

KATHY HOGAN TROCHECK

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Every Crooked Nanny

A CALLAHAN GARRITY MYSTERY

KATHY HOGAN TROCHECK

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A CALLAHAN GARRITY MYSTERY

 HarperCollins e-books

*For my family with love,
especially Tom, Katie and Andy, and all the rest of the Hogans and
Trochecks*

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Although some streets, locations, and neighborhoods referred to in this novel are authentic, the author has occasionally rearranged Atlanta geography to suit her own purposes. This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are the product of the author's imagination, and resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

1

I

KNEW IT WAS GOING TO BE A BAD DAY when Neva Jean called that early in the morning.

“Callahan?” she said hesitantly.

“What is it now, Neva Jean?” She’s one of the best housecleaners I have working for me, but you wouldn’t believe the shit that happens in her personal life.

Neva Jean hesitated again. “No use lying. You’ll find out anyway. Me and Swanelle were on our way to Valdosta Friday night when we got in a big fight. You know Swanelle’s temper. Well, he got so mad at me he pulled into a Waffle House outside Macon, put me out of the truck, and took off and left me standing there. Me with nothin’ but a bottle of Mountain Dew in one hand and the Danielle Steel paperback I was readin’ in the other. Left me standing there in the middle of the parking lot wearing my house shoes.”

I sighed, loudly. “Where are you now, Neva Jean? And how much money do you need to get back here right away? I’ve got you scheduled to work every day this week, and two of the other girls are already out sick.”

There was extended throat-clearing at the other end of the phone. “I’m still in Macon, honey,” she wailed. “Some of the girls working at the Waffle House have been taking turns putting me up, and they let me clean up there in return for meals, but my purse is in Swanelle’s truck, and if I know him, he’s gone off on a toot. You reckon you could wire me bus fare back to Atlanta? You know I’m good for it.”

I scabbled on the kitchen table and found my checkbook. My balance had been lower, but not much. “Will twenty-five dollars do it, Neva Jean?”

“I reckon it’ll have to,” she said resignedly.

“Fine,” I snapped. “Get somebody to give you a ride to Western Union, and I’ll have Edna wire it to you. Make sure you’re here by eight A.M. tomorrow. You’ve got the Mahaffeys and the Greenbergs, and you know they don’t like anybody but you in their houses.”

Just as I banged the phone down—hard—the front door slammed. Into my kitchen, which also serves as office and headquarters for the House Mouse, Atlanta Central Division, a cloud of cigarette smoke preceded a five-foot-two-inch woman in her early sixties. The blue hair was teased and tormented

into an unnatural-looking winged creation I call her Hadassah do. It was Edna Mae Garrity, my live-in office manager and three-pack-a-day mother. She set the morning paper down on the old oak kitchen table we share as a desk and sniffed the air.

“No coffee made?”

“I thought that was your job,” I said, pointedly waving away the smoke she blew in my direction.

She deliberately shot a stream toward me, then turned toward the coffeepot.

“You wanna tell me why you’ve got your panties in a wad so early on a Monday morning?” I flipped open the daily appointment book and showed her a full day’s worth of bookings penciled there in her own rounded, looping handwriting.

“We’ve got a full day’s work, one big new client, and Jackie and Ruby are out sick. On top of that, Neva Jean just called; she’s stuck in Macon with no money and can’t possibly get back until tonight at the earliest.” Maybe I should explain here about the House Mouse. Jesus I hate that name. It’s a cleaning service, actually. After I left the Atlanta Police Department last year, I had the hot idea of becoming a private detective. Lots of guys I know have done it after leaving the department. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but I overlooked one thing—my sex. Once I got my license, I found out fast that unless you’re a man and latch on to one of those high-priced corporate-security consulting gigs, most private detective work is just nickel-and-dime skip-tracing and divorce work. Which I detest.

About then, Edna talked me into buying this cleaning service. Easy money, she’d said. She could get her longtime cleaning lady, Ruby, and some of Ruby’s friends to come to work for us. And with all her contacts, neighbors, and friends, people she knew from the beauty parlor she’d managed for twenty years, we’d be in high cotton. She kicked in some money she’d been putting aside, and I took ten thousand out of my police pension fund and bought the business.

And since the stationery, brochures, and even the pink Chevy minivan that came with the deal all said HOUSE MOUSE, it was cheaper to keep the old name. Which I hate.

We operate out of my little bungalow in Candler Park, a nice tree-shaded neighborhood here in Atlanta. The business has grown steadily, I’ll have to admit. I had no idea how many yuppies there were in this town who can’t bring themselves to scrub their own toilets

but who would gladly pay me or my girls \$75 a half day to do it for them.

The downside is that every week some fresh disaster strikes. Either a heavy-duty vacuum cleaner burns out a motor, or one of the girls (most of whom are at least fifty) throws out her back, or some old biddy calls to complain we waxed her no-wax floor. Kind of makes you long for a nice clean Friday-night domestic knifing.

The disaster du jour on this particular Monday was three clients who expected the House Mouse to show up this morning, and there I was with most of my mice out of commission.

Edna pulled the appointment book away from me and squinted at it through her bifocals. She's too vain to admit she needs glasses, so she makes do with these \$4.99 Kmart specials. She tapped a pencil against her teeth, a sign of deep thought.

"OK, look, Jules," she said patiently. (She knows I hate to be called that.) "The Eshelmans and the Browers can be switched to Wednesday. I'll call them and explain and offer to throw in a free window-washing for their trouble." (We usually charge \$25 extra for windows.) "We can move Dr. Zimmerman too.

"But now these new people, the Beemishes, I hate to disappoint. Florence Foster recommended us to them. He's that big developer, you know, and their place over on Paces Ferry is huge. I quoted Mrs. Beemish one hundred seventy-five a week for the heavy cleaning, since they have a maid who does the light stuff, and she didn't bat an eyelash. If they like the House Mouse, they could set us up with a lot of those rich Northside clients, and then we could quit dicking around with these penny-ante fiftydollar condo jobs."

I shot her a look for her dirty language, but she ignored it. Twenty years in a beauty parlor, and you

pick up some amazing expressions. Anyway, even before my dad died and she went to work, Edna was never what you'd call a Southern Magnolia.

"Well, who do you suggest we get to do the Beemishes?" I asked.

She stared at me and sipped her coffee. "I'd go myself," she said, "but you know how my arthritis is. And they have stairs. Two flights. That's why I jacked the price up so high."

"I guess that leaves the head mouse."

"I guess it does," she agreed, pushing an appointment sheet across the table at me. "Here's our contract, with all the specifics on it and the address. Better take an antihistamine before you go; the place is thick with dust. And

remember, this time vacuum the refrigerator vents and clean the tile grout in all the bathrooms. The last time we sent you out you forgot to do it, and Ruby had to go out the next day to finish up.”

I glared at her, but she was busily filling out the crossword puzzle in the paper and didn't look up. I grabbed the assignment sheet, and she lifted her head and swept her eyes over my torn T-shirt and jeans.

“You're not going to the Beemishes like that, I hope,” she said. “The uniform service delivered some clean smocks and pants on Friday. And don't forget to put on a pair of white shoes. These rich people like to have the help dress like help.”

2

A

AS I PULLED ONTO PACES FERRY ROAD, I suddenly snapped out of the coma I usually fall into when I drive. Ten years as a cop in Atlanta, and in some parts of town I automatically go on autopilot. Buckhead was one of those places. I'd been a patrol officer in Zone 2 for four years, so the billowing white dogwoods, rolling green lawns, high wrought-iron fences, and Italianate mansions were ancient history to me. I sniffed the air for a whiff of my favorite spring scent, new-mown grass. Instead I got a lungful of eau de carbon monoxide. Glancing in the rearview mirror I saw black smoke roiling from the van's tailpipe.

Damn. I had no clue what was wrong. Since I'd bought the van along with the other House Mouse equipment three months ago—it was an '85—I'd already put \$800 into it. Now the thing probably needed a ring job or some other faintly sexual-sounding and equally expensive repair. We'd need at least two or three decent new accounts to pay for that smoke.

The fence in front of the Beemishes' house was actually a pink stucco wall with an elaborate wrought-iron gate set into it. I pulled off the street and stopped at a contraption that looked like an old speaker from the Twilight Drive-In. A red button glowed and a staticbroken voice said, "May I help you?"

I suppressed the urge to order a double Wendy's with chocolate shake, no fries. The gate swung open noiselessly. I noticed the wrought-iron curlicues actually formed interlocking B's. In the corners, iron bumblebees hovered over dogwood blossoms. Nice.

As the van chugged down the driveway, I saw the smoke getting thicker, and now I heard a clunking noise coming from under the hood. Excellent. Now I could not only act like poor white trash, I could look the part.

It was a short but scenic trip to the front of the house. Spanish Revival from the '20s, I'd guess, with graceful balconies on the second story and a massive carved wooden front door. The drive circled around the front of the house, past a round rose garden in full bloom. A slim blond woman dressed in tennis whites was deep in discussion with an ancient black man in a straw pith helmet. I followed the drive around to the side, where a worn pickup truck was parked beside a vintage Cadillac. The help's cars, I guessed. A