

Double Chocolate

Roswell Brown

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"And the double chocolate soda goes where?" the blonde waitress demanded, shifting her weight from one foot to the other with a swinging movement of the hips. She balanced a trayful of soda and shortcake expertly, her china blue eyes staring off into the distance.

Grace Culver had been making a snake out of the paper wrapper from her soda straw. She looked up quickly, with a gleam in her eyes as they fixed on the double chocolate. But she answered the question another way.

"Mrs. Moody wanted the shortcake, Stella."

"Oh, yeah—I remember now." Dishes clanked on the glass top of Ye Blue Bird Tea Shoppe's front table.

and the swinging hips undulated indifferently in the direction of the kitchen once more. Maggie Moody regarded her shortcake with a two-hundred-pound sigh of satisfaction.

"Sure, it's a good thing not to be so weighty you got to be worrying over what you put in your stomach all the time," she observed. "When Terrance Moody was alive—three hundred and four," they buried him at, and a better man never breathed—"

Grace, plunging her straws into the creamy liquid before her, listened vaguely. Her sherry-colored eyes were fixed on the tall, cool glass with a gaze of real affection. Double chocolate! It was the high spot of her birthday spree.

Slowly, luxuriously, she began to sip. It was nice to have the day off from her job at Tim Noonan's detective agency. It was nice to be repaying her landlady's many motherly kindnesses with a holiday treat of lunch and a movie matinee. But best of all—the flavor of chocolate slipped down her throat, cool, rich, savory.

"—no patience with these skinny women," the ample widow of Terrance Moody was continuing. "You, now—you're different. You're the kind that's born slim, and you eat your head off and still you stay that way. But when vain birds that won't so much as look sideways at a piece of candy for fear that—"

The rich Irish voice broke off suddenly. Maggie Moody had an idea.

"Say, dearie, speakin' of candy? Why don't I buy us some at the counter there, for eatin' in the movie? After all, it's your birthday and I've given you not so much as—"

"And after all, this is my party, too," Grace objected. "I'd already planned to get us a—"

But her guest was paying no attention. A box of chocolates—blue, with a silver ribbon—had caught her determined eye from the display case along-side the door. She was making for it like a homing pigeon—more accurately, like a homing hippopotamus.

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Grace watched her with a little shake of her red curls and then turned back to her soda glass. Once Maggie Moody took hold of a notion! Oh, well—

The "tea shoppe" was pleasantly restful at two o'clock of a mid-week afternoon. The girl from Noonan's liked it. Too bad birthdays didn't come oftener. But, if they did, she probably wouldn't think to take advantage of them.

This holiday had been Big Tim's idea. She had forgotten what the day was when she reported at the office in the morning.

But not Tim. He had been her dead father's friend—had all but brought her up, in the other man's place, after a gang war bullet had rubbed out Sergeant Culver.

So, this morning, it had been Tim who had remembered the birthday; Tim who had pressed a crisp ten-dollar bill into her hand and shoved her toward the door; Tim who had bellowed to puzzled Jerry Riker, at a desk in the corner, that they'd have no doddering old ladies about the place this day.

Swell, salt-of-the-earth Tim! Even if detective work weren't the grandest business on earth—even if it weren't in the Culver blood—the fact that Tim was her boss would have made the job.

Jerry, second in command at the agency, felt that way about the grizzled ex-inspector, too. A guy like Tim—"Counterfeit!"

The ugly word cut into Grace's aimless thoughts like a steel knife. Her red head snapped up. The tableau at the candy counter burst upon her with all the unreality of a group in a waxworks museum.

Maggie Moody's fleshy face was purple. The clerk behind the counter was frigid. Between them, on the glass slab, lay a blue-and-silver box—and a five-dollar bill.

"What do you mean, counterfeit?" the big woman gasped. "What do—"

"I mean counterfeit. The bill's a phony. It's faked. It's no good!"

"But I got it not an hour back from me best boarder!" Maggie snorted. "I'm tellin' you that Mr, Figgen wouldn't never—"

Grace rose hastily from their table and, abandoning the soda in its early stages, hurried to her guest's embattled side.

"What seems to be the trouble, Mother Moody?"

The older woman turned, bristling.

"Tryin' to tell me that Mr. Figgen would pay his board in no-good money, that's what he is! When I go to pay the young man for his candy, them's the very words he ups and sasses me with! You can see—"

Grace picked up the disputed bill and held it to the light. She crinkled it deftly. Her eyes were unsmiling as she turned back again.

"He's right, Mother Moody."

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Maggie's face went blank. A gray tinge stole over it. She ran the tip of her tongue along an underlip suddenly gone flaccid.

"You mean— But—but Mr. Figgen—twenty years he's been—"

"Have you any more of the board money he paid, in your purse?"

Figgen's landlady nodded vigorously.

"Every cent for the month of November! And Mrs. Reilly's, and both the Hoffstadters', and old Mrs. Gilliman's. I was plannin' on (takin' them into the bank as we passed by."

"May I see?"

There was a fat wad of small bills in the plump hand which snapped shut the Moody purse. Maggie held them out on an open palm—perhaps a hundred and fifty dollars' worth.

Grace bent above them for a minute, her eyes sharp, her fingers busy. Then she straightened slowly.

"They're almost all fake, darling." Not only Mr. Figgins' money, but other money that Mother Moody had.

The head cashier of the Importer's Trust downtown branch bank ruffled the bills through his fingers carefully.

"Counterfeit." he said. But the word was matter-of-fact, not indignant in the manner of the Blue Bird cashier.

"All but these few are counterfeit, Mrs. Moody."

Maggie faced him across the mahogany desk, her eyes stunned. Grace, sitting beside her and holding one of her hands consolingly, could feel a shudder passing through the heavy body.

"But—I'm sure I don't understand it, at all, at all. If it was only the money from one boarder, sure; although even then I'd be doubtin' me senses, them folks is that close to me. But here's Mrs. Reilly payin' me the first of the week, and Mrs. Gilliman only yesterday, and—"

"Very odd," Mr. Albertson commented. "Very odd, indeed. They couldn't all be in on the counterfeit ring, very well. And there's a new ring in operation, ladies. A big one. The same plates that struck off these have been working overtime here lately. Yours is our—let me remember—our twenty-third complaint since last month."

It was his first remark which had struck a spark in Maggie Moody. She eyed the cashier angrily.

"Don't you be hintin' me boarders is a crime ring, Mister—Mister What's-it! There's guests have been with me since seven years before Terrance Moody died, and—"

Grace laid a quieting hand on her landlady's arm.

"There, there, darling, nobody's accusing your pets of having long jail sentences behind them. Mr. Albertson, I just was wondering—that's all new money, isn't it?"

The cashier nodded.

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"Fresh from the plates. Cleverest engraving I've ever run across, too. As I say, we've been fooled before by this same brand. There's a lot of it around the town right now."

"But not," said Grace, "enough to explain why every one at Mrs. Moody's should pay her with nothing but phony bills of small denominations." She turned toward Maggie. "Try to remember—was all the money they gave you new?"

The Moody head shook instantly.

"It was not, that! I remember thinkin' Mrs. Gilliman must of saved hers in her coal hod since the Armistice, it was that dirty. And there was a grease spot on—" Her heavy jaws dropped suddenly. "Say! None of that's my money! None of that's what me boarders paid me!"

The redhead caught her up with shallowly concealed eagerness, her nose lifting like a pointing dog's.

"I knew it! And the first time those bills were all together was when you put them in your purse to bank them to-day! So—where did you stop on your way from home before you met me at the Blue Bird?"

A frown, puzzled and uncertain, pulled Maggie's honest eyebrows out of line.

"I—I don't just recall. There was Louie's—the butcher on the corner. No place else, and I've known Louie since he was— Wait now! There was the curiosity store!"

The sherry-brown eyes watching her face seemed to contract.

"The—what?"

"That new curiosity store. You know—that place the Armenian or whatever he is opened up on the block behind us. That Ivan—you know—"

Grace nodded. In her mind she could see the new sign, carefully lettered, swaying above a cluttered doorway. IVAN JORGEN: Rugs, Vases, Curios.

"I know. Whatever made you stop there?"

"I was fixin' to buy you a birthday present. He had some strings of blue and yellow beads in the window—kind of foreign appearin' and queer—so I sort of went in and tried a couple on. But then I remembered how you never wear beads—"

"Did you put down your purse while you were trying on? Even for a minute?"

"Well— well, yes, now that I think of it, but—"

Grace, small nose quivering excitedly, swung back to the cashier across the desk.

"Mr. Albertson, have you one or two of those fake bills that have been used—the dirtier the better? And a fine-point pen? And a bottle of green ink?" "Certainly. But I'm not sure—" Grace dipped her hand into a pocket of her jacket. An official card slipped between her fingers. She held it out toward Albertson.

"It's quite all right. I'm Culver, from Tim Noonan's agency."

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Grace paused beneath the sign, IVAN JORGEN: Rugs, Vases, Curios, glancing into a show window filled with a hodge-podge of stuff which was, indeed, "foreign appearin' and queer." Mr. Jorgen seemed to have a little of everything in his shop.

A thick, stale smell issued from the darkness beyond the open doorway. In the shadowy interior of the store, a lone dim figure was moving forward.

Under ordinary circumstances, the girl from Noonan's would have hurried past the place after one glance at the cheap atrocities displayed there. But now she stood her ground, admiring a particularly ugly vase in the background. A conspicuous red leather purse—very new and shiny—dangled loosely from her fingers.

When the heavy-set dark man had stepped suggestively to the door, she was noticeably eager. Her gaze, as she turned toward him, took in his matted eyebrows, his strong but sensitive hands, and the brutish jut of the jaw above his soiled collar.

"I wonder—could you tell me, please, how much that is? That vase in the corner?"

The man bowed, rubbing his hands together across his stomach. Three gold teeth glittered in his oily smile.

"But yes, Madame. Ver' cheap. Ver' good work. You maybe step inside, like to see?"

Grace stepped inside. It was very much the sort of junk shop she had been expecting. There was some article in that conglomerate mess in the window to attract almost any eye—to lure the passer-by inside for further examination.

But there couldn't be many sales made. A thin film of dust was spread over the roll of wrapping paper beside the counter. Mr. Jorgen obviously wasn't making much out of his business.

"It was that vase at the very back of the window," Her voice sounded feminine and helpless to a degree. She put down the bright red pocketbook on the edge of a chair behind her while she pointed.

Jorgen stepped around her, lifted the bit of pottery over the back of the showcase, and put it in her hands. She glimpsed a Made in Brooklyn stamp on its bottom before his persuasive voice poured over her.

"Imported, Madame. Ver' fine. Comes from Latvia. A very special low price—"

The back of the redhead's neck tingled. She yearned to spin about and face him suddenly. But instead, still keeping him out of her line of vision, she moved forward a little and held the vase up to the light—studying it intently.

"No," she said at last, her voice regretful. "No, it isn't the right color after all. I wanted it for a special place, you see. I'm sorry."

Now she did turn toward him. He was standing a good two feet from the chair where she had left her pocketbook. His hands were extended to take back the vase. He was smiling unhappily.

"I, too, am sorry. Perhaps—something else?"

"I haven't time to look, this afternoon. But I'll certainly be back! Thank you so much."

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She caught up the red pocketbook and tucked it neatly under her arm. As she marched out of the store, she was conscious of Ivan Jorgen moving along at her back and purring something about, "ver' fine turquoise bracelets, if Madame—"

At the end of the block, the black-and-silver facade of a beauty shop boasting the name of Maison de Chic glittered impressively. In its windows, an ornately-lettered card announced: "Paris Manicure Our Specialty."

Grace ducked quickly into the lobby. Screened from the street, her fingers fumbled with the clasp of the bright bag crooked in her arm.

A roll of small bills—ones, fives, tens—fanned open in her free hand. Her sherry eyes narrowed in triumph as she held them to the light.

On each of the noses of her own Lincolns, Washingtons and Hamiltons she had made three inconspicuous dots with the excellent green ink of the Importer's Trust.

But the noses of all the faces before her now were innocent of any blemish! The bills had been switched while she was alone with the proprietor of the "curiosity store."

It was Jorgen, then!

"And will he be sore when he finds out he's taken in some of his own phonies in trade! Just proves they're good, if they fool the man who made 'em!"

A black-gowned Frenchwoman, weighted down with artificial pearls, approached her brightly.

"Bon soir", Mademoiselle. A manicure?"

Grace shook her head.

"No, thanks. I stepped into the wrong shop by mistake."

"But perhaps, now you are here, Mademoiselle? Our Paris system, it makes the hands so chic, so alluring to the gentlemen!"

"I've just left a gentleman," Grace chuckled softly. "And I think my hand was quite up to the situation."

Six o'clock—closing time.

From the shadows of the cellarway across the street, the girl from Noonan's could see the new sign swaying on its iron hooks. IVAN JORGEN: Rugs, Vases, Curios. She smiled dryly as a random thought occurred to her. What curios!

Her eyes narrowed suddenly. The dim lights in the store across the street had snapped out. The bulky figure of the proprietor, appearing at the narrow doorway in hat and ulster, was locking up.

Grace watched, flattening back against the rough cement wall behind her. A keen-edged wind was whipping down the street, scurrying old papers and some bits of packing excelsior before it. But it was for another reason that the girl's trim figure trembled vibrantly.

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Jorgen pocketed his key and swung out of the inky entrance. His shaggy head was bowed against the wind as he plowed off up the dark street. His massive shoulders were hunched.

A hundred yards behind, and on the opposite side of the sparsely populated thoroughfare, the redhead followed. She had changed her clothes since the afternoon's shopping tour. Her black beret and matching wool coat were inconspicuous, The red pocketbook had disappeared.

Down one block to the even numbered intersection, and then across town toward the west, Jorgen moved. At Seventh Avenue he boarded a downtown surface car.

Grace was already in a cab by the time the light had changed to permit the trolley to proceed. "Follow that green one and keep behind it!" was her order to the driver.

In the electric-spattered city darkness, the swaying yellow windows of the clumsy vehicle ahead were an easy focus for the girl's eyes.

The taxi was equipped with a radio, over which an adenoidal tenor was beating something about "a room with a view." Grace did not hear him. The only view that interested her was the back of Jorgen's hat, outlined against the bright, steamed glass almost alongside.

At Sheridan Square he left the car, heading west once more on foot. The girl in the taxi clipped a quick command to the man at the wheel. A moment later, she, too, was facing toward the North River, fighting the raw, chill wind..

Up ahead, the figure of the man she was following plodded forward with long, swinging strides. His muffled silhouette, as it was repeatedly outlined against temporary light from shop windows or street lamps, was peculiarly menacing. Like a scarecrow at midnight.

On and on. Two blocks. Around a corner.. Three. Four.

They were almost to the river, when Jorgen's figure swerved suddenly to the left—and vanished!

Heart pounding, Grace kept on. Had they reached the end of the trail? Or was it possible that he had learned he was being followed and was waiting for her, ambushed in some dark hole in the wall?

Whatever it was, she had to keep going now. Breathing deeply, she swung ahead—her red curls, free of the beret, streaking in the increased blow, At the point where Jorgen had disappeared, she looked up quickly—and once again her heart skipped a beat. There he was!

A narrow, sinister cul-de-sac opened off the pavement at right angles; a roughly paved, dead-end alley, on both sides of which grim rows of squalid buildings opened. The dirty walls were a literal honeycomb of doors and windows. There was no light except that thrown in from the street where she stood.

At one of the doors—a battered looking cellar hatch—Jorgen's hunched figure was pausing. Metal gleamed between his fingers—a key. The door swung inward. He plunged through it into darkness, and the panel closed.

Grace did not stop, or turn into the cul-de-sac. If there were a gang—as Albertson at the Importer's Trust had stated—others of them might easily be about the place and watching her.

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Head down, hands plunged deep in her pockets, the redhead scurried onward, turning south at the next intersection as though a muffled man in a dead-end alley were no concern of hers whatever.

But there was a drug store on the corner, its grimy windows alight behind cigar boxes, magazines and soft drink ads. And less than a minute later, Grace was in a booth in its stuffy interior, listening to the ring of a nickel in the telephone.

It was a long time before her party answered. But before she had resigned herself to failure, the receiver at the far end lifted.

"Noonan's agency."

The redhead recognized that voice.

"Jerry Riker? It's Grace, Jerry. I—"

He interrupted her with a whoop. "Hi, Carrots! Say, listen—I didn't know it was your birthday until Tim spilled it this morning. How about a date to-night?"

"That's why I called you up," she answered.

"Swell! How about that new show at the—"

"This is business, Jerry! I've got a show of my own—gang of counterfeiters that are flooding the city. Stumbled on 'em by luck. Now listen! Get Tim. Both of you shag down here as fast as you can make it. I'm on Wickenden Street, a block from the river."

"But—but what's the set-up?"

"Odds unknown. All I can tell you is, the hang-out's in a blank alley about half a block east of the drug store where I'm phoning. You'll know it by the picture of Jean Harlow over the cash register. I've got to get back now. I'm watching 'em."

She heard the receiver click.

Jorgen might have gone out again already, Grace realized, as she moved back in the direction from which she had come with as much speed as she dared.

But that had been a necessary risk. She had been in a tight spot alone, and Tim and Jerry would be on their way to help her now. She needed them.

The cul-de-sac was empty when she reached it. Blank windows—some of them boarded up—stared down on the sinister alley like watching eyes. Behind a few of the cracked panes, stories above the street, lights shone faintly.

But it had been a cellar entrance Jorgen had taken. There was a row of them, all alike, yawning from the shadows on the side where he had stood. She hadn't had time, before, to notice which one was his.

Knowing only that it was the east side of the alley she must watch, Grace hugged the dingy bricks of the opposite wall and stepped forward into darkness.

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At a point some twenty feet in from the street, a rain barrel had been set against the west side of the cul-de-sac. Its lee formed a shallow black pocket, shadowed thickly. Here the girl from Noonan's stopped, flattening back out of sight with a quick, deft movement. Her thin shoulders pressed tight against the hoops of the rotting barrel.

She waited.

The minutes dragged past with leaden slowness, one like another, the next .like the one before. It was cold in the narrow place, but at least the wind was cut off.

From the eaves above, water was dripping into the barrel with maddening steadiness, like a drum pounding. Drip ---drip---drip---drip---

Suppose Jorgen had already gone, while she was telephoning? Or suppose he had no intention of leaving the hang-out until morning? Or suppose there were another exit, on some other street?

It was a fool's business, waiting like a cat at an unknown mousehole while the.---

A latch clicked suddenly somewhere in the darkness.

The tiny, metallic sound sent an echoing tremor through the redhead's crouching body. She tensed against the barrel until its nailheads bit into the soft flesh of her shoulder. Slowly---breathlessly---she worked herself erect, her back scraping the damp old wall.

It was Jorgen! His rangy figure was turning away from the fourth door in the row. And he had not locked it behind him!

Grace flattened back between the rotting staves and the cold bricks, like the middle layer of a sandwich. So close that she could have touched him, the proprietor of the curio shop swung down the alley to the intersecting street. His jaw made an ugly line against the lamplight beyond as he turned the corner and disappeared.

She watched the entrance to the alley for a full two minutes---waiting. At the end of that time, a grocery truck bumped past the opening and a fat woman waddled along in its wake. No Jorgen. She could breathe again.

The fourth door in the row. The girl's trim figure flashed across the space between shadows and shadows so quickly that even a watching eye might easily have missed the movement.

But there seemed to be no watching eye. The cellar ahead of her, in which only a dim light flickered, looked empty. And Jorgen had not shown any indication of a belief that he was spied upon.

Now---if she could get into his quarters while he was away---if she could unearth some incriminating evidence, to justify an arrest by Tim when Jerry brought him--- Now, while the place was empty!

The door slid away from her with a rusty groan, at the pressure of her hand. Hugging the wall to keep from falling in the darkness, Grace felt her way forward into a black pit.

Three steps down. Then level flooring was beneath her feet again. In the half-light, as her eyes became used to it, she had little difficulty in seeing what came next.

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Solid mortar walls slanted away from her, flanking a narrow hallway. There was no opening in either—no doors, no windows. But between them, a hundred yards farther on, a closed wooden panel showed, dimly. And beneath it a line of white light glittered.

Her fingertips following the wall for guidance, the redhead moved quickly along the passageway. Her steps were unconsciously stealthy, like a stalking panther's. Her body was tense.

At the door she stopped, holding her head flat against the unpainted wood while she listened for the slightest sound from the room beyond. But none came. It had the eerie stillness of an abandoned place.

Slowly, her careful fingers touched the latch beneath them. She could feel it lift. The door gave, easily, silently. She stepped across the threshold—into Ivan Jorgen's hideaway.

The cellar room was lighted solely by a dingy bulb set into the middle of the ceiling. Its walls were only the whitewashed foundations of the rickety building above. There were a few chairs about the place. In one corner stood an iron bed, its covers disordered; in another, beneath a powerful arc light which was not turned on, the wall was flanked by a table covered with a mass of sticks and wires.

Grace, a soft sound of triumph in her throat, started forward,

Etcher's tools, on that table! Knives —bottles of acid—scalpels—copper plates. The counterfeiter's workbench!

The door creaked on its hinges in closing, and a menacing shadow wavered suddenly over the dim white wall before her.

Gasping, the girl from Noonan's whirled.

The man who stood there was little better than a Thing. He had long, hairy arms, a huge chest, powerful shoulders. His head, atop them, seemed unnaturally small.

Much of the flesh of his face had been eaten and scarred beyond recognition, in some long-ago mishap with chemicals. He was horrible to look at; and he was grinning at her with the cunning of a murderous animal.

Swinging inward as she had entered, the door had screened him from sight. But now it had closed again. She was alone with him—trapped in the strange cellar room.

With a low cry of instinctive terror, Grace leaped for the first weapon her eyes lit upon—an ink bottle on the stand beside the iron bed.

But as she moved, the deformed guardian of the doorway hurled himself upon her.

Arms like huge iron bands clamped about her with rib-crushing violence. A force as irresistible as gravity jerked her up into the air.

With savage fury she clawed at the giant who held her imprisoned in his pitiless grasp. Her fingernails dug into the soft mass scar tissue that was his jaw. Her fists, driving furiously, thumped his chest.

But she might have been belaboring the whitewashed stone wall, for all the good her resistance did her. The iron arms tightened. Hot breath fanned her cheek as her captor lifted her higher from the floor. The cellar rumbled with his brutish laughter.

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"Let—me—down!"

Her face kicked wildly, but the man held her off as easily, as though she were a rag doll. His whole great body pivoted slowly, like a barber's pole, dragging her with him.

"So—you try put one over on Rocco, eh? You try take away tools from Boss?"

Chuckling ghoulishly, he set her on barren corner of the big room, now. He had selected a position from which he could cut off her approach to the work table, the door, or the bedside stand.

For a silent moment they eyed each other, the disfigured monster shifting his weight easily from one foot to the other. Grace's breath was uneven. The unexpectedness and violence of the attack had shaken her badly.

Mockery glittered in his little eyes. Mockery and hatred and something more vicious, something lethal.

Springing forward quickly, she tried to leap around him to the door. Every nerve in her body strained forward, toward escape. But his huge hand flashed up.

Its open palm caught her alongside the head with a slap which echoed wickedly through the low-ceilinged room. Zigzags of orange light skyrocketed through the air, and suddenly the place began to whirl about her.

Back against the wall she crashed, the force of the impact sending a sickening shudder through her body. She felt herself falling—falling—falling—

She mustn't faint! She must get back on her feet somehow! She must get through that door, before Jorgen returned—while there was only one of them to hold her!

Slowly the room settled. She was on the floor, her knees buckled under her, her head still ringing. Above her, legs spread, Jorgen's henchman stood ready.

With a sick quiver, Grace lifted one hand to her face. It was wet when she moved. Wet and red. A little trickle of blood was cutting down her chin, from one corner of her torn mouth.

"You best not move," Rocco rumbled warningly. "You stay there, safer for Boss."

She knew it was hopeless. His massive frame loomed like a wall between her and the door, or any possible weapon.

Minutes throbbed past, desperate, useless. There wasn't anything to do. No chance of escape.

Suddenly her heart leaped—only to fall again.

There were footsteps stamping in the hall outside. The chance of a rescue by Tim and Jerry had flashed through her mind. But—they wouldn't be approaching an unknown hideout with so little caution. This wouldn't be help coming.

In that moment of realization, a new and heartbreaking truth occurred to her. Tim and Jerry couldn't come! They wouldn't know where she was. The outside of the building, even if they stumbled upon the cul-de-sac, was as hopelessly pocked with entrances as a rabbit warren. They couldn't find her, even if—

The door slammed open.

"What the—"

Rocco, turning, stood aside. In the doorway, Ivan Jorgen paused staring at her. And, behind him in the passageway, two other figures crowded.

Four of them! Four against her, and no chance of help from the outside!

Grace's heart sank heavily as Jorgen stalked toward her across the wide room, a sardonic smile flicking the ends of his thin mouth, his eyes gleaming rock hard beneath their matted black brows.

"So—it is Madame with the fondness for vases, is it not?"

His voice was as cold as a knife blade. At his shoulder, the two others moved into the room. One of them was prematurely gray-haired, and scowling. The other's bald skull looked like the narrow end of an egg.

The egg-head closed the door behind him.

"And Madame has also a liking for copper plates, perhaps?" Jorgen chuckled nastily. "And the time to look around, no?"

He was like a cat, playing with her. Grace felt weak with dread at the menace lying behind his onyx-black eyes. Slowly, shivering despite herself, she struggled upward to her feet.

"What goes on?"

It was the gray-haired newcomer speaking. His brick-red face was peering over Jorgen's shoulder. It was expressionless.

"Ah, Pete! A lady honors us who was a customer at my store. Perhaps also you see her at your delicatessen? Or you, Mal, at your dry goods store?"

The egg-head growled: "Nope" and the one called Pete made a similar sound of denial. But it seemed to Grace that the eyes of both had hardened.

Other outlets for Jorgen's counterfeit money. It was easy to tie up Pete and Mal with the business at hand. Running fronts like Ivan's own curio shop, they could pull the same game on others like the ring Boss had played to-day on Maggie Moody and her own red pocketbook.

Mal, his naked skull gleaming, walked forward slowly.

"We oughta do something, Jork. We oughta fix her, huh?"

Their cold eyes bored into her—four pairs of killer eyes, all determined that she should never leave this cellar room alive. A semicircle of death, closing in on her, glittering, wicked.

Suddenly something snapped in Grace's taut brain. Hopeless as it seemed to break through, she hurled herself forward at Jorgen with all the force left in her.

A snarl of rage replaced the mockery on his lips. Thick brows contracting, jaw shut, he lunged for her,

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Quick as an arrow, she was past him. His extended fingers, clawing, scraped down the side of her arm as she hurtled across the room. Pete blocked the door. But there were weapons on the work bench—something—there must be something—

Her right hand caught up the first thing it touched—a long, thin scraping knife like a thick knitting needle. She whirled to face the room. Not an instant too soon.

Mal, the egg-head, was upon her. His lips were drawn back from yellow in a grimace of hatred. His paws were up, and in one of them a blunt-tipped blackjack wavered.

Driving hard, in a frenzy of fighting fury, Grace let him have the knife.

It was the force of his own descending blow that saved him. The thin blade ripped him from shoulder to elbow.

Blood spurted through the long gash in his coat sleeve. Screaming, he tottered back.

Before the girl could recover, Rocco was upon her. Those pitiless iron arms clamped around her again, crushing. Her own arms, pinned to her sides, were powerless.

"Bloody devil!" Mal was shrieking. Rocco growled menacingly.

"Maybe you like I slap her around some more, eh. Boss?"

Jorgen strode across the room until he was standing directly in front of her, his face a mask of hatred as he thrust it close to hers.

"No slapping, Rocco! This lady who know so much, too much—she need more than a slapping, no?"

Grace faced him with the blood gone from her cheeks. Her eyes were wide.

"You're—what are you going to do to me?"

The counterfeiter shrugged his wide shoulders expressively,

"When some one is executed—they grant one last wish, no? You have such wish? This is the time, Madame."

Execution!

Grace always had known that Death played tag with her profession. Her own father had gone out that way, fighting, with his boots on. She might have been content to follow him.

But cold-blooded execution, without a chance—

Something flickered in Jorgen's hard eyes. Ugly amusement.

"Maybe you like a nice vase, eh?"

He really meant it, then—that "last wish"! His twisted sense of humor relished the situation. If only she could think of something difficult—something that would give her a little time—

Double Chocolate

"A vase, Madame?"

She eyed him as calmly as she could, and forced her voice to steadiness.

"No, thanks. I'd—I'd like a double chocolate soda, please."

It was the shortest ten minutes Grace Culver ever had spent. It seemed to her that Jorgen, laughing disagreeably, had no more than sent Rocco out to the drug store on the corner than the disfigured giant was back again.

The prisoner was sitting on the edge of the iron cot when the counterfeiter's henchman came into the room, with the long paper carton gripped in one hand.

Across the small stand, the iron-haired crook called Pete stood watching her. The ink bottle had been moved. There was nothing between them but the gray automatic resting under Pete's fingers on his side of the table—mute warning that there would be no second chance to reach the work bench.

Rocco set down his purchase on the table with a grunt. There it was. Double chocolate soda. Straws. Everything. Her last wish!

The four men stood silent, staring at her. Grace could feel their eyes again boring, cold, pitiless. When she had finished that soda—what?

"Drink, Madame!"

Her fingers moved stiffly in response to Jorgen's guttural command.

She ripped, the wrapper from about the straws and wadded it into a hard little ball under her thumb. She thrust the straws into the creamy liquid.

She began to drink.

Pete's fingers, across the level table top, were spread loose on the automatic. He was only a guard. But Jorgen— there was a gun in his hand, too, now.

A tense hand. And the muzzle was lifting.

Up through the straws slid the sweet brown drink which was to be her last. It choked in her throat, but somehow she swallowed it. Nothing to do! There wasn't any way out!

A moment, and the double chocolate would be gone. A hot roar, grim and final, would fill the room. And then the—

A hideous din filled her ears, sudden, unexpected. It wasn't the gun. It—

Some one was hammering on the panel which Mal had locked behind Rocco. Some one was shouting.

"Culver! Red!"

It couldn't be Tim's voice, of course. She must be mad. Those staring eyes had driven her mad. It couldn't be Tim.

Double Chocolate

"Tim! Tim!"

As Grace screamed the word, she saw Jorgen whirl—Mal leap away from the door—Rocco tense for a spring—and Pete—

Whipping into action as sudden as the stupor which had frozen her, the redhead caught up the carton in which half the soda still remained.

Into Pete's granite face she hurled the container with all her strength. The liquid, bursting from the open end of the tube, struck him with an audible slap. He fell backward, sputtering, digging raw knuckles into his eyes.

She was around the stand in no time. Out of his still clawing fingers she wrenched the snub-nosed automatic. His fist closed—too late—over air.

Crash!

The shot had not been fired inside the cellar, but it was so close at hand that the walls echoed with it. The door shivered.

Crash!

Into the quivering instant which followed the second explosion, the small sound of metal striking stone intruded. Tim had blasted the lock loose from its moorings. The door slammed in.

Jorgen was waiting for it. His gun was trained on the opening. His finger was tensing with deadly precision.

"Look out, Tim!"

And as she screamed the warning, Grace's own arm snapped up. Pete's automatic, steady in her hand, belched a thin line of hot fire. Ivan Jorgen, screaming while he caught at his gun arm, budded and fell to his knees.

Tim Noonan was over the threshold now—familiar face set in a grim mask, gun barking from his fist as he came.

Rocco, to Grace's left, had caught up a light chair and swung it high above his head. Through the air the bulky thing hurtled viciously. Tim ducked.

As wood splintered against stone, the veteran detective's gun snapped up once more. Its ugly snarl spat out on a tongue of flame. Rocco cried out once—in infantile terror.

The slug had ripped between his pig-like little eyes. Blood poured in a fountain down his shapeless face. His throat contracted. Onto the stone floor he crashed, his huge body sprawling.

Mal was leaping on Tim from the rear, now—screaming with rage. He held a wicked knife in his raised hand.

But before he could reach the seasoned ex-inspector, interference from a new source intervened. A lithe young body hurtled from the dark passageway and caught him with such force that both figures tottered. The knife dropped.

"Good work, Jerry!"

Double Chocolate

The cry of triumph was still on Grace's lips when she saw Jorgen whipping up his gun once more—in his left hand, this time. She swung to stop him, automatic ready. But Tim was ahead of her.

"Drop that gun, louse!"

There were two muzzles fixed on him. The game was up, and Jorgen knew it.

His gun clattered to the floor. His arms lifted slowly. There was a sullen light of surrender in the eyes beneath those matted brows.

"All right, Culver—line 'em up. No funny business, crooks. We've got some boys in a car outside that are gonna take you to an art school you never been in before. Free scholarships for all of you!"

Grace watched the patrol wagon starting up the street, with Noonan's powerful bulk in the rear end of it. He was one who believed in personally finishing a job to the last detail, was Timothy Noonan.

"There goes the toughest spot I ever was in," she observed, in an almost matter-of-fact voice, to "Jerry Riker, who stood beside her. "Never believe 'em, my lad, when they tell you that the condemned man ate a hearty meal!"

Riker was a good hand at action. But he was afraid of the redhead. His face colored now, just because he was alone with her outside office.

"Gee, I was scared we weren't gonna get to you in time, Redsie!"

The sherry-colored eyes sparkled suddenly.

"Say! That reminds me! How did you happen to stumble into that particular cellarway out of the lot—like a movie hero in the seventh reel?"

"The double chocolate soda," he said instantly.

"What?"

"The soda. Tim and I knew something was sour when we couldn't find you. So we split to search the neighborhood. I'm in that corner drug store—I knew you'd been there when you called—and this mug walks in. When he orders a double chocolate to take out, and you're in the neighborhood, well, even a dumb dick would of followed him!"

Grace tucked her arm comfortably through the crook of Jerry's, oblivious to his instantly reddening ears.

"And you and Noonan are pretty smart, if your old Aunt Grace does say! A double chocolate soda! Mm—m—how I love 'em! You could buy me one for my birthday right now, mister, if you felt inclined."