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Live-In Help

Margaret L. Carter

At first, Julie thought the attic had mice.

She wouldn't have been surprised to see them, considering that the core of the house dated to pre-1700, and the building stood on the outskirts of Newport next to a weedy vacant lot. But why should rodents invade the attic and not the kitchen or the detached garage?

While hauling boxes of baby clothes (a nuisance, but giving them away would invite a surprise pregnancy) and past years' Christmas cards up the folding steps, Julie caught Smog, the gray Maine Coon cat, sniffing at a hole in the baseboard. She deposited a box in the middle of the attic floor and tiptoed over to check the cat's find. Smog growled and lashed his bushy tail as she knelt down with a flashlight. Something was blocking the hole. Dried leaves or crumpled paper? Looked like a mouse nest, all right.

She fastidiously gripped the edge of the wad between thumb and forefinger. When she tugged, it came loose in a single lump. Yellowed paper. Smog's back fur bristled, and he let out a yowl. Julie thought she glimpsed a brownish blur flash past. Smog leaped up and darted down the steps.

If that was a mouse, she thought with a shiver of disgust, *I hope he hunts it down*. She unfolded the paper, wondering how old it might be. She and Ted could have qualified for Navy housing on the base, but a preliminary scouting tour with a realtor had unearthed this place at a bargain rent. Its age, despite the later accretions and (thank goodness)

modern plumbing, fascinated her. The roof even featured a nineteenth-century "widow's walk," accessed by a trap door in the ceiling of the upstairs hall. They would never be able to afford to buy such a house, so why not snap up the chance to enjoy it for a couple of years? She'd been disappointed to find it unfurnished, but of course the owners wouldn't have left any valuable antiques in place. Maybe this bit of paper would contain something interesting.

Just a page of script in faded sepia ink, apparently Latin, of which she knew only a few words, from plaques and mottos. Probably some long-dead schoolboy's exercises. She absentmindedly stuffed the page into the top of a box filled with threadbare blankets.

Again she beamed the flashlight into the small hole. The cavity looked clean. It didn't smell any worse than the overall odor of dust and mildew. Inhaling deeply to check, she sneezed. *Enough of this grubbing around for one day*. Meg would be getting off the high school bus any minute, with Mark home from middle school soon after. Julie wanted to get in some of "her own" work before she had to start supper. Since the move, she'd had to neglect her soft-sculpture dolls, which she sold steadily, if modestly, by mail and at local bazaars. It helped her self-image to have a source of income she could carry across country with her. The wives' club on base was sponsoring a fall craft show in two months, and Julie wanted to be ready for

it.

Down in the kitchen, she tried to ignore the piled-up moving cartons and the grimy linoleum. The adjoining room, the enclosed remnant of what had once been a back porch, was neat and swept, stocked with her sewing supplies. If she could find more than an hour at a stretch to work there. Shaking her head, she closed the door to shut out the silent accusation of the messy kitchen. *What I need is a maid.* She picked up the pattern of a sailor-boy doll she'd begun designing the week before. *No, make that a three-person cleaning team.*

She discovered she'd been mistaken about the "mouse-hole" soon after she and Ted gave their first party for some of his fellow instructors at Officer Candidate School. She awoke on a Saturday morning to the gloomy thought of dirty glasses and used paper plates strewn over the living room, dining room, kitchen, and screened front porch. When the last of the guests had left at oh-one-thirty, she'd paused only to wrap and refrigerate the leftover sausage rolls before stripping off her clothes and flopping into bed.

She raised on one elbow to squint across Ted's inert body at the digital clock on the other side of the king-size bed. Eight thirty-five. She didn't have to get up so soon on Saturday, but she knew the vision of beer stains on the coffee table and burgeoning mold colonies in the kitchen wouldn't let her sleep any longer. And the cat was probably gorging himself sick on crumbs from the chips and dips.

Julie sat up. No sound from the kids, of course. She gently poked Ted in the ribs. He emitted a faint snort and rolled over. "Slug," she muttered. *Well, the sooner I start, the sooner it'll be done.*

After a hasty wash-up, she scrambled into shorts and T-shirt and headed for the living room. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs and scanned the scene with her mouth open.

No glasses with puddles of beer, wine, or cola. No crumbs ground into the carpet. No paper plates and plastic forks. Not even any stale-smelling ashtrays. The room looked as if that cleaning crew she'd fantasized about had blown through like a benign monsoon. It even smelled clean, not like pine or lemon cleanser, but like a garden after a spring rain.

Julie shook her head. *Now I'm imagining fragrances, and thinking like a commercial on top of it!*

A quick peek into dining room and kitchen showed that whoever had beaten her to the mess hadn't missed any of it. Even the trash bags had disappeared. One strange touch, though – the glasses were displayed on the counter instead of put away in the cabinet. Displayed in a rectangular pattern, at that. *Weird. Well, I'm not complaining.*

She crept down the hall to listen at the kids' bedroom doors. Silence. She didn't really think Meg and Mark had done the work, anyway. Aside from the cataclysmic personality change that would entail, they couldn't cooperate on a task without yelling at each other like rival fans at the

Army-Navy game. But when had Ted managed to clean up? He'd staggered off to bed right along with her, and surely she would have awakened if he'd tried sneaking out at dawn to surprise her.

Why quibble about details? Let the gift horse sleep; he's earned it. After bringing in the newspaper and feeding the cat, she settled at the kitchen table with a pot of coffee.

She luxuriated in the quiet for some time before Ted appeared, his thinning blond hair uncombed, his usual faded Bermuda shorts displaying his jogger's build. She jumped up and threw her arms around his neck. "Thanks a million for cleaning up." When he opened his mouth to answer, she kissed him.

"Umm," he mumbled into her neck. "What are you talking about?"

She pulled back to gaze up at him. "You did a great job, but why on earth did you leave the glasses like that?"

"Huh?" He stared at the counter by the sink. "Hey, not me. Must've been the kids. Does this mean I have to return the kiss?"

She dodged his lips. "What kids? Not ours – you must mean the changelings who replaced them overnight."

Ted shrugged and poured himself a mug of coffee. "Who else? Unless it was a flock of little elves."

Luckily, Julie was alone in the house when the answer popped out at her that afternoon. The kitchen faucet had mysteriously developed a steady leak, and Ted had driven to the hardware store for repair parts. Both Meg and Mark, scenting the threat of work, had run off with friends. As Julie sat at the sewing machine, hemming a doll's skirt, Smog sprinted into the room and skidded to a halt next to the old bureau where she kept fabric scraps and patterns. The cat whipped his tail from side to side and challenged unseen prey with a deep-throated yowl.

Julie edged close to him. "Did you find that mouse? Good boy." She leaned over to peer between the chest and the wall. Yes, she definitely saw something moving. "Hang on, I'll flush it out for you."

She brought a broom from the kitchen and prodded at the thing behind the bureau. It darted out, and Smog pounced. He sat at Julie's feet, growling between his teeth, grasping the creature in his jaws.

No, not a mouse. Too big. Its four limbs dragged on the floor, even though Smog held his chin high. And two of those limbs looked more like arms than legs. Mice could be brown, but they didn't have humanoid faces. And they didn't wear ragged shreds of clothing.

Julie sagged into the rocking chair. *What am I looking at? Whatever it is, can't let him kill it --* She hurried into the kitchen and returned with a large pyrex mixing bowl. The creature was still there. Smog apparently didn't know what to do with it.

"Neither do I, kitty." She crouched next to the cat, holding the bowl poised above him. "Let go! Drop it!" She poked the cat, who must have tightened his grip,

because his prey squealed. Fighting her repugnance – and fear; it might have sharp teeth – she grabbed one of the thing's legs and tugged. The startled cat let go, and she slammed the bowl down over the creature. Smog stalked away, indignant at being robbed of his catch.

Julie sat on the floor beside the bowl and stared at the thing. It was muddy brown and had pointed ears and a shriveled, squashed-in face. The bent limbs were long and stick-thin, like a spider monkey's. She noticed that the hands and feet ended in blunt stubs, with no fingers or toes. It glared at her.

"What in heaven's name is that thing?"

"What do you think I am?" The voice penetrated the dome of the bowl as a querulous squeak. "And are you going to leave me in here forever to suffocate?"

"If you've been inside that hole in the attic for who knows how long," she said, "I'm not sure you can suffocate."

The thing's tone became coaxing. "Let me out, Mistress. I won't run away. You have my sworn word. We can help each other, you know."

She removed the bowl. *I can't be cruel to a helpless animal – or whatever.* Her brain churned, trying to process this anomaly. *Unless I'm dreaming, in which case it doesn't much matter how I treat it – him.* "You cleared up the mess last night, didn't you? How?" *No fingers.*

"By magic, how do you think?" He delivered an awkward seated bow. "And my apologies, mistress, for the damage to your pump."

"My what?" Julie shook her head to settle the rattle of confusion. "You mean the faucet? You did that?"

He shrugged. "The wonders of this time are new to me. But I trust I performed the other tasks to your liking?"

"Why did you do that?"

"'Twas my duty, since you left such lavish refreshment for me."

"Refreshment?" Did he drink the dregs out of the glasses? *Must have, he couldn't mean stale tortilla chips.* "What are you?"

The mannikin sat cross-legged on the floor with his arms folded. "You'd say a brownie. Or some folk call us boggarts."

"Brownie." Julie rubbed her eyes. *I haven't had enough sleep to deal with this today.* "Aren't you supposed to work for a bowl of milk?"

He sniffed. "Milk, pah! I liked your offering much better. Speaking of drink –"

"What? Oh, sure, wait here." If she played the generous hostess, he might stick around longer. A little man who could clean the whole house by magic had definite possibilities. She poured a couple of ounces of leftover blush wine into a wide-mouthed juice glass and set it on the floor. The brownie extruded an insectoid tongue and siphoned up the liquid without stopping for breath. If he needed to breathe at all.

He smacked his lips. "Ah, that hits the spot."

"Uh – do you have a name?"

His face wrinkled even deeper, in what looked like a frown. "Names have power. We don't just give 'em away."

"Well, I have to call you something besides 'brownie.'" She giggled, quickly biting back the impulse before hysterics could seize her. "How about Charlie Brown?"

The creature snorted but offered no direct objection.

"So, Charlie, how does this deal work? I've never had a live-in brownie before."

"Very simple, Mistress. You set out refreshments for me every night, and you needn't give another thought to your household tasks. You don't bother me, I don't bother you – and keep that beast away from me!" His skinny limbs shivered.

"The cat? I'll shut him in the sewing room at night. I don't want anybody else cleaning in there, anyway." *This will be great! No salary, no record-keeping, no Social Security copayments!* "During the day – well, you could hide in the pantry. I never let Smog into it."

"Good enough." He unfolded himself into a semi-crouch.

"Wait, don't disappear yet! I have to know – how on earth did you get here in the first place?" *Unless I'm dreaming all this.*

The creature shrugged. "A plain enough tale. Mistress Fletcher brought me over from the old country. When the folk of the Massachusetts colony drove her out, she settled here."

"Drove her out?"

"The parson and the elders accused her as a witch. They thought I was a demon familiar." He emitted a creaking sound that might have been a laugh. "Mistress Fletcher grew dissatisfied with my services and stuffed me into that hole." He scowled. "With an incantation writ on parchment to keep me there. So, Mistress, I'm forever in your debt for my release." After bowing to Julie, he vanished in a brown blur.

Rising to her feet, Julie shook her head. *Brownies. No way can I tell Ted about this. He'd think I've totally lost it.*

She glanced around the room, which held no sign of a visitor except the empty glass. *Maybe I have.*

Nevertheless, she left a cereal bowl half full of cheap sherry on the kitchen counter that night. When she woke Sunday morning, she found the house spotless again, scented with that outdoorsy fragrance. The dishes had even been put away. Juice glasses were mixed in with coffee mugs, and the saucers were stacked upside down, but she didn't quibble. Any employee needed time to adjust to a new routine.

In the following two weeks, she got no glimpses of "Charlie," but she saw the results of his magic every day. The copious free time allowed her to get far ahead of schedule in her doll-making, and she placed several new ads in anticipation of filling more orders than she'd previously

had time for. She happily contemplated showing up at the craft fair with more than enough items for the impulse purchasers who might buy an early Christmas gift on the spot but, on cooler reflection, wouldn't bother to order one custom-made.

If Ted noticed how often she replenished the liquor cabinet, he didn't remark on the change. She took care to buy only a couple of bottles of sherry at a time and hide them toward the back. Luckily, the brownie didn't mind the bargain-priced brand. She idly wondered why Mistress Fletcher, the supposed witch, had become "dissatisfied" with such a useful servant. True, the TV often turned itself on in the middle of the night, and one morning Julie awoke to find the Beach Boys' "Little Deuce Coupe" playing on the stereo in perpetual repetition, but those were minor inconveniences.

She got her first inkling of trouble one morning when Ted rummaged through his sock drawer and growled, "What is this, a late April Fool joke?"

Half-asleep, she threw off the sheet and sat up. "Huh?"

He tossed a couple of pairs of socks onto the bed. She unrolled one set, discovering that it consisted of a white and a black. The other turned out to be identical. She giggled. "Hey, at least it's consistent."

He pawed through the drawer and pitched three more pairs toward her. "They're all like that. Aren't you a little too old for this stuff?"

No use trying to explain. And blaming the kids would just complicate matters. "Sorry, I don't know what got into me. Irresistible madcap impulse." She suppressed another giggle.

With an exasperated sigh, Ted snatched up two white socks and resumed dressing.

The next day, Meg's favorite blouse and jeans turned up in Mark's closet. Julie had to take the blame for that error, to prevent fratricide.

Gradually the anomalies became more bizarre -- a crystal vase of rosebuds in the refrigerator, a dozen eggs in Mark's underwear drawer, Smog's food bowl in the oven, the dining room chairs upside down on the patio, the entire contents of the dishwasher stacked in a precarious pyramid on top of the clothes dryer. All except the flatware, which she'd noticed the brownie never touched. Julie was particularly upset when she heard the blender whirring one Sunday morning and found the colorfully confettied remains of the comics inside it. *Well, he did say he had trouble with the "wonders" of the twentieth century.*

Ted began making remarks such as, "You aren't going through the change, are you? I thought you were too young for that." Her denial of responsibility led to Ted's accusing the children, followed by yelling contests.

One evening when Ted, Meg, and Mark were all out, Julie made a closer than normal examination of the liquor cabinet. *Oh, no! Why didn't I think of this before?* The sherry wasn't the only alcoholic beverage whose level had decreased. Ted's seldom-touched bottles of Scotch and brandy were half empty. Charlie hadn't settled for her

"offerings"; he'd started helping himself. Wasn't that against the fairy code of honor? *My brownie is a lush. No wonder the witch fired him.*

If he could use his magic to steal booze at will, stopping the nightly handouts wouldn't make any difference. It might even annoy him, and heaven knew what havoc he'd create if he started *trying* to cause trouble. Julie decided it was past time to learn more about her live-in help.

She spent the next afternoon at the public library downtown, reading an illustrated tome on fairies. The fanciful drawings and conflicting legends didn't inspire confidence. Some of the information seemed authentic, though. She read that a brownie was supposed to appear as a small, brown man in ragged clothes, with no digits on hands and feet. Accurate so far. She hoped the various safeguards against fairy magic were equally reliable. She made a mental note of those that might be of practical use in the home.

What am I supposed to do with him? she wondered while making her preparations late that night, after the rest of the family had fallen asleep. *Put him on Antabuse? Send him to a twelve-step program? Seems cruel just to stick him back in the attic.* Well, she could decide once she'd caught him.

With her supplies ready at hand, she stood in the middle of the kitchen and said in a harsh whisper, "Charlie, come out here. We have to talk." No answer. She raised her voice a bit. "You show yourself right this minute, or I'll sic the cat on you."

He popped out of a corner and appeared at her feet. "Does my work not please you, Mistress?"

"You know darn well it doesn't! You've got my husband thinking I'm crazy. Or blaming me for your boozing!" She knelt beside the brownie, one hand behind her back. "You didn't tell me you had an alcohol problem."

"What problem? All the fair folk enjoy a wee sip of the grape or the grain." A whine crept into his voice. "And you'd indulge, too, if you'd spent nigh three hundred years in a musty hole."

His self-pity kept him from noticing how close she'd sneaked. In one quick stroke, Julie swooped down with the carbonized steel carving knife – and pinned the hem of his smock to the floor. *Cold iron, just like the book said!* Ignoring Charlie's outraged squeals, she grabbed the box of salt she'd left on the nearby counter and poured a circle around the creature. "Shut up, or I'll sprinkle it on your head." He wrapped himself in a ball and fell silent. *Great, the salt works, too.*

Hardening her heart against his pleading expression, she used a second butcher knife to force him into a gopher trap she'd hidden under a pile of newspapers. The clerk at the garden shop had assured her that the cage was made of steel. "I ought to put you right back where Mistress Fletcher left you. I still have that piece of paper with the Latin on it."

"No, anything but that," he whimpered.

Not only did Julie hate the idea of losing her free cleaning service, she almost felt sorry for the grotesque being. "Don't you have any self-respect? Look at you! Do you really want to spend the next however many centuries as a slave to chemical addiction?"

"Give me another chance, Mistress. I'll mend my ways."

Yeah, right. From what she'd read about the problem, addicts would say anything to manipulate people. "Give me your word of honor to do exactly what I tell you." According to the book on fairies, leprechauns and such were absolutely bound by their promises. She hoped that rule applied to brownies.

Charlie nodded with a show of pathetic eagerness. "Yes, yes, you have my sworn word."

"Okay, but remember, if you break it, there's still the cat. And I'm not about to trust you running around loose. Too much temptation." She couldn't get rid of all the liquor in the house; Ted would *really* think she had a problem if she went that far. After a moment's thought, she said, "First off, you're living in that cage." She cut off his squawk of protest by raising the salt box over his head. "I'll keep you in the attic where Smog and the kids won't find you." Neither would Ted, who never bothered with the attic unless she drafted him to carry up heavy items. "You'll get a bowl of milk every night – more than you got when you were trapped inside the wall. I'll let you out once a week to clean up, and if you behave yourself, maybe I'll add a shot of brandy to your supper that night." She knew he ought to quit cold turkey, but she suspected he would rebel at that degree of strictness.

"You're a hard woman," he grumbled. "Almost as bad as the witch."

"If you're good, I might even let you watch TV sometimes. That's the deal. Take it, or out into the cold, cruel world you go."

Folding his arms, he bared his teeth at her.

"Think about it. You expect to find another home? How many people do you think will feed a brownie these days? If they decide you're not a hallucination, they'll probably call an exterminator or turn you over to a gov-

ernment lab."

"I'll take your – deal," he said, still scowling.

"Your promise? You'll obey my orders and return to the cage when you're told?"

"Aye, you have my promise."

"Wonderful." Julie put the knives and the salt away, then poured the brownie a cup of milk. "Drink up. I'll bet malnutrition is part of your problem. You'll see, in the long run this will be for your own good."

And to make sure Charlie got the full benefit of the new agreement, she bought an hour-long videotape on overcoming chemical dependency, which she made him watch every Monday after he finished his chores.

☞ ☞ ☞

AMBER

by Corrine DeWinter

Gather honey, coriander
and charms
for the wide eyed
sleepless child.
I will keep the wolf
from the door,
the trees from beckoning
to you
on restless nights,
the witches from consoling
and bargaining
for earthly secrets,
the seven seas
from swallowing you.
Wonderland trembles
for one so little,
but sleep sound
on the half shell
of dreams,
no gypsy shall win you
with a riddle.