

A Frank Callahan Mystery Twofer
The Bashful Vampire Murder
&
The Comic Book Murders

Bob Frey

Van Fleet Books

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The Bashful Vampire Murder

The story begins where other vampire tales end.

1. *Staked*¹

Karl had followed the bloodsucker over the streets of the city. In the maggot of his mind, he had watched him sweep down on his victims like a bird of prey, puncture their necks with his lethal fangs, and drain their blood until they shuddered and collapsed into unconsciousness. Yet he had been powerless to stop him. He would be no match for the creature's superhuman strength. If it came to a fight, the creature would handle him like a baby, and it would be all over in seconds. He watched nervously as the bloodsucker slipped a key into the door, opened it, and entered. And then he held his breath and crossed his fingers until a light went on in a window that was above the store below.

Finally, he had him where he wanted him. After months of dark thoughts, flights of fancy, and maledictions, he had tracked him to his lair. Now it would only be a matter of hours until the sun came up and he could do the job. He tapped the black medical bag on the seat beside him and smiled. His namesake would be proud.

But wait, hold the phone. He hadn't done the deed yet. Don't count your chickens before they hatch, Karl, his father would say. There was still a lot to be done before he could put an end to this lecher. One of the main characteristics of the Van Helsing family had always been resolve. That was how they had become the most celebrated vampire hunters in history, beginning with the renowned Abraham Van Helsing, the original vampire hunter who had tracked and slain the infamous Count Dracula.

Karl peered out the windshield into the eerie twilight and shivered. Why would the parasite choose to live in such a rundown neighborhood? The store beneath his living space looked squalid and barely functional. Several other shops were boarded up and deserted. And the street itself was dingy and dirty and looked as if it hadn't been swept in ages. The bloodsucker had money. Karl knew that. He didn't have to live in such a crummy neighborhood. It was a puzzle, like the creature himself. How could he be so charming and loving in

one moment and so criminal and cold in another?

It had been a long day and he was tired. Karl put his head back against the seat, just for a minute, and the next thing he knew it was daylight. He checked his watch. It was late but not that late. He still had plenty of time to do the deed. He was lucky he hadn't been attacked and robbed, asleep at the wheel like that in this God-forsaken neighborhood. He pushed up his eyeglasses, grabbed his black bag, and got out.

Some locals were already up and around, low lives that looked like they had never done an honest day's work in their lives. That would work to his advantage. Such people wouldn't think twice about him tampering with the lock on the bloodsucker's door. Karl crossed the street, careful to avoid eye contact with anyone, lest they ask for a handout or something even worse.

When he got to the door, Karl took an L-shaped tool out of his pocket and carefully inserted it into the keyhole. While turning the tool with one hand, he inserted a pick with the other and began to lift the pins of the lock one by one. In the old days, when vamps lived in castles and spooky places such as that, there was no need for a skill like lock picking. Nowadays, modern vampires might have locks on their doors like everybody else, so the skill would be a necessity. After several clicks, Karl turned the knob, and the door opened. Smiling, he removed his tools, took a look around, and stepped in.

The hallway was dark and foreboding, just like in the movies. He stood for a moment and let his eyes adjust until a long flight of stairs materialized in front of him. Then he started up. He hoped the creature didn't have anybody up there with him. It was unlikely. Still, you never knew. Well, if he did, Karl was prepared to deal with it.

At the top, he found the doorknob and turned it. The door was unlocked. Carefully, oh so carefully, he pushed it open and entered. Again, it was dark and quiet, as silent as a tomb. A strange odor hung in the air. It wasn't garlic, of that he was sure. Then he realized with a start, it was him. It was the smell of his own body, the smell of funk, fear for his unworthy soul. His hands were sweaty and his mouth was as dry as toast. He had to get a grip on himself. Yes, it was dark in here, in what appeared to be a living room. Yet it was daylight outside and people were out on the street. With all the alcohol the bloodsucker had consumed, he would be asleep, as helpless as a child.

With that thought in mind, Karl stole across the carpeted floor,

went through an entranceway, and took a right. He tried the first door that he came to. It opened with a creak. There in a dim shaft of light escaping from a shutter on a window was a casket silhouetted on a bed. It couldn't have been any better if he had planned it. His heart went pitter pat as his eyes surveyed the room. There didn't seem to be anybody but him and the bloodsucker. Pulling himself together, Karl entered.

Once inside, he couldn't see very well. Despite all his preparation, he had forgotten a flashlight. He could feel a crest or some kind of metal work on the face of the casket, and he was sure he would be able to open it. However, if he opened the shutters to see, he might have a battle on his hands. What to do?

After a moment of contemplation, he sat the black bag on the floor, knelt, and took out the wooden stake and hammer. Then he stood up, felt for the edge of the lid and lifted it. His fear was ill founded. He could see fine. His eyes must have adjusted to the dark. He could make out the profile of the monster's face, and more important, the area of his heart. Cautiously, he placed his hand on the creature's chest and thought he felt a beat. Just to be sure, he carefully opened the bloodsucker's shirt and tried again. Yes, that was it all right, slow and faint in sleep, but nevertheless it was his ticker, the divine spark. Keeping his fingers on the spot, Karl positioned the stake, wrapped his hand around it, raised the hammer, and came down with a thump. To his horror, the bloodsucker let out a blood-curdling scream that almost sent him through the roof.

Dizzy and breathless, Karl screwed his courage to the sticking place and shuddered as blood oozed out onto his hands. He should have expected it, the yell. Damn, you couldn't drive a wooden stake through someone's heart without him yelling about it. Karl remembered the stethoscope he had brought along just in case, but now he was sure he didn't need it. The creature was dead and gone. Nobody could live through that. He would never prey on any one again. His bloodsucking days were over.

Karl's happiness turned to panic after he went back down the stairs and opened the door. In broad daylight, several hooligans were stripping his car. Karl ran at them full speed, screaming all the way. However, instead of running off as he expected, they simply stopped and stood their ground. "Hey, that's my car," he said.

"So?" one boy said with a grin.

"So leave it alone, will you?"

“Who's gonna make us?” the boy said.

“Yeah, who's gonna make us?” the other boys chimed in.

“Me,” Karl said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handgun.

“Now hold on, Mister, don't do anything stupid,” the boy said. He dropped a hubcap and stood up.

At that moment, Karl heard the wail of a siren and saw a black-and-white come lumbering down the street. The boys disappeared like wild horses, and Karl was left all alone with the revolver in his hand. As the door of the squad car opened and a pudgy cop climbed out, Karl slipped the gun back into his pocket.

“What's going on?” the cop said. Then he stopped dead in his tracks. “Holy cathedrals, look at this.” He turned to his partner who had come around from the other side of the cruiser.

Karl looked down. His hands were covered with blood. It was too late to wipe them off now.

The Comic Book Murders
Characteristic kills

1. Mr. Freeze

His eyes jumped when the spray hit his face and his hands flew to his throat in panic. He screamed as he clawed at the crystals in a desperate struggle for survival. Another blast blanketed his eyeglasses and filled his mouth and he wheezed and gurgled and violently gasped for air. He turned in terror as another burst wrapped his head in a shroud, stopping him dead in his tracks. With one last cry, he reached out with his hand and collapsed to the ground and began to shake. A moment later he was still.

The figure in the mask bent down, put an ear to the fallen man's chest, and listened. Momentarily it raised its head, glanced around, then listened again. Removing its heavy gloves, it hurriedly went through the horizontal man's pockets, rolled him over, pulled out his wallet, and slipped off his watch. The masked figure then stood up and studied its prey as it slipped the gloves back on. Shaking its head, it turned, and walked away.

"Carbon dioxide, as any schoolboy knows, is exchanged for oxygen in the lungs, and both are carried in the blood by hemoglobin. If the concentration of CO₂ increases, it displaces oxygen and asphyxia, or oxygen deprivation, results. This, in turn, can cause a lack of oxygen in the body, which if not corrected rapidly leads to unconsciousness and possible brain damage." The coroner turned to Frank Callahan. "Detective, this poor fellow died of shock, by a heart attack. You might say, he was done in by a fire extinguisher."

So that's what it was. Callahan hadn't known what to make of it when he and Barry arrived at the crime scene. He had been roused from his bed by a LAPD dispatcher's call around midnight, then dressed in the half light spilling in from the bathroom, so as not to disturb his live-in lover, Carlton, or Car as everybody called him. Twenty minutes later, Callahan had met his longtime partner, Detective Barry Jennings, on a residential street in Brentwood, a small city in West LA. The victim's face was a train wreck. The skin

was red, bloated, and blistered, and crawling with purple splotches. Deep black circles framed his eyes like those of a panda.

"Gee, he looks like he's been out in the sun too long," Barry said. "Got himself a real bad burn. Whatta ya think happened?"

"I don't know," Callahan said. "The couple who found him said a dog on a leash led them back to the body. I'd say the vic was taking the pooch for a walk and the assailant attacked him with some kind of chemical, threw something in his face."

"Yeah, like a sunlamp."

Callahan looked at his partner and blew out a burst of air.

Barry grinned. "Sorry."

"Like I said, it looks like the killer attacked him with some kind of chemical. Only thing is, there doesn't seem to be any trace of it. His clothing is perfectly dry. There's no residue or puddles. No other evidence except for a tube of lip balm that could belong to the victim, the killer, or neither one." Callahan bent down and took a whiff of the body. "There's no smell that I can tell. It's a real puzzle."

"What about the blood stains around his mouth?" Barry said. "Maybe he was strangled. That's a classic sign of burking, right?"

"Possible, I guess. But it's hard to tell with the charred skin around his neck. And look at his clothes, at his shirt and tie. There doesn't seem to be any sign of a struggle. Plus his fingernails look clean."

"Hey, Frank, we got that neighbor who thinks he heard something."

Callahan turned and saw an elderly man in a bathrobe standing with the watch commander. They were just outside the glare of the forensic lights. He and Barry ambled over.

"Frank, this is Mr. Christopoulos," Sergeant Marcos, the watch commander said. "He lives in the apartment building right behind us. Here where the homicide took place. Mr. Christopoulos, this is Detective Callahan."

Callahan shook the man's hand. "What did you hear?"

"Well I was watching a movie on TV when I heard a lot of screaming and a dog barking. I went to the window but I can't see out here on the street. It didn't last long, so I paid it no mind and went back to the movie."

"What time was that?"

"The movie started at eleven. I would say it was about eleven fifteen, eleven twenty, something like that. Funny coincidence."

"How's that?"

"The movie I was watching was a murder mystery."

"Yeah, pretty grim," Callahan said. "Anything else?"

Mr. Christopoulos tapped his thick moustache. "No, that's about it."

"Thanks, sir, for coming forward. I appreciate it."

"Look at his face," the coroner said. "Note the black areas of necrosis, the blood blisters, the scabbing—all indications of severe frostbite or burn. He looks like he was left out on a mountaintop someplace. Carbon dioxide gas released from a steel cylinder, such as a fire extinguisher, is extremely cold. Merely getting some on your skin can cause blisters. And this poor guy looks like he took a bucketful."

Callahan nodded. He could smell the rank odor of human waste that always seemed to be present in autopsy rooms. "Time of death?" he said.

"My guess is he went into cardiac arrest in a matter of minutes. When I got to the crime scene there was no sign of livor mortis so I figured he had been dead a couple of hours. I would say somewhere between eleven and eleven-thirty p.m."

"Well the time of death fits with the Greek guy's statement," Callahan said. He picked up his coffee from his desk. The West LAPD on Butler Avenue was quiet this time of the day.

"What kind of a crazy would assault someone with a fire extinguisher?" Barry said.

"Beats me. Poor guy. Gets home from a movie, takes the dog out for a walk, and boom, he's dead, just like that."

"What kind of a salesman was he?"

"According to his wife, Cummings sold office equipment, file cabinets, chairs, stuff like that."

"You think it was a simple 211?"

"I don't know. Why go to all the trouble of frosting a guy to lift his wallet when you could just rob him with a heater or a blade? You'd have to be some kind of lunatic to do that."

"Sounds like Mr. Freeze."

"Who?"

"Mr. Freeze. He was this character in Dick Tracy who was screwy. He wore this cold suit, see, and he killed his vics with a gadget called a cold gun. Froze them into a solid block of ice. He

was some kind of scientist or something."

"Mr. Freeze, huh?"

"Yeah, he was an expert in psychogenetics or something like that. You know, something that had to do with temperatures."

"You mean cryogenics?"

"Yeah, that's it. He wore this neat cryogenic suit like an astronaut's to keep his body temperature below freezing. He had been in this industrial accident and he needed to stay cold to survive. His wife had some kind of a terminal disease. He wanted to freeze her, to preserve her until they came up with a cure. As a kid—"

Callahan put up his hand. "Okay, enough Mr. Freeze already." He stroked his long chin. "I wonder if our killer wore something like that to protect himself."

"You mean like a cold suit?"

"No, like a gas mask. Then again, it was outside so he probably didn't need it. I don't know. Maybe we should talk to somebody."

"You mean like a firefighter?"

"Yeah, or maybe the people who make fire extinguishers. There's also the guys who go around and inspect them to make sure they're working properly. They should know about them."

"And they have access to them too," Barry said. "Maybe we could find out who made the one the killer used and how you go about getting one."

"You buy them."

"Or steal them, I bet. Gee, maybe the killer was hard up and couldn't afford a heater. Maybe it was just a simple case of robbery after all."

"Yeah, CO2 tanks are one of our most common types of extinguishers," the fire captain said, nodding. "They're good for offices and homes because they don't make a mess or leave a lot of residue. They're especially good for electrical fires like computers and stereos because they don't damage them like some of the chemical foams do."

"Could one be used to kill somebody?" Callahan said.

"A CO2?" The captain leaned against the fire truck and mulled it over. "It might in a small space like a closet or something." He shook his head. "But not outside as you described."

"How about knocking somebody unconscious outside?"

"It could. Even so it would have to be a fairly large cylinder. They

discharge very quickly. It could burn you pretty good though."

"Yeah, we've seen what they can do, haven't we, Barry? How long do they last if you don't use them?"

"It varies. Most come with a warranty of about five years. That is if they're properly serviced."

"Any problem with people swiping them?" Barry said.

"Some. That and vandalism, especially in schools and public places where they're out in the open. In fact, some companies make what is called a theft stopper. It sounds an alarm if the unit is moved from its proper place."

"I see where Captain Cain, the smoke eater we talked to the other day, got into a little fracas with another firefighter." Callahan passed the newspaper to Barry, who sat on a chair beside Callahan's desk. "Yeah, a guy who was dismissed for insubordination came in and threatened him with a handgun. But some of the other smoke eaters jumped him and took the piece away from him."

Barry's eyes ran down the story. After he finished, he folded the paper and set it down. "Geez, they're the worse kind, these guys who get fired from their jobs. Maybe we should pick this bozo up for questioning, Frank. Maybe he's pissed, has a hard on for the whole world, and wants to do everybody in. He would know all about fire extinguishers, wouldn't he? Just as the other firefighter did."

Callahan blew out a puff of air. "C'mon, partner, get real. We can't pick up every ex-firefighter or everybody who gets fired from their job. We'd be picking up half the country."

"You got anything better, wise guy?"

"Well, no."

"Then let's do it. What do we have to lose?"

"Insubordination, my ass," Joe Rickenbacher said. He was a husky guy with a bald head, an earring, and an attitude. "Cain just had it in for me, that's all. He criticized every frigging thing I did. He was never satisfied. He's a real ass kisser, an everything-by-the-book kind of guy. No sense of humor, you know what I mean?"

"*Times* said you were dismissed for insubordination and conduct unbecoming a member of the LAFD. It said you had a confrontation with Captain Cain during which you cursed him and physically threatened him. I'm sure you've read the story." Callahan held up the newspaper. He and Barry were seated across from the suspect in an

interrogation room at the West LA police station.

"I don't care what the *Times* said. It didn't say I was railroaded, did it? Or that the board violated due process by firing me without a hearing? Or that my first amendment rights to freedom of speech were violated by punishing me for expressing myself to a superior officer? They didn't print that in their rag, did they?"

"What was the confrontation about?"

"Like I told you, Cain was on my case. He had it in for me. I didn't like him and I told him so. He's a nitpicker, a control freak, a real shitface."

"He says he told you time and time again not to watch porn on the department's computers or to smoke pot at the fire station. He also said you were in constant dress violation by wearing that earring with your firefighting gear. He claims you dogged it on fire runs, putting other firefighter's lives in jeopardy."

"That's all a bunch of crap. Oh I might have watched some porn a couple of times and had a joint or two. The rest of it is pure bullshit and he knows it."

"Where were you a week ago Saturday night about eleven o'clock?"

"What do you want to know that for? How come you cops are always harassing innocent people?"

"Just answer the question. Do you know where you were?"

"I was at home watching the tube."

"Do you have any witnesses, anyone who can confirm that?"

"Yeah, my wife and kids. Hey, what the hell's going on? Are you talking about the guy that was killed with the CO2 tank in Brentwood? I didn't have anything to do with that. Holy smoke!"

"I didn't say you did, chum. I'd say you were in deep enough shit as it is. Threatening someone with a deadly weapon is a felony. It could get you a nice vacation in the slammer."

"So whatta ya think?" Barry said. He shook a generous amount of salt and then some pepper on his dog, put it in his mouth, and crunched it. "Hey, that's good kraut," he said.

"I don't know," Callahan said. "His wife claims he was home the night of the homicide. But she also said he went out for some pizza, although she wasn't sure exactly what time."

"He did have a motive, getting fired from his job like that." Barry went back to his dog.

Callahan watched a pretty girl rattle by on rollerblades as the traffic behind her on Ocean Avenue in Santa Monica moved in a steady stream. "Motive? Good grief, Barry, if every guy who got fired from his job went out and killed somebody, there wouldn't be anybody left."

"Maybe so. Yet I still think we ought to keep our eye on that bird. I don't like him. He has a frigging attitude."

"Well that doesn't make him a killer. And why go to all the trouble of assaulting someone with a fire extinguisher? He has no connection to the deceased that I could find. It just doesn't add up."

Barry took a drink of his soda and wiped off his mouth. "Maybe we're making too much out of it, over thinking, you know what I mean? Like I said before, it might just be a random 211. A guy's hard up for some cash, grabs a fire extinguisher, knocks the guy cold, and lifts his wallet. As simple as that."

"Weird," Callahan said. "But possible, I guess."