

Taya Bayliss

Tree Hugger



E. J. Gore

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Also by E. J. Gore
Taya Bayliss – Treasure Hunter
Taya Bayliss – Dog Sitter
Taya Bayliss – Code Breaker
Taya Bayliss – Snake Charmer

Praise for Taya Bayliss

'If you believe, as I do, having three children of my own, that adults often underestimate the wisdom of children, then you will want to share the Taya Bayliss mysteries with your young readers'

Bernie Ripoll MP Australia



Chapter 1

The Sounds of the Bend

Taya Bayliss stood on the platform that formed the floor of the treehouse. She tied the corner of a tarpaulin to a branch before pausing to gaze out over the stretch of riverside land known as Monahan's Bend. Red gums, silver wattles and manna gums grew happily in the rich soil, creating shelter for possums, bats, kingfishers and parrots. Small birds made their homes in the paperbarks, tea trees and bottlebrushes. Ducks and other waterbirds built their nests along the river's edge and raised their babies safely there.

Although The Bend, as most people called it, was only a short distance from the centre of the city, it was almost silent, thanks to the canopy formed by the tall trees and the lush under-storey of shrubs and grasses. The Monahan family, who had owned the land since colonial times, had always allowed the public to enjoy the peace and beauty of The Bend.

Walkers and joggers had worn a pathway along the riverbank. The only rule that the family had insisted upon was that no wheels were allowed at Monahan's Bend. Taya breathed deeply, drawing in the rich smells of the surrounding trees and bushes.

Two men walked quickly along the path. Deep in a conversation punctuated by violent hand gestures, they did not notice the dark-haired boy and the blonde girl in the treehouse above them. As they disappeared from view, Taya turned her attention back to her handiwork. She checked the knot to make sure it was secure. The tree house now had a rainproof roof.

'We'll have to get going soon,' she said.

'I'm nearly done,' replied a voice from below her. Chris Comino, her best friend and neighbor, was standing on the lowest branch of the large fig tree, attaching a rope ladder to a higher branch. 'There,' he said. 'That should make getting up to the platform easier.'

Taya looked down. The rope ladder would certainly make access to their treehouse less of a struggle. 'But, we don't want it hanging down when we aren't here. The treehouse has to be a secret place.'

Chris climbed up from the branch to stand beside her. He patted her shoulder.

'You young people,' he chuckled. 'No imagination. Watch this.' He pulled on a cord which was tied to the last rung of the rope ladder. The ladder rolled back up to the platform of the treehouse.

'Now I just tie it off back here,' he added, securing the rope to a small branch. 'And taa-dah - no rope ladder! When we want to use it, all we have to do is release it. You may applaud now.' He stretched his arms sideways like a magician who had just made a rabbit disappear.

Taya nodded in approval and provided the requested applause. 'That is totally cool. Now, we just need...' she stopped mid-sentence and turned to look towards the river. 'What was that? Did you hear that?'

'What?' Chris followed her gaze, listening intently. 'I can't hear anything.'

'I thought I heard something - sort of a shout.'

'Who'd be shouting down here? It was probably a bird.' Chris inspected the tarpaulin. 'This looks really good. We can leave stuff up here now and it won't get wet. I think I will bring a plastic storage box though, just to be on the safe side.'

Taya stood still, ears straining. She shook her head.

Was it really a shout? It sounded really weird, like someone was in trouble. Am I imagining things? It probably was just a bird.

She looked around again, suddenly uncomfortable. The Bend was strangely quiet. Something didn't feel right. There was no scurrying of small animals in the leaf litter, no bird song. It was as though the inhabitants of The Bend were waiting, listening, for something to happen, just as she was.

The sound of feet pounding along the path broke the silence. A man approached. Heavily built, he looked uncomfortably hot, his jaw clenched, his blue shirt darkened by sweat. It was one of the men who had passed the tree earlier. The children watched him as he hurried off in the direction of the Captain's Point ferry terminal.

'Angry man in a hurry,' Chris said.

'Hmm, maybe he had an argument with his friend,' Taya agreed. 'Come on. I told Dad we'd be at Tall Pines at three o'clock.'

'Right. We can pick up Minnie on the way.' Chris released the rope ladder so that they could climb down from the platform. Once on the ground, he tugged on the rope to draw the ladder back up out of sight, tying it off on a bush behind the tree.

'Did you know that they used to scratch for gold down here?' Chris asked as they walked past the ferry terminal and turned into Captain's Point Road.

'Who did? When?'

'According to my history teacher, people used to pan and scratch for gold around the bend of the river and, they actually used to find some.' He passed to pick up a pebble. 'Just imagine scratching out little nuggets of gold.'

Taya grinned at the thought. 'But that was back in the 1800s, wasn't it?'

Chris lobbed the pebble into the water. 'Yes, but people were still digging tunnels into the riverbank right up until the ferry service was started in the 1920s. The city council had the tunnel entrances filled in after some guy was killed when a tunnel collapsed.'

He grasped Taya's arm, staring at her in mock horror for a moment. 'That's probably what you heard just now - Old Jasper's ghostly wails. Oooooooh!'

Taya rolled her eyes. 'Oh, very funny. You're hilarious, Comino. Ghosts! Whatever next?' She walked purposefully on. Chris might have been joking about a ghostly

presence, but she still felt uncomfortable, on edge. The riverside area had, for the time being at least, lost its air of serenity. For the first time in her life, Taya was glad to be walking away from Monahan's Bend.



Chapter 2

It's All in the Detail

'No, no, no! The Bend is not included in the deal!'

The old man's voice was loud and angry. Those sitting on the sunny terrace of the Tall Pines Retirement Village could hear him clearly. He was stomping around the kitchen of his apartment and banging his fist on the counter tops as he spoke to someone on the telephone. Taya was glad she was outside on the terrace. When Professor Monahan was in a bad mood, it was best to keep out of the way, and he was often in a bad mood these days.

'I know I've signed the contract and I know what it says,' Professor Monahan roared. 'House and out-buildings buildings it says. House and out-buildings does not include green belt land. The Bend is green belt!'

The telephone was slammed back into its cradle on the wall.

'Calm down, John.' This voice was low, concerned. 'I'll put the kettle on. Come on, sit down for a minute.'

'Dad sounds worried,' Taya said. She looked over her shoulder towards the apartment and then back to her companions at the table on the terrace. Her best friend and neighbour, Chris, sipped his lemonade thoughtfully.

Her grandmother, Mrs Casey, nodded.

'Poor John. Moving out of his home has been very stressful for him. I'm glad that your father has been able to come to visit him. They get along so well.'

Chris and Taya exchanged glances. Professor Monahan had lived in the big, old house by the river for as long as they could remember. Poor health had forced him to put his house up for sale and move to an apartment in the retirement village.

'Dad told me that Prof. Mon.'s family have owned that house for over one hundred years,' Taya said. 'His great, great grandfather built it. He was a soldier or something, and the governor of the state gave him the land by the river as thanks for his service.' She accepted another scone from the plate offered by her grandmother.

Chris applied butter and jam to his scone. 'It is such a cool house. It even has a turret.'

Taya nodded. 'Yes, I love the turret. You can see quite a long way down the river from up there. He has heaps of treasures too. He has stuff from ancient Egypt, stone axes and all sorts of old coins.'

'It's sad he has to sell the place, but I guess he needs to be closer to medical assistance these days,' Chris added.

'Mmm, he has a heart problem,' Taya said. 'Look. Even Minnie is worried. She has come to knock at his door.'

Mrs Casey and Chris turned to watch the big, woolly dog that was sitting at the apartment door. Minette raised one paw and knocked softly on the door. *Woof!* Her head angled sideways as she waited for a response. Receiving none, she knocked again. *Woof, woof!*

'Someone had better answer soon, because she won't give up,' Chris chuckled.

'She must have heard the shouting,' Taya smiled. 'She knows something is wrong. She likes Prof. Mon. too. This is so sad. I wonder who will buy the house now.'

Mrs Casey looked over her glasses at her grand-daughter. 'The house is being sold to developers, Taya. It will probably be demolished so that an apartment complex can be built on the land.'

Taya choked on her scone. 'What?' she spluttered. 'Demolished? That beautiful old house? That's...that's...despicable! They can't do that, can they?'

'Once the developers own the place, I guess they can do what they like,' Chris said.

Mrs Casey shrugged. 'Well, the developers would have submitted a proposal to the city council outlining what they planned to do with the property. If the council has approved the proposal, then the developers can go ahead with their plans.'

Taya's mouth dropped open. The thought of bulldozers tearing into Professor Monahan's house brought tears to her eyes. She blinked them away and sniffed twice. Crying was not going to help the situation. She glared down at the half-eaten scone on her plate, her appetite suddenly gone.

Minette began dancing excitedly at the apartment door, making little yips of delight as she did so.

Taya's father opened the door. 'Settle down, Min. We heard you knocking and here we are. Out of the way, please, I have hot tea here.' He carried a teapot and a plate of sandwiches to the table. Professor Monahan followed him, leaning on a walking frame. Chris jumped up and brought extra chairs to the table.

'TJ, there are some mugs on the counter inside. Could you bring them, please?' Steven Bayliss grinned at his daughter. He assisted Professor Monahan into a chair.

'There now, John, have a sandwich.'

Taya crossed the terrace and entered the apartment that was the Professor's new home. A small kitchen adjoined the comfortable sitting room beyond which lay the bedroom and bathroom. Everything was neat and tidy. 'I bet you hate it here, Prof,' Taya whispered. 'This is totally opposite to what you are used to.' She smiled at the two silver-framed photographs that stood on the mantelpiece above the gas heater. One showed a smiling young couple on their wedding day. The other, a double heart-shaped frame that folded like a book, held pictures of Professor Monahan and his wife. To Taya, it looked as though they were smiling at each other.

'At least you have some familiar objects with you.' The tears gathered threateningly again. Taya swallowed hard, picked up the three mugs from the kitchen counter and headed back to the group on the terrace.

Minette was pacing back and forth, her tail wagging slowly, as she considered the situation. She could see there was food to be enjoyed. She would have to choose which of these humans would be most likely to share some with her. She completed a circle of the table before deciding to sit between Chris and Professor Monahan. She nudged the

professor gently with her woolly head and was rewarded with an ear rub.

'Are you walking Minnie later?' Professor Monahan asked when Taya had seated herself.

Hearing her name, Minette wagged her tail and pressed herself more firmly against the old man's leg. 'Oh, you want your sandwich, don't you?' Professor Monahan smiled. 'There is a peanut butter one on the plate especially for you.'

Minette offered a large paw for shaking. She loved peanut butter. The professor began feeding her small pieces of sandwich. 'She is such a lovely dog. It always makes me feel better to see her.'

'She is certainly popular here. All of the residents look forward to her visits,' Mrs Casey agreed. 'We don't even mind when she decides to rearrange our possessions.'

Chris laughed. 'Oh yes. Do you remember when poor old Mrs Wong discovered that her best cushion had been replaced with a pair of Mr Kyle's blue underpants? That was hilarious!'

'Those underpants somehow ended up under a bush in the Dumont's garden,' Taya added. 'I had to pick them out so that we could return them to Mr Kyle. Yuk! It was disgusting. Totally disgusting.' She wrinkled her nose and pulled a face at Minette. Hearing her name, the big, blonde dog laughed with the group, *Wuff, wuff, wuff*.

'Prof. Mon., will we still be able to take Min down to The Bend, now that your house is up for sale?' Taya was suddenly serious.

The old man turned to face Taya. His eyes, usually a piercing blue, were a tired, faded grey behind the wire-rimmed glasses. His hand shook slightly as he laid it over Taya's.

'I am only selling the house. Do you understand? Just the house. They can do what they like with it. It is falling apart and I can't afford to repair it. I have had a wonderful life there, but now it is time for me to move on. I was hoping that the University might find a way to buy the place so that it could be used as a research centre or museum. Sadly, however, I have had no response from them. These developers, Garson and Craig, have made an enormous offer. They want the house and the land along the river as well, but I have made it very clear to them that Monahan's Bend is not part of the deal. You will always be able to walk Minnie down along the river.'

Taya turned her hand over to grip the old man's hand. She smiled at him and nodded.

Steven Bayliss pushed his chair back. 'Well, let's hope we can find that document, otherwise we are going to have a major battle on our hands. Without it, it is going to be very difficult to prove that the Bend is protected land.'

**Will the developers get their way? Where is the protection document?
Find out in 'Taya Bayliss – Tree Hugger'.**



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