

Chapter Four

Returning to the other end of the hallway, Ames entered his office, laid his overcoat over the back of a chair and tossed his hat on the seat. At home he'd rolled down and buttoned his shirt sleeves and put on his suitcoat. Now, peering into the mirror on the wall over the sink, he fastened his collar button and snugged his tie.

He'd left home still half asleep. Since arriving he'd been provoked by the mayor's broken promise to ensure a clean alleyway, by the poker-room drunk's ranting and raving, and by Officer Carling's seeming indifference to the existing social order. Not only had these several provocations fully awakened Ames, they had engendered a strongly felt urge to put matters right.

Keeping in mind, of course, the preference for a quiet resolution of the poker-room problem.

Ames squatted in front of the safe that occupied one corner of his office. He turned the dial and opened the door and took out a banded packet of \$500 in twenties. He re-locked the safe, straightened, and slid the packet into the left breast pocket of his suit jacket. An interior

door connected his office to the poker room. In front of the door he attempted and failed to smooth the bulge that the money packet made in his suitcoat, spoiling the drape.

The Club St. Vincent's one and only poker game ran nightly, ten PM to four AM, as a community service. Compared to the slot- and pinball machines on the first floor, the craps, blackjack, and roulette tables in the basement, even the restaurant and lounge trade, the poker game generated very little revenue. The dealer collected five percent from each pot. He didn't play. With complimentary food and drinks for the players, and the dealer's salary, some nights the game didn't break even.

Ames entered the poker room without a knock and instantly the eyes of all were upon him. "Gentlemen," he said, greeting the company. High up along one wall, two transom windows vented cigar and cigarette smoke to the out-of-doors without much cooling the room. Half-filled with dishes and glassware, the busboy's plastic tote sat on a table near the hall door.

Not counting Ames, there were eight men in the room, five at the poker table and three on their feet. At the table, Dave Greenlow, wearing a white shirt and black arm garters, held a deck of cards as if poised to deal the next hand. The four others, substantial citizens one and all, looked as if they'd been ordered to keep their traps shut and their mitts in sight.

Standing well away from the table, flanked by Billy Taffy and Floyd Anderson, the drunk was a big husky fellow, almost as tall as Kragthorpe, with pink ears, a ruddy drinker's face, and waves of reddish-brown hair breaking back from a high forehead. Forty or thereabouts.

Paunchy. Sallow coloring. Eyes and mouth ringed with shiny, greasy sweat.

Ames reached out a hand to the drunk. "I'm Alvin Ames. I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

The drunk reared up and back and looked down at Ames as if trying to demonstrate his physical dominance. “Nice friendly li’l game you’re runnin’. Bring a man over to fleece ‘im.” Fists clenched, his hands remained at his sides.

Floyd Anderson lifted apologetic shoulders half an inch and grimaced, exposing the lines where his dentures met his gums. No fairer or kinder man in the county than Anderson, who managed First Marine Bank’s Vancouver branch. A soft touch for any charity. Never too concerned about what a man’s collateral looked like on paper. He trusted people and his trust was almost always rewarded. As necessary, Club St. Vincent staff assisted the bank with collections.

“Didn’t catch your name,” Ames said, lowering his hand. “Mr....?”

“Boatwright,” Greenlow muttered. He laid the deck on the table and edged back his chair. One leg squeaked causing every other man at the table to flinch.

“Mr. Boatwright,” Ames said. “Let me tell you our policy here. A man won’t always walk away winners, but we want him to feel that he’s had a fair shake.”

The drunk looked like a banker, and Ames guessed he knew the story. Anderson and Boatwright had met at a business or social function and Anderson had mentioned the game. Boatwright fancied himself a player. He coaxed an invitation from the affable Anderson, expecting to clean out the rubes and plead beginner’s luck. Except that he’d lost and, by the look of the distribution of chips on the table, he’d lost big. He didn’t like losing. The reason for losing couldn’t be him, not in this hick town, not with these rubes. It must be the game. Anderson, Ames guessed, had never seen the man’s ugly side which, if known to Anderson, would certainly have precluded an invitation.

Ames drew the packet of twenties from the pocket of his suitcoat. “What are your losses, Mr. Boatwright? We’d like to make you whole and chalk this evening up to experience.”

“Down three and a half,” Greenlow whispered. Ames re-confirmed the figure with Greenlow, rounded up, licked his thumb, and counted out three hundred sixty dollars which he held out to the drunk.

Boatwright batted Ames’ hand away. “Can’t bribe me. Not for twice tha’ much. Gonna see you shut down. See you shut down. See you shut down.” His sing-song voice became louder with each repetition.

Ames re-pocketed the money. With his hand first refused and then batted away, he had given up the idea of a quiet resolution. No, what he had in mind would not be quiet, though the noise of it might be contained. Also, it wasn’t anything his friends needed to see. He smiled at the drunk. “Why don’t we talk in my office? What are you drinking?”

Boatwright leered and wavered in place. Ames guessed the man put great stock in appearing the master of every situation.

“He’s drinking Scotch,” said Greenlow when Boatwright, still leering and swaying, failed to respond.

“A fellow I know imports what he assures me is Scotland’s best. Not the commercial stuff. This comes straight from the bog.” Ames pushed open the door to his office. “Join me for a nightcap.”

Boatwright hiked his shoulders higher and nodded to the men around the table. See what happens, he seemed to be saying, when you call a spade a spade? He took a moment to steady himself and lurched through the door.

Before he followed, Ames took Mr. Anderson aside. “Does he have a car here?”

“He came with me,” Anderson replied. “I’ll take him home. I’m awfully sorry about this, Alvin. I’ll cover his losses.”

Ames patted Mr. Anderson’s shoulder. “No need to feel sorry. And don’t worry about your friend or his losses. We’ll see that he gets home alright.” Ames entered his office, pushed the door closed, and, circling around the swaying drunk, reached the business side of his desk..

“This cubbyhole is what you call an office?” the drunk scoffed.

“It serves my needs,” Ames replied. He opened the top drawer of the desk.

“Where’s that drink you promised, that special Scotch? Probably a sham like everything else around this dump.”

From the top drawer of his desk, Ames pulled out a police baton that had been cut down eight inches so as to fit in the middle tray. He smacked the baton against his open palm as he sauntered toward Boatwright, who, slow to comprehend, looked back and forth between Ames’ face and the stout stick. Then Boatwright backed off a step, hunched his shoulders, and raised his fists in the semblance of a fighting stance.

Advancing, Ames wig-wagged the baton in Boatwright’s face. “You’re getting sleepy,” Ames said. Still in a fighting stance, the drunk shuffled backward. His right heel contacted the wall. He looked back. Quickly, Ames lowered and leveled the baton and poked Boatwright hard in the sternum.

Boatwright rubbed the point of impact with the knuckles of one closed fist. He grabbed for the baton with his other hand, missed it, and lunged, trying to wrap Ames in a bear hug. Dropping to one knee, Ames ducked under the man’s embrace. He cocked his wrist and whipped the baton forward, striking Boatwright’s left shin six inches below the knee.

Given Boatwright's level of intoxication and the distance between the point of impact and the pain receptors in his brain, it took him a few moments to feel the blow. When at last he did, he let out a long keening wail. He raised his stricken leg and cupped both hands around the injured shin and hopped on his good leg, more erratically with every hop, coins and keys jangling in his pockets. The man appeared sure to go down. When he didn't, Ames rose and toppled him with a hard left hook to the temple.

Ames returned the baton to his desk drawer. He went out into the hall and, closing the door behind him, beckoned the two young cops. He told the short one to go downstairs and fetch Kragthorpe. He told the tall one to go next door to the poker room and collect Mr. Boatwright's coat and hat and whatever else he'd brought with him. "I'll wait for you here," Ames said.

When the two cops plus Kragthorpe had joined him in the hall, Ames led them into his office.

Boatwright lay on his side on the floor in what appeared to be a semi-comatose state. Kragthorpe laughed out loud. The two cops looked at each other and then at Ames.

Ames reached into his pocket and drew out the money Boatwright had refused. "See this?" Ames asked the two cops. He stooped and stuffed the bills into the front pocket of Boatwright's suit pants. He looked up at the cops. "Make sure that money stays with him." He stood and again addressed the two cops. "You're going to help Mr. Kragthorpe transport this ape down the back stairs. You're going to get your car, drive it into the alley, cuff our friend, and load him into the back."

"Is he under arrest?" asked the shorter cop, the one with the mustache.

"Call it protective custody," Ames said. "You cuff him and put him in your car and take him someplace on the other side of the river. I don't care where it is, so long it's on the other

side of the river. Then dump him and all his belongings. Make sure the money is still in his pocket. Then take your cuffs back and come along home.”

“You want me to ride along, boss?” Kragthorpe asked, his voice hopeful.

“You just help with the loading. I’m sure these two officers can take care of the rest.”

Kragthorpe crossed over to where Boatwright lay and ordered him to get up. When the moaning man failed to comply, Kragthorpe grabbed handfuls of his expensive shirt and worked him into a sitting position. Then he squatted behind Boatwright and took him around the chest in a fireman’s hold.

The cops stood frozen.

Ames shook his head. He’d about had it with city employees, up to and including the mayor, who didn’t understand their duties. “Each of you grab a leg,” Ames told the cops. Did they remember what came next? Repeating his previous instructions, Ames spoke more slowly, as if to backward children. “Take this man downstairs, cuff him, put him in the back of your car, drive him across the bridge, and dump him. Get it? Simple as pie.”

Officer Stretcher shuffled forward and reached down for Boatwright’s left ankle. Officer Carling still hesitated. Alvin Ames moved around in front of him. “Are you hard of hearing?” Ames asked. “Back problems? Muscle weakness?”

Carling shook his head. He started to protest but Ames waved him quiet and pointed at Boatwright. “There,” Ames said, fixing Carling with a steady level gaze which Ames knew from experience was most often—and properly—read as a threat. “Right ankle. Now. I want him gone. What do you think I’m paying you for?”