

Hit the Baby

Roswell Brown

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"Blue Monday?" The redhead yawned, stretched, looked up from her desk in the quiet office of the Noonan Detective Agency. "Who started that whoop-de-da about Mondays being blue? You got a whole new week's work ahead of you on a Monday morning. Saturdays, it's all over. Nothing but a picnic in the country or washing out your stockings to look forward to."

Young, good-looking Jerry Riker straightened from the filing cabinet where he was culling routine entries. He grinned at the girl who sat scowling on the other side of the desk sign reading: "Miss Culver, secretary."
"Bored, huh?"

"Alongside of me," said Grace Culver, drearily, "a guy in the last stages of sleeping sickness feels as spry as a kangaroo. Saturdays! Whoever invented 'em?"

Jerry saw an opening and dove into it. They came few and far between with a fast-action girl like "Big Tim" Noonan's red-headed aider-and-abetter. But from long habit, young Riker kept on trying. "Saturday nights are Heaven's gift to the movie business, Redsie. Every right-minded citizen goes to a show then with her Big Moment." He reached a morning newspaper from his own desk, flicking it open to the amusement page as he laid it down before her. "There's the ads. Take your pick. And a free feed with Jerome A. Riker goes with it."

"Why bother with a show, then? Watching you eat spaghetti is funnier than any comedy."

Grace glanced down at the printed spread propped against her typewriter. Gossipy columns of news from Moviedom separated other columns of advertising on "epic features" and "colossal superspectacles."

"How's about it, lady?"

The redhead smiled at him absentmindedly. "I see Moe Eisman opened up his Long Island studio again. Shooting a picture with Lulu Dore," she said, dreamily.

"Very interesting. But what about my date for—"

"Listen to this," Grace commanded. "The headline reads, 'Eisman Defies Witch Jinx To Film Dore Extravaganza.' Then it goes this way."

She continued to read aloud, oblivious to the dark looks she was getting from Jerry's corner. The article stated:

Suddenly opening the Eastern studio of Dictator Pictures Corp. for the first time in seven years, Moe Eisman yesterday began surprise production on "Love Locked Out" at his Maysville lot. The elaborate screen spectacle features Lulu Dore, famous French song star now appearing personally on Broadway in "Errors of 1936."

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Interesting to the show world in this connection is the producer's disregard of the jinx popularly attributed to Dictator's Long Island plant at the time of its closing in 1929. Folks who are afraid of black cats are asking if Ik-la-Duk still haunts the Maysville stages.

It will be remembered that salary difficulties with the Haitian witch doctor imported to lend authentic zombie atmosphere to "The Voodoo Vow," the company's last Eastern production— resulted in a complete break between executives and magician. A series of strange and tragic mishaps following the rumpus gave rise to a then-popular superstition that Ik-la-Duk's demons were holding his curse over the studio.

"The Voodoo Vow" was Dictator's most expensive and drastic box office failure.

"So what?" Jerry Riker demanded, as the redhead stopped reading. Zombies and voodoo were so much banana grease to Jerry. But Grace Culver was the kind of girl any young man likes to have hanging on his arm of a Saturday night. "How about our stepping out?"

Big Tim's secretary folded the newspaper slowly.

"Well, it won't be as much fun as tracking down a witch doctor. But it's better than catching up on my back mending. Suppose we—"

What she had been going to say then, was something Jerry Riker never knew. The shrill whine of the telephone on her desk sliced imperiously across the redhead's idle banter. She uncradled the little black instrument and clipped into its mouthpiece the traditional, "Good afternoon. The Noonan Agency."

The voice at the other end was shrill and excited, making the earpiece click so fast that Jerry could catch nothing of what was being said. But he could see Grace's keen sherry-brown eyes going wider and wider.

It was three full minutes before the voice stopped, waiting for an answer. Then all Grace said was, "Right away Mr. Eisman"—and she hung up.

"Eisman?" Jerry blurted. "That couldn't be—"

"The great Moe Eisman of Dictator. In person. And a pretty excited person, too!"

"What—"

"Tim's visiting at his sister's over the weekend. He said not to bother him unless something hot came up. What's her number?"

Jerry tossed her the Brooklyn telephone directory. "What's Eisman want? Another of his hot-shot movie stars being blackmailed?"

The redhead was spinning her dial with fingers that trembled visibly.

"Blackmail could wait. Murder can't!"

Jerry's jaw dropped.

"Mur— Say, somebody hasn't gone and gotten bumped off over at that jinxed studio?"

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"Somebody's gone and done just that!" She jerked her bright head back to the telephone. "Hello? Tim? . . . Listen, it's Grace. There's a voodoo curse running wild out at Moe Eisman's studio. A guy named Dinty Boyd was killed this morning. Shall we stop by for you?"

There was significant rust on the open gates of the old Dictator lot. Seven years is a long time in the movie game, but according to the papers those grilles had been shut since the last "take" on Eisman's ill-fated production of "The Voodoo Vow."

Just outside them, a little caretaker's bungalow looked newer than the rest of the plant. Grace had only a glimpse of its white clapboards and green shutters, as the agency's black sedan roared past it.

At the gates, a uniformed attendant was waiting with hand lifted to stop them. The sedan slowed as Jerry pressured the brakes. Big Tim, on the other side of the redhead, glared like an outraged lion full into the scarred face of the watchman.

"We're expected," he growled.

"Orders not to let anybody in but police and the company," the studio employee answered firmly. "There's been trouble here."

"Yeah. Trouble about a stiff named Boyd." Tim flashed the identification badge cupped in the palm of his hand. "Eisman sent for me."

Instantly the man's manner changed. He stood aside.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Noonan. I took you for reporters. Only expected one of you." His voice was deep and resonant, like a radio announcer's.

The disapproving word "reporters" rang out good and clear. Jerry nudged the redhead in high glee. Time was when the Evening Banner had known no better "sob sister" than Grace Culver.

"Mr. Eisman's in his office, Mr. Noonan," the guard informed. "First bungalow on your left inside the lot. He's waiting for you."

Big Tim signaled and his young assistant drove on. When the brakes squealed again, it was before the painted front of the building the guard had indicated. A placard above the entrance further identified it with the name:

M E. EISMAN.

The agency trio tramped up the steps, with the grizzled chief a step in the lead. He jabbed a rusty button. Inside, a bell warned metallically. The door opened. A thin, horse-faced young man with the look of a secretary stood inside, nervously inquiring.

"Timothy Noonan to see Mr. Eisman!" The giant ex-police inspector's boom seemed to blast the little fellow back into the bungalow's cool interior. Moe Eisman's callers followed.

At a desk between the two windows of the office's far wall, the producer himself was turning toward them. Bald, flabby, the Hollywood tycoon lumbered forward eagerly. His florid face was marked by worry. Purple patches rimmed his glazed eyes.

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"Thank heavens you have come, yet! For eight hours already, the village police tear up my studio! They find nothing. Now I send for you. My company gets maybe in such a panic I should have a walk-out, unless your agency finds me who killed poor Boyd."

Big Tim took the floor.

"This Dinty Boyd—who was he? Work here?"

Eisman nodded. "Sure, sure! Nobody, only they got business in 'Love Locked Out,' has set a foot on the lot. Dinty was my gaffer. He—"

"Gaffer?"

"Our chief electrician, Mr. Eisman means," interpreted the secretary's timid voice, somewhere in the background. "It's studio slang, sir."

"I get it. Go on. What happened to him?"

"Must be it early this morning. Six o'clock, maybe. Dinty was alone on the sound stage, working on wires. We got people called for to-morrow, Sunday work on account of Dore is in this Broadway show and only got mornings and Sundays to give me. It must 've shot from behind of him, up on the grid where we got overhead lights banked."

Noonan jerked forward.

"Boyd was shot, then?"

Eisman nodded until his fat jowls shook. Then the movement checked. He had thought of something else.

"But not by a bullet, no! It was a blow-gun arrow, poisoned like-like sometimes they use in voodoo tribes! Mr. Noonan, I ain't a superstitious man—but—"

"Never mind the zombie stuff. Miss Culver here told me that witch-curse yarn the papers dug up. Blow-guns take a pair of real lungs, like an automatic takes a real trigger finger. Let's see the sound stage."

Eisman led the way out of the bungalow. But as his squatty bulk plodded forward, miserable words piped over a thickset shoulder to his followers' ears.

"Only that Dore wouldn't budge a step from Broadway, never had I come back to this place! A square mile of safe million-dollar stages in Hollywood, and why should I? But no! I had to have Lulu Dore in my picture! I had to mess into them same jinx breaks like seven years ago! Ten times the salary I was paying that black devil, and it would have been cheap!"

Stage 5, the faded paint above its dingy entrance indicated. But it was the only one in the long row that had even been unpadlocked. It was Stage 1, as far as the "Love Locked Out" company was concerned.

The atmosphere of desertion hung heavily over Dictator's Maysville lot. Overgrown weeds had replaced its one-time grass. Windows of locked buildings were screened with dusty cobwebs. Late afternoon sunlight and the little knot of shirt-sleeved workers and uniformed police guards on Stage 5 did little to liven up the barnlike enclosure.

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"Where'd you find Boyd?" Big Tim queried.

Eisman led him around a section of erected canvas scenery that seemed to represent one end of a banquet hall. Dead ahead, the blank brick wall of the enclosed stage was pocked with doors that stood like a row of shadows on guard.

"Right—here!"

The movie mogul stopped on a spot not a dozen feet from one closed door. Instinctively, the trio from the agency glanced down. There was a blue chalk mark on the hard, bare floor to show where the murdered "gaffer" had fallen. Big Tim turned. Behind the painted canvas set, and a good two yards nearer the rafters, a skeleton iron runway like a fire escape flanked the heavy pipes from which large, unlighted multiple-arc lamps, of the type known as "ash cans" were swung.

"That's where the blow-gun artist stood? Up there on the catwalk?"

"Must have, the angle the arrow hit," Eisman nodded, his froggy eyes blinking.

"Tim."

The interruption came from the redhead at the grizzled agency chief's elbow.

"Tim, Boyd was shot in the back, according to Mr. Eisman. Doesn't that add up?"

Noonan frowned.

"Huh? Sure it adds. The guy on the catwalk was no spook and couldn't risk being seen. So he waited till Boyd was headed away from him before— Hey! Now I get you!"

He lunged forward eagerly, gray eyes ablaze. Four scant yards lay between that blue-chalked X and a door in the thick brick wall. And on the steel panel, in painted letters that had been white six years ago, were the words: ELECTRICAL SUPPLIES—SUPPLEMENTARY STOREROOM.

"He was heading for that door!" the big detective bellowed. "You're right, Redsie! Whoever dropped him—didn't want him to get there. It's locked. Where're your keys, Eisman?"

Panting after him, the flabby mogul looked blank.

"Boyd—he had the caretaker's set. They—they wasn't found on him this morning, though."

"No duplicates?"

Eisman's head shook.

"Too long it's been locked up. By to-morrow, maybe, I could get—"

"To-morrow's too late. If those keys were worth lifting, I want to see what's inside that store room, right now!"

From a shoulder holster, the brawny ex-inspector drew a revolver that seemed dwarfed in his big hand.

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Tim stood back a pace from the storeroom door, leveled the gun and pressed the trigger.

An explosion, just loud enough to attract every worker on the big stage, shivered the metal panel.

Noonan snatched for the doorknob, twisted it. As the door jerked forward, halves of its shattered lock clattered to the cement floor.

"Now we'll get at whatever your zombie didn't want Boyd to find!"

They went over the threshold, Grace and Jerry at Big Tim's heels, with the studio employees and their stuttering boss crowding behind. The redhead and her seasoned chief caught at the same eloquent detail with the same soft breath.

"Footprints!"

The supply room was a windowless brick cell, illuminated from a glass skylight and the open door. Rolls of insulated wire were stacked along its walls, covered with the grime of long disuse. Nothing else, except two empty crates for plugs, was visible. The dust lay thick over everything, including the floor—and it was there that the footprints showed.

Two sets of recent male tracks, an average size shoe, were easily traceable. One trail led from the door to an open, empty crate in the far right corner. The other led back again to the door.

Jerry Riker grunted in disgust.

"Shucks! Boyd was in here once, after all. Took away some plugs. There goes your theory, Redsie. It was cute while it lasted."

The redhead smiled thinly.

"It's still cute."

"But—"

"Mr. Eisman, it's true, isn't it, that every technician who works on a sound set in movie-making wears rubber soles to kill any noise the sound tracks aren't supposed to record?"

Moe Eisman blinked.

"Sure! You bet! Nothing but rubber."

Grace met Jerry's puzzled glance. "Leather soles with hard heels made those marks, Bright Eyes. Which means that it wasn't Boyd but our murdering voodoo zombie pal who used those missing keys to get in here, and then—"

Faint but sharp, a distant sound cut across her excited explanation. There was a quality of stark horror in it that jerked every one of the scant dozen in the group erect.

The cry trembled from outside, in through the foul air of the supply room like a scream from hell.

"Help!"

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Big Tim's feet were pounding the hard floor of the sound stage before his red-headed assistant shook off the freezing terror of that shout enough to dive into action.

Hard on her chief's heels, she raced across the big barn in the direction where daylight showed beyond the huge sliding doors. She was abreast of him when they reached the relative brilliance of the open lot.

That eerie yell had come from somewhere near Stage 1, at the end of the row. Noonan and Grace plowed toward it, trained instinct guiding them through the weedy lawn that once had been a carefully kept-up picture plant.

The late light slanted from behind the last stage, throwing a blotchy purple shadow toward the oncoming detectives. And huddled at the rim of the unobstructed radiance lay what they were racing toward.

A crumpled shape—a man scarcely more than a boy—sprawled limply among the weeds. His face, turned skyward, was distorted with terror, jaw rigid, eyes bulging. Like a giant grinning mouth, a gash clear across his throat was spewing blood in a terrible, swift tide. From the brutal wound, where it had been sunk almost to its hilt, a queer, primitive dagger protruded.

As Grace went down on her knees at the boy's side, she could hear their racing followers thrash to a horror-choked standstill in the undergrowth at her back. Moe Eisman's breathless whimper panted words of recognition.

"Oh! Bill Daley, it is! Is—is it that he—"

"Dead," the girl from Noonan's pronounced quietly. She had seen death strike often enough before in her private detective career. But there was something so wantonly savage in the attack on this good-looking kid, that it left her silent.

"Daley? Who's Daley?" Tim rapped. "My camera punk. Assistant camera man, that means," one of the shirt-sleeved workers spoke up. "I'm Ziegler, the camera chief. I sent Bill over here to look over the stock, maybe half an hour ago."

"Stock?" Tim cut in. "What stock?" "All the photographic stuff Dictator didn't ship west when they shut down here is stored on Stage 1. Maybe some things we could fix up, instead of buying new. Bill is—was—good at that kind of tinkering."

Looking up from the dead boy's side, Grace saw her employer's grizzled brows draw together. He queried:

"The kid was alone?"

"Sure. We got only a small crew. All the rest were on Stage 5, working with me, when you blew that supply room door."

Tim bent slowly, squinting down at the knife plunged into its ghastly crimson sheath. He had made no move to enter Stage 1; seemingly because the two local police in the crowd had jurisdiction and had gotten on the job already.

But Grace realized, from intimate knowledge of the older man's methods, that he had taken in the whole layout and figured search to be a waste of time.

"Funny kind of a knife. Looks like one of those native machetes from—from some place like Haiti."

He straightened decisively.

"There's a print of that voodoo movie you made somewheres around the studio, Eisman?"

The paste-colored face of the terrified executive twitched in stuttering acknowledgment.

"Like all white elephants—sure!"

"And a projection room, of course?"

Again Eisman nodded.

"I want you to have it run through for my two assistants. Right away." He turned to Grace. "There is a tie-up some place, I don't know what you'd best look for. But give that Ik-la-Whoosit a good once-over, anyways."

He strode off purposefully, on some errand of his own. Neither of his helpers followed. They had their orders.

The redhead met Jerry Riker's eyes unsmilingly.

"Well—here's your chance to take me to a Saturday movie," she said.

THE VOODOO VOW

The darkness of the tiny, unadorned cubbyhole flickered as that out-dated picture's title flashed on the screen. Tinny and hard, the voices of the early "talkie" rasped from the screen as the opening sequence slid on.

A native dive in Ornoa. Villainous-looking extra people crowded the bar, lounged at tables, chanted with the weird native orchestra. The scene narrowed down to one table.

Two white men, in spotless linen, were talking. An elderly English character actor and a young, almost too handsome chap Grace remembered vaguely as Barit Tyson. He had been a promising second lead, once. Since the coming of talkies, she couldn't remember having seen him.

The Englishman, sardonically amused, said, "So you don't believe in our voodoo magic, eh? Well, Bob, if you'd been here long enough to see the things I have—"

Tyson, interrupting, said, "Magic? Mumbo Jumbo, you mean."

Just four words. But Grace straightened quickly in her hard chair. Ugly voice? It was deep and appealing, even in those first crude days of recording. Barit Tyson had been a talkie natural!

The Englishman's line, emphasized by a curt nod of the head, was, "Yes? Glance over there, then, my friend. See that man near the door?"

The camera trucked across the noisy, vicious crowd, once more to show the dive's battered entrance. A black man, tall but emaciated, crouched there.

He looked like a black skeleton draped in tattered rags. Sunk deep in their sockets, burning eyes stared out from the screen with a fanatic madness that was no act. Ik-la-Duk, the antagonized witch doctor!

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"Golly!" Grace breathed in Jerry Riker's ear. "If that face was haunting me with any curse, I'd give up quick! Eisman picked the wrong baby to fight with about salary."

"The first big .mistake was ever letting him get out of Haiti."

Reel by reel, "The Voodoo Vow" went on with its story of love under the dark menace of zombies and demon visitations. Tyson, as the unbeliever, was tortured and driven mad himself amid the tropical jungles that once had bloomed artificially in the Maysville studio.

Jerry grunted suddenly.

"That knife there! See it in the zombie's hand? It's a dead ringer for the one the throat-ripper used on that poor Daley kid!"

Grace nodded grimly, Fifty minutes of sitting in the dark and watching this witch stuff, and you began to wonder.

Could some dark spirit actually be hovering malignantly over this long-closed movie lot? Could that legendary curse of Ik-la-Duk be anything more than tommy-rot to fill the gossip columns?

The terrified producer, she knew, really believed in it. Two men had already been butchered, in the same day and for no sane reason, as soon as the "haunted" lot was reopened. Both weapons used were native devices. And why would any human murderer have picked them; and how come into possession of them?

"I wonder," she muttered in the darkness, under cover of the wailing voodoo death chant that emanated from the screen, "whatever became of Barit Tyson?"

Moe Eisman was getting ready to leave his office for the day when the little redhead from Noonan's agency appeared on the office bungalow's doorstep. The mogul's car was waiting, and in his eyes lurked something that said he didn't at all like to be in this particular spot after dark.

But the girl detained him with a grin.

"Well, Miss-Miss Culver?"

"I won't keep you a minute, Mr. Eisman. But "The Voodoo Vow" got me to remembering Barit Tyson. I thought maybe you'd know why he dropped out of pictures? Where he is now?"

The seemingly unimportant question had hounded her, for some reason, to the extent of bringing her here. Yet, despite its insistence, she was unprepared for the way Eisman took it, for the popping of his frightened eyes and the visible chill that racked him.

"Oh! You should ask me now about poor Tyson! It was that no-good of a monkey devil that did it! Just like now he kills off good workers like Boyd and Daky and--"

"Did what?" Grace gasped. "Did Barit Tyson die here, before you closed the lot seven years ago?"

"Better he should 've! Such a box office! Such a draw with the women! Only two days and we'd have finished shooting the picture. And it had to happen to Tyson!"

The redhead's brown eyes glinted.

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"But what happened, Mr. Eisman?"

"A charge of powder is supposed to blow up the witch doctor's hut, for the fadeout."

"Yes?"

"Gives it a defective fuse, gives it voodoo monkeyshines, I don't know. She goes up two minutes too soon. Like a beefsteak, Tyson's face turned out. Scars! Burns!"

"So that's why he had to leave the screen?" Grace exclaimed softly. "Poor devil. Where is he now?"

Eisman shrugged.

"To fire him is a crime. He's no more good in pictures. So I give a job as watchman here. I build him a nice bungalow. Still he stays on. It was Tyson let you onto the lot, this afternoon."

Barit Tyson, the scarred gateman? But it was true. That deep voice of his was what she had been remembering all through the voodoo picture. Grace's heart began to pound.

Eisman, turning away, was scurrying into his limousine. She caught at his elbow.

"Mr. Eisman, shooting on 'Love Locked Out' begins in the morning, doesn't it?"

"Heaven help me—yes!—if we have no troubles."

Grace smiled.

"Fine. I'll be on deck. I'm working for you, Mr. Eisman. I'm an actress."

The producer's face registered despair.

"Listen. Actresses I've got. Sure, you're pretty! Sure, you got personality. But now you're in steady work. The movies is no place for a nice sweet—"

"I'm an actress—for one day only." Grace's voice was firm, "My name's Olga—Olga Egloff. What clothes do I wear? Oh, and you don't know me. Catch wise?"

Mr. Eisman blinked down at her stupidly. Then, slowly, he caught wise.

The Sunday morning sun was cut off from Stage 5 when the heavy doors rolled shut against it. But the big barn was bathed in a dozen-fold better job of lighting than nature had provided the previous afternoon. Arc lights and "ash cans" glared whitely overhead. Small spots—"pickles"—played from the sides.

The "herder," one of a mess of assistant directors, was collecting his costumed extra people on the set. Ziegler, head cameraman, standing on a box, was training the camera on the pretty blonde who was "standing in" for Lulu Dore.

"Hit the baby!" somebody shouted.

A little Russian actress, with coal-black hair twisted in a heavy braid around her head, turned curious sherry-colored eyes on a girl who had shared her make-up mirror an hour before.

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"What do they mean, 'Hit the baby?'"

The girl laughed.

"It's studio for 'Turn on the spotlight. They're ready for Dore now."

Before Grace could make further conversation, the costumed mob fringing the lighted set fell back. It was Dore, the French prima donna, sweeping in with a blaze of emeralds.

At her heels trotted a stunted man –almost a dwarf, but with bull–like shoulders. He carried a littered tray.

"That's Waxy Lubin with her," the girl at Grade's side confided. "Greatest make–up man in the show business! But he'd never leave New York. He retired when Dictator's Eastern studio was closed, until now Eisman hires him back.

"They call him 'Waxy'–because he can wax in wrinkles and lines till the oldest living citizen looks like an infant! Why, one time Waxy–"

But Gracie's new–found friend was talking to thin air–for the redhead had disappeared into the crowd.

Grace waited, crouching low in the tall weeds, until the doors to Stage 5 had rolled shut for the last time. They were ready for the first "take" now. The whole studio would be busy inside.

Slowly she approached the open gate, where a thinning line of hopefuls still wheedled Barit Tyson for admission. Her costume and grease paint made her conspicuous in the bright sunlight. Her knees were unsteady. She'd never tried to fool an actor before.

"Hey! What are you doing off the set?"

A step inside the gates, she gave Tyson's scar–ugly face the full voltage of her big eyes. She was no scared greenhorn now. She was Egloff, the great Russian dancer; and regal enough to make Lulu Dore look humble.

"I am Egloff. I do not dance until ze dinnair scene ees fini."

Tyson stared down at her. His brooding eyes seemed to spark to life, cruel and still handsome in their ruined frame. She flicked an addressed, stamped envelope between careless fingers.

"I take ze walk to ze vil–lage and post my lettaire. You let me in again, yes, no? Bien!"

She swept past him, conscious of the boring of bright orbs into her retreating back. Heart pounding, she passed the caretaker's white cottage and rounded a bend in the road that led down a short hill and so into rural Maysville.

Then, leaping like a cat, she was across a shallow ditch and screened by roadside underbrush.

Slowly, moving with infinite care, she wormed back undercover toward the rear corner of that unimpressive bungalow in the shadow of the studio fence. Its windows, dead ahead of her, looked blank. But if her hunch wasn't a million miles off, that dwelling wasn't empty.

Voodoo? Curse–devils, killing for a witch–doctor's vengeance? Not by a long shot! Not after what Dixie had spilled about Waxy Lubin!

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So a one-time star had been content for six years with a gatekeeper's job, had he?—and no suits for damages against Dictator, either. And at the same time, the East's ace make-up man had retired, refusing to go to Hollywood?

Hadn't the "voodoo devils" left the Dictator lot unhaunted, as long as nobody tried to make a picture there? And hadn't Barit Tyson been in possession of the only set of keys to the buildings inside, until by Eisman's order they were turned over to unlucky Dinty Boyd?

Grace flashed across the narrow strip of lawn that separated the rear of Tyson's bungalow from the tangled thicket overgrowing the slope below. Flat against the white wall, she edged toward the screen door that marked the kitchen entrance.

Inside, as the knob of the wire panel materialized under her groping fingers, she heard the guttural mutter of voices. Two men were talking.

They hunched over the kitchen table, like ghouls dabbling in gore as they ran their fingers through the little pile that glittered between them atop a square black box. Face pressed to the wire, the girl from Noonan's waited.

Both of the thugs were gang-stamped. One, she recognized as a gun named "Butch" Pember, with his face on file at police headquarters. The other was a stranger, with the shrewd look of a fence about him.

That pile on the box—which, Grace saw now, was a collapsed camera—sparkled like a haul from a jeweler's vault. Stolen jewels! So that was what Tyson had been hiding away, unmolested, in various safe places around the old studio!

This looked like the end of a good many trails of unsolved Manhattan gem thefts.

"Gee, but that young punk came near to settin' us in the hogpen yesterday!" Butch confided. "Seems he got sent down to Stage 1 to rubber over the old equipment. First thing his eye lands on is this old color camera Tyson had the Chinese stones put away in,"

"Yeh? That's maybe why I got the hurry-up call to come out here and move the stuff?"

"Sure! Tyson just spotted this Daley goin' into the stage, Jake. Time he got there with a knife from the prop room, the kid was streakin' back to Ziegler with his find as happy as a pup with a bone. Boy, oh, boy, if they'd ever got that box opened up they'd 'a' seen plenty of color, all right!"

Grimly, the girl from Noonan's remembered young Bill Daley's dead eyes staring with horror. And the native knife. She should have had that figured long ago,

Tyson was the only studio employee with a key to the building where props used in "The Voodoo Vow" had been stacked away. Nobody else could have gotten at the bizarre weapons the killer had used—the machete and the blowgun.

Inside, the men were beginning to shovel the stones back into their square black nest. Grace groped in the deep pocket of her Russian smock, fingers closing over the steely coldness of the midget automatic she carried there. "That's two narrow squeaks since this cursed picture crowd showed." Butch growled. "First was Boyd, all but walkin' in on the gold plate Ty had stacked in a crate of plugs. And him with Tyson's only keys, too!"

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Jake, the fence, kept on pushing away the "hot ice."

"Seven years of breaks, you can't expect everything. With Tyson actin' any part from a pushcart guy to a visiting duke, and Waxy fixin' up his pan according, things ain't been too tough."

Butch started a reply, then his voice broke into a startled grunt. Grace, automatic leveled to cover them, had eased the screen door open and started forward with stern purpose in her eyes.

But that wasn't what warned Butch Pember. Behind the girl from Noonan's, a voice yelled sharply.

"The dame! Watch her, boys!"

Arms flung about the agency detective's slim shoulders, knocking down her gun hand with brute force. The automatic, springing from stunned fingers, leaped away like a jackrabbit. Before she could twist to meet the unexpected rear attack, she was pinioned helplessly in a grip of terrific power.

Waxy Lubin's distorted face leered over her shoulder as she tried to turn.

Panting, fighting like a hellcat, using sharp heels and writhing body, Grace battled to break that grip.

But the malformed make-up man only croaked with malignant laughter. His long, apelike arms imprisoned her as relentlessly as steel bands.

His subnormal height was the only weapon nature had handed her for a fight that left every other trick in the monster's stack. They stood eye to eye. Eeling in that wicked grip, Grace had twisted to partly face him. His hot breath blasted in her face.

Her head thrust forward suddenly, like that of a striking snake. Small, strong teeth pinioned Lubin's bulbous nose between white rows—and clamped. They clamped hard.

With a shriek of anguished astonishment, the ape-man let his powerful hands fly from their old grip to a belated defense. Grace whirled away from him.

Like a catapulted bullet, she dove across the room toward the little automatic that glittered where it had fallen almost at Butch Pember's feet.

A huge paw smacked flat across her chin with the power of a driven pistol. Butch had awakened from his amazement at Grace's attack.

Off balance, Grace struggled to ward off a second descending clout from Pember's rock-ribbed fist. It landed just where he'd planned it to. Her jaw snapped back inches. Then she crumpled against him.

Vaguely, she knew that she was being carried across the room. Sudden darkness enveloped her, and she heard a latch click. She was held erect by a strength not in her battered body—by the narrow walls of the closet, so close together that she couldn't fall.

Far away, Lubin's voice said: "She can't get out of that, I'll get Tyson, see what he wants us to do."

Five minutes must have passed, but Grace's jaw hadn't stopped throbbing any. Propping her pounding forehead against the wooden panel in front of her, she listened to the heavy thud of feet tramping into the kitchen outside. Tyson had arrived with Waxy.

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"Waxy says you caught a dame snooping." The deep, actorish voice paused significantly. "A dame with a rod."

"Dame, hell! Didn't you pipe Waxy's schnozzle? That's a wild panther, that frill is!"

Tyson chuckled, a sound as cold as the click of ice cubes.

"Well, she's caged now. What she look like?"

Butch Pember growled, "Russian, kind of. Black hair done up in a braid. It felt like a wig, though, maybe."

"Wig?" There was a murderous new throb to the scarred actor's exclamation. "Say! She passed me. Dancer, she said. But I got her figured now! That's the dame from the Noonan Agency, the bonfire skirt."

Grace, upright in her narrow prison, heard him pace up to the door, wheel and stride away again. There was scarcely space to shudder in the broom closet. She'd seen coffins that were roomier.

"The studio's getting too hot. Too many cops, along with the dicks." Tyson paused only an instant. "The zombie's going to pull his last curse—right now!"

"Huh?"

"The poor, faithful watchman is going to lose his bungalow, By fire! Too bad that pretty little cutie has to burn. But that's how it is with a voodoo hex."

He went on swiftly, his cold, deliberate voice outlining the steps of his hellish plan to cover all tracks.

"Jake, you'll stay here. Stack rags, papers, wood from around the place against the broom closet. Douse 'em with gasoline and start a good blaze. Then grab the ice and the camera and scam. Later, when the crowd collects, you're a news photographer here after pictures. Hitch back to Maysville with the fire company or the cops, camera in the open. You won't be tracked that way."

"O. K., chief." Jake sounded pleased.

"You, Butch—you and Waxy and I are leaving, too. But not without that Dore's emeralds. On Stage 5, in about three minutes; the hex is going to show up plenty! Good luck, Jake."

The heavy footfalls receded—three pairs of them. Then the screen door slammed. In the kitchen, Jake began to whistle softly.

The noise of a table being dragged toward the broom closet door scraped menacingly across the scrubbed planks.

Three minutes!

Twisting frantically in the narrow space, the girl from Noonan's worked her arms aloft. When they were level with the heavy Russian braid atop her head, supple fingers went to work.

They found what they were seeking quickly, settled down to the swift business of unplaiting the false black hair.

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"Here's where that Culver gal's last chance to stay uncooked takes the spotlight for fair!" she whispered grimly.

In her eager fingers now was a little green pellet. It was one of Gracie's many crime-solving gadgets. A single wisp of string, protruding from it, unwound slowly out of the loosened braid. Gracie pressed the green "pill" into the keyhole of the closet door. A match, from a pocket of her smock, was lighted and the flame applied to the dangling string.

"Well, redhead: Hit the baby!"

The muffled boom, like a single drum beat, jerked Jake from the pile of rags he was gathering from a far corner of the kitchen.

Spinning, he was in time to see the narrow door of the broom closet splinter open as if a mule had kicked it from inside. And right behind the door came a small, leaping figure made up of shredded clothing and a powder-blackened face.

Jake let out one yell. Then he dove. And the dive was in the direction of a corner cabinet, where two guns—a businesslike army pistol and a midget automatic—lay cuddled together like sleeping lovers.

That instinctive move was just what the girl from Noonan's was figuring on; just what her keen, brown eyes had been watching for. It located the weapons for her.

Swerving, she bore down on the cabinet.

Still dazed, Jake swung to attack her. He balanced hastily; and, as she flung herself abreast, leaped with a sprawling forward lunge. His fists flayed murderously.

Spinning like a leaf on a whirlpool, Grace slid past the driving knuckles so close that they contacted her swaying braid. Back slammed to the corner cabinet, she thrust a lightning-swift arm behind her.

Twisting, Jake lunged again. His eyes glittered wickedly. He left his feet in a direct dive, thrusting forward with all his weight and with telling speed. The space between him and the cornered girl closed like—

Cra-ack!

Scant inches from his prey, Jake jerked back as if a rope had caught him. A tiny black hole appeared between his eyes. Surprise, then terror, flickered over his pasty face.

Sobbing softly, he buckled to his knees and slumped against an old black camera lying unheeded on the floor.

Palmed gun still smoking, the girl from Noonan's leaped across him and sprinted for the kitchen screen.

Stage 5 loomed ahead of her in the glaring noon light as she sped across the empty lot. The open gate had been unguarded. Barit Tyson was through playing watchman.

The heavy roller doors were shut and locked for the "take" supposedly going on inside. But what must really be happening on that set was something Big Tim's helper flinched to think about.

Panting, she drew up before the big barn. Directly in front of her, set into the huge roller door, was the regulation small hinged one for the necessary passage of technicians during a "take." Had they thought to

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lock that on the inside? But she was praying Tyson had left it ready for a quick get-away.

Automatic steady despite her jerky breathing, she thrust out for the latch left-handed. It moved under her clammy fingers! Sobbing with relief, Grace flung her whole weight against it. The panel gave. She hurtled forward-into inky darkness.

The blaze of lights she had left on the busy Stage 5 had been blotted out. Blackness blanked the walls, the cameras, the catwalk and light grid.

Dead ahead of her, one white spot gleamed from above like a devil's eye. Undiffused, it hit the gay canvas of the backdrop. And against the canvas, arms above heads, the "Love Locked Out" company huddled like sheep.

The direct glare from above, pointed full into their eyes, blinded them. Staring into it, with various expressions of fear or baffled rage, Grace could, glimpse Ziegler, Lulu Dore, Big Tim, Jerry, Eisman. And it was hands up high for every one. Tyson's masterly surprise, depending only on blanked lights and fiendish speed, had caught them all!

From the utter darkness behind the light, a deep, cold voice-the scarred killer's voice-was speaking:

"All right, Miss Dore. Off with the emeralds. All of 'em! Hold them in front of you at arm's length. Now walk forward, toward my voice. You can't see me. I won't shoot unless--"

Grace ducked. An inch or so to her left, where the brief flash of light had shown as she whipped through the door, something whizzed past with the silken sigh a hurled knife makes, Butch Pember's shout followed it.

"Boss! Somebody just came through the door--"

Up snapped the automatic in Grace's cold fingers. The trigger kicked daintily at her expert touch, and a little orange eye of flame winked once. It didn't wink in Pember's direction, though.

There was a tinkle of shattering glass. The girl from Noonan's whirled back against the roller door and dropped to "" knees, as the bullet-riddled spotlight sputtered out.

Instant lead, pumped from two angles at once, snarled in the place where she had stood a split-second before.

Somebody shouted: "Cops!"

Feet thudded across the stage, running frantically. Women screamed. Tim's warning yell split the tumult: "It might be Redsie, Jerry! Don't shoot unless--" The hammer of racing feet drew nearer, nearer, nearer--

Still crouching, Grace swung to face the spot where the small hinged door would offer the crooks their only out. Nothing to do but wait. Her jaw was set.

Suddenly, light appeared. A square of garish high noon showed, against which three backs in seething, crowded motion were outlined sharply. They had closed in on the exit together. Now Tyson was shoving back Butch Pember. Waxy Lubin was crowding into Tyson.

"Stop! Right there!"

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They didn't stop. Butch bellowed frantically. Waxy went down on one knee, flung backward by Tyson's shoulder. Grace clipped a single shot above their heads.

"You get the next ones! I mean that!"

She did, and they knew she did. The fact that she was there at their backs, instead of locked in a burning closet, argued coldly for her feeling about them. Up crept their arms. Rage, impotent hatred, showed in the set of their backs; but not one of them tried out that move they had been warned against.

Grace lifted her voice.

"Lights, please! There are your zombies, Mr. Eisman; and you'll find the real curse in a camera over at the watchman's bungalow. Let's have a look at 'em. There's plenty of arcs and what-not for somebody to turn on around the place, even if one of my slugs did have to-er-hit the baby!"