

BOMBPROOF BABY

Roswell Brown

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It's summer fever," the redhead yawned, stretching like a cat and knocking a file of finger-print cards off one corner of her desk with the sweeping gesture.

"Huh?" Jerry Riker muttered.

He had been looking at the backs of her bright curls for a long time and thinking thoughts of his own. When she came suddenly to life, it startled him. But "Redsie" Culver was always startling him.

"Summer fever," Grace repeated distinctly. "Spring fever grown up. I'm sleepy. I'm bored. Nothing happens. Life is too smooth."

Jerry looked hopeful.

"How about a movie to-night?"

"A movie? You would!" Disconsolately, "Big Tim" Noonan's secretary and right hand began to gather up her scattered cards. "A movie I'd even rather sit here like I am, till I'm old and gray, trying to prove that the mug that broke into Mrs. Rabinovitz's store and tuck the till for eight bucks fifty hasn't got a double-whorled thumb like Rocco C. Bragatelli's. And that says little."

It was a perfect afternoon outside the windows of Tim Noonan's detective agency offices. Blue sky. Bright sun. The wrong time entirely to deal with Rocco C. Bragatelli and his problematic connection with minor monies once in the possession of Mrs. Ashelom Rabinovitz.

"I wish Tim would get back she announced. "I could tell him about that laundry lad that's telephoned three times since he left for lunch. It would take up a couple of minutes, anyhow."

Jerry grunted.

"What the guy want?"

"I wouldn't know. And if I did, as the perfect confidential secretary to a man of affairs, I wouldn't tell."

It was ten minutes and an additional laundry call later that Big Tim lumbered into the office and tossed his battered panama in the direction of the hatrack with nonchalant precision. Grace whooped at the sight of him.

"Your Sunday shirt's been shredded, Noonan! Or else they broke off all your buttons. They're hot to apologize."

"Who?"

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"Horner's Laundry. Mr. Horner himself, in fact—whoever he is. I've taken four calls and a call-back number. They must have messed up your scanties good and proper."

The gray-haired giant creaked into his desk chair.

"I trade with a one-eyed Chinese man on Madison Avenue. Where's that number? Oh, yeah. I'd better see. They maybe have run the Rabinovitz woman through a wringer by mistake. In which case, no call for apologies."

He spun the dial.

Exactly six minutes later, he was on the street hailing a cruising taxi to the curb. His red-headed secretary, slightly breathless, was beside him.

"I still don't see—"

"Get in. The meter's running," Big Tim suggested.

Grace got in. The laundry was a Brooklyn address. The cab started downtown, in the direction of the bridge.

"So what goes on in Brooklyn?"

"A war," Noonan rumbled.

"A—huh?"

"A war. Laundries for trenches. There's a protection racket gang starting its stuff, from what this Mr. Horner tells me. The old Chicago game. He don't want to play."

"So—enter Noonan?"

Big Tim stared out the window beside him.

"I wouldn't know. That takes more confab with Horner. So far, there ain't any case. Only crank notes. We're going over to have us a look."

The redhead sighed dismally.

"I ask for excitement, and what do I get? A peek at a set of Brooklyn valentines!"

That finished the Horner case—for fifteen minutes. And then the lid blew off. Literally blew off.

The cab had no better than turned the corner at the end of the block occupied by Horner's Home-Way Laundry when the explosive roar fanged into the silence, vicious, deafening.

"Holy—cat!"

A delivery truck had just nosed into the street from the doors of the Horner garage.

One second, it was edging cautiously forward. The next, it seemed to lift into the air. Its sides buckled out. Its roof tore open like the top of a burst balloon, and shredded.

Along the opposite curb, a curtained black sedan had been cruising slowly as the track appeared. Now, springing into sudden swift motion, it hurtled forward, headed toward the far intersection.

Tim was onto his driver's neck like a striking rattlesnake.

"After 'em!"

The cab shot ahead. But the quick movement seemed almost simultaneous with the shrill, tortured scream of jammed brakes. Swerving, they brought up abruptly at the curb.

Into their path, swinging crazily to block off the entire street, the shattered truck had careened like a spinning top. There, miraculously on all four wheels, it jerked to a standstill.

Around the distant corner, the escaping sedan whipped out of sight into the maze of city-bound traffic. Swearing softly, Tim leaped the taxi's running board.

From the laundry, shouting employees were racing for the bombed truck as Grace sprang after him.

The private office of Nicholas Horner overlooked the street in which the sudden attack of a quarter hour previous had taken place. As he finished his statement, the haggard laundry magnate stared down at the wreck of his truck, sombre-eyed.

"So there it is, Mr. Noonan. The whole industry has received notes like those. Some of my rivals have seen fit to pay the 'dues' and 'assessments' this Mr. Almond demands. I did not. You saw what happened."

Big Tim flicked the little stack of notes through his fingers. All of them typed. All signed with one name, in a round uniformed hand: "Mr. Almond."

And all pompously decorated with blobs of red sealing wax in which the letter "A" had been stamped with the sort of stock signet available at the jewelry counter of any cheap department store!

"Look like kid stuff, don't they?"

Horner smiled wryly.

"That truck down there doesn't look much like a child's game, Mr. Noonan. At least, my three at home don't play that rough."

Tim's eyes, following the smaller man's, inspected the wreck of the blasted vehicle below. Shreds of charred cloth—all that was left of the two o'clock delivery—were swirling in the eddies of wind that fanned the neighboring gutters.

"How about the police?"

Horner frowned.

"No. We haven't gone to them. Police mean publicity Publicity means ruin. No sane housewife would send out a wash she knew was going to be blown to atoms before it was returned to her."

Noonan fanned the letters in his big hand.

"The Laundrymen's Protective Combine, eh? Who is this Almond guy? What's he look like? Could you identify him?"

Horner couldn't.

"Nor can any other laundryman in Brooklyn. His letters are all we have on him. Except his bombs."

Tim tossed the collection of papers into his secretary's lap. She scooped them up eagerly. There had been too much time wasted already, she felt.

"What you make of them, Redsie?"

She grinned.

"There is no Mr. Almond."

Horner lurched forward. His eyes were wide. He was quivering with emotion.

"No Almond? Young lady, if you think that truck is a mere hallucination or—"

Grace interrupted. "It's real enough. And whoever wrote those letters means business. But his name isn't Almond. See how slowly he has formed each letter? That's not the way you'd dash off your own familiar signature."

Who—who is he, then?"

"I don't know—yet His right name doesn't begin with A, because the signet is evidently brand-new. He's illiterate, of course. And he isn't a business man or used to seeing letters, or the 'Mr.' would have been a first name or initials. Aside from that—"

A door at the opposite end of the office opened. Horner's secretary, a drab female in tweeds, shuffled in.

"They've finished the emergency treatment on Wally, Mr. Horner. The ambulance is on its way."

"Wally?" Tim rumbled.

"Wally Mapes, the driver. Badly messed up, he was."

Tim's big frame swung toward the exit at the secretary's back.

"Better talk to him before the hospital people come. No chance he saw anything out there. The attack was too quick. But it won't hurt to ask. Coming, Redsie?"

Wally Mapes was fully conscious, stretched out on a mattress on the floor of the laundry garage. The doctor who had been rushed to the scene had given him emergency treatment on the spot before sending for an ambulance.

Peering down at the bandaged figure, Grace contacted the man's tortured eyes almost at once. Her scrutiny seemed to arrest his attention. They stared at each other for a full minute without speaking.

"Tough luck, Wally."

Hopes made no answer. His lint-swathed jaw might have explained this. So, she thought suddenly, might some other things.

It was the driver's eyes that had burned the corners of the redhead's intuition. Strange eyes. There was a dark glint in them. Something like—like blood hate.

What could that mean?

"Can he talk, doctor?" Tim rumbled.

The physician shrugged.

"A little. But not too much, man. He's lost some blood. Shock, too; you know."

There was no shock in Mapes's eyes, the girl – from the agency mused. And no noticeable weakness, either. Some terrible inner struggle seemed to be burning him, lending him extra strength.

But the man's Home-Way uniform was blood-spattered, and the thin mist of sweat on his forehead showed he was suffering.

Tim bent above him.

"Who got you, old-timer?"

Mapes might have been bomb-deaf. His eyes, meeting the detective's, sparkled dangerously. Then they closed. He made no other movement.

Tim turned away, shrugging. But those eyes of the injured man's still bothered Grace Culver. Just a hunch. But she bent above him quickly.

"You could hear him, Wally. And you know something. Come on and give! We'll find out other ways, any how."

Wally's lips panted slowly. But when she bent to catch the slow words gritting through his teeth, they weren't the tip she had been half-expecting.

"The—devil with—you—baby." And that was all he had to say.

The ambulance arrived, clanging like mad up the narrow street. Orderlies loaded the mangled Horner driver aboard. Grace, following them to the curb, stared after the departing vehicle with a puzzled little frown.

Seeing the street reminded her of that moment the bomb had landed. The slowly cruising car, abreast of the laundry door at just the right minute. The neat get-away All too perfect for a hit-or-miss hoodlum job.

Mapes couldn't have seen his attackers. And yet he knew who did the job! The hate in his eyes could mean nothing else but that Mapes knew.

Heart tingling Grace went back to Horner's office. Tim was just turning from the telephone.

"Calling Jerry," he explained. "Not much chance tracing those letters. Only way to get action from this Almond is to bait a trap. One truck is only a starter. He'll crack down on others, And—"

"And there we'll be!"

Tim's eyebrows lowered.

"There Jerry and me may be. Not you. Pineapples are no toys for girls. This case is all male stuff, from now on."

"Tim Noonan, if—"

"No sale." Tim said.

She knew he meant it. The Irish in her flared up, then died. No sense getting him riled until—"When do you big men try it?"

"To—night. Near midnight, maybe. But as far as you're concerned, young lady—"

"All right, all right!"

She left the office hurriedly. Her eyes were bright, angry. She found it hard work to smile when she stopped at Horner's secretary's desk in the outer waiting room.

"Er—could you—"

"Yes, Miss?"

"I need some information. Do your delivery trucks go out on a definite schedule? I mean, that one this afternoon? Is two the regular hour?"

The secretary's pale lips twitched.

"No, Miss. The regular schedule has been suspended for a week. Since the Combine letters have seemed dangerous, each driver has been told when to report the next day. Never two days the same."

"So only the driver and Mr. Horner would know?"

"Yes, Miss."

Grace nodded thoughtfully.

"I see. And one more thing. I wonder if you have this particular driver's home address on file? Wally Mapes, I mean."

"We have, Miss."

Slowly, the smile in Grace Culver's sherry-colored eyes was becoming more genuine.

Number 11 Barnstable Street, might have been the building from which the dreary little crosstown alley had derived its name.

Standing on the broken flagstones that passed for a sidewalk, Grace stared up at the bleak expanse of peeling paint and gray, weathered timber. Narrow windows, like unblinking dead eyes, stared back at her.

Mr. Wally Mapes, she decided, was in a brighter spot even in the bare, anti-septic-scrubbed aridity of the District Hospital's emergency ward.

Climbing the rickety wooden steps from the street, she jabbed a rusty bell with one cautious finger tip. It had seemed more than likely that the ark of a building would collapse under the pressure.

Somewhere inside, a metallic jangle began and continued until she removed the finger. She waited. The finger that had pressed the buzzer button traced the outline of a long pearl barpin, obviously cheap and flashy, that she wore at the throat of her blouse. The pin had not been part of her costume when she had left Horner's laundry, half an hour earlier.

Heavy footsteps, moving slowly, thudded along the hall on the other side of the drab panel. The door, opening a narrow slit, creaked dismally on its hinges.

The girl from Noonan's looked into the red-rimmed eyes of the sloppy female who peered out at her. Frowzy hair and rolls of fat vanishing into the ample filth of an unwashed Mother Hubbard, was her chief impression.

"Mrs. Mapes?"

The woman's voice, answering, was an ill-tempered rasp. But Grace kept on smiling.

"Naw. Miz Mapes lives upstairs. I'm Miz Clancey. What you want? You another of them charity bureau people?"

"No. I'm a staff aide. From the hospital. It's about Mr. Mapes. Is his wife—"

"She's still up to the hospital, lookin' after Wally." Grudgingly, the door opened wider, "You can set on the stairs and wait if you're a mind to, I guess."

Grace sat on the stairs and waited. "Miz" Clancey lumbered off into the shadows at the rear of the reeking hallway, leaving her to her own devices.

Her own devices consisted largely of trying not to breathe any oftener than she had to and of piecing and re-piecing what few tidbits on Mapes and Horner affairs had come her way during the early afternoon.

That "Combine" of the mysterious Mr. Almond. Childish, or no, there was a big-shot gun who had a pretty sizable industry by its coat-tails. His little daubs of sealing wax meant something in the laundry world. Something noticeably grim.

Did Mapes know who "Mr. Almond" was?

Grace doubted it. But he knew something. That curious glint in his eyes had been more than the bad nerves that might very easily follow such an experience as he had just been through.

Ten to one, the redhead figured, Wally at least knew who had tossed that pineapple at him. And if he wouldn't tell, there must be some darn good reason. Yet he couldn't have identified his attacker in that curtained sedan. Couple that with the secret delivery hour, and you got—

Heels beat a swift tattoo on the flimsy steps outside, and the door at the front of the hall was flung open suddenly. Before Grace could scramble to her feet, it had shut again.

The little woman who began to climb the stairs was wiry and bright-eyed. Wisps of fading hair escaped from beneath her outmoded hat. Her face was colorless, set in lines of strain, its lips grim, its cheeks hollow.

"Mrs. Mapes?"

The woman gasped.

"My lands! I didn't see—"

"Sorry if I startled you. I'm from the hospital, Miss Redmond."

Mrs. Mapes kept on climbing. "Hospital? But—I've just been there, and Wally was doing pretty good. It—he isn't—"

"No." Grace swung into step beside her, going up. "No bad news at all. Only some questions. Routine stuff. If you'll just give me five minutes or so.

Mrs. Mapes was fumbling with her latchkey.

"Sure. That's all right, Miss Redmond. Come in, if you like."

The Mapes flat was just what might have been expected from a look at the outside of the building. Small. Dark. Clean enough, but tainted with the fetid smell of decay that hung over everything in the place.

Mrs. Mapes, indicating a wicker rocking chair to her caller, flopped wearily onto the broken-down couch herself.

"All set, Miss Redmond."

The girl from Noonan's pawed in her bag for a notebook and the stub of a pencil. She flipped the former open on her knee with a professional snap that she hoped would impress her hostess.

"Now then! Mr. Mapes's age?"

"Forty-three."

"Born in New York?"

"Englewood, New Jersey, ma'am."

Stock questions, all meaningless, dropped from the girl's lips as quickly as the driver's wife could answer them. In the notebook she was making shorthand notes of quite another character. Such as: "Beer steins on shelf; Mapes and two others must drink here. Poker chips under table—they play here—Poker-face Mapes."

At last, having lulled the woman's suspicions, Grace started to put out her feelers.

"Has Mr. Mapes any close friends?"

"Friends? Sure. He ain't a clubby man, but he gets on all right."

"I mean, special friends. People we ought to let know about hospital visiting hours?"

"Well—there's Peewee Belk and Otto. Especially Peewee. Them three play a bit of cards together. And Wally and Peewee been meeting noontimes at the Imperial Lunch near by Horner's, ever since Peewee was fired from there."

"Check ex-employee Belk," went into the notebook.

"I'm liable to find him at the Imperial, then, Mrs. Mapes—to inform him?"

Wally's wife nodded.

"It's right good of you folks to do all this for a poor man, Miss Redmond. I sure didn't realize—"

"Part of our regular hospital routine, Mrs. Mapes. Now if you could give me a description of Mr. Belk, so I can—"

The woman jumped to her feet and began to fish for something in one drawer of a battered chest in the window corner of the room. After a moment, she dragged out a sleazy snapshot album and bore it in triumph across to the rocker.

"Better than that! Here's the photo the boys had took at the laundry convention picnic last year. Peewee was still workin' for the laundry, then. There's Wally, and then Slugger Nixon—him and Wally ain't good friends any more—and then Peewee next."

It was too dark in the cubbyhole of a flat to make sure of faces. But Grace studied the convention picture as best she could, cursing the shadows.

Nixon, with whom Mapes had fallen out somehow. "Peewee" Belk, fired from Horner's, the wounded driver's crony. The fact that they were side by side at the picnic might have been an accident. On the other hand—

Grace Culver's whole life had been a series of hunches, striking like lightning. One of her better ones struck now! She swallowed hard.

"Thanks, Mrs. Mapes. That about finishes us, I think. I'll be getting on now. Oh—one more thing. I hate to bother you, but could I have a glass of water? I'm dry right down to my toes."

"Why sure. Why sure you can."

Mrs. Mapes's willing back had scarcely disappeared into the kitchen when the redhead went into action.

The tawdry pearl barpin at her throat jerked open in quick, strong fingers. The disguised skeleton key that formed one end of it had gotten the girl from Noonan's out of many a tight jam before. But it was another part of the gadget that she was using to-day.

One side of the cross-piece was filed and whetted to the sharp edge of a razor blade. This, she slipped deftly beneath a loose corner of the convention picture. The white paper lifted easily from its mounting, curling forward like a wave ahead of the sliding knife.

When Mrs. Mapes came back with the water, her husband's album was lying neatly closed on the edge of the couch. Miss Redmond was waiting at the door.

"Thanks, Mrs. Mapes. My, that tastes good. I'm sure Mr. Mapes is going to be all right. Goodby."

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The five o'clock whistle was due to sound at almost any minute when the red-headed doll strolled into the Imperial Lunch Wagon and cocked a bold eye at the clock on the wall above the griddle.

"You got a telephone in here, handsome?"

Mrs. Mapes herself would have had a hard time identifying the hospital's efficient Miss Redmond. This girl might have been off any street corner in the city. Her face was made up as heavily as a circus clown's. Her eyes were stupid, her lips a flaming invitation.

The attendant, who was fixing up a pair of "Westerns" for the two steady customers at the end of the counter, gave her an appraising look.

"Sure, sweetheart! In that wall niche behind you. But it ain't closed in, so be careful you don't say nothin' us fellows is too young to hear."

A certain Miss Redmond had gotten coffee at the Imperial, hours earlier. She knew about the wall instrument. All about it.

"Thanks, wise guy."

Swinging her hips, the doll moved up to the open booth. Blinders, fashioned after those used on a horse, screened the telephone itself. From the waist up, the girl was masked from the counter.

The redhead opened a large flat compact and began to fish for a nickel, muttering audibly. Those mutters covered an action her audience might have found it hard to explain.

From somewhere beneath the compact's mirror, released by the deft pressure of a spring, another mirror dropped into her hand. This was of metal, long, folded into sections like a steamer ticket and hinged four times.

The two-inch sections of highly polished steel, capable of being set up in a variety of position combinations, could pick up a room from all its angles and mirror it entire in the final reflector.

While the coin dropped jangling into the box, and while the doll's finger twirled the dial with gusto, her free hand was busy. By the time she had finished one operation, she had finished both. The attendant and the pair at the counter beyond were clearly visible to her, leers and all.

The picture of Mr. Mapes's convention picnic had come in for some serious study under good lights, since it had left its moorings in the cheap album on Barnstable Street. She knew the ugly faces of "Slugger" Nixon and Peewee Belk by heart, And she was looking at them now!

She couldn't say much for Wally Mapes's choice of friends, if Belk was one of them. But Nixon looked as if he might make a pretty good enemy. Hard-eyed, pock-marked and huge, he crouched above his food like a malformed anthropoid.

"Noonan's Agency," a voice in her ear said abruptly. She recognized Jerry Riker's voice. Her own, lowered with seeming care, still managed to carry the length of the lunch wagon as she answered.

"Jack? . . . Listen, it's Daisy, honey."

Jerry got it. The instrument's ear-piece squeaked magnificently.

"Well, Daisy! Hiya, baby?"

"You hear me O. K., Jack? There ain't no one around?"

"Not even the little bird," Jerry told her.

"Then listen. I just got wise Horner talked you into taking a wagon out to—night. In place of that mug they got to this p.m. You ain't gonna do it. Jack! You ain't, you hear me?"

There was a split second's silence. then: "Never say 'ain't' to a college boy," Jerry offered weakly.

"I won't let you, honey! They'll get you, just like him! For my sake, Jack! Midnight ain't no safer than noon. This ain't easy money. Jack—please—"

Things were happening in the multiple—mirror. The counter attendant didn't seem to pick up much, one way or the other. But his customers were registering interest by the bucketful.

Belk, the nearer figure, had swung on his stool and was staring at her out of cat eyes that were nothing better than slits in his vicious little face. A fine pal to confide in! And Wally Mapes was probably thinking that same thing, along about now, in the emergency ward.

Slugger Nixon, the crouching ape, had stopped pouring salt on his sand—wich with the shaker in mid—air. The fingers of his big, hairy paw were clenched over it tight. Reflected on one of them was a tiny point of light—the kind of flashy ring, no doubt, that many bruisers of his type affected.

"Not even midnight!" the doll sobbed into the mouthpiece. "I don't care if they got cops ambushed all around the darn laundry. That don't mean you're safe after you turn in at Hirtzell Street, where it's lonesome and dark! Jack— listen to me—don't hang up on me— Jack—"

Taking his cue, Jerry slammed the receiver. Its click must have been audible all down the counter. Instantly. the picture in the mirrors changed again.

When the doll turned to face them, dabbing at tear—filled eyes, the two customers had their backs toward her. They were hunched above the counter. They were eating busily.

"There's other guys in the world, baby," the attendant suggested.

She faced him fiercely.

"Keyhole stuff, huh? Listenin', huh?"

"Aw, why get tough, Daisy? Strike out this Jack. Say, I get off here at ten and know a hot joint where—"

"The joints I'd like to get hot." the doll announced flatly from the door, "is your flappy ears, from wrappin' that greased griddle around 'em. Can't a lady even talk private to a gentleman on the telephone, without you snoopin' in? You make me feel like I need a liver pill!"

A clock struck, somewhere across the darkened city. Twelve times. The eerie notes trembled mournfully down the deserted block that bordered Horner's Home—Way Laundry.

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The doors between the laundry garage and the street were shut. Thin beams of light from inside sliced under their partly lowered blinds, throwing narrow slivers of illumination across the curb.

The girl from Noonan's had parked her small, topless roadster around the corner of an intersecting avenue in the opposite direction from Hirtzell Street. She walked up the block, eyes knifing the gloom as she came. There was no sign of a Combine car anywhere in the neighborhood.

So the little scene at the Imperial was working out! Belk and Nixon, taking to heart that tip that police would be ambushed around the laundry, had planned their own little party for somewhere along the route.

Reaching the splinters of light on the sidewalk, the redhead turned in. Her knuckles beat a sharp summons on the fastened panel. She waited.

Inside, Jerry Rikers voice said, "Leave me go, Tim. It may be some funny business from this Almond palooka, and—"

Noonan's heavy steps on the concrete door interrupted him.

The door opened an inch, and Grace was staring into the muzzle of an automatic and one sharp gray eye. Then Big Tim grunted. The opening widened quickly.

She stepped inside. The door thudded shut on her heels. Before she could blink her eyes into focus in the sudden light, the grizzled agency chief's sharp tongue was lashing her.

"So what's the big notion? Didn't I tell you to stay home to-night? Didn't I say this was men's work? Many's the time I've tipped you up over my knee since them mobsmen mowed down your father, rest the soul of him! And by the—"

She smiled at him blandly.

"Who's asking to ride in that truck with you? If you and his nibs want to get blown into little pieces like a jigsaw puzzle, it's your privilege. I wouldn't set foot in the truck!"

Tim blustered.

"Then why—"

"I just came to say good luck to you. And find out how everything was going. There was no order against that, Timothy Noonan."

The laundry owner and Tim's other assistant were crouching on the lowered tailboard of a Hornet delivery truck, stacking up a wall of paper cartons and bundles at the rear of the van.

Inside, behind the deceptive barricade, a finger of light struck cold fire from the nose of a wicked-looking "typewriter." It was set up for instant use, and ready to sweep the street behind the truck.

"Some wash!"

Jerry Riker chuckled.

"And there's another one trained frontwards, over the driver's shoulder, to snipe 'em off from that end. And some fireworks of our own stacked up in the front seat."

"Surprise, surprise! for Mr. Almond, huh?"

"That's right. When that little black buggy with the curtains hauls in sight ———Oh, boy! Oh, boy!"

Grace let it go at that. Her sherry-brown eyes inspected the camouflaged arsenal for a full five minutes before she spoke again.

"Very nice. Only thing I can't figure is, how come midnight? You can't deliver wash then. I mentioned your own time at the Imperial. But won't these babies figure out there's something phony about the hour?"

Horner explained.

"Westchester delivery. Leaving early to be out to the suburbs to-morrow morning. We spread that tip all through the plant this afternoon. There's sure to be a leak to Almond somewhere."

"And the streets are empty at night," Jerry finished. "Easier to spot the sedan. Less danger of nicking some innocent bystander when the shooting starts. They all seemed so sure that trapping "Mr. Almond"—or his hired rods—was merely a matter of beating the enemy to the draw, shooting first, and bringing in what was left for questioning.

But something—her "hunch machine" at work again, maybe—seemed to warn the redhead that the business at hand was a whole lot tougher than they thought.

Slugger Nixon's face had been a study in low animal craft, at the counter of the Imperial. Its reflection in her series of little metal mirrors had sent a chill up her spine. Things wouldn't be so simple, with a man like that holding any kind of a hand at all.

And, except for the arsenal, all the cards in the deck seemed to be Slugger's!

"Ready!" Jerry barked from the tailboard.

Big Tim, nodding curtly, climbed into the cab and eased his big frame under the driver's wheel. He had his automatic ready on the seat beside him.

Horner jumped for the garage floor, and helped Jerry lift the tailboard on its chains. When it was in the van, with Jerry half screened by the low wall of boxes, Tim turned the engine over.

As the motor's low drone became regular in the big room, Horner threw the bolt on the street doors. Slowly, moving before his weight in their oiled grooves, they swung open.

The white truck, rolling like a big cloud in the darkness, dipped across the curb and swung north in the direction of Hirtzell and the other river streets.

Horner and the redhead watched the blinking tail-light grow smaller as it drew away down the block. The laundryman grunted uncertainly.

"Well——"

"That's that," Grace said.

"If you'll tell me where I can find your car, Miss Culver, I'd be glad—"

"I'll get it while you're locking up. It's just around the corner."

Homer switched off the inside lights, pulled the big doors shut from the street side, and was fumbling in his pocket for a key when the roar of a motor echoed in the shadows behind him.

It showed no signs of slowing. The engine howled a challenge. Gasping sharply, the laundry owner ducked for cover as he spun.

But it was the girl from Noonan's, after all.

Her open roadster was picking up speed as it whipped past Horner's Home-Way Laundry. She was bent above the wheel like a young devil. She was grinning.

"Hey!" Horner shouted. "Miss Culver! Hey!"

She paid no attention. She was giving the small machine its head. And its nose was hot on the trail of the white truck's tail-light, still visible as a tiny spot of red far up the street.

At the curb where she had parked the roadster, the redhead had stopped long enough for one simple operation. From behind the mirror of her compact, she had produced once again the small hinged steel reflectors that she had used at the Imperial.

Above the driver's mirror, in brackets especially placed for the purpose, she had adjusted the line of plates with quick, sure movements. Then she climbed under the wheel and shoved down her toes.

Past the laundry she shot like a bullet out of one of the truck's concealed machine guns. In the driver's glass, she was able to watch Horner waving his arms and running.

In the little polished surfaces above, she could see the tops of trees she was passing. Nothing in the neighborhood, before or behind, escaped the surface of at least one of the reflectors ahead of her.

The wind whistled past her with a vicious swish as she urged the little car forward at a speed that rocked the light body and made the engine roar. Up the street, the truck's swaying tail-light grew bigger. Then she could make out the bulky outline of the vehicle itself.

Abruptly, she slowed the roadster to a pace similar to that of the machine she was following. It would be a mistake to get close enough to be recognized. And a worse mistake to trail them within gun range, if she were not recognized.

The truck kept on, heading north and toward the river in the direction of the Williamsburg Bridge. The streets were empty as it rolled along. Occasional pedestrians or a chance taxi appeared at intersections and were gone again.

That hunch inside the redhead grew unaccountably stronger, however, despite the silence through which she was following the bigger machine's rumbling wheels.

The lull before the storm. She wondered what lay ahead—along or near Hirtzell Street, where she figured that, after her deliberate tip, the Combine men must be waiting.

The truck swerved to the left, into a westbound cross street. She jerked her own wheel, keeping on its tail.

A little later, swinging north again, the van passed under a lone overhead light. The redhead was close enough to the intersection to glimpse the mound of boxes and parcels heaped behind the tailboard. There was no sign of Jerry's lurking presence behind them.

Down the new street, the white truck rolled like a moving tomb. It was narrow and dark ahead, the girl from Noonan's noticed. Then, as she twisted her wheel to follow, the overhead light flung its oblique rays athwart the identifying sign at the corner. Hirtzell Street. Her heart began a dull, fast pounding as the shadows of the cramped thoroughfare closed over her. Danger ahead! Danger ahead!

The place was little wider than an alley, flanked on both sides by window-pocked factory walls. Two vehicles the width of the Hornet truck could scarcely have passed in the confined area without scraping fenders. If that elusive black sedan— Something was wrong ahead!

The forward movement of the disguised arsenal was slowing perceptibly. Grace, letting the roadster's pace slacken to suit, was afraid for one instant that they had spotted her pursuit and mistaken her headlights for the Combine gang.

Then the roadster's swerving lamps picked out the real cause of the difficulty.

Parked at the left-hand curb, all its lights off stood a car. An inconspicuous sedan, with a hood that showed black in the darkness. A familiar sedan, with all its windows screened by drawn curtains!

Grace felt her heart do a double flip up into the region of her throat. She let the roadster coast as easily as it would toward the tailboard of the slowing truck. And she reached with her left hand for the pocket of the door beside her, lifting her head a little as she did so.

Then, suddenly, her brain seemed to freeze.

Her eyes had swept the mirrors arranged to reflect the areas above her to right and left. And what she saw mirrored there was—death.

The sinister sedan ahead was obviously drawing all Tim's and Jerry's attention. The jockeying of the truck made this easily apparent. And—that was just what "Mr. Almond" and his agents had intended it should do!

In the redhead's bright metal reflectors, their ruse was revealed. They had baited a trap as good as Tim Noonan's. A little better, in fact.

Along the roof line of the three-story building directly above the point where the truck was slowing, three figures had appeared. Their black, hunched shapes loomed up like globs of tar against the pale sky. Rat-tat-a-tat-tat!

The sudden staccato bark shattered the silence of the deserted street with guttural precision. Jerry's machine gun, aimed at the empty sedan!

A distant tinkle of shattering glass came to the redhead's ears as her left hand whipped out of the roadster's side pocket and transferred its bit of cold metal to her rigid right.

Her eyes were fixed, not on the scene ahead, but upon the mirrors directly above her. She saw one of the three globs at the roof's edge straighten and become a man. She saw his arm swing back, like a baseball pitcher's. Cra-ack!

It was her own automatic, jerking up in a hand that reacted with the movement of a perfect bit of machinery. She saw flame fan the darkness ahead of her in a thin red banner. Her trigger finger twitched again. Crack! Cra-ack!

The man at the roof's edge stiffened abruptly. His body had made a good target outlined against the sky. Now it lurched crazily.

The ball in his lifted arm spun backward into space. A thin, tortured shriek ripped down from above. Then two things happened at once.

Over the edge of the sharp drop, the swaying body pitched like a sack of meal tossed from the squatty chimneys.

It hurtled, terrifying in its speed and silence, toward the pavement just ahead of the redhead's fenders. It struck stone with a gruesome sound that made her retch despite herself.

Behind the dark factory, suddenly, hell broke loose. A roar like the end of time ripped at the night with shattering violence. Flame, styled after the blaze of a lightning bolt, leaped up behind the blank windows and vanished. The ominous rumble of falling stone and caving mortar followed, a dull, increasing sound. Part of the factory, on the back side, had been blasted by the charge intended for Tim and Jerry in the truck.

At the roof's edge, the two remaining crouchers had sprung from their unexpected revealed position and were wavering uncertainly in their scramble for cover in the shadow of the overhanging chimneys. Grace's gun snapped up again.

But Jerry, in the truck ahead, had rallied with the trained speed of a cop to the truth of the trap Nixon and his men had set for them.

Before she could take aim on another of the men above, the masked typewriter at the back of the van sprang into action. Rat-tat-a-tat-a-tat-tat!

One of the looming shapes above flung up his arms and reeled toward the chimneys, falling out of sight on the roof. Dead or wounded, it was impossible to tell.

His companion, however, wheeling in a frenzy of terror, sprang straight for the drop. His arm was lifted. He had scooped up, from somewhere, a twin to the bomb that had missed fire. He was shrieking insanely as he came.

The unrelenting snarl of the machine gun in the truck began again. The red fire of it flickered in a thin, wicked line against the blackness. Its target took the lead in his belly. Clawing, he plunged.

The missile, rolling out of his stiff fanned fingers, took the drop ahead of him. Grace saw it coming and screamed. Jerry saw it, too and dove back into the black recesses of the van.

Deafening, blinding, the explosion filled the narrow street. Its roar shattered windows in the confining walls to either side. The paving between truck and roadster lifted like a black wave.

The redhead ducked.

Orange flame filled the night, and into it hurtled the dead weight of the luckless gunman. Then, thudding like hail on the hood of the roadster, bits of debris began to descend in a swift shower.

Grace heard the glass of her windshield smash. She felt little jagged bits of the pulverized cement flaying her body. Arms shielding her head, she lay cramped in the bottom of her car.

Amid the growling echoes of the terrific explosion, the tinkle and crash of falling fragments kept on.

Then silence.

The jackknifed girl straightened slowly, lifting her bruised body back into the seat.

Ahead, the truck stood undamaged. Behind it, under cover and with his machine gun arm—cradled, Jerry was advancing cautiously on the factory side.

Too late, he spotted the movement a corner of the van had screened from him.

Grace lurched for her ignition. The engine coughed. But she, too, had not acted in time.

The street door of the dingy brick building had whipped open. Toward her, at a dead run, three figures spurted. She glimpsed Slugger's evil face—a sallow stranger, grinning—Peewee Belk's killer eyes—

Springing like cats, they were upon the roadster as it began to move. Jerry shouted. His weapon was up. But he dared not use it.

"Redsie, for the—"

"Keep your cover, Riker!"

She screamed the warning as the car, careening madly to avoid the hole in the road before it, whipped forward. The third man, gun in hand, had swung on the running board to finish Jerry.

Z-zing!

The one instant in which the mobster had gotten out of line with Grace had been enough for Tim Noonan. His automatic barked from inside the van, and Big Tim never missed.

"Sallow Face" screamed once before he buckled away from the speeding car. Grace had a flash of him spinning forward into the yawning pit. Only a flash. The roadster was in its stride by now.

The wheel jerked twice in her hands. Once to the left, avoiding the truck. Once to the right, avoiding the parked sedan. Then it straightened.

The narrow blackness of Hirtzell Street lay ahead.

Far away, the wailing of police sirens split the night. Help! But she couldn't stop for it. Two killers were hanging onto her car, one on either running board. Both of them with rods in their hands.

Her only hope lay in keeping the roadster moving at top speed, so that they dared not finish her. Eyes grim, teeth set, she jammed down on the gas.

Ahead of her, a little needle wavered and began to climb.

Fifty-five — sixty — sixty-five — They whipped past an intersection, and she heard a scream from far away.

"You—little—punk—" That roar was Peewee Belk. He was on the farther running board, hanging on like grim death and howling at her. Her gaze was steady on the lane ahead. But one corner of an eye took in the rim of the door beside her. A paw gripped it, wet with strain, white at the knuckles. Five brute fingers. A signet ring. Nixon was "Mr. Almond," then! Crouching so close that his hot breath fanned her, he was growling his lethal command in her ear. It was an order that meant business. "Slow her down, sister! Slow her down, or—"

Sixty-five — sixty-eight — Her foot was jamming the floorboard now. The needle shivered at seventy when she took the corner, swerving west toward the river. Tires screamed, skidding over the bad pavement. She could feel the wheels on Peewee's side lift into the air. He howled a frenzied oath before they slammed earthward again.

"Stop this dame, Slugger! Stop her quick—"

The new street plunged down a short hill to the water front.

Too late, sickness gripping her heart, she realized the truth. A dead end!

Far off, the sirens were wailing. They seemed no nearer. Wind whipped back her hair, lashing in through the shattered glass.

"You grab the wheel, Slugger! I'll pump her!"

Ahead, a closed gate of thin iron rods shut off the empty coaling pier in which the little side street ended. Bars, and the pier, and then a blackness that must be the river.

No way out! And death if she stopped!

Belk's voice was a sudden frantic shriek.

"She ain't stopping! She's crazy! She—"

The redhead laughed between her teeth.

"Summer fever, Peewee!"

They hit the gate head on.

A splintering crash that meant the end of the roadster filled all the world, as the rusty old bars caved before the terrific impact.

In a flash of blinding clarity, Grace saw Peewee's finish. One of the broken *spikes had caught him. Clean through the little rat, it had ripped.

He was swept from his running board and hung there, in the air, helplessly impaled. Except for his ghastly face, there was little to prove those dripping scarlet shreds had ever been human.

Down the pier the car lashed, rocketing, utterly beyond control. The wheel had snapped in its driver's hands. She was helpless.

Then—only blackness ahead.

She felt the tires leaving ground. Blindly, in the direction where Nixon should be, she struck out. Her arms contacted flesh. As the water closed over them, she clung.

Tim explained most of it, afterward.

They were flung free of the car. When the patrol reached the pier, she was holding Slugger's head under water like grim death. They had a hard time breaking her grip so they could fish him in.

Grace was wrapped in a blanket, in the back seat of a borrowed car, when the haze cleared. Jerry sat on one side of her. Tim on the other.

"It's too bad," were the first words she said.

"Huh?"

"It's too bad I finished Peewee before Mapes could get at him. Mapes had him marked. His pal, the only one he'd told when his truck would start! Mapes knew! He had a better right to — to ——"

Big Tim grunted.

"Truck drivin'? It's not the soft racket I'd figured it. To-night, if you hadn't been fool enough to trail us on a man's job and spot that—"

Grace grinned at him. "A woman's job!"

"How come?"

"Well—that part of it was all done with mirrors, wasn't it?"