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STALKING *the* **VAMPIRE**

A FABLE
of TONIGHT

A John Justin Mallory Mystery

MIKE RESNICK



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2008 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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WWW.PYRSE.COM

12 11 10 09 08 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Resnick, Michael D.

Stalking the vampire : a fable of tonight : a John Justin Mallory mystery / Mike Resnick.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-59102-649-5 (pbk. : acid-free paper)

1. Private investigators—Fiction. 2. Vampires—Fiction. 3. Manhattan (New York, N.Y.)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3568.E698S728 2008

813'.54—dc22

2008026155

Printed in the United States on acid-free paper

To Carol, as always,

and to Mallory's (and my) ladyfriends:

Lesley Ainge

Catherine Asaro

Joan Bledig

Laura Frankos

Cokie Cavin

Linda Donahue

Linda Dunn

Laura Frankos

B. J. Galler-Smith

Paula Goodlett

Adrienne Gormley

Janis Ian

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Kay Kenyon

Nancy Kress

Yvonne MacDonald

Julia Mandala

Maureen McHugh

Heidi Ruby Miller

Debbie Oakes

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Joseph Sherman

Jane Yolen

and The Female Person from Colorado

CHAPTER 1

6:30 PM–6:55 PM, All Hallows' Eve

It didn't look much like a detective's office.

One side contained a desk covered with doilies, a teapot that could only be described as precious, pencils and pens neatly aligned by a telephone, and a framed tintype of a chubby woman, rifle in hand, posing with her foot on the neck of a dead gorgon.

The other side of the office looked like it hadn't been cleaned in months, if not years, which was exactly the case. There were a pair of pneumatic Playmates taped to the wall, on which Mallory's partner had meticulously drawn bras and panties with a Magic Marker. There was a large wastebasket, surrounded by eleven crushed paper cups that Mallory had tossed in its general direction, missing each time. One drawer of the desk held the office bottle, another a stack of unread pulp magazines, a third a change of underwear and socks.

The kitchen—the place had formerly been an apartment—held an ancient refrigerator that, at the moment, contained three six-packs of beer, a supply of sliced lemons for his partner's tea, and seven half-gallons of milk for the office cat.

John Justin Mallory leaned back in his chair, feeling every one of his forty-five years. He'd tossed his trenchcoat over a chair, but he still wore his battered fedora. His feet rested comfortably on his desk, a fresh paper cup held a shot of Old Peculiar, and he held the *Racing Form* up so that Periwinkle, his magic mirror, could read it over his shoulder.

"So what do you think?" asked the detective.

"You know very well what I think."

"He's got to be ready today," said Mallory. "I feel it in my bones. I mean, how the hell many races can he lose in a row?"

"According to the *Form*, it's sixty-four and counting," said Periwinkle.

"But look at the odds," persisted Mallory. "Ninety-nine trillion to one, in a five-horse field. Whoever heard of odds like that?"

“Probably the tote board doesn’t go any higher,” replied the mirror.

“O ye of little faith. How can a horse with a name like Flyaway not win every now and then?”

“Do you really want me to tell you?” said Periwinkle, stifling a yawn.

A feminine creature, who seemed human at first glance but decidedly less so upon further examination, stretched her feline body languidly atop the refrigerator. “They should make him run in handicap races, so he’ll have a better chance,” she said.

“He’s in a handicap today,” said Mallory. “The other four horses are spotting him from ten to sixteen pounds.”

“I meant a *real* handicap,” replied the cat-girl, purring gently. “Like a quarter-mile head start against a field of blind three-legged horses.”

“Try not to be so encouraging, Felina,” said Mallory. “It’ll go to my head.”

“Good,” said Felina. “Maybe it’ll push all thoughts of betting on Flyaway down to your left elbow.”

“Not very likely,” intoned Periwinkle.

Felina hurled herself through the air and landed on Mallory’s desk. “Then since your elbow’s not busy, you can skritch my back.”

Mallory reached out a hand and absently scratched between her shoulder blades while still reading the *Form*.

“That’s wrong!” protested Felina.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re scratching,” she complained. “I want you to *skritch*.”

“What’s the difference?”

“It’s like the difference between night and almost-night,” she said helpfully.

“Fine,” said Mallory, rubbing the small of her back. “Let me know when I’m doing it right.”

She stretched and purred noisily, and before she could answer him—not that he needed one—the office door opened and Mallory’s partner entered. She walked to her own desk, set down a brown shopping bag filled with purchases, smoothed some wrinkles out of her dress, brushed a wisp of gray hair back from her pudgy face, and exhaled deeply.

“You wouldn’t believe how crowded it is out there,” said Winnifred

Carruthers. "I'm exhausted! It took me almost an hour just to get a jar of incense, and the line for black candles was endless. Everyone's doing their last-minute shopping."

"I thought they were supposed to do it on Christmas Eve," said Mallory.

"That's in the Manhattan you left behind, John Justin," she replied. "In *this* Manhattan, everyone celebrates All Hallows' Eve."

"Call it anything you like, but where I come from, it's Halloween."

"The younger generation calls it that," acknowledged Winnifred. "But to the traditionalists, it will always be All Hallows' Eve. You should be more noticing, John Justin. The whole city's getting ready for the celebration."

"I should think this Manhattan had suffered through quite enough ghosts and goblins and things that go bump in the night without setting aside a day to celebrate them," remarked Mallory dryly.

"You're looking at it all wrong, John Justin," said Winnifred. "It's a festive occasion." She smiled happily. "My nephew Rupert has come to visit for a week. He just arrived yesterday. I hope he likes some of the gifts I bought him."

"I'm sure he will," said Mallory. "If I know you, you bought him a big enough selection to choose from." He went back to studying the *Form*.

"Oh my goodness!" exclaimed Winnifred. "You're reading the *Racing Form!*"

"So?"

"So that poor creature is running again tonight, isn't he?"

"Running *again* implies that he ever ran before," said Felina.

"There's an awful lot of sympathy in this office for a horse who's never yet worked up a sweat," said Mallory irritably, "and not much for the guy who keeps betting on him."

"Perhaps it's because the horse doesn't know any better," suggested Periwinkle.

"There's a dog down the street who keeps running away from his owner," said Felina. "Maybe we could feed him Flyaway and slow him down."

"One of these days he's going to win, and the payoff is going to make history," said Mallory.

"If you bet him to show, and he starts in the fourth race of the day and finishes third in the ninth race, do you still win?" asked Felina.

“Enough already,” said Mallory. He put the *Form* back down on his desk. “All right, it’s a holiday of sorts. I’ll skip the track and take you out to dinner.”

“It’s All Hallows’ Eve,” said Felina, rubbing against him. “Let’s be generous and take the fat broad too.”

“I was talking to the . . . to my partner,” said Mallory. “You’re staying here and guarding the office.”

“There’s nothing here worth taking,” protested Felina.

“Well, I like that!” snapped Periwinkle.

“What use is a magic mirror that never shows cat movies?” sniffed Felina.

“There *are* no cat movies,” replied the mirror.

“All you ever show is women taking their clothes off,” said Felina. “What fun is that?”

“*What?*” demanded Winnifred, glaring at her partner.

“That’s not so,” said Mallory defensively. “Sometimes I watch wrestling.”

“Naked ladies wrestling in the mud,” said Felina, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

“It’s an art form,” said Mallory, “not a sporting contest.”

“It’s obscene,” said Winnifred severely.

“It’s boring,” said Felina.

“I could show you naked ladies sky-diving, if that’s more to your taste,” offered Periwinkle.

“Can’t you show anything but naked ladies?” said Winnifred.

“My job is pleasing my audience,” said Periwinkle. “If you asked me what *I* would like to show . . .”

The mirror became a screen, and characters moved through an exotic-looking bar.

“So it’s *Casablanca*,” said Mallory. “Big deal. There’s Dooley Wilson at the piano, and here comes Peter Lorre with the letters of transit.” Then: “No, I’m wrong.”

“You’re right,” said Periwinkle.

“But that’s not Bogart, and the girl certainly isn’t Bergman.” He peered at the screen. “The guy looks like Ronald Reagan.”

“And Ann Sheridan is the girl,” said the mirror.

“So it’s not *Casablanca*,” said Mallory.

“It *is*. This is the film they would have made if they’d signed their first choices. We can make it a double feature with Clark Gable and Humphrey Bogart, John Huston’s first choices, in *The Man Who Would Be King*.”

“Forget it,” said Mallory firmly. “If it isn’t Bogey and Bergman, it’s not *Casablanca*.”

“All right,” said Periwinkle with a melodramatic sigh. “I did my best. Some people are rooted in their ignorance. Some people just refuse to be culturally uplifted.”

Reagan and Sheridan were instantly replaced by Bubbles La Tour, who was gyrating her hips so fast that it almost made Mallory dizzy to watch her.

“That’s quite enough of that,” said Winnifred harshly.

“Whatever you say,” replied Periwinkle. Bubbles La Tour was immediately replaced by the fifth inning of a 1938 American Association baseball game between the Miami Monorchids and the Gainesville Geldings.

“You know,” said Mallory wistfully, “I can remember the good old days, when all I had to contend with were thieves and muggers. And I had to leave my office to find them. There weren’t any uppity mirrors or spoiled ninety-pound office cats in *my* Manhattan.”

“For better or worse, *this* is your Manhattan now, John Justin,” noted Winnifred.

“But only as long as he feeds and skritchies me,” said Felina.

“You are a walking appetite,” complained Mallory.

“I’m too comfortable to walk,” replied the cat-girl. “I’m a lying-down appetite.”

“Speaking of appetites,” said Winnifred, “you mentioned something about dinner, John Justin?”

“Yeah, what the hell, why not?” said Mallory. “If it’s really a holiday, it seems a shame to send out for pizza.”

“Sounds good to me,” she replied. “Where shall we go?”

“Anywhere you want. I just want to stop by Joey Chicago’s bar on the way, and maybe lay down a sawbuck or two on Flyaway with Harry the Book. Then, if you like, we can pick up your nephew and all have dinner together.”

“Rupert was still sleeping an hour ago,” she said. “I think it would be better not to disturb him.”

“Sleeping?” repeated Mallory. “The kid must be a real night owl.”

“He’s a healthy young man, and he’s new to the big city,” agreed Winnifred. “He was out exploring it all last night.”

Mallory shrugged. “If he made it back, I guess he can take care of himself.”

“Once he gets his hours straightened away, I’m going to take him to the art museum and the symphony,” said Winnifred.

“Yeah, a nice healthy young man will love that,” said Mallory, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.” He paused. “So where am I taking you for dinner?”

“You know, I haven’t had unicorn steak in years.”

“Do they serve it in New York?”

“I know just the place,” said Winnifred. “The Mystic Skewer. It’s on the corner of Sloth and Gluttony.”

“Then let’s go,” said Mallory, walking over and holding his arm out to her. She reached for it, then suddenly swayed as if she was about to faint.

“Are you all right?” he asked solicitously as he helped to steady her.

“Just a slight dizzy spell,” replied Winnifred, leaning against him. “Probably I overexerted myself shopping.”

“I don’t know,” said Mallory. “I’ve never seen you tired before.”

“We’re all getting older, John Justin. It’s hard for me to believe it, but I’m in my sixties.”

“In fact,” continued Mallory in worried tones, “I’ve never seen you this pale before. Maybe we should stop by a doctor, just to be on the safe side.”

“I’ll be fine,” Winnifred assured him. She moved free of his supporting arms. “I just needed a moment to rest. I’m ready to go now.”

“You’re sure?”

She nodded her head. “I’m sure.”

“Do that again!” said Mallory sharply.

“Do *what* again?”

“Nod your head like that,” he said, staring intently at her.

“Is something the matter, John Justin?”

“Just do it!”

She shrugged and nodded her head.

“*Sbit!*” muttered Mallory. “Come over to the light.”

“What is it?” asked Winnifred, worried now.

“If I tell you, you’re going to think it’s some kind of Halloween joke,” said Mallory. “Felina, get over here, look at where I’m pointing, and tell me what you see.”

“Two little holes,” said the cat-girl.

“And where are they?”

“On her neck.”

“Are you quite serious?” asked Winnifred.

“Why the hell would I lie to you?” said Mallory. “How long have you been having these dizzy spells?”

“Just today,” she said. “Once while I was shopping I had to stop and sit down for a moment until it passed, and then right here. But as you can see, they don’t last for very long.”

“No others?” he demanded.

“No.”

“Think hard.”

She frowned. “Well, just one.”

“What time last night was it?”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “How did you know?”

“Because your nephew didn’t arrive until yesterday afternoon.”

“Surely you can’t be suggesting that Rupert—?”

“What else has changed in your life since yesterday afternoon?” said Mallory. He looked out the window. “Dinner can wait. Even Flyaway can wait. We’ve got to get over to your apartment *fast*.”

“Why the hurry?” asked Winnifred. “He’ll still be there, and we can put an end to this foolishness. He told me that he wasn’t going out to celebrate until seven or eight o’clock.”

“I’m not worried about his going out.”

“Then what?”

“I want to make sure we confront him before it’s dark.”

