

SCOOP

BY B. R. FLYNN

Chapter Two, "Nat Scarlet"

Natalie "Nat" Scarlet pushed her way through the crowd, trying to get to the front. The dock was swarming with reporters and police. The snow had stopped falling but it was still cold. Nat looked around as she pushed through her colleagues. *Does everyone have a cop on the payroll?* she thought. She certainly did. But unlike the row upon row of indistinguishable men, Nat stood out, and not just because she was a woman. She was twenty-nine and gorgeous. Her voluptuous form was packed tightly into a smart reporter's suit, black with white highlights. Her dark auburn hair curled down from her head and just reached her shoulders. She caught several of her male colleagues looking down her front, which suited her just fine, allowing her to push towards the front.

"Excuse me," she said. "Pardon me. Out of my way."

Her voice was deep, husky, luscious. A bedroom voice. It added to her whole mystique.

She reached the front, bumping a fellow reporter out of the way with a strong jab with her hips, finally getting a good view of the dock. There were ten police officers milling around, most of them not doing any real work. One of them kicked snow off the dock, clearing a space. Nat could see a dead man crumpled up on the docks. The police hadn't covered him up yet and Nat smiled. She pulled her camera off her shoulder and took a shot. Of course, all of the reporters at the front also photographed the body, but none of them were as talented as Nat. She had an eye for the macabre, the grotesque. She got down on one knee - taking the cold - to snap the picture. The angle made all the difference, added that little extra touch.

Nat blew a stray strand of hair out of her face, smiled again and stood up. Now she could see a man being handcuffed by the police at the end of the dock. He looked beat up, shaken. As the officers began to lead him her way, she recognized him. Gerald McGrath, a gunman for the Irish mob, one of Coll's men. That had to mean that the other man was Joseph Meehan, who was never far away from McGrath.

Several officers made a hole in the crowd and they started to lead McGrath through.

"I'm telling you it was a ghost!" McGrath said. "I hit him but he kept coming! It was The Outsider!"

"Sure, sure," one of the cops said. "Next thing you'll be telling me is that it was a guy in a bat suit. Save it for the judge."

The rest of the reporters concentrated on McGrath, following him up the dock, but Nat stayed where she was. She combed the scene as best she could, which was quite a bit now that she was largely alone and could concentrate. But she wanted in there, wanted to get close. But how?

She recognized Lieutenant O'Malley among the remaining cops and leaned over, exposing a bit of cleavage to catch his eye. It worked and O'Malley wandered in her direction, stealing glances at her chest.

"Quote, lieutenant?" she asked as he approached.

"Who are you with, young lady?" he countered, his Irish brogue still audible after all these years.

"Nat Scarlet, the *Tribune*. Remember me?"

The cop produced a cigarette from his front pocket and lit up. The flickering light illuminated his lined face for a moment and Nat could see all the years written on it, like they had been etched in stone.

"Oh, yes," he said, "how could I forget?"

"Yeah, you remember," she said. "The shootout at City Hall last year?"

"I was thinking of that piece you did on police corruption, actually. This year."

"It was an honest piece."

"Honest my foot! None of my men take one red cent from the Irish mob."

"You're right."

O'Malley smiled wide as if he had her caught. "Thank you."

"They take it from the Italian mob," Nat said. "Got my details a little mixed up that time. Probably because I was wondering why an Irishman would be taking money from Italians instead of from his own kind."

"You're trouble, miss."

"Trouble's my middle name."

The reporters, deprived of McGrath - who had been led to a squad car and driven away - were starting to return. She had to make her move. Now.

"Look," she said, "I think we got off on the wrong foot. You got another one of those?" She indicated his cigarette.

O'Malley mused his cigarette as smoke drifted off it and into the air, swirling up like a devil. She smirked.

"Course," he said.

He produced a second coffin nail and handed it to Nat. She took it, wrapped her lips around it and looked up at him with a pouty look.

"Light?" she said.

The cop obliged and lit her cigarette. She inhaled deep, and blew a puff out as sexy as she could muster.

"My question still stands," she said. "You have a quote for me?"

"About what?" O'Malley said. "This is a simple case. Mob justice, no more, no less."

"What about that chain over there? Are those handcuffs?"

"Don't know all the details yet."

"Know any details about this 'ghost' that's been terrorizing the underworld? The Outsider?"

"He's a myth, a ghost story. Nothing more."

"Fifth time this month that I've seen you drag a criminal away babbling on about The Outsider. Now, I can get a story into the interior pages no problem. Already had one yesterday, in fact. But if I want to get on the front page, I'm gonna need some more information. Now, all of these other guys are trying to get the same thing but I'm a little more resourceful than your average reporter. I got something the others don't."

O'Malley took a drag on his cigarette and took another look at her cleavage. "I can see that."

Nat smiled. Her lips were luscious - juicy - and she had a small mole on her left cheek, a beauty mark.

"Moxy," she said.

"Oh, really?" O'Malley said.

"Come on, lieutenant," Nat said, "give me an exclusive. I'll keep your name out of it. Anonymous source."

"It's not worth it."

"I see. You need something more. Speaking of which, I noticed you taking a little peek at me just now."

"So?"

"So, take another look. A closer one."

The cop frowned and took another drag on the cigarette. Then he leaned forward and looked down Nat's cleavage. Tucked in between her breasts was a five dollar bill, folded neatly between the two globes of flesh. O'Malley's eyes widened.

"Yeah, I thought that'd interest you," she said. "It's yours. If you let me through and answer a few of my questions."

"All right," he said.

Nat pulled the bill from her cleavage slowly, letting it brush the soft, white flesh as it traveled up her cleavage. She used it to fan her face, as if it was hot out here and not the total opposite. Nat was

freezing in the outfit she had chosen - especially since she had left her coat in her car for effect - but it was doing the job. Finally, she passed the bill to O'Malley with a smile. The cop threw down his spent cigarette as he grabbed the bill.

"Come on," he said. "Let her through."

The cops let her pass. Nat caught glare after glare from her fellow reporters. She smiled at them and shrugged as she sauntered across the police line.

"Sorry, boys," she said.

Nat walked the crime scene, taking it all in, memorizing every little detail, every single thing she laid her eyes on. Her memory was excellent - had to be - and she put every available bit of it to use now. O'Malley stayed by her side, not letting her out of his sight.

"So, what do we have?" Nat asked.

"Looks like a hit interrupted," O'Malley said. "Some Irish mobsters show up, planning on dunking somebody into the water to get eaten by a shark, but it appears that the tables were turned. From what we could get out of McGrath, this 'ghost' killed one of them by throwing him to the shark, and then somehow caused the death of the other one."

"Somehow?"

"He's being a bit cagey on that part of his story. Ask me, he clocked his associate himself. Probably on accident."

"What else?"

"Some of the others escaped, along with the intended hit. Got away."

Nat continued walking. Her footsteps clacked across the wooden slats of the dock. There were bullet holes everywhere, like a massacre had gone down. But only two dead? And only one of those from gunfire? It didn't make sense. Nat counted as many of the holes as she could before running out of patience. There was no pattern.

"Did this mysterious 'ghost' bring his own Thompson?" she asked.

"Doesn't appear so, no," O'Malley said.

"So what did he use to defend himself? Pistol? Shotgun?"

"Neither."

"Neither?"

"Appears that he used a throwing knife," O'Malley said.

"A throwing knife?!" Nat said.

"Yep, a throwing knife. McGrath said it looked tribal. African, maybe."

"An African throwing knife? No offense, but that sounds made up."

"And it very well could be. But that's the story he's sticking to."

"So, the ghost stuck 'em?"

"No, he used the knife to stop this little contraption they rigged up to dunk the hit into the water."

"So, after that, he was unarmed?"

O'Malley smiled wide. He leaned into Nat. "Used his fists."

"His fists?" Nat said.

"Beat McGrath up pretty good, broke his nose."

"Had McGrath lost his gun?"

"Not until this ghost knocked it out of his hands."

"You're telling me that this 'ghost' took on a man with a Thompson unarmed?"

"That's what it looks like."

Nat shook her head. It was incredible - unbelievable, even - but she found herself buying it. Three months ago, she wouldn't have, but she had seen enough strange things connected to this "ghost" recently to give credence to the story. She was silent for a moment after that. Then she smiled, finished off her cigarette with a flourish and leaned into O'Malley, giving him another good look at her cleavage. O'Malley didn't mind taking it.

"Let me have a closer look at the body?" she asked.

"Not on your life," O'Malley said.

"Why not?"

"Two reasons. One, I've already told you what five dollars and a good look at your tits can buy. Two, I know your come-ons are nothing but a lot of hot air."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, I heard about you, Miss Scarlet. There's no bulldyker that's got anything for a man."

Nat smirked and wished she hadn't finished her cigarette: she now had nothing to do with her hands. The truth sure did get around.

The next day, around noon, the offices of the *Tribune* were buzzing. The newsroom was constant noise and movement, reporters on phones trying to squeeze a source, newsmen trading insults back and forth with each other, girls fetching coffee and copy, and smoke, smoke, smoke, trailing up in the air, so thick that it almost created a grey cloud bank above everyone in the room.

But Nat Scarlet, sitting at her small desk - pushed up against the wall in a corner of the room - was still and silent, leaning back in her chair facing the wall, thinking. She kept a baseball, old and weathered, on her desk. At the moment, it was in her hands, passed back and forth between them.

The details of the case didn't make any sense. An African knife, a man who used his fists against guns, some of the hoods left alive, others not. She couldn't wrap her head around it.

She threw the baseball at the wall, where it hit and bounced off, back into her hands. She repeated this again and again as she considered the story. Hardly anyone noticed, the newsroom was so rowdy. Nat was the only female reporter among them, having proven herself to her editors. It had taken some considerable time. At first, they had only wanted her on advice columns and puff pieces. She did those, to begin with, but was able to move onto bigger and better stories with time and work, much more work than any of her male colleagues. But that was life and she wasn't going to complain. She liked her job, liked where she was now. And yet, she often felt like there was something missing from her life, something she couldn't put her finger on.

The phone on her desk rang. She caught the baseball one last time and swiveled around in her chair and looked at the loud device, letting it ring for a moment. It was a big, black affair with a ring that shook the whole desk when it went off. Finally, she put the baseball down on the desk, sighed and answered the phone.

"Nat Scarlet, the *Tribune*," she said into the receiver. She sat up straight in her chair as the person on the other end began to speak. "No, Beth, I told you not to call me at work... Because it's inappropriate... It was a whole week ago. I've been on something else since then." She picked the baseball back up and swiveled around again, throwing the ball against the wall extra hard now. One of the reporters near her looked at her, annoyed, both by her strange behavior and the personal call, which was frowned upon. She shrugged and shot the man a smile. "Yes, someone else, too. Sure... Well, I had a good time, too, but that's all it was, a good time... Same to you. Goodbye, Beth."

She hung up the phone, sighed again and caught the baseball then threw it up into the air. She caught it and threw it again, over and over.

"A brawler," she said to herself, "not a gunsmith. A vigilante, obviously not on the police payroll. Not on the mob's, of course, at the least the Irishmen. African knife, tribal..."

She caught the baseball for the last time and just held it in a hand, her eyes unfocused, looking off into nothingness.

"Doesn't make any sense," she said.

She set the baseball on the desk, almost slamming it down. It rolled partway across the surface then came to rest. Nat put her head in her hands. She didn't keep it there for long, though: the men might get it into their dumb brains that she was crying. She stood up and sauntered out of the newsroom. She needed some air.

The *Tribune* offices were installed in a tall, wide building on 4th, near the Park. Nat came out of the

revolving doors at the front, a smart-looking coat bundling her up. She lit a cigarette and puffed on it as she hurried across the street, dodging traffic. It was a bit hairy: traffic was getting worse around here lately.

The Park was a short walk north and Nat smoked and smoked as she hoofed it. A smile broke across her face as she stepped into the Park, taking in all of its green beauty. Even the large Hooverville set up there didn't detract from its majesty. She stopped at a little hot dog cart set up on the edge of the Park.

"Hey, Chuck," she said to the middle-aged man running the cart.

"Nat, my favorite girl!" Chuck said. "Good to see ya!"

Chuck was a big man, wide and tall. He was bald and his apron was splattered with mustard and bits of onion. He immediately produced a large dog with a pair of tongs and stuffed it into what a fresh bun.

"Great to see you, Chuck," Nat said. "What's the word?"

"The word is bupkis."

"Nah, really?"

"Yeah, really. I mean nothing. You're my fourth customer of the day. Zilch. What's the world coming to when a guy can't even afford a dog for lunch?"

He smothered her dog in mustard and then threw on a generous scoop of chopped onions for good measure. Nat found that she was licking her lips. She had been working so hard on the story that she had forgotten to eat this morning. Coffee and cigarettes, that was it.

"Well," she said, "hope this helps."

She handed him a half-dollar as she took the hot, steaming, scrumptious dog. It was a hefty tip and Chuck looked at her, surprised.

"You sure?" he asked.

"Absolutely," Nat said, "you've earned it."

"Well, thank you. Hope you have a good day."

Nat nodded and wandered into the Park. She smelled the dog first, took in the yummy scent, before biting into it. It was heavenly. Who knew that a sausage in a bun would taste so good, especially with mustard and onions? She took a moment to have a swig from a flask on her person. Ah, that sweet burn down her gullet.

The Hooverville stretched out in front of her: dozens and dozens of tents and make-shift houses, cobbled together in an effort to survive. Many fires had been set in metal barrels. How cold must it have been here at night? Nat didn't want to know. She was grateful that she had a roof over her head, a steady job and enough money to enjoy a good hot dog most days of the week.

There were people of all colors and creed in the Hooverville, but Nat had wandered into what

appeared to be a predominantly Black area. She got nervous, suspicious looks from many of them: a beautiful white woman among them was never a good sign and usually spelled trouble. So she kept back, staying among the trees whenever possible.

She came upon a crowd, most of them colored, of course. They were bunched around what looked like a make-shift stage, raised off the ground a few feet. A cheap curtain covered the mini-stage and, as Nat watched, the fabric parted, revealing several puppets.

A puppet show. Nat smiled. How wonderful. These people, destitute as they were, provided their own entertainment, tried to cheer up their fellow man, especially the many children in the audience.

The puppets were caricatures of gangsters and policemen, both portrayed as bumbling, if not outright stupid. They went about their little mini-drama, which was funny and well-staged. Whoever the puppeteer was, he was certainly talented.

Nat had almost finished her hot dog when The Outsider appeared. Not in person, but as a puppet on the little stage. Nat's mouth dropped open, shocked. She never finished the hot dog. All the children - and many of the adults - cheered when The Outsider puppet made his appearance.

The puppet was an exaggerated version of the descriptions Nat had heard about the Outsider: black clothes and hat, face covered in a soft, form-fitting mask. The puppet Outsider battled the gangsters, beating them up, outwitting them, using brains as well as brawn. Nat shook her head in amazement. This Outsider was a hero to these people, they loved every minute of the show and obviously knew who the puppet was supposed to represent. It was incredible.

Nat caught someone out of the corner of her eye and looked to her left. A tall, strong colored man was standing away from the crowd a little. As Nat watched, he lit up a cigarette and drew the smoke in deep. Nat recognized him but it took her a moment to figure out who he was.

Finally, it came to her: "Big Tom" Hurley. He was a boxer, semi-professional, strong and well-regarded by those in the know. Nat had seen him once while she was covering a story on illegal betting among the boxing world.

Then something clicked in her mind. She looked at Big Tom, then looked at the little stage, where the puppet Outsider beat up the bad gangsters. A brawler, not a gunslinger. An African knife, tribal. It all came together in her mind and she dropped what remained of her hot dog. It hit the ground at her feet, a bit of mustard splashing onto her shoes.

"He's a boxer," she said softly to herself. "Hot damn, yeah! A colored boxer. An outsider..."

She dashed through the trees, and out of the Park like a bullet. She had work to do.

"Can I help you?" Lou Baker said.

He was a big, pale man, around fifty. A cigar was planted firmly between his teeth as he spoke. Nat crossed the room quickly, her hand outstretched in offer. It was morning of the next day and bright light streamed in through patched up windows in the gym. Several rings had been set up all over the room for practice. Two of them were occupied at the moment: two pairs of men sparring, honing their skill. Nat sized both pairs of men up as she walked to Lou.

"Lou Baker?" she asked.

"Who's asking?" he countered.

"Nat Scarlet, the *Tribune*."

Lou took her offered hand and they shook. Nat made sure to give the man the strongest handshake she was capable of. It was a survival instinct, something innate in the woman: slink like a minx around cops like O'Malley - or others who she thought might like it - and get tough around older men who obviously had no interest in her womanly wiles. She had sensed it the moment she saw Lou: he simply wouldn't be interested in her in that way. So a different tack was required.

"*Tribune*?" Lou asked. "The newspaper?"

"Yes, the newspaper," Nat said. "Terry Bellows put me onto you. You know Terry? He manages 'Big Tom' Hurley."

"Yeah, I know Terry. Don't know what Terry - or you - have to do with me, though."

"Sorry, I should explain myself. I'm writing a story about the boxing world, specifically the colored boxing world, and am looking to interview a few fighters."

"Can't help you."

"And why is that?"

"You know as well as I do that it ain't right to have a white woman sit down to talk with a colored fellow. Just ain't done. Too many heads would turn, too many people who think it's wrong."

"But not you?" Nat asked.

"What I think don't matter," Lou said. "It just ain't done."

"Well, that's why I've come to you."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. I can ask you a few questions, you could speak to your fighters, write down their responses, and submit them to me."

"Seems like a lot of work."

"I assure you, it won't be very many questions."

Lou chewed on his cigar and looked at her. He appeared to be thinking about it. Nat remained silent: sometimes silence was the best weapon a reporter had. It drew out the subject, sometimes got them

talking better than any other prompt.

"I don't know," he said.

"Feel free to think about it," Nat said. "In the meantime, I hear you have something special."

"Do you now?"

"I do. 'Boilerplate' Walker?"

"Sage? Yeah, he's something special, I'll give you that."

"I've seen many fighters. Yesterday, I went to five gyms and saw three fights. All of them were good, but not what I was looking for. Your man is different, though, I've heard."

"You've heard right. He has the heart of a lion."

"I'd love to see him fight."

Lou sighed. "Why do you keep asking me for things that I can't provide? Sage's fights are all underground. No dames allowed."

"Ah, now," Nat said, "I know for a fact that the fights at Bernie's allow women, because I've been to more than one."

"Bernie's, sure, but we're talking about underground, miss. Real underground. Baker and 5th, basement of a dive bar called Pal Joey's."

"I know it."

"Then you also know that they don't allow no dames."

"I'm sure you can get me in."

"Oh, yeah? And why would I want to get you in?"

At that moment, a door to a back office near the two of them opened and a young, rather effeminate man with blond hair stepped out of it. Lou and the young man exchanged a glance, a glance that most people would have overlooked but Nat - accustomed to seeing things from a different perspective, from living a partially hidden life - caught right away.

"Ricky," Lou said to the young man, "I'll be there in a minute."

Ricky nodded and returned to the office. Lou looked back at Nat, who was smiling now. She could tell that he knew that she knew but put a front anyway.

"Why are you smiling?" he said.

"Because you're gonna get me into that fight tonight," Nat said.

"What? You've gone loopy, girl."

"Look, I know what it's like, okay?"

"Know what what's like?"

"Living like this," Nat said, indicating the office where Ricky had disappeared. "Hiding yourself. I'm

the same."

Lou chewed on his cigar and looked away. He puffed up his chest, making a display of it.

"We're a pair," he said, "you and I."

"Don't I know it?" Nat said. "You're pretty masculine for a sissy and I'm pretty feminine for a bulldyker."

Lou smiled and laughed a little. He shook his head. "I suppose you're gonna blackmail me into getting you into that fight?"

"Blackmail?!" Nat said. "Blazes no! I'm gonna bribe you." She reached into her jacket, pulled out a five-dollar bill and handed it to the man. "That should do, right?"

"This will do."

Nat put a hand on his shoulder. "I would never blackmail a brother of mine."

Lou shook his head again. "What if I don't want to be your brother?"

"Too bad," Nat said. "I'm your sister whether you like it or not. So, Pal Joey's?"

"Pal Joey's."

"What time?"

"Ten."

"I'll be there."

"I'm sure you will be."

When Nat left, Lou crossed the room with her but stopped halfway. He came to rest between the two occupied rings and finally took a puff of his cigar. In the ring on his right, the sparring match had come to an end and one of the fighters approached the ropes. He was in his mid-twenties, Black, about six feet tall.

"Hey Lou," he said. "That woman asking about me?"

"She was, Sage," Lou said. He did not turn to look at the boxer.

"Might have to keep an eye on her."

"I was thinking the same thing."

Sage "Boilerplate" Walker pounded his fists on the ropes before returning to the ring. He to train for a fight tonight.

The basement of Pal Joey's was large and expansive - Nat suspected that it was used to either store or brew illegal alcohol during prohibition - and the atmosphere in the room was electric, and very masculine. Nat got quite a few stares from many men and was glad that she had dressed down a bit,

less sexy and more reserved - for her, at least. She kept her coat on, though it was actually hot in the room, with all the men crowding around.

A ring had been set up in the center of the space, allowing everyone to crowd around it, all of them standing: there were no seats. Lou was getting his fighter's corner ready and caught sight of her, shook his head and gave her a nod. She smiled back and gave him a little wave. Standing next to Lou was an older Asian man, presumably Walker's cutman.

The doorman had been initially hesitant to let Nat in but a mention of Lou's name and a dollar bill had done the trick.

And here came the fighters. Jim "Hammer" Johnson was first: he mounted the ring, pushing the ropes down in front of him like they were twine. He was colored and well over six feet, a sculpture of muscle. Scars lined his body, leaving intricate patterns. His hands were immense. The crowd went crazy when he stepped into the ring: he was clearly the local favorite.

A moment later, the challenger entered the ring. Sage "Boilerplate" Walker was a flat six feet tall, not as impressive looking as Johnson, but - to Nat, at least - he looked just as strong, though his strength was different. He was lean, spry, athletic. His strength was more disciplined, honed.

When the bell rang, they both went at it. Johnson's blows were powerful, devastating, but they were also slow, with no real skill involved. Walker's moves were jaw-dropping. He ducked and weaved, landing punches here and there when the opportunity arose, never leaving himself open to attack. It was a rousing, exciting fight. Even Nat, who felt boxing was rather barbaric, found herself getting involved. She was able to get to the front fairly easily, as usual. Men ogled her body, even as covered as she was now.

At ringside, the fight was both better and worse. Better because she could see the skill involved, worse because she could see every blow in great detail, could imagine flesh and muscle being pounded, bones under stress, threatening to break, skin actually breaking, drawing blood. It was brutal, to be sure, but it was exhilarating, as well.

Johnson hit the mat in round three, but he was up by the count of four. In round five, Walker delivered a devastating blow to Johnson's jaw. The local champ reeled back, a long line of blood erupting from his mouth. The blood splattered right across Nat's face and it was the reporter's turn to reel back, as if she had been hit herself.

Several men in the crowd cheered at this, and there were several wolf whistles. Nat ignored them as she wiped the blood off her face. She was back at ringside in seconds, pushing a man aside. She had to see if Johnson would go down.

The local champ teetered on his feet but remained standing. Walker spotted Nat while Johnson was

regaining his balance. He seemed to lock eyes with her, seemed to mark her. After that, his skill seemed to diminish, his step not as sure. Punches didn't land. What was going on? Nat was confused.

In round eight, Walker went down and didn't get up. Nat watched it happen, watched Walker take a hard right. But it wasn't that hard. Walker had taken much worse before. And it certainly wasn't strong enough to floor him and keep him down. But stay down he did.

The crowd went wild, the local champ had prevailed. Money changed hands and the crowd milled around for a few minutes to congratulate the champ before setting out for a late drink.

Nat stuck around and watched Walker get up with ease, like he wasn't even hurt. Nat was in the shadows of the room by now, hidden away as best she could be.

It had been a show, she realized. Once Walker had seen Nat paying a little too much attention, he had let himself be beat. Not throwing the fight - not exactly - but pulling back, letting his guard down.

As if he was protecting himself. Hiding.

Nat clocked him as The Outsider right then and there. He had a secret, not a secret like Nat or Lou, but one that had to be kept, regardless.

Walker stepped out of the ring into the helping arms of Lou, his manager, and the cutman. Nat wasn't sure, but she thought the boxer shot her a look in the shadows. Did he know she was here? Soon, he and Lou were gone, leaving Nat pretty much by herself in the room.

"So you're the ghost," Nat said quietly to herself with a smile. "I want an exclusive."

To Be Continued...

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