

CHAPTER ONE

DUST BIN BOB

Bobby Dingle looked down at water the color of Coca-Cola lapping against the pilings. The sagging pier smelled of fish and diesel fuel. The *Empress Baltimore* groaned and creaked against its mooring lines, a sleeping giant in Albert Dock, Liverpool. There were lights aboard, and the faint sounds of machinery. An icy fog hugged the waterline. Bobby's shopworn pea coat and corduroy cap shielded him from the cold yet he could still see his breath, and his ears stung. A whistle sounded from the deck. He looked up.

A backlit figure waved.

"That you, Bobby-boy?"

"Yeah."

"Come on up. I left the gangplank open. Hurry, now. I could get pinched for this."

Bob hastened his step up the narrow passageway, careful to mind his footing. He was well coordinated for a gangly eighteen-year-old.

"Nip along smartly, lad. Come on, come on, that's it."

Bob legged it the last twenty feet. An unshaven, middle-aged, Merchant Marine named Hank the Frank grabbed his arm and swung him over the rim and onto the deck. The man's short gray hair looked metallic in the half-light. He had a mad gleam in his eye, the kind of gleam Bobby knew from the movies – a Dr. Frankenstein gleam. When he spoke, a prominent bad tooth

flashed in his mouth.

“Steady there, mate. Follow me.”

The deck seemed deserted. Except for the sounds of machinery below and the constant creaking of the old cargo ship, the waterfront felt weirdly still and silent. Hank led Bobby through a hatchway into a warren of tight corridors, down a ladder and into the crew’s quarters. He unlocked a metal door and opened it with a chalkboard screech.

“In here.”

They entered a cramped cabin with two bunks lit by a single caged, 40-watt light bulb. Its silvery light pierced the small space, forming sharp, elongated shadows. From beneath the lower bunk, Hank pulled out two square cardboard boxes.

“I got good stuff this time, laddie. Real good stuff. The best yet. I think you’re gonna like what you see.”

Bobby carefully lifted the lid off the first box. The smell of freshly pressed vinyl filled his nostrils. With the light behind him, he looked inside and gasped.

“Chess Records! Chuck Berry! My all-time fave!”

Hank beamed an uneven smile.

“Got that one in Philly. Go ahead, take ‘em all out.”

Bobby pulled the stack of thick 45-rpm records out of the box. The paper sleeves rustled through his fingers like bills in stacks of currency. Bobby knew American 45s better than most U.S. teenagers did. He knew they’d begun as disks for American jukeboxes, playing music in bars and roadhouses Bobby could only imagine. He knew that their huge spindle holes were a carryover from that original jukebox function which made it easier for a machine to handle them. But most of all he knew the music.

Bobby began sorting through them, reading the titles aloud in his mild Liverpoolian lilt.

“Little Richard, Fats Domino, Jimmy Reed. Oh, and what’s this? *Money*? By Barrett Strong? I’ve never heard of him.”

“One of my own finds. Great song, that.”

Bobby held up another record.

“Bo Diddley on Checker Records. *Say, Man*.”

“Oh, yeah. *Say, Man*. Mr. Diddley sings about gettin’ whupped with an ugly stick in that one. An ugly stick! Can you imagine? A stick, that once you’re beaten with it, makes you ugly. Sheer genius. So . . . young Bob, what have you got . . .” he paused and raised an eyebrow, “for me?”

Bobby felt in his pocket and pulled out a ball of twine. He deftly unraveled

it to reveal a piece of hashish nearly the size of a golf ball. Hank's face lit up.

"Well, I like the looks of that."

"Red Lebanese. Very good stuff, if I do say so myself."

Hank sniffed the chunk of hash.

"Red Leb, eh? Hmm . . . I think we can do business."

Bobby sat down on the lower bunk. He emptied the two boxes of 45s, examined each, counted and recounted. When he was finished, he divided the records into two stacks. One stack of stuff he knew, one stack for unknowns. The new releases by Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Fats Domino were worth their weight in gold. It would be months before any of the import record shops would have them . . . if ever. And the unknown pile was sure to contain nuggets.

Bobby tallied the value of the records based on his best guess, then figured what Hank must have paid for them back in America.

"What do ya reckon, then? About fifty records here? That piece of red Leb must be about an ounce, eh? I'd fancy a trade, straight up."

Hank chuckled. "A trade, he says. Well, now . . . You've seen the merchandise. You can attest to the quality of the selection."

Bobby said, "Hey, I don't know half of these guys." He picked up a record with an all-black label. "*Think*, by James Brown, on King Records. So, who's this James Brown, and what's his game?"

"That's a great record, take my word for it. A real corker, that one is. The guy screams like a maniac when he sings. It's unbelievable."

Bobby shuffled the records, reading more titles. The more he read, the more excited he got. He could only imagine the exotic sounds locked in those grooves. The Coasters, Johnny Burnette, Gary "U.S." Bonds, Jackie Wilson, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, Ray Charles.

Hank coughed. "I could fancy a bit of smoke. It's a long voyage comin' up, and old Hank is feelin' the chill of winter a bit harder these days."

"Then you'll go for it?"

The sounds of the ship echoed through the superstructure. Bobby wondered how the big vessel sounded at sea with an ocean swelling and dipping beneath her rusty hull.

Hank gave Bobby the thumbs-up.

"What the hell. Deal."

"Bless you, kind sir," Bobby said, with cynical Liverpoolian lyricism. "I will now take my leave of this vessel."

Bobby and Hank shook hands. Bobby gathered the records and put them

back in the two boxes.

“I can’t wait to hear these.”

“You won’t be disappointed. This is the best batch yet.”

Bobby pulled the gold-labeled Anna Records 45 by Barrett Strong out of its paper sleeve: *Money (That’s What I Want)*.

“I love these American R&B designs.”

He held the record up to the light and examined the spiral pattern of the grooves.

“Look at this thing. It’s so . . . audacious. Who ever heard of Anna Records?”

The logo was a silhouette of a guy waving a baton against a gold background.

“It’s like a flier for a strip club. The Yanks are so brazen. And look at the grooves on this thing. You can almost see how the song changes from moment to moment.”

Hank pointed. “Be careful with that one, lad. It’s a song about money. The lyrics are insane. Barrett Strong is not to be trifled with. It’ll blow your bloody socks off.”

Bobby looked down at his ankles.

“Better wait till I get home for that. Can’t afford a scandal.”

Hank chuckled. “That’s what I like about you, Bobby-boy. Always sharp, always quick as a ferret. You’re a smart lad. You’ll go far one day. Mark my words.”

“I’m just a businessman. Quicker than some, luckier than most. But thanks for the compliment. You forget that I’m stuck here in Liverpool. Nothing much going here, you know.”

“Something will come up. You’ll see. Life is funny that way. Back during the war I just hoped I’d live through the day.”

Bobby tied the two boxes together with the twine and hefted the package over his shoulder.

“I’m off, then. Thanks, Hank. It’s a pleasure doing business with you.”

“Likewise, young Master Robert. Careful on the way out. Don’t be spotted.”

Bobby stole off the *Empress Baltimore* and faded into the gray streets of Merseyside. The package hung heavy across his shoulder blade, pounding his back rhythmically as he walked.

Harbor mist leached the color from the brick row houses, leaving a shimmer of translucent condensation. The sidewalk was slick under his shoes. Bobby’s mind anticipated what the records might sound like. His expectations thrilled him.

When he got home, he went up to the tiny room he shared with his two stepbrothers above his father's shop. Again, he sorted through the records. Separating a pile of the ones he wanted to hear first, he inserted a spindle into the first, *Money*, by Barrett Strong. Placing it carefully on the compact phonograph, he dropped the needle. The piano started like a chain saw. A feverish voice sounded the cry, "The best things in life are free . . . but you can keep 'em for the birds and bees . . . I want money . . ."

Bobby felt swept away. Surely, this was greatness. *I've never heard a more honest song.* The song ended. Bobby played it again, not entirely sure he'd heard it right the first time. *Even better the second time.* The lyrics seemed to be sung in some incomprehensible, incredibly hip, American patois. *A song about money. Ingenious.* When the record ended the second time, Bobby tried another, then another, then another. Little Richard, Fats Domino, The Coasters, Ray Charles, Bo Diddley – all exciting, wonderful names. Bobby absorbed the rock and roll energy until he thought he would burst. The records were truly magic. Bobby's world expanded past all horizons.

Around midnight, he stopped listening and went downstairs to his father's second-hand shop. His two older stepbrothers, Mick and Clive, were there. The Dingle brothers drank Guinness and smoked. They looked at Bobby, nodded and went back to their beer.

Bobby was the true black sheep of the family. His mother, a dark-skinned Greek woman named Ariodni, had married Bobby's father late in life. She died when Bobby was eleven years old. He grew up under the badgering of older half-siblings. In the eyes of his stepbrothers, Bobby wasn't really part of the family. Then there was the issue of ethnicity. Bobby's mum was small and dark, with thick, wavy, black hair above breathtaking ebony eyes. She'd married into a family of Irish and Welsh descent. Bobby's stepbrothers were, like many of their father's ancestors, large, pale, and red haired. Bobby resembled his mother. That made things worse. "A touch of the tar brush," Clive called it.

Mick hit Bobby a half-hearted blow to the shoulder.

"Been down to the docks, little brother?"

"How do you know?" "I have spies everywhere. So, what'd you nick?"

Bobby shrugged. "Traded for some records."

Clive belched. "Bloody waste of time."

Bobby looked at Mick.

"What's eatin' him?"

"Aw, he's just sore because somebody pinched his favorite pocketknife."