



With a hysterical shriek Diana Duane halted beside the body

# DON'T FOOL WITH MURDER

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

*"Make your act perfect tonight, because it may be your last,"  
was the grim warning sent to the Great Cordova, handcuff king!*

WHEN I looked up from my desk I saw the back of a trick hat, several hundred dollars worth of fur coat, and an appealing pair of ankles. Then she finished closing my office door, turned around, and I saw her face. It was a nice face, somewhere between twenty-five and thirty.

"Mr. Alec Jason?"

I got up on my feet, nodded at her.

"Won't you be seated?" I said, and waved my hand. "Give me your name, please."

She didn't answer until she had finished seating herself.

I liked the way she did that, too, very casually, and relaxed. None of this crossed-legs witness chair stuff.

"I am Diana Duane," she told me.

The way she said it indicated that I was

expected to be both impressed and delighted. Frankly, her name didn't strike a familiar chord, but in the private dick business it is money in the bank to play along with a prospective client, so I beamed a little, and nodded.

"Oh, yes, of course, Miss Duane," I said. "How do you do?"

But she sensed I was bluffing. Her dark eyes showed hurt, and her lips formed a reproachful pout.

"You have never seen me?" she demanded. "Diana Duane, the Diving Venus?"

Her explanation made things click. I had never seen the Diving Venus in the flesh, but I had seen plenty of her pictures, and read about her sensational act. It was something truly box office. Fancy diving into a glass tank on the stage with just enough water in the glass tank to prevent certain suicide every time she tried it. There was something else connected with the glass tank act but I couldn't remember it at the moment. I smiled apologetically.

"Naturally, I've heard about you, Miss Duane," I said. "But I don't get to the theatre very often. You're playing in town, now?"

She nodded, and fumbled in her purse for something. When she brought it out I saw that it was a folded slip of paper. She handed it to me. I took it, and waited.

"I want to hire your services, Mr. Jason," she said. "That will explain."

I UNFOLDED the slip of paper and looked at the writing. The words were printed in block letters the way an eight-year-old kid might do them. The printed words read:

MAKE YOUR ACT PERFECT TO-  
NIGHT, BECAUSE IT MAY BE  
YOUR LAST!

The note was unsigned. I looked at her and snapped the note with a thumbnail.

"Any idea who might have sent you this?" I asked.

"It was not sent to me," she said. "Cordova found it under his dressing room door at the theatre, at the Palace, this morning."

That name was well known to me. Carlos Cordova had a reputation equal to that of the late Houdini. In fact, many claimed Cordova was even better than the late master magician. Which may be so, too. I had seen him several times, and the handcuffs, locked trunks, and so forth, he couldn't get out of just didn't exist.

"Cordova?" I murmured. "What has he got to do with this?"

"Three times in different cities Carlos has received one of those," she said. "He just laughs, but I am afraid. So I have come to you. I want you to protect Carlos. I will pay you, of course."

"He might not like your doing that, Miss Duane," I said with a frown. "After all, he should consult me personally."

"You do not understand," she cut me off. "It is not known by many outside of the theatre, but Carlos Cordova is my husband."

That revelation was a bit of a shock to me. This cute little trick Cordova's wife? Cordova was crowding sixty, if he was a day old. However, there's no telling about women in love, I suppose.

"Why didn't he come here?" I asked.

"I told you, he just laughs!" she said impatiently. "He says they are from some crank, some fool. Because he is Cordova he believes that nothing can harm him. But I am afraid. This is the third note, the third warning. I am afraid of threes. It has always been my unlucky number."

"The other two cities?" I asked.

"Boston three months ago," she said with a little shiver. "Albany last month. Our engagement is five days at the Palace. I want you to be back stage every performance. I will pay you a thousand dollars to see that no

harm comes to Carlos.”

Nice money, of course, but I was not particularly eager to earn it. A lot of show people are screwy. They’ll do anything for a few lines of publicity. I don’t like to get hooked up in any gag like that for any kind of money. I have my own reputation to think about now and then. I looked at her thoughtfully, and she was good at reading thoughts. Her voice had a catch in it.

“Please, Mr. Jason, please! If it is not enough I will pay you more. But you simply must protect Carlos. Else I—I would die of anxiety. He does not even need to know. You wear no uniform. I can arrange so that you will appear as a reporter or something. It will only be from nine to nine thirty for five nights. Say you will, please?”

I didn’t answer for a moment, I just looked at her, and maybe weakened a little. She certainly seemed scared, and so maybe it wasn’t a publicity gag. She was kind of cute, too. Cordova certainly must be good at other things besides handcuffs and trunk locks.

“Have you any idea what might be back of this?” I finally asked, and thumbnailed the slip of paper again.

She hesitated, frowned, and thought that over for a long minute.

“I cannot say for certain,” she said to me presently. “Of course there are many who are insanely jealous of Carlos, but I don’t think they would do anything so foolish as that note threatens. It’s only that I don’t want to take chances.”

She let the last slide with a shrug, and I had a sudden bright thought.

“Is his divorced wife still living?” I asked.

She looked at me popeyed, and then dismissed the question with a laugh.

“He’s never been married before,” she said. “But I have been. I was divorced eight years ago. A year afterward I married Carlos. But for my former husband to threaten him is silly. I haven’t seen him, or heard from

him since the day we parted in the divorce court.”

“What was his name?”

“George Parkins,” she said. “But his stage name was Professor Sparks. His act was magic with electricity. It was a very good act, too.”

“Is he still doing the act?” I wanted to know.

“Oh, no,” she said, and looked sad. “Something went wrong one performance. He was severely burned, almost killed. He retired from the stage. It was horrible, too, because it was right after we had agreed on the divorce. But why should George want to harm Carlos?”

I had my own ideas on that, but I let them slide. I got to thinking that maybe this was going to be a very easy way to grab off a thousand smackers with no gags attached. I picked up a pencil, and pulled over my desk pad.

“Give me a description of your former husband.”

She furnished some details which were about as helpful to me as a blank sheet of paper.

“That’s how he looked eight years ago,” she added. “And those terrible burns may have changed him. There were bandages over his face when I last saw him in court. But really, I think you can forget George. I believe it must be somebody on the same bill, but I have no idea which person. Here, here is all of it, now.”

THE money she took from her purse and placed on my desk was in one hundred-dollar notes. There were ten of them, and fresh from the bank. They looked very wonderful considering my financial situation at the time. Perhaps that fact went a long ways toward deciding things for me. Anyway, I opened a drawer and dropped the money inside.

“All right, Miss Duane,” I said. “I’ll

protect him the best I can, but you haven't given me very much to go on."

"Lack of information is what frightens me so much," she said and shivered again. "If only I knew, or even suspected somebody, but I don't. Oh, yes, here is my card. The stage doorman will let you through. My act is not on until ten o'clock so I will be waiting for you in my dressing room. Carlos has the one opposite mine. A little before nine, Mr. Jason?"

"I'll be there," I said, and got to my feet.

"Just one thing," she said before she left. "Don't say anything to Carlos. He would be furious, and it might disturb him in his act. He—he thinks sometimes he is—What is the word?"

"Omnipotent?" I suggested.

"Exactly!" she beamed at me. "You understand, eh?"

"Perfectly," I assured her, and bowed her out of the office.

I gave her five minutes, and then I carried out Rule Number One in my business. I went right down to the bank and deposited the thousand bucks to my account. After that it was time for lunch. That job done with I started back to the office, but made a detour when I had a sudden thought. I dropped into the office of a friend of mine, Sid Foster, who had been connected with show business production and management since about the time he took his first step.

A half hour with Sid and his files confirmed what the Diving Venus had told me. She had once been married to a George Parkins, who had appeared in a tricky electrical act that was pretty fair box office. She had been part of the act, too. The usual part in that kind of an act. She handed him things, and wore a little costume that just barely covered the law.

One performance, after she had left the act, a couple of wires had got crossed. Parkins was almost electrocuted right in front of the horrified spectators. He lived,

but he had never returned to the stage, at least, so far as Sid knew.

A year later his former wife married Cordova and came out with the Diving Venus act of her own. They always played on the same bill, and nowadays they each got a star-marked dressing room. That's all Sid knew, or would admit he knew. I left him with the feeling that he had left something out, but maybe I was crazy.

Anyway, at quarter of nine that evening I showed her card to the stage doorman, and was given the green light. With the show underway half a hundred people were chasing about in all directions, and it was something like going through the Army line to get to her dressing room. I didn't have to knock because she was waiting outside for me.

She was wearing her act costume which was a less than less bathing suit with more silver and gold spangles than suit. The thin robe she had wound about her she might just as well have left home.

A very, very appealing eyeful, but I didn't have the chance to take my time. The kid was stiff with fear. She didn't even acknowledge my greetings. She grabbed me by the hand and pulled me inside. In fact, she was so jangled up I had to wait a few seconds.

"I've seen him!" she suddenly whispered at me. "This evening, when I came to the theatre! He was standing outside on the sidewalk. I'm sure of it!"

She looked like she was going to come apart in small pieces, so I had to grab her by the shoulders and shake her a little.

"Who did you see?" I snapped. "Who did you see? Get hold of yourself, Miss Duane!"

She tried, and made it.

"George!" she said in the same kind of whisper. "George Parkins, my former husband!"

I DIDN'T say anything for a moment. I just looked at her.

"You're sure?" I pressed. "Absolutely sure? After all, it's eight years, and you said he got burned badly."

"I know, I know!" she panted, and began twisting her fingers. "And he has changed. He doesn't look at all like he used to. Those scars on his face! He looks evil!"

"But how could you be sure?" I wanted to know.

"The lobe of his ear," she said with an effort, and touched her right ear. "He lost it in an accident when he was a child. That's how I knew him tonight."

"A missing right ear lobe, and scars on his face?" I echoed. "Anything else?"

"I didn't notice exactly how he was dressed," she said. "But I think he was wearing a gray topcoat and a gray hat."

"Did he speak to you?" I asked.

"He started to, but I hurried into the theatre," she said.

I asked the last question with my hand on the doorknob.

"Do you think he knew you recognized him?"

"Certainly he did," she replied instantly. "As I just told you, he started to speak to me!"

I let go of the doorknob and fished for a cigarette. Then I saw a No Smoking sign, and gave it up.

"Don't worry, Miss Duane," I said. "If he knows you spotted him, he'd be crazy to try anything."

"No, no!" she gasped, and put a hand to her throat. "He would! You do not know George Parkins like I do. Besides, I've paid you. You simply must protect Cordova."

I shrugged, then stepped quickly to one side. The door was flung open and Cordova came striding into the dressing room. He was snappily dressed in tails, and looked a good twenty years this side of his true age, unless you looked very closely, as I did. He didn't

see me because of the opened door.

"Well, aren't you going to witness my performance?" he boomed. "Cordova is performing the impossible tonight. You shall see!"

Then he saw me out the corner of his eye. His face clouded up like a thunder storm.

"So!" he boomed again. "Who is this person?"

"Why, only a reporter, you silly boy!" she chided him. "Mr. Jason, of the Globe. He wanted an interview, and I—"

The last was cut off by the bored but cutting voice in back of Cordova.

"Curtain's waiting, Cordova. Snap it up!"

Cordova swung around to glare at the disappearing call-boy, then he swung back to me.

"A reporter, eh?" he boomed. "Good! Cordova will show you something tonight. Come, pet!"

The last was to her as he swung away. She lingered long enough to whisper one final beseeching plea.

"You must not let anything happen, please!"

I nodded, and followed her out. All lights had been dimmed but I was able to find a place in the wings where I could keep my eye on the stage. The orchestra banged away, the curtain slid up and a couple of spots focused on Cordova. The applause was really something, and you could see Cordova lapping it up like maple sirup. Then with soft music and lights he went into his act.

Briefly, he was handcuffed, ankle cuffed, and tied up with twenty feet of rope or so. Then a couple of flunkies hoisted him up and down into a glass tank filled with water. He stood there a moment taking a last bow, and then let himself sink under water as the flunkies lowered the tank lid and locked it. Then the lights went out, and the orchestra played on for about two minutes. Standing

there in the darkness I thought, and imagined all kinds of things, but I didn't move. Then suddenly the lights flashed on, the orchestra played like crazy, and there beside the tank stood Cordova, dripping wet. The cuffs he held in one hand, and the twenty feet of rope was coiled neatly over his other arm. The paying customers raised the roof with their applause.

**T**HEY kept Cordova bowing beside the tank for all of five minutes. Then with a very smooth, contemptuous gesture he flung the cuffs and ropes from him and stalked off the stage.

He went by me, and a couple of others, as though he were a god on his own. What Cordova thought about Cordova would certainly fill a book.

It didn't bother me any, though. All in a day's work for Jason. I swung around and trailed him over to his dressing room. To keep earning my money I'd play the reporter and go right in with him, and stick until he left the theatre. Then the rest of the night would be mine.

But, it didn't work out like that!

He was right in front of his door, me half a dozen steps behind, when suddenly all lights went out. I heard a couple of people yell way back stage, but before the yells were just echoes the lights came on again. One look toward Cordova, and my heart hit rock bottom. He was sprawled flat on a worn rush mat in front of his dressing room door. The fingers of his left hand were crooked as though he still held the doorknob, with the water from his soaked clothes making little puddles all around him.

Even as I leaped to his side and dropped to my knees, I knew that Cordova was dead. Nevertheless, I tried the pulse, the heart, and even put my little pocket mirror to his mouth, but nothing doing. I yelled for somebody to get a doctor, and meantime examined him carefully. There was not a

mark on him. I was trying artificial respiration when a doctor arrived and took over.

He made a much more exhaustive examination than mine, but finally straightened up shaking his head sorrowfully.

“Heart failure,” he said to nobody in particular. “His age, and the terrific strain under water in that tank, were too much for him this time.”

“No, no! That is not true. He was murdered, I tell you! Cordova was murdered! Oh-h-h!”

The shrill, hysterical words had come from the Duane woman. She had charged through the little pop-eyed group, and stopped beside her husband. I bent over and took her by the shoulders, and started to speak. She didn't give me the chance for even one word. She whirled like a tigress with blood in her eyes.

“You let him die!” she screamed at me. “You let him be murdered! I paid you a thousand dollars, too!”

The rest choked up on her as she came at me with clawing fingernails. I managed to duck just in time. A couple of women in the show grabbed her, and led her sobbing and wailing into her dressing room. That left everybody looking with both eyes straight at me. I felt very foolish, and also sore as a boil.

“Say, you're Alec Jason, the private detective, aren't you?” the doctor suddenly broke the silence. “What did she mean he was murdered?”

I looked at him, and pointed at the corpse.

“What do you think, Doctor?” I asked.

He didn't like that. It showed in his frown, and in the rest of his face.

“It was his heart,” he said slowly.

“I agree with you,” I said pleasantly. “Just the same, we'll call the police.”

And without waiting for anything more

from him I walked over to a wall pay phone and made the call.

Was I crazy? I didn't think so. Murder is something you don't fool with, if you've got any sense. And so I was more than willing to have the cops step into the picture. The only trouble was that they did with Lieutenant Hesse in charge of the detail. When I saw him come in through the stage door I almost wish I hadn't made the call. Hesse and I were never exactly fond of each other, if you get what I mean.

Of course, he had to spot me right away, and his eyebrows climbed right up his forehead. He came right for me, his mouth starting to open. I pointed at the corpse, and that detoured him. He took a good look, and then motioned for the Medical Examiner with him to do the same. Then he spoke to me.

"How come you're here, Alec Jason?" he snapped.

"Been here all the time," I said, holding my temper. "His wife, Diana Duane, hired me to protect him. He'd received a couple of threatening notes. She—"

I STOPPED short as I saw the sneer start to curl Hesse's lips. The devil with him! I jerked my head toward her dressing room door.

"She's in there," I said. "She'll tell you all about it."

The sneer had spread clear across his face.

"Some protector!" he grunted, and turned toward her dressing room.

I pretended not to hear the crack, ignored a lot of eyes that were still fastened on me, and watched the Medical Examiner do his stuff. He didn't take much longer than the civilian doctor. And, when he nodded at the other medico I asked the question.

"You say it's heart failure, too?"

He gave me a hard stare as though I was challenging him.

"What else?" he snapped.

I shrugged, and didn't say a thing. For the present, that was good enough for me. I simply stood there staring down at the dead Cordova on the rush mat. Then suddenly something caught my eye. I didn't move. I just looked and looked while the tingling ran up and down my spine. A moment or two later Lieutenant Hesse came plowing out of the Duane woman's dressing room. There was a twisted grin on his face, and a mounting gleam in his eye.

"Well, Doc?" he said almost eagerly to the Police Surgeon.

"His pumper couldn't take it any more, Hesse. Heart failure. Make what you can of it. He's all yours. I'll give him a good going over downtown, but it was his pumper. Shucks, the stuff he did at his age!"

Hesse's grin faded, and the light died in his eyes. He looked sore, very sore. He nodded to a couple of his waiting men, and then turned to me. The sneer was back.

"Do some guys get the breaks!" he said. "The easiest thousand you've ever earned, Jason. And a break for that Parkins guy, too. I think I'll pick him up, though, on those threat notes. The rat needs a lesson, scaring the pants off that poor kid in there."

It was all I could do not to laugh out loud in his face. Show Hesse a pretty face, and a nice pair of legs, and he'll jump through hoops for you. Backwards.

"Luck," was all I said.

He started a little, and narrowed his eyes: "Yeah, wise guy? Just what kind would you mean?"

"Why, your kind, of course," I said innocently. "Be seeing you, Lieutenant."

With that I walked away from him. I went over to a table and did something I did not like to do often. I took out my checkbook and wrote out one for nine hundred and ninety-five dollars, payable to Diana Duane. And then I just sat there, letting the ink dry, and watching our Police Department remove

the evidences of tragedy. A little later I went over to her dressing room door, and on in through it without bothering to knock. She was alone, and dressed for the street. At my entrance she made a grab for her purse, but changed her mind.

"Get out!" she blazed. "I never want to see you again. You are stupid! You all are stupid!"

"So you heard what the police decided, too, eh?" I murmured. "Well, could be, Miss Duane. You still think your former husband did it somehow?"

"Certainly!" she snapped, and looked like she was going to cry, she was so mad. "Heart failure, bah! My Carlos was strong, very strong. His heart would never fail him. It was George Parkins. I'll tell the newspapers how stupid you and the police are!"

"Your privilege," I said with a shrug, and put the check on her make-up table. "Here's the fee, less the cost of some phone calls I made. I couldn't protect your husband that well, so I don't consider I've earned the fee."

She didn't say anything. She looked down at the check, and then up at me. She looked very puzzled and unsure of things. I gave her a parting smile, and moved toward the door. When I reached it I turned and looked at her.

"I'll give you this advice for free, Miss Duane," I said quietly. "If you go to the newspapers, you'll turn out looking awful foolish. You'll cut your own box office in half. Good night."

"Wait!" she stopped me. "You mean, the newspapers would be stupid, too?"

"No, just you would be," I said. "You see, when they came to me I'd prove to them that Parkins couldn't possibly have murdered Cordova. Good night, again!"

**W**ITHOUT giving her a chance to ask questions, I went out quickly, and closed the door. There were only a few about

now, and they chose to ignore me. That was okay. I headed toward the stage but didn't quite reach it. In a spot where there were lots of shadows I turned fast and ducked behind some propped up stage settings. Then cat fashion I worked my way around to the deep rear of the stage where in was as dark as the inside of your hat. But by a little maneuvering I was able to keep my eye on the passageway leading to the outside stage door. I settled down comfortably to watch, and to wait.

It was almost an hour before the last person, the theatre manager, left the place. I felt sorry for him as I watched him walk out. Of course the whole show had been stopped right after Cordova's death, and the customers had been given their money back or rain checks. A night like that could blow an awful hole in a week's total take. I wondered just how the poor guy would feel, say, this time tomorrow night?

But I didn't wonder about it long. Maybe five minutes and then I slipped out my small pocket flash, and eased out of my hiding spot. Fifteen minutes was all I needed to do what I had to do. When I was finished I took a chair and placed it where I could reach one of the light switches that worked the passageway between the two rows of dressing rooms. And then, finally, I really settled down to wait.

It was a long, long wait, and as time dragged on and on I began to have more and more fears that Alec Jason wasn't such a very smart guy after all. He seemed to be simply a first class bag holder. When I heard some distant clock toll two my restlessness went up to a new high. Maybe I had figured my little play all wrong. Before I fell sound asleep at my post, maybe I should try some other angle. But, what angle? That was the catch! What other angle could get me the results I simply had to get in order to wrap the whole thing up proper?

So with fears and dreads nagging at me I

batted my brains about for all they were worth, and kept coming up with absolutely nothing worth the effort.

At last I heard the sound. When it wasn't repeated I started cursing my imagination and jangled nerves. But I did hear it again—the scrape of the latch in the stage door lock. A faint breath of air hit my cheek to tell me that the door had been opened. Then silence, for so long I wanted to yell just to break the tension.

But at the end of a year or so the tiny pencil beam of a flashlight cut the darkness. It hit the passageway floor and came creeping toward where I stood hidden and waiting. But it did not come all the way. It stopped when it lighted up the worn rush mat in front of the late Cordova's dressing room door. It was at that point I raised my hand and flipped the light switch.

The Duane woman was half bent over, with the hand not holding the flashlight outstretched a little. She froze and turned fear glazed eyes toward me. I had stepped out into the lighted passageway by then.

"It's just as you left it," I said. "But don't touch it. The police like to see those kind of things."

She didn't answer at once. Like waking from a deep sleep, she slowly straightened up, undid the purse under her arm, and dropped the flashlight into it. I watched her hand come out of the purse—empty. Very nice for her that it did!

"What are you talking about?" she said in a voice that sounded like it came from a mile away. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," I said. "I had a hunch you'd come back. So, I waited to tell you a couple of things I didn't tell you before. One is, that I used to fool around with electrical gadgets, myself, years ago. Sort of a hobby of mine. Used to do a lot of stunts at parties. You know, like giving people shocks when they sat down in certain chairs, or picked up

their ice cream spoon. Naturally, I didn't clip-tap any high voltage lines!"

**A**BRUPTLY I stopped talking, and watched all the blood that was left in her face drain away. She swayed a little and put one hand against the steel fireproof dressing room door for support.

"You're mad—insane!" she finally got out in a hoarse whisper. "I know what you've found out. I thought it out myself when I got back to my hotel. I came back to make sure. It was George Parkins. It would have been simple for him to slip in here last night and arrange things, and slip in again tonight without being seen. I tell you—"

"Don't!" I cut her off. "That's why I deducted the five bucks for phone calls. Calls to some people I know in certain Government departments in Washington. But you don't even have to have friends down there to find out what I found out. It was that Sergeant George Parkins was killed in the taking of Iwo Jima. See how you gave yourself away by insisting you'd seen him tonight? If you'd just shut up, instead of trying to build up your story, it would have made it twice as tough for me."

Her shrill, shaky laugh stopped me.

"I was simply mistaken!" she cried. "You fool! You utter fool! If I had wanted to kill Carlos, would I have come to you? Would I have insisted even after he died that it was murder?"

"Definitely, yes!" I snapped right back at her. "That was the smoothest bit of your build-up—publicity for Diana Duane, the Diving Venus. A million dopes would have mobbed the theatres to see the beautiful wife of the murdered Cordova. Your picture would have been in every newspaper, every edition. But for Cordova to kick over from just plain old age heart failure? Nothing. Of course, too, there may be another angle. Some lad who has more money than

Cordova had when you married him, plus being a whole lot younger. Is there?"

"You're mad—you're insane!" was all she could tell me.

I didn't argue. Instead I told her what she already knew. In short, how she had worked it. How she had led a cleverly concealed wire out of the rush mat and over to one of the main power lines. How she had probably done it last night, in view of the fact she was able to get into the place a few minutes ago. How she had soaked the rush mat at some time to make sure, maybe while Cordova was on stage and doing his stuff. How, while he was on stage, she had slipped to the other end of that wire fitted with needle pointed prongs.

How when she saw Cordova dripping wet step on the soaked mat and grab the metal handle of the steel door she had clipped the needle prongs into the main power line—for just a few seconds. How tapping the line at that point killed the other lights so nobody could see how the power shooting through Cordova shook him. How his soaked clothes made a perfect conductor to the steel door that served as a ground. How the amperage was not enough to leave burn marks on his shoes or his fingertips.

How the current stopped his heart, just as it would stop anybody's heart. How his age and condition didn't give his heart a chance to kick back, not even with my artificial respiration. How any doctor would call it heart failure just the same.

Yes, I gave her the works, and finished by telling her how she got scared when I assured her in her dressing room that Parkins hadn't done it. If I could find out he'd been

killed in the war so could the police, in time. So, better half a loaf than none. Let it slide as heart failure but get rid of the murder evidence. Her "perfect" fall guy wasn't perfect any more!

"You don't fool with murder!" I clipped at her. "Nobody does and gets away with it for very long. So, I guess that's all."

I didn't say any more. She started to play her trump card, but I had been waiting for just that. She had tipped me off to that, too, in her dressing room. I mean, her hand flashed down into her handbag, and came out with a little lady's gun. But I was moving long before it showed. I ripped up one hand to knock the gun hand upward. But that wasn't the trump card she was playing. I guess it wasn't that she was afraid of being tagged for two murders. It was fear of not being able to take being tagged for one. Anyway, instead of jabbing the gun at me and pulling the trigger, she jabbed the muzzle up under her jaw and fired. She fell over backwards, stone dead with the little slug lodged some place in her brain.

For a moment I could only stare down at her, as though it couldn't possibly be real. She was sprawled out on the worn rush mat exactly the way Cordova had been. Only the way they had died differed. Finally I came out of my trance, cursed softly, and walked over to the pay phone on the wall. I crossed my fingers and breathed a fervent prayer, but it didn't do any good. I'd be up the rest of the night now explaining, and arguing with Hesse, because it was he who answered my police call. After he barked at me the second time I sighed heavily, and started talking.