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—*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

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*Author of Homemade Sin and
To Live & Die in Dixie*



HAPPY NEVER AFTER

A CALLAHAN GARRITY MYSTERY

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KATHY HOGAN TROCHECK

 HarperCollins e-books

For my own girl group, Las Malas Chicas: Linda Maring Case, Debbie DeWitt Cox, Sue Boore Foster, Nancy Bushman Graff, Debra Justus, and Margaret Crist Wood.

Old friends are the best.

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**Acknowledgments About the Author Praise Other Books by
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1

I

S THIS CALLAHAN GARRITY?”

I'd probably heard that voice thousands of times over the years. Heard that high, gutsy contralto pining for lost love in the sixties girl group hits that made her a star. And later, after the songs ran out in the early seventies, on those sappy BurgerTown radio jingles. But now, on the phone, she sounded like just another pain in the butt.

Of course, the two-pack-a-day Kools habit had laid the sandpaper to the vocal cords, and the hot-and-cold-running Dewar's had done the rest. So when she identified herself as Rita Fontaine, the name meant nothing. “Yes,” I said impatiently. “What's this in reference to?”

What pays the bills around here is House Mouse, the cleaning business my mother and I run. We get a lot of women calling looking for work, but I already had all the mice I could handle. I just assumed Rita Fontaine was looking for a cleaning job.

“I'm Vonette Hunsecker's cousin,” she said, as though that made everything okay. She obviously didn't know that Vonette was not on my hit parade. Vonette is the ex-wife of an old friend and the wife-in-law of the old friend's second wife, Linda Nickells, who is a good pal of mine. 2 / KATHY HOGAN TROCHECK

“Vonette said you could help,” Rita said. Her voice said she doubted it. “You're the private detective, right?”

“That's right,” I said warily. “Just exactly what kind of help do you need?”

She let out a long wheezy sigh. “You never heard of me, of Rita Fontaine, have you?”

“Afraid not,” I said. “Should I have?”

“That depends. Ever hear of the VelvetTeens?”

Who hadn't? I'd been a little kid the year when the VelvetTeens hit it big with “Happy Never After,” but I can still remember watching their first early appearances on *Platter Party*, a locally produced teen dance show that ran on WSBTV, and then later, of course, on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and *American Bandstand*. Since they were from Atlanta, like me, the VelvetTeens were hotter than the Chiffons, the Shirelles, or any of those other mix-'n'-match Motown inventions as far as I was concerned.

Now it came back to me. She was the lead singer. Of course, that voice. Then I had a brief vision: long skinny legs, mile-high beehive, odd almond-shaped eyes fringed by inch-long fake eyelashes.

I said it before I could stop myself. "I thought you were dead."

"Me too," she said.

What do you say to something like that? "I didn't know Vonette had a famous cousin," was all I could think of.

"Vonette was famous too," she said. "You didn't know she was a VelvetTeen?"

All I knew about Vonette was that she was hell on wheels if you crossed her. Before she and C.W. split up, she'd cut out the crotch of every pair of pants the man owned. If Rita Fontaine was Vonette's cousin, famous or not, she probably meant trouble.

"Uh, no," I said. "Listen, what kind of help is it that you need? See, I don't know if Vonette mentioned it, but my real job is running a cleaning business. I just do the private investigation thing once in a while. And right now, I've got..."

"Forget it," she said. "I'll find someone else." And she hung up.

2

W

HEN NEVA JEAN CAME bursting through the back door a few seconds later, bawling her eyes out, I did what Rita Fontaine had suggested. I forgot about her.

“Hey Callahan,” Neva Jean sobbed. Her face was red, and twin tracks of melted mascara ran down her cheeks. She staggered over to one of the oak kitchen chairs and heaved herself down with another loud sob.

I looked at the kitchen clock. The kitchen is as close as we come to an office for the House Mouse. It was only four o’clock.

“Aren’t you through for the day a little early?” I asked. Mondays are usually booked solid for all our girls, and Neva Jean was no exception.

“Oh,” she said, sniffing. “That Mrs. Clifford is so sweet. She saw how torn up I was about Kevin, and she told me to go on home. I’ll dust the Levolors next week.”

“Kevin,” I said quickly, my pulse quickening. “What’s wrong with Kevin?” My older brother and I are not exactly close. He lives right here in Atlanta, but we see each other only on the major family occasions that demand it.

“Oh my Lord,” Neva Jean said, her upper lip trembling like a bad Elvis impersonator. “You didn’t hear? Kevin got run over by a drunk driver today. He’s in an irreversible coma. The doctors say he’ll never walk or talk or nothing. When I heard I nearly died.”

I felt a chill run down my spine. I reached for the phone. “What hospital? And where’s Edna? Does she know?”

I was dialing my sister Maureen’s number at work. She works in Grady Memorial Hospital’s emergency room. She’d know what my brother’s chances were.

Neva Jean was flat-out blubbering now. “I ain’t seen Edna since this morning,” she cried. “After all Kevin’s been through, this had to happen. First that sorry Roberta trying to convince him the baby was his when she knew all along it was really Sean’s, and then being kidnapped by those awful Estonian extremists, and now this.”

I put the phone back on the hook. “What the hell are you talking about?” I demanded. “Who the hell is Roberta? What Estonian extremists? Which