

SCOOP

BY B. R. FLYNN

Chapter Seven, "Print the Legend"

More than a week later, deep in the Heights, a quaint little shop called Candyville was being shaken down. It was the morning, not yet ten - one of those bright, cold December mornings that sometimes seem worse than the dark, snowy nights. The proprietor of the store, Louis, was shaking his head tucked away in a corner while O'Bannion threw a glass jar full of sweets to the floor where it shattered, sending peppermint candies all about. Louis was a big, tall colored man and could have easily taken O'Bannion apart but he didn't dare.

"You want this to keep happening?" O'Bannion said as he picked up another jar and held it aloft over his head. "Huh? Do you? If not, pay up."

Louis just continued to shake his head. O'Bannion shook his own head along with the older man but he was smiling as he did so. His bruises were still pronounced, still colorful: The Outsider had left his mark. A moment later, this second jar was shattered, against a wall this time, where it sent two more jars crashing to the floor. O'Bannion walked across the store, shards of glass cracking under the thick soles of his shoes. He glared at Louis as he passed by.

"Look," Louis said, "I can't pay. Not this week. Business has been down, people are scared to even come out of their homes because of..."

He let the statement trail off. O'Bannion stopped his pacing and approached the man.

"Why are they scared, Louis?" he said. "Come on. Out with it."

"They're scared because of your people," Louis said after a moment.

O'Bannion nodded slowly. "Okay. Okay, Louis. Fair enough. But I wonder what my boss will have to say about that."

At that moment, the bell over the door to the shop rang. O'Bannion kept looking at Louis as the older man looked past him to see two people entering the store. One of them was an attractive, tall woman in a strange uniform, like that of a driver but stylized and sexy: revealing. The other was Coll himself, wide and precise with his actions. He sauntered into the shop, stepping around debris, rubbing together his small hands and surveying the shop as if he were a normal customer. The woman kept back, staying in the doorway, actually keeping it open. She turned sideways and stood in the entrance. Louis could see a pistol stuffed into her belt.

"Nice place," Coll said. "Could use some tidying up."

"Mr. Coll," Louis said. "I'm sorry, I don't have the money. I was explaining to your man here--"

"He said that we're scaring away patrons," O'Bannion interrupted.

"Well, no," Louis said, "I didn't say that, not exactly. I only meant--"

"It's all right, Louis," Coll said. "We're scary people. I understand. But there's a reason for it. And do you know what that reason is?"

"I think so, yes, Mr. Coll."

"Good. It's for your protection. If we weren't around to protect you, God knows how many hoodlums would be robbing you blind in the middle of the night. But with us protecting you, you needn't worry."

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Coll. I appreciate your... help, but I simply can't pay this week."

"Unfortunate," Coll said.

He turned away from Louis and took a few steps towards the open door, stopped, and produced a cigar from his jacket pocket. He stuck it in his mouth and produced a lighter. A moment later, he was smoking while looking out onto the street.

"You have a son, don't you, Louis?" he said, still not looking at the other man.

"I..." Louis said. "I do, yes, Mr. Coll."

"He's what? Seventeen?"

"That's correct."

Beads of sweat trailed down Louis' forehead despite the cold. He wiped them away as best he could. O'Bannion was watching him with glee.

"Let's not worry about that," Coll said, turning around to regard the shop once again. He still wasn't looking at Louis, but wandered about the shop. "Let's talk about something else. Have you heard of The Outsider, Louis?"

"I have, yes, Mr. Coll," Louis said.

Coll nodded and grabbed a candy cane from a jar off a shelf. He held it to his nose and sniffed it, seemed to like what he smelled and stowed it away in his jacket. "Of course you have. He was a legend around here. Now, I'm not sure if I believe he was what all of your people said he was. That I'm not sure about. But I can tell you this: he's not around anymore. If he was ever real, he's gone now. And we're your only protection. This is something that should concern you, if you understand me. I know that if I were you, I'd be worried. I'd be damn worried and I'd find a way to pay the real people protecting me. Wouldn't want something to happen to my wife, to my son."

Louis was silent. He saw something outside, near the big Packard that the three mobsters had pulled

up in. It was Andrew, his son. He was back from the dugout, bat in hand, and had seen what was going on inside the store. He got low, drew his bat back and approached slowly. The strange driver woman was distracted, watching Louis' terrified face and didn't see Andrew.

What should he do? If Andrew was able to get a good lick in, what good would that be? The both of them would be gunned down in seconds. It was a bad move.

Louis tried to dissuade Andrew. He shook his head, eyes meeting with his son's. But Andrew was stubborn, like his old man was at that age. He had seen the situation and had made a decision. He was only about ten feet from the strange woman now, bat cocked back, ready to strike.

"Louis?" Coll asked.

He was looking at Louis now, eyes wide, suspicious. Louis froze and wiped another wall of sweat off his forehead. Finally, he couldn't take it anymore.

"Andrew, no!" he shouted.

Andrew was about five feet away from the woman now and as the woman turned and saw him, he reared back to strike. But for all his youth, all his strength, he wasn't fast enough. The woman pulled her pistol like a gunslinger in a western picture show and fired three times. Louis could see that the pistol was an automatic and it had a long barrel - silenced. The reports were like the staccato hammer of nails into his skull.

All three bullets found their mark, in Andrew's midsection. He crumpled up and fell to the ground just outside the store. Louis ran to him - past O'Bannion, past Coll, past the strange woman - and got down on his knees to cradle the boy as his life drained out of him. He choked back tears as Andrew looked up at him in pain. The strange woman walked past, towards the car, followed by O'Bannion and, finally, Coll.

The mob boss put a hand on Louis' shoulder. He puffed smoke out of his big cigar and shook his head.

"Dangerous neighborhood," he said. "You got three more days to pay up."

Then he was gone, into the car and tearing off down the road. Louis felt the tears well up in his eyes. They would be falling soon. Grief would come but first was anger, rage. Louis bit his own tongue and concentrated on the metallic taste of the blood, held onto it. Maybe The Outsider was a ghost. Maybe he would be back to stop things like this from happening. Louis only wished it would have happened sooner.

Nat Scarlet looked around the dining room of the Emerald Club and felt deeply uncomfortable. Nothing but white faces as far as the eye could see. Nat, herself, was white, of course, but she couldn't stand the

hypocrisy of the place: colored folk performing for an all white audience. And if those white faces knew what Nat's personal life was like - if they knew what she had done with Brett the night before, for example - they would have kicked her out as quick as they could. But she had to be here. Her press credentials had gotten her a table even though she wasn't a member. She looked again at the telegram in her hand:

MEET AT EMERALD CLUB 8 TONIGHT STOP URGENT STOP

There was no name, which was suspicious. Nat came armed, just in case, her small derringer pistol stuffed between her 32D's for safe-keeping.

She looked great. She had chosen a dress Brett had bought her for Christmas a year ago that she simply hadn't had the time to wear yet. It was a deep, lovely green, which highlighted her eyes and contrasted nicely with her hair.

She had ordered a sherry instead of something stronger - trying to cut down for Brett - and was eyeing the menu for dinner when she heard the first shocked reactions from the other patrons. She quickly looked up, caught, cornered: did they know who she was? What she was?

But the surprised gasps were not about her. Nat saw a beautiful, elegantly dressed colored woman striding through the tables. The patrons were shocked by the sudden appearance of a person of color in the middle of this whites-only audience. Nat recognized her: it was Angelina Savage, Sage Walker's girlfriend. And she was heading straight for Nat's table.

"Oh hush," Angelina said to a particularly shocked woman she passed, "you just saw me on stage a half hour ago. Did I suddenly become hideous?"

She sat down at Nat's table with a deceptive smile. Nat found herself slowly drawing away from the woman. It disgusted her, but she did it. This sudden confrontation - this break with decorum - was in such contrast to the way Nat lived her own life, hiding who she was from most people. It shocked her. And she was not happy with herself in that moment.

"Miss Scarlet," Angelina said.

"Hello, Miss Savage," Nat said. "And you can call me Nat."

"Nat," Angelina said. "Almost sounds like a man's name. Oh, and you can continue to call me Miss Savage, if you please."

"Alright."

A colored waiter approached. He looked just as nervous as Nat.

"I'll have a Tom Collins, Ben," Angelina said to the man.

"Angelina," Ben said, "I can't serve you. You know that."

"Take it up with Bruno. We're making an exception tonight. Thursday night crowd isn't important

enough, it seems."

Ben shook his head and left to fetch Angelina's drink. The lovely singer rested her head in both hands, elbows on the table.

"So," she said, "are you stepping out with my man?"

Nat choked on her drink, which she had just slammed, deciding that she was going to need it. A quick grab of her napkin saved her and she regained her composure.

"Jeepers, no," she said. "What gave you that crazy idea?"

"So you do know him," Angelina said.

Nat nodded slowly. She had been caught off guard and gave away the information without a moment's hesitation.

"He's fine," Angelina said, "in case you were wondering. I've been taking care of him. Damn fool won't stop working out, training. I keep telling him that the wounds are gonna reopen but he won't listen. Wants to get back to fighting as soon as humanly possible."

"That's good."

"Oh, is it? So, when he's up and about again, is he going to get back together with you?"

"I'm not..." Nat said, looking around nervously. "I'm not with him. I'm not like that."

"All women are like that, honey," Angelina said. "When they see a fine specimen like Sage, they simply can't help themselves."

"Well, not me."

"What makes you different?"

Nat looked around again, then leaned in, conspiratorially. After a moment, Angelina sighed and leaned in, as well.

"I'm..." Nat said.

"What?" Angelina said.

"I'm a homosexual, okay. You happy?"

Angelina frowned, one eyebrow raised. She leaned up, chin now resting on a single hand. She clacked her nails on the table with her free hand.

"That one I don't hear often," she said.

"It's true," Nat said. "And I don't like to talk about it in sensitive company." She looked around.

"Oh, these people? Most of them are scum, honey. Half of them would be slave owners if it was still legal. The other half are slave owners, just the legal kind. I don't give a damn what they think. Now let me tell you a story."

Ben returned with Angelina's drink. She took a great sip of it and looked at Nat.

"You want one of these?" she asked.

"God, yes," Nat said.

Ben nodded and left the table to fill the order. Angelina put down her own drink and looked Nat in the eye.

"I went to see Sage that morning," she said "The morning it happened. A surprise. Had the day off work. So I see him, half dead, all patched up. I asked him what happened. And he was cagey, he didn't want to give me any details, just that he'd bothered the wrong people, if you know what I mean. But I'm nothing if not persistent and got a story out of him. I don't know if it's the truth, but it's a story, all right. Says that he was helping out a newspaper man on a story about fixed fights and he asked the wrong questions to the wrong people and they retaliated. I asked him why he didn't go to the hospital and he tells me that he'd be a dead man if he went to the hospital. That the gunman would know he survived if there was a record at the hospital. So Hong patched him up."

"He named me, then?" Nat said.

"Well, he called you Nate Scarlet but it wasn't that hard to find out who you were. I still thought you were a man for a while and was going to let it go, even if I wasn't quite sure about the story. Then I heard from Eli at the door that some reporter lady was snooping around and said to myself, 'Angelina, you aren't thinking what I think you're thinking, are you?' But I was. I inquired at the newspaper and, what do you know? Natalie Scarlet, ace reporter. Stepping out with my man in the early hours of the morning. I was livid, I can tell you. But you say you're a sister?"

"Keep it down. Yes, I'm in the life."

Angelina was silent for a moment. She looked away and sighed. "You know, a part of me wishes that you were stepping out with him."

"Why's that?" Nat asked.

"Because if you're not, that means my other suspicion is true." She leaned in real close and Nat found herself leaning in, too. Angelina whispered now. "I know what he's been doing all night. And it might involve a black outfit. Something dramatic, theatrical. He fancies himself as some kind of ghost."

Nat reeled back like she had been struck. She shook her head, scoffed, tried to brush it off.

"No, no, no," Angelina said despite Nat's protests. "I've suspected for months and now it all makes sense. Did you and him cook up that story about the ghost being killed? Clever."

Ben returned with Nat's drink and the reporter practically snatched it out of his hands and drank half of it down. She coughed a bit and set the glass down.

"Now, I may know his secret," Angelina said, "but he doesn't know I know. We'll keep it that way for now. If he feels like he has to protect me, that's okay. It's a little sweet. But it's going to come out. In

the meantime, you can keep a secret, can't you?" She finished her own drink and stood up. "What am I saying? Of course you can keep a secret. Be seeing you, Nat."

She walked away, her hips swaying from side to side. Nat wasn't the only patron in the club to watch her leave. After she was gone, disappearing backstage, Nat finished the rest of her drink in one mighty swig.

"Oh, man," she said to herself, "that's quite a woman."

Angelo's Barbershop was in Little Sicily, which bordered Chinatown and the Heights. The shop was a nice, out of the way place, very private, with quite an excellent reputation. O'Bannion sat in the passenger seat of the Packard, next to Saoirse. Coll was behind them in the backseat. All of them watched the barbershop.

It had been almost a week since the candy store incident and Christmas was close. O'Bannion had seen the tree in the big department store in midtown. What was it called again? He couldn't remember. Business had been booming and he had been having the time of his life.

"You sure he's gonna be here?" Coll asked.

"Oh, he'll be here," O'Bannion said. "He gets a shave once a week, same time, same place. And today is the day."

"Who told ya?" Coll asked.

"Frankie the Rat."

"How much you have to pay 'im?" Saoirse asked.

"Nothing. Got him a nice cold cut. Coughed up the information before he was even finished with it."

Saoirse laughed. It was infectious and O'Bannion found himself joining in. Coll did not laugh and shook his head. After a moment, the laughter died down and silence reigned.

"Good couple weeks," O'Bannion said to break up the monotony.

"Gonna be a great Christmas," Saoirse said.

"Once we take out this little problem," Coll said. "Big Anthony has been trying to muscle in on our business for too long now. Today he pays."

"Right, boss," O'Bannion said. "Say, uh, can we talk about Doyle?"

"What about him?" Coll said.

"He's been acting a little funny lately. Like his heart ain't in it, if you get my drift."

Saoirse nodded. "Our friend may need a little talking to, I'm afraid."

"I'll say who needs a talking to around here," Coll said. "Doyle is a loyal man, a good soldier. He may not be qualified for the front line, but in the planning room, he's got his head on straight."

"If you say so, boss," O'Bannion said.

"I do say so. No one makes a move on Doyle unless I give the word. If he's disloyal, then we'll have this conversation again. Until then, you can talk all you want about acting funny or the quality of his heart. Loyalty is what matters in this business."

"Right, boss," O'Bannion repeated. "Thinking about that cold cut's making me hungry. Think I might duck out and grab one. There's a deli right there."

But before he could make a move, Coll put a hand on his shoulder. It was firm, strong. O'Bannion looked at it in fear for a moment. Then Coll extended a small finger towards the windshield. Slowly, O'Bannion followed it and saw a large, almost hulking, man walking towards the barbershop.

"You see the scar?" Coll said.

O'Bannion nodded. The man had a large scar running down his right cheek. It was old, a badge of honor. "I see it, boss."

"That's him," Coll said.

"Big Anthony," Saoirse said.

"The Italians aren't gonna like this," O'Bannion said.

"Who cares?" Coll said. "Anyone in this car care?"

Saoirse shook her head. O'Bannion followed suit right after.

"Good," Coll said. "Now get in there."

O'Bannion nodded and slipped out of the car slowly, quietly, waiting for Big Anthony to enter the barbershop. When he did, O'Bannion casually crossed the street to the shop. He stood outside for a brief moment, then went in. He grabbed the bell above the door, silencing it as he entered then turned the sign around from OPEN to CLOSED. Big Anthony was already in the chair, a hot towel around his face.

The barber - Angelo, presumably - looked up at O'Bannion as he entered. The Irish mobster shushed him with a finger to his lips and produced a five dollar bill. The barber's eyes widened as O'Bannion set it down on the little desk by the door. After that, O'Bannion made a little brushing motion with a hand and the barber disappeared out the back way silently.

Slowly, O'Bannion approached Big Anthony and the barber chair. The smell of these places was always distinctive. It must have been the chemicals they used on their scissors or something. O'Bannion had always rather liked the smell and he drew in a great inhale, a mighty sniff. Big Anthony's towel-covered head turned to the sound.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"Oh, no one," O'Bannion said.

Big Anthony instinctively reached for his pistol but O'Bannion was faster. He pulled his own pistol and struck the Italian mobster in the back of the head. And, as Big Anthony reeled in pain and shock, O'Bannion quickly used two aprons hanging on nearby chairs to tie the man's hands down. Big Anthony shouted in alarm as O'Bannion grabbed the towel off his face and choked him with it, tying it to the back of the chair. Big Anthony's face was a wide O of surprise and pain, his head swept back, getting blue.

O'Bannion pulled a beautiful switchblade from his jacket. It was gold plated with a pearl handle. O'Bannion leaned over Big Anthony menacingly.

"Let this be a lesson to ya, Big Anthony," he said. "Well, a lesson to your fellow Italians, anyway, since you won't be around to give it to 'em, least not with your voice: don't try to muscle in on our turf. Not when it's controlled by a man who has himself a collection like this."

O'Bannion flicked the knife open and leaned in further. Big Anthony's face was a mask of terror. O'Bannion smiled. He went for the nose first.

Everything that came after was improvised.

"So what are we doing out here?" Al asked behind the wheel.

"I wanna catch a few of Coll's men paying off a cop," Nat said in the back seat of the cab. She checked her camera, looked it over and made sure the bulb was fresh.

It was close to midnight and they were parked in almost complete darkness near the entrance to the Andrew Jackson Bridge. It stretched out over the water to the borough of Kingsland beyond. Nat didn't like the area but found herself out here often. It was a good place to catch bad people doing what they do best.

"Your source tell you they were gonna be here?" Al asked.

"Yep," Nat said. "Right on the money."

"You trust your source?"

"Hasn't steered me in the wrong direction yet."

"And he's still in contact with you? Even after, well, you know?"

"Yeah. Took about a week or so after our friend was gunned down, but he called. Figured I could do some good, even if the big man was gone."

"And what are you hoping to catch?" Al asked.

"I want a picture of money changing hands," Nat said. "That's good crime reporting, if you ask me."

Nat looked out of the car towards the approach slab which led to the civilian walkway. The guardrails were massive: big metal safety rails high off the ground. Impressive workmanship. The

bridge had been open for a little over five years now, and was pretty much the height of architectural technology.

As she watched, two figures approached. One of them, Nat didn't recognize: he was short and looked out of place in his clothes, like they were too big for him. The other, however, Nat knew. It was that woman who had shot The Outsider. She searched her memory and came up with a name: Saoirse. A lovely name for a lovely woman. Well, lovely looking, at least. She was bad, bad to her very core.

"They're here," Nat whispered. "Keep quiet."

"Right," Al said.

The two hoods stood near the entrance, waiting. As Nat watched, the man lit up a cigarette, presumably to keep warm. He held a small briefcase in one hand. They were across the street but Nat had ears like radar and could hear them quite easily.

"You're tense, Doyle," Saoirse said. "Need to work that off. Relax."

"Right," the man, Doyle, said.

"Ya have any hobbies?"

"Not really."

"Well, get one or you'll have a heart attack at a young age. How old are ye now, lad? Nineteen, twenty?"

"I'm thirty," Doyle said.

"Are ye now?" Saoirse said.

"You know how old I am."

"Course I do. Just teasing ye."

"I guess I'm just a tense kind of person."

Nat suppressed a shocked reaction: she recognized this Doyle's voice. He was her source in Coll's crime family. She shook her head in surprise.

"Here he comes," Saoirse said. "'Bout time, too. Cold as a witch's teat out here."

Doyle looked at her, a confused expression on his face. Nat turned to regard where Saoirse was looking and saw two men approaching. The man in the lead was Lieutenant O'Malley and Nat shook her head once again. Boy, was she lucky: she had been given the opportunity to take down a cop she didn't care for one bit. The second man Nat didn't recognize: he was young, no older than twenty, colored, and looked scared.

"Evening, my fine folk," O'Malley said as he approached. "What brings such an odd pair out this late?"

Saoirse looked at Doyle. When Doyle remained silent, she stepped forward with a sigh.

"Business, officer" she said. "We're supposed to meet a dashing handsome flatfoot at this spot."

"Do I fit the bill, lass?" O'Malley asked with a smile.

"Don't ye just. Who's this?"

O'Malley turned to regard the young man in tow. He shrugged.

"This is Toby," he said. "Toby's nobody. A stool pigeon a mine."

"You think it's a good idea to bring him along tonight?" Doyle said.

"Oh, Toby won't talk. Not anymore."

Nat frowned and risked leaning out the car window a little. She squinted and saw that Toby's mouth was gagged and that he was in chains, hands and feet bound.

"The boy talked to the wrong people," O'Malley explained. "So he'll be taking a swim tonight."

Saoirse laughed as Doyle looked away, clearly uncomfortable. Saoirse took a step towards the two men, looked Toby up and down, then turned her attention to O'Malley.

"Glad you decided to come over to our side, officer," she said.

"Spaldoni and his Italian brethren are losing, lass," O'Malley said. "And I'm a winner."

"Now you can take money from your own brothers, and sister, a course."

"I'll take money from whoever pays me the most. No other way makes sense. Now hand it over."

"Get ready to bolt when I take the picture," Nat whispered to Al. Al only nodded. She wanted to stick around and see if she could do anything about Toby but was afraid that she or Al couldn't offer any assistance. She had her pistol but what good would it do, really?

Doyle slowly handed the briefcase to O'Malley, who held it loosely at his side. Nat silently willed him to open the briefcase, so she could get a juicy picture. It wasn't working.

"Aren't you gonna count it?" Doyle asked, as if he was reading Nat's mind.

"Think I don't trust you, lad?" O'Malley asked.

"I don't know. Do you trust us?"

"Not especially, no. No more than any other hoods I've met. So I think I will count it, if you don't mind."

"Of course."

O'Malley lifted the briefcase as Nat began to frame the shot. As with many of the photographs she had taken, time seemed to slow down for her. Seconds became minutes and her eye - a Public Eye if there ever was one - sharpened. O'Malley opened the briefcase and examined the several rows of cash hidden therein. He seemed almost to be asking for his picture to be taken and Nat was ready to oblige. Then a voice rang out and everything changed.

"Lot of money for a crooked cop."

Everyone's jaws dropped in shock. The Outsider, risen from the grave, stood on the guardrail nearest the motley crew of criminals. He stood like a ghost, coat blowing in the cold wind. His blank, featureless face seemed to regard them with contempt.

"I'm getting out," Nat whispered to Al.

"What?" Al said. "That's not a good idea."

But Nat wasn't listening and she slid out of the cab and stepped into the street. Reframing her shot, getting The Outsider in the picture, standing over all of them like a judge, Nat got into position. O'Malley still held the briefcase open, shocked as he was. Nat would capture this, too. It was perfect.

She had told Sage - through Lou, mostly - about every tip that she got from Doyle in the last few weeks, wondering when the boxer would resurrect The Outsider. Which tip was the right one? And now here he was. What was it about this tip? It wasn't as if she had known about Toby or what was going to happen to him. So, what was it? What did she not know about Sage? About The Outsider? Could he see into the minds of criminals, like a real spectre or demon?

Nat shook her head, amazed, and took the shot. The bulb flashed, briefly illuminating everything: the entrance to the bridge, The Outsider standing defiantly on the guardrail, Doyle's shocked expression, Saoirse's shrewd smile, O'Malley's caught gasp, Toby's hopeful though panicked eyes.

Things happened fast after that.

Saoirse immediately pulled a pistol to fire, but she wavered, not knowing whether to shoot The Outsider or Nat. She looked from one to the other, then pointed the gun at the spectre on the guardrail.

"Take care of the pretty reporter," she quickly told Doyle.

And she fired. The first shot grazed the spectre's shoulder, doing no damage. He moved, jumping off the guardrail and going straight for the corrupt cop. A swift, hard right hook sent the cop to the ground. The briefcase hit the street, spun and came to rest at Toby's feet. None of the money had escaped, not yet. Toby looked down at the open briefcase, longingly. The Outsider moved towards him in a rush as Saoirse took aim again. The spectre knocked Toby off his feet, pinning him to the ground.

"Stay down!" he said to the man.

Saoirse's second shot rang out, just missing the huddled, tangled mass of Toby and The Outsider. She cursed and started walking towards them, gun held out in front of her, at the ready.

Doyle rushed towards Nat. His gun was also drawn, but it hung limply at his side.

"Get out of here, miss," he said. "This ain't no place for you."

"Think I don't know who you are?" Nat said. "What kinda phone calls you been making?"

Doyle looked like he'd been struck across the face. He was aghast. Spotting Al in the parked cab beyond the reporter, he shook his head and grabbed Nat. Pushed her towards the cab.

"Go on, go!" he said. "Don't make me shoot you."

"You're not gonna shoot me," Nat said. "Might give me a tip, though."

At the approach slab, Saoirse was about to fire once again. The Outsider stood up in a fighting stance, ready for anything. At the same moment, O'Malley stood up and Saoirse fired. She winged him, hitting him in the left arm. The man yelped in pain and surprise and Saoirse looked shocked for a moment, giving The Outsider enough time to close the distance between the two of them. With a quick punch to the solar plexus, he knocked the wind out of Saoirse and sent her gun flying away, skittering across the pavement. She countered with swift grace, sending a hard kick to the inside shin of the spectre.

"You're supposed to be dead!" she screamed. "I killed you!"

"Yeah, you did," The Outsider said. "But I came back."

For the first time that Nat had seen, Saoirse looked afraid. Truly scared. She looked like she had just kicked a ghost and the kick had done nothing. She looked caught, trapped. Then, as Nat watched, she regained her resolve and lashed out at The Outsider with a surprise left, hitting him in the face. The spectre hardly moved at all.

Nat smiled and Doyle grabbed her by the shoulder. He looked at her, pleading.

"Go," he said. "For both of us, get out of here."

Slowly, Nat nodded. She began to back away, heading for the cab. Saoirse, still engaged with The Outsider, called out over her shoulder.

"Doyle," she said, "get the car!"

Doyle got moving immediately, running past Nat and Al, into the shadows of the street. A moment later, Nat heard the sound of a car starting up. Their getaway car came pulling up in seconds, beside Saoirse and The Outsider.

Saoirse moved towards the car and The Outsider grabbed her, throwing her violently against the vehicle. He had her firm in his grasp.

"You're not going anywhere," he said.

"Don't you know it's bad form to hit a lass?" Saoirse said.

Then, quick as a snake, she pulled a small, incredibly sharp knife from her jacket and slashed it across the spectre's left arm, drawing blood. The Outsider let go of her and took a step back. Saoirse took the opportunity to jump into the vehicle, right through the window, the knife between her teeth like a pirate. It glinted in the dim streetlights as she settled into her seat. She tipped the spectre a little salute as the car began to take off.

The Outsider pulled his own knife from its sheath and drew it back to throw. Saoirse's eyes widened

but she needn't have worried.

"Hey, boyo," O'Malley said from behind The Outsider.

The Outsider turned to regard him, knife still drawn back waiting for release. The getaway car sped away. O'Malley had Toby in his grasp with one hand. He held the boy to his left, his pistol placed against the man's temple. Toby looked at The Outsider with pleading eyes. Sweat ran down his face and neck. The gag in his mouth twitched nervously.

"Well, this is a pickle, ain't it?" O'Malley said. "Think you're fast enough, lad? I wouldn't bet on it if I were you. I'll give you a solution. Let me go with the money and I'll give you this wretched creature. He's yours, you hear me? Is that satisfactory for ya?"

The Outsider slowly shook his head. O'Malley smiled.

"Suppose I'll just kill him, then," O'Malley said.

His finger tightened on the trigger the same moment that The Outsider let go with his knife. The blade spun through the air. To Nat, it looked like a fan turned up on high, flying through the air though it was. It found its mark: O'Malley's wrist.

The blade passed straight through the flesh and bone, severing the hand at the wrist. O'Malley screamed as his hand began to fall away from his body. The finger tightened on the trigger as it fell. The gun went off but the bullet went wild, passing right in front of the tip of Toby's nose and hitting the pavement to his left. O'Malley fell back, holding onto his bleeding stump and running into the darkness, screaming as he did.

The Outsider ran to catch Toby, who looked like he was going to faint. O'Malley's severed hand hit the ground and rolled away, gun still held in its dead grasp. Nat ran to the two men's side. The Outsider sat Toby down on the concrete and started to unchain him with his tools. Nat helped him by ungagging the boy.

"Are you hurt?" she asked The Outsider.

"It's nothing," the spectre said.

"What about you?" she asked the boy.

Toby didn't answer. He looked at The Outsider and his expression was mixed: he was grateful but he was also afraid. As far as he was concerned, he was looking at a ghost, one risen from the grave to combat evil. It was intimidating, to be sure.

"Hey," Nat said, "look at me. You're okay. No one is going to hurt you."

"Don't be too sure," The Outsider said.

He stood up, towering over Toby, who was still sitting on the ground. He had the appearance of a child looking up at the boogeyman.

"You're a snitch, Toby," The Outsider said, pointing an accusing finger at the man. "You snitch on your own people. That stops tonight. Right now. You understand?"

Toby slowly nodded. Nat looked up at The Outsider, as well.

"Don't scare him," she said.

"He needs scaring," The Outsider said. "His actions almost got him killed tonight. O'Malley's bad news. He's racist and crooked to the core, but he paid you and you came calling when you picked up the phone, isn't that right, Toby?"

Again, Toby nodded. The Outsider, seemingly satisfied, walked over to collect the briefcase. Nat got up and ran to grab the spectre's knife off the concrete sidewalk where it had come to rest. Toby stayed where he was, still scared, still frozen in place.

The Outsider took out a small stack of bills and fanned them. Counted them. Nat gently picked up the large throwing knife and brought it to the spectre. He idly took it from her and sheathed it away, not even looking in her direction. Silence reigned as The Outsider closed the briefcase and slowly turned to regard Toby.

"Stand up," he said.

Toby did, brushing himself off. He seemed to have collected himself a bit.

"Al?" The Outsider said.

Immediately, Al was out of the cab and by their side. He seemed out of breath, though he hadn't exerted himself at all.

"Yeah," he said.

"Here," The Outsider said and handed Al a bill. As Al looked at it, the spectre approached Toby. He fanned the remaining bills in his hand. "This should be enough to get you started."

"Started?" Toby asked.

"Started over," The Outsider said and handed the bills to the man. "Al's gonna drive you across the bridge to Kingsland. Set yourself up there. I'm gonna need you. You work for me now. I'm gonna feed you information and you're gonna give it to the people I tell you to give it to. Understand?"

"I think so."

"Good. Get outta here."

"Thank... Thank you."

The Outsider nodded. Toby headed for the cab as Al looked at Nat.

"You gonna be okay?" he asked.

"I'll get another cab," Nat said.

"Right," Al said. "See you around, Mr. Outsider."

"Don't call me that, Al," The Outsider said.

"Right."

Al headed for the cab himself and Nat and The Outsider watched the two of them leave, heading across the bridge. Nat turned her attention to the briefcase in the spectre's hand.

"What are you gonna do with the money?" she asked.

"There's a church I know," he said. "They'll get it to the community and won't squander it on building a bigger church or lining the pockets of their priests. They know what they're doing."

Nat nodded. "We better get out of here. What do you want me to do?"

"Write the story. Print the legend. Let them know that killing me won't stop me."

Nat nodded again. "Practically writes itself."

She turned, scanning the horizon to find another cab. When she turned back around, The Outsider was gone, disappearing into the shadows.

"Typical," she said. "Leave a lady out here all alone."

The next morning, the headline towered massively over Nat's amazing picture:

OUTSIDER RISES FROM GRAVE, DECLARES WAR ON CRIMINALS AND CORRUPT COPS

Below that, smaller:

"I AM THE BOOGEYMAN," HE CLAIMS

Nat printed the legend. The events described were essentially what happened, but exaggerated, embellished. It made for a great story and, she hoped, had criminals and corrupt cops quaking in their boots.

To Be Continued...

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