

SCOOP

BY B. R. FLYNN

Chapter Four, "The Follow"

It wasn't yet noon, the sun was high and severe - cold though it was - and Nat's head hurt. The coffee provided by Brett the night before had helped but it had kept her up longer than she should have been, depriving her of sleep, and she was paying for it now. She was currently standing in the shadows provided by an alley across the street from the gym where she had met Lou, the gym she now knew that Sage Walker trained at. It was situated right on the border of Chinatown and the Heights.

The waiting was the worst part of the job, she felt like a cop on a stakeout: nothing but time and boredom stretching out in front of her. She had misjudged Sage this morning: he didn't even get to the gym till ten. She presumed that he had decided to give himself the morning off after the fight last night. So she had been waiting for hours, grabbing a bite to eat at a diner nearby before returning to the alley. Now, she watched as Sage emerged from the building, setting a cap in place on his head and wiping his hands in the suddenly cold air.

Nat ducked back into the shadows as deep as she could. She was dressed for the part: a dark, nondescript coat with a tall collar covering her up. Sage paused and looked both ways down the street before walking deeper into the neighborhood. Cautiously, Nat followed him, keeping a safe distance behind him at all times.

The boxer made his way further downtown into the Heights, stopping to buy an apple from a small, sparsely packed fruit cart. The fruit seller seemed to know him well and they shared a smile and a few words that Nat didn't catch. Sage ate his apple as he headed further into the neighborhood. The faces around Nat became steadily more black and she found herself sinking further into her coat. It was no good: she stuck out like a sore thumb. Luckily, Sage seemed to have reached his destination and headed up a crooked set of concrete stairs to a tenement building, presumably where he lived. It was an old, run-down building. A young boy played with a stick and an old hubcap in the street and an old woman looked out a window on the second floor.

Nat played the waiting game again, though not as long this time: which was good as she was starting to get looks from people who passed by her hiding spot, once again tucked into the shadows of a facing alleyway. Sage came out of the building a little cleaned up: showered and shaved, wearing a different

suit which was old but neat.

The follow continued as Nat tailed Sage to a subway station. She waited a moment before heading downstairs. It was a risk: she had to make sure she was down on the platform before he got on a train, so she could jump on a car, but at the same time she didn't want to alert him to her presence.

The subway was all grime and darkness, which worked to Nat's advantage. She deposited a coin into a turnstile and entered the station, keeping an eye out for Sage. She found him quite a distance away, breathing into his cupped hands, trying to keep warm. Making sure to hide behind a pillar, she kept an eye on him. Presently, a train arrived and Sage entered it. Nat got on a car further back and they were on their way.

The train continued underground for a mile or so before ascending to ground level. To Nat, it was like being born: darkness, then sudden, brilliant light - blinding, even. She blinked and was momentarily awed by the savage beauty of the City as it became visible to her, the train ascending into the air, becoming an El Train.

The City stretched for miles and miles, all concrete and steel, the Park in its heart providing the only real green. It was terrible and wonderful at the same time and Nat smiled. This was her City, her home.

She looked away from the view and concentrated on Sage, a car ahead. She could just see him through the windows between the cars, standing and holding onto a loop hanging from above. It was his City, too, of course. The Outsider's City. What must he have thought of this place? She so wanted to ask him, along with about a thousand other questions. But which one first?

Finally, midtown, Sage exited the train and Nat found herself scrambling to get off at the same station, just making it before the doors closed and the train resumed its endless journey.

Sage proceeded down the steps and into the street, Nat following a little ways behind. It wasn't far before Nat figured out where they were headed. A moment later, she had her confirmation. The opulent, oppressive building that housed the Emerald Club loomed over Sage as he rounded around it into an alley: presumably a service entrance.

Nat knew the place by reputation: fairly high class, whites only clientele, predominately colored performers. The very idea sometimes made Nat sick to her stomach.

She let a moment or two pass before heading into the alley herself. On the side of the building, as she expected, was a service entrance. It was guarded by a tall, strong colored man with a bald head. She cautiously approached.

"You can't enter here, miss," the large man said. "Just go around to the front and--"

"Hello," Nat cut him off, "Nat Scarlet, the *Tribune*. I'm doing a piece on the Emerald Club, interviewing performers and the like."

"All the same, this entrance is for performers, staff and family members of such. You can't come in here."

"Surely, that doesn't apply to the press?"

"Applies to everyone who doesn't fit the description I just gave. Now, are you a performer?"

"No," Nat sighed.

"Right," the man said. "Are you staff?"

"You know I'm not."

"I certainly do. Are you a family member of such?"

Nat looked at him shrewdly. "And if I were?"

"Then I'd be obliged to let you in," the man said.

"Then I'm a family member!" she said with a bright smile.

"But you just said that you were doing a story on the club. Don't sound like a family member to me."

Nat sighed again. She produced a cigarette and lit up. Offered one to the man.

"You know I can't take a smoke from you," he said.

"Must be awful," she said. "Look, I can write my story two ways: a good story about the club or a bad story about the club. Which do you prefer?"

"I don't care."

"Okay. How about this? I give you a quarter to go buy yourself a pack and, while you're gone you'll be none the wiser about who enters through this door. How does that sound?"

"I can't take money from you. No better than a cigarette. Worse!"

"Fine," Nat sighed. "Let's say I drop a quarter on the ground and forget about it? I'll drop it and wander further down the alley. And when I turn around, you're already gone, with my quarter."

The man rubbed his chin. "Half dollar."

"Jeeze," Nat said, "you're not cheap, are you? I'm gonna run out of money here. You know there's a Depression going on, right?"

"Oh, I know. Better than you do."

"Fair enough."

She produced a half dollar and flipped it with her thumb a few times before finally sending it into the air and then crashing to the ground. Smiling, she turned on one heel and headed down the alley, the sound of her shoes echoing down the entire length. She waited a few moments to make sure the big man was gone before turning around again and heading for the service entrance door. There was a horrible moment when she believed that the door was locked - she hadn't considered that - but it turned out only to be jammed. She had it open in a moment and proceeded inside.

The back rooms of the club were like a labyrinth, tight and twisting hallways leading to tiny areas for make-up and dressing, a confusing mess of curtains just behind what Nat presumed was the stage for entertaining paying guests. Just behind this tangle of curtains was a tiny, almost paper thin wall. It must have been recently - and cheaply - erected but it came in handy: Nat wandered out of a hallway and nearly ran into Sage. Luckily, his back was turned to her and she had time to duck behind the thin wall before he turned his head to look.

From her hiding place, Nat saw a gorgeous colored woman - early twenties with her hair stylish and pinned up, wearing a lovely blue dress - emerge from the tangle of curtains and head towards where Nat knew Sage to be.

"Baby," Nat heard the woman say, "you came to see me. How sweet!"

"Whenever I can, honey," Sage said.

This was the first time that Nat had heard Sage speak and his voice was deep and powerful. He could have been a singer if he had the proper training but fate had other plans for him, Nat mused.

"Lou's been working you too hard," the woman said. "Look at your face."

"It'll heal," Sage said. "It always does. No harm, no foul."

"You win last night?"

"I lost."

"Oh, I'm sorry, baby."

"It's all right. I win where it counts."

"That's my tough man. But you're going to get hurt someday. And I mean real hurt. Not like this."

"And I could get hurt crossing the street," Sage said. "Could get hit by the El. Life's life, baby. Nothing's certain."

"But you do know how to stay out of trouble, don't you? Any man out of his teenage years knows how to stay out trouble, assuming he has all his faculties."

"My line of work doesn't exactly lend itself to staying out of trouble. Most of these fights are illegal."

The woman sighed. "You know I don't like that, baby. I'm not judging you. We all do what we have to do to survive, especially now, but don't go asking for trouble. Understand?"

"I'll try," Sage said. "I can't promise anything but I'll try. That's all I can do."

"That's enough. Thank you for coming to see me. You gonna stick around for the show?"

"I've already seen it! Private showing!"

They both laughed warmly and Nat found herself smiling. They had been together for a while, she could tell.

"I've got some errands to run," Sage explained.

"All right, baby," the woman said. "I have to be on stage. Now, in fact!"

Nat heard what sounded like a quick kiss before the sound of a pair of feet rushing towards the curtains and the stage beyond. Then an emcee sounded off.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "Miss Angelina Savage!"

There was a pretty good round of applause, especially for the lunch hour. There came the sound of a band starting up and then Angelina Savage's voice rang out. It was gorgeous, just like she was, haunting and powerful but somehow delicate at the same time. She was talented, that was for sure. Nat's cigarette was spent and she wanted another but didn't want to alert Sage to her presence. She needn't have worried.

Sage rested his back against the same thin wall that Nat was leaning against, directly behind her, on the other side. There was silence for a moment but Nat knew, even before Sage spoke, that the man had clocked her. The hallways were empty now, as everyone backstage previously now went about their jobs serving food and drink or supporting the entertainment.

"So who are you?" Sage asked through the wall.

"Nat Scarlet, the *Tribune*," Nat said.

"I guess you already know my name."

"I surely do."

"Why are you following me?"

"When did you see me?"

Neither of them came around from their side of the wall, neither of them taking the risk of facing each other.

"Saw you on the El," Sage said.

"Damn," Nat said. "Thought I was being more crafty than that."

"Oh, you were. It's just that you stick out from a crowd. I could tell that you were looking for someone. Didn't take no degree to figure out it was me."

"What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you going to beat me up or throw a big damn African knife at me?"

Nat could hear Sage choke on his own breath for a moment. He was shocked and remained silent.

"Yeah, I know who you are," Nat said.

"Have you told anyone?" Sage asked.

"Not yet."

"Are you going to?"

"I don't know."

"Don't."

"Is that a threat?"

"No, it's a plea. Don't. If anyone finds out who I am, there are people - people I care about - who will get hurt or dead. And ain't no one gonna care about some poor colored folks who the mob kills. Believe me, I know."

"It's a great story. Colored boxer is City's silent protector! Can't you just see it in black and white?"

"Please," Sage said.

"I have to write something. This story is too big."

"At least keep my name out of it. Pretend you don't know who I am."

"Cigarette?"

"No."

Nat produced another cigarette and lit up. She drew in smoke and felt it fill her lungs, that sweet burning.

"You're smart," she said.

"Why, because I refused a smoke from you?" he said.

"No, because you refused a smoke from a white woman. And you're being careful and making sure that no one sees the two of us speaking together. In this City, just talking to a white woman could get a colored man killed."

"I know."

"I know you know. That's how I know you're smart. You should also be smart enough to know that we should meet and talk while you're wearing something different, if you get my drift."

"As The Outsider? Forget about it."

"Come on, give me an exclusive. Tell me your story. Hell, I could even help you. The cops in this town are worse than corrupt. They'll do anything that's asked of them as long as the money's right. Think about it."

"Do you even understand why I'm doing this? Why I call myself The Outsider?"

"Yes, because you're outside normal society. You're helping those who can't be helped by the cops."

"Then you understand why you can't help me."

"No, I don't understand."

"What would a beautiful white woman know about being an outsider?"

"You think I'm beautiful? That's sweet."

He sighed. "Come on. You're no outsider."

"I'm as much of an outsider as you are."

"That's bull."

"It's the truth. I'm a homosexual, just like your friend Lou. I'm good at my job, I can get stories, but everyone at work and in clubs like this... Everyone who knows the truth scorn me for who I am. I am an outsider."

There was silence as both of them contemplated this. Sage kept his head down, looking at the floor while Nat smoked her cigarette methodically.

"Don't write the story," Sage finally said.

"Oh, I'm writing the story," Nat said. "The only thing in question is what that story contains. What do you want it to say?"

Sage sighed again. Nat could hear the weariness in his voice, could hear how conflicted he was.

"Say that I'm a ghost," he said. "Put the Fear in the criminal underworld. Say that everything they've heard is true."

"I don't know if I can do that," Nat said.

"Try."

Another silence. Nat thought about it and took a few more drags then put the cigarette out.

"Okay," she said. There was more silence. "You hear me, I said 'okay'."

Still, there was silence. Finally, Nat gathered enough courage and came around the wall through the doorway. But Sage was gone. Like his Outsider counterpart, he had disappeared into the darkness.

To Be Continued...

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