

Chapter Three

It was nearly midnight when Alvin Ames returned to Vancouver from his monthly meeting in Portland. Dinner, served in a private room at the Columbia-Edgewater Country Club, was followed by two hours of business which had been stretched over more than four hours by people who liked to drink and hear themselves talk. A waste of time.

Ames unlocked the front door to his house and pushed inside. Between lamp-stands on the foyer's side-table lay a newspaper and, on top of it, a slip of paper across which a single word was written in block letters—TIDE. A message from Mrs. Epps, his housekeeper, telling him to restock.

She came every weekday, a widowed friend of his mother's. Her notes were never more than product names. No sign that she ever looked at let alone read the newspaper. She came and went on the bus, arriving after Ames left for the day at eleven AM, leaving whenever she finished. If he was around when the time came, he drove her home.

Ames hung his overcoat and suitcoat in the hall closet and shelved his hat. He unbuttoned and rolled up his shirtsleeves and went to get the newspaper.

Deep in the house a phone rang.

When he was tired Ames sometimes forgot that this was his phone—his and his alone—and he listened as he had when he was a kid and his family was hooked up to a party line. Always the same question: was the incoming call for him or one of his family or for one of the neighbors? The sequence of rings answered the question.

The call now was for him. The question was whether to answer. Five minutes earlier the instrument would have played to an empty house and he'd have been none the wiser. But, given the hour, the call was probably urgent and whoever it was would call again.

The phone and a directory sat on a table half way along the shadowy hallway that connected the foyer to the kitchen. Ames unhooked the receiver and clapped it to his ear. “Yeah?”

“Boss, you'd better get down here.”

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Roger Kragthorpe met Ames under the light overhanging the Club St. Vincent's back alley door.

“I understand there's a problem,” Ames said.

Kragthorpe, who stood a head taller than Ames, shrugged his broad shoulders and every wrinkle in his open-collared white shirt disappeared. The several places where his scalp had been stitched together zig-zagged through thinning gray hair. “There's an easy fix,” Kragthorpe said.

Dygert: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER

“Anybody I know?”

“Never seen him before. Didn’t catch the name. Some swell Mr. Anderson brought with him from the other side of the river. Mr. Anderson tried to coax him out and Billy did too, but he wasn’t having none of the sweet talk. Say the word, boss,” Kragthorpe snapped his fingers, “and he’s in the next block.”

It was Billy Taffy, the club’s manager, who’d called to tell Ames about the problem customer and to suggest that, given the names the fellow was throwing around and his resistance to the light touch, Ames might want to handle the situation himself. Ames trusted Billy Taffy’s judgment. Billy had a way with people. He anticipated problems. With a smile and a joke, he eased would-be troublemakers out the door before they knew they were gone. Such problems as Billy Taffy failed to resolve Kragthorpe addressed in his very different way.

Tired as he was, Ames had been tempted to tell Billy to call in Kragthorpe and be done with the matter. But there was Mr. Anderson to consider. Ames could imagine the embarrassment his old friend must feel over the situation he’d created. A quiet resolution was best for all.

Ames looked along the alleyway. Puddles, cigarette cellophane, and bottles, some broken and some intact, reflected the light of the half-moon slotted overhead. Where were the city sanitation people the mayor had promised to send every day?

Shaking off his irritation, Ames looked up at the club’s second story windows. “Where is he?” he asked Kragthorpe.

“The drunk? So far, Billy and Mr. Anderson have kept him corralled in the poker room. By the way, there’s a couple of cops in the hall upstairs. They were eating at the

counter when the ruckus started. Billy asked me to send ‘em up. They’re to keep the guy from going downstairs and raising hell and to keep the people downstairs from coming up.”

“They’re still in place?”

“Far as I know.”

Ames opened the alley door and entered against a breath of warm air that smelled of tobacco smoke, grilled meat, and dishwater. The din of the still-bustling restaurant and lounge carried from the front. Inside, to the left, a flight of stairs climbed to the second floor. On the wall along the stairs, photographs of singers and comedians and dance bands alternated with sconces that projected fingers of light onto the dark paneling.

Ames started up and Kragthorpe started after him. “No,” Ames said, half-turning. If he involved Kragthorpe, he could kiss off the notion of a quiet resolution. “Stay put. I’ll call if I need you.”

Upstairs, in the club’s second floor hallway, the light was reddish, softer and dimmer than down below. Three doors opened inward off the left side of the hallway. Ames unlocked the first of these, his office door, without opening it. Moving to the second door, the door to the poker room, he paused and listened.

Billy had said the drunk was slowing the pace of the game with his bragging, loud insults, and demands for more food and drink. The regulars had played on, tolerating the drunk’s disruptive behavior for Mr. Anderson’s sake. It sounded as if now the drunk was up and about, his voice penetrating the door from different points in the poker room.

“Gonna win back what’s mine. Leave when I’m good and ready. Shut this dump down.”

Ames felt outrage stirring. Maybe he should go in and grab the loud-mouthed son of a bitch and feed him to Kragthorpe. But no, that wasn't the plan.

At the far end of the hallway a third door connected to a storeroom and a flight of stairs led down to the restaurant and lounge, and there stood the two cops. One cop was tall, one short, both young and on the scrawny side, both wearing baggy uniforms with gun-belts slung low under the weight of their service revolvers. The shorter one had grown a sparse mustache.

Warily, they watched Ames approach.

"Did they assign you a car tonight?" Ames asked after he had introduced himself and shaken hands. With fourteen patrolman, two patrol sergeants, two detective sergeants and a chief, the city had provided the department a total of just three vehicles, one of them the chief's battlewagon.

"Tonight we do," the tall one said.

"For once," the short one said

"Where are you parked? On the street or back in the lot?"

"Lot," the short one said. His skeptical facial expression and tone of voice suggested that he wasn't convinced that Ames was who he said he was or, even if he was who he said he was, whether it much mattered.

"What's your name?" Ames asked the cop with the mustache.

"Carling."

Ames turned to Carling's partner whose fidgeting and nervous eye movement seemed to acknowledge the possibility that Ames was Ames and that his partner was treading on thin ice. "And yours?"

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“Stretcher, sir. Bob Stretcher.”

Carling and Stretcher. The next time Ames talked to the mayor or the chief of police he’d want to know why it made sense to keep these two, or at least Carling, employed. “Wait here,” Ames said.