liars. I've got room in my jacket."

He rode down the road, and by evening, the stories were coming back to the towns in pieces: the corpses, the money, the torn-up bounty. The barmen plugged their ears, but tongues were loose. Bounty hunters who thought they could hire the devil became a warning. People who had children pulled them closer. Men who kept their hands clean put them in their pockets—you never knew when you might have to step on the dust again.

Billy wasn't thinking about fame. Fame is another name for the pain that's allowed to grow in your back. He thought about the bottle still waiting somewhere, about the night when the air is cooler and thoughts heavier. He rode because it was the only thing that remained: forward, dust, gunfire, refuge in the darkness, the hum of engines still absent, only hooves and heat.

The next day, he heard them say, "That guy took out three bounty hunters." And again, his name grew, not because of heroism, but because people still look at the bill: money for clothes, money for coffins—the same list again and again. Billy just shook his head at the world's greed and grinned. "Law without law," he muttered, "that's the contract I signed. And my signature is in blood."

The desert swallowed the tracks, the wind carried away the scents. But the blood remains in the sand for a few days, as a memory, as a warning for those who come after. And the men who stayed behind whispered: "He laughs in the dust. He makes the rules."

Billy took one last sip from an abandoned bottle, threw it away, and rode on. The horizon slowly swallowed him, a black crack in the gold. Behind him lay corpses, silver, and torn letters. Before him, only a design of emptiness: a law without law, written with caliber and cough, perpetuating itself through the sand as long as anyone would listen.

The guy arrived like a brochure of order: clean boots, new galloon trinkets on his hat, the bearing of a man who'd already delivered three sermons before breakfast. He called himself Marshal Avery—a name so reeked of officialdom that Billy thought he smelled like old cheese. Avery was one of those people who believe in rules because rules give them a map they never learned to read.

He brought together a gang of volunteers, people with too much guts and too little sense, who finally wanted to be heroes again.

They had put up a sign, large and clunky: **No outlaws. Keep order.** Below were a few decorative lines, as if the law would be more beautiful if you circled it. Avery entered the saloon with the dignity of a man who wants to send his neighbors to the pew. He was loud, he was confident, and he had that strange gleam in his eyes that comes with people who think a book makes them stronger than a bullet.

Billy sat at his table, half in the shadows, his cigarette so crooked in his mouth it almost slipped away. The Colt looked like it had become a piece of Billy's skeleton—always there, always cold. When Avery walked in, Billy raised an eyebrow. He loved the theater, especially when it was badly acted.

Avery approached him, making his voice even louder than necessary. "Billy the Kid," he said in that tone that reeked of government office and coercion. "Your law ends here. I'm setting new rules. No guns in my district. Anyone who doesn't comply will be taken away."

Billy grinned. An evil, crooked grin. He took a sip of whiskey, spat into the ashes, and said, "You make rules? You and 'make'? That's like pouring cow's milk on a corpse, Marshal—useless and disgusting."

Avery shrugged his shoulders as if to show he didn't hear anything. "I'm serious. People are scared. Children are crying because of your name. Women are shutting themselves away. That's changing now."

"Fear's a nice ingredient in coffee," Billy murmured. "Makes it stronger. And believe me, you don't need order. You just need a better host." He laughed, short, hard, the way you laugh when someone tells you a joke at your own liver's expense.

Avery brandished the law book, as if paper could be used to nail someone to a wall. "You'll be caught. You'll be brought to trial. There will be a trial."

Billy leaned forward, his eyes cold. "Negotiation? Sounds boring. You want to talk? I'll bow to your words like a fly to a spider's web—short-lived and hopeless."

Outside, onlookers were already gathering, people hoping someone would finally atone for the indecency running through their streets. Avery felt the audience beneath his feet and grew taller, thicker, firmer—typical of men

whose courage depends on spectators. He took a step that further increased his house of cards of pride.

"Then pull the damn Colt away," Avery demanded. "You won't get any more warning. And if you shoot, I'll shoot first."

Billy stood up, slowly, as if he were holding onto the moment like an old bandage. His gaze slid around the store, meeting the eyes of those who had come, clinging to their courage. He took the cigarette out of his mouth, crushed it with his thumb. Then he smiled, that smile that sounded like a trap.

"You want a duel with rules? You want the spectacle? Fine. I'm flexible. But one condition: We'll just do it. No judges, no sermons, just you, me, and the sun. Count to three. If you draw, you take the whole thing on your conscience."

Avery puffed out his chest like a rooster. He loved scars that the audience admired, and this moment smacked of honorific retouching to him. "One man, one shot. In the street. You're going to clear the field, kid."

They went outside. The dust swirled in the warm wind as if applauding. People lined up in a crooked line, some with hope, some with hatred, all with dry tongues. Avery harnessed his horse, strapped on the Colt. Billy dismounted, walked slowly the few steps that made his heart race, and stopped, his hand on his belt, his smile so wide it sat like a bandage on his features.

Avery began counting. The audience's toes dug into the ground, and the world seemed to want to inhale. "One..." — a cough came from the crowd. "Two..." — a dog howled, as if sensing the premonition. Billy smiled, sixth sense, eye on the target. "Three!"

It was a moment like broken glass: short, sharp, and full of blood. Avery was faster, perhaps out of ambition, perhaps out of fear. His Colt fired, a shot, then a second—lead searching for wood, brick, air. Billy's signal was a smile and a movement as fluid as blood, the Colt like a lifted knife. His shot struck first—not fatal, but close enough to knock the air from Avery's lungs. Avery screamed, his hand to his chest, blood warming his shirt.

He staggered back, stumbled into the dirt, cursed the world, and the people saw how their judge was suddenly a piece of meat that couldn't be mended with laws. Billy stepped closer, raised the bottle, took a sip, and spat in the dust. "See, Marshal? Your law was paper. I am ink and fire."

The people shouted, but not in one voice. Some yelled, "Stop!" Others, "Keep shooting!" Billy smiled even wider, as if watching was dessert to him, sweet and a little lazy. Avery tried to stand up again, a man clinging to the idea more than to what was still real. Billy leaned toward him, eyes empty, and whispered, "Save the sermon, buddy. Your book isn't helping you."

Then he pulled the trigger—not with theatrical greed, but like someone settling a score. One final crack, and Avery fell silent, a pile of cloth and blood in the dust, and the law book lay beside him, a failed lie.

Billy stood up and looked out at the crowd. No one could hold their breath anymore—the air was free, but freedom was just a hole. He returned to the saloon. The barman stared, hands shaking, eyes wide, as if he had just witnessed a miracle and couldn't figure out whether it was one or a catastrophe.

Billy slammed the money down on the table, ordered whiskey, and his voice was as rough as sandpaper: "Listen up, you toothbrushers. From now on, my law applies here. No stupid signs. No sermons. If you carry weapons, you bear responsibility. Draw fast or stay in your own dirt. I don't want a beating, no show—just peace, whiskey, and a bunch of fewer liars."

People nodded, but only because they liked what was alive and not in their face. Billy's law was simple—brutal, honest, and straightforward. It sounded like the sound of a Colt hitting wood. It left scars that could later have been used as a lesson: A different standard now prevailed in this area.

He toasted the innkeeper, who shakily handed him a glass. Billy raised it, drank, and the smile remained because it had to. As he rose, he stepped over Avery's lifeless body once more, spat on the headband in which the law book had been tucked, and left the place as if he would never return.

Outside, the wind blew dust into people's faces, and people left whispers that burned like small burns in their voices: "He laid the marshal... his law is bullets... law without law..."

Billy took a drag on his cigarette, shook off the dust, and the street picked him up again as if he had never left—just another chapter, printed in blood and whiskey, where only one thing applied: whoever drags faster makes the law.

The gang called themselves "The Lawmen." A bunch of rotten bastards with too much lead on their belts and too little brains in their heads. They owned their

territory, somewhere between two damned rocks in the desert, and they told everyone who rode through that their law applied here. "No strangers. No Colts. No backtalk." Anyone who objected disappeared—into the dust, the sand, the river, depending on how brutal they felt at the time.

Billy rode past her sign, which was stuck crookedly in the ground. **Regulatory area. No entry.** He laughed so loudly that even his horse turned its head briefly. "Order," he muttered, "is just another word for boredom." He spat, took a drag on his cigarette, and rode straight on.

They were already standing at the edge of the next camp: six men, all with rifles, their hands as nervous as jackals when it comes to the last piece of carrion. The leader, a bald bastard in a long coat, stepped forward and raised his hand. "Stop there, kid. From here on, our law applies."

Billy grinned, coughed, and loosened the reins. "Your law? Sounds like a bad joke. What's the name of the law that allows you to look so shitty?"

The men laughed nervously, the leader narrowed his eyes. "We don't tolerate outsiders here. No killers, no players. You're nothing here."

Billy took a sip from his bottle, letting the rest drop into the dust. "Nothing? I'm exactly what's left when your law is dead."

The leader drew his pistol. The others followed. Six Colts, six bullets, six men who thought they had order on their side. Billy just grinned, broad, dirty, deadly.

"Then try it," he said quietly.

The first shot came from the left, too hasty. Billy pulled faster, faster and faster. A bullet to the chest, the man fell. A second came after, Billy turned, shot, blood spurted. The third had barely aimed when he was already lying in the dust.

The remaining three fired simultaneously, dust flying, wood splintering. Billy coughed, laughed, rolled to the side, caught the fourth in the neck, the fifth in the stomach. The last one remained, rifle in hand, sweat on his face.

"Wait! Wait!" he cried, "I give up!"

Billy stepped closer, grinning even wider, Colt relaxed. "Give up? That's not in my law."

A shot, short, final. The man fell. Silence. Only wind, only dust, only the smell of blood, which etched itself into the air like a new law.

Billy stood among the corpses, coughing, spitting, and laughing raspily. "Law without law," he muttered, "that's my paragraph. Short, precise, deadly."

He rode on, and behind him the shield remained. Crooked, useless, spattered with blood. Lawmen, lawmen, preachers—all fell. His law remained.

Sometimes he didn't even need the Colt anymore. His name rode ahead, faster than any horse, faster than any bullet. "Billy the Kid" had become more than a guy with teeth and a gun—he was a law in itself. Not a written one, not a printed one, not a sacred one. A law born of fear.

When Billy entered a town, a silence fell like a gunshot. Merchants lowered their scales, children stopped playing, women drew their curtains. Men who usually bragged about law and order lowered their voices, as if his name were a curse.

Once he came to Fort Stanton. No sheriff confronted him, no gang waited at the edge of town. Instead, a crooked sign hung above the saloon: **No Trouble. Billy's Law.** Billy saw this and laughed so hard he almost fell off his horse. "Billy's Law," he coughed, "I'm not even dead and they're already printing me paragraphs."

In the saloon, the men stared at him, all armed, but no one moved. The bartender wordlessly slid a bottle toward him as a tribute. Billy grinned, took the whiskey, drank, and spat. "Come on, one of you wants to be the hero. One of you wants to change the law." But no one moved. His smile was enough.

He stood up, staggered through the crowd, and knocked a man's hat off his head. The man trembled and didn't reach for his Colt. Another lowered his gaze. Billy coughed, laughed, pushed open the door, and walked back out. No shots. No fights. Just silence and whispers.

"Billy the Kid... he's the law... when he grins, you know what's right..."

And that's exactly what scared him. Not the Colts, not the sheriffs, not the bounty hunters. But the fact that he himself was already more myth than human. That they were writing paragraphs in his name, rules he never wanted. He wasn't a lawmaker, he was a bastard with a cough and too much whiskey.

He later lay in the dust, his bottle empty, his cigarette almost burnt down, and muttered: "When they start seeing you as a law, you're already half dead. Because laws always fall. And with them, the one who bears them."

But the next morning he grinned again. Because he knew it was the only mask that remained.

The night was black as burnt coffee, the moon hung fat in the sky, and the wind whistled through the empty streets like a damned preacher. Billy sat on the porch of a saloon, bottle in hand, cigarette in mouth, his eyes red from dust and drinking. He coughed, spat in the sand, and grinned. He always grinned.

A few men squatted opposite him, too cowardly to leave, too curious to stay. One asked quietly, "Kid... what's your law, anyway?"

Billy looked at him for a long moment, took a sip, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "My law?" He laughed hoarsely. "My law can be summed up in three sentences: Draw faster. Drink deeper. And laugh louder than death."

The men were silent. One tried to grin, but it looked pathetic. Billy saw it and shook his head. "No, not like that. You're grinning like traders sniffing a deal. I'm grinning because the bullet's already flying."

He stood up and staggered a bit out into the street, his Colt loosely in his hand. "Your laws, statutes, judges, sheriffs... all bullshit. Paper crumbles into the dust. Mine is simpler. A Colt writes clearer than any pen."

He raised his gun and fired into the sky. The bang ripped through the night, dogs barked, women screamed behind the windows. Billy grinned wider. "Do you hear that? That's my paragraph. Loud, short, and final."

The men nodded, no one daring to contradict him. One whispered, "Billy's Law..." Billy laughed, coughed, stepped closer, and placed the Colt on the table, hard and metallic. "No. Not Billy's Law. Just law without law. No name, no hero, no god. Just dust, whiskey, and bullets."

He took the bottle, tipped the rest, and threw it into the dust. "And if you don't understand, you'll learn if you stand in my way."

Then he turned around, walked into the night, the dust ate his tracks, and behind him again only the whisper remained:

"Billy the Kid... he has spoken his law... draw faster, laugh louder... law without law..."

Billy grinned into the wind, coughed, and spat. "Exactly. And that's enough."

The boy with the dead look

His gaze was worse than his Colt. That's what they said in the saloons, in the back rooms, on the dusty streets, where men had more courage in their mouths than in their hands. Billy's eyes were young, beardless, almost childlike. But there was no life left in them. No sparkle, no dream, no tomorrow. Only this emptiness that pierced your chest like a knife when he looked at you.

"The boy has dead eyes," the women whispered when they saw him. "As if he'd died long ago and only his shadow still rides." The men nodded, gripping their Colts tighter, but knowing that their grip didn't help them. Whoever saw that look knew: it's over.

Billy was sitting in a saloon in Mesilla, a half-empty bottle in front of him, a Colt next to his glass. A gambler sat down, cocky, grinning broadly, his hands full of cards. "Kid, I've seen worse eyes than yours."

Billy slowly raised his head and looked at him. Just looked. Not a word, not a grin. Just that look, empty like a hole in the ground. The gambler laughed at first, then his throat caught. He began to sweat, the cards falling from his hand. "Damn..." he muttered. "You... you look at me like I'm already underground."

Billy smiled crookedly, but his eyes remained dead. "Because it's you." A shot. Fast, cold, final. Blood all over the table, screams from the corners. Billy coughed, drank, grinned – but his eyes remained empty.

People whispered, as always. "That boy with the dead stare... he doesn't even have to shoot... your heart dies when he looks at you."

It was worse than any smile. Because a smile could perhaps be misunderstood. But that look... it was pure death.

The saloon was packed like a pig before slaughter. Cards were flying, whiskey was sloshing, the air was thick with smoke and sweat. A crowd of scoundrels, gamblers, whores, and would-be sheriffs crowded around the tables. And in

the middle of it all sat Billy—young, beardless, cigarette in the corner of his mouth. The Colt lay beside him, but his hand rested loosely, almost sleepily.

No loud announcement, no shouted threat was needed. Just that look. He raised his eyes and looked around. Slowly, coldly, without a twinkle. Eyes that wanted nothing and had nothing left to give. Two black holes in a face that was too young.

The laughter died down. A player, fat and sweaty, held a card in his hand, but his finger was shaking. He wanted to laugh, but the laughter stuck. "Screw it," he stammered, "that's... that's not a human look."

Another reached for the glass, but spilled it before it reached his mouth. He wiped nervously, his eyes glued to Billy's. "Jesus... that kid's looking at you like he can already see your skin in the sand."

One was stupid enough to stand up. A teenager with a new pistol on his belt, still shiny, barely used. "Stop all that fluttering," he shouted, "he's just a boy! Two holes in the head and the nightmare is over."

Billy looked at him. Just that. Not a word. Not a grin. Just that dead stare. The boy stumbled as if he'd been hit. He tried to pull, but his fingers wouldn't budge. He screamed, more in panic than courage.

Billy drew slowly, almost bored, and fired. A clean shot to the shoulder, enough to bring him down. The boy yelped, holding on, blood seeping through his fingers. Panic gripped the room. Chairs crashed, glasses fell, women screamed.

"He doesn't even have to kill," murmured one, pale as chalk. "That look... it'll kill you first."

Two men stumbled to the exit, ripped open the door, and ran out into the dust. Billy coughed, spat, grabbed the bottle, and drank. Then he looked up again—into the faces of those still there. No one could bear the look. Heads bowed, hands clenched, no one laughed anymore.

Only an old gambler, half-blind, chuckled hoarsely. "Damn, boy... your eyes are emptier than my purse." Billy grinned crookedly, but his eyes remained dead. "Then that's fine," he said.

He stood up, put his Colt away, and stepped outside. Inside, silence remained; inside, men trembled more than after a gunfight. And outside, they whispered again:

"The boy with the dead stare... he hardly needs bullets... people are already falling from fear."

The sun hung low, a red-hot ball over the desert, and the heat burned the last vestiges of courage out of every man. Nevertheless, they waited out there—six bounty hunters, tired faces, rifles in hand, the smell of dust and fear in their shirts. They had hunted the Kid for days, convinced they could catch him because there were many of them and he was only one.

Billy rode slowly toward her, reins loose, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. His horse snorted, the Colt thumping heavily against his thigh. But what paralyzed her wasn't the Colt. It was his gaze.

He looked at them, one by one. No haste, no anger, just that nothingness in their eyes. Dead. A boy, beardless, but with eyes that had long since been buried. One of the hunters spat in the sand, trying to keep his hand steady. "Screw it," he growled, "they're just eyes. Everyone has eyes." But his voice trembled.

The leader, a large bastard with scars on his face, raised his rifle. "No more drama. We're taking him now." But when Billy turned his head slightly and looked at him, the movement stopped. The rifle hung halfway raised, his fingers clutching, but the rest of his body refused to follow.

"He's looking at you," one murmured quietly, "as if you were already dead. Before he pulls."

Billy coughed, spat, and grinned crookedly—but his eyes remained cold. "Come on, pull. I've got time. Death doesn't."

The first one tried. He raised his gun, aimed—and dropped it. Just like that. His knees buckled, and he stared at Billy's eyes as if he could lose himself in them. "Shit..." he groaned, "I... I see myself in there." Then he ran. Just ran.

Two others followed, stumbling in the sand, throwing away their rifles as if they were burning. Three remained, trembling but too stubborn to flee.

Billy drew slowly. No quick jerk, no spectacle. He fired once, twice. Two bodies fell into the dust, the dust swallowing their blood. The last one was still standing, his weapon raised, but his eyes betrayed him. They fluttered, searching everywhere but Billy's face.

"Look at me," Billy said softly, his voice as rough as sandpaper. The man dared, just for a second—and froze. Then he, too, fell, without a shot being necessary. His heart had given up faster than his hand.

Silence. Only wind, only dust. Billy put his Colt away, coughed, and laughed hoarsely. "Dead eyes, dead men. Save bullets."

He rode on, the sun at his back, the dust in his throat. And behind him they whispered again: "The boy with the dead stare... he doesn't even shoot... he looks at you, and you die."

The sheriff didn't come with a bunch of volunteers, not with a gang hungry for glory. He came alone. A seasoned bastard, gray in his beard, scars on his face, and eyes that had seen enough deaths to be unfazed. His name was Cutter, and Cutter believed he was the one man who could stand up to the Kid.

He found Billy in a saloon on the outskirts of Lincoln. The room stank of stale smoke, spilled whiskey, and sweat. Cutter entered, his boots heavy, his hand on his Colt, his badge askew on his chest. People shrank back as if they'd sensed two storms colliding.

Billy sat there, as always, bottle in hand, cigarette in mouth, his face young but his eyes dead. Cutter stopped and looked at him. "Kid," he said, his voice rough but firm, "I saw you coming. I heard what they were saying. Your look kills, they say. But I've looked into more eyes than you. And I'm still alive."

Billy slowly raised his head, coughed, the cigarette wobbling from his lip. Then he looked at Cutter. Directly. No smile, no word. Just that stare, empty, cold, endless.

The sheriff blinked, resisted. For seconds. His fingers didn't move, his heart pounding, but he forced himself to stand. "I... I see you, boy. And I just see someone who's afraid to close his eyes."

Billy grinned crookedly, but his eyes remained dead. "You're lying, Sheriff. You see yourself. And you see yourself dying."

Cutter growled, trying to draw his Colt, but his hand trembled. He gritted his teeth, fighting back. The people in the saloon held their breath; no one moved. It was as silent as a cemetery.

Then it broke. Cutter gasped for air, his hand on the Colt, but he didn't pull. His eyes opened wide, he stared into Billy's – and the courage he had been carrying around with him for so long broke.

Billy pulled, shot. A clean shot, right in the chest. Cutter stumbled, fell, blood filling the dust on the floor.

Billy coughed, spat, and stood up. "Even the tough ones break when they look me in the eye."

People whispered, women cried, men gulped. "The boy with the dead look... even Cutter... he couldn't stand it..."

Billy stepped out into the sun. The wind bit, the dust sang. And he knew that the myth had grown again.

After Cutter, nothing was the same. People had seen how the old dog, who had swallowed more dust than a dozen men combined, had broken before Billy's gaze. Not before his bullet—that only came at the end—but before that empty, dead pair of eyes. And when someone broke like that, no one could claim it was just a coincidence.

The stories became sickening. In the saloons, they whispered of "cursed eyes," of a boy who had long since been buried and rode only as a shell. "The devil sees through him," muttered an old whore as she stubbed out her cigarette. "Those eyes... they don't belong to any living person."

A priest in Santa Fe claimed that Billy wasn't born, but rather vomited out of hell. "Whoever looks into his eyes sees their own end," he preached, "and no prayer can stop that." His church filled up, not because people wanted to believe—but because they were afraid of meeting the Kid themselves someday.

Children no longer dared to play alone in the streets. They painted crosses in the dust, small, crooked symbols, to shield themselves from view. Mothers murmured prayers when his name was mentioned. Fathers drank double, as if they could build armor with whiskey.

Billy heard the whispers everywhere. In every saloon, on every porch, even when he was sitting alone in the dirt. He coughed, grinned, but his eyes remained empty. "Curse," he sometimes muttered. "If that's the case, then it's a curse I like. Saves me work."

Once, a young woman approached him, her eyes wide open, her hands shaking. "Please," she whispered, "they say your gaze kills... don't look at me, kid. I want to live." Billy didn't look at her. He just grinned, kept smoking. But even that made her run away screaming.

Others wanted to test the truth. A group of scoundrels sat down across from him, staring at him, one after the other, as if it were a card game. No one lasted more than a few seconds. One started to tremble, one lowered his eyes, one simply ran out into the night. Billy laughed, coughed, and laid his cards on the table. "You idiots," he muttered, "you're playing against death, and death always has the better hand."

And outside they continued whispering, louder, harder, wilder. "The boy with the dead look... not a human... cursed... a demon in the dust..."

Billy took a drag on his cigarette, grinned crookedly, and spat. "Maybe," he muttered. "But demons need whiskey too."

It was bound to happen: at some point, someone would emerge who thought he could do it better. A killer, cold as iron, with eyes so empty that people had already started calling him "the Grave." His name was Mason, a bastard without a conscience, a man who left just as many dead as the Kid—only no one whispered about him. Mason wanted to change that.

They met in a godforsaken town consisting of little more than a saloon, a stable, and a handful of shacks. People sensed what was in the air and ducked down before anyone even said a word.

Billy sat at the table as usual, cigarette in his mouth, whiskey glass in front of him, Colt nearby. Mason entered, tall, lean, his boots hard on the ground. His eyes were two holes, black, empty. Men stepped back, women held their breath. Here came someone who didn't talk, but did.

He stopped in front of Billy. No greeting, no mockery. Just that look. Two pairs of dead eyes meeting. The air suddenly felt heavy, like lead in his throat.

Billy coughed, spat, and grinned crookedly. "Well, look at that... someone who looks like he's already dead."

Mason spoke slowly, his voice deep as a pit. "They say your gaze kills. Mine consumes you."

The men in the room held their breath. Two shadows, two voids, probing each other. No laughter, no trembling. Only silence.

Seconds dragged on like hours. Mason made his first mistake—he tried to harden his gaze, squeezing his eyes tighter, his muscles tensing. Billy, on the other hand, remained calm, empty, like dust that simply existed.

"You want to prove it?" Billy muttered. "Then pull."

Mason flinched. Only briefly. But it was enough. A hint of doubt, one breath too many. Billy's Colt was out, the shot rang out, and Mason stepped backward, blood pouring from his chest, his eyes wide—not blank this time, but full of surprise.

He fell. The boards shook, the dust rose. Billy coughed, laughed raspily, stepped over, and looked into his slowly dying eyes. "Your gaze was cold, Mason. But not dead enough."

The saloon fell silent. Then the voices began, the old whisper that never ended. "The boy with the dead stare... he even defeats those who are just like him..."

Billy drank, grinned, but his eyes remained empty. Always empty.

The saloon was empty. Only Billy remained, his bottle half full, the air thick with smoke and the stench of gunpowder. Outside, voices rattled, singing the same tune over and over again—"the boy with the dead stare"—like a damned prayer no one wanted to say, yet everyone knew.

Billy stood up, staggered across the room, and stepped in front of a crooked mirror hanging on the wall. He looked at himself. Young face, barely a beard, dry lips, cigarette in the corner of his mouth. But his eyes... empty. Two black holes that swallowed everything.

He gave a short, hoarse laugh, coughing blood into his hand. "Shit... I look like those stories." He put the Colt on the table and continued staring in the mirror. His face was still that of a boy. But his eyes said: Grave.

He remembered Mason, Cutter, all the men who were broken even before the bullet hit them. It was never the shot. It was the look. The mirror showed it to him now. This emptiness, this nothingness. And for a moment, he wondered if the others were right. If he himself had been dead for a long time and was just riding, drinking, grinning, because the flesh didn't yet know that the soul was gone.

He slammed his fist against the mirror, the glass shattering, and his own face shattering into a thousand pieces. "Damn it," he growled, "I'm still here." Blood dripped from his hand, mingling with dust and whiskey.

But even in the shards, the same eyes stared back at him. Dead. Empty. Colder than anything. He laughed again, this time longer, raspy, insane. "Well... if that's my curse, then let it accompany me. Dead eyes see better in the dark."

He took the bottle, tipped the rest, wiped the blood on his pants, and pocketed the Colt. Then he went out into the night. The wind bit, the dust sang, and somewhere in the distance, they were telling the stories again.

"Billy the Kid... the boy with the dead stare..."

Billy coughed, grinned crookedly, and spat. "Exactly. And I'm sticking to that."

Horses, dust and hunger

The desert took more than it gave. Horses, dust, hunger—that was all that remained when you were on the road for days, without a destination, without rest, with only a dead look and a dry throat. Billy rode, and every hoofbeat sounded like a curse, repeated over and over again.

His horse was thin, its ribs etched like the lines in an old law book no one wanted to read anymore. Dust clung to its hair, its beard, its throat. Every breath was a struggle, every sip of water more valuable than silver or gold.

Hunger gnawed at him. Not just in his stomach, but in his head. Days without proper food, only dry bread, a piece of meat that tasted more like carrion than food. Billy chewed, coughed, and spat half of it out. "Screw the taste," he muttered, "hunger eats worse than lead."

Sometimes he thought the horse would give up first. Its legs trembled, its eyes glowed dully, foam clung to its lips. But every time it was about to collapse, Billy urged it on. "Come on, you old bastard," he growled, "we're both not dead yet."

At night, it was worse. The hunger grew louder, the dust crept into the blankets, and the cold bit like a knife. Billy lay there, his Colt next to his head, his stomach empty, thinking about how many men he'd shot just to pay for a

meal. "Hunger makes you more honest than any law," he murmured before falling asleep.

Things were no better in the cities. He rode in, entered a saloon, and ordered meat and whiskey. If he paid, the money was blood. If he didn't pay, it was the Colt. And the whisper always lingered. "Billy the Kid... he brings dust and hunger with him..."

Hunger was the enemy he couldn't shoot. He grinned, coughed, drank—but his stomach remained empty. And that was precisely what made him more dangerous than any sheriff.

The village lay there like an open mouth without teeth. A few mud huts, a withered well, a stable with more flies than horses. Billy rode in, slowly, with his Colt at his belt and his stomach empty. Hunger burned like fire, but he knew there was no firewood left.

People didn't come out to greet him. They peered out from behind crooked doors, thin faces, eyes like holes, children who looked as if they hadn't eaten anything but dust for weeks. Billy looked at them and knew: Here, hunger was more powerful than he was. Even his bullets couldn't fill a belly.

He got off, went to the well, and cranked, but only a few drops came out: rusty, warm, and full of sand. He spat, but drank anyway, because he had to. The owner of the only saloon stood in the doorway, thin as a withered branch, his hands empty. "Kid... we have nothing," he said, "nothing but dust."

Billy grinned crookedly and coughed. "I've already got dust in my throat, old man. I need meat."

The innkeeper shook his head. "Meat? If there's meat here, it's only in the stories. We eat what we find. Roots, lizards, maybe a piece of bread if we're lucky."

Billy stepped closer, his eyes empty, hunger in his bones. "Then give me the bread. Or I'll take it."

The innkeeper's wife came forward, a small, hard piece of dough in her hands, barely more than a memory of a loaf of bread. She handed it over hesitantly, as if afraid her fingers would disappear with it. Billy took it, bit into it, chewed slowly, coughing as he did so. It tasted of dust, of sweat, of despair. But it was bread, and his stomach accepted it as if it were a feast.

The children stared at him, hungry eyes, hungrier than anything he'd ever seen. For a moment, he felt naked, like a thief stealing a dead man's boots. But he grinned anyway, because that was all he could do.

"You live on dust," he muttered, "and I live on the Colt. The only difference is that mine fills you up faster."

He rode on, his belly half full, his head full of dust. And behind him they whispered again, quieter than usual, but still there: "Billy the Kid... he's got hunger in his eyes..."

Hunger became its own beast in his stomach. It gnawed, bit, scratched, and sometimes Billy even heard it growling, as if a damn wolf were inside him. Days without real food, just whiskey and dust, eventually that burns more than any bullet.

He rode into a small settlement, a few fences, a few horses. And there he saw it—a young animal, strong, its muscles beneath its coat, its coat shining despite the dust. A horse that looked well-fed. And well-fed meant meat.

Billy dismounted and walked to the fence. His own horse stood beside it, thin, tired, its bones like sticks. He placed his hand on its neck. "Sorry, old bastard," he muttered, "but hunger eats away friendship."

The people of the settlement came out of their huts, saw him, saw his look, saw the Colt. No one said a word. They knew what was going to happen.

Billy drew his revolver and aimed at the horse in the fence. One shot. The animal collapsed, its legs like matchsticks, its whinnying drowned in the dust. Children screamed, women covered their mouths.

Billy went over, drew his knife, and began cutting into the fur. Blood flowed, warm and dark. He grinned, coughed, and continued cutting. "Meat," he murmured, "meat at last."

The men stood there, staring at him, but no one pulled. They knew his hunger was more dangerous than their pride. One dared to whisper, "Kid... that was our best horse."

Billy looked at him. Only with those dead eyes. The man immediately lowered his gaze and remained silent.

He roasted the meat over a small fire he lit himself, while the people watched silently. The smell of burnt blood and fat filled the air. Billy chewed greedily, meat juice running down his chin, laughing, coughing, and spitting out bones.

"Hunger makes no laws," he said loudly, as if to impress it on everyone. "And horses are just meat on legs."

When he was finished, he climbed back onto his skinny horse, blood still on his hands, his mouth full of the bitter taste. The settlement was silent. No one screamed, no one fought. Hunger was stronger.

And as he rode, the whisper came again, this time even darker: "Billy the Kid... he even eats horses..."

The desert took his mind away bit by bit, like a dog gnawing on a bone. No water, hardly any meat, only dust in his throat and sun in his skull. Billy rode, but at some point he no longer knew whether it was the horse still snorting or his own cough, emanating from him like an animal.

Hunger made noises. A growling in his stomach that was louder than the chirping of insects. Thirst cut his throat, every breath burned as if he were drinking dust. At night he shivered from the cold, during the day he boiled from the heat. And at some point he began to see things.

At one point, he thought he recognized a caravan. Men with water barrels, women carrying bread. He spurred his horse, charged through the sand, his throat full of hope—only to discover that they were stones that looked like people. He laughed, coughed, and almost fell from his saddle. "Screw your games, desert," he muttered, "you're worse than any sheriff."

Another time, he thought he saw Cutter, the sheriff he'd shot long ago. Cutter stood there, his chest covered in blood, his eyes staring. "You're just dust, kid," the figure whispered. Billy pulled, shot, the echo echoed among the hills. Nothing but rock.

His horse was nothing but skin and bones, its ribs like sharp knives. It stumbled, buckled, and scrambled to its feet. Billy patted its neck. "Hold on, old bastard. If one of us dies, it'll be both of us. Together in the dust."

At night, he lay in the sand, the stars glowing like balls in the sky. He saw faces in them: men he had shot, women who had abandoned him. Everyone stared at him. He grinned back, coughed, and whispered, "What do you want? I didn't call you."

Hunger slowed him down, but also sharpened him. Every step was painful, every sip of whiskey a drop of life. And yet he grinned, because grinning was the only thing that remained.

"Horses, dust, hunger," he muttered, "that's all the law knows out here."

And the desert only answered with wind.

Hunger drove him on like a spur that cut deeper than any steel. Days without proper food, only whiskey and dust, and his throat had long since become more desert than flesh. When he saw the camp, he first thought it was another mirage—but this time he smelled the smoke. Real fire. Real flesh.

There were bandits, maybe a dozen of them, squatting around a fire, laughing, drinking, and roasting horse meat. The fat dripped into the fire, hissing, and the smell crept into Billy's nostrils like a damned angel tormenting him.

His stomach growled so loudly that even the horse beneath him raised its head. Billy grinned, coughed, and reached for his Colt. "Well," he muttered, "if God doesn't give me anything, I'll take it from the devils."

He rode closer, slowly, his hat low, his Colt loose. The bandits laughed when they saw him. "Hey, that boy! Billy the Kid!" one shouted. "Come, have a drink with us, if you've got the guts!"

Billy dismounted and approached, hunger stabbing like a knife. He saw the meat, smelled it, felt his mouth water. But he just grinned, that dead grin. "You have meat," he said harshly, "and I have bullets. Let's trade."

The bandits laughed so loudly it almost hurt. "Trade? We'll take your Colt and maybe let you live."

Billy's eyes turned cold, empty. "Wrong."

He pulled, faster than their laughter, and shot the first one down. Chaos erupted. Bullets flew, men screamed, the fire spewed sparks. Billy rolled, coughed, and fired again. A second fell, a third. The bandits ran, trying to pull, but hunger also makes you cold. He aimed, pushed, laughed, and coughed. One by one, they fell.

When the last one fell, only the crackling of the fire remained. Billy stood there, blood on his hands, dust in his face, his Colt hot. He stepped up to the spit, tore off a piece of meat, burned his fingers, but chewed anyway. The fat ran down

his chin, he smacked his lips, grinned, and coughed. "Damn," he muttered, "that's the best horse I've ever eaten."

He sat by the fire, ate, and drank the rest of the bandits' flasks. Around him lay the corpses, their eyes open, staring into the dust. But Billy chewed as if the world were a buffet laid out just for him.

"Horses, dust, hunger," he whispered between bites. "That's my law."

Night came like a fist, and Billy fell right into it. His belly was fuller than it had been in weeks—horsemeat, half-burned, half-raw, and whiskey burning his throat. But instead of rest, it only brought fever. Hunger had tormented him, now his stomach was eating away at him, and dreams came back like knives.

He lay by the fire among the bandits' corpses. The smoke rose, the wind tugged at the tongues of flame, and the dead stared at him. Their eyes were open, gleaming in the light, as if asking, "Did you enjoy your meal?" Billy grinned, but it was a sick, twisted grin.

He turned, coughed, his stomach cramped, and then the images came. Cutter, Mason, the bounty hunters—all sitting by the fire, meat in their hands, bites of their own flesh. "Come eat with us, Kid," they said, their voices hoarse, full of blood. "You're one of us. Dead stare, dead stomach."

Billy screamed, grabbed his Colt, and fired into the darkness. The bang echoed through the night, horses shying somewhere in the distance. But there was no one there, just wind, just dust.

He lay there again, panting, sweat running down his face, mixed with dirt. His hands trembled, his lips were dry, but his stomach felt as if he'd swallowed stones.

And then the shadows came. They crept out of the dust, stood around him, bounty hunters without faces, bandits without bodies. Only eyes—eyes as empty as his own. They stared at him, all at once. Billy squeezed his eyelids shut, but the images remained.

"You bastards," he growled, "you won't get me. I'll eat you all if I have to."

His own cough woke him. The sky was full of stars, but they seemed like glowing holes staring back at him. He straightened up, reached for a bottle, and drank greedily, feeling the whiskey like fire in his throat.

The corpses still lay around him, stiff, cold. Billy grinned crookedly, his eyes empty. "You look so hungry," he murmured. "Sorry—no meat left." Then he laughed, hard, hoarse, until his coughing forced him back into the dust.

He didn't sleep again that night. He sat by the fire, Colt in hand, staring into the darkness as if the hunger were about to return—this time from within.

The morning smelled of cold ash and blood. The fire had long since died down, the corpses around him hard as stone. Billy slowly stood up, his bones cracking, his stomach churning, and his head feeling as if the desert had slurped him out and spat him back out.

His horse was still standing there, gaunt, its eyes dull. It looked at him as if it knew that one day its own flesh would come. Billy patted its neck, coughed, and spat dust. "Don't worry, old bastard," he muttered, "not yet. Not until there's nothing left."

He saddled up, mounted, his hands shaking. The hunger wasn't gone, just quieter, more insidious. He felt like a hole that never filled, no matter how much meat or whiskey he poured into it. And yet he grinned. A grin was the only thing that remained.

He rode through the morning, the sun creeping over the horizon, the dust clinging to his lips. Behind him lay the camp—deadly silent, only the sound of crows that croaked deeper than any priest. Before him lay the road, empty, endless, gruesome.

In a village he reached at midday, people were whispering again. "He slaughtered a camp... he ate horse meat... he's no longer human..." They didn't dare refuse him bread or water. They gave it to him because they feared the gaze.

Billy took it, chewed slowly, and drank, still feeling the dust in every sip. He grinned, wiped his mouth, and climbed back on his horse. "Horses, dust, hunger," he murmured. "That's all the world gives me. And all it gets is my smile."

The wind bit, the dust sang, and Billy rode on, a boy with dead eyes, a stomach full of fire, and a Colt always ready to write the next law.

And so the day ended like any other: dust in the throat, hunger in the stomach, and a grin that was harder than death.

Friends with weak nerves

Friends were as rare in this world as water in midsummer. And if you had any, they didn't last long. Not because Billy betrayed them—he never betrayed anyone, at most he killed them—but because their nerves were thinner than paper.

They came to him again and again, young guys with big dreams and small beards. They wanted fame, they wanted stories, they wanted to stand next to the name "Billy the Kid" in the whispers of the saloons. But they had no idea what that meant. They only knew the whiskey, not the hunger. They only knew the pull, not the blood that lay in the dust afterward.

Billy rode with two of them—Joe and Miguel. Two kids, really, barely older than him, but full of hope that they were part of something big. At first, they laughed, told stories, and played poker in the dirt. But after the third shooting, the laughter had faded. After the fifth, it was gone altogether.

Joe began to lose sleep at night. He trembled, cursed in his dreams, and jumped at every hoofbeat. Billy just grinned. "You're hearing ghosts," he said, "I only hear the wind." But Billy knew what Joe was hearing. The dead spoke to all who were weak.

Miguel became quieter. He barely spoke, looked into Billy's eyes, and then turned away. When they entered a village, he stayed in the background while Billy ate the food, drank the whiskey, and intimidated the people. Miguel simply muttered, "You're worse than hunger."

Billy grinned, coughed, and spat. "Hunger is worse than anything, friend. And if you don't learn that, it'll eat you first."

By the fire, they talked about escape. Quietly, they thought. But Billy heard it anyway. Joe wanted to go back to his mother, Miguel wanted to go south, "somewhere the dust doesn't consume everything." Billy grinned crookedly. "You're free," he said. "But if you leave, you'll leave with me watching you."

They stayed, out of fear, not courage. But their nerves were already on edge.

It was in a dump that wasn't even worth a name. A few shacks, a saloon, a store with an empty shelf, and a sheriff who was more of a drunk than a lawman. Still, they had the guts to intercept Billy and his two boys at the saloon door. Five men, all with Colts, all with that look: fear disguised as courage.

Billy grinned, coughed, and spat into the dust. "Five to three. Bad odds for you."

Joe beside him was trembling. You could see it in the hands holding the Colt. He murmured softly, "I... I can't..." Billy turned his head, looked at him—that dead stare, cold, final. "If you can't do it now, boy, you'll never be able to do it again."

The shots rang out. Dust flew, wood splintered, bullets pierced walls. Billy moved as always—quickly, confidently, coldly. Two men fell instantly, one with a hole in his forehead, one with blood in his stomach. Miguel also fired, hitting a third, who staggered, screamed, then lay in the dust.

Only Joe... Joe stopped. The Colt trembled in his hand, his finger cramped, but he didn't pull the trigger. An enemy ran toward him, screaming, aiming. Joe stood there frozen.

Billy roared, raised his own Colt, and shot the man down before it could hit Joe. The man fell hard into the dust, blood splattering over Joe's boots. Joe stumbled back, staring at Billy, his eyes wide, panicked. "I... I couldn't..."

Billy approached him, his gun still warm. He grabbed Joe by the collar and pulled him up, his eyes dead, his grin hard. "You couldn't? Then you're already dead. Out here, there's no 'I couldn't.' It's just fast or dust."

Joe stammered, tears streaming down his face. "Please... Billy... I swear... next time..."

Billy pushed him back, shoved him into the dust. Miguel stood there, staring, saying nothing. He knew the next time would never come.

Billy grinned, coughed, and spat. "Friends with weak nerves die faster. Remember that, Joe." Then he turned away, collected the Colts of the fallen as if they were coins, and left Joe sitting in the dust, trembling, broken.

And already at night they whispered in the huts: "Billy the Kid... even his friends break before him..."

Since that shooting, Joe had been nothing but a shadow. He barely spoke, slept even less, stared into the fire as if there were an answer in there he would never find. His hands trembled even when they weren't holding anything. Miguel saw it, Billy saw it, the whole world saw it. And everyone knew: this wouldn't last long.

One of those nights, somewhere between two dead villages, Billy heard him. The soft click of boots in the dust, the rustle of leather, the creak of the saddle. Joe. He quietly saddled his horse, probably thinking Billy was sleeping soundly enough.

Billy opened his eyes, slowly, coldly. He said nothing, not immediately. He watched. Joe had the face of a man who had long since decided: Away. Only away. His hands trembled as he tightened the straps, his eyes wandered into the darkness, as if he saw freedom there, not just more dust.

"Where to?" Billy's voice came out rough, hoarse, like a knife on stone. Joe froze. "B-Billy... I... I have to get away. I can't do this anymore. The dust, the bullets, the dead. Your look. I can't do this anymore."

Billy straightened, coughed, and stood up. The moon cast a long shadow across the ground. He stepped closer, his grin crooked, his eyes dead. "You want to leave? Then go. But you know what happens when someone leaves. People talk. And when they talk, they don't just talk about you. They talk about me."

Joe swallowed, tears glistening. "I swear, I won't tell anyone. I... I just want to go home. To my mother."

Billy stepped even closer, grabbed the Colt at his belt, and let it dangle loosely. "Home? There's no home, Joe. Not for us. There's only dust and bullets. You know that."

Joe fell to his knees, his hands clasped as if praying. "Please, Billy. Let me go. I swear, I swear..."

Billy looked at him for a long time. The dead stare made Joe feel even smaller, even weaker. Miguel stood a few meters away, holding his breath, knowing he couldn't say anything.

Then Billy grinned. "Go," he said quietly. "But if I ever hear you use my name... or if you breathe where I find you again... then you'll be dust. Got it?"

Joe nodded frantically, jumped up, swung himself onto his horse, and disappeared into the night.

Billy coughed, spat, and laughed hoarsely. "Friends with weak nerves," he muttered, "go faster than any bullet."

Miguel stepped out of the shadows. "You could have killed him." Billy grinned, eyes still. "Could? No. I should have. But sometimes it's worse when they're alive."

The wind carried the words away. And somewhere out there, in the darkness, Joe rode—but he was already dead before anyone pulled the trigger.

Miguel stayed. But that didn't mean he was stronger. It just meant he was breaking more slowly. Billy saw it in his eyes—that flicker that came when the night fell silent and only the wind spoke. Miguel talked less, didn't laugh at all. He rode, he shot, he ate when there was something available, but his gaze wandered more and more often to Billy, as if testing whether he was still human or already just a shadow.

One evening, as they sat by the fire, the wood crackling and smelling of damp dust, Miguel broke the silence. "Billy... you're not like us anymore."

Billy grinned, coughed, and spat into the fire. "I never was."

"No," Miguel continued, his voice shaky, "you're... empty. When you shoot, there's nothing. No anger, no joy, no regret. Just emptiness. I don't know if you feel anything anymore."

Billy looked at him—that dead stare that extinguished even the flickering flames. "Feelings are for those who can afford a bed. I'm just dust."

Miguel swallowed. "Sometimes I wonder if you're looking at me too... like that... and in your head, you're already deciding how I'll lie in the dust."

Billy grinned even wider. "Maybe."

The fire crackled, and Miguel lowered his gaze. His hands trembled slightly, not much, but enough for Billy to see. Weak nerves, he thought. They kept coming, and they always broke the same way.

Over the next few days, Miguel barely spoke. He kept his distance as much as the road allowed. He ate hastily, as if afraid Billy might shoot the food out of his mouth. And when Billy coughed or laughed, he flinched as if a Colt was about to follow.

Billy grinned, again and again, but his grin wasn't funny. It was a test. And every time Miguel lowered his eyes, Billy knew: This friend, too, was dust, just hadn't fallen over yet.

"Friends with weak nerves," Billy muttered one evening as Miguel sat with his back to him. "You can hear them break before the shot rings out."

The wind howled as if in agreement.

It was one of those nights when the dust was thicker than the darkness. Billy, Miguel, and two stolen horses were hanging around the edge of a small post house. Inside: a few sacks of flour, a bit of tobacco, maybe a crate of silver. Nothing big, nothing for which legends would be written—but enough to keep them going.

Billy grinned, coughed, and pointed with his Colt. "Quick in, quick out. Two shots at most, and we're full." Miguel nodded, but his gaze flickered. His hands were too tight on the rifle, his breathing too fast.

They stormed the door. The landlord, an old bastard with a gray beard, jumped up and stumbled against the counter. Billy darted beside him, into the wood, spraying splinters. "Steady, old man. Give me what you've got."

Miguel was supposed to cover the rest. But when a young man—perhaps the innkeeper's son—rushed out of the back room, a rifle in his hand, it happened. Miguel aimed. But he didn't pull the trigger.

The boy screamed and fired, the bullet shattering a glass shelf. Miguel stumbled back, almost dropping his rifle. His eyes wide, his hands frozen.

Billy cursed, pulled, and fired. The boy fell, blood splattered against the wall. Silence. Only Miguel's breathing, fast, rattling, full of panic.

"Damn it, Miguel," Billy growled, grabbing him by the collar. "You would have had him. One shot. Just one damn shot."

Miguel stammered, tears streaming down his face. "I... I couldn't... he was a boy..."

Billy grinned, but the grin was cold, like steel at dawn. "A boy? We're all boys, Miguel. But we still shoot."

Miguel slumped to his knees, his head in his hands. "I don't want this anymore, Billy... I want to go home... I want to live."

Billy looked at him for a long time, his eyes empty, the Colt still warm in his hand. "Life?" He coughed, spitting blood into the dust. "This is life. Everything else is dust."

The bartender sobbed behind the counter, not daring to raise his head. Billy let go of Miguel and stepped back, the grin still on his lips. "Get up. Or stay down. But if you stay, you're dead. Make up your mind."

Miguel remained kneeling, trembling, unable to speak. Billy turned around, picked up the box of silver from the counter, and walked out. "Friends with weak nerves," he muttered, "are worse than enemies."

Outside, he took the horses and changed saddles. Miguel didn't come out. He stayed behind—in the dust, in silence, with his own nerves shattering.

And the very next morning they whispered: "Billy the Kid... he's leaving even his friends behind..."

Billy rode alone. It wasn't a plan, it wasn't a grand principle—it was simply what remained when everyone else had either run away or broken. Joe in the darkness, Miguel in the dust. Two friends less, and the world hadn't gotten any harder.

He coughed, grinned, and spat over his shoulder. "Friends," he muttered, "are just another word for burden."

The road was silent, the dust bit at his neck, the horse trudged forward. Billy thought of the faces—Joe with his shaking hands, Miguel with his flickering eyes. Weak nerves, weak men. They wanted adventure, they wanted legends, but they couldn't pay the price.

In a saloon in a godforsaken town, Billy could already hear whispers. "He had companions... but they're disappearing. All of them are disappearing. Because he's ruining them. Because he's leaving them behind." People stared as if he were a ghost who had just randomly drawn a Colt.

Billy sat down, drank his whiskey, and grinned at the group. "Friends," he said loudly, "are dust. The wind blows them away. Only bullets remain."

A man at the next table laughed nervously. "You can't ride alone forever, kid. At some point, you'll need someone to watch your back."

Billy looked at him—that dead stare that knew no warmth. The man immediately fell silent, lowering his eyes into the glass.

"No one's got my back," Billy muttered, "except the dust. And it never misses."

He lay outside at night, his Colt beside him, the starry sky above. He thought of Joe, of Miguel, of Cutter, of Mason, of all the names that had turned to dust. No guilt, no regret, only this knowledge: Friends don't last. Bullets do.

He coughed, spat blood into the sand, and grinned crookedly. "I'm better off alone. Because alone, no one trembles, no one cries, no one begs. Alone, there's only me. And that's enough."

The wind whistled, the dust sang. And Billy fell asleep, Colt in hand, alone as always—but safer than with any friend.

They met him on the side of the road, somewhere between two villages that both looked as if they had long since ceased to exist. Three young men, dirty, but full of fire in their eyes. They had heard that Billy was riding alone, and they thought this was their chance. "Kid," shouted the first, "we want to go with you. We can shoot, we can ride. Together we would be strong."

Billy didn't even dismount. He stayed in the saddle, dragged on his cigarette, coughed, and spat in the dust. Then he grinned, that crooked grin that didn't reach his eyes.

"Together?" His voice was ragged, full of whiskey. "Together means one of you ends up shaking. And if one shakes, everyone dies. I've seen enough shaking."

The second man stepped closer, his hands open, almost pleading. "But we could learn from you. We don't want glory, we just want to survive."

Billy laughed, short and hoarse. "Survive? You think you can survive with me? Look at Joe. Look at Miguel. Oh yeah, right—you can't see them. Because they're already dust."

The boys exchanged glances. One of them opened his mouth to protest, but Billy's eyes caught his. That dead stare. The boy immediately fell silent, as if someone had squeezed his throat.

"Friends," Billy said slowly, "are just flesh that gets in the way when the bullets fly. And I don't have room for flesh. Only for dust."

He mounted his horse and rode past them, leaving them standing like trees no longer needed by the wind. No one dared to follow him. They just stared at his back until he disappeared into the dust.

And that very evening, they whispered in the saloons, in the shacks, even in the damned fields: "Billy the Kid... he has no friends. Not anymore. He doesn't need any. Dust is his only companion."

Billy rode on, alone, his Colt at his side, hunger in his stomach, dust in his throat. And he grinned because he knew: This was the only truth that held.

Three nights in Lincoln

Lincoln smelled of gunpowder, sweat, and fear. A city already coughing before the bullets flew. Billy came in, not because he wanted to, but because he had to. He needed whiskey, he needed ammunition, he needed a roof over his head—even if it was just for one night. But Lincoln didn't take a guest without a price.

The first night began quietly. Billy sat in the saloon, drinking, coughing, spitting in the dust. People stared at him as if the devil himself had taken a seat. He grinned crookedly. "Don't you have anything better to do than stare at me?" No one answered. Everyone knew: If you looked the Kid in the eye for too long, you'd find your own grave in sight.

They were already gathering outside—sheriffs, deputies, bounty hunters, greedy bastards who thought tonight was the night they'd get rich. Billy knew it even before he heard the first boot creak on the wood. The town smelled of trap.

He sat at the table, his Colt next to the bottle, and waited. Men whispered, women disappeared, even the piano player stopped. It was the kind of silence that comes when the dust is about to swallow blood.

Then the door slammed. Two sheriffs, nervous as horses before a thunderstorm, rifles in hand. "Billy the Kid! Hands up!"

Billy grinned, coughed, and slowly stood up. "Hands up? What do you get for this—a piece of lead or a piece of silver?"

The sheriffs flinched, one stepped back. The other aimed. Billy's eyes went cold, dead. A shot, faster than their flinching, and one of them flew backward, blood splattering over the door. The other ran, dropping the rifle.

Outside, the howling began. Voices screamed, boots trampled, the wind carried words like knives. "He's in there! Get him out!"

Billy sat back down, took a sip, and spat into the glass. "Three nights, Lincoln," he murmured, "let's see who survives."

And so the siege began.

The second night was worse, even before it really began. Billy was still sitting in the saloon, the same table, the same bottle, the Colt never more than a fist's length away. Outside, they had surrounded the building. He heard it: boots in the dust, the metallic clack of rifle bolts, men whispering to encourage him, but their voices trembling like cheap glass.

The windows were boarded up, the door a pile of splinters through which the moon shone. Inside, it smelled of cold sweat, old smoke, and the blood of the sheriff who had fallen the night before. The stain on the floorboards was drying, but it seemed to be growing larger, as if it wanted to swallow the entire building.

Billy drank, coughed, and spat in the dust next to his boot. "Come in, you bastards," he muttered. "I'll even spare you the door." But they didn't come. They had seen how fast his Colt was. So they made noise to wear him down—shouts, threats, even a priest outside screaming that Billy was cursed, the devil himself.

Inside, it was silent except for Billy's breathing and the scratching of a rat searching for food somewhere under the floorboards. "We're both looking for something, huh?" he said to the animal. "Only you're smaller and run away faster."

Around midnight, they sent a brave man. He ran toward the door, yelling, wanting to write himself into the heroic books. Billy waited, pulled, and fired. The man fell, slid a bit further across the floor until he came to rest. Outside, it became quiet again.

The whiskey dwindled, the dust increased. Billy coughed blood, but he grinned anyway, because the fear of the men outside was louder than his own cough. "Three nights," he muttered, "and each one makes you weaker, not me."

By the fire outside, he heard them whispering, "He's alone... but he sounds like ten." One suggested setting fire to the entire building. Another objected: "Then he'll run out, and then he'll shoot us like dogs."

They knew, no matter what they did, the boy inside was waiting for them with that dead stare and a Colt that was faster than their prayers.

Billy leaned back, closed his eyes briefly, and let the gun rest on his chest. "Second night," he muttered, "let's see how many you have left before you turn to dust yourself."

The third night crept toward them like a mangle that won't die, no matter how many times you kick it. The men outside had had enough of waiting. They weren't whispering anymore—they were shouting, laughing nervously, drumming on their rifles as if they could beat the courage into their bones. And then Billy smelled it. Smoke.

They had set fire to the saloon. First one wall, then another. The crackling grew louder, sparks flew through the cracks, the stench of burning wood mingled with the old stench of blood and whiskey. Billy coughed, laughed hoarsely, and spat. "Finally," he muttered, "finally, you're making this interesting."

The smoke crept down his throat, burning his eyes, but Billy's gaze remained blank. He crouched behind the table, Colt in one hand, bottle in the other. The boards creaked, flames licked at the windows, the night outside became as bright as day.

"Kid!" someone yelled from outside. "Come out, and we'll give you a quick death!" Billy laughed, coughed, and yelled back: "I'll give you all a slow death!"

Then the first window crashed. A man tried to jump through, brave fool. Billy's Colt barked, the bullet ripped through his chest, and his body fell half through the window, half back into the flames.

The crowd screamed, but no one dared to be next. Instead, they shot from outside, bullets whizzing through the wood, tearing splinters from the walls. Billy lay in the smoke, pushing back, every bullet a curse, every movement accompanied by a cough.

The saloon was now a furnace. Sweat burned his forehead, his throat was dry as sandpaper. He knew he couldn't stay. But running out meant jumping right into the gunfire.

Billy grinned, crooked and bloody. "Three nights, Lincoln," he muttered, "and when I go out, it won't be with my hands up, but with burning dust behind me."

He strapped on his spare ammunition, tucked his Colt deep into his hand, and waited. The smoke ate through his lungs, the flames licked at the beams. Soon the roof would fall.

Outside, they knew it too. "He has to get out! He'll burn in there!" One laughed hysterically. "Or he'll stay in there and go up in flames!"

Billy coughed, grinned, and whispered, "Come on, you dogs... anyone can burn. Only a few can shoot."

The roof began to groan as if a giant were standing on it. Smoke billowed from above, flames were already licking through the ceiling. Billy knew: In just a few more minutes, the saloon would be a grave. And he'd never been into graves—those were for other people.

He yanked up the table and pushed it in front of the door, which was already half-burned. Bullets hammered against it from outside, splinters flew, and the smoke made his eyes red. He coughed, spat black, and grinned. "Come on, you bastards, here comes your firebug."

Then he kicked open the door. Wood cracked, sparks flew, and Billy rushed out—half in flames, half in smoke. He pushed the table in front of him as a shield, while bullets rained down like hail. Two men fell instantly, one hit in the neck, the other in the stomach.

"There he is!" someone yelled. "Shoot! Shoot!"

Billy laughed, a hoarse, demented laugh that drowned even the wind. He pulled the trigger, Colt in each hand, bullets flying, men screaming. One stumbled into the fire spreading from the saloon and fell to the ground, burning. Another dropped his rifle and ran away, but Billy's bullet took him in the back.

Dust, blood, smoke—everything mingled into a single, dirty mess. Billy coughed, felt the heat in his hair, smelled burnt leather. But he kept grinning, as if the whole thing were a goddamn dance, and he was the only one who knew the steps.

The men outside thought they were driving an animal out of its cage, but instead they had unleashed the devil. Billy moved like a shadow, ducking,

darting, jumping over the corpse of a sheriff, coughing, spitting blood and dust, and still laughing.

When the saloon's roof finally collapsed with a crash, Billy was already standing outside, the smoke at his back, his Colt still hot, and around him lay men in the dust, dead or fleeing. Those still standing didn't dare take another step.

He stopped, his gaze cold and empty, grinning crookedly. "Three nights, Lincoln," he murmured, loud enough for them to hear. "And you're all dust."

No one answered. No one pulled. Only the wind, which carried the saloon's ashes into the night, as if it wanted to continue the story itself.

The next morning, Lincoln smelled of ash and blood. The saloon was nothing but a blackened skeleton, beams reaching into the sky like twisted fingers. The street was filled with pools of blood, charred wood, and silence. An entire town, once alive with the bellows of cowboys, the clinking of glasses, and the laughter of prostitutes, was suddenly dead.

Billy stood in the middle of it all. Dust on his shirt, smoke in his hair, his gun still hot, his eyes blank. No one came out. Behind every window, every crooked door, there were eyes that dared not show themselves. The men who had survived had either disappeared or were sitting shivering in some hole, praying the boy wouldn't take them too.

He had spent three nights here, and the city was broken. Not by an army, not by a siege, but by a boy with a dead stare and a smile that never reached his eyes.

On the second day, everyone avoided him. The shopkeeper placed bread and a bottle of whiskey on the counter, then walked silently to the back, as if he didn't want to exist as long as the Kid was in the room. The women scurried away like shadows, children hid behind skirts. Not a word, not a protest, just silence.

Billy grinned, drank, and coughed. "You wanted to catch me," he muttered, "now you've had me. For three nights. And you're emptier than I am."

On the third day, it was even quieter. No music, no card games, not even the howling of a dog. Only the wind whistling through the burnt beams, like a mocking laugh. Billy saddled his horse, thin and tired as he was, and looked back. Lincoln was no longer a city; Lincoln was ashes.

People didn't dare stop him. No one spoke. Only the silent, fearful gazes that followed him as he rode out down the road. He grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat. "Three nights, Lincoln," he murmured, "and you'll still be whispering about it a hundred years from now."

The wind carried his words away, and Billy disappeared into the dust. Behind him, the city was still burning—slowly, silently, like a wound that would never heal.

Billy had barely been out of Lincoln for half a day when the stories had already overtaken him. In the saloons further west, they whispered about a boy who had burned an entire town single-handedly. About a devil with Colts who laughed for three nights while men died.

The truth was already dead before he left the county line. It was said he set fire to the saloon himself, just to kill more men. It was said he shot ten, twenty, fifty, piled up the bodies, and built a barricade with them. Some swore he danced in the burning smoke, the bullets singing around him.

An old whore's assistant claimed he saw Billy walk right through the fire without the flames touching him. "The devil protect him," he muttered, "otherwise he'd have been ashes long ago." Another said Billy hanged the Sheriff of Lincoln himself before leaving town. All lies, but lies taste better than dust.

Billy heard the rumors even before he entered the next town. Strangers stared at him, their faces pale. One dared to ask, "Kid... is it true? Did you take Lincoln alone?"

Billy grinned, coughed, and spat into the dust. "Maybe," he muttered. "Maybe it was just the wind."

The men didn't laugh. They didn't know if it was a joke. They only knew: Lincoln had been burned, and Billy was alive. That was enough.

Even those tasked with hunting him became quieter. Bounty hunters drank longer before setting out, sheriffs looked twice in the mirror before putting on their hats. Three Nights in Lincoln – that was more than a story. It was a shadow that hung over everyone who heard his name.

And Billy himself? He grinned, drank, coughed, and spat. But his eyes remained dead. "Three nights," he muttered, "and the world will think I'm immortal. That would be nice. I'm just hungry."

The dust picked him up again, as it always did. Behind him lay Lincoln, black and silent, a city still smoking like a half-smoked butt. Ahead of him lay only road, dust, hunger, thirst. But this time he wasn't just riding as Billy. He was riding as a story bigger than himself.

The wind carried the words faster than any horse. "Three Nights in Lincoln." A phrase heard in every saloon, in every marketplace, even in the huts of the poorest farmers. They didn't know how many men he had killed. Some said five, others fifty. It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that he had survived, and the town hadn't.

Billy coughed and grinned crookedly. "Shitty stories," he muttered, "they're worse than bullets." Because he knew that every new lie, every new exaggeration not only made him bigger—it also made him a target everyone wanted to hit. Bounty hunters, sheriffs, scoundrels, would-be heroes. Everyone wanted to kill the man who had eaten death for breakfast for three nights.

He rode on, alone, his horse tired, his colt heavy at his side. He thought of Joe, of Miguel, of Cutter, of Mason, of all the faces that had disappeared into the dust. And he knew: sooner or later, he, too, would end up in one of those stories. Not as a human being, but as a fairy tale.

In the evening, he stopped and stared into the sunset, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He coughed, spat blood into the dust, and laughed hoarsely. "Three nights in Lincoln," he muttered, "and they think I'm the devil. But I'm just a hungry boy."

The wind blew the words away. Behind him, the legend crawled on, growing, becoming bigger, uglier, inescapable. Before him lay only dust.

Billy pulled his hat down over his face, kicked the horse, and disappeared into the distance, a shadow that laughed, coughed, and wore the dust like a second skin.

Revolver in the rain

The sky closed in like a damned curtain, choking off all hope. Gray clouds piled up, heavy, black, so low they almost touched the ground. Billy rode into the thick of it, his horse puffing, the dust slowly giving way to water, and the first cracks of thunder rolled over the hills like a cannon shot.

He hated the rain. Not just because it was cold, not just because it turned the dust into mud that clung to his boots. The rain took away the Colt's safety. Wet leather, slippery grips, failing primers. A revolver in the rain was just a piece of iron, heavy and deceptive.

As the first drops fell, thick and heavy as stones, Billy pulled his hat down further over his face. He coughed, spat, and grinned crookedly. "Damn it," he muttered, "you fight dirtier than any sheriff."

The horse became nervous, its hooves slipping in the softening ground. Lightning flashed, followed immediately by thunder. Billy knew he was riding right in nature's line of fire—and nature wasn't afraid of colts.

He sought shelter in an abandoned stable, rotten boards, a roof with more holes than a dead man. The rain still lashed through, dripping down his neck. He sat down on a crate, placed his Colt on his knees, and watched the water drip from the barrel. An image that enraged him.

"Revolvers in the rain," he whispered, "almost as useless as friends."

Outside, the storm hit harder. Thunder rumbled as if a hundred guns had fired simultaneously. And then he heard it—not thunder, not rain. Hoofbeats. Several. Men searching for him.

Billy grinned and pulled up his wet Colt. "Well, you dogs," he muttered, "let's see who slips first—me or you."

The rain drummed on the roof like a horde of drunken devils dancing with their boots. Every thud, every drop, was louder than his breath. Billy sat on the box, his Colt on his knees, and listened. The hoofbeats outside were now distinct. Four, five horses. Men foolish enough to go hunting in the storm.

They stopped, just short of the stable. Voices whispered, words were lost in the thunder. Billy heard only the crack of rifle hammers, the clang of metal pushing through the rain. He grinned, coughed, and spat into the puddle in front of his boots.

"Surround him," someone outside yelled, his voice shaky with nervousness. "The rain is slowing him down!"

Billy laughed hoarsely. "The rain's slowing everyone down, you dog."

Lightning ripped the sky apart, and for a heartbeat, everything was as bright as day. Billy saw their shadows through the cracks in the stable, saw them duck, saw them raise their rifles. Then came the thunder, and with it the rain, harder, merciless.

The door burst open. A man rushed in, rifle at the ready. But the floor was mud, slippery. He slipped, half-fell, and at that moment Billy pulled the trigger. The Colt was wet, his hand slipped—but the bullet went off anyway. The man fell, the rifle clattering into the corner.

Outside, the others screamed. Bullets hammered the wooden walls, splinters flew. Rain seeped through the holes, dripping onto Billy's face and the barrel of his Colt. He felt the metal grow cold, the leather on the grip slippery.

A second man came through the window, boots first, rifle at the ready. Billy rolled to the side, fired, the shot echoed dully in the rain, and the man fell back into the mud, his face shot to pieces.

The others hesitated. The storm roared, the thunder crashed, the rain lashed their faces. "Damn it!" he heard someone curse. "We can't see anything!"

Billy grinned, his voice raspy as the wind. "Exactly. You don't see anything. But I see you."

And again the lightning flashed, again everything was bright for a heartbeat. Three men in the rain, their rifles shaking, their boots in the mud. Billy coughed, spat, and pulled back the hammer of his Colt. "Come on, you dogs. The rain makes us all the same."

The rain was now pounding like nails from the sky. The ground was no longer ground, but a swamp of mud and blood. Every step was a stumble, every hoofbeat outside a dull gurgle. Billy stood in the stable, his shirt wet, his Colt heavy and slippery in his hand.

The men outside lost their courage. They shouted orders to each other, but the thunder drowned out their voices. One ran to the door, trying to get in – slipped in the mud, and fell sprawled. Billy stepped forward, saw the shadow in the flashlight, and pulled the trigger. The shot rang out, and the man lay still, his face half in rainwater, half in the dirt.

Another tried to climb through the roof. The wood was slippery, his hands slipped. Billy saw the shadow, waited until lightning tore through the night, and shot through the boards. A scream, a dull thud. One more down.

But Billy, too, felt the rain in his bones. His fingers were numb, the trigger heavy, the primer hissed once without firing. He grinned, coughed, and spat. "Shitty weather... even bullets turn into cowards."

A third enemy jumped sideways through the window, mud on his boots, rifle outstretched. Billy backed away, stumbled, and fell halfway to his knees. The man aimed, but he too slipped, the muzzle jerking upward—the shot hit the roof, splinters raining down. Billy seized the moment, fired, and the bullet ripped through the man's chest.

Outside, he heard cursing and panic. "It's the rain!" someone shouted. "We're shooting blind!" "No," another yelled, "it's the Kid!"

Billy laughed, hoarse, sickly, almost suffocated by smoke, rain, and blood. "Both, you dogs."

The storm roared, the thunder rolled like cannon fire. Every flash of lightning turned the night into a battlefield of white shadows and black holes for a heartbeat. The men outside staggered, stumbled, shot into nothingness. Some fell without a bullet—slipped, broke their necks, drowned in the mud, as if even the rain were on Billy's side.

He stood in the doorway, his Colt loose, his eyes dead. Rain ran down his face, turning him into a ghost, half flesh, half water. "Guns in the rain," he muttered, "and yet you're slower than me."

The stable was a coffin made of wet wood, and Billy knew that in a few more minutes, he would rot inside like a piece of meat in mud. So he stepped out into the storm.

Rain lashed his face, burning his eyes, making every blink an agony. The mud sucked at his boots, every step felt heavy as lead. But he walked, slowly, with that dead look that no storm could erase.

The men who were still alive stood outside, trembling, rifles in their hands. Their hats hung wet, rain dripping from the barrels. They saw Billy coming like a shadow, half man, half thunder.

"Shit," one whispered, "he's coming... in the middle of the storm..."

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat rain and blood into the mud. "Come on, you dogs. Bullets or lightning—everything hits you."

The first man raised the rifle, but his hands were slippery, the stock slipped, and the shot went high into the sky. Lightning responded, as if the heavens themselves had laughed at him. Billy fired, and the man fell backward into a puddle, which immediately turned red.

A second man tried to flank, stumbled in the mud, and fell to his knees. Billy stepped closer, put his Colt to his forehead, and pulled the trigger. The sound was lost in the thunder, leaving only the impact.

The last two were still holding on, standing there frozen, the rain running down their faces, their rifles shaking. They didn't just see Billy—they also saw nature against them. Lightning, thunder, storm. Everything against them.

"Shoot!" Billy yelled, his voice a harsh howl in the rain. "Shoot, damn it!"

They fired. The bullets whistled, passed by, hissed in the rain, disappeared in the storm. Billy laughed, a hoarse, sick laugh, and fired back. Two shots. Two bodies. Two more stains in the mud.

Then there was only rain. No screams, no curses, just water, thunder, and Billy standing in the middle of it, dripping wet, with a Colt that was still hot despite everything.

He looked up at the sky, which was ripped apart by lightning. "Revolver in the rain," he murmured, "and yet faster than God."

The storm retreated, slowly, like a drunken bastard not knowing whether to leave or strike again. The thunder grew fainter, the lightning less frequent. What remained was rain, no longer a whip, but a thick curtain that turned everything gray.

Billy stood there, deep in the mud, his boots sunken, his Colt heavy in his hand. Bodies lay around him, mingled with puddles, blood, and rainwater. Some faces were half buried in the mud, others stared up at the sky as if asking God why he hadn't made the rain heavy enough on their side.

Billy coughed, spat redly into the water, and laughed hoarsely. "You wanted the rain... now you have it."

He put the Colt back, the leather holster soaked, soaking wet at his hip. Every step was a struggle as he walked to his horse. The animal trembled, snorted, but it still stood. Billy put his hand on its neck. "Both of us, you old bastard... even the rain couldn't do it."

He rode slowly away, rain dripping from his hat and coat, water running down his face, making him even more of a shadow than he already was. Behind him remained a battlefield that soon no one could distinguish from the mud.

But the voices started immediately. Men who had seen it ran to the nearest town, talking, swearing they had seen the Kid fighting in the middle of a storm, how the rain made his bullets go faster, how lightning struck down his enemies. One said he had seen Billy run through the water without the mud to hold him back. Another swore thunder had been his voice.

"Revolvers in the rain," they whispered in the saloons, "it's faster than the sky itself."

Billy grinned, coughed, and spat from his horse. "Legends grow like weeds," he muttered, "but at least they keep you dry."

And the rain didn't stop.

The next morning, the sky was clear, blue like a freshly sharpened knife. The sun shone mercilessly on the land, as if trying to make everyone forget all the rain. But the ground remembered: mud everywhere, puddles of blood, the flies were already coming.

Billy's boots were heavy, his shirt clung to him like a second skin, cold and damp. He rode slowly, his hands sore from the wet leather, his bones more tired than ever. Every cough burned, every spit splattered the dust. But he grinned, crooked, stubborn.

He reached a small village, little more than a few huts, a shop, and a chapel. Children usually played outside the doors, but this morning they just stood there, staring. The women held them tight, the men lowered their gazes. They knew who was coming. They had heard what the rain had done.

"It's him," one whispered. "The Kid... the one with the storm." "They say he talked to the thunder," another murmured. "They say the rain didn't touch him."

Billy dismounted slowly, his horse as exhausted as he was. He walked into the shop, his heavy boots treading on the creaking floor. The merchant froze, as if death itself had entered the room. Without a word, he placed ammunition and a bottle of whiskey on the counter. Billy grinned, put down a few coins, coughed, and spat next to the door.

"Revolver in the Rain," he muttered, half to himself, half to the shivering crowd. "Nice shitty name for a fairy tale."

No one laughed. No one said anything. They just saw him walk back out, the bottle under his arm, the Colt at his side. A shadow in the sun, still smelling of the storm.

The women whispered by the well. The men talked by the fire. And by night, the village would swear that Billy the Kid had defeated the rain—that he was a ghost who broke even the laws of nature.

But Billy rode on, coughing, grinning crookedly. "Ghost, huh?" he muttered. "Maybe. But ghosts don't get hungry."

The dust absorbed him again.

The rain was long gone, but the legend dripped behind him like wet leather that wouldn't dry. Billy rode alone through the dust, the sun burning, the heat gnawing at him, and yet he heard them whispering—in every town, in every dump, in every dirty saloon: *Revolver in the rain*.

They spoke of him as if he were no longer human. Some swore he guided lightning; others said the rain made bullets fly faster, as if God himself had blessed his ammunition. One recounted that the storm wasn't against him, but for him—as if he were a son of thunder.

Billy coughed, spat blood into the dust, and laughed hoarsely. "Idiots," he muttered. "If the rain were on my side, I wouldn't have been so cold."

But he knew how it worked. Stories made men bigger than their skin, tougher than their bones. Stories turned hunger into legends. And stories made him even lonelier. Because the more they talked about him, the less anyone dared to ride beside him.

He thought of Joe, of Miguel, of Cutter. Dust. All dust. They had lost their nerve, lost their courage, lost their blood. But him? He stayed. And now the world believed he was immortal, a spirit who survived even rain and thunder.

But Billy felt the truth in his chest, in every cough, in every drop of blood he spat out: He was mortal, damned mortal. Just faster than most.

The sun slowly sank, painting the horizon red like a slashed belly. Billy rode, his Colt heavy at his side, his hat pulled low over his face, a grin at the corner of his mouth.

"Revolvers in the rain," he muttered, "let them talk. In the end, I'll just be a boy in the dust."

And the dust took him again, as always.

One sheriff too many

Some towns didn't have a sheriff at all. Dust, fear, and the cheapest gun in their belt ruled. Others had one, sometimes two, if the county was rich or the ranchers bellowed loudly enough. But this town here—this goddamn hole in the middle of nowhere—had three.

Billy knew immediately that this meant trouble. Three sheriffs meant three egos, three hats, three stars on their shirts, and everyone wanted to be the rooster in the dirt. This couldn't last. One sheriff too many was worse than ten bounty hunters.

As he rode down the road, he felt the stares. Women pulled their children inside, men leaned against the doors and looked away, as if suddenly interested in their boots. Only the sheriffs stood there, in the middle of the road, lined up in rows, stars shining in the sun as if they wanted to blind the whole world.

"Billy the Kid," said the first, a fat bastard with pig-like eyes. "You're not welcome here." "Was I ever welcome anywhere?" Billy grinned, coughed, and spat in the dust.

The second stepped forward, a young man with a smooth face, his rifle loosely in his hand. "There's more silver on your head than this city has ever seen. We'll take you alive."

Billy laughed, hoarse and dry. "Alive? You three can't even agree on which one of you should handcuff me."

The third remained silent. An old dog with a gray beard, his face full of wrinkles, his eyes tired but sharp. He studied Billy as if he were seeing not a person, but a ghost.

"We could end it here and now," muttered the old man. "Then pull," said Billy, his deadpan stare cold, his grin crooked. "But remember: three sheriffs are two too many. One might make it. The others will end up in the dust."

The street was quiet. No wind, no dog, no laughter. Just sun, dust, and four men with Colts.

Billy coughed and put his hand on the handle. "One sheriff too many," he muttered. "Let's see who it is."

The sun stood like a judge over the road, hot, merciless, every shadow a line in the dust. Billy stood alone, three stars before him, three men who all bore the same title and yet couldn't have been more different.

The fat man with the piggy eyes was sweating so much that his star shone like it had been freshly polished. He kept his hand close to his gun, but his gaze kept darting over to the others. The smooth-faced boy was nervous, his fingers drumming on the gunstock as if he were giving himself a pep talk. The old man remained silent, his eyes fixed on Billy, but the twitch in his jaw betrayed that he saw more than just the Kid—he saw the end.

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat a dark lump of dust and blood into the ground. "Three stars," he muttered, "but only one sky. It's getting crowded up there."

The fat man snorted. "Shut up, boy. We're taking you." The boy laughed uncertainly, a chuckle that betrayed more fear than courage. "You talk too much, Billy. You're history long ago." The old man remained silent.

And then it happened. The fat man took a step forward, probably wanting to show he was in charge. But the boy moved at the same time, his rifle jerking, almost aimed at his own colleague. One wrong step, one wrong look, and sparks flew between them.

Billy saw it, felt it, and his grin widened. "You can't even agree on who gets the loot," he said, quietly but sharply. "I just have to wait until you get at each other's throats."

The old man growled. "Shut up, Kid. We won't let ourselves be divided." But Billy saw the truth in his eyes. Each of them wanted the fame, each of them wanted the name "Billy the Kid" on their star. And no one wanted to share.

The street remained silent, but the air was filled with gunpowder even before a shot was fired. Billy stood there, like a shadow with a smile, and knew: He didn't need a quick Colt. He just needed patience.

"One sheriff too many," he muttered, "and soon one of you will be dust."

The dust hung heavy in the air, as if even the road itself wanted to see who would break first. Billy stood still, only the twitch at the corner of his mouth, that crooked grin, betrayed that he'd seen it all before.

The fat man wiped the sweat from his forehead and gripped the revolver tighter. "I'm in charge here," he growled. The boy with the gun laughed nervously. "You're in charge? You can barely button your shirt without getting out of breath."

That was the first crack. The fat man whirled around, his gaze sharp, his face red. "Watch out, kid. I was sheriff, back then you were still attached to your mother." "And now you're attached to the bottle," the boy quipped, rifle at the ready, hands shaking, but dangerously close to the trigger.

The old man grumbled, took a half-step back, his hand steady on his gun. He saw what Billy saw: the two of them were about to blow each other out.

Billy grinned, coughed, and spat. "Come on," he said calmly, "make it easy for me. One less for my bullets."

The fat man shouted, "Shut your mouth!" and in the same movement, he raised his Colt—not at Billy, but at the boy. The boy screamed back, the rifle jerked, the bullet whistled, and hit the dust. The fat man's Colt cracked, the bullet ripped the boy's hat off his head, tore skin from his temple. Blood spurted, and the boy staggered.

Billy stood motionless, watching the chaos unfold. The old man yelled, "You idiots!" and then pulled too.

Three sheriffs. Three stars. Three Colts. And no one who trusted the others anymore.

Billy grinned wider, his eyes dead. "One sheriff too many," he muttered, "soon means three in the dirt."

The bullets flew, and this time the thunder came not from the sky but from the street itself.

The street burst with noise, Colts fired, the echo bounced off the wooden walls of the houses. Dust swirled, smoke hung like a blanket in the heat. Billy stood in the middle of it all, motionless, his eyes dead, his grin wide. Three sheriffs, three stars, three men, striking each other down faster than he could even lift a finger.

The fat man screamed, his face wet with sweat and blood, firing wildly, the bullets whizzing by, hitting the wooden walls, shattering windows. The boy stumbled back, rifle raised, firing half-blindly, the bullet grazing the fat man's arm, drawing blood. The old man shot both of them, coldly, with precision, a man who knew only one could remain sheriff.

Billy laughed hoarsely, coughed, and spat into the dust storm. "You're doing my job," he shouted, "I'll drink while you shoot."

But then, briefly, everyone's eyes turned to him. Three seconds in which everyone realized: No matter how much they hated each other, the true prize was him. Billy the Kid.

"At him!" screamed the boy, blood on his temple, his eyes wide with panic. "No, at you!" growled the fat man and pulled the trigger.

Bullets flew, everything was dust and thunder. Billy ducked, rolled to the side, and drew his Colt. One shot, and the boy fell, chest open, rifle in the dirt. He trembled, gasped, then fell silent.

The fat man roared, ran at Billy, shot, and hit nothing but dust. Billy grinned, coughed, and fired back. The bullet ripped open the fat man's throat. He staggered, blood gushing, his hands grasping at nothing until he collapsed, gasping, in the dust.

Only the old man remained. He stood motionless, the smoke from his Colt rising like incense into the heat. He looked at Billy, cold, tired, knowing. "The two of us," he murmured.

Billy nodded, pushed his hat down, coughed, and spat red blood. "The two of us."

The old man pulled—fast, damn fast. But Billy was faster. The shot echoed through the street, the sheriff staggered, fell backward, the stars on his shirt sparkled one last time in the sun before the dust swallowed them.

Billy stood alone. Three sheriffs lay dead. Three stars glittered in the dirt.

He grinned, hoarsely, coughing. "One sheriff too many... none more now."

The street was silent. No dog barked, no chicken clucking, not even the wind dared to venture through the alley. Only the flies buzzed, swiftly and greedily, above the three bodies lying in the dust. Three stars shone crookedly in the sun, one drenched in blood, one half-torn, one twisted at the waist.

Billy stood in the middle, his Colt loosely in his hand, his hat pulled low over his face. He coughed, spat dark red into the dust, and stepped over the fat man as if he were just a burst sack of flour. No one moved. The people had seen everything—children behind broken windows, women at doorways, men in the shadows of balconies. Everyone had watched as three sheriffs fell, one after the other, and no one was stupid enough to make a sound now.

Billy entered the saloon, the floorboards sticky with whiskey that had spilled days ago. The patrons crowded against the wall, making room as if it were a disease they didn't want to catch. He went to the bar, rapped his Colt on the wood. The barman trembled, and set down a bottle without lifting his head. Billy grinned, drank straight from the bottle, coughed, and spat on the floor.

"Three sheriffs," he muttered, loud enough for everyone to hear. "No one stays. One sheriff too many means everyone's in the dust."

No one answered. No one dared. Even the piano player sat there silently, his fingers on the keys, as if he had forgotten what music is.

Billy put the bottle back, turned, and left. His boots pounded through the silence, each step a blow to people's throats. Outside, his horse waited, restless but faithful. He swung himself into the saddle, looked over his shoulder once more. The whole town stared, no one blinked.

He grinned crookedly, raising his Colt slightly, almost as if in salute. "You need a new sheriff," he said. "But pick only one this time."

Then he rode off, slowly, through the street, past the three bodies, past the staring eyes of the city, out into the dust.

And the very next night, they were whispering in every saloon: "Billy the Kid—he took out three sheriffs in one minute. The town was silent as a grave. One sheriff too many... and he left none."

Billy had barely been out for a day's ride when the stories were already hanging in the air like flies over carrion. In the villages, they talked about it as if they had been there themselves. One swore Billy shot the three sheriffs at once, three bullets, three dead, in a single breath. Another said the Kid laughed like the devil and shot the stars off their shirts before striking them down.

In a saloon in the next county, the story was even more grotesque. They said Billy hadn't actually killed the sheriffs with bullets, but had instead set them on fire until they shot themselves – and he had just stood by, whiskey in his hand, as if watching a show.

Billy heard the stories himself when he stopped into a shack to buy tobacco and ammunition. Two cowboys at the bar were whispering, not even realizing that the man they were talking about was standing right behind them. "Three sheriffs," one whispered. "He told them to pull the trigger, and then he took them all out at once. Zap, zap, zap. Nobody stood a chance." The other nodded nervously. "The kid's faster than God. No sheriff on earth can catch him."

Billy grinned, coughed, and spat a dark lump into the dust on the ground. "Faster than God?" he muttered, loud enough to make them jump in alarm. "I'm just faster than you."

The cowboys froze, pale as corpses, the innkeeper pretended to be deaf. Billy paid, took the cartridges, pocketed the tobacco, and went back out.

Outside, he grinned crookedly and spoke to the wind. "Three sheriffs, three bullets, and they're already saying I stole from heaven. Shitty fairy tales. But fairy tales are harder to kill than men."

He coughed, rode on, and the dust swallowed him. Behind him, the stories continued to grow, bigger, louder, like weeds in any saloon.

The dust trailed behind him like a shadow, but the stories were faster. At the next campfire, he heard them again, from cattlemen who didn't know him but swore they knew the truth. Everyone had a different version. One said Billy had disarmed the sheriffs, shot their Colts out of their hands, before laughing and leaving them lying in the dust. Another swore he'd only used one bullet—one damned bullet for three men.

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat into the fire. "If that were true," he muttered, "I'd be God long ago, not just a boy with dust in his throat."

But he knew how it went: The bigger the stories got, the more men wanted to disprove them. Bounty hunters who wanted to prove that legends die like everyone else. Sheriffs who wanted to clear their names by shedding his blood. And kids with Colts who thought they could be fast enough to burn their names next to his on the saloons.

"One sheriff too many," Billy said quietly as he twirled the Colt, "and soon I'll have a dozen too many, all with their stars and their greed."

The nights became lonelier. Even those who would once have sat beside him by the fire now kept their distance. Those who rode beside the Kid didn't live long—whether from bullets, fear, or the weight of his name.

Billy laughed hoarsely, but there was no humor in it. "Legends," he muttered, "are like leeches. They suck you dry until nothing but dust remains."

He pulled his hat down, feeling the cold in his chest, the cough, the burning in his throat. But his hand remained steady on the Colt. "Let them come," he said. "Sheriffs, hunters, angels, or devils. One too many is one to fall."

The wind took the words and carried them on. And somewhere in the darkness, men swore that Billy the Kid wouldn't ride much longer.

But he still rode.

Bullets make no difference

It was a goddamn dump, no bigger than a dozen shacks and a saloon that had more dirt than whiskey in its glass. Billy rode in, coughed, spat dust, and knew immediately: There was going to be a blast. Not because he wanted it to—but because bullets always found their way.

Inside the saloon, it stank of sweat, stale tobacco, and cheap liquor. Cowboys played cards, a few whores forced a laugh, the piano player tinkled as if he wanted to blend in. Billy sat down, ordered a bottle, and placed the Colt next to the glass. Everyone saw, no one said anything.

Tension hung in the air like gunpowder. Two men at the card table were arguing, their voices getting louder, their hands moving faster. Billy grinned, drank, and coughed. He knew: Two more sentences and it would all come crashing down.

And there was a crash. A Colt flashed, a scream, and the first man flew across the table. The others followed suit, bullets knocked over chairs, wood splintered, the whores screamed. Billy remained seated, his dead stare cold, the Colt steady in his hand.

He didn't shoot immediately. He waited. Bullets flew through the room, blind, panicked, and untargeted. One hit the piano player, right in the chest. The man fell onto the keys, the piano screeching like a dying animal. Billy grinned crookedly. "Bullets don't discriminate," he muttered. "They don't recognize angels, or sinners. Only flesh."

A woman was hit, right next to the door. She was just trying to get out. A shot tore open her shoulder, she stumbled, fell into the dust, and screamed. No one helped her, no one had time. Bullets didn't ask if you wanted to fight.

Billy drew now. Two shots, two men down. The rest fell silent for a breath, long enough for the dust to settle. Then they stared at him—the boy, the devil, the one who had survived the rain.

"More?" Billy asked, his voice rough. "Or is that enough?"

No one answered. No one moved. Only the piano continued to tinkle, mutilated and bloody.

Billy drank, coughed, and spat. "Bullets don't discriminate," he repeated. "But I do."

The saloon stank of gunpowder and blood. The piano player still slumped over the keys, and every time one of the men moved the floor, the piano wailed a final, pitiful song. The woman by the door moaned softly, her shoulder bloody, but no one dared touch her as long as Billy was still there.

He took the bottle, drank deeply, coughed, spat into the glass, and put it down again. Then he stood up, his Colt loosely in his hand, and walked out into the street.

Outside, people had gathered, staring at the saloon as if it were a burning pyre. Children clung to the women's skirts, men nervously chewed tobacco, spat in

the dust, unaware that they were all hitting the same spot—as if the dust itself were a target.

Billy stepped out and looked at them all. His deadpan gaze wandered over faces that immediately fell, as if he had already marked them. He grinned crookedly. "You're staring at me as if I guided the bullets myself."

An old man muttered, "Bullets don't ask... they hit whoever they want." Billy laughed hoarsely. "Finally, someone who gets it. Bullets don't discriminate. Only humans think they have a choice."

He walked down the street, slowly, his boots heavy, his Colt visible. Eyes stood at every door, cautious, fearful, like dogs who had learned that every blow could be fatal. The city wasn't a place full of guilty or innocent people—it was just flesh waiting for a bullet to find it.

Billy coughed and spat in the dust. "You fear me," he said loudly, "but you should fear the bullets. They're worse. At least I decide where to aim. They don't."

No one answered. No one dared. They lowered their gazes, and Billy continued walking as if the street belonged to him alone.

The next morning, the city smelled of cold ash and damp dust. The night's rain had turned the pools of blood in the saloon into brown streaks, and the flies buzzed in choruses louder than any prayer.

Billy sat at the side of the road, his legs stretched out, his hat pulled low over his face, the bottle beside him. He coughed, spat dark red into the dust, and watched as they carried the dead out. Two men in dirty shirts who had been sitting at the card table, and the piano player, whose hands remained stiff over the keys. They wrapped him in a sheet as if to protect him from the sun, but death needed no shade.

The woman with the bloody shoulder also lay on a stretcher. She was still alive, but barely. Her face was gray, her eyes half-open, as if she were already in the other world. Children stared, men looked away, women wept, quietly, controlled, like people who knew that crying loudly only invites trouble.

The priest muttered words that the wind immediately swallowed. Billy grinned crookedly, drank, and shook his head. "Words don't stop bullets, Padre."

A boy, no older than fifteen, stared at him, his fists clenched, tears in his eyes. Billy saw it and grinned wider. "So, what's up, kid? Want to raise your Colt? I'll give you five seconds before you run away crying."

The boy didn't run. But he lowered his gaze, his anger buried in the dust.

Billy stood up and walked slowly past the people. They stepped back, making room, but their eyes burned. Hatred, pure, silent, dangerous. Not because they were attacking him—they didn't dare. But because they were cursing him alive.

He stopped, looked at the crowd, coughed, and spat. "You hate me because I survived," he said quietly. "But I wasn't the one who directed the bullets. Bullets don't discriminate. Your friends are dead because they stood in the way. It's that simple."

Silence. Only the clatter of the coffins as they were carried toward the cemetery.

Billy lowered his hat and grinned crookedly. "If you want someone to blame, look in the dust. That's where all the bullets are."

And he walked on, while the bell of the little chapel rang, hoarse, tinny, like a last, futile protest against what the world really was.

The town didn't really sleep that night. Too many candles flickered in too many windows, too many prayers murmured in the shanties, as if words could stop the dust. Billy sat outside the saloon, bottle in hand, Colt on his knee, coughing, spitting, grinning crookedly. He knew someone would come. Someone always came.

And he came. A man, tall, sinewy, his face hardened by dust and sun. He had carried the dead woman, the woman with his shoulder. Maybe it was his wife, maybe his sister, maybe just someone he wanted to fuck. Who cares. He had blood in his eyes and a Colt on his belt.

"Kid," he said, his voice shaky. "The bullets took my wife." Billy drank, put the bottle down, and looked at him with that deadpan stare. "The bullets took her, yeah. Not me. Bullets don't ask about rings, about beds, about children. They go where they go."

The man shook his head and slowly drew his Colt. "Someone has to pay. And that's you."

The street fell silent. Men crept out of the shadows, women peeped from behind doors. Everyone wanted to see if the legend would be buried this time.

Billy stood up, kicked the dust, coughed, and spat. "Someone has to pay? Then carry your coin. But don't forget – bullets don't discriminate. They eat widowers, too."

The man didn't tremble. He wasn't a boy. He was someone who had lost too much to still know fear. He pulled.

The thunder crashed not from the sky, but from two Colts. Dust flew, children screamed, women prayed. When the fog cleared, Billy was still standing. The man lay in the dust, his chest riddled with holes, his eyes open, the coin of his revenge worthless.

Billy coughed, grinned crookedly, and looked at the crowd. "See? Bullets don't discriminate. They take whoever they find. Today it was him. Tomorrow it'll be you. Maybe me, too."

Silence. No one moved. The wind blew the dust over the dead man, as if it wanted to immediately forget him.

Billy put away the Colt and raised the bottle to his lips again. "Revenge," he muttered, "is just another word for dust."

And he drank while the city was silent.

The next morning, the city was no longer a place, but a grave. No one spoke to Billy, no one looked him directly in the face. The children, who usually ran barefoot through the dust, stayed behind doors. The women carried water in buckets, but they gave him a wide berth, as if he were a contagious plague. The men—the few who were brave enough to still stand outside—silently chewed tobacco and held their Colts visible, not to shoot him, but to show him they knew he was there.

Billy coughed, spat, and grinned crookedly. "Screw your looks," he muttered. "They kill slower than bullets."

He went into the store. The dealer was already standing behind the counter, sweat on his brow, his hands empty. Without a word, he put down ammunition and a bottle of whiskey, as if he had guessed what Billy wanted. Billy put a few coins on the counter, not because he had to, but because he could. The dealer nodded, but didn't speak.

Outside, the crowd had gathered, silent, motionless. Billy stepped out, bottle under his arm, cartridges in his belt. He looked at them all, one after the other, at the dead stares of dozens of eyes. Hate, fear, silence—all the same.

"You avoid me like I'm the rain itself," he said harshly, his voice a cough. "But bullets don't discriminate. They'll hit you even if you're cowering behind the stove."

An old man spat in the dust, muttering something about "the devil." Billy laughed hoarsely and spat back. "If the devil were as fast as I am, there would be no more priests."

He swung himself onto his horse. The crowd retreated, the dust settled before him like a carpet. No one attacked, no one spoke. They just wanted him gone.

And he disappeared. He rode out of the street, his bottle already open, his Colt loose at his belt. Behind him remained a city that hadn't just been killed—it had lost its soul.

The women whispered by the well, the men by the fire. And the whispers became a new story: Billy the Kid, the boy who didn't just kill people—he made entire towns hold their breath.

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat into the wind. "Shitty cities. In the end, bullets will eat them all. I just go faster."

The city lay behind him like a grave in the dust, and before him nothing but endless expanse. No tree, no shade, just sun and a road that disappeared like a damned rope into nothingness. Billy rode slowly, coughing, spitting reddish-brown into the wind, and thinking about the only thing that still kept him alive: bullets.

He had seen too many fly, too many holes torn into too many bodies, to still believe in justice. Every bullet was blind. She didn't know whether it hit a bandit, a sheriff, a whore, or a child. She knew only flesh, only blood, only the sound of bones breaking.

"Bullets don't discriminate," he muttered, as the horse snorted beneath him. "Only we pretend."

Sheriffs talked about justice, bounty hunters about order, preachers about sin. All bullshit. In the end, the only thing that mattered was who pulled the trigger

faster. Not who was right, not who had prayed. Only who lifted their finger first.

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and put his hand on his Colt. "My advantage," he said quietly, "is that I'm faster than most. Not better. Not fairer. Just faster."

He remembered the widower who had fallen. His bullet had been just as fatal as his own—only a second too late. A damned heartbeat difference, and one lay in the dust, the other rode on.

"That's all," he muttered. "No hero, no devil. Just a boy who finds the trigger first."

The wind blew dust into his face, making him cough. He spat, laughing hoarsely. "And in return they make up stories, write songs, pretend I'm bigger than bullets. But I'm nothing without them. Just flesh that hasn't been hit yet."

He pulled his hat down over his face and rode on, the sun burning, the dust tasting bitter. The vastness absorbed him, and he knew: sooner or later, a bullet would get him too.

But until then he would stay faster.

The sun was already low in the sky when Billy came across a few wagon remains in the dust. Burnt wood, shot-out barrels, blood in the sand, already dark brown from the day. Flies buzzed like a damned choir, and the wind blew over the stench of death.

Billy dismounted, coughed, spat, looked around. It hadn't been an amateur raid—too clean, too fast. The bodies lay there, men, women, even a boy barely older than twelve. All the same story: bullets, right in the chest, right in the face. Bullets that didn't ask if they deserved it.

He walked between them, the horse snorting restlessly. Billy bent down, picked up an empty cartridge case, and turned it between his fingers. "Blind," he muttered. "Fucking blind."

The truck doors were ripped open, the cargo stolen, but death remained. Billy looked at the boy, his eyes wide open, as if still asking why he was lying in the dirt. Billy spat next to him, grinning crookedly, bitterly. "Because bullets don't discriminate, kid. You were just standing wrong."

Two of the attackers also lay in the dust. Their faces torn, their hands still on their Colts. Billy stepped closer, saw the look in their dead eyes. Surprise. Damn it, even those who killed always forgot that bullets eat them too.

He laughed hoarsely, a sickly cough that brought more blood than humor. "All the same. All dust."

The horse neighed, wanting to move on, to get away from the stench. Billy nodded and mounted again. He looked back once more: wagons, blood, dead bodies, whether innocent or guilty. All just like that in the dust.

"Legends lie," he murmured, "but bullets don't. They know no heroes, no children, no angels. Only flesh."

Then he rode on, a shadow in the setting sun, knowing that he himself was just a piece of meat—one that hadn't yet been struck by lead.

The wind knows my name

There are things that travel faster than horses, faster than bullets, faster than death itself. Stories. Curses. Names. And Billy knew that his name had long been blowing ahead of him, carried by the wind like dust that no one wanted to see, but everyone could taste in their throats.

He rode across a barren plain, the sun burning, the dust clinging to his skin. The wind blew sharply, whipping his face, and with every stroke he heard a whisper: *Kid...Kid...Billy the Kid.*

He laughed hoarsely, coughed, and spat in the dust. "Fucking wind," he muttered. "You know my name better than my mother."

By the time he arrived in a small town, everyone already knew what he'd done. Some said he'd killed three sheriffs with one shot. Others swore he'd walked through fire without burning. Still others said he'd caught bullets with his bare hands and sent them back. All lies, but lies that outweighed any truth.

The children whispered when they saw him. The women pulled their skirts tighter, the men placed their hands on their Colts, even though they knew they had no chance. The wind brought the name, and the name brought fear.

Billy grinned crookedly and coughed again. "The wind knows my name," he said quietly. "But it also knows my cough. And that sounds more like death than legend."

He thought about how many people had already come for him. Sheriffs, bounty hunters, teenage boys who thought fame was in the trigger. They'd all made the same mistake: They believed the name was more important than the bullet. But the bullet didn't care about names.

The wind picked up, howling across the plain, carrying dust with it. Billy lowered his hat and rode on. Behind him lay the stories, ahead of him the next town, where his name had long since arrived.

And he knew: no matter where he went, the wind would always have announced his arrival – like a damned trumpet blowing death.

The town appeared like a bad joke in the desert—three shacks, a saloon, a store, a chapel so crooked it would put even God to shame. Billy rode in, coughing, spitting, and feeling the stares before he even reached the first shadow.

People knew him. Not his face, not his voice, but only his name. The wind had brought him, with stories thicker than dust. Some stared, others immediately lowered their heads, as if eye contact could cost a bullet.

Billy tied up his horse and entered the saloon. Silence. Only the squeaking of the swinging doors, then the nervous tinkling of the keys, which immediately fell silent, as if the strings themselves were frightened. He walked to the bar, the bartender already drenched in sweat, his hands shaking.

"Whiskey," Billy said harshly, his voice a cough. The barman immediately put down a bottle, no questions, not a word.

Two cowboys whispered at the table. "That's him... the kid. The one who beat the rain. The one who shot the sheriffs." "I heard he shot a man's bullets out of the air."

Billy grinned crookedly and drank directly from the bottle. "You're talking bullshit," he said loudly without turning around. "But keep talking. The wind will carry it anyway."

The cowboys froze, one almost choked on his own tobacco.

A whore approached, her dress torn, her eyes tired. "Mister Kid," she breathed, "they say you... you're faster than God." Billy coughed, spat on the ground, and laughed hoarsely. "God doesn't pull a Colt. And if he does, I'll pull faster."

The laughter that then went through the room was not one of joy – it was a nervous, brittle laugh that was only meant to show that they understood who made the rules in the room.

Billy drank, twirling the bottle in his hand, seeing the reflection of his dead gaze in the glass. "The wind knows my name," he murmured, "and it tells more lies than all of you combined."

And no one objected.

It hung in the air like cheap whiskey: Someone would try. Always. The wind not only brought the name, it also brought idiots who thought they could make history by cutting it down.

Billy sat at the bar, drinking, coughing, spitting, grinning crookedly. And there he came: a young bastard, barely a beard on his face, his eyes wide with false courage. He stepped into the middle of the saloon, his hands on his hips, his voice louder than his heartbeat.

"Billy the Kid!" he shouted, and the whole bar held its breath. "They say you're faster than God. But I want to see it."

Billy turned slowly, looking at him with that dead look. Not a twitch, not a tremble. Just dust in his eyes. He grinned, coughed, spat. "And who the hell are you?"

The boy puffed out his chest, his pride high. "Tommy McGraw. My father was sheriff." Billy laughed hoarsely, the laugh more coughing than humor. "Your father was dust. And you're right behind him."

The silence in the room was sharp as a knife. The whore gasped, the barman instinctively reached for a bottle, as if glass could protect him. The boy placed his hand on the butt of his Colt.

Billy saw it, felt it, knew: This wasn't a man, this was a boy fooled by the wind. He believed in stories, not bullets.

"Pull," Billy murmured, "but pull fast. The wind knows my name—and soon yours too."

The boy hesitated. One heartbeat. Two. Then, the leather squeaking, he pulled the gun halfway out of the holster.

Billy was faster. Always. The shot echoed through the room, shattering the silence, pulling the boy back, his face pale, his chest red. He fell into the dust of the saloon, his eyes wide, surprised that the legend wasn't on his side.

Billy put away his Colt, coughed, and grinned crookedly. "The wind doesn't know your name, Tommy. And now it never will."

Silence returned. No one moved, no one spoke. Only the wind howled through the alleys outside, and Billy knew he would forget the boy before the body was cold.

The next morning, the boy was already forgotten, at least by Billy. People in the saloon were still talking, whispering, swearing that Tommy McGraw had drawn faster than any man before him—except Billy. Some said Billy hadn't even shot him fair game, but had laughed and fired before Tommy even touched the handle. Shitty lies. But that's exactly what the wind greedily devoured, carried it on, blew it into every ear too cowardly to look.

Billy stepped out into the sun, his hat pulled low over his face, a bottle under his arm, a Colt loosely at his belt. No one dared to speak to him. Women pulled their children inside, men nodded silently, as if to say: *We didn't see anything.*

The boy was carried out in a wooden box, the nails hastily hammered in, as if they were in a hurry to bury him. No song, no prayer, just dust. Billy looked briefly, coughed, and spat into the dirt. "The wind no longer knows his name," he muttered. "Soon even his grave won't know who's inside."

He swung himself onto the horse. The saddle squeaked, the animal snorted, nervous as ever when the air smelled of lead. Billy grinned crookedly and took a sip. "Fucking wind," he said. "You've been called anything, but you've never kept any."

The road was empty as he rode out. Only the creaking of the houses, the rattling of a window in the wind. But he knew: before he reached the next level, they would be talking about Tommy—not how he had fallen, but how he had tried to overthrow the legend.

And they would mix his own name with the dust in the air again, thicker, heavier, more toxic than before. Billy coughed, spat, grinned. "The wind knows my name," he said quietly. "But it's making more noise than it's worth."

He rode on, alone, the wind howling behind him like a damned dog.

For two days, Billy rode through dust and heat, seeing nothing but thorn bushes and withered grass. The wind was his only companion, and it whispered incessantly, sometimes like a child, sometimes like an old bastard, but always with the same refrain: *Kid... Billy the Kid*.

On the third day, he encountered a group of cattlemen. Three men, ragged, sunburned, rifles slung over their shoulders, dust deep in their faces. They stopped when they recognized him, or rather, when they recognized his name.

"Are you... are you the Kid?" asked the first, his voice a whisper, as if the name itself could burn him. Billy coughed, spat in the sand, and grinned crookedly. "Depends. Who's asking?"

The second stepped forward, his eyes shining like a child's before their first whiskey. "We heard you killed three sheriffs in one minute. Some say you ordered the rain to fire bullets. Others swear you're faster than lightning."

Billy laughed hoarsely, a rough, sick laugh that sounded more like blood than joy. "Fucking wind," he muttered. "It turns every fart into thunder."

The men looked at each other, nervous, half-awed, half-feared. One carefully tipped his hat, as if paying respects to a saint. "Whether it's true or not... you're the Kid. That's enough."

Billy's gaze turned cold, dead. "No," he said quietly. "That's not enough. You only know the name. Not the cough, not the hunger, not the blood. The wind knows my name, but it doesn't know me."

The men fell silent, stepped back, and Billy rode past them. He coughed, spat, drank from the bottle, and grinned crookedly. "Legends are easier to bear than dust," he muttered. "But in the end, both will wear you down."

The wind picked up the words, mixed them with dust, and somewhere far ahead, someone would craft a new story out of them.

The nearest town lay like a damned nest of planks in the dust, bigger than the usual holes, with two saloons, a blacksmith shop, and even a hotel that, even from a distance, looked like it would sell every guest to the bedbugs. Billy rode slowly in, coughing, spitting, the horse snorting. Even before he set foot in the saloon, he knew: They knew him.

Not because they looked at him – but because they sang songs.

A boy stood by the well with an out-of-tune guitar, singing in a hoarse voice about "Billy the Kid, faster than lightning, stronger than the storm, colder than death." Children clapped, women giggled, men nodded as if it were gospel.

Billy stopped, listened, coughed, and laughed hoarsely. "Damn wind," he muttered, "now it's even making music out of me."

The same scene unfolded in the saloon: One drunk was belting out a verse claiming Billy had strangled a sheriff with his bare hands. Another swore the Kid had wiped out an entire gang in one night without even a scratch himself.

Billy sat down, put the Colt on the table, and ordered whiskey. Everyone saw him, everyone knew who he was—and yet they stared, as if checking to see if the legend had any teeth.

He grinned crookedly, drank straight from the bottle, and spat in the dust. "They sing of a man I don't know," he murmured. "The wind knows my name, but it doesn't know my truth."

An old man dared to approach, his hands shaking. "Kid," he said reverently, "is it true you catch bullets?" Billy laughed, coughed, and almost spat at the old man's feet. "Yes. One after the other, right in the chest. Ask the ones who've tried it."

The old man stepped back, and the entire saloon fell silent. Billy continued drinking, grinning crookedly, his eyes dead.

The songs outside continued, louder, more colorful. And Billy knew: the more they sang, the less he would recognize himself.

The hotel room was little more than four walls and a bed that smelled of sweat and old semen. Billy sat on the edge, bottle in hand, Colt beside him. The noise from outside filtered in through the open window: laughter, clapping, the off-key strumming of the guitar.

They were still singing. They sang of a Billy who could catch bullets, who spoke with lightning, who rode faster than the wind. A Billy who never coughed, never spat, was never alone. A Billy who was more myth than flesh.

Billy coughed, spat into the dust blowing through the window, and laughed hoarsely. "They're singing about another bastard," he muttered. "Not me."

He took a deep drag from the bottle, felt the burn in his throat, the scratchiness in his chest. Outside, someone shouted, "Billy the Kid! The wind knows his name!" The crowd roared as if they'd invited the devil himself.

Billy's gaze went blank. He looked at the Colt beside him, saw the cartridges gleaming, saw his own reflection in the metal—a face, young, beardless, but tired, sick, scarred. He grinned crookedly, bitterly. "The wind knows my name, but it doesn't know my face. Maybe that's for the best."

He stood up, went to the window, and looked out. Down below, they continued singing, swinging bottles, laughing as if it were a damned ballad, a drinking song. No one saw the man in the shadows, only the ghost in the story.

Billy spat down, the red in his saliva glistening in the moonlight. No one noticed. No one wanted to see it. They only wanted the name, not the blood behind it.

"Perhaps," he murmured, "I'm already dead. Perhaps all that rides is just the wind with my name in its mouth."

He closed the window and sat back down on the edge of the bed, the Colt beside him, the bottle in his hand. Outside, they continued singing, louder, more out of tune, and Billy drank until the singing sounded like a distant howl.

And so the day ended: outside a legend, inside just a boy with dust in his throat.

Spit, sweat, saloon

It smelled of everything bad: sour whiskey, cold sweat, blood that hadn't been wiped away, and spit that made the floor glisten. The saloon was no place for songs, no place for legends—the only thing that mattered was who stayed standing when fists flew and chairs broke.

Billy entered, coughed, and spat into the dust mingled with the dirt from his boots right at the entrance. All eyes turned to him briefly, then immediately away again. This wasn't a town that lived off the wind—here, they lived off the dirt. And legends smelled no better than shit.

Men stood at the bar, tall and broad, sweat running down their shirts, their hands sweating on the glass. A few whores were crouching on the players' knees, but they weren't laughing—they were just chewing nervously, as if they'd long since realized that someone would bleed today.

Billy ordered whiskey. The barman put the bottle down, not a word, not a question. The floor beneath his boots was sticky with dirt, and somewhere in the corner, someone was vomiting into a bowl, as if it were part of the music.

"That's him," one muttered, not quietly enough. "The Kid." "Screw him," another growled. "The only thing that matters here is who has the hardest hit."

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and drank straight from the bottle. "Then drink faster, boys," he said roughly, "because punches hurt less when you're drunk."

Laughter, rough, hoarse, no humor, just aggression. A chair crashed, one flew across the table, a fight broke out like a fire in hay. Fists, teeth, blood. Billy stayed at the bar, drank, watched as men tore each other apart, while the piano player continued to play as if his life depended on it.

"Spit, sweat, saloon," Billy muttered, "you get beaten more honestly here than shot outside."

And he grinned as the chaos raged.

The fight grew like a damn storm. First a chair, then a table, then bottles, fists, and knives flew. The floor was soon a sea of spit, blood, and spilled whiskey. Men yelled, women shrieked, the piano player continued to hammer, as if trying to drown out the chaos with his music.

Billy stayed at the bar, drinking, grinning crookedly. He knew how it went: first laugh, then scream, then die. Fists were honest, yes – but they had a habit of pulling out Colts at some point. And that was the moment everything tipped over.

A giant with hands like shovels stumbled against him, sweating, stinking, his shirt ripped open. "You're the Kid, aren't you?" he roared. Billy coughed and spat in his face. "And you stink worse than your mouth."

The fist came like a sledgehammer, Billy narrowly dodged, and the glass behind him shattered. He laughed hoarsely, hit back, and hit the bastard right in the

ear. The giant staggered, fell over two others, and suddenly everyone had their hands on Colts.

"Finally," Billy muttered, reaching for his revolver.

The first shot rang out, a man fell, blood spurted across the table. The second shot knocked the lamp from the ceiling, and the room filled with smoke and screams. It was no longer a boxing match, now it was war.

Billy moved slowly, cold, deadpan. Every bullet he fired found a face. He laughed between fits of coughing, spitting blood and whiskey, while men shrieked, fell, and screamed.

"You wanted sweat and spit," he shouted harshly. "Now you have lead!"

The fight collapsed faster than it had begun. Men lay groaning on the ground, others dead, the rest cowered, too cowardly to continue.

Billy put the Colt back in his pocket, drank the last swig from the bottle, and spat into the dirt. "Fists are more honest," he said, "but lead has the last word."

And no one objected.

The saloon was a battlefield. Blood, shrapnel, overturned tables everywhere. The air stank of gunpowder, whiskey, and fear. Men whimpered, clutching their wounds; others lay still, their eyes open, as if they'd never looked at the ceiling so closely before.

Billy stood in the middle, his Colt still warm, his bottle empty. He coughed, spat red into the dust, and grinned crookedly. No one came closer. No one wanted to be next.

Then the women. The whores crawled out of the shadows, skirts torn, faces pale. One, her hair matted, placed a glass of water before him, her hands shaking. Billy grinned and poured it onto the ground. "I don't drink anything that doesn't burn."

Another dared to pat him on the shoulder as if he were a damned hero. "You saved us," she breathed, "they could have saved us all..." Billy coughed, laughed hoarsely. "Saved us? I just shot faster than them. There was no saving us involved."

The bartender stood behind the bar, his eyes wide, the rag in his hand useless. He saw the saloon, saw the dead, saw Billy, and his face was a mixture of gratitude and pure hatred. "You're nothing but trouble, Kid," he said quietly. Billy nodded and grinned. "True. But without me, you'd be dead by now, and your bar would have burned."

No one objected. No one dared.

The piano player finally lifted his hands from the keys, sweat glistening on his forehead. "Should I play?" he asked in a shaky voice. Billy coughed, spat, and grinned. "Play something sad. Something that sounds like blood."

And the man played, while Billy sat back down, pressing the bottle to his mouth as if nothing had happened. Outside, the wind raged, inside, silence raged.

"Spit, sweat, saloon," Billy muttered. "All the same filth."

The piano player tinkled, the notes scratching like rusty nails on the wall. Billy sat at the bar again, bottle in hand, Colt loosely on his knees. The saloon was silent except for the groans of the wounded and the nervous gulping of the whores.

But dust doesn't eat away pride. One of the men, lying on the ground, his side bloody, slowly drew his hand toward his gun. A bastard with more hatred than blood in his body. His eyes burned, his breath labored, but he drew nonetheless.

Billy saw it in the mirror behind the counter. That little twitch, the clang of metal. He coughed, grinned crookedly, didn't even raise his head. "One of you can never let go," he muttered.

The man wheezed, pulled the trigger, and aimed askew, blood dripping from his hand. A shot rang out, smashing into the counter and tearing out splinters of wood. The women screamed, the piano player jumped back, and the music fell silent.

Billy slowly turned around, coughed, spat, and grinned. "Missed aim, friend." His Colt spoke once. Briefly. Clearly. The man lay still, the revolver slipping from his hand.

Silence. Again. Even heavier, even thicker. The innkeeper stared at him, his lips pale. "You're... you're the devil." Billy laughed hoarsely, a laugh full of coughs. "The devil is slower."

He put away his Colt, took a deep drink, and spat into the blood running across the floorboards. "Remember this," he said harshly, "even in the dust, even in the dirt—someone always tries. And they always die."

The piano player began playing again, more quietly, more shakily. No one spoke anymore. Only Billy's heavy, panting breath filled the room.

"Spit, sweat, saloon," he muttered. "And always a bullet at the end."

Night hung heavy over the town. The saloon was empty except for the corpses and the stench of gunpowder. The whores had hidden, the piano player had left, even the landlord had cast only one last, hateful glance and locked the door behind him. Billy sat alone, coughing, spitting, drinking.

Then he heard it: slow footsteps, heavy, steady. Not the staggering stagger of a drunk, not the nervous shuffling of a coward. Those were boots accustomed to walking on dust and blood. The door creaked, and there he stood—the sheriff.

A tall man, his shirt clean, his star shining, his eyes alert. Not young, not old, just someone who knew he alone had to represent order in a city that had none.

"Kid," he said calmly, "you've given me work. Too much work." Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat next to the chair. "If you're looking for work, Sheriff, get a job as a bartender. At least someone's staying put."

The sheriff stepped closer, his hand on his gun, but not drawing. "I could get you now. People would celebrate. Three men dead, half the saloon shot to pieces. No one would question whether it was legal."

Billy drank, staring at him deadpan. "But you won't." "No," said the sheriff. "Not yet. But every shot you fire brings a new star down your throat. And eventually, someone will come along who's faster than you."

Billy laughed hoarsely, his laughter a cough, his blood tasting of iron. "Maybe. But not today. Today you sit here and talk. And I drink."

The sheriff nodded, studied him for a moment, then turned around. "Go, kid. Get out of town. Before I change my mind."

Billy raised the bottle and grinned. "Spit, sweat, saloon—and a sheriff who knows when he's seen too much."

The sheriff left. The door creaked. Billy coughed, spat into the blood on the floor, and continued drinking as if nothing had happened.

In the morning, the dust was heavy, the sky gloomy, as if the city itself had a hangover. Billy saddled his horse slowly, coughing, spitting redly into the dirt. The saloon behind him was locked, its windows shattered, a grave of wood and silence.

People stood at the side of the road: men with tired faces, women with downcast eyes, children peeking out from behind skirts. No one spoke to him, no one called out. They just stood there, as if they wanted to be sure he was really leaving.

Billy swung himself into the saddle, his Colt loosely at his belt, his bottle hanging from the saddle pommel. He looked at them, one by one, with that deadpan stare that said more than any bullet. "You look like you've seen the devil," he muttered harshly. "But the devil doesn't drink as cheaply as I do."

A few men stepped back, a woman crossed herself, a boy clenched his fists. Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat again. "Spit, sweat, saloon—that was all. No miracle, no hero. Just dust and blood."

Then the sheriff stepped out of the shadows. Not hastily, not threateningly. Calmly. The star on his chest glittered faintly in the morning light. He stood beside the crowd, his hands visible, his voice calm but heavy. "Go on, Kid. But remember one thing: Legends ride, yes. But not forever."

Billy laughed hoarsely, a cough that made his blood taste like iron. "Maybe, Sheriff. But by then, they'll be riding faster than you can run."

He urged his horse on. Dust swirled, obscuring the gaze of those who followed him. The city remained silent, only the wind picked up his name again, whispering it on, carrying him into the next hell.

Billy rode out, and behind him remained only silence, suspicion – and a sheriff who knew that every legend falls at some point.

The city disappeared behind him like a damned speck in the dust. Before him, only expanse, nothing but sky, sand, and wind. Billy rode slowly, coughing, spitting reddish-brown dirt, listening to the howl of the wind, which spoke louder than any human words.

Spit, sweat, the saloon—all that remained. Men shouting, women screaming, a sheriff issuing warnings. All dust. All episodes. In the end, all that remained were the sounds in his throat, the burning in his chest, and the wind that bore his name.

He drank, the bottle clinking against the saddlebag. The horse snorted, the saddle squeaked. Every step was a new cough, every breath a new proof that he was still there. But for what? For songs, for rumors, for spit on dirty floors?

“Fucking legends,” Billy muttered, “they won’t keep you warm at night.”

The wind blew dust into his face, biting, like a fist of sand. He laughed hoarsely, tasted blood, and spat. “You’re the only one left, Wind. All the other saloons are falling apart, all the women are disappearing, all the sheriffs are rotting away. But you... you know my name.”

He thought about the last few days: the sweat, the fights, the blood running across the floor like spilled whiskey. It was all the same, no matter what town. The names of the dead faded, but his remained. Not because he was worth more—but because the wind carried him on.

Billy pulled his hat down over his face, grinning crookedly, a deadpan expression. “Spit, sweat, saloon,” he said harshly. “All dust. Only the wind remains. And the wind whispers my name, whether I want it or not.”

He rode on, alone, the horizon shimmering, the sun burning, and the only thing that kept him company was the hoarse howl of the wind.

Everyone owes everyone something

The next town didn't smell of blood, but of debt. You could smell it in the streets, between the houses, in people's faces. Everyone looked at each other as if they were calculating who they owed something to—money, whiskey, a horse, a woman, or simply a broken promise. No man was free here; everyone was tied to some rope.

Billy rode in, coughing, spitting in the dust that tasted more of coins than dirt. He tied the horse to the post, and even before he saw the saloon, he knew: more words are used here than Colts. But words are just air, and air doesn't keep anyone alive.

The first man he met was a scoundrel with a crooked nose who eyed him like a piece of cattle. "Kid," he said harshly, "if you want a drink here, you pay double. Half owes the bartender, the other half owes me." Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat in front of the bastard's boots. "I won't pay you anything. And if you try to collect, you'll owe your God a confession."

The man didn't pull. He just grinned, toothlessly, and nodded. "Then you'll just pay later. Everyone owes everyone something here. Sooner or later, it'll get you."

It was the same in the saloon. Men didn't drink out of thirst, but because they were stalling the bill. Women lay in strangers' arms because they had something to make up for somewhere else. Even the cards on the table were nothing but debts, every trick a loan, every lost round a knot around the neck.

Billy ordered whiskey, drank straight from the bottle, coughed, and grinned crookedly. "You live off debt," he said harshly, "but I only pay in lead. And none of you count that."

Silence. The gamblers looked at him, the whores were silent, the bartender nervously cleaned his glass. They knew it wasn't a joke. They knew Billy didn't get into debt. He just took.

And the wind outside howled as if it wanted to carry the words further.

The cards slapped against the table like blows. Men smoked, drank, and tossed coins as if they had them. But Billy saw immediately: This wasn't a game about money. This was a game about debt. Everyone here was deeper in it than they let on. And debt ate men faster than bullets.

One of them, a guy with greasy hair and eyes as sharp as rat teeth, looked at Billy. "Kid," he said, "you sit here, drink my whiskey, breathe my air—so you owe me."

The entire saloon fell silent. So no one spoke to Billy. But that bastard was already half dead, he just didn't know it yet.

Billy coughed, spat on the ground, and grinned crookedly. "The most I owe you is a bullet, buddy. And I'll pay you cash."

Laughter, nervous, brittle. The man grinned back, but his hand trembled as he reached for the cards. "Everyone owes everyone something," he repeated. "You too, kid. You too."

Billy drank from the bottle and placed it down hard on the table, which vibrated dully. "I don't owe anyone anything," he said quietly, his gaze dead, cold as dust. "Everything I take, I pay back immediately—with lead. And no one will forget that."

The man wanted to say something else, but Billy was faster. Not a word, not a twitch. The Colt flashed, the shot rang out. The bastard flew from his chair, blood on his cards, the coins clinking as if they understood that their debt had been paid.

The saloon froze. No one moved, no one breathed loudly.

Billy coughed, spat next to the corpse, and grinned crookedly. "See? I don't owe anyone anything. Not yesterday, not today, not tomorrow."

He put the Colt back, reached for the bottle, and drank. "Debt is for men who want to live. I count in dust."

And again, the only one who answered was the wind outside, which carried away the crackle of the shot like a bill with no creditors.

After the shot, the saloon was dead silent. Smoke hung heavy between the rafters, the smell of gunpowder mingled with the blood on the cards. The men weren't looking at the corpse—they were looking at each other. Suddenly, every glance seemed to be asking: *What do I owe you? What do you owe me? And who pays first?*

Billy drank, coughed, and spat reddish-brown into the dust. "You look at each other," he muttered, "as if you all just realized that guilt is just another word for fear."

One of the players pulled the coins toward him, trembling, his eyes fixed on Billy. Another stood up, pushing his chair away as if he had just settled an invisible score. The women huddled closer together, their faces hard and tired. They knew: every man here could be dead tomorrow—not because of debt, but because he believed debt kept him alive.

At the bar, the bartender nervously wiped a rag across a glass that had long since been clean. "Kid," he whispered, "you're throwing everything out of balance." Billy grinned crookedly, deadpan. "Shitty balance. Your scales are just dust anyway."

Outside, the murmuring began. Voices gathered, the word "kid" was mentioned, mixed with "debt," mixed with "murder." The wind picked it up, carried it on. In this city, every coin, every debt was now an excuse. And Billy had just shown how it was truly paid off: with a shot.

The men avoided his eyes, but they also avoided the eyes of the others. Suddenly everyone was a debtor and everyone a creditor—and no one knew which bullet would fall first.

Billy drank, coughed, and laughed hoarsely. "You want to live by accruing debt. I live by paying it off."

And no one dared to contradict.

It took less than an hour before they tried to be clever. Men with sweaty shirts, shaking hands, and faces who had played cards too long and slept too little. They stood outside the saloon, talking fast, whispering loud enough for Billy to hear every word.

"He owes us something." "No one can just kill and leave." "If we stick together..."

Billy sat by the window, the bottle on his knee, his Colt loosely in his hand. He coughed, spat into his glass, and grinned crookedly. *Stick together*, he thought. *Only men who have already lost talk like that.*

They walked in, four of them, their Colts half-drawn, but none of them with the courage to actually point them at him. The one in front, a guy with a narrow face and eyes like rat holes, spoke up. "Kid, you owe us. The man you shot was one of us. And one of us is all of us."

Billy laughed hoarsely, a laugh full of coughs and dust. "Shit. You can't even pay for your own drinks, and now you want to collect from me?"

The men narrowed their eyes, one took a step forward. "Then we'll pay you."

The room was suddenly silent. Everyone knew what was coming. Billy slowly stood up, coughed, spat, and put his hand on the Colt. "I'll tell you how it goes: You call it guilt. I call it dust. And the wind sweeps away dust."

He pulled, faster than they could blink. Two shots, two men fell, one face down on the card table, the other against the bar, blood splattering over the glasses.

The other two tried to pull, but their hands trembled, their courage slipping into their boots.

Billy stepped forward, his deadpan gaze fixed on her. "Anyone else who thinks I owe them something?"

They shook their heads, silent, pale. One dropped his Colt, the other raised his hands. Billy grinned crookedly, put away his gun, and drank. "Good. Then we're even."

The bodies lay in the dust, the wind howled outside, and Billy knew: This city had just learned that debt didn't make you richer, it only made you deader.

The news spread faster than wildfire. Four men had tried, two were dead, two had lost their courage before they could even pull the trigger. From then on, the city was never the same.

Billy sat in the saloon, coughing, spitting in the dust, drinking. Outside, everyone whispered about each other. No one said, "He owes me." Instead, it was, "If I don't get him first, he'll get me." The card games broke up, the men drank alone, each with their backs to the wall. Even the whores only spread their legs when they knew for sure that the guy had put down his gun.

The streets became quiet, but not peaceful. Every glance was a score, every step a pledge. You could see it in people's eyes: guilt was suddenly no longer a word—guilt was an excuse. And everyone was waiting for someone to fire the first shot, to set everything ablaze.

The sheriff tried to calm things down, but no one listened to him anymore. One owed the blacksmith, the blacksmith owed the innkeeper, the innkeeper owed the whore, and in the end, everyone owed Billy what they feared most: their damned breath.

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and wiped blood from his mouth. "You live off debt," he muttered harshly. "I live off paying it off. And dust is faster than any bill."

The wind whistled through the streets, carrying the voices with it, turning them into legends. "Billy doesn't owe anyone anything," they whispered. "But we all owe him."

And that was the truth they didn't speak: everything in this city belonged to him – not because he had taken it, but because no one dared to deny him anything anymore.

The sheriff arrived after dark. No shouting, no commotion, just the slow footsteps of a man who knew full well that every breath he took could be his last. Billy sat in the saloon as usual, coughing, spitting, his bottle half empty, his Colt on the table.

The door opened, and there he stood. Tall, broad shoulders, hard face, tired eyes. He didn't look like someone who wanted to win—more like someone who wanted to finally finish.

"Kid," he said calmly, "you ruined this city."

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat on the ground. "The town was already destroyed, Sheriff. I just pulled faster."

The sheriff stepped closer, his hand on his gun, but he didn't draw. Not yet. "People here used to argue, haggle, get into debt, yes. But they lived. Now everyone distrusts everyone else. Because of you. Because of your fucking dead stare."

Billy drank, wiped his mouth, and looked at him. "Debt kills slower than bullets. I was just shortening time."

A few men stood at the edge of the room, watching, whispering. They hoped the sheriff would come and get him. But no one dared to breathe loudly.

"I could arrest you right now," said the sheriff. "You could," Billy replied. "But you know I'm faster. And faster here means I don't owe you anything."

The sheriff narrowed his eyes. "Someday, kid, there'll be someone faster than you. And then you'll be the one who pays."

Billy grinned, crooked and cold. "Maybe. But not you, Sheriff. Not today."

Tension hung heavy in the air; a single breath would have been enough for the entire town to collapse into dust. But the sheriff finally turned around and stepped back into the darkness.

"You're not a man," he said quietly. "You're a debt that will eventually come due."

Billy coughed, laughed hoarsely, and spat into the blood on the ground. "Then make the bill big, Sheriff. I'll pay in lead."

The next morning, the city hung heavy like a bill no one could pay. Billy saddled his horse, coughed, and spat dark red into the dust, while people watched him from a distance. No one came closer, no one spoke. They just stood there, men with blank faces, women with downcast gazes, children with eyes wide with fear.

He sensed it—they didn't see him as a man, not even as a murderer anymore. To them, he was a debt lying exposed in the dust. Someone who existed only to be paid off someday. A walking IOU, issued by God or the devil, no one knew for sure.

Billy swung himself into the saddle, his Colt loose at his belt, his bottle banging against the saddle pommel. The sheriff stood at the end of the road, his hands on his hips, his eyes hard. Not a word passed between them, only that look that said: *The bill remains open.*

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, spat, and rode off. The dust swirled up, burning the eyes of the people who didn't move. The wind picked up the name again, carried it out, and mixed it with stories bigger than any face.

"Everyone owes everyone something," Billy muttered, more to himself than to them. "But I owe no one more than dust."

He disappeared over the horizon, and the town remained behind—silent, suspicious, consumed by guilt. And deep within each of them burned the same thought: Billy the Kid would pay someday. But not here. Not today.

The wind laughed and took the blame away.

In the arms of a widow

The sun burned mercilessly as Billy rode into a village that was little more than a handful of huts and a half-collapsed stable. The dust was thicker than the voices, and the people's faces all bore the same expression: lost. There were hardly any men, only women and children, their expressions dull, as if they had already given up believing in tomorrow.

Billy coughed, spat, tied up the horse, and stepped into the shade of a hut. There she was. A woman, no longer young, no longer quite fresh, but with eyes so empty that he knew immediately: She had seen more than a person should. The kind of eyes that say: *Everything I had is already underground.*

"You're the kid," she murmured, without really looking at him. Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat. "Depends on what you need. You won't find a saint here."

She didn't laugh. "My husband is lying outside," she said quietly. "Shot in a robbery. They left him in the dust. I have three children, two already dead. The third is sleeping now, and I don't know if he'll wake up tomorrow."

Billy took a sip and looked at her with a deadpan expression. "Then you're a widow," he said harshly. "And widows seek arms, not justice."

She just nodded, quietly, slowly, like someone who knows the game. Not another word, no more pleading, no more tears. She stepped closer, placed her hand on his arm, firmly, without trembling. There was no longing in the touch—only emptiness, a hunger for warmth, even if it came from the wrong person.

Billy coughed, spat on the ground, and pulled her to him. Her lips tasted of salt and dust, her breath of whiskey she didn't have. For one night, they both knew, she wasn't a widow and he wasn't a murderer. For one night, they were just bodies trembling in the dust.

And outside the wind howled, as if it knew there was no comfort inside—just another guilt left behind in the morning.

The morning came gray, no sunrise, only a pale light filling the cracks of the hut. Billy lay half-dressed on the bed, bottle in hand, coughing, spitting into the dust that had found its way here too. Beside him lay the widow, silent, her eyes open, her skin as pale as the sheets.

She turned her head and looked at him. No smile, no thanks. Just that look that said it all: *You are not salvation. You are just another kind of storm.*

Billy grinned crookedly, wiping blood from his lips. "You look at me like I'm a walking tombstone." Her voice was quiet, shaky, but clear. "You're no better than those who shot my husband. You're just faster."

Billy coughed and laughed hoarsely. "Faster is all that matters."

She sat up, adjusted her dress, and tied her hair up. No tears, no drama. Just tiredness, which weighed more than lead. "I didn't bring you in here because I wanted to," she said, "but because I had to. The dust freezes, and an empty body freezes even more."

Billy drank, spat, and nodded. "I know. I didn't take you because I was in love. I took you because I'm still breathing. That's all I need."

Outside, a child could be heard coughing, thin, frail, like a last thread about to break. The widow didn't even flinch. She was long past it.

She looked at him again, this time longer, harder. "You're leaving soon, aren't you?" Billy grinned crookedly, stood up, and drew the Colt to his belt. "I'll never stay. Not because I don't want to—but because the wind bears my name. And the wind never stays in a house."

She nodded, slowly, wearily. "Then go. And forget my name as quickly as you'll forget my arms."

Billy coughed, spat, and stepped outside. The dust ate away the night they had shared, leaving only emptiness behind.

The light outside was harsh, almost white, and the dust lay heavy over everything. Billy stepped out of the hut, coughing, spitting, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He wanted to go to the horse, but then he heard it again: the child's cough. Thin, fragile, so small that it was almost lost in the wind.

He turned around. Standing at the door was a boy, maybe five years old, his eyes wide and far too empty for such a face. He stared at Billy as if he'd just learned what fear was. Not a word, not a cry—just this cough that sounded like dust in his throat.

Billy grinned crookedly, but it was a bitter grin. "You're what's left when bullets are through," he muttered.

The boy didn't step back. He held on to the door, his fingers thin as bone. He looked at Billy as if to ask: *Why are you here if my father is no longer here?*

Billy spat in the dust, pulled the bottle from his pocket, and took a sip. He wanted to say something to the boy, anything at all—but all he knew were curses and cold truths. And a child couldn't handle those.

The widow came out and stood between the boy and Billy. Her gaze was hard, not angry, not pleading, just final. "Go," she said quietly. "He doesn't need a name the wind carries. He needs rest."

Billy coughed, put the bottle away, and pulled his hat down over his face. "There's no peace," he muttered. "Not in this world. Only dust."

The boy coughed again, the sound gnawing at Billy's chest like a bullet. But he mounted his horse and pulled on the reins.

"Perhaps," he said harshly, "he's better off never seeing me again."

The widow was silent. The boy was silent, too. Only the wind answered, taking Billy's name and carrying him away—far from a cabin where dust weighed more than any memory.

The nearest saloon was little more than a shack with a sign dangling in the wind like a loose tongue. Billy walked in, coughed, spat, and ordered a bottle. The room smelled of smoke, spilled beer, and men who had lost more than they could ever win.

He sat in the corner, drinking, and the voices around him were loud—cards, laughter, a few whores pretending to have fun. But Billy only heard the boy's cough in his head, thin and dry, like a damned echo.

"Kid," shouted one of the men from the table, a big, red-faced bastard, "they say you collect women like other people collect IOUs. Was it like that again this time? Did you snag another widow?"

Laughter, rude, dirty. Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and drank. "Widows," he said harshly, "have more dust in their eyes than tears. There's not much left to collect."

The men laughed again, but uncertainly. They wanted a story, and he gave them a truth.

Another leaned forward. "How was it? Did she scream when you left?" Billy's gaze went dead. "No. Only the child screamed. And that wasn't a scream, that was a cough."

Silence. The laughter caught in his throat. One tried to break the tension: "Screw it, kid, women are all the same." Billy spat in the dust and looked at him. "No. They're not the same. Some have men buried in the ground, others

have children who are already half-dead. But you bastards just want to know how warm the bed was."

Nobody said anything else.

Billy leaned back, drank, and coughed. "You talk about women," he muttered, "but I'm talking about dust. And dust eats everything—men, women, children. You too."

The wind howled outside as if it agreed with him.

Night fell heavily over the shabby town. The saloon slowly emptied—men staggering home, whores counting their last coins, the bartender rinsing the glasses as if they could wash away decades of blood.

Billy stayed. In the corner, the bottle half empty, the Colt beside him. He coughed, spat into the sawdust on the floor, heard the cracking of the wood, the breathing of the walls. And there was that sound in his head again: the child's cough. Thin. Weak. Like a damned shadow traveling with him.

He drank, but the burning in his throat wasn't strong enough to drown it out. He pulled his hat down, wanting to sleep, but the cough persisted, as clear as if the boy were standing right next to him.

"Fucking dust," Billy muttered. "It's eating into everything. Even my dreams."

He looked at the Colt, saw his reflection in the cold metal. A face, young, but marked, tired, burned. And behind the face—again and again—the child's eyes. Not full of tears, but full of dust.

Outside, the wind howled. It carried voices, laughter, curses, lies. But Billy heard only that single cough, cutting through the wind like a knife.

He laughed hoarsely, a sick, broken laugh. "The wind knows my name," he whispered, "but it also knows his. And that will get him faster than any bullet."

The bottle tipped to the side, whiskey running into the dust. Billy leaned his head against the wall, his eyes open, his gaze dead. No sleep, only that damned noise in his head, over and over, until even the wind fell silent.

The morning was cold, a northerly wind blew dust across the street. Billy stepped out of the saloon, his hat pulled low over his face, his bottle empty, his

Colt heavy on his hip. He coughed and spat reddish-brown dirt into the dirt, which was immediately blown away by the wind.

The city was still asleep, only a dog barked, thin, starving, like an echo of everything missing. Billy saddled his horse, his fingers stiff, his bones heavy. He mounted, pulled on the reins—and heard it again. Not the dog, not the wind. The coughing. Thin, brittle, like a damned song stuck in his skull.

"Fucking brat," he muttered, grinning crookedly and bitterly. "Your cough sticks to me more than blood."

The wind took his name, as always. *Kid... Billy the Kid...* But this time something else intervened, something quiet and tenacious, that wasn't a word, just a cough. The wind carried it like a second echo, as if it had decided that the story no longer belonged to it alone.

Billy rode slowly, each step heavy on the horse. He knew: no matter how far he went, the coughing would ride with him. No sheriff, no bounty hunter, no bullet stuck as hard as that sound.

He drank, his throat burning, but it was no use. "The wind knows my name," he murmured harshly. "And now it knows yours too, little one. And if it keeps dragging it along like this, no one will know which of us will eat dust first."

He laughed hoarsely, coughed, and spat in the dust. The horse snorted nervously, as if it had heard the cough itself.

And Billy knew: There were bullets that tore flesh. But there were also sounds that ate you away more slowly. And this one would never let him go.

The sun rose slowly, but it didn't warm anything. The dust was thicker than morning, the wind bit his face. Billy rode, coughing, spitting, and every breath burned like a cough that wasn't his.

He thought of the night. Of the widow who lay silently beside him, no tears, no words, only emptiness. Of the boy who coughed like one already in the grave, only the lid hadn't closed yet. He had found nothing in her arms—no warmth, no salvation. Only a mirror that showed him how empty he himself was.

Billy drank, the glass burned, but it didn't help. "Screw it," he muttered, "I didn't give her anything. Nothing, except more dust."

The wind carried it on, as it carries everything. It whispered his name, mingled with a cough that wouldn't go away. And Billy knew that was the real blame. Not the coins, not the dead, not the saloons. But that damned sound that would never leave him.

"There's no salvation in a widow's arms," he murmured harshly. "Only a bill that grows the longer you breathe."

He coughed, spat, and laughed hoarsely. "I won't pay. I can't. But maybe... maybe the dust will get me faster when it realizes I deserve it."

The horse trudged on, the sun burned, the wind howled. And Billy knew: He was no longer riding just for himself. He was riding with a cough on the back of his neck that was like a second bullet—slow, merciless, inescapable.

On the horizon lay the next town, the next bottle, the next Colt. But no matter what came, that noise was still in his ears.

And it would last longer than any legend.

Shots in a card game

The saloon in the new town smelled different—less of sweat, more of stale smoke and the smell of cards that had been slammed down on the same table too many times. Men sat in rows, staring at their hands, sweating not from the whiskey, but from the thought that every card could cost them their necks.

Billy entered, coughed, spat in the dust, and scanned the room. He saw it immediately: No one here made a living by working. They all lived by cards, dice, and the hope that the next trick would be more valuable than the last. Hope was cheaper than whiskey—and just as deadly.

He sat down at a table, grinned crookedly, and took a bottle without asking. The men looked at him, some recognizing him immediately. One whispered "Kid," another swallowed as if he'd already lost before he played.

"Any seat left?" Billy asked, a deadpan expression, his voice ragged. The dealer nodded nervously. Cards flew, dry, fast. Billy took his hand, coughed, spat, and grinned. "I'm not playing for coins," he said quietly. "I'm playing for respect. Whoever loses pays in blood."

Silence at the table. Someone laughed, a thin, pitiful laugh. "Shitty joke, kid." Billy's gaze was hard. "I'm not joking. Cards are as honest as bullets—only slower."

The men played, hands shaking, sweat on their brows. Everyone knew this wasn't a normal game. Every card they threw was a breath less needed. Billy laid his down calmly, like someone who had long since known he wouldn't lose.

And above it all hung the wind, whipping against the boards outside as if it wanted to carry the echo of the inevitable shots.

The cards were dealt, the whiskey flowed, but no one laughed. Everyone at the table knew: This wasn't a game anymore. It was a dance with knives, only the knives were made of lead.

Billy coughed, spat, and looked at his hand. Two jacks, one queen. Enough. He grinned crookedly and laid them down as if it were nothing. The men looked at each other nervously, one wiping sweat from his forehead.

Then it happened. The bastard across the hall—narrow eyes, smarmy smile—sneaked a card under his sleeve. He probably thought Billy's deadpan was drunk enough not to notice.

Billy coughed and laughed hoarsely. "Bad trick, friend. Your sleeve gives you away faster than your face."

The man froze, then reached for his Colt. But Billy was already halfway up. The first shot rang out, tearing through the table, blood splattering across the cards. The bastard fell, the ace from his sleeve fluttering to the floor, soaked in red.

Chaos. Chairs flew back, men screamed, hands went to weapons. Billy stood there, his Colt smoking, his gaze dead. "I said we're playing for blood," he growled. "Now you get it."

Two more men pulled, too slowly. Two more shots, two bodies crashed to the ground, cards swirled through the air like leaves in a storm.

The rest ducked, fled, and left their winnings behind. The table was no longer a gaming table—it was a grave.

Billy coughed, spat, and grinned crookedly. "Cards are like bullets," he muttered. "They always show who screwed up."

He grabbed the bottle and drank, while the wind outside carried the gunshots far away, as if to tell everyone that Billy the Kid had played again—and no one survived the operation.

Smoke hung heavy in the air, the wood of the table splintered, and blood dripped quietly between the cracks in the floorboards. Men who were still breathing crawled backward, away from Billy, dropping their Colts, their eyes wide with fear. No one wanted to play anymore. No one wanted to talk anymore.

Billy remained seated. He coughed, spat in the dust, and reached for the cards that were stuck to the table, soaked with blood. He roughly wiped them off and shuffled them with steady hands, as if nothing had happened.

"Cowards," he muttered, grinning crookedly. "The game goes on. Whether you like it or not."

He dealt cards, placing them on the dead's seats as if they were still sitting there. An ace lay before one, a three before the next, and a queen before the third. Billy took his hand, two kings, and laid them down with a cold look.

"Your turn," he said, coughing, drinking from the bottle.

The survivors cowered in the shadows, not daring to make a sound. But Billy continued speaking as if he were sitting in the middle of a social gathering. "You lost," he muttered toward the empty chair where the imposter had just been living. "You see, an ace up your sleeve doesn't count when you're lying in the dust."

He laughed hoarsely, a sick laugh that sounded like a cough. "And you," he looked at the bloody lady, "maybe you should have waited before you drew."

The wind howled outside, rattling the shutters as if listening. Billy played another card, then threw the deck away.

"Ghosts or men," he murmured, "cards don't lie. And in the end, the one who draws first always wins."

The survivors only dared to breathe again when Billy put the bottle to his lips and looked at nothing - except the dust that leveled everything.

The door creaked, a hinge screeched like a dying man. Boots thumped onto the bloody floor. Heavy, slow, no trembling. Billy didn't look up—he already knew

who was coming. Only one person walked as if the dust belonged to him. The sheriff.

He stood in the doorway, his hand on his belt, but he didn't pull. His gaze wandered over the dead bodies, over the cards lying like tombstones on the chairs, to Billy, who coughed, spat, and took another swig.

"Kid," the sheriff said quietly, "another table that's seen more blood than whiskey."

Billy grinned crookedly without putting down his cards. "What can I say, Sheriff? Some people lose coins. Some people lose faces."

The sheriff stepped closer, his shadow falling across the table. "You could have left before it started."

Billy coughed and laughed hoarsely. "Walking is for men who think they'll still be alive tomorrow. I prefer playing."

The sheriff looked at him for a long time, then at the cards. "Why are you even playing, kid? You know, in the end, nobody wins. Not with dice, not with cards, not with Colts."

Billy laid down two kings and looked at him deadpan. "Because I can. And because it's faster than waiting for the dust to eat me."

Silence. The sheriff was breathing heavily, his fingers close to his gun. But he didn't pull. He knew what would happen.

"You're like a debt no one can pay," he said harshly. "Wherever you play, others pay the price."

Billy spat on the ground, drank, and grinned. "Then at least I'm being honest, Sheriff. I'll tell you right away that I'm going to cost you something."

The wind whistled through the door, swirling dust over the corpses. No one moved. It wasn't a duel, it was only the knowledge: Here stood someone who lived by losing everything else.

The sheriff paused for a moment, as if testing the air—heavy, filled with blood and gunpowder. Then he nodded, as if he'd seen everything there was to see. "Keep playing, Kid," he said quietly. "But eventually you'll be sitting alone at the table. And then death will deal you the final card."

Billy coughed, spat, and grinned crookedly. "Then let him shuffle. Maybe he'll finally have a better trick than all of you."

The sheriff turned and stepped out. The door slammed shut behind him, the wind whipping in dust, carrying the smell of iron out into the street. Billy remained, alone at the table, the bottle within reach, the cards sticky with blood.

The few survivors crawled out of the shadows, but didn't dare approach. They whispered nervously, as if they were in a church. "He's not playing against us..." one murmured. "He's playing against death itself."

Another nodded, his hands shaking. "And he wins. Again and again. Until there's no one left but him and the wind."

Billy heard her, but he didn't answer. He shuffled the cards, calmly, coldly, his hands steady, as if he were really still in the game. He placed them on the places of the dead, as if the bastards still had something to say.

"Your turn," he muttered, grinned crookedly, and coughed.

The men in the background didn't dare utter another word. They knew what everyone else knew: whoever sat at this table paid not with coins, but with meat.

And outside the wind laughed, as if it had long since understood that Billy the Kid was just a player – but one who kept forcing Death to play along.

In the morning, the city was quieter than a grave. No children on the street, no women at the well, no men outside the houses. Only glances, heavy and suspicious, from windows as dark as graves.

Billy saddled his horse, coughed, and spat into the dust, which was immediately blown away by the wind. No one came near. No one spoke. They looked at him as if he weren't a man of flesh and blood, but something Hell had invented to remind them of their debts.

The survivors from the card table stood together, their eyes red, their hands empty. They whispered that he had defeated death, at least for one night, and that everyone who saw him was now part of this damned game.

Billy climbed into the saddle, his Colt hanging loosely at his side, his bottle clinking against the saddle pommel. He looked at them, the men, the women,

the children hiding behind curtains. His gaze was dead, but his grin crooked. "You owe me nothing," he muttered harshly. "You only owe the dust."

No one answered. No one dared.

He urged his horse on, the dust swirling up, burning the people's eyes. And as he rode, they knew: Billy the Kid was no longer a gambler. He was a curse. A shadow that entered towns, shuffled their cards, left their men covered in blood—and moved on as if nothing had happened.

The wind took his name, as always, but this time it sounded heavier, as if it were carrying away not just a man, but an entire debt.

And the city remained behind, empty, silent, as if it itself had been lost in a game that no one could win.

No man's land lay before him like a board without cards. Only dust, wind, and the endless horizon. Billy rode, coughed, spat, and wiped blood from his lips. The sun hung low, the light burned, but he felt nothing except the heaviness in his chest—and the silent knowledge that his game continued, even though there was no table.

He reached for the bottle, took a sip, and let the whiskey burn his throat. Then he pulled the deck of cards from his pocket, which he had taken from the dead dealer. Blood still clung to the edges; dust had long since turned them gray. He shuffled them in the saddle, slowly, mechanically, like a man trying to keep death happy.

"Your move," he muttered into the wind, grinning crookedly and coughing. "But move quickly, or I'll move for you."

The wind answered, howling, shrieking, as if it were truly the enemy. Billy laughed hoarsely and spat over his shoulder. "See, bastard? Even out there, where there's no one, the game goes on. And you still lose."

He placed cards on his leg as he rode on. A king, a queen, an ace. "See, Death?" he whispered harshly. "I have the better hands."

The sun sank, dust ate the horizon, the wind took his name and carried it far away. But this time it sounded as if he carried not just a name, but a bet. A bet that was still open.

Billy coughed, laughed, and spat. "Shots at cards, shots in the dust, all the same crap. In the end, there's only one thing left: I play, you lose."

He rode on, alone, cards in hand, Colt at his belt, death in the wind. And he knew: The game had long since ceased to have a table. It was the world itself, and it was covered in dust.

No angels in New Mexico

New Mexico lay before him like a wound that refused to heal. Dust, sun, adobe huts that looked as if they would collapse with the next gust of wind. Billy rode in, coughing, spitting, his gaze cold as iron.

Above the saloon hung a crooked cross, made of cheap timbers. Below it was a sign: "*God protects the righteous.*" Billy grinned crookedly and laughed hoarsely. "Screw it," he muttered, "God doesn't protect anyone around here. Especially not in a saloon."

The men there drank more slowly, spoke more quietly. They weren't ordinary gamblers, they weren't drunks. Here, they acted as if angels were watching over the city. But Billy saw it in their eyes: fear. Guilt. Hypocrisy. Everyone prayed, but everyone had blood on their shirts or dirt in their hearts.

A woman forced to play the whore came to him, put down whiskey, her eyes lowered. "People here believe in angels," she whispered, "but angels don't come down. Not here."

Billy drank, coughed, and spat. "Angels?" he grinned crookedly. "They'd have dust in their throats and flies on their wings by now."

A preacher entered, dressed in black, Bible in hand, stern-faced. "Kid," he said loudly, "there's no place for you here. God sees everything."

Billy leaned back, took another sip, and wiped blood from his lips. "Then God should take a closer look. Maybe he'll learn something."

The men stared, the preacher trembled. But no one moved.

"No angels in New Mexico," Billy muttered, deadpan. "Just dust, whiskey, and bullets. And they're more honest than any damn prayer."

The preacher stood in the middle of the saloon, Bible raised high like a damn shield. His face was red with rage, his voice roaring against the whiskey haze. "Kid! Your name is sin. Your bullets are sin. Every step you take here insults God himself!"

The men at the bar held their breath, the women huddled closer together. No one laughed, no one dared to stop the preacher. He was their only attempt at order, at heaven—and they clung to him like a drowning man to a rock.

Billy coughed, spat next to his boot, and grinned crookedly. "God?" he muttered harshly. "God was never here. He never even looked at this place. And if he had, he would have left long ago."

The preacher raised the Bible even higher, his voice trembling. "The Word of God is stronger than your weapon, Kid!"

Billy laughed hoarsely, coughing, a sound that sounded more like death than life. "The word of God? Fucking words. Words don't put anyone in the ground. Words don't make widows. Bullets do that. And bullets don't lie."

Silence. The heart of the entire room beat audibly. The men looked at the preacher, then at Billy, then back at the Bible.

"You will burn!" screamed the preacher. "You will pay in hell!"

Billy placed the bottle firmly on the table and slowly stood up. His Colt hung loosely, his eyes dead. "Maybe," he said quietly. "But by then, everyone else will be paying. And faster than they can pray."

The women shrank back, the bartender hid behind the bar. The preacher remained silent. His lips trembled, but no more words came out.

Billy took a step closer, coughed, and spat at his boots. "Bullets are more honest than your sermons. And more honest than your God."

The wind ripped at the shutters as if it had heard the last words and wanted to carry them away, out into the damned vastness of New Mexico.

The words still hung in the air, heavy as lead. The preacher stood with trembling hands, the Bible clutched tightly to his chest, but he said nothing more. His eyes darted toward the men in the saloon, searching for courage, for someone to help him keep his fairytale about God alive.

And there they were: three guys, broad-shouldered, their faces covered in dust and rage. They'd hesitated long enough, but the sermon had given them just enough poison to make them stupid. The first one stepped forward, his hand on his Colt, his voice rough. "Kid," he growled, "there are no angels here, that's true. But we'll send you to hell anyway."

Billy coughed, spat on the ground, and grinned crookedly. "Then move faster, you bastards. Let's see if your god really counts."

The first one reached for his gun. Billy's Colt flashed. A shot, clear, hard, short – the man flew back, his head hit the door frame, and slid into the dust.

The other two were slower, but no wiser. One drew, took a bullet through the chest, and fell on the preacher's Bible, who dropped it like a useless piece of wood. The third stumbled, fired wildly, hitting only the lamp, the flames spraying sparks, before Billy put a bullet in his neck. Blood spurted across the floor like a curse.

The rest of the saloon froze. No one moved. No one dared to breathe loudly.

Billy coughed, wiped blood from his lips, and grinned crookedly. "See? No angels in New Mexico. And heaven's too cowardly to come down."

The preacher knelt beside the dead man, his hands trembling, his lips moving in a silent prayer. But his eyes said it all: He, too, now knew that no angel had come.

The wind shook the door, whistling through the cracks as if it were proving Billy right.

It wasn't long before they arrived. Women with gray faces, children with eyes that had seen more dust than games. They entered the saloon, slowly, heavily, as if they knew there was another one lying on the floor. Or three.

The widows stopped, staring at the dead, then at Billy. No screams, no tears. Just a look so empty it was worse than any crying. The children clung to their skirts, silent, too tired to show fear.

The preacher looked at them, trying to find words, but nothing came. His Bible was still covered in blood, and no one bent down to pick it up.

Billy coughed, spat in the dust, and looked at the women. "No angels," he muttered harshly. "Not for your men. Not for you. Not for the children. No one is coming down to save you."

A woman picked up the child and held it tightly, her lips pale. "Then why... why are you doing this?" she whispered.

Billy grinned crookedly, deadpan. "Because I'm faster. Because your men were stupid. And because the dust doesn't give a shit about angels."

The children stared at him as if he were the devil himself. Maybe he was. Maybe worse. He coughed, laughed hoarsely, and wiped blood from his lips. "You want angels?" he asked harshly. "Look around. There are only men who drink, men who lie, and men who die. Angels don't land in New Mexico. They'd suffocate here before they even spread their wings."

The widows said nothing. They took their children and left the saloon, one by one, so quietly that even the wind fell silent for a moment.

Billy reached for the bottle, drank deeply, and spat again. "No angels," he muttered. "Just dust, just bullets. And me."

The saloon was empty except for the preacher, the bartender, and Billy. The women had left, and so had the children. Only the dust remained, heavy and sticky, as if it had absorbed the words.

The preacher was still kneeling by the corpses, his hands red, his Bible in the dirt. His lips moved, but no sound came. It wasn't a prayer, just a flickering in his mind that no longer knew who to address.

Billy drank, coughed, and spat. "Come on, preacher," he muttered harshly. "Say something about angels. Say something about heaven. I need something to laugh about."

The man raised his head, his eyes filled with tears, but they weren't tears; they were pure despair. "He... he doesn't hear," he whispered. "I call, I pray, I scream within myself—and he doesn't hear."

Billy grinned crookedly, deadpan. "Then stop it. Heaven is deaf. And angels don't land here anyway. They'd end up lying in the gutter with broken wings, next to your bastards."

The preacher slammed the Bible shut, hard enough to spurt blood. "Everything was in vain?" Billy laughed hoarsely, a laugh filled with dust. "Everything is always in vain. Your God is no better than my Colt. Only mine responds faster."

The man fell back, sitting on the ground, his eyes blank, his hands useless. He was no longer a preacher. Just an old man in black who had realized his angels would never come.

Billy stood up, put down the bottle, and stepped closer. "Learn to live without angels," he said harshly, "or die with your fairy tale. But don't you dare tell me about heaven again."

He coughed, spat in front of the man's boots, pulled his hat down over his face, and sat down again.

The preacher remained, silent, broken, while the wind laughed outside.

The next morning, the town was quieter than a cemetery. Not a bell tolling, not a prayer, not even the caw of a bird. The preacher was still squatting outside the saloon, Bible closed in his lap, his eyes as empty as a dry well. He didn't look up as Billy saddled his horse. He couldn't see anything anymore.

People stood at the doors, children clung to their mothers, no one approached. One might have thought the devil himself was about to mount the horse. And perhaps he did.

Billy coughed, spat in the dust, and pulled his hat down over his face. "No angels," he muttered harshly. "Just dust. Just me."

He swung himself onto his horse, the bottle clinking against the saddle, the Colt hanging by his side like a second truth. The town sheriff was nowhere to be seen—perhaps he was smart enough not to show up. Perhaps he knew there was nothing left to save.

The crowd retreated, step by step, as Billy pulled on the reins. No one called out to him, no one dared to stop him. They just watched him, their faces filled with fear, but also with this silent question: *Was he really human? Or just the curse sent by the desert?*

The preacher suddenly muttered, barely audibly, but enough to be carried on the wind. "He's not a man. He's the devil. The devil on a horse."

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat. "The devil would be more honest," he muttered. "I'm just faster."

Then he rode off into the vastness of New Mexico, while the wind bore his name – and in the huts the people whispered: *There are no angels here. Only Billy the Kid.*

The open country welcomed him back like an old lover—cold, dusty, merciless. Billy rode, coughing, spitting, the sun burning on his young but already burnt face. Behind him lay a city that no longer believed in anything, not in God, not in angels, not even in itself.

The wind blew harshly across the plain, stirring up dust, tearing the taste of blood and smoke from the city and carrying it after Billy. He grinned crookedly, took a swig from the bottle, and wiped his chin. "Angel," he muttered harshly, "a terrible word. They'd suffocate here before they even beat their wings."

He looked to the horizon, where the sky shimmered like a glowing iron plate. Nothing but emptiness, and yet he heard them all—the voices, the prayers, the coughing of children, the crying of women, the cursing of men. Everything sounded the same, everything was dust torn to pieces by the wind.

Billy coughed, spitting reddish-brown spit. "No angels in New Mexico," he said, as if speaking to the wind itself. "Just bullets. Just dust. Just me."

The wind answered, carrying his name across the steppe. No hallelujah, no promise, no salvation. Only the echo of a boy who was faster than everyone else and therefore lived while the angels stayed away.

He rode on, alone, the bottle clinking, the Colt at his belt, his gaze dead. And deep down he knew: Even if there were angels, they would never come for him.

Only the wind remained. Always.

Blood on the shirt

The sun was high as Billy rode into the next town. His shirt was torn, the dust clung to him like scabs. He coughed, spat, and this time it wasn't just phlegm that came out, but blood. Dark, rusty, sticky. He wiped it away with his sleeve, but the sleeve was already red.

"Shit," he muttered, grinning crookedly, deadpan. "Now I'm one of the bastards who bleed."

He remembered the last shootout: blurry faces, smoke, screams. A bullet had grazed him, deep enough to tear flesh, shallow enough to keep him alive. But the shirt now bore the price. Red like a banner, showing everyone that Billy the Kid had blood like everyone else.

The people in town stared at him. Women pulled their children back, men put their hands on their hips as if checking if the Colt was still there. But no one attacked him. Not today. Not when his shirt was already talking.

Billy dismounted, coughed, and spat blood into the dust. He walked into the saloon, each step heavy, but his grin crooked as always. He ordered whiskey, no words, no backward glance. The bartender set down the bottle, his hand shaking.

Billy drank deeply, wiping blood from his chin. "Look," he murmured, "even I'm wearing it now. Blood on my shirt. But don't think it was your blood that hit me. This is mine. And I forget mine more quickly."

The men ducked their heads, no one laughed. They knew: If Billy was bleeding, everyone else would have to pay twice.

The wind swept through the door, playing with the shirt, making the red flash like a warning signal. And Billy grinned, coughed, and spat. "I'm still standing," he said harshly. "And as long as I'm standing, no one here will really settle the score."

It took less than an hour for the vultures to smell it. Not the birds—the men. Four of them, scarred faces, cheap Colts, too much guts from too little brain. They saw the blood on Billy's shirt, saw him cough, spit, and knock back the whiskey in one gulp, and thought: *Now. Now he's weak.*

They approached, one in front, the others behind. The first one spoke, his voice scratchy like sandpaper. "Kid," he growled, "you're in trouble. Time someone like you paid the price."

Billy grinned crookedly, raised his head, his eyes dead. "Paid?" he muttered harshly. "Guys, I already paid. With my own damn blood. But if you want more, you'll have to pull faster than my cough."

The men laughed, but it was nervous laughter. One reached for his Colt. Billy coughed, spat a reddish-brown spit onto the ground—and at that moment his revolver flashed. The first man fell, a hole between his eyes that spoke louder than a thousand sermons.

The others pulled, panicked, clumsily. Two shots, two screams, two bodies crashing against the bar, glasses shattering, whiskey flowing like blood. The last one stumbled, ran to the door, but Billy shot him in the back. The man flew out into the dust and lay still.

Silence. Only the crackling of the lamp, the ticking of the clock, and Billy's heavy breathing.

He coughed again, spat blood, and wiped his shirt. "Screw it," he muttered, grinning crookedly. "Blood on my shirt, blood on the floor, all the same filth."

People ducked their heads, not daring to make a sound. They had hoped the blood would have slowed Billy down. Instead, it seemed as if it had only made him more merciless.

The wind ripped open the door, swirling dust over the corpses, and Billy raised the bottle. "I'm still standing," he said harshly, "and as long as I'm standing, your god is as dead as my shirt."

The saloon was empty except for the dead and the barman, who crouched behind the bar, his head between his arms. No one dared to move. No one dared to look at Billy for long. Only the ticking of the clock above the bar, the creaking of the floorboards beneath the corpses, and the smell—iron, smoke, whiskey, sweat.

Billy sat down again, coughing, spitting, this time bright red. His shirt was sticky, his blood cold, hard as a second skin. He reached for the bottle, drank, and laughed hoarsely. "Damned shirt," he muttered, "now it's got my blood on it. Not yours anymore. Mine."

He looked at the men he had just killed. Their blood seeped into the dust, mingled, and was instantly lost. Other people's blood was nothing. A kick, a cough, a gust of wind, and it was gone. But his own, it stuck, it burned, it reminded.

"Funny," he whispered harshly, "you have it better. Your blood goes right back into the dirt. Mine sticks here like a damn debt."

He laughed again, coughed, spat, and wiped his chin. His gaze was blank, but he spoke as if someone were sitting across from him. "Foreign blood makes you great, gives you a name, makes you a legend. But your own blood? That only makes you old. Weak. Mortal."

The silence in the room was so heavy that even the wind outside was silent.

Billy laid the Colt on the table, examined it, the metal dull and stained. "Bullets don't make a difference," he muttered. "But blood does. Blood knows whose it belongs to. And mine doesn't want to go back to the dust. Not yet."

He coughed again, laughing crookedly and sickly. "Screw it," he said harshly. "If it's going to get me, at least let it laugh before it eats me."

He took another sip, leaned his head back, and looked up at the ceiling. Above him, the wood creaked as if it were about to collapse. But nothing happened. Only his blood remained, heavy, warm, red, a testament that even the Kid wasn't faster than anything.

Billy sat in a back room of the saloon, a bowl, an old towel, a blunt knife, and a bottle of whiskey. No doctor, no angel, just himself and his damned blood.

He pulled off his shirt, grimaced, and coughed. The fabric clung to the wound, tearing as he pulled at it. Blood oozed out, warm, thick, reddish-brown. "Shit," he muttered, grinning crookedly, "they kissed me. Shallow, but deep enough that it burns like a whore's ass in summer."

He poured whiskey directly over the wound, gritted his teeth, and laughed hoarsely. "Come on, burn, you bastard. I've eaten worse than you."

The flesh twitched, the skin contracted. Billy took the knife, disinfected only with the remaining whiskey, and stabbed in, searching for splinters, for lead, for anything that didn't belong there. His breathing was ragged, his eyes empty, but his hands steady, like a fortune-teller.

"You know, life," he muttered harshly, "you're a bad player. You keep trying, but you can't get me off the table. Not today. Not like this."

He sewed himself together roughly, a piece of string meant for sacks, the needle rusty. Every stitch a curse, every knot a cough. The blood continued to drip, but less. Enough that he could laugh again.

"Blood on your shirt," he said quietly, "just means you're still breathing. If you're not bleeding anymore, you've already lost."

He pulled his shirt back on, sticky and heavy, but he stood up, reached for the bottle, and took a deep drag. "I'm still standing," he murmured, "and as long as I'm standing, life makes the jokes—and I'm the last one laughing."

The wind shook the window as if it had heard him, as if it wanted to applaud him. Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, spat—and went on living.

When Billy stepped back onto the street, the air smelled of burnt dust and fear. His shirt clung to his body, dark red, hardened like a second skin. Every step creaked through the silence, as if the whole city were waiting for him to finally collapse.

Women peered out from behind shutters, children clung to their mothers, men stood still, hands on their hips, but no one pulled. They saw only this shirt, this damned sign screaming in their faces: *Even Billy the Kid bleeds.*

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat into the dust. "Look," he muttered harshly, "I still stand. And as long as I stand, the blood belongs to me. Not to you."

An old man took a step forward, hat in hand, his voice shaky. "You're hurt, Kid. You'll die like everyone else."

Billy laughed hoarsely, wiping his chin, which was shining red again. "Die?" he said. "Maybe. But not today. And not because you want me to. I'll die when the dust laughs—not when you whisper."

People bowed their heads, no one dared to speak further. They watched him walk down the street, his bloody shirt like a flag that protected neither God nor angels.

The wind whipped, ripping at the fabric, making the stains flash. And everyone who looked knew: This blood didn't make him weaker. It made him feel like a warning, a sign that even half-dead, the Kid was deadlier than any healthy man.

Billy spat, drank from the bottle, and his grin remained crooked. "Blood on your shirt," he muttered, "is better than dust on your face."

Then he moved on, and the city didn't dare breathe again until he was long gone.

Billy rode out along the edge of town, the sun low, the wind sharp as a blade. His shirt fluttered heavily in the dust, dark red, a banner for all who were still looking. They stood behind the windows, silent, their faces pale. No one called, no one waved, no one blessed. They watched him walk as one carries a dead man to a grave.

He coughed and spat, the blood on his lips as fresh as the blood on the cloth. "Screw it," he muttered harshly, "now I really do look like someone who's already halfway in a coffin."

The horse trudged slowly, every hoofbeat an echo in the silence. Billy grinned crookedly, took a swig from the bottle, and wiped his chin. He knew what they were thinking. He saw it in their eyes: No longer a human, no longer a boy, no longer an outlaw. A ghost. A damned shadow, riding a horse and wearing blood as its uniform.

"Ghosts don't ride," he muttered, "but I do. So I'm more than dead."

The last houses disappeared, leaving only steppe, dust, and wind. The sky flickered, hot and merciless. Billy pulled his hat down, coughed, and spat. His gaze was empty, but he spoke softly, as if speaking to the wind. "You can take me for a ghost, for the devil, for whatever you want. But you know one thing: as long as I stand, everyone who stands in my way will die faster."

The wind answered, carrying his name out into the void. No prayer, no song, only this echo, which sounded as if the dust itself had decided to keep Billy—whether as a man or a ghost, it didn't matter.

And Billy rode on, his bloody shirt flapping like a damn gravestone in the wind.

The plain was empty, only wind and dust and the snorting of his horse. Billy rode, his shirt flapping heavily against him, soaked, hard, reddish-brown like

encrusted iron. Every breath burned, every cough tasted of metal. He grinned crookedly, laughed hoarsely, as if the pain were just a bad joke.

"Well, look at that," he muttered harshly, "my shirt tells the truth better than I ever could. Blood on it. My blood. Not a fairy tale, not a preacher, not a legend. Just what comes out when you pull faster, but not fast enough to ward off everything."

He spat, watching the stains darken, blown by the wind but not gone. "Dust washes everything away," he said, "only blood sticks. Maybe that's the only damned truth I still carry with me."

The sun set, the sky turned red, and Billy saw it as if the entire horizon was reflected in his shirt. "Shit," he laughed, "the whole world is wearing blood. I'm just honest enough to show it openly."

He took a sip; the whiskey burned, mingling with the blood in his throat. The cough came back, hard, deep, but he laughed nonetheless. "I'm still standing. I'm still riding. And as long as I can do that, blood on my shirt isn't the end. It's just a chapter."

The wind carried his name, carried the laughter, as if it knew Billy was right: there was no end to blood. It was a sign.

And so Billy rode on, alone, his shirt as his flag, his blood as his truth, his dust as his companion. A boy, a ghost, a curse—but still alive enough to fill the steppe with his laughter.

Escape through the back door

The town was small, narrower than a coffin, yet full of eyes staring at him. Billy rode in, coughing, spitting, his shirt still red, his Colt hung menacingly at his side. He realized immediately: They were prepared. Men at the corners, hands on their hips, eyes that no longer carried fear, but the desire to hunt.

"Shit," he muttered, grinning crookedly, "I guess they've finally learned that you can't grab me at the card table. Now they want to try it on the street."

The saloon was the only house still alive. Billy walked in and slammed the door. Inside, the same shit as everywhere else—whiskey, smoke, men with more

courage in their glasses than in their hearts. But this time the mood was different. No murmuring, no whispering. Silence. Just the wind outside, beating against the boards.

He ordered a bottle, drank, coughed, and spat in the dust. The men approached, one by one, their eyes narrowed, their fingers nervous. Billy knew: They had the sheriff outside, deputies at the doors, maybe even a rope ready.

"Kid," one said, his voice shaky, "the game's over. You're coming with me."

Billy laughed hoarsely, coughed, and wiped his chin. "With you? Where to? In the dirt where you're all already lying? No. Not today."

His eyes darted around the room, cold and sharp. He saw it: a back room, a door, half-open, probably leading to the alley. A way out. Not honorable, not great, not heroic—but honest.

"You bastards," he muttered, grinning crookedly, "you always forget one thing: the angels are in front, the devil is behind. And I'd rather go out with the devil."

The men sensed something was wrong. One reached for his Colt, too late. Billy stepped back, knocked over the table, bottles shattered, and he disappeared back through the narrow door, out into the stench of the alley.

The wind laughed, whipping up the dust, while the city realized it had lost him again—through the back door.

The alley stank of garbage, piss, and old blood. Billy stumbled out, coughing, spitting, his shirt still heavy with his own juices. Behind him, the saloon door crashed, voices shouted, boots hammered. The chase had begun.

He ran as fast as a man half-buried in the dust could run. The Colts thumped against his hip, the bottle clinked, and every step was a curse against the world.

Shots rang out, bullets ripped splinters from the walls, dirt sprayed, bricks shattered. Billy laughed hoarsely, not even turning his head. "Too slow, you bastards! I'm coughing out more speed than you can shoot!"

He turned a corner, panting, blood running hotly down his side. A dog barked, startled, and fled, yelping. Billy stumbled over trash, caught himself, and spat reddish-brown onto the ground. Behind him, footsteps echoed closer, heavy, hectic, like men who didn't realize they had long since lost.

He drew a Colt as he ran and fired blindly backward. A scream, a body crashed into the dust. "One down," he muttered, grinning crookedly and coughing.

The alley narrowed, two facades converged, almost a corridor. Billy jumped over a barrel, rolled, and felt the tearing in his wound. Pain like fire, but he stood again. "I'm still standing," he whispered harshly, "I'm still standing, and as long as that's the case, you'll die first."

More shots, a bullet grazed the wall close to his head, dust rained down on him. Billy turned, two quick shots, two muzzle flashes, two screams.

The wind blew through the alley, taking the shots with it, as if it wanted to say to the city: *You can hunt him, but you can't catch him.*

And Billy kept running, coughing, bleeding, laughing—a ghost chased through the backyards of New Mexico, still faster than anyone who wanted him.

Billy stumbled out of the last alleyway into the open field. Before him, nothing but steppe, dust, and a sky that looked as if it were about to burn him. Behind him, the screams of his pursuers echoed, but they grew fainter, muffled, swallowed by the walls.

He paused briefly, coughed, doubled over, and spat dark red blood into the dust. Blood dripped from his side, heavy, hot, and unstoppable. His shirt was sticky, every breath burned. He placed his hand on the wound, looked at it, and grinned crookedly. "Shit, kid," he muttered, "you're losing more than you keep."

But his gaze remained hard, his eyes dead. He straightened, pulled out the bottle, took a deep swig, poured the rest down the side, gritted his teeth, and laughed hoarsely. "Whiskey lasts longer than God. At least for me."

He continued walking, stumbling but walking. His steps were heavy, his horse tied up somewhere farther out, if it hadn't already been stolen. But he talked to himself as if he were still in the middle of the saloon. "Blood on my shirt, blood in the dust, all the same filth. But as long as I'm standing, it's not the end. The end is when you bastards think I'm dead—and then I'll be standing again."

The wind caught the shirt, made it flutter, the red glowing in the sunlight like a banner warning the whole damned West: *Billy the Kid is still alive.*

He coughed again, laughed hoarsely, and wiped his chin. "You won't get me. Not today. Maybe the dust will eat me, maybe the wind will laugh at me. But none of you bastards will spell my end."

He trudged on, the city behind him shrinking, the screams merely echoing. And every step was a mockery, proof that even with his body half empty, the Kid was faster than everyone else.

The field stretched endlessly, the sun burned, and Billy's steps grew heavier. Every meter a struggle, every breath a cough that coughed up blood. But then he saw it—his horse, tied to a weathered fence post, head down, restless, as if it had long since sensed that its rider was more dust than flesh.

Billy grinned crookedly, staggered, and leaned on the post. "Well, old horse," he muttered harshly, "another one of us who eats too much dust. But at least you're still whole."

He reached for the saddle, his shirt sticking, the wound ripping open again, warm blood seeping down his side. He gritted his teeth, coughed, and laughed hoarsely. "Screw it. I'm not falling here. Not yet. Not in the dirt, not without a bottle, not without a bullet."

With his last bit of strength, he pulled himself up, every muscle screaming, the horse stamping nervously. But Billy climbed into the saddle, crooked, swaying, but on top. He took the reins, spat blood into the dust, and patted the animal's neck. "See? I'm still standing. Just sitting."

He pulled out the bottle, took a sip, and poured the rest over the wound. The horse twitched as the whiskey burned, and Billy laughed hoarsely. "No doctor, no angel, just the two of us. And that's enough."

Then he urged the animal on. Slowly at first, then faster. Behind him, the city, shrinking, leaving only dust and screams, devoured by the wind. In front of him, the steppe, endless, empty—but free.

He coughed, spat, and grinned crookedly. "I'm still riding," he muttered, "and as long as I'm riding, none of you bastards will lose."

The wind took his name, carried him across the plain, along with the smell of blood and whiskey. And Billy knew: He was half dead, but half dead was enough to make him faster than everyone else.

The ride wasn't just a ride anymore; it was a fever. Billy swayed in the saddle, the reins almost slipping from his hands. Every hoofbeat throbbed through his wound, every breath tasted of iron. The whiskey in his stomach softened the world, but the pain remained sharp.

He coughed, spat, watched the dust dance before him—and suddenly they were there. Angels. Not made of gold, not with white wings. Angels with gray faces, wings of dirt, eyes empty as graves. They fluttered beside him, silent, pitiless.

Billy grinned crookedly, laughed hoarsely, and coughed blood. "Finally," he muttered harshly, "so here you are. But you look worse than the preachers always say."

The angels said nothing, they just nodded, as if they were coming to pick him up. But others were there too: shadows that looked like men he had killed long ago. Their faces bloody, their eyes covered in dust. They grinned, pointing at him as if they wanted to welcome him.

"Shit," Billy laughed, "Angels or demons—you all look the same when the wind has eaten you."

He staggered, almost falling, but pulled himself up, took another sip, coughed, and wiped his chin. "Not today, bastards. Not with me. I'll keep riding until your dust is thicker than my blood."

The visions danced, blurred, angels and demons mingled, until everything was just dust, dust with faces, dust with whispering voices.

Billy laughed hoarsely, crookedly, sickly. "Even my hallucinations have dust in their throats. Welcome to the club."

The wind whipped, tearing the shadows apart. Only he, his horse, his bloody shirt, and the endless horizon remained.

And Billy rode on, half dead, half laughing, all damned – but still faster than all the angels who came for him.

The sun sank, and the steppe turned black. The wind grew colder, biting, carrying the dust through the air like needles. Billy hung halfway in the saddle, the horse dragging him on until a dark outline appeared—an old farmhouse, abandoned, crooked, half-swallowed by the dirt.

The horse stopped, snorting as if it knew this was the end of the ride. Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat redly into the dust. "Well," he muttered harshly, "at least a roof before the dust eats me."

He slipped from the saddle, almost fell, and caught himself with one hand on the fence. The wound ached, his shirt clung to his cold. Every step was a struggle, but he made it to the door. It hung crookedly, creaking as he pushed it open. Inside, it smelled of mold, dust, and old bones long forgotten.

Billy staggered inside, coughed, spat, drew his Colt, and slumped against the wall. He looked around—a rotten table, a few chairs overturned, cobwebs like curtains. No one, no voice, just the wind whistling through the cracks.

"Perfect," he grinned crookedly, "a palace for kings like me."

He toppled onto the floor, the Colt firmly in one hand, the bottle in the other. Blood seeped through the fabric, leaving dark stains on the wood.

His eyes were heavy, his head drooping. But still half asleep, he murmured, "I won't sleep without a weapon. Not even in the grave."

Then he fell away, half unconscious, half dreaming, while the wind continued to howl and the dust crept softly over him, as if testing his claim to Billy the Kid.

The gray dawn crept into the farmhouse, through cracks and holes in the roof, a light so faint it was more reminiscent of grave candles than sunlight. Billy lay on the ground, the Colt still in his hand, his fingers clenched around it as if he'd spent the night fighting ghosts.

He coughed, deep and heavy, spitting blood onto the floorboards. It was sticky, dark, almost black. His shirt was stiff as armor, his whiskey empty, his body heavy. But he was alive. That alone was a slap in the face to anyone who had hoped that the night would claim him.

He slowly straightened up, leaning on the table, which creaked under his weight. His gaze was blank, his eyes dead, but his mouth was grinning crookedly. "Come on," he muttered harshly, "one more day. You bastards had all night. But you screwed up again."

He walked to the door, staggering, his legs like lead, but every step a mockery. Outside, the wind was the same as always, only a little colder, as if apologizing for not having fetched him.

Billy stepped outside, coughed, spat, and wiped his chin. "Escape through the back door," he muttered, "and yet I'm back at the front. You can chase me, you can shoot holes in my stomach, you can put angels in my head—but in the end, I'll still wake up."

The wind took his name, carrying him further across the plain. No hallelujah, no prayer, only dust that knew: Billy the Kid was still there.

And Billy laughed, hoarse, sick, but genuine. The laughter of a man whom even the night hadn't been able to kill.

A laugh in the Galgenhof

The town smelled of rope. Even before Billy saw the first houses, the wind blew over the scent of hemp and cold sweat. He coughed, spat blood into the dust, and grinned crookedly. "Shit," he muttered, "those bastards mean business. Finally, a reception with decorations."

It stood on the outskirts of the city: the gallows. Freshly constructed, beams of light wood, still splintery, the noose neatly knotted. Not an old, rotten rope – a new one, proudly displayed. Men squatted beneath it, smoking, their eyes fixed on the horizon, as if waiting only for the one rider the wind would carry.

Billy approached slowly, the horse snorting, the colt hanging loose, his shirt stiff with old blood. People emerged from their houses, whispering, pointing. Children were dragged back, women held kerchiefs over their faces, men spat in the dust as if they needed to gather courage.

"Kid!" shouted one of the deputies, his hand on his rifle. "Today is the end. No one's laughing anymore."

Billy coughed, laughed hoarsely, and wiped his chin. "Someone's always laughing, bastard. Even if it's just me."

The crowd murmured, tense, as if before a performance. The sheriff stepped out of the saloon, heavy-set, tired, but with a look that asked no questions. "Billy the Kid," he said loudly, "you're finished. The gallows court awaits."

Billy grinned crookedly, spat in the dust, and looked directly at the rope. "The end?" he whispered. "The end only begins when the wind forgets my name."

Then he laughed, a rough, sick laugh that echoed across the square like a curse – and the gallows itself seemed to sway, as if it had realized that it would not get its victim so easily.

They came from all sides: deputies with rifles, men with ropes, one with rusting handcuffs. Billy was still in the saddle, grinning crookedly, coughing, spitting blood into the dust. "Come on," he muttered harshly, "get me down before I fall on my own. That would be boring."

Four men grabbed him and dragged him from his horse. He fell hard to his knees, laughing so hoarsely that even the sheriff blinked briefly. "Shit," Billy grinned, "you touch me more tenderly than any whore in this dump."

The crowd laughed nervously, a few women screamed, and one of the deputies slammed his rifle butt into his back. Billy coughed, spat, and grinned again. "I'm still standing, bastard. I'm still standing."

They handcuffed him roughly, coldly, the iron rubbing against the open wound in his side. Billy winced, grimaced—and laughed. "It hurts more than your bullets. You should be blacksmiths, not deputies."

The men grew nervous the more he grinned. One whispered, "He's still laughing... he's still laughing..." Billy heard, raised his head, his eyes dead, his smile crooked. "Of course I'm laughing. You're dragging me into the yard, into your little theater. But I'm the only one here who already knows how it ends. You hang me, I cough, I spit—and the wind carries my name away. You'll forget your own before my rope is dry."

The crowd murmured, and the sheriff growled, "Shut up, kid." Billy laughed even louder, coughing. "Shut up? Sheriff, I've had nothing but a shut up for years. And that's killed more bastards than your rope ever will."

They dragged him into the yard. The gallows was close, the rope hanging like a grinning neck. Billy stepped into it, the chains clanged, the blood sticky. He spat in the dust, grinned—and laughed. Loudly. Sickly. Endlessly.

And the crowd realized: They had caught him, but not broken him.

They led him up the steps, two men on the left, two on the right, as if they were afraid he might jump off their plank like a damned wizard. Billy went along, calmly, coughing, blood dripping from his shirt onto the wood. Every step a stain, every stain a mockery.

The rope was waiting at the top, neatly knotted and heavily coated with tar to prevent it from breaking. The executioner stood there, masked, but his hands trembling. Billy grinned crookedly, looking him straight in the face. "Nice knot," he murmured, "but I bet your wife is better at tying it."

The crowd laughed briefly, nervously, until the sheriff yelled, "Quiet!" But the calm wasn't real—it was fragile, full of fear.

The executioner lifted the noose and placed it around Billy's neck. The hemp rope scratched and smelled of sweat and dust. Billy coughed, laughed hoarsely, and spat on the floor. "Fits," he said roughly, "feels like a damn scarf. Only not as stylish."

The deputies stepped back, one crossing himself. Billy saw it and grinned. "Are you praying for me now, bastard? Or for yourself? If heaven's even listening, it's laughing at you, not me."

The crowd murmured again, a whisper like wind through dry grass. A few women covered their ears, children squeezed their eyes shut. But they heard it nonetheless—that laughter, sick, crooked, full of dust.

The sheriff stepped forward, his face hard. "One more word, Kid, and I'll shut your mouth." Billy grinned wider, his eyes dead, his voice ragged. "Stuff him with what, Sheriff? With your guts? That's thinner than my blood."

A murmur went through the crowd. The sheriff growled and signaled to the executioner. But even as the noose was tightened, Billy continued to laugh—laughing so hard that even the gallows seemed afraid to go through with the job.

The sheriff took a step forward, his hands firmly on his belt, his voice loud, almost roaring. "Quiet! Everyone! This is the end of Billy the Kid! Today the devil himself dies, and we have the rope that holds him!"

The crowd cheered briefly, but it was hollow, forced, more noise than belief. Billy coughed, spat, and grinned crookedly. "The devil?" he muttered harshly, his voice full of scorn. "Shit, Sheriff, if I were the devil, you'd be my driver by now."

Laughter erupted, not loud, not brave—more nervous, like a gasp for air. The sheriff growled, raised his fist as if to hit Billy, but he didn't dare. Perhaps because he knew that even hitting the bastard would only make him seem stronger.

Billy looked out at the crowd, his eyes dead, his grin wide. "Look at you," he cried, "you're standing here, sweating, shaking, waiting for me to die, because you think the rope will bring you peace. But when I fall, you'll hear my laughter in every gust of wind, in every damned speck of dust that crawls down your throat."

The crowd fell silent, the whispers died away. Even the wind briefly held its breath.

Billy coughed again, blood on his lips, and laughed hoarsely, a sound so off-key it filled the gallows yard like a funeral bell. "You want peace?" he cried. "You'll never get peace. Not with me. Not as long as you're breathing."

The sheriff stepped back, pale, his hand on his Colt, unable to draw it. And the crowd unconsciously backed away a bit, as if Billy had already won—with nothing but his damned laughter.

Billy stood there, the rope around his neck, his hands tied, his shirt covered in blood—and laughed. Not like someone who was afraid. Not like someone who was surrendering. But like someone who already knew the joke before the punchline came.

He coughed, spat on the ground, and looked at the crowd, one by one. "All of you," he growled harshly, "you're standing here because you hope I hang. But not one of you would have had the guts to pull the rope yourself. You need the rope, you need the sheriff, you need the crowd. Alone, you're nothing. Less than dust."

A man in the crowd shouted, "Shut up, kid!" But his voice trembled. Billy grinned crookedly, pointing at him with his bound hands. "You there—you were pissing in the dust last week when I was just riding past the saloon. And now you want to see me hanged? Coward. Bastard."

Laughter, nervous, but it was there. Billy laughed along, hoarse, sickly. "And you," he pointed with his chin at a woman, "your husband is lying in the dirt because he thought he was faster. You cried, now you're standing here hoping the rope will comfort you. But it will leave you as empty as his grave."

The woman gasped, pulling the child closer to her. The crowd murmured, restless, angry, but also full of fear.

Billy coughed, blood trickling down his chin, but his voice cut like glass. "You're here because you want someone to die to remind you how small you are. I'm

young, I don't have a beard, and yet you die faster than me. That's your damn problem."

Then he laughed again, loudly, crookedly, so that the gallows creaked as if it itself would break under the weight of this laughter.

And the crowd sensed: They weren't witnessing an end. They were extras in Billy's damned performance.

The sheriff was sweating, his face pale, his fingers twitching at his belt. He saw the crowd, saw how Billy had already had them in his grasp—with nothing but blood, dust, and that damned laugh. He raised his hand, his voice hard yet brittle. "Enough! Down with the trap! Now!"

The executioner nodded, hesitantly, his eyes wide. Billy felt the board vibrate beneath his boots, the rope tighten. But instead of falling silent, he laughed. Loud, hoarse, sickly. So loud that the crowd flinched as if a gunshot had ripped through the air.

"You bastards!" Billy screamed, his voice rough and dusty. "You think I'm hanging and then you're free? Shit! I'm hanging, and you still hear me! In the wind, in the dust, in your fucking sleep!"

The crowd backed away, a few screamed, one stumbled and ran away. The sheriff yelled, "Quiet, damn it! This is an act of law!"

Billy coughed, spat, and grinned crookedly. "Law?" he wheezed. "There's no law here. Only dust. Only bullets. And my laughter."

Then the sheriff gave the signal. A blow, the board cracked—and Billy fell. The rope tightened, his body jerked, his neck didn't crack immediately. He hung, coughing, wheezing—and laughing. He was still laughing, with his last breath, choking, spitting, a sound that ate into his bones.

The crowd froze. They wanted to see a dead boy. Instead, they heard one who, even in his rope, laughed like a bastard whom even death couldn't take seriously.

The gallows creaked, the rope stretched taut, Billy hung there, his body twitching, his shirt red, his boots pounding against the wood. And as his breath caught, it still came—that laughter. Choking, gasping, blood-soaked, but real. A laughter that wouldn't stop, even as his eyes glazed over.

The crowd stood silent, no one cheered, no one clapped. Women held their children back, men swallowed hard, deputies wiped the sweat from their brows. They had thought they would find peace in this courtyard, justice, perhaps even salvation. Instead, a laughter echoed above them that would haunt them in their sleep.

The sheriff stood pale, his hand still on his belt, unable to say anything. He had dropped the rope, but not Billy's ghost. None of them could grasp that.

The wind caught the laughter, tore it apart, and carried it across the square, between the houses, into the alleys. It sounded as if it were coming from all directions at once, as if even the dust were giggling.

The people retreated, one by one, until the gallows yard was empty. Only the body hung, heavy, but the laughter hung with it—an echo that never died.

An old man murmured, "This is not an end. This is a curse." And he was right. The courtyard had become not a place of justice, but a cursed place where death itself was laughed at.

And so Billy remained, a boy, a ghost, a bastard – and his laughter floated on, louder than any prayer, stronger than any law.

Horse thieves, childish people

The wind carried him onward as if the gallows had never known him. Billy rode again, coughing, spitting, his shirt even darker, his face as pale as dust itself. In the next settlement, they said he was dead, had died on a rope. But there he was—alive, laughing, a ghost with a Colt.

On the way, he met them: a gang of five young bastards, barely older than children, but with horses they certainly didn't deserve. The animals were freshly groomed, the colts cheap, their faces stupid.

Billy grinned crookedly and looked at them. "Horse thieves," he muttered harshly. "Children with too much dust in their brains."

The leader, a snot-faced brat with no beard, grinned broadly as if he'd just eaten the world. "You're Billy the Kid? The one they wanted to hang?"

Billy coughed, spat, and wiped his chin. "Hanging, yes. Wanting, yes. Skilled, no."

The boys laughed, nervous, uncertain. They held their Colts crookedly, their fingers too tense. Billy saw immediately – they weren't killers. They were kids with guns, and kids with guns were dumber than anything else.

"You steal horses?" he asked harshly. "And then? Do you ride them to paradise?"

The leader grinned, showing half-rotted teeth. "We'll ride until no one can catch us."

Billy laughed hoarsely, coughing in between. "Shit, guys. You don't even know how to tie a rope and you're already dreaming of the gallows. You'll be dead before you've even eaten dust."

The boys looked at each other, uneasy. One whispered, "Maybe we should..." But the leader growled, drew his Colt, and pointed it at Billy.

Billy grinned crookedly, his eyes dead. "Come on, kid. Show me if you can outpace my cough."

The kid with the Colt held the gun so tightly that his hand trembled. Billy saw it, grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat a reddish-brown spit into the dust. "If you're shaking like that, boy," he muttered harshly, "the worst you'll do is hit your own balls."

The others laughed, briefly and nervously, but the leader growled and raised his weapon higher. "Shut your mouth, you old bastard. I'm faster than you."

Billy coughed, laughing hoarsely, his eyes dead. "Faster? Boy, I cough faster than you breathe."

And then he did it. Not a twitch, not a tremble. A cough, a shot—and the leader's Colt flew away, along with three fingers. The boy screamed, fell into the dust, and writhed.

The others stared at him, their mouths open. Two drew clumsily, panicked. Billy's hands were already there—two shots, two boys lying in the dust, their Colts still warm in their hands.

The fourth boy stumbled back, almost falling off his horse. "Shit, Kid... we were just..."

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and wiped blood from his chin. "Just what? Playing? You're not playing cowboys and Indians here. You're playing death. And death never plays fair."

The last one dropped his weapon, his hands raised, his eyes filled with fear. "Please... we just wanted horses."

Billy spat in the dust and stepped over the leader, who was still screaming. "Horses, idiots, all the same filth. You're not riding into the sunset, you're riding into the dust. And I'm the dust that eats you."

He turned around, walked to his own horse, coughed, and laughed hoarsely. "Three down, two to go. Learn or die. I don't give a shit."

And the wind carried his laughter on, while the children realized that they should never have played along.

The two survivors were still standing there, pale, trembling, their Colts long since buried in the dust. One was helping the mutilated leader up, who was screaming and bleeding, the other stared after Billy as if he were the devil himself.

Billy swung himself into the saddle, coughed, and spat a dark red spit into the wind. "Still there?" he growled harshly. "I let you live. That's more than you deserve."

But instead of fleeing, the two mounted their horses and rode after him. Unsteady, unsteady, like dogs not knowing whether they would follow or be eaten.

Billy laughed hoarsely and turned in the saddle. "You idiots," he muttered, "now you want to be my shadows? Do you think you're learning anything? Do you think death takes apprentices?"

One boy cried out, "Please, Kid! We don't want to die! We want to learn to be like you!"

Billy coughed, wiped his chin, and grinned crookedly. "Like me? You're too stupid to die, and that's the only thing I really know how to do."

He drew his Colt, didn't even aim, and shot into the ground in front of their horses. The animals reared, the boys screamed, barely able to stay in the saddle. "Listen," Billy growled, "if you keep following me, I'll shoot you. Not out of hate, not out of fun—just because I don't have room for children in the dust."

The boys looked at him, their faces covered in dust and fear. Then they stopped, let him go, and watched him disappear into the wind.

Billy coughed, spat, and laughed hoarsely. "You're silly kids," he muttered. "The dust will eat you anyway. I'm just the appetizer."

And so he rode on, alone, as always, leaving two children behind – too young to die, too stupid to live.

Billy stopped, the horse snorted, and the two children—too young to truly hate, too old to still be innocent—crawled into the muddy tracks. Their horses stood crooked in the shadows, their eyes wide, their flanks trembling. Behind them lay the rest of the gang: a small, mutilated heap, and a leader with blood on his fingers who could no longer form a word that didn't taste of pain.

Billy turned, watched them go. The wind took their screams and turned them into rags, fluttering like the flags of a house that had long since burned down. He rode slowly toward them, his hand loose on the girth, as if he were only scrutinizing them, not judging them. Perhaps it was scorn, perhaps it was mercy—most of the time he couldn't tell the difference. Mercy cost too much. Scorn was quicker to come by.

He stopped the horse and dismounted, the saddle creaking, the wood groaning. The two boys dug their heels into their horses' flanks, as if that would keep their fear within reach. The leader, wailing with severed fingers, looked like a puppeteer without strings. He leaned on one hand, the other clutching the reins, as if trying to hold on to something that no longer belonged to him.

"Look at you," Billy said calmly, and it sounded like a knife clanging into a bowl. "Are you proud? Are you still riding proudly, even though three of your friends now have more earth than names?"

The leader snorted, clapped his hand over his mouth, and tried to stand up straight. "We... we just wanted to... learn." The words came out like teeth grinding against cement. "We didn't want to die."

Billy laughed, a short, harsh sound, like a door slamming shut. "Learn? What did you want to learn, you children? How to steal a horse? How to hold a knife? How to scream loud enough for the wind to take it? Those are things no school teaches. Those are things a damn life burns."

He approached, his boots crunching in the dust. The blood on his shirt still glistened, dried, a banner. "You thought you were cowboys in the movies, huh? You think if you steal horses, you ride into sunsets and everyone claps." He looked one of the boys straight in the eye—no quirks, no pathos, just raw curiosity. "But the sun doesn't step on your shoulder when you fall. It burns your pupils out so you can't even dream."

The younger man pressed his lips together as if he wanted to keep from crying. He was less a man than a thought, half-formed from stupidity and fear. "You're a bastard," he hissed suddenly, a voice like a broken mirror. "You do this because you enjoy it."

Billy raised his eyebrow. "Fun?" he repeated. "Fun is a luxury. Pretend you've had some, and then we'll talk." He put his hand in his pocket, pulled out a piece of wire that was more like a rag than a tool, and twisted it between his fingers. "You were never the greedy ones. You were never the brave ones. You were just too lazy to get your hands dirty. Now your hands are dirty enough, aren't they?"

The leader cursed, gasping, but the sound was hollow. "You... you could have taught us."

"Teach?" Billy snorted. "I'm not a teacher." He spat in the dust, the red curling in the grooves. "What were you supposed to learn? How to be fast? You don't learn that from me. You learn that when you crawl out of the grave every morning and still remain funny. When you eat bullets and laugh in their faces. When you see friends fall and still keep drinking."

He stepped back again, sat on the fence post, his hands on the butt. "Listen, you two. You think you can rub yourselves against me like a stone and then you'll be polished. That's not happening. You'll just turn into shit on my boots. You understand that? You're not the weapon. You're not the legend. You're just annoying pebbles."

The older of the two began to sob, a quiet, helpless sound that none of the men around him could answer. There was something like remorse in his face, but not enough to save him.

Billy looked at him for a long time. Then he briefly withdrew his hand and grabbed one of the horses by the neck. He hit the animal, not hard, so it knew it had a master, not a thief. "Ride home," he said, his voice cold. "Tell your mothers that the sun is honest: it cooks meat, it makes dust, it doesn't lie. Tell your fathers that there's nothing to teach except what you give yourselves: a few stitches, a bit of survival, and the ability to at least stop dying so stupidly."

"And what about us?" whispered the leader, half beggar, half murderer, his eyes flashing with panic. "What about the others? We can't..."

Billy looked at him for a long time, like a judge who already knew the verdict. "The others are gone. They're learning their lesson in dust. You two have a choice: Ride home and live the rest of your lives like greedy thieves counting their breath, or ride into the wilderness and try what you always wanted—a quick death. I guarantee nothing. I can only say: Anyone who tells you life rewards stupidity is lying. Anyone who tells you it punishes them is right."

The boy was now crying openly, sobbing so hard that the wind carried the sounds to the city. The shame and fear were suddenly visible, heavy as wet lambskin.

Billy threw the wire away, looking thoughtful, as if considering whether to teach them something else—perhaps a truth that didn't come with lead. Something like: You can't pay everything by force; some bills you only have because you didn't dare them when you had time. But then he laughed softly, a ragged sound. "Nah. Not today."

He mounted again, his boots pawing the ground, the horse tossing its head, restless. "Go home. Walk the planks of your little life clean. And don't curse me when you're consumed by your own stupidity. Run while you still have legs."

The two climbed uncertainly into the saddle. They kept their eyes downcast, remorse clinging to their lips like dust. They rode off, slowly, unsteadily, as if they were dog catchers releasing a timid animal.

Billy watched them go, the wind tugging at his shirt, feeling the world carry him on. A thought slipped through his mind, so quiet it was almost not there: Maybe, he thought, I'm just a bigger kid with a faster gun. Just another kind of idiot, taking more from life to prove he's worth something.

He shook off the thought, like water clinging to oil stains. The sneer was simpler. The laughter was quick salt water on old flesh. He pulled his hat lower

and sat in the saddle, eyes fixed on the road. "Childhoods," he muttered, more to himself than to anyone else. "The dust will take you whether you like it or not. I'm just the one who shows you what it feels like first."

Then he rode on, and the sun sent shadows behind him, as hard and sharp as knives.

He rode on because he always rode on. Because stopping meant hearing the voices, and the voices were like holes in his head. They gnawed; they whispered, condemned, told him he should have fallen long ago. So he rode. The horse beneath him was more habit than animal—a bundle of muscle that swallowed dust, that knew when to bound, when to push. Billy protected it like a cloak against loneliness.

The road ahead led to another village, made up of planks, hopelessness, and a shop that knew more about credit than supplies. He could see the inhabitants from afar: gaunt, suspicious, like people who had been fried by the sun and forgotten their hearts. A small chapel, crooked like a chewed bone, stood at the edge, the cross half-eaten by the wind. The people there had never known anything but bad times and even worse weather.

Billy rode into town, his shirt still dark, his breath ragged, a cough catching in his chest like a bad tune. He tied his horse to the post outside the saloon, stepped inside, and sat down as if it were his place from birth. The piano player wasn't there; the piano had a missing key and two missing intestines from guys who'd drunk too much, but it half-functioned, like a person still trying. The barman's beard was gray, his eyes pale—a man who had seen the world turn men to dust.

"Whiskey," Billy muttered, his voice like an old saw. The barman put down a bottle without asking any questions. The men in the corners whispered, each a judge, each a coward; the children behind the curtains stared like little judges with nothing to judge but their breath.

A guy at the other table—a farmer, poorly plucked, but with hands that still knew earth and purpose—stared too long. Finally, he stood up, his voice rough with dust. "I lost horses last week," the man said, not looking. "They're gone, just gone. You ride here, and the world takes everything from us." It wasn't an accusation; it was more like an exhalation of pain.

Billy spat, laughing hoarsely. "And you want me to hurt? To give back what I never took?" He saw through the man as if through a door. "You want blood?"

You'll get blood. But you won't get it on demand. You'll get it when the world sends it to you."

The farmer's eyes narrowed. "You're a horse-stealer, aren't you?"

"Some call it taking when you need it," Billy replied. "Others call it a lifestyle. And still others call it filth. You can call it whatever you want." He emptied his glass, placed the bottle on the table, and pushed it slightly toward the farmer—a mock gift. "Take a sip, maybe it'll help you remember."

The farmer sniffed and shook his head. "It's not about me," he said nervously. "It's about the children. They have nothing to eat. I tried to keep the cattle together. They're gone. They're gone. And you ride through, laughing like nothing's wrong."

Hell may have been great, but it was also just: it gave everyone what they deserved. Billy thought of how they gave the wind names, how they sang songs to it so it would carry on the name. He thought of how the horse thieves had wanted to hear the wind, to feel it on their flanks like a reward. And here was the man who lost, uninterested in accountability. He wanted food, wanted peace, just wanted the children not to go to sleep hungry.

"My answer?" Billy said, running his thumb over his lip where blood had dried. "My answer is always the same: I take what I can get. And sometimes I give it back." He smiled crookedly—a smile that held no joy. "But not today. Today is not a day for giving."

The farmer stamped his foot, his anger not reaching his voice. "Then you'll live like a thief."

"And you live like a man who believes words change the weather," Billy said. "Do you think your 'why' changes who comes to my table? Do you think your pain is a currency I recognize?" He picked up the bottle and pressed it to his mouth. "Listen: I could give you back what you're seeking, straight back. But my life isn't a bank book for the morals of people who cling to their children with trepidation."

The conversation was like a knife to the inside, both of them knowing the words carried more weight than a bullet. And then, as always, one of them stood up and hurried to the door as if the handhold were a prayer. Outside, there was a commotion—horses prancing nervously, voices rising in shrill

voices. Billy jumped to his feet, his Colt at his hip, his heart as cold as every stone in the path.

He ran to the door and saw two men dragging a horse into the alley—an animal still hot from someone else's property. One was young, too young for the rage inside him; the other, older, his eyes empty, like someone who knows what it's like to freeze. "Shit," Billy cursed. "Childhood again?"

At the mention of "child's-brains," a stranger raised his head—a pale guy with a note on his hat, as if he'd lost a job he never wanted anyway. "Stop!" he shouted. "It's mine! You can't just take it, man!"

Billy approached, his pace slow, like a man who's seen a lot and scared of little. "Yours? Your horse? Or your heart? Because both look similar—tired."

The stranger clenched his hands, a curse pouring from him. "Do you know who you are? You are cursed. You are..."

"A name," Billy said, softly, like a knife, "that the wind knows." He stood before them, the sun at his back, his shirt hard with old red. The guy trembled. Greed slid into his eyes like dirt.

"Give it here," said the older man, his voice devoid of tenderness. "You've had enough."

Billy laughed, a harsh sound. "Enough? Enough is a fancy word. I never have enough. Maybe I just want to see you curse it." He grabbed, suddenly, quickly, like the hand that takes a cup when the water is too hot. The first shot went off, not long, no drama. A whoop, a horse shy, then silence. The stranger sank into the dust, his head in an ungodly position. The second man gasped, grabbed, fell.

The alley shimmered. Billy stood there, the Colt smoking in his hand, the wind carrying the scent of blood like a banner. He looked at the men retreating. "You buy horses with dirt and call it robbery. You call it survival when it's earned. But you know what? Your survival stinks. It stinks of cowardice." He spat in the dust, wiped his hand on his trouser leg.

In the lively, shifting world of the small town, they now saw him not just as a thief. They saw him as an answer, one that came not with law, but with a rusty knife called truth. The hour passed, and people gathered like crows after the dead. Women covered their children, men disappeared into cracks and doorways.

Billy saddled his horse again, dusty and heavy. He thought of the farmer's children, of the hungry face, of the angry lines in the eyes of those who would never learn that you can't have it all. For a moment—a brief, crooked moment—something like regret flickered across his face. But he wasn't made for regret. Regret is only useful in stories, and he didn't live in stories. He lived in dust and in the serenity of a man who'd rather laugh while he stings.

"I showed you what happens," he murmured as he took the reins. "Not because I find it funny. But because I can." Then he urged the horse on. The hooves pounded, the wind took his name, the last screams faded like bad songs. Behind him remained a town with empty eyes and a new, rotten rumor: Billy the Kid had passed through, like a storm that knew no guilt, only effect.

And before him lay the steppe. Long, empty, relentless—like a mirror reflecting every lie. Billy pushed his hat lower, laughing softly, not out of joy, but out of the certainty that for a moment he was king again—over dust, over fear, over childish minds who only thought mine were learning. He was nobody's hero. He was just a boy who pulled faster than most, who laughed while people fell, and who rode on because stopping was the end, and he couldn't stand the end yet.

Night came, black and heavy, the sky hung low like a tattered tent. Billy rode alone, his horse tired, his bottle empty. The wind tasted of iron, and the dust hadn't yet forgotten the faces of the children—their screams, their stupidity, their pitiful stumbling in the dirt.

Billy coughed, spat blood into the wind, and laughed hoarsely. "Childhoods," he muttered, "the land is full of you. You grow faster than cacti and die even faster. And yet you think death makes you men."

He stopped at a small campsite, little more than a burnt fire pit and a few bones someone had left behind. He sat down, laid his Colt beside him, pulled open his shirt, and saw the wound, which was still oozing. No wonder he tasted like rust.

"Perhaps," he said quietly, "I'm just a bigger kid with sharper tools." The thought was a fleeting shadow, but it stuck. He shook it away, took a swig from the empty bottle, and pretended.

In the distance, a coyote barked, lonely and hungry. Billy grinned. "Yeah, go ahead and cry. We're brothers. Both greedy, both alone. But I'm laughing, you're not."

He lay down in the dust, his Colt at his chest, his eyes on the sky. Stars flickered, cold and unimpressed. "Just look down," he murmured, "look at a boy laughing in the dirt while the world forgets him."

And then he laughed again, hoarsely, harshly, until the dust swallowed it and the wind carried it far – as always.

Morning came like a slap in the face. Gray, dusty, cold. Billy sat up, coughed, and spat blood into the ash pile of the old fire. His body was heavy, the wound throbbed, his throat burned—but he was alive. And that was more than many of yesterday's victims could claim.

He saddled his horse and briefly stroked the animal's neck. "One more day, old fellow. A few more miles of dust, and maybe something warm in the belly." The horse snorted, as if it knew the promise was empty. But it carried him on anyway.

The rumor would linger behind him. The two who had survived would talk—oh yes. They'd tell every bar, every saloon, every godforsaken place about Billy. How he'd killed three of their brothers like flies, how he'd maimed the leader and laughed while he did it, how he'd spit in their faces while they begged. Maybe they'd also make up that he'd hung in the gallows and kept riding anyway. And the more they told it, the bigger it would get.

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and wiped his chin. "Legends, bastards," he muttered. "You make them for me, while I leave you nothing but dust."

The sun rose higher, burning on his back. Every step the horse took kicked up dust, and in the dust hung his laughter, his coughs, his curses. He was carried along, onward, onward—faster than any law, harder than any sheriff.

And so Billy rode into the day, alone, bleeding, laughing. Behind him were children who survived to spin fairy tales. Before him was the steppe that knew only dust.

A boy, a bastard, a ghost who fed the wind.

Whiskey makes you brave until it's empty

The saloon smelled of sweat, old beer, and despair—exactly the mix Billy liked. He pushed open the door, stepped inside, and immediately coughed, as if the dust here had decided to lodge in his throat like an old friend. His shirt was stiff with blood, his face pale, but his grin was like a knife.

Eyes followed him. Men holding cards suddenly held their breath. Women who had been laughing fell silent. Even the piano player stopped hitting the wrong notes. Everyone knew who was walking in: the ghost the children had outlived, the boy who had laughed at the gallows himself.

Billy shuffled to the bar and slammed his fist down, making the glasses clink. "Whiskey," he growled, "and finish the bottle right now before I do." The barman nodded, hesitantly, as if afraid even the bottle might be offended at having to touch Billy's lips.

Billy took the first sip like medicine, coughed afterward, and wiped his chin. "Shit," he muttered, "that burns worse than any bullet." Then he laughed hoarsely, as if that were precisely the point.

A man at the card table shouted, "Billy! They say whiskey makes you brave!" Billy turned his head, his eyes dead, his smile crooked. "Brave, yes. Until it's empty. After that, you'll be the little dogs you always were."

Laughter, nervous, off-key. Billy grinned and took another sip. "Whiskey's not a hero, you bastards. It's just a crutch, and most of you are already limping before you drink."

He leaned back, bottle in hand, Colt at the ready. "I don't drink to be brave," he murmured, "I drink to make the sight of you more bearable."

The laughter died down. No one knew whether it was a joke or a judgment.

Billy sat at the bar, his bottle half empty, his eyes glassy but not faint. Every sip was like fire burning through his gut, but he grinned crookedly, as if it made him younger. "Screw water," he muttered, "only people who think they have to wake up tomorrow drink that."

They whispered at the card table. Three guys with faces like old shoes, and a fourth, too young, too nervous to belong. They spoke quietly, but the whiskey sharpened Billy's ears. He heard one say, "They say he'll still be laughing when

he dies." Another: "Legend. More ghost than man." The boy whispered, "Maybe just a man. Maybe you can try."

Billy laughed loudly, making the bottles clink. "Taste it?" he shouted. "Taste it is for women while they eat cake. You want to know? Then come on, you bastards."

The men flinched. The boy jumped up, his face red, his hands shaking. "I'm not a coward!" he cried. His voice broke, but he took a step toward Billy.

Billy grinned broadly, coughed, and spat blood into the spittoon. "Not a coward, huh? Then you're an idiot. Courage and stupidity are twins, boy—they both drink from the same trough."

The boy pulled the cards out of his pocket and held them up. "Card game. If I win, you won't call me boy anymore."

Billy laughed hoarsely, wiping his chin. "Card game? Shit, kid, I don't need cards to know you're losing."

The crowd murmured in anticipation. The innkeeper ducked as if seeking shelter.

Billy stood up, swaying, but with a grin that outshone everything. "Come on, bastard. Cards or bullets—make up your mind. The whiskey's almost empty anyway."

The table was sticky, the cards greasy from hands that had known more dust than soap. Billy sat down, the bottle beside him, his Colt within reach. The boy across from him swallowed, tugged on his vest as if it would make him taller.

"Sit down," Billy growled, "but don't think the chair makes you a man."

The boy laid down the cards, trembling but determined. "We'll play fair," he said, his voice too high.

Billy coughed, spat in the dust, and laughed hoarsely. "Fair? Bastard, I'm Billy the Kid. Fair is a word for priests and widows. I play how I want."

The first cards went out. The boy was lucky, a pair of jacks. He grinned, too broadly, too early. Billy saw it, sipped his whiskey, and calmly laid down his cards—nothing special, just a ten.

"I'll lead," murmured the boy.

Billy grinned crookedly and coughed. "You're not leading anything. You're a child who thinks the first drop of rain turns it into a storm."

The second round. The boy was dealt an ace, his hands shaking, sweat dripping. Billy saw it, took his time, drank, and wiped his chin. He laid down two kings.

The boy cursed and slammed his hand on the table. "Fraud!"

Billy laughed loudly, hoarsely, a cough interspersed. "Cheating? Shit, kid. Just because you lose doesn't mean the cards love me more. They just sense who has the dirt in their blood."

The crowd laughed nervously, expectantly. The innkeeper ducked lower.

The boy jumped up and ripped the cards off the table. "I won't let myself be fooled!"

Billy remained seated, grinning broadly, eyes dead. "Then stand, bastard. But when you stand, stand properly—otherwise, I'll fall into your grave faster than you can see your ace."

The boy's hand jerked toward the Colt. The crowd held its breath.

The boy's fingers twitched on the handle like the wings of a dying fly. He wanted to show courage, but his trembling betrayed him. The crowd ducked, hands on their chairs, someone quietly called out a prayer. The barman was already reaching for a bottle, not to serve, but to seek cover behind.

Billy remained seated, one hand on his glass, the other loosely on his Colt. His grin was crooked, his breath was ragged, blood glistened at the corner of his mouth. "Come on, boy," he muttered harshly, "show me if your courage can outpace my cough."

The boy raised the gun, too quickly, too clumsily. A shot rang out, hitting the ceiling, splintering wood. At the same moment, Billy's Colt fired, steady, dry, and definitive.

The boy fell backward, pulling the chair with him, the cards flying across the room like white feathers. A red hole appeared in the middle of his forehead, his eyes still open, but empty.

The crowd froze. Not a breath, not a whisper. Only Billy coughed, spat blood into the spittoon, and grinned crookedly. "Screw it," he muttered, "the whiskey was faster than him."

He looked around; the guests ducked their heads; no one dared to look at him. "That's how it works," he said hoarsely. "Whiskey makes you brave until it's empty. Then you're just dead-eyed children."

He downed the rest of the bottle and stood up, his Colt still smoking. His grin was wide, sick, and unbroken. "Remember this, bastards. Courage isn't drunk. Courage is shot."

Then he stepped out of the saloon, his Colt loose, his breathing heavy, and the laughter echoed behind him like a curse that no one dared to interpret.

Outside, the night was cool, but the dust still hung in the air like an old dog. Billy stepped out onto the street, bottle tilted in his hand, boots shuffling, Colt still warm. He coughed, spat dark red on the porch planks, and laughed hoarsely, as if it were all just a bad joke he'd told too many times.

He sat down on the steps in front of the saloon, tipped the bottle, and a drop ran into his mouth, burning down like fire that refuses to die. He shook the bottle, empty. Not a drop left. Only glass, laughing at him.

"Shit," he muttered, "there it goes—my courage in liquid form." He held the bottle up as if it were a lantern, then threw it into the dust. It shattered, a hard, snapping sound that sounded like applause.

Billy grinned, leaning back, his eyes half-closed. "What's left when the bottle's empty?" he asked into the night. "Just dust, coughing, and a laugh no one wants to hear."

The alley was quiet. No dog, no piano, just the wind whistling through the cracks in the houses. Billy could almost hear voices in it, old voices, men who had long since lain in the dirt, laughing more quietly, but laughing nonetheless.

"There you go," he whispered, "I'm not alone. The bottle is empty, but the spirits are drinking with me."

He rested the Colt on his thigh, his fingers wrapped around it as if it were his only pillow. Then he laughed again, hoarse, sick, but genuine—the laugh of a man who knew the whiskey hadn't saved him, but that even sober, he had no reason to remain silent.

The dust had thickened, as if the night itself had decided to suffocate Billy. He stood unsteadily, his boots heavy, his Colt loose in his hand. The whiskey still burned in his throat, but the bottle was dead, and without it, he heard things he would otherwise have washed away.

The alley swam, the shadows became faces. First one, then many. Men he'd killed. Kids, drunks, sheriffs, even the boy from a moment ago. Their eyes were empty, but their mouths were laughing. No noise, just that grinning, silent laughter that surrounded him like a damned song.

Billy coughed, wiped blood from his chin, and grinned back. "Well, bastards," he muttered harshly, "you look better dead than alive."

The figures approached, blurring into the dust. One, an old sheriff with half a face, raised his hand as if to grab him. Billy stepped toward him, Colt at the ready, his eyes glazed over. "Not so fast, old man," he growled, "you'll only get me when I'm ready to fall."

He pulled the trigger—a shot into the night, the dust exploded, the ghosts vanished, only the echo remained. Screams were heard from inside, someone yelled: "He's shooting shadows!"

Billy laughed, a hoarse, broken laugh that was more coughing than joy. "Shit," he said, "Shadows are faster than you. I'm just practicing."

He staggered on down the street, the ghosts at his back, his gun loose, his eyes dead. The whiskey was gone, his courage too—but the laughter remained. Always the laughter.

Morning came like a slap in the face. The sun pierced through the clouds, the dust still hung heavy in the air. Billy lay on his back in the middle of the road, his Colt still in his hand, empty of shots, his fingers clenched around it as if it were the last straw in this goddamn desert.

His shirt was sticky, his mouth tasted of rust and ash. He coughed, spat red-faced into the dust, grinning crookedly as if he'd ordered it all himself. The bottle lay beside him, shattered, the shards glittering in the sun like tiny fragments of hell. Not a drop left. No more courage in the glass. Only dust and his own breath.

A few people stood by the side of the road, whispering and gossiping. "He talked to ghosts all night," one said. "Laughing, shooting, screaming." A woman pulled her child away as if Billy were contagious like a disease.

Billy slowly stood up, swaying, leaning on the Colt. His smile was broad, broken, but unbroken. "Well," he croaked, "the whiskey's gone. But I'm still standing. Brave enough?"

No one answered. They backed away as if he were more dust than man.

Billy pulled his hat down over his face, kicked aside the broken bottle, and walked toward the horse. His gait was crooked, his lungs burned, his eyes blank. But he laughed again—hoarse, ragged, sickly, but it echoed across the street.

"Whiskey makes you brave," he murmured, "until it's empty. And me? All I need is dust."

Then he rode off, and the echo of his laughter remained, clinging to the walls of the city like blood on wood.

A song about nothing

The nearest saloon had no name. Just a rickety sign that squeaked in the wind, as if tired from its own weight. Billy rode into town, his shirt stiff, his Colt loose, his eyes dead. He coughed, spat, grinned. Everyone knew immediately who he was. Everyone pretended they didn't know.

Inside, it was dark, stuffy, smelling of sweat and cheap tobacco. A piano player was tinkling something that wasn't even a melody, more like a cough on the keys. Next to him sat a bard, one of those wandering bastards who sell songs like they're bread. He had a lute, a few stories in his eyes, and the audience listened to him because listening was easier than living.

"...and he laughed even in the rope," sang the guy, "Billy the Kid, the devil with the angel face..."

Billy laughed loudly, causing the song to stop. "An angel? Shit, I don't even look like an angel after three weeks in hell."

People turned around, the singer stared, his fingers trembling on the strings. "You... you are..."

"Yes, the bastard from your songs," Billy growled, "but you're doing it wrong. You're making poetry out of dirt. You sing of courage, but it was just whiskey."

You sing of freedom, but it was just dust. You sing of heroes, but it was just a boy who pulled faster because otherwise he would have been eaten."

The hall was silent. Billy stepped closer, spat next to the lute, and grinned crookedly. "Go on singing. Sing your song about nothing. But don't forget, bastard: I am nothing. And that's worse than anything you wish for."

Then he sat down, ordered whiskey, coughed, and laughed hoarsely. And the bard plucked the strings again—this time quieter, more brittle, a song without a hero, a song about dust.

Billy sat at the table, the whiskey in front of him, the bottle already half empty. He looked at the bard, who was nervously plucking the strings as if trying to recapture every note he had played earlier. The room was silent, only the clinking of glasses and Billy's coughing filled the air.

"Listen, singer," Billy croaked, his voice as rough as sandpaper. "You want to sing a song about me? Then sing the truth. Not that shitty heroic talk you bums put into every tune. Sing about dirt in your mouth, blood in your shirt, and whiskey that tastes like guts until it's empty."

The bard stared at him, sweat glistening on his forehead. "I... I don't know if people want to hear that."

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat in the dust. "People always want to hear lies. But lies only make you dumber. I'll give you the verses, bastard—and you play, or I'll break your damn lute over your head."

The crowd held its breath, the bard nodded hesitantly, struck a chord, uncertain, fragile. Billy raised his glass, drank, wiped his chin, and began to speak. No melody, just words, which he spat into the room as if they were nails:

"Dust in my throat, blood in my mouth, whiskey empty, and still a laugh. No angel, no hero, just a boy pulling faster because the world is slower. No ballad, no glory—just a song about nothing."

The bard followed, his fingers sounding thin, but carrying Billy's words. The room listened, silent, as if everyone were afraid to breathe.

Billy grinned wider, coughed, and laughed hoarsely. "See, bastard. That's what a song no one wants to sing sounds like—and that's exactly why it sticks."

The lute sounded off-key, but it was enough to fill the room. Billy's words hung in the air like smoke, heavy, bitter, and yet no one remained untouched. A few men at the card table swayed to the beat, women whispered, one even tapped his boot on the floor.

The bard played, his fingers unsteady, but he played. Billy's voice—rough, brittle, half cough, half laugh—became a rhythm that couldn't be ignored.

"Dust in my throat," Billy repeated, "blood in my shirt, whiskey empty—and still laughing."

One of the guests, a fellow with a face like an old mule, timidly chimed in: "No angel, no hero..." Another followed, louder: "...just a boy who pulls faster!"

The crowd began to murmur the chorus, a damned choir of dust-eaters who, only yesterday, were afraid to say his name out loud. They sang his "song about nothing"—a song without hope, without glory, only dirt and death.

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat redly into the spittoon. "Listen to you, bastards. Yesterday you were trembling when I rode into town, and today you're singing my obituary like drunken birds."

The laughter burst out of him, hoarse, sick, but genuine. "You're worse than dust itself—you cling to anything that sounds like a story. You want heroes, and if there aren't any, you sing about a bastard like me."

The crowd fell silent, ashamed; someone dropped their cards. The bard fell silent, the lute fell silent.

Billy drank, looked around, his grin as cold as the wind. "Remember this. You're singing a song about nothing. And nothing is all you'll ever get."

The bard held the lute in his lap as if it were suddenly a burden too heavy for him to bear. His fingers trembled, the crowd stared at him—no one dared to speak, no one dared to laugh. Billy grinned, coughed, and wiped the blood from his chin.

"Come on, minstrel," he growled, "go on. But this time sing it right. No angels, no heroes—just dirt, blood, and bastards. Sing that Billy the Kid isn't a man, but a cough in the dust. Sing that I'll spit in all your mouths while you pretend it's raining."

The bard swallowed hard. "I... I can't do this."

Billy pulled the Colt halfway out of its holster, the metal gleaming in the dim light. "Yes, you can. Or do you want me to teach you how to play with broken fingers?"

A murmur went through the room, the women covered their faces. The bard nodded shakily, struck a chord, brittle, off-key, but loud enough. He began to sing, haltingly, his voice filled with shame:

"Billy the Bastard, laughing in the dust, spitting blood into the light, no hero, no savior—just a boy breaking faces. No heaven, no glory, no God to hold him, just dust and a Colt to tell the truth."

The crowd held its breath. Some looked down, others couldn't look away. It wasn't a song anyone wanted to remember—but that's precisely why it stuck with them.

Billy laughed loudly, hoarsely, and slammed his fist on the table, shattering the glasses. "There you go, bastards! Your hero, your devil, your song. Nothing but a cough in the dust!"

He drank, wiped his chin, and grinned broadly. "And you know what? I sing it better than you."

Then he started singing, no melody, just a harsh roar: "I am nothing – and nothing will eat you faster than I will!"

Billy stood up, his chair tipping backward, crashing to the floor. Bottle in hand, Colt at his hip, eyes empty. His grin was wide, bloody, like a knife that hadn't been washed in too long.

"Come on, you bastards," he croaked, "sing! You heard it. The bard showed us how. A song about nothing—that's your damn hit!"

Silence. Only the wind creeping through the cracks in the boards. One of the card players coughed nervously, a woman pulled her child under the table.

Billy approached the bard, grabbed him by the collar, and pulled him halfway up. "Play!" he yelled, "or I'll smash your fucking lute and your head with it!"

The bard struck, the strings sounding off-key, out of tune, but they filled the room. Billy turned to the crowd. "Now you! Loud! So loud the dust can hear you!"

And one began. Then a second. Then more. Hesitantly, fragilely, but they sang:

"Billy the Bastard, laughing in the dust, spitting blood into the light, no hero, no savior – just a boy breaking faces..."

It sounded like a curse, not a song. But the voices grew louder, rushed, almost hysterical. Whiskey flowed, hands trembled, men pounded their fists on the tables in time. Women screamed the words as if they had to drown out the dust creeping into their throats.

Billy raised the bottle, drank, coughed, and laughed in between. "Yes, that's what it sounds like! A choir of cowards finally singing the truth!"

The notes became more off-key, the voices broke, it was more shouting than singing. A saloon full of dust, blood, and off-key music. Not a song about heroes. Not a song about hope. Just a song about nothing—exactly what Billy wanted.

The voices swelled, off-key, drunken, more shouting than melody. The bard's lute sounded like a dying man with strings, each clang a nail in the ground. Men bellowed along, women screamed, children cried. The saloon vibrated as if the dust itself had taken control.

Billy stood in the middle, bottle in one hand, Colt in the other. He laughed, coughed, spat redly on the floor, and stamped his feet to the beat, his boots pounding hard on the planks. "Louder!" he yelled, "otherwise the dust will think you're scared!"

Some actually sang, full of ecstasy, with voices long since broken. Others buckled, sank to their knees, and covered their ears. One collapsed, his face in the spittoon, his body trembling like a fish on dry wood.

Billy stepped up to him, looked down, and grinned. "That's what music sounds like, bastard. Your screeching fits the beat perfectly."

The crowd fluctuated between drunkenness and madness. One person threw over a chair, another ripped the blouse of a woman who screamed yet continued singing. The dust in the air grew thicker, heavier, every breath a cough.

Billy lifted the empty bottle and shook it like a bell. "See? Nothing in it! Just like your song! And yet you sing like you have God himself in your belly."

Then he laughed—loud, hoarse, so sickly that even the walls shook. Boards cracked, glasses shattered, the piano player ran out. It was no longer laughter, it was a thunderclap from a throat that had more blood than voice.

The people paused, fell silent, stared at him—and knew: they hadn't sung, they had shouted. A song about nothing that was more than any prayer.

The saloon smelled of blood, sweat, and burnt wood when Billy finally dropped the bottle. It shattered on the floorboards, and the last drop crawled through the dust like a dying beetle. Silence followed. Only his cough remained, dry, rattling, as if it itself were the last note of the damned song.

The guests slumped in their chairs, one snoring, another whimpering. The bard clutched his lute tightly, as if it could save him. His fingers were bloody from the strings, his gaze empty. No one sang anymore, no one dared to utter a word. They had screamed until their voices broke, until nothing remained but dust in their throats and an echo in their heads.

Billy strode through the crowd, everyone recoiling as if from an illness. He coughed, spat redly on the ground, and grinned crookedly. "A song about nothing," he muttered, "and yet you sing it like it's your last breath."

He pushed open the door and stepped outside. The sun was blinding, the wind whistled coldly. The dust immediately grabbed him, settling on his skin, creeping into his lungs. But this time the wind sounded different—as if it were carrying the words of the night, as if it had absorbed the song, note by note, scream by scream.

Billy laughed hoarsely, pulled his hat down over his face, and climbed into the saddle. "There you go," he said, "the dust sings better than you."

He urged his horse on and rode out. Behind him remained a saloon full of broken voices, empty bottles, and people who no longer knew whether they had been singing or cursing.

And before him the wind blew—buzzing, howling, a song about nothing. A song no one could forget.

Lost Brothers

The steppe lay silent, only the wind scratched across the dry grass, as if trying to bleed the earth dry. Billy rode slowly, his colt heavy on his hip, his throat filled with coughing. Behind him echoed songs no one wanted to hear. Before him, a horizon as empty as a drunken stomach.

He didn't think much, or he pretended not to. Thoughts were like bottles—the longer you sucked on them, the faster they were empty. But then, as if born from dust, they appeared: faces. Old comrades he'd long thought had been buried in the dirt.

He found them by the river, which barely held any water. Three figures, ragged, dirty, but alive. One coughed worse than he did, another had a leg that was more wood than flesh. The third, tall, with a beard made of hunger and resignation, was the first Billy saw.

"Billy," he said, without joy, without surprise. Just like a man recognizing a ghost.

Billy grinned, coughed, and spat into the dry grass. "Damn," he muttered, "so you're still alive."

"Life," growled the bearded man, "do you call this life?" He pointed to the emaciated horses, the rusty Colts, the empty look in the men's eyes. "We are brothers, Billy. But brothers without bread, without bullets, without a future."

Billy sat down, stepped closer, and studied them. "Brothers," he repeated, his grin crooked. "Funny. That word always sounds like a joke. Brother, until the hunger strikes. Brother, until the gun jams. Brother, until the dust separates you."

The men were silent, the wind laughed in their place.

"Lost brothers," Billy said quietly. "That's you. Maybe I am too."

They sat by the riverbed, where there was barely any water left, just a stinking puddle that refused to go away. One of the men, the one with the wooden leg, lit a cigarette, coughed, and laughed hollowly. "Remember, Billy? Back in Silver City, when we stole the merchant's entire cash register and you were still a baby face?"

Billy grinned crookedly, taking a drag from the whiskey flask he'd fished out of his pocket. "Milkface, yeah. And you used to shove it in my ear every night back then. Until I blasted it out of you. Two of you, anyway."

The men laughed, but their laughter was thin, like broken boards rattling in the wind. The bearded man looked at him for a long time. "We called ourselves brothers, Billy. But brothers don't mean anything. Brothers sold us out, brothers let us down. And in the end, everyone saved their own ass."

Billy coughed and spat into the grass. "Brothers are just bastards with a softer word. Everyone laughs at you until they notice you're moving faster. Then they call you a traitor."

The one with the wooden leg nodded and blew smoke into the air. "You're right, Billy. But still... the three of us survived. Together. Maybe we're the last ones who can still believe in brothers."

Billy grinned coldly, his gaze dead. "Or the last ones who are too stupid not to do it anymore."

The mood changed. The river fell silent, the men stared into the void. Somewhere a bird screeched, as if it knew the dust was about to drink blood again.

"Lost brothers," Billy muttered, "that's what you are. And so am I. But the difference? I still laugh about it."

The smoke hung heavy between them, mixed with the smell of old blood and river rot. The one with the wooden leg stubbed out his cigarette, staring at Billy as if he were a mirror he couldn't bear.

"Do you know what you are, Billy?" he began quietly, his voice shaky. "A bastard. Always have been. You call us lost brothers—but you lost us, not the other way around."

Billy coughed, laughed hoarsely, and spat into the muddy water. "I've lost you? Bastards, you've lost yourselves, even back when you shivered like children whenever a sheriff so much as tipped his hat."

The bearded man growled, "You're always laughing, Billy. But do you know how many of us aren't laughing anymore? Do you know how many are lying in the dust because you pulled the Colt faster—and because we had to take revenge afterward?"

Billy's grin sharpened, a hint of madness in his eyes. "I didn't tell anyone to ride with me. Each of you had a choice. And each of you screwed up."

The one with the wooden leg slammed his fist into the ground, sending dust flying. "Shit, you always talk like you're God! But you're just a boy who never learned what a brother is."

Silence. Only the wind.

Billy slowly raised the Colt, turned it over in his hand, looked at the barrel, then at the men. "Brother," he said quietly, "is the last word you say before someone dies."

The wooden-legged man instinctively reached for his weapon—too late. The bearded man tensed his fingers, but he too stopped. Dust settled over the scene like a blanket, and the air tasted of betrayal.

The wooden-legged one trembled, his hand still too close to his holster, too far from rest. The bearded one gritted his teeth, his eyes glowing like coals that had lain too long in the fire. Only the third, the sickly one, coughed into his hands, as if he had long known that nothing remained here but dust and death.

Billy grinned, coughed, and spat a deep red face into the sand. "Come on," he said quietly, "show me how brothers kill each other. It's the only truth the word still has."

The wooden-legged man raised his Colt, but too late. Billy's shot rang out, short, hard, and definitive. The man flew backward, his wooden leg cracking like dry branches, the dust swallowing his final curse.

The bearded man roared, pulled a trigger—a second shot, a third. Two men fired simultaneously. The bullets thudded into the wood, into the ground, one whistling just past Billy's ear. Billy's Colt barked again, and the bearded man staggered, falling into the dirty waterhole, which turned red like a rotten flag.

Silence. Only the wheezing of the sick man, who raised his hands, his eyes wide, panicked. "Billy... I... I didn't..."

Billy coughed, grinned crookedly, and pointed the barrel at him. "Sure, bastard. But you're still breathing, and that's reason enough."

The shot echoed across the dry riverbed. Three bodies lay there, dust covering them like a shroud. Billy put his Colt back in his holster, coughed so hard he almost collapsed, and laughed anyway.

"Lost brothers," he murmured, "now at least you're found. In the dust."

The three bodies lay there as if the dust itself had claimed them years ago. Blood seeped into the dry riverbed, mingling with the putrid sludge that could barely be called water. The smell was sweet, heavy, sticky—the smell of brothers who were no longer brothers.

Billy stood still for a while, his Colt still in his hand, his breath ragged. Every cough ripped open his chest, but he grinned, because he always grinned when the dust had swallowed three new voices. He looked down, shook his head. "Brothers," he muttered, "nothing but dust talking longer than it should."

He put his Colt away and walked over to his horse, which was pawing the ground restlessly. "Easy, old man," Billy said hoarsely, patting its neck. "They're singing along now. More noise, more ghosts. But they're quieter than the living, I swear."

He climbed into the saddle, the dust swirled, the sun burned mercilessly on the scene. No grave, no cross, no last words. Just three bodies that soon no one could tell apart.

As Billy rode off, he could already hear them. Quietly at first, then louder, a chorus in the wind. Voices whispering his name, sometimes full of hatred, sometimes full of laughter. The brothers were now part of it, part of the caravan of spirits that haunted him but also accompanied him.

Billy coughed, spat into the void, and grinned. "All right," he said, "then sing. Sing until the dust eats you. I can hear you louder than any bard anyway."

The horse carried him on, the sun at his back, the voices in the wind. And Billy laughed, rough, broken, as if this were all he had ever known: dust, ghosts, and a scorn that drowned out even death.

Evening came quickly, like a knife in the back. The sun set, the sky turned red, as if painting the brothers one last time before vanishing them completely. Billy set up camp on the edge of a dry slope, where the grass crackled like straw.

He didn't light a fire—not because he couldn't, but because the crackling in the wind brought enough voices. He sat there, his Colt on his thigh, coughing, wiping blood from his mouth, and listening.

And they were there. The voices. Quieter than whiskey, sharper than dust. At first just whispers—the brothers he'd left behind by the river. Then the old ones joined in: the boy in the saloon, the sheriff with half a face, the horse thieves, the children. A whole damned chorus, dragging out his name like a rusty saw.

"Billy...Billy...Billy..."

He laughed hoarsely, pulling his hat down over his face. "You sing like crows. But at least you're more honest than the bards. Your songs stink of blood, not glory."

He took a sip from the bottle he'd found somewhere, almost empty. Each sip burned, as if it only made the voices clearer. "You are my brothers," he murmured, "lost brothers, found spirits. And you better shut up, or I'll laugh you all back into nothingness."

The wind laughed along, whipping dust into his face. Billy coughed, spat into the darkness, and grinned. "Screw it," he whispered, "just talk. I can hear you. But you can hear me louder."

Then he lay down in the dust, Colt in hand, grin still on his face. The spirits sang, the wind answered, and Billy fell asleep as if he were lying in the middle of a concert played just for him.

The morning smelled of cold dust and old blood. Billy opened his eyes, the Colt still in his hand as if it were his damned pillow. The sky was pale, cloudless, and the wind played the same damned tune as it had during the night: whispering, croaking, laughing. The voices weren't gone. They had never been gone.

He sat up slowly, coughing so deeply he almost thought he was going to vomit his lungs out. Dark red dripped onto the floor, seeping into the dust, and he grinned crookedly because it looked like just another nameless grave.

The voices were everywhere. "Brother... Brother... Billy..." He laughed hoarsely, pulling his hat further over his face. "Brother? Shit. Brothers are just dust that talks too long. Nothing more."

He stood up and staggered over to the horse, which snorted restlessly as if it heard the same voices. "Calm down, old man," Billy murmured, "they're harmless. Dead people don't bark. Dead people only sing."

He swung himself into the saddle, the sun blazing across his face. The spirits followed, an invisible retinue that accompanied him whether he wanted them or not.

Billy coughed, spat, and laughed. "Lost brothers," he growled, "you're just dust in the wind now. And the wind knows my name better than you ever could."

Then he urged his horse on, rode on, the horizon empty, the voices louder. And the only thing that remained was his laughter—rough, bloody, but stronger than any memory of brothers.

The night smells of iron

Night came like a stalking dog, and with it a smell Billy recognized immediately: iron. Not fresh, not shiny, but old, rusty, sweet. The smell of blood clinging somewhere in the dust, as if the earth itself had drawn a knife.

Billy rode slowly, the sky dark, no moon, just a few stars that looked like rusted nails in black wood. Every breath brought the taste of iron to his throat, mingling with the blood he himself was coughing up. He grinned crookedly, wiping his chin as if it were all just a cheap joke.

"The night smells of iron," he murmured, "and the bastards who lost it are long since dust."

By the side of the road lay a dead horse, half-eaten by carrion birds that growled like drunken priests as he approached. Next to it lay a hat riddled with holes and a pair of boots no longer needed. Billy didn't dismount; he just looked and laughed quietly. "Shitty brothers," he whispered, "always faster through the mud than I am."

Further ahead, in a hollow, a fire smoldered. Men's voices, rough, exhausted. Billy rode closer, saw four figures, ragged but alert. They had rifles beside them, bottles in their hands, and the wind carried the smell of iron directly from their camp to him.

They spoke quietly, but Billy heard enough: robberies, blood, a sheriff lying in the dirt again. Men drinking to give themselves courage while shuffling cards with shaky hands.

Billy dismounted, adjusted his Colt, and grinned. "There you go," he murmured, "the night is already singing, and I'll set the rhythm."

Billy stepped out of the shadows, grinning broadly, Colt loosely in his hand. The men around the fire looked up, their conversations breaking off like ropes under too much weight. One immediately raised his bottle, as if trying to calm the stranger with whiskey, not lead.

"Who the hell are you?" asked the elder, his voice scratchy and suspicious.

Billy coughed and spat into the embers, which hissed and stank. "A shadow with a Colt. That's enough of an idea."

The men exchanged glances. One reached for his rifle, slowly, as if trying to disguise it. Billy laughed hoarsely. "Not so fast, bastard. The night smells of iron, and I swear to you, the next blood it tastes will be the first to flinch."

The tension crackled, the fire crackled, the silence was louder than any words.

"Sit down," the eldest finally murmured, "drink with us."

Billy didn't sit down. He remained standing, his gun loose, his grin cold. "You already drink enough. Whiskey makes you brave until it's gone. After that, all that's left is fear. And fear smells worse than iron."

One of the men, young and too nervous, laughed brittlely. "Big mouth. Maybe you'll be the one smelling like iron when we're done."

Billy took a step closer, the Colt slid a little higher. "Maybe. But I'll laugh when it happens. And you bastards will cry when you fall."

The fire crackled again. The wind blew through, heavy, ferrous, as if only waiting for the first shot.

The youngest boy held his gaze on Billy for too long, his hand too close to his rifle. His breathing was rapid, unsteady, like a horse about to bolt. Billy saw it, grinned crookedly, and coughed as if he had all the time in the world.

"Come on, bastard," he croaked, "show the night how brave you are."

That was enough. The boy raised his rifle, too hastily, too nervously. The first shot rang out, missing nothing, tearing through only dust and shadows. At the same moment, Billy's Colt barked, dry, final. The boy opened his eyes wide, fell backward into the fire, his scream burning with the wood. The stench of flesh immediately mingled with the iron in the air.

The other three drew simultaneously, bottles fell, cards flew. Two shots rang out, one hit Billy's shoulder. He staggered, laughing hoarsely. "Shit, that burns!" Then he fired back, hitting the man with the scar, who staggered into the dust, blood gushing from his chest.

The elder roared and leaped forward, knife in hand. Billy kicked him hard in the knee, raised his Colt, and shot him in the face. A dull thud, then nothing but dust falling over him.

The last one, pale and trembling, dropped his rifle. "Please... I..."

Billy coughed, blood in his mouth, and grinned crookedly. "Please isn't a word the night understands." He pulled the trigger. The shot echoed, short, hard, and then there was silence.

The fire crackled, the smell of iron became heavier, denser, as if the earth itself had greedily absorbed death.

Billy stood there, his Colt smoking, his shoulder bleeding, his laughter hoarse. "The night got what it wanted," he muttered. "Iron, blood, and a bastard who's still laughing."

The fire cast long shadows over the corpses. Four bodies, twisted, open, steaming, as if they had never belonged. The smell of burnt flesh mingled with the sweet iron, so thick in the air that every breath tasted like chewing on rusty wire.

Billy finally sat down, breathing heavily, his shoulder throbbing, blood seeping through his shirt. He laughed hoarsely, coughed, and spat redly into the embers. "Shit," he muttered, "the night has a better appetite than I do."

The bottle someone had dropped lay next to him. Half full, cheap, but it still burned. Billy took a long swig and wiped his chin. "There you go," he croaked, "whiskey and iron—the two best friends I have left."

The wind played with the branches, but Billy heard more. Every shot he'd fired still echoed, like a damned drum. It was as if the night itself was recording and repeating his bullets, a melody of cracks, echoes, and blood.

He almost heard her singing. Not beautiful, not pure—a song of rattling, crashing, fire, and death. A song that had no beginning and no end. Only pulse. Only iron.

Billy grinned, pulled the Colt from his holster, and twirled it in his hand as if it were a trumpet. "Keep playing, bastard," he said quietly, "play until the dust sings along."

It shot into the air. The boom erupted like thunder, the smoke rose, the dust swirled. The wind caught the sound, carried it further, made it ring like an answer.

Billy laughed, coughed, and put the Colt down next to him. "The night smells of iron," he murmured, "and I have the song to go with it."

Billy lay by the fire, his Colt beside him, his bottle empty. The sky was as black as burnt paper, and the wind still smelled of iron. He closed his eyes, but sleep was no friend, just a bastard who came when he wanted it, and most of the time he came drunk.

And then he heard it again. Not just in the air, but deep in his skull: the iron song. Every shot from just now, every scream, every last breath of the men transformed into a damned rhythm. First slow, like heartbeats. Then faster, louder.

"Billy... Billy..." sang the voices, sometimes whispering, sometimes shrieking. The brothers from the river, the boy in the saloon, the children, the horse thieves—everyone sang along. A choir of the dead that needed no god.

Billy turned in the dust, coughed, felt his chest burn. He grinned crookedly. "Shit, you sing weirder than the Bard. But you have more soul."

The embers of the fire turned into faces. Eyes glowed in the darkness, mouths formed his name, laughed, and spat blood. The Iron Song became a nightmare, but Billy laughed anyway. "Come on, sing louder! You're dead, I'm alive! That's the only chorus that matters!"

He raised his Colt and fired into the sky. The bang shattered the night, the ghosts screamed louder, as if they'd applauded. Billy coughed, his laughter cut off mid-blood, but he continued to grin, teeth red, eyes empty.

Then he fell back, half asleep, half listening. The voices still sang, an endless chorus. And in his dream they rode beside him, all those he had shot, all the brothers, all the bastards—and the Song of Iron became their anthem.

The morning came pale and merciless. No clouds, no mercy, only the sun hanging over the horizon like a rusty sword. Billy opened his eyes, felt the dust in his throat, tasted metal on his tongue. Every breath was iron, old and sweet, as if the night had taken up residence in his mouth.

He sat up, the Colt still clutched in his hand as if it were attached. The barrel was cold, but the shots continued to echo in his head, like a song that refused to stop. "Shit," he muttered, "the night still sings."

The four bodies lay around him. Cramped, twisted, still. Flies crawled over the open wounds as if they were the new musicians in the orchestra. The wind tore at the shreds of their clothing, turning them into a damned melody.

Billy coughed, red and heavy, and wiped his chin. He laughed hoarsely. "You sing off-key even dead. But it's better than alive."

He stood up slowly, his legs heavy, the dust clinging to his skin. His horse waited restlessly, pawing the sand as if it wanted to get away. "Easy," Billy murmured, "we'll take the choir with us. It suits me."

He took a step, feeling the ground taste of iron, as if seeping through his boots. "The night smells of iron," he said quietly, "and the day tastes just the same."

He laughed again, coughed, and grabbed the reins. "There you go, bastard. The song doesn't stop. It just plays differently."

Then he climbed into the saddle, the sun burned, the wind sang. And Billy rode on—with iron in his blood, iron in his mouth, and the iron song in his head that never stopped.

The sun rose higher, and with every hoofbeat, the dust seemed to grow heavier. It clung to Billy's skin, crept into his wound, settled in the cracks in his neck. The taste of iron was no longer just in his throat—it hung around him like a flag, an invisible stench that betrayed him before he was seen.

At the edge of the steppe, where a few wooden huts stood like gnawed teeth in the sand, he saw them: three men and a woman, farmers or something like that. Their faces were thin, their eyes large and empty. They stood still as he approached, their hands on tools that looked like weapons, even though they weren't.

Billy rode slowly toward them, coughing, spitting, grinning. He saw in their eyes that they had long known the smell. Iron. Death. They smelled it like one smells rain—inevitable.

“Good heavens,” whispered the woman, “the boy stinks of blood.”

One of the men made the sign of the cross, the others stepped back, their eyes full of fear.

Billy laughed hoarsely, a sound like rusted metal. “You smell it, right? The iron. You think it's the night. But it's just me.”

No one answered. They stood there, frozen, as if the wind itself had nailed them to the spot.

Billy lowered his hat and rode right through them, so slowly that the horse almost crept. He heard their breathing, saw their mouths open, as if they wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

“The night smells of iron,” he murmured without turning around. “And I am the night.”

Then he urged his horse on, the dust swirled, the figures shrank. All that remained was the iron flag he dragged behind him—a banner no one wanted to see, but everyone smelled.

The law never sleeps, only badly

The land became narrower, the steppe narrower, the cities more frequent. Billy knew what that meant: sheriffs. Men with stars on their chests and sleep in their eyes. The law was never awake, never alert, never as fast as his Colt—but it had bad dreams, tossed and turned restlessly, and sometimes it woke up just when you least needed it.

He rode through a street made of planks half-eaten by the wind. Children stood at the side, barefoot, with faces that knew more dust than bread. They stared at him as if he were a ghost on a horse. Perhaps he was.

A sheriff squatted in front of the saloon. The star on his chest gleamed in the sunlight, but his eyes were small and red from sleeplessness. Beside him was a Winchester, half-polished, half-neglected. He looked at Billy without rising.

"You're early," he murmured, his voice shaky. "I was expecting you later."

Billy grinned, coughed, and spat into the dust. "The law never sleeps, does it? But it looks tired, Sheriff."

The man blinked and took a drag on his cigarette. "Tired, yes. But not blind."

The street held its breath. A dog growled, then immediately fell silent. Women pulled children into their houses, men remained seated on their porches, as still as furniture.

Billy laughed hoarsely, his cough swallowing half of his voice. "If you want to stay awake, Sheriff, then get up. I don't want to shoot into a dream."

The star shone, the dust danced. It was another one of those moments when the law opened its eyes—and yet blinked too slowly.

The sheriff didn't stand up. He just took a drag on his cigarette, blowing the smoke into the hot air, trying to look like he had more control than he actually did. His fingers drummed on the stock of the Winchester, a nervous rhythm louder than his words.

"You must be tired from riding, Billy," he said slowly, as if he could smother the tension with time. "Sit down, have a drink. We don't have to..."

Billy coughed, laughed hoarsely, and spat in the dust. "Not right away? Bastard, you're sitting there like a hangover after three days of drinking and talking about patience. I'm Billy the Kid. Patience and I aren't friends."

The people on the street listened as if their own hearts were at stake. Every movement, every word felt like lead. The dog whined softly under the porch.

The sheriff blinked, his voice calm, but his hands betrayed him. "You're still young, Billy. Too young to know only blood and dust. There's always another way."

Billy grinned broadly, his teeth red, his eyes empty. "Another way? You mean the grave. That's the only way I haven't taken yet. But don't worry—I'll laugh there too."

A few men on the porch coughed nervously, someone dropped a bottle, and it shattered loudly. The sheriff barely flinched. But Billy saw the muscle in his cheek tense.

"Do you know what your problem is, Sheriff?" Billy's voice was quiet, but it cut like glass. "You sleep badly. Your law sleeps badly. And a tired man is always late."

The sheriff said nothing. The smoke curled in front of his face, and his eyes betrayed that he knew Billy was right.

The sheriff took the last drag from his cigarette, stubbed it out in the dust, and very slowly placed his hand on the Winchester. He acted as if he wanted to convince Billy he had all the time in the world. But his eyes betrayed him. They were red, puffy, and deep within them lay a tiredness that no sleep could quench.

Billy grinned, coughed, and spat on the boards. "Come on, old man. Prove to me that dreams are faster than bullets."

The street held its breath. Children peered through cracks, women whispered behind closed doors, men pressed bottles to their lips without drinking.

The sheriff cocked his Winchester, much too slowly. Billy's Colt barked, a short, dry shot. The star on the sheriff's chest flashed in the sunlight, then his body fell hard against the saloon wall, sliding down like a sack of dust.

Silence. No dog, no whispering. Only the wind carrying the smoke from the barrel.

Billy coughed and holstered his gun, his grin fixed on his face. "Didn't I tell you?" His voice sounded like a knife. "The law sleeps. And when it finally opens its eyes, it's already dead."

A few men on the porch stared, their faces pale. No one moved, no one dared to breathe.

Billy walked slowly past the dead sheriff, stepping over the body as if it were just another stone in the way. He bent down briefly, took the cigarette from

the dead man's hand, put it between his lips, and lit it from the embers of his own cigarette.

"Tastes like sleep," he murmured, inhaling deeply and laughing hoarsely. "And I taste like iron."

The cigarette hung crookedly in the corner of Billy's mouth, the smoke curling into the shimmering midday sun. The dead sheriff lay open-mouthed in the dust, the star half-obsured, as if even the earth no longer respected the law.

The city remained silent, but not empty. Men on the porches stared with pale faces, bottles still in their hands, but no one drank. Women peered through cracks in the shutters, fingers to their lips as if praying, but no prayer spoke louder than fear. Children stood barefoot in the doorways, their eyes wide, full of curiosity and terror, as if they had just witnessed a god born and immediately shot.

Billy coughed and spat on the sheriff's badge. "That's your law," he muttered, "dust with a piece of tin on it."

A man on the porch cleared his throat, about to say something, but his voice broke before a word could be said. Billy turned his head slowly, grinned crookedly, and the man immediately lowered his gaze, pretending to be invisible.

Then came the whispers. Quiet, surreptitious, but growing. "Billy... Billy the Kid..." Some spoke it with fear, others with hatred, and a few, foolish or desperate enough, with a sick admiration.

Billy took a drag on his cigarette, blew out the smoke, and laughed harshly. "You whisper my name like it's a curse. Maybe it is. But a curse that's faster than your damned law."

He looked around, his hand on his Colt. No one moved, no one stood up. The entire town was a single silent witness, and everyone knew: they hadn't just seen the sheriff die. They had seen that the law itself was too slow.

And at this moment, with dust in his mouth and smoke in his lungs, Billy was the only thing still awake here.

At first there was only silence, then this whispering that crept through the street like a disease. But eventually, a few men found the courage—or maybe just enough whiskey in their bellies. They stepped down from the porches,

three of them, with the faces of farmers pretending to be cowboys. Hands on their belts, hard looks, but their knees trembling.

Billy was still standing over the sheriff, cigarette in mouth, grin on his lips. He dragged slowly on the ember, letting the smoke whistle through his teeth. "Well, you bastards," he muttered, "do you feel like you're more awake than the law?"

The first one spat in the dust, as if to show he wasn't afraid. "You can't just ride through here, kid. The sheriff was our man."

Billy laughed hoarsely, coughed, and spat blood onto the floor, where it formed a dark crust with the dust. "Your husband? Shit, he wasn't even his own. He was more tired than a whore after a night at the fair. I just helped him sleep."

The three men looked at each other. One reached for the butt of his gun—slowly, tentatively. Billy didn't draw his Colt. Instead, he took a step forward, kicking the sheriff's badge in the dirt with the toe of his boot, making it clink. "See that? That's all your courage is worth. A piece of shitty metal. Do you really want to get shot for that?"

The second, a young fellow with nervous hands, lowered his gaze. The third, an old bastard with a gray beard, growled, but his fingers didn't move.

Billy took another drag on his cigarette and tossed it into the dust, where it slowly burned out next to the sheriff. "You're not law enforcement officers. You're extras in a dream that doesn't belong to you. And me? I'm the nightmare that draws faster. Don't forget that."

The three retreated, slowly, one by one. No bullet, no shot. Only words that hit harder than lead.

Billy grinned. "The law is asleep, and you're its fucking pillows."

The dust slowly settled, and the three would-be heroes crawled back onto their porches, as if they'd suddenly realized their courage was nothing but hot air. Billy stepped over the sheriff, kicked open the saloon door, and the hinges squealed as if they were afraid they'd be shot right along with it.

Inside, it was quieter than a church after a massacre. The pianist had taken his hands off the keys, the cards lay on the table, and no one moved. Whiskey glasses stood half full, half empty, it didn't matter—no one dared to drink.

Billy coughed, spat into the spittoon by the door, and grinned broadly. "Well, you bastards," he growled, "I'm thirsty. And if one of you reaches for the bottle faster than me, there'll be a bang."

The bartender, a thin man with sunken cheeks, immediately raised his hands and nodded frantically. "What... what would you like?"

"Whiskey," Billy said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "And enough until the sheriff outside gets up again."

The bartender nervously reached for the bottle and poured, his hands shaking so badly that half the drink spilled. Billy took the glass, gulped it down, wiped his chin, and laughed hoarsely. "Shit, you seem more awake than your law. Maybe I can help you sleep anyway."

No one laughed. A guy at the card table lowered his gaze, a woman with smudged makeup pressed a handkerchief to her face as if she wanted to disappear.

Billy placed the glass on the counter and tapped it three times with his Colt, as if it were a bell. "Listen," he murmured, "you just saw a tired man die. And if you're wise, you'll learn from this: The law sleeps. But I don't."

He grinned, coughed, and ordered another one.

Billy drained the last of his whiskey, slammed the glass on the bar, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. Nobody moved. The whole place held its breath, as if Death himself were standing at the bar, drinking for free.

He grinned crookedly, coughed, spat darkly into the bowl, and then stepped back to the door. No one dared to look him in the eye, no one said a word. Even the pianist stared at his keys as if they had betrayed him.

Billy stepped out into the bright sun, stepped over the sheriff again, who was still lying in the dust like a bad joke character with a shining star. He stopped briefly, squatted down, and ripped the star from the dead man's chest. The metal was warm, sticky with blood.

"Souvenir," he muttered, putting it in his pocket. "So I can remember how shitty the law looks when it's asleep."

The town stared. Men on porches, women behind windows, children in doorways—all silent, all frozen. They knew: the sheriff was no longer there. It was only Billy the Kid, who was pulling faster than their breath.

He lowered his hat, mounted his horse, coughed, and grinned. "Go back to sleep, you bastards," he shouted harshly, "I'll wake you if it goes bang."

Then he rode off, the dust swirling, and the town was left behind—silent, petrified, with one sheriff in the dirt and one star less in the sun.

Two shots, no mercy

The road led out of town, through low hills where the dust lay so thick that every hoofbeat sound was muffled. Billy rode slowly, coughing, spitting, the sheriff's badge heavy in his pocket. He grinned as if it were a talisman—a damned piece of metal that meant more to him than any halo.

But the dust had eyes. He noticed it before he saw it. That crackling sound when men hold their breath, the trembling in the wind when rifles are cocked. Behind a rock, two silhouettes, silent as scorpions.

"There you go," Billy muttered hoarsely, "two bastards who think they have more patience than I do."

A shot rang out, and dust leaped up beside his horse. Billy ducked, raised his Colt, and laughed hoarsely. The second shot came immediately, just wide, whistling like a curse.

"Two shots," he growled, "no mercy."

He fired back, twice, so fast that the wind could barely distinguish between the bursts. The first man toppled from the rock, a scream already drowned in the dust. The second staggered, clutching his stomach, and fell to his knees, his weapon still in his hand.

Billy stepped away, slowly approaching him, coughing, spitting blood. The man gasped, his eyes wide, filled with fear. "Mercy," he whispered, "please..."

Billy grinned, the Colt steady in his fist. "Mercy is for people who sleep. I'm awake."

A shot, short, hard. Then silence.

The wind blew the smoke away, and Billy put the gun back as if nothing had happened. "Two shots," he muttered, "no mercy. Just what the night demands."

The dust settled heavily on the bodies, as if the dead had lain there hours ago. Billy approached slowly, coughing, spitting, his grin fixed on his face. He knelt beside the first man and reached into his coat. Paper rustled.

A wanted poster. His face, young, smooth, almost innocent—but the words beneath it were as hard as nails: *Billy the Kid. Alive or dead. \$500.*

Billy laughed harshly, holding the paper up in the air for the wind to see. "\$500? Shit, I thought I was worth more."

The second guy lay half-in the dust, blood in his mouth, his eyes staring. Billy reached into his pockets and found another wanted poster, this time with a higher sum: *800 dollars*. He laughed even louder, coughing so hard he drew blood. "There you go, bastards. The market knows my name, but it can't decide what I'm worth. I'm like a bottle of whiskey—the emptier it gets, the more you sell it for."

He took the ammunition from both of them, pocketed it, then kicked them in the ribs again, as if they were still trying to get up. "Bounty hunters," he muttered, "the only kind of man dumber than sheriffs. Little sleep, lots of greed, and even less brains."

He stood up, grinned, and held up the two pieces of paper as if they were playing cards. "See that, bastards? My face is worth money. But only if you move faster than me. And none of you fall asleep as easily as I make you fall asleep."

Then he let the papers flutter into the dust, kicking them so hard they tore. "The business of my death," he said quietly, "that's the joke that never gets old."

Billy climbed back into the saddle, the Colt heavy at his side, the notes torn in the dust. The wind picked up shreds, carrying his face away like a mocking song stuck everywhere at once.

He rode slowly, the sun burning, his lungs scratchy. But before he'd even covered the first mile, he heard them: two new voices in the chorus.

"Billy... Billy..." Rough, hoarse, bloody. The bounty hunters weren't even cold when they were already screaming along with the others. One gasped, as if he could still feel the bullet in his stomach. The other laughed thinly, a brittle chuckle that sounded more like choking.

Billy grinned, coughed, and spat reddish-brown into the sand. "Well, bastards. Welcome to the choir. You sound like shit, but everyone here does."

The wind took the voices and blew them into his face. Some called his name, others cursed, still others pleaded. But all together they formed this song—not a song of mercy, not a song of hope. Just a scream of dust and iron.

Billy shook his head and laughed harshly. "You're like kids who don't realize the game is over. I hear you. But I'm laughing louder."

He urged the horse on, the dust swirled, and the voices followed, an invisible train of ghosts. Every shot he fired further filled the choir. And Billy knew: in the end, the whole damn world would sing along.

"Two shots," he muttered, his eyes dead, his grin crooked. "No mercy. And no rest."

The sun was high, the dust stung his eyes as Billy rode into the next settlement. A dozen shacks, a saloon, a store with a crooked sign—that was all. But even from a distance, he saw them: the notes.

They were stuck to boards, fluttering on doors, hanging crookedly on the wall of the general store. His face, young, beardless, almost like that of a damned schoolboy. Below the picture, the words: *Billy the Kid – \$800*.

He laughed hoarsely, coughed, and spat into the dusty light. "Shit, I look younger than I ever was."

People stared as he rode in. Men with tools in their hands, women with children in their arms, eyes wide and fearful. Some glanced at the wanted posters, then back at him, as if testing whether the image and the reality were truly the same bastard.

Billy rode slowly down Main Street, his Colt loose, his grin cold. He saw one of the men put his hand to the note, as if he wanted to tear it off—or make sure it was real. Billy stopped, coughed, and lowered his hat. "Nice price, huh? \$800. You could buy three new pigs with that. Or a coffin, if you try."

No one moved. The wind ripped at the papers, making his face dance as if he were mocking the entire city.

Billy rode on, right up to the saloon. He dismounted, stepped up to one of the posters, and ripped it off the wall with a hefty yank. He held it up, laughing harshly. "You'll hang me on the wall before you even get me. Save yourself the trouble, bastards. I'll hang myself when the time comes—and I'll do it faster."

He crumpled the note, threw it into the dust, and stamped on it with his boot. The dust swirled up, and the image of his face crumbled beneath his sole.

"Two shots, no mercy," he muttered, "and now my laughter is plastered to your walls."

The saloon was silent, except for the creaking of the doors in the wind. Billy stood in the dust in front of the crumpled wanted poster, his eyes cold, his grin fixed. People kept their distance as if they were dealing with a disease that killed faster than any bullet.

Then someone stepped forward. A broad-shouldered farmer, his face sun-drenched and wrinkled, his hands hard from the plow, not the Colt. But he still held a pistol, shaky, held much too high, almost like a child with a stick. His wife screamed softly behind him, grabbed his arm, but he pulled away.

"Eight... \$800," he stammered, his voice more fear than courage. "For that money, we could get out of here. A new life."

Billy coughed, spat, and laughed hoarsely. "A new life? With my blood on your hand? Shit, bastard, you're dumber than the sheriff I put to bed yesterday."

The farmer raised the gun higher, both hands on the grip, his knuckles white. "I... I have to try."

Billy approached him slowly, the Colt loosely in his fist as if it were just a toy. "Do you have to?" He coughed, his laughter sounding like a knife. "This is the last *Mustt* that you will ever have."

The farmer pulled the trigger. A dull click—the gun jammed. Panic flickered in his eyes.

Billy grinned broadly, drawing faster than the bastard could blink. A shot, short, cold. The farmer fell backward, the gun slipping from his hands, landing in the dust.

The woman screamed, a shrill sound that immediately died away as Billy pointed the Colt at her. He coughed, spat, and grinned. "Don't worry, sweetie. Two shots, no mercy. He got the first one."

Then he put the weapon away, stepped over the dead body, and laughed as the entire settlement retreated in shock.

The woman fell into the dust next to her husband's body, her hands covered in blood, her eyes full of hatred. She screamed, not like a woman, but like a trapped animal. A sound that shook everything in the street. Children wept, men bowed their heads, as if they could pretend they didn't hear.

Billy just stood there, coughed, spat a dark red spit into the dust, and grinned crookedly. "Go ahead and scream, sweetie. Maybe the sheriff in heaven will hear you. But he's probably just as sound asleep as the guy down there."

The woman raised her head, her eyes filled with tears and rage. "You bastard! You devil!"

Billy laughed hoarsely, a sound like rusty iron. "Devil? Shit, that's too kind. The devil has style. I only have a Colt."

He walked slowly past her; the horse waited at the side of the road. No one dared to step in his way. The men with tools stood still like pillars of salt, the women hugged their children tighter.

"Two shots," Billy muttered, gripping the stirrups, "no mercy. He tried, and you saw it. Nothing more to say."

He swung himself into the saddle, coughed again, his laughter mingling with blood. "Hold your tears, bastards," he shouted into the silence, "you won't drink the desert dry anyway."

Then he urged the horse on. The dust swirled, swallowing the woman's screams, and the town was left behind—broken, cursed, with another body in the dirt and Billy's laughter lingering among the huts for a long time.

The path out of the settlement led through bare dust, no shade, no water, only the sun like a rusty nail in the sky. Billy rode slowly, coughing, wiping the blood from his mouth. Behind him lay the woman with her scream louder than any bullet. But the wind took him, twisted him, turned him into something else.

After a while, he heard them. Two new voices in the chorus. The farmer, short of breath, trembling, still with that pitiful "must" in his voice. And the woman, her scream, torn, full of hate that had no end. They were singing with the others now, whispering his name, sometimes like a curse, sometimes like a prayer.

Billy grinned crookedly, coughed, and spat in the dust. "Well, you bastards," he muttered, "even the civilians are dancing in my choir now. Death has no rules anymore."

The voices mingled, screaming, laughing, howling in the wind. An entire orchestra of ghosts that only he could hear. Every shot a beat, every corpse an instrument.

Billy lowered his hat and urged his horse on, reins loose, Colt at his thigh. "Two shots, no mercy," he said quietly, almost solemnly. "And the song's getting louder and louder."

The dust rose, swallowing him, the sun burned. And the only thing that remained was the choir, which continued to grow—a music of dust, iron, and damned brothers who had never been brothers.

Conversations with the dead

Night came faster than expected. The sky was black as old leather, the wind howled, and the dust tasted of blood. Billy sat by the fire, bottle in hand, Colt in his lap. He coughed, spat, grinned. And then he spoke. Not to himself, not to the wind—to the voices.

"Well, bastards," he muttered, "are you all here? The brothers, the bounty hunters, the farmer, the woman with the scream? I hear you. So talk."

And they talked. At first just a whisper, then louder, at once, like a choir that never agrees. One cursed, one begged, one laughed. The woman was still screaming, as if her throat had never stopped bleeding.

Billy laughed hoarsely and took a sip. "You sound like a damn saloon after midnight. But at least you're honest. No cards, no lies—just dirt, blood, and screaming."

He leaned back, looked into the fire. "You thought you were faster. Every one of you. Sheriffs, bounty hunters, brothers, even a farmer with shaky hands. But in the end, you only learned one thing: The dust sings louder when I laugh."

The fire crackled, and the voices became clearer, almost like real men at the table. Billy grinned crookedly. "You want to talk? Then ask. I'll answer. I have time—more than you."

The wind blew through, taking the voices with it, bringing them back again. A constant conversation, an endless echo.

Billy coughed, laughed, and raised the bottle. "To the dead," he said, "my best listeners."

The fire devoured the wood, sparks shooting into the sky as if they themselves were trying to escape. Billy pulled his coat tighter, coughed, spat redly into the embers, and grinned. The voices were clearer now, almost familiar.

"You betrayed me, Billy," whispered the one with the wooden leg, his voice thin and brittle. "I was your brother."

Billy took a sip and wiped his chin. "Shit, you were never my brother. You were just a bastard with a lame leg. The most you would have done was help me chop wood. And you would have screwed up even that."

Another whisper came, brighter, feverish. The farmer. "My wife... she hates you... she will hunt you, even in death."

Billy laughed harshly, coughed, and shook his head. "Your wife's still screaming, dude. If she ends up in heaven, God will have a migraine in two minutes. And if she ends up in hell, the devil will leave voluntarily."

A growl, deep, angry. The sheriff. "You're not a man. Just a boy with a Colt. A boy who laughs too easily."

Billy grinned crookedly, tapping the barrel of his Colt against the bottle. "And yet you're the one sleeping while I sit here playing cards with your rotten voice. Who's the man, Sheriff?"

The ghosts mingled, talking over each other, like gamblers at a table, all cheating. Billy raised his bottle and toasted the darkness. "Come on, bastards. Everyone gets a round. Ask, curse, shout. I hear you, and I answer. You're my company—better than any living."

The wind rustled, the fire crackled. Billy grinned, his eyes empty, his chest heaving. "Cards, whiskey, and dead bodies—the only friends who won't betray me."

The wind ripped through the voices, making them louder, more biting, sharper. Billy sat there, Colt in hand, bottle to his mouth, listening to them like a damned card game.

"You're just a coward," hissed the bearded man, one of the brothers. "You always shot first because you were afraid you'd be the last one."

Billy coughed and laughed hoarsely. "And now you're all the last ones. In the dust, with mouths full of dirt. Who's the coward here?"

Another laugh, shrill, mocking—the farmer's wife. "Look at you, Billy. Young face, empty eyes, coughing like an old man. You're already dying, and nobody needs a Colt for that."

Billy spat into the fire, which hissed briefly. "Maybe. But even my cough blows faster than you."

The sheriff spoke again, his voice muffled and contemptuous. "They'll hang you, boy. And then the dust will laugh at you, not you at it."

Billy grinned crookedly, pulled on his Colt, and turned it in his hand. "If they hang me, Sheriff, I'll laugh louder on the rope than you've ever screamed."

The voices became a chorus, wild, full of mockery. *Bastard... boy... milksop...* They shouted him down, laughed at him, as if they wanted to show him that the dust would not always let him mock it.

Billy laughed along, rough, hoarse, almost choking. "Shit, you guys sound better when you insult me. Finally, some honest music."

He raised the bottle and toasted the darkness. "Come on, you bastards. Let's scream together. Maybe heaven will hear us. But I swear—it's covering its ears."

Billy's grin hardened, his breathing more labored. The voices didn't let up; they grew louder, more insistent, like a pack of hungry dogs sniffing out the scent of blood.

"Coward!" sneered the wooden-legged man. "Milkface!" shrieked the woman. "Dead before you know it!" boomed the sheriff.

Billy jumped up, coughing, blood spurting into the dust. "Shut up!" he yelled, his voice hoarse but sharp. "You're dirt, you're dust, you have no mouths left! So shut up!"

But the spirits laughed. A chorus that circled him, whipping through the wind, making every vein in him quiver.

"Billy the boy! Billy the bastard!" they screamed.

Billy raised his Colt and fired into the darkness. One shot, another, another. The bullets tore holes into the night, sparks flew from the rock, the smoke rose, the smell of iron settled over the fire.

The voices screamed louder, not quieter. They howled, laughed, prayed, cursed. Every shot fed them, made them stronger, as if they lived on his anger.

"You want blood? You want dust?" Billy coughed, screamed, and laughed at the same time. "Then eat it! Eat everything I give you!"

He emptied his Colt into the night, six shots, a roar that rolled across the steppe. Then he stood there, coughing, wheezing, empty barrel in hand, his knees weak.

The voices fell silent for a heartbeat. Only the wind blew, only the fire crackled.

Billy grinned bloodily. "There you go," he whispered, "at least you can hear me talking."

Then the laughter started again, quieter this time, like mockery from far away. Billy sank into the dusty grass, reloading, his grin still on his face.

Billy sat by the fire again, his Colt loaded, his bottle almost empty. The smoke hung heavy between the flames and the sky, the wind blew dust in his face. The voices were still there—taunting, cursing, laughing. But he didn't shoot anymore. He grinned, coughed, shook his head.

"You want to belittle me," he muttered, "you want me to think I'm nothing more than a coughing bastard with a fast Colt. Shit—you're right. But what does it matter? You're all dead. I'm still breathing."

The voices hissed, spewing venom. One cursed, one prayed, one laughed like a madman. Billy took another sip, letting the whiskey burn his tongue. "You're better than any family I've ever had. At least you stay. At least you don't piss off when things go wrong."

He looked into the fire, his eyes empty, his features hard. "You're my choir. My damn saloon full of screams. I don't need a sheriff, a wife, or a brother. I've got you. And you've got me."

The wind rustled, and for a moment it sounded as if the voices were agreeing, as if they had accepted that they belonged to him like dust to the ground.

Billy coughed and laughed hoarsely. "So, brothers. Let's drink to it. Cards, whiskey, bullets—and whoever loses, screams louder. You know how it goes."

He toasted the darkness, drank, coughed, and grinned. For the first time, the voices stopped taunting him. They just talked—like friends gathered around a table while the dust raged outside.

The fire crackled, the shadows danced, and Billy laid out the cards, even though there was no one there to hold them. No one except the voices. He coughed, spat in the dust, and grinned. "Come on, bastards. Sit down. I'll deal everyone a hand."

The wind blew across the table of wood and dust, and the voices became clearer, like chairs being moved, like glasses being put down.

"I'll bet it all," growled the sheriff, his voice muffled. "And you lose, boy." Billy laughed harshly. "Shit, Sheriff. You've already lost everything, or you wouldn't be sitting here with me. Shut up and play."

The wooden-legged man whispered, "I'll bluff you down, Billy. You were never a good player." Billy coughed, pulling the cards closer to him. "Bluffing in the grave? You have even less chance than alive, and you were already a miserable failure."

The farmer's wife screamed, "I don't want a leaf, I want your blood!" Billy grinned, showing her his empty hand, covered in cracks and scabs. "Here, sweetie. All you get is dust and scars. That's all."

The ghosts laughed, cursed, and screamed in confusion. But Billy saw them now as figures in the smoke, like fellow players at a table that never ends. He drew a card, threw it into the fire. It burned, and he grinned.

"You give me advice, don't you?" he muttered. "But your advice is as rotten as your bones. Still—I'll listen. Because you're the only ones left."

The wind swelled, voices whispered, laughed, and mocked. Billy raised his bottle to toast. "Shitty advisors, shitty players—but you're my family. And damn it, that's enough for me."

The bottle was almost empty, the fire burned down, but Billy's grin still burned. The voices had grown louder, firmer, almost as if they were really sitting around him. A card table full of dead people, a saloon without walls.

"All right, bastards," he muttered, coughed, and spat into the fire, "one last drink for today. A toast. To the only host who serves us all: Death."

The voices rose like glasses being raised. Some laughed, some cursed, some screamed, but they all joined in.

Billy raised the bottle and dripped whiskey onto the dust, where it immediately evaporated. "For you down there," he said, his voice scratchy, "and for me up here. We'll drink together until no one can talk anymore."

The spirits shrieked, bellowed, and screamed in confusion as if it were a real feast. The echo rolled across the steppe, a mad chorus that knew nothing but mockery and blood.

Billy drank, coughed, and laughed hoarsely. "Cards, bullets, whiskey—that's all any of us need. And anyone who says they want more is lying. Here's to you, bastards!"

He downed the rest of the bottle and threw it into the fire, where it shattered with a dull thud. Sparks flew, and for a moment it looked as if the spirits had truly toasted.

"Conversations with the dead," Billy muttered, his grin bloody, his eyes empty. "Better than any confession. You're my damned congregation."

Then he leaned back, the Colt in his lap, the voices still in his ears. And as the steppe grew dark and cold, the only laughter that remained was his own—rough, broken, but louder than the dead.

Shadow on the wall

The nearest town lay like a pile of bones in the sand, wooden houses crooked, roofs corroded, windows covered in dust. Billy rode in slowly, coughing, spitting, his grin like a scar on his face. The sheriff's badge in his pocket clinked with every step the horse took, a cold talisman, heavier than gold.

People saw him, but they didn't see him. They ducked into alleys, disappeared behind doors, dragged their children away. Not a word, just eyes. Eyes staring out of shadows, flickering like candles behind tattered curtains.

Billy laughed hoarsely, lowering his hat. "There you go. Another city that thinks it's invisible. Shit—you're not invisible. You're shadows. And shadows don't have bullets."

His voice echoed through the street, bouncing off the walls, louder than any preacher. No piano playing, no hoofbeats, no barking. Only his coughing, his laughter, the scraping of his boots in the dust.

His face was plastered to a wall, another wanted poster, this time for \$1,000. The paper fluttered in the wind, a child's shadow falling across it, distorting his features, making him look like a ghost.

Billy stepped closer, ripped the note off the wall, and held it up. "A thousand dollars for a shadow. You'll hang me before you even look me in the eye."

He crumpled the note, threw it into the dust, and stamped on it with his heel. "I am not a shadow. I am the dirt you are made of."

The city was silent. Only the shadows on the walls moved, flickering as if they were giggling.

The street remained silent, but then a door creaked. Slowly, someone stepped out—a preacher, dressed in black, as thin as a dried-out stick, carrying a cross that seemed heavier than he was. His face was pale, his eyes glowing like two nails someone had left in the fire too long.

"Billy the Kid," he said, his voice loud, trembling, but sustained by faith. "You are a son of darkness. A shadow among shadows. You bring only death and dust."

Billy coughed, spat stubbornly into the dust, and grinned crookedly. "Son of darkness, huh? Shit, that sounds almost poetic. Better than what everyone else says: bastard, milksop, devil's spawn."

The preacher raised the cross higher, as if it could deflect bullets. "You can still repent, Billy. The Lord forgives—if you confess."

Billy laughed hoarsely, louder than the wind. "Confess? I've already confessed everything. Every bullet I fired was my damned confession of faith. And the earth wrote it down."

The shadows on the walls trembled as if the whole city had forgotten to breathe.

The preacher took a step closer, the cross trembling in his hand. "You are beyond saving. You are damned."

Billy approached him, his grin as hard as steel. "Tell me something, Father. If I'm damned, why aren't you laughing? Is hell so bad that even your God fears it?"

The preacher stepped back, the cross sinking slightly. His voice broke. "You... you're no longer human."

Billy laughed, coughed, and spat. "Finally, someone says it right."

Billy stood close to the preacher, so close that the stench of sweat, dust, and cold whiskey hung between them like a sermon of its own. The Colt dangled loosely in his hand, but the weapon wasn't necessary—words sufficed.

"Well, father," Billy muttered, coughing and spitting in the dust, "you talk about light while you yourself stand in the shadows. Don't you see?"

He grabbed the preacher by the arm and roughly turned him toward the wall, where the flickering shadows of the townspeople hung like specters, distorted, restless, ghostly. "Look at you! Your shadow is dancing next to mine. Yours looks like a crow's foot, mine like a damn knife. Tell me, which of us is more of a hell?"

The preacher gasped, pressing the cross tighter to his chest. "Those are just shadows... just illusions..."

Billy laughed harshly, his grin bloody. "Shit, mirages? Shadows don't lie. They show what you are—without a beard, without a god, without a mask. And yours tells me: you're just as lost as I am."

The preacher trembled, muttering a hasty prayer, the words stumbling from his lips. Billy knocked the cross from his hand, and it fell into the dust, lying crookedly as if it refused to stand up again.

"See?" Billy stepped on it, half crushing it with his heel. "Your God sleeps worse than any law. And me? I watch over you like your nightmare."

The shadows on the wall flickered as if they had laughed. The preacher fell to his knees, his hands shaking, his eyes empty.

Billy grinned, coughed, and pulled his hat down. "Look at them, Father. The shadows belong to me. And you—you belong to them now, too."

The street was quiet, so quiet that even the wind seemed to have stopped. Billy stood there, his hat pulled low over his face, the preacher on his knees in the dust. The cross lay broken beside him, the splinters glittering in the sunlight like cheap shards.

Eyes stared from every alley, every window. Shadows on the walls, faces in the gloom, children peeping from behind aprons. Everyone watched, but no one moved. No one came to the preacher's aid.

Billy coughed, spat in the dust, and stepped on the cross once more. "Well, you bastards," he growled loudly enough for the whole town to hear, "there you are. Your father in the faith is lying in the dirt, and you're doing nothing. You're shadows—nothing more."

A few women sobbed quietly, men pressed their lips together, one raised his hand, then immediately lowered it again when Billy briefly raised the Colt.

"No guts," Billy laughed hoarsely, coughing, his voice sharp as glass. "Not even the courage to defend your own god. You stand there like shadows on the wall—and shadows can't fire bullets."

The preacher bent over, whispering a prayer, but the words sounded hollow, like a bottomless bucket. Billy stepped past him, pulled the bottle from his pocket, and drank as he walked through the silence. Every gaze was glued to him, every breath a confession.

"You belong to me," he murmured, grinning broadly, "every single one of you. You're alive, but you're already dust. And I'm the wind that blows you away."

The city remained silent. Only Billy's coughing and laughter echoed through the streets like a judgment.

Billy continued down the street, slowly, heavily, every cough a clap of thunder. The city seemed to creep in on itself, walls bending under the silence. But then something moved.

Three young men stepped out of a side alley. Barely older than Billy himself, but without his grin, without his cold eyes. Hands on their belts, shoulders stiff, their courage fresh and stupid as milk. One held a rusty revolver, the second merely a hunting knife, the third clenched his fists as if they were enough.

"Enough!" shouted the man with the gun, his voice almost breaking. "We won't be intimidated any longer. You're just a boy, Billy!"

Billy coughed, spat into the light, his grin like a cut on his face. "A boy, yes. But a boy who'll pull faster than all of your futures."

The other two moved forward, one raised the knife, the other growled like a dog.

Billy laughed harshly, shaking his head. "You're shadows who think they have flesh. Look at you—you're trembling, you reek of fear. You want to be heroes? Heroes die young, bastards. And you're already late."

The man with the revolver raised his weapon, too slowly, much too hesitantly. Billy's Colt flashed, a shot rang out, and the boy flew back, blood in the dust.

The others froze. One dropped the knife, the other raised his hands. Billy approached them, coughed, and grinned. "Come on, keep going. I might have some bullets left for your shadows."

They fled, stumbling and screaming like children. Billy watched them go, spitting red into the sand. "Courage," he muttered, "is just a shadow that quickly fades."

The city was silent. And the shadows on the walls seemed to laugh.

Billy pushed open the saloon door, and the creak sounded like a scream. Inside, it was quiet, so quiet that even the flies could buzz. A few men sat at the card

table, cards still in their hands, faces pale as chalk. Two women leaned against the bar, their rouge smudged as if they'd been crying long ago. The bartender stood there on two legs, like a coffin nail.

Billy coughed, spat on the ground, and grinned broadly. "Well, bastards. A boy is lying out in the dust, freshly dead, and you're sitting here like shadows. That's sad. So let's drink to that."

No one moved. Only the bartender lowered his eyes and reached for the bottle, trembling.

"No, no," Billy growled, slowly pulling the Colt from its holster. "Not just for me. For everyone. Each of you raises a glass. Or I'll help you sleep."

The bartender poured hastily, glasses clinking, hands shaking, but everyone took one. Billy grabbed the bottle straight away, took a deep swig, wiped his chin, and laughed raggedly. "That's what I like. A funeral where everyone's drinking. That boy outside would have hated it."

The men drank silently, the women choked on their whiskey, one choked and coughed blood into his glass. Billy patted him on the shoulder, hard, almost friendly. "See? You're right for me. Dust in your throat, whiskey in your stomach. That's all anyone needs."

He raised his glass and toasted the crowd. "To the shadows! To you, you silent bastards who would rather drink than die!"

No one answered. Just the clinking of glasses, the swallowing, the trembling. Billy grinned, coughed, and drank deeper.

Outside, the boy lay in the dust, the sun burning his face, and inside, the city acted as if he had never been there.

Billy slammed the glass down on the counter, shattering it, took the bottle under his arm, and stomped out into the blazing sun. Behind him, the saloon remained silent, no laughter, no words, only the shadows of the people hanging frozen on the walls.

The boy lay outside. Dust in his hair, blood in the dirt, his eyes open as if still trying to prove his bravery. Billy coughed, spat next to the body, and grinned crookedly. "There you lie, hero. You wouldn't have even been worth a thousand dollars, let alone alive. But hey—now you're finally a shadow like the others."

He stepped over the corpse, his heel leaving a mark in the bloody earth. The townspeople stared out of windows and doors, no one daring to step out. Their faces were pale, their mouths silent. Only the shadows on the walls flickered, as if giggling.

Billy raised the bottle and toasted the shadows. "Your boy is dead, your preacher is kneeling, and you're all just dark spots on the wall. Congratulations. You're mine."

Then he swung himself into the saddle, coughed, and laughed harshly. The horse began to move, the dust rose, and Billy's laughter echoed through the streets like a knife scraping against stone.

The city remained—silent, broken, another place where the law had crumbled to dust. And only the shadows on the wall still moved, as if they had finally understood who they belonged to.

A boy remains a boy

The sky hung heavy over the steppe, as if it were about to collapse at any moment. Billy rode on, dust in his throat, his sheriff's badge in his pocket, a grin on his face that made him look younger than he was. Too young. Too smooth. Too beardless.

In the next town, it took less than two minutes before someone laughed. A fat bastard in an apron, presumably the butcher, stood in front of his shop, his hands full of beef blood. He stared at Billy, grinned broadly, and yelled: "Well, look at that! The milksop with the Colt. What does the little fellow want here—buy milk?"

A few men on the porch laughed along, women giggled, even a few children joined in. The laughter rippled through the street like a wave.

Billy coughed, spat stubbornly into the dust, and looked at the butcher. His grin remained, but his eyes turned cold. "Milk? Shit, bastard. I only drink whiskey. But maybe I'll get a glass of blood from you right now."

The laughter faltered, only briefly. Then someone shouted, "He looks like a boy, but he acts like a man!" More laughter, rougher, louder, almost like a chorus.

Billy approached slowly, his Colt loose at his side. His cough sounded like a rusty gate. "A boy is a boy, right? You laugh. You think you're men. But men know when to keep quiet."

The butcher spat, wiped the blood from his hands onto his apron, and stepped toward him. "Then show me, little one. Let's see if you even have any balls."

The street held its breath. Only the wind blew, only the shadows flickered. Billy's hand rested on his Colt, his grin fixed on his face.

"Balls?" he coughed, his voice hoarse. "I have balls. And they laugh louder than you."

The butcher stood with his legs wide apart, his hands full of animal blood, still dripping from his fingers. His grin was fat, his eyes sparkling like those of a man who thought he'd just made up a joke. Behind him, a few men were still laughing; one was slapping his thigh as if he were about to burst.

Billy coughed, spat redly into the dust, his grin crooked, his eyes ice-cold. "You stink of pigs, bastard. That's right – you're about to drop like one."

The butcher approached, powerful and heavy, each step shaking the ground. "Come on, little one! Pull if you've got the balls!"

The crowd roared as if it were a spectacle. Children jumped onto the porches, women held their aprons over their mouths, men filled their eyes with cheap curiosity.

Billy barely moved. His hand, as if of its own accord, went to his Colt, lithe, calm, almost lazy. The butcher raised his arms, about to shout something else—when the shot rang out.

Short, hard, final.

The butcher slumped, a hole in his chest, his apron even redder than before. His grin remained half-stuck on his face, twisted, grotesque. He toppled onto his side, heavy as a slaughtered cow.

Silence. No one was laughing anymore.

Billy stepped over to the body, coughed, and spat next to the head. "A boy, huh? The boy just filleted your butcher." He grinned broadly and looked out at the crowd. "Who wants to be the next slab of meat?"

No one moved. The children disappeared, the women closed the doors, the men lowered their gazes, as if suddenly afraid of being seen even in the shadows.

Billy turned around, pulled his hat down, and muttered harshly, "A boy is a boy. But the boy has bullets. And bullets turn men to dust."

The dust slowly settled over the butcher's fat body, as if the earth wanted to forget him immediately. But the street couldn't forget so quickly—the air hung heavy, full of fear and sweat.

Three men were still standing there, tense, their faces white, but their eyes full of rage. One of them, a skinny bastard with a crooked hat, took a step forward. "He's just a boy," he growled, "we're not going to let some idiot terrorize us."

Billy coughed, spat at the butcher, then approached the thin man. His grin cut like glass. "Milkface, huh? And yet your fat friend lies there like a gutted pig. What does that make you? Men? Or just shadows yapping?"

The second, broader built, his hands clenched into fists, shouted: "You can't shoot everyone, Billy!"

Billy laughed harshly, his cough tearing half of his body apart. "Yes, bastard. I can. I just need time and bullets. And I have more of both than you have courage."

The crowd held its breath, children watched with their mouths open, women pressed their hands to their chests.

The third man, young, wide-eyed, shouted, "He's just a boy! If we stick together, we can—"

Billy didn't even raise his Colt. He just stepped closer, his voice quiet and hard. "You want to stick together? Then hold on to the dead butcher. Maybe he'll give you some backbone."

Silence. The three looked at each other. Hands trembled, fists unclenched. One lowered his gaze, the second stepped back, the third fell silent.

Billy grinned, coughed, his eyes cold. "See? A boy is still a boy. But you're already less than men."

He turned away, his Colt loosely at his side. No shot necessary—just words that hit harder than lead.

The saloon smelled of sweat, stale beer, and cheap cigars. When Billy pushed open the door, no one immediately turned away. On the contrary, they stared at him like a lost boy. A few men even grinned, as if they'd forgotten what had happened outside.

"Here comes the little fellow," someone called from the card table, his teeth yellow, his eyes contemptuous. "Sit down, boy, we'll show you how men play."

Laughter. Muffled, hollow, as if they'd been drinking to boost their courage.

Billy coughed, stepped into the middle of the room, and spat into the sawdust on the floor. His grin was wide, but his eyes were cold as stone. "Men? You mean the kind that lie outside, already half-eaten by flies? If that's your standard, then I'd rather be a boy."

The laughter faltered, but one man persisted. A broad-shouldered bastard with a wrinkled waistcoat patted the chair next to him. "Come on, milksop. Play with us. Maybe you'll learn how to behave."

Billy approached slowly, his boots creaking against the wood. He stopped, right behind the man, and coughed on the back of his neck, making the guy jump. "Manners?" Billy muttered quietly. "Shit, the only thing I've learned is to pull faster than any asshole who thinks he's a man."

The man tried to jump up, but Billy's Colt was already out. A shot, short, dry. The bastard fell forward onto the table, blood seeping between the cards, mingling with the whiskey.

Nobody laughed anymore.

Billy sat down on the empty chair, put the Colt on the table, and grabbed the bottle. "So, bastards. Who's playing with the boy now?"

Silence. Only the cracking of wood, the ticking of a clock. Billy laughed hoarsely, drank deeply.

"A boy is a boy," he muttered, "but the boy wins every round."

The men at the table stared at the cards, but not because of the game—they stared because they didn't want to look at the dead man, still warm, lying

between them. His blood seeped through the cracks, soaking the aces and jacks, staining everything red.

Billy grabbed a few cards, coughed, drank straight from the bottle, and put the Colt down next to the chips. "Come on, bastards. Let's play. Or do you want to pretend this is a funeral? Then I'll start building the coffin."

The first man, thin as a fence post, picked up a map with trembling fingers. The second, with a greasy hat, wiped sweat from his brow and nodded silently. The third looked at Billy, his lips firm, his hands clenched.

"Your bet," said Billy, throwing a few cartridges into the middle. "I'll play with what I've got. You play with your fear."

The men reluctantly laid out their cards. Billy laughed harshly, coughed, and spat into the sawdust. "See? Already lost. Your hands are shaking more than your courage."

The thin man whispered, "We... we just wanted to play."

Billy grinned broadly, his teeth bloody. "Play? You're playing with death now, bastards. And I make the rules."

The cards flew, whiskey flowed, and no one spoke a word except Billy. He talked, laughed, and insulted, while the others sweated in silence. With each round, it became clearer: this wasn't a game, it was a damned interrogation.

Billy leaned back, Colt in hand, cards in front of him. "A boy's a boy, you say. But here you sit—men with beards, with wrinkles, with children at home. And who's shaking like a baby? You."

Silence. Only the dripping of blood on wood.

Billy drank deeply, coughed, and grinned. "In the end, you bastards, the boy always wins. Remember that."

The game dragged on like a tightening rope. No one spoke anymore, except Billy. His coughing fits and his ragged laughter were the only sounds besides the cracking of wood and the dripping of blood still seeping from the table onto the floor.

The thin man, who had been shaking all evening, held the cards tightly in his hands, his eyes constantly flickering toward the door. Finally, he dropped them, stood up, and his chair crashed back. "Shit, I'm not playing this anymore!"

Billy grinned, coughed, and pushed the cartridges together in the middle. "Come on, bastard. Run. Maybe you're faster than my Colt. But I'll tell you right now: no one has done it yet."

The man hesitated, then ran—stumbling, panicking, his hat flying off his head. He didn't get three steps. Billy raised his Colt and fired. A dull thud, a hole in his back, and the thin man sprawled into the sawdust.

The other two men stared. One swallowed hard, the other pressed the cards so hard they tore.

Billy slowly stood up, coughed, stepped over the corpse, and grinned broadly. "See? A boy is a boy. But he plays the game to the end. You, on the other hand, run like rats."

He sat back down, put the Colt back on the table as if nothing had happened, and poured himself another. "So, bastards. Which one of you wants to draw the next card?"

The men didn't move. The saloon was silent, only Billy's laughter echoed through the room like a curse no one could shake off.

Billy stood up, slowly, as if he had all the time in the world. The Colt hung loosely in his hand, his hat low over his face, and his cough filled the room like a rusty bell. On the table lay the cards, soaked in blood and whiskey, beside them two men who were barely moving—too petrified to breathe, too cowardly to die.

The dead man lay in the sawdust, his arms twisted, his back riddled with holes, and outside in the dust the butcher was still waiting. A trail of death that Billy had left through the city like other men spill beer.

He lifted the bottle, took the last sip, and slammed it onto the floor. It shattered, and the shards glittered like shadows with edges. "A boy is a boy," he murmured hoarsely, "but the boy turns men to dust."

No one answered. The bartender just stared into space, the women pressed themselves against the wall as if they were already dead.

Billy stepped to the door, spat on the floor, and grinned coldly. "You thought you could laugh. Now no one's laughing. Remember: ridicule costs more than whiskey."

Then he went out into the blazing sun. The street was empty, but eyes were glued to windows and cracks. Silent, cowardly, glassy. Children were dragged back, women covered their mouths.

Billy swung himself into the saddle, coughed, and laughed hoarsely. "A boy is a boy," he shouted into the silence, "but a boy with bullets is your damned end."

His laughter echoed through the city, echoing into every alley, into every wall, until only shadows remained. And these shadows later told every stranger that Billy the Kid had passed by again—young, laughing, and deadly as dust.

End in the dust

The sky was leaden gray, heavy as a pistol at the ready. Billy rode alone, only the horse beneath him, only the dust around him. No laughter, no saloon, no shadows this time—only the emptiness that settled over him like a blanket.

His cough came harder, deeper. Every breath tasted of iron, every phlegm was red. He wiped it away, grinning as if it were just whiskey gone down the wrong way. But deep down, he knew the dust was eating away at his lungs, grain by grain.

The sun no longer burned. It hung dully on the horizon, as if it had seen enough of this damned land itself. The wind played with the bones by the roadside, cattle that had perished, men no one wanted to bury. Billy stared, coughed, spat, and nodded. "Company," he muttered hoarsely. "Better than the living ever were."

In the distance, he saw mountains, small and blurred, like a promise no one keeps. He didn't know if he'd ever reach them. But that didn't matter. The dust would get him one way or another.

He pulled the Colt from the holster, turned it over in his hand, and saw his young face reflected in the shiny cylinder—young, but sick, full of cracks, full of fever. A face that people had always laughed at before they died.

Billy laughed, hoarse and bloody. "An end in the dust," he muttered, "that's more than you deserve."

Then he rode on, deeper into the emptiness that had always been waiting for him.

The ride became harder. Every hoofbeat sounded like a dull drumbeat in Billy's skull. His breath was ragged, the fever burned beneath his skin as if the sun had decided to burn him from within. He swayed in the saddle, holding on only because his hand gripped the Colt like a damned talisman.

The dust swirled higher, thicker, seeming to take on shapes of its own. He saw faces in it—blurred mouths, bloody eyes, shadows of men he had long since shot. They grinned, cursed, laughed.

"There you are again, Billy," whispered the dust. Or maybe it was just his head dissolving. "We've waited. For a long time."

Billy coughed, spat blood into the wind, and grinned crookedly. "Fucking dust. You talk too much. But at least you stay with me. More than those living bastards ever did."

The dust swelled, encircling him, settling on his skin, creeping into his nose, his mouth, his eyes. Every breath was sharp, every gulp of air cut like a knife.

"You are one of us," whispered the dust. "Always have been. You belong to us."

Billy laughed hoarsely, his laughter breaking into a cough. "If I'm going to become dust, I'll become the damn dust that laughs while you die."

His vision blurred. Mountains, sky, horse—everything shimmered, dissolved. Only the dust remained, everywhere, endlessly, as if he had never known anything else.

Billy slurred, whispering, his voice almost gone: "End in the dust. Shit... sounds almost like a song."

Then he slumped deeper into the saddle, the fever holding him like a rope. The dust danced around him like a chorus calling him home.

The horse trotted on, but Billy's body couldn't take it anymore. He swayed, the Colt almost slipping from his hand. He raised his head once more, saw the

shimmering steppe as if it were a sea of fire. Then his coughing jerked him forward, he lost his footing, and fell.

The impact was dull, dust swirled up, settling immediately over him, as if the earth had been waiting for it. The ground tasted of iron and dirt. His fingers dug into it as if trying to hold on, but everything slipped away.

He lay there, gasping, spitting blood that immediately mingled with the dust. His eyes stared at the sky, which already looked like a giant gravestone.

And then they came. Not really, but in his fever they were there—the faces of the dead. The butcher, the sheriff, the wooden-legged man, the farmer, his wife, even the preacher. They stood over him, not with bodies, only with shadows, but clear enough. They laughed, mocked, some cursed, some were silent with dead eyes.

"Well, Billy," whispered one, "now you're like us." "Welcome, milksop," sneered another. "A boy's a boy," shrieked the woman.

Billy grinned, coughed, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. "You're all dust. And I... I'm your king."

The shadows bent lower, the wind carried their whispers over him, mingling them with his rattling breath. For a moment, it seemed as if they were carrying him, not to heaven, not to hell—only deeper into the dust that was already swallowing him.

Billy lay motionless, only the twitching of his chest betraying that he was still alive. The dust settled heavily on his face, creeping into his lips, into the cracks in his teeth. Every breath was a cough, every cough a spurt of blood.

His eyes were half-closed, but the grin was still plastered on his face. "Come on," he slurred, his voice barely above a rasp. "Laugh with me, you bastards. Laugh with the boy."

And they laughed. At least, that's how he heard it. Voices everywhere. Voices in the wind, voices in the dust, voices in his own head. Sometimes deep, sometimes shrill, sometimes like bottles shattering.

Billy laughed along. First quietly, then louder, until he was gasping, coughing up blood, and still didn't stop. It wasn't a human laugh anymore—it was the laughter of someone who knew he was already halfway to the grave and didn't give a damn.

The sky spun, the earth swayed, shadows danced as if on a wall of fire. Billy saw hands reaching for him, faces dissolving into dust, eyes staring at him. He saw them all, and he laughed them down.

"You thought I was a boy," he gasped, "but I am the dust. I am your damned end."

His fingers clutched the Colt, but he couldn't lift it. He just pressed it against his chest as if it were a heart that was still beating.

The laughter continued, mingling with the whistling of the wind, until one could no longer tell whether it came from Billy or from the dust itself.

Hooves thundered somewhere in the distance. Plumes of dust rose, closer, heavier, until shapes pushed through the shimmering air. Five or six riders, their silhouettes black against the sky.

Billy heard them, but he didn't move. His body was heavy as lead, only his grin remained. The Colt lay against his chest, sticky with blood, and he muttered hoarsely, "Come on... bastards... the dust's already got me."

The riders stopped and stared down at him. One, perhaps a sheriff, perhaps just a robber, leaned forward in his saddle. "Damn it," he muttered, "that's him. Billy the Kid."

"Is he dead?" asked another.

They dismounted and approached. One knelt down and roughly shook Billy's shoulder. Nothing. Then a twitch, a cough, a spurt of blood that stained the ground red.

"Shit," the man gasped, jumping back. "He's still alive."

Billy laughed, wheezing, coughing, more blood than voice. "No... I'm not alive... I'm dust."

The men looked at each other, no one daring to touch him. The sheriff—if he was one—spat in the sand. "He'll die anyway. Leave him there. The dust will take what's his."

They stepped back, whispered, some made the sign of the cross. No one shot, no one helped.

Billy's eyes flickered open, seeing them like shadows in the light. "You... already belong to me... every one of you." Then he laughed, a hoarse, broken sound that chilled the men's spines.

The riders swung themselves back into their saddles, one muttering, "Not even the devil wants him." Then they rode on, leaving Billy in the dust.

And Billy, half-conscious, grinned wider. "End in the dust," he whispered, "this is... my damned kingdom."

The dust settled heavier over him, layer upon layer, as if the earth were already trying to swallow him. Billy lay motionless, only the trembling of his chest betrayed that a shred of life remained within him. Every breath was a tear in his throat, every cough a piece of death that he spat out.

The riders had disappeared, leaving only their hoofprints, which the wind was slowly covering. Billy was still grinning, though his lips were bloody and torn. He spoke barely audibly, but his voice crawled across the ground like a snake.

"The end... in the dust... that's always been it... that's how it was from the beginning..."

His eyes rolled, seeing nothing and everything at once. He saw the steppe, but it was no longer land—just a sea of dust, endless, without sky, without ground. In it, thousands of faces, all laughing, cursing, screaming. Some with holes in their heads, others with bloody mouths. All his victims.

"Come on... bastards..." he panted, "draw your cards... we'll play... until the dust wins."

He laughed, a hoarse, broken sound that rattled more than sounded. His Colt slipped from his hand, half-buried in the sand. He grabbed it, curled his fingers around it, and held it like an anchor in a world that no longer wanted him.

Above him the sky – pale, empty, a giant wall. Below him the dust – warm, hungry, his only bed.

Billy coughed one last time, blood splattered on the Colt, but his grin remained. "A boy... remains a boy... and dies like dust."

Then his head sank lower and the dust settled over him like a blanket.

The wind swelled, sweeping across the steppe, tearing the dust into swirling veils. Billy lay in it like a stone no one wanted to lift. His body had become small, thin, barely more than a shadow. But the grin remained—nailed to his face like a final insult to the world.

His breathing was barely audible, just a rattle, swallowed by the wind. His fingers still clutched the Colt as if it were the heart he had long since lost.

And then he laughed. Quietly at first, brokenly, more of a choking than a laugh. But the wind carried it, magnified it, spun it across the steppe until it sounded as if the earth itself were mocking.

“Dust...” he croaked, “I... am... dust...”

The laughter broke into coughing, the coughing into blood, the blood into silence.

The wind continued to sweep. The dust settled over him, grain by grain, until his body was no longer visible. Just a mound in the sand, small, inconspicuous, as if no human had ever lain there.

But those who listened closely later swore they had heard it: a laughter that came from the dust itself. Rough, mocking, indestructible.

Billy the Kid was gone. No grave, no cross, just dust. And the dust laughed.

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Author: Michael Lappenbusch

E-mail: admin@perplex.click

Homepage: <https://www.perplex.click>

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