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STALKING *the* UNICORN

A John Justin Mallory Mystery

A FABLE
of TONIGHT

MIKE RESNICK



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To Carol, as always

And to Bill Cavin,
God-Emperor of Midwestern fandom

CHAPTER 1
8:35 PM–8:53 PM

Mallory walked over to the window and stared out through the dirt.

Six floors below him people were busily scurrying about the street, parcels and briefcases in hand, as an endless row of yellow cabs inched past them.

Christmas decorations were still attached to most of the lampposts, and a couple of Santa Clauses, evidently unaware that it was New Year's Eve—or possibly simply displaying a little individual enterprise—were ringing their bells, laughing their laughs, and asking for money.

He leaned against the window and looked directly down at the sidewalk in front of his building. The two burly men who had been stationed there all day were gone. He grinned; even enforcers got hungry. He made a mental note to look again in half an hour to see if they had returned to continue their vigil.

The phone rang. He looked at it, mildly surprised that it hadn't been disconnected yet, and briefly wondered who could be calling him at this time of night. Finally the ringing stopped, and he walked over to his chair and sat down heavily.

It had been a long day. It had been an even longer week. And it had been an absolutely endless month.

There was a knock at the door and he sat up, startled, then let out a yelp of pain.

The door squeaked open and an ancient, white-fringed head peered in at him.

"You okay, Mr. Mallory?"

"I think I pulled something," muttered Mallory, rubbing his back gingerly with his right hand.

"I can call a doctor," offered the old man.

Mallory shook his head. "We've got all the medicine we need right here."

"We do?"

"If you'll open the closet door, you'll find a bottle on the top shelf," said Mallory. "Pull it down and bring it over."

“Well, now, that’s mighty generous of you, Mr. Mallory,” said the old man, walking across the worn linoleum to the closet.

“I suppose it is, at that,” acknowledged Mallory. He stopped rubbing his back. “So, what can I do for you, Ezekiel?”

“I saw that your light was on,” replied the old man, indicating the single overhead light above Mallory’s bare wooden desk, “and I thought I’d stop by and wish you a Happy New Year.”

“Thanks,” replied Mallory. He smiled ruefully. “I don’t imagine it can be much worse than the last one.”

“Hey, this is expensive stuff!” said the old man, pushing aside a couple of battered bats and pulling out the bottle. He stared at it. “There’s a ribbon around it. Did one of your clients give it to you, for Christmas?”

“Not exactly. It’s from my partner.” He paused. “My ex-partner. Sort of a surprise going-away present. It’s been sitting there for almost four weeks.”

“It must have cost him, oh, twenty bucks,” ventured Ezekiel.

“At least. That’s first-class sour-mash bourbon from Kentucky. It was probably fertilized by Secretariat or Seattle Slew in its natural state.”

“By the way, I’m sorry about your missus,” said Ezekiel. He opened the bottle, took a swig, murmured a contented “Ah!” and carried it over to Mallory.

“No need to be,” said Mallory. “She’s doing just fine.”

“You know where she is, then?” asked Ezekiel, seating himself on the edge of the desk.

“Of course I know where she is,” said Mallory irritably. “I’m a detective, remember?” He grabbed the bottle from the old man and filled a dirty New York Mets mug that had a broken handle he had glued back on. “Don’t take *my* word for it. Check out my office door.”

Ezekiel snapped his fingers. “Son of a bitch! *That’s* what I was going to talk to you about.”

“What?” asked Mallory.

“Your office door.”

“It squeaks a lot. Needs some oil.”

“It needs more than oil,” replied Ezekiel. “You crossed out Mr. Fallico’s name with red nail polish.”

Mallory shrugged. “I couldn’t find any other color.”

"The management wants you to hire a painter to do it properly."

"What makes you think a painter can cross out Fallico's name any better than I can?"

"It don't make any difference to me, Mr. Mallory," said Ezekiel. "But I figured I ought to give you a friendly warning before they start making threats again."

"Again?" repeated Mallory, lighting a cigarette and tossing the match onto the floor, where it created a tiny burn mark to go with several hundred similar charred brown spots. "They've never made any threats about my door before."

"You know what I mean," answered Ezekiel. "They're always after you about your rent, and throwing paper cups out the window, and the kinds of clients that walk through the lobby."

"I don't choose my clients. They choose me."

"We're getting off the subject," said Ezekiel. "You've always been nice to me, always willing to pass the time of day and share a drink or two, and you're the only one who doesn't call me Zeke even though I ask everyone not to . . . and I'd hate to see them throw you out over something as trivial as the sign on your door."

"Wait until they open the mail next Monday and my check's not there," said Mallory with a grim smile. "I guarantee you they'll forget all about the door."

"I know a guy who could paint it over for twenty bucks," persisted Ezekiel. "Twenty-five if you want gold lettering."

"It's part of the building," said Mallory, staring thoughtfully at the glowing tip of his cigarette. "The management should pay for it."

Ezekiel chuckled. "*This* management? You've got to be kidding, Mr. Mallory."

"Why not? What the hell am I paying my rent for?"

"You're not paying your rent," noted the old man.

"Well, if I were, what would I be paying it for?"

Ezekiel shrugged. "Beats me."

"Beats me, too," agreed Mallory. "I guess I won't pay it." He turned to the door. "Besides, I kind of like the way it looks."

“With Mr. Fallico’s name all crossed out like that?” asked Ezekiel, scrutinizing the door.

“The son of a bitch ran off to California with my wife, didn’t he?”

“I know it’s none of my business, Mr. Mallory, but you’ve been bitching about both of them for the better part of five years. You ought to be glad to be rid of them.”

“It’s the principle of the thing!” snapped Mallory “Nick Fallico’s off in Hollywood collecting two thousand dollars a week as a consultant for some television detective show, and I’m stuck back here with all his deadbeat clients and a month’s worth of laundry!”

“You haven’t done any wash since she left?”

“I don’t know how to work the machine,” said Mallory with an uncomfortable shrug. “Besides, they repossessed it last week.” He looked at the old man. “I didn’t get this deep into debt on my own, you know,” he added sharply. “I had a lot of help.” He glared at his cigarette. “And to top it off, the two-timing bastard took my slippers.”

“Your slippers, Mr. Mallory?”

Mallory nodded. “Doreen for the bourbon was a fair trade, but I’m going to miss those slippers. I’d had them for fourteen years.” He paused. “That’s a hell of a lot longer than I had Doreen.”

“You can get another pair.”

“I’d just gotten these to where they didn’t pinch.”

Ezekiel frowned. “Let me get this straight. You wore slippers that pinched for fourteen years?”

“Twelve,” Mallory corrected him. “They felt just fine the last couple of years.”

“Why?”

“Because Doreen never took a broom to a floor in all the time I lived with her.”

“I mean, why didn’t you go out and get a pair that fit right?”

Mallory stared at the old man for a long moment, then exhaled heavily and grimaced. “You know, I hate it when you ask questions like that.”

Ezekiel laughed. “Well, anyway, I just thought I’d let you know they’re going to start complaining about the door.”

“Why don’t *you* paint it? After all, you’re the janitor.”

"I'm the sanitary engineer," the old man corrected him.

"What's the difference?"

"Thirty cents an hour, more or less. And I don't paint doors. Hell, I'm getting so old and stiff I can barely push a mop down the hall."

"Ten dollars," said Mallory.

"Twenty."

"For twenty I can get your friend."

"True," admitted Ezekiel. "But he can't spell."

"Then why did you recommend him in the first place?"

"He's neat, and he needs the work."

Mallory smiled ironically. "Yeah, my keen detective's mind tells me that a sign painter who can't spell needs all the work he can get."

"Fifteen," said Ezekiel.

"Twelve, and you can see all the dirty photos I take the next time I'm on a divorce case."

"Deal!" said Ezekiel. "Let's seal it with a drink."

"You'll have to wait until next week for the money," added Mallory, passing the bottle to him.

"Come on, Mr. Mallory," said the old man, taking a swig. "How hard can twelve bucks be to come by?"

"That all depends on whether this damned rain stops in time for Aque-duct to dry out by tomorrow afternoon." He snorted in disgust. "Who ever heard of rain on New Year's Eve?"

"You're not betting on Flyaway again?"

"If the track is fast."

"Doesn't it bother you that he's lost eighteen races in a row?"

"Not a bit. I'd say that, statistically, he's due to win one."

"Pay me before he runs and I'll do it for ten dollars," said Ezekiel.

Mallory grinned, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a number of crumpled bills. He tossed two of them across the desk to the old man.

"You're a sharp bargainer, Mr. Mallory," said Ezekiel, pocketing the money. "I'll paint it the day after tomorrow." He paused. "What do you want it to say?"

"John Justin Mallory," replied Mallory, arranging the words in the air with his hand. "The World's Greatest Detective. Discretion Assured. No Job

Too Small, No Fee Too High. Special Discount to Leather-Clad Ladies with Whips.” He shrugged. “You know—that kind of thing.”

“Seriously, Mr. Mallory.”

“Just my name.”

“You don’t want me to put ‘Private Detective’ below.”

Mallory shook his head. “Let’s not discourage any passersby. If someone comes in here with enough money, I’ll play point guard for the Knicks.”

Ezekiel chuckled and took another sip from the bottle.

“This sure is good drinkin’ stuff, Mr. Mallory. I’ll bet it was aged in oak casks, just like the ads say.”

“I agree. If it was a cigar, it would have been rolled on the thighs of beautiful Cuban women.”

“A man ought to drink something this good to ring in the New Year.”

“Or get rid of the old one,” said Mallory.

“By the way, what are you doing up here at this time of night on New Year’s Eve?”

Mallory grimaced. “I had a little disagreement with my landlady.”

“She threw you out?”

“Not in so many words,” replied Mallory. “But when I saw my furniture piled up in the hallway, I applied my razor-sharp deductive powers and decided to spend the night at the office.”

“Too bad. You ought to be out celebrating.”

“I’ll celebrate like hell at midnight. This damned year can’t end fast enough to suit me.” He looked at the old man. “What about you, Ezekiel?”

Ezekiel looked at his wristwatch. “It’s about eight forty. I’m locking up at nine, and then I’m taking the wife out to Times Square. Check your TV in a couple of hours; you might be able to spot us.”

“I’ll do that,” said Mallory, not bothering to mention the obvious fact that he didn’t have a television set in the office.

“Maybe you’ll get an assignment yet tonight,” said the old man sympathetically. “A couple of guys were looking for you earlier, at about four o’clock. They said they might be back.”

“Big guys?” asked Mallory. “Look like they’ve been munching on steroid pills?”

“That’s the ones.”

“They’re not looking to hire a detective,” answered Mallory. “As a matter of fact, they’re out to dismember one.”

“What did you do to them?” asked Ezekiel.

“Not a damned thing.”

“Then why are they after you?”

“They’re not,” said Mallory. “They just don’t know it yet.”

“I don’t think I follow you.”

Mallory sighed. “Nick needed a grubstake to go out West—Doreen is many things, good and bad, but inexpensive isn’t one of them—so he blackmailed some of our clients.”

“And left you to take the heat?”

Mallory nodded. “It appears one of them took exception to Nick’s notion of fund-raising.”

“You’d better tell them that it wasn’t your fault.”

“I intend to. I just haven’t found the right opportunity yet. Something about their faces implies that they’re just not in a very conversational mood. I suppose they’ll calm down in a couple of days, and we’ll work things out.”

“How?” asked Ezekiel.

“Well, if all else fails, I’ll give them Nick’s address in California.”

“That doesn’t sound like you, Mr. Mallory.”

“I got into this business to *catch* blackmailers, not hide them,” replied Mallory.

“I always wondered about that,” said Ezekiel.

“About what?”

“Why someone becomes a detective. It’s not as exciting as the TV makes it out to be.”

“You ought to see it from *this* side.”

“Then why did you become one?”

Mallory shrugged. “I don’t know. I saw too many Bogart movies, I guess.” He took the bottle back, filled the New York Mets mug again, took a swallow, and made a face. “It sure as hell isn’t the way I imagined it, I’ll tell you that. Most of the time I feel like a photographer for *Hustler*—and whenever I *do* luck out and bust a thief or a pusher, he’s back

on the street before I'm back in the office." He paused. "The worst part of it is Velma."

"I don't know any Velma," said Ezekiel.

"Neither do I," replied Mallory. "But I always wanted a big, soft secretary named Velma. Nothing special: outfitted by Frederick's of Hollywood, slavishly devoted, and maybe a little bit oversexed. Just your typical detective's secretary." He stared at the bottle. "So what I got was Gracie."

"She's a nice lady."

"I suppose so. But she weighs two hundred pounds, she hasn't gotten one message right in close to two years, all she can talk about is her kid's allergies, and I share her with a one-eyed dentist and a tailor who wears gold chains." He paused thoughtfully. "I think maybe I'll move to Denver."

"Why Denver?"

"Why not?"

Ezekiel chuckled. "You're always talking about getting out of the business and moving away, but you never do."

"Maybe this time I will," said Mallory. "There's got to be someplace better than Manhattan." He paused. "I hear that Phoenix is pretty nice."

"I've been there. You can fry an egg on the street at midnight."

"Then one of the Carolinas."

Ezekiel checked his watch. "I've got to go now, Mr. Mallory," he said, getting up and walking to the door. "You have a nice evening."

"You, too," said Mallory.

The old man went out into the corridor and closed the door behind him.

Mallory walked over to his window and peered out through the dirt for a couple of minutes. Finally he pulled some peeling gray paint off one of the walls, wondered how such an empty room could seem so small, and sat back down at his desk. He uncapped the whiskey bottle again and had a drink in loving memory of the Velma who never was. He had four more in honor of four unnatural sexual acts he had never had the courage to suggest to Doreen (and which he was absolutely sure she was gleefully performing with Fallico at that very moment), another one for the last race Flyaway had won (assuming that he actually *had* won a race in the dim and distant past; it was always possible that he had only gone to the post eighteen times), and one more for the year that was finally crawling to a close.

He was about to have a drink to mourn the loss of his slippers when he noticed the little green elf standing in front of his desk.

"You're pretty good," he said admiringly. "But where are the pink elephants?"

"John Justin Mallory?"

"You guys have never talked before," complained Mallory. "Usually you just sit around singing 'Santa Lucia.'" He squinted and looked around the office. "Where are the rest of you?"

"Drunk," said the elf disgustedly. "This won't do at all, John Justin. Not at all."

"The rest of you are drunk?"

"No. *You* are."

"Of course I am. That's why I'm seeing little green men."

"I'm not a man. I'm an elf."

"Whatever," said Mallory, shrugging. "At least you're little and green." He looked around the room again. "Where are the elephants?"

"What elephants?" asked the elf.

"My elephants," answered Mallory, as if explaining the obvious to a very slow child. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"Mürgenstürm," said the elf.

"Mürgenstürm?" repeated Mallory, frowning. "I think he's on the next floor."

"No. I *am* Mürgenstürm."

"Have a seat, Mürgenstürm. And you might as well have a drink before you vanish." He checked the amount of whiskey remaining. "A *short* one."

"I'm not here to drink," said Mürgenstürm.

"Thank heaven for small favors," murmured Mallory, raising the bottle to his lips and draining its contents. "Okay," he said, tossing it into a wastebasket. "I'm all through. Now, sing your song or dance your dance or do whatever you're going to do, and then make way for the elephants."

Mürgenstürm made a face. "We're going to have to get you sobered up, and quickly."

"If you do, you'll disappear," said Mallory, staring at him owlshly.

"Why did it have to be New Year's Eve?" muttered the elf.

“Probably because yesterday was December thirtieth,” replied Mallory reasonably.

“And why a drunk?”

“Now, hold your horses!” said Mallory irritably. “I may *be* drunk, but I’m not *a* drunk.”

“It makes no difference. I need you now, and you’re in no condition to work.”

Mallory frowned. “I thought *I* needed *you*,” he said, puzzled.

“Maybe a professor of zoology . . .” muttered Mürgenstürm to himself.

“That sounds like the beginning of a limerick.”

The elf uttered a sigh of resignation. “There’s no time. It’s you or no one.”

“And that sounds like a bad love song.”

Mürgenstürm walked around the desk to where Mallory was sitting and pinched him on the leg.

“*Ouch!* What the hell did you do that for?”

“To prove to you that I’m really here, John Justin. I need you.”

Mallory glared at him and rubbed his leg. “Whoever heard of an uppity hallucination?”

“I have a job for you, John Justin Mallory,” said the elf.

“Get someone else. I’m mourning my lost youth and other elements of my past, both real and imagined.”

“This is not a dream, this is not a joke, and this is not a delirium tremens,” said the elf urgently. “I absolutely *must* have the help of a trained detective.”

Mallory reached into a drawer, pulled out a dog-eared copy of the Yellow Pages, and tossed it onto the desk. “There’s seven or eight hundred of them in town,” he said. “Let your fingers do the walking.”

“All the others are already working or are out celebrating,” said Mürgenstürm.

“You mean I’m the only goddamned detective in New York City who’s in his office?” demanded Mallory unbelievably.

“It’s New Year’s Eve.”

Mallory stared at the elf for a long moment. “I take it I’m not exactly your first choice?”

“I began with the As,” admitted Mürgenstürm.

“And worked your way all the way down to Mallory and Fallico? You must have been looking since October.”

“I’m very fast when I have to be.”

“Then why don’t you hustle your little green ass out of here very fast?” said Mallory. “You’re making me think.”

“John Justin, please believe me when I tell you I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t a matter of life and death.”

“Whose?”

“Mine,” answered the elf unhappily.

“Yours?”

The elf nodded.

“Someone’s out to kill you?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Somehow it never is,” said Mallory dryly. “Damn! I’m starting to sober up, and that was my last bottle!”

“Will you help me?” asked the elf.

“Don’t be silly. You’re going to vanish in another half minute.”

“I am *not* going to vanish!” said the elf in desperation. “I am going to die!”

“Right here?” asked Mallory, sliding his chair a few feet back from the desk to make room for a falling body.

“At sunrise, unless you help me.”

Mallory stared at Mürgenstürm for a long moment. “How?”

“Something that was entrusted to me is missing, and unless I recover it before morning my life will be forfeit.”

“What is it?”

Mürgenstürm returned his stare. “I don’t think you’re ready for this yet, John Justin.”

“How the hell can I find something if I don’t even know what I’m looking for?” demanded Mallory.

“True,” admitted the elf.

“Well?”

Mürgenstürm looked at Mallory, sighed, and then blurted it out. “It’s a unicorn.”

"I don't know whether to laugh in your face or throw you out on your ass," said Mallory. "Now, go away and let me enjoy what little remains of my inebriated condition."

"I'm not kidding, John Justin!"

"And I'm not buying, Morgenthau."

"Mürgenstürm," corrected the elf.

"I don't care if you're Ronald Reagan. Go away!"

"Name your price," pleaded Mürgenstürm.

"For finding a unicorn in New York City?" said Mallory sarcastically. "Ten thousand dollars a day, plus expenses."

"Done!" cried the elf, plucking a fat wad of bills out of the air and tossing them onto Mallory's desk.

"Why do I feel that this stuff isn't exactly coin of the realm?" said Mallory as he thumbed through the pile of crisp new hundred-dollar bills.

"I assure you that the serial numbers are on file with your Treasury Department, and the signatures are valid."

Mallory cocked a disbelieving eyebrow. "Where did it come from?"

"It came from me," said Mürgenstürm defensively.

"And where did *you* come from?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me," said Mallory. "I've seen some pretty weird sights in this city, but you sure as hell aren't one of them."

"I live here."

"Where?"

"Manhattan."

"Give me an address."

"I'll do better than that. I'll take you there."

"No, you won't," said Mallory. "I'm going to close my eyes, and when I open them, you and the money will be gone, and there will be pink elephants on my desk."

He shut his eyes for the count of ten, then opened them. Mürgenstürm and the money were still there.

He frowned. "This is going on longer than usual," he commented. "I wonder what the hell was in that bottle?"

“Just whiskey,” answered the elf. “I am not a figment of your imagination. I am a desperate supplicant who needs your help.”

“To find a unicorn.”

“That’s right.”

“Just out of curiosity, how the hell did you manage to lose it? I mean, a unicorn’s a pretty big thing to misplace, isn’t it?”

“It was stolen,” answered Mürgenstürm.

“Then you don’t need a detective at all,” said Mallory.

“I don’t?”

“It takes a virgin to catch a unicorn, right? Well, there can’t be two dozen virgins left in the whole of Manhattan. Just pay each of them a visit until you come to the one with the unicorn.”

“I wish it was that easy,” said Mürgenstürm gloomily.

“Why isn’t it?”

“There may be only two dozen virgins in *your* Manhattan, but there are thousands in *mine*—and I’ve got less than ten hours left.”

“Back up a minute,” said Mallory, frowning again. “What’s this ‘yours and mine’ stuff? Do you live in Manhattan or don’t you?”

Mürgenstürm nodded. “I told you I did.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

“I live in the Manhattan you see out of the corner of your eye,” explained the elf. “Every once in a while one of you gets a fleeting glimpse of it, but when you turn to face it head on, it’s gone.”

Mallory smiled and snapped his fingers, “Just like that?”

“Protective coloration,” replied Mürgenstürm.

“And just where is this Manhattan of yours? Second star to the right and straight on until morning—or maybe over the rainbow?”

“It’s right here, all around you,” answered the elf. “It’s not a different Manhattan so much as a part of your own Manhattan that you never see.”

“Can *you* see it?”

Mürgenstürm nodded. “You just have to know how to look for it.”

“How *do* you look for it?” asked Mallory, curious in spite of himself.

Mürgenstürm gestured toward the money. “Accept the job, and I’ll show you.”

“Not a chance,” said Mallory. “But I’m grateful to you, my little green friend. When I wake up, I’m going to write this whole conversation up and send it off to one of those sex forum magazines and let them analyze it. I think they pay fifty bucks if your letter gets published.”

The elf lowered his head in defeat. “That’s your final word?” he asked.

“Right.”

Mürgenstürm drew himself up to his full, if limited, height. “Then I must prepare to meet my death. I’m sorry to have troubled you, John Justin Mallory.”

“No trouble at all,” said Mallory.

“You still don’t believe any of this, do you?”

“Not a word.”

The elf sighed and walked to the door. He opened it and walked out into the hall, then stepped back into the office.

“Are you expecting visitors?” he asked.

“Pink elephants?” asked Mallory.

Mürgenstürm shook his head. “Two very large, mean-looking men with bulges under their arms. One of them has a scar on his left cheek.”

“Shit!” muttered Mallory, racing unsteadily to the light switch and plunging the room into darkness. “They were supposed to be waiting downstairs!” He hurried back to his desk and knelt down behind it.

“Perhaps they got tired of waiting,” suggested the elf.

“But they don’t want *me!*” complained Mallory. “It’s Nick Fallico they’re after!”

“They looked pretty determined,” said Mürgenstürm. “I think they want anyone they can find.”

“Well,” said Mallory, wishing he could have just one more drink, “it looks like you may not be the only one who doesn’t live to a ripe old age.”

“You’re going to kill them?” asked Mürgenstürm.

“I wasn’t referring to *them*.”

“Aren’t you going to shoot them?”

“With what?” asked Mallory.

“With your gun, of course.”

“I don’t own a gun.”

“A detective without a gun?” said the elf. “I never heard of such a thing!”

"I never needed one," said Mallory.

"Never?"

"Until now," he amended.

"Do you really think they'll kill you?" asked Mürgenstürm.

"Only if they get carried away. They'll probably just break my fingers and see to it that I don't walk without crutches for a couple of years."

Two bulky figures could be seen through the clouded glass of the office door.

"I have a proposition to make to you, John Justin," said Mürgenstürm.

"Why am I not surprised?" replied Mallory with a touch of irony.

"If I make them go away without hurting you, will you help me find the unicorn?"

"If you can make *them* go away, you don't need my help," said Mallory with conviction.

"Do we have a deal?" persisted the elf.

The doorknob slowly turned.

"What about the ten thousand dollars?" whispered Mallory.

"It's yours."

"Deal!" said Mallory just as the door opened and the two men burst into his office.