

Chapter One

Racing his forklift across the asphalt-decked wharf, Einar Lund clenched the tiny steering wheel with both hands and held on for dear life. The wharf was pot-holed, gouged, slick with oil, and littered with scrap. The forklift bounced, dipped, and sloughed sideways, each time threatening to throw Einar from the unpadded plank seat.

Slowing momentarily during his mad dash from the dockside staging area to the railroad siding, Einar risked a glance at his watch.

The union and the shipper had negotiated a deal. If, by four p.m., the local's longshoremen could unload every sheet of plywood from the flatcars strung out along the siding and stow it shipboard, then each of them would pocket a fifty dollar cash bonus.

Two and a half hours to go. Son of a bitch.

How much plywood? As much as the ships could swallow. A pencil-pusher at Hedgepeth Marine had worked up a number: this much cargo space equals this many pallets stacked five feet high with eight by four foot sheets of finished plywood.

Einar looked down the line of flatcars. They had a fighting chance, he thought, to make the deadline and earn that sweet bonus.

Einar throttled up, completed his perilous journey across the wharf, then swung left and ran his forklift parallel to the railroad track, passing flatcars already emptied. Upon reaching the first car still bearing freight, he swung hard to the right. Slowing, not stopping, adjusting in motion, he eased the forklift's blades between the deck-boards of the pallet he'd targeted, centering on the middle stringer. He bumped the lift control until the blades made contact, raised the load six inches, and then, coordinating the action, he backed up, pivoted, lowered the blades, and began to retrace the route he'd followed from dockside.

His sights were set on the *Lucky Star*, a rust-bucket coastal freighter, which, together with the *Ellen McDonald*, its equally shabby sister ship, was tied up at the Port of Vancouver's Terminal Number Two on the north shore of the Columbia River in Washington State. A half mile upstream red beacons pulsed atop towers looming over the Interstate Bridge, which connected Vancouver to Portland on the Oregon side.

A gusty southwest wind drove rain into the open-sided steel cage that surrounded Einar. He had tried using safety pins to close the long rent in the left leg of his rain pants but water was getting in through the gaps. He was wet to the crotch and literally freezing his nuts. How many times had he told himself, go buy some new rain pants? Why hadn't he listened?

At least the wind cleared off the plume of diesel smoke that Einar had been ducking and dodging since daylight when he'd first cranked up the forklift's belching engine.

The plywood was bound for Oakland, California, where rumored war work was drawing men from all over the country. Rumored, hell. So far as Einar was concerned, Roosevelt's tap-

dance around the subject was an act, no more, no less. The country was gearing up for another goddamn war and bigshots like Oakland's Henry J. Kaiser were getting in at the front end.

Einar had thought about hoboing down to Oakland where the wages were better than they were along the Columbia River waterfront. Word was, though, that hundreds of men who'd straggled into the city were living in tents and cheap hotel rooms or sleeping in their cars, waiting for the shelter Kaiser had promised them, and which only now, using Northwest plywood, the industrialist was beginning to hammer together.

Einar had decided to stay put.

So now here he was busting hump to meet the four o'clock deadline. Meet it and, if everything broke right, the ships would cross the bar at the mouth of the Columbia River on the turn of the evening's high tide. Miss it, and the ships would sit at anchor at least twelve hours—longer if another storm blew in and made the bar too hairy to cross.

Einar raced toward the *Lucky Star* with his head and neck extended just enough to see over the top of his load. Raindrops skipped off the top sheet of plywood and smacked his face. He knew that if he hit a pothole or even a pebble the wrong way, there was a good chance he'd dump the load or even lay the forklift on its side with himself squashed underneath. He maintained speed nevertheless, taking those chances. It wasn't gonna be him, by God, who got blamed if they missed out on that bonus.

A shrill whistle drew Einar's gaze to the cab of the deck-crane that was loading the *Lucky Star*. Archie Collins, the operator, leaned out of the cab and pointed downstream toward where the *Ellen McDonald* was berthed. Men—it looked like every one of the gang working that piece of the job—were hurrying from the *McDonald* toward Hedgepeth Marine's Warehouse Number One, the oldest and most rickety rat warren on the entire waterfront.

Reapplying himself to the crane's controls, Collins swung the boom over the *Lucky Star's* port side and the deck crew, each man clinging to a corner cable, rode a loading platform to the dock where they jumped off, joining the riggers. Just short of the loading platform Einar eased the forklift to a stop and slid from the seat, merging with his gang already hustling toward Warehouse Number One.

"What is it?" Einar asked Spud Lodge, one of the riggers.

"Somethin'," Lodge said. "Don't know for sure."

Einar looked back over his shoulder. Small, thin, and agile as a monkey, Archie Collins skittered down the ship's ladder and soon caught up to the group. Einar asked him the same question he'd asked Spud Lodge. Collins didn't know either. He said that Lou Vitti, crane operator on the *McDonald*, had given him the high sign.

Whatever it was couldn't be good news, Einar thought, everyone walking off the job with that bonus in play.

A forklift came up from behind and bumped alongside Einar and the rest. At the wheel was Einar's counterpart, Phil Peeples, the forklift driver who'd been feeding cargo to the *Ellen McDonald*. He wore thick smeary glasses and a Santa Claus beard. Not one to walk if he could ride, to stand if he could sit, Peeples was as fat as Einar was lean.

"Look there." Collins pointed to an ambulance, which, with dome light turning but no siren, had nosed through the port's main gate. It was moving left, easing along warehouse row toward Warehouse Number One, which was last in line. Metal bay doors on the newer warehouses reflected the ambulance's revolving light. No light reflected off the doors of Warehouse Number One because it didn't have any doors, only squat open archways.

Without a word, Peeples throttled up his forklift and sped away as if to intercept the ambulance.

A heavy-set dark-haired man shuffled out of Number One's middle door. He wore a green hip-length poncho. His feet were shoved into unbuckled black rubber rain boots, the cuffs of his khaki trousers tucked into the splayed tops.

Arms raised and waved crisscross overhead, the man in the poncho halted the ambulance. Three attendants with dark overcoats thrown over their whites jumped from inside. Two of them yanked a stretcher from the back. The third attendant pulled out two satchels, exchanged a few words with the man in the poncho, and then followed the stretcher-bearers through the doorway from which the man in the poncho had emerged.

Still at the wheel of the forklift, Peeples circled the parked ambulance. Why? With Peeples, you never knew.

Hands raised, palms foremost, the man in the poncho advanced on Collins, Einar Lund, and the rest as they marched toward him. "Nuthin' to see," the man called out. "A crowd ain't gonna help in there, fellas, only get in the way." The gang paused momentarily and the man in the poncho soon stood before them.

"Who is it?" Collins asked. "Let's have it, Sal."

Sylvester "Salmon Sal" Ordway, the assistant warehouse manager at Hedgepeth Marine's Vancouver office, spread his arms wide and fumbled for words. Dandruff speckled the furrows combed into his oily black hair.

"Who?" Collins demanded. Slowly, the gang resumed its forward march forcing Salmon Sal to back-pedal.

Dygert: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER

Einar knew it had to be either Mack Smith or Willy Bischoff. Those two, working alone, had been loading canned goods into Warehouse Number One from trucks on the city side.

“Who?” Despite his size, Collins was a scrappy so-and-so and often spoke for the men.

Peeples must have noticed the confrontation between Collins and Sal. He sped back. He drove up behind Sal and jockeyed the forklift side-to-side, mirroring Sal’s movements, slowing his retreat.

Finally Sal stopped. Peeples switched off the forklift’s engine. He slid down from the seat and stood close behind Sal, further boxing him in.

Sal couldn’t seem to find his voice. Instead of speaking, using his forefinger, he made tight, circling motions above his right ear.

Einar interpreted Sal’s gesture as an illustration of curly hair. That meant Bischoff.

Sal’s unspoken answer sent the *Lucky Star* gang, all but Collins, Peeples, and Einer Lund, surging around him. “Here. Hey, there,” Sal called after the men. “Stay away from there.”

Inadvertent or not, Sal took a step toward Collins and Collins pushed him, two hands to the chest. Peeples caught Sal reeling backward, grabbed the shoulders of his poncho, and jerked him half around. Sal dropped to one knee and then fell back onto the seat of his pants, directly in front of the forklift. Collins and Peeples walked around the machine and the fallen man. Einar hesitated.

Salmon Sal, Einar thought, wouldn’t be much to blame for whatever had happened. Einar wasn’t sure why the company kept him around. Nobody listened to him. Nobody did what he said.

Down on the wet pavement, in the rain, on the seat of his pants, Sal looked pathetic. Einar extended a hand, which the fallen man batted away.

“Goddamn Red Communist bastards,” Sal muttered. He struggled to his feet and hobbled toward Hedgepeth’s business office, a hundred yards off. The seat and the backs of his pant legs were soaked through.

Tony “Treasure” Trovich, Hedgepeth’s Vancouver manager, had come out of the little building where he and Sal had offices. He stood motionless under the eaves, without a coat, hands in his pockets, awaiting Ordway’s return.

Was there, Einar wondered, any reason to push Sal around? No good could come of it. Treasure Trovich deserved a push, more than a push, but no good could come of that either unless the men were ready for a fight, the way they’d fought during the strikes of ’34 and ’37, knock-down drag-outs that at least had put—and kept—union men on the docks.

The revolving light atop the ambulance swept across the gaping warehouse bay but showed nothing of the scene inside. A few gallon cans had rolled out of the doorway onto the wharf. Rain was stripping away cheap gaudy labels that showed tomatoes—red, green-stemmed and plump—against a cheery yellow background.

Footsteps dragging, wishing he was anywhere else, Einar closed on Warehouse Number One. He reached under the waistband of his rain pants and pulled a damp handkerchief from his hip pocket. He grimaced and wiped his face. No two ways about it. The *Lucky Star* and *Ellen McDonald* wouldn’t be crossing the bar this night. Wouldn’t be any bonus. And Einar needed the goddamn money.