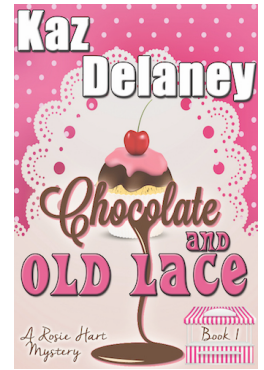


Chocolate and Old Lace

by
Kaz Delaney

CHAPTER ONE



IT WAS A FUNERAL for two. One body, one mourner.

Some things are made for two; they're comfortable—even desirable. Things like: tea for two. A tango. A tandem bicycle ride. A cuddle at a drive-in movie.

Funerals aren't one of those things. Funerals are a celebration of life, a time for mutual comfort and support; a time for shared memories.

Generally.

The funeral of Miss Alice Auchinschloss was obviously the exception to that rule. And let me say, being the only graveside mourner leaves a chill inside that would take a whole lot more than a warm spring Texas morning to alleviate. Especially if that wasn't what you were expecting.

I knew because that's what I felt as I stood there alone that Friday morning, bidding my last goodbye to Miss Alice. Shock—and pain for her—had made my prayers for her safe passing more fervent. Well, at least when I wasn't thinking dark thoughts about the people of her hometown. The ones who'd all found something more important to do that morning than giving an elderly lady a respectful send-off.

It was true that Miss Alice hadn't been the most pleasant woman I'd ever met, nor the easiest client I'd cared for, but did that warrant their behavior? I felt I'd gotten to know her in the course of my work as a daily in-home companion, and yes, she was crotchety, but she was eighty-five years old and I'd actually become quite fond of her. As weeks had turned into months that rapier tongue had lost some of its edge, and I put her initial mood down to the fact she'd just had enough of a life that hadn't been as kind as it could have been.

And in my opinion that was a poor reason to ignore an old lady on her final day on earth.

She was the last of two family lines, and had been for some time. So I hadn't expected any family to come to her funeral, but I'd hoped that some of the townspeople would see it in their hearts to send her off. But they hadn't and so I'd stood alone next to Reverend Peatree, while the gravediggers lowered her coffin into the family plot under the branches of a sprawling oak tree.

I shivered as the sod hit the hardwood coffin, the sound echoing around a dark cavity that was as cold and empty as the chairs circling the grave.

The morning had challenged every assumption and belief I'd held about small-town life. Even though I was a relative newcomer to Texas having moved from Oklahoma, I thought I had a good idea of what it would be like to live in a small community like Airlie Falls. Blame it on all those cozy mystery stories I'd devoured, but when they'd described neighbors who cared for each other in a place where everybody helped everybody else—I'd fallen for it.

Sure, some of them murdered each other—but for the most part they knew you and you knew them and community trust meant no one locked their doors.

Which, come to think of it, was probably why they were easy to murder—but that was another point completely.

What's more, I'd craved this small-town life. Not the murdering part of course—but that sense of inclusion; of being an integral part of something. And I'd read enough cozy mystery

books to consider that I knew these places as well as the people who lived in these magical towns.

Well, so much for believing what you read in books because from what I could see all those authors had got it wrong. Airlie Falls in North Central Texas was nothing like that.

Maybe the good pastor had guessed it would be like this. Miss Alice had, surprisingly—and shockingly in one sense—left instructions that I should organize her funeral. Or more to the point, simply see to it that her wishes were carried out. She'd chosen the readings, prayers and hymns. She'd not mentioned anything about serving refreshments, and as a love of baking had been one of the things we'd bonded over, I'd offered some options to the pastor. In response, he'd looked at me in an odd way, and then quickly told me not to worry, that his wife, Miz Peatree, would arrange something at the church hall.

Yet that morning when I'd arrived at the manse a few minutes early with two sour cream and peach cakes and a plate of candy bar cookies, Pippa Peatree had been really awkward about it. And as far as I could see, as I peeked over her shoulder, no other preparations had been made. That had surprised me. The Peatrees had seemed like good community people—just as I would have expected from the spiritual leaders of a small rural town. But even they didn't seem to care about Miss Alice's final farewell.

From what I could see it was obvious some kind of celebration was taking place, but that didn't include any platters of food or preparations for a wake.

Of course, the puzzle was solved forty minutes later when I instructed the embarrassed minister to begin the service. A service for two—the deceased and her one mourner. And I imagined, a whole flurry of family ghosts who held the family secrets. Because—and *maybe I'd just read too many books*—it was starting to appear to me that surely there was more to this situation than an uncaring community.

Afterward I thanked the pastor for the service—an impersonal mash of generic, haltingly delivered words—and taped hymns. And I was sincere. I could hardly blame him for not knowing her when I didn't really know her all that well myself—nor the facts behind the day's strange outcome.

But it still rankled that someone who'd lived such a long life—someone who'd surely left a substantial footprint on this world—should slip out so unnoticed. There must have been family stories. Adventures she'd had? The roles she'd played in the community where she'd lived her whole life? Her interactions in that community before she became too old and unwell to take a further role?

But there'd been none of that; no one to speak for her or tell those stories. And as I walked away, I knew no more about Miss Alice Auchinschloss than I'd known four and a half months ago when I was hired to be her daytime companion and caregiver.

The cemetery was quiet as I headed back to my car—save for the peaceful drone of local bees ransacking a grouping of huckleberry bushes, and the distant chug of a tractor going about its work. It might be early in the season but spring had well and truly rolled into town. Spring blossoms had arrived in an explosion of color and the air was fragrant, and warm against my face and arms. Had I not been swamped in misery and confusion I would have found such peace in this setting.

That was another thing that made me sad. This pretty little town was a place that I would have happily called home; it had everything I had ever dreamed of. Quaint little stores, a town green, clean air and sunshine, and room to grow your own produce. A place where crafts and 'homemade' were appreciated and to prove it, there was a twice-monthly thriving Craft and Farmer's Market that pulled interest from far and wide. Of course I'd assumed this came wrapped in all the hometown warmth of a Norman Rockwell painting. But now I knew how wrong I'd been.

I was almost at my destination when another vehicle crunched onto the gravel driveway and pulled up right beside mine in the otherwise empty parking lot. An older man—maybe in

his mid seventies, balding and a bit paunchy—stepped out and looked over toward me. He was neatly dressed in a pale suit, white shirt and bolo tie held by a huge silver and turquoise slide. I paused. Had he come to say goodbye to Alice? My heart lifted a little as he pulled on a white Stetson and took determined strides to reach me.

His right hand reached me first. The left tipped the hat he'd just donned before dropping it back into position. "Miss Hart? Rosie Hart?"

I took his hand, and noted it didn't have the work-roughened feel of a farmer's, despite his well-worn boots. "Yes, that's right. Have you come to pay your respects to Miss Alice? I'm afraid the funeral is over but her resting place is just over near that old oak tree."

"Well," he said pushing that hat further back on his forehead. "That's partly why I'm here. I'd intended to get here earlier but I had a derved flat tire, and it cost me time. I expect it all went to plan? Ol' Alice seemed to have it all laid out as she wanted it to be."

His voice carried that rough cigar rumble and I found it oddly comforting in a grandfatherly way. Nodding I said, "Yes it did. And you are... I mean are you a relative? Oh no wait, I'm sorry. Miss Alice told me she didn't have any relatives so you must be a friend?"

"Scuse my manners, young lady. My name is Hank Henderson, and I can't rightly say I was Miss Alice's friend, but I was certainly her lawyer."

My heart sank. "Oh."

His brow morphed into a mock frown. "You look disappointed. We lawyers aren't all that bad you know." There was a twinkle in his eye, and I could see kindness there that sat well with the rest of the image.

I sighed. "I'm sorry. I guess I was just hoping that some friends might have dropped by."

For a moment, he said nothing. Just stared at me. Finally he said, "I can see you didn't know all of Alice's instructions for today. It was in the local paper, and of course the town gossip machine spread it to all corners of Airlie Falls but I guess that news wouldn't have gotten to you. You see," he said, choosing his words carefully, "Alice left a note with me to be delivered to the town paper, to be published when her time came. It was a notification of her death with the categorical instructions that no one from the town or surrounds was welcome at her funeral." He cleared his throat. "I shouldn't be admitting this, but I edited it a mite. She did go on to express her explicit—and unsavory—feelings about several of the townspeople and her general dislike of all of them. I removed that part. It didn't seem to serve any good purpose to hurt people unnecessarily. They're good people; they tried but she shunned them at every turn."

"Oh." It was the second time this man had rocked me off course this morning. Words wouldn't come, which was odd because my head was reeling. Could I owe Airlie Falls an apology? Maybe I'd misjudged them... Perhaps the townsfolk hadn't been as uncaring of one of their elderly members as I'd thought. Had it been the other way around? But she was an old lady. A lonely old lady. Why would she harbor such venom? Why even bother? Why expend that much energy? Unless it was what fueled her? Kept her going? But why? So many questions, but I seemed unable to make any of them into coherent, utterable sentences.

Hank Henderson took my arm and led me to a bench under another sprawling tree that, in its present state, my crazed mind couldn't even identify. "Seems like you've had a bit of a shock. I'm sorry, Miss Hart, I figured you'd worked her out by now. Alice was a troubled lady. I tried to get her help many times, but that ornery old bat—'scuse me—would chase them off with her daddy's rifle. That thing was so old everyone was terrified of it blowing up in her face as much as her being able to actually hit anything."

"I don't understand. I'm not sure why you'd even want to help her if she was so difficult..."

He fiddled with that hat again. "Well, it's no secret and you're bound to hear it sometime, but I was sweet on Miss Alice's younger sister. Marion and I wanted to get married and have a family. Alice was older than Marion and their parents were elderly and needed care. And that derved Alice, she had such a guilt hold over poor Marion. Every time Marion got the courage,

Alice'd somehow make her feel guilty for leaving her and Marion would beg me to be patient a while longer. It should have worked itself out after the old folks passed, but still Alice manipulated Marion with guilt. This time it was for thinking about leaving her while they were still grieving. It always seemed to be something. Some reason... That went on for thirty years. I reckon in the end, Marion died of a broken heart. They called it cancer but I believe it came because she was so broken up. So torn between the people she loved."

"That's so sad! You looked out for Alice because of Marion?"

He shrugged, his shoulders still powerful beneath his suit. "I might not have liked the old bat, in fact, I think I might have hated her, but I knew Marion would want to know someone was looking out for her. As much as Alice'd allow anyway. I gotta say I was surprised when she chose me to be her lawyer in the end. The family had dealt with some firm over in Dallas for years, but maybe she just figured I was closer bein' I'm the only lawyer in these parts."

"Still, it's so romantic that you would come today for the woman you loved."

After sharing such a personal story, I wasn't prepared for him to suddenly look embarrassed. "Well not exactly. In part yes. But also in part I'm here in an official capacity. I'm here to hand over the keys of Alice's property and to talk you through a few things." He took a lumpy envelope from his breast pocket and handed it to me. "Miss Hart, Rosie Hart? Miss Alice Auchinschloss has named you her sole heir. You inherited everything. The farm, all her belongings—and a substantial bank balance."

I blinked. And blinked again. My head struggled to comprehend. Surely I'd misheard. Only one thing was certain: Hank Henderson had gone and done it a third time—I was completely speechless.

SOMEHOW HE GOT ME to understand. No, not understand, but to at least hear him. And also agree to his suggestion for him to drive me to the property. That was a no-brainer because I was shaking so much there was no way I'd be safe on a road—even in a small farm town like Airlie Falls. I only vaguely remembered the trip. The pretty bluebonnets, so profuse even this early, were for once lost on me. Maybe I waved to Reverend Peatree's wife returning to the vestry. Maybe I wondered about the peach cakes, hoping she could make use of them. Though how my brain even remembered them is a mystery. Everything felt upside down and I had an inkling I knew how the other Alice felt. The one who fell down the rabbit hole...

The events of the morning to that point gathered in my mind like unrelated ragged fragments; a backdrop to the star attraction filling the rest of my head. Alice Auchinschloss had made me her heir. It made no sense. I hardly knew her, relatively speaking. I probably should have been grateful; excited. But I was numb.

Turning into the driveway of the farmhouse I'd come to know well didn't help. This was Miss Alice's house. It always would be. It was inconceivable that I should be the owner. It felt wrong.

Hank said there were things we had to discuss, things he had to show me. I didn't argue. I'd been practically living there for the best part of five months but my focus had been on Miss Alice. Not on the extent of the house or the land.

Still, I hadn't expected any major surprises when we arrived a few minutes later. But as soon as we pushed open the unlatched kitchen door I knew this was my day, not just for surprises, but for shocks as well.

"Holy mo..."

I could only guess at what Hank was going to say but I suspected I agreed with him. "Wh... what?" My hands flew to my mouth and my first instinct was to jump back; to close the door and run.

Not Hank. Eyes wide, he wordlessly moved slowly into the room, carefully side-stepping the scattered debris that cluttered the entire floor. The silence was eerie. No tick of a clock. No

thrum of the old refrigerator. That silence somehow made the mayhem around us even more treacherous; more terrifying.

Drawers and cupboards had been opened and contents thrown around the room. Dishes, flatware and utensils joined foodstuffs and papers. The beautiful hand-painted German flour canister that had belonged to Alice's grandmother's lay smashed, its contents forming a thick white carpet that stretched across the vast room. So many times I'd baked for Miss Alice, admired and handled that canister with care. My heart lurched. Like the canister, many of the broken pieces of china had been handed down through generations. Not antiques but representing years of family history. My hands were shaking as I bent to pick up a pretty, flowered pie dish.

Too late I wondered if we should even be in there and the piece almost slipped from my fingers. "What if...?"

Hank turned, and for the first time I realized how pale he'd become. When he spoke I was worried by the tremor in his voice, then quickly comprehended it was anger, not fear or stress. "It's okay. They're gone. Whoever it was—they're not here."

He moved further into the house, and I followed. Every room over two floors of the large house had been vandalized, and yet the levels of destruction weren't uniform; some rooms were worse than others. Weirdly, that calmed me. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on had bothered me from the start, and while it still evaded me, the vague notion it had triggered became clear as I moved through the rooms.

It was a crazy thought, but it seemed that in some rooms, the focus had been more specific; more deliberate. And that's when it hit me—that strange as it seemed—some areas almost looked staged. Like the kitchen.

"Hank, did Alice have anything that someone would need to find?"

"What do you mean? You think someone was looking for something?" He shook his head. "This has been kids, Rosie! Stupid, bored kids! Out-of-towners looking for some cheap fun!"

I didn't agree. "I know this must be hard on you. This was Marion's home... But there's something wrong here, Hank." I paused to let this sink in. "It seems like maybe someone was looking for something specific."

He shook his head. "Ridiculous. What could she have? And why wait until now?" His response made sense, yet as he turned away I saw something in his face. Maybe the shadow of a long-lost memory? Or maybe I was just being fanciful...

I decided I was being fanciful when he spoke again and there was only purpose in his voice. "We need to get the police here. I'll call the Sheriff to warn him to be on the lookout for any strangers in town. Groups of kids who don't belong."

It was pointless to argue, and I also had to accept the fact that he might be right and I could be way off base. He knew this town. Evidence this very day had already proven that I didn't.

"I'm not sure how long this will take," he continued, taking a glance at his watch. "I have another appointment later this morning. Would you be up to drivin' if I get you back to your car? That way I could even drop in to see Sheriff Kinnead in person and get an idea of when he might get out here to take a look at this mess so I can swing back here."

I agreed and after he took my cell number, we parted company twenty minutes later.

I THOUGHT I'D BEEN in tense situations in my former career in finance, but this morning proved there was tense—and then there was tense.

That thought brought me up short. *Lordy*—how my life had changed. I'd second-guessed my decision to walk away from that position with the brokerage company so many times. Especially when there was no good reason other than the fact that I'd simply fallen out of love with it—and in truth questioned whether I'd ever really loved it in the first place.

At times that decision had felt irresponsible and that didn't sit well at all. It hovered too closely to how I viewed my parents and I had never wanted to make the same choices they had. Yet, at other times it felt like I was being true to myself; like I was giving myself time to find what it was that made my heart sing. To do something I loved, and not just settle for something I happened to be good at.

Signing on with the Home Care Agency, which provided companionship and *very general* care for the elderly or infirm was supposed to fill a gap while I found that magical 'thing.' But it had proved to be more.

And now, despite still feeling uncomfortable about Miss Alice's generosity, I couldn't help but think this was where I was meant to be—that there'd been a reason.

More worrying this morning, however, was the prickly little feeling in the pit of my stomach there was more to come. That my true reason for being here wasn't yet fulfilled.

Or perhaps the strange events of this day were playing with my head.

That rationale should have been an easy sell, but for some unfathomable reason, I wasn't buying.

These thoughts had occupied the time I'd taken to get back to the farm, and I'd almost reached the turn into 'my' driveway when I slowed. A truck was parked furtively behind an overgrown bush and a guy was darting in and out of some bushes a little further up the road. I placed him as being right in front of Alice's—my—farmhouse. Was it significant? After this morning everything seemed significant.

Taking only a second to consider my options I pulled in behind the truck. Every instinct told me to get the registration details and get the hell out of Dodge, but a lonely voice argued that if he got away then any answers I needed would get away right along with him.

Funeral attire, including my now seldom-worn black stilettos, was not the preferred choice for sleuthing. That was something I worked out in less time than it took me to trip for the second time and almost lose my balance on the rough ground. And also that untended bushes and a mass of long, unruly curls don't help either. The only good thing was that the focus required somehow chased away my tummy issues.

Though, by the time I'd 'sneaked' up on the culprit I figured I resembled a walking scarecrow. Perhaps a scarecrow in mourning.

"You don't need to sneak. It's okay to just come on up and ask what you need to know."

He hadn't even turned around and my shoulders slumped, grieving the wrecked state of my best mourning outfit for nothing. All for nothing. This black pencil skirt had cost me a fortune but now it had the addition of tiny pulled threads that dangled like party decorations. Ruined.

"You knew I was here?"

He turned then and I only just stopped myself from gawking like an impressionable teenager. He was roughly my age, late twenties, early thirties. That deep raspy timbre of his voice had tricked me into thinking he was older but that wasn't the only surprise. His shoulders were broad and he didn't need the cowboy hat to add to his impressive height. Shaggy, sandy-colored hair peeked out from under the hat and fell down over sun-browned skin and skimmed the collar of his denim work shirt. But it was his eyes that held me. Blue gray. Intense and shrewd. Intelligent.

And at that moment narrowed in on me. "You were making more noise than a herd of buffalo. Why'd you come sneakin' up anyway? I'm just here trying to keep this here sign from doing someone an injury."

My head tried to catch up. "Sign?"

He sighed and pointed upward. Until a half hour ago there'd been a rickety sign that arched over the entrance to Alice's driveway. 'Auchinschloss Farm.' I'd driven under that sign every day and not given it a thought. Now I saw the rusted metal had worn through and

broken away leaving sharp jagged edges that could be fatal in the right circumstance. *Was it significant that it fell this very day?*

"It's been a potential hazard for years and it finally gave way. Lucky I was coming along and saw it fall just before I got here. I've dragged it inside the gate out of harm's way and now I'm just trying to get the rest of it down before it falls too."

The long-handled implement in his hand was coated in mud and dirt, obviously well used, but neither of those disguised the sharp-tooled edge.

I shuddered to think what damage it could do. "Why are you doing this?"

"Pardon me?" His look was incredulous. Like I'd just asked if it was acceptable to eat beef in Texas. *"Why am I doing this?"* He shook his head. "Not from around here are you?"

"Well," I began, a bit defensive now, "I guess that's obvious."

"No offense meant," he explained. "It's just that this is the way we do things around here. We see a problem—we jump in and help out. It's no big deal. It's just the neighborly thing to do."

Shame filled me. "I'm sorry. That was a stupid question and I need to thank you. If that had come down as I was driving under it, I guess I could be in a mess. What can I do to help?"

I saw so many questions in his eyes, but to his credit he simply glanced over my clothing and smiled and right then I saw something else—the cheekiness in those eyes. He was one cheeky cowboy. "That's a mighty fine offer, but I think I can take it from here. I'm nearly done." And with that he attacked the remainder of the sign and brought it down with a thundering crash.

Unable to stand and watch him do all the work, I kicked off my heels and grabbed some of the smaller pieces, dragging them away from the driveway and behind the fence and overgrown bushes that lined the property.

He didn't protest or take over. He just worked beside me, his only deference to my smaller stature and female state was that he always managed to grab the big pieces first. I appreciated that respect.

When we were done, I wiped my hands down over my skirt and held out my hand. "I'm Rosie Hart. And again, I need to thank you."

He tipped his hat, just as Hank had done, and smiled. "Jonah Fencott and you're welcome. Are you looking out for this place now that Miss Alice has passed?" A shadow fell over his face as he mentioned her name.

Awkwardness and confusion burned through me. It seemed wrong to somehow say I owned it now—and yet, this was a small town. Probably half of them knew already and the other half would know by sundown. Face burning, I lifted my chin and looked him straight in the eye. "As unlikely as it seems, Miss Alice has bequeathed her property to me. I guess... I guess it's mine now."

To his credit he didn't look shocked or suspicious. "So, does that mean you might become a resident of Airlie Falls, Miss Rosie Hart?" The words were pitched low and for no feasible reason my pulse started fluttering faster than the wings of those blue monarch butterflies my gran had been so fascinated with.

I blamed it on the topsy-turvy morning and again, my face burned—not a frequent occurrence for someone with olive skin. But there he'd gone and done it twice. What was it with Airlie Falls men and their ability to knock me off-center?

"Oh um... well, I'm not sure. It's been such a shock and I've barely had time to comprehend it all... I guess... I mean, I don't know."

Desperate to brush away this awkwardness I hadn't felt since I was a teenager, I grasped on to my inbred southern hospitality like a lifeline. "I'm babbling. I..." I shook my head to clear it. "Please, let me at least give you a cold drink to make up for all that work. I'm not sure what's there but at least we can get water."

He grinned. "Water's fine. Nectar of the gods."

We walked side by side along the long, rutted track that led to the house. Every step making me more aware of just how much maintenance was long overdue on this place. The chat though, was easy; nothing scary or uncomfortable. I learned he was a builder and he owned a building and renovating business; proud of his crew—they were good honest men. I learned he was Airlie Falls born and bred. And proud of that too. He lived in a farmhouse not far from Alice’s and ran a small herd. That he had one brother Ben who was interning at a big Austin hospital. And that, like his brother, he was unattached. I was so absorbed in our conversation that we’d almost reached the kitchen door when I suddenly remembered the state of the house.

I felt the blood drain from my face as I turned to him. “Oh no! I can’t offer you anything! How could I have forgotten? Oh my! I’m such an idiot. It was the very reason I was checking up on you!”

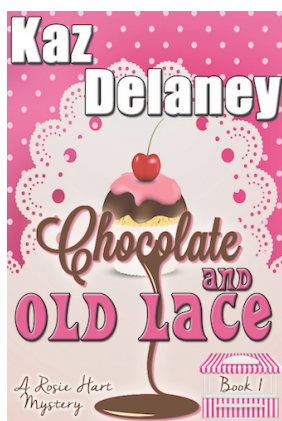
Jonah’s brows furrowed. “Whoa. Back up there, darlin’. What’s happening? Why can’t you give me a drink and why were you checking on me?”

They weren’t really questions but more of a repetition of my blurted ravings. Like someone trying to make sense of the insensible. But it was more somehow. After the crazy morning his simple concern was almost too much. I hadn’t cried all morning. But now a lump rose to fill my throat; cut off my words. In the end it was easier to just show him and I pushed open the door and waved him inside.

He didn’t apologize for his expletives and in all honesty, I wasn’t sure he even knew he’d uttered them. He was gone mere minutes and then he was back, took one look at me and grasped both my hands in his, rubbing warmth back into them. It was only then I realized how much I was shaking. Yes, it had all caught up to me. All of it. All too much of it.

We might have talked, and I would have loved to hear his opinion, but the roar of another truck moving into the yard caught our attention. A dusty white truck with a faded County Sheriff logo on the driver and passenger doors.

And as the driver stepped out, the set of his chin and wary look in his dark eyes as they zoomed in on me warned me that the surprises—or shocks—for this day hadn’t quite finished. Not yet...



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