

A BATTLEFIELD REUNION

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My potential client was waiting for me at the entrance to the MTA station in Scollay Square in Boston, pretty much fitting the description he had given me over the phone: mid twenties, skinny, with black hair, wearing a black suit, white shirt, and black tie. But skinny didn't cover it: The poor guy looked like he hadn't eaten in a month. He had bulging eyes behind round-rimmed glasses, ears that looked like smooth scallop shells attached to his skull, and his black hair had streaks of white in it.

I went up to him and said, "Ronny Silver?"

He licked his lips, like I was a Boston cop rousting him for doing something naughty in Scollay Square, where lots of naughty things were available for a cost. "Yes, yes, that's me," he said, holding out a hand. "And you're Billy Sullivan?"

"Yep," I said, giving him a shake. His hand felt like dry tree branches covered with old leather. "Want to head over to my office?"

"That'd be fine, thank you," he said.

It was a Friday night, nine months after the surrender documents were signed in Tokyo Bay aboard the USS *Missouri*. There were still lots of guys in Army, Navy, Air Corps, and Marine uniforms in the area, ready to raise healthy amounts of hell without worrying they'd get blown up or burnt or shot down in the months and years ahead. There were buses, taxis, and trucks crowding the streets, and the noise of the bars and burlesque houses bounced around the brick walls of the near buildings and made talking and listening challenging.

Ronny kept track with me as we walked the block to my office, and I kept track of him as well. He seemed jumpy, eyes flickering around, head scanning, but I knew from personal experience where he had come from. As we approached the crosswalk there was a loud *bang!* as a truck up the street backfired, and Ronny nearly dove to the asphalt, with me right behind him.

I caught his eye. "Hard to shake it off, eh?"

Ronny said, "Yeah," and that was it.

At my building I opened the wooden door that led to a small foyer, then we climbed the stairs, the treads creaking under our footfalls. At the top of the stairs a narrow hallway led off, three doors on each side, each door with a half frame of frosted glass. Mine said B. SULLIVAN, INVESTIGATIONS. Two of the windows down the hallway were blank; the other three announced an attorney, a piano teacher, and a press agent.

I unlocked the door, flicked on the light, and walked in. There was an old oak desk in the center with my chair, a Remington typewriter on a stand, and two solid wood filing cabinets with locks. In front of the desk were two wooden chairs, and I motioned my guest to the nearest one. A single window that hadn't been washed since the Roaring Twenties overlooked the square and its flickering neon lights. It was stuffy in the office so I opened the window just a crack, to let in some of Boston's alleged fresh air.

I hung my fedora and suit jacket on a coatrack, and went around my desk and sat down. My prospective client said, "I thought all guys like you . . . you know, carried a gun in a shoulder holster. Or something like that."

I stretched out in my chair. "A gat? Heater? Roscoe? No, had my fill of weapons when I served. I don't particularly like them."

"Where did you serve, then?"

I took a pad of paper from underneath some unpaid bills, slid open the top drawer of my desk, and removed a fountain pen. "Here and there. England at first, then France, Belgium . . . Germany eventually. I was in the Military Police."

"Oh," he said. "Snowdrops, right?"

I uncapped the pen, ignoring the nickname he just mentioned, a nickname all of us MPs hated. "And you?"

"Sicily, Italy, France . . . Germany. I was in the Forty-fifth Infantry Division. Typical G.I. Joe, you know?"

Holy crap. "A tough slog."

"You got it, brother."

He looked around, eyes flickering, and I felt a stab of sympathy mixed with shame. Sympathy for what he had gone through, fighting through landing beaches, mountains, trails, forests, swamps, villages, fields and across three nations . . . where nearly every second exposed you to a mine, a sniper's bullet, an 88-mm German artillery shell, or a strafing Luftwaffe fighter. No wonder he was one jumpy son of a-gun. And I felt shame as well, for while we had both worn the same uniforms, I had been one of those REMFs (real echelon mother-fill-in-the-blank), doing a cop's job in an Army uniform. I was mostly stuck behind the front lines, rarely ever finding myself in danger.

"Let's get to it," I said. "How did you find my name?"

Sounds like a dumb question, but it's good to know where a potential client is coming from. A recommendation from a Boston cop? One of my old neighbors in Southie? A tip from a bail bondsman?

Ronny shrugged. "Yellow Pages. I'm not from Boston, don't really know anybody, and I thought I'd just go through the phone book."

“Good idea,” I said. “But S is pretty far along in the alphabet.”

A ghost of a smile. “I know. I figured the guys in the front of the alphabet would get all the business. So I started at the rear. The guy named Yellen never answered his phone. A guy named Tucker was out of the business. And so I came up to you.”

My turn to smile. “Glad it worked out.” I scribbled his name on the top of the paper pad, and said, “All right, then. What can I do for you, Mr. Silver?”

He rubbed the palms of his hands on top of his pant legs. “I’m looking for someone. I want you to find him.”

“Who is he?”

“Craig Ledder. He was a war correspondent with the *Chicago Tribune*. He was attached to my company and rode with us during the last couple of months of the war. A good guy.”

“Okay. A good guy. Do you know where he might be?”

“Somewhere around here,” Ray said. “I saw him getting off a train at South Station. He walked right past me. I called out his name, but he moved into a crowd of folks . . . that’s the last I saw of him.”

“Do you know what train he was on?”

“No.”

“Could it have been one of the Boston Elevated trolleys?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

I wrote some more. “When did this happen?”

“Last Wednesday.” Five days ago.

“Do you remember the time?”

“Yes. It sounds funny but I was at South Station and I was checking my watch. It always runs fast. The big clock there said it was eight oh five in the morning.”

“Why do you want to find him? Does he owe you money? Did he steal your socks or Hershey bars while out on the front?”

A quick shake of the head. “No, no, nothing like that. You see, he stuck with us, for weeks on end. Other times, we had newsies drop in for a couple of days, to get a feel or taste of what was going on, and then they’d go back to the rear, get drunk and laid in Paris, and leave us be. But not Craig. He stayed with us through the shelling, the snow, the rains. He ate our rations, he got the shits and trench foot like we did . . . he was practically one of us.”

“I see.”

“He also took a lot of photos. He had this small camera—pretty pricey piece of equipment, I’m sure—and he told us, ‘Boys, when this is all over, I’ll make sure I send you copies of all these pix.’ He even wrote down our names and addresses in his notebook.”

I scribbled some more. “But you never got the photos, am I right? Is that why you’re looking for him?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I know it sounds crazy and all that. It’s been a year now, but I still got memories. Bad and good. I want to remember the good: the

guys in my squad, my platoon, and a lot who didn't make it back. Their bodies are still over there, and I'm starting to forget what their faces looked like. You know? I don't want to forget them, not ever . . . and those photos . . ." He paused, swallowed. "Crazy, huh?"

"Not on your life," I said. "Look, can I get you a drink? Coffee? Tea?"

Ronny's voice was hopeful. "Anything stronger?"

I got up from my chair. "No, nothing stronger."

"Oh." The disappointment in his voice was real. "Coffee, I guess."

I got up from my chair. "Be right back," I said, ducking through a curtain off to the side of my office. Beyond the curtain was a small room with a bed, radio, easy chair, table lamp, and icebox. A closed door led to a small bathroom that most days had plenty of hot water. I filled up a kettle with water from the bathroom, set it on a hot plate, and switched it on. I rummaged around a crowded shelf and came down with some sugar packets and Nescafé instant coffee. I made two trips back to my desk, remembering to bring along a small bottle of cream from my icebox.

He took the cup in both hands and gingerly sipped at it. "Thanks. Always thought the height of luxury was drinking your coffee from a cup made of china, instead of a steel mess kit, and sitting in a real chair, and not with your ass in mud."

"Sounds right to me," I said.

With the open window I heard a loud bellow of laughter, followed by some young women laughing as well. Hands shaking, Ronny put his coffee cup back down on my desk.

"Are you listening to that?" he asked.

"Hard not to," I said.

Ronny blinked his eyes, looked again at the open window. "Not even a year later, and they're forgetting, every day. All they care about is the end of rationing, getting raises at their jobs, and putting that war in their rearview mirror. All the sacrifices, all the blood, all the tortures . . . forgotten."

I sipped from my cup. "I don't think so, Ronny." A brief, painful thought of my older brother Paul, dead at Bastogne. "A lot of us still remember."

"But not enough," he said. "It's about the A-bomb, new electric appliances, and those V-2 rocket tests in New Mexico. The future, the future, all hail the glorious future, built on the corpses of millions."

It was starting to make sense. "That's why getting those photos are important to you, right?"

He raised his cup. "That's right. I . . . every month, every year that will come up, more and more folks will forget. I won't let that happen, Mr. Sullivan. I won't. Can you help me?"

My first instinct was to say yes, but I wanted to know more. "You said this Craig Ledder wrote for the *Chicago Tribune*. Did you try to get in contact with him after the war?"

"Oh, yes, I certainly did," he said. "I wrote a few letters that were never answered, and once I even made a phone call. Some guy in a hurry said

that Craig had quit the newspaper in the summer of 1945, and that's all he could tell me. Then he hung up."

"Uh-huh." I put my coffee cup down, picked up my fountain pen. "Ronny, you said you're not from Boston. Where are you from, then?" "Philadelphia."

"Long way from home."

He stiffened up and I knew I had struck him somehow.

"That's right," he said, after several seconds.

"What brings you to Boston?"

A few more seconds passed. "Does that matter?"

I was quick. "You bet it does."

He wiped his hands again on the legs of his trousers. "I . . . I had a hospital appointment."

"Where?" I asked. "Peter Bent Brigham? Mass General? Beth Israel? New England Deaconess?"

No reply. I stared at him for just a moment, and then it came to me.

"McLean Hospital?" I asked. "In Belmont, right?"

A quick nod, like even saying a word would push him over the edge.

"I see."

He cleared his throat. "Yeah. The looney bin, am I right?"

I spoke carefully. "A psychiatric hospital," I said. "Nothing to be ashamed about."

"Ashamed?" he said sharply. "You think I'm ashamed?"

Oops. "No, it's just that, well, there's a stigma, and if you need help . . ."

He leaned forward, clasping his hands together. "During the day I can get along, you know? Though I don't like loud noises, and I really, really don't like trains. But it's at night, that's the worse. The nightmares. You're not just dreaming, you're actually back there again, like you're using a time machine. You can feel the cold. Hear the gunfire, the shellfire. The blows hitting you, over and over again . . . the sheer hopelessness, knowing you were doomed, would never get out alive. The dreams . . . Do you get dreams, Mr. Sullivan, do you?"

My pen hesitated. I remember a young American soldier, brown hair, caught during the Battle of the Bulge. I had been called away from my regular duties to help empty ambulances as they growled in from the front lines, and he was on a canvas stretcher that I and three other MPs took out to bring him into a large tent marking a field hospital. The ground was a mush of snow and mud, torn up by the jeeps and ambulances, and a heavy sleet was falling. He had a bloody bandage wrapped around the top of his head, and he kept on repeating a street address in Spokane, over and over again, asking us to contact his grandmother. The first nurse to see him lifted up the bandage and said, "Sweet Mother of God, I can see his brain."

But the boy hadn't heard her. Over and over again, over and over again, he repeated the Spokane address of his grandmother.

I resumed scribbling. "No," I said. "I've been lucky. No dreams."

I looked up at him and he had a look of anticipating disappointment, and

I said, "Ronny, I'll take your case. I'll find this Craig Ledder, see what he's up to, and if we're very lucky, maybe he still has the negatives of the photos he promised you."

He grinned. On his skinny and scared face, it looked pathetic. "That's great, Mr. Sullivan, that's great."

"Not great until I find him," I said. "What does he look like?"

I took careful notes as Ronny went on: nearly six feet, bulky, short blond hair, blue eyes, small ears, with a short scar on his left cheek.

"Sounds good," I said.

Ronny said, "How much do I owe you?"

I waved a hand. "Vet discount. We'll settle up when we're done, all right?"

"Sure, sure," he said.

"Oh . . . and how can I get ahold of you?"

"At the McLean. You see, we're allowed off the campus if the doctor thinks we won't harm ourselves."

"Good," I said. "Tell me, are they helping you?"

A shy smile. "Not a goddamn bit."

About fifteen minutes after my client left, I opened my eyes, leaned forward and picked up my phone, and got the long-distance operator. The call would be pricey but would be a good start to what I hoped would be a quick and simple case.

I looked over my notes when the phone rang. The operator said, "Your call is going through, sir."

"Thank you, operator."

There was static on the line and the sound of the phone ringing was faint. Nearly a thousand miles away. It was picked up on the first ring. "*Chicago Tribune*, where can I direct your call?"

"Newsroom, please."

"Which part?"

Good question. "Ah, your foreign desk. Or overseas. Whichever fits."

"Hold, please," she said, and there was another, louder hiss of static, and I tried not to think of the long-distance bill I would pay next month with each pricey second slipping away.

"Overseas, Cynewski," came a gravelly voice.

"Hello," I said. "This is William Sullivan, calling long distance from Boston."

"Yeah?"

"I'm trying to locate a foreign correspondent of yours, name of Craig Ledder."

"He doesn't work here no more."

"I know that, but I was hoping I could locate a family member of—"

"Christ, pal, we've got a newspaper to run."

Click, which considerably cut my long-distance bill but which otherwise didn't help me.



The next day I moved around a lot, starting with the Boston Public Library, located on Copley Square and built in 1895 in a supposedly great Italian Renaissance Style. Since the closest I've ever been to Italy was the towns and battlefields of France, Belgium, and Germany, I'd have to take their word on it.

In a reference room at the library, I spent a few minutes thumbing through a thick Chicago phone book published by Illinois Bell. The room was cool, dusty, and filled with phone books and directories from cities in all forty-eight states. In the L section, I noted only six Ledders in the Chicago area. Doable. I checked the Philadelphia phone book from Bell Pennsylvania. The number of Silvers exceeded six pages. Not doable.

After putting the Chicago and Philadelphia phone books back in their places, I looked around. I was still alone. I went over to the New England Telephone book for Boston, and took down the volume for 1943. A waste of time and effort, shouldn't look at old ghosts, but my hand seemed to act by itself as I pulled down the thick and battered volume, and flipped through the thin pages, stopping at the Sullivan page. Like the Silvers in Philadelphia, there were pages and pages of Sullivans.

My finger stopped at the tiny print marking SULLIVAN, Paul X., 52 L Street, S. Boston.

My older brother. My finger rubbed at the small print. Dead in Bastogne at about the same time I was helping bring in stretcher cases during that bitterly cold December, 1944.

I closed the book, tossed it back in its place.

Armed with rows of nickels, I grabbed a pay phone on Copley Square and started making long-distance phone calls to Chicago—and struck out like last year's Red Sox pitching staff. Made call after call to Chicago, and none paid off. No one on the phone nearly a thousand miles away had ever heard of a Craig Ledder.

With my last roll of nickels gone, I flagged down a Yellow Cab.

"Newspaper Row," I said, and with a grunt, he flipped down the meter flag.

A few minutes later I exited the hackney on a crowded stretch of Washington Street, also known in this town as Newspaper Row. Within one block were the offices of the *Boston Post*, the *Boston American*, and my destination for today, the *Boston Globe*. After passing through the lobby I found my way to the newsroom, crowded with desks and chairs on a wooden slat floor. There was a low, steady roar of men talking, phones ringing, and the chatter of teletype machines in one corner, spewing out copy from the Associated Press, United Press, and INS. There was a haze of blue smoke up by the ceiling from cigars and cigarettes, as I weaved my way through the desks, stopping at a familiar place.

Don Burnett glanced up at me, then gestured to a battered, empty chair. "Hey, look who's here," he said. "My favorite private dick, Billy

from Southie. How's it hanging?"

"It does, here and there," I said, sitting down. Don was my age, but skinny with brown hair, thin Clark Gable-style mustache, and thick round-rimmed glasses. Those glasses and a bad ticker kept him out of the war, and when he had been drinking some, he would always bitterly complain that his 4-F status had kept him out of the greatest story of our generation.

I'd always change the subject, thinking about a lot of things, including that hospital tent that December, and the cleared area at the side of the tent where bodies of American soldiers were being stacked up like logs, wondering at the time if my older brother Paul might be there in that bloody pile.

He had on a faded white shirt, black slacks, and a black necktie. "I'm looking for some information, was hoping you could help," I said.

From his messy desk, from city directories to competing newspapers and stacks of tan-colored reporters' notebooks, Don managed to pull out a slip of paper, fold it over, and said, "Okay, shoot."

"You don't want to know what it is first?" I asked.

He frowned slightly. "The beach off L Street, summer of 1940. I don't have to say any more, am I right?"

Yeah, he was right. He had been swimming when a stitch cut into his side—dummy hadn't waited a half hour after eating to go into the water—and I had dragged him in before he drowned.

So I said, "No, you don't, and I appreciate it. Okay. This one should be pretty easy, should just take a phone call or two."

"Uh-huh," he said. "Go on."

"I'm looking for a guy named Craig Ledder," I said. "He was a foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune* during the war. Looks like he quit work sometime after VE Day. I got a client who was a buddy of his overseas. This Ledder character promised him some photos that were taken during those last months."

Don wrote a few notes. "Some promise. Your client should know better than to trust reporters or photographers. Is your client in Boston?"

"Yep."

"And this Craig Ledder?"

"My guy saw him at South Station. My client tried to get his attention, but the station was crowded and he faded away."

"Uh-huh," Don said. "Any one of you two bright boys think of calling the *Trib* and see what's up?"

"Gee, what a suggestion," I said. "No wonder you're a reporter, a real nose for news. Yeah, my client called, and I've called as well. Pretty much got hung up on."

Don rubbed the end of his fountain pen against his brown mustache. "You want me to work some phone magic? That's going to be a bit pricey. Long distance, of course."

I shrugged. "I'll make you whole. Or get you lunch at Locke-Ober's, whichever one is cheaper."

"Yeah." He picked up his phone, dialed a single number. "Shirley, sweetie, it's Don up in the newsroom. Will you set up a person-to-person call to . . . Dave Wendell, *Chicago Tribune* newspaper, Chicago. Yeah, Dave Wendell. Thanks, sweetie."

He hung up the phone with a clatter, tossed his pen on the crowded desk. "Dave Wendell used to work here until he got a hankering to see Lake Michigan. Setting up the call will take about ten minutes or so. You got anything you want to talk about?"

"Not really," I said.

On his desk he pulled out a copy of that day's *Globe*. "Here. Go find a corner and educate yourself, then come back in ten minutes. I'll see what I have to share."

I took the newspaper, glanced at the headlines—about an A-bomb test in the Pacific called "Operation Crossroads," a threatened national railway strike, and some mess involving Acting Mayor John Kerrigan. I put the paper down on an unoccupied desk and wandered around, noting some framed front pages hanging from the walls and pillars holding up the ceiling, including the ones marking VE Day and VJ Day. I stopped in front of one noting the Battle of the Bulge, the tens of thousands of American casualties.

Another memory popped up, like a fishing bob coming up in the harbor water. I was back at that tent, later moving bodies along, and an Army surgeon, smoking a Camel with shaking hands, wearing a bloody white smock over his fatigues, noted two infantrymen, as I and a guy named Cooke struggled to put them into canvas body bags. "See where those fellas were shot? Right in the back of the head. Close-range. Meant those Nazis took 'em as prisoners and executed them."

I went back to Don's desk and sat down. "You're early," he said.

"Got a lousy track of time."

"I guess," he said. "How's your ma?"

"Hanging in there," I said. "She still wants to think Paul's coming home, still has a shrine built to him on the mantelpiece, all his photos from the Army and his high school track ribbons. He was always . . . well, he was popular."

"Hard to be the not-so-popular brother," he said.

"Hey, you dating anyone?" I asked.

Don looked surprised at the change of subject. "Um, no."

"Gee, I wonder why, considering you have such a warm and inviting personality."

His face reddened, but the phone rang before we escalated, and he snapped it up.

"Burnett, newsroom."

He stayed silent a moment, then spoke animatedly into the phone. "Well, hello, Dave, how's things in the hog butcher capital of the world?" Don smiled. "Uh-huh, uh-huh, well, I'll bet you a sawbuck that the Red

Sox are gonna be ahead of your White Sox come September . . . okay. Hey, this call is costing a lot of money, so here it is. Looking for info on a foreign correspondent of yours—" Don glanced down at his handwriting. "—name of Craig Ledder. Seems to have quit last summer, right after the Krauts raised up the white flag. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Well, any relations in the area? Any forwarding address? All right."

Don rubbed at his eyes with his free hand. "That's good to know. Hey, want some advice then? Huh? This year, root for the Cubs . . . hah! Bye, Dave."

He hung up the phone. "Remember, you owe me for the call."

"Haven't forgotten it yet."

"Okay, here's the deal. Your guy Craig worked for the *Trib*, was in the ETO for nearly a year, and on May eighth—VE Day—he sent a telex back to Chicago, saying, 'To hell with you and to hell with the human race.' His severance pay was sent to an Army post office in occupied Munich. No other info, no relatives in the area, and that's all she wrote."

"Damn."

"Yeah."

I got up from his desk, offered my hand, which he shook. "Locke-Ober's, right?"

"How about the Union Oyster House?"

"How about go to hell? You know I hate seafood."

"Later, Don."

"Best to your mom, Billy."

The next day I got up earlier than usual and took a cab to South Station, the major railway hub for this part of the city, just above my old neighborhood of South Boston. Among the railroads it served was the Old Colony Railroad and the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad, and it was also a destination for the Boston Elevated. The building was huge, with three stories of windows and Roman-styled pillars. In my child's memory, the place looked odd, with the Atlantic Avenue Elevated Line having been torn down some years back.

At the top of the building was a huge clock. It was seven fifty A.M., and commuters from the towns and cities to the south of Boston were already streaming out, and Yellow Cabs were lined up to take the well-paid to their jobs.

I waited at the main entranceway, watching the laughing men and women exit, the women wearing their finest and makeup after years of clothing rationing. It was good to see. Maybe winning the war was worth something after all. I made sure my watch was synchronized to the large clock above the entrance, and waited.

And waited.

And at eight oh five, there he was. Strolling self-assuredly through the crowds, description matching just like Ronny had said. Nearly six feet tall, well built, short blond hair, small ears, scar on his cheek, snappily dressed

in a dark gray suit, light yellow shirt, and blue necktie. He walked past me and I kept my mouth shut, and I started walking behind him.

One-man tails are tough, especially if the someone you're tailing is spooky or suspicious. You have to duck in and out, learn to strip off your hat and necktie, muss up your hair, try to look like a different guy for the benefit of whoever you were following. But Craig acted like he was on the side of the angels, and he joined a stream of people going down D Street. He ducked into a diner at D Street and Fargo Street, came out with a cardboard cup of coffee and a small brown paper bag. I tailed him down Fargo Street, until he walked into a watch and jewelry store: BRONSTEIN FINE JEWELS. I hung outside for a few minutes, and then went into the store. Lots of glass cases, lots of displays, and there were window displays on one side that showed the work areas. Craig Ledder was back there, wearing a white chest-sized apron, with glasses on his face with those kind of optics that let you work on fine watches.

There was a young man who seemed to be running the show, with a thin beard and wearing a plain black yarmulke on the rear of his head. I showed him my professional identification and asked to see the owner.

Mr. Bronstein came out from a rear office a couple of minutes later, a worried look on his face. He was an older version of the young man who had helped me earlier. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up on his thick arms.

"Yes?" he asked.

I smiled and said, "Purely routine, Mr. Bronstein. I'm doing a background check on an employee of yours, Craig Ledder. He's in the process of purchasing a rather large life-insurance policy, and there's just a few things I'm looking for."

At the mention of the word "routine," he visibly relaxed, and I had a brief and clear conversation with him. Craig Ledder had been working for him for about six months. One of his best. Quiet and kept to himself. No problems. One of the first in, and one of the last out. Hadn't even taken a sick day. Lived somewhere in Dorchester. Anything else?

He rubbed at his thick beard. "Oy, I'm sure he was in the war, though he won't talk about it. One day there was a construction accident down the street, a large cement block fell to the ground. Sounded like a bomb went off. And Craig, poor fellow, was underneath one of the counters."

I shook his hand and thanked him, and I said, "If you don't mind, can you keep this confidential?"

"Absolutely," he said. "You can rely on me. I'd hate to see him leave. In fact, I wish I had three more of him."

Back at my office, Ronny Silver was standing outside in the hallway. There was the sound of a typewriter being hammered from the press agent, and the tinkling of a piano from the music teacher. He was shifting from one leg to another, like he was looking for permission to pee.

“Well?” he demanded. “What have you found? What’s going on?”

My first thought at seeing him was going to invite him back into my office, talk him out, maybe give him another cup of coffee, but I didn’t like the buzz I was getting from him. He had been a bundle of nerves when we had first met; now he looked like he was ready to explode.

“It’s just the beginning,” I said. “I’ll let you know when I’m finished.”

“What? Won’t you give me a . . . a status report? What you’ve found so far?”

“Nope,” I said. “That’s not how I work. When I’m done, I’ll write up a report, and you’ll get it. Not before then.”

His fists clenched and I automatically tensed up. Hard to believe, I really thought the skinny little bugger was going to throw himself on me.

“That’s not fair.”

I stepped around him, made sure I kept him in view as I unlocked my door. “Probably not,” I said. “And if you don’t like it, you can find another P.I. That won’t keep me up at night.”

I got into my office, made a point of shutting the door. From the hallway lights I could see his shadow on the other side of the frosted door glass, and he stood there for a bit, and then walked away.

I felt better after that.

The next day I did some surveillance work for some clown who thought his wife was cheating on him—she was, and she was doing it with the guy’s younger brother, which was going to make family get-togethers interesting later this year—and then went back to my office. It was a cold, windy day for May, and I was getting ready to head out for my big job of the day, when something came to mind.

I picked up the Boston phone book, looked up a number, and gave it a quick dial.

“McLean Hospital,” a woman’s voice said.

“Admissions, please.”

A *click-clunk*, hiss of static, and an older woman’s voice came on the line. “Admissions, Miss Turner.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Turner,” I said, making my voice a bit deeper and more authoritative. “This is Ralph Sweeney, Boston office of the Veterans Administration.”

“Hello, Mr. Sweeney,” she said. She sounded like a close-fisted battle-axe who liked her little bit of power and wouldn’t take any pushing around.

“Miss Turner, I know how incredibly busy you must be, especially after the war’s end, so I won’t waste your time,” I said, laying it on pretty thick. “We have a bit of a records snafu on our end, and I just want to verify that a Mr. Ronald Silver—” I ruffled a sheet of paper in front of the phone. “—of Philadelphia is a patient at your facility. We want to make sure that the McLean is promptly compensated for your most excellent service.”

“Hold on, Mr. Sweeney.” Her voice had lightened just a bit, which seemed like a big victory. A clunk of the phone receiver on her desk, and

I even could make out the sound of a filing cabinet drawer being opened and closed.

The receiver was picked up. "Mr. Sweeney?"

"Yes?"

"That's correct," she said. "Former Private Ronald Silver, of Philadelphia. He's an outpatient here, referred from the Friends Hospital there."

"I see," I said, twirling my fountain pen in my hand. "You've been quite helpful. He served with the Forty-fifth Infantry Division, correct?"

And then it got very interesting and I stopped playing with my pen.

"No, I'm afraid not," she said. "The paperwork here says he was with the Ninety-ninth Infantry Division. Not the Forty-fifth."

"Are you sure?"

A frosty tone returned. "I'm in charge of admissions, Mr. Sweeney. I'm positive."

I knew I only had a few more seconds before she'd either hang up on me or ask some very embarrassing questions, and I said, "The Ninety-ninth . . . that was in France, right?"

A labored sigh. "Oh, I don't know . . . it says here he was in Belgium, and then spent six months in Germany."

"In Germany? As part of the occupation forces?"

"No," she said. "As a prisoner of war."

Later that afternoon I was back near my home turf, trailing Craig Ledder as he emerged from Bronstein Fine Jewels and made his way back to South Station. At the entrance to the large terminal building, there was a row of men holding up signs from The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, warning of an upcoming national strike if their demands weren't met. Two men in front of me said something nasty and the other said, "I froze my ass off, riding in B-29s over Tokyo, so these cushy bastards can get a raise? Jesus!"

And the other said, "Truman should draft their sorry butts into the Army, make 'em keep the trains running."

I followed Craig and saw him bundle himself onto an electric trolley. A sign on the train said DORCHESTER. From my keen investigative abilities, that's where I determined he was going.

Dorchester is a neighborhood to the south of Boston, located right next to the city of Quincy, famed for being the hometown of John Adams, second president of the United States, and the Fore River Shipyard, which turned out a lot of ships for the Navy during the war, including the battleship USS *Massachusetts* and the aircraft carrier USS *Hancock*.

Ledder lived in a small gray apartment building about two blocks away from the station. I kept my eye on him as he stopped at a corner grocery store and left a few minutes later with a paper sack. The apartment building was across the street and he lived on the ground floor. It looked like there were three other apartments there—one on the first

floor, and two upstairs, accessible by a set of side stairs.

I gave him a couple of minutes to get settled, and then I went across the street and knocked on the door.

He opened the door, wiping his hands on a dish towel. He had taken off his necktie, hat, and coat. He looked curious and unafraid. "Yes?"

"Mr. Ledger? Craig Ledger?"

"Yep, that's me," he said. "What's going on?"

I showed him my Massachusetts private investigator license, and he gave out a low whistle. "Wow. A real private eye." He lifted his gaze from my hand and said, "What are you investigating?"

"Well . . . you."

That made him laugh. "Really? Why's that?"

"Look, it'll take just a few minutes," I said. "Mind if I come in?"

He shrugged. "Why not? Come on in."

The apartment was small but clean and tidy. There was a small kitchen at the rear, a large living room with couch, coffee table, two easy chairs, and a large RCA radio playing big band music. On the coffee table were carefully piled copies of the *Boston Post*, next to a pile of *Life* magazines, next to a pile of *Time* magazines. In the center of the table was a clean crystal ashtray, with a pack of Chesterfields and a Zippo lighter next to it. He took the couch and I took the chair and removed my fedora, put it on my lap.

"Mr. Ledger, I'll make this as quick as possible," I said.

"Sure," he said. "Look, do I know you?"

"No, but I've been hired by someone who does, and who's looking to find you." I said. "An Army vet who said you were with his unit during the war, back when you were a newspaper reporter."

"Yeah, right," he said, crossing his leg. "The *Trib*. A while ago. Why does he want to find me?"

"He says you promised to send him—"

"—photos of him and his buddies when the war was over," Ledger said, grimacing. "Yeah, yeah." He sighed and settled in the couch and suddenly looked ten years older, running a hand across his face. "You know, I did promise a bunch of dogfaces that I'd do that. Even took down their names and addresses . . . and, well, the end came. And I looked at the blasted cities and the dead American kids and the piles of bodies and the smoke and the death . . . I'd had too much of it. Way too much of it."

Another big sigh, and he rubbed his hands together. "Sent a nasty telex back to the colonel saying I no longer wanted to work for the world's greatest newspaper, and that was that. Dumped my notebooks, my camera, bummed around southern France for a while, and then came back to the States."

"Why Boston?"

"Why not? Got a cheap liner ticket from Brest to Boston, decided I liked it when I got here, and I got a job."

"At the jewelry store, right?"

His eyes widened. "My, you really have been poking around."

"Just my job, sorry," I said. "How did you end up at the jewelry store?"

"Worked at a store in Cleveland where I grew up, after school." He smiled, rubbed the armrest of his couch. "It sounds strange, but after a couple of years attached to various Army units, living in shit and mud, eating their rations, avoiding getting shot up and shelled, I needed something relaxing, soothing." Ledder's smile grew wider. "The store is the perfect place. Everything is right at your hand. A very narrow and peaceful place. And when your day is done, you leave, feeling satisfied that you've fixed a watch, or repaired a ring."

"Don't you miss newspaper work?"

A firm shake of the head. "Nope. Damn, look at Ernie Pyle. He should have done what I did, walk out when the war in Europe was over. Instead, the damn fool went to the Pacific and got a Jap sniper bullet drilled into his head for his troubles."

Ledder leaned over, picked up the Chesterfields and the Zippo. He offered me the pack, and I declined. He took a cigarette out, lit it. Taking the hint, I stood up, but something I couldn't put my finger on was bothering me. "Mr. Ledder, sorry to disturb you. I appreciate you letting me in."

He stood up, extended a free hand, which I shook. "Not a problem. Hey, what's this vet's name? Wonder if I can remember him."

"Sorry," I said. "Client confidentiality and all that."

"Ah, I see."

He led me out and took a deep puff on his cigarette, and I felt something odd again.

I tried to think about it when the door shut behind me, but I was distracted when I got out onto the sidewalk, and found Ronny Silver, nickel-plated semiautomatic pistol in his right hand.

I swallowed. "Hey, Ronny."

"He's in there, isn't he," Ronny demanded. His face was flushed and sweaty, his white shirt soaked through, and his legs were trembling. But the hand holding the pistol was rock-steady.

"Ronny, look, what's going on here, I mean—"

He stepped closer. "Billy, I like you, and I thank you for doing your job, but if you don't turn around and go back in there right now, I'll shoot you down without blinking."

I didn't move my head, but let my eyes flick around. The sidewalk was empty, and only a few cars and buses were moving up and down the road. Ronny said, "Don't think I won't. I've shot old men, soldiers, young boys pretending to be soldiers. I once shot a boy of about fourteen or fifteen who was a sniper, hidden behind some trees in snow, and I had to crawl so close to him that his brain and blood got all over me."

"Okay," I said. "Let's go in . . . just calm down, all right?"

"Don't worry about me. Go."

I went back to the front door, gave it a hearty knock, and when Ledder

opened it up, Ronny grabbed the scruff of my neck and with amazing strength, pushed me in. There was a tussle and a couple of “hey, heys” from Ledder, and in a moment, Ronny closed the apartment door and came into the room. Ledder and I were back in the same position, me on the chair, he on the couch, but this time, our hands were up in the air. Ronny stood in the room’s center, grinning widely. Soft music continued to come from the radio, and the room smelled of tobacco smoke.

“Hans,” Ronny said. “Hans, you son of a bitch, sure has been a long time, hasn’t it. What a goddamn surprise, eh?”

Ronny stepped forward, kicked Ledder’s left shin, and he cried out and fell back against the couch. Ronny stepped back and said, “Hurts, don’t it. But it doesn’t compare to what you did to me, and what you did to so many others, right? Oh, Hans, can’t tell you how long I’ve been dreaming about this.”

It came to me, then. “Ronny, you lied about your service record. You were a prisoner of war, right?”

Ronny laughed. “Oh, that sounds so innocent, so clean, so normal. Prisoner of war. Oh, no, Billy, I was much, much more than that . . . and this Kraut made me know that, day after day, week after week, month after month.”

Ledder’s face was red, fixed in a grimace. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Ronny said, “Don’t get off that couch, or you’ll get it, right between the eyes.”

“Mr. Sullivan,” Ledder pleaded, “that guy’s gone nuts. I’m no Kraut.”

“That’s partially right,” Ronny said. “Family was originally from Germany. You were born in Cleveland. Went back to the Fatherland when the little corporal started running things. And he ran things all right. Helped run a factory for torturing and killing people.”

I was still trying to get my head around what Ronny was claiming. “What are you saying? That he mistreated you when you were in a POW camp?”

Ronny whirled on me, but still kept his pistol pointed at Ledder. “I wasn’t in any prisoner of war camp, don’t you understand? I was captured during the Battle of the Bulge, me and my whole platoon, and when we were sent to the rear, I got separated from my buddies. The Krauts found out I was Jewish. So everybody else went to a regular stalag. But not me. I went someplace special, someplace where I met this guy, one *Sturmbannführer* Hans Kessler, at a very special place indeed.”

He took a deep breath. “A place called Dachau.”

The room seemed still after Ronny blurted out that evil-laden word. “But Dachau . . . that was a concentration camp,” I said. “You were a soldier.”

Another high-pitched laugh from Ronny. “What? You think the master race cared about my status as a soldier? All the hell they cared about was that I was Jewish. That’s all. Dachau had a mix of Jews from all over

Europe, and a few other Americans like me as well. And German Americans like Hans here.”

Ronny’s voice suddenly broke. “Hans came up to me when I first got there, after the first beatings, after I was stripped and given those thin striped pajamas. He said he was from the States, and would look out for me . . . I shouldn’t have believed it. The bastard looked out for me, all right. Gave me extra beatings, extra work details, extra torture.”

I stared at the man on the couch. “Is that true?”

Face still red, he said, “My name is Craig Ledder. I’m a watchmaker. I used to be a newspaper reporter for the *Tribune*. I don’t know why he’s saying this crap, Mr. Sullivan.” He started to move off the couch and said, “Look, let’s call the police, let them sort it out, and—”

Ronny moved quick. Standing close to the man, he dug the end of the pistol into the side of Craig Ledder’s head. “No! No! You goddamn SS, so smart, so tough . . . they’re good at escaping, at slipping away. Just like at Dachau when the Americans finally came to liberate us. It was chaos. So many of us just broke out of the barracks; some cornered a couple of SS guards and beat them to death with their hands. We weren’t scared anymore! And when the troops saw all the bodies piled up, all of those skeletal bodies, some troops rounded up SS guards, stood them up against a wall, and machine-gunned them to death. Just like that.”

Ronny swallowed, like the terrible memories were threatening to crawl up from his gullet and choke him to death. “But me . . . I was looking for Hans . . . looking for payback for all the times he whipped me, starved me, made me stand still in the snow, hour after hour. And yeah, I saw him all right. He had slipped into prisoner garb, like a well-fed monster like him could pass as one of us. But he was smart . . . I saw him going into a building with a guy that looked like a soldier, except he had a patch on his upper arm. Official War Correspondent.”

He swallowed again. “I’m sure he had some story to get that guy’s attention . . . I tried to follow him, but I was so damn weak . . . so weak . . .”

Ledder said, “Please, Mr. Sullivan. You know he’s crazy. Look at him. One phone call to the police, we can clear this whole thing up.”

“Shut up!” Ronny said. “Later, I heard from a couple of troops that Ledder from the *Trib* had gone missing, and they had found an SS officer in the commandant’s office with his head blown away, like he killed himself by putting his gun in his mouth. That’s when I knew what had happened.” He turned and spoke directly to the man on the couch. “You put an SS uniform on Craig Ledder’s body, and you took his identity.”

Ledder was staring at me with a pleading look. “Yeah, I was there, at Dachau,” he said. “I had seen too much, had photographed too much and I wanted out, and that’s what I did. You heard me earlier, right? That’s what I did. I got out. I couldn’t stand it anymore.”

I shifted my glance to my client. “Ronny, give me the pistol. I promise you, we’ll settle this. I promise to track down his identity, make sure he doesn’t slip away, make sure the truth comes out. All right? You’re

my client. I'll see it through. I promise."

Ledder kept his mouth shut, wisely, while Ronny stood there still, pistol aiming at his chest.

"Ronny," I said.

"You promise you'll help me?" he asked.

"Yes, I will."

"You mean it?"

"I do," I said, feeling the tension in the room ease out. Even Ledder was beginning to look relieved.

"All right," he said. "You can have my pistol."

Ledder started to smile.

Ronny said, "When I'm finished with it."

And he shot Ledder three times in the chest.

I'm very much used to the sound of gunshots, but not in an enclosed space. It was pretty damn loud. Ledder fell back against the couch as I jumped out of the chair, punched Ronny in the side of the head, and grabbed him and threw him to the floor. I got to Ledder and tore open his shirt, saw the bloody grouping right in the center. Ledder remained conscious for another few seconds, his eyes dimming out, and like those old memories—ready to jump back into life in a moment—his skin grayed out and he died.

I whirled around and Ronny was sitting on the floor, pistol in hand, pointing it at me.

We both stayed still.

Ronny flipped the pistol in his hand, and held it to me, butt first.

"Here," he said. "I'm finished with it."

I resisted the urge to punch him out once more and took the pistol. I ejected the magazine and put it in my left coat pocket, then I worked the action to clear the chamber. The round—it looked like a .32 caliber—clattered on the floor. I put the unloaded pistol in my other coat pocket.

Ronny was talking, but I ignored him. I went back to Ledder's body, and after some maneuvering, removed his wallet from a rear pants pocket. I went back to Ronny and opened the dead man's wallet, and started dropping cards on Ronny's splayed out legs.

"Massachusetts driver's license," I said. "Social Security Card. Press pass from the *Chicago Tribune*. Correspondent pass from the U.S. Army. And the ones with his photos, they match his face."

Ronny smiled the smile of a man suddenly content with what he had just done, and with his place in the world. "Mr. Sullivan . . . Billy, the SS were masters of torture, killing, and deceit. Hell, he even found himself a job at a Jewish business! Who would ever think of looking for a Nazi war criminal there? Don't you think a man like *Sturmbannführer* Hans Kessler could have false identification papers prepared?"

I didn't say a thing. Ronny coughed. "Look, please, just check one thing

for me, and one thing only. And if it doesn't pan out, then, I'm yours. I'll confess to everything, say I forced you and duped you, and I'll even make sure my family in Philadelphia wires you whatever compensation you feel is fair."

The room smelled of death and burnt gunpowder. I found my voice. "What do you want?"

"Remove his shirt," he said. "Check his upper arm. You'll find a tattoo of a letter there."

"What the hell does that mean?" I asked.

"Please . . . just do it . . . and all will be well."

I don't know why I did it, but that's what I did. After my time in the ETO I'm not shy around bodies, so I went back to the dead man—Craig or Hans—and started taking off his shirt. Grabbing the back of his neck, I pulled him forward, managed to tug off one sleeve, for his right arm. I was lucky rigor hadn't set in yet. The skin was pale, smooth, and unmarked.

"Sorry, Ronny," I said. "Nothing."

"Check the other one," he said, with confidence. "It'll be there."

So I did that again, with the smell rising off the man's body, the burps and gasps as his body shut down, and when the other sleeve was off, I had to stop.

There was a tattoo, just like Ronny had said.

I lowered the body back. "You're right," I said. "There's an 'AB' tattooed on his upper arm."

The contented smile was still there. "Most members of the SS had their blood types tattooed on their upper arms, so if they were wounded, they would get priority medical care, no matter what. All German doctors had orders that SS personnel would go to the head of the line. Conniving bastards, weren't they."

At the mention of the word doctor, another memory spun to the surface, back in Belgium, back in 1944, back at that medical tent. Me and the other MP named Cooke, struggling with those two dead American soldiers, trying to get them into body bags, and Cooke saying to the doctor, "You're saying the Krauts executed these guys?" And the exhausted Army surgeon had said, "No, not Krauts. They're hard core. The SS."

Masters of death, of torture. Of deceit.

And then it came to me, what had bothered me just before I left, when the man calling himself Craig Ledder had lit up his cigarette in this room. Rather than hold the Chesterfield between his index and middle finger, the way an American does, he held it with his thumb and index finger.

Like a German.

I wiped my hands on my coat. Ronny slowly got up, weaving, and sat on a chair. "What now?" he asked.

"Earlier you said you wanted my help," I said. "You still thinking that?"

"Of course."

"Then you got my help."

Ronny looked confused. "To do what?"

I looked back at the couch. "To get rid of this bastard's body." 🦋