

"A PAGE-TURNER."  
—*Publishers Weekly*

KATHY HOGAN TROCHECK

Author of *To Live & Die in Dixie*  
and *Every Crooked Nanny*

*Homemade*  
*Sin*



A CALLAHAN GARRITY MYSTERY

# KATHY HOGAN TROCHECK HOMEMADE SIN

A CALLAHAN GARRITY MYSTERY

 HarperCollins e-books

*Dedicated with love and gratitude to my spousal unit,  
Tom Trocheck*

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## **Author's Note**

Although some streets, locations, and neighborhoods referred to in this novel are authentic, I have occasionally rearranged Atlanta geography to suit my own purposes. *Homemade Sin* deals with themes of murder, family, and betrayal. Although certain real-life situations may have influenced the plot line, this is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are the product of my imagination, and resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

# 1

N

INE-LETTER HINT,” I muttered, absentmindedly winding a curl around my finger.

“Adumbrate,” said a disembodied voice from behind the sports page. I glared, but he didn’t see me. Too busy reading about the ACC basketball tournament. Edna and I exchanged glances. My mother knows about my love/hate relationship with the Sunday crossword puzzle. I like to save them up and work them on Saturday mornings. I read the clues out loud. Helps me think. But I loathe it when someone tries to help me. And Lord help the person who tries to beat me to the puzzle. Edna knows better than to even talk to me while I’m working the crossword.

Reluctantly, I scribbled the letters in the box. Adumbrate worked, of course. Stupid word. Mac doesn’t even bother with the *Atlanta Constitution*’s crossword puzzle. He usually picks up a Sunday *New York Times* at Oxford Books.

“Any coffee left?” said the voice again. With a small, martyred sigh I put down the paper and got up to refill both our cups.

I caught the telephone on the first ring.

“Callahan?” The voice on the other end was low, muffled. “Yes,” I said. “Who’s this?”

The response was whispered.

“Speak up,” I said. “I can’t hear you.”

“It’s me, Neva Jean,” she hissed. “I can’t talk any louder. I’m at a pay phone.”

I rolled my eyes heavenward. Edna saw me, got up, refilled the coffee cups herself and sat back down.

“Must be Neva Jean,” she told Mac. “She’s got that look.” Mac lowered his paper and looked for himself. “Definitely Neva Jean,” he said.

“Callahan,” Neva Jean said. “You gotta help me. I’m in trouble. Big trouble.” This was not hot news. Neva Jean McComb is rarely not in some sort of mess. She’s a hard worker, one of my best employees, and she usually means well, but Neva Jean is one of those souls who attract trouble like a black dress attracts lint.

“What’s the deal?” I asked, leaning my back against the kitchen counter.

“Where are you, anyway?”

“I’m at one of those fast-food emergency room places, over on Covington Highway,” she said, raising her voice a little. “Swannelle’s bad sick. Callahan, I might of sorta killed Swannelle.”

“Might have?” I repeated. “Speak up, Neva Jean. Is he dead or isn’t he?”

“I don’t know,” she wailed, up to top volume now. “He’s been back in with the doctor for over an hour now. The nurse won’t tell me nothing. For all I know Swannelle’s dead and they’ve already called the cops to come get me.”

“Calm down,” I ordered. “Tell me what happened.”

“It was that goddamned bass boat,” she said, sobbing. “It never woulda happened if it weren’t for that damn boat. I didn’t mean to kill him, really. I was so mad I didn’t know what I was doing. Is pissed off a defense for murder, Callahan?”

“What bass boat? Did you try to drown him or what? Quit crying and quit talking in circles, damn it. Just tell me what’s going on.”

“Swannelle went to the boat show with Rooney. Rooney Deeb’s, that’s his cousin. And when he came home last night he was towing a brand new candy-apple-red bass boat behind his truck.”

Slowly, the motive for Neva Jean’s attempted murder was becoming clear.

“He bought a bass boat? Aren’t they pretty expensive?”

“Twenty-eight frigging thousand dollars,” she said, gasping for breath in between sobs. “Our house didn’t cost but eighteen thousand. And it’s got plumbing. He put eight thousand down—all the money we had saved, and signed a note for the rest. Said he was gonna sell McComb Auto Body and him and Rooney was gonna go on the professional bass fishing tour together.”

“So you had a fight.”

“Not this time,” Neva Jean said. “I was so mad, I thought I’d bust a gusset. I slammed the bedroom door and locked it. Then I took every piece of clothes he owns, and all his bowling and softball trophies, too, and pitched them all out the window. And you know it rained last night.”

“So what did Swannelle do?” I was almost afraid to ask.

“Hollered at the locked door for a while. Stormed around, rippin’ and rantin’. Then he got drunk. Knee-walking, commode-hugging drunk. Then he passed out on the living room sofa. I got up this morning. I saw the little prick, laying there, passed out on my good sofa, and when I looked out the front window and saw that twenty-eight-thousand-dollar bass boat, I got mad all

over again. I picked up the nearest thing to hand, a can of Raid, and I emptied it on that bad boy.”

“You sprayed Swannelle with a whole can of roach spray?” Poisoning was a new frontier for Neva Jean. The last time the two of them got into it, she’d taken a steak

knife and cut off his ponytail while he was sleeping. She’d grazed him once with the pickup truck in the parking lot of Mama’s Country Showcase out on Covington Highway another time. And then there was the memorable time he’d abandoned her in a Waffle House parking lot in Macon.

“It was more like half a can,” she said, calmer now. “We’ve had a bad bug problem this year.”

“What happened?”

She started sniffing again. “It was awful. He started coughing and choking. Grabbing at his neck like he couldn’t breathe. Tried to sit up, but he fell back down again. His eyes were watering and his nose was running, he was drooling like a mad dog, and when I looked down I noticed he’d peed his pants, too. I never seen nothing like it in my life. He was dying, right there in front of me.”

“You got him to an emergency room, right?” I said, encouragingly.

“Yeah,” she said, pausing to blow her nose. “But he’s been in there an awful long time. An hour at least. I just know something awful is happening. You reckon I killed him?”

She had me there. I’m a former cop and I’ve been dabbling in the private investigation business for a couple of years now, when I’m not running my cleaning business, but I’d never heard of death by Raid before. There’s always that first time, though.

“Tell you what,” I said, “give me your number there. I’ll call Maureen and ask her. In the meantime, do you have a lawyer?”

“A lawyer?” she screamed. “What do I want with a lawyer? I didn’t mean nothing by that roach spray, Callahan. I was just so mad I couldn’t think straight.”

“I know,” I said. “And if ever there was a case for a justifiable homicide, you’ve got one. But if the worst happens, if somebody calls the cops, you really should have legal representation. You want me to call Katie Reilly?”

“That’s the lawyer with the condo in Ansley Park?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think you clean her place alternate Thursdays.”

“I reckon,” she said, resignedly. “She keeps a real neat kitchen as I recall.”

Neva Jean gave me the emergency clinic phone number and then hung up.

“Did I hear right?” Edna asked, looking over the top of the bifocals that slide down to the end of her nose. “Did Neva Jean spray Swannelle with bug spray?”

“Half a can of Raid,” I said, picking through the box of doughnuts Mac had brought. I found a cake, one with gooey chocolate frosting, and picked a piece of the frosting off with a fingernail. I’m trying to diet again. “They’re at one of those doc-in-the-box emergency clinics. Neva Jean’s convinced she’s killed the one great love of her life.”

“Are you really going to call Maureen?” Mac asked. He knows my sister and I are not on the best of terms. But she’s a nurse at Grady Memorial Hospital’s emergency room, and even if she is a bitch she knows emergency medicine.

My eyes met Edna’s. “I thought maybe you’d call, Ma. It’d be quicker. Neva Jean really sounded scared.”

“Gimme the phone,” Edna said, slapping my hand away from the doughnuts. She dialed my sister’s number and turned her back to me. After chatting for a moment or two she hung up.

“Maureen says Swannelle’s probably sick as hell, but that Neva Jean probably couldn’t kill the little pissant with Raid unless she managed to bash his head in with the can. She says they’ve probably got him hooked up to an IV with atropine; that’s the antidote to roach poison. And your sister sends her love.”

“I’ll bet,” I said. “Well, I guess I’ll hold off calling Katie, since it looks like we’ve ruled out homicide.”

Katie Reilly’s an old family friend. She handles what little legal work I need, and in return we clean her condo every other week. I love cash-free transactions like that. I called the emergency clinic back and asked for Neva Jean.

“Callahan,” she said quickly, “he’s all right. My lover man’s gonna be fine. The nurse just came out and told me. Swannelle’s gonna pull through.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “Maureen says you can’t kill a person with Raid. So I guess you don’t need a lawyer unless you decide to divorce him.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” she said, sniffing. “I’m just so thankful Swannelle’s going to live. I’d never forgive myself if anything should happen to that man.”

She started blubbering again, going on about how sweet and kind and good Swannelle McComb really was.