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GAIL PALLOTTA

Cooking
up
a Mystery

"GAIL PALLOTTA HAS COOKED UP A DELECTABLE MYSTERY
WITH ALL THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS..."

~NANCY MEHL, BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF
THE KAELY QUINN PROFILER SERIES

Cooking Up a Mystery

Gail Pallotta

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Dedication

For Rick

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Thanks to God for His many blessings.

What People Are Saying

Gail Pallotta has cooked up a delectable mystery with all the right ingredients: rich characters, page-turning suspense, and heart-touching romance. One warning. Don't read this when you're hungry! With all the great food references, you could gain five pounds!

~ Nancy Mehl, ACFW Carol Award Winner and Best-Selling Author of the Defenders of Justice and Kaely Quinn Profiler Series. nancymehl.com

1

Laney Eskridge took a breather from polishing the bakery display case and surveyed the dining area in her small tea house. A soft glow from the lamppost out front shone through the large window and danced on the blue flowered curtains. She rubbed the fabric of a tie back between her thumb and forefinger. Sometimes in the quiet moments after the customers and George, her assistant, left, she gazed around and marveled that the place belonged to her. Mom had named it Laney's Delectable Delights. She would've loved the decor.

Pot and pans clanged in the kitchen.

Laney jumped. Was the rolling worktable bashing into the wall? Not by itself. Horror that an intruder wrecked the new appliances buckled Laney's knees. She leaned against the counter and slid to the floor.

Clanks, bonks, and crashes reverberated. Laney buried her head between her legs and trembled like a leaf in a storm. Rattling and slamming resounded. Tears cascaded down Laney's face. Had she lost everything? Silence fell as suddenly as the commotion had started, and the aroma of her bread baking tickled her nostrils. She raised her head and wiped her cheeks. Calling on all the strength she had left inside, she stood. Would her wobbly legs take her to the kitchen?

~*~

Laney rolled the gray food warmer up a cement walkway past a white hydrangea. Each click pounded the importance of every customer in her head. How could a person with no college degree run a business? She never would've opened the place if she'd known Mom would die. She breathed in false confidence and pressed the bell by the beveled glass door. No one answered.

She shielded her eyes from the May sun and tapped her foot. *Come on. I have work to do.* Her gaze fell on a mountain laurel bush and nearby dogwood blossoms. Soon summer would bring tourists to the North Carolina Mountains, and she'd hardly noticed the spring flowers. She rushed around like a mosquito in a chef's hat trying to cook and serve enough food to keep Laney's Delectable Delights afloat. If only she and Mom could've run the business together, as they'd planned.

Mom would be minding the restaurant, and the future would look secure. Laney wouldn't wake each day trembling with fear she might have to close because she'd mismanaged money and supplies, or she hadn't cooked enough gourmet meals to bring in customers. Last night after hearing those horrible noises, she'd dreamed the sheriff evicted her and padlocked the business.

Was anyone home? Laney shifted her weight and mashed the bell several times. Still no one responded. She glanced at the food warmer then the SUV and started to leave. Instead, she cracked the portal. "Mr. Crider, it's Laney's Delectable Delights here with dinner."

“Right, come in.” Weariness rang in the baritone voice.

Laney yanked the handle on the food warmer and it clicked over the foyer. From there she rolled it into a den.

A man with mussed blond hair sat in a brown leather easy chair with crutches leaning against the armrest. His left foot lay on a footstool, and a plaster cast up to the knee stuck out of the wide leg of his Bermuda shorts. Laney flinched at what probably was a broken bone.

He flashed a toothpaste ad-worthy smile, and Laney couldn't help but admire his handsome, rugged features.

“Dinner smells delicious.”

The heat of embarrassment rushed to Laney's cheeks as she tried to reign in her sudden infatuation. She'd sworn off men after Brian.

Every time she dredged up Brian's name, it triggered a disgusting smirk. Was he in her kitchen last night? She wouldn't put it past him, but not likely. He'd left town with his new bride. She swallowed her emotions and concentrated on this order.

It was difficult not to think of Mr. Crider as part of the male gender, but she would. Other than George and her poor deceased dad, she carried so much animosity toward men she might offend him without trying. Seeing someone so striking had thrown her off guard, but she'd regained her senses. The scars Brian left on her heart would show up in time no matter how good looking the guy was. From here on, she'd think of Mr. Crider as a customer with a hurt foot.

“Thank you. I'm glad the dish whet your appetite.”

He pointed to the food warmer. "It smells like the pot roast my mother cooked when I was growing up."

Laney pulled back her shoulders at his compliment. "Should I put your meal in the kitchen?" No, Mr. Crider couldn't navigate to the other room.

He stared at her with powder blue eyes as though she'd asked him to fly over the moon.

"Perhaps, the coffee table." He couldn't reach it from the easy chair. "No."

Amusement filled Mr. Crider's chuckle. "If it isn't too much trouble, could you bring over the TV tray?"

"Of course." Laney followed his gaze to a pine serving tray leaning against the wall beside the television and retrieved it.

He grasped his injured appendage with both of his large hands, lifted it, and moved the footstool out of the way with his right foot. She set up the tray, and he peered at her with a helpless look in his eyes. Sympathy that Laney had buried in the tough shell she put on to survive in business, surfaced.

"I'm happy to bring a dish from your kitchen if you prefer it to paper and brew whatever you'd like to drink." As soon as the words left Laney's mouth, she wanted to pinch herself. She needed to bake cookies and prepare ingredients for tomorrow's menu selections.

"That's very kind of you. I'll take the dinnerware and a glass of water."

Thank goodness that wouldn't take long. Laney's nerves raced for wanting to return to the tea house as she charged into a large kitchen, filled a tumbler with water, and grabbed a blue-banded china plate.

She marched into the den, and Mr. Crider sat there looking as pitiable as the toddler who lived next door

to them when she was a kid. He'd broken his little arm, and seemed so over-burdened with that big cast. It had been long ago, but a twinge of sympathy hit her in the stomach for the little tyke, and to her surprise, Mr. Crider. She squatted beside the tray, scooped roast beef, peas, carrots, and new potatoes from the warmer onto the dish, and stood. "Your friend ordered today's special around three o'clock. When did you hurt your leg," she asked in her most supportive tone.

The corners of Mr. Crider's lips turned down. "I fell on the steps at school and broke my foot. I'm a math professor at Triville Community College. I have a minor in history, but the subject's a thing of the past." He gestured with his hand. "Ahh, no pun intended, but everyone's into social studies nowadays. There's no demand for history, per se. Anyway, a rather embarrassing moment in front of my students."

Laney glanced at the food warmer. She wanted to grab it and go, but she focused on Mr. Crider and gave him her undivided attention.

"Thank goodness, the year ends next week, and one of my cohorts graciously agreed to administer my tests. I'm not due back until the fall." He directed his gaze at the cast. "I might tutor later, but after this, I'm glad I didn't sign up to teach summer school." He spoke freely as though it relieved him to voice his angst.

"Anyone can have an accident at any moment. If your students don't realize that then it's time they did."

He straightened in his seat. "I hadn't thought of it that way, but of course, you're right. Thank you. Please, call me Eric."

Ahh, he looked so vulnerable, and a hint of

sweetness lined his sad eyes. If Laney hadn't caught Brian with another woman after she'd worked to send him through dental school...But she had. The divorce was horrible. *No men, no dating, no heartache.* "All right, I'm Laney."

She motioned toward the food. "Well, there you have it. I need to head back to the store. My assistant, George, left early, or he would've brought your order." Laney clasped the handle on the rolling food warmer.

"Stop!" Eric's voice rang out.

Laney jumped. "What's wrong?"

~*~

Eric couldn't let her leave. He'd been wallowing in pain in his easy chair, thoughts as dreary as rain filling his head. Then Laney called out to him from the front door. He heard the food warmer clicking across the parquet floor, and a scent that reminded him of his mother's cooking wafted into the room. A vision with a beautiful smile and a soft, caring voice appeared. Her long, auburn hair and hazel eyes had burst into his melancholy existence like a ray of sunshine. He had to at least have a phone number.

What had she called her service? Roger had told him he sent the meal before he left to go overseas on business. No telling when Eric would talk to him again. Laney headed toward the door, the food cart clacking behind her on the way out of his life. His heartbeat accelerated. The throbbing in his foot beat in his head. He couldn't think. She'd asked him what was wrong. "Uh, it's a little cold. The roast beef."

She turned and glared at him.

He wanted to slap himself. If he added two plus

two, right now, he'd probably get five, and he had a PhD in math. The doctor had said to stay put, no movement at all that wasn't an absolute necessity for seventy-two hours. The cast might as well have been a bear trap. He couldn't stand up and chat or follow her to the door. He wasn't himself.

Laney's facial muscles tightened. "Cold?" She could've shot the word from a cannon the way it boomed into his psyche. Irritation, horror, or a mix of both lined her tone.

Eric's insides crumbled. He'd stopped her all right, and he couldn't believe the words *it's a little cold* had come from him. He cared about people and tried to lift their spirits. When he helped students overwhelmed with personal problems, his mother claimed it was a gift. Seemed he'd lost or misplaced it today. He pointed at the pot roast lying on his plate. "Actually, this is scrumptious. It's good even cold."

Laney stared at him as though he had mashed potatoes for brains.

He patted the cast. "It's the foot. It really hurts. Have you ever broken a bone? I mean a really bad break?"

She shook her head.

"It throws the whole world out of kilter."

Her eyes softened the tiniest bit around the corners. "I'm sorry your meal isn't what you expected. I don't want any of my customers unhappy."

Eric flashed the biggest grin he could with pain pulsing through his foot. "I'm happy. This is wonderful. I can't wait to savor every bite of it."

Confusion filled her eyes. "All right, I'll tell you what. Just to make sure you're convinced you've gotten your friend's money's worth, I'll send a free

meal tomorrow to make up for the...the...cold roast beef."

"Send it?" He'd made an idiot out of himself for nothing.

"Yes, my assistant, George, will arrive about this time."

"No. You have to bring it."

"I, I, I have to bring it?" Laney sputtered again. "I need to cook at my tea house."

"Let me explain." Could he explain? His foot ached so bad he wanted to scream. If only he'd taken a pain killer before she arrived, but how could he have known? He'd expected a pimple-faced kid in a pair of baggy jeans.

Laney put her hand on her hip, wrinkling the black sheath skirt that showed off her curvy figure and narrowed her eyes.

"I haven't eaten a meal like this since I left home. How I loved those aromas coming from my mother's kitchen." His mom was ill and couldn't visit him. Something about the scent of the pot roast comforted him. "I don't want a free meal. I'd like to order dinner seven nights a week for the next thirty days. I'll pre-pay, but I want you to bring the food. It doesn't matter what time, on your break, after you close, whenever it's convenient." There. That was honest, coherent, and simply put.

She pressed her finely shaped lips together, and then they parted slowly as though she still wasn't sure she wanted to commit. "Do you want a custom order, or would you like the daily special?"

Eric dared not make his request difficult. "The daily special."

Laney bit her bottom lip, staring at him.

He drummed his fingers on the chair's arm as he waited for the answer.

"All right." She stuck out her hand and shook Eric's. "Is there anything I can do for you before I go?"

Best to leave well enough alone. "No, I'm fine. I appreciate your help and the meal. Tomorrow, bring the cost for the rest of the month, and I'll write you a check. Roger left the door open for you. Would you lock it?"

"Of course. Have a nice evening." She left, the food warmer clicking behind her.

Eric stared at the cast. He had thought he'd have nothing to look forward to with this nasty turn of events, but he couldn't wait until the next food delivery. Laney would have a warm, happy reception, and he would not say anything disparaging about her food. "Geez," he mumbled to himself as he ran his hand over his face. He grew a bit dizzy from the pain, or was it Laney that dazzled him?

What was he thinking? Knowing his situation, he shouldn't date. Every time a relationship grew serious, he pulled back. He'd promised himself he'd not enter another one until he knew he could never hurt that person the way his father did his mother. The kids in his classes were his family, and he had the strong faith his mother had instilled in him. It would give him strength when she...he placed his hand over his mouth. It was too soon. He'd not think of it now. Mother had claimed he was nothing like Dad, but Eric looked just like him, and he *was* his son. That dogged him. He was thirty-eight and still single.

~*~

Laney turned the lock, shut the door, and put a spring in her steps for the first time since Mom's funeral. She knew in her mind Mom was gone, but it seemed more like a bad dream than a reality. She rubbed her stomach, trying to soothe the ache still in it. Today, she'd landed her first regular customer. Never mind that he seemed a little weird acting the way he did over the roast beef. Mom would be proud. Laney hummed a happy tune as she plunked the warmer in the rear of the SUV. Then she slipped into the driver's seat and backed out.

A couple of ducks waddled across the road from the lake. Laney ran her hand around the steering wheel while she waited. Would George leave before she arrived? If he did, would she lose customers? To launch this new business she needed every penny she could earn. Some people didn't even bother to collect a penny or two in change if that's all they were due, but she couldn't pass up a single one.

If only there were two of her, or if she could hire Mom's friend, Nancy, to mind the diner when George had class. Nancy had attended culinary school, and Mom had loved her. It was only a dream. Laney could barely pay for lights, air conditioning, and water.

She arrived at the restaurant with visions of piles of bills and meals frozen because no customers arrived to eat them flashing in her mind. Twilight cast its shadows against the Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance. The lampposts in the strip center shone on the white and blue lettering on the front of the Williamsburg building. It looked so peaceful, as though all was right with the world with no hint of the commotion in her head or the noise she'd heard last night.

Hoping she'd have a late customer, she pulled around back and parked. In a flash, she grabbed the food warmer and charged to the weathered rear entrance of the structure, which appeared drab compared to the Main Street view. She stepped inside and paused to catch her breath at the way the stainless-steel kitchen sparkled. She closed her eyes for a moment. Did it really belong to her?

She hoisted the food warmer onto the shelf above the work counter then trekked to the dining area and took down the clock sign. For now, Laney's Delectable Delights monopolized dining in Downing Estate Shoppes, a cute, new center with colonial style buildings. Her tea house and two other businesses filled the spaces of the renovated Downing home, built by Lydia and Noel in 1840. Their children sold the house, but one of their grandchildren purchased it in 1955. It had remained in the family until Noel and Lydia's great-grandchildren sold it to Marcus Development. As soon as Mom heard of it, she signed a lease, and she and Laney moved the catering service from Mom's kitchen. Mom had been killed before the restaurant opened, and Laney had inherited their dream to live out alone.

Mom would always be in her heart, but never in the tea house again. Laney had to make the business succeed for Mom and pay off to survive, but the pain, the shock, of Mom's death refused to leave her. It was too soon to be strong, wasn't it?

The back door slammed. Who was that? She hurried toward the kitchen.

2

A glow of outside light streamed in the kitchen along with a whoosh as Laney entered from the dining room. She stopped short as George charged in, slammed into the rolling worktable, and sent it sailing across the vinyl floor.

“Whoa.” Laney held out her hands and corralled the movable counter.

George wore a light blue shirt with a button-down collar. The color set off his dark hair and the crisp, casual look suited his personality. He stepped to the sink, filled a glass with water, and took a sip. “The English professor cancelled class. He and most of the students attended a campus-wide, summer school One for All and All for One rally, but I wanted to come here.”

“You scared the daylights out of me, but I’m glad to see you. I’m sorry about the rally, though. Please don’t give up any of your college life for the tea house.” Guilt shot through Laney’s veins. If Brian hadn’t left her in such a vulnerable position, she wouldn’t have to impose on George. Ire replacing blame exploded in her gut, and she clenched her jaw.

George put his hand on her shoulder. “Hey, it’s no big deal. I’m focused on earning a degree. I suppose

you can call me a loner, selfish, or responsible, whichever mindset you have.”

George had stuck to Laney ever since Mom’s funeral. “How about one of the greatest guys I know?”

George’s eyes lit up. “I’ll take that.” He finished his drink and set down the glass. “I have good news. While you were catering the pot roast, I received an order for fifteen lunches from a marketing group.”

Laney walked over and high-fived George. “Thank you.” It would all work out. God was so good. “Eric Crider wants meals too.” She explained Eric’s order, and it dawned on her, she had a problem.

“I don’t know how to figure costs. Mom was supposed to manage the business end. I’ve been buzzing around taking care of the food and haven’t thought of it, but what if I’ve over-extended? Mom didn’t include fees for inspections and licenses when she calculated expenses. Then I bought the cookie convection oven.” Laney couldn’t keep the anxiety out of her voice.

She’d spent all of her parents’ insurance money on Mom’s funeral and essentials for the tea house. Now, she had no idea how much to charge Eric Crider. Did she need a course in accounting? How could she pay for it? She picked up a dish towel and twisted it into a tight rope pattern. “Eric plans to pre-pay tomorrow.”

“Business accounting is my major, remember? I’ll keep the books.”

Laney gave George a bear hug.

He puffed out his chest. “Let’s sit out front and work up a plan for Mr. Crider.” He led the way through the double doors to the first linen-draped table in a row of three.

A painting of a thin man with a handle-bar

moustache riding a huge tricycle jumped out at Laney. She wrinkled her brow and pointed. "Where'd we get that picture? It belongs in a barber shop, not a tea house."

George turned and gazed at it. "In my excitement over the new orders, I forgot to tell you. Right after you left with the delivery, a slim-built guy with dark hair brought it."

Laney tapped her lips with her forefinger as she tried to think who that could be. "I lost contact with most of my friends after I married Brian. Did he give you his name?"

"No, he said it was from a customer. Then, he rushed out." George bit his bottom lip. "I should've gotten it."

Here she was grilling George over a weird-looking piece of art when they needed to figure the costs for Eric's order. "You had enough to do without taking names. Anyway, it's so ugly."

George nodded. "Yeah."

Laney placed her hand on the back of a straight-back chair with a cushion that matched the window dressing. "Go ahead, sit down, and we'll get started. I'm sure you have other things to do. I probably should leave the monstrosity where you hung it in case the mysterious person stops by to see how it looks on the wall." Laney shrugged. "The blue sky compliments the flowers on the pull-back curtains."

"With the great meals you serve, it's doesn't matter." George pulled out the chair and motioned for Laney to take it.

She did and he sat beside her.

He was twenty-two—ten years younger than Laney. Seventeen years, or a lifetime ago, she babysat

for him. Here he was five-foot-eleven inches of muscles with piercing brown eyes and one of those new hairstyles shaved on the sides. Long locks fell forward on the top and covered his forehead like bangs. He must've been driving the girls nuts. What would she do without him to tie up the loose ends at the tea house? Thank goodness, for his friendship. Maybe she should tell him about last night. "Did you hear any noise in the kitchen when you stayed late last week?"

George leaned back in his seat and looked at her with questioning eyes. "No, why?"

"I was out front polishing the bakery display case."

"Yeah."

"Pounding and clanging resounded from the kitchen." The hair on Laney's arms stood on end at the memory. She shivered and rubbed them trying to calm herself. "I went in there and nothing was amiss. What if I imagined the racket?"

George swung his hand out. "It was probably a late trash pick-up."

Of course. Relief settled over Laney like morning dew, but she gritted her teeth at the way she'd jumped to a conclusion. Why hadn't she realized it was the garbage company? "I'm sure you're right. Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you, but back to business. I'm not certain of each day's menu, or what deals I might arrange at the meat market. How can we know what to charge Eric?"

George removed a pencil and small notepad from his pants pocket. "We'll work it out."

Laney stood. "The least I can do is feed you."

George's dark eyebrows shot up. "I won't say 'no.'"