

Homicide Tally



By
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From warblers to wicker baskets in one easy hop. That was the setup Counselor Carew found at the Humming Bird Club. For he arrived just in time to see a glamor gal canary swing into a dance of death.

THE door to my law office jerked open and this hard, lean-figured blond man entered. His mouth was as thin as the edge of a dime, and his eyes held an Arctic frost in them. I took one look and I came up out of my chair and I thought my heart was going to burst its moorings.

Ordinarily I am not subject to hallucinations. Nor do I believe in ghosts. And yet the man who now stood in front of my desk was dead.

He had to be. With my own eyes I had seen Ralph Powell stretched cold and stiff in his coffin. I myself had arranged for his funeral, had seen them lower him six feet down into the earth, had watched them pour the soft, black dirt on top of him.

Ralph Powell had died violently, and his face, contorted with pain, had not relaxed in death. And now in some weird reincarnation his features still remained twisted. He spoke in a voice that was scarcely more than a dry, harsh whisper,

like the crumpling of stiff tissue paper.

"Where is she, Carew?"

I steadied myself on the arms of the chair and croaked: "Who?" knowing exactly what it was he wanted.

He advanced a single step and growled: "Diane. Where is she?"

And then my knees caved and I collapsed into the chair. I sat there blinking at him and thinking: *This is crazy. This is just my imagination. Powell is dead. Diane killed him.*

I reached deep into my lungs and found my voice. "Listen, Ralph, leave her alone. She's paid the penalty. The law has exacted its price. Fourteen months in prison. You—"

I stopped. His lips had spread open in a taut grin and he was laughing. Inside—to himself. He cut it short, drifted over to the desk and placed his big hands flat on the glass surface. Blue eyes pierced mine.

"I'm Greg," he said. "Ralph's brother."

I GAVE a short giggle, like a hysterical schoolgirl. I felt forty kinds of a fool. I remembered Ralph telling me that he had a twin brother connected with some tin company in South America. I held out my hand which he ignored.

"You're the lawyer who defended Diane?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you let them burn her?" he bit out between his teeth.

I shrugged. "Because I thought it was an accident. Because Diane was his wife and he loved her!"

Muscles bulged whitely at the corners of his mouth. "So you fixed it for her to cop a manslaughter rap. That's a laugh! Fourteen months for murder and then she goes scotfree."

"Look, Powell," I said quietly. "It wasn't murder. They'd been out to a party.

They were drunk, both of them. Diane was driving. When they reached the house Ralph got out to open the garage doors. Diane started the car, lost control, and pinned him against the wall. Careless driving while under the influence of liquor. That made it manslaughter. I wrote you about it. Why didn't you come sooner?"

"Because I was in the interior," Greg Powell said. "I didn't get the note till long after the funeral. Then it was too late to make the trip and this was the first chance I've had."

"Let sleeping dogs lie."

He shook his head. "I met Diane a long time ago. She never loved Ralph. She only married him because she thought he had money."

"That doesn't mean she killed him. Get that idea out of your head."

He leaned forward slightly. "Maybe not. But the fact remains that she brought about his death only two weeks after he took out a twenty thousand dollar insurance policy in her favor."

I cocked my head. "What do you want to see her for?"

The blue eyes narrowed to sharp bright slits, then opened again. "I'm leaving for South America tomorrow. I know she's out on parole. I want to see her just once before I go."

I got up slowly. "I don't know where she's living, Powell." I lied, "but I'll try to find out. Call me in the morning."

Teeth glittered against the tan of his face. "Never mind. I'll find out for myself." He turned and strode out of the office and my diploma danced on the wall with the impact of the slamming door.

I sat quite still, biting my lips, trying to figure the best way to handle this thing. Greg Powell was trouble. Diane had to be warned. Not that she deserved it after the dirty shake she handed me, but after all

she was a woman, and helpless against a guy carrying a load of anger as big as Niagara Falls. I reached for the phone and dialed her apartment. No answer. I pursed my lips and decided to call her at the club later. She was singing again at the Humming Bird.

But I was tied up all the rest of that day. And when my stomach finally wired for its dinner I resolved to have it at the club and see Diane at the same time.

THE lighting was bad and the music was so-so and the dance floor was no bigger than a lead quarter, but the house was packed. Every table was jammed and blue smoke hung around the electric bulbs like fog over the Thames. You could scarcely breathe. I don't know what made the joint so popular, whether it was the dance team now on the floor, or a chance to see ex-jailbird Diane Powell.

At any rate the Humming Bird was packing them in and Benny Blum, its proprietor and a client of mine, was cleaning up. I don't suppose there was a more surprised guy in the business than Benny Blum.

Hartley and Jarett was the name of the dance team. Fay Hartley and Don Jarett. I gave them a stare. She was worth it. A long-legged, smooth-thighed dame with red hair, red lips, and red fingernails, all matching. Jarett was a tall, slightly effeminate-looking lad with patent leather hair and muscles concealed under his white skin. I knew he had to have muscles to toss Fay around the way he did.

They were doing some Conga variations. The colored musicians were thumping out the rhythm like a bunch of savages getting ready for a feast of boiled missionary.

I squeezed against the bar, ordered a steak sandwich and wished I could also buy a lungful of oxygen. I let my eyes drift

through the blue cigaret pall, rested them on a handsome middle-aged chap with iron temples, a crisp iron mustache, and set of tails into which he'd been poured. Arthur Boardman had made his money the easy way—inherited it. But don't get the idea he was soft. He wasn't. Not with his talent for getting out of girl trouble.

I had been seeing Diane until he came along and beat my time with her. But lately I had been hearing rumors. The atmospheric pressure between them was entering the glacial stage. Both his eyes were aimed at Fay Hartley and I had the feeling he was going to try to rekindle the spark that had existed between them before he took up with Diane.

And then the music got really wild. Hartley and Jarett were tossing themselves around like a couple of Jap acrobats and the patrons were eating it up. This may have been dancing, but give me a Strauss waltz any day.

I saw Boardman empty his glass, rise, and cut across the floor between tables to the washroom. Hartley and Jarett took their bows. The orchestra attacked a rumba and they came back for an encore. This was a little tamer, more graceful, and easier on the eyes.

A voice at my side said, "Brandy," and I glanced sideways.

Greg Powell smiled thinly and lifted his blond eyebrows. The smile lacked humor.

I drew in a long breath and said: "So you found out where to look."

Powell nodded. "It wasn't hard." He reached for the pony, keeping his eyes on mine over the rim of the glass.

He killed the brandy and I turned back to watch Hartley and Jarett throwing phony kisses at the applauding monkeys. They disappeared behind a black velvet curtain at the side of the bandstand. Then the lights went out and you couldn't even

see the blue smoke any more, though you could still smell it. The orchestra started to beat out a plaintive blues melody. I knew that one. It was Diane's theme song.

A bright yellow spot slapped against the black velvet curtain and the patrons drew in their collective breaths. They were waiting for the girl who'd done a fourteen month stretch on a manslaughter charge of killing her husband.

DIANE had been a singer before, and when she got out of prison not a single night club operator had had the foresight and vision to realize what a drawing card she might be. None except Benny Blum. And he was plenty glad the others had fought shy of her.

The introduction ended and started again. When it started for the third time I knew something was wrong. I eased away from the bar and weaved across the floor toward a door at the back that led to the dressing rooms.

Benny Blum's pale round face was very white and very wet. His bald skull was shining as if he'd polished it. He stood halfway through the threshold of Diane's dressing room door and his eyes were glassy with shock and the muscles were working under the folds of flesh at his throat.

I got one look over his shoulder and pushed him inside, pulling the door shut behind us. He looked up at me dumbly and his mouth opened and closed like a fish in a tank, but no words came out.

After that first look at Diane I didn't want another. I didn't, as a matter of fact, need it.

"Is—*is she dead?*" Benny whispered.

"Yes," I said. There could be no doubt about that. The thumb prints in her throat were still blue and discolored and the natural elasticity of human flesh had not quite filled the indentations. They were

there like thumb prints in soft dough. She lay sprawled grotesquely in the center of the floor. Her face had a scraped bone look under the makeup which she'd been applying when the need for it suddenly came to a conclusive and final end.

Something caught my eye and I went over to the wall and looked at it. The plaster was chipped and a web of cracks spread out around the hole. The bullet was buried pretty deeply. I decided to leave it there for the cops. A faint sprinkling of plaster powder had piled up on the floor directly beneath the hole.

I swung a fast glance around the room. There was no sign of the gun. Nor any sign, so far as I had seen, of a bullet wound in Diane's lovely body. That puzzled me. If anybody'd taken a shot at her, the room was certainly small enough not to have missed. And if Diane had taken a shot at her assailant, then where was the gun?

I twisted suddenly at a knock on the door, opened it a crack and saw the headwaiter. "Miss Powell?" he demanded. "Where is she?"

"Tell them to play some dance music," I said and slammed the door in his face. I turned to Benny Blum and gave him instructions. "This is dynamite, Benny: Call the cops."

His hands were clasped at me in supplication as if he thought I could help him, could bring Diane back to life. His voice was choked, jerky. "Listen, Carew, will they close me up? Will they take away my liquor license? Will they—"

I opened the door and eased him into the corridor. He would stand there blinking for a minute and then he would call headquarters. As soon as the law arrived the patrons of the Humming Bird were in for a sour surprise. Lieutenant Geiger was a very thorough agent of law enforcement and he would want to

question each and every last one of them.

I forced my eyes back to Diane. Whoever had done this had no appreciation for a work of art. Diane was one of those rare specimens with the clear, innocent, trusting face of a child, and a brain that knew and weighed all the angles. Her long black hair was spread out on the bare floor like a frayed bathmat. Her almost violet eyes were open and glazed. Her bloodless lips were parted, showing the dazzling brilliance of white enamel. I sighed. It was really a shame.

AND then I saw something else. The edge of an envelope barely peeking out of her dressing robe pocket. I scooped it up, gave it a quick scrutiny and buried it in my wallet. It was a letter from Mr. Arthur Boardman and steam was still condensing from the heat waves it gave off.

That surprised me. I thought Boardman had too much sense to put stuff like that in writing. The postmark was dated some weeks before and he certainly cooled off quickly. I stood there thinking about Diane. She was no angel, but she certainly didn't deserve this.

The noise in the corridor sounded like a troop of Indian elephants and I knew Geiger was here with his boys. I got myself set for the barrage of questions he was going to lay down.

Geiger was no story book cop. He was smart, make no mistake about that, shrewd and cagey as a secondhand clothing dealer. Thin and dapper, his sharp eyes stared out from behind a pair of steel-rimmed glasses.

I told him the story, omitting the part about Boardman's ardent correspondence, and the visit I'd had from Greg Powell. Which gave him absolutely nothing. He knew it and I knew he knew it, and if Benny Blum hadn't been there to

corroborate me I think he'd have dug up some pretext to slap me into the clink until I opened up.

He walked over and stared at the bullet hole in the wall and then he turned and cocked his magnified eyes at me.

"Where's the gun, Carew?"

I shrugged. "We never saw it, did we, Benny?"

Blum's simonized skull jiggled a negative.

I don't know just when he started doing it, but quite suddenly Geiger was behind me and his deft hands were patting at my pockets. He moved away with an apologetic smile.

"No hard feelings, Carew—yet. But you were once carrying a torch for the girl."

I paid him off with a grin and said: "If you don't need me I'd like to get some air. You can reach me at the office any time."

Geiger and I had engaged in some neat verbal duels when I'd cross-examined him at Diane's trial. I don't think he enjoyed having me around at the investigation and he waved his hand.

"Go ahead, Carew. I know where to get you."

It was almost ten o'clock when I hit the street and I still hadn't had any nourishment, so I went into a hash joint and gave my digestion a chance to practice. Following which, I cabbied over to the Parkhurst and took the elevator to the tenth floor. I walked down three flights, lifted the mat in front of 7-E and flicked up the key. From the old days I knew that's where Diane always kept it.

She had a nice spread. She'd always liked nice things and one way or another had managed to get them. The bedroom was inlaid rosewood and the bed, big enough for Ringling's chariot race, was set up on a platform at the far end of the room. Ivory curtains hung from the

windows and piled up on an ivory carpet.

I started with the bureau. Underneath a mess of underclothes I found a bank book. One peek was sufficient to produce a long exhaled whistle. Yes, sir, until today Diane had been doing all right for herself.

Spaced at intervals of one week apart for several weeks were deposits totaling eleven thousand dollars. I knew Benny Blum wasn't paying her that kind of hay and it left me stymied.

I was standing beside a small, curve-legged chair when the bank book slipped out of my hand and skidded under the chair. I stooped, tilted one of the legs and suddenly jerked the chair upside down.

THERE are many kinds of hiding places. One of the best is in full sight, but concealed actually by some prosaic and utilitarian object. Taped with adhesive to the underseat of the chair was a thin package of letters. I got them loose and riffled through the contents. They were all cousins to the one I'd found in Diane's dressing gown, all from Arthur Boardman, very touching and exceedingly torrid.

I was leering at the last one when the voice interrupted me. It was a crisp voice, cool and confident.

"I'll take the letters, Carew."

I stared up into the barrel of a small but very businesslike automatic. It fitted snugly into Boardman's hand and from where I stood it looked like he knew how to use it.

I said: "You know, Boardman, in a case like this the police department is supposed to get first crack at this kind of stuff."

His left eye twitched and he repeated: "I'll take those letters, Carew."

I tossed them over to him. "Well," I said lightly, "at least this time you're getting them for nothing."

He dropped the letters into his pocket.

"What do you mean?"

"I know that Diane has been selling them to you piecemeal."

"What else do you know?"

"That's all, except she was still on parole and blackmail is an ugly business. Why did you let her get away with it?"

He shrugged. "Pride. She was going to sell them to the tabloids."

"Hmm," I said. "Nasty business."

His lids narrowed slightly. "Do you think I killed her?"

I grinned. "What should I answer with you pointing that thing at me? If you killed her the cops will find out. If you didn't they'll find who did. In either case it's none of my affair."

"You seem to be making it so," he said quietly. "You're here, and—"

"And," I cut in, "if you're smart you'll let us both get out of here right fast—before the law arrives. Or we'll both have a lot of explaining to do."

He chewed that over for a moment, nodded briskly, said: "Let's go," and jerked the gun in front of him.

I led the way to the door, stuck my hand out for the knob and kept it motionless in mid-air like a sleepwalker. A cold drop of perspiration trickled down the full length of my spine. Very softly a key was scratching in the lock from the outside.

Suddenly galvanizing into action I touched my lips, indicating silence, snapped off the light switch and plunged the foyer into darkness. As I crouched back against the wall I felt Boardman at my side, breathing hard through his nostrils.

Dim light from the outside corridor made a narrow yellow bar across the floor which widened as the door stealthily opened. This wasn't the cops. That was certain. They wouldn't be so furtive. A shadowy figure took a single step into the

room. I heard the swish of Boardman's gun butt and felt the wind of it as it plummeted through the air.

It made a soft soggy sound against the intruder's hat and he seemed a long time falling to the floor. That was my cue. I have a great deal of respect for Boardman's jaw. It felt like a lump of granite against my fist, and for a moment I felt that I'd cracked a knuckle.

He was so preoccupied in taking out the stranger that he never expected the blow. I put everything I had behind it and it exploded against the very apex of his chin. In a way he was lucky. The guy he'd knocked cold acted as a cushion. He grunted and plopped down on top of him.

I kicked the door shut, reached for the light, gave the foyer a dose of electricity and took a look.

BOARDMAN had been over-cautious. He hadn't knocked out a guy at all. It was a girl, and an extremely eye-filling one at that. Fay Hartley, the dancer at the Humming Bird.

Luckily, she was wearing a hat or we'd have been in a jam. I picked the gun off the carpet, got the packet of letters from Boardman's pocket, and explored Fay's small suede handbag. It had some cash and a tiny key ring. I left the cash and appropriated the keys.

I got out of there none too soon. Just as I swung through the revolving doors a police car hauled up and Lieutenant Geiger slid out. I averted my face and stepped swiftly. He never saw me. What was going to happen right away was Boardman's affair. I hoped he had a good explanation. I hoped Fay Hartley had a bad one.

A phone call to Benny Blum gave me her address. This seemed to be my day to go visiting. Fay Hartley had sneaked back to Diane's apartment. I wanted to know

why. Clearly there was some connection between them. And I hoped Geiger detained her long enough to give me a free rein.

The Hotel de Soule was strictly show; no class, but expensive. Fay's key had number 627 on it. It fitted the lock and the door swung open. Her place was not so sumptuous as Diane's, but it was a very nice nest and I could imagine that it would be very comfortable with Miss Fay Hartley in it.

I started the search very methodically. As it turned out I'd have saved time just by going to the dresser and finding the little tin box right away. One of the keys on Fay's key ring fitted it. I pried open the lid and found one single object. It was a picture negative. Near as I could make out it was a girl standing on a street corner.

I dropped it into my pocket, finished the search without finding anything else, straightened up and headed for the door. I opened it, stepped into the hall and was closing it when the elevator suddenly appeared and dumped its cargo.

Don Jarett, Fay's dancing partner, was only five paces away from me. He crossed the carpet and stuck his lean white face close to mine. Perfume from his hair grease almost choked me. His obsidian eyes, cold and snakelike, narrowed.

"What were you doing in there?" he asked between his teeth.

I smiled. "Visiting a friend of mine."

"You're a liar! She's not home."

"All right," I said, "then call a cop."

His hand stabbed out for a fistful of my coat lapels and I moved fast. The blow should have been a beaut. I pivoted on my toes and threw it at the side of his jaw. This time my knuckles did not feel the impact of shock.

He may have been effeminate-looking, but dancing had made him quick on his feet and early adagio training had

hardened his biceps. I never saw him swing, but the wallop caught me full against the left ear and the next instant my mouth was full of carpet lint. From that angle I had a close view of his small pointed slippers and I saw one of them speeding viciously toward my ribs.

I rolled with the kick and dug into my pocket for Boardman's automatic. The first kick missed me, but the second got me flush against the chin and I lost all desire to continue the combat.

I opened my eyes. The gun was under my cheek. Don Jarett had disappeared. I started to push myself off the floor, dropped back with my nostrils sniffing. There was no mistaking the odor from the barrel of the automatic. Cordite. Faint, but indisputably present.

I got up, wiped some blood from my lip and put my cranium to work. The smell of cordite meant that Boardman's gun had been recently fired. I thought of his disappearing act at the Humming Bird during the Hartley-Jarett dance number. That might have given him enough time to get back to the dressing rooms. And he certainly had plenty of motive for knocking Diane off.

THERE was a camera shop in the lobby of the Hotel de Soule, and they promised me immediate service in printing the negative I'd swiped from Fay's little tin box. Which proves that you can get almost anything if you're willing to pay for it.

While I was waiting I thought about Jarett. Finding me in Fay's room had burned him plenty. That meant one of two things. Either he didn't want anybody snooping around, or he was in love with her and powerfully jealous. I was inclined to favor the latter.

The clerk came out of a door in the back of the shop and handed me the still

damp print. I looked at it. It was a picture of Diane Powell. She was standing in front of a theater marquee advertising its current attraction:

SPENCER TRACY
IN
DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE

In neon letters above the marquee glowed the name of the theater: *THE COLONY*. Off in the background, some distance behind it, was another sign which read:

NEW JERSEY POWER AND LIGHT
COMPANY

I thought about this setup for a little while till the picture blurred, and then I gave the clerk a five dollar bill and left. My office was several blocks away and when I got to it, I closed all the windows, pulled the shades and lined all the telephone books against the wall.

I aimed Boardman's gun at the center and fired. The small automatic made a sharp slapping noise and the line of telephone books shuddered and spilled. I got the slug from the next to last book. It was in pretty good shape, not too badly mashed.

I called headquarters and got Sergeant Luden on the wire, and asked him if he'd check the slug with the one Geiger had taken from the wall in Diane's dressing room at the Humming Bird. Luden had once appeared as a witness for me and the fee I'd sent him had dwarfed two months' pay. So he now jumped at the opportunity to do me a service.

I slipped the bullet into an envelope, addressed it, called for a Western Union messenger and gave him instructions. Then I took out the picture of Diane, propped it against my desk lamp and

leaned back to stare at it. I kept my eyes on it for a couple of minutes and then looked up as newsboys down in the street started hawking extras. I heaved open the window. They were yelling about the Powell case.

I went downstairs and got a paper. It was a carnival all right. The rags were having themselves a time. Beautiful, ex-jailbird singer strangled. Mysterious bullet hole in wall. Millionaire playboy found knocked cold in her apartment. Ditto beautiful dancer. Brother-in-law of singer arrested on charges—

My eyes started to pop. They had Greg Powell, and it certainly made a story.

Lieutenant Geiger had been in Diane's apartment, questioning Boardman and Fay Hartley, when a cop piloted Greg Powell into the room, saying that he'd found him outside acting suspicious. Geiger who'd handled the original Powell case took one look and almost passed out. He'd remembered pictures of Diane's husband, had seen the corpse, and mistook Greg for his dead brother.

Confusion! Accusations! And the discovery of motive. Greg had let it slip that he'd been in the club that evening. He insisted he left the instant Diane failed to show up for her number.

I FLAGGED a cab and raced over to the city prison. As a lawyer I had a right to see Powell—if he retained me. I didn't think he would, but it was worth a try. There was only one hitch to that idea. Powell wasn't there and the head keeper didn't know anything about it.

"What are you running here?" I ranted. "A gestapo? This is America, the twentieth century. You can't keep a man incommunicado."

The keeper grinned. "He's not here, Carew."

"That's a lie!"

"Okay. Get a habeas corpus."

I let him see my locked teeth. "You I know damn well I can't at this hour. Every judge in the county is fast asleep."

"You got personality," the keeper said sweetly. "Wake 'em up."

Then I saw it.

"What the hell am I wasting time with you for? Of course he isn't here. Geiger still has him at headquarters. They're having a talk, downstairs maybe, in the basement."

I spun out of there and took the few blocks to Geiger's domain with my coat-tail flying. The lieutenant's office was on the second floor. I had just maneuvered the landing when a voice called: "There you are—Carew."

It was Sergeant Luden, the ballistics expert. I grabbed his arm. "What did that slug show?"

He nodded slowly. "I didn't finish the tests yet, but so far I'd say there's no doubt about it. Both bullets we're fired from the same weapon. The markings are unmistakably identical. I'm on my way to tell Geiger about it. Where did you get the second bullet, Carew?"

I stood there and stared at him. The nice little theory that had been forming in my mind suddenly fell apart. I'd left Boardman out of my calculations because his motive was too pat. Now it was his gun that had fired the mysterious shot. It probably hadn't been heard because of the blaring Conga music.

"Look, Luden," I said. "I'm on my way to see Geiger now. Let me tell him about it."

From behind the thick-lensed glasses, Luden peered at me suspiciously, finally nodded. "Sure," he said slowly, "sure," and moved away. He had a job to hang onto and I felt he was going to call the lieutenant through the switchboard.

The harness bull planted outside

Geiger's office was stubborn. "He's in conference. Nobody gets in."

We started arguing about it, and then suddenly we had company. He came storming down the hall, a newspaper crumpled in his fist, his white face tighter than a knot in a wet rope. Somebody downstairs must have told Don Jarett the lieutenant's room number and he was carrying a heavy load of anger. He didn't even look at me.

"Miss Fay Hartley," he bit out at the cop. "I want to see her."

That made the cop even more stubborn. He stuck out a brick-colored jaw. "Do you, now? Ain't that nice?"

Sticking out his jaw was a mistake. Jarett was in no mood for arguments. He swung and it was a diller. It didn't knock the cop out, but it jarred him plenty. He staggered back and I jumped for the door knob.

THEY were all there. Geiger, a plainclothes dick, and a man from the D. A.'s office. Draped around the room in various stages of sullenness were Powell, Boardman, and Fay Hartley. There was a strip of adhesive over the girl's temple. When she saw Jarett, she came to her feet, and her face fell apart like a wooden shack in a hurricane. He mumbled something about not having been arrested and she put her face together again.

Greg Powell was impassive. I could see that Lieutenant Geiger could not and would not get anything out of him. Geiger's eyes hit me like a cold wave.

"What's this about a bullet?" he asked softly. "Luden just called me."

I exposed the gun and laid it gently on his desk and nodded toward Boardman. "It's his. Ask him about it."

Geiger snatched up the automatic and sniffed it like a terrier at a rat hole. Then

he shifted his gaze to Boardman. "How long have you owned this?"

"A long time, several years."

"Has it been out of your possession?"

"No."

I sighed audibly. "You're digging your grave, Boardman. You'd better level with Geiger. He's very smart."

Boardman's eyes clouded. "I—I don't understand."

"They've checked your gun against the bullet found in the dressing room. If it was never out of your possession that means you were there when it was fired."

For the first time I saw Boardman's composure drop away from him like a discarded bathrobe.

"Yes," he said. "Listen, I loaned the gun some time ago to Diane. She said she needed it to frighten somebody with. This evening, just before her number, I wanted to talk to her. I went back to her dressing room and opened the door. She was lying there on the floor—dead. My gun was in her hand. At the moment I thought she'd committed suicide, then I saw she'd been choked. I knew they'd be able to trace the gun to me, so I took it out of her hand and left. That's what happened, the truth—so help me!"

I turned to Greg Powell. "You walked up to her apartment. What for?"

He smiled thinly. "I knew something was wrong when she didn't come out for her number. I asked the bartender. He shrugged and said she probably hadn't shown up. He knew where she lived. I went over there. I wanted to see her. Why shouldn't I? She was my sister-in-law, wasn't she?"

"It took you a long time."

He hunched his shoulders up, let them fall. "I walk slowly. Any objections?"

I sent my eyes on a round trip between the dance team, shuttling a look back and

forth. "You two seem mighty worried about each other. Married?"

Fay Hartley let it slip out. "Yes."

Boardman looked shocked. Jarett clamped his lean jaw.

I produced the snapshot of Diane, held it in front of the girl. "This is yours, isn't it?"

Fear mounted up behind her eyes, but just for an instant, and then she was wearing a mask again. "No." The denial was a shade too emphatic.

"Quite sure?"

"She said no," Jarett cracked.

IGNORING him I laid the picture before Geiger, waited a minute till he'd had a good look at it. Then I asked: "What does that mean to you?"

He sucked in a gentle breath. "Plenty. This picture was taken recently in Jersey City."

"What else?"

"It means that Diane Powell had broken her parole by leaving the state."

"Precisely," I said, "And she could have been slapped right back into jail to serve out her term. It makes a wonderful item of blackmail, doesn't it? Do you know where I found it?" I didn't wait for him to ask. "In Fay Hartley's apartment. She—"

I didn't get a chance to finish. Jarett was on me like a panther. But this time I'd been expecting him. Concealing it with my back, I'd got hold of the heavy glass inkwell and I was holding it in my hand now. I laid it flush against his face and he fell back like the recoil of a heavy gun. Blood spouted from his nostrils in twin geysers. He was in a bad way.

Geiger never batted an eyelash. He looked over at Jarett as if he were examining a pair of socks in a haberdashery store. Then he looked back at me.

"Go ahead, Carew."

I felt pretty good about Jarett. I owed him one for laying me flat in Fay's hallway. "Well," I said, "the way I see it is this. Boardman had been romancing Fay. There was no objection from Jarett, so they must have been up to some game. Probably she was trying to marry him, and that's why she was keeping her other marriage a secret. In that case it would have been too bad for Boardman.

"But he spiked their plans by dropping her and focusing on Diane. So they conceived the idea of luring her to Jersey City, maybe when she was drunk, I don't know, and when they got her there they took a snapshot of her in front of a picture house. That fixed the location and the date.

"Then they blackmailed her into dropping Boardman. I guess that wasn't enough for Jarett. He wanted some money too. So he began shaking her down. And Diane, who didn't want to go back to prison, was compelled to shake down Boardman to meet the payments.

"She had borrowed his gun, and this evening she decided to throw a scare into Jarett. She pulled the gun on him. He got jittery and jumped for her throat. The gun popped one slug into the wall, and Jarett—"

"You'll never be able to make that stick," the dancer said. He had a pretty good hold on himself by now.

"Maybe not. That's up to the D. A. But I'll wager they'll find a print of the snapshot in your wallet. That may not amount to much, Jarett, but when they examine you they'll find minute particles of skin under your fingernails which any toxicologist will be able to prove came from Diane's throat and—"

That did it. With an agile dancer's leap he practically soared toward the door, had it open and was halfway through before Geiger made use of Boardman's gun

which was still on his desk. The slug caught him in the back of his knee and he skidded across the hall, nearly scaring the wits out of the cop on guard outside.

I glanced with admiration at Geiger. There was still no expression on his deadpan face. He was staring thoughtfully

at a long tendril of smoke curling up from the snub-nosed barrel of the gun.

“Well,” I said, “that makes three shells. One Diane fired into the wall. One I fired into a telephone book. And one you fired into Jarett. There are still three left. Let’s go down to the river, Geiger, and shoot rats.”