

SCOOP

BY B. R. FLYNN

Chapter Six, "The Cutman"

At first, Nat thought that Sage Walker, The Outsider, was dead. He wasn't moving - wasn't breathing, as far as she could tell - and there was a lot of blood. She grabbed hold of him and tried to turn him over while she called for help.

"Al!" she yelled. "Al, get over here right now!"

She managed to get Sage's large form up off the concrete a few inches before he crashed back into the wet grime once again with a resounding thud. In a moment, Al was at Nat's side.

"I heard gunshots," Al said. "What happened?"

"They plugged him," Nat said. "Help me turn him over."

As Al laid hands on Sage, the vigilante came back to consciousness with a deep, shocking inhale of breath. Both Nat and Al jumped at his sudden recovery. The Outsider slapped Al's hands away.

"I can get up myself," he said.

"You're hurt!" Nat said.

The Outsider got to his feet and stood, shaking in place. "It ain't so bad."

He wavered, nearly fell and caught himself against the wall of the alley with one outstretched hand. Nat and Al made a move to help him but he stopped them with his free hand, a simple gesture of power that stopped them in their tracks.

"You have to get to a hospital," Nat said. "That's a lot of blood."

"Hospital isn't an option," The Outsider said.

"Then where?" Nat asked. "You have to go somewhere."

There was silence for a moment. Al looked back and forth at The Outsider and Nat: they were like two immovable objects, stubborn and strong. Finally, The Outsider nodded.

"I know a place," he said. "A man. He's not far from here."

"Al," Nat said, "get the car."

Al rushed to the car. Nat could hear the big cab rev to life but she didn't watch it come; she knew that Al was reliable and would be there if and when she needed him. No, she kept her eyes on The Outsider, on Sage. She couldn't read him. That blank, black, masked face gave nothing away. But one thing came shining through, all the same: he was willing to die for his cause, willing to die to save

others, even a dame like her, beautiful but unavailable - at least sexually - to him, resourceful but annoying, a busybody. He had no reason to save her life except that he felt obligated to do so, to help a fellow outsider. The Outsider himself just looked back at her, giving nothing else away.

The cab pulled up beside them and Nat opened the back door, swinging it wide for Sage. The vigilante slowly made his way into the car, refusing Nat's help. He slumped inside and Nat got in beside him. Al sped off the moment their door was closed.

"Where we goin?" Al asked.

Buildings whipped by at breakneck speed as Al tore through the streets. Nat could see them in the window, shuffling past so quick that she couldn't make any of them out. The Outsider leaned over in his seat, took hold of the cushion in front of him, and spoke to Al.

"A few blocks south," he said. "Burroughs Street & 27th. Know where that is?"

"I do," Al said. "Rough neighborhood."

"They're all rough."

"Who's there?" Nat said.

"Someone I trust."

"Unlike me?"

The Outsider just looked at her. There was an unspoken communication between them and Nat sensed that he was, indeed, beginning to trust her. At least a little.

"What about him?" he finally said.

"Al?" Nat said. "Al's okay. He won't blab. Will you, Al?"

"Who, me?" Al said. "Even if I did, who would believe me?"

"Fair point," The Outsider said. "But if I find out that anyone else has put two and two together, if I hear that anyone can put me and this address in the same ballpark, I'll be coming for you, Al."

"Jeeze," Al said, "you sure know how to scare a guy who's only trying to help."

"It's his way," Nat said.

"I suppose. We're almost there."

The cab careened around a corner onto Burroughs Street, wheels spinning like mad, the whole vehicle a veritable blur. Nat had to hold on tight so that she wouldn't be flung from the car like a rag doll. Al leaned into the turn like a racecar driver. But the Outsider remained in place, not moving at all. It was as if the car moved around him, like he was a statue that refused to move amidst an earthquake. Nat was a little afraid of him, but impressed as well. She began to see him as a compatriot, someone she could confide in, like an old friend. Someone who wouldn't judge.

As they tore down Burroughs Street, their destination getting closer, Nat looked out the window

again. This neighborhood of outsiders had a protector, even if he was of a different skin color than most of them. Did they know it? Nat didn't know and was determined to get the word out on The Outsider.

Doyle kept an office at the Midway Club not far from Coll's office. He sat at his desk, idly chewing at a thumbnail as O'Bannion sat across from him, a towel full of ice held to his chin. He would be pretty bruised in the morning. Neither of them spoke, both of them waiting in suspense for Saoirse's return. Coll was no doubt in his own office, looking over his collection, smoking a big cigar as he was want to do. Doyle tried not to think about the collection, tried not to let the image of those severed noses, all pinned up in a row, intrude on his too-sensitive mind.

"Feeling okay, Doyle?" O'Bannion asked.

Doyle looked up in surprise. O'Bannion was smiling at him, that towel full of ice held firmly in place at his chin.

"What?" Doyle asked.

"You look troubled," O'Bannion said. "Look like somebody punched you in the face. It's funny, because I'm the one that got punched in the face. Several times. Not you."

"Funny, yeah."

"So what is it?"

"It's nothing."

"It's not nothing. You've got something on your mind. What is it?"

"I got a lot on my mind is all. Nothing special."

"A lot on your mind, huh? What's on your mind? I know that I don't have a whole lot on my mind. Just breaking people who look at me funny. That's about it. But you? You don't seem to be that enamored with the rough stuff, Doyle. So what do you have on your mind?"

"I'm worried about Featherstone."

"Featherstone?" O'Bannion said. "That old fool never worries about anything south of the Park. The Heights and Chinatown are our turf. The numbers, the protection racket, they all make money for Featherstone. So he turns a blind eye to Coll's, shall we say, particular brand of enforcement."

"And it doesn't bother you?" Doyle said. "None of that... enforcement bothers you?"

"Not me, I sleep like a baby. Don't look like you do, though. You've got whole suitcases under your eyes there. Don't worry about Featherstone. He's too busy fooling around with those teenage broads he likes to worry about what we're doing."

"Yeah. I'm just..."

He let the phrase hang in the air unfinished. O'Bannion leaned forward and put the iced towel down

on the desk next to him. His smile was wide and mean. Doyle found himself recoiling from it as if from a snake.

"Don't like this business, do you, Doyle?" he asked. "Why did you join up if you don't like it? Not been talking to anyone, have you?"

Doyle opened his mouth to answer but left it hanging when the door to his office swung wide. O'Bannion turned to welcome the visitor and was greeted with the sight of Saoirse standing in the doorway. She sauntered into the room, all slinky and sexy in her chauffeur's outfit. She carried a Tommy gun in one hand. Smiled at the two of them as she reached the desk and set the machine gun down on the dark mahogany surface.

"Well?" O'Bannion asked.

Saoirse nodded slowly. O'Bannion laughed and stood up, wrapping his arms around the woman. She looked embarrassed and uncomfortable but allowed it.

"Ah, I could kiss you!" O'Bannion said after the hug was broken.

"Goin a little too far, love," Saoirse said.

O'Bannion put up both of his hands in surrender. "Hey, didn't mean anything by it. How 'bout that, Doyle?! The Outsider ain't gonna be a problem anymore! Let's go tell Coll."

The two of them exited the office, leaving Doyle alone at his desk. He grabbed a bottle of scotch from a sidebar behind him and poured a drink with shaking hands. Drained the harsh liquid down his gullet, choked on it. He stared off into nothingness. A moment later, he turned off the small lamp on his desk and finished his drink in the dark.

By the time The Outsider and Nat got to the apartment door, Nat had to practically drag Sage's large form with her, using all the might in her body. He was draped over her, his left arm around her neck and shoulders. Al had left, Nat convincing him that she would be okay, that she had been in tougher scrapes than this, though, admittedly, not many.

"Hello!" Nat said as she pounded on the door.

It was early, around 5:30, so no one was wandering the halls, especially as it was a Sunday morning. It took a few moments but the door was finally answered by a Chinese man, one who Nat recognized. This was Sage's cutman in the fight she had witnessed.

He appeared to be in his mid-fifties, but he also had one of those timeless faces, one that probably looked fifty twenty years ago and would still look fifty twenty years from now. He looked annoyed more than shocked to see a masked, wounded vigilante standing in his doorway this early in the morning. Though, he looked like he'd been up for a little while, Nat observed.

"He needs help," Nat said.

The Chinese man looked from The Outsider to her, then back to The Outsider. The vigilante nodded.

"It's okay, Hong," he said, "she knows."

"All right," Hong said. "Come in, I suppose."

His accent was very good, with only a hint of his ancestry. Nat wondered when he had immigrated to the states.

She dragged The Outsider inside, grunting as she did. He weighed a ton and was only helping a little, his strength dwindling. Hong lit up a cigarette and lent a hand as he smoked away. Nat eyed his cigarette and wished she had one.

Meanwhile, Hong eyed The Outsider's bloody back and led him to a chair. With some effort, the two of them sat the vigilante down in it backwards. Hong took off Sage's coat and flung it aside, revealing a multi-colored vest. Sage himself took off his hat and pulled his mask off. Underneath it, he was drenched in sweat, the effort of the night taking its toll on him in more ways than one.

As if reading her mind, Hong produced a cigarette for Nat, which she gratefully accepted. She lit up and nodded.

"Thanks," she said.

"You're welcome," Hong said. "I know he won't have one. Good to have someone in the place that won't judge me for my perfectly normal habit."

"Those'll kill you," Sage said.

He shrugged his vest and shirt off, revealing a steel plate that covered much of his back. Nat marveled at it: it was strapped over his shoulders and around his waist and there were many dents in it, obviously caused by bullets. But there was also at least two gunshots that had found their mark on his person, both of them high up on his left shoulder. They were bloody and looked bad. Hong leaned down to inspect them as Sage unhooked the steel plate and let it drop to the floor. Nat could now see that there was a smaller one covering part of the man's chest. He flung this one down as well. It clanged against the other one.

Now naked from the waist up, Sage just leaned into the chair and let Hong do his job. He spoke to Nat while the Chinese man worked his magic.

"Hong here helps me out when I get in my little scrapes," Sage said.

"Yeah, despite my better judgment," Hong said. "Besides, who else is he gonna go to?"

"Good to have on standby," Nat said. "Your own on-call doctor."

"I'm no one's on-call anything," Hong said.

He applied a healthy splash of iodine to the wound and Sage winced in pain. He grit his teeth and

took it.

"I'm sure she didn't mean anything by it," he said.

"I didn't," Nat said. "I'm Nat Scarlet, the *Tribune*."

"Wonderful to meet you," Hong said. "You're the one trying to make a star out of this fool, I suppose?"

"That'd be me."

"Don't. He's going to get himself killed. Hell, this wound is bad. Might not even survive this one. Hope it didn't hit a lung."

"I'll be fine," Sage said.

"I didn't recognize the blond man," Nat said, changing the subject.

"Name's O'Bannion. He's a crazed killer. Been cutting off people's noses for a little collection his boss has been cultivating. Nasty piece of work."

"Unbelievable."

"Believe it. I didn't recognize the dame who shot me, though."

"Oh, her? I recognized her. Don't know her name, though."

"Really?" Sage said. "Where have you seen her?"

"The Gateway Club," Nat said.

"Gateway?"

"It's in the Heights, actually, but you wouldn't know it. It's the kind of club that doesn't have a sign on the door."

Sage grunted as Hong wiped iodine off the wounds. He had several tools ready to dig in and take out the slugs.

Nat looked at the equipment that Sage carried on him as they talked: his belt was stuffed with useful material, such as rope, thieves picks, and what looked like climbing tools. She admired the knife that she had heard spoken of: it was strapped to one leg, colorful and deadly, a beautiful specimen.

Hong stuck Sage in the shoulder with a syringe, numbing the pain as best he could. He then got his own tools ready, preparing to go in and extract the slugs.

"If you're going to help me, Nat," Sage said, "I need you do something for me."

"All right," Nat said.

"You have to make an oath, a promise."

"I can do that."

"Swear that everything you do from now on will benefit those who need our help. Those who may not be able to defend themselves without coming under fire from the police, outsiders like you and I

and Hong here. By joining us, you become an outlaw. We work outside the law. We are the true outsiders in this City, the only ones who truly stick up for those outside."

"I swear."

"Say it."

"I swear to help out those like me and others who are outside. Is that good enough?"

"That'll have to do," Sage said as Hong began to dig into his flesh and he stifled a scream. "Cause I'm gonna pass out."

He fell forward onto the back of the chair, slumped over unconscious. Nat put a hand on his good shoulder, something she could never do outside the privacy of someone's home: a white woman touching a black man would sometimes result in the lynching of said black man, even in this City.

"He's dedicated," Nat said.

"Dedicated, yeah," Hong said. "Dedicated and naive. Dedicated and stupid."

"Seems pretty smart to me."

"All right. How 'bout foolish, then? He's foolish. Thinks he can solve all of this City's problems with just a handful of friends." Hong shook his head. "It'll get him killed."

"Were you serious about him maybe not surviving this?"

"You're a reporter, Miss Scarlet. You should know that getting shot isn't like it is in the movies or in pulp novels. This wound could easily kill a man."

"Can you save him?"

Hong stopped what he was doing and turned to Nat. He nodded. "I'll try."

"Well, try hard," Nat said.

Hong nodded again.

"Can I use your phone?" Nat asked.

"As long as its not long-distance," Hong said, "be my guest."

"Thank you," Nat said.

She headed through Hong's modest rooms and came to a small kitchen, where she found a phone hanging on the wall. She picked up the receiver and dialed. After a few moments, the call was connected.

"Hello," Brett said on the other end of the line. She sounded tired.

"Did I wake you?" Nat asked.

"It's 5:45, of course you woke me. What is it, Nat?"

"It's nothing. I just... I had a bad night."

"I'll bet."

"It's not what you think."

"What is it that you think I think it is?"

Nat shook her head. "You think I'm drunk."

"Are you?" Brett asked.

"I'm sober as the day I was born, swear on my mother's grave."

"Your mother's alive, Nat."

"You know what I mean."

Brett chuckled and Nat followed suit. It was absurd. It had been such a horrible last hour or so but here she was laughing.

"Look, I miss you," Nat said. "After tonight, I need you. I need to be with you. You know?"

"I've got to go to work, Nat," Brett said.

"I know, I know. I have to write a story, too. But after work. Tonight. Is that okay? I promise I won't drink today."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. Then a sigh.

"All right," Brett said. "Yes, you can come over. I miss you, too."

Nat found that there were tears in her eyes. From laughter to tears in a matter of seconds. It was that kind of night. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," Brett said. "I'm making my famous meatloaf."

"Yuck."

And they were laughing again. The call ended a moment later and Nat found her laughter dying. She looked into the small living room where Hong was busy working on Sage. Another moment later and she headed there to see what she could do to help.

About twenty-four hours later, Doyle was in his apartment, a nice robe draped over his shoulders. He hadn't bothered to tie it around his waist as he made his way to the front door to collect the paper. It was cold this morning and his open robe wasn't helping. The heater must not have been working properly. His slippers clapped against the floor as he walked. He hadn't shaved in several days and looked unkempt, despondent. O'Bannion had been right: there were bags under his eyes, big ones, large enough to pack for a trip to Europe.

Reaching the door, he opened it and grabbed the paper off the ground. Before he even unfolded it, he knew what it was going to say and it filled his heart with dread. So he avoided it and threw it on the kitchen table as he made breakfast. As bacon fried and eggs boiled, Doyle turned and looked at the paper, sitting like an ace of spades waiting to be drawn at a card table.

He knew what it was going to say. He had squealed on his men, called the *Tribune* dame and told her about the newsstand, hoping that she would write a story about it, hoping that she would be in contact with The Outsider, hoping that The Outsider would take Coll down for good. Now it was all for not.

Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. He rushed to the kitchen table and turned the paper over, unfolded it. And there it was in big, bold, black and white:

VIGILANTE "OUTSIDER" GUNNED DOWN BY ARMED CRIMINALS

An incredible picture accompanied the article, that of The Outsider clinging to the top of one of their cars as it careened down the road. It was iconic and almost took Doyle's breath away. The article - written by Nat Scarlet, of course - spoke of the night's events, of The Outsider foiling an attempt of money collection from a beloved Chinatown newsstand, of him then being gunned down by an unnamed criminal.

It spoke of how friends of The Outsider collected his body and took it away, to save his privacy and protect the anonymity of his family and those who loved him. It was thrilling and heart-breaking journalism and Doyle sat at his kitchen table as bacon burned on the stovetop behind him and he wondered where his life was going, where he would end up, how he was going to die.

It was the worst morning he could recall but many of the days that followed were worse.

To Be Continued...

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