

Chapter Two

Even on a sunny day, which this wasn't, it was hard to see inside Warehouse Number One. Half the ceiling fixtures were broken or the bulbs burned out. What light there was mostly came in through the doorways.

Einar walked through the middle doorway and paused just inside, allowing his eyes to adjust.

The warehouse was filled with rows of long lofty three-tiered shelves. From the end of a row, a fisherman casting a lure might reasonably expect to reach the far end. If tall enough, he could reach up and touch a top shelf. Forklifts were left room to maneuver between rows and around the ends.

At least at first glance, the accident explained itself. Shelves throughout the warehouse were stacked high with cartons containing canned fruits and vegetables. Under the weight of too many cartons, a section of shelving on the waterfront side of the warehouse had buckled and the cartons sloughed off. Onto Bischoff? So it appeared.

The men who had hurried into the warehouse from the *Lucky Star* and the *Ellen McDonald* now formed a tight circle in front of the buckled shelves. They stood shoulder to shoulder, some on tiptoe, all leaning in. Einar caught the smell of tomatoes along with that of wet cardboard, cigarettes, and diesel smoke. Smashed cans, he guessed, were leaking juices.

One man, Mack Smith, remained apart from the others. He sat slumped on an intact carton, head hanging, elbows resting on his knees. Thirty-five years old, a good steady worker who pitched in on tough jobs some sought to avoid. Einar approached him.

“The office will say we did it.” Smith seemed to sense Einar’s presence though he didn’t look at him and spoke to the ground. “They’ll say we clipped a post with the forklift and brought down the whole shittaree.”

“They won’t admit any part of it,” Einar agreed. “Sure as you’re sitting there, they’ll say it was you and not them.”

The circle of men expanded and broke. Einar glanced over. Straining under the weight of their stretcher, two of the ambulance crew emerged. A gray blanket covered the stretcher and its heavy burden from end to end.

Smith slapped the carton. “They’ll lie. We weren’t working this side at all. We were working the other side, only come over here for a break. I was having a smoke, looking to see how you were making out loading them ships. Wasn’t paying Bischoff any mind. Behind me, I hear a noise like a load busted loose from a crane. Look around and he’s under all those damn boxes. I pull the boxes off and seen the way his neck is

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bent back.” Smith lowered his head and ran his hand back over his hair. “Dead or soon will be. Twenty years old. Not a bad kid.”

“I didn’t much know him,” Einar muttered. What did that matter? Einar hadn’t known the stranger he’d seen run down and killed by a car a year ago, and he thought about that man and the man’s family most every day.

The ambulance crew had reached the warehouse’s middle doorway. Several men walked alongside the stretcher, touching it. The rest trailed behind. All but Mack Smith and Einar and Jimmy O’Leary.

“Hey, you men,” O’Leary called after the procession. “Come look at these posts. This ain’t wood here. This is dry rot, nothing but mush.” O’Leary rubbed thumb and fingers together as if sizing grit.

“Hey, you, Collins, Vitti,” O’Leary, his voice raised, called after the crane operators, leaders in any crew. “Here. Look at the new way they found to kill a union man.”

O’Leary was a grubby little Leprechaun—nothing cute about him, the angry sort—loud-mouthed and wild-eyed, a union zealot up from San Francisco, claiming close association with Harry Bridges, the waterfront firebrand. He didn’t seem to care about a paycheck, always agitating to lodge a complaint or to start a job action, even a strike. Which was the main reason Einar and most everyone else avoided O’Leary. Much as they might agree with him, they needed the dough.

Several of the men following the stretcher hesitated, seemingly torn between keeping Bischoff’s body company and fixing blame for his accident. Einar threaded his way among the gallon cans and poked at the broken four-by-four posts. Sure enough, in

places the posts were mush. Einar wasn't a complainer. He didn't want anything to do with Jimmy O'Leary. But he owed it to Bischoff, didn't he, to speak up this once?

"It's what he says," Einar called out.

Now, backed by Einar, O'Leary had the ally he needed and, as always, a plan of attack. "They killed a man, and they got to answer for it, the murdering bastards. Who's with me? Who wants to hear the reason why?"

No one spoke.

O'Leary hopped on a carton. "When Bischoff's mother comes and begs to know what's happened to her boy, what's your answer? Are you gonna stand mute? The poor woman deserves an answer. Don't we owe her as much?" O'Leary waved a fist. "Who wants an answer? Who wants to hear it?"

"Me," Einar heard himself say. "I do."

Other voices joined in and formed a chorus which for a few moments pushed back the gloom.

O'Leary jumped from his perch and struck off toward the Hedgepeth office, through a bay door, out onto the cracked asphalt, in the vanguard of what, with the laggards catching up, became a gang of eighteen men. Only Mack Smith remained behind, hunched over, his head in his hands. The ambulance was already gone.

The office stood just inside and west of the port's main gate, a one-story building with tall windows in front and on both sides which every other day, it seemed, Salmon Sal Ordway washed inside and out. The flat roof slanted back at a low angle. The port's chain-link fence, topped with barbed wire, showed over the top.

Salmon Sal was often seen outside the office washing windows, delivering messages, and whatnot, whereas his boss Treasure Trovich remained mainly indoors—and yet made his presence felt. Hands clasped behind his back, Trovich patrolled the front office, eyeballing operations through the spotless glass. Einar couldn't recall seeing the man lift or carry, climb or stoop, run, or even hurry. Not a lick of exercise and still he sported a wrestler's build, trim in the gut, thick through the shoulders and chest, with wrists and forearms as stout and corded as hawsers.

Einar walked at the rear of the pack, saw rain dotting the puddles, felt it not at all. Something had happened to the safety pins holding the left leg of his rain pants together. The two sides, undone, flapped in the wind.

O'Leary flung open Hedgepeth's front door. He marched inside, and the men behind him spread out on either flank. The front office was empty of furniture except for a plug-in electric heater and a desk and behind the desk a single chair in which Salmon Sal was sitting and from which he now rose. Einar smelled liquor. Probably poor old Sal, feeling his earlier humiliation, had soothed himself with a snort.

O'Leary banged the desktop with his fist. "We're here to see Trovich. We have questions."

Salmon Sal stepped to the side of his chair and then back. Centered in the wall behind Sal's desk were a steel-reinforced doorframe and door. A ship-fitter's calendar hung on a nail to one side of the door, a flyswatter on a nail to the other. Sal's gaze darted from angry face to angry face, finding no place to land. "Concerning what subject?"

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Einar heard something of a sneer in Sal's voice. Others must have heard it too. Among the men there was a ripple, the stirrings of a forward surge.

Sal retreated—two faltering steps.

“We want to know why you bastards killed Bischoff,” O’Leary said. “Simple as that. We know how you killed him. We want to know why.”

Sal wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Get him out here!” O’Leary ordered. “Or, damn you, we’ll bust in and take him.”

Sal backed up tight to the door behind him.

Einar had never been through that door, never even looked through the doorway. He understood there to be a room full of file cabinets, and Trovich’s office, and a bathroom, and a meeting room where business was done. He’d heard that Trovich carried the company’s current paperwork home at night, afraid that despite port security someone might break in and ransack the office or set it on fire. Or so went the rumor, wishful thinking more than likely.

Salmon Sal knocked on the door with his knuckles, down low, a couple of quick sharp raps. The door opened suddenly, and Sal nearly fell through. He caught himself and made way for Trovich.

Looking at his watch, Trovich said, “Two-thirty. If you bunch don’t get back on the job, I don’t see you collecting no bonus.”

“The hell with the job,” O’Leary said. “We’re here about Bischoff.”

“What about Bischoff?” Trovich replied. “On his way to the hospital, I hear tell.”

“He’s dead and you know it. You killed him. We want to know why. No answers, no work.” The men around O’Leary chimed their support, though not as heartily as they had in the warehouse. Money complicated the analysis. It did for Einar, sure as shooting.

Trovich had left open the door behind the desk. Einar could see past him, along a lighted corridor. At the far end of the corridor, the office building’s back door looked like a carbon copy of the door behind the desk, solid and steel-reinforced.

Trovich had yet to look at O’Leary straight on. Now he did. Only the too-quick pulsing of blood in the man’s bull neck contradicted his seeming composure. “Not for you to say, Red. Work or don’t work, that’s a union call. You’re full of baloney and bullshit, which fits you for the part, but it don’t mean you speak for the union.”

Right, Einar thought. O’Leary didn’t speak for the union. Brennan and Malmquist, who did, were back at the union hall. Did they even know about Bischoff? Had anyone gone over to tell them?

O’Leary gestured to his left and right. “We’re the union.” He put both hands on the edge of the desk and leaned across it. “And we’re here for an explanation.”

“Talk, you bastard.” Peeples said, and then he and several men with him moved forward from left of the desk. Trovich looked at Peeples and snorted with contempt.

“Let’s hear it,” said Collins, generally the coolest of heads. From right of the desk, he’d led other men forward. Einar had misjudged the group’s determination, the feeling for one of its own.

At the far end of the corridor, the back door opened. Two men were momentarily silhouetted in the doorway. Einar saw them, recognized them, and then the door closed.

Though he didn't look around, Trovich seemed to have heard the door. His face relaxed and took on an expression akin to a smile.

“Get out,” Trovich told O’Leary. He made a shooin’ motion with his right hand as if he were waving off a fly. “Get back to work, or not only do you lose the bonus, by God, I’ll dock every man jack of you a day’s pay. Sal, make a list.”

Salmon Sal’s pen was soon poised over a page of the notebook he’d pulled from his shirt pocket. He scrutinized faces and scribbled. Names? Maybe a few, all that the oaf knew and could remember. After that he’d be making it up, writing gobbledygook just to look busy.

And soon beside the point.

The two men who had entered through the back door now sauntered into the front office, two young toughs in low-crowned felt hats and suits tight enough to show the bulge of shoulder-holstered pistols.

The arrival of these two was as likely to provoke O’Leary as to frighten him. Einar slipped up behind the angry imp and took hold of his belt.

The first of the men through the doorway, without a nod to Sal or to Trovich, came around the desk and bumped Peeples chest-to-chest. Of the two new arrivals, he was the taller and stockier, his face pale, round, and pudgy. His hat was pushed back on a mass of copper-colored curls. Ginger lashes sprouted from sore-looking eyelids. His name was Keith Green, but most everyone knew him as Pinkeye, one of Hedgepeth Marine’s waterfront heavies.

How had they managed to arrive so quickly, Einar wondered? Trovich must’ve smelled trouble and phoned Hedgepeth’s main office in Portland.

“Beat it,” Pinkeye told Peeples. He stroked the fat man’s Santa Claus beard as if it were an animal pelt nailed to a plank. He turned to O’Leary. “You too, Red, and the rest of you. Take a powder.”

Laird Seeley—Laddie—Pinkeye’s cohort and handler, looked out the east window, chin raised, sucking on a toothpick.

O’Leary growled and started for Pinkeye. Einar maintained his grip on the loud-mouthed little man’s belt. Was he really ready to sacrifice himself for the cause or was he faking it, depending on Einar to restrain him as he bluffed an attack?

Einar thought about letting go. Then he thought about Bischoff, dead on the warehouse floor, and shook off the temptation. He tightened his grip.

“Out.” Pinkeye pressed a fat hand against Peeples’ chest. Peeples leaned against the weight. Sleepy-eyed, chin lowered, Laird Seeley watched the contest across his right shoulder. Pinkeye jerked back his hand and, with the pressure removed, Peeples lurched forward.

A man seeking provocation might see such a lurch as an attack, justifying protective measures. And, sure enough, Seeley’s hand darted under his coat.

“Wait a minute,” Collins said. He jumped forward, inserting himself between Peeples and the gun-happy thug. “Hold on a minute.” Across his shoulder he said to the men, “I say we take a breather. These rats seem lost. What say we give ‘em a chance to sniff the floorboards and find their way home. Then we come back and ask our questions.” To Trovich he said, “And we’ll have our answers.”

Einar had felt the room getting colder and when he looked around he saw that Lou Vitti had opened the front door. “This way out,” read Vitti’s expression. The men

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retreated, faces variously pale or flushed or set in anger. Einar came out next to last, dragging O'Leary by the belt.