

## ONE

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MARCH 1946

When it came to robbing the bank, we wasn't polished or nothing. We just set the old truck's hand brake and jiggled out the side while the motor was still running, shrugged off the rain while throwing sacks over our heads to hide our faces, and hustled straight up the middle with our rifles aimed forward. Shoot, I never would have hurt nobody innocent. I just needed money real bad, like anyone does if he's spent time in the clink and nobody will give him a job once he gets out.

Right through the front door, Crazy Ake walloped the guard over the back of the head and he went down like a sack of peas thrown on a stock house pallet, which I felt sorry about, but not much blood was coming out, so I ran to the counter and stuck my rifle up in the clerk's skinny face so the man could see I wasn't fooling. We was only carrying one sack to fill—mine—so as one partner could be more of the muscle if folks decided to fight back. Besides, it was a big sack, and the clerk stuffed it full while Crazy Ake strode back and forth up there on the countertop yelling about how he was the fires of hell and was pouring down wrath on the town.

All that yelling may not have been simple scare tactics with Crazy Ake. He was foaming around the edges of his mouth where the sack was cut for an airhole, and cursing a blue streak, and he

looked genuinely like his finger might twitch tight against the trigger and blow some man's head away if aggravated enough. Yes sir, that worried me a might. It did. But I didn't offer much time to my worrying because once my sack was good and full we ordered the folks to lay down on the tile and count backward from five hundred to one while we skedaddled out the door and back to the truck for our getaway.

Dang that rain. Our old truck's motor coughed its last revolution just as Crazy Ake slid behind the wheel and I slid in the other side. He stomped on the starter but the wetness must have already slunk into the wiring because the motor sputtered and growled, but no life came. It never rains in West Texas, least never when I was growing up near here, and I don't know why we picked this day of all days to commit a crime. Sure enough, the rooftop gutters on the adobe bank were full and overflowing, and muddy rivers were flashing up and rolling down the streets already. Crazy Ake slugged me hard in the shoulder as if the truck's dead motor was my fault. I moved to paste him back when I thought smarter and hollered instead, "Run!"

The bank sits square on Main Street, right across the way from the sheriff's office and jail. We sprinted east a block, hooked south onto Highway 2, and kept running. Far in the distance we could see our goal. There ain't but one stretch of two-lane in and out of the town of Cut Eye, Texas, and if we'd had more time we would have done smart to hide somewhere. But since we could already hear a siren starting up from back of the sheriff's house, we kept running, hoping to get lost in the wide section of bunch grass and mesquite trees out of town.

We passed by the café and mercantile, the tavern and pool hall with its shady rooms on top, and pushed ourselves hard past the Cut Eye grade school, a red-and-white brick building that squats direct across the street from the tavern. I reckoned city planners wanted their children to grow up seeing the evils of

strong drink up close, which made me laugh, though by the time we reached the far edge of the school's baseball field the thought of the school's ill location flitted out of my head. Except for a few scattered houses, the town of Cut Eye was finished. Crazy Ake and I were running free.

That's when a bullet zinged behind my ear. I jagged to the right and Crazy Ake jagged to the left. Another bullet rang out and thudded into the mud on the highway's gravel shoulder five yards in front of us. That sheriff behind us was never a military man, I reckoned, to shoot so far away from his target such as he was doing. Or maybe he was simply a man of mercy and wanted to catch his criminals before frying them in the chair.

I glanced back and saw the long snout of the car's hood gaining on us. No way we could outrun it no how, and I could already see the narrowed eyes of the two men inside. By the cut of the man's uniform in the driver's seat, I knew it wasn't the sheriff but only a deputy. He shot out of the window of the squad car with one hand on the wheel and another on his gun. That meant he was shooting left-handed and squirrely, though a bullet is a bullet any way you look at it. Another man in regular clothes sat beside him, just some hayseed in overalls who probably had money in the bank, so I knew he weren't the sheriff neither, which further relieved me a might.

Even so, I sprinted harder and jagged off-kilter again so the next bullet would be just as hard-pressed to find the back of my head. Sure enough two more shots thudded into the blacktop near my feet, and then a fifth and a sixth. I noticed the deputy shot with a Smith & Wesson square-butt military and police revolver, a real gem of a weapon that's warmed the hearts of thousands of men in authority across the country. So with six shots fired, that meant he needed to pause and reload. That gave me a moment to hatch a plan.

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A hundred yards ahead lay the bridge across the river. Crazy Ake and I jagged closer together and kept sprinting forward. The squad car pulled in close and breathed on our heels; it's a wonder the deputy didn't accelerate and run us over. Wasn't much of a plan, I knew even in the moment, but I dropped my rifle to the pavement, lashed my gunnysack to my belt while still on the run, and hollered, "Jump in the river! Swim with the current!"

Our boots clattered on the edge of the bridge's grating just as two more bullets whizzed over our heads. Crazy Ake didn't answer at first. Then he yelled, "That's my money! You remember that, Rowdy Slater!" And he leaped over the guardrail and dived into the water faster than you could yell jackrabbit.

I jumped after him and counted on the long way down. *One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi. Four*—and sucked in a quick lungful of air right before I hit. The shock of cold water smacking my body flattened me out. It was all mountain runoff, and I burbled underneath the black river that raced along now in flood proportions from today's heavy rainstorm. Immediately something hard struck me from behind and scraped its way along the top of my head. I fought against the current and scrambled to reach the surface, but no surface could be found. I pushed and shoved with my hands and arms, kicking with my legs so as not to go deeper under. Whatever was blocking me rolled and turned this way and that. I was stuck.

From its feel, the blockage seemed to be the stump of a tree trunk caught over my head. The deadwood washed its way down river same speed as me, except now I was tangled in the bare branches on the stump's other end. I kept counting, all the while struggling to break free. *Thirty Mississippi. Thirty-one Mississippi. Thirty-two*—I clawed and pushed against the branches. Nothing would budge. I couldn't bounce upright and I couldn't clear myself away. *Hundred-and-one Mississippi. Hundred-and-two Mississippi*—my lungs pounded in my chest. The tree became my lawman,

judge, and jury, and was trying me for my crimes, finding me guilty, holding me under. *Two-hundred-and-fifty Mississippi. Two-hundred-and-fifty-one Mississippi*—my hands flailed against the branches above. Air trickled out of my nose. My lungs emptied and I fought a strong urge to gasp.

Strange how a man is racing along under the surface of a rain-swollen river, he's but a moment away from death, and he takes a split second to take stock of his life. Maybe the thought rushes at him because he can't help himself. I knew I was about to die and I wasn't afraid. No, it honestly wasn't fear. Last December 1944 I'd survived the artillery blasts of the Battle of the Bulge. For two months I'd slept in a foxhole during Belgium's coldest winter in thirty years. We were outgunned and outmanned with no proper winter clothing or supplies. We ate thin brown bean soup with maggots in it and peed on our hands to warm them before pulling the trigger against our enemies. No, it wasn't fear.

'Twas regret. That was the thought that rushed at me. *All that scrapping around I done. All that getting loaded. All that visiting the shady rooms above taverns.* My C.O. once called me "the most incorrigible man in Dog Company," and considering we were a combat-hardened group of paratroopers who brawled, drank, and visited brothels every chance we got, that was paying me no compliment indeed. Shoot—I was the worst of the lot. From a hundred yards away I could fire my M1 and hit the wings off a fly, and that's the only thing that saved me. My skill as a sharpshooter won their respect. My ability saved their lives. My knack with a rifle saved me from going to the clink before I did, even though I undoubtedly deserved it way ahead of time.

The thought raced away from me as quick as it came, and I continued to fight. Raging water surrounded me. I began to black out. Still I fought, but still the branches wouldn't come loose. My chest sunk flat and a pressure caved the insides of me. I inhaled a lungful of muddy water, and then another. The river swirled into

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me like a bullet from a Nazi's rifle, choking my insides, filling tight my lungs.

That's when I heard him. I swear I did. The man spoke loud, although I couldn't tell from what direction his voice came. Some man I didn't recognize, maybe a lawman who sprinted alongside the riverbank. He shouted at me the same clear way I'd shouted at Crazy Ake exactly eight minutes and thirty-eight seconds earlier by my count of Mississippis.

"Hey fella!" came the voice. "You want to live?"

How that man's voice was reaching me so far under the water, I couldn't rightly fathom, but there under the river, caught as I was and speeding along in the current of destruction, I nodded my head and hoped a saving rope would soon follow.

"Then find the good meal and eat your fill," it said. "Swear you'll do that?"

I nodded again. *What a crazy thing for the man to say*, I thought. Maybe I was going unconscious, but just then the tree broke loose like a strong hand moved it, the tangle of branches passed over my head, and I shot to the surface. A moment later my knees scraped gravel on a shallow section of riverbed. I stumbled forward out of the river, walked three steps onto dry ground, and vomited a bellyful of muddy water.

No one was around. I flopped down on my side and stayed flat against the cold river stones for some time, panting. I could see the river bent right where I washed up. The river's force must have propelled me to safe ground, and the lawman, whoever had yelled at me, was lost in the dusk. Maybe passed by on the bank.

Little by little, the rain let up. Somewhere a coyote howled. Crazy Ake was nowhere to be seen, same as the deputy and the fella in the overalls chasing me in their car. The sack of money was still tied to my belt. After a time, I stood and walked to the river's edge. I washed away the vomit's slime from my mouth,

then scrambled a mile or two more downstream on my feet, all the while taking stock of what to do next. I found a thicket to hide myself and waded into the midst of the trees. Again I listened carefully. No sirens. No dogs in the distance. If the shouting lawman had been near he would have caught me by now. I didn't know exactly how far I'd traveled, but I might be ten miles away from Cut Eye now at the rate that river raced.

A piece of flint lay in my jacket pocket, same as I always carried it, so I gathered some brushwood, lit a tiny flame so as not to be seen, and set about drying the chill out of my wet clothes. The thicket covered me well enough, so in stealth I counted out the cash, ventilating stacks of bills in the heat of the flame so they wouldn't stay wet and grow moldy, and saw we'd bounced out of the bank with exactly \$18,549. That amount of money would solve any man's aggravations, I knew, including mine. But when I stared at the loot it looked oddly tarnished, as decaying as an enemy corpse found in the woods. As impossible as it seemed for someone like me, I actually whispered out loud, "I don't want it."

'Course, I didn't know what to do with the money neither. A man can't be roaming around the Texas countryside with fifteen years' wages stuffed in a gunnysack. I clambered halfway up the bank, far enough so high water would never touch the mark, and eyed out a location at the base of a tree. I scraped out a hole, lined it with rocks to prevent rot, and buried the money still in the sack.

My stomach rumbled. The adrenaline buzz of nearly dying gave me the shakes, and I reckoned some food might do me good. After making it up the rest of the bank, I stopped, momentarily mesmerized by the clearing of the clouds. The wind blew storm-like, except the storm was leaving, not coming, and high in the night sky as far as I could see was a breathtaking blue and black. Below that were the ends of a sunset, the purples and reds, and low against the horizon were the last oranges and yellows, all fire and brilliant, an absolute pure light.

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I didn't want to leave this sight of wonderment but I knew a criminal needs to make haste. In front of me lay thin growths of tussock and salt grass. One lone juniper tree stood tall in the dark. I wondered what distant land I might run to now, far away from Cut Eye, Texas, and the law. There came another rumble deep in my gut, one I couldn't shake no matter how hard I tried, and I recognized it as the kind of ache that brings about death if a man ignores it long enough. I wondered how I might find that good meal, the one the voice was talking about, and eat my fill.



## TWO

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They say the town of Cut Eye sits halfway between nowhere and emptiness. It's been around for some one hundred and thirty years, ever since the days of the Wild West. The only highway for two hundred miles in any direction is Highway 2, which passes right through Cut Eye, and I knew if I didn't find that highway, I'd be wandering around in the sagebrush until the buzzards ate me.

So I left the riverbank, pointed myself southeast, and started walking. What I hoped to do was flag down a long-haul trucker, a man passing through who had no knowledge of the events that transpired the late afternoon before. What I didn't want was any locals to come along and get suspicious of a man standing beside the side of the road with his thumb sticking out, someone they didn't recognize straightaway.

It took me most of the night to find my way back to the blacktop. I hid in the ditch while a car or two passed. When a tanker truck loomed in the distance I took a risk and stepped up. Morning sun was just beginning to show, and on the truck's side was painted "Kansas City Southern Lines: *For the Duration*," so I knew he was hauling for the railroad, most likely out of Shreveport or Lake Charles. Sure enough, he pulled to the shoulder and I ran to the cab.

"Where headed?" He was a colored man, which didn't bother me none, and although he was leaned over so as he could speak

to me, I could still see a shotgun resting across his legs pointing my direction.

"Next town ahead."

"You drifting?" He wasn't smiling.

I paused before answering truthfully. "Yeah."

He looked me up and down as if weighing his options. "Lots of fellas drifting these days. A man of your height and build surely saw some action. What branch?"

"101st Airborne."

"I was Red Ball Express. We hauled your sorry butts up to Bastogne. You fellas had it tough up there, fighting surrounded like you were. Good thing Patton broke through the lines to save y'all."

I coughed and muttered, "Patton might have broken through, but he sure didn't *save* us."

The trucker launched into a big grin, then laughed and set the shotgun back on the rack behind him. "Hop in. I can always use someone's ear to bend on these long empty roads."

I climbed aboard and the trucker took off at a slow crawl, working through the gears, gradually gaining speed.

"I've always wondered what kind of courage it takes for a man to jump out of a perfectly good airplane," he said. "How many campaigns was that for you, anyway—Normandy, Market Garden, Belgium? You make it into Germany too?"

I shook my head. "Belgium but not Germany."

"So what now? Headed for the oil fields? That's some hard labor, but a man can make a buck at it if he puts his back into it."

"Not me." I was still telling the truth. Two months ago I spent a week working for a rig. Every day we worked from dawn to dusk, slippery crude covering us 'til we was black as darkness. But late one evening at a bar, I was drunk and punched out some yahoo who ratted on me to the company's manager. The manager became mistrustful and asked to see my papers, which he'd over-

looked at first. When he saw my dishonorable discharge, well, I was out on my ear. It wasn't a new story.

"Farmhand then?" the trucker asked. "Ranch hand? Lumberyard? Trucker like me? A man returns from war and he's got to find his trade."

I shook my head and kept silent. I'd tried all those. Applied, anyway. With all the servicemen spilling home from overseas, there weren't hardly no jobs to be had. The rare openings that came up, I was always last in line. Time after time they checked my papers and I heard the same thing: "Keep moving, boy." I knew who I was.

The trucker kept talking without seeking much feedback from me, and I let my mind wander. I guess I even dozed a bit because next thing I knew the sunrise was over and a city was upon us. He pulled to the side of the highway and motioned to the door with his head. "I can take you farther, but you said 'next town.' This is it." He held out his hand. "You best be finding your purpose soon, friend. A man with no purpose is a man who don't last long in this world."

I shook the trucker's hand and climbed out. The truck growled and headed away down the highway. I took stock of my surroundings. Last meal I'd eaten was yesterday morning. Crazy Ake had a biscuit in his pocket and we'd split it between us. My pockets were bare of cash like usual. I hadn't taken a dime off the loot we'd heisted. Somehow it just didn't seem right.

A diner sat on the edge of town and I walked around back of it and tried their garbage cans but they were empty still in the morning, so I kept walking up the road. In front of me was a bright neon sign that said "Union Gospel Mission of Texas—free meals." I didn't cater much to religion, but a man on the run can't be choosy. The door listed open and I walked inside the entryway where a man behind the desk told me to sign in and join the line that was forming through the main door.

"You gotta hear the preacher first," the man said. "That's rules. Breakfast is served afterward."

Well, that seemed like a raw deal to me, but I wasn't arguing with my stomach growling like it was. I filed into the chapel, sat on the back bench, and leaned back with my eyes closed. I could use another thirty minutes of sleep.

"Hear now the words of Isaiah." The minister took his stand, flopped open his Bible on the pulpit, and cleared his throat. He was an older fella with a thin, sharp face and round wire-rimmed glasses. His suit was starched and clean-pressed and he looked to me more like a fella in an advertisement for the Arthur A. Everts jewelery company than any preacher I ever knewed.

"Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord." The preacher began to read. "'Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.'" The preacher looked up, paused for effect, and added in his own words, "I wonder if there's a man out there this morning who knows what this passage from God's Word means?"

Men were still filing into the room, knocking over chairs, sitting down hard. I glanced around. Most were winos, bums who'd never seen an honest day's work in their lives. A few of the younger men looked sober, men simply out of work like me. Most still wore bits and pieces of their war uniforms.

"It means that God is in the business of giving men second chances," the preacher said. "It's true your sins are reprehensible to God. You might be an adulterer or a reprobate, a slanderer or a gossip." He cleared his throat again. "You might even be a murderer or a thief, but God's Word declares there isn't any sin that can't be forgiven."

Well, when he said that bit about being a thief, I was listening.

"Isaiah continues," the preacher said, "and he offers us this warning as well as an encouragement. 'If ye be willing and obedi-

ent, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword.”

Well, now that preacher had my full attention. I was willing and obedient. I’d always been a soldier who followed orders. And there was that mention of eating from the good of the land. I wondered if that had anything to do with what the lawman beside the river shouted at me.

“With God’s help, any man can change his ways,” the preacher said. “You may be lost and without direction. You might have led a life with a complete lack of purposefulness. You might be drifting forsaken through this world same as many of you are drifting through Texas right now, but the shed blood of Jesus Christ can make you a new man. When Jesus was crucified on the cross, two thieves were crucified along with him. Both men deserved death. The man on one side cursed Jesus and went to his condemnation. But the man on his other side asked to be remembered. Some consider that one of the first churches, a congregation of thieves, and Jesus extended mercy to that second thief and said to him, ‘Today, you will be with me in paradise.’”

The man was preaching straight at me, I knew, and I respected him for it. He wasn’t fiddling around with his words or trying to sugarcoat the facts. There was a heaven and a hell, and I was bound for hell. I knew that. That preacher was to the point and he was calling out my life as he saw it.

I stood to my feet.

“Rev’rond,” I said. “Are you for real?”

The minister looked jolted for a moment, like he wasn’t used to outbursts in the middle of his sermons. “Come forward and receive salvation,” he said. “You’ll know this is no lie.”

That plank-hardened room was swimming in scent, I tell you. Something lay in the air of the room, and it wasn’t the smell of the winos. It was the good smell of bacon and eggs. The bacon was frying up crispy and golden; I could almost taste it on my

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tongue. Those eggs were real, not powdered, the kind a man didn't need to pour ketchup on in the mess hall. I'd put salt and pepper on them. Maybe some chili sauce if they had it. And the smell of that breakfast cooking worked its way through my nose and down into my gut.

"I'm saved!" I cried out. "Let's eat!"

The preacher's eyebrows lowered. "Blasphemer!" He reared back like he was getting ready to shout out a mouthful, and sure enough it came forth mightily: "What right have you to partake of the kingdom of God?! If all you came for is a free meal, then out with you. Go out into the byways and highways, and let God have mercy on your soul!" He pointed at two burly looking types standing in the wings. Then strode over to me and grabbed me by the arms.

"C'mon fella," one of them said. "Time for you to leave."

I shook off his grip. "I ain't leaving without a meal!" I shouted. "I sat through the sermon. Now I'm saved. Time to eat!"

The other fella started shoving my shoulders, pushing me toward the side door. I hate to be shoved. He dropped his chin like he was getting ready to be rougher with me, and before he could move again I slugged him across the jaw. He went down into a million glass pieces, and the other fella jumped on my back and started whaling on my head with his fists. I crashed over backward on him to break his grip, leaped up in case he beat me to it, and another man's fist came from out of nowhere and popped me in the eye. One of the out-of-work servicemen joined in. I walloped him back, and the room erupted. Men who'd previously sat together hearing the holy Word of God busted each other's chins, broke chairs over each other's heads, and knocked each other on the nose.

A hard-backed Bible flew my direction. I ducked its sharp edges just in time, hit the deck, and crawled toward the door. Over the years I've learned the floor's the safest place in any large fight.

Not that I was always seeking a safe place mind you, but I figured the law would be called soon, and a man such as me would be wise to take an opportunity in the chaos to beat a hasty retreat.

The sunlight streamed against my face and I slammed the mission's door behind me. I ran across the street, spotted another trucker bearing down on me, and flagged him down.

"You sticking around this joint long?" I asked as soon as he opened the door.

"Driving straight through."

"Good enough." I climbed aboard before he could say otherwise.

A siren sounded in the distance, and a sheriff's car appeared heading toward us. It roared by and kept going, headed straight for the brawl at the mission.

"Wonder what all that was about?" the trucker asked.

I shook my head. "You know those church folks. Always squabbling about something."