

## The Amorous Broom

A John Justin Mallory story

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John Justin Mallory, his feet up on his desk, his battered fedora worn at an angle, was studying the Racing Form.

"You know," he announced, "I think I just may take a run out to the track this afternoon."

"Oh my God!" breathed Winnifred Carruthers, his pudgy, pink-faced, gray-haired partner. "That poor creature is entered again, isn't he?"

"How did you guess?" asked Mallory.

"It's the only time you ever go to the track—when Flyaway's running."

"'Running' is an overstatement," said the not-quite-human creature perched atop the refrigerator in the next room. "Flyaway plods."

"When I want advice from the office cat," said Mallory irritably, "rest assured I'll ask for it."

"That's what Flyaway does," continued Felina from atop the refrigerator. "He rests assured."

"If you ever leave here," said Mallory, "don't apply for a job as a comedian."

"Why should I leave here?" purred Felina. "It's warm and dry and you feed me."

"How many races has Flyaway lost in a row now, John Justin?" asked Winnifred.

"Fifty-three."

"Doesn't that suggest something to you?" she persisted.

"That it's past time for him to win."

"You are the finest detective in this Manhattan," continued Winnifred. "How can you be so stupid?"

"O ye of little faith," said Mallory.

"You've solved a lot of tricky cases, and put yourself in harm's way at least half a dozen times. Did you do it solely so you could keep losing your money on Flyaway?"

"When I go out on a case, my function is to detect," replied Mallory. "When I go to the track, my function is to bet. Why do you have such a problem with that? Mallory & Carruthers is paying its bills. This is discretionary income."

"I don't have a problem with betting," shot back Winnifred. "But betting involves an element of chance. Putting your money on Flyaway doesn't."

"You're going to look mighty silly when he finally wins one," said Mallory.

"Well said!" cried a voice. "You tell 'em, John Justin Mallory!"

Mallory was on his feet in an instant. "Who said that?" he demanded.

Felina leaped catlike to the floor and bounded into the office. She grinned, extended a shining claw at the end of her forefinger, and pointed it toward a broom that was leaning against a wall in the far corner.

"Come on," said Mallory. "Brooms don't talk."

"I most certainly do," said the broom.

Mallory stared at the broom for a moment, then looked at Winnifred. "Yours?" he asked.

"I never saw it before," she said.

"Then what's it doing here?"

"Why not ask it?" suggested Winnifred.

"I've never spoken to a broom before. How does one address it?"

"You may call me Hecate," said the broom.

"Isn't that a witch's name?" asked Winnifred.

"She was my first owner."

"All right, Hecate," said Mallory. "Who and what are you, and more to the point, what are you doing in my office?"

"I want to be near you, John Justin Mallory," said Hecate.

"Why?"

"The Grundy hates you. Isn't that enough?"

"Okay, he's behind this, right?"

"No, he doesn't know I'm here," said the broom.

"It's pretty hard to keep a secret from the most powerful demon on the East Coast," said Mallory. He paused. "Where does the Grundy think you are?"

"Hanging on his wall with his other magical trophies."

"Why aren't you there?"

"He's mean and cruel and unfeeling," complained the broom. "He put me there a year ago and hasn't let me down since. I made up my mind to escape months ago, but I didn't know where to find sanctuary until he started complaining about you. Mallory did this, and Mallory did that, and Mallory thwarted him again—so I knew that you were the one person who could protect me from the Grundy." Hecate paused. "He was wrong about you. You're beautiful, John Justin Mallory."

Mallory turned to Winnifred. "Call a cab."

"What are you going to do?" asked Hecate apprehensively.

"I'm going to return you to your owner before he rips my office apart looking for you."

"But you can't! He'll just hang me on that wall again!"

"We all have problems," said Mallory, walking across the room toward the broom. "Yours will have to be resolved without my help."

He picked up the broom and began carrying it to the front door.

It squealed.

"Oh, my! What strong, manly hands you have, John Justin Mallory!"

"Where the hell's your voice coming from?" asked Mallory.

"Why?"

"I want to shut you up. I thought I'd put some tape over your mouth."

"I'll never tell!"

Mallory opened the door, then looked back over his shoulder. "Tell them I'll pay double if the cabbie doesn't ask any questions."

"Right," said Winnifred.

It took Mallory twenty minutes to drive to the Grundy's Gothic Baptist castle at the north end of Central Park. He handed the broom to one of the Grundy's trolls, then walked back across the drawbridge, climbed into the cab, and had it drive him home.

When he entered the office the broom was propped against his desk, waiting for him.

"I forgive you, John Justin Mallory," it said.

"How the hell did you get back ahead of me?"

"I'm a magic broom. I can fly. My original mistress and I used to fly everywhere. She loved the loop-the-loop, before my arthritis made it too difficult."

"Forget all that," said Mallory. "You don't seem to understand the situation here. You belong to my mortal enemy, a being who can bring freezing weather to the whole damned city just by blowing on it. He touches things and they die. If he finds you here, he's going to think—"

"Think what?" interrupted a familiar voice.

"Oh, shit!" muttered Mallory, turning to face his newest visitor. "Doesn't anyone ever knock or even use a door anymore?"

The creature facing Mallory was tall, a few inches over six feet, with two prominent horns protruding from his hairless head. His eyes were a burning yellow, his nose sharp and aquiline, his teeth white and gleaming, his skin a bright red. His shirt and pants were crushed velvet, his cloak satin, his collar and cuffs made of the fur of some white polar animal. He wore gleaming black gloves and boots, and he had two mystic rubies suspended from his neck on a golden chain. When he exhaled, small clouds of vapor emanated from his mouth and nostrils.

"Why should I knock?" replied the Grundy. "Did you knock when you stole my broom from me?"

"I didn't steal it," said Mallory. "Hell, I just drove across the city to return it."

"Yet here it is," said the Grundy, pointing to Hecate.

"Take it," said Mallory. "I didn't ask for it and I don't want it. It's yours."

"How can you say that after all we've been to each other?" demanded the broom.

"We haven't been a thing to each other, and we're never going to see each other again!" snapped Mallory. He picked the broom up and thrust it into the Grundy's hands. "Take it and get the hell out of here."

"You still have no fear of me, have you?" asked the Grundy curiously.

"Let's say I have a healthy respect for what you can do," answered Mallory.

"But no fear."

"Not today. I didn't steal the damned thing, and you must know it. It's not my fault that your broom has a crush on me." He paused thoughtfully. "Maybe you should introduce it to a nice, masculine mop."

"No!" cried the broom. "It's you that I want!"

Mallory and the Grundy exchanged looks, and for the first time since arriving in this Manhattan from his own, the detective actually felt a surge of sympathy for the demon. What could one, even a demon, do in the face of such earnest if misdirected passion?

"Mallory!" screamed the broom, as the Grundy secured his grip on it. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"We'll always have Paris," answered Mallory.

And then the Grundy and the broom blinked out of sight, all trace of them gone in the smallest fraction of a second.

"Well," said Mallory, "what did you think of that?"

"I felt sorry for it," said Winnifred.

"We've got Felina. One freeloader is enough."

"But to spend the rest of its life hanging on a wall . . ."

"It's a broom, for God's sake!" said Mallory irritably. "It doesn't have a life."

"It feels and it thinks," insisted Winnifred stubbornly.

"It feels foolishly and it thinks irrationally," replied Mallory.

"So says the man who's about to bet on Flyaway again."

"Maybe I'll just go to the Emerald Isle Pub and hang one on," muttered Mallory. "I've got to get away from this place."

"I'll go with you," said a voice.

"Shit! You're back again?" growled Mallory, looking around the room until he finally spotted the broom leaning against the fireplace. "Didn't the Grundy just take you away about two minutes ago?"

"He adjusts time for his own convenience," said the broom. "I've been back at the castle for almost three days of subjective time. I had to wait until the room was empty of trolls, goblins, and leprechauns before I made my escape."

"You know that I'm just going to send you back," said Mallory wearily.

"No!" cried the broom. "You can't send me back to a life of humiliation and degradation. Everyone looks at me as if I'm . . . I'm some kind of object."

"I don't know how to tell you this gently," said Mallory, "but you are an object."

"No! I'm a living entity, with hopes and dreams and fears and sexual needs!"

"I don't think I want to hear about this," said Mallory.

"You can't send me back! I beg of you, Mallory—I live only for you! Let me come out and catch criminals with you!"

"I'm not a cop. I don't go out and walk a beat and catch criminals. I'm a detective. I wait until someone hires me."

"You need management. Advertising. Let me write your phone book ads." It lowered its voice to a whisper. "And lose the fat broad. I'm all you'll ever need."

"Well, I like that!" snorted Winnifred.

"Have you any other requests?" asked Mallory sardonically.

"Make sure the cat thing doesn't sharpen her claws on me."

"That's all?"

"That's all—except that I'm dying to see you work. When do you expect to be tailing a villain up a dark alley?"

"Not for at least five or ten minutes," said Mallory sardonically.

"Then I'll just stay right here and admire you," said the broom. "You're beautiful, John Justin Mallory. Exquisite. Perfection personified."

"Thank you," said Mallory in bored tones.

"I'll bet you'd be hell in a heart-shaped waterbed with a mirror on the ceiling."

"Goddammit!" snapped Mallory. "I've been in this Manhattan for almost two years now, and every time I think I'm starting to really understand it, someone says something like that!"

"I understand it," offered Felina. "It's filled with people who were put here to scratch me and feed me." She sidled over to Mallory. "Ask it if it drinks milk."

"You want to share your milk with it?" asked Mallory, surprised.

"If it says it does, I'll scratch it until it's nothing but a pile of wood shavings."

"I heard that!" said the broom sternly. "What kind of monsters do you keep in your office, Mallory?"

The detective sighed. "The kind that won't go away."

"In answer to the cat thing's question, I don't drink milk."

"Just out of curiosity, what do you eat and drink?" asked Mallory, still wondering where its mouth was.

"It's been so long since I've eaten, I can't remember," said the broom. "Not all of us lead a life of privilege. Some of us undergo endless privation while the object of our affection continues to ignore us."

"I've been the object of your affection for about ten minutes, tops," said Mallory.

"Not so. I've loved you from afar for years."

"Years?" demanded Mallory.

"Well, weeks, anyway," said the broom. "Why must you insist on precision, John Justin Mallory? Why don't you just sweep me up in your arms and tell me you return my love?"

"You want a list of reasons?"

"My God, you know how to hurt a person!" moaned the broom. "This is so humiliating—especially in front of the fat broad and the cat thing."

"I'm sure they both appreciate your sensitivity."

"How could they? They're still here!"

"They belong here. You don't."

"How can you say that to me?" demanded the broom. "Who else loves you so completely and unselfishly? Who else hears heavenly music at the sound of your voice? This is the passion of the eons! How can you be so blind to it?"

"I have cataracts," said Mallory dryly.

"I pour my heart out in front of these two unwanted hangers-on, and you make puny little jokes. Do you enjoy causing me such pain?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," admitted Mallory. "But now that you mention it, somehow I don't feel guilty at all."

The broom screamed in agony. "Cut me to the quick! Spit on my love! See if I care!"

"This has gone on long enough," said Mallory. He picked up his phone and dialed the letters G, R, U, N, D and Y in succession. An instant later the Grundy materialized in front of the detective's desk.

"Will you please take your emotionally unstable broom back?" said Mallory.

The Grundy stared at the broom for a long moment, then turned back to the detective. "This broom is proving to be more trouble than it's worth. I hereby give it to you."

"I don't want it."

The broom moaned.

"What you want doesn't interest me," said the Grundy. "The broom is yours."

"You're all heart, Grundy," said Mallory.

"Save your sarcasm, Mallory," said the Grundy. "You will need it for comfort when I am slowly and painfully disemboweling you."

"Were you planning on doing that sometime soon?"

"Soon, late, what is the difference? Death always wins in the end."

"I don't know why you're so anxious to kill me," said Mallory. "I'm the only person you know who's never lied to you."

"Why do you think you're still alive?" said the demon, and vanished.

"Everyone comes and goes so fast here," said Mallory sarcastically. "Somehow, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto."

"My name is Hecate, not Toto," said the broom. "And now we can be together forever and ever. Isn't it wonderful?"

Mallory looked across the room at Winnifred. "You know, I could really grow to hate that goddamned demon."

"What do you plan to do about . . . well, you know?"

"The broom?" he said. "Well, it's here and it's ours. We may as well put it to work."

"I don't do dishes or windows," said the broom.

"You're magic. You have powers. I was thinking of taking you on a case and seeing what you can do."

"You and me? Together? Stalking super-villains to their lairs? Breaking up international espionage gangs?"

"We've got a lady goblin who thinks her husband is cheating on her," said Mallory. "I've got to follow him until I find out if she's right or wrong."

"How mundane!"

"They give you medals for tracking down super-villains," explained Mallory. "They give you money for tracking down straying husbands. We're running a business."

"It makes no difference," said the broom after a moment's consideration. "As long as I can be with you . . . uh . . . can I call you darling?"

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Okay, sweetie," said the broom. "Let's go tracking unfaithful goblins."

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Monday night—the first case:

They had followed the goblin to the corner of Lust and Despair. Then it took a sharp turn down Lust Street.

"We've got the goods on him!" cried the broom excitedly. "He's going to patronize a brothel!"

The goblin turned at the sound of the broom's voice, peered into the darkness until it saw Mallory, and then took off like a bat out of hell.

"Thanks a heap," muttered Mallory.

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Wednesday night—the second case:

They stood in the shadows near the Kringleman Arms Hotel, watching one ersatz Santa Claus after another enter the place with a pot of money in hand.

"So how do you know which ones are legitimate and which are keeping the money themselves?" asked the broom in its normal speaking voice.

Three Santas instantly emerged from the lobby and began firing Saturday Night Specials into the shadows. Mallory could almost feel the bullets whistle by as he raced around the corner and dove for safety behind a pair of trash cans.

"Whatever would I do without you?" said Mallory, checking to make sure he still possessed the requisite number of arms and legs.

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Saturday night—the third case:

An old man, his hair white and thinning, sparse whiskers on his chin, his eyes hidden by a pair of sunglasses, walked down Broadway, beggar's cup in one hand, an ancient cane in the other.

Behind the shades, Mallory was concentrating his gaze on Creepy Conrad's Bizarre of the Exotic, where he was certain that Conrad was showing his client prints of some very revealing, if inartistic, photos prior to blackmailing him.

A woman stopped to toss a few coins into Mallory's cup. She inadvertently brushed against him as she walked by, and to keep in character he pretended to momentarily lose his balance. The woman instantly stopped and helped him regain his equilibrium.

"Take your hands off the man I love!" roared the broom.

Creepy Conrad looked out at the distraction, stared long and hard at Mallory, grinned as he finally recognized him, and quickly substituted some photos of Tassle-Twirling Tessie Twinkle, the lizard girl who shed her skin four times a night at the Rialto Burlesque, for the blackmail shots.

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"Well?" asked Winnifred, looking up from her paperwork as Mallory shuffled into the office.

"If I take that damned broom on two or three more cases, we'll be looking for a new line of work."

"Where is Hecate now?"

"Down at the corner, getting some coffee and a donut."



"Why didn't she just—?"

"She doesn't want me to know where her mouth is," interrupted Mallory. "Right now I'm more interested in locating her jugular."

"So what are we going to do?"

"I've been giving it some thought," said Mallory. "After all, we're detectives. Our job isn't necessarily catching crooks or preventing crimes, it's solving problems . . . so I think it's time we solved our own."

"How?"

"I've got an idea, but I can't do it myself. That damned broom'll never let me out of its sight long enough." He pulled a roll of bills out of his pocket and stared mournfully at it. "This was what I was going to bet on Flyaway the night Hecate showed up."

"What do you want me to do, John Justin?"

He tossed the roll to her. "Buy a gallon of glue, and a few bottles of glitter, and then go over to Morgan the Gorgon's hardware store and . . ."

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"What's going on here?" demanded Hecate.

"Business as usual," said Mallory. "Why?"

"There's nothing usual about this!" said the broom.

"Oh, you mean these?" said Mallory, gesturing to twenty brand-new brooms lined up on the wall, each totally covered with gold and silver glitter.

"Yes, I mean these!" snapped the broom. "They weren't here before! What's going on, Mallory?"

"You were so helpful the last few nights that I decided we could use even more brooms," said Mallory. "And as long as I'm going to be spending all my time with them, why not surround myself with beauty?"

"But . . . but—" sputtered Hecate.

Mallory picked up a broom at random. "Isn't this one gorgeous?" he said, stroking it lovingly. "I'll never be bored on a stakeout again."

"You ingrate!" screamed Hecate. "You heathen! You ungrateful swine! How dare you forsake me for another broom!"

"Another twenty brooms," Mallory corrected it pleasantly.

"And I would have married you!" said the broom. It began weeping copiously. "I'm going back to where I was appreciated. Maybe the Grundy didn't spend much time with me, but I was well-cared for and people stopped by to admire me every day and . . ." Its voice tailed off.

"You can stay here," said Mallory. "I promise to take you out of the broom closet at least twice a year, for exceptionally easy cases. And think of all the fun you can have hanging around with all these truly beautiful brooms. Who knows? Some of their elegance might rub off."

"My mother was right!" cried the broom. "Never trust a man!"

And then, with one final heart-wrenching sob, it vanished as quickly and completely as the Grundy ever had.

"Well, you got rid of it, John Justin," said Winnifred.

"I feel like shit," said Mallory grimly. "Still, it had to be done."

"Don't feel bad," said Felina. "I certainly won't feel bad when I desert you under duress."

"Thanks," said Mallory ironically. "I take enormous comfort in that."

Felina smiled happily. "I knew you would."

"Remind me to check on the broom in a few months and make sure it's doing okay," said Mallory.

"I will, John Justin," said Winnifred.

"Good." He pulled out a tissue, blew his nose, and tossed it into the waste basket next to his desk.

"When did you buy that?"

"Buy what, John Justin?"

"The waste basket with the fancy trim," he said. "I don't remember seeing it before."

"I didn't buy any waste basket," said Winnifred.

The waste basket approached Mallory and rubbed gently against his leg.

"I think I'm in love with you," it said.