

★ American Girl®

Blaire



BY JENNIFER CASTLE

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FOR SADIE AND CLEA,
WHO MAKE EVERY DAY DELICIOUS

-J.C.





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CHAPTER 1

Checking In



Some kids can't wait for the lazy, quiet days of summer.

Lazy? Quiet? No way, not at my house . . . and that's just how I like it.

Pans and dishes clang in the big kitchen. Voices chatter and silverware clinks in the dining room. Upstairs, the vacuum cleaner hums. Outside, a tractor sputters its way across a field.

Then there's the sound of the bell at the front desk, ringing one clear, musical note. *Ding.*

I turned away from the bulletin board, where I'd been pinning up a flyer for the big Ulster County Fair in August, and smiled at the man standing at the desk.

"Welcome to Pleasant View Farm Bed-and-Breakfast," I said. "Can I help you?"

“Um . . .” He hesitated, looking around for a grown-up. He was obviously surprised to be greeted by a ten-year-old girl.

I get that a lot.

“I’m Mark Reilly and I have a reservation for tonight. I know I can’t check in until later, but I’m hoping I can leave a bag here while I go for a hike.”

“No problem,” I replied. “We can even bring it upstairs when your room is ready.”

“That sounds perfect.” He bent down and picked something up, then placed it delicately on the desk in front of me. “There you go.”

I looked at the bag.

And the bag looked right back at me.

Or I should say, two round eyes looked back at me, through a mesh panel on the side of the bag. Whatever was in there had two huge ears and a gray nose with whiskers.

“My chinchilla, Honeybun,” explained Mr. Reilly. “He’s quite the traveler.”

Okeydokey, I thought. I wasn’t planning on babysitting a chinchilla today, but when your family’s farm includes a bed-and-breakfast (especially one that

advertises itself as “pet-friendly”), you pretty much expect the unexpected.

I watched Honeybun’s little nose twitch. “Your buddy seems a bit nervous,” I said to Mr. Reilly. “I’ll bet he needs a moment to relax.”

“He would like that,” Mr. Reilly said, his face softening with relief. “Somewhere dark and quiet.”

I nodded. “I know just the place.”

“Thank you.” Then he said good-bye to us both and left.

I picked up Honeybun’s carrier bag and walked past the restaurant dining room and the door to the restaurant kitchen, then down a hallway. At the back of our house was a second, smaller kitchen—the one our family used—and my grandfather’s bedroom.

“You’ll be comfy in here for a while,” I said to Honeybun as I put him on Grandpa’s desk in the corner. “I’ll come back for you a little later.”

I turned to leave the room, only to be stopped short as my dress caught on the bag’s zipper and pulled it open.

Uh-oh.

Before I knew it, there was a flash of gray fur and a puffy tail moving past me. I squealed as the gray blob

Blair

raced around my grandfather's room, almost faster than I could keep track of him. Under the bed! Under the desk! Under the chair! And then . . .

Stillness. Where had he gone?! I could already picture Mr. Reilly's review on the travel sites: *ZERO stars!!! Pleasant View Farm Bed-and-Breakfast LOST my chinchilla!!!!*

Don't panic, I told myself. *This is your house, not Honeybun's, and you know every nook and cranny.*

I got down on my hands and knees, peeking under Grandpa's bed. I saw something fuzzy. "Honeybun! Thank goodness," I said, reaching for the chinchilla. "It's okay, little guy. Let's get you back in your bag where you'll be safe." I pulled him out slowly and started petting . . . Grandpa's old slipper. Great. I'd been talking to a shoe.

Still on my hands and knees, I checked under the dresser. Nothing. I looked behind Grandpa's hamper. No chinchilla, just one dirty sock that hadn't made it into the basket. *Eww.*

As I crawled slowly toward the door, I scanned the room, checking the corners. I poked my head into the hallway, calling a soft, "Here, chilla, chilla, chilla," hoping Honeybun would come running like a cat.

Nope. Instead I saw Grandpa standing at the other end of the hall, looking at me with a confused expression. He was with a young couple, and the woman was holding a squirming toddler by the hand.

“Blaire?” asked Grandpa, peering at me over the top of his glasses. “What on earth are you doing down there?”

I jumped up and brushed myself off. “I . . . was . . . uh . . . trying to see which floorboard is the one that always creaks when you step on it,” I stammered, walking back to the front desk. “Doesn’t that bug you? It really bugs me!”

Grandpa raised an eyebrow. “It’s been one of the biggest mysteries of my life.” He knew something was up. “In the meantime,” he continued, “Blaire, these are the Springers. They came here on their honeymoon a few years ago, and now they’re back with their son, Aiden.”

“Oh, I remember you guys!” I said, turning in a slow circle and looking for any signs of Honeybun. The little boy let go of his mom’s hand and started spinning in a circle, too. I caught his eye and he giggled.

“We remember you, too,” Mr. Springer said. “We’ve been following the cooking posts you do with your mom on the farm’s website.”

I stopped spinning. “Thanks!” Mom and I have fun posting recipes and cooking videos. It’s always cool to be reminded that people actually read them.

“And it looks like you all have a big project going on with your old barn,” added Mrs. Springer. “I saw your father working out there.”

“Yep,” I replied, peeking behind the long curtains that covered the front windows. “We’re converting it into an event space for parties and weddings.”

At the word *weddings*, Grandpa cleared his throat. He wasn’t too supportive of our family’s new business venture. “I hope you’ll enjoy your stay,” Grandpa said, changing the subject.

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Springer, hurrying after Aiden, who had stopped spinning and was now headed for the front door. “Something tells me it won’t be quite as restful this time.”

I was just about to look for Honeybun behind the pillows on the window seat when Aiden started crying. His mom had picked him up, and he was not happy. Okay, the chinchilla would have to wait. I cannot let little kids cry at Pleasant View Farm.

“Aiden,” I said brightly. “Come with me.”

Mrs. Springer and Aiden followed me to the wall under the big staircase. Hidden in the patterned wallpaper was a tiny doorknob, easy to miss if you didn't know to look for it. I opened a little door, and as soon as he saw what was inside, Aiden stopped crying and squirmed out of his mom's arms.

I'd spent months turning a storage space under the stairs into a play kitchen for kids and families who visited the B and B and the restaurant. It was an idea I'd gotten from one of my favorite design bloggers about doing creative things with unused spaces. Dad and I had a blast building a miniature pretend stove and fridge, and I'd filled it with toy pots, pans, dishes, and food. We even made a kid-sized table and two chairs, and I painted windows with curtains on the walls.

Mrs. Springer and I crawled in after Aiden. "Oh, Blaire," she said, "this is absolutely delightfaaaahhhh!"

A puffy gray blob darted into the room and did a figure eight around Mrs. Springer's ankles.

"What was that?" she shrieked as Grandpa and Mr. Springer came running.

"Honeybun!" I shouted.

“Honey who?” Grandpa shouted back.

I didn’t stop to answer. Honeybun scrambled out of the play kitchen, dashed across the hall, and raced toward the dining room. I ran after him and—*BAM*.

I collided with my seven-year-old brother, Beckett.

“I just saw a giant mouse!” he exclaimed.

“It’s a chinchilla, and he’s one of our guests,” I replied. “Help me catch him!”

We ran into the dining room. Luckily it was empty. I remembered what Mr. Reilly had said about keeping Honeybun calm, so I closed the door, turned off the lights, and told Beckett to stay quiet.

“Where is he?” Beckett whispered after a few moments.

“There!” I whispered, pointing to a tail sticking out from underneath a tablecloth.

Beckett dove under the table . . . and Honeybun scurried out the other side.

“Over there!” I whispered, as Honeybun disappeared under a different table. Beckett followed him, but the same thing happened.

“Table by the fireplace!” I whispered. This time I crouched on one side of the table while Beckett guarded the other. For a few moments, nothing—and no

one—moved. I plucked a cloth napkin off the table as the corner of the table cloth twitched. *One . . . two . . . three . . .*

“Gotcha!” I grabbed Honeybun and wrapped him in the napkin. Rodent rescued!

Back in Grandpa’s room, I put Honeybun in his carrier while Beckett zipped up the opening as fast as he could. “That’s enough excitement for you, Honeybun,” I said. “You deserve a nap.”

I high-fived Beckett. “Thanks for your help.”

“That was fun,” Beckett said. He was always catching something in the creek on our farm, so this was probably not the only critter he’d be chasing today.

For me, one was enough.

When I went back out front, the Springers were gone. “I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation for all of that,” said Grandpa from behind the desk.

“Of course,” I replied. But before I could say any more, my mother popped her head out the door of the restaurant kitchen, where she was the chef.

“Blair, can you go pick more sugar snap peas? I have some time to work on our recipe for the website before lunch service starts.”

Blair

“You got it,” I replied.

“Thanks. Hey, what was all that racket in the dining room?” she asked.

“Oh, you know,” I said, “just another day at Pleasant View Farm.”