

A Matter of Faith

By Jane Tesh

“‘New born Baby Glows in Dark.’ Nice touch. You can always find the kid.” Edgar Benedek leaned over to admire the layout for the next National Register. “And I like this, too. ‘Girls Cry Real Rocks.’ Must be hell on Kleenex.”

“Ah, it’s old stuff, Benny,” said Jordy. “We need a new angle, kid, something with a little punch, a little flair.” He ran a hand through his curly hair, rumpling it further. “I’m talkin’ ghosts, monsters--”

“Zombies?”

“If you can dig ‘em up. Something really spooky for the spring season, know what I mean? I’ve had enough alien baby stories. That Oz stuff was good, Benny, but I need pictures.”

“Yeah, my camera was acting up that day,” said Benny. “I know things have been kinda slow lately. I’ll see what I can rustle up. You know me; I’ll come through for ya.”

His editor nodded, his attention on the layout. “Yeah, you’re the best, kid. Now get outta here.”

Well, I am pretty good, Benny thought as he made his way past the odd assortment of people who crowded the tabloid office. Where would this paper be without me? “Oz Exists.” That was my scoop. “Love Songs From Beyond the Grave.” All mine. All terrific. I know I can come up with another blockbuster. All it takes is the Benedek touch.

He paused by a colleague’s desk to admire a photo of a two-headed chicken. Wonder what Dr. M had on her desk today? Wouldn’t hurt to zip over to Washington. Tomorrow, maybe. He hadn’t seen Jonathan in a while; he figured he’d been away just long enough to lull MacKensie into a false sense of security. Time to drop a bomb. Time to light a fire under Jon and head out into the great unknown.

The Georgetown Institute campus was quiet when he arrived the next day, so Benny rightly assumed classes were in session. He let himself into Dr. Moorhouse’s office and flipped through the stack of folders he found on her desk. Most of them concerned Institute business, but there were three he found most interesting.

“Wild Dolphins Meet with Humans in West Australian Bay.”

Hmm, might be worth a shot, but Jonathan couldn’t swim, so it was highly unlikely he’d care to put on scuba gear and go nose to nose with Flipper and company.

“Evidence Suggests Stonehenge May Have Been Built by Aliens.”

Well, Jonathan might like to see his native land again, but the Register had just done a piece on Stonehenge as God’s Dominoes. Too similar.

“Bizarre Murders Unsolved.”

Okay, now, this was more like it. Benny’s eyes widened appreciatively as he read the details. Bodies found drained of blood. No clues. No suspects. No motives. All right! This was the one. This was the work of a vampire, or he’d turn in his Bela Lugosi make up kit. And right here in town, too! Wow! Why hadn’t he heard of this? Just like Dr. M to keep a story like this under wraps – or maybe she was waiting to spring it on Jonathan. That had to be it.

Speaking of Jonathan, guess Jack was well into a lecture by now. Benny decided to go sit in and pick up a few facts on australopithecus and his kin. As he slid into a seat in the back row, he saw Jonathan’s eyebrows lower, and a brief look of supreme annoyance crossed the man’s face before he resumed his lecture. Some of the students grinned; they’d seen Benny on

campus before, and Randy beamed at him pleasantly.

Benny sat back, his expression one of rapt attention. Jonathan was a good lecturer, concise, well-informed, and he had a good rapport with the students, especially the young ladies, and a surprising amount of patience, at least to Benny's way of thinking. Jon rarely showed too much patience with him.

"So, in conclusion, the findings in the Rift Valley had not added anything significant to our knowledge of this particular group. That's all for today – oh, and your papers are due Monday. Thank you."

The students gathered up their belongings and filed out. Randy rolled her wheelchair to Benny's seat. "Hi, Benny. What brings you to town?"

"An ill wind," said Jonathan as he stacked up his notes.

"Came to see you, kid," Benny said to the young woman. "Can't live another day without you."

She grinned, and Jonathan said, "Oh, good. I thought perhaps it was time for another exciting, illegal, and potentially life-threatening Benedek extravaganza."

"Missed me, hasn't he?" Benny said to Randy.

"Terribly," she replied.

Jonathan sighed. "These last three weeks have been the calmest, most blissful days I can remember. Something tells me they are about to become a distant memory."

"Three weeks!" said Benny. "You should be rarin' to go, partner. Here it is: the call of the wild. Bizarre murders are happening in town, and vampires are on the loose!"

"Randy," said Jonathan, "you are about to witness another bizarre murder: Yellow Journalist Felled by Ancient Skull." He hefted the nearest skull in a warning manner.

"It's true, pal," said Benny. "I read all about it in Dr. M's office."

"Why can't you leave things alone?" said Jonathan. "Do you have to go snooping around here? Aren't there enough bizarre murders in New York to keep you happy?"

"This is different," said Benny. He hopped up and prowled the aisle, hands in motion. "Bodies drained of blood, Jack! Gotta be a vampire."

Jonathan disagreed. "It's probably some lunatic."

"Or the victims could have been hemophiliacs," Randy put it. "They can bleed to death in minutes."

"Do you mind?" said Benny. "One skeptic at a time."

She grinned as she rolled out. "Keep me posted on this one, Jonathan. Sounds like fun."

"There isn't going to be anything to tell," he said with a glare at Benny. "I'm not interested."

"Old news, pal, old news." He perched on the edge of Jonathan's desk. "Tell me something I don't already know."

"What makes you think vampires are the cause of these murders?" Jonathan asked. "Dr. Moorhouse hasn't said anything about vampires."

"Would you rather chase dolphins or go to Stonehenge?"

"Not particularly."

"Those look like your choices this week, Jon-boy. Why not beat her to the punch and start investigating these murders? She'll pop her corset."

"Isn't this better left to the police?" Jonathan asked.

"Nah, what do they know about vampires? I thought I'd go have a look at the bodies, maybe ask around."

"Fine," said Jonathan. "You go do your digging and leave me to mine. I'm planning a trip to Arizona to check on some carvings, and I don't have time to indulge your strange fantasies."

"I'll stop by your place later and we can compare notes," said Benny as he started out.

"Benedek--" he protested.

"Check you later, Jack!" came the cheerful reply from halfway down the hall.

"There is no such thing as a vampire!" Jonathan shouted after him. Unfortunately, his cry of outrage caught Dr. Moorhouse as she was entering his classroom.

She winced and glared. "Really, MacKensie, must you bellow so? And as for vampires, I think you'd better have a look at this before you make such sweeping declarations." She slapped a folder into his unresisting hands.

Jonathan already knew what it said.

One of Benny's many friends worked at the morgue, and he let Benny have a look at the two victims.

"Drained, all right," said Benny. "What's the story, Phil? What do the cops think?"

Phil pushed the drawer back in. "They think it's some nut playing Dracula."

"They got any clues?"

"Nope." Phil pulled open the next drawer. "This is Bertram Freed. Same cause of death."

"Sucked dry," said Benny, pleased. "Look, he's even got holes in his neck. This is a vampire's work, for sure."

Phil chuckled. "Yeah, only these two didn't take. They've been right here, trust me. They didn't go out terrorizing Washington. Isn't that how it goes?"

"Maybe they're waiting for just the right moment," said Benny. "Waiting for when your back is turned. You're leaning down to tie a tag on some poor stiff's toe and bingo! Right in the neck."

"Yeah, sure," said Phil. "Anyway, Mr. Freed and Mr. Anderson there in 202 are really victims two and three. There was another about a week ago that now the cops are calling related. Same cause of death."

"Where were these people found?"

"Different places." He pushed in the second drawer. "Parking lot. Alley."

"You see any connection?"

Phil shook his head. "Mr. Freed was thirty-four, good health, recently divorced. Mr. Anderson was sixty-seven and a widower, but in pretty good shape for a guy his age."

"And the other guy?"

"Terry Holcomb. Twenty-two, single."

Benny was stumped. "They had nothing in common?"

"Not that I can see. Not even the same blood type. Your vampire must not be choosy."

Benny thanked Phil, got some addresses, and decided to make the rounds. There had to

be some common link, something the police had overlooked.

No one answered at Holcomb's apartment, but at Mr. Freed's, a large woman in a maid's outfit stopped a moment to talk with him.

"Mr. Freed was a real nice gentleman," she said. "Real polite. Such a shame he had all that bad luck. A messy divorce, then murdered."

"He and his wife go a couple of rounds?" Benny asked.

"As far as I know, they never saw each other. But Mr. Freed had some very nice lady friends."

"Didn't waste much time, huh?" Benny said with a grin.

"Oh, it isn't what you're thinking," the woman said. "These were fine young women. Business women and doctors, most of them."

"Anyone in particular?" She shook her head. "Mind if I have a look around?"

"No need to," she said. "All his stuff's gone. I'm cleaning up for the next folks. I hope they're as nice as Mr. Freed was."

The apartment was bare and clean. Seeing a search was useless, Benny thanked the maid and turned to go. Then he thought of something else. "Did Mr. Freed have a favorite place to go? A restaurant, maybe, or a bar?"

She nodded. "He liked the Lily Pad."

"The Lily Pad?" Benny repeated with a laugh.

"Silly name, isn't it? That's how I can remember it. It's some kind of little eating place on Taylor Street."

Benny thanked her again. "Guess I'll hop on over there," he said.

Despite the silly name, the Lily Pad was an elegant little restaurant in shades of green with stylized bullrushes and water lilies etched on glass panels and a curved bar decorated with small gold frogs. Benny resisted the urge to order a Grasshopper and settled for a beer. He leaned back comfortably in the green bar chair. "Shame about Bert Freed," he said to the bartender.

"Yeah, too bad," he replied. "Came in here quite often. You a friend of his?"

"Cousin," said Benny. "In town for the funeral."

"Oh, gee, I'm sorry, pal. Have one on me."

"Thanks," said Benny. "he told me this was his favorite place, and I can see why. Really eerie what happened, wasn't it?"

"I'll say," the bartender agreed. "Plenty of nuts in this town, that's for sure."

Benny took a drink. "Maybe you can help me. I'm looking for a friend of Bert's, Cindy Morrison. She doesn't know what happened to him, and I'd kinda like to break it to her gently, if you know what I mean. Trouble is, she's not in the book. She ever come in here?"

"Cindy Morrison," the bartender frowned thoughtfully.

"Good lookin' redhead. Wears designer type clothes."

The bartender shook his head. "Nope. Sounds like his type, though. Bert had some classy dates."

"Yeah, Bert always did have good taste," said Benny. "Wonder how he did it?"

The bartender leaned forward. "Let you in on a little secret. He used a service."

"A service?"

"Yeah, a dating service, you know, where you make a tape of yourself. Asked him about it one time. He said it was the easiest way to meet women. I'd have tried it myself, but my wife woulda killed me."

Benny laughed, all senses alert. "I guess being recently divorced and back on the dating scene, it was the easiest way. So, he went to Lucky Al's House of Dates?"

The bartender laughed. "No, nothing like that. It's some place called Meet-a-Mate."

"Meet-a-Mate," Benny repeated. Could this possibly be Meet-a-Vampire, as well?

He went back to Terry Holcomb's apartment where a sad-eyed young neighbor said yes, Terry had gone to some kind of dating service. A few nice girls had called, but no serious attachment had been formed. Terry had gone to the grocery store one night and had been attacked and killed.

Next, Benny went to Mr. Anderson's home in a quiet residential area. Mr. Anderson's son was there and didn't want to talk to Benny or to anyone, for that matter.

"Just clear out!" he said at the door. "I've had enough of you people snooping and prying, trying to make something crude and sensational out of this! My father was murdered by some sick creep, and you want to spread it all over the papers."

Benny held up his hands in a placating manner. "Hold on here. I'm trying to find the murderer. I just want to know if your dad belonged to the Meet-a-Mate dating service."

At this, young Mr. Anderson's face turned an alarming shade of purple. "Now you're going to drag his personal life into the mud, too? I told him not to go there! I told him it was for losers and rejects! You think he listened to me? Get out of here! Get out!" He slammed the door.

"With pleasure," said Benny. "Don't burst a blood vessel around here, chum. There is definitely a vampire on the loose."

Jonathan had tried to ignore his typical twinges of guilt. He remembered what happened the last time he'd let Benny follow what seemed to be a ridiculous lead alone. Yes, but for heaven's sake, Benedek was a grown man and trained journalist who'd been rooting around in graveyards and tracking down bizarre murder cases long before they'd met.

Still, it wouldn't hurt to keep in touch. Benny had an almost supernatural knack for getting into trouble. He could just as easily postpone his trip to Arizona. It wasn't as if the carvings were going to get up and walk away.

He was beginning to get worried when nine o'clock came and still no sign of Benny. Then, at nine thirty, the doorbell rang, and in he came, lugging a VCR.

"Wait till you see this, Jack! Have I got a story!"

"You've got a vampire on tape?" Jonathan said. "I thought they didn't show up on film."

Benny hauled the VCR into the living room and hooked it up to Jonathan's TV. "This is some scheme, I'm tellin' you. This is one for the books." He turned on both machines. "Sit down, sit down."

Jonathan sat. Benny's face appeared on screen, grinning brightly.

"Hi, ladies! My number is 8052, but you just call me Benny. That's 8052, call before midnight tonight, operators are standing by. I'm looking for an out of this world experience with a

woman who'll believe in anything and try anything at least twice. The sky's the limit, girls, so come on down. That's 8052, and I am ready for action!"

"Good God," said Jonathan.

"Great, huh?"

"What woman in her right mind would respond to that?"

Benny winked. "You'd be surprised, Jon-boy. All part of my master plan."

"I don't want to hear it."

"Somewhere in this city lurks a vampire," Benny intoned.

"Benedek."

It was too late. "Not just an ordinary vampire, no, but a vampire who's changed with the times, a modern day vampire. Why go out prowling the cold lonely streets when you can have your victims delivered fresh to your door?"

"What on earth are you talking about?" Jonathan asked.

Benny's eyes were shining in triumph. "All the murder victims belonged to the same video dating service."

"So?"

"So, the vampire belongs, too! He or she has been screening tapes, choosing a likely subject, and calling him up. The poor sap goes to the agreed meeting place, hoping to get lucky, and gets drained dry as a bone."

Jonathan stared at him. "You have come up with some ludicrous stories in your time, but this one wins the prize."

"We'll soon find out," said Benny. "This is a copy of my tape from Meet-a-Mate. I am all set up and ready."

"Even if your ridiculous theory were true, what's to keep you from being the next victim?"

"You forget, Juanito, I have faced vampires before. I've got crosses, my Star of David, and I'll lay in a supply of holy water and garlic."

"Then I don't suppose I should worry about anyone getting too close."

"Yes siree, the minute that vampire sees my tape, noticed I'm single, no dependents, and that I'm a healthy, red-blooded American boy, she'll be flapping her little wings right over." Benny sat back on the couch with his arms behind his head. "No problem."

"And suppose this vampire of yours is a man?"

"I got all the bases covered, J.J. Shelley's taking that end for me."

Jonathan felt his jaw drop. "Shelley? You've got Shelley mixed up in this? Are you out of your mind? She's just a kid!"

"Relaxovision," said Benny. "I know what I'm doing. I'm not going to let anything happen to her."

"You don't know that!" Jonathan exclaimed. "There are a lot of perverted people out there. Suppose one of those creeps calls her up?"

Benny was unfazed. "Jon," he said, "you've got to learn to trust me. Everyone's got a number. No names, no addresses. She wanted to help out."

"That's not the point!" said Jonathan, his voice on the rise. "First of all, you don't have any proof anything is happening in this dating place. Second, to ask Shelley – to ask anyone – to do this kind of thing is unbelievable, and third, there is no such thing as a vampire, and if there

were, it wouldn't use a dating service!"

"Don't you think vampires change with the times, Jack? How else could they survive?"

"They don't survive because they don't exist," Jonathan insisted. "What makes you so certain this is a vampire, anyway?"

Benny tapped his temple. "Sheer brain power, pal, plus years of experience. What else could it be?"

"Lots of things," said Jonathan. "I'm calling Shelley right now."

"Too late, Jack. She made her tape this afternoon."

Jonathan wanted to take Benny by the scruff of the neck and shake him. "You have no right to involve her in your crazy schemes!"

"Wanna see it?"

"No!"

Benny had already put a second tape into the recorder. He pushed "Play." "This is great. You're gonna love it."

Shelley's face appeared on the screen. She wasn't the frizzy-haired girl Jonathan remembered, but a poised and confident young woman in a pink sweater and gold earrings. Her blonde hair was pulled up in a stylish topknot with graceful little tendrils framing her face, and she wore just a hint of pale pink lipstick.

"Hello," she said pleasantly. "I'm 8058. I'm new to all this, but I love trying different things, so here I am. I like the beach, early mornings, baby animals, and chocolate cake. I'm looking for a serious relationship with a mature, responsible man who can let me be me. If you're thoughtful, sensitive, and kind, give me a call. I'm 8058."

Benny pushed "Stop" and grinned over his shoulder. "Dynamite, right?"

Jonathan was at a loss for words. The last time he'd seen Theo's trainee, she'd been a spacey, gum-chewing teen. "What happened? She looks so different."

"Great, huh? We dressed her up."

"Benedek, this is disgusting."

"It was her idea!" Benny protested.

"I'll bet."

"She had a great time. She's real gung-ho on this, Jack. Don't burst her bubble."

Jonathan was trying very hard to control his anger. "Benedek, she could get into serious trouble. She's only sixteen."

"Eighteen," Benny corrected.

"She's aged two years in a month?"

"Yeah, sure. She whipped up this potion and--"

Jonathan threw up his hands. "Forget it. Just forget it. You do what you want. I don't want to have anything to do with this nonsense."

Benny unhooked the VCR. "Still got that cross I gave you?"

"I'm sure it's around here somewhere, but I'm not going to need it because there are no vampires," said Jonathan. "Will you leave?"

"Okay, okay," said Benny, "but find that cross 'cause there's gonna be vampires crawling out of the woodwork in a few days."

Jonathan pushed him out the door. Then he hurried to his telephone.

“Oh, it’s okay, Jonathan,” said Shelley in reply to his anxious questions. “I had a lot of fun.”

“Shelley, you’ve got to take your tape out of there before some really undesirable person sees it and gets in touch with you.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “If anyone calls me, I’m to check with Benny. I’ll be very careful, honest.”

“It’s just that Benedek’s schemes have a habit of backfiring. I can’t believe he asked you do to this.”

“I didn’t mind at all,” said Shelley. “How’d you like my hair?”

“You looked very nice, but don’t you realize what you could be getting into?”

“I borrowed the earrings from my mom. The sweater, too. How old do you think I looked?”

“Will you listen to me?” said Jonathan. “If anyone calls you, do not, under any circumstances, go out with him. This is too dangerous.”

“What if he’s cute?” she asked, and, as he choked out an incoherent response, laughed. “I’m just kidding! Gosh, Jonathan, give me a little credit, okay? I’ve been around the block once or twice. I can take care of myself.”

“I just don’t want anything to happen,” he said.

“I’ll be careful,” she promised. “It’s really sweet of you to call, but Benny’s got everything under control. When we catch this vampire, I’m going to have loads of things to ask it. It’ll be a real plus for Theo, too. Lately he’s been experimenting with synapses, and a vampire’s brain would be just the thing.”

“A vampire’s brain,” Jonathan repeated. Was everyone insane? “Shelley, I really wish you wouldn’t do this.”

“Probably nothing will happen,” she said. “The vampire could be long gone by now. Oh, I gotta go. My newest potion is sending up smoke signals. See you!”

Jonathan found it difficult to concentrate on the next day’s work. He kept imagining some dimwitted oaf slobbering all over Shelley, or worse, the murder choosing her tape and luring her to a lonesome place.

It didn’t help that Benny was still wildly enthusiastic about his plan. In fact, he’d received several calls, and so had Shelley.

“I checked ‘em out thoroughly, Jack,” he said, hoping to forestall the angry protests, but Jonathan was livid.

“You can not, in all good conscience, let her go out with anyone! Suppose it’s the murderer?”

“She’s got her cross on.”

“I mean the real murderer!”

“Okay, okay,” he said. “What if we tag along?”

“What?” said Jonathan, confused.

“Go with them. Sneak after. If anything suspicious happens, we’ll be there.”

“It would be a lot simpler if Shelley would just say no, thank you.”

“Gee, I dunno, Jack. One of those guys is a real hunk. Just her speed.”

Jonathan tried to control his temper. “Benedek, I’m asking you as a favor, please. Putting your own life on the line is bad enough, but involving Shelley--”

“They’re going to a basketball game, pal,” Benny interrupted. “Thousands of screaming fans. You think this guy’s gonna chow down in the middle of the arena? She’ll be okay. You take a chance every time you go with someone new, don’t you?”

“Yes, but--”

“If it’ll make you feel any better, I’ll take my date to the game, too. I had something totally different in mind, but, hey, I’ll get her on the rebound.” He made an imaginary dunk shot on his way out of Jonathan’s office.

“We’ve got another order.”

“Good,” Reed Elson said, not looking up from her work. “Any prospects?”

Her colleague set a stack of video tapes on the desk. “Out of yesterday’s clients, these look promising.”

“Fine.”

“You want me to choose, or do you want to?”

Reed glanced up. Even after all this time, Stephanie’s stunning beauty was still a surprise: gleaming blonde hair, perfect features, and blue eyes that were amazingly cold. Well, this was a cold-blooded operation, in more ways than one. “Go ahead.”

Stephanie’s graceful hand with its long fingernails selected one of the tapes. “This one,” she said with a smile.

Reed took the tape and set it aside. “You know the papers are saying there’s a vampire on the loose.”

Stephanie chuckled. “They’ll say anything, won’t they?”

Reed didn’t reply. She had been content to handle the dating service and let Stephanie Blair take care of other matters, but it seemed Stephanie was taking this all too lightly. It was dangerous business, and the vampire angle made Reed uneasy. Maybe it was because Stephanie derived such morbid pleasure from it.

“It’ll throw them off,” she had said. “It’ll distract from our real purpose.”

It was distracting Reed, as well. She frowned at her mistake and re-added the figures.

Stephanie’s nails tapped an idle rhythm on the stack of tapes. “How are we doing?” she asked.

“Very well,” said Reed. “You’re sure Perkins is reliable?”

“Oh, yes, and very happy with his share. Just leave that to me.” She fluffed her golden hair. “I’d better get ready for my date. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

As Reed watched her go, she felt an odd, unshakable feeling of – well, it couldn’t be fear. What was there to be afraid of? Stephanie could take care of things. There was something about the woman, though.

Snap out of it, she told herself. Maybe you’re just jealous.

Benny ran across his hotel room and jumped over the bed to reach the phone which had been ringing steadily. “Yo! What’s up?”

Jonathan's voice was just on the edge of hysteria. "I've been trying to reach you for hours! There's been another murder!"

"Another one?" he echoed.

"Where's Shelley? I've called and called and there's no answer!"

"Relax, Jon, relax," said Benny. "Her date dropped her off at her sister's round midnight. I made certain of that."

"Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure?"

"Just calm down, Jonny. Take some deep breaths. I am absolutely sure, cross my heart. I just got in from her sister's. She's safe and sound. Now tell me about the murder."

There was a long pause, and Benny envisioned Jonathan sinking into a chair and running a hand through his disheveled hair. When he spoke, his voice was much calmer. "It was on the late news. The police discovered a body in a vacant lot, but they weren't releasing any details." He swallowed. "I just knew it was you or Shelley."

"Same cause of death?"

"Yes. Completely drained of blood." Jonathan's voice quit and then returned. "They're calling it another Dracula Murder."

"Great news, Jack! Now all I have to do is find out if the victim belonged to Meet-a-Mate."

"You are the most insensitive, ghoulish person I know," Jonathan said. "Another poor soul is murdered, and you're celebrating."

"Only if I make the connection," said Benny.

"Well, I'm severing this one," said Jonathan and hung up.

By morning, Benny had the name of the latest victim, but the grieving relatives didn't know if he had belonged to Meet-a-Mate. Benny stopped by the dating service, hoping he could check the tapes himself, but he didn't have Charles Marshall's number. Miss Elson, the slim business-like brunette who ran the place, said she'd be glad to help. When Benny mentioned that Mr. Marshall had been murdered, her eyes widened in alarm.

"That's terrible," she said.

"Yeah," said Benny, "and it's kinda odd, but all the recent murder victims belonged to Meet-a-Mate. Must be some sort of really wacky coincidence."

"And what's your interest in this, Mr. Benedek?" she asked.

"Oh, these off-beat police cases intrigue me. This story about a vampire is quite interesting."

Whatever alarm she had shown was carefully hidden now. To Benny's surprise, she began to look through a list of names on her computer. "Marshall, you said?"

"Yeah, Charles Marshall." He watched her curiously. Had he misinterpreted her first reaction?

"Well," she said, "this is indeed an unfortunate coincidence. We do have a Charles Marshall. In fact, we have two." She smiled. "I'm afraid you've been watching too many detective shows, Mr. Benedek. We're one of the largest and most popular dating services in the city. If you'll check with the police, you'll find they've already questioned me as well as other dating services."

Feeling a bit foolish, Benny said, "Thanks. I might do that."

"You're welcome to look at our records. We have nothing to hide."

"No, that's okay," he said. "Sorry to waste your time."

"No trouble at all," she said with another smile.

"What's your feeling on this vampire story?" he asked. "Got any clients who don't show up on tape?"

"I don't believe that nonsense," she said. "Do you?"

"Nah," he said. "Probably some kook. Too bad he's picking on your operation."

"Yes," she said. "Now if you don't mind, I have some work to do."

"Sure, sure. Catch ya later." Benny sauntered out, but paused at the door to glance back. Miss Elson was watching him, her eyes alive with worry.

"Yo, Jon-boy, just wanted you to know Shelley is tucked in for the night, and I am going out with a blonde that would make a bishop kick in a stained glass window. I'm talking A-1 deluxe blonde here, Cybill Shepherd, eat your heart out."

"I'm very happy for you, Benedek," Jonathan replied.

"And victim four did belong to Meet-a-Mate. Too much coincidence here, pal. I kinda gave the owner a nudge. We'll see what happens. I'm taking the night off to do a little close encounter work."

"You do that."

Benny hung up the phone and checked his appearance in the hotel room mirror. Stephanie Blair was one lucky young lady, yes, sir. An evening of dancing and conversation; then maybe they'd swing by the Lily Pad for a drink. He kind of liked the place.

It was there in one of the quiet booths he realized he hadn't seen Stephanie Blair on any of the tapes he'd previewed.

"Oh, I didn't make one," she said when he asked her. "I'm much better in person."

"Can't argue with that," said Benny. In her short, low-cut black dress and black heels, she was easily the most gorgeous woman he'd seen in a long time.

She ran her hand lazily through her golden hair. "No, actually, Benny, I'm part owner of Meet-a-Mate, so it's my job to screen all applicants. When I see somebody I like, I call them. One of the advantages of being the boss."

"So you and Miss Elson run the place."

"That's right."

"How come I never see you around?"

"I'm very busy. It takes a lot of work to make sure no one's heart gets broken."

He chuckled. "Hey, you take your chances."

"In this case, everything worked out perfectly," she said. "I've had a wonderful evening, Benny."

"So have I," he said.

"And I think we've been here long enough, don't you?"

"Way too long," he agreed.

"Let me go freshen up, and we'll go somewhere a bit more private." She slid out of the seat and blew him a kiss before sauntering off.

Whew, thought Benny. Would you look at that? Every guy in the place is breaking his

neck swiveling for a better view. She really lights up the night with that beautiful hair and – wait a minute. It was fashionably dim in the restaurant, but there was still enough light to reflect gently on the panes of glass with their etched designs. The glass showed the shadowy dark heads of the other patrons and the misty candle flames on the tables. It did not reflect Stephanie Blair's shining mane, easily the brightest object in the room. It did not reflect Stephanie Blair, at all.

Hold on now, Benny told himself. It's hard to see in here. Don't jump to any conclusions. But his thoughts were racing. She was part owner of the dating service. He had never seen her there, but he'd always gone during the day. She hadn't made a tape. She was absolutely beautiful. Maybe too beautiful? Supernaturally beautiful?

He patted his shirt front, feeling the hard edges of the Star of David. This would have to do. He hadn't thought to bring any garlic with him, not on a date with a gorgeous blonde. Yeah, a gorgeous blonde vampire.

He was so busy thinking, he almost didn't see her return. Here she came, graceful, elegant, and not a hint of reflection showing in the panes of glass.

"Ready?" she said.

"Ready as I'll ever be," said Benny in all sincerity.

"Jonathan, have you seen Benny lately?"

Shelley's question caught Jonathan off guard. He set aside the pile of test papers and gave his full attention to the phone. "No, he called me last night and said he had a date with a beautiful blonde. I assume everything went well in that department."

"Well, some guy called from Meet-a-Mate, and I'm supposed to check with Benny, only I can't find him."

"I'm sure he's around someplace," said Jonathan. "Let me try to locate him, and I'll get back to you. Meanwhile, please stay put."

"Well, okay," she said reluctantly.

Jonathan spent all afternoon calling places Benny often frequented: Wang-Ho's Fish Camp, Elvira's Tattoo Parlor, Durty Nellie's, the hotel, and Phil at the morgue. No one had seen him.

"Are you going to spend all day on the phone?" Dr. Moorhouse asked. It was the third time she'd stopped by his office.

Jonathan finished his conversation hurriedly and hung up. "I'm sorry, Dr. Moorhouse. I'm trying to locate Benedek."

"I cannot imagine why," she said.

"He was working with me on this vampire case – well, actually, he'd taken it on himself--"

"What do you mean?" she interrupted. She fixed him with an icy stare. "How deeply is he involved?"

Jonathan tried to explain. "He has this crazy notion that a vampire is using one of the local dating services in order to find victims. All the murder victims belonged to the same service, which seems an odd coincidence. And now Benedek's missing." He felt an uncomfortable fear grip him, but there hadn't been a report of a murder or another body found.

"He could be anywhere," said Dr. Moorhouse.

"Yes, but I have the feeling he's in trouble." Benedek would have called to gloat about his date – unless he and the blonde had eloped to Vegas.

"Not from vampires, surely!" said Dr. Moorhouse. "Have you any proof of that?"

"I haven't proof of anything," he said.

"Well, then," she said, "what do you propose to do about it?"

Reed Elson gave the newest member of Meet-a-Mate a sympathetic glance. Slicked back hair, dark-framed glasses, dark suit, bow tie, a flat, hesitant voice, obviously ill at ease, poor man. No wonder he'd come here. Well, he'd paid, and there were plenty of desperate women out there. Maybe he'd get lucky.

"Just go ahead, sir. Whenever you're ready."

"I'm, ah, 8101. I've, uh, never done anything like this before. It's very odd. Well, not odd, really, just a bit, um, daunting. I'm looking for a woman who is intelligent, successful, charming, well read, and clever in conversation. That's all I have to say. Thank you."

"Your number," Reed prompted.

"Oh, um, yes. Number 8101."

"There now," she said as she turned off the video camera. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

He still looked uncomfortable. "What happens next?"

"We'll put your tape on file with all the others and make it available for our women clients to view. Then, if one likes you, she'll be able to contact you by number."

"And I could see her tape?"

"That's right. In fact, no one is using viewing room C at the moment. Why don't you select some tapes? You may see someone you like."

"I could do that today?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes, of course. I'll show you."

Her new client seemed interested in the offices and viewing rooms, so Reed took him on a tour. She was pleased to see he relaxed a little.

"And what's this?" he asked, pointing to the basement door.

"We keep our extra supplies and blank tapes stored down there," she said. "Would you care to view some tapes now?"

"How late are you open?" he asked. "I have a little time now, but I must get back to my accounting seminar."

"We're open till ten tonight."

He thanked her and agreed to look at a few tapes before he had to leave. Takes all kinds, Reed thought. Still, without the glasses and the hair styled differently. . .there were possibilities there. He did have a nice smile. And he was single, no family, looked healthy.

When Stephanie came in at seven that night, Reed showed her the man's tape. "Here's another."

"Good," said Stephanie. "We can use a spare. I've still got Mr. Benedek to go."

Reed looked alarmed. "Didn't you take care of him last night?"

"He kept me up so late talking, I didn't have time. I put him away for later."

"People may come looking for him," Reed protested.

"Someone already has," said Stephanie calmly. She sat down and began to file her nails.

"What?" Reed exclaimed.

Stephanie smiled. "I put her away, too."

Reed took a deep breath. "Explain, please."

"I found a young girl nosing around back. Must be a girl friend. They're in the basement."

"Here?" Reed said, startled.

"Don't get excited. I'll take care if both of them tonight."

"I think we'd better stop for a while," said Reed. "If Mr. Benedek made the connection, it won't be long before someone else does, too."

Stephanie shrugged. "Whatever you say."

"You know I don't like the idea of murdering young girls. They have parents, friends, too many others involved."

Stephanie had finished the nails on one hand and started on the other, giving each nail undivided attention. "She knows too much."

"I don't see how you can be so unaffected by this," said Reed uneasily. "Sometimes I wonder--"

"What?" Stephanie lifted her cold blue eyes. "Do you think I'm a vampire, Reed?"

"You're as heartless as one."

Stephanie smiled. "Check out my pearly whites." Her teeth were perfect, white, and even.

Reed gave a slight laugh. "Give me a break."

"I'll take care of everything, don't worry," said Stephanie. "As soon as I change the sheets in my coffin."

Reed made a face and went back to her rows of figures.

Jonathan gave the window a little push and waited. No alarm sounded. He pushed it up further and tried to climb in. It took three attempts, but he finally managed to get a good grip on the sill and pull himself up and in. He looked around the silent viewing room, congratulating himself on thinking to unlock the window during his visit to Meet-a-Mate.

He opened the viewing room door and peered out into the silent hallway. There was a light on in the office area, but no one was there. Now where was that basement door? He crept along the hallway. This was absurd. Benny might not even be here. But he knew he couldn't live with himself if he didn't check.

The basement doorknob caught him on the hip and he stifled a cry. He turned the knob slowly. The door was unlocked. Now just what was lurking down there in the dark?

Turn on the light, MacKensie, he told himself. No one's here.

The dim light bulb revealed a room much larger than he expected, the corners obscured by shadows. He went door the wooden stairs. There were piles of boxes, tape cases, stacks of office supplies, an old refrigerator, and what appeared to be two closets. Jonathan walked cautiously through the maze of boxes. He paused to listen, but all he could hear was the thudding of his heart. This was foolish. There was nothing here.

The closets were dark and empty. I think I'd better get out of here before I'm discovered, he decided. Benedek's probably at his hotel. He'll laugh his head off when he finds I've been skulking in dark basements alone. He'll also laugh if he finds out I'm wearing that cross he gave me.

When he saw the small huddled figure, he was certain his heart stopped. Shelley! What was she doing here? She lay half-hidden by an old filing cabinet. Jonathan carefully turned her on her back and found to his great relief she was alive and breathing steadily. He had just gotten over this shock when he saw a pair of shoes that could only belong to Benny sticking out from the shadows. Benny's feet were still in them. His friend was alive and deeply asleep.

"Benedek," he said urgently, shaking him. "Wake up."

In a few minutes, he succeeded in rousing Benny, who blinked up at him owlishly. "Lights out," he remarked.

"What happened?" Jonathan asked. "Are you all right?"

"You got me, pal," he said groggily. "I was having a drink with Stephanie, and the next thing I knew, I disappeared." He looked around. "Where are we?"

"The basement of Meet-a-Mate. Come on, get up. We've got to get Shelley out of here."

"Shelley's here, too?" said Benny. "Oh, brother."

"I think she's okay," said Jonathan. He gently patted her cheek. "Shelley? Come on, now."

Benny staggered to his feet. "What's she doing here?"

"She must have come looking for you. Who are these people? What do they want?"

"I'm in the dark, Jack." He shook his head as if trying to clear it. "Is there something in the fridge? I'm dry as dust."

"Not as dry as you could be," said Jonathan. "You were probably supposed to be victim number five."

Benny opened the refrigerator. "Yeah, I guess--" he stopped. "Jon, have a look at this!" Jonathan glanced over his shoulder. His eyes widened. "Good lord."

The refrigerator was filled with small plastic bags of blood.

"Whoa," Benny breathed. "I got it! They're runnin' a black market blood bank!" He paused. "Boy, try saying that three times fast."

"But that's crazy," said Jonathan. "What hospital would buy it?"

"Times are tough, J.J. Not as many people are giving blood. Hospitals are desperate."

"Yes, but not that desperate."

"Okay, then, it's the vampire's 7-Eleven." He took one last look and shut the door. "This is some big story here, Jack. The victims are called up, killed, drained, and the blood is sold to someone with hospital connections, and the vampire stuff's just to throw the police off the trail."

"Fine," said Jonathan. "You think what you like. Can you help me with Shelley?"

"Only Stephanie didn't have a reflection," Benny mused. "And how did you get in? Dr. Jon to the rescue! Don't tell me you made a tape! This I gotta see."

"Well, I did, but not exactly," Jonathan said uncomfortably. "I used a disguise."

"Better and better," said Benny. "I knew you'd get into the swing of things. Who'd you do?"

"The accountant. Will you give me a hand here?"

Benny whooped and Jonathan shushed him. "Garth Mandeville? You trotted out old Garth Mandeville? That is great! So, how'd you do?"

"He photographs very well."

"Yeah, but do you think anybody's gonna call him?"

Shelley gave a sudden giggle. "I'm looking for a serious relationship with a mature responsible man."

"What did they give her?" Jonathan asked Benny worriedly.

"She must've had a double."

"I'd better carry her."

The girl wrapped her arms around his neck. "Oh, Jonathan," she sighed.

"Benedek," he said, alarmed, trying to untangle himself.

Benny laughed. "You wanted to carry her."

"Kiss me!" said Shelley.

"Shelley, please wake up," Jonathan said.

"We'd better move, Jonny," said Benny.

Jonathan nodded and picked Shelley up. "Oh, my," she said with a pleased sigh. He threaded his way carefully through the boxes. Benny moved ahead of him, still dizzy. Shelley kept sighing and emitting little oohs and ahhs.

"What are you doing back there?" Benny asked.

"Nothing! Absolutely nothing!"

Benny seemed to find the basement stairs hard to navigate. "Who keeps moving the steps?"

"Can you make it?"

"Give me a push."

"My hands are full."

Shelley giggled. "This is so romantic."

Benny grasped the railing and pulled himself up one step at a time. "I gotta talk to you about your love life, Jon."

Jonathan tried not to look at Shelley's blissful face. "Just shut up and keep moving." When they reached the top of the stairs, he said, "Go to your left. I came in through viewing room C."

By the time they reached the room, Shelley was more alert.

"Can you walk?" Jonathan asked her. "I'm going to help you out the window."

"Jonathan, I hear something," said Benny. "I'm gonna go have a look."

Jonathan had boosted Shelley up to the window, her arms still wrapped firmly around his neck. "Benedek!" he whispered in protest, but Benny had already turned to go. He pulled Shelley back inside, put her carefully into a chair, and tried to pry her loose. "Shelley, let go. Stay right here. Don't move, understand?"

"Whatever you say," she murmured, smiling.

Benny moved through the open office area. The vampire's here, he thought excitedly. Let's just see if it isn't Miss Stephanie Blair. He wasn't surprised to see the stunning blonde step out of the shadows.

"Why, Mr. Benedek," she said pleasantly. "Benny. You're here very late. What can I do for you?"

"For starters, explain how I ended up in your basement," he said.

Her blue eyes went wide. "My basement? Dear me, you must have had more to drink than I realized."

"Yeah, a little extra, that's for sure. What's your game? What's with the fridge full of goodies down below? Stocking up for the winter?"

She smiled. "I see I should have taken care of you long ago."

Benny pulled out his Star of David. "Well, you won't get the chance, sister."

Stephanie laughed and came forward. "That's cute, Benny, real cute. But didn't anyone tell you you have to have faith to make that work?"

Benny backed off, startled.

"Where's your faith, little man," she hissed. "that trinket is worthless without faith."

Before Benny's horrified eyes, fangs sprouted in her perfect mouth, the lips stretching wide. Her eyes gleamed, two searing beams of evil color. He kept holding out the Star, but she laughed low in her throat and advanced. He heard Jonathan's anxious call and saw Stephanie's eyes flicker toward the sound of the other voice.

"Jonathan, run! Get out of here!"

Stephanie lunged forward, her long nails raking his arm. He was flung across the room and landed against the wall. Stunned, he watched her turn and start for the viewing room. He saw Jonathan down the hallway, halting at the sight of the woman.

"Benedek, where are you?"

"Run, Jonny! She's a vampire!" Benny managed to gasp.

"Don't be ridiculous--" Jonathan started to say when Stephanie attacked.

Jonathan wrestled to get free and they rolled and struggled on the floor. Whoever this woman was, she was incredibly strong. He felt her sharp fingernails tear at his collar. He managed to get a foot underneath to kick her off. She snarled angrily, and he heard his collar rip. At the same time, she gasped and recoiled. Taking advantage of her momentary lapse, he kicked again. She tumbled off and sprang to her feet with catlike grace.

Shaken and breathing rapidly, Jonathan slid back until he was sitting against the wall. The woman's lips had drawn back to reveal jagged teeth. Her eyes gleamed with some strange inner fire, and she licked hungrily at the long bloodstained nails. What was keeping her away? She made animal like snarls, slashing out with her hand. Jonathan reached up to feel where her nails had cut his neck and felt the chain. The cross! He clutched it and thrust it forward. The woman gave a choked cry, flinging up her hand to ward him off. She turned and fled. He heard the basement door slam. He sat where he was, breathing hard. He tried to get up, but his legs wouldn't work.

Benny had recovered from Stephanie's backhand blow. "Jonathan," he called anxiously. He staggered out into the hall. When he saw Jonathan slumped against the wall, pale and wide-eyed, with blood streaming down his neck, he gasped. "Oh, no, she got you!" He ran unsteadily to him. "Jon, it's me, pal, Benny. We'll start transfusions, get some really good food, call Reverend Wilkes--"

"I'm all right," said Jonathan, his voice uneven. "She just scratched me."

Benny put a hand to his heart in relief. "Boy, you gave me a start there. You wanna let go of that?" He pried Jonathan's hands off the cross. "Glad yours worked," he commented. "Where'd she go?"

"Basement."

Benny helped him up. "Sure she didn't bite you, bud?"

"Get me out of here," said Jonathan.

"Where'd you leave Shelley?"

"In the viewing room. Oh, God, I hope she's all right."

They hurried back to the viewing room. Shelley was looking around in confusion. "What was all that noise?" she asked. "Jonathan! Oh, gosh, what happened? Did the vampire get you? Oh, golly, look at all that blood."

"Shelley, please," said Jonathan.

"Let's move it, gang," said Benny. He'd had quite enough for one night.

"Sit down and let me fix it," Shelley said. They were all in Jonathan's living room, a pretty scruffy looking bunch, Benny thought. Dusty, dirty, bloodstained, hair in all directions. It's a good thing we weren't stopped by the cops on our way over here.

Jonathan sat down in the armchair while Shelley's small nimble fingers pulled back the remains of his collar. "Boy, she really meant business! This shirt's a goner. How'd you get away? Oh, I see. You've got your cross on."

"I think mine needs a tune up," Benny remarked with far more cheer than he was feeling. He fingered the chain around his neck. Why hadn't it worked?

Shelley poured some yellow liquid onto a cloth. "These scratches look pretty bad, Jonathan, but this ought to help."

"Is that going to sting?" he asked worriedly.

"Nope." She pressed the cloth to his neck and he yelped in surprise. "It may burn a little," she confessed. "Here. You hold it. I've got something else."

"A little!" he repeated, wincing.

"You were lucky this time, Juanito," Benny said. "If she'd gotten those fangs into ya, I don't know what we would've done."

"Given me rabies shots," he said. "That is one highly disturbed young woman."

"Woman, nothing, pal! That is one class A vampire."

"She is not a vampire," said Jonathan.

"Then why'd she try to take a chunk out of your neck? Why'd she run away when you showed her your cross?"

"Because she's crazy! She obviously thinks she's a vampire, so she's acting like one."

"She's acting like one because she is one," Benny argued.

"She is not!" Shelley returned, bearing another flask. "Oh, God, what's this? Would you practice on someone else?"

She chuckled. "This is some of my very special germ killer, and I promise it won't hurt." She took the first cloth away and replaced it with a second bandage. "See? Now keep still so I can finish."

Jonathan continued his argument. "Miss Blair is obviously insane. We need to call the police. She needs a good psychiatrist."

"Dr. Van Helsing, maybe," said Benny. "What we need, Jonny, is a really good sharp stake."

"I'm not going in there again. That woman is crazy. She could do anything."

"There," said Shelley. "All done."

Jonathan thanked her and gingerly felt the bandage. "Did you call your sister?"

"She'll be by in a little while."

"And you're sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine," said Shelley. "I don't remember a thing."

Benny grinned at Jonathan's obvious relief.

"Good," said Jonathan. "I hope your sister wasn't too worried about you."

"She figured I was with Benny, so it's okay."

Yeah, and look where it almost got you, Benny thought. His hand went to his Star of David again, uncomfortable suspicions nagging at him. He didn't realize he was frowning until Jonathan said, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," said Benny. "Why don't you turn in? You look like you've been run over."

He might have known he couldn't fool Jonathan that easily. "If you're concerned about your Star of David not working, remember we are dealing with a very sick young woman," Jonathan said. "She's not likely to play by the rules."

"Yeah, right. And what if it's a real vampire?"

"She's not a vampire."

"What I wanna know is, how am I gonna keep her off me?"

"That's very simple. Keep away from Meet-a-Mate."

"And miss out on a great story?"

Jonathan sighed. "I'm going to bed."

He went upstairs. "Let me have a look at your arm, Benny," said Shelley.

Benny bravely let her doctor the few scratches on his arm and then fell to brooding about the incidents of the evening. Shelley found a Pepsi in the kitchen and came back to the living room.

"What's up?" she asked him.

He roused himself from his brown study. "Oh, nothing. Just pondering the mysteries of the universe."

She sat down in the armchair, tucking her legs under her. "So you think it's a real vampire?"

"I'm pretty sure." Though he had to admit it would be somewhat of a relief if Stephanie Blair were just some crazy female with a neck fetish. He toyed with the chain of the Star.

"Maybe you need a new one," said Shelley. "I'm awfully glad Jonathan was wearing his."

"Yeah," said Benny, "though somehow I can't see Jonny's soul in too much danger."

Shelley frowned curiously. "Is that what you're thinking about, Benny? Your soul?"

He snorted. "Are you kidding? I'm thinking of a way to get back in that basement. That must be where our queen of darkness bunks during the day."

Shelley slurped her Pepsi and idly glanced through one of Jonathan's anthropology texts. "Okay."

Benny couldn't forget the vampire's mocking expression and unholy snicker of laughter.

Where's your faith, little man? That trinket is useless without faith.

He smoothed the silver surface of the Star. He did have faith. He believed in everything, didn't he? Everything. Ghosts. Werewolves. UFOs, demons – he'd seen them. Although he'd never seen God, he was just as certain such a being existed. Heck, why not? It was true he hadn't attended any religious services lately, or studied the holy books, but he never thought either was particularly necessary to be, well, good. Maybe it did make a difference. Maybe he'd fallen behind in that department.

"Benny?" Shelley poked his arm to get his attention. "My sister's here. I'll make up a recipe of Theo's vampire repellent. Call me when you're ready to go after her."

"Okay," he said. He saw her out and waved good-bye. You have no right to involve Shelley in your crazy schemes! Jonathan's angry words came back to haunt him. Sheesh, the kid could've been killed. No wonder nothing's working for me tonight. Come to think of it, I've been awfully cocky about this whole case. Mr. Hot Shot Vampire Killer. If Jonathan hadn't come to the rescue – and then Jon almost got killed, too – whoa, things were really stacking up on the sin side of the ledger.

He sat in the quiet house, trying to shake off his pensive mood. They had to get rid of the vampire; that was the main thing. And he was going to have to do it, one way or another.

He woke suddenly and realized he'd fallen asleep on Jonathan's couch. Sunlight was streaming through the windows, warm and golden. It was hard to believe that the night before, he'd confronted a vampire.

He yawned and sat up. He could hear Jonathan in the kitchen, banging open cabinets and dropping silverware. Better make my presence known, he thought.

He strolled into the kitchen. "Hi. What's for breakfast?"

Jonathan looked only mildly surprised. "You still here?"

"Fell asleep on your couch. How's your neck?"

Jonathan touched the bandage carefully. "A little sore."

Benny sat down at the kitchen table. "Shelley's sister came and got her."

"I hope you told Shelley this case is closed," said Jonathan. He put some bread in the toaster. "I still can't believe she went over there alone looking for you. When I think of what could've happened--"

"Yeah, okay," said Benny. "No lecture today, all right?"

Jonathan had his mouth open to continue, but at this, he closed it.

Benny played with the salt shaker. "How was I to know she'd try something like that? I'm just glad she's all right."

Jonathan regarded him a moment longer and then said calmly, "Me, too. Orange juice?"

"Sure."

The toast popped up. Jonathan put the slices on a plate and brought over the juice and toast. "So what do you want to do now?" he asked. "I say we go to the police."

Benny kept his eyes on the salt shaker as if it contained all the answers. "We have to kill the vampire."

"It's Miss Blair, and we aren't killing anyone. We should call the police."

"Jon," he said patiently, "if you call the police, she'll fly off and get away. We have to go in and take care of this ourselves, bud."

"Are you suggesting we sneak back in?"

"Yup. Pass me the butter, will ya?"

Predictably, Jonathan said, "Benedek, it's too dangerous and it's illegal."

Benny feigned surprise. "This from a man who disguises himself to scope the joint and then breaks in last night?"

"That was different. I just wanted to look in the basement. I wasn't going to stab anyone with a piece of wood."

"I got it all figured," said Benny. "Stephanie's got her coffin stashed somewhere in the basement within sucking distance of the fridge. All we have to do is destroy her coffin, and if we're lucky, destroy her, too. No need to involve Shelley. No need to call the cops. The murderer is dead. Case closed."

"Look," said Jonathan. "She is not a vampire. She is a terribly disturbed person who needs psychiatric help. We can't murder her!"

"Didn't you see her fangs? Didn't you see that weird light in her eyes?"

"It was very dark in that hallway."

"She doesn't have a reflection, Jack. She has six inch fangs and laser beam eyes. She's a vampire. You got any ketchup?"

Jonathan got the ketchup and watched in disbelief as Benny made a butter, salt, and ketchup sandwich with his toast. "I still say we should call the police."

"Will you just try it my way first?" Benny asked. "Have a little faith." The words and the food clogged in his throat. He managed to swallow, but it was with difficulty. "Trust me, okay?"

"You want to confront this demented woman after she tried to kill you, after she tried to kill both of us?" said Jonathan. "Why? Give me one good reason."

I've got to try again, Benny thought. I've got to know the truth. Am I all surface, no substance? Can I be serious enough for once in my life to get rid of this unholy creature?

"Benedek," Jonathan said impatiently.

"I told you, Jack. There's a big story here. Jordy's been on my back to get a real scorcher, and this is a live one. 'Vampire Beauty Haunts Love Broker.' 'Four Fall Victim to Deadly Hicky.'" He absently rubbed his neck and fingered the chain. He knew instantly he'd made a mistake. Jonathan's eyes narrowed.

"You're not still concerned about that, are you?"

"About what?"

"That! Your Star of David." He frowned. "Benedek, just because some crazed woman doesn't recoil in horror from a religious symbol doesn't mean anything."

"Then why'd you use yours?" Benny asked.

Jonathan stalled. "Well, I don't know. It was just a reaction. It seemed to work."

"It worked fine, buds, because you believed it would."

"Now wait a minute," said Jonathan. "This is backwards. I'm not the one who believes in this stuff."

Benny abandoned his sandwich. "Assume for the moment Stephanie Blair is a real vampire. What's the key here? Not the Star or the cross, but the power behind them." He could tell his seriousness took Jonathan by surprise. "Now, maybe I've been kinda casual about it, but I always thought I believed, at least enough to get by."

"Benedek," Jonathan said in an amazed tone. "She's not a vampire. You don't have to prove anything."

“Oh, she’s a vampire, all right.”

“Listen to me,” said Jonathan. “It’s natural to have doubts. These past few months, I’ve had literally thousands. But you can’t take this seriously!”

Benny looked him straight in the eye. “There’s only one way to prove it, Jon-boy, and that’s to go back in.”

Jonathan sighed, exasperated. “If we don’t find anything, will you give up this outlandish notion and call the police?”

Benny stuck out his hand. “You’ve got yourself a deal, pal.”

Jonathan gave his hand one shake. “Fine.”

“But I want to come, too,” Shelley protested. “I even brought the repellent.”

Benny took the bottle of green garlic-scented liquid and set it on Jonathan’s coffee table. “Look, Shelley, I appreciate what you did last night, but it could’ve been real final, know what I mean? You’d better leave this to me and Jon.”

“Benny,” she said scornfully, “what’s with the macho routine?”

“I didn’t mean it that way. You’re good, kid, and if it was up to me, I’d have you along, but, well, you know how Jonathan is.”

“Yeah,” she said. “He’s awfully protective.”

“Exactly, you got it. So how about staying put and staying near the phone? We may need some back up.”

This didn’t suit Shelley, at all. “You two didn’t do so well the last time,” she said.

“You’re the only other person who knows about this case,” said Benny in his most persuasive manner. “You’re our main contact; you gotta keep in the clear. Beside,” he added, “I know Jonathan wants you to stay out of danger.”

Shelley’s hand strayed to her hair, which she had kept up in her new style. “Well,” she said, wavering.

“Atta girl. I’ll tell you all the gory details, Scout’s honor.”

“Is Jonathan here now?”

“He’s teaching a class or two, but he’ll be back at five. Why don’t you come around, and we’ll get a pizza or something before we go on the trail?”

Shelley thought this was a good idea. After she’d gone, Benny opened the bottle of repellent and took a sniff. Great stuff. It would probably work, too. Theo had taught Shelley everything he knew. The kid was good. Yeah, looked like a sure thing, but he wasn’t going to use it. He felt the Star of David under his shirt. This was all he was going to take. This was all he was going to depend on. All or nothing.

“This is really crazy,” came Jonathan’s familiar whispered litany. “We shouldn’t be here. We could get arrested. This is breaking and entering.”

“And searching and finding,” Benny whispered back. They were in the Meet-a-Mate office. So far, no sign of anyone or anything.

“Finding what? I’m telling you we should go to the police.”

“So they can take a bite outta crime, right?”

“Will you be serious? Why are you looking through all those papers?”

"I'm curious," said Benny. "Haven't you figured that out by now?"

"Come on, come on. You said you wanted to find a coffin."

Benny peered at the papers on Reed Elson's desk illuminated by the circular glow of his flashlight. "Some guy named Perkins has been getting a nice piece of the action. Wonder what his angle is?"

"Will you come on? This place makes me nervous."

"Think the vampire's gonna jump you again?" Benny was a little uneasy about this himself and was stalling before venturing into the basement. "This dating business is pretty lucrative. Maybe I oughta look into getting my own service."

A light snapped on, causing both men to jump, startled, and whirl around.

"What are you doing here?" a sharp voice demanded. It was Reed Elson, a determined look on her face, a small revolver in her hand. "Mr. Benedek?" she said, perplexed. "What are you--?" She drew in her breath. "You're not even supposed to be alive!"

"Nine lives and still counting," Benny said with a grin. "Guess Miss Blair didn't tell you about my daring escape. Why don't you tell us what's going on around here? Who's this guy Perkins? And how did you get mixed up with a vampire?"

The hand holding the gun shook slightly. "A vampire?" said Reed.

"Yeah, what is this little operation? What's with the snack packs downstairs?"

Her voice wobbled. "If you know that, I'm afraid you leave me little choice."

"Hold on now," said Benny. "We can make a deal here. We're really after Stephanie Blair. If you help us get rid of her--"

She broke in. "You talk as if she were a real vampire."

"Fooled you, too, huh?"

"Miss Elson, if you'd just put the gun down," said Jonathan.

Her eyes darted nervously to him. "What is this? Who are you two? What do you mean about getting rid of Miss Blair?"

"Don't tell me you didn't know," said Benny. "Did you ever see her during the day? She ever check that perfect face in a mirror?" he could tell he was getting through, so he pushed harder. "You had your suspicions, didn't you? Come on, help us nail her, and we'll tell the cops you cooperated. Blame it all on her. Say you didn't know she was taste testing the victims."

She was pale. "I didn't – I can't believe – it was just a trick, a trick to frighten people."

"Miss Blair needs a great deal of help," said Jonathan. "If you could just tell us where to find her, we could straighten all this out."

Miss Elson was more agitated now. "I am not a murderer," she said. "I never killed anyone. You can't prove I had anything to do with this. It was all Stephanie's idea."

"Sounds good," said Benny. "So where does Dracula's daughter hang out?"

"Yes, tell them," came a soft pleasant voice from behind. Stephanie Blair smiled as she came down the hallway to the office. "It was all my idea, wasn't it, Reed?"

Benny and Jonathan moved back cautiously as the blonde walked gracefully towards them. She acknowledged their presence with a nod.

"Gentlemen. Nice to see you again."

Reed's voice was shaking. "Tell them they have no proof of anything. They're crazy, both of them, with their talk of vampires."

"Of course they are," she said calmly. "And they'll do very nicely for our next supply. Shoot them."

"No!" said Reed. "You take care of this! You should have before."

"I'll take care of you all," said Stephanie.

Before Benny or Jonathan could react, she lunged at Reed. Terrified, the woman began shooting wildly. Seeing the bullets had no effect on Stephanie, she screamed as the blonde woman tore at her throat.

When the bullets started flying, Benny yelled, "Out!" and dashed for the hallway. Jonathan ran after him and fell over his feet at the doorway to the first viewing room. They landed in a tangle.

Benny struggled to sit up. "Ow, what'd you do that for?" Then he saw the bright red stain and Jonathan's wide surprised eyes. His friend clutched his left arm, blood running through his fingers.

"I've been shot," he said in disbelief.

"Whoa, have you ever," said Benny. "And me without a petticoat to rip up." He quickly took off his tie. "Yours isn't wide enough," he said as he tried the strip of bright material around Jonathan's arm. "Doesn't look too bad, Jack, but I hate the thought of all that blood leaking out at this particular moment. Let's slide in here."

They backed into the viewing room, and Benny readjusted the tie. Jonathan winced. "Is this one of those flesh wounds I've always heard about?"

"Ya got winged, partner."

"Ow! Watch it! Nobody tells you they hurt like the devil."

"A brave cowpoke never lets a little thing like this slow him down," said Benny. "What do you say we get out of here?"

There were muffled screams and thrashing noises from the office.

"I thought you had a plan," said Jonathan. "And where's that foul-smelling stuff Shelley brought over? That'd kill anybody."

"Change of plans, Jack." He paused. "Uh-oh."

"What?"

"Listen."

There was silence. Jonathan looked at him apprehensively.

"I'll go have a look," said Benny, but Jonathan grasped his arm.

"Benedek, no. That woman's crazy. Let's go out the window. Let the police deal with her."

"Shh," said Benny. "She just went down the hall." He got to his feet and cautiously peered out. In the dim light, he could see Stephanie Blair crouched in the hallway. The back of his neck prickled with fear. She was sniffing them out! He had to get Jonathan away. One look at that blood, and there'd be no stopping her. "You're right, Jonny," he whispered. "Time for a big exit move."

Jonathan had already decided they had overstayed their welcome. He used his good hand to push up the window; his left arm was throbbing painfully and completely useless. "I'll boost you up," he said.

"Nah," said Benny. "Let me stand on this chair and--"

There was a terrible shriek and Stephanie Blair burst into the room. She grabbed Benny

and made a swift biting motion towards his throat, but Jonathan seized her arm and managed to pull her off. She snapped at him madly, forcing him back against the wall. Benny rolled quickly to his feet and grabbed the chair. He brought it down hard on her shoulders. This gave Jonathan time to stagger out into the hallway. Benny joined him, breathing hard.

"This way," he started to say when Stephanie jumped him again.

Jonathan tried desperately to pry her off, but she seemed twice as powerful as the night before. Her arm connected sharply with his head and he was flung off. He landed hard on his injured arm. Gasping with pain, he saw her and Benny rolling and struggling dangerously near the open basement door. Suddenly, they fell noisily down the stairs. Jonathan's heart jerked in his chest.

"Benedek!"

"I'm okay," came the faint reply.

Jonathan made his way half crawling to the stairs. Benny was halfway down, clinging to the banister. Below, Stephanie flopped and writhed on the basement floor, a piece of broken railing protruding from her chest. Each convulsive movement drove the improvised stake in further until, with a great gush of dark blood, she gave one last heave and lay still. With a choked gasp, Jonathan turned away, sick.

Benny forced himself to stare at the ghastly sight until he was certain the creature was dead. "It's all right, Jon," he said in a weak attempt to be funny. "She bit the big one." Receiving no reply, he hauled himself up the stairs, feeling battered and stiff. "Jonathan?"

"Over here," came his whisper.

Benny wasn't sure he could walk, so he settled for a stagger across the floor. Jonathan was sitting down, holding his arm and looking like the victim of a three car crash. Benny knew he looked just as bad. "You okay? She's dead. We need to go, come on."

"Just a minute," said Jonathan. His eyes were glassy, and Benny was afraid he was in shock, or close to it.

"Come on, pal. You can't sit here all night. It's okay, it's over."

"I thought – when you went over. . ."

"Nah," said Benny. "I learned a trick or two from those Romanian acrobats, not to mention Miss Matlovsky, who is dynamite on a trapeze. Come on, I need a hand here."

This had the desired effect of redirecting Jonathan's thoughts. He struggled to his feet and helped Benny up. Finding his legs still weak, Benny was glad for the assistance. They made their way back to the office, leaning on each other. Reed Elson's body lay in a heap, eyes staring sightlessly.

"Oh, God," Jonathan murmured.

"Hang in there, Jack. I'll call a cab." Benny leaned on the desk and reached for the phone. "Whew, it's a shame to feel this way and not have anything to show for it."

Jonathan sank into one of the swivel chairs. "Call an ambulance," he said.

"You'll make it, buds."

"I meant for Miss Elson. . .and Miss Blair." He could barely get the words out.

Benny shook his head. "Past help. Probably nothing left of Miss Blair but a shriveled corpse – at least, I hope so." He pressed more buttons. "What's with this phone?" he complained. "Did our little vampire chew through the lines?" he looked up in time to see Jonathan's eyes close as he slowly toppled out of the chair. "Jon!" He bent over MacKensie anxiously. "Jonathan, come on, now, don't do this to me." Jonathan was unconscious, his breathing shallow. Benny's gleaming tie was dark with blood. "Okay, you win," said Benny. "I'll

go get help. Stay right here.”

He then heard a sound that made him freeze.

Whump.

Thump.

A dragging sound and another thump, terribly slow, but steady, rhythmic.

Whump.

Thump.

My God, he thought. It can't be! He went into the hallway and listened.

Whump.

Thump.

The vampire was crawling up the stairs.

No, no, no!

The creature's eyes were ablaze, its mouth fixed in a ghastly snarl that was a grimace of intense pain, a parody of Stephanie Blair's perfect smile. It pulled itself to the top of the stairs.

“I thought you were dead!” Benny exclaimed.

The vampire started its deliberate way down the hall. The jagged edge of the stake was still in its chest. Benny could see that the piece of wood had just missed the heart. He ran back to Jonathan and tugged at him desperately. There was no way he could lift MacKensie. “Jonathan!” As he leaned over, trying to rouse him, the little silver Star of David fell out of his shirt and dangled just above Jonathan's head.

All right, Benny thought grimly. This is it. It's got to work this time, maybe not for me, but for Jonathan's sake. What do you say, God? Help me out here.

He held out the Star, and it caught the light. He was shaking so hard, he had to hold it with both hands. “Take a hike,” he said to the creeping horror that was steadily advancing.

The once glorious Stephanie Blair began to shrink back. Benny kept the silver reflection dancing on the long bony body, the clawed hands, the still incongruously golden hair. Whenever the light fell on her, she flinched.

“Go away,” said Benny, trying to keep his teeth from chattering. “Die, monster, die. Buzz off.” He felt a surge of hope as the creature recoiled. There was a strange sizzling sound that made his stomach churn. The light was burning her! It took all his courage to hold steady as she screamed over and over, horrible nerve-grating screams, her lips curled back, her claws turned inward. He had to close his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, Stephanie Blair was a pile of charred bones and black ashes.

Benny sagged back beside Jonathan, exhausted. In the distance, he heard a siren. If I had the strength, I'd go out and flag it down, Jonny, but I'm just too tired. I'm sorry, pal. I did my best.

The siren wailed closer and stopped. Benny looked up dazedly as two paramedics came in. One knelt by him, the other by Jonathan.

“What's the trouble here?” one asked Benny.

“I'm fine,” Benny kept saying. “I'm okay. Just take care of my buddy. I'm fine.”

Jonathan regained consciousness in the ambulance and gave Benny a very puzzled look.

"Hospital Express," said Benny.

"Oh, good," he said, closing his eyes. "You got through."

"Yeah," said Benny. "Yeah, I got through."

"I'll fix my own lunch, thank you," said Jonathan, politely refusing Benny's offer of a grilled peanut butter and cheese sandwich.

"It's no problem, Jack. I already got one made."

"Perhaps Shelley would like it."

"I've had two," she replied. "They're really good, Jonathan. You oughta try one."

Benny flipped the sandwich in the frying pan. "It's better with crunchy, but Jon had only plain in the house."

Jonathan sat down at the kitchen table, being careful not to bump his bandaged arm. "I believe you bought that when you were here last."

"Oh, yeah. When someone was going through his second childhood."

"How are you feeling?" Shelley asked Jonathan.

"Fine, thanks," he said with a wry look in Benny's direction. "I got off easy this time. No concussion."

"I must be losin' my touch," said Benny. He tossed the sandwich onto a plate and brought it to the table. He sat down. "I was right about the blood bank. This Perkins fella worked at mercy Central. He was buying blood from our Meet-a-Mate ladies and then reselling it to the hospital at a healthy profit."

"But Miss Elson didn't know about Miss Blair's – aberrational behavior?" Jonathan asked.

"If you mean she didn't know Miss Blair was a vampire, right. Stephanie had plenty of blood for herself, knowing there was no end to the supply of warm bodies. Plus she had Elson for a front. Pretty neat set-up for a woman who must have been a thousand years old."

Jonathan sighed. "You're still going to insist on this vampire story?"

Benny took a bite of sandwich. "You were conveniently out when I fried Miss Blair, or you wouldn't be so skeptical."

"What did you tell the police?"

"Well," said Benny, "when confronted, Perkins confessed to his part in the scheme and told them Stephanie committed all the murders, which was true. I told them Miss Elson shot you and Stephanie killed her. Since there wasn't anything left of Stephanie, the police figured it was all Miss Elson's doing, and they're happy this case is solved. I saved the real story for the Register."

"The real story," said Jonathan. Sometimes it was better just to nod. "Of course."

"There's still one big loose end," said Benny. "But I think I figured it out." He grinned at Shelley. "You called the ambulance, right?"

She shook her head. "Not me. I didn't even know you needed one. I should have known you needed one. But I waited right here till you called me from the hospital."

Benny's grin faded. "But who else knew we were there? Dr. Moorhouse?"

"No," said Jonathan. "What's up? I thought you called."

Benny frowned in thought. He didn't remember very much about the ride to the hospital. He couldn't recall the paramedics' faces, or the type of ambulance; it was all a blur. But

ambulances don't appear out of nowhere, picking up the wounded. You have to call.

I did call, Benny realized, filled with a strange emotion. I called and I got an answer. He looked at Jonathan and at Shelley, his grin back on full power. "Have I got a story!" he said.