

# Jesse James



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## Contents

Missouri mud and children's dreams .....	3
Bible in hand, blood in head .....	16
Brother Frank, Brother Shadow .....	30
The first Colts in the dirt.....	42
The damned guerrilla .....	53
Quantrill's revenge .....	63
Lawrence in Flames .....	73
The bullet in the chest.....	82
Hidden in the church, God laughs .....	91
From rebel to outlaw.....	99
The first banks, the first deaths .....	108
Train robbery in the moonlight .....	116
The Pinkertons are coming.....	126
Blood on the farm door.....	133
Mother without arm, brother without head.....	140
Robin Hood or dirty dog? .....	148
Newspaper articles and lies .....	155
The myth grows, the corpses too.....	163
The railway workers scream .....	170
Minnesota goes wrong.....	177
Shots, smoke and cold fields .....	185
In the hideout of the Southern ghosts .....	191
Friends who become enemies .....	198
Women, whiskey and halo .....	205
A hero for the poor – a bastard for the rich .....	211
Back room full of curses .....	217
An old revolver, a tired man .....	223
Bob Ford knocks .....	229
The last wall, the last picture .....	235
A shot in the back of the head .....	241
Hero, traitor, corpse .....	251
Coffin lids, onlookers, newspapers.....	262
The shattered myth .....	272
America eats its own children .....	281
imprint.....	288

## Missouri mud and children's dreams

The ground in Missouri was a stinking swamp. You couldn't take a step without your boots sticking to the dirt like tar. Horses sank up to their knees, children slipped, pigs wallowed in dung, and everything smelled of decay and rain. This wasn't a land of dreams. This was a land where dreams drowned in the mud before they could even grow.

Jesse James was born here. 1847. Kearney, Missouri. One of those goddamn farms in the middle of nowhere. His father – Robert James – was a preacher, but not just any preacher. He was one of those hotheads who yelled in church as if they could sweep the hell out of here with their yelling. But preaching didn't bring in any money. So he went off to the California Gold Rush because the yellow metal held more promise than Jesus. And he never came back. Not even a body, not even a grave. Just stories.

The mother, Zerelda, stayed behind. A woman as hard as a rock, religious to the core. She gripped the Bible so tightly her knuckles turned white. She believed her children would be either saints or devils—and she prayed it would be the former. But Missouri had other plans.

So Jesse and his brother Frank were up early in the mud. Chopping wood, feeding pigs, hauling water, mending fences. Work that was endless, work that broke your back before you were even big enough to kiss a girl.

Frank was the older one, three years ahead. He was the role model, the shadow, the teacher. Frank spoke little, but he had those eyes, as if he knew that life gave nothing to anyone. He taught Jesse how to punch, how to duck, how to strike at the right moment. He taught him how to slaughter animals without vomiting, how to swallow pain without crying.

And Jesse soaked it all up. The boy was like a sponge for blood and violence. He didn't like the Bible, but he liked the stories Frank told: stories of the revolutionaries, of horsemen who had fought against the English, of men who had lost everything but managed to keep their names. Jesse understood early on: names are worth more than money. You can gamble away money, lose it, blow it while you're drunk. But a name remains. A name can make you immortal.

And Missouri was full of hatred. Union against Confederacy, neighbor against neighbor. One wrong word was enough, and you had a knife in your stomach. Jesse heard the conversations of the men sitting on the porches of the taverns,

whiskey in their glasses, tobacco in their mouths. They spoke of slaves, of war, of freedom and honor. Words so big they felt like stones in his mouth. Jesse didn't understand everything, but he felt the hatred, the anger, the greed.

When he was twelve, he saw a Colt in the hands of a horseman for the first time. The iron gleamed in the sunlight, a heavy, cold thing. Jesse stared, mesmerized. He knew in that moment: No prayer, no psalm, no Lord's Prayer could ever grip him like a loaded pistol.

The evenings were long. Candles burned, Mother prayed, the Bible always remained open. Jesse lay on the ground, his head on a sack of corn, and imagined what he would be like one day. Not a farmer, not a poor dog. He wanted people to know his name. To fear him or revere him—it didn't matter. The main thing was that they didn't forget him.

Little Jesse's childhood dreams were not innocent. While others might dream of owning a horse or marrying a beautiful woman, he dreamed of drawing a pistol, being faster than the other guy, and sending him sprawling to the ground. He didn't laugh when a dog did tricks. He laughed when a rooster was beheaded, when blood spurted, when someone tripped and busted their face open. Blood was real, blood was honest.

The farm was a prison of dirt, wood, and sweat. Every day was the same. Getting up early, driving cows, hoeing fields, sweat on your face, blisters on your hands. And at the end of the day: nothing. No money, no thanks, just tiredness. Jesse hated it. He hated that the world wanted to force him to remain a nobody.

But deep down, he knew: Missouri was just the stage. He wasn't born to die in the dirt. He was born to soak the dirt with blood and make something greater out of it.

He didn't dream of paradise. He dreamed of people whispering his name in taverns. Of newspapers printing his deeds. Of him no longer being "Jesse the farm boy," but Jesse James, the man who came and took what was his.

The world laughed at farmers. But it feared outlaws. And Jesse knew even as a child which kind he wanted to be.

The nights in Missouri were black as burnt tar. No streetlights, no lights, just the moon, stars, and the chirping of crickets. When the wind blew through the cornfields, it sounded like the whispers of dead men. And sometimes, when

Jesse couldn't sleep, he lay there, staring at the ceiling, listening to his mother's breathing. Heavy, stern, almost as if she were still preaching in her sleep.

His father was gone, damn it, and no one knew exactly how he'd died. In California, by the gold mine, they said. Maybe beaten to death, maybe starved to death, maybe drowned while drunk. It didn't matter to Jesse. To him, the old man was simply a coward who'd run away. A man who preached God but sought the devil. He left behind only work, hunger, and that goddamn Bible lying on the table like a rusty sword.

His mother always talked about virtue, about God's will, about trials. But Jesse only saw the dirt, the hard hand, the severity. She was a woman who tolerated no dissent. If Jesse cursed, he got a fist. If he contradicted her, he got the belt. "The Lord will judge you, boy," she snarled, and all he could think was: If the Lord is anything like you, then he can kiss my ass.

But he didn't say it. Not yet. He was learning to be silent, like Frank. Frank was older, already had a different kind of calm. He seemed to understand the world, even if he hardly spoke. Frank was his shield and his teacher. He sometimes took Jesse fishing, not because he liked fishing, but because he wanted to show the boy how to learn patience. "Be still, wait, strike when the time comes," Frank said. And Jesse remembered that.

But patience wasn't his thing. Jesse was restless. He wanted more. He wanted out of this goddamn filth. He didn't want to grow old among cows, pigs, and Bible verses.

The area was full of stories. Old men sat around fires and told stories of Indian wars, of horsemen burning towns, of soldiers risking everything. Jesse soaked it all up. Every sentence, every image, every bloody story was a piece of the future for him. He didn't just want to hear it—he wanted to experience it.

Missouri was a divided country. Union or Confederacy? Neighbors who had been drinking whiskey together yesterday were drawing knives the next. Men disappeared, women screamed, houses burned. Jesse didn't understand politics or slavery back then. But he did understand that hatred was the true foundation of the country. Everyone hated everyone, and the gun decided the difference.

The kids in the neighborhood were no better. They fought, spat in each other's faces, kicked dogs. Jesse joined in. He was small, but tough. He wouldn't let



them beat him, even if he ended up lying bleeding in the dirt. He laughed when his lip burst. He learned that pain made you stronger.

Once, a traveling salesman passed by. He had a cart full of junk: mirrors, knives, cheap jewelry, fabrics. But Jesse saw only one thing: an old pistol, rusty, with a worn handle. He couldn't tear his eyes away. He begged his mother, but she hit him with the Bible. "That devil's stuff isn't coming into my house."

Jesse didn't cry. He just swore to himself that one day he wouldn't beg. He would take. And if he had to take with blood, then so be it.

The fields were his training ground. He ran through the lines, imagining Union troops chasing him. He climbed over fences, pretending to escape at the last moment. He built pistols out of wood, made "Bang! Bang!" noises with his mouth, fell dramatically to the ground, and got up again. But in his mind, it was real. For him, it wasn't a game, but preparation.

Frank sometimes smiled crookedly when he saw his little brother. But there was also a hint of worry in his eyes. Frank knew Jesse had too much fire in his belly. Fire that would eventually burn everything down.

The Bible studies continued. Mother forced him to memorize verses. Jesse could rattle them off, but to him they were empty words. When she spoke of sin, he thought of a woman's flesh. When she spoke of punishment, he thought of whipping. When she spoke of salvation, he thought of a horse under his ass and a gun in his hand.

The nights when he couldn't sleep were the worst. He heard the wind, the creaking of the boards, the distant howling of coyotes. And he thought: I won't die here. I won't remain a damn farmer. I'll burn my name into the earth so no one will ever forget it.

The world had no idea what the boy would become. But Missouri didn't spit out saints. Missouri spit out bastards. Men who made their own rules. Men who would rather die than be bowed down. And Jesse James was one of them. Even as a child, he was poisoned by mud, by hatred, by the stories of war.

He was a boy, but in his mind he was already an outlaw.

The Missouri mud didn't just stick to your boots—it stuck to your soul. If you were born there, you breathed the dirt, tasted it in your mouth, and carried it in your bones. It made you soft or hard, usually broken. The farms were

nothing but drudgery: cows, pigs, cornfields, a roof with more holes than an old sieve, and a mother who feared God more than hunger.

Zerelda James wasn't a woman you wanted to hug. She was tall, broad-shouldered, as hard as oak, and with a tongue as sharp as a razor. She had raised three children, and most of the blows she delivered were quicker than kind words. Jesse knew early on that there was no mercy when you messed up. She didn't hit you to discipline you; she hit you to make you realize that you were small, that you were nothing, that you had to bow down—to God, to her, to life.

But Jesse didn't give in. He gritted his teeth, swallowed his tears, and a fist formed in his skull. Every blow, every humiliation was like a bet with himself: One day, I'll turn the tables.

Frank was the other pole. Frank was calm. Silence. Eyes that saw more than they should. He read books whenever he could find them—poems, stories of old wars. Jesse looked up to him, not like a child to a saint, but like a wolf to a pack leader. Frank wasn't soft, he was just... controlled. He didn't strike back, he waited. And when he struck, he hit.

The two were brothers, but also two different paths. Frank could wait, Jesse couldn't. Jesse was burning. He was like a spark in a haystack, except the rain never came to extinguish him.

The war was in the air, even if no one had officially fired a shot yet. Missouri was a powder keg. Men were arguing in the markets. Union, Confederacy, freedom, slavery. Words Jesse didn't understand, but which blazed like flames in people's minds. One called another a traitor, and the next morning a pig lay dead in a ditch—not because it was sick, but because someone wanted to make a statement.

Jesse listened. He heard the anger, he heard the threats. And he knew: The world was no place for preachers and prayers. The world was a place for men with guns.

He wasn't even fifteen when he first tasted blood that wasn't his own. A neighborhood boy, a hothead, called him "Fatherless Bastard." Jesse lunged at him, wrestled him into the dirt, punched him until his fists went numb. When the boy lay still, Jesse grinned, his face smeared with blood. He felt no guilt. Only a calm that was addictive. Violence was like whiskey: It burned first, then it warmed, then you wanted more.

The farm was a prison. Every day was the same. Wake up, work, sweat, fall into bed tired. But other movies played in Jesse's head. He imagined himself riding a horse, gun at his belt, pockets full of money. He imagined himself riding into a town and people whispering, "There he is." He imagined never having to bow his head to a woman like his mother again.

He built himself weapons out of wood, he played war. But it wasn't child's play. He practiced. He practiced drawing quickly, aiming, and hitting. He practiced falling, getting up. He was obsessed.

The other kids thought he was crazy. Maybe he was. But craziness was a gift when the world wanted to trample you into the mud.

One night, the moon was full and the sky looked as if it were about to burst open, he sneaked out. Frank was already in bed, his mother asleep. Jesse crept to the shed, where old tools lay. He looked for a piece of metal, a pipe, something that looked like a weapon. He wanted the feel, the weight, the cold comfort. He found nothing, only rusty scythes and broken nails. But he held the scythe in his hands, swung it as if it were a sword, and whispered, "One day..."

He knew the farm wasn't the end of his life. The farm was just the hell from which he had to ascend.

Frank sometimes said, "We're James. We're tougher than the rest." Jesse believed that. But toughness wasn't enough for him. Toughness made you a survivor. Jesse wanted more. He wanted to be a goddamn man they wouldn't forget.

The Bible stories still haunted him. David versus Goliath, Cain and Abel, Job. His mother wanted him to learn humility from them. But Jesse learned only one thing from them: The strongest survives. The one who strikes first lives longer. The one who is willing to stand brother against brother makes history.

The Missouri mud absorbed everything—blood, sweat, tears. But Jesse James absorbed even more. Hate. Pride. Dreams that stank like cheap whiskey but were stronger than prayers.

And while other boys his age still dreamed of kissing the most beautiful girl in the neighboring village, Jesse dreamed of a life where he didn't need permission. No mother, no father, no God. Just himself, a horse, and a colt.

He was still a child. But in truth, he was already on his way to becoming a damned outlaw.



Missouri was no place for romance. No Paris, no Vienna, no place for poetry and strolls under the trees. Missouri was a damned mess of mud, blood, cornfields, and people who would slit each other's throats for a pig or a piece of land. Growing up there had no choice. Either you became a tough bastard, or you perished.

Jesse James grew up in that swamp like a weed you can't get rid of. He was thin, wiry, with eyes that burned brighter than summer corn. He wasn't a dumb boy. No. He was attentive, greedy, receptive. He absorbed everything he saw: his mother's beatings, his brother's calmness, the stories of the men who roamed through town.

Sometimes riders passed through, dirty men with more dust in their beards than dignity. They rode into the saloon, drank, played cards, argued, and sometimes one of them drew a gun. Then Jesse heard the shot. That single sound that cut through the night like a knife. And then silence. A man on the ground, blood, screaming, and the riders moved on.

Jesse often stood rooted to the spot at the window, listening, absorbing everything. For him, it wasn't fear. It was music. The music of a world he wanted to enter.

The farm, however, was a different kind of music. The dull thud of the axe, the lowing of the cows, the creaking of the wagon wheels, his mother's constant "Do this, do that." She dragged God behind her like a chain, and Jesse hated it. She spoke of humility while she dealt out punishments like an executioner. She spoke of love while she beat. For Jesse, it was clear: religion was just another way of keeping people down.

Frank was mostly silent. He could sit for hours, staring at the sky, smoking his pipe, without saying a word. Jesse couldn't stand it. He had to talk, rage, scream. He wanted to feel something. He wanted to see blood, wanted to hear something break. Frank was like a rock, Jesse like fire. Two brothers who complemented each other, but also two brothers who were never truly alike.

The neighborhood children often mocked Jesse. "The fatherless one! The bastard!" they cried, and he reacted as only he could. He pounced on them, biting, scratching, hitting them until one of them bled. And when his mother found out, she hit him even harder. But he didn't care. With every blow, he felt only confirmation: Life was an endless struggle, and if you didn't fight, you were already dead.

Once, when he was maybe thirteen, a man came through the village, a Confederate passing through. His horse was dusty, his coat covered in stains that looked like old bloodstains. He wore a revolver at his belt. Jesse couldn't tear his eyes away. The iron seemed to gleam, even though it was dirty. The man laughed, drank whiskey, told stories of battles, of burning houses, of men tearing each other apart.

Jesse absorbed every word. For him, this man wasn't a criminal, not a soldier—he was a hero. Someone who was free, who did what he wanted. Someone who had no farm breathing down his neck, no mother, no God. Just his horse, his gun, and his will.

That night, Jesse couldn't sleep. He lay awake, staring at the ceiling. He heard the wind, heard the animals outside, heard his mother snoring. And all he thought was, "This is how I want to live. Not die in the mud. Not praying. But laughing, with a gun in my hand."

The years dragged on. Every day was the same. Planting corn, feeding animals, chopping wood. But Jesse's head was on fire. He wasn't made for waiting. He was made for action. He felt it in his bones, in every vein.

The men's conversations in the village grew louder. War was coming. Union versus Confederacy. Brothers against brothers. The country was falling apart. And Jesse knew: Here was his chance.

The Missouri mud was just the beginning. But he would plant his blood, his hatred, his dreams in that soil. And one day, he would reap from it something greater than corn, greater than cattle, greater than all of his mother's goddamn sermons.

He wanted to become a name. A name that inspired fear. A name that was stronger than any bullet.

And he already knew as a boy: **That name would be Jesse James.**

It wasn't a childhood home where Jesse grew up. No apple pie, no clean shirts, no innocence. Missouri was a field of sweat, dirt, and blood. If you were born there, you had two choices: you became an ox that pulled the plow or a wolf that took what he needed. Jesse never wanted to be an ox.

The days dragged on like a rope. Early in the morning, before the sun even hung over the fields, the mother would yell her children out of bed. They'd fetch water, chop wood, and drive the cows. Their hands were calloused, their

feet covered in mud. The bread was hard, the coffee was weak, and the Bible always lay in the middle of the table, as if to say, "No matter how hard you work, in the end, you're mine."

Zerelda James wasn't a mother who told stories or sang songs. She was a woman who dished out blows, commands, Bible verses. She had her children under control like a field hand his horses. And if one kicked, she tightened her belt. Jesse hated her for it, but somewhere deep down, he learned from her: toughness. Ruthlessness. No room for weakness.

Frank was different. Frank didn't make a fuss. He worked, kept quiet, read when he could. He was a quiet dog, one who devoured everything. Jesse was the opposite. A fire that wanted to burn. A dog who bit if you provoked him.

The neighbors whispered. "Those James boys are going to cause trouble." They were right. Even as children, the brothers were different. Frank withdrew, Jesse sought out a fight. He was the first to strike, the last to give up. If one of them shouted "Fatherless bastard," he was already punching the other one in the face. He bled often, but he laughed about it. Blood wasn't a misfortune for him. Blood was proof that he was alive.

The area was rife with violence. Men murdered their wives while drunk, neighbors poisoned each other's wells, children tortured animals because they knew nothing else. Missouri was a frontier country. A place where the law was as full of holes as the roofs of the cabins. If you wanted justice, you had to take it.

Jesse learned this early. Once, an older boy stole a piece of meat from his plate. Jesse was ten. He waited until the boy was at the river and jumped on him from behind. He rammed his head into the water until the kid screamed and coughed. Then he took his pants and made him run home naked. It wasn't the meat that mattered. It was the message: Take something from me, and I'll take it back, double and triple.

The farm was a hell of a place, but sometimes men from outside came by. Traders, drunkards, Southern sympathizers. They brought stories. Stories of battles, of Indians, of riches. Jesse absorbed them like a drowning man absorbs air. He heard of Quantrill, a guerrilla leader who showed no mercy. He heard of horsemen burning towns and blowing up trains. To his mother, they were devils. To Jesse, they were heroes.

The nights were the worst. Dark, full of sounds, full of thoughts. Jesse lay on his back, listening to his family's breathing, and his head was full of images. Images of himself on a horse, a Colt at his belt, his pockets full of money. Images of enemies falling when he fired. Images of men whispering his name. He grinned in the dark as if he already belonged there.

At thirteen, he stole his first knife. It wasn't big, nothing special, but to him it was like a key. He carried it with him as if it would protect him, as if he were now one of the men who rode into the taverns at night. He practiced with it, carving wood, throwing it at trees. The other children laughed until one day he gave one of them a small cut. After that, they didn't laugh anymore.

Frank shook his head. "You're too wild, Jesse." "And you're too quiet," Jesse replied. "Quiet will put you in the grave."

The war was approaching. Men disappeared, reappeared as soldiers. The farm was full of rumors. Union troops, Confederates, guerrillas. His mother prayed more than ever. But Jesse only felt this burning sensation. Finally, something was happening. Finally, a chance to leave the mess behind.

He wasn't old enough to fight yet, but he knew: Soon. Soon he would no longer just dream. Soon he would shoot. Soon he would take what was his.

The Missouri mud was a grave for many. But for Jesse James, it was a birthplace. A place that shaped him, steeled him, made him what he would become: not a farmer, not a preacher, not a nobody. But a name. A name America would never forget.

Missouri was a torn-apart land. A state that didn't know whether it was North or South, whether it wanted to be free or bound. On one side, the Union, which spoke of freedom; on the other, the Confederates, who wanted to keep their plantations and slaves. And in between, villages, farmers, and families, bashing each other's skulls because they disagreed.

For Jesse James, this was normal. He grew up surrounded by curses, threats, and mistrust. The neighbor with whom you traded cows that morning could set fire to your barn that evening because you supposedly supported the wrong people. It was a civil war even before the armies officially marched.

The conversations in the village square were poisonous. Hard-faced men spat words like "Yankee pigs" or "slave-owning pack." Some had Bibles in their hands, others knives. Jesse often stood on the sidelines, listening, absorbing

the anger. He didn't yet understand why everyone was talking about slaves, but he understood the heat in their voices. He understood the hatred.

Jesse had seen slaves himself. Not many, Missouri was a border state, but enough to know what the system smelled like. Black men toiling in the fields, their eyes as empty as dried-up wells. His mother hardly talked about it. For her, it was simply God's order. Jesse didn't ask. He didn't care. He only cared about how the world was falling apart.

Because when a world fell apart, something could be made out of it. When everything burned, there was room for someone to take what was left.

The guerrilla ghosts were everywhere. Quantrill. Anderson. Bloody Bill. Names that blew through Missouri like curses. Men who supposedly razed cities, shot women, and didn't spare children. Some said they were devils. Others said they were heroes fighting for the South. For Jesse, they were one thing above all: stories that made his heart race.

In the evenings, when he lay in the dirt and stared at the sky, he imagined himself one of them. Mounted on a fast horse, pistol loosely in hand, eyes glowing with intoxication. No plowing, no chopping wood, no goddamn corn. Just smoke, blood, and freedom.

His mother smelled the fire in him. "You'll end up like your father," she sometimes said, "driven away by the devil." She hoped the Bible would save him. But the more she prayed, the more Jesse laughed to himself. He didn't want to be saved. He wanted to be damned, if damnation meant he was finally free.

Frank watched all this with his quiet calm. Frank was older, and the rumors of war gripped him more seriously. He read newspapers when he got one, he listened to the men, he thought. Frank saw Missouri breaking apart, and he knew: Soon he would have to vote. Jesse didn't see that. He wasn't thinking about elections, about politics. For him, it was all just a gateway—a gateway into the world he longed for.

The Missouri mud was covered in blood. Not his yet, but he could smell it. There was more drinking in the taverns, more fighting. More men were disappearing at night. Horses were returning riderless. It was as if the ground itself was crying out for war.

And Jesse screamed along. Quietly, only within himself. But he knew: his hour would come.

He began to toughen himself up. He sought out fights, other boys who insulted him. He took blows just to hit back harder. He practiced with his wooden Colt until his fingers bled. He practiced falling, rolling, and getting up. It was all just a game—but in his mind, it was serious. He was convinced that God or the Devil—or both—had destined him for something greater.

His mother realized she was losing him. She yelled harder, prayed louder, hit harder. But she had no chance. You can't chain a boy to the Bible when he already has a gun in his heart.

And so Jesse James grew up: a child in the mud, with dreams of iron. A child who knew war was coming. A child who sensed he wouldn't sink in it, but would rise.

He wasn't old enough to be there yet. But the land, the hatred, the stories, the violence—they had already shaped him. Missouri had turned him into a bastard before he'd even properly bled for the first time.

The sky over Missouri was vast, but it felt cramped. A boy could stare until his neck ached, and still there was no escape. The horizon promised freedom, but the earth held you down like a chain. Mud, work, hunger—all that remained was the feeling of being trapped.

Jesse James absorbed this sky and hated it at the same time. He saw the stars and imagined that somewhere out there were cities where men had money, whiskey, and women without having to drive cows in the morning. He imagined that somewhere out there, real life was happening, while he was stuck here in a goddamn hole that smelled of manure and fear.

The boy was smarter than most people thought. He knew no one would come to save him. No father, who had long since rotted away in the ground or in some California mine. No God, who sounded like a sadistic overseer in his mother's sermons. No neighbor, no friend. If he wanted out, he would have to do it himself.

Frank saw all this, but he didn't say much. Frank was the observer, Jesse the doer. When Frank read, Jesse was impatient. When Frank thought about it, Jesse was already ready to lash out with his fists. But deep down, Jesse knew:



Without Frank, he would perish. Big Brother was the net that caught him when he got too wild.

But this web had cracks. The war was approaching. Men disappeared from the village, reappearing in uniform. Sometimes they returned, sometimes they didn't. Stories of battle seeped through like blood through fabric. Men with missing arms, missing eyes, missing souls. Jesse saw them, heard them talk, heard them curse. And he knew: There was a game out there, bigger than milking cows and chopping wood.

The farm was a bad joke. The corn grew, but the future didn't. Zerelda, the mother, prayed louder than ever. She shouted at the children as if Bible verses could stop the war. Jesse heard the words, but they bounced off him like rain off a tin roof. He didn't believe in salvation. He believed in fire, in gunfire, in revenge.

His dreams were filled with blood. He imagined himself riding into a city, the people scattering when they heard his name. He imagined himself striking down one opponent after another until no one dared to challenge him. He imagined himself becoming rich, not by working, but by taking. Everything else was a waste of time.

Sometimes he watched the slaves in the fields of other farms. Black men toiling in the sun as if they themselves were machines. Jesse felt no pity, not really. But he saw how power worked. Whoever had a gun, whoever had land, whoever had the power—could make others into slaves. And Jesse swore to himself that he would never be anyone's slave. Not to a man, not to a woman, not to God.

The village was full of alcohol. Men drank because life overwhelmed them. Women screamed because their husbands were drunk. Children fought because they saw the old people doing it. It was all a cycle of violence. Jesse was no stranger to it. He was a part of it, but he wanted more than that.

At fourteen, he had the gaze of a man older than he was. He could stare into the distance for hours without saying anything, as if waiting. Not for a miracle, but for the moment when he could jump up and ride off.

Frank told him stories of heroes, of soldiers, of men who had written their names in the dust. Jesse listened, but he didn't want to just listen. He wanted to become one of those names. Not a footnote, not a victim. A man people feared and admired at the same time.

Missouri was the teacher. Every day brought a new lesson: Distrust your neighbor. Fight first, explain later. Strength counts more than morals. And most importantly: No one is coming to save you.

One evening, when the wind howled so loudly that the windows rattled, Jesse sat down outside the house. The sky was black, the trees were bending, and he held his stolen knife in his hand. He stared at it as if it were a gun and whispered, "I'm going to take what I want." No one heard, except maybe God, and if God did, he laughed.

Jesse James was still a boy. But in his mind, he was already an outlaw. Missouri had shaped him—not with love, but with blows, not with hope, but with hate. He was the son of a strict mother, the brother of a quiet thinker, the child of a dead father. But above all, he was a product of mud, of war, of anger.

And one day he would shout this name he bore out into the world. **Jesse James.** No longer the kid from Kearney, Missouri. But the man America would fear.

### **Bible in hand, blood in head**

It was a goddamn joke. On one side, the Bible, heavy as a brick, always open, always with his mother's finger tracing the verses like an executioner reading his sentence. On the other side, the hunger, the beatings, the work, the mud. And somewhere in between, a boy named Jesse James, who learned that words meant nothing without iron.

His mother was a battlefield on two legs. Zerelda. A woman who loved God more than her children. Or maybe she hated her children and called it love, using the Bible as a club. She read verses about humility and at the same time hit them when someone laughed, when someone disagreed, when someone asked why God allowed so much suffering. Jesse got those blows more often than anyone else. Not because he was weaker, but because he had that look. That look that said, "I don't believe you."

Frank took the verses, read them, and reflected. Jesse pretended to listen, but his head was ablaze. When his mother recited "Thou shalt not kill," he thought of the neighbor boy whose teeth he had already knocked out. When she shouted "Love thy neighbor," he thought of men he would later want to shoot.

For him, the Bible was a book full of contradictions, full of weakness. For him, blood was the only clear language.

The farm was no place for religion, even though his mother believed otherwise. It was a place where the plow was harder than any prayer, where cows received more attention than children. Jesse saw men pray before going to war—and then being torn apart like cattle in a slaughterhouse. He saw women sing psalms while their drunken husbands fought. God was there, they said. Jesse didn't see him. All he saw was hunger, death, and violence.

And yet, as much as he despised God, the Bible ate into him. The verses clung to his mind like parasites. They mingled with his dreams, distorting his images. In his fantasies, he rode through cities with Bible names. He saw himself as a kind of David, only without a sling, but with a Colt. He imagined he could be a prophet, but one who preached with gunfire.

Frank was more rooted in faith. He didn't believe blindly, but he saw structure, peace, in religion. Jesse sometimes hated him for it. "You read Psalms like they'll save you," he snarled. Frank just shrugged. "Sometimes they save you. If not in this world, then in the next." "Screw the next world," Jesse growled. "I want to live here."

His mother heard something like this and hit him. But the blow didn't silence Jesse. He only remained silent on the outside. But inside, the anger and hatred grew.

There were evenings when she would recite Bible verses for hours, as if trying to hypnotize the children. Jesse stared at the flickering candle and thought how easy it would be to knock it over, set the table on fire, and end the whole mess. But he didn't. Not yet. He was still too young, still too small, but he knew: His time would come.

The Bible was poison that shaped him. It wasn't salvation, but fuel that fed his flames. Every verse about punishment made him harder. Every verse about sin made him hungrier. Every verse about humility made him more determined never to kneel.

The local church was no better. A preacher sweating while talking about purity, his hands greedily gliding down the backs of young women. Men who shouted "Amen" but spent the evening playing dice and cheating on each other. Jesse saw the double standards, smelled the hypocrisy. For him, the church was just

a second battlefield, a place where the weapons were words, but the blood flowed just as much.

He had the Bible in his hand because he had to. But there was blood in his head. He imagined himself firing bullets with the same ease with which the preacher hurled words. Words couldn't save you. Bullets could.

One evening he asked Frank, "Do you think God sees us?" Frank calmly replied, "Maybe." "And if he does see us, he'll probably laugh at us." Frank remained silent, and the silence was answer enough.

His mother heard only the scorn in Jesse's voice and sent him out into the night. It was cold, the wind bit, but Jesse grinned. Outside was better than inside. Outside, he heard the howling of coyotes, and it sounded more sincere than any prayer.

Missouri was a damn slaughterhouse, and the Bible was merely its echo. Jesse James was young, but he already knew: Saints die young, bastards survive.

And he had chosen to be a bastard.

The Bible was always the center of attention. Whether it was breakfast, lunch, or dinner, whether they were hungry or the sky was emptying over Missouri like a leaky bucket—the Bible lay open in the middle of the table, and the mother treated it like a gun, ready to fire at any moment.

"Read, Jesse," she commanded, and the boy had to rattle off verses while he seethed inside. Words about humility, about obedience, about punishment. Words that didn't calm him, but made him sharper. He knew them all by heart because they had been drilled into him like scars. But in his head, he twisted them. "Thou shalt not kill," he heard, and he thought: Yes, I will kill, and I'll be damn good at it. "Honor your father and mother," he heard, and he thought: My father, who ran away? My mother, who beats me? Screw them both.

It was as if the religion that was supposed to save him was doing the exact opposite. It made him angry. It made him greedy. It made him dream of a God he would one day spit in the face.

Frank was different. Frank could sit still for hours, reading the Bible, and at the end, instead of being angry, he felt somehow calmer. Jesse didn't understand. "You read that stuff and you become as gentle as a lamb," he mocked. Frank shrugged. "Sometimes gentleness is stronger than violence." Jesse just laughed. "Meekness will get you to the grave."

The village preacher was the perfect example of hypocrisy. A fat man with a sweaty shirt, who described hell in a thunderous voice while watching the children run out of the church. Jesse watched him closely. He saw how his eyes gleamed when he passed too close to the girls. He saw him cheat at cards. And he thought: If that's a man of God, I'd rather drink with the devil.

His mother saw things differently. For her, the preacher was a saint, his words law. When Jesse laughed or mimicked him, she hit him. But every blow was just further proof that God was nothing more than an excuse for violence. And Jesse swore to himself that he would eventually repay this violence—not with a belt, but with lead.

The boy learned early on to distinguish between words and actions. Words were cheap. Anyone could say, "Love your neighbor." But when that same man was drunk and brandishing a knife that night, only actions counted. Jesse began to pay more attention to hands than mouths. Hands revealed the truth: whether they trembled, whether they grasped, whether they hesitated.

He began to rewrite the Bible as a manual for war. David versus Goliath? For Jesse, David wasn't a shepherd boy, but an outlaw with a gun who struck down the giant with a single bullet. Moses, who led the people through the desert? For Jesse, he was a gang leader who managed to get his men to follow him despite hunger. And Job, who endured all the torments? For Jesse, he was the idiot who didn't fight back.

His mother would have loved to make him a little priest. But Jesse wasn't priest material. He was the material for a damned robber. And every evening spent with psalms and prayers only brought him closer to that goal.

There was a day when he couldn't stand it anymore. He was maybe thirteen or fourteen. His mother had dictated verses again. Jesse repeated them, monotonously, empty. "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife." Then it burst out of him. "And what if your neighbor doesn't deserve his wife?"

Silence. Then the blow. A harsh, dry sound that echoed through the room. But Jesse grinned, even with his burning cheek. That was the moment he knew: He was no longer her child. He didn't belong to her, not to God, not to the Bible. He belonged to himself.

Frank looked at him the way one looks at a man about to climb a scaffold. But Frank said nothing. Perhaps he knew that words no longer reached Jesse.

In the evening, outside, under the sky, Jesse whispered to the wind, "If there is a God, let him come. I'm not afraid." No God came. Only the howling of coyotes. And that was more honest than any amen.

Bible in hand, blood in his head—that's how he grew up. A boy who learned that words were worthless without violence. A boy who realized that saints drown in the mud while bastards ride away on horses.

And Jesse James had decided never to be a saint.

The village church wasn't a place of light, but a stinking shack full of sweat and false hope. A white-painted wooden building that looked like a lighthouse from afar, but inside it smelled of wet dog, cheap perfume, and the breath of men who had never seen their teeth.

Jesse had to go there every damn Sunday. Mother insisted. "The house of the Lord," she said. For Jesse, it was more like the house of lies.

The men sat in their best shirts, the women in bonnets, the children as silent as tamed dogs. The preacher sweated at the front, Bible in hand, preaching about purity, about sin, about obedience. His voice boomed like a drunken ox, and sometimes a drop of spit flew across the front row as he bellowed. Jesse sat beside him, gritting his teeth and thinking: This man wants to scare us because he has nothing else himself.

The preacher talked about sin, and Jesse saw his greedy glances as he peeked at the women. He talked about humility, and Jesse knew he cheated at cards. He talked about purity, and Jesse heard the rumors that he had been seen at the brothel at night.

The congregation pretended to believe him. But after the sermon, outside, the men spat in the grass, laughed dirty, and talked about whiskey and money. Jesse watched it all. He saw the hypocrisy, and he absorbed it like smoke. It was proof to him that words were just fog. That with enough spit and noise, you could fool people for an hour. But outside, only one thing mattered: who had the fist. Who had the gun.

The mother was blind to this hypocrisy. For her, the church was the center. She knelt, she prayed, she sang. Jesse stood beside her, whispering the words without meaning them. In his head, he forged his own religion: a religion of steel, of hoofbeats, of blood.



He began rewriting the Bible like an outlaw's handbook. "Blessed are the meek" – nonsense. Blessed are those who shoot first. "The Lord is my shepherd" – nonsense. No shepherd. A wolf tearing apart the flock, that's what he was. "Love your enemies" – even greater nonsense. Kill them before they kill you.

He considered these reversals to be the true Bible—the one that truly explained life.

Frank was the opposite. He truly listened. He said quiet prayers, sometimes even at night. Jesse watched him and wondered how two brothers could be so different. Frank sought peace in the Bible. Jesse found only anger in it.

There was a moment that left a lasting impression on him. After a sermon, he was standing outside, listening to two men whispering. They were laughing about a third who had lost everything in the last card game. One of them said, "The preacher tells us about sin, but he was the first to raise the stakes in the game." Jesse listened to the men laughing. And he thought: That's it. Religion is a game. One person shouts, one pays, one laughs. And in the end, you lose anyway.

His mother noticed the hardness in him. "You have to believe, Jesse," she said. "Faith saves." "If faith saves, then why is Father dead?" Jesse shot back. The slap came immediately. But he laughed, even with his cheek burning.

He began to view sermons like a boxing match. The preacher was the announcer, the crowd the crowd. He himself was already outside the ring, ready to enter at some point, not with words, but with lead.

In the evenings, when he had to read the Bible, he let his fingers glide over the pages and imagined they weren't verses, but lists of names. Names of men he would eventually kill. Every verse a target. Every psalm a bullet.

The Bible in his hand, the blood in his head—that wasn't a metaphor, that was his everyday life. The contradiction shaped him. He had to obey, but inwardly he never obeyed. He had to read, but he only read with the intention of distorting it. He had to kneel, but in his mind he stood upright.

One day, the preacher himself came to visit the farm. A fat man, sweating, a Bible under his arm. He spoke of morality, of hard work, of gratitude. Jesse stood by, holding back, biting his tongue. But as the man left, Jesse whispered,

"He preaches about heaven, but he smells like hell." Frank just shook his head. His mother hit him. But Jesse knew he was right.

The Bible didn't make him pious. It made him sharper. It made him a man who saw through the world. Who knew that words could bind you like chains. And that only bullets could break those chains.

This is how he grew up: forced to hold the Bible, but secretly with his head already full of blood. A boy who learned that religion was nothing more than a game of the powerful. And that one day he would found his own religion: with smoke, fire, and the sound of gunfire.

Sunday was always the worst day. During the week, Jesse could at least pretend that work would save him—chopping wood, herding pigs, milking cows, sweat on his brow. But on Sunday, there were no excuses. Sunday was God's day, and God's day was the day Jesse would have liked to take the Bible and throw it into the fire.

The mother got up early and dressed the children as if they were her soldiers marching off to war. Except the war was taking place here in the church building, between preacher and congregation, between words and lies. Jesse was forced into a shirt that was tight around the shoulders and smelled of soap—soap they could never otherwise afford. And then they went to church.

It was stuffy inside. Men, women, and children, huddled together, all with that look: as if they were hoping heaven saw them while they sweated and suffered. The preacher roared. "Sin! Temptation! Condemnation!" Jesse listened, but not really. He watched the faces. He saw the men nodding, but their eyes were absent. He saw the women whispering secretly. He saw children dozing. And he thought: No one really believes this. Everyone's just playing along.

The Bible was like a game where everyone pretended to know the rules, even though they knew they were shitty. And Jesse was the only one who wouldn't pretend.

Once, the preacher caught him yawning. "Son, wake up, the Lord is speaking to you!" he shouted. Jesse grinned and said loudly, "If the Lord has something to say, let him say it himself." Silence. The people stared. His mother turned pale. The preacher was silent for a second too long—and in that silence, Jesse heard his victory.

Of course, he later received the beating of his life. His mother dragged him home, the belt whizzed, his skin burned. But inside, he laughed. He had dared to say the unspeakable. And he had seen that even the preacher was just a man who could become speechless.

Frank tried to calm him down. "You have to be smart, Jesse. Smarts win wars." "Smarts win nothing," Jesse growled. "Only courage. Only force. Only those who are not afraid win."

His mother heard such conversations and prayed louder. But every prayer she spoke only made Jesse harder. He was convinced that every psalm she tried to force on him turned into a ball in his head.

The Bible in his hand felt like a weight. But in his mind, he already had the revolvers. He imagined himself one day entering the church, not as a dirty farm boy, but as a man on a horse, the gun loosely in his hand. The preacher would roar, and Jesse would just grin. A shot through the ceiling, dust, screams—and then silence. That was his fantasy, and it kept him alive.

The hypocrisy was everywhere. Men who shouted "Amen" on Sunday beat their wives on Monday. Women who sang psalms cursed their neighbors at the well. Children who dutifully folded their hands in church put stones in their pockets outside to throw at dogs. Jesse saw it all and realized: This was America. No purity, no heaven, no paradise. Just filth and people trying to cover up their own shit.

For Jesse, this was a gift. Because he saw that he wasn't the only one living against the rules. Everyone lived against the rules. It's just that he wanted to do it openly, while the others pretended to be pious.

The Bible didn't make him a believer. It made him cynical. It made him hard. And it made him hungry for something more real than verses.

In the evenings, when his mother read the Bible, he would close his eyes and imagine tearing out the pages to polish his pistol. He would see himself in his dreams, lighting a fire with the Bible, the light flickering, and he would laugh in the glow while others wept.

Frank tried to hold him back, but Jesse was no longer able to be held back. He was like a horse staring at the fence, ready to pounce.

Missouri shaped him. But the Bible gave him hatred. Without the Bible, he might have become a quiet farmer. With the Bible, he became a boy just waiting for the war to finally come so he could write his own gospel—in blood.

And in this Gospel there would be only one name: **Jesse James**.

The Bible was like a second skin in this house. Every breath his mother took smelled of it. Every evening ended with it. Any conversation that came too close to the truth was crushed by it. Jesse could almost hear the pages rustling, even when no one opened them.

"The word of God is a sword," said his mother. For Jesse, it was more like a rope. A rope meant to strangle him.

Sometimes he thought of his mother kneeling at the table in the evenings, her head bowed, her hands folded, her Bible open. She was like a soldier receiving orders. But they weren't orders from above; it was an illusion, an addiction. Jesse looked at her, saw her lips tremble, and thought: She's not talking to God. She's talking to her own fear.

Frank followed her, not blindly, but respectfully. He could kneel beside her for an hour, silent and focused. For him, religion was like a bonfire in a storm. Jesse saw only smoke in it.

He began to read the verses differently. He read them as threats. "Thou shalt not kill" was, to him, a cry of the weak. "Love your enemies" was the biggest lie he had ever heard. In his world, it was exactly the other way around: Kill before you are killed. Hate is stronger than love.

This made him lonely. The other children prayed well, talked well, and laughed well. Jesse was the one who isolated himself, the one who stared up at the sky with cold eyes. They said he was wild, they said he was disrespectful. But secretly, they feared him.

The church reeked of lies, the Bible of hypocrisy. But Jesse learned from this. He learned that power came not from truth, but from staging. The preacher shouted, the people nodded. They nodded because he was loud, not because he was right. Jesse thought: This is how it's done. Be loud, be strong, be convincing – regardless of whether it's true.

Once, he sat next to Frank while his mother read Psalms again. Jesse stared at the candlelight flickering across the Bible pages. "If God is all-powerful, why doesn't he work for us in the fields?" he suddenly asked. Frank just looked at

him. His mother screamed as if he had committed the sacrilege of the century. Jesse just laughed.

The slap came quickly, but it didn't hit him like it used to. His face burned, but his heart was cold. Every blow was a nail in the coffin of his childlike innocence. Every blow made him more determined never to kneel again.

His dreams became more intense. He imagined that one day he would no longer hold the Bible in his hand, but would leave it in the dust as he rode away on a horse. He imagined himself returning to church, gun in hand, and that people would no longer sing psalms but whisper his name.

Frank saw the darkness growing within him. "You have to be careful, Jesse," he said. "If all you know is hate, it will eventually consume you." "Then let it eat," Jesse growled. "I'd rather be eaten than tied up."

That was the difference between them. Frank wanted to survive. Jesse wanted to burn.

The Bible was his mother's tool, but it was also the tinder for his fire. The more she forced him, the more he swore to do the opposite. It was a constant tug-of-war. And Jesse knew: sooner or later, the rope would break.

Missouri was the perfect place for such a rift. The village was divided, the families were divided. Conflicts everywhere, violence everywhere. Jesse absorbed it like other children absorb milk. For him, violence was as natural as breathing.

The Bible in his hand was a symbol. A book that had been forced upon him. But deep down, he had long since decided: one day, his writing would not be on paper, but on gravestones. Not in ink, but in blood.

There are moments when the world closes around your throat, and you feel something click inside you—like a trap snapping shut. For Jesse, it wasn't the sermons alone, not his mother's beatings, not the hunger. It was the combinations: the sermons and the card game afterward; the Psalms in the morning and the rough hand in the evening; the amen in church and the knife at the bar. It was this double life of the people around him that made him harder. It was as if Missouri itself was polishing him until only the edge remained.

Frank read more newspapers than you'd think a farm boy would. He brought with him words that reeked of cities, of the sound of cannons, of political

despairs that were bigger than the small village. Jesse saw the headlines, but he read them differently. For him, the headlines were just pretexts, reasons, underlines, printed lies. "Army recruiting," they read. "Men wanted." For Jesse, that meant opening doors. For Frank, that meant choosing where to place his loyalty.

War knocked. Not quietly, but with a soldier's boot. One night, a squad came through the village—men with faces that looked as if they had already seen too much. They asked for food, for boots, for a bed. They said nothing of honor. They said nothing of freedom. They only said, "Who's ready to fight?" The men nodded, bought the wine, felt important because they were now part of something bigger. Jesse watched everything from his corner, hands in his pockets, teeth clenched. He thought: If this is admission, then give me the uniform.

The day the guerrillas began to talk was like a drop of oil on an open wound. Stories from Quantrill that told of burning villages, of men who wouldn't negotiate. Some called them robbers, some freedom fighters. Jesse heard the word "freedom" and rolled it around in his mouth like tobacco. Freedom, he thought, is the right to take. Not to beg, not to ask. Take—and no one will question your right.

His mother sometimes cried while praying. Not those shrill cries of prayer, but quietly, so quietly that you'd think someone had stolen her tongue. Jesse saw those tears and realized: lamenting didn't carry her away. It changed nothing. For him, the tear was just a salt shaker: it seasoned life, but didn't change it. And that wounded him.

He began doing small things that meant nothing and everything. Stealing a horse without a light, putting a knife under a neighbor's mattress, stealing a stagecoach driver's horseshoes. Small acts that taught him how fear grows. He saw in people's eyes how they retreated at every unexplained loss, how they considered whom to suspect. And he, Jesse, made notes in his head. Who was cowardly? Who was loud? Who was hiding?

And then the voices of war—not just cannons, but the voices at the bar. Men who had suddenly decided what they were fighting for, without even knowing it. "For our rights," some said. "For the slaves," others said. It was a play they were being presented with. Jesse listened, laughed inwardly, and realized: theater is easier to manipulate than people. If you had the right props—flags, anthems, a fiery speech—then people would follow like lambs. He thought: I don't want to follow. I want to lead. Or I want to set the stage on fire.



Once, when he was younger, he came across a slave hiding in the twilight, his eyes wide open, his shirt covered in dirt. Jesse wasn't prepared. The image stayed with him: not a political argument, not an ideology, but a human being trembling and hiding. For a brief moment, something rose within him that was almost compassion—but it vanished as quickly as rain on hot iron. He only realized: power is what gives you the ability to command such people or ignore them. And he appreciated that. Not out of clemency, but as a tool.

The nights before men disappeared reeked of adventure for some and fear for others. Men joined guerrilla groups, sharpened knives, and tied wagons together. The community splintered into small factions, into secrets, into alliances formed only in whispers. Jesse absorbed it like dust. He was ready to be part of something—as long as it suited him.

Frank began to hesitate. He talked more, about consequences, about what war does to a soul. Jesse laughed at him. "You talk like a woman," he said. Frank, calm as ever, simply asked, "And if you're no longer like a woman, who are you then?" Jesse didn't think about it. He didn't want to filter, he didn't want to explain. He wanted to act.

Then came the first real test. Men you knew, men you liked, disappeared. A neighbor who often bought whiskey was taken away at night. No shot, no warning. Only silence. The next day, his house was empty. Women were crying, children were screaming. Jesse imagined how easy it would be to enter such a house and empty the closets. He imagined how it would tickle, like a game.

The mother became more nervous. Her prayers became more urgent, her blows sharper. She recognized something in her son that she feared: not open rebellion, but the calm that followed. When a boy becomes silent, something is brewing. And she was afraid that her name might be associated with his actions. People like her feared the pull that a son who left the mud behind could have.

One morning, Jesse saw a Confederate come into the village and question the people. Eyes that glittered differently, hands that held differently. A small spark of tension. No one knew whose side they were really on. Jesse just smiled. For him, it was perfect: confusion. Chaos. When no one knew who was friend and who was foe anymore, that was the time for men like him.

Frank warned: "You have to choose, Jesse. Either you stand with those who want law and order, or you stand with those who sow injustice." "Law and

order," Jesse spat, "are the pigs who eat us. Sowing injustice is only turning the seed."

He wasn't cowardly. He wasn't loyal. He was pragmatic. And in a world consuming itself, pragmatism was king. He learned that morality was fluid like water, and that it could be shaped as one wished. Today, the morality was: survival. Tomorrow: glory. The day after tomorrow: survival in glory.

The animals on the farm sensed the change like a change in the weather. Horses became nervous, dogs barked more often. Jesse laughed when he stole the horseshoes. It was as if he wanted to show the earth that he would no longer be part of its game. He practiced how to cover tracks, how to ride at night, how to saddle a horse quickly. He absorbed life like poison, and it made him sharper, faster, deadlier.

The Bible remained on the table. His mother leafed through it like a woman leafing through a recipe book. To Jesse, it was just paper. But the pages she fervently preached to him had transformed into knives—tools with which to cut people. And he learned to handle those knives. Not just with steel, but with words, with fear, with publicity.

So he continued to grow: half child, half beast. The world around him was ablaze, and he didn't see the destruction; he only saw the possibility. The possibility of standing in the smoke, putting on a mask, and emerging at the end as someone whose name people whispered. Not because they loved him, but because they feared him.

And that was exactly what he wanted.

The Bible was always there. No matter where Jesse turned, it lurked like a shadow. The black book, its verses reaching out like fingers. Her mother held it up like a shield, as if it could stop the world. But the world wouldn't stop. The world marched over her, with boots, with cannons, with fire.

The people in the village began to change. The war was no longer just talk. It was becoming real. It was coming closer. Men disappeared, reappeared in uniforms. Union, Confederacy—it didn't matter. As long as they had a gun and a reason to shoot. Jesse saw this and understood that words like "honor" and "justice" were just masks. Beneath the mask was always the same face: greed. Power. Violence.

The mother prayed louder. She forced Jesse to memorize verses, as if she could use them to chain him. "Thou shalt not kill," she yelled, while outside in the neighboring village the first corpses lay in the ditch. "Love thy neighbor," she prayed, while men were handing their neighbors over to the slaughter. For Jesse, it was all a perverse joke.

He sometimes laughed during prayer. A dry, short laugh that infuriated his mother. "Why are you laughing?" she screamed. Jesse replied, "God doesn't hear you."

The blow came as always, but he continued to grin. Each blow was like a seal. A seal that he wouldn't belong.

Frank tried to mend the cracks. "We have to stand firm, Jesse. We can't let ourselves be torn apart." "Stand firm?" Jesse growled. "Stand firm means waiting in the dirt until someone shoots you. I'm not standing firm. I'm going out."

The Bible didn't give him support. It gave him a mirror. He didn't see God in it, but rather the weakness of people who clung to something because they were too cowardly to act on their own. He saw men who lied to themselves. Women who took refuge in prayer. Children who dutifully recited without knowing what they were saying. Jesse saw this and decided: He wouldn't be one of them.

The nights became more restless. In the distance, one heard gunshots, sometimes screams. Men came into the village, wounded, hungry, with eyes like empty bottles. They spoke of massacres, of villages being burned down. Jesse listened. Not with fear, but with a cold hunger. This was the world he wanted. A world where masks fell. A world where only the strong survived.

The mother knelt before the Bible, tears streaming down her face. Jesse stared at her, and for the first time, he felt nothing. No pity, no anger. Only emptiness. She was a woman drowning in her verses while outside, the river was already flowing with blood.

Frank tried to rein him in. "The Bible isn't just words, Jesse. It's hope." "Hope?" Jesse spat. "Hope is for men who have nothing. I don't want to hope. I want to take."

He began to rewrite the Bible in his head, for good. No more verses, but rules. His rules. Not Ten Commandments, but just one: **Take before it is taken from you.**

The church, the village, the farm—everything was a cage. But the war was the open gate. Jesse knew it. Every shot in the distance, every rumor, every conversation at the bar was a call. And he was ready to answer.

The Bible remained on the table. But in Jesse's hands, it had long since become a dead thing. His mind had long since been filled with something else: images of smoke, of riders, of blood. He had blood in his mind, and he knew that one day he would pour it out into the world.

The mother sensed it. She looked into his eyes and knew she had lost him. She prayed even louder, as if she could persuade God to bring the boy back. But Jesse was already gone. Not physically, but in spirit. He was no longer her son. He was a bastard of war, conceived of mud and raised by hate.

And so his childhood ended: with a Bible in his hand and blood on his head. The Bible didn't make him a saint. It made him what he would become: an outlaw, a name, a man who no longer needed prayer because he carried his own hell within him.

### Brother Frank, Brother Shadow

Frank wasn't a boy, he was a shadow. Even as a child, there was something about him that seemed older, more mature, darker. If Jesse was like fire, blazing, unpredictable, then Frank was like a smoldering ember that never went out. He spoke little, and when he did speak, they weren't empty words.

Frank was the older brother, three years ahead, and in a world like Missouri, that was enough to make a difference. He was the first to truly understand the job. The first to know when to keep quiet, when to clench a fist, when to wait. Jesse, on the other hand, always wanted it right away, right now. Frank was the teacher who showed him that waiting could be a weapon.

His mother saw Frank as the better son. He prayed with her, he rarely contradicted her, he read the Bible as if he genuinely found something in it. For Jesse, this felt like a betrayal, but at the same time, a form of protection. As long as Frank was the good son, Jesse could be the rebel. As long as Frank played the shadow, Jesse could be the fire.

They worked side by side on the farm. Chopping wood, plowing fields, herding cows. Frank did the work quietly, with concentration, with a calm that drove

Jesse almost mad. "How can you stand it?" Jesse asked. Frank shrugged. "It is what it is." Jesse spat in the dirt. "Screw 'it is what it is.' I want it to be more."

Nevertheless, Jesse clung to Frank. He followed him when they went into the village, he listened when Frank told stories, he watched Frank talk to the men. Frank wasn't loud, but people listened to him. He had a way of not lowering his eyes, even when he was silent. Jesse learned that silence was sometimes louder than shouting.

The war was approaching, and Frank was drawn to it like a magnet. He read everything he could get his hands on: newspapers, leaflets, sermons. He absorbed the politics, while Jesse only wanted to hear the sound of gunfire. For Frank, it was a matter of loyalty. For Jesse, it was a matter of opportunity.

One evening they sat together outside the house. The crickets chirped, the sky hung heavy. "There's going to be war," said Frank. Jesse grinned. "Finally." "It's not a game, Jesse." "Everything is a game," he replied. "The only question is who wins." Frank shook his head. "You're thinking too short-sightedly. War turns men into beasts." Jesse laughed. "Then I'll be the greatest beast."

That was the difference. Frank feared what war did to people. Jesse longed for it.

The mother clung to Frank. She hoped he would show them the way, the pious, the right one. But Frank was no saint. He was just quieter. He had the same anger in his veins, but he didn't show it. He let it simmer, while Jesse let it flare up.

When the first guerrillas in Missouri became known, it was Frank who knew the names. Quantrill. Anderson. Men who burned cities. Jesse listened and felt his heart race. "They're heroes," he said. Frank looked at him coldly. "They're murderers." Jesse grinned. "It's the same thing."

The brothers were two sides of the same coin. Frank thought, Jesse acted. Frank was thoughtful, Jesse impulsive. But together they were dangerous. One had the brains, the other the fire.

At night, when his mother was asleep, they spoke quietly. Frank talked about books, about history, about wars of the past. Jesse listened, but in his head he imagined how he himself would one day be part of such stories. Frank wanted to understand. Jesse wanted to act.

And yet, Frank was his shadow. Without him, Jesse would have been just a wild animal, burned too soon. With him, he had direction. A brother who sharpened the blade while Jesse swung it.

The mother could pray as much as she wanted. War was knocking, and both brothers heard it. One with fear, one with joy.

And at some point, they would both respond. Together.

Frank wasn't a man who shaped the world with his fists. He was a man who endured it with silence. This silence was sometimes worse than any scream. It was as if he knew everything, saw everything, and yet said nothing. For Jesse, this was torture. For his mother, it was hope.

Frank was three years older, and those three years were like a chasm between them. He was already half a man, while Jesse still fought with his fists and dreams. Frank could weigh things up. Jesse could only react. But when people in the village talked about the James boys, they said: "Frank, the level-headed one. Jesse, the wild one." Two labels that were true—and yet didn't tell the whole story.

Frank read books. Old, tattered volumes that sometimes seemed to have fallen from the sky. He read about wars in Europe, about generals, about battles long forgotten. He absorbed stories like smoke. Jesse didn't understand. "Why are you reading about dead men?" he scoffed. Frank answered calmly: "Because you can learn from the dead." Jesse laughed. "I prefer to learn from the living. And when they're dead, I know I was better."

His mother loved Frank, not only because he obeyed, but because he presented the outward image she wanted: pious, quiet, obedient. But Jesse saw the other side. He saw how Frank sometimes sat by the river, his pipe in his mouth, his eyes dark. He saw that something was working inside Frank, something heavy. Jesse knew: just because Frank didn't scream didn't mean he didn't feel anything. It just meant he was burying it.

The two brothers were like two animals sharing the same cage, but looking for different ways out. Jesse wanted to break through the bars. Frank wanted to wait until someone opened the door.

When the first shots rang out in the state, they talked about it at night. Jesse was full of fire. "We're riding out, Frank. We're getting guns, we're getting names."



Frank looked at him for a long moment. "It's not about fame, Jesse. It's about survival." "Screw survival. Everyone survives until they die. The question is, will they be remembered?" Frank shook his head, but he saw the gleam in Jesse's eyes. A gleam he couldn't extinguish.

In the village, Frank was known as the quieter of the brothers, but some feared him more. Silence was more unpredictable than fire. Jesse was loud; you knew when he would strike. Frank was quiet. You never knew if he would strike—or when.

Frank could listen. He listened to the men drinking, the women whispering, and the rumors about troop movements. He absorbed information while Jesse plotted. Together, they made a dangerous pair: one who knew, one who acted.

The mother sensed this, even if she didn't say it. She saw that both were lost—one to his anger, the other to his silence. But she held on to Frank, as if he could pull Jesse along. Perhaps she hoped the shadow would put out the fire. But everyone knew: sometimes shadows only fan the flames.

There were evenings when the brothers barely spoke a word. They sat side by side, listening to the crackling of the fire, the chirping of the crickets. Frank blew smoke into the night, Jesse stared into the flames. And yet there was a bond. An invisible rope that held them together.

Jesse needed Frank, even if he never admitted it. Without Frank, he would have been a wild dog, shot too soon. Frank needed Jesse, even if he never said so. Without Jesse, he would have become a man suffocated by silence.

They were opposites, but they needed each other. Fire and shadow. Loud and quiet. Now and later.

And as Missouri turned to blood and lies, both prepared for their fate. Not separately, but side by side. Two brothers who knew the world wouldn't save them. But perhaps they could save each other—or perish together.

Frank was like a wall Jesse kept running into. He screamed, raged, cursed—and Frank stood there, motionless, smoking his pipe or sharpening his knife without saying a word. For Jesse, it was like poison. He wanted an explosion, a fight, something. But Frank remained silent.

This silence was more dangerous than any roar. The people of the village knew that. Jesse was easy to judge—he burned hot and struck immediately. Frank, on the other hand, was the opposite. When he remained silent, you never

knew whether he would agree or whether he would stick a knife between your ribs the next moment.

Sometimes the villagers would watch the two and whisper, "The James boys—one with fire in his veins, the other with shadows in his eyes. Together they'll ruin us." They were right.

Frank wasn't a coward. He was cautious. He knew when to wait. He understood that every action had consequences. Jesse hated that. "You think too much," he often said. "Thinking gets you nowhere." Frank replied calmly, "Thinking may not get you anywhere, but it keeps you alive." "Life is for the weak," Jesse growled. "I want more than to live."

The mother placed all her hopes in Frank. He was the quiet son, the obedient one, the one who listened to the Bible without laughing. But Frank didn't believe in God as much as she thought. He only believed that order was better than chaos. Jesse was chaos, and that made him nervous.

But blood is blood. And Frank was a brother. He let Jesse have his way, even if he sometimes wanted to slow him down. If Jesse hit too hard, Frank was the one who pulled him back. If Jesse had a plan that was too wild, Frank was the one who defused it. But Frank wasn't a hypocrite either. He knew Jesse had something inside him that was greater than fights in the village. He knew the war would absorb him like a sponge.

And he also knew: He himself would be there.

They were like two players at the same table. Jesse was the one who immediately put everything on the line. Frank was the one who read the cards, observed his opponent, and slowly unraveled the game. But both were playing.

In the village, they were a team. Some feared Jesse because he was unpredictable. Some feared Frank because he was predictable—and that was precisely what made him dangerous. Together, they were a threat. If one struck, the other wasn't far away.

There were nights when they sneaked out together. Frank took Jesse to places where men drank and played cards, where stories were told that weren't meant for children's ears. Frank was silent; Jesse absorbed everything. Stories of trains, of robberies, of men disappearing into the smoke. Jesse felt his heart racing. Frank listened, and in his eyes flickered something Jesse could never quite interpret. Perhaps admiration, perhaps warning.

The war was the invisible third person between them. Jesse wanted in, immediately, regardless. Frank thought, weighed things up, waited. But they both knew: sooner or later, they would no longer be just brothers. They would be comrades, brothers in arms, followers in a story bigger than themselves.

Frank had that look when he talked about war. Dark, serious, heavy. Jesse, on the other hand, grinned when he thought of blood. For him, war was not a burden, but a release. For Frank, it was destiny.

And yet, despite all their differences, they were one. Two brothers who knew they were nothing without each other. Jesse needed Frank's shadow to avoid burning too soon. Frank needed Jesse's fire to avoid suffocating in his own silence.

They were like two knives, sharpened on the same grinder – different, but both sharp.

And Missouri was the hand that would soon use these knives.

Brothers aren't a gift from heaven. Brothers are a burden, a mirror, a damned weight on your shoulders. Jesse knew that. Frank knew it too. They loved each other, yes, but it was a love full of blows, full of silences, full of unspoken threats.

Frank was the shadow, Jesse was the fire. And when shadow and fire meet, there's smoke. Lots of smoke.

There was constant friction between them on the farm. Jesse was the one who quit a job when he found it too boring. Frank was the one who finished it without a word. "You're a bull," Jesse would snarl. "Always good, always quiet. Mother will be happy." Frank just looked at him, puffed on his pipe, and this silence drove Jesse madder than any blow.

Sometimes it exploded. Once, while chopping wood. Jesse swung the axe, too quickly, too wildly, and the wood splintered, almost flying into his face. Frank said calmly, "Slow down. Concentrate." "Shut up!" Jesse yelled, throwing the axe into the wood. Frank stood up, slowly, putting his pipe aside. "I'll just tell you how not to die." "I'll die however I want!" Jesse grabbed Frank by the shirt, dragging him. For a moment they stood there, forehead to forehead. Jesse with the eyes of an animal, Frank calm, but his muscles tense. It could have ended in a fight. Instead, Frank let go, just pushed him away. "You're too hot-tempered,

Jesse. One day this will kill you." "Or it will make me immortal." Jesse laughed, but his laughter was full of venom.

His mother noticed the tension. She tried to win Frank over. "Keep your brother in check," she commanded. Frank remained silent. He knew Jesse couldn't be controlled. He knew he could at best be guided, but never broken.

In the evenings, when they sat next to each other, the tension was almost palpable. Jesse stared into the fire, Frank into the darkness. Two brothers, two worlds—and yet chained together.

Despite all the fighting, there was this bond. If someone came from outside and attacked Jesse, Frank was there immediately. He didn't speak, he didn't warn, he just struck. A silent shadow that suddenly became razor-sharp. Jesse knew that. And he loved him for it. He also hated him for it. Love and hate—that was their relationship.

In the village, whispers were spreading that the James boys were a problem. "Jesse, the wild one. Frank, the dark one. Together they're a disaster." They were right. Together they were a time bomb.

Frank was the thinker. He listened to the men in the saloon, gathered rumors about troop movements, and understood who was betraying whom. Jesse was bored by such conversations. But he knew: Frank's knowledge was a weapon. And he would need that weapon someday.

Once, a man came into town, a Union soldier passing through. He spoke loudly about freedom, about honor, about duty. Jesse seethed. He felt himself want to jump up, to punch him in the face. Frank just put his hand on his arm. "Not here. Not now." Jesse snarled, but he stayed seated. Later, he asked, "Why did you hold me back?" Frank replied, "Because he was armed, and you would have lost." Jesse spat in the dirt. "I'd rather lose than wait." Frank looked at him for a long time and said, "Sometimes waiting is the better weapon."

That was the difference. Frank could wait. Jesse couldn't.

But Frank was no saint either. He carried his own darkness within him. Sometimes Jesse saw him sitting by the river at night, his pipe forgotten, his eyes black. Then he knew: Frank was fighting his own war. An internal one. One that was perhaps quieter, but just as dangerous.

The two brothers were like two knives in the same sheath. Friction was inevitable. But when they were drawn, it would be drawn together. And Missouri, that damned swamp of mud and blood, would soon draw them both.

Brotherly love wasn't a warm word for the James boys. It was a fist bump, a look, an unspoken agreement that they wouldn't let go of each other, no matter how much they sometimes smothered each other.

Everyday life on the farm was an endless repetition. Sunrise, work, sunset. Jesse hated this loop. Frank endured it. But he, too, had moments when he darkened his eyes and stared at the sky longer than necessary, as if to say: *Shit, that's all?*

They worked together, but their minds were different. Jesse chopped wood as if he wanted to split the world. Frank chopped wood as if he knew there would be just as much the next day. Jesse cursed loudly, Frank gritted his teeth.

Once, while they were mending fences, Jesse lost his temper. "We're slaves, Frank. Slaves of this earth, this goddamn field." Frank paused, hammer in hand. "Better slaves of the earth than slaves of men." "Screw both! I don't want to be anyone's slave." Jesse kicked the post so hard it almost toppled over. Frank sighed. "You can't always be against something. You have to know what you're for, too." Jesse grinned crookedly. "I'm for myself. That's enough."

That was Jesse in a nutshell. Frank, on the other hand, thought bigger. He saw the chessboard, while Jesse only saw the fist.

His mother often held Frank up as an example. "Look at your brother. Quiet, hardworking, God-fearing." Jesse only heard "boring." But deep down, he knew Frank was more than that. He wasn't a lamb. He was a wolf who waited. And Jesse admired him for that, even if he never admitted it.

Their conflicts were small, but they burned into his memory. At dinner, when his mother read verse again, Jesse muttered along mockingly. Frank discreetly poked him in the leg, a silent command: Shut up. Sometimes Jesse obeyed. Sometimes he didn't. And when he didn't, his mother hit him—and that silent headshake from Frank, which was worse than any belt.

They often appeared together in the village. Jesse led the way, loud, snotty, ready to punch anyone in the face. Frank stayed a step back, his eyes watchful. And if Jesse went too far, Frank was the one to pull him out before there was a murder. But when it mattered, they stood shoulder to shoulder. Once, they got

into a fight with three older boys. Jesse jumped on immediately, fists flying. Frank held back at first, but then, when one of them pushed Jesse to the ground, he struck – with a calmness that was almost frightening. He grabbed the guy by the throat, squeezed until his face turned blue. Only when Jesse was gasping for breath did Frank let go. Without a word. That was their alliance: if one fell, the other struck.

And word got around. The village soon realized: They might be able to handle Jesse alone. With Jesse and Frank together, it was better not to.

Jesse often lay awake at night thinking about it. He knew that without Frank, he'd be in the ditch faster than he could say "Amen." But he also knew: Frank needed him. Because without him, Frank might drown in his silence.

They were like two tools. Jesse the hammer, Frank the knife. Different, but both deadly if used correctly. And Missouri, that damned frontier, would soon need both tools.

The war was no longer a distant thunder. It was near, in the breath of men, in the curses of women, in the footsteps of soldiers marching through the village. Missouri was a torn land, half North, half South, all chaos.

Jesse smelled the blood before he even saw it. To him, it was like the smell of rain before the storm hit. Frank smelled it too, but to him, it was more like the smell of decay. Where Jesse felt pleasure, Frank felt anxiety.

They often talked about it at night, out by the river, where the crickets chirped and the wind rustled through the trees. Jesse was excited, as if he had a fever. "Soon, Frank. Soon the land will burn, and then we'll be among those making history." Frank shook his head slowly. "History isn't written with glory, Jesse. It's written with blood. And mostly it's your own." "Screw it," Jesse grinned. "Better my blood in history than my sweat in the dirt."

Frank puffed on his pipe, the embers glowing red. "You talk like someone who's already lost before they've even started." "No," Jesse growled. "I talk like someone who's won because they don't want to wait any longer."

That was the difference. Jesse couldn't wait. Frank could only wait.

But despite all their differences, they both knew they would be drawn into this war. Their mother could pray as much as she wanted, shout Bible verses, or beat them until their skin burned—the war would take them. It was inevitable.

Conversations in the village were heated. Men argued in the saloons, women wept at the wells. Some swore allegiance to the Union, others to the South. But essentially, everyone was pledging allegiance only to themselves. Jesse watched this, laughed softly, and said, "Look at them, Frank. Everyone preaches honor, but they all just want to survive." Frank nodded. "And that's exactly why you have to be careful. Every neighbor could be your enemy." "Or your victim," Jesse grinned.

The first guerrilla riders came through the village. Dusty men, bearded, with eyes that had seen more death than a human could bear. They spoke of raids, of burned houses, of revenge. Jesse absorbed every word. To him, they were gods riding on horses. Frank saw the same men and thought: These are lost souls. But he remained silent.

Later, when they were alone again, Jesse said, "This is it, Frank. This is our path." Frank didn't answer immediately. He just stared into the darkness. "Maybe," he said quietly. Jesse's eyes widened. "Maybe? Come on, brother. This is the only chance. Do you want to herd cows forever?" Frank blew out smoke. "I want to survive. And I want you to survive." "Survival is for the weak," Jesse snarled. "I want more."

It was like a vow he shouted into the night. A vow that Frank didn't join in on, but didn't contradict either.

The mother sensed the restlessness within them. She knelt more often, prayed louder, as if she could persuade God to send the war past their door. Jesse laughed at her. Frank remained silent. But they both knew: It was too late. The war was already here, even if not a shot had been fired yet.

Frank began hoarding supplies. Salt, tobacco, bullets, whenever he could find them. Jesse scoffed. "You hoard like an old woman." Frank looked at him. "When the world falls apart, he who is prepared is king." "Wrong," Jesse growled. "King is he who takes what he wants."

And so they stood there: two brothers, united by blood, separated by worldviews. But both knew they would walk side by side. Not because they agreed, but because they had to.

Missouri was a powder keg. And the James brothers were the lighter just waiting to be ignited.

The nights in Missouri grew louder. At first, there were only distant cannon fire, then shots that came closer. The clatter of horses on dusty paths, men with rifles riding through the village to demand bread or beer. Everyone knew: the war was no longer something to be talked about. It was there, sitting at the table, sleeping in the hay, stealing from the pantries.

Jesse was electrified. Every shot in the distance made him grin. Sometimes he ran outside, stood on the hill, and listened. "That's music, Frank! Music!" Frank followed, stood next to him, and smoked quietly. "This isn't a song, Jesse. This is a funeral bell concert." "Funeral bells or not—it sounds better than Mother's psalms."

The mother prayed more than ever. Her voice was hoarse, her hands sore from folding. Jesse mocked her. "Praying until God goes deaf—that won't get us through the winter." Frank intervened, not with blows, but with silence. He looked at Jesse, that long stare that said: Shut up. And sometimes Jesse kept his mouth shut, sometimes he didn't.

One evening, as the wind carried the smell of smoke into the village, the brothers were sitting outside. Frank held a newspaper in his hand, crumpled, half-torn. Jesse looked at the headlines, didn't understand half of them, and asked, "So?" Frank answered quietly: "Quantrill was in Kansas. They burned Lawrence. More than a hundred men dead." Jesse laughed harshly. "A hundred? That's a start." Frank stared at him. "They're not heroes, Jesse. They're butchers." "Butchers live longer than heroes. And they're remembered."

At that moment, they both knew: there was no way back. Jesse would jump into the war, no matter what. Frank would follow, not because he wanted to, but because he knew he couldn't let his brother go alone.

The mother sensed it. She saw it in their eyes as they sat by candlelight in the evenings. She prayed louder, hit harder, read more verses. But the Bible bounced off the brothers. Jesse laughed at her, Frank remained silent, and both drifted away from her like boats following the current.

Once, when Jesse was raving about guerrillas one night, Frank said, "You talk like you're already one of them. But do you know what they do? They burn houses. They shoot men in front of their wives. They hang children. Do you want to be part of that?" Jesse grinned. "If I don't do it, someone else will. And why should he get the credit and not me?" Frank breathed heavily. "You're crazy." "No," Jesse hissed. "I'm being honest."



The nights were full of tension. Sometimes they argued loudly, shouting at each other until the dogs barked. Sometimes they were silent for days, only the sound of work filling the air. But always there was this bond, invisible, hard as iron.

The village began to see the brothers with different eyes. Men nodded to Frank, respectfully, cautiously. They avoided Jesse, whispering behind his back. But when the two walked through the village together, they made way. It was as if the people had understood: Here come two men who are better left alone.

Then came the day a troop of soldiers showed up at the farm. Dusty uniforms, sweating horses, hard faces. They demanded food, water, and tobacco. The mother obeyed, silently, her hands shaking. Jesse stood beside her, his fists clenched, his eyes full of fire. Frank discreetly placed his hand on his shoulder—a silent "not now." Jesse bit his lip, but remained silent.

Later, when the soldiers were gone, he exploded. "Why did you hold me back? We could have ambushed them!" Frank grabbed him hard by the arm. "There were ten men with guns. The two of us with nothing. That would have been suicide." "Better suicide than cowardly servitude!" Jesse spat in the dirt. Frank let go, turned away, but Jesse saw his shoulders shaking. He knew: Frank, too, was close to losing his mind.

The days that followed were quiet. But Jesse's mind continued to burn. He spoke of riders, of raids, of blood. Frank listened, sometimes shaking his head, but he didn't contradict him as often anymore. He knew: the rope was stretched to the breaking point.

And then came the decision, which wasn't really a decision at all. The guerrillas appeared nearby, again those bearded men with the hard eyes. Jesse saw them, and in his eyes burned the light. Frank saw the same thing, but with him it wasn't fire, but a shadow.

They looked at each other, brothers, blood, fire, and shadow. And without a word, they both knew: Soon they would leave their homeland. Soon they would hold weapons in their hands. Soon their mother's Bible would finally gather dust in the corner.

Chapter 3 ended where childhood finally died. Two brothers venturing out into a world of mud, smoke, and blood. Jesse with a hunger for fame. Frank with a hunger for survival. Together—and yet already separated.

## The first Colts in the dirt

Jesse saw the first Colts not in a store, not in a display case, but in the dirt. Missouri dirt mixed with blood, horse manure, and rain. No hero, no fine parade. Just a man who lost his life on earth, and beside him the iron that was supposed to protect him.

Jesse stood there, his eyes wide, his heart pounding. The dead man was some kind of traveler, a horseman who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. The bullet had hit him, he lay in the dust with his mouth open, the flies faster than prayer. But Jesse saw only the gun. A Colt, dull, scratched, heavy as a promise.

He knelt down and picked it up. The weight surprised him. Cold, solid, as if the world itself were in his hand. He turned it, felt the mechanism, the clacking as he moved the drum. It wasn't a toy. It wasn't a prayer. It was truth, raw, cold, honest.

Frank stood beside him, his brow furrowed. "Leave him there." "Screw it," Jesse muttered. "He doesn't need him anymore." "If they catch you, you're dead, Jesse." Jesse grinned. "If I have him, I'm alive."

That was the difference. For Frank, a gun was danger. For Jesse, it was salvation.

For the first few days, he carried the Colt hidden. Under his jacket, under his shirt, on his belt. He pulled it out at night and held it to the light, like other children hold a Bible. He didn't speak to God, he spoke to the Colt. "You are my gospel," he murmured.

He practiced secretly. He aimed at trees, at bottles, at shadows. The first shots were rough, loud, inaccurate. But it didn't matter. Every bang vibrated through his body like a heartbeat. Every puff of gunpowder smoke was like an incense stick from hell.

Frank watched him. "You're playing with death." "No," Jesse grinned. "I'm dancing with him."

The first Colts in the dirt – that wasn't a myth. That was the beginning of something bigger than his mother's Bible, bigger than Frank's shadow. It was the first time Jesse felt: Now I have power. Not the power to talk, not the power to pray. The power to take.

He didn't show the Colt to anyone except Frank. And even then, he held it like a sacred object. "This is our future," he said. Frank shook his head. "Our future is work or death. Probably both." "No," Jesse growled. "Our future is this." He cocked the hammer, the click echoing through the night like a promise.

Frank remained silent. He knew Jesse was already too far gone to stop him.

The first Colts in the dirt—they weren't shiny, they weren't clean. They were dirty, heavy, deadly. Just like Jesse James.

A Colt is not a tool. A Colt is a curse. Jesse knew that even before he pulled the trigger for the first time. The weight in his hand wasn't a piece of iron. It was a promise—blood, smoke, respect. All in one.

For the first few days, he practiced in the forest, far enough away that his mother couldn't hear him. He aimed at tree trunks, at stones, at the shadows cast by the moon. The bullets flew poorly; sometimes he hit, sometimes he missed. But that didn't matter. What mattered was the sound. The echo that raced through the trees, like the devil's laughter.

Frank was always there. Not because he wanted to, but because he had to. He saw his brother pulling the Colt, grinning, vibrating with energy. Frank just sighed. "That thing will kill you." "No," said Jesse. "That thing will make me immortal."

It wasn't long before Jesse started showing off the weapon around town. Not openly, not proudly, but enough to attract attention. A handle sticking out of his shirt. A look that said: *I can do more than fists*. And people noticed. Conversations died down when he entered. Some men avoided him. Others eyed him suspiciously, as if testing whether he would actually pull the trigger.

And of course came the first test.

A guy in the saloon, older, rough, one of those people who drinks too much and laughs too loudly. He nudged Jesse, deliberately, pushing him off the bar. "Down, brat. This is no place for kids." Jesse remained silent. He felt the pounding in his head, the tugging at his belt. Frank was there, saw him, sensed what was about to happen. The guy nudged him again. "Get out of here, kid. Otherwise—"

The "otherwise" didn't come. Jesse drew the Colt. Quickly, roughly, still clumsily, but he drew. The click, the weight, the sudden silence in the room.

The guy laughed at first, a hoarse, drunken laugh. "A kid with a gun. Go on, pull the trigger if you're a man."

Jesse aimed. His hand barely trembled. Frank tensed, ready to intervene. But Jesse didn't pull the trigger. Not this time. He simply left the Colt there, the hammer cocked, the cylinder gleaming dully in the lamplight.

The air was heavy, no one moved. Then Jesse slowly put the gun away. "Call me kid again, and I'll prove you wrong."

The guy stopped laughing.

That was the true birth of Jesse James—not the shot, but the pull. The moment he realized that power lay not just in killing, but in knowing that one could kill.

Frank asked him about it later. "You could have shot him." "But I didn't." "Why not?" Jesse grinned crookedly. "Because it's stronger if he thinks every night that I could."

That was the difference. Jesse understood that a Colt was more than a weapon. It was a tool for fear. For respect. For whispered names.

From then on, things were different. The village knew it. Jesse was no longer a brat, no longer a hothead with fists. He was a boy with a gun. And that changed everything.

Frank remained the shadow. The one who watched, the one who saw the strings Jesse didn't want to see. But Jesse was the one pulling the strings. And together they were more dangerous than ever.

The first Colts in the dirt had found their owner. And Missouri had given birth to a new threat.

It was inevitable. A drawn Colt must eventually fire. Iron in the hand demands blood. Jesse knew that. He was just waiting for the moment that felt like an invitation. And Missouri offered such invitations in abundance.

It was a humid afternoon, the air heavy as wet laundry. Jesse was sitting with Frank at the edge of the field when they heard shouting. Two men, drunk, at the village well. One was a farmer, the other a boy from out of town. They were screaming, bumping into each other, sweat glistening on their necks. Jesse jumped up immediately. "That's it." Frank sighed. "Sit down." But Jesse was already walking.

The two men didn't notice him right away. They wrestled like two dogs that wouldn't let go. Then one of them pulled out a knife. That was the moment. Jesse saw the knife, felt the throbbing in his stomach, and without thinking, he reached for the Colt.

It happened quickly. He cocked the hammer, aimed the gun, and pulled the trigger.

The bang ripped through the air. A bird rose in alarm, women screamed, children ran away. The man with the knife fell, the metal clanged, his body slumped into the dirt. The bullet had hit him in the leg, just above the knee. Blood spurted out, dark and thick, and the man bellowed like an animal.

Silence.

Everyone stared at Jesse. A boy, dirty, with a Colt in his hand, smoke rising from the barrel. His eyes glittered, not with fear, but with a kind of ecstasy.

Frank was beside him, instantly. He grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "Are you crazy?" "He had a knife," Jesse gasped. But he was grinning, that damned grin that almost made Frank sick.

"You almost killed him!" "Almost is enough to be remembered."

People whispered, the wounded man screamed, someone fetched rags. But in that moment, Jesse James was born. Not as a child, not as a farm boy, but as someone who could no longer be overlooked.

The news spread like wildfire. A boy had fired. A James boy. Some said he was a hero for stopping the knife. Others said he was a dangerous brat who grabbed a gun too quickly. But everyone talked. And that was what Jesse wanted.

Frank raged later. "You could have killed him. Then they would have lynched you." Jesse just grinned, cleaning the Colt with a rag. "But I didn't. And yet now they know I can." "It's not about if you can. It's about when you can." "Screw being allowed. I'll take what I need."

Frank slammed his fist against the wall. It was the first time Jesse had seen him so angry. "You don't understand, Jesse! One bullet changes everything. People forget punches, but they never forget gunshots." Jesse nodded. "That's exactly why I shot."

That was the beginning. No murders, not yet. But the Colt had spoken. He had seen blood, and Jesse had tasted it.

He could barely sleep the nights that followed. He kept hearing the bang in his head, seeing the blood, smelling the gunpowder smoke. It wasn't a nightmare. It was a dream, a horny, dirty fever.

The mother knew nothing about it, not in detail. But she sensed the change. She sensed that her son wasn't coming back. She prayed louder, hit harder, recited verses. But the Colt was stronger than the Bible.

Frank avoided him for a few days, barely speaking. But he stayed close. He knew Jesse was now definitely on a path to no return. And as a brother, he had to be there, whether he wanted to or not.

Missouri was full of Colts. But this one, lying in the dirt, that Jesse had picked up, was like a key. A key to a door behind which there was no light, only smoke, blood, and history.

And Jesse James walked through that door, grinning, without looking back.

A Colt changes everything. It's like a third arm, an arm that shows no mercy. Jesse felt it the moment the first shot rang out and the guy lay screaming in the dirt by the well. After that, nothing was the same again.

The people in the village looked at him differently. Before, he was just the wild boy who talked too much and hit too quickly. Now he was the boy with the gun. One look, and the conversations died down. One step into the saloon, and his card hands trembled. Jesse absorbed it like cheap whiskey.

Frank saw it too, and it made him nervous. "You enjoy this too much," he said one evening as Jesse stood in the yard, polishing the Colt like a holy relic. "Of course I enjoy it," Jesse grinned. "It's the only pleasure this goddamn life offers." "Pleasure will break your neck someday." "Maybe. But by then, they won't be laughing at me anymore."

That was it. The Colt wasn't a tool. It was a call. It spoke for Jesse before he even opened his own mouth.

The power was addictive. Jesse began testing it out. Small things at first. He went into old Mr. Thompson's store, placed the Colt visibly on the counter while he bought sugar. Thompson counted the change with trembling hands. Jesse grinned. "Ever consider that money is just paper until someone with a gun demands it?" Thompson just nodded, speechless.

Frank was there, and he hated it. "You didn't rob him, Jesse. But he thinks you almost did." "Exactly," Jesse said coldly. "And that's better than any amen."

The nights became more restless. Jesse no longer practiced only on trees. He began targeting animals. Stray dogs, birds, even a pig they were supposed to fatten up for the winter. A gunshot, blood, screams. Frank once grabbed his arm and yelled at him: "That's enough, Jesse! They're animals, damn it!" Jesse tore himself away, his eyes filled with madness. "If I get soft when I shoot, Frank, I'll die the moment a man stands in front of me."

Frank saw that he could no longer speak. Jesse had long since become addicted to the power that came from the drum.

Tension grew in the village. Some men hated Jesse and wanted to challenge him. But no one dared. Not because he was so strong, but because he was faster. A boy with a Colt – that was like a dog with rabies. No one wanted to be the first to be tested.

Frank increasingly became the opposite pole. Where Jesse boasted, Frank remained silent. Where Jesse grinned, Frank glared darkly. But they stayed together because blood was thicker than reason.

The mother noticed, even if she didn't understand it. She felt the Colt swallowing her son. She prayed louder, hit harder, recited endless verses. But Jesse just laughed. "Your God doesn't have bullets, Mother."

The break came when Jesse stopped using the Colt for threats. It was a fight in the saloon. A drunken man insulted Frank. Jesse immediately jumped up, Colt in hand. No warning, no hesitation. A shot into the wall, just past the man's head. Plaster trickled down, and the man stumbled back, white-faced.

Everyone stared at Jesse. He stood there, still smoking the Colt, and grinned. "Next time, Frank, I won't even need your fists."

Frank was furious when they were outside. "You're going to put us all in the grave, Jesse! Don't you understand?" "No," said Jesse. "I'm going to put us in memory."

That was the moment Frank knew: There was no way back. His brother was lost to the Colt, just as others were to whiskey. And he himself? He was doomed to follow him. Not out of desire, but out of blood.

Missouri was a powder keg. And Jesse James was the match that was already lit.

There's an invisible line between threat and action. As long as the gun is drawn, there remains some leeway. A residue of "he could, but he didn't." But at some point, the moment comes when the "could" turns into "did." And from then on, there's no turning back.

For Jesse, this moment came not from self-defense, not from heroism, but from rage. From pure, stinking Missouri rage that had been building up for years.

It was a night in the saloon. Men were drinking, the air thick with smoke, the wood sticky with beer. Frank sat at the table, quiet, cards in hand. Jesse stood at the bar, his Colt loosely at his belt. Then he came—a stranger, tall, broad, with a face that looked like it had been carved from granite. He was drunk, loud, one of those guys who always needed proof that he was more of a man than everyone else.

He saw Jesse, grinned crookedly, and said, "Nice toy, boy. Show me how to use that thing." Jesse grinned back, but there was no humor in his eyes. "Toy? That's more of a man than you ever were." Laughter erupted in the room, but it was nervous laughter. Everyone knew what was about to happen.

The stranger stepped closer and nudged Jesse with his shoulder. "Come on, kid. Let's see if you've got guts in your balls or just lead in your belt."

Frank saw it. He laid down his cards, his eyes alert. "Jesse..." But Jesse didn't hear him. He only heard the blood in his ears, the ringing in his head.

The Colt was out, faster than the stranger took his next breath. A bang, a flash, a scream. The bullet hit him in the chest, hard, deadly, right in the flesh.

The stranger stumbled back, fell against the table, and toppled to the floor. Blood seeped from him, dark and heavy. Silence. Only the men's panting, the screams of a woman in the corner.

Jesse stood there, his Colt still smoking, and grinned. It wasn't a happy grin. It was the grin of a man who had finally become what he always knew he would become.

Frank jumped up and grabbed his arm. "Damn it, Jesse! What did you do?" "I showed I could do it," Jesse whispered.



The crowd was paralyzed. No one moved. No one dared to touch him. It was as if the room had suddenly become smaller, filled with Colt smoke and the smell of blood.

Then chaos broke out. Men screamed, ran outside, someone called for the militia. Women cried. The innkeeper screamed that Jesse had the devil in his body.

Frank pulled him outside, almost by force. "We have to leave, immediately." But Jesse didn't resist. He walked calmly, the Colt still in his hand, as if he were a king and not a murderer.

Outside, in the darkness, Frank stared at him. "Now you're dead, Jesse. Whether it's today, tomorrow, or next week—they'll hang you." "Maybe," said Jesse, grinning again. "Or they'll fear me."

That was the difference. For Frank, it was the beginning of the end. For Jesse, it was the beginning of the beginning.

The news spread faster than any prayer. A James boy had shot a man. Some said it was self-defense. Some said it was murder. But no matter what they said, they all now knew the name Jesse James.

And Jesse absorbed that name like whiskey.

The mother collapsed when she heard the news. She opened the Bible and cried out to God to save her son. But Jesse just laughed, cold and empty. "Your God lost, Mother. My Colt won."

Frank was quieter than ever. He no longer spoke, just looked at Jesse with a gaze that contained anger, sadness, and love. He knew that his brother was now on a road paved in blood. And he also knew: He would follow him. Not out of pride, not out of lust—but because he was his brother.

The first dead man is always the hardest, they say. But for Jesse James, it was easy. Too easy.

And Missouri would see many more deaths.

A dead man in a saloon changes the atmosphere in an entire village. It was no longer the same Missouri after the shooting. The streets seemed narrower, the conversations shorter, the eyes more suspicious. Jesse hadn't just killed a man, he had shot an entire village off balance.

The next day, the sun was the same, but it burned harder. Women pulled their children away when Jesse walked by. Men lowered their voices and stopped talking as soon as he entered the saloon. The Colt wasn't just a gun—it was now a stamp, a brand. Everyone knew: The boy had blood on his hands.

Jesse absorbed this. He walked more slowly through the streets, enjoying the glances, enjoying the silence that rolled out before him like a carpet. He felt like a king who had no castle, but a weapon.

Frank saw it with different eyes. He felt the cold. He felt the mistrust growing like weeds. People were afraid, yes, but fear was fleeting. Fear could quickly turn into hatred. And hatred was more dangerous than a Colt.

"You're a fool, Jesse," he said one of those nights as they sat outside, the moon above them, the land still. "You think they fear you. But they're already plotting how to get rid of you." Jesse grinned, chewing on a blade of grass. "Then let them come. I have lead for everyone." "Lead doesn't make you immortal." "Yes, it does," Jesse countered. "In stories."

The mother was a wreck. She prayed, she cried, she opened the Bible as if the Psalms could bring back the bullet that had changed her son forever. Jesse heard her crying at night, heard her crying to God. But he slept peacefully, with his Colt under his pillow.

Frank tried to calm her down, but he knew she'd lost her son long ago. Jesse was no longer the boy she'd beaten into reciting Bible verses. He was a man with a gun, and men with guns don't listen to their mothers anymore.

The village was divided. Some called Jesse a bastard, a murderer. Others whispered that he had shown courage, that he was someone who would take no offense. The truth was, both sides were right. Jesse was both a bastard and a brave man. A hero to some, a devil to others.

Frank avoided the village. He knew that every conversation, every glance put them in deeper danger. But Jesse couldn't help it. He sought confrontation. He sought out the looks. It was like a drug.

One evening they sat in the saloon, and the silence was palpable. Everyone knew who he was. Everyone knew what he'd done. The bartender set down his glass of whiskey with trembling hands. Jesse took a sip, looked around, and grinned. "So? No stories today?" No one answered.

Frank leaned toward him. "You have to hold back. If you keep provoking like this, they'll call the militia." "Let them. I want them to call me. Then everyone will know they have to call a man, not a brat."

That was the core. Jesse didn't want a childhood anymore, a farm, or a Bible. He wanted to be the name whispered when it got dark. And for that, a dead man was just the beginning.

His mother grew harder. She hit him again, as if he were still a boy. But the blows bounced off him like rain on stone. Jesse took them, even laughed. "Hit harder, Mother. Maybe someday it'll hit my heart." But his heart had long since been made of iron.

Frank was the only one who could still slow him down. And even he noticed his hand weakening. Jesse slipped through his fingers, bit by bit, like a horse breaking through a fence.

The conversations in the village became more venomous. "This can't go on." "That boy is bringing disaster on us all." "He should be chased away, or worse." Frank heard it, Jesse heard it too. But where Frank saw alarm, Jesse saw only confirmation. "They're talking about me, Frank. They're finally talking about me."

That was the difference. For Frank, it was a warning signal. For Jesse, it was music.

Missouri was full of Colts, full of blood. But that one shot in the saloon was the stone that rolled down the hill. And no one could stop it.

Fear in the village was like a constantly ringing bell. Everyone knew more was coming. More gunshots, more blood. And that the name Jesse James would never disappear, no matter how many more psalms the mother cried.

A village can forgive a boy if he drinks too much or impregnates the neighbor's daughter. But a village won't forget if that same boy kills a man with a Colt. There's no more childhood, no more laughter, no second chance. There's only blood, dust, and an unfinished business.

Jesse knew that. And he enjoyed it. He felt like he no longer fit into this narrow world—the village was too small, the farm too narrow, his mother too weak. He was a dog who had learned he could bite, and now he wanted more than just bark.

Frank knew it too. He didn't say it, but he saw that Jesse couldn't stay much longer. The looks in the village became more venomous. The men drank faster when Jesse entered the saloon. The women held their children closer as he passed. It was no longer fear. It was hatred building up beneath the skin.

And then the guerrillas came.

They rode in one evening when the sun was low, men with faces like iron, bearded, sweating, their eyes as empty as the fields after the harvest. They didn't come to preach. They came to take. Whiskey, meat, tobacco, ammunition. They took it without question.

Jesse saw her and knew: *This is my people*. He saw how they laughed while they drank, how they didn't justify themselves, didn't apologize, didn't explain. They took because they could. That was exactly what he wanted, too.

Frank watched them differently. He saw men who had already lost everything, who had nothing left to lose. Men who knew only smoke and blood. He saw their end in their faces. But he also knew: Jesse would follow them, whether he wanted it or not.

Later, as the guerrillas mounted again, Jesse stood there, his Colt heavy at his belt, and shouted, "Take me with you." Frank grabbed his arm. "Be quiet." But Jesse pulled away. "I'm not staying here. I'm not a farmer. I'm not a child. I'm one of you."

The guerrillas laughed. "A boy with a big mouth." Jesse drew his Colt, cocked the hammer, and pointed it at the sky. A shot rang out, smoke rose, the horses neighed. Jesse grinned, his eyes wild. "No mouth. A man."

The guerrillas looked at him, first skeptically, then appreciatively. "You're crazy," one said. "No," Jesse growled. "I'm free."

Frank stood beside him, the shadow that was always there. He knew he had no choice. He would go, not because he wanted to, but because otherwise Jesse would go alone—and alone, he would die on the first night.

The mother screamed when they heard about it. She threw herself on her knees before Jesse, holding up the Bible, begging, pleading. "God doesn't want you in this blood!" Jesse stepped back, staring at her with cold eyes. "Your God can go to hell. My Colt wants me."

And then they went. Two brothers, fire and shadow, following the Colts through the dirt, out into a world that no longer had anything to do with psalms. A world where men existed not through prayer, but through bullets.

The village breathed a sigh of relief when they disappeared. But this relief was deceptive. For Missouri would soon learn that Jesse James wasn't disappearing—he was growing. And that his Colts wouldn't stay in the dirt, but would speak through entire towns.

### The damned guerrilla

They came like shadows on horses. No flag, no God, only dust, sweat, and gunpowder. Men without a home, without a future, without a prayer other than the drum of their Colts. Missouri knew many bastards, but the guerrillas were the worst.

For Jesse, it was love at first sight. There they were—the men who lived the way he wanted to live. No farm, no mother, no Bible yelling. Just fire, smoke, and the taste of fear in the air.

Frank saw the same thing and hated it. These men were no destination, no future, just walking graves. But he knew Jesse was lost if he didn't accompany them. So he ascended, the shadow beside the fire.

The guerrillas weren't an army. They were a pack. Twenty, thirty men, ragged, scarred, some barely older than Jesse, others already half-skeletons on horses. They wore Confederate uniforms, but not proper ones—tattered remnants, stolen, filthy. Their flag was the smoke from their cannons.

The leader was a bastard named Quantrill. Calm, ice-cold, with eyes that knew no light. He spoke little, and when he did, it was with an order. Jesse absorbed every word as if it were gospel.

The first thing they saw was an ambush. No major battle, just a small farm, a Unionist living in the wrong place. The guerrillas rode up, shouting, shooting, burning. The house was ablaze, the cows ran screaming through the smoke, the man lay in the dirt, blood pouring from his mouth, while his wife was dragged away screaming.

Jesse stared. His heart pounded, his hands trembled. He'd seen blood, he'd fired shots, but this was different. This was war.

Frank grabbed his arm. "See? This isn't glory, Jesse. This is madness." But Jesse couldn't answer. His eyes gleamed, and a voice screamed in his head: *This is it. This is my place.*

The guerrillas soon gave him a weapon. Not just his Colt, but a rifle, old, rusty, and heavy. He treasured it.

The first ride with them was like a fever dream. They hunted through forests, through villages, always searching for prey. Sometimes food, sometimes tobacco, sometimes just the fear in the people's eyes. Jesse absorbed it. Frank remained silent, but he rode.

They ambushed a stagecoach. A scream, a shot, horses reared. Jesse aimed, pulled the trigger, and hit a driver in the shoulder. The man fell, screaming, blood spurting. Jesse felt himself laughing. Not because it was funny, but because he finally knew: He was in the right place.

The other guerrillas laughed along. "That boy has guts!" they shouted, and one patted him on the back. Jesse grinned as if he'd just received a king's crown.

Frank watched it all with dark eyes. He hated it. But he knew there was no turning back. Not now. Not anymore.

The nights in the camp were filled with whiskey, sweat, and lies. Men told stories about how many people they had shot, how many houses they had burned. Jesse listened, absorbing everything. Frank remained silent, smoking his pipe, his eyes on the fire, always ready to grab Jesse if he went too far.

The guerrillas weren't soldiers. They were dogs who had learned that killing was easier than working. And Jesse James was now one of them.

The guerrillas had no plan, no honor, no marching orders. They were just hungry. Hunger for blood, for loot, for something that would make them feel alive while the world rotted around them.

For Jesse, it was a celebration. For Frank, it was hell.

The second ride took them to a village that had opened its doors to the Unionists. They came at dawn, like wolves smelling sleep. Screams, gunshots, burning roofs. Men were dragged into the streets, women torn away, children huddled in corners.

Jesse rode along, his Colt loosely in his hand, feeling like a king on a throne of dust. He saw a fellow guerrilla shoot an old man simply because he was too slow. He saw a woman scream while two other men laughed. And he felt this fever in his stomach, urging him: *Do it too. Show them.*

Frank rode beside him, stiff and pale, but he didn't intervene. He knew one man was nothing against thirty. So he remained silent, and the silence consumed him.

Later at the river, as they counted the loot—a few coins, whiskey, blankets—an argument broke out. An older guerrilla mocked Jesse, calling him "a puppy with too big a gun." Jesse immediately grabbed the gun and cocked the hammer. Frank stood up and grabbed his arm. "Not. Not yet." Jesse snarled, the veins in his neck bulging. "He's laughing at me!" "Then laugh back," Frank growled, "but don't shoot him. Not yet."

Jesse lowered the Colt, reluctantly. But the others had seen how quickly he'd drawn it. And that meant something. Respect came not only from actions, but also from that twitch of the hand, faster than thought.

The guerrillas began to take him seriously. The boy was hot-blooded, yes, but he was also willing. And in war, that was often enough.

Frank watched it all. He saw Jesse laughing, drinking, playing cards with the men as if he were already one of them. But he also saw the darkness growing. Jesse was no longer just an angry boy with a Colt. He was part of something bigger, dirtier. An animal in the pack.

That night, Jesse lay in the grass, his Colt beside him, talking as if he were drunk, but he wasn't. "You know, Frank, I've never felt alive. Never. But now, when the blood spurts, when they scream—then I know I exist." Frank turned away, his pipe between his teeth. "This isn't living, Jesse. This is dying in slow motion." "Maybe," Jesse grinned, "but it's me dying."

The guerrillas moved on, village by village, farm by farm. They took what they wanted. Jesse took it, Frank looked away as best he could. But he too would have to shoot at some point, would have to shed blood at some point, if he wanted to survive. And that gnawed at him, quieter but deeper than it did at Jesse.

One night in the camp, Frank saw Jesse laughing, whiskey in his beard, his rifle beside him. Men patted him on the back, calling his name. "That boy's got fire!

That boy's one of us!" Frank felt his heart sink. He knew he couldn't bring Jesse back. The Colt had swallowed him, and the guerrillas had spit him out—as one of them.

The damned guerrilla. It wasn't a name, it was a curse. And now they both bore it.

The third ride was the one that cemented everything. After that, there was no longer any doubt: Jesse James was no longer a farm boy, no longer a son of a praying mother. He was a blood brother of the guerrillas.

They arrived in a village shortly before sunrise, a miserable little town with perhaps twenty houses, a church, and more pigs than people. The people there had declared their allegiance to the Union; that was enough of a death sentence. Quantrill gave a hand signal, and the men leaped from their horses like hyenas smelling carrion.

It wasn't a fight. It was a slaughter. Doors were flung open, men dragged out, bullets shot into their chests before they could say a word. Women screamed, children whimpered. Houses burned, and the smoke settled over the village like a shroud.

Jesse was in the middle of it. His Colt barked, his rifle cracked. A man ran away, barefoot, his shirt flapping. Jesse aimed, pulled the trigger, and hit him in the back. The man fell, hit the ground, lay still. Jesse grinned. Not a flinch, not a doubt. Just the sweet echo of the shot in his veins.

Frank saw it, and something inside him broke. He shot too, yes—he had to. But he did it coldly, forced, without a smile. While Jesse came back to life, Frank died bit by bit.

A few villagers gathered in the church, probably hoping for God's protection. Quantrill laughed and kicked in the door. Smoke, flames, bullets. Jesse stood beside him, watched the pastor hold up the Bible, and laughed as the man fell to the ground, blood in his beard, pages from the book fluttering in the wind.

"God won't help you," Jesse cried, "but my Colt will!"

The guerrillas roared with laughter. Jesse had made it. He was no longer just a boy with an oversized Colt. He was one of them, baptized in blood.

Frank stood in the back, his hands black with smoke, his heart heavy as lead. He wanted to scream, wanted to pull Jesse away, wanted to beg him to stop. But



he did nothing. He couldn't do anything. He was trapped, not by the guerrillas, but by his own blood. He couldn't leave Jesse in the fire.

When they left the village, it was nothing but ash. Pigs ran screaming through the embers, women whimpered, men lay dead. Jesse rode in front, his face black with smoke, his eyes glowing. He looked like the devil himself on a horse.

Later, by the river, as they were washing, Jesse spoke. "Did you see it, Frank? They were afraid of me. They knew it was me who struck them down." Frank looked at him, his eyes red. "They were afraid, Jesse, because they were human. Humans are afraid when they die." "Screw humans," Jesse growled. "Humans are dust. I want to be more than dust."

The guerrillas patted him on the shoulder, gave him whiskey, and called him "brother." To them, he was now one of them, no longer a cub, but a wolf.

Frank didn't drink. He smoked, stared into the fire, saw the blood still on his hands, heard the screams in his ears. He knew that one day he would pay for it. But he also knew that Jesse would never come back.

The damned guerrillas had eaten him.

The nights after the massacre were different. It was as if Jesse had stepped deep into the mud for the first time and realized he couldn't just stand still—he could dance in it.

He spoke of it with sparkling eyes as he sat by the fire, whiskey in one hand, Colt in the other. "Did you see, Frank? Did you see how they begged? They knew who I was. They knew they were dying because I wanted them to."

Frank listened, remained silent, and smoked. He could hear the scream of the woman trying to pull her child from the burning hut. He could see the old man's hands shaking before he fell. And he hated himself for not having intervened.

But he said nothing. Because he knew: words bounce off Jesse like stones off iron.

The guerrillas made Jesse their lapdog and their brother at the same time. They gave him tasks, set him goals. He was fast, he was eager, he was ready. He rode in front, no longer in the back.

Frank saw it and knew: his little brother had now become a wolf. And wolves no longer listen to their mother's howls.

The days were filled with blood. One ambush followed the next. Sometimes a carriage, sometimes a small farm, sometimes just a few men by the side of the road, unlucky enough to experience the wrong morning. Jesse shot faster, laughed louder, drank more. He absorbed the chaos like a drug.

Frank didn't drink. He stayed on the edge, watching. He saw how Jesse was becoming more and more like the others—loud, brutal, indiscriminate. But he also saw that Jesse wasn't just one of those *under* them. He began to stand out. There was something in his eyes, a glint that said: I want more. I want to be bigger than you.

One night in the camp, as the men slept, Jesse spoke softly. "You know, Frank, we could be more than this. Not just raids. We could make history. Banks, trains—the big things." Frank blew out smoke. "We're already lost enough." "No," Jesse growled. "Not yet. We're just getting started."

Frank closed his eyes. He knew Jesse didn't just want to burn the world to get warm. He wanted everyone to see the flames.

But Frank was tired. Every shot gnawed at him. Every corpse stuck to his hands, even if he hadn't pulled the trigger himself. He felt his heart grow heavier, his dreams grow darker.

The guerrillas had no rules. They took, they destroyed, they disappeared. But Jesse began to invent rules for himself. Not out of morality, but out of ambition. He didn't want to be just another rider who disappeared into the crowd. He wanted *the* To be a rider known by name.

"One day, Frank," he said, "they won't just fear us. They'll worship us. They'll know my name. Yours too, if you like. But most of all, mine."

Frank turned his head away. He didn't want to hear his brother preaching the devil. But he knew it would happen.

The nights grew longer, the screams louder. Jesse was no longer the boy with the Colt in the dirt. He had become a man, baptized in blood and ashes, one who laughed while others died.

Frank broke apart slowly, quietly, without a cry. But he stayed. Because he couldn't, because he wasn't allowed to, because blood was stronger than reason.

The damned guerrilla had shaped Jesse. And Frank was just a shadow stumbling behind him.

The guerrilla wasn't a life, it was a fever. Once you'd drunk on it, you couldn't go back. Jesse had long since become sick of it, addicted, greedy. And the worst part was: he enjoyed every minute.

The next raid was larger. Not a humble village, not a single farm—this time it was an entire convoy of Unionists, with supplies, ammunition, whiskey. Loot enough to feed a town.

Quantrill sorted the men like a butcher separating pigs. Everyone knew what to do. Jesse grinned, riding in front. Frank followed him, silent, his hands sweating on his rifle.

They attacked at dawn. A scream, a crash, then chaos. Horses neighed, men shouted, bullets flew. Jesse shot, laughed, rode right into the thick of it. He didn't just aim at soldiers, he aimed at anything that moved. A boy, maybe sixteen, ran away—Jesse hit him in the back. The boy fell, his face in the dust. Jesse rode on as if it were nothing.

Frank saw it. He saw the boy's face, saw the fear in it, and something inside him died. But he shot anyway. He had to. In the guerrilla, you couldn't hesitate. Hesitation meant lying in the dirt yourself.

When the dust cloud settled, the column was nothing but a slaughterhouse. Dead men, screaming horses, burning wagons. Jesse stood there, smoking his Colt, his shirt covered in blood—not just someone else's, but his own, a scratch on his arm. He grinned like he were king.

"Did you see, Frank? Did you see them fall?" Frank didn't nod. He just stared. "That was a boy, Jesse. Barely older than you." "He was in the way." "He didn't have a weapon." "He had eyes, Frank. Eyes that could have betrayed me."

Frank turned away and vomited into the dust. The men laughed, one patted Jesse on the shoulder and called him "a real devil." Jesse laughed along.

The loot was plentiful. Whiskey, tobacco, and ammunition. The guerrillas drank heavily that same evening. Jesse drank until he dropped, danced around the fire, and screamed songs no one understood. Frank sat off to the side, smoking, staring into the darkness.

A storm raged inside him. He knew that one day he would have to leave. Away from Jesse, away from the guerrillas, away from all the blood. But how could he leave? Jesse was his brother. Blood. Shadow. And blood ties weren't easily severed.

Later, when the men were asleep, Jesse sat down beside him. His eyes gleamed in the firelight, dark and feverish. "We were born for this, Frank. I can feel it. We're not farmers. We're not laborers. We're riders. We're ghosts. They'll know our names." Frank shook his head. "They'll hate us." "Screw hate," Jesse grinned. "Hate means they'll never forget you."

Frank remained silent. He knew Jesse had long since gone too far. There was no turning back.

The guerrilla was the mother Jesse adopted when his own failed. She fed him blood, she drenched him with smoke, she cradled him in the cries of the dying. And he suckled on it like a baby at the breast.

Frank, on the other hand, drowned a little more every day. But he stayed. Because he couldn't, because he wasn't allowed to, because he knew: If Jesse fell, he'd fall right next to him.

War devoured everything, and the guerrillas had the sharpest teeth. Anyone caught in it was chewed, swallowed, and spat out as something else. Jesse James was no longer the kid with the Colt in the dirt. He was a rider, a dog of war.

They moved deeper into the country, always searching for prey, for fear, for a spark to light the night. They didn't hunt armies—they left that to the officers. They hunted people. Civilians, traders, farmers, anyone who smelled anything like "Union."

Jesse was at the front. Colt in hand, his eyes burning. He shot fast, he loved shooting, he shot even when he didn't have to. For him, every shot was proof that he was alive.

Frank rode beside him, silent, his teeth gritted. He shot too, he had to. But each time it consumed him more. He began to lose sleep at night. The screams haunted him, the faces of the men, the women, the children. He saw them when he closed his eyes. He heard them when the wind blew.

Jesse, on the other hand, slept like a log. With his Colt beside him, a grin on his face. Sometimes he spoke in his sleep, murmuring words like "see me" or

"bigger" or "my name." Frank heard this and knew: his brother was no longer human, he was a myth, just born—and myths sleep soundly.

One raid in particular stuck in Frank's memory. A small farm, a family. Father, mother, and two children. The guerrillas stormed in, shouting, shooting. The father reached for a rifle – Jesse was faster. One shot, the man collapsed, blood on the floorboards. The mother screamed, the children howled. Jesse laughed.

"See, Frank?" He wiped the sweat from his forehead and grinned broadly. "It's that simple. One shot, and an entire farm is ours."

Frank couldn't answer. He saw the children trembling in the corner, their eyes wide open, tears streaming down their faces. He wanted to pull them away, wanted to protect them, wanted to do something. But he did nothing. He stood there, rifle in hand, silent.

That night, as the guerrillas were drinking, Frank lay awake. He thought for the first time: *Maybe I have to stop him.* His own brother. Jesse. The boy with whom he had chopped wood, driven cows, and listened to psalms. But that boy was gone. In his place rode a demon with Colts.

But he couldn't. He couldn't raise his hand. Blood is stronger than reason.

Jesse grew in this world. Every attack made him colder, faster, more dangerous. The men respected him and soon stopped calling him "boy." He was one of them, maybe even more. One once said, "The little one will outlive us all. He's got a fire in his belly like I've rarely seen." Jesse just grinned, drank the whiskey, and the fire grew.

But Frank became increasingly quiet. He barely spoke, only smoked. His eyes were deeper, darker, full of shadows. The men laughed at him, calling him "a preacher without words." Jesse never defended him—he pretended not to hear him. But Frank knew that Jesse always stayed one step closer to him.

Because Jesse also knew: Without Frank, he was just a fire without a shadow. And fire without a shadow dies quickly.

The guerrilla movement was a maelstrom. Jesse swam in it like a fish in water. Frank drifted along, always on the verge of drowning.

And somewhere inside him this thought grew that wouldn't let him go: *One day I might be forced to shoot him myself.*

The war had long since lost its mask. It was no longer a battle of ideas, a battle over flags or states. It was just hunger and hatred, smoke and corpses. And the guerrillas were the filth growing in the cracks.

Jesse loved it. Every day was a new stage, every robbery a new play, and he played the lead role. He didn't want to be a spectator; he wanted to be the devil in the spotlight. Frank knew it, and he hated it, but he couldn't bring him back.

The climax came in a town called Centralia. A miserable little town, but full of Unionists. Quantrill had given the order; there was no mercy. They rode in like demons, a dozen men in front, Jesse in the middle, the Colt loosely in his hand, as if he'd been born with that grip between his fingers.

It began with a train arriving, full of soldiers in blue uniforms. Young men, many barely older than Jesse. They got out, still laughing, talking loudly, suspecting nothing. The guerrillas didn't wait. Shots rang out, horses neighed, screams ripped through the air. Men fell like dolls.

Jesse was possessed. He shot, he laughed, he ran through the middle of the crowd. He stopped aiming, he fired. Two, three, four soldiers fell beneath his bullets. One begged for mercy, kneeling in the dust, his hands raised. Jesse stepped closer, grinned, and pulled the trigger. The head flew back, blood spurted onto the ground.

Frank saw it, and his stomach lurched. He shot too, forced, but he didn't aim at faces. He shot at shadows, at legs, at anything that kept him alive. But he felt himself losing a little more with every shot.

The guerrillas took no prisoners. They let the few survivors run naked, driving them across the fields, and Jesse rode alongside, laughing, Colt in hand, shouting, "Run faster, or I'll help you!" And then he pulled the trigger, leaving them lying in the grass one by one.

Frank rode behind, pale, his lips tightly pressed together. He hated his brother at that moment. He hated him because he loved him, and he hated himself for not intervening.

When the smoke cleared, Centralia was nothing but a mass grave. Houses were burning, the church collapsed, blood mingled with dust. Jesse stood in the center, smoking his Colt, his face black with soot, grinning like a king.

The men yelled his name. "Jesse! Jesse!" They patted him on the shoulder, called him "Brother of Fire." For them, he was now one of their own, no longer just a boy, no longer just a brat. He was blood, he was a guerrilla.

Frank stood aside, smoking, staring into the flames. The screams and the faces of the boys who had fallen echoed in his head. He thought: *If I stay here another day, I will lose everything I am.* But he couldn't leave. Jesse was there, and Jesse meant blood.

Later, by the river, Jesse washed his face; the water turned red. He looked at Frank and grinned. "See, brother? Now they know my name. Soon all of Missouri will know it." Frank didn't answer. He pulled on his pipe, feeling the smoke in his throat, but it wasn't enough to drown out the screams.

The damned guerrilla hadn't just taken Jesse James in. They had given birth to him. And Frank knew: from now on, things would only get worse.

### Quantrill's revenge

Quantrill was not a soldier. He was not an officer, not a hero, not a patriot. He was a demon on a horse, a man who used war like other men use a bottle of whiskey—to quench his thirst.

His revenge campaigns were notorious. They had no strategy, no mercy, no rules. Just fire, blood, and fear. To some, he was a traitor; to others, a hero. To Jesse James, he was a prophet.

Quantrill spoke little. But when he opened his mouth, his words were sharp as knives. "The Union wants to take the South from us. We'll take everything from them. Men, women, children—it doesn't matter. If they wear blue or think blue, they belong in the dirt."

Jesse absorbed every word. It was like a Bible, only more honest. No heaven, no God, only revenge. He felt as if Quantrill was voicing what he himself had always felt: that the world belongs only to those willing to set it on fire.

Frank saw it differently. He saw Quantrill not as a prophet, but as an executioner. A man who dragged all who followed him into the abyss. But he said nothing. He couldn't say anything. Jesse listened only to the thunder of the Colts, no longer to his brother's voice.

The revenge raids began with small attacks—raids on farms, small post stations, merchants. But soon they grew larger. Entire towns felt the shadow when Quantrill and his men appeared. They came like a storm, and when they left, nothing but ash remained.

The most infamous of all was Lawrence. Kansas, August 1863. Jesse was young, much too young to be there—but he rode along anyway. It was his first real inferno.

They came at dawn. Almost 400 riders, dusty, dirty, like a flood of hooves and weapons. The city was asleep, unaware.

Then all hell broke loose.

Gunshots, screams, flames. Men were dragged from their homes and shot in the streets, without trial or questions. Women screamed, children screamed; it was chaos. The guerrillas set fire to houses, laughing as roofs collapsed.

Jesse rode right in the middle, Colt in hand. He was still a boy, but that day he was a man of blood. He shot, he ran, he laughed while men died.

Frank followed, pale, his eyes full of shadows. He saw his brother dancing in the fire, how he cheered when another body fell. And he knew: Jesse was lost.

By the time the sun was high, Lawrence was no longer a town. It was a cemetery. More than 150 men were dead, houses burned down, smoke in the air that didn't dissipate for days.

Jesse stood in the dust, his Colt still warm, and grinned. "That's it, Frank. This is war. This is glory." Frank looked at him, his lips dry. "This is madness."

But Jesse couldn't hear him anymore. His ear now belonged to Quantrill.

Lawrence wasn't a victory. It was a massacre. A bloodbath that lingered over Missouri and Kansas like a foul odor. But for Quantrill, it was the pinnacle of his career. And for Jesse James, it was his baptism in fire.

The city was asleep when the guerrillas arrived. Men were still in bed, women were making breakfast, children were playing in the streets. They had no idea that death was already galloping toward them.

Quantrill didn't give a signal that sounded like a trumpet blast. He didn't need a fanfare. His signal was a shot. One, and then all hell.



Jesse was one of the first to ride into the heart of the city. His Colt barked before he even knew who he was aiming at. A man fell, his eyes wide open, his hands full of flour from the store. Jesse felt his heart racing. Not from fear, but from desire.

The guerrillas stormed every house. They dragged men from their beds and shot them in front of their wives. They ran through the town hall, burned it down, dragged out barrels of whiskey, and drank among the corpses.

Jesse was everywhere. He shot a man trying to climb over a fence. He kicked in a door, saw an old man with a Bible in his hand, and pulled the trigger without hesitation. He yelled, laughed, and cheered as the fire consumed the city.

Frank was behind him, always behind him. He saw the same things, did what was necessary, but there was no joy in his eyes. Only emptiness. He shot because he had to. He rode because he had to. But every shot gnawed deeper into his soul.

Lawrence wasn't a battle. It was a massacre. 150 men shot, burned, and slain. Houses burned, shops looted, churches desecrated. Children were left crying, women on their knees, praying, while the guerrillas laughed.

Jesse was drunk on blood. As the sun rose, he rode through the streets like a victor, his gun in the air, smoke rising from the barrel. "This is war, Frank! This is glory! They'll never forget our name!"

Frank stared at him, wordless. He wanted to say something, wanted to scream in his face that this wasn't glory, but madness. But he knew it was pointless. Jesse could only hear the sound of the Colts, no longer his brother's voice.

Quantrill saw all this, and he grinned. He saw in Jesse a mirror of himself: younger, wilder, hungrier. "The boy has fire," he said later, "and you don't put out fire. You let it burn until it's all ash."

Lawrence burned for three days. Smoke rose, the sky was black. The guerrillas rode on as if nothing had happened. But the world had seen it. The Union swore revenge. Newspapers called it barbaric, inhuman, hellish. For Jesse, it was a title he wore with pride.

The mother found out about it later. She prayed louder, read more verses, and cried out to God that her son would be saved. But Jesse just laughed when he heard about it. "Saved? I'm already saved. Saved from the dirt of the farm, saved by her psalms. Now I'm somebody."

Frank remained silent. But deep down, he knew: Lawrence was the point at which his brother was finally lost.

Lawrence lay behind them, but the stench lingered in their clothes. It was the sweet smell of burnt wood, blood, and sweat, a smell that doesn't leave your pores, even if you wash in the river.

For Jesse, it was a perfume. He rode with his head held high, as if he wore an invisible medal on his chest. He talked incessantly, telling everyone how he had shot, how he had burned, how he had laughed, while the city turned to ash.

"You see, Frank," he kept saying, "that's what matters. Not psalms, not fields, not the damned cows. But that your name lives in the flames."

Frank didn't answer. He smoked, dragging on his pipe, which had long since become nothing more than a lump of wood in his lips. The smoke no longer burned, and it tasted of nothing. Nothing could mask the taste of Lawrence.

The guerrillas celebrated. They drank, they sang, they boasted. One boasted about having shot 20 men. Another about having burned down three houses single-handedly. Jesse mingled with them, eclipsing their stories with his own, and they listened. They laughed, they toasted him. The boy was no longer one—he was one of their own.

Quantrill watched everything with that blank stare. He saw that Jesse was more than just a soldier. He was ambitious. Ambition was dangerous, but useful. Quantrill loved men who wanted more. Such men carried others along with them.

Frank felt Jesse growing. Not physically—he was still thin and young. But there was something inside him that was growing. A shadow that covered everything. A hunger that could no longer be satisfied.

The days after Lawrence were a fever. Every attack, every gunshot, was like an aftershock. Jesse wanted more. He wanted to hear those screams again, wanted to ride in flames again. He sought chaos like it were a drug.

Frank saw how he was drifting away. How he no longer spoke of "us" but of "me." "My name will remain," Jesse said. "My Colt will make history." Frank heard this and felt himself become even heavier.

The guerrillas continued to hunt. They raided villages, trains, and traders. It was a constant trek through the dust, a life of saddle and gunfire. Jesse was at the

front, always at the front. He laughed when the bullets whistled, he cheered when one fell.

Frank was there, but his heart was no longer there. He shot, yes, but only to stay alive. Every shot was another nail in his coffin. He dreamed of the faces they left behind—women, children, old men. Faces that wouldn't disappear, even when he filled his head with whiskey.

Jesse slept peacefully. He even snored sometimes, the grin still on his lips. Frank hated him in those moments. Hated him because he could sleep while he himself just lay awake, listening to the screams.

After Lawrence, Quantrill was spoken of as if he were the devil himself. Newspapers called him a monster. The Union offered bounties. But in Missouri, other voices were heard—whispering, reverent. Men said, "Have you heard of Jesse James? The boy who was in Lawrence?"

Jesse absorbed these rumors like honey. Even the whisper of his name was like music to him. He wanted them to say it. He wanted them to never forget it.

Frank, on the other hand, just wanted it to stop. For all hell to finally stand still. But the guerrilla was a wheel that couldn't be stopped. And Jesse drove it on, faster, louder, bloodier.

Lawrence was over, but Lawrence wasn't over. It lived on in Jesse, in every breath, in every look he gave the men. He was young, thin, but when he drew his Colt, he looked like a man carrying the devil in a sack.

Frank realized his brother was no longer the Jesse he knew. The boy who had once driven cows, who had lived on childhood dreams in the Missouri mud—he was dead. Another had been born. A man who was hungrier than all the other guerrillas combined.

Quantrill saw this, and he used it. "That boy has fire," he often murmured, half admiringly, half warningly. "Fire burns down houses, but sometimes it eats your own roof."

Jesse didn't care. He wanted more. He talked about it every night. "Frank, we could take anything. Banks, trains, cities. Not just small villages. Not just puny merchants. Big stuff. Stuff that'll erase their name and hammer mine into their heads."

Frank barely answered anymore. What should he say? That he was afraid? That he heard the screams every night? That he sometimes wished Jesse had stayed in Lawrence, among the dead? He couldn't say. He remained silent, smoking, and the silence ate away at him from the inside.

The revenge raids became wilder. The guerrillas rode deeper into the country, hunting not just Unionists, but anything that looked weak. Jesse was always the first to shoot. He sought danger, sought heat, sought chaos. He was addicted to it, like other men are to whiskey or women.

Frank could hardly bear it. But he stayed. Always one step behind Jesse, always ready to grab him if he went too far. But secretly, he knew: Jesse had long since gone too far.

A night in the camp, the men drunk, the air heavy with smoke and sweat. Jesse sat by the fire, talking with sparkling eyes. "They're afraid of Quantrill, yes. But one day they'll be afraid of me. *Of me*" Frank. I don't want to be just a name in the shadows. I want to be the shadow."

Frank stared at him, his pipe between his teeth, and thought: *Maybe one day I'll have to shoot him myself.* The thought made him sick, but he wouldn't let it go.

Quantrill sent them on another revenge mission. A village, small, poor, full of people who were just unlucky enough to live on the wrong side of the border. They arrived at dawn, as always. Doors broke, shots rang out, screams rent the air. Jesse was in front, grinning as he shot.

A man fell, a boy screamed, a woman pleaded – Jesse heard none of it. To him, it was music. For Frank, it was hell.

As the guerrillas moved on, the village was ablaze. Jesse rode in front, laughing. Frank rode silently behind, his heart heavy as lead.

The revenge campaigns weren't just Quantrill's war. They were Jesse's birth. And Frank knew: He was riding alongside a man who could no longer be stopped.

Quantrill wasn't a human being; he was a force of nature. A storm that crushed everything in its path. But a storm needs thunder, and Jesse James became its thunder.

There were days when it was so hot that even the horses groaned, and the men stank like carcasses. But when Quantrill gave the signal, the gang rode off as if

the devil himself were after them. Houses, villages, wagon trains—everything fell victim to them.

Jesse was always at the front. He wanted to be at the front. He wanted to be seen, heard, feared. The Colt in his hand wasn't just a weapon, it was a banner. Every shot was a message: *Here I am. Jesse James. Remember the name.*

Frank rode beside them, silent, pale. He shot because he had to, but not with the same greed. He did it coldly, mechanically, and each time he felt something inside him break. He had stopped talking about the future. He had stopped thinking about returning. The war had captured him, and Jesse was his jailer.

Quantrill fired up the men like a preacher. "You call us bandits? Good! Then we're the best bandits they've ever seen. You call us demons? Then we'll show them hell." And the men cheered, shouted, drank, and set off.

Jesse soaked it all in. He listened to Quantrill like other boys listen to their fathers. He had found his God, and this God carried not a Bible, but two Colts.

But Frank saw the end. He saw how Quantrill wore out the men like cheap bullets. One after the other they fell, shot, hanged, burned. But Jesse laughed as if the dead were just stones on the road.

Once, after a particularly bloody ride, they sat by the fire. Jesse drank, his face sooty, his eyes shining. "Did you see, Frank? Did you see them screaming when we dragged them out?" Frank stared at him. "Yes. I see it every night. I hear it every night." "Then get used to it," Jesse grinned. "It's music."

Frank wanted to punch him, wanted to wipe the grin off his face. But he didn't. He couldn't. Instead, he puffed on his pipe, as if the smoke would save him. But smoke didn't save anyone.

The revenge attacks became more brutal. Jesse became more brutal. He shot faster, laughed louder, always sought out the hottest spots in the fight. Some men began to whisper his name. "That boy has devil blood." "That boy is worse than Quantrill." And Jesse heard it, absorbed it, grew from it.

Frank heard it too. For him, it wasn't praise, but a judgment. He knew: Jesse was no longer just his brother. He was a myth in the making, and myths no longer had a place in the human world.

One evening, as the men fell asleep drunk, Frank spoke quietly, almost to himself: "One day, Jesse, someone will pull faster. And then you'll be gone." Jesse turned his head and grinned. "Then he'd better be damn fast."

The revenge campaigns had long since lost the character that history books call "war." It was no longer a battle; it was a decay. A fever that infected all who rode along.

Quantrill didn't need a reason. A rumor, a suspicion, a wrong word—that was enough, and the men were in the saddle. A house was burned down, a family wiped out, an entire village sent into oblivion.

Jesse was always in the thick of things. He lived for it. He no longer just shot; he played with his Colt, turning it in his hand as if it were a circus act. He grinned as he took down men. For him, every shot was proof of his immortality.

Frank could no longer count how many dead they left behind. The faces were blurred. But Jesse remembered each one, and he boasted about it. "The old man lying in the bed—he was mine. The boy who ran away—mine too. Did you see, Frank? Did you see how they trembled?"

Frank saw it, and he hated himself for it. He hated himself for doing nothing. He hated himself for riding beside Jesse instead of stopping him. But blood is thicker than hate, and the chain that held him wasn't made of iron, but of family.

The guerrillas grew harder the more they pursued. They knew the Union swore revenge. Bounties hung from trees, posters with Quantrill's name, with sketches of his men. Jesse was too young to be mentioned yet, but he knew it was only a matter of time. And he wanted it. He wanted to see his name on paper, black on white, between the words "dead or alive."

"That's glory, Frank," he once said, his face still covered in dust, blood on his shirt. "Not a damned song in church. But your name on the lips of your enemies." Frank shook his head. "That's a noose around your neck." "Screw the noose. As long as they fear me, I'm alive."

The men followed Quantrill blindly. But sometimes they also looked at Jesse. They saw that he was something else. Not just another rider. He was hungrier, greedier. A man who saw fire in every spark.

Frank noticed this with horror. He knew Jesse wasn't just along for the ride. Jesse dreamed of more. Of his own gang, of his own revenge, of his name being bigger than Quantrill's.

One night, when the whiskey was empty and the men were snoring, Jesse spoke softly: "We don't need Quantrill. I don't need him. I could light my own fire." Frank puffed on his pipe, saying nothing. But in his head, a voice screamed: *Then it's over. Then you're lost forever.*

The revenge attacks escalated. A village on the river – they came at night, slaughtered the men, set fire to the boats, and drove the women into the water. Jesse stood on the bank, laughing as the flames colored the waves.

Frank stood by, staring into the fire, and something inside him shattered. For the first time, he thought that not only could Jesse die—but perhaps he himself would have to die to escape this nightmare.

But he stayed. He stayed because he couldn't do otherwise. Jesse was his brother, and even if he hated him, he was blood.

The guerrillas were a grinding mill, and Jesse James grinned in the middle of it all, his face smeared with blood. Frank, on the other hand, became ever quieter, ever heavier. A man who lived as if he were already dead.

It was as if Quantrill sensed that his time was limited. His features became increasingly wild, increasingly senseless, as if he wanted to set the world on fire one more time before it consumed him.

The last major revenge attack of the year struck a village that barely deserved the name. A handful of houses, a saloon, a small church. Essentially worthless. But someone had told Quantrill there were Unionists there. That was enough.

They rode at dawn. The dust hung in the air like flour, horses stamped, Colts gleamed. Jesse was in front, almost on par with Quantrill. He grinned as if it were a ride to paradise. Frank was behind, pale, silent, his rifle heavy in his hand.

When they entered the village, there was no battle. Only a massacre. Doors flew open, bullets rang out, screams mingled with the neighing of horses. Men fell, women screamed, children ran, were trampled.

Jesse was everywhere. He jumped off his horse, ran through a house, shot a man, tore open a door, fired blindly into the darkness. He laughed, he screamed, he was like a fire that knew no direction, only destruction.

Frank saw him and felt sick. He shot, yes, but mechanically, without joy, without aim. He shot because otherwise he would have been dead. But his heart was no longer in it. His heart had long since burned.

Quantrill stood at the center, barking orders like a general, but it wasn't war. It was just murder. And Jesse thrived in it.

Later, when the village was nothing but smoke and ash, the men sat on the sidelines, drinking whiskey, laughing, and boasting. Jesse stood in the circle, his eyes sparkling, telling how he had shot the old man in his bed, how he had left the woman crying. The men cheered, shouted his name, and toasted him.

Frank sat off to the side, staring into the fire, and he knew: his brother was lost forever. There was no turning back. No farm, no mother, no psalms. Only blood, smoke, and the sound of a name that would soon echo throughout Missouri.

That night, as the men snored, Jesse spoke softly, barely audibly, but clearly. "Soon, Frank. Soon I'll be bigger than Quantrill. They'll whisper my name. Jesse James. And they'll tremble."

Frank closed his eyes. He didn't want to hear it. But he heard it anyway. And he knew: the war hadn't just destroyed villages and towns. It had created Jesse—and destroyed him.

Quantrill rode on, ever on, but the shadows grew longer. The Union swore retribution, bounties grew, the roads narrowed. But Jesse laughed. For him, it was just the beginning.

And Frank? Frank was just a shadow next to the fire.



## Lawrence in Flames

Lawrence, Kansas. A town like any other in the frontier—a little too proud, a little too safe. It was home to teachers, merchants, and craftsmen. People who believed their flag protected them, that their faith was stronger than any bullet. They were wrong.

Quantrill had decided to burn Lawrence. Not for any strategic advantage, not because it mattered on a map. But out of hatred. Hatred of the Union, hatred of the people who wanted to crush the South with laws and guns. And out of pure lust for chaos.

Jesse James rode along. Still a boy, but with a Colt that made him a man. He didn't know exactly why they were going to meet Lawrence. But he knew there would be blood. And that was enough for him.

Frank was there too. The shadow. The brother who always slipped along because he couldn't let go. He knew it would be a massacre. But he couldn't hold Jesse back. No one could hold Jesse back.

On August 21, 1863, they rode out at dawn. Nearly four hundred men. Guerrillas, bandits, burned souls. The sun still hung low, a reddish ball over the fields, when the sound of hooves shook the ground.

Lawrence was still asleep. A few dogs barked, a rooster crowed, the city breathed calmly. But Quantrill's men were already a storm.

They came from several sides, encircling the city like wolves around a pack. Then the signal. No trumpet blast, no official order. Just Quantrill's hand raised in the air—and then hell.

Shots. Screams. Hallways filled with blood. Men ripped from their beds, barely awake, already dead. Women screamed, children screamed, and no one heard them because the roar of the Colts was louder.

Jesse was in the middle of it. He shot, he grinned, he felt the fever in his veins. A man ran out a door, still in his shirt, his hands raised. Jesse pulled the trigger, and the body fell into the dust. He didn't feel guilty. He felt alive.

Frank was right behind him. He shot too, had to. But he saw the faces. The horror, the panic. He heard the prayers cut short when a bullet struck. His heart grew heavier with every shot.

The guerrillas stormed the shops, looted, and set fire to them. Whiskey barrels rolled through the streets, windows shattered, and smoke rose. Lawrence was no longer a city—Lawrence was a slaughterhouse.

Jesse laughed as he ran through the streets. "This is it, Frank! This is war! This is glory!" Frank said nothing. He couldn't say anything. He saw a boy, maybe fifteen, trying to run away. Jesse raised his Colt. "Don't, Jesse!" Frank shouted, but the shot was faster. The boy fell, blood in the dust. Jesse grinned.

The church was filled with people hoping God would save them. Quantrill gave the order, and the doors were kicked in. Men with Colts and torches rushed inside. Screams, gunshots, smoke. God remained silent while Lawrence burned.

Jesse stood at the front, the Colt hot in his hand, his face sooty, his eyes glowing. He was no longer just a boy; he was a demon in human form. And he knew it. He enjoyed it.

As the sun rose higher, Lawrence was ablaze. More than 150 men were dead, houses burned, women and children left screaming. The air was thick with the stench of blood and burnt wood.

Frank stood there, breathing heavily, rifle in hand. He saw Jesse laughing, basking in the fire. And he knew: his brother was lost forever.

The first shots had shattered the silence. After that, there was no turning back. Lawrence was awake, but too late. Quantrill's men were already everywhere, like rats crawling through every crack.

They pulled men out of their houses, half-naked, sleepy-eyed, their eyes filled with panic. Some still had breakfast spoons in their hands, others prayers on their lips. It was no use. The Colts barked, blood splattered on wood, earth, and clotheslines.

Jesse ran through the streets like a boy through a fair. Everything was new, everything was exciting, everything was a game—except the prizes weren't teddy bears, but corpses. He grinned when he met one, he laughed when one screamed.

Frank was behind him, always behind him. He saw Jesse walk through a front door, shoot, shoot again, shoot again. When he followed, an old man lay in the hallway, his face in the carpet, blood like a trail leading to the kitchen. Jesse stood there, breathing fast, the gun still hot. "Did you see, Frank? Did you see him fall?" Frank didn't nod. He just stared, then turned away.

The church, which people had seen as a refuge, became a trap. Men stormed in, torches in hand, Colts drawn. Women screamed, children screamed, the pastor held up his Bible—and was struck down by a gunshot. Jesse was one of the first through the door, screaming, firing, laughing, while the flames blazed from the ceiling.

“God doesn’t listen!” he cried, “but my Colt does!”

Frank stood in the back, staring, unable to comprehend that his brother was saying those words. It was as if the war had replaced Jesse's tongue, and his soul along with it.

The streets were a slaughterhouse. Corpses everywhere, men in nightgowns, children shaking their fathers, women begging. Some guerrillas took their time, looting jewelry, searching bags, laughing while the world burned. But Jesse just wanted to shoot. He wanted the sound, the bang, the brief flash, the echo in his stomach.

"That's glory, Frank! Do you hear that? That's the sound of glory!"

Frank heard it. But to him, it was the sound of hell.

The town hall collapsed, burning, while the guerrillas danced around the flames like witches. Whiskey barrels were cracked open, men drank amid gunshots, blood, and smoke. Jesse drank too, wiped the blood from his face, laughed as the sky turned black.

By day's end, Lawrence was no longer a city. It was a pile of ashes. More than 150 men lay dead. Women wandered weeping through the streets, children clinging to them. The fire consumed the houses, the smoke smothered the sun.

Jesse stood in the middle of the flames, Colt in hand, his eyes bright. "This will be talked about, Frank. This. They'll know my name."

Frank couldn't look at him. He could only stare into the smoke that swallowed everything, and feel himself slowly disappearing into it.

Lawrence screamed. The entire city was a single scream, a chorus of men gasping, women pleading, children screaming until their throats broke. The smoke was thick as a blanket, but the screams still pierced through, shrill, rending.

Jesse absorbed it. For him, it was proof that he existed. Every scream that echoed across the rooftops was confirmation of his name. He shot, ran, laughed, like he was performing in a damn circus.

Frank stumbled after him. His hands were black with soot, his eyes burned with smoke. He saw too much. Too many faces, too many eyes looking at him as if he were the executioner himself. And maybe he was, simply because he was doing nothing.

In a side alley, Jesse saw a woman trying to run away with her children. Two little ones, maybe eight and six. Jesse raised his Colt. "Jesse!" Frank shouted, grabbing his arm. "No!" Jesse growled, his eyes wild. "They'll betray me." "They're children!" Jesse paused for a moment. Then he lowered the gun, but kicked the woman so hard she fell into the dust. "Run!" he yelled, "but say my name when you run!"

Frank was breathing heavily as they ran away. He hadn't stopped him. Not properly. He had only prevented the worst. But that wasn't enough. It was never enough.

The guerrillas moved from house to house. Men were shot as soon as they were seen. One knelt in the yard, pleading, his hands to the sky. Jesse stepped closer, grinned, and pulled the trigger. The body fell like a sack. Jesse wiped his brow and laughed. "Another one, Frank. Another one who knows my name."

Frank could barely breathe. Every shot from Jesse was a stab in his gut. But he couldn't let go. Blood is stronger than reason, and Jesse was his damned blood.

The church burned like a torch. People screamed inside, some jumped out of the windows, landed heavily in the dust, broke bones, but died nonetheless. Jesse watched, laughed, raised his Colt, and shot someone who tried to crawl away. "Stay in the fire, old man!"

Frank turned away and vomited into the dust. The stench of blood and smoke mingled with his bile. He trembled, but he stayed. He stayed because he knew if he left, Jesse would never come back.

The guerrillas took no prisoners. They took whatever they wanted—whiskey, jewelry, meat. Some even took women, laughing as the flames crackled outside. Jesse drank, shot in the air, and roared like an animal.

"That's fame, Frank! You hear? Fame!"

Frank only heard screams.

By the afternoon, Lawrence was a field of corpses. Men lay in the streets, women crouched beside them, weeping. Children stood silent, their eyes empty, as if they had ceased to be human.

But Jesse grinned, his Colt loosely in his hand. For him, it was a victory. For Frank, it was the end of the world.

Lawrence was no longer a place, but a nightmare. The sun hung over the city like a red eye, seeing everything but doing nothing. Smoke hung thick in the air, the ground black with fire and dark with blood.

Jesse moved through the streets like a dog finally off its chain. Every shot was a kind of prayer for him, not to God, but to himself. A man came out of a bakery, his face white with flour, his hands raised. Jesse grinned and pulled the trigger. The body fell into the dust, the flour mingling with blood.

Frank saw it, and it burned inside him. "Damn it, Jesse!" he cried. "That was a baker! Not a soldier!" Jesse laughed, his teeth flashing black with soot. "So he's baking for the devil now!"

The men around them shouted, laughed, and sang. Some were so drunk on whiskey that they could barely shoot straight. But that wasn't necessary. You couldn't miss in Lawrence. Everyone was a target.

A boy, maybe sixteen, ran down the street, stumbled, fell, got up again. Jesse chased him like a cat chases a mouse. "Run!" he yelled, "run until you scream my name!" Then he shot. The boy fell, his hands in the dust. Jesse stepped closer, stared at him, grinned.

Frank turned away, pressing his hands over his ears. But the shots went through. They always went through.

A guerrilla dragged an old man out of a house and into the street. "Union pig!" he shouted. Jesse stepped up, raising his Colt. The old man pleaded, weeping, his hands to the sky. Jesse shot him in the head. His body toppled backward, blood spurting onto the ground. Jesse wiped his forehead, laughing as if he'd won a race.

Frank felt himself getting sick. He knelt down, breathing heavily, staring at the floor. Everything inside him screamed: *Go away, run, save yourself.* But he couldn't. Jesse was his brother, and that was a chain stronger than any rope.

The church collapsed, flames consuming the roof. People screamed inside, voices growing fainter and fainter until they fell silent. Jesse stood there, watched the walls crumble, and grinned. "This is it, Frank. This is glory. We're making history!"

"You're not writing anything," Frank growled, his voice harsh. "You're just burning paper." Jesse wasn't listening. Or he didn't want to.

The guerrillas looted, taking whatever hadn't been burned yet: whiskey, jewelry, weapons. Some took women and dragged them into the alleys. The laughter, the screaming, the howling—it all blended into a sound that was no longer human.

Frank could barely stand. He felt like a man drowning in a whirlpool. Every breath was smoke, every sound a scream. And Jesse, his brother, was the one stoking the fire.

As the sun set, Lawrence was a graveyard. Corpses everywhere. Men who had taken their last steps in the dust. Women kneeling beside them, weeping. Children staring silently at the flames.

Jesse stood in the middle of it all, his Colt still in his hand, his face black with smoke, his eyes bright as torches. He was no longer just a boy. He had become a name, a shadow, a myth, born of blood.

Frank saw him and knew: his brother would never come back.

The city was a pile of ashes, but the fire wasn't yet satisfied. It continued to devour, room by room, house by house. Flames blazed everywhere, as if the demons themselves had hurled their torches into the streets.

The guerrillas rampaged through Lawrence like wolves in a flock of sheep. Gunshots, screams, laughter—it wasn't a war, it was an orgasm of violence. Everyone wanted to be louder, faster, more ferocious than the other.

Jesse was in the middle of it all, his Colt like a conductor's baton. He was leading this damned orchestra. A man tried to jump out a window, his hands full of documents, perhaps something sacred to him. Jesse fired, the body hit the frame, and fell backward into the flames. Jesse laughed as if it were a magic trick.

Frank saw this and felt his throat tighten. He wanted to scream, to yell at Jesse, to rip the gun out of his hand. But he did nothing. He stood there, the rifle in his hands, and his silence was louder than any roar.

An old man hobbled across the street, a cane in his hand, his eyes filled with tears. Jesse rode toward him, stopped, aimed, and grinned. "Say my name," he commanded. The old man shook his head, murmured a prayer. Jesse pulled the trigger. The body fell, the cane rolled across the street. Jesse laughed again.

"Did you see that, Frank?" he cried. "They refuse, and yet they hear from me."

Frank couldn't answer. His mouth was dry, his throat tight. All he felt was a weight almost pressing him to the ground.

The guerrillas stormed the saloon. Whiskey bottles clinked, men screamed, women shouted. Some guerrillas danced on the tables, drinking while the city burned outside. Jesse stood in the middle, his Colt still in his hand, drinking directly from a bottle. Blood stuck to his fingers, smoke in his hair. He grinned like a king.

"That's fame, Frank! Don't you see? We're immortal!"

Frank saw only corpses. Corpses everywhere. Men in the dust, children with their eyes open, women throwing themselves over them. The air stank of blood, of burnt flesh, of whiskey. It was the smell of hell.

A small boy stood in a corner, his face black with smoke, his eyes wide open. He didn't move. Frank saw him, wanted to go to him, wanted to take him away. But Jesse got there first, saw the boy, laughed, and raised his Colt. "No, Jesse!" Frank screamed, grabbed his arm. A moment. A flinch. Jesse paused, looked at his brother. Then he lowered the gun, grinned. "Just kidding, Frank. Just a damn joke."

The boy ran away, disappearing into the smoke. Frank let go of Jesse, his hands shaking. He felt that he had just crossed a line—and yet, once again, had done nothing.

The sun set, and Lawrence was a grave. More than 150 men were dead. Houses burned, streets blackened. The women and children who were still alive were mere shadows, wandering among the flames.

Jesse stood in the middle of it all, drinking, grinning, his Colt still at his side. For him, it was a victory. For Frank, it was an abyss from which he would never escape.

Night crept over Lawrence, but it brought no rest. The fire made the darkness brighter than day. The entire city was a burning torch, an altar on which Quantrill and his men sacrificed blood.

The guerrillas were tired but drunk, and that made them more dangerous. They staggered through the streets, Colts in hand, bottles at their mouths. Some sang, off-key, hoarse, as if they had won something. But all they had won was ashes.

Jesse was in the thick of it, still full of energy. The smoke burned his eyes, but he grinned as if he were on stage. He still shot into the sky, into the shadows, just to hear the echo.

Frank followed him, silent, his face hard. He felt nothing anymore, only a dull emptiness. Everything had been too much. Too many dead, too many screams, too much fire. His heart had turned to stone.

Corpses lay piled up in the marketplace. Men who had tried to defend the city, or who had simply taken the wrong stand. Jesse dismounted his horse, walked through the ranks, and kicked a body that was still moving. "Not dead enough," he muttered, and pulled the trigger. The head lolled to the side.

Frank stood there, staring, and thought: *That's not my brother anymore. That's an animal.* But he didn't say it. He couldn't.

A few guerrillas dragged women out of their houses, laughing, dragging them into the dust. Jesse watched, laughed along, and shot into the air. Frank turned away, clenched his jaw. He knew if he intervened, he'd be against everyone—and against Jesse. So he remained silent. Silence was his curse.

The church was just a ruin, but the stench was still there. Burnt wood, burned flesh. Frank covered his mouth, but it didn't help. Jesse walked through the rubble, saw charred bodies, and grinned. "See, Frank? God didn't stop us."

Frank growled, his voice hoarse. "Maybe he's still waiting." Jesse laughed. "Then let him come. I have two Colts for him."

The men later gathered at the remains of the saloon. They drank, laughed, and talked. Jesse spoke louder, his eyes sparkling. How he had shot someone, how



one had begged, how they had burned. The men cheered, toasted him. He was no longer the boy—he was one of them, perhaps more than that.

Frank sat at the edge, smoking, silent. He heard the voices, but they seemed to him like the howling of animals. He no longer felt human. Only a shadow.

As the night deepened, Lawrence was dead. Ash, blood, and smoke were everywhere. Women knelt beside corpses, children wandered the streets, silent, broken. But for Jesse, it was a celebration. For him, it was the day his name was born.

But Frank knew: It was the day his own soul had died.

The morning after the massacre wasn't a morning. It was a hangover from hell. The sun rose over burned roofs, over corpses in the dust, over women sitting with empty eyes among the rubble. The screams of the night had fallen silent, leaving only a hum, a silence louder than any gun.

Lawrence was dead. More than 150 men lay in the streets, in courtyards, in the remains of their houses. The guerrillas rode slowly through the ruins, some still drunk, others exhausted, but none repentant. They laughed, spat, and collected loot as if they were traders after a market.

Jesse rode in front, proud, his Colt loose at his belt. His face was black with soot, his clothes covered in blood, but he looked as if he were wearing a crown. "That'll be the story," he said, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Lawrence on fire. And Jesse James was right in the middle of it."

The men nodded, some grinned, some patted him on the shoulder. To them, he was no longer the boy he was. He had become a name, a shadow larger than his years.

Frank rode behind, silent. His gaze slid over the rubble, over a woman crouching over her husband's corpse, over a child clutching a burned doll. His heart was heavy, his hands cold. He felt like a dead man who was still walking.

They rode out of the city, slowly, through the ashes. Behind them, the fire still burned, plumes of smoke rising high into the sky. Lawrence was no longer a place; it was a scar, burned into history.

Quantrill grinned, looking at his men, as content as a king after a battle. "They will hate us," he said, "but they will never forget us."

Jesse laughed loudly, his grin dirty, his eyes bright. "Fine! Then let them hate me. As long as they say my name."

Frank heard this and knew: It was over. His brother was no longer the boy from Missouri, no longer their mother's son. He was a demon, born of fire, smoke, and blood.

As they rode into the fields, Jesse spun his Colt and fired one last shot into the sky. The report echoed across the land, a final salute to Lawrence.

Frank tightened his reins and didn't look back. He knew if he did, he would remain in this city forever, among the corpses.

Lawrence was ashes. Jesse was glory. And Frank was just a shadow.

### The bullet in the chest

After Lawrence, Jesse thought he was immortal. He walked through the world with a Colt at his hip and a grin as if no bullet could ever find him. He believed he was more than flesh, more than blood. He believed he had become a name, and names don't bleed.

But war has its own way of reminding men that they are nothing but skin, bones, and damned chance.

It was an ambush, somewhere in Missouri. The guerrillas rode, tired, drunk, some half-conscious in the saddle. They had looted, burned, and shouted—and believed they could continue on without being retaliated against.

The Union was already waiting. Blue uniforms in the tall grass, loaded rifles, cold eyes. And as Quantrill and his men rode into the hollow, all hell broke loose.

Rifle volleys, bullets like hail. Horses neighed, men screamed, blood spurted. It wasn't a fight, it was a slaughter.

Jesse was in the middle of it, jumped off his horse, drew both Colts, and fired into the grass where he saw shadows. He was still laughing as if he had the hell under control. Then the bullet came.

He didn't hear her. He only felt something warm pierce his chest, as if a hot iron had struck him. He was knocked out of breath, his legs buckled. The Colt fell from his hand.

He lay in the dust, the sky spinning above him. Blood filled his lungs, he coughed, spat out red blood. For the first time in his life, Jesse James looked death straight in the eye.

Frank was at his side immediately. He shot, yelled, and dragged him back. "Jesse! Damn it, Jesse!" His hands trembled as he grabbed him, blood seeping through his fingers.

Jesse gasped, his eyes glassy. "Frank..." he whispered, "I... I'm not dying, am I?" Frank gritted his teeth and dragged him behind an overturned car. "Shut up. Just shut the hell up."

The bullets continued to fly, men screamed, died. Jesse wheezed, blood pouring from his mouth. For the first time, he wasn't the demon, not the fire, not the glory. He was just a boy who had dreamed too much.

"Frank... say... say my name," he gasped. Frank stared at him, his eyes dark. "Your name won't save you."

The guerrillas fought their way free and rode away, leaving corpses and blood behind. Frank carried Jesse halfway in the saddle, blood dripping onto the ground, every breath a gasp.

For Jesse, it was the first crack in his immortality. For Frank, it was proof: his brother was mortal. And that made him even more dangerous.

They had dragged Jesse out, half dead, half unconscious. The horse was sweating under the weight, Frank held him with one hand while the other gripped his rifle. Behind them, shots, screams, men left in the dust. But Frank rode on, rode like a madman. His brother was bleeding in his arms, and he knew: If he weakened now, it was all over.

The hiding place was an abandoned barn somewhere in the middle of nowhere. The boards were crooked, the roof leaking, and the smell of hay, sweat, and old animal dung. No place for healing, but better than the bullets out there.

They laid Jesse on the ground. He was wheezing, blood was running from the corner of his mouth, his chest rising and heaving. The bullet was lodged deep,

somewhere near his heart. Frank knew he couldn't get it out. No doctors, no tools. Just dirt, whiskey, and the will to keep him from dying.

The men stood around, some looking pitying, some cold, one muttering, "The boy's gone. No chance." Frank drew his Colt and aimed directly at him. "Say that again, and you're next." The guy was silent.

Frank knelt next to Jesse, soaked a piece of cloth with whiskey, and pressed it against the wound. Jesse screamed, wheezed, and spat blood. "Shit... Fuck it, Frank... stop... stop it." "Shut up. Breathe."

Night slowly crept through the cracks in the barn. Jesse lay there, feverish, sweating, his lips blue. He mumbled names, sometimes "Mother," sometimes "Quantrill," sometimes simply "Glory." Frank heard everything, and every word cut into his heart.

Once, Jesse grabbed him by the collar, with his last bit of strength. "Frank... if I die... tell them... tell them who I was..." Frank shook his head, his eyes dark. "You're not dying. Not now. Not like this. And if you do—I won't tell anyone. Not a damn word."

The men outside drank, whispered. Some wanted to move on, some wanted to leave Jesse behind. But Frank sat there, night after night, watching, washing the wound with whiskey, praying not to God, but to damned chance.

Jesse dreamed. He twitched, groaned, saw ghosts. Faces of men he'd shot in Lawrence, women who'd begged, children who'd screamed. They all stood over him, staring. And Jesse, even in his fever, sometimes grinned. "Yes... it's me... Jesse James."

Frank heard this, and he knew: Even if he survived, he'd never come back. The bullet in his chest wasn't just flesh—it was a mark. Jesse was marked.

By the third day, the whiskey was almost gone, and Jesse was barely breathing. Frank put his forehead in his hands and cursed quietly. "Damn it, Jesse... damn it..." Then Jesse opened his eyes, glassy and bloodshot. "Frank..." "What?" "I'm not dying. Not before my glory."

Frank stared at him, and in that moment he knew: The bastard would truly survive. Simply because he was too stubborn to die.

The barn stank of blood, old hay, and cold sweat. Flies buzzed over Jesse's body, landing on his face, his shirt, crawling into the edge of the wound. Frank

swatted them away with a wave of his hand, as mechanically as if he were chopping wood. He'd been doing it for hours, days. He couldn't remember what day it was.

Jesse wheezed. Every breath was a struggle, as if the bullet in his chest was trying to strangle him from the inside. Sometimes it sounded like he was giving up. Then suddenly a jerk, a twitch, a whisper, as if he were screaming at Hell itself: *Not yet, bastard. Not yet.*

The men around them became restless. Guerrillas aren't nurses. They could shoot, loot, and burn—but dragging a half-dead man through? That wasn't their style. One said, "We should leave him behind. He's only dragging us down."

Frank was faster than his own shadow. The Colt in his hand, the barrel pointed at the man's forehead. "Say it again." Silence. No one else said it.

Jesse mumbled in his fever. Names, places, words that made no sense. "Mother... Quantrill... Fire... Glory..." Frank heard everything, but he no longer reacted. It was as if he were sitting next to a demon who was speaking its own language.

Once, in the middle of the night, Jesse half-sat up, his eyes glazed over, filled with madness. "Frank! Did you see it? They screamed my name, Frank! In Lawrence! In the flames! My name was louder than the church bell!" Then he slumped back, wheezing, blood on his lips.

Frank looked at him for a long time. His brother was between life and death, and even then he thought not of mercy, not of peace, but of glory.

Outside, the men whispered. Some were loyal, others wanted to move on. Quantrill was already gone, moved on, had no time for a half-dead man. Jesse James was no king to him, just a boy with too much fire. But Frank stayed. He didn't leave.

He changed the cloths, soaked them in whiskey, and pressed them against the wound, hearing Jesse's scream each time. It was a scream that frightened even the flies. But Frank held on. He knew: If he let go now, it would be over.

By the fourth day, Jesse was almost silent. Just a whisper, a breath. Frank sat next to him, his eyes red, his hands black with blood. "Jesse... if you die, you die a human. If you live, you live a monster. Which is worse?"

Jesse opened his eyes, glassy, and grinned weakly. "Monsters live longer."

Frank slammed his fist against the barn wall, sending dust flying. He hated him. He hated him because he was right.

The men didn't give Jesse a chance. But he gave himself one. Every night he wheezed, fought, and bit through the fever. Frank thought he was gone, then he breathed again. A curse, a miracle, or simply the stubbornness of a bastard.

By the end of the week, he still wasn't dead. Thinner, paler, weaker—but his eyes still burned. And Frank knew: This bastard would survive. Not because he was healthy. But because he longed too much for the world to hear him continue cursing.

The seventh day smelled of death. The barn was filled with the odor: old blood, spilled whiskey, cold sweat. Even the flies seemed to be flying slower, as if they were waiting for Jesse to finally die so they could feast.

But the bastard didn't die. He hung between worlds, wheezing, groaning, whispering. Every breath was a coin toss: heads, he lives. tails, he goes. And the coin always landed on heads.

Frank sat next to him, his eyes red, his hands calloused, burned by the blood he repeatedly wiped from Jesse's chest. He barely drank, he barely slept. His face was gaunt, his features hard. He looked like someone who had died long ago and was just waiting to be noticed.

The men outside had long since lost patience. "We can't sit here for a half-dead brat," one muttered. "Quantrill is gone. We're losing time." Frank stepped out, Colt in hand, his eyes like coals. "Then piss off. But without him. And without me."

It was quiet. No one dared to stand up to him. They knew: Frank wasn't a boy. Frank was cold. And whoever was cold shot first.

Inside, Jesse wheezed, his eyes sometimes open, sometimes glassy. He babbled incoherently, as if speaking to ghosts. "I saw them... they screamed my name... Lawrence... fire... glory..." Then he fell back into the darkness.

Frank listened, but it only cut deeper into his flesh. Even in his fever, half-dead, Jesse didn't speak of mother, home, or God. He spoke of fame. He was addicted to it like others are to opium.

On the eighth day, the fever returned. Jesse was sweating, shivering, the sheets beneath him were wet. Frank held him, wiped his face, cursed. "Stay here, damn it. Stay here, you bastard." Jesse weakly grabbed his hand. "Frank... if I can do it... we'll rob banks... you hear? No more villages, no more farmers. Banks. My name... bigger than money."

Frank stared at him. His brother lay there, half dead, already planning the next bloodbath. He wanted to strangle him. Instead, he nodded, knowing that if Jesse believed there was more glory out there, he would keep fighting.

The gang began to see him differently. No longer just as a half-dead child. Some said, "That boy is tougher than any of us." Others whispered, "Maybe he really is touched by the devil." Jesse heard this when he was awake, and his grin was as faint as a shadow—but it was there.

Frank saw it and hated it. He knew the bastard would survive. Not by luck. But because he damn well wanted to.

The bullet was still lodged in his chest, deep, untouchable. Every breath was painful, but Jesse took it as proof. *You see? I'm bleeding, but I'm alive.*

On the ninth day, he could speak again, more clearly. "Frank," he gasped, "you have to promise me something." "What?" "If I can't do it... then tell it in a way that makes them fear me. Make me bigger than I was." Frank shook his head, his voice hard. "If you die, Jesse, I won't tell anything. Then only the truth will remain. And that's dirty." Jesse grinned, weakly but genuinely. "Dirty is better than dead."

The days passed in a frenzy of sweat, blood, and whiskey. The barn was their hospital, their cemetery, and their confessional all in one. Outside, the wind whistled through the cracks; inside, Jesse fought against death as if the bastard were just another enemy he could tear down tooth and nail.

Frank watched. Night after night. His brother lay in the dirt, his chest ripped to pieces, but sometimes he grinned. Grinned as if he had death by the collar and wouldn't let go.

The men began to grow restless. Guerrillas had no time for miracle cures. They wanted to ride, pillage, and live. But this boy stopped them. "We're wasting time," one said. "He's already half dead." Frank drew his Colt and took aim. "Then ride alone if you're so hot. But if you turn your back on him, don't turn around. Otherwise I'll shoot."

Nobody objected anymore.

Jesse wheezed and coughed up blood, but his eyes were bright when he was awake. "Frank..." he once whispered, "do you know why I don't die?" "Why?" "Because my name isn't big enough yet."

Frank wanted to hit him, wanted to smash his skull, just to silence him. But he didn't. Instead, he pressed water to his lips, watched him drink, watched him wheeze again.

The men began to tell stories. "He outlived Lawrence." - "He has a bullet in his chest and he's still laughing." - "Maybe he really is immortal." Jesse heard this when he was half awake, and he soaked it up like a damn sponge. Even in his death, he devoured fame.

Frank saw it, and he hated it. "You're a fool," he muttered as Jesse slept. "A damn fool, and I'm the bigger fool for staying with you."

By the twelfth day, Jesse could sit upright. Pale, thin, his chest bandaged, but with a grin stronger than any bullet. He coughed blood, but he spoke of the future. "Banks, Frank. No more villages, no more farmers. Banks. We take from the rich, we take by force, and my name will be greater than Quantrill."

Frank snorted. "You can barely stand." "But I can still aim." Jesse weakly raised his hand, formed a gun with his fingers, and aimed at a piece of wall. "Bang." Then he grinned, even though he almost collapsed in the process.

For the men, it was a sign. "The boy is alive," they said. "The boy is tougher than iron." Some even began calling him "Jesse" in a tone that was not just a name, but a legend.

Frank heard that, and a little more died inside him. He knew: his brother would survive. And he wouldn't just come back—he would come back greater. The myth was born, not in Lawrence, not in the fire, but here, in a stinking barn, with a bullet in his chest.

And Frank knew: If Jesse survived, Hell would survive too.

The thirteenth day. Some men said it was a miracle. Others called it the work of the devil. Frank called it nothing. To him, it was simply proof that Jesse was too stubborn to die.



Jesse stood up. Swaying, trembling, his hand against the wall, his chest bandaged, but he stood. His shirt was plastered with blood and sweat, his face as pale as chalk, but that damned light burned in his eyes.

The guerrillas stared at him as if he'd risen from the grave. Some grinned, some nodded reverently. One murmured, "That boy really can't be killed."

Jesse grinned back, his lips chapped and bloody. "See? One bullet isn't enough." Then he coughed, spat Red into the dust, wiped his mouth, and grinned again.

Frank watched, his face hard as stone. There was no joy in him. No relief. Only a dull ache, as if someone had shoved a knife into his chest. His brother stood there, but he was no longer human. He had become something else.

Jesse took his first steps, slowly, heavily. Every breath sounded like a sawblade through flesh. But he laughed. "One more step. And another. See? I'm stronger than death."

The men cheered, clapped, and toasted him with whiskey. For them, he was now more than a comrade. He was a symbol. Someone who had a bullet in his chest and still stood.

Frank saw them staring at him, whispering his name. *Jesse James*. It was no longer just a name. It was a myth, born in the middle of a stinking barn.

That night they sat by the fire. Jesse was weak, but his eyes sparkled. "Frank," he said, "we're wasting our time with farms and villages. When I can ride again, we'll go to banks. The rich. The big money. That's fame."

Frank stared into the fire, his pipe between his teeth. He wanted to say: *You should be dead*. He wanted to say: *You're already dead, but your body hasn't realized it yet*. But he remained silent.

Jesse lay back, coughing again, blood on his lips. "The bullet didn't take me, Frank. Nothing will take me. I still have too much to do."

The men nodded, murmured, and toasted him. They saw in him a demon, a leader, perhaps even a savior. But Frank saw only his brother, half dead, half alive, and knew: Death had lost—and that was the worst thing that could happen.

Because Jesse James lived. And that meant more people would die.

On the fifteenth day, Jesse walked again. Not far, not fast, not without pain. But he walked. The men held their breath as he stomped through the barn, his hand pressed to the bandage, his chest covered in blood. Every step sounded like a mockery of death.

"See?" he gasped, "I'm not dead. I'm still walking." Then he coughed, blood splattered on the floor, and he laughed anyway.

The guerrillas cheered as if they'd witnessed a damned miracle. Some made the sign of the cross, others toasted him with whiskey. "Jesse lives!" one shouted. "One bullet isn't enough for him!"

Jesse savored it. Even weak, even half dead, he absorbed the words like fresh water. He stood there, pale, trembling, and yet he shone like a king.

But Frank stood in the shadows, smoking, silent. He saw it, but he felt nothing except a dull hole in his chest. His brother was alive—but was he even still his brother? Or just a myth in dirty skin?

That evening, Jesse sat by the fire, a blanket over his shoulders, his eyes shining brightly. "Frank," he said, "do you know why I'm alive?" Frank didn't answer. "Because my name is still needed. I won't die until it's big enough."

The men laughed, nodded, and toasted. One shouted, "Jesse James! Immortal!" Jesse grinned, coughed again, wiped away the blood, and continued grinning.

Frank thought:*Immortal? Shit. You're mortal like the rest of us. But your damn will is worse than any bullet.*

On the sixteenth day, he mounted his horse again. Unsteady, pale, his hand on his chest, but he sat. The men called his name as if he were a hero, a prophet.

Jesse grinned, his teeth red with blood. "See? I'm back. Death didn't want me."

Frank rode beside him, his face hard, his pipe between his teeth. He knew what it meant. Jesse James had survived—and that meant the world would burn.

The bullet hadn't just remained in his chest. It was in his story. A sign, a seal. Everyone would hear it: Jesse James, the boy who kept going even with a bullet in his chest.

For the gang, it was a miracle. For Jesse, it was glory. For Frank, it was the end of all hope.

### Hidden in the church, God laughs

The bullet was still lodged in Jesse's chest, like a truth no one wants to hear. But he was alive. He coughed blood, he sweated, he grinned. And at some point, they needed a place where he wouldn't die immediately or be found.

A few old women whispered about an abandoned church somewhere out in Missouri. A building that had already been consumed by war. No congregation, no pastor, just dust, cobwebs, and a roof with more holes than a beggar's hat. But it still stood. Four walls, an altar, a cross—and enough for Jesse to say, "Take me there."

Frank shook his head. "This is crazy." "This is God," Jesse grinned, blood on his lips. "And God owes me something."

So they dragged him there. Night, rain, horses sinking in the mud. Jesse hung in the saddle like a wet sack, but his eyes burned. Frank saw it and thought: *The bastard never dies. He lives by his own damned will.*

The church stank of mold. Broken pews, shattered windows, the altar black with smoke. But to Jesse, it was a palace. They laid him on the pew, the boards creaked, dust rose. Jesse grinned, looking at the cross above him. "Do you see that, Frank? God's watching." Frank growled. "If he's watching, he'll laugh himself silly."

The nights in the church were a hellish chapter. Rain dripped through the roof, wind howled through the cracks. Jesse lay there, bandaged, sweating, talking to the darkness. Sometimes to God, sometimes to himself. "You owe me," he whispered. "A bullet didn't make it. Make me big, make me bigger."

Frank heard it, sat in the corner, smoked, and remained silent. He felt nothing but tiredness. His brother spoke to God, but Frank knew that if someone was laughing, it wasn't because they had grace on their minds.

Sometimes villagers came, secretly, quietly, bringing bread, water, and whiskey. They whispered as if they were offering to a spirit. Jesse grinned every time. "See? They bring it to me like a king."

Frank saw only the dirt, the flies, the looks of fear. To him, it wasn't a king. It was a sick man in a ruin, writing his own legend.

Once, Jesse knelt beneath the cross, trembling, sweating, blood on his lips. He didn't pray. He laughed. "If you're there, God, then listen to me: I won't die until the whole world is screaming my name. Do you hear?" The church responded with silence, the roof dripping. Frank laughed bitterly. "If he's there, Jesse, then he's laughing at you."

But Jesse didn't hear. Jesse only heard himself.

The church breathed dust. Every gust of wind drove old cobwebs through the cracks, and the walls creaked as if they themselves were still laughing at the faith that had once held them together.

Jesse lay in the front, where the pastor had once stood. Now it was his place. Not the word of God, but his wheezing, his cursing, his dirty grin echoed through the ruins.

Frank sat at the back on a half-collapsed bench, smoking his pipe and staring into the darkness. He didn't know if he was still awake or already dreaming. Everything was blurred. The days smelled the same: blood, sweat, damp wood.

Jesse talked a lot, too much. "Frank... do you see the cross?" "Yes." "That's my audience." Frank blew out smoke. "Then it's laughing at you right now." "No. It's praying to me." Jesse coughed, wiping away traces of blood on his lips. "They'll scream my name, louder than any prayer."

The villagers came at night. Old women with baskets, men with torches, children who didn't know whether to feel fear or awe. They brought bread, water, sometimes whiskey. They whispered, laid it down, and disappeared again. No one spoke to Jesse directly, but everyone looked at him as if there weren't a person lying there, but a ghost.

Jesse grinned every time they left. "See, Frank? I'm already a legend. They make sacrifices to me like I'm God." Frank growled. "Or like they're afraid you'll burn down their houses when you get back on that horse." "Fear, awe—the same thing." Jesse laughed, gasped, clutched his chest.

His fever brought faces. He talked at night, talked to the walls, to the cross, to the dead. "I outlived you all... you begged... you screamed... and yet I'm still here." Frank heard it, his pipe cold in his hand, and thought: *He's no longer sick. He's crazy.*

Once, Jesse woke up in the middle of the night, sat up, his eyes glazed over. "Frank! I saw it." "What?" "The future. Banks, trains, newspapers. My name on everyone's lips. The South will sing me." Frank rubbed his face. "You're dreaming." "I'm prophesying."

The church became his theater. Every day was a performance. Sometimes he grinned, sometimes he cursed, sometimes he preached, but always in front of that damned cross. Frank could no longer look at it without vomiting.

He thought of his mother, the farm, the fields. All that was gone. All that remained was a brother proclaiming himself a saint in a ruin, while God lay outside in the dust and laughed.

The men of the gang began to talk differently. No longer, "The boy might survive." Now they said, "The boy has conquered death." Some even whispered, "immortal." Jesse heard this, and each time his grin grew.

Frank heard it too, and each time a piece of him died.

The church was no longer a place of worship. It was a hospital room, a slaughterhouse, a stage for a boy who had seen too much blood to speak normally.

Jesse lay on a bench, the boards creaking beneath him, his bandage dark with blood. Sometimes he sat upright, leaning against the cross as if he had driven it into the earth himself. Sometimes he crawled through the dust, searching for whiskey bottles Frank had hidden.

His fever made him a prophet. "Frank," he gasped, "I saw God. He was tired, tired of praying, tired of the war. Do you know what he said?" "What?" "He said, 'You go on, Jesse. I give up.'" Frank stared at him, the smoke from his pipe in front of his eyes. "If God really said something like that, he was drunker than you."

But Jesse didn't hear the mockery. Or he heard it and turned it into applause.

The villagers came more often. Always at night, always whispering. Bread, water, a piece of meat, whiskey. No one spoke aloud. But their eyes said it all: They believed he was more than human. A survivor, a demon, an emissary, no one knew exactly what. But something.

Jesse played the part. He smiled faintly, nodded his thanks, and sometimes muttered words like a priest. "God laughs, children... but he laughs with me,

not at me." The old people bowed their heads, the young people stared at him as if they were seeing a new Christ.

Frank saw it, and his heart boiled. "You're no Christ. You're a fucking murderer with a bullet in your chest." Jesse grinned, blood on his teeth. "And yet they still make sacrifices to me. Explain that, Frank."

At night, Jesse talked to the dead. "I saw you, old man... you begged... I saw you, boy... you ran... you all fell... and me? I'm here. You are dust, I am name."

Frank couldn't listen anymore. He pressed his fingers into his ears, but the words crept in anyway. Each syllable like a knife.

One night, as the wind howled through the cracks, Jesse stood up. Staggering, but upright. He pulled the bandage aside, showing his wound. "See?" he yelled into the empty church. "I'm hit! But I'm alive! This is God's joke! He's laughing because he can't get me!"

His scream echoed between the walls, through the broken windows, and out into the fields. Maybe no one heard him. Maybe everyone heard him. But for Jesse, it was a sermon.

Frank stared at him, his pipe cold in his teeth. "You're crazy." "No," Jesse laughed, "I am the truth. And the truth carries Colts."

The men of the gang listened. First silently, then with a chuckle, then with a nod. They no longer saw the half-dead man. They saw a man who had laughed at death.

And Frank saw his brother bury himself – as a human being. And simultaneously rise again – as a myth.

The church was no longer a place of refuge. It was a circus. A dirty circus, and Jesse was the clown, the priest, and the devil all rolled into one.

The men sat on the broken benches, drinking whiskey, laughing, smoking. The villagers came at night, quietly, like sheep seeking their new shepherd. And Jesse played the part. He lay at the front of the altar, pale, his chest bandaged, but his eyes burning.

"You believe in God?" he once asked, his voice croaky but loud enough to cut through the walls. No one answered. "Screw God. God didn't protect anyone here. Not in Lawrence, not in Missouri, not here." He coughed, blood on his

lips, wiped it away, and grinned. "But I survived. So pray to me. Pray to Jesse James."

The men laughed and toasted him. One actually whispered "Amen."

Frank sat in the back, smoking, and feeling sick. He heard the words and felt the ground beneath him rot. Not from the boards, but from his faith. If he'd ever had any.

Jesse preached in pain. He showed the wound, let the bandage slide off, the skin black, the edges red. "See? A bullet in my chest. And I'm still standing. God laughs because he can't get me. He laughs, and I laugh with him."

The villagers nodded, some wept. An old woman whispered, "He is chosen." Jesse heard, grinned, and drank whiskey straight from the bottle as if it were wine at a mass.

Frank wanted to scream. Wanted to shout: *He's not the Chosen One, he's a bastard with more blood on his hands than all of you combined.* But he remained silent. Silence was his chain.

The nights grew longer. Jesse talked in his fever, talking to the walls, to the cross, to the shadows. "I've survived them all. Lawrence, the bullet, God. And I'll survive more. Trains, banks, Pinkertons. They come, and I laugh in their faces."

The men listened as if they were sitting in on a sermon. They laughed, they toasted, they nodded. Jesse was no longer just one of them. He had become something greater.

Once, he actually stood on the altar. Pale, swaying, but with that damned grin. "Look at me!" he yelled. "I'm the bullet in the chest that doesn't kill. I'm the fire in Lawrence that doesn't burn. I'm the devil God can't catch!"

The men cheered. The villagers crossed themselves. And Frank sat in the back, smoking, and felt his soul laughing—not out of joy, but out of despair.

That night he couldn't sleep. He saw Jesse standing on the altar, his bandage bloody, the cross behind him. And he knew: God was really laughing. But not with Jesse. But at him.

The church became a cult. Not of priests, not of angels, but of filthy guerrillas, of frightened peasants, of red-eyed widows, and of Jesse James, the half-dead man who declared himself a prophet.

It started small. An old woman placed bread on the altar, murmured a prayer, and fled again. The next day, two men came, bringing water and whiskey. Later, there were five, then ten. And at some point, they stood there, silent, while Jesse spoke.

He spoke no Latin, no psalms. He spoke blood. "I was in Lawrence, I saw the fire, and I laughed. I have a bullet in my chest, and I'm still breathing. I'm not your God, but I'm more than your pastor. Don't pray, live like me. Take what you need. Screw morals, screw laws. Only those who draw their guns faster survive."

The men nodded, the women wept, the children stared with open eyes. Jesse laughed, coughed, and wiped the blood from his lips. "See? Even my body won't let me die."

Frank sat in the back, smoking, silent. Every sentence Jesse spat was a nail in the coffin of his faith—if he ever had one. Perhaps he had never believed. But here, in this stinking house, he realized: If there was a God, he was drunk and laughing his head off.

The guerrillas played along. Some cheered, some toasted, some laughed loudly. They saw Jesse as more than a boy. They saw a symbol. One of them, but bigger, dirtier, tougher. Someone who had even slapped death in the face.

One evening, villagers came with a candle. They placed it before Jesse and knelt down. Jesse grinned. "See, Frank? I have my own altar." Frank blew out smoke. "An altar for a bastard." "An altar for one who's alive."

The villagers whispered his name as if it were a prayer. *Jesse James*. It was no longer a name. It was a spell.

Jesse played along. He preached, he grinned, he talked. About Lawrence, about smoke, about blood. He told it as if it were a revelation. "I saw men die, women scream, children burn—and I survived. Why? Because my name demands it."

The church shook with his coughing, his laughter, his madness.



Frank couldn't bear it anymore. He went out into the night, stood among the graves that had long since been overgrown. He stared at the sky, smoked, and cursed. "If you're there, God—then laugh. But I'm not laughing anymore."

Inside, Jesse continued talking, talking himself into a rage, into a fever, into glory. His voice echoed through the walls, through the night, until even the dead in the churchyard had to turn around.

And God? When he was there, he laughed. Not out of joy. But because everything in this church was a mockery.

The church was no longer a roof over their heads—it was a theater. And Jesse was the leading actor, even though he was as pale as a shroud and every cough nearly tore him in two.

He stood at the front, directly beneath the cross, his hands bloody from the bandages, his face covered in sweat. The benches creaked under the men, the villagers crowded against the walls, and Frank sat at the very back, smoking like someone long since buried.

Jesse spoke, and everyone listened. "You believe in heaven and hell? I've seen it. Heaven doesn't exist. Hell is here." He pointed to his chest. "The bullet. The fire. The screams. This is hell. And me? I'm proof that you can survive it."

A murmur went through the crowd. Some nodded, some bowed their heads, some had tears in their eyes. Jesse grinned, coughed, spat blood onto the ground, and stepped on it as if it were a host.

"You want to survive? Then stop praying. Get what you want. Screw laws, screw morals. The Colt is your prayer. The bullet is your answer. He who draws faster lives longer."

The men cheered. One shouted, "Amen!" Jesse laughed, a hoarse, bloody laugh.

Frank felt his stomach lurch. He saw the faces—farmers, widows, children—following the words as if they were psalms. And he knew: Jesse wasn't just preaching. He was infecting them.

Night crept in, cold, but the church was hot with breath, whiskey, and smoke. Jesse stood swaying, his hand to his chest, but grinning like a king. "Look at me! I'm not dead! God came for me, but he laughed and said, 'No, Jesse, you're too dirty for me.' So I'm staying here. So I'm taking the earth."

The men toasted, the women wept, the children stared. Frank bit down on his pipe until it almost broke.

Later, when the villagers disappeared again, Jesse knelt beneath the cross. Alone, Frank thought. But he heard him whisper. "Go ahead and laugh, God. Laugh. I'll laugh louder."

Frank went out and stood in the churchyard, his hands in his pockets. The moon hung over the old graves, and he felt like one of them. Dead, but still breathing.

Inside, Jesse's laughter echoed, rough, feverish, like a dog that can't stop barking.

And God? When he was there, he laughed. Not with Jesse. Not with Frank. But at the whole damn church.

On the twentieth day, Jesse was able to stand upright again. Pale as death, thin, his bandages dark, but he stood. And that was enough. For the men, for the villagers, for himself.

The church was silent as he slowly walked to the altar. Every step creaked the boards, a rustle of dust. He stood before the cross, raising his hand as if preaching. His grin was thin, bloody, but genuine.

"I'm not dead." His voice echoed through the ruins. "A bullet tried to get me, and it didn't. Fire tried to eat me, and I laughed. God wanted to test me, and I laughed at him. So listen to me: From today on, I don't give a damn about heaven and hell. Earth is my kingdom."

The men cheered, the villagers whispered his name. *Jesse James*. It was no longer a name, it was an echo.

Frank sat in the back, smoking, his pipe cold in his mouth. He heard the words, but he didn't believe anything. Not in God, not in Jesse, not in the cheering crowd. It was all a play, and the punchline was that everyone here was damned.

After the sermon, they drank. Whiskey, laughter, cheers. Jesse coughed blood, but he drank anyway, grinning as if he were stronger than death. "See? I can drink, I can laugh, I can walk. I'm back. And I'm bigger than before."

At some point, Frank got up and stepped out into the night. The stars hung coldly over the churchyard, and he whispered, "If you're there, God—then laugh. I'm not laughing anymore."

The next morning they left the church. Jesse in the saddle, swaying but upright. The Colt back on his hip, the grin back on his face. Behind them remained the old building, a grave full of laughter, a place where God had lost.

Jesse spat in the dust and pulled on the reins. "God laughs, Frank. But I laugh louder."

Frank said nothing. He rode beside him, the smoke from his pipe rising into the morning. And deep down he knew: God had long since given up on them.

### From rebel to outlaw

War had educated Jesse James, but it didn't satisfy him. Blood was not bread, fire was not a roof, glory was not a bed. The South lay in ruins, the armies disintegrated, and what remained was a mob of men who had nowhere to go. Guerrillas, rebels, vagrants. Men without a home, without a purpose. Men like Jesse.

He could have gone home, to the farm, to his mother. He could have plowed the earth, planted corn, sweated like an ox. But the thought was worse for him than any bullet. "I've tasted blood," he told Frank, "I can't pull plowshares anymore. I pull Colts."

Frank remained silent. He had known it. Ever since Lawrence, ever since the bullet in his chest, ever since the church, he knew: Jesse would never be a farmer again.

The men scattered, but Jesse held a few together. Not as an army, not as a battalion, but as a band. No more uniforms, no more flags. Just Colts, horses, whiskey. And greed.

"We're not rebels anymore," said Jesse, his face pale, his eyes bright. "We're outlaws. We take what's ours. And if it's not ours, we'll take it anyway."

That was the break. The war had given them the pretext, the flag, the anthems. But now it was over. Now they were naked. Outlaws.

The first robbery was small. A store, somewhere in Missouri. Jesse walked in, Colt in hand, people staring. "Give me the cash register," he said. Just like that. No battlefield, no army. Just a boy with a scar on his chest and a grin on his face.

The cash register clinked, the shopkeeper trembled. Jesse took the money, took a sip of whiskey from the bottle behind the counter, and spat on the shelf. Then he rode out. "This is easier than war," he laughed.

Frank rode beside them, silent, but something dark was growing within him. He knew they had crossed the line. Rebels fought for a cause. Outlaws fought only for themselves.

The gang grew. Men joined because they were hungry, because they wanted fame, because they knew nothing else. Jesse led them not with plans, but with madness. He grinned, he shot, he survived—that was enough to make them follow.

Newspapers soon wrote about "ex-guerrillas who rob." Names began to appear. Jesse James. Frank James. They were no longer shadows. They were headlines.

"See?" Jesse grinned, the newspaper in his hand. "They know my name. No longer as a soldier, no longer as a rebel. As an outlaw."

Frank took the newspaper, crumpled it, and threw it into the fire. "A name in the dirt remains dirt." Jesse laughed. "Dirt outlives honor."

The line had been cut. There was no turning back. No farm, no fields, no rest. Jesse James was no longer a rebel. He was an outlaw. And he loved it.

After the first store, hunger set in. Not for bread, not for meat. For more. Money, fame, fear in people's eyes. Jesse tasted it like whiskey – and he couldn't stop.

The gang was small, but it was growing. Renegade guerrillas, deserters, men without homes, without women, without a future. They had nothing but horses, Colts, and a willingness to kill. Perfect company for Jesse James.

Frank still rode along. Not because he wanted to, but because blood was thicker than reason. He saw where they were going, but he couldn't let go of his brother. Not after the war, not after the church, not after all that.

The next ambush was a stagecoach. It came down the dusty road, the horses heavy, the wheels creaking. Jesse grinned, raised his Colt, and shouted, "Stop!" The coach stopped. Two men jumped out, ready to shoot. Jesse shot faster. Two bodies in the dust.

The box in the wagon was full of letters, a few coins, and jewelry. Not riches, but enough to buy whiskey and disappear for a few nights in filthy dorms. Jesse was content. Not with the money. With the bang, with the blood, with the eyes of those who saw him.

"You remember my name," he said, sipping whiskey. Frank smoked silently, his eyes lost in the smoke.

The gang got used to life. No more war, no more flag-waving. Just robbery, violence, smoke, whiskey. But it was simpler. More honest. No general, no plan. Just: "In, out, shoot, take."

And Jesse—he was their leader simply because he was. He didn't need a vote, no crown. He was the loudest, the wildest, the one with the scar on his chest. Men followed what survived.

One night, by the fire, Jesse spoke to them as if it were another sermon. "We are free. No uniform, no general, no damn law. We take what we want. If they call us bandits, let them. Bandits live longer than soldiers."

The men toasted him. Whiskey flowed, laughter echoed through the night. Frank sat silently, smoking, listening to the words and feeling his soul continue to crumble.

Newspapers started writing stories. Some were true, most weren't. But that only made it better. "Ex-Confederates plunder Missouri." - "James Brothers rob in daylight." Jesse read them aloud, grinning, laughing. "See? They're writing my name. I'll be a myth before I'm dead."

Frank took the newspaper and threw it into the fire. "Myths also end in dust." Jesse toasted him, whiskey on his lips. "Then I'll die a myth. Better than in a field."

The war was over, but for Jesse, it was never over. He had simply traded his flag for his Colt. From rebel to outlaw—it wasn't a leap, it was a step. A step he took with joy.

The stagecoaches were just a prelude. Jesse wanted more. More and more. He talked at night by the fire, whiskey in hand and Colts beside him, as if he were a preacher who spoke only for demons.

"Carriages are small change," he said. "We need big fish. Banks. Money stacked up in chests. Money that makes us immortal."

The men grinned, nodded, and toasted. Some didn't understand, but they followed him anyway. They didn't follow the plan; they followed the fire in his eyes.

Frank remained silent. He had learned that silence was easier than speaking. Words bounced off Jesse like bullets. So he smoked, blew smoke into the night, and listened as his brother declared himself king of the outlaws.

The first big coup was a small bank in an even smaller town. The sun was blazing, the street empty. Jesse walked in, Colt raised, grinning broadly. "This is a withdrawal. Of your money. For me."

The cashier trembled, the customers froze. Jesse took what he wanted—coins, bills, jewelry. He stuffed everything into bags, got on the horses, and left. Five minutes, a shot into the ceiling, a few screams—and a city that spoke of Jesse James for years.

"So simple," he laughed later, whiskey in his beard. "No war, no general, no plan. Just me, my Colt, and fear in their eyes."

Frank looked at him, his pipe between his lips. "And what happens if the Pinkertons come?" Jesse grinned. "Then I'll shoot them too."

The gang continued to grow. More and more men who had nothing but hunger and hatred. They swore no allegiance; they only followed because Jesse was alive, because Jesse grinned, because Jesse's name was in the newspapers.

And the newspapers? They devoured him. "James Brothers rob bank." - "Outlaws escape in daylight." - "Jesse James – the new Robin Hood?" Jesse read everything, laughed, drank. "See? I'm bigger than war. I'm bigger than Quantrill. I'm bigger than God."

Frank felt the words burning inside him. *Greater than God?* Maybe. But every shot, every headline brought them closer to the abyss.

They hid on farms, in forests, in old barns. Always on the move, always armed. No home, no bed, no peace. Just whiskey, horses, and Colts. But Jesse thrived in it. He lived for the escape, for the bang, for the fear in the faces of those he robbed.

Frank only lived because he had to. Because Jesse was his brother.

From rebel to outlaw—it wasn't a fall. It was a rise. A climb on a scaffold of corpses and smoke.

Jesse had acquired a taste for it. Not just the money, not just the blood. It was the name. His name in strangers' mouths, his face in the minds of people who had never seen him.

The newspapers wrote. And Jesse read every damn line as if they were psalms. "James Gang Robbes Bank in Missouri." – "Outlaws Strike, Escape Unrecognized." – "Jesse James – Bandit or Hero?"

He grinned, the paper in his hands, his face pale from the fever, his chest still sore. "You're writing about me, Frank. About me." Frank smoked, watched the smoke dissipate into the air. "You're writing about murderers, too." "Murderers live longer in stories than heroes." Jesse threw the newspaper into the fire, laughed, coughed, and wiped the blood from his mouth.

It wasn't enough for him that they were writing about him. He started to feed it. Little messages to the reporters, rumors he himself spread. He told people he was a new Robin Hood, taking from the rich. And people spread the word. Each raid grew, became bigger, bloodier, more legendary.

"The Colt does half the work," he grinned. "The newspaper does the other half."

The men in his gang believed it too. Some of them spoke his name reverently, as if he were an outlaw with a halo. They drank to him, they toasted him, they followed him into every town, no matter how dangerous.

Frank looked at them and knew: They weren't following a human being. They were following a myth. And myths always end in dust.

The next robbery was bigger. A bank in the middle of the day, full of customers, full of screams. Jesse stormed in, Colts in his hands, his eyes burning. "Get down on the floor!" His voice filled the room, and the people obeyed.

The cash register was full, the bags heavy. But Jesse stayed longer than necessary. He talked, he grinned, he wanted them to remember his face. "Spread the word," he laughed. "Jesse James was here."

Frank grabbed his arm and pulled him out. "Are you crazy? We could have left long ago." "That's exactly the point, Frank. I want you to know I'm not afraid."

The gang escaped, as always. And the next day, the newspaper was full of it. "James Gang Robbing in Broad Daylight." Jesse read it, laughed, and drank as if he'd won the world's greatest battlefield.

"You see?" he called from the fire. "Not Quantrill, not Anderson, not any general. Me. Jesse James."

The men cheered. Frank remained silent. He saw the fire, saw the faces in the smoke, and he knew: This wasn't a war anymore. This was a play, and Jesse was his own director.

From rebel to outlaw – it was done. The war was history. But Jesse wrote his own. With Colts, with blood, with ink in the newspapers.

And Frank knew: They were in, deeper than ever before. No flag to protect them. No general to give orders. Only the name Jesse James – and that was now a law, a curse, a death knell.

Jesse quickly learned that robbery wasn't just a business. It was a performance. The greater the fear, the louder the screams, the more clearly his name was spoken, the more his power grew.

For him, robbing a bank was like a performance. He entered as if he were on stage, Colts in hand, his eyes bright. "Ladies and gentlemen," he would sometimes say, "today Jesse James himself is going to rob you." Then he would grin as if he'd just made a joke, while the horses pawed outside.

Frank hated it. He wanted a quick in, a quick out, no gossip, no time for fame. But Jesse stayed, grinned, and let the fear grow until it was almost tangible.

"They should remember, Frank," he said when they were back in the saddle, their bags heavy. "Not just that we robbed them. But who did it." Frank clenched his pipe. "Memories are bullets. Sooner or later, they come flying back." "Then I'll catch them." Jesse laughed, coughed, and spat blood into the dust.



The gang loved him for it. To them, he wasn't just a leader. He was a demon, a prophet, someone who had spit in the face of death. They drank to him, they swore by him, they followed him wherever he went.

The villagers whispered his name. Sometimes they secretly brought him food, water, even information. "The carriage will arrive tomorrow." - "The bank is lightly guarded." They helped him, not because they loved him, but because they were afraid. But for Jesse, it was the same. "They're following me, Frank. All of them."

Frank knew: They weren't following out of love. They were following out of fear. But Jesse didn't care. Fear was stronger than love, and Jesse only wanted strength.

The newspapers did the rest. Each raid became bigger, bloodier, more legendary. Even when hardly anyone died, they wrote about massacres. And when many died, they wrote about heroic deeds. Jesse soaked it up. "See? I'm bigger than any general. I am America in blood and smoke."

Frank remained silent, but a burning premonition burned within him: fame was deadlier than any bullet. Bullets pierced flesh, fame devoured the soul.

But Jesse didn't listen. He only heard the headlines, the whispers, the murmurings in the taverns. And he grinned, always, with that bloody grin that Frank could no longer bear.

Jesse was no longer a simple robber. He was a damned show. Every town, every bank, every carriage was just a stage. He performed like an actor, and his Colts were the props.

The men looked up to him, not because he was smarter, not because he shot better—but because he grinned where others fled. "He conquered death," they said. "He survived Lawrence, he has a bullet in his chest, and he's still laughing."

Frank heard this, and it gnawed at him. They didn't see a human being. They saw a myth. A myth fed only by blood.

Jesse drank more, talked more. By the fire, he delivered speeches like a king without a crown. "We are not peasants. We are not soldiers. We are free. The law doesn't belong to us, so we don't give a damn. Banks are the cathedrals of the rich, and we loot them like heretics. Every robbery is a sermon."

The men toasted, shouted, and laughed. They loved him. Some almost as if he were their damned messiah.

Frank sat quietly, smoking, and felt the ground crumble beneath them. Fame was like a poison. At first it tasted sweet, then it ate you from the inside.

The next robbery was bigger. A bank in the middle of town, in broad daylight. Jesse marched in, shot into the ceiling, made the people cower, and instead of just taking the money, he spoke. "My name is Jesse James. Don't forget him." Then he took his time. He talked, laughed, took the cash register, took the jewelry, took a swig from a customer's bottle, and left.

The gang escaped, of course. And the next morning, the newspaper was full of: "Jesse James Mocks Law." Jesse read it, laughed, coughed, and banged on the table. "They love me, Frank. They hate me, but they love me."

Frank took the newspaper and threw it into the fire. "They'll hang you too, Jesse. Sooner or later." "Then I'll hang as a legend."

He grinned, bloody teeth, feverish eyes.

The men called him "boss," "king," some even "preacher." Jesse took it all in. He soaked it all up like a man who could never get enough.

Frank looked at him and knew: his brother was no longer a rebel. He was an outlaw. Not out of necessity, not out of hunger. But out of damned megalomania.

And megalomania had never lived long.

The war was over, but Jesse had created his own war. No North against South, no flag against flag. Just Jesse James against the rest of the world.

The gang was no longer just a handful of men. It was a procession of shadows moving across the land. Nameless, dirty faces, all with Colts, all hungry. And in their midst was Jesse, the boy with the scar on his chest, always laughing when he should have died.

He no longer spoke of home, no longer of the South, no longer of anything. He spoke only of robbery, glory, and his name. "I am Jesse James," he said, as if it were a prayer. "And America will know me."

Frank watched him, smoked, and remained silent. He knew there was no turning back. The farm was dead. The fields were dead. Her mother prayed alone in a house that was already half-ruined. And they rode through dust and smoke as if they were demons with no home.

Every robbery was bigger. Banks, carriages, shops. Sometimes bloody, sometimes quick. But always with Jesse's grin, Jesse's voice, Jesse's name. He wanted them to know him, to hate him, to fear him. Hate and fear were enough for him.

The gang cheered him on. They no longer saw him as one of them. They saw him as something more. A symbol. An outlaw who couldn't die.

Frank saw it, and it cut into his flesh. He no longer had a brother. He had a myth at his side. A myth that grew bigger every day, the more blood he shed.

By the fire, in the middle of the night, Jesse said, "Frank, we did it. We're free. No flag, no general, no damn law. Just us." Frank smoked, blew out the smoke, and looked at him for a long time. "Free? No, Jesse. We're chains. Just made of a different metal." Jesse laughed, coughed, and spat blood. "Chains that shine. Chains that bear names."

The men toasted, shouted, and laughed. They drank to Jesse James as if he were a king.

Frank also drank, but only silence burned within him. He knew: It had been a step from rebel to outlaw. But there was no going back.

And Jesse? Jesse had arrived. No longer a soldier. No longer a farmer. No longer a son. Just an outlaw.

And the country would never forget his name again.

## The first banks, the first deaths

The small bank in the backyard had only given Jesse a taste. He knew it worked. In, gun up, screams, money in the bags, out. But something was still missing: blood. Blood made stories. Stories made legends.

"Banks are like churches," he said by the fire, whiskey in his mouth, his eyes bright. "And anyone who stands in the way is a priest who should be gunned down." The men laughed and toasted. Frank remained silent.

The next town was bigger, richer. A bank with two counters, a fat teller, armed guards. Jesse wanted them in broad daylight. "So everyone can see. So everyone can tell."

Frank growled. "And if someone shoots?" Jesse grinned. "Then we'll shoot faster."

They rode in as if they were soldiers on parade. Horses in the middle of the street, Colts in their hands. Jesse stormed through the door, the men behind him. Screams, panic.

"Get down, you dogs!" he shouted. Shots blasted into the ceiling, shrapnel rained down. A security guard pulled his arm—too slowly. Jesse shot, the man flew back, blood on the marble steps. The first death in a bank, and Jesse laughed.

The cashier trembled, opening the tills, coins, bills, jewelry. The men stuffed the bags. Customers cried, a woman screamed, a child ran – Frank pulled it down, perhaps saving it, or perhaps only for a moment.

A second guard jumped forward, gun at the ready. Frank fired first. The man slumped, blood running down the counters. Two dead, and the bank smelled of gunpowder and iron.

Jesse stood in the middle of the room, smoking his Colts, grinning broadly. "Spread the word! Jesse James was here!"

They rode out, money in their luggage, the sun high in the sky. Behind them, screams, blood, corpses. In front of them, the open road.

That evening, Jesse read the newspaper, grinned, and drank. "Two dead. Two! Now they're not just talking about robbery. Now they're talking about murder. Now they're talking about me."

Frank smoked silently, his face hard. He still saw the images: the blood on the marble floor, the woman screaming, the child crying. Jesse saw glory. Frank saw only death.

But the step had been taken. There was no turning back. From now on, the banks weren't just full of money. They were full of blood.

And Jesse James was no longer just a name. He was a shot in the daylight, a dead man on the ground, a myth with corpses behind him.

The blood in the bank was just the beginning. Two dead bodies, one scream, one headline. For Jesse, it was music. For Frank, it was a curse.

By the fire, Jesse spoke as if he'd rewritten the Bible. "Listen to me, men. Every shot, every death isn't just a risk. It's a story. And stories live longer than we do."

The gang toasted, laughed, and shouted. They had money, they had whiskey, and they had fear in the eyes of the people. That was all they needed.

But Frank saw the corpses again. Men who weren't soldiers, but merely employees. People paid to guard the cash register. They hadn't carried a flag, hadn't carried any ideals, just cotton uniform jackets. And now they were lying in the dust because Jesse wanted a grin.

The next robbery came sooner than Frank had hoped. A bank in a village, not large, but well-known. Jesse didn't just want money. He wanted the name. "They should whisper when we leave. They should say: Jesse James was here, and he left blood."

They rode in, the Colts outside, the horses snorted. People ran, screamed, fell. Jesse walked through the bank door as if it were his house. "Lie down, you bastards!" Shots rang out, glass shattered.

A man pulled a gun too fast, a customer perhaps, not a security guard. Jesse shot him in the stomach. The guy fell, whimpering, blood on the floor. Jesse stepped past without looking.

Frank pulled out the sack full of coins, heard the screams, smelled the blood. It wasn't war. It was slaughter.

When they rode out, the man was still lying there, gasping, dying. Jesse turned around, grinned, and shot him in the head. "No half measures," he muttered.

The men cheered as they fled. Jesse laughed, the wind in his face, blood still on his hands. "See? Every death makes my name greater."

Frank rode beside him, his face like stone. He thought: *Every death makes you smaller, Jesse. But you don't see it.*

That evening, Jesse read the newspaper. "Outlaws kill customers in bank robbery." He grinned, drank, and banged on the table. "Now they're afraid. Fear is better than money."

Frank remained silent. His smoke rose into the darkness, and he knew: the line had long been crossed. Jesse needed the dead like others needed air.

From the first store, where no one died, to here, it had been a straight path. A path of blood.

And every step made Jesse James more of a myth – and less of a human being.

After every raid, it was the same. Money in the saddlebags, whiskey in the throats, the men cheering. But Jesse didn't want to count the gold. He wanted to hear the stories. He wanted his name mixed with blood.

"Money is just dust," he said, the bottle to his mouth. "But fear? Fear remains. If they whisper my name, in a shaky voice, then I've won."

The men toasted, laughed, didn't even understand half of it, but they loved the other half: the feeling of being free, the feeling of being above all laws.

Frank smoked silently, watched the fire. For him, it wasn't a feeling of freedom. It was a chain, only heavier than any other. Jesse was trapped in his own myth, and the gang was in it with him.

The next robbery was practically an opera. A bank, packed in the morning. Jesse wanted it with an audience. He entered the stage like an actor, guns high, grinning broadly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to experience a premiere! Jesse James, live and in color!" Shots hit the ceiling, shrapnel flew, women screamed, men ducked.

A security guard drew a shot—Jesse fired faster. The guy fell, blood splattered on the floor. Jesse laughed, stepped over him, while the men looted the cash register.

A customer screamed and jumped up. Frank pulled a trigger, fired, and the man collapsed. Two dead.

Jesse raised his voice as if it were a play. "Spread the word! Say my name! Jesse James!"

They fled, as always. And as always, the newspaper wrote: "Outlaws spread fear – Two dead in bank." Jesse read it, grinned, and toasted himself. "They're writing my name. They're writing my story."

Frank heard only the wheezing of the customer he had shot himself. A face without a uniform, without guilt. A face that still stared at him at night.

The men only saw the glory. They saw Jesse laugh, saw him live, and that was enough.

But Frank knew: every robbery now needed blood. Taking money was no longer enough for Jesse. He needed dead bodies because they fed his legend. Without blood, the name was only half as big.

And that meant: every further step would lead deeper into the abyss.

It didn't take long for Jesse to understand: Without death, there would be no thunder. Money was good, but blood made stories. And stories made Jesse James.

"A robbery without a shot is like whiskey without alcohol," he said by the fire, bottle in hand, his face bright with the glow. "It fills you up, but not makes you happy." The men laughed, toasted, nodded. They didn't understand, but they loved the sound of his voice, the madness in his eyes.

Frank heard the words and knew: Jesse wasn't just planning robbery. Jesse was planning murder. Not in self-defense, not by chance. But because blood had become the ink of his legend.

The next bench was in a city, larger, full of eyes. Jesse wanted it just like that. "The more witnesses, the better. They shall see me. They shall taste my name."

They rode in, their horses in the middle of Main Street, their Colts high. Jesse pushed open the door, yelling, "Jesse James is here!" Shots rang out in the ceiling, glass shattered, women screamed, men ducked.

The cashier trembled and opened the drawers. Jesse stepped closer, pressing the Colt to his forehead. "Your name doesn't matter. Mine does." Then he took the money, letting him live—but only because the woman next door screamed. Jesse shot in her direction, hitting her husband. He slumped to the ground, blood on the floorboards. Jesse grinned. "They should talk, Frank. They should have something to say."

Frank pulled him out while the men stuffed their pockets. A guard jumped – a shot, and he fell. Two dead, this time intentionally.

They fled, as always. But this time, more remained. More blood, more screams, more faces.

That evening, Jesse read the newspaper. "James Gang commits murder in robbery." He grinned, toasting himself. "Murder. Finally, they've written it. Murder sounds better than robbery."

Frank smoked and looked at him for a long moment. "You're not chasing prey, Jesse. You're chasing your own echo." "Echo is all that remains," Jesse laughed, coughing, blood on his lips.

The men cheered as if they had won a battle. But it wasn't a battle. It was slaughter.

And Frank knew: From now on, Jesse would claim a victim in every robbery. It wasn't the money that made him great. Not the gold. Only the bodies that bore his name.

The border had not only been crossed. It had long since been burned.

After every robbery, it was the same ritual. Counting money, distributing whiskey, telling stories. But Jesse was becoming less and less interested in the loot. He wanted to know how people looked, how loudly they screamed, how quickly the blood flowed.

"Gold is forgotten," he said, grinning crookedly, his face tinged with smoke. "But screams burn in. If they lie awake at night whispering my name, then I've won."

The men toasted, nodded, and laughed. They believed he was right. They no longer saw him as a robber. He was their prophet, their king without a crown.



Frank heard the words, and it ate at him from the inside. He saw the faces again. Men who weren't soldiers. Women who had only screamed. Children who had trembled in the corner while Jesse laughed. He saw them, every night, in every wisp of smoke.

The next robbery was like a staged attack. Jesse wanted to make a statement. "We need blood, Frank. Without blood, we're just robbers. With blood, we're legends."

Frank growled, biting down on his pipe. "Blood will kill you, Jesse. Sooner or later." "Then I'll die as a name. You as a shadow."

They rode into town, as always, in broad daylight. Jesse marched in, Colts up, his voice loud. "Jesse James is here! Get down, you bastards!"

People screamed and lay down. A guard drew his gun—and Jesse shot him immediately, right in the head. Blood spurted, people screamed. Jesse laughed. "That's what history sounds like!"

The men looted, stuffing sacks full. A customer jumped up, trying to run away. Jesse aimed and shot him in the back. The man fell, gasping, and died in the dust. Jesse stepped over him as if he were a stone.

Frank saw it, felt himself getting sick. But he said nothing. He knew words would bounce off him. Jesse had long since moved on. He wasn't chasing money, he was chasing Echo.

That evening, Jesse read the newspaper. "Two dead at James Gang." He grinned, drank, and slammed his fist on the table. "Two! Tomorrow they'll write three, then five. I grow with every corpse."

Frank stared into the fire, his pipe cold in his hand. "You're shrinking, Jesse. You're getting smaller, every time." "No," Jesse laughed, "I'm becoming immortal."

The men cheered, toasted, and shouted. They saw him as more than a human being. They saw a ghost who ate bullets and laughed.

Frank knew: They were no longer robbers. They were prisoners of a myth written by Jesse himself. A myth that could only be redeemed with blood.

And every additional attack meant more deaths. More stories. More Jesse James.

Jesse had understood: Blood was no longer an afterthought. Blood was part of the show. Without blood, a robbery was just a theft. With blood, it was a legend.

"I want people to sweat when they hear my name," he said one evening, whiskey in hand, his eyes filled with fever. "Not just for the money. But because they know: wherever Jesse James appears, someone dies."

The men laughed, toasted, and joined in. They were long drunk on the glory of their leader. They no longer hunted prey. They hunted stories.

Frank sat in the back, as always, smoking, silent. Every syllable cut into him, but he said nothing more. Words had no place in this gang. Only smoke and blood.

The next coup was almost a ritual. Jesse chose the city not for its wealth, but for its audience. "Many eyes, many mouths. The more witnesses, the bigger the name."

They rode in, again by daylight, like soldiers without a flag. Jesse stepped into the bank, immediately shot into the ceiling, and rained down glass. "Jesse James is here!"

People screamed and ducked. A guard drew his arm—Jesse shot him, right in the heart. The man fell, blood spreading like a carpet. Jesse grinned and kept kicking.

A customer tried to defend himself, perhaps just out of reflex. Jesse laughed, shot him in the leg, and made him scream. "So they have something to talk about."

The gang looted, sacks full of coins and bills. But Jesse wanted one last exit. He grabbed a woman by the arm, pulled her up, and pressed his Colt to her temple. "Tell everyone," he growled. "Jesse James spared you. This time." Then he pushed her away, shot into the wall, and ran out.

The men fled, the money heavy, the dust high. Jesse laughed, coughed, spat blood, but he kept laughing. "They'll tell, Frank. They'll tell everyone."

Frank rode beside him, his face like stone. "They're talking too, as you can see, Jesse. With blood in their eyes." "That's exactly how I want it."

That evening, the newspaper arrived. "James Gang terrorizes city. Two dead, several injured." Jesse read it aloud, grinned, and raised a toast. "Terrorized. Do you hear the word? I am terror. I am the horror."

The men cheered, laughed, and drank. Jesse stood, staggering, his face pale but his eyes burning. "I'm not just an outlaw. I'm a damn law unto myself."

Frank smoked and looked at him for a long time. He knew: They were no longer rebels, no longer robbers. They were executioners. Executioners on behalf of a name that Jesse was making bigger every day, until it would crush them all.

At first, they counted how much money was in the bags. Bills, coins, jewelry—they held it in their hands as if it were the reason for everything. But the further they moved, the more often they robbed banks, the less it was about money.

Now they were counting the dead.

"Two last time," Jesse grinned, the bottle to his mouth. "One before that. Three together. Next time I want five." The men laughed as if it were a drinking game. They toasted, shouted, and patted each other on the back.

Frank sat off to the side, smoking, and feeling sick. Death as currency, death as a measure – his brother had finally transformed into a ringmaster. The Colt was the whip, and the audience was America.

The next bench was bigger. Jesse chose it not because it was rich, but because it was full. He wanted eyes, screams, stories. "We can get money anywhere. But a name only grows in blood."

They rode in, Jesse in front, Colts high. "Jesse James is here!" His voice cut through the crowd, shots blasted into the ceiling, shrapnel rained down. A security guard pulled the trigger, and Jesse shot him, right in the neck. Blood splattered on the customers, screams echoed.

Frank drew, shooting a second guard, almost mechanically. His finger did it, not his heart.

A third man jumped up, a customer perhaps, no gun. Jesse shot him down, laughing as he fell. "Count, Frank! Three already!"

The gang looted, coins clinked, sacks filled. But Jesse wanted more. He grabbed a man, pressed the Colt into his mouth, and made him tremble. "Say my

name." The man stammered, cried, and managed a hoarse "J-Jesse James." Jesse grinned, pushed him away, and shot into the wall. "Good. He'll spread the word."

They rode out, the city behind them covered in blood and dust. Jesse laughed, coughed, and spat red, but he kept laughing. "Five dead, Frank. Five! You'll write it tomorrow. They'll all read it."

Frank rode beside him, his pipe cold, his eyes empty. "They also write that you're a bastard." "Better a bastard in the paper than a nobody in the field."

In the evening, the newspaper arrived. "James Gang kills five in robbery." Jesse read it aloud, grinning, toasting, practically dancing in the dirt. "Five! I'm growing! Tomorrow it'll be ten, then a hundred! I'm bigger than death."

The men cheered, toasted, and laughed. They were drunk on blood, on glory, on smoke.

But Frank knew: They were no longer free. They were slaves to a name. Jesse James was no longer a person. He was a hunger. A hunger for blood, for fear, for headlines.

And this hunger would devour them all.

### Train robbery in the moonlight

Banks were stages, small theaters. But trains—trains were moving cathedrals. Money, people, jewelry, weapons—all in one long, rattling body of iron. And they traveled through the night, vulnerable as a vein full of blood.

Jesse knew that. He felt it. "A train isn't a robbery, men," he said by the fire, bottle in hand, smoke thick in the air. "A train is a damn spectacle. Everyone hears it, everyone sees it, everyone talks about it. A train robbery is history before it's even over."

The men toasted, shouted, and loved the idea. Frank smoked, remained silent. Tiredness burned in his eyes. But he knew: Jesse would do it, whether he wanted to or not.

They chose a lonely route, between fields, with only a few farms nearby. A spot where the train slowed down, heading uphill. Jesse grinned as he explained the

plan. "We'll climb up, we'll slow it down, we'll take everything. And it looks even more beautiful in the moonlight."

Night came, the moon hung fat and yellow over the fields. The train rattled and hissed, the locomotive spewed smoke. Jesse and the gang lurked in the shadows, the horses snorted.

"Now!" Jesse shouted as the iron monster came. They rode off, jumping, and firing. One climbed onto the locomotive and held his Colt to the fireman's temple. "Slow down, or you'll die!" The train groaned, slowed, and came to a gasping halt.

Jesse jumped onto the first car, Colts up, his eyes burning. "Ladies and gentlemen! Jesse James welcomes you aboard!" Shots rang out, screams everywhere. Women screamed, men cowered, children cried.

The gang roamed the train cars, stealing bags, watches, and jewelry. Jesse laughed, shouted, and left his name in every compartment. "Spread the word! Jesse James was on your train!"

A man pulled out a gun – Jesse shot him immediately, directly in the chest. The body fell between the seats, blood dripping onto the floor. Screams grew louder. Jesse grinned. "Now they have their story."

Frank followed, Colt in hand, his eyes cold. He saw the dead man, saw the fear, saw Jesse laughing—and knew there was no stopping this.

They continued looting, car after car. Jewelry, money, watches, everything in sacks. The passengers cried, screamed, knelt. Jesse shot again, this time into the ceiling, showering shrapnel. "So they'll never forget!"

When they were finished, they jumped off the train, letting the monster roll on, the screams still inside. They rode into the night, the moonlight above them, money heavy on their saddles.

Jesse laughed, coughed, and spat blood, but he kept laughing. "That's it, Frank. That was more than a robbery. That was a fucking poem!"

Frank rode beside him, his pipe cold, his eyes tired. "It was a slaughterhouse." "Slaughterhouse, poem—in the end, my name remains. And that's all that matters."

The moon hung still, and the tracks gleamed like veins in the darkness. Behind them rolled the train, full of fear, full of screams, full of stories.

And from now on, Jesse James wasn't just a bank robber. He was the man who stopped trains in the moonlight.

The morning after the robbery was different. People had been heard whispering at the banks, in taverns, in barns, at the fences. But the train—the train robbery—was a thunderclap.

They heard it while having breakfast in some dive bar: "Did you hear? Jesse James stopped the train. In the middle of the night. Under the moon." The men grinned, toasted, and Jesse laughed, coughed, and banged his fist on the table. "They're talking about me, Frank! Not about the war, not about generals. About me!"

Frank smoked, his face like stone. "You're talking about the dead guy, too." "That one?" Jesse spat into the straw. "For a name like mine, that's a small price to pay."

The newspapers were full of stories: "James Gang Stops Train – One Dead, Dozens Robbed." – "Outlaws Terrorize Railroad – Passengers Report Fear and Screams." – "Jesse James: The Man Who Crippled the Railroad."

Jesse read each line as if it were a song. "See? Trains are bigger than banks. Banks are dust. But a train? A train is America. And I stopped America."

The men toasted him, cheered, and drank. For them, it was more than money. It was a feeling of being immortal, on iron rails.

Frank saw it differently. He saw the faces on the train—the women, the children, the man Jesse had shot, just to put a stop to it. For him, it wasn't a poem. It was a massacre on wheels.

But Jesse couldn't be stopped. He started to embellish it. Everyone who asked him got a bigger story. "The train was full of gold." - "We killed dozens." - "They screamed my name in the night." Lies, exaggerations, but they worked. The newspapers ate it up, people talked about it, and the myth grew.

"A train robbery is more than a robbery," Jesse grinned. "It's a performance. And I'm the star."

Frank sensed it was just the beginning. Jesse had tasted blood. Not just money, not just fame—the railroad itself was now his plaything. And America would watch, whether it liked it or not.

That evening, they sat by the fire, the moonlight above them, when Jesse whispered, "That was just the first. There will be many more to come. And each time, my name grows louder."

Frank smoked, blew the smoke into the darkness, and thought: *Every train you stop, Jesse, brings you closer to the edge.*

But he said nothing. Words bounced off him like bullets off stone.

The first train had changed Jesse. Banks were nothing more to him than peasant stalls, small wooden shacks with cash registers and frightened cashiers. But a train—a train was a rolling temple. And Jesse had stopped it, had looted it, had carved his name into the tracks.

"Train robbery is art," he said by the fire, a bottle to his lips, his eyes feverish. "A bank is just a store with more walls. But a train... a train is a monster of iron, packed with people, with money, with stories. If you stop a train, you'll hear it for miles. And if you loot it, the story will spread throughout entire states."

The men nodded, laughed, and toasted. They had smelled blood, they had heard the screams. It intoxicated them. They felt taller, more powerful, as if the railroad tracks themselves were carrying them.

Frank sat off to the side, smoking, his pipe in his mouth. He could hear the wheezing of the man Jesse had shot. He saw the faces of the women and children who had cried on the train while Jesse laughed. For Frank, it was no feat. It was a crime, ugly, bloody, without heroes. But he knew that words meant nothing here.

The second robbery came sooner than Frank had hoped. Jesse wanted to strike again under the moon, again in the dark, again with the stars as witnesses.

"The country should know: If the train travels at night, Jesse James could be on it."

They chose the track, a curve where the train slowed down. The gang lurked, dust clinging to their faces, the horses restless. Then it came—the iron monster, hissing, smoke rising into the sky, a roar on the tracks.

"Now!" Jesse shouted, and they jumped. Shots, screams, the train braked. Jesse rushed into the cars, his Colts up. "Good evening! Jesse James greets you!"

Screams, panic. Women held children, men ducked, some tried to escape. Jesse shot at the ceiling, laughing, screaming his name. The men looted bags, watches, jewelry. A passenger pulled out a small pistol, perhaps out of desperation. Jesse immediately shot him. Blood, screams, more fear.

"This is what art looks like!" Jesse yelled as he walked through the train cars.

Frank followed, his face cold. He helped bag the loot, but all he saw were corpses on wheels.

They fled back into the night, their loot heavy, the moon still above them. Jesse laughed, coughed, and spat blood, but he kept grinning. "Two puffs, Frank. Two! I'll be a legend before I die."

Frank rode beside him, his gaze hard. "Legends stink even when they rot." "Then let them smell my stench," Jesse grinned.

In the morning, the newspapers were full of headlines. "James Gang Stops Train Again – Several Dead, Dozens Robbed." Jesse read it aloud, laughed, and slapped the table. "You wrote it, Frank! You wrote it!"

And Frank knew: Railroads were now their new blood ritual. No bank could keep up. The tracks would bear their mark, and Jesse would laugh as long as he could.

Jesse had tasted blood. Banks had become too quiet, too small, too boring for him. A train, by comparison, was a rolling battlefield, and he wanted a bigger spectacle every damn time.

"If you rob a bank, the village hears," he said by the fire, bottle in hand, eyes glowing. "But if you stop a train, the state hears. Entire towns talk about it. Newspapers eat it up. That's greatness, Frank. That's my name in ink."

Frank puffed on his pipe, staring into the fire. "Printer's ink fades. Blood remains." Jesse grinned. "That's exactly why I need both."

The third train arrived under a starry sky. Jesse didn't just want loot—he wanted a massacre. "When we leave, they'll count more dead than coins."



The men nodded, drank, and agreed. They had long been addicted to Jesse's madness, to his laughter in the dust.

The train came thundering, the iron shuddering, the locomotive spewing smoke into the sky. Jesse screamed, shot, leaped like a demon from the shadows. The train braked, screeched, and came to a stop.

They stormed inside. Jesse immediately shot a guard, who could barely draw his gun. Blood splattered against the carriage wall, screams echoed. "Jesse James greets you!"

The gang looted, stealing jewelry, watches, and money bags. Jesse walked through the rows, Colts in hand, grinning and talking loudly. "Remember my name, you bastards!"

A passenger jumped up, trying to grab him – Jesse shot him directly in the face. His skull exploded, blood and splinters everywhere. Women screamed, children whimpered, men ducked lower. Jesse laughed as if it were a celebration.

Frank watched, his heart heavy, his hand mechanically on his Colt. He shot when he had to, but all he saw were faces. Faces that would never disappear.

As they looted the last train car, Jesse took his time. He chose a man, old, gray, probably innocent like all the others. "Say my name," he growled, his Colt to his forehead. "J-Jesse James." "Good." Jesse shot him down. "So they don't forget."

They fled into the night, the moonlight on their sacks, the dust behind them like smoke from hell. Jesse laughed, coughed, spat blood, but he kept laughing. "That's how you write history, Frank! That!"

Frank rode beside him, his face like stone. "History? No. Just a cemetery on rails." "A cemetery with my name on it."

In the morning, the newspapers were full of headlines. "James Gang Stops Train – Bloodiest Robbery Yet." Jesse read it aloud, practically dancing in the dust, grinning broadly. "Bloodyest! They love it, Frank. They eat it up!"

Frank remained silent. He knew the newspapers were eating it up. But in the shadows, others were eating it up, too. Pinkertons, sheriffs, men who not only wrote but also shot back.

And Frank knew: With every train Jesse plundered, not only did the myth grow, but so did the number of enemies breathing down their necks.

After the third train robbery, there was no turning back. Jesse was addicted. Not to the money—they ended up distributing it drunkenly and unfairly anyway—but to the sound. The screeching of the brakes, the screams in the train car, the bang when he shot the first one. It was music to him, damned organ music made of iron and blood.

"Trains are my church," he said one evening, his face lit by the fire, his bottle half empty. "And I am the priest. Every shot is a prayer, every sacrifice an amen."

The men toasted, cheered, and laughed. They loved it. For them, Jesse had long been more than a leader. He was a prophet, someone who preached with Colts.

Frank sat quietly, puffing on his pipe. For him, it wasn't a church service. It was a slaughterhouse with rails. But he said nothing. Words bounced off Jesse like bullets off stone.

The fourth train arrived in the fog, late at night. Jesse wanted it just like that. "They should say we're coming like ghosts. Invisible, unstoppable, everywhere."

They lurked on the hillside, the horses snorted, the smoke hung low. Then it came, the train, rattling, hissing, the light like an eye in the darkness. Jesse jumped, screamed, shot. The train screeched, slowed, and came to a stop.

"Good evening! Jesse James greets you in the fog!" His voice echoed, the Colts belched fire. People screamed, ducked, women cried. A man tried to run away — Jesse shot him in the back, grinned, and stepped over his body.

The gang looted, as always. Jewelry, money, watches. But Jesse wanted more. He pulled a man up and pressed the Colt into his mouth. "Say it." "J-Jesse James." "Good. Keep telling it." Then he let him live, just to make the story bigger.

Frank watched, his face hard, his heart heavy. He knew: every attack was now nothing more than a ritual. An altar to Jesse's name, soaked in blood.

As they fled, Jesse laughed, coughed, and spat out red, but he kept grinning. "See? They already think I'm a ghost. A demon. I'm more than human."

Frank rode beside him, his gaze dark. "Ghosts don't have hearts anymore." "No need, Frank. You just need a name."

In the morning, the newspapers were full of them. "James Gang like ghosts – train ambushed in the fog." Jesse read it, grinned, and slapped the table. "Ghosts! See? I'm not just a man anymore. I'm a legend."

The men toasted, shouted, and drank. They felt immortal, carried by rails, smoke, and blood.

But Frank knew: the more Jesse elevated herself into the supernatural, the more human the bullets that would soon hit her would be. Pinkertons, sheriffs, bounty hunters—they wouldn't write, they would shoot.

And Frank knew it was only a matter of time.

Jesse had blood, smoke, and iron in his veins. Every train robbery made him higher, bigger, untouchable. But it wasn't enough for him to just show up anymore. He wanted performances. Plays on rails.

"Listen, men," he said one evening, bottle in hand, his face feverish. "A train isn't just loot. A train is a stage. We enter, we play our parts, we leave behind applause—gunshots, screams, blood. The audience will never forget."

The gang toasted, laughed, and roared. They believed every damn word. Jesse was their messiah in the dust.

Frank smoked, listened, and remained silent. For him, it wasn't a drama. It was a cauldron about to explode. Every shot was a match, and Jesse was holding the entire gas can in his hand.

The next train arrived under a full moon, the tracks gleaming like veins. Jesse had them line up like actors. Two men at the engine, two at the back, and himself through the middle of the carriages. "We'll perform," he grinned, "and when they scream, we'll be great."

The train screeched, braked, and the first shot rang out. Jesse jumped up and rushed inside. "Ladies and gentlemen! Jesse James himself!" He shot into the ceiling, shrapnel rained down, screams filled the air.

The gang looted systematically, everyone knowing their role. One collected watches, one jewelry, one bags of money. Jesse himself moved through the rows like a director controlling his play.

A man resisted, refusing to give up his watch. Jesse shot him in the head, blood spurted, and the passengers screamed. "That's what applause sounds like!" he laughed, coughed, spat out red blood, and continued grinning.

Frank pulled the next customer down and took his bag, without saying a word. His eyes saw only corpses, even if they were still alive.

When they were finished, Jesse didn't just let the train go. He climbed onto the engine, turned to the passengers, and raised his Colts. "Don't forget my name!" Then he shot into the night, the bullets echoing across the tracks.

They fled, their bags full, their laughter loud, the moonlight above them. Jesse rode in front, like a king on his steed. "You see, men? We're not just outlaws. We're legends on wheels."

Frank rode beside him, his face hard. "Legends that write their own graves." "Then I'll write it myself, Frank. In blood."

In the morning, the newspapers were full of headlines. "James Gang staged robbery – train robbed in the middle of the night, dead left behind." Jesse read it, laughed, and slapped his hand on the table. "Stage! You know it! I'm theater, I'm myth!"

The men cheered, toasted, shouted.

But Frank knew: theater always had an end. And when the curtain fell, it wouldn't end with applause, but with gunfire.

After each train robbery, the gang was intoxicated, as if they'd just celebrated. Whiskey, screams, laughter—and Jesse in the middle, feverish, pale, coughing, but with eyes that burned brighter than any lamp in the car.

"Do you hear it, men?" he called one evening, his face lit by the fire. "The tracks are talking about us. Every train we stop echoes across the States. I am the ghost that rides the tracks."

The men cheered, shouted, and believed. They no longer saw him as a human being. He was their prophet, their ghost, their demon.

Frank sat in the back, smoking, his face in shadow. He saw no ghost. He saw his brother, sick, coughing, spitting, but so high on his own myth that no fall could save him.

The trains were no longer just raids. They were rituals. Jesse wanted blood, wanted screams, wanted to hear his name echoing in the nights. And he got it every time. A shot here, a dead man there, enough for the newspapers to eat.

The newspapers were his second weapon. "James Gang Stops Train – More Deaths." – "Passengers Report Jesse James in the Moonlight." – "America's Rails Belong to the Outlaws." Jesse read it all, grinned, laughed, and drank. "See? I'm bigger than the railroad. I'm bigger than America itself."

Frank heard the words and sensed the truth behind them: The bigger Jesse grew, the smaller their chances of staying alive became. The railroads wouldn't stand by for long. The Pinkertons were already out there. Every train Jesse stopped was a shot coming back, only delayed.

But Jesse couldn't hear anything anymore. He was like an actor who had long since forgotten that he was just standing on a stage. For him, the stage was real, the blood was real, the applause was real.

At the last robbery of the month, it was clearer than ever. Jesse stormed through the train, Colts high, grinning broadly. "Good evening! Jesse James is back!" Gunshots, screams, blood. A man fell, a woman screamed, children cried. Jesse laughed like it was a damn comedy.

As they fled, bags full, dust high, the moon bright above them, Jesse turned to Frank. "Did you see it? They were screaming my name, Frank. They were praying it."

Frank rode beside him, the smoke from his pipe wafting into the night. "They're not screaming your name. They're just screaming in fear." "Fear is enough." Jesse grinned, coughed, and spat. "Fear makes you immortal."

They rode on, the gang cheering, Jesse laughing, Frank silent. And above the tracks, the echo lingered, cold, metallic, like the laughter of a dead god.

The moves belonged to Jesse James – until someone struck back stronger, faster, more brutally.

Frank knew that day was not far off.

## The Pinkertons are coming

The railroad wasn't just any business. It was the backbone of America, the iron pulse that connected cities, carried goods, and moved armies. Jesse hadn't just stolen money. He had slashed its artery.

And America responded. Not with newspaper articles, not with prayers, but with men.

Pinkertons.

They weren't heroes, they weren't sheriffs with stars on their chests. They were dogs, trained, paid, and merciless. Men who were turned loose when the law wasn't enough. They didn't write reports. They wrote in blood.

"They're after us," Frank said as they found shelter in a barn. He held a crumpled newspaper in his hand; the headlines spoke of bounties, of Pinkerton agents swarming on behalf of the railroads. Jesse grinned, took a drag on his cigarette, and coughed. "Let them come. They're writing my name, Frank. Again." "These aren't farmers, Jesse. They're hunters." "Then let them hunt. I'll hunt back."

The men in the gang laughed, drank, and joked. But there was unease in their eyes. They had heard of the Pinkertons. Men who could read tracks like others could read Bibles. Men who shot cold, without warning. Men who weren't afraid because they were paid not to be.

The first collision came faster than Jesse expected. They were on the move, somewhere in Missouri, the dust high, the sun blazing. Suddenly, shots rang out, loud and sharp. One man from the gang fell, blood in the dust. A second man screamed and toppled from his saddle.

"Pinkertons!" someone yelled, and panic broke out.

Jesse drew his Colts, grinned, and fired back. "Finally! Finally, real opponents!"

Frank ducked, drew, fired, but he sensed it was different. These weren't farmers, not bank security guards. These men aimed. These men hit.

They narrowly escaped, leaving two dead and one seriously wounded. Jesse laughed, coughed up blood, and shouted, "See? They can't get us! We're ghosts!"

Frank saw the dead bodies left in the dust. He knew: ghosts don't bleed. But Jesse does.

That evening, as they barricaded themselves in a cabin, Jesse read the newspaper again. "Pinkertons hunt James gang." He grinned, toasting himself. "See? I'm not just an outlaw. I'm a legend being hunted."

Frank smoked, his gaze dark. "Legends die too, Jesse. Usually faster than humans." "Then I'll die loudly."

The Pinkertons were there. And the war that Jesse himself had brought about had only just begun.

The banks had brought screams. The trains had made headlines. But the Pinkertons brought bullets.

There weren't many of them, but there were enough of them. Well-equipped, cold, paid not to give up. They slept little, they ate poorly, but they followed a trail until they found blood. And Jesse James left more traces than he could have wished for—cigarette butts, bottlenecks, horse tracks, dead men.

"They're closer, Jesse," Frank said as they rested on a farm. "They're not going away. They're not farmers we scare and then disappear." Jesse grinned, coughed, and spat into the straw. "Closer is good. Let them come. I want to see faces, not ghosts."

Unrest spread through the gang. Men who had cheered at the first blast were now quieter. They knew that the Pinkertons weren't just shooting to intimidate. They were shooting to kill. And they hit.

During the next stagecoach robbery, revenge came. They had just bagged the loot when a shot rang out from the woods. One of Jesse's men fell from his horse, his head torn to pieces. Panic, screams.

"Get down!" Frank yelled, but Jesse rode straight into it, shot back, and laughed. "Come out, you dogs! Jesse James is waiting!"

The bullets flew, hard, aimed. Two more men were hit, one in the shoulder, one in the stomach. The gang fled, scattered, panicked. Only Jesse laughed, coughed, and screamed: "They won't catch me! I'm too fast, too loud, too big!"

They escaped, but three men fewer. They sat silently by the fire, the bottle circulating, their faces ashen. "The Pinkertons won't let go," said Frank. "Good," grinned Jesse. "Then people will never stop reading my name."

But he knew, deep down, that Frank was right. Every round of gunfire, every ambush, made them louder. And the louder they were, the sharper the eyes became that were searching for them.

The Pinkertons didn't write newspapers. They wrote lists. Lists of names, lists of corpses.

And Jesse James was at the top.

The Pinkertons knew their craft. They didn't hunt animals, they hunted people. And people had families. Homes. Roots.

Jesse always wanted to be a ghost, a myth on wheels, smoke, and bullets. But a ghost leaves traces, and the Pinkertons followed those very traces.

They showed up in the yards where Jesse had found shelter. They didn't knock. They kicked in doors. Men were beaten with rifle butts, women were screamed at, and crying children were dragged aside. "Where is Jesse James?"

People often didn't know anything, or they knew and still said nothing. Sometimes they helped him, out of fear or respect. But the Pinkertons didn't believe them. They searched, they destroyed, they left fear behind like the smell of burning.

Frank first saw it when they sought shelter at a farm. The farmer's wife, old and with shaking hands, whispered, "They were here yesterday. They beat my husband. They said they'd be back."

Jesse grinned, coughed, and wiped blood from his mouth. "Good. Then we wait." Frank grabbed his arm. "Are you crazy? They don't play games, Jesse. They don't come to hear stories. They come to kill." "Then let them try."

But Frank saw in the woman's eyes that she didn't care who died. She just wanted the men gone, so her children could sleep again. Jesse wasn't a hero to her. He was a curse.

The Pinkertons struck in the night. Shots, screams, dogs barking. Jesse fired back, the gang jumped into the saddle, and fled through the darkness. Behind



them, the barn burned, blood spilled in the yard, a woman screaming over her husband's body.

The next morning, it was in the newspaper. "Pinkertons vs. James Gang – Deaths on Farm." Jesse laughed, holding up the newspaper. "See, Frank? They're writing again." Frank slapped the newspaper out of his hand. "They're not writing your fame, Jesse. They're writing death. Yours, mine, and the deaths of anyone who helps you." "All the same. The main thing is that my name's on it."

Frank remained silent, his gaze dark. He knew it was no longer about robbery, not about loot, not even about Jesse himself. It was about war. War between a name and an iron arm called the Pinkertons.

And war always devoured everything.

The Pinkertons were patient. They knew Jesse wasn't a shadow, but a man of flesh who coughed, who drank, who slept. And men of flesh made mistakes.

So the Pinkertons put pressure on him. Not just on him, but on everyone around him. They followed leads, listened, bribed men, threatened women, beat old people. Anyone who knew Jesse was a suspect. Anyone who had poured him a drop of whiskey was questioned, interrogated, and beaten.

"They're everywhere, Jesse," Frank said as they lay in a barn again, the rain on the roof, the horses nervous. "You can't even cough anymore without them hearing it." Jesse grinned, took a drag on his cigarette, and coughed blood into the straw. "Let them hear it. Let them know I'm still alive."

The gang was nervous. Men who had cheered a few months ago were now silent, looking around, whispering. One said, "Maybe we should give up. Maybe we should go west. California. Mexico." Jesse looked at him, ice-cold. "You want to escape? Run. But then you'll be dead. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow. But dead. The Pinkertons will find you alone faster than with me." The man was silent, swallowed, drank. No one left the gang. But no one laughed like they used to.

During the next bank robbery, the Pinkertons struck back immediately. Shots from behind, bullets through the window, blood on the floorboards. Two of Jesse's men were left lying on the ground, one with his head half-torn off. Jesse laughed, shot back, and yelled, "Come on, you dogs! I'm here!"

They fled, their loot forgotten, only smoke and blood in the air. That evening, in the hideout, Jesse was still laughing. "They want me dead, Frank. They want to erase my name. But as long as I'm laughing, they'll keep writing." Frank stared at him. "You're laughing at graves." "At least it's louder then."

But the gang broke apart. Men whispered, argued, and drew knives on each other because fear was greater than glory. Some wanted to leave, others swore to betray them. Jesse shot one in the shoulder just to make an example. "Traitors don't live long."

The Pinkertons knew this. They were just waiting. Every gang eventually falls apart, not through bullets, but through mistrust.

Frank saw it, smoked, and remained silent. He knew their world was shrinking. Courtyards were closing their doors, people were looking away, and newspaper writers were writing less about fame and more about death.

And in the middle of it all was Jesse, coughing, laughing, with eyes burning as if he wanted to set the world on fire.

The Pinkertons were like rat traps. Quiet, patient, full of iron. Sometimes you didn't even hear them until your bones cracked.

The James Gang heard them everywhere now. Hoofbeats in the night? Pinkertons. A dog barking? Pinkertons. A man looking around too long? Pinkertons. They etched themselves into the men's minds until fear was greater than the bullets.

Jesse laughed at that. "Let them come," he coughed, cigarette in the corner of his mouth, blood in his cough. "I want them to come. The closer they are, the louder my name is."

But the gang wasn't laughing anymore. One whispered at night, "He's going to kill us all." Another talked about running away, from the south, about ships to Cuba. Jesse heard, drew his Colt, and slammed his gun into the ground next to them. "No one runs. If you run, you die."

The silence that followed was heavy as lead.

The Pinkertons struck where it hurt. They attacked helpers. They found a farmer who had given them shelter slain in his barn. A woman who had given them water lay beaten in a ditch, barely alive. Frank saw it and said, "That's

you, Jesse. Your name draws blood, even if you don't shoot." Jesse just grinned, his face sick and feverish. "Then my name is stronger than I am."

The next robbery went wrong. They had a stagecoach in their sights, believing it was routine. But as they struck, a shot shot out of the woods, aimed, icy cold. Pinkertons. One of the men fell immediately, a hole in his head. A second screamed, blood spurting from his chest. The coach escaped, leaving only dust and corpses in its wake.

Jesse screamed, laughed, and shot into the darkness while Frank pulled him off his horse. "Ride, damn it!" he yelled. They fled, again, as always.

That evening, in a dilapidated hut, they sat quietly. Two men were missing. The others stared into the fire, drank, and said nothing. Only Jesse spoke, coughed, and grinned. "They'll write tomorrow. James Gang under fire. See? I'm everywhere."

Frank didn't answer. He knew they weren't everywhere anymore. They were only where the Pinkertons wanted them to be—like trapped animals.

And Jesse continued to laugh as the trap tightened.

The Pinkertons weren't romantics. They had no patience for heroic songs, no respect for legends. They wanted results. And results meant: Jesse James dead.

They understood that men like Jesse weren't just made of flesh and blood. They were also made of roots. Families. Homes. People who loved them somewhere, even if they never admitted it. So the Pinkertons aimed right at that.

"They're on their way to Kearney," said a man who wanted to warn the gang. "Your mother, Jesse. Your house."

Jesse heard it, laughed, coughed, and spat blood into the straw. "Let them go. My mother's tougher than ten Pinkertons." Frank grabbed his arm, his eyes cold. "This isn't a game, Jesse. They're not going there to talk. They're going there to destroy. They want to force you out of the shadows." "Then let them try."

Night fell, and the Pinkertons came. They threw a bomb through the window of Jesse's farmhouse. Wood splintered, fire spread. His mother screamed, his brother was torn to pieces. Blood, smoke, chaos.

The news hit Jesse like a ton of bricks that morning. But he laughed. Yes, he laughed. "They fear me so much they're attacking my family. See? My name drives them crazy."

Frank looked at him as if he wanted to punch him in the face. "Your name, Jesse? Your name cost your mother her arm. Your name tore your brother apart. Your damn name is eating away everything you care about."

The gang was silent, the bottles circulated, their faces gray. Even the toughest among them saw that there were no lines anymore. No boundaries. The Pinkertons had come to destroy not only Jesse, but everything around him.

And Jesse? Jesse grinned, coughed, and spoke with feverish eyes: "Good. Then I'll write my name in their blood. Every Pinkerton who comes will be my monument."

Frank turned away, puffed on his pipe, and stared into the darkness. He knew: Jesse was lost. Perhaps he had been for years. But now he was dragging everyone to the grave with him—family, friends, strangers. The myth wasn't just consuming America. It was consuming Jesse James himself.

The farm was just the beginning. After the bomb, after the blood, after the mother's arm and the dead brother, it was clear: The Pinkertons knew no bounds. They would set fire to every house, frighten every child, and smash every helper, until Jesse James himself lay in the dirt.

The gang sat in an abandoned barn, rain dripping through the roof, the whiskey tasting of rust. No one spoke. Only Jesse coughed, laughed, and drank.

"They're scared, Frank. Otherwise they wouldn't drop bombs. They fear my name so much that they have to kill innocents." Frank stared at him, his eyes black with tiredness. "Your name gave them the bomb, Jesse. Your damn name is the dynamite that blows everything up." "Then let them blow it up. I rebuild myself every time. Bigger. Louder."

The men were silent. Some stared into the fire, others into the darkness. They were tired, burned out, shot to pieces. One whispered, "We're dying out here. All of us." Jesse heard, drew his Colt, and aimed it at his face. "Then die silently." The man fell silent, drank, and stared at the ground.

The gang shrank. They lost men with every raid. Sometimes to bullets, sometimes to fear, sometimes to betrayal. The Pinkertons hunted them like wolves, and the James Gang was nothing more than a pack of emaciated dogs.

But Jesse continued to laugh. "Every bullet they fire at me is an anthem. Every one of us killed makes my name greater."

Frank couldn't hear it anymore. In his dreams, he saw the farm, the bomb, the screams, his mother's severed arm. He heard the voices of the men who had fallen. He saw Jesse laughing, amidst the blood, and he knew: the war could no longer be won.

The Pinkertons weren't like sheriffs. They had no choice, no fear, no end. They would always keep going. And Jesse would always laugh. Until a bullet finally silenced him.

The next morning, it was in the newspapers again. "James Gang Under Heavy Fire – Pinkertons Vow Revenge." Jesse read it aloud, coughed, grinned, and held up the newspaper. "See? I'm immortal."

Frank turned away, smoked, and remained silent. He knew no one was immortal. Especially not a man who coughed up blood and had to watch his own house in ruins.

The war was decided. Jesse was still alive. But everything around him was already dead.

### Blood on the farm door

The farm had never been a palace. Simple walls, a creaking roof, fields covered in mud. But for Jesse, it was more than a place. It was proof that he belonged somewhere, no matter how many banks he robbed, how many trains he stopped, how many dead he left behind.

Now she was a target.

The Pinkertons knew that outlaws didn't live in the void. They had mothers, brothers, wives, and children. And they knew that Jesse always returned home, no matter how loudly the world outside screamed.

The night they arrived smelled of cold smoke and rain. Jesse's mother sat in the house, an old woman, tough but tired. His little half-brother was still creeping through the room. They heard the dogs barking, then boots, then the cracking of wood.

"Pinkertons," she whispered, the word hanging heavy in the air.

They kicked in the door, men with hard faces, guns in hand, no star, no uniform, just a mission. "Where's Jesse?" they screamed. No one answered. So they threw the bomb.

The house shook. Wood splintered. Glass shattered. Fire and smoke. A scream echoed through the land. The little boy was torn to pieces. Jesse's mother screamed, blood and splinters, her arm torn off.

In the morning, people were talking about a massacre. But for the Pinkertons, it was work. An attempt to drive Jesse out of his hole.

When Jesse heard about this, he laughed at first. Yes, he laughed. "They're so afraid of me they're dropping bombs on my mother." Then he coughed, spat out blood, and fell silent.

Frank looked at him, his eyes full of hatred. "Your name, Jesse. Your damn name killed your brother. Your name took your mother's arm." "My name lives on." "And everything else dies."

The gang was silent. No one wanted to say anything. Even the toughest men stared into space, as if they had realized they were no longer fighting for money. Not for fame. But only for the echo of a man who couldn't stop.

That evening, Jesse sat alone in front of the farm, a bottle in his hand, his eyes filled with fever. He stared at the blood in the dirt, at the house that no longer stood. "They wanted to kill me here," he muttered. "But I'm still alive. So I won."

Frank stood in the shadows, smoking, silent. He knew: no one had won. The only thing left was blood on the farm gate.

The farm stank of burnt wood, blood, and sulfur. The dogs stopped barking. They had seen everything.

Jesse sat in front of the remains of the house, bottle in hand, coughing, laughing, talking to the smoke. "You see it, men? They're dropping bombs on me. Bombs! Not bullets, not handcuffs. Bombs! Do you know what that means? That my name is bigger than the law. That they're afraid. That I'm more than a man."

The men in his gang stared at him, silent. One nervously rubbed his Colt. Another stared at the ashes, in which a piece of bone still lay. No one raised a toast. No one laughed.

Only Frank. He stood next to Jesse, pipe in mouth, cold eyes. "Your name killed a child, Jesse. Your name maimed your mother. Your name is now just a tombstone." "A tombstone where they'll read my name. For all time." "And for all the dead."

Jesse coughed, spat Rot into the grass, and continued drinking. "Dead people don't write newspapers, Frank. The living do. And they're writing about me."

It actually said so in the papers. "Explosion on James Farm – Brother killed, mother seriously wounded." Jesse held up the paper, grinning as if it were a medal. "There! My name, again! I'm bigger than them all."

The gang remained silent, still. They had realized there was nothing left to gain. No money, no fame, no security. All that remained was Jesse's feverish madness and the bullets coming from all sides.

At night, as the fire crackled, Frank heard the men whispering. "Maybe it's over. Maybe we should leave him." "If you leave Jesse James, you're dead," another whispered. "If you stay with him, you're dead too."

Frank heard it, but said nothing. He knew they were both right.

In the morning, Jesse sat again in front of the door, where the blood had dried in the dirt. He stared at the spot where his brother had fallen. Then he laughed softly, almost like a child. "They wanted to break me. But they only made me bigger. I'm the man they drop bombs for."

Frank stepped closer, pipe in mouth. "No, Jesse. You're the man for whom even bombs are too cheap. You're a man who lost everything and laughs like it's a victory."

Jesse grinned, coughed, and spat red. "Then I'll laugh until I die."

The farm was nothing more than a grave. No roof, no windows, just charred beams, blood in the dust, and the screams hanging like ghosts. But Jesse saw no end in it. For him, it was a crowning achievement.

"Do you understand, men?" he cried, bottle in hand, his face red from coughing. "They fear me so much they throw bombs at old women. They don't

hit me—they hit what's mine. That means I'm bigger than them. That they know they can't kill me outright. I'm too big."

The gang listened, silent. No one nodded. No one raised a glass. They had seen the rubble, the old woman's severed arm, the boy's corpse. They knew there was nothing great there, just blood and misery.

Frank approached, pipe in mouth, his voice raspy. "You talk like a preacher, Jesse. But you're just a man who loses everything and laughs so he doesn't cry." "I'd rather laugh in my blood than let them see me break." "You've been broken for a long time. You just don't realize it."

Jesse grinned, coughed, and spat Red into the grass. "Broken men don't write legends. I write one every day."

In the nearby town, people were talking about it. Newspapers printed headlines: "*James Farm attacked – Pinkertons crack down.*" Some readers shook their heads. Others toasted the name Jesse James as if he were a martyr.

Jesse absorbed these stories like whiskey. He read aloud, laughed, and practically danced in the dirt. "See? I'm not a thief anymore. I'm a victim. A hero they hunt because he's bigger than them."

Frank turned away. He couldn't bear it. The scorched earth smelled of death, not heroism. Jesse saw glory where there were only ruins.

At night, when the men slept, Frank heard the silence. No laughter, no fire, only the creaking of the beams that were still standing. He knew they all had one foot in the grave now. Not because of money, not because of robberies, but because of Jesse's damned name.

And Jesse? He kept laughing. He laughed at graves, at ashes, at the echoes of his own madness.

The blood in the courtyard had long since dried, but Jesse stared at it as if he could read signs in it like a priest reading entrails. The sun burned on the rubble, the air was still, and all that remained was dust.

"That wasn't an attack, Frank," he said quietly, almost reverently. "That was a message."

Frank stood beside him, pipe in mouth, face gray. "A message? It was a bomb. They ripped your brother to pieces and took your mother's arm." "Exactly. That



means I'm more than a man. If they need bombs to hit me, then I'm a force. Almost divine."

Frank laughed dryly, bitterly. "Divine? You're a sick bastard who coughs up blood and leaves more corpses than a plague." "And yet they talk about me. And yet they write my name. God or devil—what difference does it make if the name lasts forever?"

The men of his gang listened, silent, their faces blank. Some lowered their gaze, others drank deeper, one whispered, "He's gone mad." But no one said it out loud. No one openly questioned Jesse James.

It was written in bold in the newspapers: "*James Gang Defies Attack – Pinkertons Fail, Jesse James Escapes.*" Jesse held the sheet up like a Bible, grinned, and coughed, his teeth red with blood. "See? I'm untouchable. Even bombs make me bigger."

Frank saw only the charred beams, the dead brother, the mutilated mother. "You're not any bigger, Jesse. You're just another man who loses everything, and people call it a legend because they're too stupid to smell the ashes."

But Jesse wasn't listening anymore. He spoke like a preacher, bottle in hand, eyes glowing. "They've made me a martyr. Every drop of blood on this door is my gospel. Every splinter of wood tells my name."

Frank closed his eyes, inhaled the smoke, and wished for a moment that a bullet would finally end everything—not because he hated his brother, but because he knew he was long gone.

He was a ghost with Colts, and the farm was his altar.

The farm was burned, the door covered in blood, and yet Jesse spoke as if it were a pulpit. He held the bottle like a missal, coughed, spat red, and preached into the faces of his men.

"You saw it," he cried, "they're throwing bombs at children because they fear me. They fear my name more than death. And if they fear me that much, then I'm greater than them all. I'm more than an outlaw. I'm a sign."

The men sat around him, tired, empty, their faces gray. They listened to him because they had to, not because they believed they should. One muttered, "We wanted money. No signs." Another stared at his hands as if the blood of the farm still clung to them.

Frank smoked, said nothing. He knew what was happening. Jesse was turning robbery into a religion. Every bullet, every death was now a sermon. The gang was no longer a gang—it was a procession following a martyr who wasn't yet dead, but already talked like a dead man.

That evening, Jesse read the newspaper again. "James Farm attacked – mother seriously wounded, brother killed." He grinned, holding the paper up like a relic. "See? I live in printer's ink. They wanted to kill me, but they made me immortal."

The men drank, but the laughter was gone. They used to cheer when Jesse got loud. Now they saw only a man coughing blood and talking nonsense.

At some point, Frank stood up and stepped out into the darkness, his pipe in his mouth. He couldn't hear it anymore. Not the sermons, not the laughter, not the way Jesse turned his own family into a martyr song.

He saw the men through the crack in the door—tired, broken, trapped by Jesse's fever. They would follow him because they had no other choice. But Frank knew: none of them believed in gold anymore. They only believed in the end.

And Jesse continued to talk as if he were the Messiah. But Frank knew: He was just a man slowly leading his gang to their deaths—and no one had the strength to stop him.

The door was dark with blood, a mark of shame, a monument, depending on whose eyes saw it. Jesse sat in front of it, day after day, bottle in hand, and spoke as if he were a damned priest on an altar.

"Do you see this?" he cried, his voice hoarse, his lungs full of coughs. "This blood here is not the end. It is the beginning. Every drop is my gospel. Every splinter of wood preaches my name. They wanted to destroy me, but they made me immortal."

The men listened, silent, their faces broken. They had nothing left to believe in, except the man who spoke like a fever dream. One drank deeper than usual, another nervously rubbed the barrel of his revolver, as if searching for an escape in the metal.

Frank stood next to it, smoking, and just thought: *This isn't gospel. This is madness.*

One of the men finally burst out. "Jesse, we wanted money. No sermons, no bombs, no dead children. We wanted gold in our pockets and whiskey down our throats." Jesse turned slowly, his eyes red from fever. "Money? Money is dust. My name is gold. My name is whiskey. My name is all that remains." The man fell silent, retreated, but Frank saw the hatred in his eyes.

That evening, by the fire, Jesse coughed, spat Rot into the grass, laughed, and read the newspaper again. "James Gang defies bombs. Jesse James escapes." He grinned, his teeth bloody. "See? I'm not just a man. I'm a myth."

The men looked at him, no one toasted, no one laughed. They were exhausted, already dead inside. One whispered to Frank, "We're dying out here. We're dying for a laugh." Frank didn't answer. He knew it was the truth.

The night was silent, except for the creaking of the beams of the burned farm. Jesse was still talking, words like fire, like smoke, like madness.

Frank puffed on his pipe, looked into the darkness, and knew: They no longer lived for the gold, not for the land, not even for each other. They lived only for Jesse's death.

And Jesse continued to preach as if he were the prophet of his own doom.

The farm stood there like a black tooth in the mouth of the earth. Charred, broken, the courtyard a graveyard without crosses. Every step crunched over ash. The wind brought back the stench of old blood, as if the air itself were contaminated.

Jesse sat in front of the door, or rather, what could still be called a door. A piece of wood, dark, splintered, soaked with the blood of his own family. He drank, coughed, spat red into the dust—and talked. Over and over.

"This," he said, his voice croaking, "is my will. Every splinter, every stain of blood is proof. They wanted to kill Jesse James, but all they succeeded in doing was making my name greater. When the children sleep, they talk about me. When the men drink, they curse me. And the women pray that I ride past them. I am more than a man. I am a damned sign."

The men in his gang listened in silence. Once, they would have cheered and toasted him. Now they stared into the fire or at their boots, and the silence between his sentences was heavier than any Pinkerton thunder.

Frank stood by as always, pipe in mouth, eyes tired. He knew Jesse heard himself preaching, like a pastor without God. But in truth, he was just a man slowly rotting away, coughing, feverish, laughing over graves.

"We're not a gang anymore," one of the men murmured quietly, barely audibly. "We're dead bearers." Another didn't reply, but took a deeper drag on his whiskey, as if trying to drown the word in alcohol.

Frank heard it, but said nothing. He knew it was true. Every ride, every ambush, every breath was no longer a step into life—but a march to the grave.

In the city, the newspapers continued to write. "*James Farm destroyed – but Jesse James lives.*" Jesse held the paper up like a Bible, grinning, his face covered in dirt and blood. "See? Even in ashes, I'm alive. Even in blood, I'm greater than them all."

Frank turned away. He couldn't hear it anymore. He knew Jesse was long gone—he was just an echo, forcing his men to move on, whether they wanted to or not.

That evening, silence fell upon the gang like a shroud. No one spoke, no one toasted, no one laughed. Only Jesse coughed, spat out red, and continued talking as if the door, dark and bloody, were an altar.

And Frank finally realized: They were no longer robbers. No brothers, no heroes, no outlaws. They were grave-bearers following a man who had long since dug his own grave.

### Mother without arm, brother without head

The newspapers wrote it soberly, almost cleanly, as they always turn blood into ink: "*Explosion on James Farm – Mother wounded, brother killed.*" Clean words for a dirty massacre.

In reality, things were different. Jesse's mother lay on a bed that smelled of manure, her stump hastily bandaged, her face contorted in pain. She didn't curse. She didn't cry. She just stared blankly at the wall, as if the pain had robbed her of everything that still kept her human.

Next to it was a box containing what had once been Jesse's brother. No body, just shreds. No one could find the head. A boy, blown to pieces because men in suits had decided that an outlaw would die faster if his home was blown up.

Jesse saw it, coughed, spat out red, and laughed. Yes, he laughed. "You see, Frank? They fear me so much they drop bombs on children. On my mother. On my blood. That means I'm bigger than them. That they can never kill me outright. I'm more than a man—I'm a curse."

Frank stood beside him, pipe in mouth, face hard. "You're not a curse, Jesse. You're the reason your brother's in a box and your mother can only pray with one hand." "Pray?" Jesse grinned, coughed, and reached for the bottle. "She won't pray. She'll curse. She'll whisper my name when she screams. And everyone should hear."

The men of the gang stood still, looked at the ground, and drank. They had seen many dead bodies, heard many screams. But this was different. This was family. And yet Jesse spoke as if it were a medal pinned to his lapel.

"My brother dies for my name," he cried, his voice loud. "My mother bleeds for my name. Do you understand what that means? That my name is greater than life itself."

Frank wanted to punch him in the face, but he didn't. He knew it was useless. Jesse was long gone, trapped somewhere in his own myth, half-man, half-ghost, and the family's blood was just paint for his damned picture.

The gang was silent. One man murmured quietly, "I never wanted to become a priest in this hell." Another just shook his head. No one contradicted Jesse. But no one believed him anymore.

That evening, Jesse sat outside, the box containing his brother's remains in the shade, the house silent. He drank, coughed, spat red, and spoke to the darkness: "They can behead my brother, they can take my mother's arm. But my name—they won't get my name."

Frank stood in the background, smoking, silent. And thought: *Your name has already taken everything. Except you. Not yet.*

The old woman lay in a bed that was more stench than rest. The stump where an arm had once been was raw, poorly bandaged. She didn't speak much. When she did speak, it was quietly, with the bitterness of a woman who had seen everything and no longer wanted to feel anything.

"I gave birth to two sons," she murmured, her eyes clouded. "One is lying in a box, headless. The other is sitting outside, laughing as if it were all a game."

Jesse heard it, laughed, coughed, and spat Rot into the grass. "Mother, your pain is my proof. They took your arm because they couldn't get me. Your blood is my monument." She turned her head, looked at him with a gaze harder than any bullet. "Your monument is my grave."

Frank stood in the corner, smoking, looking at both of them. He knew: The woman was no hero, no symbol. She was a mother who had lost more than any human being could lose. Jesse made her a statue for his myth. But she was just a human being with a stump and a dead son.

The gang avoided the house. They stayed outside, by the fire, drinking, barely talking. No one wanted to hear the woman's screams as the stump burned like fire. No one wanted to see the image: Jesse sitting by her bed, talking as if he were speaking to a saint.

"Mother, your sacrifice will go down in the books," he murmured, gritting her teeth. "You are part of my name." "Your name," she spat, "is filth. Your name took my arm. Your name tore my boy to pieces. Your name burned this farm." Jesse grinned, coughed, and wiped blood from his mouth. "Then my name is stronger than life."

Frank left the room because he could no longer listen. Outside, he saw the men sitting around the fire like ghosts. They were drinking, staring into the darkness, and one whispered, "I want to leave." Another replied, "Where do you want to go? Wherever you're going, your name is already there."

Frank heard it, blew smoke into the night, and knew: It was true. Jesse had poisoned the gang. Even if they ran away, they would always die in the shadow of his name.

And inside, in that stinking bed, lay the mother, armless, without comfort. For Jesse, she was a symbol. For Frank, she was the final proof that no myth can be made from flesh, only ashes.

Jesse's mother lay in bed, her blanket smeared, her stump poorly bandaged, her breathing labored. Every movement was a curse against life itself. She was no longer a woman, merely a shell held together by pain.

But Jesse didn't see it that way. To him, it was a flag, a statue, a sacred sacrifice.

"Men!" he cried one evening by the fire, bottle in hand, his face feverish. "My mother is more than blood and bones. She is the sign that they can't get me. They took her arm because they couldn't hold me. They dismembered my brother because my name is too big. My family is the monument to my glory."

The gang was silent. One stared into the embers, another gritted his teeth as if he wanted to punch Jesse in the face. But no one said anything.

Inside, the woman lay, listening to his words, and her face grew harder, her eyes darker. When Jesse came in, proud, loud, she grinned at him—not with love, not with pride, but with pure hatred. "You're talking about glory, Jesse," she hissed. "I'm talking about my arm, which I'll never feel again. You're talking about monuments. I'm talking about a child lying in a box because you tied his name to your damned glory."

Jesse grinned, coughed, and spat Red onto the ground. "Your pain is my victory, Mother. Your blood is my gospel. You are a part of me." She turned away, whispering so quietly that only Frank heard: "I am not a part of you. I am your victim."

Frank stood at the window, smoking, silent. He saw the gang outside, drowning themselves in whiskey, and he knew: They no longer believed Jesse. But they couldn't leave. His name hung over them like a gallows, no matter where they rode.

Jesse's mother became a legend in the newspapers. "*Jesse James' mother seriously wounded – a victim of the law.*" Jesse read it with shining eyes. "See? Even she is a part of my story. Even she carries on my name."

Frank saw only an old woman, betrayed by life, whose arm had been left in the flames, whose son was rotting in a box. Not a symbol. Not a saint. Just a woman who could no longer die because life was too cruel to let her go.

And Jesse? Jesse continued to build his gospel of martyrdom, stone upon stone, blood upon blood.

Jesse rode through Missouri like a preacher with no gospel but blood. Everywhere he could get a drink, he told the story. Not about gold, not about banks, not about trains. But about the bomb.

"They mutilated my mother," he cried, raising the bottle. "They ripped my brother to pieces. They threw bombs at children because they couldn't catch

me. You see, men? The law is afraid. The railroad is afraid. The Pinkertons are afraid. And I'm the reason."

People listened. Some toasted, some cursed, some spat in the dirt. But everyone listened. And that was exactly what Jesse wanted. Every look, every syllable, every glass raised in recognition of his name was fuel on his fire.

Frank watched him as he made the story bigger and bigger. First, it was just a boy and an arm. Then two children. Then a woman who had burned in the fire. Every night, the story grew, like a tree of lies watered in blood.

"My brother died for my name," Jesse shouted in a bar. "My mother bleeds for my name. I am both the victim and the victor. I am the man they can't kill, so they kill everything around him."

The crowd cheered, toasted, some shouted his name. Jesse grinned, coughed, spat red into the spittoon, and raised his glass. "And I'm still alive!"

Frank stood in the shadows, smoking, silent. For him, it wasn't a victory. It was a market. Jesse sold his family's suffering like a showman displaying dead children in a circus wagon. Every round of applause was a coin, but the coins were made of dust.

At night, as the crowd staggered home drunkenly, the men of the gang sat silently. No one spoke. One whispered, "We drink blood. We live off his mother's pain." Frank didn't answer. But he knew it was true.

And Jesse? Jesse continued to laugh, cough, and preach his own gospel. He turned the farm into a monument, his mother into a flag, his brother into a drumbeat.

Frank saw it clearly: his brother was no longer an outlaw. Not a human being. Not a son. Jesse James was a business. And business sold blood.

Jesse couldn't stop. Wherever he appeared, he told the same story—and each time he exaggerated it further, like a merchant turning a dead cow into a sacred bull.

"They wanted me, but they hit my mother," he yelled in a tavern that reeked of sweat and liquor. "They wanted my heart, but they ripped my brother's head off. They dropped bombs on a farmhouse. That's how afraid they are of Jesse James!"



The men toasted, some shouted, one even cried. Jesse drank, coughed, spat red on the ground, and grinned. For him, it was theater, and he was the star.

Frank stood by, smoking, watching the men's faces. Some truly believed Jesse was greater than the law. Others looked away in disgust, as if they could no longer bear the image of his mother without an arm.

It was the same in the gang. A few listened to him, spellbound, as if he were a prophet. Others drank silently, wanting only to forget. One murmured to Frank: "He's selling his own mother. He's turning her into an altar, his brother's blood into a sermon. He's no longer a man." Frank nodded, remained silent. He knew it was true.

The Pinkertons, of course, heard the stories too. And they just grinned. For them, it wasn't a legend. For them, it was advertising. Every saying Jesse shouted in a tavern was another reason to hunt him down. The bigger he made himself, the more bullets were waiting for him.

But Jesse loved it. He absorbed the danger like whiskey. "They're coming, Frank," he laughed, his eyes feverish. "And they're coming louder because I'm louder. I'm the drum, and they're dancing to my beat."

Frank didn't answer. He knew Jesse wasn't the drum. He was the sacrificial lamb who considered himself a hymn.

The men of the gang became quieter, harder. Some began to view Jesse with fear, not with respect. They knew he could turn a bullet in their direction at any moment if they refused to believe him. And so they nodded, toasted him, listened to his sermons—while in truth they were only waiting for the moment when the myth collapsed.

By the fire, deep in the night, Frank heard someone whisper, "Perhaps it would be better to shoot him ourselves. Then at least it'll end here." Another replied, "You do it, I won't. His name won't die if you kill him. It will grow."

Frank listened, remained silent, and puffed on his pipe. He knew both were right. Jesse had long since become untouchable—not because he was immortal, but because every shot made him bigger, even the one that would kill him.

And Jesse? Jesse drank, coughed, spat red, and kept talking. He turned pain into capital, loss into legend, blood into currency.

Frank saw it and knew: This was the final frontier. Jesse James was no longer human. He was a business. And the business sold dead people.

The nights grew longer, but Jesse grew louder. He could no longer remain silent. Everywhere they stopped, he told the same story, like an itinerant preacher with nothing but wounds in his luggage.

"They took my mother's arm," he cried, "because they couldn't get my heart. They blew off my brother's head because my name is too big. And I'm sitting here—alive!"

He coughed, blood splattered on the floor, the men barely flinched. They'd seen it too many times. For Jesse, it was proof. For the others, it was just a sign that he was dying more slowly than everyone around him.

Frank sat quietly, pipe in mouth, looking at the faces of the gang. There was no cheering. No pride. Only tired eyes that asked him: *For how much longer?* One drank so deeply he vomited. Another stared into the fire as if he might disappear into it.

Men no longer considered him invincible. They considered him cursed. A man whose name was greater than himself, and whose curse dragged them all down with him.

In a Kansas tavern, Jesse yelled the story again. "They threw bombs at children because they fear Jesse James! Bombs! And yet I'm sitting here!" The crowd cheered, some shouting his name, some spitting contemptuously. Jesse absorbed both, cheers and scorn, as if everything were fodder for his hunger.

Frank saw it and knew: his brother lived only in an echo. The man himself had long since died – somewhere between the mother's scream, the torn-to-death boy, and the burning farm. What remained was a shell held together by whiskey, coughing, and lies.

At night, by the fire, the men talked quietly. "He's dead, and he doesn't know it." - "We're just carrying his corpse with us, and he keeps talking." One laughed bitterly: "Perhaps that's the trick. Perhaps his spirit is already greater than his body."

Frank heard it, remained silent, and puffed on his pipe. He knew: They were right. Jesse was dead. But the myth lived on, stronger than ever.

And Jesse? Jesse coughed, spat red into the fire, grinned, and preached. "As long as my name is mentioned, I am immortal."

Frank looked at him and thought: *No, Jesse. You died long ago. Only your ghost refuses to be silent.*

The farm had long since burned, the wounds long since healed—but Jesse kept them open like a preacher rubbing salt into meat, just to keep people listening. Every night he retold the story, bigger, bloodier, louder.

"They mutilated my mother! They dismembered my brother! They dropped bombs on my house, and yet I'm sitting here—alive!"

He raised the bottle, coughed, and spat blood into the embers. The men looked away. Once, they would have cheered, raised their glasses, and shouted. Now their throats were dry, their faces blank. They knew he was no longer speaking to them, but to some invisible audience of newspapers, myths, and shadows.

Frank saw it more clearly than anyone. His brother was gone. Just a shell held together by whiskey and madness. A ghost with Colts who considered himself immortal because he screamed louder than death.

The gang fell apart in silence. No one spoke of money, gold, or loot. They stopped talking altogether. At one point, one murmured, "We're just his coffin." Another nodded and remained silent.

Jesse didn't notice anything. Or he didn't want to notice anything. He talked, laughed, coughed. For him, the gang wasn't a gang anymore—it was a procession. Funeral bearers carrying his name to the world while he himself was already half-rotting.

Frank listened to his sermons, smoked, and remained silent. There was nothing in his eyes but tiredness. He knew Jesse had lost all humanity. There was no brother left. No son. No husband. Just a ghost of the dead, polluting the air with his own glory.

And the men? They continued to follow. Not out of faith, not out of respect—but because they were too deeply involved, because they knew whoever left was dead.

The farm had taken everything that was left of Jesse James as a human being.

What remained was a myth with blood on its hands, which turned its own gang into bearers of the dead.

### Robin Hood or dirty dog?

The stories about Jesse moved faster than trains. They crawled through taverns, rode across fields, fluttered in newspapers, and hung in people's throats like whiskey and dust. And at some point, people wondered: Who was this man?

For some, he was a hero. "He takes from the rich and gives to the poor," they whispered in the villages. "He steals from banks, from railways, from the powerful. And when he rides through our land, he greets us as if we were brothers."

To others, he was a dog. "He doesn't rob for us. He robs for himself. He doesn't shoot for justice. He shoots because he can." In some towns, his name was spat out like poison. "Jesse James—a bastard who terrifies children."

The newspapers didn't know which side to feed. Some wrote of a modern-day Robin Hood, a fighter against the railroads, against cold capital, against the Pinkertons. Others portrayed him as a devil who turned blood into whiskey.

Jesse read both, grinned, coughed, and spat red into the spittoon. "You see, men? They can't decide. Hero or bastard—but always my name. Always me."

Frank looked at him, his face gray with smoke. "You're neither a hero nor a bastard, Jesse. You're just a man who coughs up too much blood and laughs too loudly." "Then at least I'm not a nobody."

People loved myths more than people. Farmers who had nothing imagined Jesse James fighting for them, even if he never brought them a cent. Rich people who had everything feared him because he showed them that money can't stop a bullet.

In a tavern in Kansas, a man stood up and shouted, "To Jesse James, the Robin Hood of our time!" The crowd toasted, the whiskey flowed, Jesse grinned, coughed, and read the newspaper aloud as if it were his Bible.

In another town, further north, notices were nailed to doors: "Beware of Jesse James—a murderer, a dog, a scoundrel." Children were called in when word reached them that he was in the area. Women closed their shutters.

Frank stood between these worlds, smoking, silent. He knew Jesse was both and nothing. Neither hero nor bastard, but a man living in a gray area where blood counted more than gold.

But the country wanted simple stories. And so Jesse became either Robin Hood or a dirty dog.

And Jesse? Jesse laughed, coughed, and drank. It didn't matter to him. The main thing was that they said his name.

Jesse had read the headlines, heard the bar talk. Robin Hood. The avenger of the poor. The man who took the gold from the rich and gave it to the peasants.

He grinned, coughed, spat out red, and began to play the part.

"I'm not just an outlaw," he shouted in a tavern that reeked of sweat, liquor, and cheap tobacco. "I'm the man who'll show the banks they're not untouchable. I'm the slap in the face for the railroads. I'm the one who'll avenge you!"

The crowd cheered, toasted, and shouted his name. No one asked where the money he stole was. No one asked why the farmers were still poor while Jesse swigged whiskey from bottles that cost more than a cow.

Frank stood by, smoking, silent. He knew Jesse wouldn't give anything back. Not a coin, not a sack of corn, not a loaf of bread. He took, he drank, he wasted. And when he spoke, he spoke like a preacher selling hell itself.

There was a murmur among the gang. One said, "Maybe we really are like Robin Hood." Another laughed bitterly: "Robin Hood shared. Jesse only shares with the bottle."

But the farmers were happy to hear it. In the fields, in the villages, they whispered: "Jesse James is for us." Even if they got nothing, the thought that someone out there was putting fear into the rich was sweet.

The rich saw it differently. For them, Jesse wasn't a hero, but a disease. Every robbery was a fever that made their stocks, their trains, their banks tremble. And they paid the Pinkertons to burn out the fever.

Jesse enjoyed both sides. "See, Frank?" he grinned, coughed, and held up the newspaper. "To the poor, I'm a hero. To the rich, a dog. But I'm always their topic. I'm the man who can divide them." Frank blew out smoke, his eyes tired. "You don't divide, Jesse. You bleed. And everyone who listens to you bleeds with you."

But Jesse didn't listen. He continued to play his role. Every robbery received a speech. Every shooting was a sermon. Every coin he stole was proof that he was greater than the law.

And the country swallowed it. Farmers told their children about Jesse James as if he were a fairytale hero. The rich cursed, paid more Pinkertons, and swore revenge.

But Frank knew: Jesse was neither Robin Hood nor a dog. He was just a man writing his own legend—with the blood of everyone else.

Jesse wore the mask so easily, as if he'd always owned it. He knew how to talk. How to have his mouth full of pathos and whiskey at the same time.

"I'm fighting for you!" he shouted, holding the bottle up, his voice hoarse from coughing. "The banks are the chains. The railway is the rope. I am the knife that will free you!"

The farmers clapped, toasted, and called his name. They believed in him like a saint, even though they went home empty-handed, their pockets as empty as ever.

Frank stood by, watched the spectacle, and smoked. He knew: It was nothing but smoke. Jesse gave nothing to anyone. Not bread, not a cent, not protection. He robbed, drank, wasted away. And people still loved him because they'd rather believe in a liar than in their own misery.

Things were different in the cities. There, he was painted as a dog. "Jesse James – a bastard who steals and murders." On posters, his name appeared like a curse; in saloons, people spat on the floor when they heard it.

Jesse grinned at both. "See, Frank? To some I'm a hero, to others a dog. But I'm always bigger than them. They talk about me, not themselves." Frank blew out smoke, his eyes dark with tiredness. "You're not bigger. You're just louder. And noise dies faster than a name."

But the country didn't listen to Frank. It listened to Jesse. Every story he told became a song. Every lie he uttered became a truth. Every raid, no matter how bloody, was a victory for the peasants and a nightmare for the rich.

The gang was divided. Some believed him, absorbing the Robin Hood mask as if it gave meaning to their misery. Others looked away, drank, and grumbled. One whispered to Frank, "He really thinks he's a saint." Frank nodded, smoking. "Saints bleed too. Usually more."

And Jesse? Jesse laughed, coughed, and spat red. He played his role so convincingly that he believed it himself.

Frank saw it clearly: The truth had long since died. Myths were stronger. And Jesse James no longer lived as a human being, but as a lie the country wanted to hear.

Jesse no longer needed newspapers to know that his legend was running like a train without brakes. Everywhere he went, whispers began before he even spoke. "That's him. Jesse James. The man who will bring down the banks. The man who will avenge the poor."

And he played the role as if he had never done anything else.

"I am your sword!" he roared in a tavern that reeked of horse, smoke, and cheap whiskey. "The banks take your air, the railroad takes your land. But I'll take their pockets! I don't rob for myself—I rob for you!"

The crowd roared, toasted, and shouted. One shouted, "Jesse James—our Robin Hood!" Jesse grinned, coughed, spat red into the dirt, and drank like a king.

Frank stood by, with his pipe as always, and saw the faces. Farmers with empty pockets who believed in fairy tales because they had nothing else. Men who drowned their hunger in whiskey for one evening and saw Jesse as a savior.

Frank knew: He wasn't a savior. He was an actor, a fever dream, a false prophet. He gave them nothing but stories, and they thanked him as if he had given them gold.

The gang was as divided as the crowd. Some toasted him, roared along, genuinely believing they were part of a grand game against the law. Others looked silently at the ground, drank, and shook their heads. One whispered to

Frank: "We're not a gang anymore. We're a damn cult." Frank nodded. "And our prophet coughs blood."

But Jesse didn't hear it, or he didn't want to hear it. He kept talking, talking, preaching, until his voice was hoarse. "I am not just Jesse James. I am the people. I am your arm. I am your cry against the powerful."

Frank thought: *You're a man with guns and empty pockets. Nothing more.*

But the country preferred to believe lies. To some, he was Robin Hood. To others, a dog. To Frank, he was a ghost who wore his own demise like a crown.

And the gang? They continued to follow, silent, exhausted, broken. Like a procession following their false prophet because there was no other way.

Jesse no longer just talked like a robber, he talked like a damn prophet. His voice was rough from coughing, his lips red with blood, but he raised the bottle like a crucifix and preached into every bar, every campfire, every night.

"God himself chose me!" he cried, whiskey dripping from his chin. "He carried me through bullets, through bombs, through blood. My mother lives even though she's missing an arm. I live even though I cough up blood every night. My name lives even though they tried to kill me a thousand times. This is no coincidence. This is destiny!"

The peasants toasted, the drunkards shouted, some even knelt in the dirt as if they truly had divine blood in them. They wanted to believe, because faith was sweeter than hunger.

Frank stood by, cold as stone. He saw the men with their mouths open, saw the farmers with shining eyes, and he knew: Jesse wasn't one of the chosen ones. He was just a man who lost too much, drank too much, and shouted too loudly.

But myths were stronger than truth.

The gang itself became increasingly divided. One whispered, "Perhaps he really is chosen." Another growled, "Chosen to kill us all." No one openly contradicted him. No one dared to tell the Prophet to his face that he was just a sick bastard.

And Jesse? Jesse soaked it up. Every adoration, every word, every bottle raised at him fed his delusional heart. "I am more than a man," he muttered, coughing, blood dripping onto his shirt. "I am God's instrument."



Frank thought: *If God needs such a tool, then he is a damned blacksmith of doom.*

The reality was that they barely had any money left. Every raid yielded less, every ride resulted in more deaths. They lived on whiskey, on lies, on Jesse's sermons. They were no longer a pack. They were rats in a sinking boat, which Jesse continued to bore into with each of his speeches.

But the country continued to listen. Robin Hood or dog—it no longer mattered. Jesse James was now a prophet. Some called him the Avenger of the Poor. Others spat his name out like poison. But everyone spoke it.

But Frank knew: A name can be loud. But it can't save a man who has been dead for a long time and is only kept alive by blood and madness.

Jesse stood in the middle of a tavern, his shirt sweaty, his hands shaking from the fever, talking like he was the damned Emperor of the West.

"Law?" he roared, his voice hoarse. "The law is dust beneath my boots. People? The people drink my name, whether they love me or hate me. And God?" He held up the bottle, whiskey dripping onto the floor. "God himself gives me air when my lungs are full of blood. I am greater than law, people, and God!"

The farmers shouted, toasted, some fell around his legs as if they'd seen the Messiah. Jesse grinned, coughed, spat red into the straw, and continued drinking.

Frank stood by, cold, unmoved. He knew there was no Messiah standing here. Just a man so deeply delusional that he could no longer distinguish between preaching and madness, between whiskey and truth.

The bond had long since broken internally. One stared into the glass, murmuring, "He is not greater than God. He is greater than our death." Another nodded, whispering, "And he's taking us with him."

No one dared to tell Jesse to his face that he was overreacting. They knew he'd shoot them rather than tolerate any insult. So they toasted him halfheartedly, forced laughter, and listened to his speeches like prisoners to a jailer.

Jesse absorbed it all. Cheers, mockery, fear. For him, every reaction was a testament to his greatness. "See, Frank?" he called in the tavern, coughing. "Even those who hate me are my choir. Everyone who speaks my name sings my song."

Frank blew out smoke, his eyes tired. "Your song is just a dirge, Jesse." But Jesse didn't hear. He was deaf to everything but his own echo.

And the country embraced him. Newspapers wrote about the "Immortal Outlaw." Farmers whispered he was a hero. Rich people cursed him like a demon. But no one ignored him.

Frank knew: That was the curse. Jesse had put himself above everything. But a man who puts himself above everything no longer has any ground beneath his feet. And at some point, he falls.

The gang marched on. Not because they wanted to. Not because they believed they could. But because they had no choice. Jesse had made their fate his own madness.

And madness drove them all into a hole that could only be filled with blood.

The night was black as burnt paper, and Jesse was still talking. He stood by the fire, his eyes feverish, his bottle almost empty, his cough deep, and yet he spoke as if he had to carry the world with words alone.

"I'm bigger than the law!" he screamed, coughing, blood dripping onto his shirt. "Bigger than the banks, bigger than the railroad, bigger than any Pinkerton! I'm bigger than God Himself, because I'm standing here while everything around me is falling."

The men of the gang looked at him like shadows. They were no longer brothers, no longer robbers, no longer fighters. They were the bearers of his madness, his silent priests, who had to swallow his sermons because they could find no way out.

Frank stood a little way off, pipe in mouth, face still. He knew: Jesse was no greater than the law. He was no greater than God. He was no greater than life. He was just a man drowning in his own echo, pulling the others into the whirlpool with him.

But the country didn't listen to Frank. It listened to Jesse. In the villages, they called him Robin Hood. In the cities, a dog. In the newspapers, a ghost. No one knew who he really was, and no one wanted to know. The truth was dead, the myth lived.

By the fire, one of the men whispered, "We are only shadows." Another replied, "We no longer carry any treasure. Only its name." Frank nodded. "And the name is heavier than any loot."

Jesse didn't hear it. Or he didn't want to. He kept talking, coughing, drinking, spitting red into the fire. For him, the gang was a congregation, the fire a pulpit, his cough proof that even blood could preach.

"I am immortal!" he cried, his voice shaky, his face ravaged by fever. "As long as you speak my name, I live!"

Frank watched the men remain silent, bow their heads, and drink their whiskey. He knew they no longer believed in him. But they couldn't get away from him either. He was no longer a person they could rely on. He was a curse that ran through their veins.

And so the night ended. Jesse laughed, coughed, and preached. The gang remained silent, drank, and endured.

Frank thought: *The man is dead. Only his myth lives on. And the myth is stronger than all of us.*

### Newspaper articles and lies

The printing presses clattered louder than Colts. Every newspaper wanted a piece of Jesse James. Some painted him as a folk hero, a Robin Hood in shot-up boots. Others as a murderer, a beast who dragged children and women to the grave.

And the truth? The truth was dead. It lay somewhere in the dust of Missouri, shot, buried under headlines.

"Jesse James robs banks for the poor," one newspaper wrote. The next day, another printed: "Jesse James – bloody dog, shoots innocents in cold blood." The farmers read the first version, nodded, toasted, and told their children that there was a man out there fighting for them. The rich read the second, ordered more Pinkertons, polished their rifles, and prayed that the bastard would soon be lying in the dirt with a hole in his head.

Jesse sat by the fire with the newspaper, coughing, spitting blood, grinning. "You see, men? Every line is my gospel. Whether they love me or hate me, they write my name. I'm in every town, on every tongue. I'm more than a man. I'm a damned printer's swarm."

The gang was silent. One stared at his boots, muttering, "We're just footnotes." Another laughed bitterly. "Footnotes who die so he can make headlines." Frank smoked, said nothing. He knew it was true.

The lies grew faster than weeds. They wrote that Jesse had distributed gold to poor widows. They wrote that he had stopped an entire train with just a Colt. They wrote that he was bulletproof, protected by God.

Jesse read it, believed it, or at least pretended to. "See? Even if I don't do anything, they'll write that I did it. I could be dead, and my name would still be robbing, still shooting, still drinking."

Frank thought: *Maybe you're already dead. And this is just your shadow in ink.*

The men of the gang listened to the stories, sometimes laughing, shaking their heads. One whispered, "If we die tomorrow, none of us will write. Only about him." And Frank answered quietly, "That's how it's always been. That's how it will stay."

Jesse didn't care. For him, every lie was a stone on the monument he was building for himself. Whether he truly shared or not, whether he shot or not, whether he laughed or bled—the newspaper made him bigger than he ever was.

And the land devoured it. Because people loved stories more than truth.

Newspapers were like vultures. They didn't just hover over corpses—they made them themselves. Jesse James was an endless carcass to them, pecked at again and again until nothing remained but bones and ink.

"James Gang Robbers Train and Distributes Sacks of Gold to the Poor," read a newspaper read in Kansas. The truth was, they hadn't even looted enough to feed everyone in the gang. But the story sold well. Farmers read it, nodded, toasted, and told people how Jesse was the avenger of the common people.

Another paper wrote: "Jesse James – Murderer without mercy, shoots children in their sleep." Completely made up, but that, too, sold. Citizens in the cities

read it, nailed their doors shut, and spat on the floor whenever his name was mentioned.

Jesse laughed at both. "See?" he shouted from the fire, coughing, and spitting red into the embers. "They're making me bigger, whether they love me or hate me. I'm the stuff their newspapers are made of."

The men looked at him, blank, exhausted. One whispered, "And us? We're just shadows in the margins." Another growled, "Shadows dying so he can make headlines."

Frank smoked quietly, his eyes heavy. He knew it was true. Jesse grew taller with each article, but the man himself grew smaller. Thinner. Sicker. Only the headlines remained bold.

Sometimes Jesse read a lie so absurd that even the men laughed. "Jesse James steals \$100,000 and gives it away to orphanages." Jesse grinned, coughed, and patted his chest. "See? Even if I don't do it, they think I could. My name steals, even if my hand sleeps."

Frank thought: *Your name is robbing, yes. But your body is dying, Jesse. Your body is shrinking, and eventually, only the name will remain. And that will outlive you like a dog that won't let go of its dead master.*

The peasants who had nothing clung to the good lies. They told their children that Jesse James was their guardian angel. The rich clung to the bad lies, painting him as a devil who ought to be shot. Both sides were blind, both sides sucking on the same ink.

And Jesse? Jesse absorbed it all. He believed he was both the hero and the dog. A man you could neither love nor hate without simultaneously making him immortal.

The gang continued to fall apart. Some listened to his speeches, nodding as if they still believed. Others drank, remained silent, and just wanted to disappear. But no one left. Because where could they have gone? Where the name didn't precede them?

And the printing presses continued to clatter. Every lie made Jesse James bigger. Every day made the man behind it smaller.

Jesse read the newspapers like Bibles. Every article, whether praise or hate, became part of his preacher's song. He absorbed the lies until they flowed like blood in his veins.

"They write that I distributed sacks of gold to widows!" he cried one evening by the fire, coughing, spitting red, and grinning. "Then it must be so! If the newspapers say so, it's true. See, men? I'm a benefactor!"

The gang laughed bitterly. One muttered, "Widows? We've made widows at the most." Another stared into the fire, silent.

Frank smoked, looked at Jesse waving the newspapers like flags. "You believe that crap yourself, Jesse." "If everyone believes it, Frank, then it's the truth. The truth is what's in print."

This was the new Jesse. No longer just a robber, no longer just an outlaw. He was a character who played his own lies. Every article was a mask he put on. Today Robin Hood, tomorrow a bloody dog, the day after a demon. He played them all.

And the country believed it. In villages, people said Jesse James gave cattle to poor families. In cities, people swore he shot children in their sleep. Both stories were lies. But both made him greater.

The men of the gang saw how he incorporated the lies into his sermons. "They say I'm the terror of the railways!" he cried, coughing, grinning, and raising the bottle. "So I am! They say I'm the savior of the poor! So I am! They say I'm the devil's hound—then I howl like one!" And he did howl, his laughter filled with blood in his throat.

The gang was silent. One whispered to Frank: "He's no longer human. He's a paper figure." Frank nodded and blew smoke into the night. "Paper burns quickly. But it burns loudly."

And Jesse burned. He burned in every headline, in every pub, in every whisper about him. But the fire consumed him from the inside, and only the lies kept him going.

Frank knew: The man was dead. Only the figure lived on, fed on printer's ink and whiskey.

One day, a reporter showed up at the camp. A thin guy with a hat that was too soft and ink on his fingers. He was scared, but more than that, he was hungry—hungry for a story that could sell his newspaper.

Jesse grinned, coughed, wiped blood from his mouth, and beckoned him closer. "Come on, boy. Write down. Write what you see. But write it bigger than it is."

The reporter wrote. Every word Jesse spewed landed in the notebook, twisted, inflated, ready for the printing press. Jesse recounted robberies that never happened, gold he never gave away, deeds greater than any bullet.

"Write that I'm expropriating the banks so the poor can live." "But... did you really do that?" the reporter asked hesitantly. Jesse laughed, coughed, and spat Rot on the floor. "Write it anyway. The truth is what's printed. Not what happens."

Frank stood in the shadows, smoking and shaking his head. He knew: This was no longer an outlaw. This was a ringmaster, and the reporter was just a clown making the audience cheer.

The men of the gang watched, silent, exhausted. One muttered, "We're extras in his damn show." Another spat into the fire. "Extras dying while he's giving interviews."

The reporter eventually rode back, and days later they read the newspaper. Jesse James, the avenger of the poor. Jesse James, the hero against banks and railroads. Jesse James, bulletproof, sent by God.

Jesse laughed, holding the paper up like a Bible. "See, men? I say it—and they print it. I am what I want because they write it."

Frank blew out smoke. "You are not what you want. You are what they sell. And they sell you piece by piece until there's nothing left."

But Jesse didn't listen. He was too enamored with the sound of his own legend. Every reporter was welcome, every pen a tool that would make his name bigger.

And the land devoured it, again and again. Peasants cheered because they believed in a hero. Rich people cursed because they believed in a demon. Both read the same newspaper, both fed the same myth.

Frank knew: Jesse James, the man, had long since disappeared. What was riding, coughing, laughing, and preaching—that was just a headline on two legs.

The lies never stopped. They grew like weeds after rain, faster than they could be pulled out. Newspapers invented deeds that never happened. A robbery here, a murder there, a charitable act he never committed.

According to one newspaper, Jesse had single-handedly robbed an entire garrison. Another wrote that he had distributed a bank's entire assets to starving families. Yet another claimed that he was bulletproof, bullets ricocheting off his chest like drops from a stone.

Jesse read everything, coughed, laughed, and spat blood. "You see, men? I'm immortal. Even when I do nothing, I do everything. I can sleep, and they write that I rode. I can die, and they write that I'm alive."

The men looked at him, empty, drained. One whispered, "Perhaps he himself no longer knows what he did." Another nodded, "Perhaps he was never who we thought he was."

Frank knew it was worse. Jesse was now a prisoner of his own headlines. He could no longer distinguish what he had really experienced from what was just in the newspapers. Every article became a memory, every lie a building block in his mind.

"Remember the story about the sacks of gold, Frank?" Jesse grinned, coughing. Frank blew out smoke. "That was made up, Jesse." "No," Jesse replied, his eyes glazed over. "It was in the newspaper. So it happened."

That was the point at which Frank finally understood: His brother no longer lived in a world of dust, sweat, and blood. He lived in a world of printer's ink and lies, and he loved them more than any truth.

The gang felt it too. One muttered, "We are characters in a story we no longer write." Another spat into the fire: "We live in the shadow of his name, not in the sunshine of our own deeds."

And Jesse? Jesse laughed, coughed, and continued preaching. "My name is greater than the truth. My name is the truth."

Frank thought: *Then the man died. And only the story continues.*



Jesse had learned to sharpen lies like knives. He knew which headlines the farmers wanted and which ones terrified the rich. He fed both.

"Write that I bring gold to the poor," he told a reporter who was taking notes with trembling hands. "And write that I slit the throats of the rich while they sleep. Write it in capital letters, boy. Write it so they'll fear and love me at the same time."

And the reporter wrote. And the printing presses roared. And the next day, the country knew more about Jesse James than Jesse himself knew about himself.

The peasants celebrated him, considered him a saint. The rich paid even more Pinkertons, painted him as the devil. And Jesse stood among them, grinning, coughing, spitting blood, and laughing, holding both sides in his hands like puppets.

"You see, men?" he shouted by the fire. "The newspaper is my gun! With every word, I hit whomever I want. With every lie, I shoot a Pinkerton. With every headline, I buy myself a place in people's hearts."

The gang was silent. One muttered, "Then we're just the bullets he fires." Another stared into the darkness. "Bullets no one counts anymore."

Frank smoked, looked at Jesse. "You're not a man anymore, Jesse. You're a play. An actor who forgets he has to retire, too." "Retire?" Jesse grinned, coughed, and wiped blood from his chin. "My resignation will be the biggest headline of all."

And that was crazy: Jesse knew he was going to die. But he was looking forward to it because he was sure his death would be greater than his life.

The men sensed it. They rubbed their Colts, drank deeper, and looked at Frank as if asking: *For how much longer?* But no one said it out loud.

Because Jesse kept them all in chains—not with Colts, not with gold, but with lies. Lies that were heavier than iron.

And Frank knew: They were no longer men. They were puppets in a theater written by newspapers. Jesse was now merely the leading man. And the audience went wild.

The newspapers grew louder than the Colts. Every day, a new headline, a new lie, a new myth. Jesse read them all, laughing, coughing, spitting blood, and talking as if he were the author of his own Bible.

"They write that I paid for the roof of an orphanage!" he grinned, his eyes feverish. "Then it must be so! If they print it, it's happened. And if they write tomorrow that I robbed the president myself, then that's happened too. Do you understand, men? I am what they print!"

The men stared at him, silent, blank, their faces gray. They knew he was no longer sane. He no longer lived in their world. He lived in a world of ink and paper, and they were merely characters he dragged along in his stories.

Frank smoked, exhaling smoke into the darkness. He knew his brother had long since disappeared. What stood before him, coughing, grinning, preaching—wasn't human. It was a myth on two legs, a shadow fed by headlines.

One of the men whispered, "We don't talk to each other anymore. We only talk about him." Another nodded. "And he only talks about himself."

The band dissolved into silence. At the fire, no one spoke except Jesse. On the ride, they just stared ahead, as if riding through fog. Everyone knew they were no longer a band. They were shadows following an echo.

And Jesse? Jesse laughed, coughed, spat blood, and held the newspaper up like a Bible. "As long as they print my name, I'm alive!"

Frank looked at him and thought: *You're no longer alive, Jesse. You're dead. Your name lives on. But you've been in the grave for a long time.*

Night fell, the fire crackled, the men drank, and were silent. And Jesse continued preaching as if he were alone in the world.

The chapter was clear: Jesse James no longer belonged to the Colts, not to the gang, not to the family. He belonged to the newspapers. And the newspapers had made him their god—a god of lies, blood, and whiskey.

## The myth grows, the corpses too

The name Jesse James grew faster than any grave they left behind. Every robbery, every bullet, every death was not just a fact, it was a story. And every story grew bigger the moment it was printed, drunk, or whispered.

The country couldn't get enough. In the taverns, they talked about Jesse as if he were a fairytale hero. "He robbed the bank and gave every poor farmer a gold piece!" – a lie, of course. The truth was, they had drunk the money away, gambled it away, and thrown it away in the dirt. But lies were sweeter, easier to swallow.

And in the cities, in the wealthy houses, people spoke of Jesse James as if it were a disease. "He shoots innocents. He robs churches. He burns villages." That, too, was mostly a lie. But fear doesn't need truth, it only needs a face. And Jesse James was that face.

Frank saw it all. Every new story made his brother bigger—and smaller at the same time. Because as the legend grew, the man shrank. Jesse coughed more, laughed louder, drank more deeply. His body was tired, his face haggard, but his name had become a damned monster that could no longer be stopped.

"They're talking about me in every state," Jesse grinned by the fire, his eyes red from the fever. "I'm in Kansas, Missouri, Texas—everywhere. Sometimes I feel like my name rides faster than I can." Frank blew smoke into the night. "Your name rides, Jesse. But it rides over corpses. And the corpses don't just belong to the Pinkertons."

For the dead piled up. Not just enemies. Friends too. Men of the gang who lay riddled with bullets by the roadside. Farmers who accidentally got caught in the crossfire. Women who huddled in their houses with screaming children while Colts fired outside.

Jesse saw the blood, grinned, coughed, spat red, and said, "Every corpse makes me bigger. Every death is proof that they fear me." Frank thought: *No. Every death is another nail in the coffin of your damned soul. If you even have one left.*

The men of the gang saw it differently. They felt the corpses on their shoulders, they felt the weight. One murmured as he rode, "We're no longer carrying loot. We're only carrying dead." Another nodded and remained silent.

But Jesse didn't hear that. He only heard his own name, echoing through bars, printed in newspapers, living in the whispers of farmers.

"You see, men?" he shouted in a tavern that stank of sweat and smoke. "As long as they talk about me, I'm greater than death!" The peasants toasted and cheered. And the next day, another person was shot, another person burned, another person buried.

The myth grew. So did the corpses.

There were more and more graves. Small, nameless mounds by the side of the road. Men lying wide-eyed in the dust, women with children in the wrong place at the wrong time. And every time a body lay in the dirt, Jesse turned it into a chapter in his damned Bible.

"There must be sacrifices," he said, bottle in hand, coughing, blood on his beard. "Every bullet fired is a nail in the coffin of our enemies. Every death is a price we pay so that my name lives on."

The men stared at him. Some nodded, not because they believed, but because they were too tired to argue. One whispered, "His name is consuming us."

Frank heard this, blew out smoke, and said, "Jesse, you call it sacrifice. I call it murder. You call it price. I call it blood that drowns us." Jesse grinned, coughed, and spat red into the embers. "You don't understand, Frank. Blood is the ink with which history is written. And my history will be red."

And she blushed. Every ride, every robbery left blood behind. Even if they only robbed a few dollars, there would be two, three, four bodies left. The Colts spoke faster than tongues, and every time, Jesse stood there afterward like a priest counting victims.

"They fear me," he cried in a tavern that stank like a slaughterhouse. "They send men, they send bullets, they send bombs. And yet I sit here, alive! And their corpses pave my path!"

The crowd toasted and cheered. Farmers clapped, preferring to believe in a hero rather than the truth. The truth was, Jesse was far from a hero. He was just a man swimming in blood as the waves continued to rise.

The gang felt it. Every death weighed on them. They drank more, slept less, looked in the mirror, and saw only ghosts. One said to Frank: "We're no longer

alive. We're just the shadows of his sermons." Frank nodded. "And shadows bleed, too."

But Jesse saw only the echo. His name echoed through villages, towns, and newspapers. For him, that was enough. "As long as they call my name, the dead have not fallen in vain."

Frank thought: *They all fell in vain, Jesse. Every single one. And you will be the last.*

The myth continued to grow, thicker and fatter, like a pig gorging itself in mud. And every dead person was just more fodder.

It was no longer a coincidence that blood was flowing. Jesse made it part of the performance. He knew every corpse was a sentence in his legend, every grave further proof that he was greater than the law.

After a robbery that left two railroad workers dead in the dust, Jesse stood in the middle of the tracks, Colt in one hand, whiskey bottle in the other, and shouted to the gang: "Look! Every dead man is my preacher. Every scream echoes my name. Without blood, I'd be just a man. With blood, I'm a story!"

The men stared at him, pale, exhausted. One whispered, "He wants the dead." Another nodded, murmuring, "He needs them. Without them, he's nothing."

Frank heard this, puffed on his pipe, and blew smoke into the night. "You're not a man anymore, Jesse. You're a body collector." Jesse grinned, coughed, and spat red onto the tracks. "Then I'm the greatest collector this country has ever had."

And so blood became a ritual. Every robbery ended with one shot too many. A man who could have lived lay dead. A woman who could have escaped took a bullet in the back. And Jesse saw it, coughed, laughed, as if it were necessary, as if it were wanted.

"You must pay," he said again and again. "Every bank, every train, every Pinkerton. You pay in dollars and in blood. Both are mine."

The gang fell silent. No more protest, no more questions. Only empty eyes, only tired hands, holding the Colts like shackles. They knew they were no longer riding for prey. They were riding for death.

Frank saw it clearly. Every ride was no longer a fight, but a march to the grave. Jesse led them, coughing, laughing, drinking, and they followed because there was no other way.

"We're not fighting anymore," thought Frank as he rode beside Jesse. "We're marching. And the march only ends in the dirt."

But Jesse heard only his name echoing through taverns, printed in newspapers, whispered by farmers. For him, the blood was not a burden. It was his applause.

And so the myth continued to grow. And so did the corpses.

Jesse stopped talking about loot. He started talking about blood. "Money is dust," he said, bottle in hand, coughing, his lips red from the constant coughing. "Banknotes burn. Coins rust. But blood remains. Blood tells a story. Blood writes my name in the earth. Without blood, there is no legend."

The men heard it, stared into the fire, some nodded, others remained silent. One murmured: "He wants it now. He wants the dead. Without the dead, he's naked."

Frank pulled on his pipe, blew out the smoke, and said quietly, "You're not leading a band anymore, Jesse. You're leading a procession. We're not carrying loot. We're carrying coffins."

But Jesse grinned, coughed, and spat red into the fire. "A coffin is just an altar for my name."

And so he rode on, seeking ambushes, not for money, but for blood. It was like a hunger, a frenzy. If no man died, Jesse was dissatisfied. When bullets rang out and someone lay in the dust, he coughed, laughed, and raised his bottle.

"You see, men? Every shot is an amen! Every death is my gospel!"

The gang remained silent. They knew they were no longer robbers. They were priests in a cult that worshipped only death. They rode as if in a funeral procession that never ended.

Frank felt the weight with every ride. Every Colt he drew was no longer for prey, but for a ritual demanded by Jesse. Every bullet that flew was not payment, but a sacrifice.

And out in the country, the myth grew. In the pubs, people talked about Jesse, who never left a raid without a casualty. In the newspapers, he was portrayed as a demon, a blood wolf. In the villages, farmers whispered that he was an avenger who paid his enemies with blood.

No one asked whose blood it was.

Frank knew: They were no longer riding for money. Not for freedom. Not even for revenge. They were riding for death. And Jesse was the damned master of ceremonies who set the pace.

The myth grew. And the bodies piled up like firewood.

Jesse spoke of blood as if it were gold. "Banknotes lose their value," he grinned, bottle to mouth, coughing, blood in his beard. "A dollar is worth less tomorrow than it is today. But a dead man? A dead man remains. Every corpse buys me more than a thousand bills. Blood is the only currency that never expires."

The men heard it and sat silently by the fire, their faces gray, their eyes empty. One murmured, "We're not robbing banks anymore. We're robbing lives." Another nodded, "And he's selling them for his name."

Frank pulled on his pipe, blew out the smoke, and looked at Jesse. "You're no longer a robber, Jesse. You're a merchant. And your merchandise is death." Jesse grinned, coughed, and spat red on the ground. "Then I'm the richest merchant in the West."

And he meant it. For him, every robbery wasn't a money deal. It was a trade in which dead men served as coins. The more corpses lay in the dirt, the bigger his name in the newspapers. And the bigger his name, the more secure he felt.

The gang was part of this deal. They were no longer men; they were coins in Jesse's pocket. Everyone knew that if he was hit, if he fell, he was just another price Jesse paid to keep the myth growing.

Sometimes they talked about it, secretly, quietly, when Jesse was sleeping. One whispered, "We are his offerings." Another nodded. "We are the currency. We are the coins he tosses so his name shines." Frank heard this, but remained silent. He knew it was true. But he also knew: No one would leave. The myth held them tight, heavier than chains.

And out in the country, the trade worked perfectly. Every headline was a price tag. "Train robbery, three dead." – "Bank robbery, five dead." – "Jesse James

escapes, leaving ten dead." The peasants read and toasted because they believed in an avenger. The rich read and cursed because they believed in a demon. But both sides paid with attention, and attention was the dividend Jesse reaped.

Frank saw it clearly. Jesse had turned the logic of the world upside down. Money was worthless. Blood was capital. And they were all part of his damned market.

"You're gambling with dead people, Jesse," Frank said one night, his voice harsh, his face dark in the firelight. Jesse grinned, coughed, and raised the bottle. "I'm not gambling. I'm investing."

And so the myth continued to grow. And corpses became his course.

Jesse spoke of the dead as if they were stamps authenticating his name. "Everyone who falls seals my existence," he muttered, coughing, bottle in hand. "Without the dead, I'm just a robber. With the dead, I'm a force. Blood is my seal."

The men heard it, silent, exhausted. One murmured, "We're not a gang. We're funeral bearers." Another nodded. "We march like a funeral procession, and he leads the way."

Frank blew out smoke and looked at Jesse. "You're no longer human. You're a gravedigger digging your own legend." Jesse grinned, coughed, and spat Rot into the embers. "Then I'll dig deeper than anyone else. And when I fall, my hole will be the biggest."

The raids became bloodier. Jesse wasn't interested in the loot anymore. He wanted something to be left in the dust—bodies, blood, screams. Every time someone fell, he coughed, laughed, and raised the bottle. "See? Now they're even more afraid of me!"

The gang was silent. They rode as if in a trance, tired, empty, with Colts that grew heavier with every shot. Everyone knew: they were no longer traversing the land; they were carrying it to its grave.

And outside? Outside, the myth continued to fester. "Jesse James leaves a trail of blood in Missouri." - "The James Gang: More dead than loot." - "Outlaw or executioner?" The headlines were louder than gunshots. And they made Jesse bigger, while his body grew thinner, sicker, weaker.



Frank saw it clearly. The myth was the horse, Jesse merely the rider, barely able to stay in the saddle. But the horse ran, ran over corpses, and they were all dragged along.

In a tavern, Jesse, coughing, his lips smeared with red, shouted: "Every dead man is my testimony! Every shot is a gospel! Every scream is my prayer!" The farmers raised their glasses, the men of the gang were silent. Frank thought: *We are no longer a gang. We are a funeral procession. And our destination is the abyss.*

The myth grew. So did the corpses. And Jesse rode ahead, a priest of blood whose sermons knew only death.

Talk of money had long since disappeared. Jesse spoke only in blood. Every word he spat was red, every picture he painted a corpse in the dust.

"They only understand one language," he murmured, the bottle to his mouth, his eyes glassy. "The language of death. I am their translator. Every bullet is a sentence. Every corpse is a chapter."

The men heard it and fell silent. Their faces were like stone, their gazes empty. They knew they were no longer robbers. They were extras in a play that only demanded corpses.

Frank saw them, their tired bodies, their bowed heads. He knew: They were no longer riding for prey, no longer for freedom, no longer for revenge. They were riding because Jesse was leading the way, and Jesse was only riding into the blood.

The raids were like rituals. Hardly any loot, hardly any planning. Just Colts talking and bodies falling. And Jesse coughed, laughed, spat red, and shouted, "See? My name grows! My name lives!"

But everyone knew it was just the blood that was growing.

The gang became more silent, drank more, and slept less. One muttered at night, "We're gravediggers." Another replied, "No. We're dead men who are still walking." Frank blew out smoke, thinking: *Exactly. We're already dead. We just don't know it yet.*

And out in the country? People loved it. The farmers said Jesse was their hero because he made the rich bleed. The rich swore he was the devil because he filled their world with bullets. But both sides fed the same myth.

Newspapers wrote: "Jesse James – Trail of Blood in the West." "The James Gang: More Corpses than Dollars." "Myth or Monster?"

And Jesse absorbed it, coughed, laughed, drank. For him, the blood was not a blemish. It was his crown.

Frank knew: They were no longer riding. They were marching. A funeral procession, endless, aimless, with Jesse leading the way like a priest tolling the death knell.

The myth grew. So did the corpses. And the gang was now merely the shadow of a funeral procession moving through the country – a country that believed more in lies and blood than in truth.

### The railway workers scream

The railroad wasn't just tracks and metal. It was a damned religion. For the rich, it was proof that America was unstoppable—steel, smoke, profit. And Jesse James had tampered with that religion like a heretic peeing in church.

Every train robbery was a sacrilege. Every dead railway worker was a scream that echoed through the tracks. And the railway workers screamed back.

"We'll get him!" they howled in the workshops, which stank of oil and sweat. "We'll chase him to hell! This bastard is making us look ridiculous! He's paralyzing the trains, he's taking our hearts away! No man will escape the railway!"

The companies paid Pinkertons like priests to defend their religion. But the railroad workers themselves, the ordinary men, hated Jesse in their own, raw way. Not just because he took their jobs. But because he humiliated them.

A train was power, speed, pride. Jesse had stopped it, robbed it, left it lying in the mud like a lame horse. And the men who drove the trains were now bellowing like caged dogs.

Jesse laughed at all this. "The train is howling," he said by the fire, coughing and spitting red. "But a scream isn't a gunshot. And as long as they scream, I'll keep riding."

Frank looked at him coldly. "They're not screaming, Jesse. They're roaring. And behind every roar is a Colt."

The newspapers picked up on the hatred: "Railroad workers vow revenge." "Stopping trains means killing progress." "Jesse James – America's enemy."

The farmers read and laughed. For them, the railroad was just the monster that devoured their land, cut up their fields, and destroyed their houses. For them, Jesse was the man who made the monster bleed.

But to the railway workers, he was a demon. They swore to see him hanged. They cursed in the bars, spat in the dust, and rubbed their oily hands on their revolvers as if the Colts were part of their tools.

And Jesse? Jesse enjoyed it. "See?" he exclaimed. "Even the tracks are singing my name. The trains are screaming, and they're screaming Jesse James!"

Frank thought: *No. They're screaming for your death.*

The railway didn't just scream. It struck back.

After each raid, the trains were armed like rolling fortresses. Railroad workers with rifles, Pinkertons with pistols, guards with hard faces who swore they would die rather than let the bastard Jesse James laugh at them again.

"No train runs naked anymore," they said in the depots. "Every train is a fortress. Every car is a coffin for the outlaw."

The railway workers weren't soldiers, but they were men of iron, forged by the smoke and noise of the machines. They had hard hands, calloused, oil-stained, and in those hands now lay Colts, gripped as tightly as wrenches.

Jesse heard about this, coughed, grinned, and raised the bottle. "They're arming. Good. Then it'll be a real war." Frank blew out smoke. "A war against steel, Jesse. Against trains, against machines. Against men who have nothing left to lose but their pride."

"Pride!" Jesse laughed, coughed, and spat out Rot. "I'll take that away, too. I'll rip the pride out of their hands and drink it down with whiskey."

But the trains were no longer easy prey. Where they once stopped because a few planks were lying on the tracks, they now rolled through, shooting back. Pinkertons jumped out of the cars like devils from crates, railroad workers fired shots from open windows as if they were an army.

The gang's first attempts failed bloodily. One man fell into the dust, another lay on the track with his throat torn open. Jesse coughed, screamed, fired back, but even he knew: The railroad had learned to scream and bite simultaneously.

In the pubs, the railway workers proudly recounted the story. "We caught one of them! We showed that trains don't die!" And the crowd toasted, roared, and banged on the tables as if Jesse James were already half dead.

The newspapers ate it up. "The Railroad Strikes Back." "Pinkertons and Workers Against Jesse James." "Every Train a Rolling Grave."

Jesse read, coughed, and grinned. "They're making me bigger, Frank. The more they hate me, the more they talk about me." Frank looked at him, his eyes dark. "They're not just talking anymore. They're reloading."

The railroad workers screamed. They screamed for blood. And their screams echoed through the tracks, through the newspapers, through the land—an echo that would soon haunt Jesse James in his sleep.

It was no longer the old game of blocking tracks, stopping trains, and emptying pockets. The railway had learned its lesson. It didn't just shout—it beckoned.

A train passed through Missouri one night, seemingly unattended. Just a few lights in the darkness, a faint rattle, as if it carried nothing but empty crates. Jesse saw it, grinned, coughed, and took a drag on his bottle. "That's ours, men. He's lying there like a fat pig waiting to be slaughtered."

They laid planks on the tracks, and the train came to a screeching halt. Jesse leaped forward, Colt in hand, grinning like a wolf. "Down! Everyone out!"

And then the train doors opened. No crates, no gold. Pinkertons, rifles, railroad workers with torches in their eyes. The rattling of the trains turned into the crackle of gunfire.

Bullets flew, men fell. One of Jesse's men threw up his arms and toppled backward into the dust. Another screamed, clutching his stomach, blood gushing between his fingers. Jesse coughed, fired back, screamed like a madman, while the torchlight cast his shadows across the tracks.

Frank pulled him away at the last moment and rode with him into the night. Behind them, the railway workers roared, shot, laughed, and shouted: "We'll get you, bastards! The tracks belong to us!"

At the fire afterward, Jesse coughed blood into his shirt, grinned, and drank. "See? They're building traps for me. Traps! That means they fear me like a devil. No man builds traps for a nobody." Frank blew smoke into the darkness. "No, Jesse. That means they're hunting you like an animal. And animals die in traps."

The men of the gang were silent. They had lost two friends, their faces were gray, their hands trembled as they cleaned their Colts. One muttered, "We are no longer the hunters. We are the prey."

But Jesse didn't hear that. Or he didn't want to hear it. He only talked about his name, the headlines, the farmers who would celebrate him. "They'll write tomorrow that Jesse James escaped," he grinned. "And that's enough."

But everyone knew: It wasn't enough anymore. The railway was a system, bigger than any gang, tougher than any village. And it screamed for his blood, day and night, with every rattle of the wheels, with every hiss of steam.

Frank was the first to understand: They were no longer fighting men. They were fighting steel.

Jesse couldn't stop talking about the trains. They were in his head like demons that haunted him at night. He coughed, spat blood into the embers, took a sip of whiskey, and growled, "It's not just about money anymore, Frank. It's about power. The railroad thinks it's God. And I want to humiliate God."

The men heard it, pale and exhausted. One whispered, "God on rails." Another nodded, "And we're supposed to shoot him."

Frank looked at Jesse coldly. "You can rob a bank, Jesse. You can shoot a man. But you can't kill a train. Every shot only brings more deaths. And the deaths are ours." "Screw it!" Jesse coughed, grinning, his eyes feverish. "Every death is proof that I tried. That Jesse James doesn't cower before the tracks."

And so they rode again. More boards on the tracks, more screams, more gunshots. The railroad workers were ready. They had guns, they had men, they had fury. And the bullets flew like rain in a storm.

One man from the gang fell immediately, shot through the chest. Another screamed, toppled from his horse, and lay motionless. Frank pulled Jesse away, once again, riding with him through the smoke, while behind them the tracks burned and railroad workers screamed like demons.

At the fire afterward, there were fewer of them. Their faces were grayer, their eyes emptier. One muttered, "For what now? No gold, no freedom. Only blood." Jesse coughed, drank, and grinned. "For my name, damn it! For the only name that stands against the railroad!"

Frank blew out smoke, thought: *We die for your name. One by one. Until nothing remains but rails and blood.*

The newspapers celebrated, of course. "Jesse James defies the railroad!" – "New raids, new deaths." – "America's outlaw against America's progress." And the farmers toasted, cheered, and told stories as if Jesse were their savior.

But the railroad workers shouted louder. They swore to hang every man, dig up every village, fill every grave, until Jesse James himself lay in the dust.

And Jesse? Jesse just heard the scream and grinned. "They hate me. Good. Hate makes my name bigger."

Frank knew: hate only makes the graves deeper.

There was a time when train robberies were quick deals. Planks on the tracks, a scream, a gunshot, bags full of money, and off they went. But that time was over. Now it was war.

The railroad had transformed into an animal, an armored monster with gun teeth. Every heist Jesse planned was no longer a business venture—it was a suicide mission.

"We have to do it again," he said, bottle in hand, coughing, blood in his beard. "We'll show them they can't break us." Frank looked at him, cold, exhausted. "You're not showing them anything. You're only showing that you're too proud to die without being crushed by a train."

But Jesse was obsessed. He spoke of trains like other men spoke of women. "Do you hear that rattling, Frank? That's America, that's God, that's the devil. And I'm going to spit in his face."

So they rode again. More boards, more shots, more screams. The railroad workers were prepared. Pinkertons fired from the cars, railroad workers yelled, bullets whizzed through the night.

One of the gang members took a bullet in the face. Another fell, screaming, clutching his leg, while blood poured like oil from a machine. Frank pulled Jesse away, once again, while the smoke hung in the air like a shroud.

There were fewer of them at the fire afterward. The men stared into the darkness, drank, and remained silent. One muttered: "This isn't robbery anymore. This is suicide." Another nodded. "And we're joining in."

Frank knew it was true. Every move was stronger than her. Every ride was a roll of the dice against Steel. And Steel always won.

But Jesse coughed, drank, and grinned. "They're writing about me again. They say Jesse James defies the railroad. They say I'm the man who doesn't die. That's enough." Frank blew out smoke, thinking: *It's not enough, Jesse. It's never enough. You're not immortal. You're just too stubborn to realize you're already dead.*

And out in the country, the railroad workers cried louder. They swore to wipe out the James Gang until not a horse, not a colt, not a name remained.

The trains rattled on, heavier, faster. And every beat of the wheels was like a heartbeat beating for only one thing: the death of Jesse James.

Jesse talked only of one last big coup. He coughed blood into a cloth, wiped it away as if it were dirt, raised the bottle, and grinned with feverish eyes.

"One big blow, Frank. One last one. Not a half-measure, not a small robbery. One blow that will shake America. A train full of money, full of Pinkertons, full of fear. We'll take him, we'll show them that Jesse James doesn't die quietly."

The men looked at him like dead men already lying in coffins. One muttered, "One more blow and we're all dead." Another nodded, "Maybe that's what he wants."

Frank smoked, blowing the smoke hard into the night. "You call it a blow, Jesse. I call it a death ride. We have no more men, no strength, no chance." "Chance!" Jesse coughed, spat red into the fire, and laughed. "Chance is for bankers and cowards. I don't need a chance. I just need my name. And my name is bigger than any train."

But everyone knew that the name didn't stop bullets. The name didn't disable rails. The name didn't heal torn bodies.

They planned anyway. They laid out maps, talked about routes, night trains, and schedules. The men barely listened, drank more, and looked into their glasses. They knew it wasn't a plan. It was a will.

The railroads screamed louder than ever. Newspapers printed articles, railroad workers swore blood, Pinkertons rearmed. "Every train armed! Every outlaw dead!"

And Jesse grinned, coughed, and drank. "Then let them come. The more the better. My last blow will be their biggest scream."

Frank knew: It wasn't a blow. It was a march to his own grave.

The men saddled up anyway. Because there was nothing left to do but follow Jesse—into death, into blood, into nothingness.

And outside the trains rattled, louder, faster, as if they themselves were shouting: *Come on, bastards. We're waiting.*

The night was black as burnt wood as they rode. Jesse in front, feverish, coughing, his Colt like a scepter, his bottle like a chalice. Behind him were the remnants of the gang—spectres on horses, empty eyes, heavy hands.

The train came out of the darkness like a monster. Smoke, sparks, the pounding of the wheels like the heartbeats of a steel god. Jesse grinned, coughed, and spat blood into the dust. "That's it, men! Our big blow! Our scream against the rails!"

They laid the planks, they lifted the Colts. The train screeched, braked, and stopped. For a brief moment, they thought they had caught it.

Then the carriage doors opened. Pinkertons, railroad workers, rifles. A hail of gunfire, brighter than the fire in the sky.

The air filled with smoke and blood. One of the men fell instantly, shot through the chest. Another screamed, fell from his horse, and lay still. Jesse roared, shot back, laughed like a madman, coughing and nearly choking on his own blood.

Frank pulled, fired, rode—but he knew from the first shot that it was over. The train was a fortress, the Pinkertons an army. They had no chance.



Jesse laughed anyway, stumbled forward, and fired into the smoke. "See? They're screaming my name! They're screaming Jesse James!" A bullet grazed him, spurting blood. He coughed, wiped it away, and grinned as if it were just whiskey.

The men of the gang died one after the other. One with a shot through the throat, one with bullets in his back, one who simply lay in the dust and never got up. In the end, only a handful remained, and even they rode away like shadows, no longer with a body.

Frank pulled Jesse away, half carrying him, half dragging him off the track. Behind them, the railroad workers yelled, shot, screamed, and laughed. "We'll get you, bastards! No one can escape the tracks!"

They narrowly escaped, disappearing into the darkness. At the fire afterward, Jesse coughed up blood, his eyes red, his face white as chalk. But he grinned, held up the bottle, and murmured, "They'll print it, Frank. They'll write: Jesse James versus the Railroad. And that's enough."

Frank looked at him, tired, cold, full of smoke. "No, Jesse. It's not enough. Steel always wins. And we're just flesh."

The railway workers continued to shout for a long time. And the country heard.

### Minnesota goes wrong

Minnesota was no Missouri. Minnesota was cold, rough, full of strangers who didn't blink an eye when Colts were drawn. The gang didn't know—or they didn't want to know. Jesse only saw the bench, the headlines, the opportunity to make his name even bigger.

"Northfield," he mumbled, coughing into his bloodstained handkerchief. "They've got money, lots of money. And if we take them, the newspapers will say Jesse James is even striking in Minnesota. From Missouri to the damned North—my name everywhere."

Frank looked at him coldly. "It's far. Too far. We don't know the country. The people aren't like here. They're tougher. They don't scream, they shoot." "Screw it," Jesse coughed, grinned, and raised the bottle. "They all scream when I come. And when they shoot, I shoot faster."

The men rode, days and nights on, through forests, swamps, and cold winds. Their faces were gray, their hands trembled with fatigue and whiskey. They were fewer in number, too few for a major raid. But Jesse talked them into it. "One last great robbery. One strike that will shake the world. After that, you can all retire. But this name—my name—must grow."

On September 7, 1876, they rode into Northfield. A small town, but not stupid. Men with sharp eyes, women with firm jaws. Farmers who knew how to use guns, not toys.

The bank was located in the middle of town, reddish-brown brick, large windows, and a heavy gate. Jesse grinned, coughed, and pulled out his Colts. "Today, men. Today we make history."

They went in. "Get down!" one yelled, his Colt pointed at the counter. "Give me all the money!" But the employees weren't frightened scribblers. They refused, didn't open the safe. One shouted, "Over my dead body!" – and got the bullet.

Outside, it was even worse. The city wasn't an audience. The city was an army. Farmers ran with rifles, merchants grabbed shotguns, even the old men loaded revolvers. "Those are the James Bastards!" they shouted. "Shoot them down!"

The road became a rifle pit. Bullets hissed, glass shattered, horses tumbled. One of Jesse's men fell instantly, his chest torn open. Another screamed, clutching his stomach, and toppled into the dust.

Jesse shot back, coughed, grinned, and yelled, "Forward, men! We'll take it anyway!" But no one believed it anymore. Frank saw clearly: This wasn't a robbery. This was a damned massacre.

They fled, stumbling, bloodied, chased by half a village with loaded rifles. One by one, they fell, hit, left lying. The gang shattered on the streets of Northfield, like glass breaking on stone.

By evening, there were fewer, much fewer. The big blow was a fiasco. Minnesota hadn't screamed. Minnesota had shot.

And Jesse? Jesse coughed, spat blood, but laughed anyway. "They'll print it, Frank. They'll write: Jesse James in Northfield. Even if we don't get it, my name will." Frank looked at him, his eyes dark. "Your name's gotten bigger. But the gang's dead."

The escape from Northfield was no longer a ride; it was a trudge through blood and dust. The Colts were hot, his lungs empty, his legs heavy as lead. Jesse coughed, blood on his lips, but still grinned like a maniac.

Behind them, the city's roar echoed. "Hang them! Shoot them!" Farmers, traders, blacksmiths—all had become hunters. Minnesota was not a spectator. Minnesota was an executioner.

The Younger brothers were almost dead. Jim with bullets in his back, Bob with blood on his face, Cole wounded in the arm and leg. They fell from their horses, crawled through the dust, screaming, and were dragged back up. Every step was painful, every breath a half-death.

"We won't leave them behind!" Jesse cried, coughing, holding the bottle in his hand. "We're riding on, all of us!" Frank looked at him, stone-cold. "They're dead, Jesse. You want to drag them along, but they're already in the grave." "Screw it!" Jesse coughed, spitting blood. "As long as they breathe, they're mine. As long as they bleed, my name grows."

But the blood only dripped into the earth, no glory, no headline, only red trails for the hunters who followed them.

For days they stumbled through forests, swamps, and fields. The Younger brothers slowed, fell, and stayed there. Cole toppled over in the grass, staring up at the sky, muttering, "It's over, Jesse. I'm done." Jesse knelt beside him, coughed, and raised the bottle. "You die for history. Your name is next to mine." Cole laughed bitterly, coughing up blood. "Screw your name. I just want peace."

The city hunters approached, louder, like dogs on the prowl. In the end, there was no choice: the Younger brothers were caught, half-dead, bleeding, and dragged through the streets like trophies.

Jesse and Frank escaped, narrowly, like shadows in the fog. Two brothers, alone, without ties, without friends.

At the fire afterward, somewhere in the wilderness, Jesse coughed, laughed, and held up the newspaper he'd stolen. "They say Jesse James attacked Northfield. My name is all over it." Frank blew out smoke, his eyes cold. "Yes. But the gang is dead. Your name lives, but the men lie in the dirt. Is that your victory, Jesse? A name on paper, and everyone else in the grave?"

Jesse grinned and spat blood. "That's enough, Frank. That has to be enough."

And Minnesota didn't stay silent. Minnesota continued to tell the story. Of the dead, of the wounded, of the failed bastards who thought they could break an entire city. Minnesota didn't go wrong—Minnesota broke the James Younger Gang in two.

They rode like shadows, not like men. Minnesota had broken them. The bond was no more. The Younger brothers lay captured, half-dead, bound, and displayed like cattle. The others had fallen, shot, bled to death, forgotten.

Only Jesse and Frank remained. Two brothers on worn-out horses, with empty pockets, full Colts, and faces that looked like they'd seen a hundred years of war.

The forests were silent, the land hostile. Every town was a knife, every farm an eye. Men everywhere were searching for them—sheriffs, farmers, Pinkertons, railroad workers. Minnesota wanted blood. And it screamed loud enough for even Missouri to hear.

By the fire, Jesse coughed, spat Rot into the grass, drank, and grinned with chapped lips. "They printed it, Frank. It's all over the place. Jesse James in Northfield. Jesse James defies an entire town. They haven't forgotten." Frank blew smoke into the darkness. "They haven't forgotten because they're celebrating. Not you, Jesse. Your failure. Your dead. Your damn carnage." "Screw it." Jesse laughed, coughed, and wiped away the blood. "As long as my name's in print, I've won."

But it wasn't a win. It was a shadow that grew larger while Jesse shrank. His body was emaciated, his hands trembled, the coughing fits nearly tore him apart. Only his gaze remained wild, feverish, obsessed with his own myth.

Frank looked at him and thought:*He's no longer my brother. He's a ghost. A name on two legs. And I'm riding beside a damned legend who's long dead, but too proud to notice.*

The nights were colder, the days longer. They stole bread from farmers, whiskey from traders, slept in the dirt, and rode on. On and on. Not out of purpose, but out of necessity.

Jesse talked about the next coup, the next blow, the next article in the newspaper. "We'll show them again, Frank. We're taking back what's ours. The West belongs to us!" Frank remained silent, puffed on his pipe, and blew

smoke into the wind. He knew: Nothing belonged to them anymore. Not the West. Not the country. Not even their damned breath.

They were ghosts wandering the land, pursued by dogs, by men, by memories. And the world no longer screamed in fear. It screamed in hatred.

Minnesota had gone wrong. Minnesota was the nail in his coffin. And Jesse James rode on anyway—not because he wanted to live, but because he couldn't accept that he had long since died.

The escape itself became a story. At least for Jesse. Every day they escaped was a new proof of his greatness. "They're hunting me, Frank. Sheriffs, farmers, Pinkertons, whole damn states—and I'm still alive. You know what that means? It means I'm greater than all of them."

He coughed, spat blood into the leaves, drank, and wiped his face as if he'd just received a sacrament. Frank stared into the fire, blowing smoke into the night. "That just means you're still breathing, Jesse. That's all."

But Jesse didn't listen. He glossed over the escape, painting it with words like a preacher painting his kingdom of heaven. "They'll write: Jesse James escapes Minnesota! Jesse James, the man no one can catch! Even an entire city couldn't hold him."

Frank thought: *They'll write: Jesse James failed. Jesse James lost his gang. Jesse James only has himself and his damned brother.*

The nights were longer, colder. They rode through swamps, forests, and Southern villages that didn't help them, but locked their doors as soon as they appeared. Everyone knew who they were. Everyone knew they were being hunted.

The world was no longer their friend. Even farmers who once secretly cheered looked the other way. No one wanted to feel Minnesota's wrath. No one wanted the Pinkertons at their door.

And yet Jesse kept talking. "Every hour we're free is a headline. They can't kill me, Frank. Not as long as my name lives." Frank looked at him, tired, cold. "Your name lives, Jesse. But the men are dead. The Youngers are rotting in chains. And we're two ghosts riding across the land. That's not a legend. That's an obituary."

Jesse laughed, coughed, and shook his head. "No. An obituary will be printed, too. And when it's printed, my name will remain. Always."

The escape wasn't a victory. It was a march through hunger, blood, and dirt. But Jesse turned it into a song that only he could hear. Frank heard only the silence between the shots, the silence between the breaths. A silence that was louder than any song.

In the end, they were just two brothers riding, without a destination, without ties, without friends. Only a myth in the mind of one – and the emptiness in the heart of the other.

Jesse couldn't shut up. Even after Northfield, even after all the blood, the dead, the captured Youngers. He kept talking, on and on, as if words were bullets keeping him alive.

"That was just a slip-up, Frank," he coughed, spat red into the embers, and pulled on the bottle. "Minnesota was bad luck. Cold, strangers, wrong ground. Next time, we'll do it differently. We'll pull off a big coup, so big they'll forget about Northfield."

Frank stared into the fire, blew out smoke, and said nothing. He no longer had the strength to speak against Jesse's madness. But only one thought echoed in his head: *There is no next time. There is only death.*

The landscape was silent, infinitely silent. Fields, forests, swamps. Nothing but cold and silence. But the headlines he wanted to hear were still rattling around in Jesse's head. "Jesse James – back! Jesse James – bigger than ever!"

He laughed, coughed, and wiped blood from his chin. "You understand, Frank? Minnesota was just a chapter. Not an end. Just a chapter." Frank growled, cold and tired: "A chapter that cost everyone else. Cole, Jim, Bob. They're in chains. The others are lying in the dirt. And you're talking about chapters."

"You're part of history," Jesse grinned, his eyes feverish. "Without sacrifice, there's no myth." Frank clenched his fists and said quietly, "Without sacrifice, there's no brother. And I've seen enough sacrifices."

But Jesse didn't listen. He was already on the road again, riding not across the country, but through headlines, through legends, through lies. All that sustained him was the damned myth.

The nights were cold, the whiskey lukewarm, the blood on his lips fresh. And yet he spoke like a preacher reciting his last gospel. "The next heist, Frank. Somewhere in Missouri. Or Texas. Or right in the middle of St. Louis. Imagine: Jesse James robbing the rich in their own little nest. They'll print it, Frank. They'll print it everywhere."

Frank looked at him, through the smoke, through the darkness. *He's no longer alive. He only dreams. And his dream is a grave.*

He knew there was no turning back. Jesse would keep going, always going, until the bullet came. There was no next coup. Only the abyss.

They couldn't stop. The scent of pursuers was everywhere. Every gust of wind carried the barking of dogs, every crack in the woods was a sheriff, every shadow a bullet. Minnesota had turned the country against them.

Jesse coughed, blood in his beard, his eyes glowing feverishly. "They won't catch me, Frank. No one will catch me. Not sheriffs, not farmers, not Pinkertons. Not even the devil himself." Frank looked at him, pipe in mouth, eyes hard. "The devil has had you for a long time, Jesse. You're only riding because he's loosening the reins."

But Jesse laughed, coughed, and drank. "I'm immortal, Frank. You understand? They shoot, they hunt, they curse—and I live. Every day I breathe proves it. I'm greater than them all."

Frank thought: *You're not immortal. You're just too stubborn to drop dead. Minnesota already took you out. Everything after that is just a fade-out.*

The hunt intensified. Newspapers described them like animals: "The James brothers escape again." "Hunt for the outlaws." "Minnesota vows revenge." Farmers laid traps, towns locked their doors, children were raised with the motto: "Fear Jesse James—or shoot him."

Jesse read anyway, coughed, grinned. "They write my name, Frank. Always. Every issue, every city. Even when they hunt me down, they make me bigger." Frank blew out smoke, cold. "Bigger, yes. But not more alive."

The days were hungry, the nights were coughing. They ate stolen bread, drank stale water, lay in the mud, and rode on. Horses panted, men stank, death rode beside them.

Minnesota wasn't a mistake, it was a judgment. Jesse didn't want to see it, couldn't see it. For him, it was just another chapter. For Frank, it was the end that had long since begun.

He knew: every step led her closer to the grave. Not through a blow, not through a coup—through a slow, inevitable bleeding out.

Minnesota didn't just go wrong. Minnesota was the beginning of the end.

The nights grew longer, faces hollower, the sky grayer. Minnesota lay behind them like a burned dream, but the smoke still hung in the air. Every footstep, every crack in the woods was a reminder: They were no longer the hunters. They were the hunted.

Jesse coughed, blood in his beard, his scarf red as a slaughterhouse. Yet he spoke as if he were still king. "They can hunt me, Frank. They can set traps for me, they can turn the whole country against me—I remain Jesse James. My name will not die."

Frank pulled on his pipe and blew out the smoke. "Your name lives, Jesse. But you don't. You're already dead. All that's left is a shadow."

Jesse grinned, drank, and wiped his mouth. "Shadows live longer than men. Ask the newspapers. They write about the shadow, not the man. I did it, Frank. I'm the shadow no one can kill."

Frank remained silent. He knew it was useless. Jesse was clinging to words, like a drowning man clinging to a piece of wood. Myth was his drug, stronger than whiskey, stronger than any prayer.

The truth was, Minnesota had killed the gang. They were no longer the James Younger Gang. They were just two brothers riding because they didn't know how to stop.

Every town avoided her, every farm locked its doors, every newspaper printed her face. The country was no longer her ally. The country was the noose around her neck.

Jesse coughed, coughed, coughed—until he almost drowned in blood. Then he laughed, swore he was still there, swore they'd never catch him. "Even if they catch me, Frank, even if they kill me—my name remains. I'm immortal."



Frank looked at him, cold, tired. *Immortal, perhaps. But not inevitable.* He knew what was coming. A bullet. Nothing more, nothing less. The end of every outlaw.

Minnesota had shown it. Minnesota hadn't just gone wrong. Minnesota was the verdict. Everything else was just a delay.

And Jesse James rode on, coughing, laughing, drinking – a man who had fallen long ago, but too proud to admit it.

### Shots, smoke and cold fields

The fields were bare, the wind biting, the sky gray as old iron. Minnesota had spat them out, but the aftertaste remained: blood, smoke, burned skin. Every step through the land was like riding through a cemetery without crosses.

Jesse coughed, blood on his handkerchief, drank, and grinned with red lips. "Do you hear that, Frank? The wind carries gunshots. But none of them hit me." Frank looked at him, tired and cold. "Not yet, Jesse. Not yet."

Behind them echoed the screams. Sheriffs, Pinkertons, farmers—all hunting like dogs on the scent of blood. Every thread of smoke on the horizon was a fire aimed at them. Every shot in the distance was a sign: *We are behind you.*

The Youngers lay imprisoned, the others dead. Only Jesse and Frank still rode. Two shadows, two ghosts. The land was sick of them, the land wanted them dead.

The fields were cold, the nights even colder. They slept in the dirt, ate stolen bread, and drank rotten water. Jesse talked anyway, incessantly. "They'll write: Jesse James escapes, despite sheriffs, despite Pinkerton, despite entire armies."

Frank blew out smoke, the wind ripping through him. "They'll write: Jesse James runs like a dog. And the fields are full of the dead you left behind."

A shot echoed in the distance. Horses shied, Jesse laughed, coughed, and drank. "They're shooting into the void. They know they'll never catch me." Frank thought: *Every shot brings us closer. Eventually, one will hit. It's just a matter of time.*

The cold fields became cold graves. Every tree a gallows, every shadow an executioner. Jesse acted as if he were riding through glory. Frank knew: they were riding through smoke and death.

And winter laughed, cold, merciless.

The fields never ceased to whisper. Every gust of wind carried the barking of dogs, every crack in the corn was a pursuer, every echo in the forest a gunshot. They were always there, sometimes closer, sometimes farther, but never gone.

Jesse coughed, spat Rot into the grass, drank, and grinned. "They're coming, Frank. They're coming like ants. But we crush ants." Frank looked at him, cold, exhausted. "There are many ants. And there are two of us."

The days were marches, endless marches across frozen fields, over dirt, through fog. The nights were cold, smoke, blood in the cloth. Jesse talked of headlines, of newspapers, of fame. "They'll write it, Frank. Jesse James escapes again. Jesse James defies all."

Frank blew out smoke, his eyes dark. "They'll write: Jesse James is running. Jesse James is fleeing. Jesse James has nothing left but his damned name."

A shot echoed closer, horses reared, Jesse laughed, coughed. "They're shooting into the wind. They want me, but all they get is dust." Frank thought: *Still. But the dust will turn to blood. It's only a matter of days.*

The fields were empty, but not dead. They were graves without crosses, graves waiting for them. Every step through the land was as if they were laying themselves down there.

Jesse continued talking, tirelessly, as if he could ward off death with words. "They'll never catch me, Frank. Even if they do, I'm bigger than them all. I am Jesse James." Frank was silent. He knew: Jesse was just words, just a myth. Flesh and blood had long since ended.

The shots came closer. The screams grew louder. And the cold fields waited, cold and patient, like an open grave.

The hunt never stopped. Day and night, the echo was there: dogs, gunshots, voices. Even when the wind was still, they heard it in their heads, like a bell that never stops ringing.

Jesse was nothing but a body full of cracks. Coughing, blood, a trembling in his hands that even whiskey couldn't smooth over. But he laughed, laughed like someone who had long since lost his mind. "They're chasing me, Frank, but I'm still riding. I'm like a damn ghost. They're shooting holes in the air, but I'm staying put."

Frank looked at him, tired, heavy, his eyes like glass. "You're not staying still, Jesse. You're falling, and it's only a matter of when."

Once, in the middle of the night, Jesse collapsed. Just like that, fallen from his horse, lying in the cold grass, his shawl covered in blood. Frank crouched beside him, heard his ragged breathing, and thought: *That's it. It ends here.* But then Jesse opened his eyes, grinned with red teeth, and whispered, "Even the fields can't hold me."

The next day he rode again as if nothing had happened. Except his back was bent, his face sunken, his hands clammy. But the laughter remained, that damned laughter.

The pursuers were coming closer. Shots whistled across the fields, horses snorted, men screamed. At one point, a bullet hit Jesse in the sleeve, ripping fabric and scratching his skin. He saw the blood, coughed, and grinned: "You've got to get better aim."

Frank thought: *They're already aiming better. And soon, one bullet will be enough. One damn bullet, and it'll all be over.*

The fields grew colder, emptier, wider. But it felt as if they were closing. Not like freedom, but like a coffin lid slowly closing.

And Jesse kept talking, on and on. "You can't break me, Frank. I am Jesse James. Every gunshot, every scream, every cold morning proves it." Frank was silent. He knew: No scream, no gunshot proved anything. Only death would do it.

The cold fields waited, silent, patient. And Frank heard them whispering: *Soon. Very soon.*

The shots never stopped. Sometimes in the distance, sometimes so close that the bullets hissed over their heads like hungry wasps. Any other man would have seen hell in there. Jesse saw applause.

"Do you hear that, Frank?" he coughed, blood in his beard, his eyes feverish. "Those aren't shots. They're applause. The country is clapping because I'm still riding." Frank stared at him, cold, exhausted. "The country isn't clapping, Jesse. The country is reloading."

The men chasing them were no longer enemies; they were a chorus. Pinkertons, farmers, sheriffs—they all screamed, shot, and chased. For Jesse, it was music. For Frank, it was the drumming of a funeral march.

The fields were empty, vast, and freezing cold. No shelter, no hiding place. Just endless ground, thrumming beneath the hooves like a heart about to stop. Jesse grinned, coughed, and drank, as if the shots were merely proof of his greatness.

"Every bullet they waste makes me stronger," he said, smeared red, the bottle in his hand. "They're shooting at the wind, and the wind bears my name." Frank blew smoke into the fog. "Every shot, Jesse, brings us closer to the end. The wind carries no song. It only carries dirt for your grave."

Once, in the middle of their flight, they stood on a hill, looking out over the fields. Smoke rose, screams echoed, shots rang out. Jesse spread his arms, coughed, and laughed as if he were standing on a stage. "See, men?" he shouted, although no one was there except Frank. "They're singing for me! The bullets are my choir!"

Frank thought: *There are no more men, Jesse. Just you and me. And we're no longer bandits. We're targets on legs.*

The fields were like a cemetery without crosses, and every step through them was a step deeper into the earth. Jesse acted as if he were riding through glory. Frank knew: they were riding through their own funeral.

And the smoke that hung everywhere was no longer that of their Colts. It was the smoke of hunting fires, of burning land, of a myth that was burning itself.

Jesse began to challenge death as if it were an old acquaintance. Every shot that whizzed by was an invitation to dance. He coughed, spat blood into the grass, grinned with red-smeared teeth, and shouted into the cold, "Hit me, you bastards! Hit Jesse James if you can!"

Frank lowered his hat and rode silently beside him as bullets whined over their heads. *It is not courage, he thought. It's crazy. And at some point they'll meet him. Or me.*

The persecutors didn't diminish. They came from everywhere—Pinkertons, sheriffs, farmers with rusty shotguns. For money, for pride, for the newspaper. Everyone wanted a piece of Jesse James.

Every night the same thing: coughing, smoke, cold earth. Jesse laughed between fits, as if mocking death himself. "You have bad aim, Frank. You aim like children. I'm immortal." Frank blew smoke into the darkness. "You're not immortal, Jesse. You're just a man who's lucky. And luck runs out eventually."

Once, mid-ride, a bullet grazed Jesse's shoulder. Blood spurted; he barely flinched, laughed, and drank from the bottle. "They kissed me, Frank. But not enough to take me." Frank saw the blood, saw the feverish eyes, the trembling. *One more kiss, Jesse. Just a little deeper. And you're gone.*

The fields grew colder, emptier. Every tree looked like a gallows, every gust of wind like a last breath. Jesse continued talking, as if every day were new proof of his immortality.

"They're writing my name, Frank. Every newspaper, every village. Even their gunshots sing my glory." Frank growled bitterly. "Gunshots don't sing. They count. And they're counting down, Jesse. To the last bullet."

There was no life anymore. It was a gamble with death. Every step, every ride, every fire was a coincidence. No plan, no God, no protection. Just one damned pull of the trigger, and the coin would fall.

Jesse laughed anyway. He was looking for the bullet. He wanted it. Because he believed that even his death would make him greater.

Frank knew: It was just a coincidence that they were still breathing. Not fame. Not myth. Just coincidence. And coincidence had no patience.

Death was no longer a shadow at their backs; he was a companion. Sometimes he rode beside them, invisible but hard to miss. Jesse talked to him as if he were an old friend.

"Come on, you bastard," he coughed, blood in his beard, his eyes feverish. "Shoot me right in the heart if you can. But you can't. I'm Jesse James. You'll miss me like everyone else."

Frank looked at him, silent, the smoke from his pipe blowing into the wind. *He wants it, he thought. He wants to die. But he wants to read about it in the newspapers. He wants death to be an article, not a grave.*

The shots in the distance were their constant chorus. Sometimes closer, sometimes farther, but never far away. Jesse heard music in them. Frank heard only the click of a game that had long been decided.

Once, Jesse stumbled while riding, almost fell off his horse, got up, coughed up blood, and laughed. "Almost! They almost had me, Frank. But almost doesn't count. I'm still here!" Frank looked at him, tired and cold. "Almost is closer, Jesse. Every almost puts you deeper in the grave."

The nights were frosty, the stars hard as nails. Jesse spoke in his fever, muttering about trains, banks, newspapers. "They'll write my name even when I'm dead. On the front page. Jesse James—fallen. And even then, I win."

Frank thought:*You gain nothing. You're just a man screaming while the shovel is already throwing up the dirt.*

The fields were silent, so silent that every breath sounded too loud. Jesse laughed anyway, over and over again, as if trying to lure Death out. "Come on, shoot! I'm ready!" Frank blew smoke into the darkness. "Death's in no hurry, Jesse. But he never forgets anyone."

And that was the truth. They were no longer robbers. Not a gang. Not a myth. They were just two brothers, hunted by death—and one of them even wanted it that way.

The fields became endless, like a desert of frozen earth. No houses, no light, only wind, smoke, and the distant sound of gunshots, beating like a timekeeper. Each blow was a reminder that death was already on its way.

Jesse coughed, spat blood into the cloth, but grinned nonetheless. "They won't catch me, Frank. Not today, not tomorrow. I am Jesse James. I am immortal." Frank rode silently beside him, his face hard as stone.*Immortal...* he thought.*No one is immortal. Every name eventually rots, just like flesh.*

But Jesse believed in his own myth like others believe in the Bible. He drank, coughed, talked. "They print my name, Frank. Every day. Even when they hunt me, my shadow grows. Even when I fall, I rise again—in the newspapers, in people's minds. No one can kill that."

Frank blew smoke into the cold. "The newspapers write about dead dogs, too, Jesse. And the next day they wrap fish with it."

But Jesse didn't listen. He was in a frenzy, a man who worshipped his own abyss. "They shoot, they scream, they rush—and yet I ride. As long as I ride, I am greater than them all. They will never forget me. Not in a thousand years."

A shot ripped through the wind, so close that the bullet hit the grass between them. Jesse laughed, raising the bottle. "They're trying, Frank! But they can't cut me down!" Frank thought: *Not yet. But soon. Every shot brings us closer. You practically demand it.*

The nights were filled with coughing, blood, and cold wind. Jesse spoke to the shadows, to death, to his own echo. Frank heard only the silence between them—and knew it was louder than Jesse's words.

At the end, as they sat by the fire, trembling, broken, coughing, Jesse raised the bottle like a preacher raises a chalice. "I am Jesse James. I am the man no shot, no rope, no sheriff can break. I am immortal."

Frank looked at him, tired, cold, with eyes that had long since given up. "You're mortal, Jesse. And you're going to die. Only your damn shadow will remain. And shadows don't warm anyone."

The fields were silent. So silent that you could almost hear the earth preparing its pit.

And the smoke hung over everything, heavy, bitter, inescapable.

### In the hideout of the Southern ghosts

The forests in the south were black, the fields burned, the houses ruins. Everything smelled of old blood and wet wood, of memories that had lain in the dirt for too long. Jesse and Frank rode into them like men seeking shelter—and found only ghosts.

"We're safe here," Jesse muttered, coughing and spitting blood into the cloth. "No one knows us here. Everything lies in shadow." Frank looked around, his rifle loosely in his hand. "Everything here lies in the grave, Jesse. No friends. No allies. Just dust and ghosts."

And so it was. Every hut they reached was empty. The men who had ridden with them in the war were dead or old, broken by the years. Some recognized

Jesse, but spat in the dust and closed the doors. "Enough blood. Enough war. Go on, Jesse."

But Jesse didn't listen. He spoke to the walls, to the burned beams, as if he could summon the spirits. "You were with me, back in '63. You bled with me. I'm still here! Jesse James still rides!"

Frank smoked, blowing smoke into the fog. "The ghosts don't hear you. And if they do, they just laugh. Because you're one of them."

The nights were silent, eerie. Sometimes Jesse thought he heard voices—old comrades whispering in the wind. "We're still here, Jesse. We never left." He drank, laughed, coughed, as if he were in the middle of a gathering. Frank heard the same voices, but to him they were just the wind, the trees, the echo of the past. Nothing sacred. Just remnants.

The Southern states were no longer a hiding place. They were a graveyard. But Jesse acted as if he were king among ghosts. "They live through me, Frank. As long as I ride, they ride too. As long as I breathe, the Confederacy breathes."

Frank thought: *The Confederacy is dead. The men are dead. And you're just an echo, Jesse. An echo getting drunk on itself.*

By the fire, whiskey in hand, Jesse spoke to invisible armies. Frank remained silent, hearing only the rustling of the trees, his brother's cough, and the faint crackling of wood that sounded like bone.

The hiding place wasn't a hiding place. It was a mirror. And in it, one saw only ghosts.

The nights grew longer in the Southern states, blacker, wetter. The air hung heavy as a shroud. Jesse sat by the fire, the shroud covered in blood, the bottle to his lips, talking to figures who weren't there.

"You were with me," he murmured, his eyes glazed over. "You shot beside me. You bled. You sang in the smoke. I haven't forgotten you. I still ride. Jesse James still rides."

Frank stared into the fire, puffed on his pipe. He heard nothing but wind, leaves, and the scratching of rats in the undergrowth. "There's no one there, Jesse. They're all dead. They can't hear you." Jesse laughed, coughed, and spat Rot into the embers. "They hear me better than you can, Frank. They're everywhere. They're in every shadow. The Confederacy lives. In me."



But it was just a delusion. Old farms, burned beams, gravestones without names. Men she had once known no longer opened their doors. Some cursed, others remained silent, but everyone looked away. "It's over, Jesse. Move on."

Frank knew: This wasn't a hiding place. It was a mirror. Every step through this land showed them what they themselves had become—ghosts in a story no one wanted to live anymore.

On the third evening, they found an old mansion, half-collapsed, overgrown, its windows like empty eyes. Jesse entered, coughing, laughing. "This is where they drank, danced, and celebrated. And now they're celebrating again, Frank. Can't you hear it?"

Frank heard only the wind through broken windows. But Jesse was dancing, staggering in the dust, the bottle held high, as if invisible regiments were marching past him. "We're still alive, Frank! We're still alive!"

Frank looked at him and thought: *You're not alive. You're just an echo. An echo that speaks too loudly because it's afraid of the silence.*

The Southern ghosts offered them no protection. They only gave them memories. Memories of lost wars, of burned fields, of men who thought they could prevail against the world—and lost.

Just like Jesse.

The Southern states were no longer breathing. They lay like a corpse in the grass. Fields burned, cities wounded, houses like skeletons with open ribs. Jesse called it a hideout. Frank called it a cemetery.

That night, Jesse crouched in the dust of an old churchyard, bottle in hand, face pale, eyes feverish. He spoke as if men were sitting around him, guns in hand, scars on his faces. "You're still here," he said, coughing blood into his handkerchief. "You saw it, back then. Missouri, Kansas, the trains, the banks. You were with me. And you're still with me."

Frank stood beside him, his rifle loose, his hat pulled low over his face. "There's no one here, Jesse. Just you, me, and the rats. The rest are dead." Jesse grinned, raising the bottle. "Dead is a word, Frank. Dead just means the newspaper doesn't write about you anymore. But as long as someone says my name, I breathe. As long as I breathe, they breathe."

Frank was silent. In the distance, a dog howled, perhaps real, perhaps just wind.

The next day, they found an old farm. The roof had collapsed, the walls riddled with bullet holes, the grass overgrown. Jesse stepped inside as if coming home. "This is where we sat, Frank. This is where we made plans, drank whiskey, and laughed." Frank shook his head. "There was never anything here, Jesse. You're talking to dust."

But Jesse saw men at the table, cards in hand, heard laughter, felt the whiskey. He talked to them, laughed, coughed, drank. Frank saw only a man alone in the dirt, talking to the walls.

Things got worse at night. Jesse woke up, screaming, calling names that had long since been buried in the ground. "Cole! Jim! Bill! We're riding on, men! We're not dead!" Frank put his hand on his Colt, but not because of pursuers. Because of Jesse. *He is no longer here, he thought. He rides with ghosts, and I crouch beside him as if I were one too.*

The truth was clear: they were no longer a gang. No longer men, no longer robbers. They were two shadows stumbling through a cemetery, and Jesse was the first to notice—and yet turned it into a song.

Frank saw him by the fire, his face red from coughing, his eyes empty and wild. *We are already part of this country, he thought. Not as kings. As ghosts.*

The Southerners spoke louder at night than during the day. When the sun was gone and only the wind whistled through the ruins, Jesse heard voices no one else could hear. He sat by the fire, coughed into his scarf, grinned, and talked to men who had long since been buried.

"Cole, old dog," he muttered, "you should have been there. Northfield was hell, but we almost made it. Almost. And almost is enough for legends." Frank looked into the fire, smoked, and remained silent. There was no Cole there. Only Jesse and his own voice, breaking in the wind.

"Jim, Bob," Jesse coughed, "you're still riding. I can hear you. You're not dead. You're with me. Always." The wind tugged at the grass, the flames crackled. No answer. Only Jesse's laugh, hoarse, bloody, lost.

Frank knew: Jesse was slipping away. Every day, a little deeper. Not into the earth, not into the grave—not yet. But into a fog in which he spoke only with ghosts.

The next morning, Jesse stumbled through the ruins of an old barn. He staggered, raising his arms as if he were on a stage. "They're all here, Frank! The boys we lost. The Southerners are still standing, riding with us. They're singing! Can't you hear it?" Frank kicked into the dust, cold and empty. "No. There's nothing, Jesse. Just dust and dirt. Just the two of us." "Screw it!" Jesse coughed, blood dripping onto the floor. "When I see them, they're there. Who are you, Frank? A damn judge? I'm Jesse James. I make the world the way I need it."

Frank blew out smoke, his eyes dark. *You're not creating anything anymore, Jesse. You're a man who drinks with spirits. And I'm sitting next to you because I'm your brother. But I can't save you.*

In the night, Jesse woke up screaming. Sweat, blood, coughing. He yelled names that the wind swallowed. Frank held him tight, felt the trembling, the feverish burn. "Rest, Jesse. Sleep." "Sleep is death!" Jesse shrieked, lashing out, then grinned as if delivering a punchline. "And death means headlines. I'm not ready. Not yet."

Frank knew it didn't matter whether Jesse was ready or not. Death was already there, patient, silent, like a shadow that doesn't budge.

And the ghosts Jesse embraced weren't friends. They were mirrors. Mirrors that showed him what he had long been: a man suspended between life and legend, with no place in either world.

Frank saw it, felt it, knew it: He couldn't save Jesse. He could only accompany him. Until the bitter end.

There were days when Jesse didn't say a word to Frank. No plan, no insult, no laughter. Just whispers into the darkness, just conversations with men who were no longer there.

"Cole, can you hear me? We could have made it if you'd held on. But they got you, those dogs. I miss you, man." Or: "Jim, Bob—I can hear you laughing. You know I'm riding for you."

Frank heard nothing but the rustling of leaves, the scratching of rats in the undergrowth, and his brother's cough. It made him sick. He smoked more, remained silent, and stared longer into the fire.

Sometimes Jesse reached up in the air as if shaking someone's hand. Once he stood up, staggered, and delivered a speech to the invisible men he called

"comrades." "We haven't fallen. We're still riding! We're the damned army no one can break!" Then he collapsed, coughing so violently that blood ran down his shirt.

Frank pulled him up, set him by the fire, and handed him the bottle. "Drink. Shut up." Jesse took it, grinning bloodily. "You drink with us. Every sip belongs to all of us."

Frank thought:*No. Every sip belongs to you, Jesse. And it consumes you.*

The days grew grayer, the nights longer. Jesse barely slept. When he closed his eyes, he screamed, cursed, and laughed. He spoke more to ghosts than to the living. And Frank saw it: The line had been crossed. His brother was already halfway to the other world.

On the third day in the ruins of a plantation, Jesse suddenly stopped. He stared at a broken window as if he saw himself in it. "Do you see them, Frank? They're behind me. An entire army. Every man we've lost. They're marching with us." Frank stepped next to him, seeing only shards, dust, and wind. "I can't see anything." "Because you're blind, Frank!" Jesse coughed, blood spilling onto the ground. "I see them. I feel them. They're carrying me. I'm not falling."

Frank remained silent. He knew that Jesse had long since fallen. And that there was nothing he could do except stay beside him.

That night, as Jesse lay coughing again with fever, Frank thought:*My brother doesn't just die. He dies twice. Once as a man. Once as a legend he no longer understands.*

He puffed on his pipe, stared into the fire, and accepted it. There was no way out. No tomorrow that would save them. Only an end that was inevitable.

Frank accepted it. Inside, his brother was already dead.

Jesse was barely human anymore. He was a shell, filled with whiskey, blood, and voices only he heard. The day began with coughing, ended with slurring, and in between lay delusion.

By the fire, he spoke with spirits, raised the bottle, and grinned bloodily. "Cole, drink! Jim, toast! We showed everyone!" Frank sat beside him, his pipe between his teeth, staring into the fire. "You're talking to shadows, Jesse." "Shadows are more loyal than humans," Jesse coughed, spitting Rot into the grass. "Humans betray you. Shadows remain."

His body grew weaker, his hands trembled, his face haggard. But his voice grew louder, preachy, full of feverish conviction. "I am Jesse James. I am not dying. I live as long as they whisper my name. I am not alone—I have an army of spirits."

Frank listened and knew: It was over. His brother had long since crossed over, only his flesh still hesitated.

Once, Jesse stumbled through a ruin, talking to walls as if they were old friends. "You were there when we took the banks. You saw it, you celebrated it." Then he fell, lay there, coughing until blood flowed from his mouth. Frank picked him up and put him back by the fire. Jesse grinned, murmuring, "They've got me, Frank. But they won't let me go."

Frank thought: *Only death will let you go. Only the last bullet, the last breath, separates you from your own haunting.*

The nights were worse. Jesse talked in his sleep, screamed, laughed. He called out names that had long since rotted away, drank in his dreams, and wrestled with shadows. Frank sat beside him, awake, smoking, and watched his brother drift into the darkness.

He had stopped trying to pull it back. It was pointless. Jesse was already over. Death was the only bridge left.

In the morning, Jesse coughed, wiped blood from his beard, and grinned. "See, Frank? They're still here. They're carrying me. I'm not falling." Frank blew out smoke, tired and cold. "You're falling, Jesse. You're falling every day. And soon you'll be lying there."

Jesse laughed, coughed, and drank. "Then write it. Jesse James fell. Jesse James — legend."

Frank remained silent. He knew this was the only consolation Jesse had left. And death was the only thing that could release him.

In the end, the ghosts were louder than anything else. Jesse barely spoke to Frank anymore. He spoke to invisible regiments, to fallen brothers, to shadows that were more alive to him than flesh and blood.

He sat by the fire, bottle in hand, coughed red into his handkerchief, and grinned feverishly. "Cole, Jim, Bob—you're with me. You never left me. We're still riding. We'll get everything back." Frank smoked, looked into the fire, and

was silent. For him, there were only flames, dust, the smell of blood. No voices. No men. Just a brother speaking to air.

Once, Jesse staggered through an old cemetery, among broken stones that no longer bore names. He placed his hand on a stone and whispered, "Here you lie, old friend. But you're not dead. You're with me." Then he fell to his knees, coughing, blood on the ground. Frank pulled him up, supported him, and thought: *You've been lying here for a long time, Jesse. You just don't know it.*

The days were gloomy, the nights heavy. Jesse told stories as if twenty men were standing around him. He laughed at their jokes, toasted invisible hands, and gave orders to armies that didn't exist. Frank listened, said nothing.

He tried once. "Jesse. They're gone. Dead. Rotting. We're alone." Jesse grinned, shook his head. "No, Frank. You're blind. They're here. I feel them. They carry me. We're never alone."

Frank knew it was over. His brother was no longer with him. He was just a myth in his own mind, a man who drank and laughed with ghosts while his body disintegrated.

One night, as Jesse lay coughing on the ground again, his eyes red, his lips full of blood, he said quietly, "If I fall, Frank, I won't fall alone. They'll fall with me. And as long as they fall, my name will remain." Frank looked at him, his pipe in his mouth, and knew: *You fell long ago. I sit next to a myth, no longer next to my brother.*

The Southern states offered no protection. They only offered mirrors. And in this mirror, Frank saw two ghosts. One who already lived on the other side. And one who was just waiting.

The hiding place wasn't a hiding place. It was a grave that had already embraced them both.

### Friends who become enemies

They were only a handful of men, scattered, broken, tired from riding, from coughing, from constantly looking over their shoulders. Once, they had been gang-sized, dozens laughing, drinking, and robbing. Now they were just faces covered in scars, eyes filled with hunger.

And the trust was gone.

They sat by the fire, staring into the wood, barely speaking. Everyone held their hand too close to their Colt, everyone drank too fast, as if afraid the bottle would be knocked from their hand. Jesse, as always, talked about headlines, about fame. "You write my name, boys. Jesse James is still alive. Jesse James defies death."

The men looked at him, cold, without luster. One murmured, "Yeah, and us? Who's writing about us? We bleed just the same. We die just the same." Jesse laughed, coughed, and spat blood into the dust. "Your name is with mine. If they print Jesse James, you're there."

Another snorted. "Shit. We're just your shadows, Jesse. You're the hero, and we're the corpses no one counts."

Frank sat next to him, silent, smoking. He knew it was true. Every shot, every newspaper made Jesse bigger—and the others smaller.

The night grew long, and the words harsher. A man rose, staggering, his hand on his gun. "Maybe it's better if we turn you in, Jesse. Sheriff's paying more than you've ever brought us." Jesse grinned, coughed, wiped away blood, drew faster, and shot him in the leg. The man screamed, fell, blood in the dust. "No one betrays Jesse James," Jesse muttered, his gun still smoking. "No one."

The others watched, no one helped. But there was a burning flame in their eyes. Not loyalty. Hatred.

Frank knew: They had no friends left. Only men who had lain in the dirt for too long. Men who would one day draw their Colts on Jesse, too.

It was inevitable.

The gang was no longer a circle of brothers. It was a group of strangers warming themselves by the fire, each quietly wondering whether it might not be better to draw their guns before the other did.

Jesse sat there, bottle in hand, shirt stained with blood and sweat, talking about glory as always. "Every bullet fired at us proves we're legends. Every article in the newspaper makes us bigger than we are." No one answered. One man just stared into the fire, his hand on his Colt, his eyes cold. Another muttered, "Legends don't pay for meals. Newspapers don't fill stomachs."

Jesse grinned, coughed, and wiped the red from his mouth. "You think too small. You think of today, of bread, of whiskey. I think of forever. Of the name that remains." "A name," one growled, "can't be eaten. But you can sell it."

The men no longer laughed with Jesse. They laughed at him. And every laugh was a knife.

Frank saw it, remained silent, and smoked. He knew it would turn. It wasn't a question of if, only of when. Every man in that circle thought of the bounty on Jesse James. Everyone thought that his name was worth more dead than alive.

And Jesse felt it. His eyes darted from one face to the other, feverish, suspicious. "You're with me. You're my men. Right?" Silence. Only the crackling of the fire.

"Or?" he shouted, coughing, blood on the ground, his hand already on his gun. One nodded, slowly, reluctantly. "We're with you, Jesse." But his eyes said something else. And Jesse saw it.

The night wore on, and no one slept. Everyone lay there, their hand on their colt, awake, listening, suspicious. Even the horses sensed it, snorting restlessly as if death were already within reach.

In the morning, the band rode on, but it was no longer a ride. It was a procession of enemies, held together only by fear of being the first to raise their hands.

Frank knew: It was just a thin thread. A whisper. Soon someone would shoot. And then they would all shoot.

They were no longer friends. Just enemies, waiting.

Jesse had a new smile. It wasn't a smile of pride or triumph, it was a crooked, cold grin—like someone expecting to be shot in the back at any moment. He talked, coughed, drank, but his hand remained on his Colt, even when he raised the bottle.

"You think I don't see it," he murmured, his voice shaky but hard. "But I smell it. Betrayal stinks. It stinks worse than a dead dog in summer."

The men stared into the fire, silent. One spat into the dust. Another chewed nervously on a piece of leather, his eyes half-hidden in shadow. Frank saw



them all. He knew: Jesse was right. They wanted to get rid of him. But no one had the courage to be the first.

"You think you could make more money with my head," Jesse laughed, interrupted by a cough. "But you know what? My head isn't for sale. Not while it's still talking, not while it's still shooting."

Silence. Only the wind blowing through the grass.

The next day, the gang rode through desolate land, no town, no village, just skeletal trees. Everyone kept their distance. No one spoke. Everyone had their hand closer to the trigger than necessary. Even the horses snorted, as if calling out the tension.

In the evening, the fire was lit again. One of them dared to say: "Jesse, we have to do things differently. We can't keep going like this. You're sick, you're coughing up blood. People want you dead. Maybe it's better if we split up."

Jesse raised his head, his eyes glazed over, feverish. "Separate? You? Without me, you are nothing. You are dust. You need my name like air." "Or we need him dead," the same man murmured, barely audible, but loud enough.

Jesse jumped up, staggered, drew, and fired. The man fell, a bullet in his stomach, blood spurting into the fire. The others raised their Colts, but no one pulled the trigger. They just stared, teeth gritted, hatred in their eyes.

Frank stood by, smoking, saying nothing. He knew: It wasn't courage that was holding her back. It was just fear. Fear of Jesse. But fear never lasts forever.

The gang was like a powder keg that Jesse himself ignited with every speech, every cough, every shot.

And Frank knew: Soon it would explode.

The fire crackled, but it no longer warmed anyone. The men sat there, their faces hard, their eyes flat, and there was no trace of camaraderie left. Everyone was alone in their own hole of mistrust.

Jesse spoke, as always, with a bottle in his hand and a Colt on his knee. "We are brothers. Brothers in blood, brothers in fire. Anyone who forgets that is already dead." One spat in the grass. "Brothers? You shoot a man in the stomach who rode with you and talk about brotherhood?" Jesse grinned, coughed, and

wiped red from his beard. "He was weak. A traitor. And traitors deserve bullets."

The men grumbled. No one spoke out loud, but everyone thought the same thing: *What if we're the traitors? What if we're next?*

In the morning, the camp was silent. No jokes, no laughter. Everyone packed their gear, their Colts at the ready. The horses snorted restlessly, as if they sensed they were being ridden by riders who were no longer men, but predators with bare teeth.

Frank rode beside Jesse, smoking, saying nothing. But he saw the men's eyes constantly on Jesse's back. They counted every movement, every weakness.

The next evening, the argument was inevitable. The bottle stopped circulating. Everyone kept their whiskey to themselves. One refused to stand watch. "Screw it. If the Pinkertons come, they come. I'm staying here." Jesse jumped up, staggered, and knocked him to the ground with the butt of his revolver. "You stand watch when I say so. I'm Jesse James." The man spat blood, his hand on his Colt, but he didn't draw. Not yet.

The others watched, their eyes filled with hatred. But no one intervened. Not because they were loyal—but because they were waiting for the moment when one of them would fire the first bullet.

Frank knew: Jesse was only holding them together through fear. No bonds, no friends, just a pack that would fall apart at any moment.

The night was quiet, too quiet. Everyone lay awake, their hands on their guns. It was no longer sleep. It was only waiting.

Waiting for the bang that would end everything.

The morning was gray, the fire long extinguished. The men stood in a semicircle, each with tired eyes and quick fingers. It was no longer a gang—it was a shooting range, and Jesse stood in the middle.

"We're on your back, Jesse," one growled, his voice hoarse from the smoke. "They're chasing us everywhere, there are wanted posters everywhere. We're the dogs, and you're the bone. Maybe we should sell the bone."

Jesse coughed, wiped blood from his mouth, and grinned. "Sell? You bastards don't have the guts. You're only alive because you ride in my shadow."

"Your shadow is eating us," another snarled. "Pinkertons everywhere, sheriffs everywhere. Because of you. You're sick, Jesse. You're a dead man who still talks. And we're supposed to pay for it?"

Jesse drew his Colt, holding it loosely, like a man ready to end the game in seconds. "I'm Jesse James. I'm worth more than all of you combined. You're just names no one knows."

The air was thick as smoke. Everyone knew: one twitch, one wrong word, and it would all start.

Frank stood by, smoking, silent. But he saw it – the hatred was open, no longer hidden. Perhaps in the past, they had secretly resented Jesse. Now they were saying it to his face.

And Jesse felt it. He spoke louder, coughed, laughed, as if he could repel the bullets with words. "You are nothing without me. Nothing! You cannot betray me without betraying yourselves."

One stepped closer, his face hard. "Or we're everything without you. Because we'd finally be free. Free from your name, free from your hunt." His hand hung on his Colt, heavy, almost determined.

Frank thought: *One more breath. One more look. And here it all ends. Jesse against the men he called brother.*

But the shot didn't ring out. Not yet. Something held her back—perhaps fear, perhaps the last vestige of respect, perhaps just tiredness.

They turned away and saddled their horses. But the threat hung in the air like smoke that wouldn't dissipate.

Frank knew: next time they wouldn't just talk.

The ride was long, cold, and dusty. No one spoke. Everyone heard only the snorting of the horses, the squeaking of the leather, and their own heartbeats. They rode side by side, but it was no longer a common path—it was a procession of enemies heading in the same direction because no one dared to turn around.

Jesse coughed, wiped blood from his beard, and rode in front. His shadow fell over them like a curse. None of the men could look in his direction without thinking: *Why is he still alive?*

That evening, as they rested in a ravine, it almost broke. One threw his bundle into the fire, his eyes full of hatred. "I'm sick of your name, Jesse. Wanted posters everywhere, sheriffs everywhere. You're sick, you're dead, and you're dragging us to your grave."

Jesse slowly stood up, staggering, but the Colt was faster than his body. He held it in his grip, his eyes feverish, his grin hard. "Say it again and I'll shoot your mouth off."

The man held his gaze. For a few seconds, there was nothing but breath, fire, and two fingers, both almost on the trigger. Then Frank stepped in, cold, calm. "Leave it. Not here. Not today."

It held. Barely. But the crack was open.

Later, when they were asleep—or pretending to be—each lay with his hand on his gun. Even in his dreams, they drew. Everyone feared that the bullet would come out of the darkness. Everyone waited for it.

Frank lay awake, watched the shadows dance, and knew: Jesse was only alive because they were afraid of him. Afraid of his hand, which was faster. But fear was thin. Thinner than loyalty. Thinner than friendship. Thinner than any coin.

And at some point fear also broke out.

The gang was just a facade. They rode together, ate together, slept around the same fire. But everything was fake. No laughter, no stories, no spark. Just eyes that gleamed like knives in the dark.

Jesse knew. He coughed, spat out blood, but he grinned nonetheless. He spoke louder than usual because he knew silence was death. "We are a family. A family of bullets and dust. No one can separate us." But in every face, he saw it: That's exactly what they wanted. Separation. And his death was the price.

On the third evening in a dilapidated stable, things almost escalated. One of them placed his hand openly on the Colt and stared at Jesse. "Your time is up. The Pinkertons are hunting you, not us. But they'll hang us all as long as we carry your shadow." Jesse laughed, the cough breaking it. He wiped away the red, raised the Colt, and placed it on the table. "Then try it. If you're faster, you live. If not, you're the next wanted poster."

No one drew. But the air was like powder, dry, tense, waiting.

Frank sat next to them, smoking, silent as the grave. He knew that neither of them were brothers anymore. They were jackals staring at the same carcass—and Jesse was that carcass, alive but already half-rotted.

In the morning, the gang rode on. Not a word. Only the horses' footsteps, heavy and slow, as if they were riding to a gallows. Jesse felt the Colts' guns at his back, invisible but sharper than any sight.

He turned once in the saddle, coughed, and grinned: "You want me dead, don't you? I see it in your eyes. But you're afraid. And fear makes me immortal."

Frank thought: *No, Jesse. Fear only keeps you alive for a few days. Nothing more.*

That night, as the wind almost extinguished the embers, they sat silently. Everyone knew: betrayal was no longer a question of "if." Only "when."

And Jesse James, the man with the feverish grin, knew it too.

### Women, whiskey and halo

The towns they rode through were full of onlookers. Children pointed at him, women whispered, men stared with that look, half fear, half respect. Jesse coughed blood into a handkerchief, grinned, and still seemed like a damn prophet.

In the bars, he was king. Whiskey on the table, pistol at his belt, his laughter hoarse, his eye feverish. Women sat next to him, laughed too loudly, whispered that they'd always wanted an outlaw. Some kissed him, tasted the blood in his mouth, and pretended it was just the whiskey.

"Jesse James," one breathed, "you're the devil and the saint rolled into one." He grinned, drank, and pulled her into the room. Later, he lay coughing in bed while she stroked his scars like relics.

Outside, people told stories. Jesse as an avenger, Jesse as Robin Hood, Jesse as a man richer than all the banks combined because he had nothing to lose. Preachers cursed from the pulpit, calling him the son of Satan. But the children painted his name in the dust.

Frank saw it all, smoked, and remained silent. He knew it was just dirt. Whiskey, sweat, blood, and lies. But Jesse absorbed it like air. Every whisper, every laugh, every sigh made him bigger in his own head.

"They love me, Frank," he coughed, his arm around a woman who could barely say her name. "They see me as more than a man. I'm a legend. A saint with a gun." Frank blew out smoke. "You're a sick bastard, Jesse. And there comes a time when even the last laugh stops."

But Jesse didn't listen. He kept laughing, kept drinking, kept loving, and in every bottle, in every body, in every look, he sought the halo they were plastering on his forehead.

A halo made entirely of smoke.

The nights in the cities were long, stuffy, and filled with smoke. Jesse sat at the table, bottle in arm, shirt open, scars on his skin like maps from a lost battle. Women sat on his lap, laughed shrilly, whispered his name as if it were a magic spell.

He grinned, coughed, and spat blood into the spittoon, and they pretended they hadn't seen it. "You are indestructible, Jesse," one breathed with red lips, "you are the man who conquers even death." He drank, laughed, and pulled her into the room. Later, he lay coughing in bed while she smoked beside him, her eyes filled with hunger and fear at once.

Outside, the stories spread faster than fire. Jesse James, the Avenger, Jesse James, the poor man's Robin Hood. Some preachers cursed his name, but that only made him bigger. In the bars, men spoke of him as if he were a saint with a gun. Children played "Jesse and the Pinkertons" in the dust, and he was always the hero.

Frank stood by, watching Jesse lose himself in booze and flesh. Women on his lap, whiskey down his throat, blood on his scarf. "Can't you see, Jesse? They're using you. You're a circus. A damn traveling circus." Jesse laughed, taking a drag on the bottle. "And they pay admission, Frank. Admission with their eyes, with their wonder. That's worth more than gold."

But behind the wonder lay decay. Frank saw it clearly: Jesse was sick, falling apart piece by piece. His eyes glowed with fever, his body clinging to the whiskey like a drowning man clinging to a board.

And yet the stories grew. The weaker Jesse became, the stronger his myth grew. The more he coughed, the louder they called his name.

It was grotesque. A sick man in a brothel, hailed like a saint.

Frank sensed it: They didn't love Jesse. They loved the image. The halo of smoke. And Jesse himself was just the skeleton underneath.

The rooms stank of perfume, sweat, and cheap whiskey. Jesse lay in the beds like a king, coughing into the pillows, and the women held him tight anyway, as if afraid he might break if they let go.

"You're the devil," whispered one, her hair disheveled, "but a devil to follow."  
"No," laughed another, "he's a saint. Just look at him. Anyone who loses so much blood and still laughs is blessed."

Jesse grinned, drank, coughed, and wiped the red from his beard. "I am both, my angels. I am the devil you kiss and the saint you worship."

They laughed, kissed him, rubbed themselves against him, as if they could smear a piece of his glory onto their skin. He let it happen, enjoyed it, as if he were truly a prophet holding his mass in the brothel.

Outside, people talked the same way. Some spat, called him a murderer, others clasped their hands as if he had performed miracles. In churches, his name was a threat; in salons, it was a fairy tale told over and over again.

Frank stood in the shadows, smoking, watching his brother. To him, there was no prophet, no saint. Just a man who coughed blood in brothel beds and kept himself warm with whiskey. A man who was more myth than flesh.

Once he stepped closer as Jesse lay between two women again, coughing, laughing, his face feverish. "You're no saint, Jesse. You're a dying bastard with too many stories behind you." Jesse grinned, spun, and pulled on the bottle. "And yet they kneel before me, Frank. Don't you see? I've won. I'm more than a man."

Frank blew out smoke, cold. *More than one man? No, Jesse. Less. Much less.*

But Jesse didn't hear him. He heard only the women whispering, only the crowd outside screaming, only his own voice, which made him bigger the weaker he became.

The halo already hung over him, made of smoke, sweat, and lies. And Jesse wore it as if it were a crown.

Jesse absorbed the intoxication as if it were oxygen. Every night a different city, every bed a different grave, every woman another shadow, simultaneously seeking to warm him and drain him. The whiskey flowed like water, the sheets stuck to his skin, his cough echoed through brothels, and yet everyone pretended it was music.

"He's still alive," the women whispered. "He's alive even though he should have been dead long ago. It's a miracle." "A saint," one said as Jesse bled into her pillow, half asleep. "Only a saint can suffer like this and still laugh."

He grinned, took a drag from the bottle, coughed, and wiped away the red. "Yes, my angels. I suffer for all of you. I am your Bloody Savior."

Frank stood beside him, in the shadows, smoking, silent. He saw the women kissing him, stroking the scars as if they were relics. He heard the crowd outside recounting stories that grew grander, holier, more grotesque with every word.

But he also saw the trembling in Jesse's hands, the fever in his eyes, the sweat that smelled more of death than life. *No saint*, thought Frank. *Just a dying man lining his pockets.*

In the bars, men stood up and raised their glasses. "To Jesse James! The outlaw who never falls!" The crowd cheered as if he were their prophet. Jesse heard it, laughed, coughed, and drank more. Every scream from outside, every hand on his back, every kiss from a woman was like a drug. He absorbed it as if he could drink himself immortal.

But there was something else in the eyes of the men in his gang. No respect, no admiration—only jealousy, weariness, hatred. They saw Jesse idolized, while they themselves remained mere shadows in the background.

Frank knew: the myth wasn't just consuming Jesse. It was consuming the gang, the women, the cities. Everything revolved around one image—a halo of smoke.

And Jesse wore it with pride, as if it were real.

The night was filled with smoke and voices. Jesse stood in the middle of the room, his shirt open, a bottle in one hand, a Colt in the other. Women sat on



the beds, men leaned against the walls, and everyone stared at him as if he were delivering a sermon.

"You think I'm just a man," he coughed, blood in his beard, his grin feverish. "But men fall. I don't fall. I am Jesse James, and I carry your misery, your dust, your hunger on my shoulders."

A few women sighed, one wiped tears from her eyes as if she had actually said a Mass. One of the men called out, "To Jesse!" and clinked his glass.

Frank sat in the corner, smoking, watching the spectacle. For him, it wasn't a messiah. For him, it was a sick man, drunkenly preaching his own lies.

"I am the Saint of the Damned," Jesse continued, his voice hoarse, his laughter broken. "I will not die as long as you call my name. I suffer so you know that one can stand against the world. I am your Bloody Savior."

The crowd cheered, women pressed against him, kissed his hands, and stroked his scars. One whispered, "He is more than human."

Frank blew out smoke, cold. *More than a person? No. Less. Much less. A man with too much blood in his throat and too many stories in his head.*

Jesse laughed, drank, coughed, almost fell over, then caught himself. "See? Even if I fall, I get up. Even if I bleed, I laugh. I am Jesse James, and no one can take me out."

For a moment, he really did seem like a preacher. But Frank saw the trembling, the fever, the cold sweat. He knew: Jesse wasn't preaching immortality. He was just preaching his own fear of dying.

The crowd didn't notice. They cheered, drank, and kissed him. They saw the halo. Frank saw only the flickering of a candle about to go out.

The nights never ended. Every city was the same: a brothel full of voices, a table full of whiskey, a few women stroking his scars as if they were Bible verses. Jesse lay there, coughing, grinning, letting himself be touched, letting himself be celebrated.

He was no longer a robber. He was an attraction. A wandering saint with a gun, a dying king in a brothel bed. And he absorbed it like poison.

"You are stronger than death," a woman breathed, licking the sweat from his neck. "You are the man who stays." He laughed, pulled her closer, and coughed into the pillow. "Exactly, angel. I'll stay. As long as they call my name, I'll stay."

Outside, they were really calling him. Men in the streets, children in the dust, preachers in the churches, enemies in the parlors. Everyone had a version of Jesse James. Everyone told it as if he were more of an idea than a person.

Frank sat next to them, smoking, watching his brother. He smelled the sweat, the blood, the perfume. He saw the women's eyes—half lust, half fear. He heard the coughing that lurked behind every laugh.

*This is no longer a life, thought Frank. This is just a show. A show that thrives on whiskey and lies.*

And yet it kept Jesse alive. Every kiss, every cheer, every call of his name was like another minute of breath. He drank them all in, as if they could delay dying.

But Frank saw the trembling in his hands, the fatigue in his body, the smell of death that remained despite all the jubilation. The myth was the only thing holding Jesse together.

And the myth was stronger than flesh.

Jesse lay in bed like a king in his own coffin. Women huddled around him, whispering his name as if it were a prayer. The bottle stood empty beside him, the Colt rested on his chest like a cross. He coughed, blood spurted onto the pillow, and yet he grinned.

"I'm not dying," he murmured, feverish, his eyes glazed over. "I am Jesse James. You can take my body, but not my name. My name is iron. My name is fire."

A woman leaned over him and kissed his bloody smile. "You are immortal," she breathed. "Death is afraid of you." He laughed, wheezed, and drank the last drop from the bottle. "Exactly. Death rides after me, but all he gets in his mouth is dust."

Frank stood in the shadows, smoking, and saw it. To him, it was no prophet, no saint. Just a man long since dying, drawing the intoxication over himself like a blanket. A man who no longer knew where the line between flesh and myth lay.

The people outside continued to talk as if they had already lost him and yet had never seen him alive. Jesse James, the avenger, the immortal, the saint with the gun. The weaker his body became, the stronger the legend grew.

And Jesse believed it. He absorbed it, every story, every whisper, every glass raised in his name. He believed he was untouchable, immortal, a man who would ride on even in the grave.

Frank blew out smoke, cold, and knew: He no longer had a brother. He only had a figure from stories, a puppet of myth, moved by whiskey and words.

The man Jesse James was dead. All that remained was the halo—made of smoke, blood, and lies.

### A hero for the poor – a bastard for the rich

They told his stories in kitchens, in fields, around fires. Farmers with dirty hands raised their heads when someone said "Jesse James." To them, he was one of them—a man who took the rich, the banks, the damned railroaders, and stood up to them.

"He's our hero," murmured an old woman as she kneaded bread dough. "The only one who dares to stand up to the gentlemen."

"An avenger," said a young lad, "one who shows that they can also fall."

To the poor, Jesse was a light, even when he himself was lying in the dirt. They spoke of him as if he were a cross between Robin Hood and an angry angel.

But in the homes of the rich, it sounded different. There sat men with cigars, polished fingers, and full bellies. "He's a dog," growled one. "A bastard who's holding back progress." "A thief, a murderer," snarled another. "He belongs on the gallows, and the sooner the better."

The newspapers vacillated between the two. Some printed him as a folk hero, with wild stories that were larger than life. Others called him a pest, a rat that needed to be crushed.

Jesse himself absorbed both. He read when he could, listened when people whispered, laughed hoarsely when they called him "hero," and grinned coldly when they shouted "bastard."

"They love me," he once coughed to Frank, blood on his handkerchief, whiskey in his throat. "And those who hate me only make me bigger." Frank shook his head, smoked, and said quietly, "You are a hope to the poor and a nightmare to the rich. But to me, you're just a man slowly dying."

The peasants spoke of him with shining eyes. The gentlemen cursed him with clenched fists. Jesse James was both hero and bastard.

And between these two images lay the man coughing in a brothel bed, clutching a bottle.

The stories grew bigger the less people had. In cabins where the wind whistled through the cracks, the old people swore that Jesse James had sent the sheriff himself to hell. Children listened, open-mouthed, as if they were talking about a saint. "He fights for us," they said. "He takes the farms away from the banks. He's our avenger."

The poor made him into something he never was. A man who saw their suffering, someone who shot for them. They said he had distributed sacks of gold in the fields, that he had relieved the poor of their debts. Lies, twisted, exaggerated – but they needed it, and so it became true.

In the salons of the rich, the picture was different. There, the air smelled of cigars and perfume, and Jesse was a bogeyman who stole their night's sleep. "That bastard," growled one man wearing a vest and watch chain, "holding up our trains, shooting down our men. He's a disease." "A plague," agreed a banker. "And a plague must be eradicated."

So they paid. They paid Pinkertons, bounty hunters, sheriffs. Every dollar Jesse brought to the poor in stories made the rich pay double for his skin.

Jesse heard it, read it, and absorbed it like whiskey. He grinned, coughed, and laughed hoarsely. "The poor worship me, Frank. The rich want to hang me. That's exactly how it should be. That's greatness."

Frank smoked, blowing the smoke into the wind. "Greatness, Jesse? You're a fairy tale to some and a nightmare to others. But here, in front of me, you're just a man coughing up blood and not much longer."

Jesse grinned and took a drag on the bottle. "And yet they all talk about me. And as long as they talk, I'm immortal."

The poor held him high, the rich pointed their Colts at him. And Jesse lived in between—hero and bastard, savior and dog.

Jesse enjoyed it. He absorbed the cheers and the hate equally, as if both were alcohol. When the farm children screamed his name, he grinned. When bankers printed "bastard" and "killer" in the newspapers, he grinned even wider.

"Do you understand, Frank?" he coughed, bottle in hand, blood on his chin. "Both keep me alive. Whoever loves me gives me glory. Whoever hates me makes me even greater."

Frank blew out smoke and looked into his feverish eyes. "Or both will put you underground faster. You're riding a tightrope, Jesse, and there's nothing but knives beneath you."

But Jesse didn't listen. He rode through villages, making people look up, waving with a shaky hand, while women waved to him, children called out. And he grinned as if he were their king.

Later, in a city full of wealth, he sat in the shade with Frank, reading the newspaper. "Jesse James – The Enemy of Progress," it read. "A dog that ought to be shot." Jesse laughed hoarsely, coughing into his handkerchief. "Look, Frank. Even their insults are crowning glory. If the rich hate me so much, then I must be doing everything right."

Frank saw the lines, saw his brother. For him, there was no hero, no bastard. Just a man who grew weaker and weaker while the world made him bigger and bigger.

The poor created a saint, the rich a demon. And Jesse danced between the two images as if he could cling to them.

Frank knew: right in the middle of it, he would die.

The bottle was almost empty when Jesse began to speak loudly, half preaching, half slurring. The table was sticky with spilled whiskey, his eyes gleamed feverishly, his shirt was open, and in the corner, Frank sat silently, his pipe between his teeth.

"You know, Frank," Jesse coughed, wiping blood from his mouth, "they see two men in me. The poor see the savior, the avenger. The rich see the bastard, the devil. And both are right."

He grinned crookedly, raised the bottle, drank, and coughed. "I am both. I am the angel with the gun and the dog who empties their pockets. I am the fire and the ashes. That is greatness. Two faces, one name."

Frank blew out smoke and looked at him. "Two faces, Jesse? No. Two lies. The poor need a hero, so they make you one. The rich need an enemy, so they make you one. But you're just a man who spits blood and soon falls."

Jesse laughed, gasped, and slapped the table. "That's the joke, Frank! As long as they talk about me, I'm more than a man. I'm a legend, a myth. Whether I die or not doesn't matter – the name lives on."

The women at the next table giggled and toasted him. Men in the bar raised their glasses and shouted, "To Jesse James!" And he grinned, basking in the attention as if he had just finished a sermon.

Frank saw it soberly. His brother was no longer his brother. He was a character, a story fed by others. Whether he lived or died – it no longer mattered. The myth had replaced him.

And Jesse was the only one who knew that – and still went along with it.

The villages lay like open mouths along the roadside. When Jesse appeared, dusty, coughing, with bloody lips and a Colt at his belt, they looked at him as if a king were coming. Children ran after him, shouting his name as if it were a song. Women nodded reverently, some even grabbed his arm as if they wanted to tear off a piece of legend.

Jesse grinned, coughed into his handkerchief, and waved as if he'd given something away. "See, Frank? I give them hope. I make them feel like someone's shooting for them."

Frank didn't nod. He smoked silently, watching the people's eyes stare at him as if he were a statue made of flesh. *They don't see a man*, he thought. *They only see a story that can run.*

In the cities, it was the opposite. Rich men with watches and cigars viewed Jesse with cold hatred, if they even saw him at all. Wanted posters hung on the walls, freshly printed, with sums rising like prayers for his death.

"They want me," Jesse grinned in a bar as he laid the latest wanted poster on the table. "Every dollar they pay makes me bigger. The poor drink to my head, the rich pay for my head. I've got both in my pocket."

He drank, coughed, and laughed hoarsely, while the men around him clinked glasses. They laughed along, but Frank saw it—their eyes were filled with doubt. They knew Jesse wasn't immortal. He was a man slowly disintegrating.

But Jesse lived by what they said. He absorbed every cheer, every curse, as if it were his last breath. He was no longer Jesse James, the man. He was Jesse James, the idea.

And ideas don't die, thought Frank. But men do.

Jesse was addicted to those looks. He needed them more than whiskey, more than women, more than air. Every step through a village was a mass: farmers nodding, children shouting, women clasping their hands, men nodding to him like a lost king.

He grinned, coughed blood, and waved. "You see, Frank? Every look is a mirror. And in every mirror I see myself, bigger, stronger, immortal."

Frank saw the same looks, but he read something different in them: pity, fear, a hunger for a story greater than their own misery. They didn't see Jesse—they only saw the image they needed.

In the cities of the wealthy, it was the other way around. There, he saw mirrors filled with hate. Merchants, bankers, politicians—they saw him not as Jesse James the man, but as Jesse James the specter that threatened their world. Every glance from them was a weapon that would follow him.

Jesse loved it. He inhaled it, grinned, and laughed hoarsely, even though he had to brace himself against the wall afterward to keep from collapsing. "You give me what I need, Frank. Love or hate—both make me bigger."

Frank blew out smoke and saw his brother trembling next to him. *Bigger?* he thought. *No, Jesse. Don't you see that you've disappeared long ago? That there's no man left, just an image they've painted in your mind?*

That evening, in the brothel, Jesse lay in bed with two women, his face feverish, his hands weak, but his grin broad. "They talk about me like a saint, Frank. Some say I'm the devil. But no one says I'm nothing. As long as no one calls me nothing, I'm alive."

Frank stood in the doorway, cold and tired. "You're nothing, Jesse. You're just a mirror. People see what they need—not what you are."

Jesse didn't hear him. He only heard the voices outside, screaming his name. And in that echo, the person he once was disappeared.

In the end, Jesse was nothing more than a silhouette, staggering through the streets, accompanied by whispers, shouts, and sermons. The poor saw him as a hero, the rich as a bastard. But no one saw the man anymore.

He would sometimes stand on a bar table, shirt open, bottle in hand, blood on his handkerchief, and shout: "I'm Jesse James! You either love me or you hate me—but you're talking about me! And as long as you're talking, I'm more than death!"

The crowd cheered, laughed, and toasted. Some shouted "Holy!", others "Murderer!" And Jesse absorbed both, grinning, coughing, and swaying as if he were performing on stage.

Frank saw it, cold, tired, smoking. For him, there was no brother anymore. No man with whom he had crossed fields, no boy who had played in the Missouri mud. Only an echo. A name louder than the flesh that bore it.

"You're already dead, Jesse," Frank muttered once, as Jesse danced on the table, sweating, feverish, half-laughing, half-gasping. "People are talking to your shadow. Not to you."

But Jesse didn't hear him. He heard only the cheers, the hatred, the whispers. He heard only his own name echoing in a hundred throats.

The man was gone. What remained was Jesse James—hero and bastard, angel and devil, holy legend on rickety legs.

And Frank knew: when death came, it wouldn't take a man. It would only take the flesh. The rest, the echo, the myth—that would remain.

A hero to the poor. A bastard to the rich. For Frank, just an empty grave that was already buried beside him.



## Back room full of curses

The great days were behind them. What remained were the small spaces—back rooms in bars, with low ceilings, stinking of beer, sweat, and stale smoke. There they sat, the last men around Jesse, their hands always on their Colts, their eyes always full of suspicion.

The candles smoked, the whiskey tasted of piss, and every sentence was half threat, half lie.

"We need money," one growled, his beard greasy, his fingers nervous. "None of us can sit around like this forever." "Money?" coughed Jesse, his face pale, his voice hoarse. "We have more than money. We have a name. My name. With that, we can get anything."

The men didn't laugh. One slammed his fist on the table. "Screw your name. Wanted posters don't buy us meals. And your stories don't buy us whiskey."

Jesse grinned crookedly, drank, and coughed blood into his handkerchief. "You talk like you're peasants. We're outlaws. We take what we need. Banks, trains, everything—as long as they hear Jesse James, they tremble."

"Trembling?" someone murmured. "The Pinkertons are hunting us, the sheriffs are hanging us. People may celebrate you, Jesse, but they don't even see us. We're just the shadows behind your name."

The room fell silent, only the dripping of something in the next room could be heard. Then a curse, loud and bitter. "Damn it, Jesse, your name is a curse. Each of us carries it with us, and it drags us down."

Jesse laughed, coughed, and leaned forward. "A curse? No, brothers. A blessing. A blessing that makes you immortal."

But there was no shine in the men's faces. Only fatigue, hatred, and that kind of silence that seemed like a loaded gun.

Frank sat in the corner, smoking, watching. *This is no longer a planning room, he thought. This is a grave full of voices. Every sentence a curse, every look a dagger.*

And he knew: these back rooms would see more blood than any bank they had ever robbed.

The door to the back room creaked, slammed shut, and suddenly you were cut off from the world outside. No daylight, only flickering candles that cast more shadows than light. The smell was pungent: stale smoke, spilled liquor, old planks that had absorbed too many secrets.

Jesse sat at the table, his back bent, the bottle in his hand. His eyes glistened feverishly, his shirt damp with sweat. He coughed into his handkerchief, leaving red stains, but he grinned nonetheless. "You think we're finished," he muttered, "but we're never finished. As long as one of us draws the Colt, we live."

The men stared at him. One growled, "Life? You call this life? Sitting in these holes, whispering like rats, while outside every sheriff, every Pinkerton, wants our heads?"

Another slapped the table. "We need money, Jesse. Not newspapers, not legends. Coins. Paper. Whiskey in a glass, not just dreams."

Jesse drank, put down the bottle, and leaned back. "Money? I'll give you more than money. I'll give you a name. With my name, you can kick down any door."

"Your name," one snarled, "is the only thing they need to hang us."

The silence that followed was heavy, like a rope around one's neck. All one could hear was the dripping in the next room, the wind blowing through a crack in the wall.

Frank sat in the corner, pipe in mouth, eyes cold. He saw them staring at each other, their hands too close to their Colts. One wrong word, and the back room would be full of corpses.

"We're brothers," Jesse finally coughed, his voice hoarse. "We curse, we fight, we bleed. But we'll ride together until the earth eats us."

The men didn't nod. They drank, they spat, they cursed. Every sentence was half promise, half threat.

The back room wasn't a safe haven. It was a cage full of curses. And Jesse was only loosely holding them together with whiskey and his damned name.

The back room was as silent as a confessional, but the words within were anything but prayers. Every sentence spoken was a curse, a dagger whizzing through the air.

"You're talking about brothers," one growled, his face cut by the candlelight. "But brothers don't shoot each other in the stomach when they disagree." Jesse grinned, coughed, and spat red into the handkerchief. "Brothers obey. Anyone who doesn't isn't a brother, but an enemy."

The men grumbled, the table vibrating under their fists. One pulled his Colt slightly out of his holster, just enough to show the metal flashing. "Maybe it's better if the gang moves on without you, Jesse."

Frank sucked on his pipe, blew out smoke, and said nothing. But his eyes were alert, alert like a man who knows: One more leap, and the first shot will be fired.

Jesse staggered to his feet, the bottle still in his hand, and laughed hoarsely. "You think you can get rid of me? I am the name. Without me, you are dust. No one remembers dust."

"Perhaps dust is better," one murmured, "than being constantly hunted."

The silence that followed was thicker than the smoke. One could hear the creaking of chairs, the cracking of knuckles, the hissing of the candle. Everyone knew: It was no longer a gang. It was a circle full of jackals staring at the same carcass—and Jesse was that carcass, still talking.

Jesse coughed, laughed, and raised the bottle. "Escape, hatred, betrayal—call it what you will. As long as you sit here with me, you are my men. And I am your curse."

The candle flickered, casting long shadows. And there was more danger in those shadows than outside the door.

The candle had almost burned down, the wax crawling across the table like a snail sealing everything that had been said in this room. And much had been said—too much.

Jesse sat hunched over, the bottle clutched in his arm, his face pale, his eyes flickering like flames. He coughed, wiped away blood, but grinned nonetheless. "You think the Pinkertons are the danger. Or the sheriffs. Or the damn newspapers. But I see it in your eyes – the bullet that will take me is sitting in this room."

No one laughed. No one objected. They just stared at him. Hands too close to the Colt, faces hard, like stone lain in the sun for a long time.

"You want to get rid of me," Jesse muttered, "but you're afraid. Afraid that with me you'll also lose the last shred of fame." He tipped the bottle, coughed again, and blood dripped onto the wood. "Without Jesse James, you're nothing. Do you understand? Nothing."

One man slammed his fist on the table, the glass tipped, and the whiskey spilled. "Nothing's better than being chased like dogs every day!"

The silence that followed was like a noose. Every breath tightened it.

Frank smoked in the corner, his pipe like a shield in front of his face. He didn't speak, but he thought: *This isn't a back room anymore. It's a grave. And Jesse talks like he's digging it himself.*

A man stood up, slowly, his hand on his Colt. "Maybe he's right. Maybe it's better without him."

The others held their breath. Jesse grinned, staggered, drew with lightning speed—faster than anyone would have thought possible in his condition—and aimed at the man's forehead. "Make that move, and I'll send you to hell where you belong."

The man stopped. Staring. Then he sat down again.

Jesse coughed, laughed, spat blood, and drank. "Exactly. You stay. You stay because I'm your curse. And you don't have the guts to break free."

The candle went out. The room was dark. Only Jesse's coughing, the grinding of teeth, the clicking of Colts in the shadows.

Outside, there were sheriffs and wanted posters. But inside lay true death, silent, breathing, lurking.

The room was cold and hot at the same time. Cold from the stares, hot from the stuffy air. Smoke hung heavy from the ceiling, and no one spoke in a normal voice anymore. Everything was whispering, growling, winged threats that buzzed through the room like daggers.

Jesse sat at the table, his shirt plastered with sweat, his handkerchief covered in blood. The bottle clinked against the rim as he raised it. His eyes darted from one to the other, nervous, feverish. "I see it," he coughed. "Every one of you thinks it. You want to betray me. You want to trade my head like a few coins at a pawn shop."

One of them laughed dryly. "And? Would that be so wrong? Your head is worth more than you are alive." Jesse slammed the bottle down on the table and reached for his Colt. "Say it again, and I'll put my bullets in your teeth."

Frank blew smoke from his pipe, surveying the scene through the cloud of smoke. He knew: Jesse was only saying what everyone was thinking. But in his feverish eyes, it was no longer a guess—it was certainty.

The men grumbled, cursed, and slammed their glasses. One spat on the ground. "Your name, Jesse, is a curse. There are wanted posters everywhere. They're asking for us everywhere. You're the dog that draws the pack." "I'm the dog," Jesse grinned, coughing, blood dripping onto the wood. "But I'm also the teeth. And without me, you're just meat."

Silence. Everyone took the sentence as a threat.

Later, when the light was almost gone, they began to lower their voices. Names of bounty hunters were mentioned, sums of money were offered. Curses were uttered against Pinkertons, against banks, against Jesse himself. It was no longer planning; it was poison slowly filling the room.

Jesse heard every word. He saw the knife in every look. And he drew strength from it, like a madman. "Yeah, go ahead and swear," he slurred. "I hear it. You hate me. But you stay. Because without Jesse James, you have nothing."

Frank saw them put their hands too close to the Colts, their eyes flickering. *One more word, he thought, One more cough, one more sip of whiskey – and it explodes in here.*

The back room was no longer a place. It was a coffin in which they all already lay, each with their hand on the trigger.

And Jesse grinned into the darkness, convinced that even in the coffin he was still the loudest.

Night crept through the cracks of the back room like a thief, but no one inside was innocent. The candles burned down, the wax dripped like rotten flesh, and Jesse leaned over the table, his eyes burning.

"You're traitors," he hissed, his voice half cough, half thunder. "I see it in your faces. Each of you counts the coins my head brings in. Each of you dreams of catching me asleep and stabbing me like a pig."

Silence. Only the dripping from the wall, the crackling of the candle wick.

"Don't say that," one muttered, his fingers on the Colt. "I'm saying it," Jesse snarled, spitting blood into the cloth. "Because it's the truth. You're vultures waiting for my bone. But don't forget—I still have teeth."

He drew his Colt and placed it on the table, the metal heavy and dark in the candlelight. "Whoever takes the first step dies. Here. Today."

The men stared at him, silent, rigid, each with his hand on his holster. This wasn't just talking; it was a race of the eyes to see who would draw first.

Frank sucked on his pipe, slowly exhaling the smoke. His thoughts were calm, like water in a deep well. *This doesn't end in riches. This ends in blood. And Jesse talks as if he decided it himself.*

"You are our curse," one finally murmured. "Right," Jesse grinned, coughed, and clutched the table. "Your curse. And curses are not broken. They remain until they consume you all."

His laughter echoed in the stuffy room, feverish, brittle. It was the laughter of a man who knew he was already on the scaffold—and yet continued to grin.

Frank saw it. And he knew: The end had begun here, in this back room full of curses.

The candles flickered as if they were afraid. The smoke hung thick in the room, the air felt like sandpaper in the lungs. Every breath was a scratch, every word a spark.

Jesse stood staggering, Colt in hand, his eyes glowing, his body a wreck. "You mean to betray me," he rasped, "I know it. I hear it in your curses, I see it in your eyes." He coughed, blood running down his chin. Nevertheless, he grinned like someone who had already outlived the world.

One of them jumped up, his chair tipping, his hand on his Colt. "Maybe I've had enough of your damn name!" he yelled. Jesse raised the revolver, the click echoing through the room like thunder.

All hands went to their weapons. Metal flashed in the candlelight, chairs scraped, hearts pounded. For a moment, it was clear: One more breath, and the gang would shoot themselves to pieces.

Frank stood up, pipe in hand like a dagger, and growled, "Enough!" His voice cut through the smoke. "You want him? Then shoot him. But know what you're doing: You're erasing the name that still holds you together."

Silence. Heavy. Breathless. The men stared at each other. One by one, they slowly lowered their weapons, growling and cursing.

Jesse laughed hoarsely, falling back into his chair as if he'd won. "See? They can't. They need me. I'm their curse, and curses can't be shot."

He coughed, drank, and grinned, as if it were all just a game. But Frank saw clearly: Nothing had been won here. Only postponed.

The back room had become too small. Every curse, every word, every gesture was a knife. Sooner or later, someone would pull the trigger—and this time, no one would hold back.

Frank looked at his brother, the Colt still in his hand, blood in his beard, madness in his eyes. *You die in here, Jesse, he thought. Not outside. Not in the field. Here, in a back room full of curses.*

### An old revolver, a tired man

The revolver lay on the table like an old dog. Worn, dull, the metal marked by years of gunfire. Jesse stroked it with trembling fingers as if it were the last piece of skin he had left.

His body was tired, drained, full of coughs and blood. The muscles that had once been proud and hard hung limp, and every step sounded like the clang of bones. But when his hand touched the Colt, it tensed briefly, as if it had once more strength.

"He's old," murmured Frank, sitting in the corner. "Like you." Jesse grinned weakly, raised the gun, and twirled it in the candlelight. "Old, yes. But he still talks. And as long as he talks, they'll listen to me."

He coughed, the sound phlegmy, red, and disgusting. The cloth was full of it. But he just wiped his mouth and placed the Colt on his chest as if it were a cross.

"You know, Frank," he gasped, "everyone says I'm finished. But they forget: I have the gun. And the gun knows no fatigue."

Frank blew out smoke and looked at his brother. *Yes, Jesse, he thought. Even the revolver is tired. Your trembling has long been embedded in it.*

Outside, they continued talking—the poor called him a hero, the rich a bastard. But inside, in that stuffy room, there was only a man who was more cough than breath, and a weapon that had long since become more myth than metal.

At some point, Jesse fell asleep, his Colt in his hand. And Frank knew: The man was tired. But the gun never slept.

Jesse woke up coughing. The sun was just a sliver of light peeking through the cracks in the wood, dust motes dancing in the air as if they had more life than he did. The Colt still lay in his hand, heavy, cold, familiar. He held it as if it were a piece of his soul that couldn't be torn away.

"He won't leave me," he murmured, his voice hoarse. "Women leave, men curse, even blood runs away. But he stays."

Frank sat next to him, his pipe in his mouth, and thought: *You talk about him like a woman who has never cheated on you.*

Jesse raised the gun, turned it, coughed, and wiped his mouth with the cloth, which was already more red than white. "You know, Frank," he gasped, "this gun is more me than I am. If I die, it lives on. Someone will take it, fire it, and then a piece of Jesse James will still be there."

Frank snorted softly. "Or it's lying rusted in the ground, like you. Metal rots more slowly, that's all."

Jesse grinned, even though his smile was filled with pain. "Maybe. But as long as he's here, I'm not an old man. I'm the gun. I'm the shot. I'm what they fear."

He held the weapon tightly as if trying to press it into his skin. His hands trembled, his fingers bony, his nails black. It looked pathetic—but in his feverish gaze, the fire still glowed that no doctor, no sheriff, no Pinkerton could extinguish.

Frank smoked, silent. He saw his brother sitting there: a bag of coughs and scars, clutching a piece of iron because it was the only thing that still reminded him of Jesse James.



The man was tired. But the gun pretended to be awake forever.

The night was stifling, and Jesse sat at the table, his cloth bloody, his eyes dull. Before him lay the Colt, pointed at the candle flame, as if testing whether the metal still breathed.

"You and I," he murmured, "we've seen them all. Banks, trains, men with big names. You spoke when I couldn't. You did what my hands wanted."

Frank heard it from the corner, his pipe in his mouth. *He talks to him, he thought. Like an old friend. Like a dog that never betrayed him.*

Jesse continued, whispering, coughing. "They call me a bastard, they call me a hero. But you, no one calls you anything. You're just the shadow emerging from the barrel. And yet you're more than me."

He raised the gun, held it to his face, his fingers trembling, his smile tired. "Without you, I'd be dust long ago. Without you, I'd be just another farmer in the Missouri dirt. But you made me a name. And as long as you're with me, I'm more than just flesh."

Frank blew smoke, saw his brother staring at the piece of metal with glassy eyes. *This is no longer a weapon, he thought. This is his last religion.*

Jesse almost kissed the barrel, then carefully laid the gun down, as one would a fragile treasure. "Sleep, old friend," he murmured. "We'll talk again tomorrow."

Then he collapsed, coughing, his hand still on the handle.

Frank sat there for a long time, silent. It was clear to him: Jesse was no longer a man. He was just a tired body, talking to a piece of iron because he no longer saw people as brothers.

The candle was almost burned down, the light as dim as a dying star. Jesse sat crookedly in the chair, his Colt on his knees, staring down the barrel as if it were a telescope. His hands trembled, but his gaze was clear, clear as madness.

"I see it, Frank," he murmured, his voice rough. "Everything. It's all in there. Missouri mud. The first shots. The first blood. Quantrill. Lawrence. The fields. The trains. Everything. It's in him."

Frank sat in the corner, pipe in hand, and watched Jesse talk without looking at him.*He believes the revolver shows him pictures,he thought.He thinks he is looking into his own soul.*

"You know, Frank," Jesse coughed, wiping away blood, "this barrel is like a tunnel. A tunnel back. I see us, kids, in the dust, with wooden guns. I see Mother in the kitchen. I see Father before they took him. Everything in there. Everything's tight."

He laughed softly, gasped, turned the gun, and continued to stare inside. "I see the dead too, Frank. All the ones we took. All the ones who would have taken me. They're inside, in the darkness of the barrel. They're looking back. Some are laughing. Some are crying."

Frank pulled on his pipe and blew out smoke.*He talks as if the revolver were his mirror,he thought.But there's no mirror. There's only steel.*

"I can even see myself," Jesse murmured, "falling. Lying. Someone aiming at me. Maybe it's you, Frank. Maybe it's Bob Ford. Maybe it's nobody. But it's in there. It's waiting."

He raised the gun, almost kissing the barrel, and whispered, "Show me, old friend. Show me everything before it's over."

Then he closed his eyes, holding the Colt like a child holds his toy.

Frank watched as his brother sank deeper and deeper into the piece of metal. To him, there was no longer a man at the table. Just a tired body staring into a black hole that gave nothing back.

The room was silent, except for the coughing. Jesse sat at the table, the Colt in front of him, looking at it as if it were a face. The candle was almost burned down, the smoke hung in the room like fog.

"You know me better than anyone," Jesse whispered, his voice shaky. "You were always there. When I shot the first man. When I took my first money. You did it. I just pulled."

Frank sat in the shade, smoking. He said nothing. He had learned not to interrupt Jesse in such moments.

"I've done things," Jesse coughed, blood on his handkerchief. "Things they'll never know. The poor who celebrate me don't know. The rich who hate me don't know. But you do. You felt every shot."

He leaned forward, resting his forehead against the cold steel. "I shot men who never saw me. I lied to women who believed in me. I betrayed brothers without realizing it. You never flinched. You never asked."

Frank blew out smoke, looking at his brother and the gun like two old friends. *He confesses, he thought. He confesses to a piece of iron because he no longer trusts anyone.*

"I'm scared too," Jesse whispered, "scared that I'll die and they'll laugh. Scared that I'll die and no one will remember. But you... you're the only one who won't forget me. You're my witness."

He kissed the barrel, coughed, and wiped his eyes with the bloody cloth. "You know, I was never a hero. Not for the poor, not for myself. I was just a man with a Colt. And you were the only one who was always there."

Frank heard the whispers, saw the tears amidst the blood and sweat, and knew: Jesse had found his last confessor. Not a priest, not a friend—a gun, worn and cold.

The man was tired. But the confession came from deep within his throat, as if it finally had to come out before the race had its last word.

The night was silent, only the scratching of rats in the rafters and Jesse's cough, deep, wet, full of red. He held the gun in his hand as if it were a throat he was clinging to avoid drowning.

"You know, old friend," he murmured, "I've never been afraid of shooting. Never afraid of blood. But I'm afraid of nothingness. Afraid that it'll get dark and no one will say my name anymore."

He held the gun to his face, his eyes glassy. "If they hate me, I live. If they love me, I live. But if they remain silent... then I am dust. And I am dust enough already."

Frank sat next door, smoking, and heard it. He said nothing because there was nothing to say. *This is a man who talks to death, he thought. Not with me.*

"I see the faces," Jesse coughed. "Lawrence is still burning. Men, women, children. I see the eyes. They ask me why. And I have no answer. Never had one. Only you."

He tapped the Colt on the table, weakly, trembling. "You always answered. Loudly. Clearly. Faster than I could think. But if I leave... who will answer?"

Tears mingled with sweat and blood. "I don't want to die in silence. I don't want them to say: Jesse James was just a man. I want them to say: He was more. More than bones, more than blood."

Frank saw his brother talking as if the gun were an ear that truly heard. He saw the pain, the madness, the naked fear. And he knew: Jesse had long since begun to say goodbye. Not to the world—to himself.

The Colt lay heavy on the table. But in Jesse's hands, it seemed like the last piece of support that kept death at bay for just a moment.

The candle burned only as a stub. The room was filled with shadows, the walls seemed to be closing in. Jesse sat at the table, the Colt in his hands, his eyes feverish, glassy, far away.

"You are my beginning," he whispered, "and you will be my end." He pressed the barrel to his forehead and closed his eyes. "If I go, I go with you. No one else may take me."

Frank sat in the shade, watching. His pipe glowed, the smoke hung heavy. *He doesn't talk to me anymore, he thought. He talks to death, cast in steel.*

Jesse suddenly laughed, a hoarse, broken laugh. "You know, old friend, they call me a hero, they call me a bastard. But to me, you're the only one who's never betrayed me. When I fall, you're the hand that carries me."

He coughed, blood spurting onto the cloth, but still he grinned as if it were a gift. "I see the puffs we took. I smell the smoke. I hear the screams. It's all still inside you, Colt. You're the Bible I wrote, page by page, bullet by bullet."

Frank pressed his lips together, watching his brother tremble, talk, cry, laugh. He was no longer human. It was a ghost, speaking to his own weapon as if it were the only truth left.

"You will redeem me," Jesse breathed, "or you will damn me. But you will do it. Not them. Not the Pinkertons. Not the cowards with wanted posters. Only you."

He kissed the barrel, then placed the gun on his chest as if it were a cross. His eyes closed, and he murmured, barely audibly: "An old gun... a tired man..."

Frank saw it. And he knew: the brother he knew was long gone. Only the shell remained, clinging to a piece of metal that had more soul than the man himself.

### Bob Ford knocks

It was a gray morning, the wind rattled the boards of the house, and Jesse sat at the table, the old revolver in front of him, coughing, tired, half-dead. Frank sat in the corner, smoking, staring out, saying nothing. The world outside was quiet, but inside there was a weight in the air that could be chewed with one's teeth.

Then came the knock. Soft, threefold, like a heartbeat at the door. Jesse raised his head, blinked, and coughed into his handkerchief. "Who's there?" His voice was shaky, but still with the tone of a man giving orders.

"Bob," came a voice from outside. Quiet, unassuming. "Bob Ford."

Frank turned his head, looked at the door, then at Jesse. He said nothing, but his gaze spoke. *There he stands. One of those who comes close enough to stab.*

Jesse grinned weakly, placing his hand on the gun. "Bob Ford... the boy. The little one. Let him in."

The door opened, and there he stood. Young, his eyes too alert, his posture too calm. He entered, greeted me briefly, and didn't sit down right away. His gaze darted—over Jesse, over Frank, over the room. He seemed like someone with nothing to hide, and that was precisely what was suspicious.

"Sit down, Bob," Jesse coughed and waved. "You're just what you need. We're talking about the future, and maybe you'll bring us one."

Bob sat down, slowly, his hands steady, his eyes bright. He nodded, smiled thinly, and said, "I'm here to help."

Frank puffed on his pipe and saw the thin smile. He knew that smile. It wasn't a helper. It was a vulture who already knew where the carcass lay.

Jesse reached for the bottle, drank, coughed, and laughed hoarsely. "A good boy, Frank. See? He comes when things get tough. That's a brother."

Frank blew out smoke, cold. *This is not a brother, he thought. This is death knocking politely.*

The knocking had stopped, but it echoed in the room. Jesse saw an aide. Frank saw the dagger in the shadow. And Bob Ford sat there silently—like someone who knows his hour is near.

Bob Ford finally sat down, his hands folded as if he were in church. Jesse grinned weakly, coughed into his handkerchief, and handed him the bottle. "Drink, boy. Whiskey warms the bones."

Bob took it, drank, wiped his mouth, and nodded. "Thanks, Jesse." His voice was smooth, without tremor, without burden. Too smooth.

Frank watched. He saw Jesse looking at him—not like a suspect, but like a son who had returned home late. *Damn, Jesse, thought Frank, You want to see a brother in every new face. And that will kill you.*

"I've heard about you," said Jesse, his eyes shining, his cough like thunder in his chest. "They say you want your place with us. Is that so?" Bob smiled thinly. "I want to do what needs to be done."

A sentence like a knife, wrapped in politeness. Jesse nodded, satisfied. "Good boy. Brave. Not many have that in them."

Frank sucked on his pipe and let the smoke through his teeth. *Not brave, he thought. Just be patient. Patient like a snake waiting for the mouse to turn its back.*

They drank. They talked. Jesse coughed, laughed, told stories of old raids, of blood, of glory. Bob listened, nodded, asked little questions, always politely, never too much. That's exactly how someone talks when they're sneaking in.

"You remind me of myself," Jesse said at one point, his voice faint, his eyes full of feverish warmth. "Young, hungry, ready to take on the world."

Bob smiled. But Frank saw that this smile didn't reach his eyes. There was something else there—cold, calculating, silent.

The knocking on the door had long since ended. But it reverberated in Frank's chest like an echo. Jesse saw a son. Frank saw the executioner. And Bob Ford sat there quietly—kind, harmless, patient.

Patient as death.

The days that followed drifted through the house like murky smoke. Bob Ford stayed, slept on a mat, ate at the same table, drank from the same bottles. He was quiet, polite, courteous. Too quiet. Too polite.

Jesse enjoyed it. He spoke to him like a younger brother he'd never had. He told stories from Missouri, from Lawrence, from the trains. Bob nodded, listened, asked the right questions. Never too many, never too deep—just enough to make Jesse feel bigger than he already was.

"You remind me of myself," Jesse said over and over, coughing, bleeding, laughing. "Young, hungry, full of fire. You're going to be big, boy. You're going to be bigger than they ever thought possible."

Bob smiled, nodded, and drank. He was doing everything right. Frank saw that. He saw his eyes—cold, calculating, ever-alert. Not a spark of brotherhood, just patience. Patience like a hunter who doesn't need to fire yet because his prey is already tied up before him.

The other men were suspicious, but Jesse stood up for him every time. "He's one of us," he said. "I can feel it."

And no one objected. Because no one objected to Jesse as long as he had the Colt on the table.

In the evenings, when Jesse fell asleep, coughing and drunk, Bob would often sit still, staring at the wall, at the antlers above the fireplace, at the clock ticking too loudly. Frank would see him then, see how he wasn't sleeping, but calculating. Every glance was a measuring tape, every movement a test run.

Frank blew smoke into the darkness. *Expected*, he thought. *He waits for the moment to arrive. Jesse sees a brother. But that's not a brother. That's the man who draws the curtain.*

And so they lived – Jesse blindly trusting, Bob quiet as a shadow, Frank alert like a man who sees the lightning coming but knows he can't avoid it.

The knocking on the door had long since died away. But the footsteps it had let in now echoed in every room.

The gang had never been a family, just a community of convenience made up of guns, whiskey, and mistrust. But with Bob Ford in the house, it felt even less like brothers and more like a pack of wolves that couldn't stand the strange scent.

One of the men growled during a card game: "The boy watches too much. His eyes never sleep." Another spat on the ground: "He sits there like a priest, counting our sins. I don't trust him."

Jesse laughed, coughed, wiped blood from his mouth, and patted Bob on the shoulder. "You don't understand. That boy has fire. He reminds me of me, back then. And if you trust me, you'll trust him too."

The men were silent, but there was no agreement. It was the silence that ticked like a bomb. Frank saw it in their faces: no one wanted the boy. No one except Jesse.

Bob took it all in stride. He played his cards, drank his whiskey, smiled thinly, and only spoke when asked. He let them talk, let them grumble. And that made him even more dangerous.

One evening, when the others were already hanging half-dead over the table, Jesse sat down next to him and placed a heavy hand on his shoulder. "You're like a son to me, Bob," he murmured. "One I'd give anything to."

Frank sat in the shade, saw this, and sucked on his pipe. *A son, he thought. Jesse, you give the executioner the keys to your neck and smile.*

Bob nodded and gave a small smile. "Thanks, Jesse." His voice was calm, too calm, like water that no longer knows any stone.

The gang gritted their teeth, but no one dared to object. Jesse was blind with pride, blind with fever, blind with the desire to mold someone else.

Frank knew: Every day with Bob in the room was a step closer to the abyss. Jesse defended him like blood, but Bob was neither a brother nor a son. Bob was the bullet that was already loaded, just not yet fired.

And the knocking that brought him into the house echoed in Frank's skull like a death knell.



The days were like glass, transparent and sharp. Everyone saw what was happening, but no one dared to say it out loud. Bob Ford was no longer the stranger. He sat at the table like one of them. He drank the same whiskey, played the same cards, slept in the same filth. But he still smiled that thin, smooth smile that never reached his eyes.

But Jesse—Jesse was blind. Or wanted to be blind. He laughed with him, coughed between stories, sometimes placed his hand heavily on Bob's shoulder, as if he were really his blood. "You are young," he often said, "you are the future. When the old dogs here die, you will bear my name. You will continue to shout it to the world."

Bob nodded and smiled. "I'll carry him." His voice was calm, even, as if he'd practiced the sentence a thousand times in his head.

Frank sat next to him, smoking, silent. *He bears the name, he thought, But not in the way you think, Jesse. He's wearing it to inscribe it on a grave.*

Sometimes Jesse talked about plans. About new raids, about ideas on how to save the gang. Things he would never have shared with someone new. Bob listened, nodded, and asked little questions, just enough to keep Jesse talking.

And Jesse talked. More than was good. He poured everything at him—old stories, new plans, fears, hopes. Frank listened, and it made him sick. *You give him the keys, brother. You let him into your house, into your heart, into your head. And he'll thank you with lead.*

Once, late at night, when the others were already asleep, Jesse whispered to Bob, "You know, sometimes I'm afraid one of my own will sell me. But you... I trust you. You would never betray me."

Frank heard this in his half-sleep, and it cut through his chest. *Exactly that, Jesse, he thought. This is exactly what will be your end.*

Bob nodded, quietly, almost humbly. "Never, Jesse. I would never betray you." And there was a brief flicker in his eyes—a cold light that only Frank saw.

The gang was tired, just like Jesse. But Bob Ford was awake. Always awake. He sat there when the others slept, he listened when they cursed, and he smiled when Jesse talked.

And Jesse talked a lot. He talked about the past, about glory, about blood. But also about tomorrow. About what was yet to come, even though everyone in

the room knew that tomorrow would bring nothing but dust and wanted posters.

"You're young, Bob," said Jesse, coughing, the handkerchief red. "You're the only one who can carry on the name. Frank is too old, too tired. The others no longer have faith. But you—you're still listening."

Bob nodded. "I'm listening." And he really was listening. Every syllable, every weakness, every confession that Jesse drowned in whiskey.

Frank sat there, smoking, silent. *A legacy, he thought. You make him your heir, Jesse. But he doesn't inherit your fire. He only inherits the shot that extinguishes you.*

Later, in the dim light, Jesse even showed him his revolver, the old, worn one. "It's old," he murmured, "but it carried me. When I go, Bob, it should be with you. You'll need it."

Frank clenched his hands, wanted to get up, wanted to scream. But he did nothing. Because he knew Jesse wouldn't have heard him. He was deaf to warnings. Blind to danger.

Bob picked up the Colt, turned it, checked the weight, and nodded. "A good revolver." "The best," Jesse coughed, grinning weakly. "It's half me."

Frank saw it. He saw Jesse hand over the inheritance, not realizing that he was only preparing his own end.

The wood creaked in the corner. Outside, the wind blew. And Frank knew: the knock on the door wasn't the beginning of a new brother. It was the beginning of the end.

The days in the house were like a funeral without a coffin. No one said it, but everyone felt it: Something was rotting in the walls, in the air, in Jesse's chest.

And in the middle of it all sat Bob Ford, young, smooth, too quiet. He never spoke too much, never too loudly. But he was always there. Next to Jesse. At the table. In the shadows. Nearby. Too close.

Jesse looked at him like a son. He laughed, coughed, drank, and patted him on the shoulder. "You're the best thing that's happened to me in years," he once murmured. "The others curse, they doubt. But you... you still believe in me."

Bob smiled, thin as a line. "I believe in you, Jesse." His voice was smooth, firm, without flinching. And Jesse accepted it like a prayer.

Frank stood by, listened, and remained silent. *He believes in you, he thought, but not in the way you think. He believes in your end. He believes in the day when he can utter the name Jesse James alone.*

At night, Jesse slept with the Colt on his chest, but when he did, Bob was often the last one awake. His eyes were glued to the gun, to the man, to the weak breathing that could stop at any minute.

Frank saw it. He saw how the boy was already calculating. How he knew Jesse wouldn't last much longer. And how he was planning to be the one to write the final chapter.

But Jesse was blind. Blind and tired. He talked to Bob about the future, about glory, about what was yet to come. A future that no longer existed. Glory that had long since turned to blood.

"You'll be my name, Bob," he said, hoarse, his eyes glazed over. "You'll carry it when I can't anymore."

Frank took a deep breath of smoke, as if he needed to remind himself that he was still alive. *Yes, he thought, He will bear your name. But not as you think. Not as a brother. As a murderer. As the man who will take you.*

And so the chapter ended, even before the shot was fired: a tired man, an old revolver, and a young dog that had long since seen death in its eyes.

The knocking that had brought him into the house had faded away. But it echoed in Frank's chest like the final drumbeat before an execution.

### The last wall, the last picture

The morning was quiet, too quiet. No wind, no dog, only the ticking of the clock on the wall. Jesse sat at the table, his Colt beside him, a cough in his chest. Bob Ford stood in the corner, his hands behind his back, his eyes too wide awake. Frank sat there, smoking, silent.

It was one of those days when the world seemed to be dead. Everyone was waiting. Everyone was holding their breath.

Jesse looked at the wall. The picture was hanging crooked. Dust clung to it, a thin gray film. He blinked, coughed, and slowly stood up. "Damn wall," he muttered, "that thing's always hanging crooked."

He took the cloth, already covered in blood, and staggered over. His steps were heavy, his shoulders hunched, the revolver remained on the table. He wiped the frame, dusted it, coughed, and laughed hoarsely. "At least one should die properly, right? With pictures hanging straight."

Frank felt his blood run cold. *Die*, he thought. *He says it without knowing how close it is.*

Bob stood there, silent, his eyes fixed on Jesse. His hands steady, but lightning lurked in his eyes. It wasn't the look of a son, not the look of a brother. It was the look of a man who had already walked the final step a hundred times in his mind.

Jesse continued wiping, coughing, shaking his head, muttering, "Always this dust, always this dirt."

And Frank saw the scene stretched like a rope, about to break. The wall, the picture, the dust—and Jesse, without a weapon, with his back exposed.

It was a moment like glass: clear, sharp, deadly. And everyone in the room knew he was never coming back.

The picture wasn't anything special. A cheap print with a frame that had long since seen better days. But Jesse acted as if the whole world depended on it. He brushed off the dust, blinked, coughed, and laughed croakily. "There," he murmured, "at least now it'll hang straight when someone comes in."

Frank watched as he adjusted the frame with weak fingers. The Colt still lay on the table, orphaned, cold, alone. For Jesse, it was just a moment of order, a flash of pride in a world that had long since collapsed. For Frank, it was the beginning of the final picture.

Bob stood behind Jesse. His eyes were glued to the man's back, to his neck, to the spot between his shoulders that looked like a target. He had the look of an executioner—not full of hatred, not full of joy. Just that sober hunger that knows the blow must come.

Frank sucked on his pipe, but the smoke tasted bitter. *There it is*, he thought. *The picture, the wall, the back. This is the moment he was looking for.*

Jesse continued wiping, speaking half to himself, half into the silence: "Always dust, always dirt. A man can shoot himself dead, but the dust remains." He laughed hoarsely, as if he'd made a joke only he understood.

Bob didn't move. But his breathing was shorter, faster. You could see it in his throat, how it vibrated. Frank knew: In Bob's mind, the shot had already been fired. He already saw Jesse on the ground. He already saw himself as the man who had killed the myth.

The clock ticked. Loudly, too loudly. Every beat was like a drumbeat before an execution.

And Jesse, blind, tired, sick, was wiping a frame as if his inheritance were at stake.

Frank knew he could scream. That he could say: *Turn around, Jesse. Get the Colt. Don't trust that boy.*

But he did nothing. Because he knew the barrel was already loaded, and words couldn't stop bullets.

The painting hung straight. The dust was gone. And the world held its breath.

The light slanted through the windows, dusty and gray. Jesse was still wiping the frame, his fingers trembling, his shoulders heaving. He coughed, spat into the cloth, then murmured, "One must keep order, even at the end. Death doesn't like chaos."

Frank heard it, and it cut into his ear like a knife. *He knows, he thought. Not consciously, but deep down, he knows. He senses that the end is in the room.*

Bob stood two steps behind him. Still, motionless, like a statue. But his eyes were lighter, his hands tense, his body charged like a rope about to break. It was as if he had replayed this moment a thousand times in his head: his back, the wall, the picture hanging straight. Everything fit. Everything was ready.

Jesse adjusted the frame once more, smiling weakly. "There," he coughed, "now at least it looks like a human lived here." A sentence that sounded like a farewell, even if he didn't know it himself.

Frank pressed the mouthpiece of his pipe harder between his teeth, his hands shaking. *Turn around, Jesse, he thought. Just one step, just one look, and the boy can't take it anymore. But you don't turn around. You're blind. You want to be blind.*

Bob breathed through his nose, quietly, with control. His right hand hung loosely, but in that looseness lurked the storm. There was no question *whether*, only *When*.

The clock on the wall continued to tick. Tick. Tick. Every beat a drumroll. Every beat a verdict.

And Jesse, the tired man, the old revolver on the table, wiped the last dust from a picture that no one but him would ever have noticed.

Frank knew: This was no longer a house. This was a gallows, and the noose hung invisible but taut.

And she would move in immediately.

The air was thick as lead. You could hear the creaking of the wood, the ticking of the clock, the rasping of Jesse's breath. He stood in front of the wall, cloth in hand, wiping the frame once more, slowly, almost lovingly, as if the crooked picture were the last thing he could fix.

His Colt lay far away, silent, cold, forgotten. It was the first time in years that Jesse James had entered a room without the weapon on him like a second skin. And it was precisely this hole in his flesh, this exposed flank, that made him smaller than ever.

Bob Ford stood behind him. Two steps away. No wall, no table, no person between him and the back of the man who once seemed invincible. His hands were steady, his eyes hard. It was the gaze of a butcher who has already marked the animal with chalk.

Frank sat at the table, his pipe cold and forgotten. His gaze wandered between Jesse and Bob. *I could say something*, he thought. *I could warn him. I could slam my hand on the table, break the spell.*

But he knew it would be useless. The room had already become a shell. Everything was just waiting for the clang of metal.

Jesse coughed, leaned against the wall, and squinted against the sun shining through the dirty curtain. "There," he murmured, almost cheerfully, almost stupidly, "now it's hanging properly. Now it fits."

Frank swallowed hard. *It fits*, he thought. *Yes. It's a good fit—for him, for you, Bob. It's a good fit because he's finally defenseless. It's a good fit because you already hold death in your hands.*

Bob didn't move. But you could see his fingers twitching, invisible, like muscles that had long since decided what they would do. His breathing was steady, his gaze fixed. No remorse. No hesitation. Just calculation.

The seconds were like a rope. Every breath pulled him tighter. And Jesse, blind, tired, broken, adjusted the scene as if he were a farmer tidying his kitchen.

Frank knew: Even if he screamed now, even if he jumped up, the shot would be faster. Faster and faster.

The house was silent as a grave. And the wall that Jesse was so carefully wiping was already his altar.

Jesse was still standing in front of the wall, his shoulders hunched, his back bare like an open coffin lid. He wiped the frame with the cloth, coughed, cursed softly, then laughed hoarsely. "Damn," he muttered, "always the same dust. As if the world were mocking me. I clean, and it spits on it again."

He didn't turn around. He didn't see how close death already was. For him, it was just a mundane chore, a moment of order in a chaotic life.

Frank saw it, heard it, and it cut deeper than any bullet. *So it ends, he thought. Not in a bank, not on the rails, not in the fire of battle. It ends with dust on a frame and a sentence that sounds like the sigh of an old farmer.*

Bob stood there, motionless, his gaze fixed on Jesse's neck. His breathing was short but quiet. His finger tensed as if he were playing an invisible string. Every muscle in him knew: Now. Soon. Right away.

Jesse wiped again, the cloth bloody, his hand shaking. "You get old," he murmured, almost like a child soothing itself. "Old and tired. But if the picture hangs straight... at least it looks like you've lived."

Frank swallowed, the pipe cold between his teeth. *A child's sentence, he thought. A tired sentence. No curse, no scream. Just weariness. That's his final legacy. And the boy back there will seal it with lead.*

The clock ticked. Loudly. Inexorably. Bob barely moved his hand. One more breath, and history would change.

Frank felt the air become heavy, how everything in the room shrank into a single moment. Dust. A picture. A back. A finger on the trigger.

The world waited.

Jesse was still wiping the picture, even though it had long since been clean. His fingers glided erratically over the wood, as if he'd forgotten why he was standing there in the first place. He hummed softly, a fragile song, perhaps from his childhood, something about Missouri, about mud and fields. It sounded off-key, weak, like a dying man rocking himself to sleep.

"There," he murmured, "now it's hanging properly... finally." He took a step back, nodding as if he had accomplished something great. A picture, straight, clean. Nothing more.

Frank sat at the table, motionless. His hands rested heavily on his knees, his pipe gone out. He stared at his brother's back, knowing that his back would have no future. *It is so close, he thought. So damn close. I could scream, I could jump up, but the shot has already been fired—in Bob's head, in his muscles, in the damn air.*

Bob stood there, still as stone, but his chest pounded. His eyes were glued to Jesse, his finger tensed, his shoulder firm. There was no more hesitation, no more deliberation. It was just waiting for the clock to strike correctly.

The clock ticked on, loudly, cruelly. Every beat a drumroll, every beat a verdict. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Jesse coughed, leaning against the wall with one hand, the cloth in the other, covered in blood, covered in dust. "Old," he murmured, "I'm old..." Then he laughed softly, almost childishly, as if he'd made a joke no one understood.

Frank felt his heart crushing his ribcage. *That's your last sentence, Jesse, he thought. And he's so harmless, so small, so human. No curse. No thunderous cry. Just tiredness.*

Bob exhaled. Quietly. Controlled. His finger tensed. The world held its breath.

It was as if someone had nailed down time. The dust hung silently in the air, every grain visible as if the sun had frozen it. The clock continued to tick, but even its chime sounded muffled, slowed, as if by water.

Jesse stood in front of the wall, crooked, tired, coughing. He stroked the frame once more, weakly, mechanically. His back was exposed, naked, defenseless—an open invitation to death. He murmured, "That's good. Now it fits." A sentence, banal, small, almost childlike.



Frank sat there, unable to move. His gaze was a knife between the two men—at Jesse, at Bob.

*That's it, he thought. The last sentence, the last wall, the last picture. And after that, there's nothing.*

Bob Ford exhaled. Quietly, evenly, like a hunter with his prey in his sights. His finger tensed, invisible but inescapable. There was no turning back. His gaze was fixed, cold, matter-of-fact. No anger, no hatred. Only this naked hunger, which had more to do with glory than with revenge.

Jesse took a step back, his head tilted slightly to the side, and examined his work. A picture, straight, clean. Nothing more. He saw it—and he didn't see that death was already lurking behind him, just a breath away.

Frank bit the cold wood of his pipe, his hands clenched. He knew the next sound wouldn't be the ticking of the clock. It would be the world breaking. A shot. An end.

The room was no longer a room. It was a gallows, a tribunal, a grave. Every breath taken there was the last.

And Frank realized: In that moment, Jesse James's story was already written. The shot was just ink.

### A shot in the back of the head

The house was quiet, too quiet. Jesse stood in front of the wall, still mopping, weak, tired, blind to what was happening behind him. The Colt lay on the table, cold, forgotten.

Bob Ford stood two steps away. His gaze was fixed on Jesse's neck, his breathing steady. He no longer saw a man; he saw only the target, the point where it all ended. His finger tensed, slowly, with control.

Frank sat at the table, his pipe dead, his stomach cold. He knew he was witnessing a murder, and that no scream, no curse, no movement would stop the shot.

Jesse coughed, adjusted the picture once more, and laughed hoarsely. "There, that's it." Those were his last words. Banal words, small, weightless. But they hung in the air like a testament.

Bob raised his gun. No trembling, no haste. He aimed, the barrel black, his eyes cold. One breath—one finger—one crack.

The shot thundered into the room like thunder. Loud, definitive, without a reverberation. Jesse's head jerked forward, his body slumped like an empty sack. The cloth fell to the floor, bloody and dirty.

The picture on the wall was hanging straight. But underneath it lay Jesse James—motionless, with a hole in the back of his head that was bigger than all his stories.

The smoke hung in the room, acrid, sweet, a smell of gunpowder and death. Bob stood there, his gun still raised, his breath short. His eyes were cold, but something lurked in the depths—fear, triumph, hunger, all at once.

Frank stared at his brother, silent. No scream, no tears. Only the empty knowledge: This is how it ends. Not in a battle, not on the run, not with fanfare. It ends in a room, with a picture hanging straight, and a shot to the back of the head.

The myth had fallen, and all that remained was a dead man on dirty ground.

The shot still hung in the air, as if it hadn't faded away, but had eaten into the wood, the dust, every fiber of the room.

Jesse lay forward, his hands on the frame, his head hanging down, blood splattering across the wall, across the clean picture he had just finished straightening. A red stain, coarse, ugly, slowly eating into the dust.

The room smelled of gunpowder and iron, of death. Bob stood there, his weapon still raised, his arm tense. His eyes were cold, but there was a flicker in the corners—not remorse, not grief. Something else. Perhaps triumph. Perhaps fear. Perhaps both.

Frank stared at his brother's body. No hero, no bastard, no myth—just a man, slumped, motionless, heavy. The hole in the back of his head wasn't glory, no song, no ballad. It was just a hole, seeping life out of it.

The clock continued to tick. Loudly, cruelly, as if it were laughing at the dead man. Tick. Tick.

Bob lowered the gun, breathing heavily. "It's done," he murmured, barely audibly. Frank said nothing. He couldn't say anything. Words had no place here. Words couldn't bring back blood, close a hole, or save a myth.

Jesse lay there, his face in the dust, his hands still outstretched, as if he'd been trying to hold the image. But the image hung straight. And Jesse hung crooked, broken, obliterated.

The room was no longer a room. It was a grave. And Bob Ford stood in it like a gravedigger who had just turned the last spade.

The sound of the shot hadn't yet died down when the room began to change. It was as if the bang had shifted the walls, as if time itself had broken. Nothing was as it had been before, and yet everything stood still.

Jesse lay on the ground. No longer Jesse James, no longer the rebel, the outlaw, the bastard with the gun, the myth in boots. Just a pile of flesh, a man whom gravity had finally defeated. His body had slumped as if the air had been let out of it. A sack, empty, worthless.

The blood slowly crept out of the hole in the back of his head. It was dark, thicker than water, and glistened in the slanting light. First a small puddle, then a stream that moved tentatively across the floorboards. It searched its way between the cracks, like a living thing.

The room smelled of gunpowder and iron, of burnt wood. The sound of the shot still hung in the air, as if it had burned itself into the wallpaper, the dust, and the throats of everyone present.

Bob Ford stood there, his gun still half-raised. His face was chalk-white, but his eyes shone. Not with joy, not with remorse—but with that naked, ugly triumph known only to a man who had done the unthinkable. He had shot the devil, and now he didn't know whether to feel like a god or a coward.

His breath came fast, in gasps. The hand holding the Colt trembled slightly, but he pressed it against his thigh as if to conceal the movement. He wanted to restrain himself, to appear as if he were in control. But the truth crept out from the corners of his mouth: a twitch, a grin he couldn't quite suppress.

Frank was still sitting at the table. He had heard the shot, he had seen the body fall, but his mind refused to comprehend it. The image of his brother lying there, his face in the dust, was too big, too final.

*So it ends,* thought Frank. *Not on the run, not in the thunder of horses, not in the smoke of the train. This is how it ends—with a crooked image, a banal sentence, and a shot from two steps.*

His pipe hung loosely in his hand, cold, forgotten. He hadn't shouted, hadn't intervened. Maybe because he knew it wouldn't have changed anything. Maybe because he was too tired. Maybe because he'd long since realized deep down that Jesse couldn't survive forever.

The blood continued to creep, reaching the table, almost touching Frank's boot. He pulled his foot back, not out of disgust, but because the red was too much. Too close. Too alive for a dead man.

Bob took a deep breath and finally lowered the gun completely. His voice came out shaky, but firm enough: "It's done." He said it like a judge passing sentence. But the words sounded hollow, hanging in the air like smoke that immediately dissipated.

Frank didn't answer. What should he have said? "You bastard?" "You traitor"? Or "Thank you for lifting my burden"? None of them fit. Any word would have been a betrayal of reality.

He stared at Jesse. His brother. The man he'd ridden with through the Missouri mud, the man who'd bled, laughed, and cursed beside him. The man he'd hated and loved more than anyone else. And now he was nothing. A pile of bones, skin, and blood. A myth dissolving into dust.

Bob took a cautious step forward, as if afraid the dead man might jump up again. But Jesse didn't move. He would never move again.

Frank heard the clock continue to tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. It was cruel how time just kept going. As if nothing had happened. As if America's greatest outlaw hadn't just met his end, not at the hands of the army, not at the hands of the Pinkertons, not at the hands of a horde of bounty hunters, but at the hands of a boy he'd let into his house.

That was the bitterest thing. Not the death. Not the blood. But the betrayal. Jesse had trusted him. He had put down the Colt, aimed at the wall, blind, childlike, full of weariness. And at that very moment, the dog had struck.

Bob put the gun away. His hand was steadier now, his back straight. He tried to stand like a hero. But Frank saw through the pose. He saw the boy he was: cowardly, greedy, full of a hunger for fame he could never bear.

*You shot the devil, thought Frank. But that doesn't make you a god. It just makes you a bastard living in the shadows.*

He didn't stand up. He said nothing. He let the image speak for itself: Jesse James, dead on the ground, his face in the dust, blood like a lake. And Bob Ford, young, proud, and yet already a ghost who could never look in the mirror again without hearing the shot.

The myth had fallen. But the world outside would soon hear about it. And Frank knew: From now on, no ballad would be true. Only lies. Only legends. But in this room, in this second, there were no legends. Only blood, dust, and silence.

The smoke still hung in the room. Thick, acrid, a gray veil that covered the air like a blanket. You could taste the taste of the shot on your tongue: metal, sulfur, blood.

Jesse lay facedown, arms outstretched, as if he were still trying to hold on. But there was nothing left for him to cling to. Only floorboards, dust, and the picture hanging straight, as if it had mocked: *You judge me, and I will survive you.*

The blood had spread further. It was no longer a small stain, but a dark pool slowly taking over the room. It dripped into the cracks, crept under the table, and reflected the flames of the fireplace, as if the fire itself were drowning in red.

Frank stared at it, stared at the movement of this red life that was no longer life. *So much blood, he thought. Everything he was now flows into the dirt. Everything he wanted to be evaporates with the smoke.*

Bob Ford stood there like a boy who had just broken something fragile he thought he could hold. His breathing was heavy, his face pale, his eyes wide. He was still holding the gun, the muzzle slightly down, but he was rigid, as if he himself were afraid of the thing he had just done.

"It... it's over," he murmured, more to himself than to Frank. But Frank heard him. And he knew: It wasn't over. It was just beginning. The shot would ripple through the world, through newspapers, through rumors, through songs. And

none of it would carry the truth hanging in this room: that Jesse James wasn't brought down by heroes, but by a cowardly boy hungry for fame.

Frank wanted to say something. He wanted to spit in Bob's face, call him a bastard, slit his throat, right here and now, so that the world would at least see not just a traitor, but also his corpse next to him. But he did nothing. He was too tired. Too empty.

He remained seated as the smoke cleared, as the smell grew heavier, as the body on the ground began to feel like something foreign. Not his brother, not Jesse James—just flesh, slowly growing cold.

Bob finally lowered the gun and put it away. He straightened up, trying to maintain his composure. But the pose didn't hold. His gaze kept wandering to the hole in his head, to the blood that inexorably filled the room. He couldn't bear the sight, and yet he couldn't look away.

Frank looked at him. For a long time. Without a word. And Bob avoided his gaze.

"You shot him like a dog," Frank finally said, his voice deep and shaky, but clear enough. Bob didn't answer. He just swallowed, his chin tense, his lips dry.

The clock struck. A dull sound that rolled through the room, like the tolling of a bell over an open grave. And Frank knew: It was the end. Not just for Jesse, not just for the gang—but for everything they had ever thought they were.

The legend lay dead in the dust. And the murderer stood beside it, young, pale, trembling—a shadow that thought it could stand in the light.

The smoke still hung in the room like a blanket, thinner, but pungent, sweet, mixed with the iron smell of blood. Jesse lay there, motionless, like a broken tool no one wanted to pick up. His body was heavy, final, without any movement. Only the blood still worked, continuing to creep across the floor as if it had a will of its own.

Bob Ford stood close by, breathing heavily. You could see him struggling with himself. His lips moved as if he wanted to say something, but the words wouldn't come. Then finally, brittle, too quiet: "It had to be done."

Frank raised his head, his eyes red from smoke and fatigue. He looked at him for a long time without a word. *It had to be* he thought. *That's what you say, boy.*

*You talk like you're a doctor who closed a wound. But you didn't heal. You killed. You ripped out the heart and think it was surgery.*

Bob avoided his gaze, his hands fidgety, as if he could no longer hide the trembling. "He was... he was at his limit. Sick. Persecuted. It would have happened anyway."

Frank dropped his pipe onto the table, its dull clack echoing through the silence. "But not like that." His voice was hoarse, broken, but the anger was in it, quiet, seething. "Not like that. Not from behind. Not like a dog, Bob."

Bob pressed his lips together. He wanted to respond, wanted to defend himself, but his voice caught. He knew Frank was right. He knew he hadn't defeated the myth, but had sullied it.

"People... people will understand," Bob finally blurted out, his words rushed and uncertain. "They'll know it was right."

Frank laughed dryly, bitterly, like a cough. "The people? The people will make a song out of this, boy. A song in which you're the traitor. They'll spit your name out, just like they feared my brother. Believe me—you're no hero. You're the bullet in the back of the head that no one wanted to see. And that will stick with you until you're in the ground yourself."

Bob remained silent. His face twitched, his hands clenched, but he said nothing more. Perhaps he knew Frank was right. Perhaps he suspected that in that moment he hadn't killed Jesse James, but only himself—for the rest of his life.

The clock kept ticking. Tick. Tick. The blood kept crawling. And Jesse James remained dead.

Frank slowly stood up, his legs heavy, his back bent as if under an invisible weight. He walked over to the body, bent down, and stared at his brother's face, half buried in the dust. For a moment, he saw again the boy who had run barefoot through the Missouri mud. The boy who had dreamed of war, of glory, of revenge. The boy he had accompanied all the way here, to this hole in the back of his head.

"You fool," Frank muttered, almost whispering. "You should have known. But you believed him. You wanted to believe. And now you're lying here."

He placed the cloth over his face. Not out of piety, but because he could no longer bear the look.

Bob was still standing in the corner, smaller, uncertain, despite the shot. He had killed Jesse James, but he didn't look like a victor. He looked like a boy who had pushed open the door, not knowing what lurked behind it.

Frank turned to him, his eyes hard. "You're done, Bob. You don't know it yet, but the world will show you. You'll live, yes. But not as a hero. Not as a man. But as the dog who shot you in the back."

It wasn't a threat. It was a judgment. And Bob knew it was true.

The minutes after the shot dragged on like hours. Nothing moved. Not a bird outside, not a breeze through the cracks, just that damned ticking of the clock, driving every second into Frank's skull like a hammer blow.

Jesse lay motionless, his face hidden beneath the sheet. The warmth slowly drained from his body; you could feel it, even from a distance. It was as if Death were now sitting at the table with them, silent, grinning, and no one dared to throw him out.

Frank was still standing next to the corpse. His hands hung heavy, his eyes burned, but no tears came. He wasn't the man for tears. And Jesse wouldn't have been the man for them either. But that didn't lessen the pain. It only made it harder, sharper, like stones in his chest.

The blood had become an ocean of its own, large enough that the floor could barely contain it. The stench was heavy, metallic, sweet, and disgusting. Frank knew: the smell would never leave this house. This room was forever condemned.

Bob Ford had sat down on a chair, far away from Jesse, as if afraid the corpse might whisper something to him. He held his hands clasped together, his knuckles white with tension. His face was pale, but his eyes flickered—sometimes triumphant, sometimes haunted, sometimes as empty as a disemboweled fish.

He wanted to say something, you could see it, but he kept his mouth shut. Maybe he knew that every word would only diminish him. Maybe he knew that Frank didn't want to hear anything.

Frank slowly sat back down at the table. The pipe lay there, dead, cold, like an old friend who had given up. He picked it up, rolled it, but didn't light it. Why? Smoke wouldn't change anything. No amount of smoke in the world could fill the hole in the back of his head.



"You ruined everything," Frank said finally, his voice calm but like sandpaper. Bob raised his head, his eyes red, as if he himself had been crying or sweating. "He was at his limit. It had to happen." "No," said Frank. "It didn't have to happen at all. He would have died anyway, but not because of you. Not like this."

Bob pressed his lips together. A muscle twitched in his cheek. He had no answer, no defense that could hold water.

Frank leaned back, his hands heavy on his knees. His gaze fell back on Jesse, on the body beneath the sheet, on the blood running in all directions. *That's it, he thought. Everything we were – gone. Everything we rode for, bled for, cursed for, robbed for – gone. With a gunshot. With a boy he let into his house.*

He felt an emptiness spreading within him. Not like grief, not like anger—something deeper, worse. A hole that could no longer be filled.

"The world will tell it differently," Frank murmured, almost to himself. "The newspapers, the songs... they'll make him a hero or a devil. And you—they'll make you the traitor. And neither story will be true. But the truth—the truth will stay here. In this room. With us."

Bob shook his head, convulsively, as if trying to ward off the sentence. "No... no, they'll understand." Frank laughed dryly. "Understand? Boy, the world doesn't understand anything. It just eats stories. And you're the ugliest of them."

The words hung heavy in the air, like lead. Bob remained silent, his shoulders hunched, his face stony. Perhaps he had thought he would feel bigger, more powerful, after the shot. But now he sat there like a child who had destroyed something he could never repair.

Frank looked at him for a long time. He considered getting up, taking the Colt, and killing Bob right there and then. But he didn't. Not for a lack of hatred, but because it made no sense. Bob was already dead, even if his heart was still beating. The shot would haunt him to his grave.

The room remained silent. Only the clock spoke. And outside, a dog began to howl, as if it had understood that something final had happened inside.

The silence in the house was thicker than any roar. Jesse lay dead, his blood spread like a carpet, the cloth half-slipped over his face. The smell of iron and

smoke made the air heavy, so heavy that every breath tasted like a mouthful of rust.

Frank sat there, heavy and motionless. His gaze kept wandering to the body, as if he couldn't comprehend that this man, who had made so much noise, was now nothing but silence. No more voice, no laughter, no cursing. Just a hole in the back of his head and the ticking of the clock.

Bob Ford barely moved. He had shrunk since the shot. Not taller, not more heroic, not more radiant. No—smaller, more hunched over, like a dog who knows he's screwed up. He had shot the myth, and yet he sat there like nothing, hunched in the shadows.

"That's it," Frank finally murmured, his words heavy as stones. "Everything died with him. The gang. The name. The fear in their faces. Everything."

Bob raised his head, his lips in a faint line. "No... the name lives on. I made... I made history." Frank laughed, a rough, broken laugh that was more pain than joy. "History? Boy, history will spit you out. You won't be the man who killed Jesse James. You'll be the bastard who betrayed him. Do you understand? Betrayal eats away all glory."

Bob wanted to object, you could see it in his eyes. But he remained silent. Perhaps because he knew Frank was right. Perhaps because the corpse on the floor spoke louder than any words.

Frank slowly stood up, his joints creaking, his shoulders hanging heavy. He walked over to the body and knelt down. With one hand, he placed the cloth back over Jesse's face, more firmly this time, as if he really wanted to cover him, as if he could make the misery invisible. But the stain on the wall, the blood on the floor—the truth couldn't be covered up.

He stayed like that for a while, next to his brother, thinking about Missouri, the mud, his childhood. About the war, the trains, the banks, the men who had shot them. Everything came back, and it all led here: to a living room, a crooked picture, a gunshot to the back of the head.

"It's over," he whispered. Not to Bob, not even to Jesse. To himself. Because he knew: With that shot, not only had Jesse died. With that shot, the last remnant of a world had crumbled to dust.

He stood up again, heavily, slowly. Bob backed away, as if afraid Frank might shoot him after all. But Frank did nothing. He had no anger left. No bullet that could change anything.

He looked at Bob for a long time and finally said, "You'll live, boy. But you'll die every day. More than once. That's worse than any bullet."

Bob swallowed and said nothing.

The clock struck. Outside, a dog barked, then silence again. And so it ended: Jesse James, dead in the dust. Bob Ford, alive, but already damned. And Frank James, who knew he had lost not only his brother, but also himself, his gang, his country, his time. Everything.

The legend lay on the ground, and the outside world had no idea that it had been born at that moment—not out of glory, but out of betrayal.

### Hero, traitor, corpse

The news left the house faster than the smoke from Bob's gun barrel. One ran to the neighbor, another ran into town, and soon every mouth was spreading the story like it was pure gold. Jesse James was dead. Shot. By a man he himself had let into the house.

It took less than an hour for the first people to arrive in front of the house. They came quietly, curiously, as if they wanted to make sure the rumors were true. Men with shovels, women in aprons, children clinging to their skirts. All with the same greedy eyes.

Frank saw them through the window. Snake-eyed. Gawkers. They didn't want to help, they wanted to see. They wanted to touch the myth while it was still warm.

Inside, Jesse was still lying on the floor, the cloth covering his face, the stain on the wall darkening. The blood had eaten into the floorboards as if it would never disappear. Bob stood in the corner, his hands clasped, his eyes on the floor. He had hoped the shot would make him taller. But now, with every step outside in the dust, he realized how small he had become.

Someone knocked on the door. Hesitantly, then more firmly. "Let us in," a voice called. "We want to see him."

Frank didn't answer. He just stood there, heavy, his hands in his pockets, and thought: *They want to see him like an animal at a fair. My brother, laid out for hungry eyes.*

But the door opened anyway. Someone pushed in, then another, and suddenly the room filled with voices, with footsteps, with that nauseating buzz of curiosity.

They surrounded Jesse, staring at the body, whispering, wide-eyed. Some made the sign of the cross, others grinned. One of the children even laughed, as if he were just seeing a picture in the newspaper.

"So that's what he looks like," murmured a man, "the great Jesse James." "He was a dog," spat another. "A hero," whispered a woman, holding her hand to her mouth. "A hero for the poor."

And there it was – the split. The first seconds after death, and the truth was already torn apart. Hero. Traitor. Dog. Prophet. All in one room, all said about the same dead man.

Frank stood by, listening, and it sickened him. They hadn't known him. They hadn't ridden with him, hadn't lain in blood, hadn't cursed under a hail of bullets. And now they spoke as if he belonged to them.

But Bob—Bob absorbed it. He stood there, pale, but his eyes grew more alert, as if he could already hear the songs that would bear his name. He believed he was now part of history. But Frank saw what was really happening: People called Jesse a hero and a traitor, but Bob was called only one thing—murderer. Traitor. Dog.

And that is exactly what would remain.

They came like vultures, one after the other, each with the same look: large, greedy, gleaming. Some crept cautiously into the room, others brazenly pushed through the door, shoving as if it were a market stall and not a dead man.

Jesse was still lying beneath the cloth, his blood long since clotted, the stench pungent and metallic. But none of the curious onlookers paid any attention. They stood around him as if he were a miracle, and some even reached for the cloth, as if they wanted to catch a glimpse for themselves.

"Let me see," one cried. "I want to see if he's really dead." "Pull back the cloth," said another. "I want his face."

And then they did it. A hand, bold and rough, pulled back the fabric. There lay Jesse, pale, the hole in his head black, the blood clotted. His face was half dust, half death. No hero, no devil—just a man, finished.

People stared, some gasped, others grinned. A woman made the sign of the cross, murmuring a prayer. A boy giggled as if he'd witnessed a sensation. "So that's him," someone whispered. "The man the banks trembled before." "Doesn't look so scary now," another mocked.

Frank stood against the wall with his arms crossed, his gaze cold, his stomach burning. *They know nothing, he thought. They weren't there when he bled. They weren't there when he laughed. They weren't there when he was human. To them, he's just flesh. Just an image they want to touch.*

Bob stayed in the background. But people's eyes met his. Some said it out loud: "That's him. The man who shot Jesse James." And then came the words he didn't want to hear: "The traitor." "The dog." "From behind."

Bob tried to maintain his composure, to hold his head high as if he were proud. But his eyes betrayed him. They flickered, seeking recognition, but found only suspicion.

An old man approached Jesse, bent down, and grabbed a strand of hair. He tore it off, put it in his pocket, and grinned. "A souvenir," he murmured. Another tried to tear a piece of the cloth.

Frank stepped forward, his voice rough and dark: "Hands off." The crowd backed away briefly, but not far. They wanted more. More of the dead, more of the myth.

"Leave it alone," one said. "It belongs to history now." Frank growled. "It doesn't belong to any of you. You have no idea who it belonged to."

But they didn't listen. They whispered, they gossiped, they coveted. Everyone wanted a piece of Jesse James, as if his death were a carnival.

And Frank stood there, his fists close, his teeth clenched, feeling disgust like a weight in his chest. The myth was dead—and the onlookers devoured its remains, still warm, still bloody.

It wasn't long before the first people appeared with pen and paper. Newspapermen. Thin guys with greasy hats, dirty shoes, and that crazy gleam in their eyes, as if they'd just discovered the gold rush. They pushed through the crowd, pushed old women aside, stepped over children's feet, and suddenly stood in the middle of the room as if it belonged to them.

"Move aside," one called. "We need room for the description." "Who's Bob Ford?" asked another, pencil already in hand.

Bob raised his head, almost proudly. He wanted to speak, but the crowd got there first. "That's him! The traitor!" someone shouted, and a few laughed, others nodded.

The newspapermen grinned, writing hastily as if every word were gold. "Shot in the back... while dusting..." one muttered as he scribbled. "That'll make a headline." Frank listened, seething inside. *Wipe the dust, he thought. My brother was a man of blood and fire, and you make him a jumping jack with a duster.*

One of the reporters leaned over Jesse, pulled the cloth away, looked at the hole in his head, and whistled softly through his teeth. "This will sell," he murmured. "People will eat it up."

Another man slid up next to Bob, patted him on the shoulder as if he were a prizefighter. "Son, you're famous now. Tell me, how was it? Did he look at you before you shot? Did he say anything?" Bob cleared his throat, trying to speak, but the words stumbled. "He... he was just hanging the picture. Then I..." "From behind," another man shouted from the crowd. "Like a dog!"

Laughter, spitting, voices clashing. Bob shrugged his shoulders, trying to maintain composure. But you could see it – he was falling apart between the stares. He wanted applause, but all he got was ridicule.

A fat guy with a mustache tried to untie Jesse's boots. "A souvenir," he grinned. "I'll get them." Frank stepped forward, grabbed him by the collar, and shoved him back hard. "The boots stay there, bastard." The man growled but backed away, his hands raised.

But the others didn't let up. One ripped a piece of Jesse's shirt. A boy tried to steal the bloody handkerchief. Frank slammed his fist on the table with a loud bang. "Get out!" he yelled, his voice harsh and burning. "Get out before I shoot you all!"

Silence for a moment. Then the murmuring, the hesitation. The onlookers moved back, one by one, but never far enough, never completely. Their eyes were still glued to the corpse, as if afraid the myth might slip away if they didn't continue staring.

The newspapermen were still writing, hastily, greedily. "A hero for the poor... a thief for the rich... shot in his own home... by a friend." Words that pierced Frank's skull like knives.

Bob stood there, his face pale, his lips dry. He knew he had made history—but he sensed he wouldn't be a hero in it. Just a marginal note, a footnote. The man who shot from behind.

Frank leaned against the wall, heavy, tired, disgusted. His brother lay dead, and outside on the street, the fair was already growing. Heroes, traitors, corpses—all in the same breath. And no one understood what had really happened.

The press smelled blood like a mob. As soon as the rumor whistled through the streets, they appeared—hats askew, coats greasy from the train and tobacco, notepads drawn like knives. One raised a lens, another wanted to take a picture immediately, as if a picture could turn death around and make it run away. They took pictures of everything: hands, boots, the cloth, the hole, the face, which was now just a shadow.

"Come here, boy, rip open that shirt! A chest shot! That'll sell." One of them roared, his voice like a coffee grinder. "Readers want details," another said, the scent of money hanging in his voice, warm and lazy.

Frank heard this, and his stomach clenched like a fist. He wanted to rise up, put the barrel of a shotgun against the wall, and pulverize every single viewer so that no one could ever hold such images in their hands again. He saw the lenses, so many glittering eyes devouring everything, and felt his own rage like gasoline in his throat.

"No photo," he growled, briefly, a sound that cut through the room. It wasn't loud, but it was enough. The men, who had just been pretending to hold the story in their hands, flinched. Some laughed crookedly, others glanced toward the door, but the cameras kept clicking. One pushed the lens to the edge of the cloth. "Just a picture," he murmured, "just a snapshot for the editors."

Another guy, fatter, his glasses fogged up, was scratching his throat and balancing on the table as if trying to squeeze the whole picture into a headline:

"How he fell—Jesse James's last breath!" He slobbered the words, and Frank would have gladly knocked his teeth out, one by one, until the drooling stopped. But he didn't do anything. What would that have changed? The world outside was faster than his anger.

A young photographer rubbed his hands, his camera like a shrine. "This is my ticket," he whispered, like a man praying. "The photo that changes everything. The picture people buy." His fingers trembled not with pity, but with anticipation.

Bob stood there, his gaze blank, somehow triumphant and yet simultaneously compressed. The more the lens focused on him, the smaller the triumph became, like piercing a balloon and discovering that beneath the varnish was only cardboard. Men arrived with notepads, red quills rolled onto the floors, and voices began to shape the case in their own word factory: "Secret of the Club," "Treason at the Hearth," "The King's Dirty Death."

The women—there were always a few women—gathered at the edges, some with tears, some with lipstick and fake sympathy. An older woman clutched her skirt and recited small, searching prayers, as if she could pray the soul back to the stable. A girl stared, her eyes as wide as coins; she took a tuft of hair that an old man had cut off and held it to her chest, as if it were a talisman against creeping disappointment.

One of the newspapermen poked at the air with his pen, searching for the phrase that would add a little salt to everything. He sat down and imagined how his headline would drag people through the crowd tomorrow: Some would cry, others would cheer—and he would cash in. It was disgusting how they were all waiting for the finished word like they were waiting for warm soup.

Frank took it all like a knife. Not just because they were taking the picture, but because they would make a celebration out of it. A celebration of simplification. In the papers, Jesse would be molded into a figure, either as a saint or as a devil, but never as the man he truly had been: a broken guy with a cough, a gun, and too much pride. They would sort him, file him away, give him a title, and then move on, never knowing what he had really smelled like.

"Get out," Frank said, and this time his voice was like a hammer blow. He stepped forward, approaching the boards, his heels creaking, and looked at each one. There was nothing holy in his eyes, only concrete and sadness. "Get



out. Take your cameras, your pens, your hands. You're not picking up souvenirs here. You're just rats."

A chorus of objections arose, then a hiss. People huddled together as if holding an invisible lock. Some cast contemptuous glances at Bob, others at Frank, and one muttered, "He's too protective of the body, that brother. Maybe he's to blame." Such statements fall like poisonous vines. They wrap themselves around reputations, plucking at nerves until the truth is no longer distinguishable.

Bob stepped forward, swaying, and staring. His voice was hollow as he tried to draw attention away from himself: "He was sick, he was done for. I... I showed him mercy." His tone was a mixture of vindication and outcry, and the crowd soaked it up, growing increasingly hungry for the juice he offered.

"Mercy?" a man mocked. "Mercy? From behind, like a dog?" The words were like loose stones thrown against the window. They shattered on the surface, leaving cracks.

A bartender, who had been counting boys in town just yesterday, shouted, "Who wants a piece of the shirt? One man will pay five dollars for a piece of cloth that's touched his blood!" And someone grabbed the shirt. The hands grew firmer, more greedily. Men ducked, yanked, and pulled, while Frank pulled up again, faster this time. He grabbed one of them and shook him until the man's eyes popped out. "Leave that!" he growled. His breath was hot, and inside him was the rage of a man who has lost everything.

The crowd staggered, but the sensation had already created a pull; they lingered, clung, and cut things off: hair, buttons, bloodstains. The journalists took notes, photographed, and some were already whistling for possible headlines. They all wanted a story, and they scratched, dug, and tore at this corpse until only bones remained.

Frank stood in the midst of the madness, knowing that nothing he said would reach the world outside this room. The papers would write, the songs would sing, and each version would force him and Jesse into molds they no longer fit. He thought of the fields, the Missouri dirt, the clang of the first gunshots, and the many nights they secretly laughed and cried. All of this would be remotely controlled, cut up, and sold.

And as the lenses clicked and the pens scratched, Bob stood there—small, crouched, with the bullet in his future—and tried to hear the distant music of

glory. But what he heard wasn't jubilation. It was the cracking of bones, the rustling of newspapers, the scraping of the city against a freshly dug grave.

The noise outside grew louder: voices, horse hooves, metal on metal. It wasn't just neighbors and onlookers anymore; now the dogs with badges were coming. Sheriff, deputies, a few Pinkerton pigs who had smelled the news faster than any reporter.

The door burst open, and a fat man with a mustache and a star entered, his hands on his hips, as if the entire house had long since been confiscated. Behind him were a few men with guns, their gazes cold and greedy. "Where is he?" the sheriff shouted, and he didn't need an answer. He saw the body, the cloth, the stain, the blood—and grinned. "Now, now. The great Jesse James. Finally taken care of."

A Pinkerton, thin, with a face like a vulture, approached, notebook in hand. "From behind," he said, as if he already had the verdict in mind. "That's how they all die who make themselves too big."

Frank clenched his fists. He wanted to jump up, grab them, throw them out, like he had done with the onlookers. But there were too many of them, and they had the law on their side. Or rather, the law, the same law that Jesse had never recognized.

Bob stepped forward, his back stiff, his voice shaky: "I did it." The men turned their heads, looking at him. A sheriff whistled softly, one of the Pinkertons grinned. "So you're the dog."

Bob tried to sound different. "I'm the man who took him down." "From behind," one growled. Laughter, muffled, mocking, a chorus that spat in his face.

Frank looked at Bob. The boy stood there, trying to appear great, but there was nothing great in his eyes. Only fear, insecurity, a small hunger for recognition that would never be satisfied.

The officers spread out, one pulled out a piece of paper, scribbled notes, another bent over Jesse, ripped up the sheet, and stared at the hole. "This will sell," he murmured, and Frank heard the same tone he heard from the reporters. No respect, just business.

"He was sick," Bob murmured again, weakly, as if he needed to convince himself. "It was mercy." "Mercy?" mocked a Pinkerton. "A shot to the back of the head isn't mercy. That's an execution."

Frank couldn't take it anymore. "Stop it," he growled, his voice dark and heavy. "He was my brother. He was a man. You're making him a fucking caricature." One of the deputies laughed. "Your brother was a thief, a murderer. We're not making him smaller than he was. We're putting him exactly where he belongs."

Frank took a step forward, but one of the men immediately raised his rifle. The message was clear: One wrong word, and he'd be lying in the dust next to Jesse.

The officers began measuring the room, asking questions, taking notes, as if they were dealing with a simple theft. They asked Bob questions, they listened to his shaky answers, and every time he tried to avoid "from behind," they just grinned wider.

Outside, the crowd continued to gather; screams, shouts, even laughter could be heard. Some were already singing, improvised ballads, crude verses that uttered the name Jesse James as if it were sugar or dirt, depending on their voice.

Frank knew: It had begun. Jesse was no longer a person, no longer his brother. He was a story. A song. A headline. And Bob Ford, who had thought he was going to be a hero, was already the ugly appendage that people would spit on.

Frank closed his eyes, heard the ticking of the clock, heard the noise outside, and thought: *Everything is lost. Everything. With a bullet, with a cloth, with a hole in the back of the head.*

It wasn't long before two deputies and a Pinkerton dragged a stretcher into the house. It smelled of horse, sweat, and cold iron. No shroud, no dignity—just a board with handles, the kind used for cattle that can no longer stand up.

"Put him on," said the sheriff, his voice indifferent, like a butcher rolling a carcass to the slaughterhouse.

Frank stood in front of the men. "Not like that," he growled, his hands clenched into fists. "He was my brother." "He was a wanted man," the sheriff replied, cold and dry. "He'll get what he deserves."

The deputies reached for the body, the sheet slipped, and Jesse's face reappeared—pale, gaunt, the hole dark and final. One of the men let out a dry laugh. "Well, he doesn't look so wild anymore." Frank tensed, his muscles as hard as ropes, but he held back. One blow now, and he'd be lying in the same blood.

Bob stood beside him, his hands clasped together, his expression somewhere between pride and panic. The officers gave him quick glances, tinged with derision and a kind of recognition that smacked more of spit than glory. "So that's him," one said. "The little dog who took down Jesse James."

They lifted the body onto the stretcher. Jesse's arms hung limply, the blood still dripping. It made noises, small, disgusting drops that splashed onto the ground like rain.

"Carry him out," ordered the sheriff.

The door opened, and the light outside fell on the dead body. The crowd cheered, shouted, and wept. Some shouted "Hero!" others cried "Dog!" and the voices mingled into an ugly chorus that swallowed everything.

Women pressed forward, some reaching out to touch the dead man, as if they could wash something away from him. Children jumped, called his name, and sang fragments of songs they had heard. Men spat on the ground, some tore off their hats, others laughed.

The deputies carried Jesse through the crowd, and the crowd tugged at him, grabbing his boots, his hair, any piece they could find. "A souvenir!" one shouted. "I want something from him!"

Frank followed, his shoulders hard, his eyes dark. He wanted to tear the crowd apart, to strike them, to silence them. But there were too many. It was a sea of greedy hands and open mouths, and Jesse James was no longer his brother, no longer a man—he was merchandise.

Bob walked a little way behind, chin raised, eyes shining. He wanted to be part of the scene, wanted to be seen, the man who had done it. But the stares hit him like stones. "Traitor!" one shouted. "Coward!" another cried. Only a few nodded to him, and even the nods were cold, empty, without warmth.

The funeral procession moved through the streets, and the houses ejected even more people. Soon it was a stream, a procession. Not out of respect, but out of curiosity. Everyone wanted to see how the great Jesse James had fallen.

Frank walked silently alongside, his boots heavy, his head full of images. Missouri mud. The first raids. The long nights in the saddle. All of this led here—to this miserable procession, to this sordid spectacle.

He knew: Jesse was dead. But worse was that the myth no longer belonged to them. It had already been divided, eroded, sold. Tomorrow it would be in the newspapers, in the songs, in the bars. And everything they had ever truly been would vanish in the noise.

Frank clenched his fists, but he knew there was nothing he could do. His brother had become history—and history was a filthy bastard.

They took him to a back room at the sheriff's office. No church, no quiet chamber, no place to be silent. A bare room with boards, a rough, crooked table, and on it they laid Jesse James as if he were a slain animal.

They only half-covered him. His face was visible, his chest, his hands. The hole in the back of his head was concealed, but everyone knew it was there. There was no need to see it. It hung in the air, smelled from the floorboards, vibrated in the silence.

Then they opened the door and the people came.

At first they were cautious, almost reverent, like pilgrims awaiting a miracle. But after just a few minutes, it was no longer a pilgrimage. It was a stream. One after another, they entered, staring, murmuring, whispering. Some wept, others grinned, still others whispered as if they were standing at a fairground stall.

"There he lies. The great Jesse James." "Looks small." "Like any dead man."  
"But he was a hero." "He was a thief." "He showed the banks what was what."  
"He shot innocent men."

And so it went on. A chorus of contradictions, lies, and half-truths. Everyone wanted to say something, wanted to secure a piece of what was there.

Some touched the cold hands as if they could draw strength from them. A man kissed his forehead and murmured something about a blessing. A woman pulled a cloth over Jesse's chest and pressed it to her body as if she had stolen a treasure.

Frank stood in the corner, arms crossed, eyes like stone. He watched as they stared at him, touched him, and already turned him into something he had

never been. *He was a man*, thought Frank. *He was a brother. A bastard. An outlaw. But he was no saint. No fairy tale. And that's exactly what they want to make of him now.*

Bob Ford also crept through the room. He tried to keep his chin up, searching for looks that would confirm him. But what he got were whispered words: "That's him. The traitor. The dog." Some stared at him like a leper. Others laughed. No song, no applause. Only contempt, quieter than gunshots, but cutting deeper.

The newspapermen were already standing there again, their pencils scratching, their hats crooked, their eyes greedy. "This will sell," one said quietly. "This will be the headline of the year."

Frank would have liked to beat them all out. But he did nothing. He knew it didn't matter. Jesse was no longer his. Jesse now belonged to them, the gawkers, the writers, the liars.

The room grew fuller, the voices louder. It was no longer a laying-out. It was a spectacle. A celebration of death, of greed, of curiosity. Everyone wanted to be there, wanted to be able to say later: *I saw him. I was there. I was part of Jesse James's death.*

Frank closed his eyes. He heard the murmuring, the rustling, the scratching of feathers. He smelled the blood, the sweat of the crowd, the dust. And he knew: the man he had known was gone. What remained was a figure. A dead body, charged with lies, with longing, with hatred.

And he himself – he was nothing more than the brother who stood by and had to watch as the world swallowed up the last remnant.

### Coffin lids, onlookers, newspapers

The table in the back room smelled of death, and the floorboards beneath it smelled of blood. Jesse lay there, still, cold, an exhibit that had been in the window for too long. And eventually, the moment came when even the onlookers had had enough—or the officers decided that enough pairs of eyes had seen their piece.

They brought the coffin. Not elegant, not large. A simple box, roughly constructed, the wood dull and rough, as if for an anonymous farmworker, not for a name already on everyone's lips.

Frank stood there, fists in his pockets, and watched as they put him in. It was a pathetic sight: two deputies grabbed Jesse's arms, one his legs, and they heaved him in as if he were a sack of flour. No respect, no silence. Just business.

The face was still visible. Paler than the day before, the skin already taut, the blood dry. The eyes half-closed, as if they had been resisting the light that was no longer meant for them.

The door to the room opened and closed, opened and closed. New faces abounded. Farmers, children, widows, curious onlookers. Some wept, some mocked the hole, others whispered myths that already had nothing to do with the truth.

And outside, the newspapers were waiting. You could already hear the printing presses, the dull rhythm pounding through the city: headlines, headings, pictures. "JESSE JAMES DEAD." "HERO BETRAYED." "SHOT IN BEHIND." Words that raced through the streets like bullets, faster than any memory could sustain.

Bob Ford stood in the corner. He had hoped that the crowd would at least stare at him, that he could bask in the glory of the shot. But they only looked at him to whisper, to laugh, to call him "dog." And Frank saw it: The bullet hadn't killed Jesse alone. It had buried Bob along with him, even before he was in the coffin.

The men reached for the lid. Rough hands, nails already between their teeth, as if it were just another job. The coffin lid slowly closed over Jesse, piece by piece, until only his face remained. Frank stepped closer, breathing heavily, and for the first time, his hands trembled.

*This is the last time he thought. The last time I see him like this. After that, he belongs to them. The songs, the newspapers, the lies.*

The lid lowered. One of the deputies spat in the corner and grabbed the hammer. Clack. Clack. Nails hammered into the wood, and with each blow, Jesse was farther away. Frank felt a tearing in his ribcage, something breaking inside that could no longer be healed.

When the lid was completely closed, when the hammer fell silent, the room was suddenly emptier. It was as if Jesse had lost the last shred of his humanity and was now nothing but a box. Wood. Weight. A dead myth, imprisoned and sold.

Outside, you could hear the crowd. They screamed, they sang, they laughed. The name "Jesse James" flew through the air like dirt, in all directions. And Frank stood in the silent room, his eyes fixed on the box, and knew: his brother was dead. But worse—his brother was no longer his.

The lid was on, the nails were firmly in place, the hammering had died down. But Jesse James's death wasn't the end. It was a beginning. No sooner had the coffin been closed than the next wave surged into the house. Onlookers who had streamed through the streets empty and now wanted to be filled.

They lined up as if for bread in a famine. Children on their shoulders, old men with sticks, women with baskets, laborers with dirty hands. Everyone wanted to see it. Not Jesse, not the man – the coffin. The sign. The proof that the bastard, the hero, the devil, the angel was really inside.

"Open up," one shouted. "Let's see if it's really him." Another knocked on the wood, listening as if to a horse in a stable. "Is he still alive?" Laughter. Voices. Murmurs.

Frank stood beside him, his shoulders hard, his eyes dark. He knew they would have loved to tear the lid back open, to see the hole, the blood, the face. They wanted more. More and more. And he knew: Soon, someone would grab the hammer and actually do it.

The deputies held them back, but only halfheartedly. They grinned, collected coins from a few particularly greedy individuals, and let them briefly touch the coffin lid as if it were a holy altar. "Five cents," one murmured. "Touch only. No opening." The coins clinked, and the hands grabbed at the wood.

Frank saw this and felt sick. His brother was now a business. A stuffed animal behind glass. Not a person. No blood. No brother. Just a box for which you paid an entrance fee.

Outside, in the streets, things were even worse. The printing presses rattled nonstop. Newsboys ran, shouting headlines as if they were on fire: "THE INFAMOUS JESSE JAMES SHOT!" "THE OUTLAW BETRAYED BY HIS OWN MAN!" "HERO OR CRIMINAL? THE END OF JAMES."



The sheets of paper flew through the crowd, greedily torn open, read aloud, and passed on. Everyone took the words, chewed them, and spat them out again in a different way. People were drinking in the bars, praying in the churches, and laughing in the streets. All at once, all with the same name on their lips.

Bob Ford crept through the crowd. He wanted to drink in the glory, but what he got was poison. Everyone shouted something different. "There he is, the murderer!" "There goes the hero!" "Coward!" "Traitor!" His face was pale, his shoulders slumped, but he forced a smile, thin, brittle, fake. He had killed Jesse James, but he had gained nothing.

Frank stayed by the coffin, his hands in his pockets, and listened to the voices. *Hero. Dog. Devil. Angel.* He heard them molding Jesse, even now, like clay being kneaded. Each one pressed his imprint into it. And Frank knew: The Jesse he had known, the one who had lain with him in the mud, the one who had ridden with him, the one who had laughed beside him—this Jesse was gone. All that remained was what the others made of him.

A half-drunk guy banged on the coffin lid so loudly that it resounded. "Get up, Jesse! Show us you can still do it!" Laughter. Jeers. Frank took a step forward, but he held back. What good would it have done? The real Jesse was dead. And the one they were calling no longer existed.

Outside, the printing press continued to roll. And with every print, with every headline, Jesse James became less of a man and more of a myth. A distorted, dirty myth.

The headlines multiplied like rats. A new edition came out every hour, every paper wanted to print the "true ending," and each paper lied more than the last.

"JESSE JAMES DIED A HERO PROTECTING THE POOR." "JESSE JAMES: THE BESTIAL KILLER SUCCEEDS TO BETRAY." "MERCY SHOT: FRIEND PUTS OUTLAW FROM MISERY."

Hero. Murderer. Dog. Saint. All side by side, black on white, and people ate it up like sugar.

The crowd piled up in front of the coffin. People pushed, shoved, and cursed. Old women with trembling hands tried to get through, children squeezed in between, men screamed for the "best seat." One got an elbow in the face,

blood dripped, but he still laughed because he could say: *I touched his coffin board.*

A few screamed at each other, wrestling over a piece of the cloth until it ripped. Two pieces, two souvenirs, two lies. A boy slid his hand under the lid, as if to check if the outlaw was really cold. He pulled it back, shrieking, giggling. "He's hard as a rock!" he shouted, and the crowd laughed as if it were a joke.

Frank stood at the edge, silent, his shoulders heavy, his eyes dark. He saw them dismembering his brother, not with knives, but with looks, words, greed. He sensed that the worst part wasn't the shot. The worst part was this—the aftermath, the celebration, the fair around a cold body.

Bob Ford repeatedly appeared in the crowd, seeking attention, seeking recognition. But he met with nothing but ridicule. "There he is, Judas!" one person shouted. "Tell us what it's like to shoot from behind!" another cried. Bob laughed stiffly, trying to make it seem proud. But everyone could see that he was shrinking inside, shrink by shrink.

Outside, the newspapers were read aloud. Men stood on crates, shouting the stories as if they were sermons: "Jesse James, the avenger of the Southern states!" - "Jesse James, the bloody demon, finally overthrown!" And every voice made Jesse both bigger and smaller.

Frank thought: *That's it. They've taken it. It no longer belongs to me, to the family, or even to themselves. It belongs to them, to these gawkers, these printers, these singers. And they will use it until there's nothing left.*

A man fell to his knees before the coffin, kissed the wood, murmured prayers. Behind him, another tore a piece of bark from the coffin, as if it too were a keepsake. A few children rapped on the lid in unison, shouting, "Jesse, Jesse, come out!" as if playing a game. Frank turned around, unable to look any longer. He walked out, into the stuffy air, beneath the screaming headlines.

Outside, the sheets fluttered through the streets, landed in the dust, were trampled under shoes, doused with beer, and picked up again. A few men fought over a photo. Women wept into the printer's ink, children collected scraps as toys.

Frank stood there, his face hard, his hands in his pockets. He knew he had no business being here anymore. His brother was gone. And what remained was just a shell.

The noise outside flooded the room like a torrent. Voices, laughter, newsboys running through the crowd like rats, holding up their papers. "JESSE JAMES! THE DOG! THE HERO!" they yelled, each clutching the pages as if they were bread in a time of famine.

Inside stood the coffin, the lid nailed, the wood dull, the blood beneath already forgotten. But forgetting was only possible for the boards – people didn't forget. They pushed their way further inside, again and again, onlookers who had already stared three times and still wanted to look again.

A man with a greasy beard tapped the lid as if testing its quality. "Cheap wood," he muttered, "for a man like him." A woman held up her child, pressed its hand against the coffin as if blessing it. "Feel it, boy. Feel the man who robbed the banks." The child laughed, clapped, understood nothing, but that didn't matter. The mother nodded contentedly, as if she had shown it something sacred.

Frank stood against the wall, his face hard, his hands in his pockets. He watched them come, go, talk. Each with a truth of their own, each with an image that had nothing to do with Jesse.

*That's it, he thought. They've already torn it apart, and it's not even in the ground yet.*

Bob Ford crept through the crowd, again and again, as if searching for the place where he could shine. But no place shone for him. Everywhere the same words, the same looks: "Traitor." "Dog." "Coward." Some whispered it, others said it directly to his face. One spat in front of his boots. Bob flinched, about to say something, but swallowed it. His face was pale, his eyes dull. The fame he had sought was a ghost that bit him instead of kissing him.

A few newspapermen crouched on the sidelines, writing and drawing. One scribbled a picture of Jesse in a coffin, with a thick, black hole on his head that was bigger than anything else. "People want to see the hole," he muttered. "That's the story."

Frank watched, and his heart boiled. *They turn him into a hole. Nothing more. Not a person, not a brother. Just a hole.*

He took a step forward, wanting to tear the pages, wanting to break the pencils. But then he stopped. Why? The printing presses outside would keep running, no matter what he did here. Words were bullets, and these bullets would travel faster than any truth.

The air was stuffy. Too much sweat, too much of the smell of blood, too much breath from too many mouths. Frank walked out, through the crowd, which barely noticed him. Only a few whispered, "That's the brother. Jesse's." Some stared at him like a second-class attraction. He heard phrases like, "Ask him if it's true." "Ask him if Jesse was really like that." But no one had the courage to speak to him directly.

Outside, it was no better. The streets were teeming. Men held up newspapers, women read aloud, children shouted the name as if it were a battle cry. Stories flew everywhere, and none were true. "He was shot in his sleep." "He had a gun in his hand, but the dog was faster." "He knelt and prayed when the bullet came."

Frank closed his eyes. *He was just a man, he thought. A tired man who hung up a picture. Nothing more.*

But nobody wanted to hear that. Nobody wanted the truth. They wanted blood, they wanted betrayal, they wanted a ballad. And that's exactly what they got.

Frank stopped in the middle of the street, among the newspapers, among the screams. He knew: Jesse was gone. Not just dead, but gone. The world had taken him. And it would never give him back.

The morning was gray as the procession to the cemetery began. No solemn procession, no silent procession of mourners—it was a damned carnival. The coffin was placed on a simple cart, two horses in front, their nostrils steaming, and behind it the deputies, the officers, the Pinkerton dogs. And then the crowd.

They swarmed behind like ants. Farmers with dirty hands, children laughing and singing, women showing their tears like one shows jewelry. And in the middle of it all, the reporters, their pens sharp, their eyes greedy, ready to nail every whisper to paper.

The carriage rumbled along the street, the coffin vibrating, nails crunching in the wood. Frank walked beside it, his shoulders hard, his hands deep in his pockets. Every step was heavy, as if he were carrying the coffin alone, even though the horses were pulling it.

"There he lies!" one cried. "The great Jesse James!" "Dead at last!" another cried. "A hero!" "A dog!"

The voices mingled, clashing with each other until they became a single noise. And the noise rolled along, louder than the wheels, louder than the snorting of the horses.

A few men threw hats in the air, others spat in the dust. Women held up handkerchiefs as if to soak them with the cart's dust. Children ran alongside, banging on the cart, calling his name, screaming, laughing.

Bob Ford walked further back, head bowed, hands nervous. He hoped for a bit of respect, but all he got was the opposite. "There he is! Judas!" someone shouted. "Show us your back, Bob, where you're best!" Laughter, mockery, voices that depressed him. Bob pressed his lips together, but you could see that he was shrinking inside. His shot hadn't made him a hero, but a figure of fun.

The procession to the cemetery took hours because the crowd grew, not smaller. Everyone wanted to see a piece, everyone wanted to be there. Some carried newspapers in their hands, reading aloud as they walked. Others invented new stories as they walked alongside.

"He smiled at the devil before he fell." "He wanted the bullet, he begged for it." "He was already dead, and Bob just finished the rest."

Frank heard all this and his head pounded. *All lies*, he thought. *All damn lies*. But he knew that the truth had no voice. It was too quiet for the noise.

The next wave was already waiting at the cemetery. Men stood huddled together, caps in hand, eyes greedy. Women wept loudly, children climbed onto graves to get a better look. It wasn't a funeral. It was a performance. A spectacle.

The coffin was lifted from the wagon and placed on the shoulders of the deputies. They carried it like a piece of merchandise, swaying, without dignity. And the crowd pressed, pushed, and shouted. Some wanted to put their hands on the lid, others to catch a glimpse, as if the dead man might rise again.

Frank walked beside them, silent, like a shadow. He saw the coffin, saw the crowd, heard the noise. *This is no longer my brother*, he thought. *This is their idol. Their devil. Their toy.*

The coffin was placed at the grave. The people crowded even closer, as if they wanted to join him in the grave. The priest raised his hands and began to

speak. But no one was listening. The crowd murmured louder, the children screamed, the reporters scribbled.

Frank stood at the edge, arms crossed, face like stone. He watched the coffin hover over the hole, watched the priest talk, and he knew: none of it mattered anymore. Jesse James wasn't in that coffin. He was long gone, torn apart, sold, sung about. This was just the remains. Wood. Bone. Blood.

And Frank felt emptier than ever before.

The deputies held the coffin by the ropes, sweating and cursing, while the crowd roared. The priest muttered something about "dust to dust, earth to earth," but his words were lost in the babble. No one was listening. The people didn't want to pray; they wanted a spectacle.

The ropes creaked, the coffin lowered. The boards creaked, nails crunched. And the crowd leaned forward as if to peer into the hole. Children clung to their mothers' sleeves, men craned their necks, women held handkerchiefs to their faces, but their eyes glittered with curiosity.

"There he goes." "The great Jesse James." "Now he's finally finished." "Or maybe he'll come back up." Laughter, jeers, voices rising above each other.

Frank stood at the edge, arms crossed, face hard. Every blow of the ropes against the wooden box sounded like a knife to him. *This is my brother*, he thought. *And they make a damn drama out of it.*

The priest raised his hands, his voice rising, but the crowd didn't hear. One of the reporters continued scribbling, another drew the moment the coffin disappeared. "The outlaw's final journey," he murmured, his pencil scraping across the paper.

The ropes came loose, and the coffin lay at the bottom of the hole. A deputy grabbed a shovel and threw dirt. Clumps fell, dull and heavy. Every blow against the lid echoed like a taunt. "Hurry up!" someone shouted. "We want to see him disappear!"

A few children laughed, throwing stones and dirt into the pit themselves, as if it were a game. Women sobbed, but their sobs sounded staged, as if for a stage play. Men pulled on their hats, spat in the dust, some shouted curses, others prayers.

Frank could barely breathe. The ground swallowed his brother, but the crowd wouldn't let him go. They bent, they stretched, as if they could pull the myth out of the hole with their bare hands. And newspapers fluttered everywhere. Young boys ran among the crowd, shouting headlines, holding up papers. "THE OUTLAW IS UNDER THE GROUND!" "IN THE END, IT WAS TREASON AND IRON!" The papers were distributed like Bibles, torn open, read, read aloud, held up.

Frank heard his own breathing, heavy, hot. He knew: Not even the earth would keep Jesse. They would talk about him, write about him, sing about him. They would bring him up in stories, again and again, distorted, twisted, until nothing remained.

The pastor continued speaking, desperately, his voice rising above the storm. But the crowd didn't listen. They didn't want peace. They wanted noise. They wanted Jesse James, not the man, but the legend. And Frank felt he was out of place here. He couldn't fight these voices, this printer's ink, this greed.

The earth continued to fall. Shovel by shovel. The box disappeared, but the names remained, the voices remained, the myth grew. And Frank knew: Death wasn't the end. Death was only the beginning of something uglier.

The last shovelful of earth fell heavily onto the lid. A dull, final thud, like a heartbeat that came too late. The hole was filled, the coffin gone. But the voices remained.

The crowd was still tightly packed, as if the cemetery itself had spat them out. Some had tears on their faces, others were laughing, still others were giving orders to children: "Get a stone from the grave, it brings good luck." And the children did so, scratching dirt, collecting gravel as if it were gold.

The pastor closed the Bible, his voice thin and exhausted. "Amen," he said, but no one responded. The crowd had its own amen—a chorus of voices, headlines, snatches of song.

"Here lies a hero." "Here lies a murderer." "Here lies Jesse James."

And immediately after: "Here begins the myth."

The reporters didn't stay silent. They were already arguing over the best wording. One wrote of "a tragic end," another of "just punishment." Yet another murmured: "This is the stuff of a folk song. In a week, everyone will be singing his name." And he was right.

Bob Ford stood on the sidelines, his hat pulled low over his face. He heard every "traitor," every "dog." He hoped the newspapers would sell him as a hero, but it was already clear: they would slaughter him, just like Jesse. No glory, only ridicule. No laurels, only dirt.

Frank remained motionless. His boots planted firmly in the ground, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders heavy. He saw the grave, saw the earth, saw the crowd. He knew: nothing could be saved here. His brother lay below, but above, the true burial raged—that of truth.

The crowd began to disperse. Some carried newspapers, some sang, some loudly discussed who Jesse really was. Everyone had a version, and none was correct.

Frank heard them talking, heard the lies growing, and he knew they wouldn't go away.

As the cemetery emptied, only the wind remained. It blew over the fresh earth, over the flowers someone had carelessly thrown, over the stone that would soon be placed. And Frank was left alone.

He looked at the grave and thought: *That's not my brother anymore. Maybe he never was. He belongs to them now. The gawkers, the writers, the singers. The damned newspapers.*

He turned around and walked slowly away. His boots crunched on the gravel, and behind him lay a grave that wasn't a grave at all, but a stage.

The printing presses would continue to hammer. The songs would grow. The children would scream his name. And the real Jesse James would be gone forever.

### The shattered myth

It took less than a week for Jesse James to cease being a man and become a damned template. Everyone cut him to fit their needs. Everyone rebuilt him as they saw fit.

Newspapers printed new versions daily. In Kansas City, he was called the "Robin Hood of the West," who robbed banks to give to the poor. In St. Louis, he was the "murderer of widows and children." And in New York, he was



portrayed as a "tragic figure of the Civil War era, betrayed by his own people." One name, three faces, all lies.

The ballad singers in the bars were quicker to pick up the hype. By the second evening, one was singing about a Jesse who laughed to his death, gun at the ready, heart pure as gold. The men roared, the women wept, and no one asked if it was true. The next evening, another sang the opposite: Jesse, the pig who shot innocents, who danced with the devil until he got the bullet he deserved. Then, too, the men roared, and then, too, the women wept. Truth didn't matter. The main thing was that the rhythm was right.

Frank read the headlines, heard the songs, and felt sick. *They make him everything at once*, he thought. *Hero. Dog. Saint. Bastard. Everything but who he truly was.*

The caricatures soon followed. Newspapers printed pictures of Jesse with angel wings carrying him to heaven. Others depicted him as a devil with horns, chewing bankers in his mouth. Children saw the pictures, laughed, and pointed. Men bought the prints and hung them in drawing rooms as if they were art.

And Bob Ford? He also appeared in the pictures. Sometimes as "the brave man who slew the beast," sometimes as "the cowardly Judas who shot from behind." Cartoonists drew him with a dog's tail, sharp teeth, and a dagger in his back. He was ridiculed, spat upon, and praised—but never honored.

Frank knew: The shot had killed two men. Jesse, and Bob as well.

But the worst part wasn't Bob. The worst part was that Jesse was no longer his brother. He had become a mirror. Everyone saw in him what they wanted to see. Everyone cut off a piece of the myth, chewed it through, and spat it out again. And the more they ate him, the less remained of the man who had really been: sick, tired, full of scars, full of pride, full of mistakes.

Frank was sitting in a bar, listening to a singer shout, "He was the noblest man in the West!" And the crowd went wild. Frank stared into his glass and thought: *You don't know him. You don't know anything. You only know your damned lies.*

But he said nothing. He drank. And he knew: no man could fight against songs, against newspapers, against myths. Not even a brother.

It wasn't long before the first circus wagons arrived. Traveling showmen, who usually had bears dancing and women with beards, suddenly had new

merchandise: "The True End of Jesse James!" was written in crooked letters on their tarpaulins, next to a crudely painted picture of Jesse with a golden halo—and right next to it, one of him grinning with horns from hell.

On stage, a drunken man played Jesse, with a fake beard and a crooked hat, and another played Bob Ford, who shot him in the back. The crowd laughed, clapped, whistled, and tossed coins. Children screamed, women shrieked, men yelled, "Again! Again!" And so Jesse James died every night, twice, three times, by the light of a kerosene lamp, while the crowd drank beer and ate nuts.

Frank heard about it, heard it in the bars, read the posters on the walls. "The Last Stand of Jesse James – LIVE!" it said, and he wanted to puke.

*They kill him every night, he thought. And they even pay for it.*

But it didn't stop at theater. Stalls began popping up at the fairs, selling "genuine souvenirs." Pieces of shirts, supposedly soaked in blood. Bullets, supposedly the ones that had hit him. Buttons, boot heels, even small splinters of wood, "straight from the coffin." All lies. All cheap junk. But people bought, greedily, with shining eyes.

Frank once saw one himself. A guy with greasy hair held up a bloody piece of cloth. "Straight from the outlaw's shirt!" he shouted. "Ten cents, and you're holding history in your hands!" Frank stepped closer, stared at the piece, and knew: That wasn't Jesse's shirt. Not even close. Just some old rag soaked in battle blood. He wanted to knock the guy's teeth out, wanted to wring his neck. But he kept going. Why? There were hundreds, thousands of such stands. He couldn't burn them all down.

And the newspapers carried on. New stories every day. Jesse as a folk hero. Jesse as a bloody demon. Jesse as a lover who allegedly seduced dozens of women. Jesse as a patriot, Jesse as a bandit, Jesse as a martyr. All at once. All wrong.

Frank heard songs, saw posters, read headlines. He saw children playing games where one got to be Jesse and the others the Pinkertons. They laughed, they fell into the dust, they acted out death as if it were fun. And he knew: his brother's picture was gone. Cut up. Burned. Stitched back together, but wrong.

Someone told him in a bar about a "wax museum" that Jesse had already recreated—stiff, with a gun in his hand, the hole in the back of his head painted black. People paid admission, staring at the figure as if it were real.

Frank laughed bitterly. *They stuff him like a dog. And they pay to see the carcass.*

Bob Ford also got his share. On stage, he was played as Judas, as the dog, as the man too cowardly to shoot from the front. He was booed, ridiculed, and praised as "cowardly little Bob." Bob sought fame—and found disgrace.

Frank drank. He drank more than ever before. Because every glass made the voices quieter, the ballads duller, the headlines blacker. But they never disappeared. They were everywhere. Jesse James was dead. But his name lived on, cut up, twisted, sold like cheap merchandise.

Frank knew: No grave, no stone, no earth could stop this. His brother wasn't buried. He was divided. And the world had no intention of ever releasing him.

It wasn't long before the preachers also seized him. On Sundays in the churches, they stood in the pulpits, brandishing the Bible, and the words flew like arrows:

"Behold, my brothers and sisters—this is how a life of sin ends! This is how he falls who rises against God and law. Jesse James, a robber, a murderer, fallen like Lucifer, with the shot of betrayal!"

The women sobbed, the men nodded, the children watched with wide eyes. And outside the churches, the same people were on their knees, humming ballads in which Jesse died as a hero, as a martyr, as the last true man of the West.

One body in the ground, two stories in the head. Both wrong, both comfortable.

Politicians quickly followed suit. In speeches, Jesse was suddenly called a "symbol of the lawlessness we must fight" – or, in the South, "a victim of Yankee oppression." Everyone used his name, everyone twisted it to fit. Some representatives sold their campaigns with, "I will prevent more men like Jesse James!" Another vowed, "I will protect men like Jesse James!"

Frank heard about this and laughed bitterly. *My brother has become a damn campaign poster slogan*, he thought. *And none of them knows what he smelled like after two weeks away from the river.*

The profiteers didn't do any better. Bars called themselves "Outlaws." Whiskey bottles had labels bearing Jesse's face. Cigar packs bore his name. In the shop

windows, crudely assembled "Jesse James" pistols hung, at a premium. Everyone wanted a piece, everyone wanted the myth in their pocket.

And the more they sold, the less of the real man remained. Jesse wasn't human anymore. He was a label. A seal that could be slapped on any shit to make it sell for more money.

Frank saw this, read the posters, and heard the speeches. He sat in a dirty bar, a glass in front of him, and next door someone was singing again. This time a song about Jesse, who "fell for freedom." The crowd roared, coins clinked. Frank drank, stared into space, and thought: *If he could hear that, he would laugh. And then he would puke.*

The decomposition was everywhere. Preachers made him the devil. Politicians made him a tool. Merchants made him a brand. And in the end, nothing remained.

Only Frank, who knew that Jesse James had been just a man—sick, tired, full of scars, full of pride, full of mistakes. But the world didn't want a man. The world wanted a fairy tale.

And so Jesse James became this: a fairy tale cut into a thousand pieces, sewn back together, sold, sung about, cursed. And the real man vanished into the dust.

The family wanted to bring him back. For themselves. For a bit of dignity, for a bit of silence. But they had no chance.

His mother, who had already lost everything—husband, sons, an arm in the Pinkerton fire—now received letters from strangers. Hundreds. Some sent money to thank her for the "hero she had given birth to." Others spat venom, calling her "the mother of a bastard who's finally going to burn in hell." The letters piled up, smelling of strangers' hands, of dirt, of curiosity. She could barely read, but she understood: Jesse no longer belonged to her. Not even as a corpse.

The children—small, frightened shadows—were stared at in the street. "There go the little ones from the great Jesse James," people shouted. Some threw them candy, others dirt. And Frank saw it: The children would never be free. They would always carry the ghosts invented by others.

Frank himself could no longer drink a glass in a bar without someone speaking to him. "Was he really that brave?" one asked. "Did he really give gifts to the

poor?" Another leaned across the table, his breath foul, and whispered, "Did he really shoot innocents? Come on, tell the truth!" Frank remained silent. Or he lied. Or he drank faster, until they sought answers in his silence.

The family no longer had a voice. Everything they said was twisted, turned around, sold. When his mother called Jesse a "good boy," the papers printed: "Mother Sees Son as a Saint." When Frank said Jesse was a "tough bastard," the headlines read: "Brother Confesses Bloody Truth." It didn't matter what they said. The world wasn't listening. The world only heard itself.

And so Jesse James continued to be dismantled. In bars, he was a hero. In churches, a demon. At fairs, a spectacle. In the newspapers, a symbol. And at home, on the farm, on the quiet nights, he was nothing more than a hole in the wall, an empty chair, a name one could hardly utter without echoing back in a hundred different ways.

Frank went out one evening, stood at the edge of the fields, and looked up at the sky. The stars were there, the same as before, when they rode together. But it felt different. Before, there were stars above two brothers. Now there were only stars above one dead man and one who remained. He thought: *They stole it. And they'll never give it back. Not even the sky belongs to us anymore.*

He felt he had lost the battle. The name James was no longer theirs. Not their family's, not his. It belonged to the onlookers, the clerks, the singers. The strangers who had never known him, but thought they knew him better than anyone who had sat at his table.

And Frank knew: The myth was stronger than blood. Stronger than truth. Stronger than any memory.

Frank soon realized that his silence was just as valuable as any lie about Jesse. Because it left room. Room for others to fill the space, to build the stories, to compose the ballads. And the more he remained silent, the wider the world's mouth became.

Newspapers began to make him their own material. "FRANK JAMES – THE OUTLAW'S BROTHER. WHAT HE'S HIDING." They printed entire columns about his silence, interpreting it, turning it into confessions he never made. A quiet glass of whiskey became the headline: "FRANK JAMES DRINKS HIMSELF INTO GUILT." A walk through the fields became the article: "THE LAST JAMES SEEKS FORGIVENESS."

He couldn't do anything. No matter what he said, no matter what he did, it was taken, twisted, sold. He was caught in a web he didn't spin, but which tightened the less he squirmed.

And outside, business was growing. Wax museums displayed Jesse like a stuffed wolf. Cards played him as trump. Cigars, whiskey, even soap bore his name. "As clean as Jesse James." A damned slogan invented by some charlatan.

Frank read it, heard it, saw the posters. He drank more. Each glass burned not only in his throat, but also in his chest.

*That's all that's left, he thought. A brand. A damned store item.*

Sometimes strangers approached him, in bars, on the street. "Was he really a hero?" "Was he really a bastard?" "Did you help him?"

"Did you love him?" "Did you hate him?"

Frank rarely answered. Sometimes he shook his head. Sometimes he said, "He was just a man." But nobody wanted to hear that. People wanted extremes. Angel or devil. Hero or dog. Everything in between was boring. And so they took his silence and turned it into exactly what they wanted to hear.

The ballad singers grew richer. Newspapermen sold more papers than ever before. Showmen, preachers, politicians—they all devoured and spat out the name, again and again. And Frank was left. With a glass in his hand, a brother in the dirt, and a name that no longer belonged to him.

One evening, drunk, he stared into his glass and thought: *Maybe that's the worst part. Not that he's dead. But that they stole him from me. Piece by piece. And I didn't defend him. I kept silent.*

And he felt the silence eating him away. From the inside. Every day was a new cut, a new knife. The myth grew. Frank shrank.

Frank soon realized there was nowhere he could escape Jesse. Not in the cities, not in the fields, not even in his own skin. The name, the image, the lies stuck everywhere.

When he entered a bar, they sang ballads. Men with crooked teeth, half-drunk, shouted the choruses as if they were prayers. "Jesse James, the hero! Jesse James, the dog!" When he passed posters, he saw his brother's face, crudely painted, disfigured. Sometimes with angel wings, sometimes with devil's horns. When he passed the preachers, he heard "Sin!" – and when he passed the singers, he heard "Saint!"

And every time it ate away at him. Because he knew: none of it was true. But the truth was too quiet, too dirty, too tired to be heard.

One evening, he stumbled drunk into a booth, a shabby theater. On stage, a man played Jesse, wearing a cheap suit and a fake beard. And another played Bob Ford, who shot him in the back. The audience screamed, clapped, and tossed coins. And Frank sat in the corner, his hat pulled low over his face, staring as his brother was made into a clown. When the "actor" fell, a red bandana tied to the back of his head, the children laughed. Frank got up and walked out. His stomach burned as if he'd swallowed poison.

But it didn't stop. It lurked everywhere. Even in the mirrors. Sometimes, when he went to the bathroom drunk and stared into the mirror above the bowl, he didn't see himself. He saw Jesse's eyes. Or worse: he saw himself, but always with the echo: "That's Jesse James's brother." Not Frank. Never Frank. Just the rest. The shadow.

In the bars, they called him "the survivor." On the street, they called him "the brother." In the papers, they called him "the follower." And sometimes, in his own thoughts, he called himself "the nobody."

It gnawed at him, night after night. When he wanted to sleep, he listened to ballads. When he wanted to eat, he listened to headlines. When he wanted to drink, he saw posters. Everything was Jesse. But not once was he the real Jesse. Only the dismembered, twisted, abused myth.

One night, completely drunk, he stared into the mirror of a dive bar. The lamp flickered, the room stank of urine and smoke. And then he saw it clearly: Not himself. Not Jesse. But a stranger. A man who only existed because he was associated with another name. "Jesse James's brother," he murmured. "That's me. Only that."

He laughed. A harsh, empty laugh. And then he continued drinking.

The day came when Frank realized he could no longer fight the myth. He had tried, in his own way—by keeping quiet, by waiting, by hoping that the world would eventually have its fill.

But the world wasn't satisfied. It became greedier. The more lies it devoured, the hungrier it became.

In every town, he heard songs. In every bar, he read headlines. At every fair, he saw carnies who, for a few cents, had his brother shot again and again. And he knew: It would never stop.

The real Jesse James—the man who coughed when the dust was too thick; the man who laughed like a brat when he found a good whiskey; the man who was sometimes as cowardly as he was brave—that Jesse was gone. Buried not just under earth, but under stories. Under voices. Under the filth of people who had never known him.

One night, Frank sat alone at a table in a flophouse, a bottle in front of him. Around him, they were singing another song. This time, one in which Jesse was portrayed as "God's rebel" who had died for the poor. The men roared, the women swayed, the coins clinked. Frank heard the words, heard the false chorus, and felt something inside him finally break.

*He no longer belongs to me, he thought. He doesn't even belong to himself anymore. He belongs to them.*

That was the truth, so bitter it burned on the tongue. Jesse James was no longer a brother. Not a man. Not a human being. He was an image, a song, a name, a damned product.

And Frank? He was the rest. The shadow, the witness, the one who stayed behind to see all the filth. The prisoner of myth.

He raised the bottle, drank, and wiped his mouth. Then he laughed, a dry, broken laugh. "Jesse James," he murmured. "Not even death could set you free."

And he knew: he too would never be free.



## America eats its own children

America hadn't created Jesse James to let him live. It had built him like a doll, out of dust, blood, and rebellion—and then, when he grew too big, swallowed him whole. That's how it always had been. That's how it always would be.

This country only loved its heroes when it could kill them at the same time. It loved the myth, but it hated the man. It loved the ballad, but it despised the flesh that made it possible.

Jesse James was just the latest in a line. Before him, there had been the gunslingers, the rangers, the rebels. Some they had sung about as patriots, others condemned as bandits. In the end, they were all the same: a name, a song, a lie. America built its heroes, only to devour them the next second.

Frank saw this clearly. The more he traveled through the cities, the more he saw the faces, the clearer it became: The people didn't want the man. They wanted the food. And Jesse was a feast.

The bankers told stories of how they had trembled before him—and laughed as they told them. The preachers used him to threaten from the pulpit. The singers made him an angel riding into heaven. And the newspapers spewed new lies, day after day, as if the printer's ink itself were mixed with blood.

That's how America worked. It took a boy from Missouri who played in the dirt, who dreamed of freedom, who saw too much blood too soon in wars—and made him into a bastard it could sell. Then it hunted him until he fell, and then it sold him again, this time as a legend.

"America eats its own children," Frank once muttered in a bar, glass in hand, eyes half-closed. A stranger laughed and patted him on the shoulder as if he'd made a joke. "You're right, brother. But the children taste good."

Frank didn't grin. He knew the stranger was serious. The land lived off its own cannibalism. It raised men to tear them apart. And Jesse James was the best example of that.

The boy from Missouri was long gone. The blood in the dust, the nights by the fire, the laughter, the howling, all that was gone. What remained was only a pile of bones in a grave—and around it a feast of lies, songs, and headlines.

America celebrated. America sang. America earned. And Jesse James was dead.

Frank realized Jesse wasn't alone. This country had a damned tradition of loving its children first and slaughtering them later.

It wasn't just Jesse James. It was the cowboys they first sang about as freedom heroes, only to then shoot them like stray dogs when they became too many. It was the gunslingers who were first cheered after they had cleared a saloon, and then left hanging when the bullets hit the wrong man. It was the generals who first put them on high—and then pushed them into the dirt when the war was over.

America loved victors. But it only loved them as long as they were on the road to collapse. As soon as they were at the top, the country shoved the chair under the rope.

Frank thought of the presidents. Of Lincoln, whom they sent to the theater and then sent home with a bullet. Of Garfield, of McKinley. Men who were supposed to carry the country, and the country only carried them until it could stomach them. It didn't matter if you were an outlaw or a president. Whether you shot a banker or saved the Union. At the end, the same digestion awaited.

"America devours its own children," Frank muttered, more to himself than to anyone else. "It eats them with gusto. It chews them up and shits them out again, as legends, as songs, as warnings. But it leaves no one alive."

He saw it everywhere. In the faces of the people who reenacted Jesse, who belted out ballads, who argued over headlines. They wanted heroes. They wanted rebels. They wanted legends. But only if they could destroy them.

And he knew: This wouldn't stop. It wasn't just people's greed. It was the core of the country. A country built on blood, on violence, on the hunger for more. A country that couldn't tolerate heroes who lived too long. They had to be shot, betrayed, torn to pieces. That was the only way America could function.

Jesse James wasn't the first. He wasn't the last. He was just further proof that America ate its own children better than any other country on earth.

Frank drank, swallowed hard, and knew: Maybe he was next on the list.

At some point, Frank realized that he himself had long been stuck in the mouth of the country. Not as loudly, not as spectacularly as Jesse, but still. He was the aftertaste, the piece of meat between his teeth that still had to be chewed out.

In every bar, they stared at him, not because he was Frank James, but because he was "the brother." The label stuck to his forehead like a brand. "There he is, the survivor." "There he is, the follower." "There he is, the one who rode with the devil and still breathes."

Some offered him whiskey, hoping for stories. Others demanded he remain silent so their own lies would shine brighter. But no matter what he did, he was part of the game. His face was already in the papers, next to Jesse's picture. "The Silent Brother," "The Shadow Man." They printed him, drew him, distorted him, until he himself no longer knew whether he was Frank or just the remnant of Jesse.

*America is eating me too, he thought. Slowly. Bite by bite. Not with a bullet, but with every look, every damn song.*

He couldn't even go home without someone standing at the fence asking questions. "What was he really like?" "Did he really give gifts to the poor?" "Was he a bastard?" And whether he answered or remained silent, they took it and made it into their own story.

Frank realized he no longer controlled anything. Not the name, not the image, not even his own life. He was trapped in the myth others had built for Jesse. And the country was draining him dry, too, like a lemon that had long since drained.

He often sat alone in dark rooms, glass in hand, and felt the voices growing louder. Sometimes he felt as if they were eating away at his mind as well. Ballads, sermons, headlines, voices—they gnawed at his thoughts until he wondered if he himself was even real anymore.

*Maybe I'm just a figure, he thought. A side note in her theater. The brother who was left behind. Nothing more.*

And he laughed. Dry, hollow. Because he knew that America had him in its belly for a long time—and that it would eventually shit him out, too. Just like Jesse. Just like everyone else.

Frank began to see America as an animal. A huge, hungry beast that knew no rest. It had many mouths, many bellies, many hands, and all of them were grabbing, all of them chewing, all of them wanting more.

The printing presses were his teeth. They ground day and night, devoured words, and spat out lies. The clattering and hammering was like chewing, endless, greedy. Every headline a bite into the flesh of those who lived or died.

The preachers were his tongues. They licked the people's souls, tasting of guilt, of sin, of cheap hope. They turned Jesse into a devil, a demon, and the crowd devoured the words as if they were bread.

The banks were his stomachs. They digested the blood that clung to the vaults and spat it back out in interest and loans. Every robbery was long forgotten because the banks made more money from Jesse's name than they ever lost from his bullets.

The politicians were the intestines. They sifted through the stuff, twisted it, and turned it into something they could use in speeches. Jesse as a warning. Jesse as a symbol. Jesse as a tool. Digested filth, packaged as truth.

And the people? The people were hunger itself. Always open, always screaming, always greedy for more. They wanted stories, they wanted heroes, they wanted monsters. And they wanted them fast, in big bites, and when one no longer tasted good, they spit it out and took the next one.

Frank saw this and felt that he lived in a belly. A belly that was never satisfied. Everything that was born was also devoured.

Sometimes he sat outside at night, the stars above him, and thought: *This country has never learned to love its children. It only knows how to eat. It gives birth to them in the dirt, gives them a gun, gives them a stage—and then it eats them again.*

Jesse was just one example. But it would continue. The next outlaw, the next soldier, the next preacher, the next president—they would all follow the same path. First on the tongue, then between the teeth, then into the stomach.

Frank drank, stared at the sky, and knew: There was no escaping this beast. America was too big, too hungry, too insatiable. And everyone born was just another bite.

Frank was sitting in a bar in St. Louis, his glass half empty, and heard two men talking about Jesse. One said he was a hero, the other said he was a dirty bastard. They argued, laughed, and drank beer.

Frank remained silent, just listened. *This will never end*, he thought. *And he is not the last.*

He could practically see it: The next generation, the children now playing in the streets, with wooden pistols, shouting "outlaw" and falling dead in the dust—they would be next. Some would join the army, and when they returned, they would first be celebrated, then forgotten, then used to tell stories. Others would become outlaws, driven by hunger, dust, and greed. They would be hunted, hanged, shot—and then ballads sung about them.

The country loved to have stories. But it needed corpses to write them. Without blood, there was no printer's ink. Without death, there was no ballad. Without betrayal, there was no song worth singing.

Frank imagined other names making the rounds in twenty, fifty years. New Jesse Jameses, new Bob Fords, new brothers left behind to drink and watch the world eat them up. Perhaps soldiers from new wars. Perhaps preachers who talked too big. Perhaps presidents who spoke too loudly. They would all fall, and the country would eat them.

*America is not only eating the past, thought Frank. It also eats away at the future. Every boy born today is just another bite. Some sweet, some bitter. But in the end, all in the belly.*

He took a deep drink, felt the burn in his throat. The men next to him were still laughing, still arguing. Hero or dog? Frank knew both were wrong. Jesse was neither. But that didn't matter. The country wanted extremes. It wanted stories. It wanted flesh.

And so it would go on. Forever. Until America itself rotted in its own stomach.

Frank knew he himself had long been on the menu. Not as a main course like Jesse, not as a feast to be sung and written about. He was more like the leftovers, the bones on the plate, with a bit of meat still clinging to them that no one wanted to waste.

Everywhere he went, they asked him about Jesse. Never about Frank. Never about how he felt, never about what he wanted. Only about Jesse. "What was he like?" "Did you love him?" "Was he a bastard?" "Were you afraid of him?"

Every word cut off another piece of him. He wasn't Frank James. He was an echo. A shadow. A footnote printed between the lies to make them more believable.

He realized that he himself was disappearing. His thoughts, his memories, his name—everything was absorbed, swallowed, digested. He remained only as "the brother."

Sometimes he sat alone at night, the bottle empty, the lamp flickering, and heard the voices in his head. Ballads, headlines, sermons. They all ate into him, chewing his thoughts until nothing remained but dust. He wondered if he was already dead. Just a body, still walking, drinking, cursing. But no longer a man. No self.

*Maybe this is the last punishment, he thought. Not the bullet. Not the rope. But this forgetting that grabs you while you're still alive and slowly erases you.*

He remembered nights when he sat by the fire with Jesse. Back then, he was still a brother, a human being. Now he was just the remnant of something that others were consuming. And he knew: Soon, he too would be forgotten. Not even as a name, not even as a shadow. Only as a silent part of a story that others told better.

Frank drank. Every sip was a kind of approval. A nod to the big feast.  
*Eat me too, he thought. I don't have anything worth keeping anymore.*

And he felt that he was only waiting to be forgotten. Just as the land waited to devour the next boy, the next man, the next legend. The cycle was endless. And he had long since become a part of it.

Frank was sitting in one of the last bars where someone would leave him alone. It was late, the whiskey was stale, the lamp flickered. Outside, the wind screamed, inside it was quiet. Just him, the glass, the thought.

He knew there was no way out. Not for Jesse. Not for him. Not for anyone. The land was a giant stomach, a never-ending appetite.

It ate outlaws. It ate presidents. It ate preachers, generals, singers. It ate children before they grew up, and men before they grew old. It ate them all, and it did it with a smile.

Frank thought of Jesse—the boy in the Missouri mud, the rebel, the robber, the dead man in the coffin. And he knew: This Jesse no longer existed. He had been torn apart in songs, in headlines, in cartoons. What remained was only a myth. And myths didn't belong to the people who lived them. Myths belonged to the land.

"America is devouring its own children," he murmured. "And we let it happen." His voice was quiet, rough, broken. No one was listening. No one needed to listen. He didn't say it for others. He said it for himself. For the emptiness in his stomach that no whiskey could fill.

He imagined how the country would continue to eat away. The next outlaw they would shoot. The next president who would fall. The next boy who would grow too big, too loud, too free—and then be silenced.

Always the same cycle. Celebrated. Betrayed. Shot. Cut up. And at the end, a song, a headline, a deceitful image.

Frank laughed. A dry, bitter laugh that lingered in the room. "Maybe that's the only thing this country is good at," he said. "Raising its children and then eating them."

He downed the rest of the bottle, stood up, and staggered to the door. Outside, the wind blew, cold and merciless. He pulled his coat tighter and stepped out. His boots crunched in the dirt, each step heavy but sure.

He knew he was just a shadow. The brother who had survived. The man they were slowly forgetting.

But that made no difference. He was part of the same land, the same cycle, the same meal.

And as he walked into the night, he knew that Jesse was never truly gone. Not because he was alive, not because he remembered—but because the land was still chewing him. And it would chew him until there was nothing left.

America was never full. And it would never be full.

## imprint

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