

SCOOP

BY B. R. FLYNN

Chapter Five, "An Exclusive With The Outsider"

The next morning, Doyle sat at the kitchen table in his apartment, eating breakfast. He swallowed a piece of bacon and took a sip of coffee while he looked at the *Tribune*. It was still folded. The president battling the Depression was the main headline. Doyle unfurled the paper and there it was, on the front page but below the fold:

MYSTERIOUS "OUTSIDER" STRIKES FEAR INTO CRIMINAL UNDERWORLD

Doyle nearly choked on his coffee and coughed a bit of it up, spattering the paper with the dark liquid. So they had named him, officially. It was the first time Doyle had seen the name in print and it was curious how it affected him: he had known the name that this spectral vigilante was known by but somehow knowing that the whole City now knew the name made it different, made it real. He shuttered and took another sip of coffee.

Nat Scarlet again, of course. Despite his boss's hesitation about having reporters bumped off, Doyle was beginning to think that Coll would be making an exception with this dame.

The article did not give the real name of The Outsider but it was clear that this Scarlet woman had spoken to the spectre. In person. Doyle shook his head. He had spoken with The Outsider, of course. And he was terrified the whole time. How did this dame keep her composure under the scrutiny of that blank, dark, masked face? She must be one tough broad.

He put the paper down, article finished, and returned to his breakfast. His mind drifted and he found himself thinking of Coll's collection: that hideous display of severed noses, each one taken from a victim of the mob boss's wrath.

He shook his head again. It couldn't continue. Something had to be done. If he, Doyle, just stayed static, he knew that Boss Featherstone would eventually do something about Coll, but what would happen before then? Would Doyle or any of the others be alive by the time that happened?

It had to stop and soon. He knew that. But how?

He had a solution, one he didn't like very much. It was small, it was shady and it was a true gamble, but it was the only way that Doyle could see. He grabbed a pack of cigarettes sitting on the table, produced one and lit up, shook his head one more time and got up from the table. He crossed the room

to the phone mounted on the wall. Looked at it for a moment before picking up the receiver and starting to dial.

Al Bronstein was sitting in his cab, which was parked near a streetlight on a barren lane in Chinatown. The bright yellow light shone down on him through the open window. He was middle-aged, a bigger man, with heavy jowls. His hat marked him as a cab driver if one somehow missed the car itself. Currently, he was so involved in his pulp magazine that he didn't see Nat until she was practically on top of him. He jumped about a foot when she spoke.

"Al!" she said.

Al dropped his magazine on the passenger seat and looked up. Nat leaned into the window of his taxi. This late at night - early, really - and in this neighborhood, there weren't any fares around so Al spent much of his time reading and filling out crossword puzzles. He was bundled up in a good coat: it was mighty cold out.

"You 'bout scared me to death, Nat," he said.

"Yeah, I know," she said.

"What are you doing in this neighborhood?"

"Got a tip some of Coll's men were going to be around these parts. Some lowlifes. Thought I'd check it out."

"Why would you wanna go and do something like that?"

Nat shrugged. Al could see her breath as she spoke.

"I'm inquisitive," she said.

"Don't I know it?" he said.

Nat reached across Al to grab the pulp magazine he had dropped. Al was surprised to find her cleavage in his face but he wasn't disappointed, either. Nat retrieved the magazine and stood back up, out of the cab. She looked at the magazine. The cover depicted a tall, square-jawed blond man with a ripped shirt facing a tiger with nothing but a machete while simultaneously protecting a cowering, barely-clothed redheaded woman. The characters were surrounded by a dense jungle and, in the background, a skull-faced mountain loomed.

"Dakota Rhodes, huh?" she said. "Classy."

"Hey, don't knock it," he said. "It's good."

"Oh, I know. I like it, too."

"Finally, something we can agree on. Say, you think it's true?"

"What?"

"Well, the tagline in all of Dakota's stories always says, 'Based on a True Story.' But a lot of 'em say that. What do you think?"

"Oh, it's true, all right."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah, I've met the real Dakota."

"No kidding?" Al said, leaning forward with interest.

"Swear on my mother's grave," Nat said and put a hand to her chest. "Hand to heart."

"What's he like?"

"Well, the writer has taken some liberties."

"Like what?"

"Well, first of all, Dakota is no 'he.' I know her as Patricia. Or Pat."

"Dakota's a dame?! Get outta town."

"I'm telling the truth."

"Okay. That's strange but, okay. What about all that supernatural stuff?"

"You'd be surprised. I've heard some pretty hairy stories. The kind I can't exactly print, you know?"

"Right," Al said. He rubbed his chin in thought. "Say, if Dakota is a dame, does that mean all those pretty ladies that he - or she, I guess - saves, you know, the ones who are always willing to show Dakota their gratitude, you know, are they all guys?"

"No," Nat said. "No, they're not. All women. I know from personal experience."

That silenced Al for a moment. He stared, mouth hanging open, eyes glossed over, thinking of the possibilities. He seemed to be frozen, unable to progress any further.

"Close your mouth, Al," Nat said.

His mouth still hung stubbornly open. Nat reached out and pushed it closed for him. His teeth audibly clattered together. That seemed to reset him. He snapped out of it.

"Right," he said.

"Hey, Al?" Nat said.

"Yeah?"

"Know anything about this Outsider fella? You know, the one all the wiseguys in town are afraid of?"

"You mean the one you say they're all afraid of?"

"Sure."

"Yeah, I heard of him."

"You think he's real?"

"Hey, if Dakota Rhodes is real, The Outsider must be, right?"

"Right."

They were silent for a moment. Al thought about The Outsider. About who he must be in both real life and night life. He had read all of Nat's articles about the legend, for sure. And legend he remained, still an enigma: Nat had not revealed who he was, if she knew. Al would have put money on it, though: Nat was a crafty broad.

"I've seen him once," Al said.

"Have you?" Nat said.

"Just once."

"What happened?"

"I was waiting for a fare on 39th Street. Real late. Three guys were ganging up on some kid. Colored kid, you know. It looked bad. I got out of the cab to see what I could do. Wouldn't be much, really. But, you know, sometimes all it takes is the presence of an authority, sends some lowlifes packing. Anyway, I had barely got out of the cab when this guy pounces out of the darkness, takes the three tough guys down, real quick like. Just beat the tar out of them. Then he said a few words to the colored kid and disappeared again. Strangest damn thing."

"Quite a story, Al."

"But true, Nat. True."

"No reason to doubt you."

"Damn right. I'm a man of my word."

Nat sighed and produced a bill from her cleavage, handed it to Al. Al took it and looked at it, puzzled.

"What's this?" he asked.

"I'm your fare tonight," she said.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you getting in?"

"No."

"No? Doll, you're confusing."

"No, I'm complicated. That's different."

"Confused, complicated, I don't see no difference."

"Then you need to read more."

"You saw me reading," Al said. "I'll have you know that the Dakota Rhodes adventures constitute

some of the best literature around right now."

"Sure, sure," Nat said.

"Okay, what bus are you throwing me in front of this time?"

"How do you know I'm going to involve you in some kind of danger?"

"Because that's what always happens when I see you."

"You have a point."

"So, out with it."

"Pull around the corner. You know the newsstand there?"

"Sure."

"I want you nearby but in the shadows," Nat said. "Don't let anyone think you're actually in the car."

"Can't I park under a streetlight?" Al asked.

"No."

"But if I'm in the shadows, how can I read?"

"You're not going to be reading. You're going to keep an eye on the newsstand and on me."

"Where are you going to be?"

"I'll be watching the newsstand, too."

"Also from the shadows?"

"Right. But different shadows. From the opposite side."

"What else?"

"Just wait for me."

"Why am I watching the newsstand?"

"I have it on good authority that Mr. Li, who runs the newsstand, is in debt to Coll."

"The gangster?" Al asked.

"Yeah," Nat said. "And his men will be coming to collect."

"How do you know this?"

"A tip."

"What kind of tip?"

"The anonymous kind. I think it was from someone in Coll's organization. Someone tired of their job."

"Sounds fishy."

"That's why I want you watching the newsstand. And me."

"Doll, I'd be happy to watch you anytime. Especially as that's all I'm gonna get."

"You're the best, Al."

She reached out, patted his cheek and gave him her best smile. She had luscious, red lips, almost the same color as her hair. Sometimes, Al dreamed about them.

"What do you think's gonna happen?" he asked.

Nat smiled. She adjusted the large leather case that she had tucked under her arm.

"I think you're going to see The Outsider again this morning," she said.

It was well before five in the morning. The cold was biting, punishing. It wasn't snowing - too cold to snow - but the moon was shrouded by clouds, only peaking out now and again to shed a meager light down on the City. Mr. Li had just received the day's newspapers and was busy arranging them on his newsstand: stacks upon stacks of white paper dotted with black script and monochrome photos, a painting of tragedy told in bold, capital letters.

The car, when it arrived, was not as nice as Coll's mode of transport but it was in the same ballpark: big, sleek and black. It came to a rest alongside the newsstand and a figure got out of the backseat, a tall, blonde man, with a grin plastered on his face. O'Bannion approached Mr. Li.

"What's in the news, Charlie?" he asked.

"Not open yet," Mr. Li said. "Come back in few."

"Oh, but I need the news now. Got to get a head start on the day. Early bird catches the worm and all that. Surely, you can make an exception."

"No!"

"All right, I get it. I understand."

O'Bannion had reached the other man by now, his demeanor changing: all business, all malice. But the grin was still in place, even when he reached for his pistol and brandished it across his waist, not bothering to point it at Mr. Li. He didn't have to: its simple presence was enough.

"What this?" Mr. Li said as he turned to look at O'Bannion and saw the gun.

"Oh, this?" O'Bannion said. "This is incentive. Do you know what that word means, Mr. Li? It's a motivator. Understand? It's encouragement. Do you know why I have it?"

"No."

"Do you know who I work for, at least?"

"I have idea."

"I'll bet you do. But I can see that you're scared so I'll answer for you. I work for Mr. Coll. This all starting to make sense?"

Mr. Li nodded. He was scared, it was obvious. O'Bannion was really enjoying this.

"The man I work for protects you," he said. "He makes sure no one messes with your little business

here. Makes sure no one steals your stock. Or, God forbid, hurts you. And for that protection, you agreed to pay him a modest sum. See where I'm going with this? If you don't pay, you don't get protection. I'm here to show you the kind of thing that can happen when you don't have someone protecting you."

"Modest sum?" Mr. Li said, righteous anger suddenly giving him a little courage. "Twenty-five percent of my business! No modest. I cannot afford."

"You strike me as a man of honor, Mr. Li. You entered into an agreement, a gentleman's agreement. That means you owe what you agreed to."

"This illegal!"

"This is business, Mr. Li. You're going to find a way to pay up. Meantime, I'm here to remind you of your debt."

He made a move to grab Mr. Li but stopped as a voice rang out. It was a deep voice, full of power and authority.

"I wouldn't lay a hand on that man if I were you!" it said.

O'Bannion took a step away, looking all around. The voice seemed to come from more than one direction at the same time. It was frightening, but it was also exciting. O'Bannion was still grinning. He led with his pistol, pointing it all about the horizon. Finally, he settled on the roof of the newsstand.

"Got ya," he said.

He fired at the shadows above the newsstand, not afraid if someone called the cops: no one would come, not around here. The cops were all paid off around these parts.

His choice of target was a good guess - the shadows were thick there and they almost seemed to move with the cold wind - but it was wrong. The Outsider rolled out from under the newsstand.

The spectre rolled past Mr. Li and unfurled himself - popped up - all in the same deft movement. O'Bannion was still looking up, into the shadows, when The Outsider delivered a devastating uppercut into the mobster's jaw. O'Bannion reeled back, shocked and thrown off balance. Another blow - this one into the midsection - sent O'Bannion's pistol crashing to the concrete below.

The mobster wiped blood away from his mouth, looked at it - still grinning - and shot a defiant look at The Outsider. The spectre pushed Mr. Li back, thinking of the man's safety, and made sure he was between the news seller and the mobster.

A gunshot rang out from the car, just missing The Outsider and hitting a stack of newspapers behind him. Newsprint went flying. The Outsider pushed Mr. Li out of the way, behind the newsstand, and rolled away. The driver of the car fired again, almost hitting the spectre once again.

"I got this, Arthur!" O'Bannion said, one hand outstretched to the car.

Arthur put his gun down on the passenger seat but kept his eyes peeled on the action, waiting for instructions. The Outsider stood up and shot him a quick glance. It was enough to make the driver jump. He wouldn't fire again without thinking long and hard about it. It was almost as if the driver's bullets had passed right through him.

O'Bannion reached into his jacket and swiftly pulled out a pair of brass knuckles, slipped them over his curled right fist. The Outsider dodged out of the way of a surprise kick from the mobster but ran right into the brass-knuckle-reinforced right that O'Bannion dealt him. The blow hit The Outsider across the face, a substantial hit that sent the spectre stumbling back. O'Bannion drove deeper, sending a foot into the vigilante's midsection and delivering another punch into his side.

"You're not so tough!" O'Bannion said.

The Outsider, not missing a beat, drove a hard right into the mobster's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. He followed up with another upper-cut, this time knocking a tooth loose. O'Bannion felt it crack, although it didn't break completely and remained in his jaw. But it was a hard enough blow to knock him off balance and The Outsider stomped on his foot and threw a wild left that connected across his chin.

O'Bannion felt the future bruise already, tried to shake it off and failed. The Outsider was punishing and hit him again, a hard right into the bridge of his nose. It didn't break but he was definitely not coming back from it easily. He decided that retreat was the right move and dashed to the car.

Arthur provided cover fire and The Outsider had to whirl out of the way, allowing O'Bannion time to escape. The mobster opened the passenger door and practically jumped into the vehicle. It was already dashing away as he entered it.

The Outsider thought quick and dashed up the side of the newsstand. He ran across the top of it - his weight making the entire structure bow under him - and launched himself into the air. He landed on top of the escaping car with a mighty crash. O'Bannion was shocked and grabbed Arthur's pistol. He pointed it at the roof of the car and fired, almost rendering he and Arthur deaf in the process.

The gunshot just missed The Outsider and he almost fell off the car. Quick thinking and lightning fast reflexes kept him on top of the car.

O'Bannion looked down from the roof long enough to see someone step out of the shadows in the road ahead of them. Someone holding something in their hands. It was a woman with luscious auburn hair. And she was holding a camera. She stepped into the road and raised the camera to snap a shot.

And what a shot it was.

The stark black and white showed the newsstand in the background, standing like a sentinel, the escaping car in the foreground. The streetlight behind the car illuminated the form of The Outsider

clinging to the top of the car. It was an extraordinary shot, a shot that would come to define the spectre, make him legendary.

But that was all in the future. At the moment, The Outsider was still clinging to the top of the car, holding on for dear life, as the vehicle careened down the road trying to throw him off.

Nat stored the camera back in its case and got out of the way of the escaping car. As she watched, the mobster in the passenger seat fired into the roof again. This time, to escape the shot, The Outsider rolled off the roof of the car and crashed to the asphalt below. He tumbled and rolled to safety all in one graceful movement. Nat approached him but he was already fleeing towards the shadows.

"Wait!" Nat said. "I just want to talk to you!"

Al got out of his cab, which was parked in the shadows nearby. He approached The Outsider as well, shocked that he had seen the spectre once again. Nat passed by him and waved him off.

"Back in the car!" she said. "And stay there! You're my ride home!"

Al sighed and got back in the car as Nat chased after the spectre. She was fast and in good shape, kept good pace with The Outsider, but she didn't stand a chance. As Nat passed the newsstand - and Mr. Li, who looked at the fleeing spectre with gratitude - The Outsider disappeared into the shadows of an alley. Nat entered the alley but it was too late.

He was gone.

"Shoot," Nat said, annoyed.

She stopped, put the camera case down at her feet and leaned against a wall. Producing a cigarette, she lit it up and drew in the sweet smoke, let it fill her lungs. She had come so close. If she could only talk to him. Well, at least she had got the picture. Now it was real, now the editor would listen to her, would take the story seriously.

"If you want to keep up with me," a voice called from somewhere above, "you should quit those."

Nat was shocked and dropped the cigarette into the damp ground below, where it sizzled out. She looked around, trying to find the source of the voice. The Outsider was still here, still in the shadows somewhere.

"That's a start," he said.

This time his voice came from somewhere else. Nat whirled around but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Talk to me," Nat said. "Tell me your story."

"I don't trust you," he said. "Not yet."

"If not now, when? I wrote the story, I didn't use your name. Hell, I didn't even confirm if you were a man or a ghost! I printed the legend! Isn't that enough?"

"I don't know."

"I'm on your side. You must see that!"

"I have every reason to mistrust you."

Nat turned and saw him. He was standing in the shadows of the alley not far from her. Steam curled up from a manhole cover, enveloping him. He looked more like a ghost than ever before. Nat made a move towards him.

"That's close enough," he said.

She stopped. The Outsider took a cautious step towards her.

"What do you want me to write?" Nat asked.

"You're on my side?" The Outsider asked.

"Of course. I'm an outsider, too."

"You'll tell the story?"

"Yes. Your story. What do you want in it?"

"I still don't know."

"Look, I can help you! I can be your man in the press."

"But you're a woman."

"Same difference! You need me."

The Outsider laughed and crossed to the other side of the alley. He looked over his shoulder at her. His featureless face seemed to burrow into her very soul. It was disquieting, to say the least.

"Seems to me," he said, "that you need me more than I need you."

"Let me convince you," she said. "I'll write another story. About tonight! I got a great picture of you on top of that car. It'll make the front page, above the fold! The picture makes you real, it gives you an identity. You looked like an unstoppable monster on top of that car! It'll strike fear into the hearts of your enemies!"

"I'm listening."

"Why do you do this?"

"This?"

"The vigilante deal. Why?"

"There are so many people in this city that can't rely on the cops. They're either corrupt or they don't care. They need someone on their side. An Outsider."

"I agree. Three years ago, I was...taken advantage of. There were four of them. They cornered me in an alley; a lot like this one, in fact. They knew who I was, had seen me coming out of certain clubs. And I guess they didn't like that I was a pretty girl who didn't need or want a man to have a good time.

So they decided to show me a good time, if you see what I mean. I tried to fight them off but I was outnumbered."

"I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago. Anyway, when I could stand again, I picked myself up and went to the cops. They didn't care. Smiled like villains and filed a report: right into the trash." She shook her head at the memory. "Right in front of me. See, they knew who I was, too. Didn't matter that I had been taken advantage of. I was a tease, so I deserved it. That's how they saw it. I think I hated them in that moment even more than the men in that alley. I've never trusted the cops since then. Sure, I've paid some of 'em off, got stories from them, but trusted them? Not a chance."

There was silence for a good moment. Nat looked defiantly into the shadows, her gaze never wavering from The Outsider. Finally, he looked away, couldn't look her in the eye anymore. Nat counted it as a small victory for herself.

"I got a tip that Coll's men would be here this morning," she said. "I thought you might also show. I got lucky."

"I knew that Li owed Coll money," The Outsider said. "Been keeping an eye on the place the last few nights."

"Jeepers. Do you ever get any sleep?"

"Enough. You say you got a tip."

"A tip, yeah."

"Regular source?"

"No, somebody new. I think it's one of Coll's men. Turned off by the man's violence, I'd imagine. I've heard some pretty terrible things about Coll."

"Oh, I know," The Outsider said. "He's a monster."

"Like you?" Nat said.

"Worse."

"Look, I understand why you dress like this, why you do what you do. You need fear. It's your most powerful weapon, not your knife, not your fists. Fear. You understand that. Your presence is more than half the reason why you've succeeded for so long! Let me help. I can make you ten times as scary! Give me an exclusive."

Slowly, The Outsider nodded. "All right. An exclusive. Where do we start?"

"A few questions," Nat said and began to pace back and forth in front of him.

"Shoot."

"That thing with your voice? How do you do it?"

"You're going to put that in the article?"

"Heck no! I just want to know. Can you throw your voice or something like that?"

"Let's say something like that."

"You have people on your side," Nat said. "People who know who you are, who help you?"

"I do," The Outsider said.

"And Angelina isn't one of them."

"I wouldn't bring her up if I were you."

"Okay, she's off limits. I get it. But there are others?"

"Yes. It's a small network, I suppose you'd call it."

"And I'm one of those people now."

The Outsider sighed. He nodded. "I suppose."

"Fantastic," Nat said. "How do I get a hold of you?"

"Through Lou or Eli."

"Who's Eli?"

"He's the bouncer at the Emerald Club. You remember him?"

"How could I forget? Guy's a mountain."

"Either of them will know how to get in contact with me."

"Good. So, I can write that you have ears everywhere. That's vague enough to not put any one of us in danger but will strike enough fear and paranoia into your enemies."

She stopped pacing and looked at him for a long moment. The Outsider just stared back, not dropping his gaze this time.

"So what can I tell them?" she finally said.

"Tell who?" The Outsider asked.

"Generally? The world. Specifically? Them. The crooks and the lowlifes, the corrupt cops and the killers on the street. What can I tell them? What does The Outsider have to say to them?"

He didn't respond right away. He waited. Nat could tell that he was giving the question some real thought. Finally, he answered.

"Tell them this," he said. "I am in every shadow. I am the monster under your bed. I am the boogeyman."

"Then that's what I'll write."

"You done asking questions?"

"Just a few more. I'm wondering--"

But she didn't get the chance to ask any more questions. A car pulled up to the alley. This car was

nondescript, a little ratty. For a moment, Nat thought it was just a passerby, distracted by something in the street and coming to a stop to get his bearings. But The Outsider was already moving, even before Nat realized that there was any danger.

The driver of the car was a tall, attractive woman wearing a strange, sexy chauffeur outfit, stylized and a little revealing. In those few seconds, Nat thought she recognized the woman. Then the driver - Saoirse - grabbed an object off the seat next to her and raised it towards the open passenger window. Nat saw what the object was - a Tommy gun - just before it erupted gunfire.

The alley was suddenly filled with loud gunshots. They were deafening and dangerous. The Outsider had moved in front of Nat as the Tommy gun opened fire. Bullets hit the walls of the alley, a trashcan behind Nat, blew apart a black garbage bag, and pelted the back of The Outsider. There were actual sparks that flew off his body as the bullets hit him and shielded Nat's smaller form, protecting her.

Nat looked up into his featureless face. It was disturbing: she could tell that he was in pain but you couldn't read anything off that blank, black face.

Saoirse stopped firing, put the Tommy gun down on the seat next to her, and sped away, escaping into the night. Nat kept looking at The Outsider. He remained standing for another moment, feet strong, stance perfect.

Then he toppled over, threatening to crush Nat if she hadn't been quick enough to get out of the way. The reporter was on her knees in an instant. She saw blood on the spectre's back and fear began to creep into her. She started to call for help.

There wasn't much time.

To Be Continued...

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