

SCOOP

BY B. R. FLYNN

Chapter Three, "A Nose For Trouble"

At about the time that Sage Walker was stepping into the ring in the basement below Pal Joey's, Doyle sat in the passenger seat of a car, up front, next to Saoirse, who was sitting in the driver's seat.

Doyle was looking at today's Tribune. There was an article about the previous night's dock incident, of course, but it didn't mention The Outsider. No, that was on page four, in an opinion piece by this "Nat Scarlet." She - Doyle had looked into her and found that, yes, she was a woman - didn't have any facts, or first-person eye witness accounts, but she had much speculation, which was why the piece appeared under the opinion byline.

It was disturbing, nonetheless: she had so many of the facts right. Doyle felt those goosebumps return on his arms and the back of his neck. She was close to this somehow. Would he be ordered to take her out soon?

"What do you do with your free time, Doyle?" Saoirse said, making Doyle jump slightly. Saoirse laughed.

"Free time?" Doyle said. "What's that?"

"You're telling me."

"I just read the papers. Sometimes I'll take in a show."

"Oh, yeah? Anything good?"

"Sure."

"What do you like?"

"I like musical comedy."

Saoirse nodded. "I enjoy the odd musical distraction."

"What does that mean?" Doyle asked. "What do you enjoy?"

"I'm not sure you'd like the kind of entertainment I frequent. Probably wouldn't even understand it."

"Okay."

They lapsed into silence. Doyle coughed and went back to reading the paper again. But it appeared that Saoirse wasn't done with him yet.

"What's your problem with me, Doyle?" she asked.

"Nothing," Doyle said. "I don't have a problem with you."

"You can't lie to me, boy. I can see it in your eyes."

"Are you a mind-reader now? Is that it?"

"And if I were? What would I be seeing right now? Is it fear? Are ye a coward, Doyle?"

"I'm no coward," Doyle insisted.

"Then show some backbone," Saoirse said. She was animated, bubbling, her eyes wide. "Why didn't you go in with O'Bannion?"

"What about you? Why didn't you go in?"

"Because I drive the car, Doyle. I'm your wheels. None of ye can drive like me. You know that. If I could, I'd be in there right now. I'd be enjoying it."

"I'll bet," Doyle said under his breath.

"What was that?" Saoirse said.

"Then what about your boss? Huh? What about Coll?"

"What about him?"

"Looked to me like he got out off that dock as fast as he could last night. That sound like a coward to you? Cause it does to me."

Saoirse leaned over in her seat, getting very close to him. It was too close for Doyle, who found himself reeling back, trying to get away from her as best he could in the small space.

"Watch what you say around me," Saoirse said. "He's your boss, too."

"Okay," Doyle said frantically. "Okay, all right!"

"Besides, he's the boss so that means he's allowed to run if he wants. Needs to, in fact. He has to survive, to lead. Doesn't that make sense to you? You're not stupid, are you, Doyle?"

"No, no. I'm not stupid. That makes sense."

"Might I ask how you survived? Wasn't by fighting no ghost, I'll reckon."

"I already told Coll, that should be enough for--"

"I'm asking you!" Saoirse said furiously. "Me. Not Coll. Me, your friend. Are we not friends, Doyle?"

"Yeah," Doyle said a little too fast. "Yeah, we're friends, of course we are."

"Okay, then, friend. So you tell me. What happened on that dock? Why did this ghost let you live?"

"He let McGrath live, too."

"But he damn near killed him, didn't he? But not you. You've not a mark on ye! Why is that?"

"He didn't go after me because I wasn't a threat."

Saoirse got out of his face and back into her own seat, hands on the wheel, ready to move when the time came. She shook her head.

"That's the truth, I reckon," she said. "I just pray you haven't gone soft, friend."

Doyle remained silent, afraid that she might be right. And if he was soft, where was his future with this business? Probably at the bottom of the sea wearing cement shoes, he figured.

The back door of the car suddenly opened like a well-coiled spring and Doyle jumped again. He shot a glance over his shoulder and caught O'Bannion as he settled into the car, a satchel in one hand, pistol in the other. The man was young, in his early twenties. His blond hair was immaculate, every strand in place. His blue eyes sparkled with menace.

"How'd it go?" Doyle asked.

O'Bannion just smiled and remained silent. Doyle didn't like the look on his face.

"Badly?" he asked.

O'Bannion just kept smiling. Doyle saw Saoirse looking at the rear view mirror. She smirked.

"You've got a spot of something on your shirt," she said. "There."

O'Bannion looked down at the small spot on his shirt, just by his lapel. He extended a single fingertip to it, which came away red. He held the finger up, letting the red spot glitter in the streetlight.

"Success, then," Saoirse said.

O'Bannion uttered a small laugh as Doyle turned to face front, sinking into his seat. Saoirse got the car going, and they were off in a flash.

It was late when the loud knock sounded on Brett Peacock's door. She sat up in bed - still half-asleep - and flicked a light on. Wiping sleep out of her eyes, she made her way out of the bedroom and through the apartment.

She was in her mid-twenties, a slim, boyish, pretty young woman with yellow hair cut short. She wore only a simple white undershirt and panties so she grabbed an unadorned, plain housecoat from her closet and draped it over herself. The knock came again as she passed the small but serviceable kitchen.

"All right, all right, I'm coming," she said.

Now in the entrance hall, Brett yawned and scratched at her scalp, not very lady-like behavior but it was late, she had been interrupted and that was simply the kind of woman she was. Another knock, louder now.

"Brett!" came a voice. "Open the door, Brett!"

"That woman," Brett said, annoyed. "Quiet down, you're gonna wake the whole floor!"

"Let me in, Brett!" the voice said.

Brett finally reached the door, unlocked it and swung it open, revealing Nat Scarlet leaning in the doorway, hair rather messed up, make-up a little run. She smiled when she saw Brett.

"What are you doing here?" Brett asked.

"I wanted to see you," Nat said, sauntering into the apartment.

Brett sighed but let her in. As Nat practically fell into the apartment, catching herself on the side table by the door, Brett took a moment to fetch a pack of cigarettes from the same table and light up. Nat seemed interested in a rather beautiful green lamp, mesmerized by it, in fact.

"You're drunk," Brett said.

Nat swung around, abandoning the lamp to switch her attention to Brett. "I'm celebrating."

"Let me guess," Brett said, "two days off the wagon."

Nat scoffed and seemed to swat at the air with a hand. "Don't be ridiculous. I always keep this on me."

She pulled a flask from her jacket and unscrewed it. But when she lifted it to take a swig, nothing but a drop came out. She looked at the flask with confusion, shook it, then looked at it again. "Empty."

"Probably for the best," Brett said.

"What would you know, Miss Perfect?" Nat said and wrapped her arms around the other woman.

"I know enough to know when you've had enough. I'll make some coffee."

She stalked into the kitchen. Nat was close behind, hanging on Brett as if she were some kind of lovely - though disheveled - coat resting on a rack. As Brett prepared a pot of coffee for brewing, Nat wandered around the kitchen. She fingered a block of knives before stopping at a small clock on the counter. She squinted.

"It's late," she said, rather surprised. Then she spun around to face Brett. "Oh, shoot! Did I wake you?"

"You did," Brett said, not looking at the other woman, still concentrating on making coffee.

"I'm sorry," Nat said and she sounded genuine. "I get carried away."

"All the time. Every time you come over, Nat. You only come here when you're drunk and you don't want to be alone. What's the matter? Can't find anyone else? None of your other little flings available?"

Nat was silent. She looked away from Brett, seemingly embarrassed.

"I'm a terrible person," she said quietly.

"You're not terrible," Brett said, still defiantly not looking at Nat. "Just insensitive. I've got work in the morning."

"So do I."

"Oh, yeah? What are you working on?"

Nat hesitated. "It's rather secret."

Brett nodded. "I understand."

"Boxing, mainly."

"Boxing?"

"Boxers, specifically. I have to be at a gym downtown tomorrow morning. This guy trains real early, so I think he'll be out of there before 8."

"You trailing somebody?"

Nat nodded but Brett still wasn't looking at her and silence reigned for a moment. Brett - finally satisfied that the coffee could take care of itself - turned to regard Nat, leaning against the counter. "Well?"

"Hmm?" Nat said. "Oh, yes. I am going to be trailing someone."

"You know you're terrible at that, don't you?"

Another dismissive scoff from Nat. "That's ridiculous. I... I can disappear when I don't want to be seen. I'm... like a ghost."

Brett laughed. "I don't want to be mean, Nat, but when we first met I could tell that you were interested from across the room. You tried to act all sneaky-like but I knew where you were the whole night."

"That's because I wanted you to see me!" Nat said with a big smile. "I wanted you to know."

"All right, that's fair. And I was fine with that, with one night of fun, maybe even a little fling, but this... What exactly is this?"

"What is what?"

"This. You showing up in the middle of the night drunk? What is that? What do you want from me that you can't get from one of your cute little chippies?"

"More."

"What?"

"I want more."

Brett nodded slowly. Then she shook her head.

"If you want something more out of me," she said, "then you can't show up drunk. That's not what someone who cares does. Does that make sense to you?"

It was Nat's turn to slowly nod. "Yes."

"First step is getting rid of that flask," Brett said. "Do that and I'll consider it."

"My flask?! That and cigarettes are the only things that keep me sane!"

"Then don't get rid of it. Just don't come around if you don't."

"You're so serious. Okay, okay, I'll think about it, all right?"

"All right. Now you can sleep here. On the couch. You can't share my bed. Not tonight. We both need sleep. You're going to attempt to follow someone tomorrow morning and I work sixty-five hours this week, at far less pay than any of the men in the garage."

Nat nodded again, her head in the palm of one hand. Then, all of a sudden, she looked up, eyes wide open, nostrils flared, taking in a deep scent.

"Is that coffee I smell?" she said.

Brett just shook her head and turned to get a mug for Nat. She was certainly a character: she had to give her that, at least.

Doyle, O'Bannion and Saoirse entered the Midway Club in the early hours of the morning. There was no one to check their coats so they took them with them as they headed upstairs.

The Midway Club was uptown, a beautiful building, Art Deco and stylish. Doyle had always admired the architecture of the abode but always dreaded going inside and heading up those dense, dark stairs to Coll's office. The walk up there now, in the dead of night, was worse than usual, the stairs only lit by dimmed lights. Doyle expected to see The Outsider strike from any number of nearby shadows. But maybe that wouldn't have been so bad: if he was going to go out, better to go out that way than shot in the back by your supposed friends.

The trio mounted the stairs and came to an opulent waiting area, the entrance to Coll's office. Doyle stopped the others with a hand.

"Give me a minute alone with him," he said. "One of us will call you in. That all right?"

O'Bannion nodded and took a seat, got comfortable, but Saoirse eyed him with suspicion. She walked around him, seeming to mark him.

"Everything all right with you, Doyle?" she said.

"Of course," Doyle said a little too fast. "Just want to speak with him alone for a moment, that's all."

"Fine. Be my guest."

She indicated the door, standing aside for him, but remained standing, not taking a seat. Doyle looked at her for another moment then went to the door and knocked on it.

"Boss," he said.

"Who is it?" Coll called out from the other side.

"It's Doyle, boss."

"Come in, Doyle."

Doyle opened the door and entered the office. The interior was large and expansive but dark and

oppressive as well. There was something about the room - something about the way Coll had arranged the furniture in here - that made Doyle's skin crawl. Everything seemed to hang over him, leer down at him. It really dug into him.

Coll was standing behind his large desk - not sitting, but standing - looking up at a large cabinet mounted to the wall behind the desk, where one would expect to find a painting in normal circumstances. The cabinet was open and Coll stared at it. He was perfectly still, not a muscle moving. If Doyle didn't know any better, he would have figured that Coll didn't even realize that he, Doyle, had entered the room. Doyle couldn't help but close the door behind him a little harder than usual.

Coll finally turned to regard him. He licked his already wet lips, which glistened in the dim lamp light. Doyle suppressed an urge to shake his head, succeeded, and crossed the distance between them.

"How did it go?" Coll asked.

"We'll get to that in a minute," Doyle said. "I wanted to talk to you about another matter first."

Coll nodded. "What is it?"

"I'm sure you saw this," Doyle said.

He dropped the paper onto the large desk. It was already turned to Nat's article. Coll didn't look at the paper and kept his eyes on Doyle.

"Well, you gonna at least look at it?" Doyle asked.

Coll slowly turned his eyes to the paper, fingered the edge of it with one hand and sucked his lips into his mouth. He made small noises with his throat as he read.

"I saw it," he finally said. "So what?"

"So what?!" Doyle said. "This guy is gunning for us. I told you what he said to me, his message."

"Yeah, you told me."

"Then what do you mean, 'so what'? This is a problem. And, what's worse, this Nat Scarlet character knows an awful lot about us, about how we operate."

"She did a story on us last year," Coll said. He slowly sat down behind his desk. His chair was large and expensive. He sighed as he sat in it. "Didn't paint us in the best of light, as you can imagine."

"You pay her off?" Doyle asked.

Coll shook his head, frustrated. "Couldn't be bought off, dumb broad. Considered having her bumped off. But killing reporters is bad for business. Not like she's some colored agitator up in the Heights that we can just shoot in the middle of the street and get away with it. This is the *Tribune*. Wouldn't look good."

Doyle slapped his hands together violently and slammed them onto the desk, palms down. "And what you did to Spaldoni's niece? How's that for the business? Maretti's already gunning for us,

Spaldoni, too, now."

Coll shrugged. "She was sweet."

"Least you didn't kill her."

"No one's perfect."

"When Boss Featherstone finds out - and he will - he'll have you rubbed out. He doesn't want war with the Italians. We barely survived the last war! And this..." He indicated the open cabinet above both of them. "This... How is this good for business?"

"That's not business," Coll said. "That's pleasure."

"It's dangerous," Doyle said.

"This bothers you, the ghost bothers you, is there anything that doesn't bother you?"

"I'm just worried is all. You didn't see this guy in action, I did. He's unbelievable."

"A ghost."

"I don't know. He looked like a ghost, moved like one. But I've never heard of no ghost that could beat the snot out of someone and throw knives like some kind of sideshow act."

"You almost sound like you admire him," Coll said.

"It ain't like that, boss," Doyle said. "It's just that he was skilled. I've never seen no one like him before. Not ever."

"He's just a man," Coll insisted. "That's all. Nothing supernatural about him. Hell, plenty of guys have tried to take us on before. All of 'em failed. We either bought 'em off or bumped 'em off. Even the cops. I don't think there's one honest cop in this city, they're all either in the Italians' pockets or ours."

"That's your solution?" Doyle said.

"Yeah, buy 'im or bump 'im. And I say bump 'im. I'm not afraid of him!" He stood up, both hands on the desk, suddenly furious. "Let him come! I'll put twenty damn bullets through 'im! See if I don't!"

Doyle held his ground and didn't let Coll overpower him. He fired back.

"Well, you looked pretty scared on that dock, boss!" he said.

Coll tilted his head, a scary look on his face. Doyle felt sweat pouring down his brow. He had gone too far. He started to say something but Coll stopped him with a single finger, held stiffly between the two of them. Doyle remained silent and silence reigned for nearly a full minute before Coll spoke.

"I should kill you for that," he said. "I've killed men for less. Is that what you want, Doyle? Go ahead, you can answer."

"No," Doyle said. "That's not what I want."

"You want to be a part of my collection so much that you're tempting fate, that it? Walking out in front of heavy traffic?"

Doyle couldn't help but look up and past Coll, toward the open cabinet mounted on the wall. He shuddered.

"No, boss," he said. "I don't want to be part of your collection."

"Then keep your mouth shut," Coll said. "Least when you're about to say something dumb. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"Good. And don't worry about him. Saoirse and O'Bannion have been itching to have a crack at this guy. And I'm gonna let 'em off their chains. Now call 'em in."

Doyle nodded slowly. He turned to the door. "Come on in!"

The door opened a moment later and O'Bannion and Saoirse came into the room, he hanging his hat on the rack, she keeping hers on. Saoirse leaned against the far wall, just watching as O'Bannion started to cross the room. Coll stood up from his desk and walked across the room to meet the man. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

"So," he said, "what was it? Did he pay up or did he come up short?"

O'Bannion smiled.

"He came up short, boss," he said.

Coll turned to regard Doyle. He looked at him as he talked to O'Bannion.

"I know it might be 'bad for business,' but I was kinda hoping that would be the case," he said.

He looked back at O'Bannion. The blonde man opened the satchel he was holding. Coll looked like he was a kid who just won a free, all-you-can-eat pass at a candy store. Saoirse leered, as well.

Doyle looked on, horrified, as O'Bannion pulled an object from the satchel. Coll snatched it out of the man's hand and marveled at it.

It was a human nose, severed from the victim's face. The blood had dried, leaving one side purplish red. The rest of it was coffee-black.

Doyle looked away as his boss took the nose and crossed the office to his desk. He walked around it, grabbed a pin from the desk drawer and stood on a little stool to raise him to the height of the open cabinet.

There, mounted behind glass, was a collection of severed noses, at least twenty of them. Doyle did all he could not to throw up as Coll opened the glass and prepared to add another to the collection.

To Be Continued...

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