

# A Clean Sweep

Laurell K. Hamilton

It's been said that familiarity breeds contempt. How long can even the extraordinary retain its novelty in an everyday world?

Captain Housework materialized on the doorstep of #11 Pear Tree Lane. His emergency beeper had awakened him, code red. Was it his nemesis Dr. Grime, or the infamous Dust Bunny Gang, or perhaps Pond Scum, the destroyer of bathrooms?

He had to levitate to reach the doorbell. As crimefighters go, Captain Housework was on the short side. His white coveralls, silver cape, and mask—formed of a billed cap with eye holes—were gleam-ingly clean. He stood on the top step shining as if carved from ivory and silver.

He looked perfect, crisp, and clean. And he liked it that way.

The door opened, and a woman dressed in a bathrobe stared down at him. "Oh, it's you. Please come in." She held the door for him, waving him in eagerly.

He stared up at her, a grim smile on his face. "And what dastardly villain is plaguing your home, dear lady.."

She blinked at him. "Dastardly villain?" She gave a small laugh. "Oh, no, it's nothing like that. My husband made the call.

Did he say we had a supervillain in the house?"

Captain Housework drew himself up to his full three feet and said, "It was a code red, Madam. That means a supervillain has been spotted."

The woman laughed again. "Oh, dear, no. I've got a party of twelve people coming at six o'clock and my maid cancelled."

"You called the superhero hotline because your maid cancelled." His voice had a harsh edge to it that the woman didn't seem to notice.

"Well, my friend Betty had you over when her kids threw that wild party. You did miracles with her house."

"I remember the incident. I made it clear that it was an exception to the rules that I aided her."

"But you've just got to help me, Captain Housework." The woman went to her knees, gripping his arms. "Please, it's too late to turn to anyone else." Tears glittered in her eyes.

Captain Housework crossed his arms across his thin chest, his mouth set in a firm line. "Madam, I am a superhero, not a maid. I do not think you realize how terrible my foes can be. Have you ever had a wave of black mildew engulf your husband and

eat him to the bone before your eyes?"

She blinked at him. "Well, no, but surely that doesn't happen all that often. In the meantime, couldn't you help me, just this once?"

It was true that his archenemies had been lying low for a while. Work had been slow. He stared into her tear-stained face and nodded. "All right, but only this once."

She hugged him, crumpling the bill of his mask. He pushed away from her, straightening his costume. "That will not be necessary. I will get to work at once, if that is all right with you?"

"Oh, that's wonderful. I'll just go get dressed." She raced up the stairs, trailing some floral perfume behind her.

Captain Housework sniffed. He preferred the cleaner scents of household air fresheners. Pine was his favorite.

He sighed and walked into the living room. For a moment his heart beat faster; surely such destruction could only be the work of the Dust Bunny Gang. Sofa cushions were scattered across the floor. A vase had fallen on its side, spilling water. Dying flowers made a sodden mess on the grey carpet. The fireplace was choked with ash and the partially burned carcass of a doll. Toys covered nearly every inch of the floor.

Children. The only natural disaster that could rival Dr. Grime.

Perhaps children weren't as deadly, but they were just as messy.

This was the fifth time in a month that he had been called in and found no archvillain but only bad housework. His name was being traded around like that of a good maid. He, Captain Housework, had been reduced to drudgery.

He, who had fought the great dust invasion of '53, would have no problem with this mundane mess. His superhuman speed would make short work of it all. But that wasn't the point. People did not call The Purple Avenger to change a tire. They called him to save their lives.

Once they had called Captain Housework for the same thing. Dr. Grime had nearly engulfed St. Louis in a giant rain of grease. All cars, trains, and planes had come to a slippery halt. Pedestrians caught in the first greasy rain had melted into puddles of sizzling goo. They had called for Captain Housework then, and been glad to have him. But that had been ten years ago.

Dr. Grime had retired. The Dust Bunny Gang had split up over contractual differences. There just weren't that many supervillains who specialized in true dirty work.

It wasn't really the mundane cleaning that bothered him. It was the repeat business. People had been calling him back again and again to clean up after them. He'd get a house spotless, perfect, and they'd mess it up again.

It was a never-ending drudgery. Even with superpowers over dust and dirt, he was tired of it. They were taking advantage of him. But without any supervillains to fight, a superhero had to fill some need. It was in his contract that he had to be useful to mankind, just as a supervillain had to harm mankind. If all the villains needing his special powers to thwart them had retired, he had to answer the call of need.

Captain Housework sighed and waved a white-gloved hand. The sofa cushions danced back in place, fluffing themselves before snuggling down. "I am a glorified maid," he said softly to the empty room.

The kitchen was the worst. Dishes were stacked nearly to the top of the windows, thick with grease and moldy food. He conjured a super-scouring wind and cleaned them with the force of a hurricane without cracking a dish.

When every room was spotless, he appeared before the woman who had summoned him. "The house is clean, Madam."

"Oh, gee, thanks." She held out money.

Captain Housework stared at the offending hand. "I am a superhero, not a servant. I don't need your money." His voice was very tight, each word bitten off.

"No offense, I'm just grateful."

"Be grateful and don't call me again."

"But I want you to come back after the party and clean up," she said.

"You what?"

"The maid can't come tonight at all. I thought you'd clean up after the party. The superhero hotline said you would."

"They said I would?"

She nodded. "The operator on the hotline said you would be happy to be of service. She said something about superheroes needing to be of service to mankind."

Captain Housework stared at the woman for a few heartbeats. He saw it all then, his future stretching out before him. An eternity of cleaning up after parties, repairing the damage of crayon-wielding tots and unhousebroken dogs. He saw it all in the blink of his sparkling eyes. It was intolerable, a hell on earth, but the woman was right. A superhero had to serve mankind. If all he was good for was maid service, then so be it.

The woman had been putting on red nail polish. She reached back to tighten the lid, but was unwilling to grip it with her wet nails. The bottle went spinning. Bright red liquid poured out onto the white carpet, trickled down the newly polished vanity.

"Oops," the woman said. "You'll get that, won't you? I've got to finish getting ready; the guests will be here any minute." She stood, waving her nails to dry them. She left him staring at the spreading red stain on the carpet he had just shampooed.

His tiny hands balled into fists. He stood trembling with rage, unable to utter a word. An eternity of this—it was intolerable!

But what else could he do? Talk Dr. Grime out of retirement? No, the villain had made millions off his memoirs. *Memoirs of the Down and Dirty* had been a best-seller.

Captain Housework stared at the slowly hardening stain, and a great calmness washed over him. He had an idea.

The police found fourteen skeletons at #11 Pear Tree Lane. The bones were neatly arranged, sparkling with polish,  
lacquered to a perfect finish. The house had never been so clean.