

Kitchen Trap

Roswell Brown

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Something was wrong. Very wrong! It was written all over "Big Tim" Noonan's rugged face, as he walked slowly into the office of his own detective agency and closed the door behind him. His gray eyes were bleak. The lines slanting down from the corners of his mouth had deepened to two gashes in his leathery skin.

At her desk in the corner, his red-headed secretary glanced up quickly. At another desk, nearer the window, his young assistant pushed back a mess of finger-print data with a low whistle.

Both of them shot the same question, in almost the same breath, at the tall man in the doorway.

"Tim—what—"

"Say, where's the funeral?"

Without answering, Noonan jerked the battered fedora from his gray head, jammed it on its customary hook, hung up his overcoat beside it. His movements were stiff, mechanical. He swung across the office slowly, his big frame moving more heavily than was its habit. He sank into the swivel chair at his own desk with a soft grunt. Staring at the stack of mail on his blotter, he replied to their questions.

His voice was gruffly monotonous.

"The funeral," he said, "will be from headquarters, I guess. Pete Brophy. They fished him out of the East River this morning. Lead poisoning!"

Red-haired Grace Culver gasped audibly as her chief spoke the name. A quick hiss of breath in sharp contrast to Noonan's dull rumble.

Brophy! She could remember the times the veteran Federal dick had come to town on official business, back in her own childhood.

Her police sergeant father had been alive, then. He and Big Tim, his inseparable pal, had welcomed Pete's visits. Pete was a swell guy. Pete was the real goods. Pete Brophy was dead. Easy to understand the look on Tim's face—the dull eyes and the deepened lines. It was the end of a twenty-year friendship. Tim Noonan was the kind who valued his friends.

"Who—do they know—"

Tim's grizzled head shook slowly.

"No clues. Nothing. Harbor patrol boat found him early this morning. Six slugs in his back. Been dead since midnight or a little after."

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Grace watched her fingers tense slowly on the keyboard of her typewriter. Her eyes were misted. Pete Brophy!

"Tim—there must be something!"

Tim grunted again.

"Sure! Suspicions! He was working on a political—extortion assignment. Big ring here in town, shaking down men in public life all over the East. Clever and tough, and they left no traces. It was a job for an old hawk like Brophy."

"There's the motive, then," Grace interjected. "Pete knew too much. When headquarters puts the bee on whoever was tied up with the racket—"

Tim's mirthless chuckle interrupted her.

"That's just the catch, Redsie. Whoever! There's no lead at all—nothing to give the boys to work on. If Brophy knew who he was after, the tip died with him."

Jerry Riker, leaning across his stack of finger prints, cut in quickly.

"How about papers? Wallet?"

"There was nothing on the body. And somebody had lifted his key to frisk his hotel room before the cops hit it. Place was in a mess. Looked like what the whirlwind left. And—no papers that mattered."

Grace said, "I can't believe it. I can't believe they rubbed out a smart dick like Pete without—without—"

Bitterly, Big Tim faced her.

"The answer's full of bullets down at the morgue, Redsie. Flannigan ate dinner with him at some joint on Eighth Street, called Andre's. Favorite hangout of Pete's. That was seven—thirty or thereabouts. Flannigan finished ahead of Pete and came on uptown to his night desk. Nobody's located a trace of Brophy after that, until—until the patrol boat—"

His hard voice cracked and Big Tim's teeth clicked together. It wasn't often that his emotions got him. That made the moment worse.

"Andre's," said Grace.

Jerry Riker shot a quick look in her direction. Nothing unusual about Brophy's meal with Flannigan that he could see. But sometimes the Culver got hunches that were—

"Spill it."

The girl's sherry-colored eyes had narrowed.

"Just thinking. I know that joint. It's new—and terrible! Food's all right. But it's all over cheap modern art, and the waitresses wear pink—and—orange uniforms. Once is enough."

Riker was disappointed. This wasn't one of the redhead's times.

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"Maybe you frills notice things like that. If the food's decent, a man's not going to bother about whether there's a picture on the wall or—"

"Pete Brophy would. Not one picture, maybe. But the whole inside of the place is painted up like lightning striking a junk heap. That sort of stuff made him nervous. He wouldn't pick it for a hangout, with a dozen places in the neighborhood serving food just as good. Not unless—"

Tim's big body, leaning forward, creaked his chair.

"Redsie, you may be— It's just possible—"

"I don't see what Andre's could have to do with a big-league extortion gang," Jerry objected. "It's a long way from being the sort of dive a big shot would eat at. They couldn't pick up anything worthwhile on anybody there, if that's what—"

"I'm going to find out why Pete went there so much," Grace said suddenly.

"It probably doesn't matter," Tim muttered gloomily.

"At least—at least it's doing something."

Jerry eyed her derisively.

"Some day you're gonna do one thing too many, Redsie. Always sticking your pug nose into trouble."

"And getting it out again!" she answered tartly.

"Luck like that don't hold forever. There's going to come a time you'll wish you never saw a gun! You'll wish you was where women belong, in some good guy's kitchen. A guy like me, for instance—"

"Nuts!" Grace said rudely. "Any day I'm not better with a gun than with a frying pan, I'll want to hear about it. And I'm not so bad with a frying pan, either."

But her heart wasn't in the typical exchange of sarcasms with her good-looking young office mate. She was thinking about Pete Brophy. Tim's friend. Her dead father's friend.

Andre's was the only hint. It was true that a place like that didn't seem the right setting for important extortion. But neither was it right for Pete's hangout. He wouldn't have liked its tawdry noisiness. Home atmosphere was what the homeless Federal agent had coveted.

So—there must have been some reason for his hanging around the restaurant. And it might not be so much of an accident that the last time he had been seen alive he had been nodding farewell to Officer Flannigan from a table in the same place. "I'm going to find out why," she said again.

And that was the reason a taxi drew up to an Eighth Street intersection at the hour when the neighborhood restaurants were swinging into their best dinner business.

A girl stepped out of the cab.

Her curly red hair was almost covered by a hat unmistakably "Bargain Basement." She was overpainted, but not eye-striking. Overgarnished with cheap jewelry, but not too conspicuous.

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The big pearl swinging on a chain around her neck, and the glittering barpin on her breast were too obviously false to merit a second glance. The slightly bulky black coat was so nondescript that it might have been on any of the women in the hurrying sidewalk crowd.

She paid off her driver in small silver, thrusting the money at him in a hand covered by a cheap, darned glove. There was nothing about her that the man at the wheel could have remembered five minutes after his cab had left the curb. She was a copy of two dozen girls who had passed him before he had cruised a block.

But there was one small difference: The eyes of the girl he had just deposited. They were like sparkling sherry, behind the protection of their cheaply obvious make-up. Keen, bright, eager.

They scanned the long, irregularly lighted block quickly, searching for something. Then a smile twitched the corners of the painted mouth, The thumb and third finger of one gloved hand snapped together in triumph as she plunged into the stream of passers-by.

Ahead, midway of the block, a neon sign was blinking on and off. "Andre's," it spelled. Then darkness. Then, "Andre's" again.

The place was crowded, garishly-lighted, noisy with the clatter of plates and the chatter of voices. Apparently unaware of the hideous color clash of sea-green tile and what the management seemed to consider modern murals, the patrons were attacking their passably good food with gusto.

At a corner table, the redhead was busy with a bowl of clam chowder. Her spoon stirring aimlessly through a floating island of cracker crumbs, she presented a vacant, slightly stupid stare to the crowded restaurant.

A usual-looking, nondescript mob was passing through the revolving glass door that bisected the big room's front wall.

Clerks, stenographers, girls from the burlesque house around the corner, swung under the sign which read "Andre's—6 a. m. to Midnight." Taxi drivers, nursemaids, neighborhood residents eating out. Nothing very tough. Nothing very fancy.

It wasn't the sort of place for big-timers. But even the sixty-cent dinner, cheapest set-up on the menu, would keep out the other extreme. Middle flight, and for the most part colorless, were Andre's customers.

Waitresses, in the hideous pink-and-orange outfits the girl had remembered from a previous visit to the eating place, were passing up and down the narrow aisles between the tables. Dozens of them. It was a big layout.

But—why had Pete Brophy picked it to eat in, night after night? What was there here to particularly attract a middle-aged Irishman of simple tastes and—

The girl at the corner table stiffened suddenly.

A man had come up to the blonde in the cashier's cage and was saying something—something casual, at which the girl grinned and disclosed a gold tooth. The man, from his dress, was an upper employee of Andre's. The headwaiter, possibly.

His long face was pock-marked, giving it almost the effect of a dappled horse. His big, yellow teeth helped to accentuate the impression. It was a face ugly enough to linger in the memory. And the redhead remembered it. Front and side views, in the Noonan Agency files. Number something—or-other in the pretty

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grifter section. Name was—Grogan. "Sniffle" Grogan. Two years for attempted holdup. Quashed indictment for perjury in the "Angelface" Maganelli murder trial. And Grogan was working at Andre's! Not impossible, of course, for a crook to mend his ways and look for honest employment. But—old Pete Brophy wouldn't have concerned himself with honest employment.

Still stirring the crackers into her chowder, the girl at the corner table watched Sniffle leave the cashier's cage and roll toward the swinging doors through which waitresses were passing to and from the kitchens beyond.

A bus-boy who looked like an ex-pug met the headwaiter's glance as the two met near the redhead's table. Sniffle's head jerked quickly. "Twenty-five, Rocky."

The bus-boy's gimlet eyes sparkled blackly in his punch-flattened face as he nodded. Andre's two employees separated, Grogan heading for the kitchens and the younger man busying himself with a tray of dirty dishes.

Again—nothing damning. The encounter, seemingly casual, might have been explained as having to do with any one of a dozen restaurant duties. But Pete Brophy hadn't been investigating the restaurant business, either! And that look that had passed between the two—

A pink-and-orange waitress, the color scheme of her uniform carried unintentionally to her lips and the blobs of color on her cheeks, stopped beside the chromium-and-tile table.

"Anything else you wish, miss?"

"That'll be all," the redhead answered, pushing back her chair and dropping a dime on the glassy surface beside her empty bowl. "Except—could you tell me where I'll find the ladies' lounge?"

"Back of the restaurant, first door to the right."

The mechanical answer did not interfere with the waitress's quick gesture toward the coin. Nodding her thanks, Andre's customer moved toward the rear of the garish room.

A new man was stopping beside the cashier's cage now—a heavy-set, swarthy face above a too-fancy cutaway, black hair and a blue, thick chin.

"Evening, Mr. Andre," the blonde in the cage said meekly.

He nodded at her, but did not speak. His restless gaze roamed the restaurant.

The redhead, passing quickly, had seemed not to notice. But as she kept on toward the ladies' lounge, her sherry-colored eyes were speculatively narrowed.

So that was Andre!

In keeping with the front of the place, the lounge room was cheaply pretentious. Gilt mirrors adorned the little cubbyholes of dressing rooms which lined one wall. Gaudy paintings hung everywhere. Red plush and wrought iron were featured in the furniture.

Beneath a hideous reproduction of Venus Rising From The Waves, a telephone was fastened to a jointed wall bracket. At the moment, the main room and the four small dressing rooms were empty.

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The instrument's dial whirred beneath a gloved finger. In the silence, a far-away buzzing filled the girl's ears. Then a clock.

"Hello."

"Listen, Tim," she spoke softly, her lips close against the mouthpiece—"It's Grace. Can you hear me?"

"Shoot!" the terse voice at the other end commanded.

"I'm in Andre's. I think I have something. It isn't definite, but—you. know—the hunch is going strong."

Tim said, "Want us?"

Not yet. Better off alone. But if I'm not back at the office by eleven-thirty, you and Jerry—"

The door behind her opened quickly and a puffing little woman in rusty black scuttled through it. She paused before one mirror, adjusting her unfashionable hat. Her beady eyes regarded the girl at the telephone curiously.

Grace Culver laughed boisterously, as if she were delivering the catch line of a joke to a friend at the other end of the line.

"So I says to him, eat your mashed potatoes good and hot! I says, make it good and emphatic! Order 'em as hot as they do 'em in Kokomo!"

Tim's puzzled grunt reached her

"Say—what's the—"

"As hot as they do 'em in Kokomo," she repeated firmly. Then, laughing again as the curious little woman turned to stare at her, she hung up.

It took the dumpy, deliberate creature before the glass an agonizing time to set her hat on her limp gray hair at an angle that suited her fancy.

Grace pretended to be busy at the washbowl, washing her hands, drying them, washing again.

At last, with a satisfied snort, her companion passed through the swinging doors once more. And they scarcely had closed behind her when the girl from Noonan's was in one of the cramped little cubicles that passed for dressing rooms.

The black coat jerked quickly from her wiry shoulders, and with one movement of her deft hands she had pulled the lining out of it. It came easily, without a rip, that lining—because the side of it which had been flat against the coat was a pink-and-orange uniform.

Three minutes later a perfectly turned-out waitress, complete to frizzes of red hair beneath her neat cap and badly applied dots of rouge, was standing in the cubicle.

She bore little resemblance to the girl in black who had crumpled crackers into a bowl of Andre's chowder. Only the red hair, the false pearl pendant and the bar-pin of cheap brilliants were the same.

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The swinging doors opened again, creaked, closed. The ladies' room was empty. One more waitress, banging an empty tray against her knee as she walked, was headed for the kitchens.

A broad pantry lay just beyond the doors which opened from the public dining room. To one side, a counter for trays of dirty china and silverware was topped with a windowlike opening manned by the dishwasher's assistant. To the other, a small door stood ajar; and behind it, murky in contrast to the lighted pantry, a dim, narrow hallway stretched away into shadows.

Directly ahead, and running the full width of the big pantry, stood the service counter. On the pantry side, waitresses yelled their orders and grabbed at plates of food as they were dished up.

Behind, in the main kitchen, white-capped chefs were frantically busy at the grids of the five big stoves. Beyond them, forming the back wall of the kitchen, a row of storage closets extended between the side partitions. It was the small door that interested the girl from Noonan's most. The dirt that Pete Brophy had been bent on uncovering was nothing dishwater could remove; and people as hectically occupied as the chefs and waitresses at rush hour would be unlikely to have time for criminal action.

If, indeed, there really was anything wrong about the place. The fact that Sniffle Grogan worked here, that one of the bus-boys had the eyes of a killer, and that Grace instinctively had mistrusted Mr. Andre himself on sight— might mean nothing. Nothing at all. Still, Pete had been after something. And that something seemed most apt to lie in the unexplored regions back of the pantry—the regions reached by the strangely sinister hallway. The secret of Brophy's murder! If that strong hunch was right—

"Look out where you're going, can't you?"

Grace faced an angry little girl, in a uniform identical with her own. Soup had slopped from a bowl on her tray, at the impact of their arms.

Resisting the impulse to apologize, the redhead snarled a typical, "Yeah? You ain't blind yourself, are you?" The girl passed on. The act had been perfect.

Beside Grace was the entrance to the hallway. In a flash, her tray had slid onto a table flanking the opening. Hinges, surprisingly well oiled for a back-stairs door of this sort, made no noise as the dark opening increased.

The lights and clamor of the pantry were behind her, suddenly; and the closing panel cut them off. Ahead, lighted only by one bulb in an old-fashioned bracket near the ceiling, lay the hall down which—she felt coldly, groundlessly certain—Pete Brophy had moved this same time last night, to his death.

Grayness seemed to haunt the dismal passage like a physical presence. Grace Culver felt it pressing about her, closing in as she stole forward slowly.

The uniform had gotten her past the only barrier she had been able to anticipate in advance—that of attracting the attention of Andre's employees before she could investigate the sections of his plant which lay beyond the reach of the public. What lay ahead was unpredictable.

But it was dangerous. Sinister shadows, seeming to flicker in the corners, warned her. The ghostly gray light seeping down from the cracked bowl overhead, brooding, dismal, warned her. Tim Noonan's words—"No clues." Six slugs in his back warned her.

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Under her careful foot, a board groaned. The redhead's startled breath sucked in sharply. A cold shudder twitched her spine.

The walls, so close that her shoulders almost touched them on either side, were papered in a splotched design long since faded into a monotonous invisibility. Dust lay on them, and there was a moldy smell to the worn carpet under her feet.

Ahead, leading sharply upward into blacker darkness, a flight of bare, uncarpeted stairs loomed like the bones of a wrecked accordion. At their foot, the redhead hesitated only for an instant. Then, breath quickening, she started up.

The stairs—evidently a little—used back flight ended abruptly at an unpainted door. Grace leaned against it, her ear to the dull wood, listening. No sound came from whatever lay beyond. Nothing.

Slowly the iron latch lifted under the increasing pressure of her thumb. Sliding away from her with a soft sigh, the door opened. ;

It formed, she discovered, one end of a fairly long corridor. At the far end, an uncurtained window let in a faint glow from the street. Doors lined both of the sidewalls. All of them were closed.

From somewhere, so indistinct that at first she thought it must be coming from the floor above, a hum of voices reached her unexpectedly. Low, like the buzzing of bees.

Slowly, hugging the scant shadow, she eased her body into the empty passageway. At the first door on her right she paused, listening. It took only a minute to convince her that the room beyond it was deserted.

But the closed panel seemed none the less sinister for that. Its brass numbers winked at her, dull and evil.

Was it in one of these chambers that Brophy—

Twenty-one!

A picture from twenty minutes before flashed instantly back to her brain. Sniffle and the man with the killer's eyes, passing in the crowded restaurant. "Twenty-five, Rocky." And "Rocky" nodding, a queer grin of understanding flicking his thin mouth.

Heart pounding, feet careful on the muffling strip of turkey-red carpeting, Grace moved forward. Past the door marked 23. The voices were louder, now.

Grace stopped again at the panel on which the brass number designated Room 25.

Despite their carefully lowered tones, she could make out the difference between the two voices which were arguing as she leaned lightly against the closed door. Deep voices. One of them, she felt sure, belonged to Sniffle Grogan.

"So Whitey says, according to his dope from inside, the cops don't even have no good guess who done it. They know Brophy was settin' to break some blackmail mob. They figger that mob's got anyway a swell reason. But who? Where? They ain't got a notion!"

"How sure is Whitey?"

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"He ain't never been wrong for us yet, has he?"

Grace was shivering as she crouched beside the closed panel. Brophy! That hunch had been straight! It had been here—here, in this dimly lighted maze of halls above the crowded restaurant, that—

"You guys and your rods!"

The new voice was a woman's. Shrewish and unpleasant, it whined through the thin wooden barrier. The girl from Noonan's felt her breath catch in astonishment.

"There was other ways of fixing him. Why the river? Why New York? Somebody's going to be just smart enough to trace it back this way. You'll see. I told you— "

Three men spoke at once—seemingly the only other occupants of the room. Grogan's voice and that other. And one more.

"Aw, dry up!"

"Cut the calamity, Rosie!"

"Listen, Rosie, no lop-eared flattie's gonna figure us!"

Grace's eyes were level with the keyhole as her body crouched. But the narrow slit of lighted room beyond told her nothing. Not one of the quartet inside was in her line of vision. And from the sound of them they were seated at a table, not moving around.

"We got the papers on that Washington love-nest to-day. Three pash notes from the Congressman. If his wife got wise—"

Grace had to see them, mark them for future identification. Was one of them Rocky? Who, aside from Sniffle Grogan, was in that conclave? Whoever they were, they had killed Pete Brophy.

The chance was desperate, but she had to take it. Mentally, she gauged the distance back to the door at the head of the stairs. She would have a lead of perhaps thirty seconds. In that time, with luck—

"Wife!" the woman snarled. "It's the cops that'll catch wise, after Brophy!"

"Aw, Rosie, no dumb cops—"

Grace's hand lifted until its cold fingers wrapped about the tarnished brass doorknob. Slowly, carefully, they tightened. The knob turned. There was a tiny metallic click, which sounded like thunder in her ears.

But the people inside—Pete's murderers—had not noticed.

"Dumb cops, eh? Remember that time in Chicago, when you was putting on the senator? Was they dumb then?"

"I tell you, Rosie, it was safe enough," the heavy, authoritative voice declared. "This plant is so good a front that—"

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The door was opening as the arm of the crouching girl in the hall stiffened painstakingly. A strip of yellow light glittered before her, widened. Still they had not noticed. Panting, she began to rise.

Another minute now, and—

The shadow on the door loomed so quickly that she was unable to turn. Above and behind her, she caught a glimpse of a white, evil face in the darkness. Rocky's face.

Then, over her head, a soft blackness fell with devastating suddenness. Dimly, she realized that it was a coat or a blanket. She couldn't breathe.

Her hands beat upward, clawing at him frantically. But she was off balance, and his strong arms were forcing her down—down—down—

She was gasping. Her brain seemed about to burst.

"What the—" some one roared, a long way off.

The blows of her fists against her attacker's unyielding body had become no more than a weak fluttering. The roar inside her skull was unbearable. Her throat was a tight, hot agony. Her chest—

"Spy!" Rocky screamed vindictively. Beneath his powerful fingers, Grace Culver fell away into a wave of blackness.

The darkness was warm and close when Grace opened her eyes. The air that gasped into her stinging lungs smelled of cooked foods—a stale, mongrel odor.

Staring at the impenetrable, murky shadows, she lay still and waited for the pounding in her brain to lessen. She was on a floor—cold and damp. Through a chink in the wall above her, a narrow slit of yellow light seeped from whatever room lay beyond. The blackness of her windowless prison made it impossible to guess at time—how long it had been since Andre's bus-boy had come upon her in the hall. Half an hour? Two hours?

Grace moved stiffly, attempting to lift her arms and stretch them. It was then, that she discovered they were tied— bound neatly in strips of cloth which did not cut into her flesh or numb her as ropes would have, so that she had not been aware of them.

Bound and helpless in the dark. Perhaps in the very room where Pete Brophy had stopped the six slugs, last night. Perhaps—

If only she knew where she was; who Grogan's companions behind that closed door had been; how long she had lain unconscious; what lay behind that chink in the wall above her!

As if in answer to her last question, a series of sounds reached her ears. The rattle of dishes in a pan. A rough cough. The opening of a swinging door that creaked on its hinges and closed again.

"One ham on rye? One sunnyside up, with bacon!" a man's voice singsonged.

Grace's heart leaped. She knew where she was, now. In one of those closets back of the main kitchen of Andre's restaurant!

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They had carried her downstairs, then, and in through some back way— unless the whole kitchen staff was in on Sniffle Grogan's scheme. That seemed unlikely.

Inching forward, she felt her shoulders contact the clammy wall. Jerkily, painfully, she edged upward, using the wall as a support. It seemed a century before she was standing on her feet in the cramped space which confined her. As she stretched, the blood began to run through her cramped limbs once more. Slowly, her body relaxed. Then, abruptly, it stiffened again.

A woman's voice had spoken from the opposite side of the thin wall. And the redhead knew that voice! Upstairs, it had been saying, "There was other ways of fixing him!"

"Here's the ham on," the voice whined. "Watch that pan, Rocky, it's spittin'. Watch out for your eye."

Rocky!

The man's voice said, "Set 'em on the tray, Rosie. The gang out front's thinned fast. Only five or six still in."

Rosie chuckled.

"It won't be so long now till Andy and Grogan and you can take the wren over. She sure came in fast on the heels of that flattie you rubbed last night. Something'll just as like spike that Washington jog yet. I was warnin' Andy—"

"Load on the potatoes," Rocky interrupted impatiently.

The girl from Noonan's, slipping quietly along the wall, had come to the crack of glittering light. It was wider than she had dared hope. When her eye was held close against it, she commanded a view of Andre's kitchen. It was different now, not crowded with a rush of chefs and waitresses. The place was almost empty, and some of the lights had been turned out. Rocky, dressed now in a waiter's jacket, leaned against the service counter. A woman —big and broad, with greasy black hair —stood at one of the stoves.

There was no one else in sight.

Something above the doors to the dining room suddenly caught the redhead's notice. Eyes tightening, she gasped. The hands of the clock pointed to six minutes before midnight!

No wonder the large staff employed to take care of the dinner crowd had vanished. No wonder the place was deserted, save for Rocky and the woman at the stove. Only six minutes to closing time. And then— As Rocky disappeared through the swinging doors, bearing his loaded tray the girl detective tugged at the bandages that trussed her wrists. Her heart was pounding.

Six minutes to get away! Six minutes before the guns that had snarled death at Pete Brophy came back for her!

The bandages were tight, skillfully tied. But they had been made of what seemed to be strips of an old dish towel —obviously to prevent the appearance of marks on her wrists when the police found her body in the river. Sometimes old cloth wasn't strong—

Five minutes, now. The black hand of the clock above the door seemed to be racing like a demon. The bandages still held.

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Grace's arms ached from the effort of trying to part them. The chords of her throat stood out hard and straight under her skin.

Hinges creaked abruptly. Rocky was back.

"There's two more guys out front wants mashed potatoes," he chuckled. "Hayseed all over 'em. They want you should heat the spuds as hot as they get 'em back home. That's just the way the old geezer puts it. 'Like we get 'em in Kokomo,' he says!"

Grace sobbed with the effort of her aching muscles. Kokomo! The signal! Tim and Jerry were out front. And she was helpless!

"Kokomo!" Rosie scoffed. "Where's Kokomo?"

The bandages—old, rotten linen—began to give.

There were three minutes left, according to the clock. Grace felt her wrists pulling away from each other as the worn cloth which held them separated. Thread by thread, the rip in the white bandage widened before her eyes. Outside in the kitchen, the swinging doors beneath the clock creaked as Rocky passed through them on his way back into the restaurant. A pan rattled. The woman at the stove muttered something, savagely, beneath her breath. The girl from Noonan's gasped as the bonds which had held her parted with a final swift, ripping sound. Her arms jerked apart, free. The bandage dropped away from her, lay like a twisted white snake on the floor at her feet.

Moving quickly, but without noise, the redhead slid along the smooth plank wall which separated her from the room where Rosie was at work. Her fingers were flat against the partition, searching wildly for a break in the even surface.

As the pan on the stove rattled again, she found it. The slight aperture which meant a door! Her hand shook as it slid down and closed over metal.

She pulled the knob toward her, cautiously. Nothing happened. She pushed against it. The panel would not move.

The door to her prison was, as she had more than half suspected, locked. And if the key was in the lock on the other side—

Quickly crouching in the darkness, Grace leaned forward until her forehead was pressing against the cold knob. A pin point of light from the kitchen was even with her eye, now.

She sobbed in gratitude. The key had been moved! Whoever had locked her here, earlier in the evening, had been taking no chances on her accidental discovery.

Clawing in their eagerness, her fingers snatched at the cheap bar-pin on her breast. She felt it part and slip away from the starched material which had held it.

Her finger tips slid along the tiny, almost invisible corrugations of the clever skeleton key which formed the trinket's crossbar. How many minutes had passed now? How much time had she left?

The lock, as with most cheaply constructed kitchen closets, was not a difficult one. Almost at once, she felt it turn beneath the probing tip of the gadget in her hand. As it gave, she pressed silently forward.

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The panel slid away from her, swinging out into the lighted kitchen. And in the sudden glare, just turning from her stove, the black-haired woman was twisting toward her.

Grace sprang.

A startled snarl, born on the other woman's lips, was choked abruptly as she dived toward a glittering butcher's knife which, lay on the work table opposite her stove.

Rosie and the girl from Noonan's reached the table in the same split-second. The cook's muscular fingers, groping wildly, clamped onto the handle of the murderous knife. Grace, swinging around the end of the table, had caught up a flour-dusted rolling pin.

The knife, sweeping upward, glittered savagely in the naked light. Down it started. Down—as the rolling pin, backed by all the muscle of a wiry young arm, crashed ruthlessly across Rosie's livid face.

Blood spurted in a horrible stream from the woman's mangled mouth. Screaming, she flung herself forward. The knife twisted from her hand as Grace struck again.

The second blow, catching its victim square alongside the skull, thudded heavily. The cook's big body tottered, lurched backward toward the stove, collapsed.

As it struck the floor, Grace was upon it. Panting, she caught the limp arms in her hands and began to pull. Rosie was no lightweight. But the nerveless poundage of her inert carcass slid gradually over the shining linoleum.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, the redhead dragged her. Around the corner of the work table and back to the open door of the closet. Into the closet.

She stepped out again quickly, slamming the door behind her. In the pot on the stove, cold potatoes were being reheated. Mashed potatoes for "the two guys with hayseed all over 'em," were doubtless heated even more than suited the local taste in Kokomo. If they ate mashed potatoes in Kokomo.

The girl from Noonan's yanked down a ladle from the open utensil rack above the stove, and went to work. Out of the pot she fished the double order, and into waiting saucers. Steam still rose from the smooth potatoes.

Hurriedly, she unclasped the bar-pin from her breast and inserted it in a mound of mashed potatoes. But Grace's heart was tingling with triumph.

A step sounded suddenly on the far side of the doors beneath the clock.

Catching up the saucers the girl detective swung around the corner of the work table. In three swift steps she reached the service counter which separated the kitchen from the pantry beyond.

Quickly setting down the saucers, she shoved them away from her across the counter. The doors opened. Grace ducked.

Her crouched body trembling as it pressed against the counter and beneath the protecting overlap of the service shelf, she listened to Rocky's steps come toward her across the pantry.

"Hey, Rosie, them hicks said to be sure—"

Kitchen Trap

The voice broke abruptly on a startled grunt. Then Rocky stuttered out, "I'll be—"

The doors to the dining room creaked again.

Slowly, when the receding footsteps had faded, Grace swung erect. As she rose from behind the counter, her eyes were on the clock. Its hands stood at one minute after twelve. A minute longer than she had been entitled to expect, remembering the restaurant's closing time! Evidently the blackmailers were waiting until their last customers, the gentlemen from Kokomo, had left.

Back across the kitchen Grace hurried. At the closed door of the closet, she paused, only long enough to glance across her shoulder. Then she reached for the knob.

Still unconscious and breathing heavily, Rosie's crumpled body sprawled on the floor inside. Hastily, expertly, the girl detective frisked her. But, as she had feared, there was no gun on the woman.

There was a sudden soft sound in the kitchen outside. Tim and Jerry, so soon? Grace whirled to the closet door. A low cry burst from her lips.

In the pantry, and therefore visible only from the waist up, two figures stood. But they were not the two she had hoped for. Sniffle Grogan, like a giant gorilla, was peering at her in stupid astonishment. And behind him, his brute face working in rage, loomed the figure of Andre himself.

In the split-second while their eyes met, the girl realized that the small door from the back hallway stood open—that Tim, out front, could not have seen them enter the kitchen. And both of them were drawing guns!

Her muscles moving instinctively like well-oiled springs, she leaped forward.

The soft snarl of a silenced automatic sang at her across the service counter as she moved, and the sharp sound of splintering wood in the closet wall behind her followed almost instantly. Flat on the floor, weaponless, cornered, the girl from Noonan's waited. "Get her, Sniff! She's that cursed spy from—"

Andre's voice, she realized, was the deepest of those from the room upstairs. Proof of his guilt!

Thoughts blurred. She seemed to be swinging upward through a haze of lights, moved by some force greater than her own will. Her fingers had closed over something—the handle of Rosie's fallen knife—as she sprang.

The haze lifted sharply. Grogan, automatic clutched in one big paw, was straightening from his leap across the counter. Andre, face working, was taking the longer way—ground.

Sniffle's gun lifted, as steel flashed through the air. The knife's blade, murderously bright, glittered toward him like the wings of a humming bird.

Gore spouted from his hand, the knife slicing through matted hair and flesh. The gorilla's crooked fingers fanned. The gat hurtled floorward, its clatter lost in his hideous shriek of pain.

Straight for the dropped gun, the girl from Noonan's dived. Dimly, as she sprang, she was aware that the doors beneath, the clock had crashed open.

Grogan lurched above her. Her fingers clawed for the automatic. Andre, almost beside her, had spun toward the counter.

Kitchen Trap

Grogan lunged.

A deafening roar filled the kitchen! Grace, staggering upward with the automatic in her wet fist, saw Sniffle stiffen, relax, plunge forward on his face.

His paws, groping, had scraped her arm in a spasmodic effort to check his fall. Now they clutched and relaxed, spreading on the new linoleum like a five-branched crack in breaking ice.

Tim's voice said, "Up with 'em, Andre!"

In answer, Andrews own lifted gun snarled gently. The glass in the little round window above Tim's head shattered. The automatic spat again at the pair in the pantry.

Jerry Riker, at his chief's side, gasped and staggered forward. The gun in his right hand had sprung from his fingers like a thing alive. His shoulder sagged ominously.

Tim fired, his bullet ripping a long scar into the smooth wood of the counter as Andre ducked behind it to safety. Grace, whirling after the blackmailer, checked suddenly.

The doors had slammed open again. Rocky, dashing in from the empty restaurant, was leaping at the veteran detective from behind. A thin dagger, whipped from beneath his waiter's coat, glittered in his lifted hand.

"Tim! Look out!"

The sharp whine of the gun in the girl's fingers crossed the counter. The man who had smothered her upstairs, and who now was attacking her chief, screamed something shrill and terrified.

His body seemed to slam backward against the doors, as if a magnet had jerked it away from Noonan's shoulder. He screamed again. Then he buckled and vanished from her view.

Grace swung swiftly toward Andre— but not in time.

The blackmailer, lunging upward with dazzling speed, caught her around the waist with one iron arm. Her slim form, jerked off balance, slammed against him. Holding her as a shield between himself and Tim's threatening gun, he began to back away from the counter.

"Stand off, Noonan! Stand off, or the girl gets it"

Tim, powerless, stood rooted to the spot where Rocky had attacked him.

Grace, despite her useless struggles, felt Andre dragging her backward step by step across the slick linoleum.

Fighting fiercely but helplessly in his grip, she felt her side slam into the stove as they reached it. Her gun was useless. And as Andre jerked her suddenly to avoid the stove, it wrenched completely free of her twisted hand.

Another minute, and he would win to the back door—and freedom. Pete Brophy's killer! The leader of the ring Pete had been set to crack!

The girl's desperate eyes fell on the stove past which he was dragging her. Her left arm flung out, its hand snatching wildly at the nearest thing. Her fingers clamped on the handle of the grease-filled frying pan.

Kitchen Trap

Up and backward, over her shoulder, she jerked it. Hissing fat from the skillet's bottom flew square into the face of the man who held her.

For a split-second, the iron grip about her waist relaxed. Grace spun. Her arm still lifting, she faced Andre's tortured oath. The hot grease had blinded him.

Down the pan hurtled in a vicious arc. Its blow as it contacted the blackmailer's skull made a sickening crunch. Andre, groaning only once, fell backward.

They rode uptown in the back of the patrol wagon. Inside, under guard, Andre and his helpers were on their way to answer for Brophy's murder.

The blackmailer and Rosie had recovered from their blows. Rocky was still unconscious. Grogan, who was probably beyond help, had been rushed off in an ambulance.

Big Tim, looking into the sherry-colored eyes of his young secretary, smiled grimly.

"Kokomo mashed potatoes! I like to fell under the table when I forked 'em and found that bar-pin inside!"

"It was a pretty good trick," the redhead answered softly. "Pete would have liked it, I think—"

Tim said, "How come?"

"I figured I'd probably need to get word to you from back there—or, at least, without speaking to you if I waited on you in the restaurant. That's why I wanted to definite signal in the potatoes which were for you."

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the shrill siren of their swaying car. Then Tim chuckled.

"Mashed potatoes!"

"They like 'em hot in Kokomo," Grace said.

Across from her, Jerry Riker moved his bandaged shoulder and grinned.

"That's right. And gee, were you a honey with that frying pan! Didn't I tell you that a woman ought to stick to her stove instead of her guns? Any time you'd like to get smart and move into my kitchen—"

The siren screamed again. Andre, between two plain-clothes men, was swearing volubly. Rosie was nursing her swollen jaw.

"A kitchen's got a lot to recommend it," Grace conceded, giving her fellow worker at least one point. "Frying pans and rolling-pins. An awful lot!"