

**Danger At Baird's Den**



**Gail E. Hedrick**

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

**Publishers Note:**

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and events are the work of the author's imagination.

Any resemblance to real persons, places, or events is coincidental.

Gail E. Hedrick ©2011

**CHAPTER 1**  
**KATE BAIRD, CLEANING GIRL**

"What have I done to deserve this?" I yelled, slamming the phone down sending pencils and the reservation book flying off the desk. I looked in the mirror over the desk convinced that steam would be coming out of my ears. No steam but instead I saw my hair frazzled all over as if it had been shot full of static electricity. When I got dressed that morning I never dreamed I would get this dirty. My favorite football jersey was covered in dust and grease and smudges of furniture polish streaked across my shorts. Dusting, mopping, scrubbing toilets.... It was hard enough doing eight jillion jobs to help Mom and Dad run our bed and breakfast, and now this?

"What's wrong, sweetie?" called Mom, from her room on the second floor.

I hoisted the laundry basket loaded with clean sheets and towels, stomped up the stairs and down the hall to their bedroom. I stopped at the end of the bed where Mom was resting with her leg propped on a pillow. I sat the laundry basket down carefully so it wouldn't bump the white cast that covered her foot. I gently tapped today's decoration, a red gingham ribbon. "I don't want one more person to clean up after."

"Well, yes you do – that's how we make money, with guests." Mom leaned against the pillows piled on her bed and blinked. "So, what brought this on?"

"The phone call I just got."

"Was it Taylor?" said Mom. "When will she be here?"

"Apparently, she'll be arriving by airport limo in about an hour." I grabbed a pile of crisply folded sheets and shoved them in the dresser. "We can't stand each other. Why didn't you tell me she was coming and more importantly, why is she coming?"

Mom reached for a glass of water, took a sip. "I didn't tell you because I thought you'd pitch a fit."

She knew me only too well. "Okay, I might actually be doing that now."

"So it seems." Mom pointed toward her foot. "While I'm laid up from this surgery, we need help."

"True, but it didn't sound like she'd be any help to me. Do you know how many bathrooms we have?"

"I do. We have six and you love cleaning them. You always say that."

I shrugged. It was true. When I finish a bathroom, the shine of the faucets and gleam of the sinks, tubs and even the commodes, make me smile. However, vacuuming and dusting were just the opposite. Seconds after you finished, new dust specks started invading like an evil enemy. "Okay, so I get no help with polishing the furniture. What exactly will Taylor be doing?"

"With you busy cleaning and handling some of the reservations, I need someone to cook."

Wow, I had to defend myself and fast. "I make great chocolate-chip cookies."

"Yes, you do," agreed Mom. "And our guests love them as a bedtime snack. But it takes more experience to prepare the cheese grits, ham biscuits, and fried apples; the things that make Baird's Den breakfasts special."

I was trying to save my summer here so I tried another angle. "Couldn't you have a local lady, like Angela Watson's auntie, come in to be our cook?"

Mom nodded and ran her fingers through her short, layered rusty-toned hair. "I could, but I'd have to pay a whole lot more plus provide insurance. Taylor's won all kinds of cooking contests, and she needs a place to stay while your Aunt Jan and Uncle Dave are away."

Dreading only one of many possible answers, I asked, "Where will she sleep?"

"Well," said Mom, taking a deep breath, "since I'm hoping we get lots of guests, I'd hate to have to keeping moving her from room to room all summer. It would just be much simpler if she bunked with you."

I knew it! "No way, Mom. Taylor is so annoying. She's what, going into eighth grade and I'm going into seventh? So we should be somewhat alike, right? But no, she acts like she's looking down her nose at me. It's not normal. It's almost like she skipped being a kid."

Grabbing the clean towels, I piled them on the shelf in mom's bathroom, and then continued my argument. "You know I've got stuff spread all over my room. I need space to write hangtags for Mr. Moss's craft shop. You know I get *paid* for that. I also haven't given up on that junior intern spot with the paper. I need time to hunt up stories and not have someone pestering to come with me."

Mom peered over the edge of her reading glasses. "I don't think Taylor will interfere with you much. She'll be too busy."

"Doing what? The only meal we serve here is breakfast. How busy could that keep her? Will she clean

commodes or is she going to help with the yard?" I glanced out the window. Something shiny flashed in the woods. What was out there?

Mom snapped her fingers. "Hello, we're talking here. Taylor *will* be helping with the cleaning, especially the floors. As for the yard, I hired Jeremy to mow whenever Daddy can't get to it."

"Mom, can you afford all this extra help?" Money was tight around here and seemed like all my parents talked about lately. I would see them hunched over the checkbook and inn ledger, but if they noticed me, they'd put on these fake smiles, shrug their shoulders, and veer the conversation in a different direction.

"Well, it's true Dad's furniture sales have dropped off and we need more guests, but basically we're behind from my surgery and the new furnace. When you own a business, things come up where you have to hire people. Jeremy and Taylor will be great. Things might be a little tight, but I'll never be sorry we converted this house to a bed and breakfast."

*See?* She changed the subject. Which was very clever, since I love our house. The tin roof made great tapping noises when it rained. The siding was farmhouse-style wood, big front porches wrapped three sides, and it sat in a stand of pine and fir trees, not far from the center of town. Something was always blooming. Dogwood trees with snowy-colored petals and azaleas with a million shades of pink in the spring, petunias and geraniums in the summer, and orange and gold mums glowed in the fall. Baird's Den was special. I imagine one day being interviewed for a travel show. "So, Ms.Baird, what was it like growing up in

a well-known North Carolina mountain inn?" I was about to answer when I felt something nudging my leg. It was Mom's crutch.

"Sorry to interrupt your daydream, kiddo, but can you stick these bills in the mail?"

"Sure." I glanced at the envelopes. "You owe money to the Agriculture Department?"

"Nope. That's a survey for me as a small business owner. Like are we growing illegal crops and reporting any suspicious activities."

"Yeah, so did you confess to having an herb garden?"

Mom giggled. "I didn't mention it. I hope I'm safe with parsley and chives."

"Let's hope," I started out of the room, then stopped, sighed, and turned back. "Mom, can I talk to you sort of 'woman to woman'?"

"Sure, come sit," said Mom. "Tell me."

I tucked one leg under the other and perched on the far side of the bed so I wouldn't joggle the cast. "Jeremy's worried about his mom."

"Is she sick?"

"No, Jeremy thinks she spends too much time with Mr. Moss."

"Well, so do you," Mom said, with a shrug. "You're delivering and picking up hangtags for all the crafts at Mountain Artists. Jeremy's mom supplies regional crafts to the shop. Evan Moss is the owner, so it's natural she sees him a lot, too. What's the problem?"

"I'm not sure if I told you, but he's started stocking things from Mexico, South America and some

other places besides the mountain stuff. He told Jeremy's mom he wants her to go on some buying trips with him. Plus, Jeremy feels she's at the shop a lot more than she needs to be. And his mom is always saying stuff like how 'fascinating' Mr. Moss is."

"He is an interesting person," Mom nodded, and then giggled. "And he's handsome. Remember he was one of our first guests. He'd just moved here with no place to stay."

"Yeah, he was the first one to take me seriously about my writing. Then he gave me my little job. I just feel bad for Jeremy. Could there really be anything going on between them?"

"I ran into Jeremy's parents at the movies recently and everything seemed fine. I don't think he has anything to worry about. Both of you need to not let your imaginations run wild."

"Who me?" I asked, trying to sound innocent.

"Yes, Miss Conspiracy Theory. Remember when you thought old Mrs. Drummond was running a theft ring?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, then opened them and grinned. "Well, she was acting pretty shifty about how she acquired all those antiques."

"Maybe so, but she wasn't a crook. You know, your dad is convinced you're going to grow up to be an investigative reporter."

"Well, I hope he's right. Good reporters are supposed to be curious about what's going on around them." I glanced out the window again. "For example, what is that guy doing going across our yard?"

Mom raised herself up just enough to peer over the windowsill. She shrugged and lowered herself back down.

"See his binoculars? He stopped by a couple weeks ago, said he was doing some research on birds. He asked if he could take a short cut through our yard to the woods."

I couldn't believe how trusting she could be. "Did he show you any ID?"

Mom blinked. "Well, no, why would he? He's just a birder. You know they are all over the place this time of year."

"Maybe so, but I want you to know he's aiming the binoculars right at this window." That seemed a teensy bit more than harmless to me, so I decided to keep my eyes peeled for this guy around town. If he was a birder, why wasn't he looking at the birds?