

SCOOP

BY B. R. FLYNN

Chapter Nine, "The Countdown"

On 42nd Street, almost 11:45, a shoe-shine boy shuffled out of the apartment he called home. He had stolen a cigarette from his father and wanted to smoke it in piece outside. The street was cold, snow drifting down from the heavens: it would be a white Christmas tomorrow morning. The moon peeked out of the clouds high above, the cigarette was burning and good and, though the boy didn't know it yet, a Ghost stalked the City.

The boy - Black and sturdy, already having seen more of life than any boy his age should see - enjoyed the cigarette and looked down the mostly-empty street. Something caught his eye and he dropped the cigarette, which sizzled out in the wet snow. There he was.

The Ghost.

The Outsider stood on the awning of a store about a block away. He looked towards the stairs that led up to the train station nearby. The boy stared, slack-jawed, as The Outsider dropped down from the awning. The Ghost started towards the stairs of the train station but stopped. Slowly, he turned to regard the boy.

The boy uttered a small, strangled cry of terror as the blank face of the spectre looked at him. The Outsider pointed to him.

"It's Christmas," the Ghost said. "Get inside where it's safe and warm, with your family. And don't let me catch you smoking again!"

"Right," the boy said.

And, as The Outsider mounted the steps towards the train station, the boy ran back inside his home as quickly as he could. He vowed never to touch another cigarette again as long as he lived.

The Outsider emerged from the staircase and onto the train station platform. It was 11:45 and here was the train, right on time. The station was nearly empty, only an old homeless man watched as The Outsider stepped into the open doorway of the train, his mouth open, eyes wide, shocked. The Outsider tipped him a salute which the old man immediately returned. Then the spectre was gone, onto the train as it continued its endless journey.

The lights of the El flickered, as they always did, and The Outsider moved through them like a shadow, moving whenever the lights went out, when the train went through a tunnel, or crossed telephone lines. The flat lighting of the cars stood in stark contrast to The Outsider, dark and mysterious, hidden but entirely present at the same time. He lost none of his mysterious nature, unaffected by the normal, everyday surroundings.

As the spectre traversed the cars, he found most of them empty. There were only a few people here and there. Almost all of them were white, which was strange. Several of them looked at him with mixed expressions: fear, surprise, contempt, anxiousness.

This was a trap.

He knew as much. Eli had managed to call him from the Emerald Club before passing out. Sage had raced there as quick as he could, making sure there was an ambulance for his loyal friend.

So, a trap. But what was the nature of the trap? And what would spring it?

His answer - part of it, at least - came soon enough. As he stepped between one car and the next, he stopped and peered through the window. There, hands tied above his head on one of the hanging loops of the train, was Doyle, the mobster who The Outsider spared that night shortly after Thanksgiving. He had also been present by the bridge, when Sage had taken the money intended for that corrupt cop. Both nights, this man had been reluctant to inflict harm, cruelty. He wasn't like the others. Now he was a prisoner. Was he being punished?

There were three other hoods in the car, one of them the malicious woman in the chauffeur's outfit who had cut him by the bridge; had shot him in the alleyway. She held a pistol in one hand and sat comfortably in one of the decidedly uncomfortable El chairs. The two other hoods stood, pistols at their sides. The Outsider assessed the situation for a moment.

The train came to a stop and the doors opened. A middle-aged man made to walk onto the car in question but the woman raised her pistol and the man stopped. He was frozen in place.

"Not your lucky night, pal," the woman said.

She fired once, hitting the man in the chest. He fell onto the train station platform just as the doors to the car closed and the train continued on its way. The Outsider made his move then.

He flung open the door and ran into the car. He led with his knife, which he flung at one of the two standing men. The blade caught the man's ankle and dug in deep. The man screamed and dropped to the ground.

The Outsider slid across the ground and came up with a devastating right uppercut that found its mark on the underside of the second standing hood's chin. He didn't know what hit him and fell to one side of the car.

The woman stood and fired almost instantly. The shot hit the spectre but bounced right off the steel plate he wore on his back.

Before she could fire again, The Outsider whirled around and disarmed her with a roundhouse kick. The woman, not to be outdone, jumped up onto her seat and kicked the spectre in the face. It caught him off guard and he stumbled back a few steps. The woman grinned cruelly and pulled out her knife.

The Outsider dropped low and grabbed his own knife from the ankle of the fallen hood. He pulled it out as the man screamed in pain.

"Give it up, Saoirse!" the man - Doyle - said.

But Saoirse wasn't listening and she came for the spectre, leading with her knife. The Outsider dodged out of the way and with one elegant move, jumped onto one of the seats and then dived across the car, using his knife to cut Doyle down in the process. Doyle dropped to the ground as The Outsider made his three-point landing on the floor of the train. Saoirse came for him once again, cutting a large groove out of the flesh of Doyle's right arm as she did. The Outsider knocked her aside, where she crashed into a row of seats.

Doyle scrambled to one of the fallen men - the one whose ankle had been cut - and grabbed the man's pistol from the ground near him. He used the butt of the gun to knock the man out, then raised the gun and fired at Saoirse. The shot missed but it got her attention.

"The girls are two cars ahead!" Doyle cried. "Go! I've got this!"

The Outsider looked at him then went, heading for the door of the car, bound for the next. As he did, he saw Saoirse grab hold of the other fallen man, using him as a shield as Doyle fired at her. The helpless mobster was hit twice in the chest as Saoirse smiled.

She was a bad one.

Nat was bound and hanging, much like Doyle, though she was next to Angelina, who was also hanging. She was no longer gagged: Coll had decided that it was unnecessary, since five cars in a row were filled only with their own men and they didn't let anyone else onto the train at the various stops. Nat looked at Angelina and scoffed.

"Can I just say," she said, "that you look amazing, despite the circumstances? It really is incredible."

"You're gonna say that to me now?" Angelina said.

"Well, we might be dead soon, so..."

The car they were held in was filled with mobsters: Nat counted six of them, including O'Bannion and Coll himself.

"Quiet, dame," O'Bannion said.

"The ghost is coming for you," Angelina said. "And I'm not gonna stop him."

"He's no ghost," Coll said.

"Yeah, he's nothing to be afraid of," O'Bannion said.

"Oh yeah?" Nat said. "Who else you know ever came back from the dead?"

O'Bannion's defiant smile wavered and he looked at Coll, as if for reassurance. Coll got up from the seat he was in and crossed the car to O'Bannion.

"There's no way he's getting past Saoirse," he said.

"Right, boss," O'Bannion said.

That was when they heard the gunshots. They were muffled - most of the men had silencers, as well as interference from the rushing cold wind as the train whipped through the City - but they could still hear them. O'Bannion's smile returned.

"Our girl's got him," he said.

Nat and Angelina shared a look. Nat shrugged and looked down at her own cleavage, then up at the other woman. Angelina frowned, not knowing what Nat was indicating. Nat sighed.

Coll crossed back to his seat and sat down while O'Bannion turned and scratched at his chin with his pistol. It was then that The Outsider came crashing through the car window.

Everything was chaos.

Glass covered everything as the spectre came bounding into the car. It was clear that he had been on top of the train and swung over the side, crashing through. Now he flew, feet first, at one of the hoods, landing a mighty kick into the man's jaw and dropping him. As everyone was still shocked, The Outsider threw his knife at the two girls, cutting their bonds and dropping them to the floor.

Angelina landed on Nat's cleavage and the reporter smiled. Angelina frowned again. The Outsider grabbed the fallen mobster and flung him at two of the other men. All three tumbled to the ground.

"I was trying to tell you that I'm hiding something down here," Nat said.

She reached into her cleavage as a mobster cocked and readied his Tommy gun, aiming for The Outsider. She pulled the derringer from her cleavage, took aim and fired at the man, hitting him in the chest. He looked at her, dumbfounded and then dropped to the ground, dead.

"None of them had the gall to check," Nat said to an amazed Angelina, "not even Saoirse."

"Hold it!" O'Bannion said.

He was pointing his gun at Angelina and Nat as they stood up. The Outsider slowly stood to his full height and looked at the man.

"Yeah," O'Bannion said. "Don't move. I'll shoot one of 'em if you do."

All of the living mobsters stood up, Coll included. They all readied their weapons.

"Boys," Coll said. "Get ready to shoot this nuisance."

"How do you know that's going to work?" The Outsider said. "Didn't work before."

O'Bannion looked at Coll, then at the spectre. He looked nervous, panicked.

"Well, we'll find out then," Coll said, "won't we?"

The men took aim and prepared to fire. That was when the door ahead of them - farther up the train, the opposite direction The Outsider had come from - opened. Three men came into the room, all of them wearing amazing suits. Coll looked at them, confused.

"Who are you guys?" he asked.

The man in front had dark hair and a smart mustache. He smiled at Coll.

"Carmine Spaldoni says, 'Hello'," he said. "This is for Big Anthony."

The Italian mobsters opened fire on the Irish mobsters, pulling out their pistols and Tommy guns. Coll, Nat, Angelina and The Outsider all hit the dirt, getting out of the way of the carnage. Nat and Angelina scrambled towards the opposite door, trying to get away.

Gunfire reigned, shooting back and forth between the two rival mobs. One of Coll's men went down instantly in a hail of bullets. A moment later, one of the Italians went down. O'Bannion plugged him with a well-placed shot. It was a nightmare. One that Nat had to escape from.

She and Angelina managed to reach the back door and shuffled out onto the landing between cars. The Outsider, silent as the grave, joined them.

"Up," he said, pointing to the ladder that led to the roof of the car.

Nat looked at Angelina, sighed and nodded. The two women started up the ladder as The Outsider supervised.

"What a night," Nat said.

Doyle and Saoirse were both out of bullets. Their car was riddled with bullet holes and blood, both of the other mobsters dead by now. Saoirse stood up, pushing aside her bullet-ridden human shield and throwing her pistol away. She pulled her knife from her side and brandished it.

"Are ye a man, Doyle?" she asked. "Can ye face me?"

Doyle coughed and shook his head, clearing it. He had taken quite a tumble a moment before, knocking his head against a pole when the train came to a stop. He stepped over the dead body of the other mobster - Billy, his name had been - and sauntered into the middle of the car.

"Here I am, Saoirse," he said. "Come and get me."

It was strange. He was probably about to die but he felt more alive than he ever had in his entire life. It was liberating, the knowledge of his impending death. He assumed a rough, rather loose, fighting

stance.

"Are ye ready?" Saoirse asked.

"As I'll ever be," Doyle said.

"Here I come."

She ran at him, teeth grit, knife at her side, ready to pounce. Doyle watched her come and decided that perhaps he wasn't quite ready to die. At the last moment, he dodged out of her way. She went crashing into a row of seats and Doyle ran forward. He opened the door and walked out onto the landing between cars.

Taking a peek into the following car, he saw only chaos. Men in suits shooting at each other. What was going on?

Then he recognized one of the men: Michael Farretti, one of Spaldoni's enforcers. They were Italian mob. Christ, the Italians were after them. He risked a look behind him, saw Saoirse coming for him once again, and began climbing up the ladder to the roof of the car.

Mounting it, he crawled forward as fast as he could in the cold and punishing winds up here. Ahead of him, he could see The Outsider, along with Nat and another woman. They were a few cars ahead.

Pushing himself, he kept moving. Saoirse was about a car behind him as he jumped from one car to the next. Soon, he was close to the other group.

"Hey!" he yelled.

Nat looked over her shoulder, saw him, and alerted The Outsider to his presence. They waited for him to catch up.

"You haven't dealt with her yet?" The Outsider shouted over the noise.

"Working on it!" Doyle said.

"Driver's dead," The Outsider said.

"What?!"

"The driver's dead!" Nat said. "We saw him get hit with a stray bullet. The controls were damaged, too. I don't think we'll be able to stop it from there!"

"Jesus," Doyle said.

Angelina was furthest ahead, near the edge of the car. She was turned to look at them so didn't see the pair of hands emerge from the gap between cars. But Doyle did.

"Look out!" he said.

But it was too late. Angelina was grabbed by the hands and pulled down. She screamed. The three of them ran to the edge and saw her disappear into the car ahead, O'Bannion clutching her in his murderous grasp. The Outsider pounded his fist on the roof.

"Look," Nat shouted. "There's a kill switch a few cars back. I'm going to go down there and pull it. That'll stop the train. Give me two minutes. Exactly. Start the countdown now! Go get her!"

The Outsider nodded, then looked at Doyle. The former Irish mobster also nodded.

"You got her?!" The Outsider said, indicating Saoirse, who was gaining on them.

"Don't worry about me," Doyle said.

"Okay," The Outsider said.

Both he and Nat jumped over the side, into the cars below. Doyle found his footing - and his courage - and stood up on the roof of the car. He turned to Saoirse defiantly.

"I'm ready, Saoirse!" he shouted.

Saoirse smiled and also stood up. She screamed and came for him.

The Outsider, silent countdown in his head, surged into the car ahead, ready for anything. What he found was a car full of dead mobsters, Italian and Irish mixed together. Standing among the dead were O'Bannion and Coll, both of them battered and bruised but relatively unharmed. Angelina was between them, scared but defiant. O'Bannion stepped over a body and started towards The Outsider.

"Out of bullets, scum?" The Outsider asked.

"We're all out of bullets," O'Bannion said. "But I lent boss here my knife, if that's okay with you."

The Outsider looked past O'Bannion and saw that Coll was pressing a gold-plated switchblade against Angelina's neck. He cocked his head slightly, menacingly.

"Now, I know what you're thinking," O'Bannion said. "You're thinking, 'Hey, I got a knife of my own.' But you don't. You never picked it up. I've got it right here."

He produced The Outsider's knife, swinging it back and forth in his hand. He smiled at the spectre, who remained silent and still.

"Very pretty," O'Bannion said. "Where's it from? Africa, maybe? Definitely seems like something a native would have, don't you think? You a native, Mr. Outsider?"

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

"Hit a nerve, did I?!" O'Bannion said. "It's okay, it's all right. I knew that I might. But I think I can take you. Boss says he won't hurt the little lady here while we fight. That satisfactory to you?"

"Okay by me."

"Right."

O'Bannion dropped the knife, where it clattered to the floor and bounced. He then reached into his jacket and came out wearing something on his right hand. The Outsider could see that it was a pair of brass knuckles, jeweled and gold-plated, expensive.

"Quite a nice little toy," The Outsider said.

"No more words," O'Bannion said.

And he came for him, fists flying. The Outsider dodged the first blow but the second took him in the face, hard. He reeled back and O'Bannion delivered a devastating left to his jaw.

The Outsider countered, landing a right hook into O'Bannion's left cheek. There was a dull crack that must have been incredibly painful but the Irish enforcer barely reacted, sending a right upper cut into The Outsider's stomach.

This was a mistake. The brass knuckles banged against the steel plate that The Outsider wore. O'Bannion shook with the impact and The Outsider stamped on the man's foot, breaking a toe.

O'Bannion nearly fell but righted himself and came back strong. He landed a kick on the spectre's inner right thigh, sending The Outsider backwards several feet in pain. He kept at it, surging forward, delivering kick after kick into the spectre's legs and side, where he had found a gap in the steel plates.

The Outsider fell to the ground and rolled. O'Bannion kicked him in the ass and got on top of him.

He rolled the spectre over onto his back and landed punch after punch into his face and neck. It was a slaughter.

"You're no ghost!" O'Bannion screamed. "You're nothing! I can beat you! I can beat you!"

The Outsider grabbed hold of a seat behind his head and suddenly pulled himself forward and up, into the next hit. O'Bannion's right fist was coming down for a devastating final blow but, instead of connecting with The Outsider's face, it connected with the steel plate on the man's chest. The brass knuckles cracked apart, O'Bannion's fingers becoming entangled in the sudden mess.

The spectre grabbed hold of O'Bannion, his left hand clamped around the man's throat, and his right gripping his crotch. O'Bannion's eyes widened in pain and terror. He looked into the blank, black mask of The Outsider.

"Please," he said.

The Outsider stood up, taking O'Bannion with him. He yanked him towards himself, so that their faces were mere inches apart.

"This is your stop," The Outsider said.

And he flung the man at one of the side windows. The glass shattered and O'Bannion sailed partway through it, screaming all the while. His head almost immediately connected with a passing steel column. There was a sickening crack as his skull broke and his screaming stopped. His body stopped moving, partway in the car, partway out, but the train kept moving. O'Bannion's body folded over, breaking apart. There were more sickening cracking sounds and then the body was gone, out of the car, falling to the streets below.

The Outsider stood, shaking the savage pummeling off. He turned to regard Coll, who looked at him with abject terror.

"Don't come any closer!" Coll said.

The switchblade was pushed hard against Angelina's neck. The woman looked pleadingly at The Outsider and something passed between them.

She knew.

How did she know? Sage didn't know but he was certain of it. She knew who he was.

"This ends now," Coll said. "You've caused me a lot of trouble."

"I would hope so," The Outsider said.

"Shut up. I didn't say you could speak. What gives you the right to take me on? Huh? I've been in this business for a long time, had a lot of problems, a lot of people try to take me on but none of them came as close as you did. What's so special about you?"

"Nothing. I'm just willing to go farther than anyone else."

"You're nothing, you're right about that. If I want to hurt some people of a lesser race, that's my right! As a white man! I got friends in Germany, if you know what I mean. They understand me! They like what I do."

"I'll bet they do."

"Think you can get to me before I kill her?" Coll said. "Huh? Do you? I don't think you're fast enough. I think you'll have to watch her die."

The countdown in The Outsider's head had reached fifteen seconds. Coll prepared to slice Angelina's throat open.

Nat ran through the chaos of the cars, heading back down the train. There were still a few gangsters left, all of them firing at each other. She had to duck out of the way as an Italian mobster shot down an Irish mobster in cold blood. As Nat ran by, the Italian smiled, his smart mustache covered with blood. He raised his pistol to her and pulled the trigger once, twice, three times. Three clicks. He smiled and grabbed for her lovely red hair but she slipped past him. He tripped while trying to catch her, and fell.

"Where you goin, pretty lady?" he called after her. His words were slurred, as if he were drunk.

He half-heartedly tried to crawl after her but didn't get far. An Irish mobster - on the ground, three bullets in his stomach - aimed and fired at him, hitting him in the head. The Italian went down, dead. A moment later, the Irish mobster also dropped over, breathing his last.

Nat hardly had time to notice. She left the car and dashed into the next. This was it, this was the car. And only fifteen seconds to spare.

She took a moment to find the kill switch. When she did, the countdown was up and she yanked off a shoe and broke open the glass with one of her heels. Pulled it.

Doyle was bleeding, broken, cut up. He was losing. Saoirse was like a wild cat, attacking him with everything she had. Her knife was sparingly used but hit its mark every time. All the cuts were shallow but painful, and they drew blood.

The train sped through the City. It was now over a lake near the Park. Saoirse stood over Doyle, who was crumpled on the roof of the car below her, spent.

"You're a rat, Doyle," she said. "A disgrace. You're a coward and a liar!"

Doyle nodded. Fifteen seconds left. But he'd be dead by then, he was sure of it.

"You're right," he said. "I am a coward. But I'm better than you."

"What?" Saoirse said.

"At least I'm not a monster, like you."

"A monster? I'm loyal. A monster can't be loyal."

"Oh yeah? I'm not so sure about that. And look what your loyalty has bought you. Spaldoni's men are on the train, Saoirse. It's over. Coll's probably dead by now."

"No," Saoirse said. "It's not true! You're lying!"

"I saw them," Doyle said. "This is the end."

"You're lying!"

She stood defiantly over him, knife held tightly in her right hand, her left clenching and unclenching. She looked like some kind of devil out of an old Irish folktale.

Three, two, one, Doyle counted down in his head. And he held tightly onto a metal clasp on the roof. There was a terrible moment when he thought that Nat had failed, that she had been killed down below in one of the cars, before the train came to a sudden, violent stop.

Saoirse immediately went down, her feet slipping out from under her. Her right hand hit the roof first, bringing her knife up. Her face followed.

The knife was plunged straight into her right eye socket, the eye immediately bifurcated in a gout of blood. Saoirse began to scream in pain. She started to tip over the side, trying to find purchase, her arms flailing this way and that. One hand, the left, caught on the lip of the roof as she tumbled partway over the side. She looked up at Doyle, her knife sticking out of her head, blood running down her face.

"Help me!" she screamed.

Doyle slowly stood up, bloody and battered but triumphant. He looked down at Saoirse and shook his head.

"Sorry, dame," he said, "you're bad news."

And he stomped on her fingers. Saoirse let go of the roof and fell off the train. She screamed all the way down, crashing into the lake below. Doyle allowed himself a small smile before he collapsed to the roof and started to crawl to the ladder down.

Three seconds.

The Outsider counted in his head. He looked at Angelina, then at Coll, who was starting to press the knife into Angelina's neck, and took a few steps forward. His foot connected with his own knife, leaning against a dead mobster's body on the floor. He looked down at the weapon.

The train suddenly and violently stopped. Everything else happened fast.

Coll was shaken, letting go of Angelina. The two of them jostled in the air for a moment, like lovers on the dance floor. Angelina's gaze connected with Sage's and she nodded.

The Outsider stamped down on the knife and it came flying up into the air, buoyed by the train's sudden stop. It spun in the air for a moment. Angelina dropped to the ground, head swept back, getting out of the way.

Coll looked up in terror at the spinning blade. He had enough time to utter a single, panicked cry - "Wait!" - before The Outsider spun around in a roundhouse kick. His foot connected with the spinning blade at the exact right moment and the knife went sailing through the air.

It landed right in Coll's open mouth, passing through the upper pallet and into his brain. Then everything fell to the ground all at once.

Angelina hit the floor and rolled away. Coll's body fell onto another fallen mobster and tumbled to one side, already dead. The Outsider crashed to the ground in a heap.

Angelina rushed to him and took him in her arms. They embraced.

Tenderly, Angelina kissed him right through the mask. It was curiously beautiful, strange, and unexpected. Sage found himself responding, kissing back.

When it was over, she looked at him with a small smile. He looked at her back and if a blank, black mask can look surprised, his did.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"Boy, I know you!" Angelina said.

Behind them, Doyle staggered through the car door. He looked a mess. The Outsider stood up to regard him.

Behind him came Nat. She put a hand on Doyle's shoulder. The former Irish mobster jumped in terror. Nat laughed.

"You made it," she said. "What are the odds?"

Doyle just shook his head. The Outsider approached them. He looked at them silently, then looked to the side.

The train had come to a stop almost exactly at a station. It would only take a moment to pry the doors open and they could escape.

"You want to join us?" The Outsider asked Doyle.

"Yes," Doyle said.

"Good. There's a place I know. 227 Eaves Street. Apartment C. Go there. You'll find Penelope there, she'll know what to do. There's a man that'll fix you up right good."

"Penelope?" Doyle asked. The business with the docks and Penelope dangling over the side seemed so long ago now.

"Yes," The Outsider said. "Welcome to your new life, Doyle."

"Thanks, I guess."

"And you."

The Outsider looked at Nat. She cocked her head, a smirk on her face.

"What are you going to write?" The Outsider said.

"The truth," she said.

"The truth?"

"Some Irish mobsters tried to kill a ghost. They failed and were interrupted by some Italian mobsters. The ghost escaped into the night. None of the mobsters survived."

The Outsider nodded. He walked to the doors and pried them open. Doyle left first, stepping onto the empty platform. He stopped, checked his watch and turned back around.

"Merry Christmas," he said.

"Merry Christmas," Nat said.

"Get outta here, white boy," Angelina said.

"Right," Doyle said.

And he was gone, into the darkness of the platform. Nat turned to The Outsider and Angelina.

"I'm gonna stay here and wait for the police," she said. "Look at you two. You're beautiful. Both of you. You're gonna be a legend after tonight."

The Outsider nodded. He walked over to Coll's dead body and pulled out his knife with some effort. Angelina looked away, wincing. The two of them started to leave but Angelina stopped them. She put a hand on Nat's shoulder. Nat looked at the hand, then up at the lovely woman it belonged to.

"Thank you," Angelina said. "You didn't have to help us but you did. That's an absolute good."

Nat shrugged. "Just doing what I can."

Angelina nodded and the two of them disappeared into the shadows of the train platform. Nat thought she could see them for a moment farther down the platform but it was just falling snow creating a phantom shape.

Like a ghost.

Chapter Ten, "Christmas Day"

It was around ten in the morning. Snow was on the ground but none of it was currently falling from the sky. Nat sat in the backseat of the cab and stared out at the window at the apartment building they were parked in front of.

"So, you said it all worked out?" Al said in the front seat.

"Most of it, yeah," Nat said. "All of us are recovering well enough."

"And the bad guys are all dead?"

"Yeah..." Nat said but her eyes narrowed.

"Like a good pulp story," Al said. "Hey, you read the new Dakota Rhodes?"

"No, Al, I did not."

"Oh, you missed out. There was an ancient Egyptian curse, mummies, a daring rescue on a sinking ship! And yet, very festive! Perfect for a little Christmas read. It's still on the shelves. I could get one for ya, if you like."

"Sure, that'd be great."

"So, you gonna go in?"

"What?"

She looked at him. Al looked back at her. There was a sad smile on his face.

"A sweetheart?" he asked.

"Yeah," Nat said. "How did you know?"

"I can tell. Well, go in."

"I don't know. Brett may not want to see me."

"It's Christmas! Of course he'll want to see you!"

Nat rolled her eyes at Al's use of the word "he." But he was persistent.

"Hey, I got out of my warm bed for you," he said. "I was gonna lay in there all day. One of the only days of the year I don't work but you call me and give me this sob story about your car being out of

commission--"

"It's true!" Nat said. "Damn thing won't start at all."

"I didn't say you were lying, doll. What I'm saying is go in. Make my day worth it."

"How long has Norma been gone?"

Al looked away, that sad smile still on his face. Nat thought that she saw him wipe away a tear but she couldn't be sure. "Six years."

"Long time," Nat said.

"Long time," Al concurred. "So don't you be wasting yours. Go in there."

"You're right."

She opened the cab door and got out. Closed the door behind her and walked to the passenger window. She leaned in to pay Al. The man took it and Nat made to leave. Al stopped her with a question.

"Say, Nat," he said. "Think I'll see him again?"

"Him?" Nat said.

"You know, him? The Outsider."

Nat smiled wide. "I got a feeling that you will, Al. I think he considers you part of the team now."

"You think so?" Al said.

"I do."

"How about that?! Hanukkah may be over but, what the Hell? Pretty good Christmas present for a guy like me."

"You betcha, Al."

She smacked the hood of the cab a few times and Al took off down the street. She watched him go. Her own Christmas present was waiting for her inside the apartment building. Along with some bad, most-likely over-cooked turkey.

"Yuck," she said with a laugh and headed into the building to see the woman she loved.

"You were so brave!" Penelope said.

"I suppose I was," Doyle said.

They were both warm and cozy in Penelope's new apartment at 227 Eaves Street. It was a pretty awful place but it was warm, at least.

"Hold still!" Hong said as Doyle winced.

Hong was busy checking the former Irish mobster's stitches from the night before. All three of them had stayed at Penelope's apartment. It was a curious Christmas Eve night but the world was strange.

"You've always struck me as a brave man," Penelope said and put a tender hand on Doyle's chest.

Doyle looked up at her, shy but grateful. She had never looked so beautiful before. And there was a strength in her that he hadn't ever seen before. She had changed since that night on the docks.

"So you're one of us now," she said.

"I guess so, yeah," Doyle said.

"If you keep moving," Hong said, "I'm apt to stick these scissors into your side. How does that sound? Sound okay?"

"I'll keep still," Doyle said.

He looked past Penelope. She had erected a small Christmas tree in the corner of the room. It was sparsely decorated but, still, it looked beautiful to him at the moment. He looked back at Penelope. She smiled.

"Has he told you about the Underground Railroad yet?" she asked.

"The what?" Doyle said.

Hong stuck the point of the scissors he was holding into the man's side, not strong enough to break the skin, but hard enough to get a yelp out of him. The old Chinese man smiled at him.

"I'll keep still!" Doyle said.

"Good," Hong said.

"Oh, well," Penelope said. "I'm sure the big man will tell you soon enough."

Doyle found himself looking forward to this new life, found himself getting excited for what the future would bring. He looked into Penelope's deep eyes once again. She was still smiling at him.

Yes, the future did, indeed, look bright.

"Come to bed," Angelina said.

It was evening, night beginning to settle about the City on Christmas Day. Angelina was already in bed but Sage stood looking out the window of her apartment. He was shirtless, his wounds visible but healing. He looked out at the City.

"Come on," Angelina said. "The City will survive one night without you."

"You sure about that?" Sage said.

"Yes."

"Well, I'm not. I almost lost last night, Angelina."

"But you didn't. And there are other people whose job it is to protect us."

"The cops? They're all corrupt."

"It can't be all of them."

"This City breeds the worst. That's why I do what I do. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, it does. But it's gonna get you killed."

"Everybody dies. Even ghosts."

"I called the hospital. Looks like Eli's gonna pull through. His mother is there with him. Not the best Christmas Day for her, but at least her son's alive. That's something, at least."

Sage sighed and turned to look at her. He crossed the room and slipped into bed.

"You're with me, right?" he asked.

"I'm with you," she said. "Till the very end."

"It won't come to that. I'll make sure you're safe. That's why I didn't tell you."

She slapped him across the face. Sage didn't see the slap coming at all and reeled back.

"What?" he said. "What was that for?"

"That was for not telling me," she said. "I'm a big girl, I can take care of myself. Now don't you ever keep anything from me again, you hear?"

"All right, all right, I hear ya," he said.

"Now what's Lou's day looking like?"

"I talked to him a bit ago. He was able to spend the day with Ricky."

"That's good."

Sage shifted in bed, turned so that he could look out the window from his position. Angelina sighed.

"What about your reporter friend?" she asked.

"I know not to bother her," he said.

"I know what you mean. That one's a wild card. Do you trust her?"

"Yes. I trust her with my life."

"She seems a good sort, even if she is mad. Look at me."

Sage turned over and looked at her. She put a hand to his face.

"You do what you have to do," she said. "But come back. Every night, you come back. You hear? You don't have permission to die out there."

Sage smiled. "Aye, sir. You know it's not late. Why are we going to sleep?"

"I didn't say that we were going to sleep," Angelina said. "I just told you to come to bed."

They kissed. And it was good.

In an elaborate shack near the train yards - essentially a converted, empty warehouse - a man leaned over a table full of instruments. He was busy polishing the shiny medical instruments, a small eyepiece stuck in his right eye socket. The man was at least fifty, with white, thinning hair that was rather wild.

It was late on Christmas Day, not that the man knew what day it was or would know the significance of it. Outside, the moon was bright, the clouds cleared. The last patches of snow peppered the ground. But the man knew none of this. He knew only his work.

There came a knock on the large doors of the shack. The man looked up, annoyed. He shook his head and returned to his work.

"Doc!" a voice called out. "Let me in, Doc! I need your help."

"At this hour," Doc said and looked at his watch.

He didn't get up from his workstation, still seemingly interested in his instruments. The knocking came again, louder this time.

"Dr. Kritzfeld!" the voice came again. "I need your help, you madman!"

Dr. Kritzfeld finally got up from his workstation, taking out his eyepiece and throwing it down. He shuffled to the doors, shaking his head the whole way. Finally, he reached the doors and unlocked them. He swung them open to reveal a woman, so cold that her skin was blue. To the doctor, she looked like a walking corpse. She looked wet.

And one of her eyes was gone. Blood ran down her face.

"My child," Dr. Kritzfeld said, his German accent thick. "What has happened?"

"You owe me, Doc," Saoirse said. "And you're gonna fix me."

She walked into the room and Dr. Kritzfeld saw that her left arm was broken in several places. It hung limply at her side. Her left leg seemed broken, too. How had she walked all this way on it? It looked painful. But he had known Saoirse for a long time. She wasn't exactly a normal woman.

"I will help in any way I can," he said.

She headed for the operating table and sat down upon it with some effort. Winced at the pain.

"Do it, Doc," she said. "I need to get better."

She laid down on the table, looking up at the ceiling. The doctor turned on the light above.

"I'm not going to lie, child," he said. "This is going to hurt."

"I don't care," Saoirse said. "I've got revenge on my mind."

Dr. Kritzfeld shrugged and began to work. She only screamed three, maybe four times. She was tough, the doctor thought.

He felt pity for whoever had wronged her.

She was the kind of woman who knew how to hold a grudge.

THE END

