

SCOOP

BY B. R. FLYNN

Chapter Eight, "The Mousetrap"

"Gotta hand it to you, Nat," Smitty said, "great story. How much of it is true?"

Nat looked up at the man from her desk. It was the morning of Christmas Eve and the newsroom was busy. Calls and tips had been coming in constantly since Nat's explosive article had hit the printers. She was getting accolades from people she never would have expected.

Take Smitty here, for example. He was in his thirties, tall and handsome in a rather conventional way with a strong jaw and dark hair. His hat was perched canted, on the back of his head. He smoked a Rally cigarette, the cheap kind that only newspaper men seemed to smoke. Nat smiled at him.

"Can I have one of those?" she asked. "I'm out."

"Sure thing, doll."

Nat looked at him curiously, a smirk on her face, as he produced one of the cheap coffin nails for her. He lit it, too, almost like a gentleman.

"What gives, Smitty?" she asked as she drew in a long drag. "You've never talked to me like this before."

"You're on fire, Nat," Smitty explained. He leaned back on someone's desk, resting against it and looking like he didn't have a care in the world. "Wanna catch a little of that heat is all."

"All right. And since when have you called me doll?"

"Well, you are a doll. Most beautiful newsman I know."

"Thank you, I know. But you know me, you know who I am, you know that's not gonna work on me."

"Hey, a guy can try, can't he?"

"He can try, certainly, but he ain't getting anywhere."

"Man, you sure know how to let a man down easy, don't you?"

"It's a gift," Nat said. "So what do you really want, Smitty?"

"Who is he?" Smitty said. Suddenly he was no longer resting against the desk and was in her face. "Come on, tell me who he is. I can keep a secret. I just wanna talk to him, write some of these stories myself."

"No can do, Smitty. My sources are sacred."

"Ah, phooey on you. And you haven't answered my question: how much of it is true?"

"Most of it. And that's all you're gonna get, hear me?"

"Just a little more, come on!"

The phone on Nat's desk started to ring - which in and of itself was not surprising: it had been ringing all morning - but provided her with the perfect distraction at the moment. She rounded her desk and shrugged to Smitty as if to say, "What are you gonna do?" and answered the phone. Smitty wandered away, cheap smoke trailing behind him.

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

"Thank the Virgin Mary you answered," the voice on the other end of the line said.

Nat sighed, realizing that perhaps she shouldn't have answered. She was about to hang up when the voice spoke again.

"Nat, it's Doyle," Doyle said.

"Whatya got?" Nat said and sat down at her desk instantly. A moment later, her hands were working independently from her body, grabbing a pencil and her notebook.

"First of all, great story!" Doyle said.

"Thank you."

"Second of all, there's something going down tonight."

"Yeah?"

"I don't have all the details, Coll's been a little quiet about it, but I know it's going down."

"Where and when?"

"The El, about 11:45, the 42 train."

"Right, right. And the what?"

"Boss ain't exactly happy about our mutual friend's return and it hasn't escaped his notice that he's been rather protective of colored folk around town."

"So?"

"So he's making an example of a colored family man tonight on the El. Poor guy's just some shopkeeper that hasn't been able to pay up. Rides the El home every night. Coll's gonna make an example of him, on Christmas Eve, right there in front of God and everyone! It ain't right."

"Slow down," Nat said. "Make an example? What do you mean? You mean he's gonna kill him?"

"For starters," Doyle said.

"Jeepers creepers. Coll's gonna be there in person, you say?"

"That's what I'm saying. Maybe our mutual friend will want to be there, if you catch my meaning."

"I gotcha."

"Be there, I want this to end, if you know what I mean."

"I'll be there."

The call ended. Nat scrambled and spent the next twenty minutes trying to get a hold of Lou, Sage's manager, but she couldn't reach him. Probably had the day off for the Holidays and was spending it with Ricky. Nat sighed: part of her really wanted to be warm and alone with Brett. But only part of her. In truth, this is what she lived for: a juicy, exciting story. Hell, even if it wasn't anything that she could print, the excitement was enough, the fact that she was doing something that mattered. And how many people could honestly say that? But still, she thought of Brett, alone on Christmas Eve and it made her sad. She made a promise to herself that she would at least try to make it to Brett's by Christmas morning.

But presently, she couldn't wait any longer. She opened a drawer of her desk and pulled out her derringer pistol, stuffed it between her breasts and dashed out of the newsroom - several of the other reporters, including Smitty, watching her go; some of them intrigued by whatever story she was on, others just trying to catch a glimpse of her lovely behind as she left - and retrieved her car. She didn't use it that much, mostly parking it in her space here at the paper, and wasn't sure if it would work in this cold, but it was imperative that she get it running: she had to move fast.

There was a horrible moment when she was convinced that the car wouldn't start but finally it revved to life and Nat patted the dashboard gratefully.

"That's my girl," she said.

And she took off. The drive to the Emerald Club was a blur. Nat found herself looking in the rear view mirror more than the road ahead of her. She kept thinking that she was being followed but it seemed like every car on the road looked the same and it was probably just paranoia. All the same, she looped around a few neighborhoods and, when she was satisfied, she parked a block away from the Emerald Club and hoofed it through the cold.

Bells rang all around her, churches looking for handouts for the poor. Nat couldn't spare the time, could hardly believe it was even Christmas Eve, and reached the alley around the side of the Emerald Club out of breath.

Eli, the big doorman, was there just like before. Nat approached him, determination in her step. Eli shook his finger at her as she approached.

"Nope," he said.

"Wait, I--" Nat said before being cut off.

"Lady, you can't be here."

"I just--"

"I let you in once but that's it! Hear?"

"But I--"

"You gotta leave."

Nat nodded continually as the man spoke. She pulled out a quarter, held it out to him and put on her best smile.

"No, ma'am," Eli said. "Look, I said I can't let you in again."

"I don't want in," Nat was finally able to interject.

"What do you want, then?"

"I need to get a message to our mutual friend."

"Our what?"

"Guy dressed in black, tends to scare lowlifes in this city? Ring a bell?"

"You shouldn't be talking about him."

"I'll stop if you deliver this message to him. Now, do we have a deal?"

Eli sighed and nodded. Nat set the quarter down on top of the metal lid of a trashcan and pulled out her notebook along with a pencil. She scrawled the details of tonight's activities onto an empty sheet and tore it out. She picked up the quarter and put the note on the trashcan, then set the coin back down on top of it.

"I'm leaving this here," she said. "I won't know what happens to it once I leave, but... make sure he gets it."

"Yes, ma'am," the doorman said.

"Your name's Eli, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you, Eli."

She gave him a smile and a wink. He looked away, embarrassed but smiling as well. Nat left him, putting a little sway into her hips as she walked, just in case he was watching. It didn't hurt to give people a little show every once in a while.

The drive back felt better somehow, like she had accomplished something. She found herself only looking at the rear view mirror every once and a while. She actually sang a few Christmas songs. Her spirits were high.

Not far from the offices of the *Tribune*, ahead of her, there was a wreck. Two cars stopped on the side of the road, smoke billowing out of the nearest vehicle, two people leaned over the open engine. Feeling generous, Nat pulled over. Part of her reasoning in stopping was the shapely behind of one of

the motorists, a woman all dolled up for Christmas, her backside prominently pointed in Nat's direction.

Nat turned off her own engine, got out of her car and approached the wreck. She couldn't take her eyes off the behind of the woman leaning over the smoking car.

"Can I help?" she asked.

"You certainly can, lass," the woman said.

She turned around, a pistol in hand now pointed at Nat. It was Saoirse, no longer wearing her chauffeur's outfit. She now looked like the most beautiful gangster's moll Nat had ever seen. Nat wolf-whistled despite the situation. Saoirse frowned. The second motorist - a man - also turned around, also armed.

"Hands up," he said.

Nat reluctantly put both of her hands up. She smirked.

"Mr. Coll would like to see you," Saoirse said. "Seems like you've got a little appointment tonight. Around 11:45?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Nat said.

"Shut up, dame," the man said. "We'll take your car. Sound all right?"

Well, she couldn't exactly argue, could she? The two hoods grabbed her and forced her towards her car.

At the Midway Club, Doyle already had his hat on, had grabbed his coat and was ready to walk out the door. It was now evening - just after five - and all he had to do now was bid the boss farewell and he could leave, grab dinner and be on his own for a few hours.

He poked his head into the boss's office, hand set firmly on the door handle. Was he sweating? It felt like it, at least.

"Heading home, boss," he said. "See you in the Heights in a few hours."

"Not so fast, Doyle," Coll said. "Come in for a minute."

Doyle stayed where he was for a moment, just staring at the boss. He tried to keep the look of fear and worry off his face but didn't know if he was succeeding. The boss was sitting calmly behind his desk, hands folded in front of him, collection of severed noses on the wall behind him. Doyle suppressed a sigh and entered the office.

"Close the door behind you," Coll said, "if you'd be so kind."

As Doyle closed the door, he saw that Saoirse was also in the room, leaning against the wall blocked from view a moment earlier. She was once again dressed in her chauffeur's outfit - this morning, Doyle

had seen her all dolled up - and full of malice. She held her knife in one hand, not threatening but held at her side, tapping it lightly against the wall. Doyle eyed her as he entered the room. There was a door beyond her, a closet door, Doyle knew. It appeared as if someone was trying to get out of it, banging against it. Doyle swallowed hard.

"Sit down," Coll said.

His was still calm, still collected, still reasoned, all of which scared Doyle even more than he already was. Slowly, he took the seat offered him and couldn't help but sneak a glance at the collection mounted above Coll.

"Do you know how long I've been with this organization, Doyle?" Coll asked.

"Yeah, boss, you--" Doyle started.

"Quiet," Saoirse said from behind him, cutting him off.

"Thirty-seven years," Coll continued, as if Doyle hadn't spoke.

"Long time, boss," Doyle said.

"Indeed it is. Started out when I was a little nothing twelve-year-old, picking pockets. Met Featherstone, who was a young man on the rise at the time - not much older than me - and got my start."

"Quite a career."

"You bet it is. Lotta years. And a lotta years left to go. Loyalty is what I'm talking about, Doyle. You understand?"

"Yeah, boss. I understand."

"I don't think you do."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because rats aren't loyal!"

He stood up from his chair and banged a fist down onto the desk. He towered over Doyle, who cowered back in his chair.

"You ain't made for this life, Doyle," Coll said. "Don't have the stomach for it. I've always known it but I kept you by my side because I thought you were loyal. And, sometimes, that's enough. But you ain't loyal."

"I swear I am, boss," Doyle said.

"Don't lie." He walked around the desk and stood beside Doyle, one hand resting on the desk, the other in Doyle's face, an accusing finger at the tip of his nose. "I know you've been feeding information to that reporter dame. And she, in turn, has been giving that information to The Outsider, this ghost! Saoirse, O'Bannion and myself cooked up this little sting, you understand?"

Doyle shook his head. Sweat dripped down his brow. It felt like the room was closing in on him, like a pair of large fists was slowly choking the life out of him.

"No, boss," he said. "I don't! I don't understand!"

"There's no shopkeeper that we're making an example of tonight," Coll said. "Louis the candy-man is fine. Well, as fine as can be on Christmas with no son anymore. I've had Saoirse and O'Bannion on the reporter dame since last night. She tore outta her office this morning. And they followed her. Oh, yes. Saoirse!"

Doyle turned to Saoirse as she dramatically opened the closet door near her. A gorgeous, voluptuous redhead tumbled out of the closet. She had been bound and gagged but her eyes were sharp and they shot daggers at everyone in the room.

It was Nat. Doyle recognized her from the bridge. He shook his head, wiping sweat off his brow and scratching his temple. His hat was sliding down over his ears. All of a sudden, it was incredibly hot in this room.

Saoirse grabbed hold of Nat. The reporter struggled and tried to get out of the enforcer's grasp. She stopped once Saoirse pressed the edge of her knife into the woman's neck. Nat's eyes were wide as a tiny drop of blood ran down her neck from the blade. She was still now, no longer struggling. Saoirse dragged her into the center of the room.

"Meet Nat Scarlet," Coll said. "Course, you already know her, don't you, Doyle?"

"Boss, I--"

"Shut up!" Coll cut him off. "You know her. You fed her that bogus information we made up. Hey, it's okay, I understand. You weren't meant for this life, like I said. You wanted a way out. Okay. I'm be giving you a way out. Tonight. Around 11:45."

"But you said that was fake."

"Oh, the shopkeeper stuff is fake. But we are going to be on the El in the Heights tonight. We're gonna catch this 'Outsider' character. And you're gonna be there. You and this dame are gonna die right in front of him, along with a very special guest. Then we're gonna kill him."

Saoirse dragged the dame with her as she crossed the room towards the desk. She hit Doyle in the temple with the handle of her knife before the man even had time to react. He was out, instantly.

Eli got back to the Emerald Club around nine. It was dreadfully cold and he cupped his hands around his mouth, blew into them then rubbed his hands together, trying to warm them up. It didn't work very well.

He had tracked Sage down at his apartment and gave him the note. Sage had nodded, that was all,

but Eli had seen his eyes, seen the concern written all over them. He couldn't hide that, couldn't hide his humanity, even if he wanted to, wanted to be a spectre, a ghost.

Eli shook his head as he approached the alley around the side of the Emerald Club. When he had read the article about The Outsider dying - well, had it read to him; Eli couldn't read - he had been worried for a day or so. But Miss Savage - he always thought of her as Miss Savage, not Angelina - had told him that Sage was okay, that he would pull through. Now, scant weeks later, the man was already donning the costume again, fighting crime. He was the toughest person Eli had ever met, an almost mythical figure.

He frowned as he passed by a group of three white men, all of them dressed in nice - though utilitarian - suits. One of them had a bruised face: old bruises, bruises that were healing but were deep and yellow. This man, blond-haired and rather scary, eyed him as he passed. The three men stood next to a parked car just across the street from the alley. Eli continued to eye them as he crossed the street and took up his station at the side entrance.

He was thinking about the reporter dame, about her shapely behind, when Miss Savage came out of the door a few minutes later. Her last show had ended and she would be heading home.

"Miss Savage," Eli greeted her.

"Why, hello, Eli," she said warmly. "Any news?"

"Not much."

"Not much, huh? Well, it is Christmas. Time to go home to the family."

"Still got another hour or so here."

"Then?"

"Then I'll head over to my mom's place downtown. Always stay with her on Christmas Eve."

"Isn't that lovely, though? You a good man."

"Thank you kindly, Miss Savage."

"You know you can call me An--"

She stopped speaking abruptly, looking off towards the entrance of the alley. Eli followed her gaze and saw the three men by the parked car. They had crossed the street and were now blocking the entrance to the alley.

"Miss Angelina Savage?" the blond, bruised one said.

"Who wants to know?" Angelina practically spit at him.

"Name's O'Bannion, miss," the man said. "And I'm afraid you'll have to come with us."

"I ain't goin with no one, mister. Now you best move aside."

"Sorry, miss, I have to insist."

"Insist all you like. I ain't comin with you."

"You should listen to the lady," Eli said.

He stepped in front of her, all two-hundred-and-sixty-five pounds and six-feet-and-nine inches of him. He towered over the would-be kidnappers and cracked his knuckles menacingly.

"Now, isn't that cute?" O'Bannion said.

He pulled a beautiful switchblade from his jacket and flicked it open. It was gold-plated. He casually turned it in his hand.

"Think I'm afraid of a knife?" Eli said with a smile.

"Not at all," O'Bannion said.

He pulled an apple out of his jacket and carved a slice off it with his knife. As he slipped the slice into his mouth, one of the other men stepped forward, a pistol now raised in his fist. Eli's eyes widened and the man fired twice, hitting the large doorman in the midsection with both shots.

Eli didn't fall, not at first. O'Bannion looked quizzically at the man, his resolve wavering just slightly. Then Eli dropped his knees to the cries of Miss Savage.

"Eli!" she said. "Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph!"

She clutched his shoulders but couldn't stop him when he fell backwards into the gathering snow on the concrete below. She knelt down and grabbed his face with both hands. Eli could see tears in her eyes.

"Eli?!" she said.

The three hoods were on her now, O'Bannion eating his apple as one of the other men manhandled the woman. Miss Savage slapped one of them across the face, hard, as he came for her.

"Don't you touch me!" she said.

O'Bannion laughed. He carved off another slice of the apple and slipped it into his mouth.

"What do you want from me?" the woman asked.

"Nothing," O'Bannion said around a mouthful of apple. "But you're either with the reporter dame or our friend in black. Either way, you're coming with us. You have a date on the El tonight."

The two others dragged her kicking and screaming away, towards the car. O'Bannion peeked around the corner to see if anyone was watching. Most people were already home with their families, Eli thought as blood began to pool around him, staining the white snow red. He thought of his mother, waiting for him at home.

O'Bannion looked down at him, cut off a final slice of his apple and tossed what remained of it onto the ground next to Eli. He chuckled.

"You look like you need that more than me," he said.

He closed the switchblade and stowed it away in his jacket before turning and crossing the street, towards the car. Eli lost sight of him after a moment. Another moment later, still thinking of his mother, Eli gathered up his strength and started to pull himself along the cold ground towards the side entrance door.

He wasn't going down easy, that much was sure.

To Be Concluded...

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