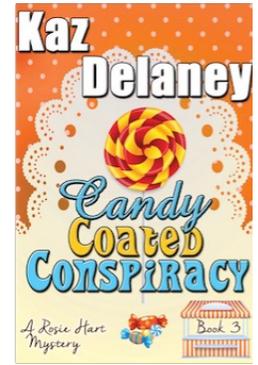


Candy-Coated Conspiracy

by
Kaz Delaney



CHAPTER ONE

USUALLY, WALKING INTO *The Sweet Treat* Candy Store was like walking into a hug as big and warm as our state of Texas itself.

The very first time I'd experienced that sensation, I'd assumed it was due to the heady combination of sugar and chocolate, but I soon learned the truth. Sugar and chocolate certainly helped but it was the proprietors—eighty-something-year-old sisters Francine and Edith Percival, always ready with a smile, to pamper and cosset and fuss—who took it to the next level.

Usually. Not today.

I noted the difference as soon as I opened the paneled glass door. Instead of the syrupy warmth I'd expected, I'd been hit with a jab of concern. Maybe others mightn't have sensed it so quickly, but for someone like me who hadn't experienced indulgent parental love, nor the unconditional acceptance of a loving grandparent, whatever the sisters usually handed out was truly powerful. Addictive.

And right then I wasn't getting my fix.

The store was situated in Hoopers Corner about thirty miles from my home town of Airlie Falls, and there were definitely two reasons to be excited when I'd been asked to supply *The Sweet Treat*. The obvious one was the proof that my little dessert business '*From the Hart*' was building a reputation, but in a way that came second to the fact I'd get to hang out with these very ladies.

Today, though Francine's smile was in place, it didn't reach her eyes. And the gentle lines she'd earned over her eighty-plus years suddenly seemed to have deepened.

"Rosie Hart! What a welcome sight you are. What magical wonders have you got for us today, darlin'?"

The words were the same, but something was very wrong. Already confused by the sudden change I was picking up, I stumbled over an answer when I saw Edith push herself up from one of the little café tables at the side. She'd been wrapping bars of pretty pink and white coconut ice in clear cello and tying them with bright pink ribbon, but that wasn't what caught my eye. It was the way she pushed herself to her feet. Usually these spritely ladies defied their age. They weren't sylph-like, nor as-softly rounded as creators of deliciously sweet candy might be. Instead they were straight-backed and sturdy, and moved with quick sure movements.

Usually. Not today.

The tiny niggle of worry gnawing at me grew with each step she took. I glanced first to Edith as she moved awkwardly towards me, and then to Francine who had her hands outstretched to take one of the trays I balanced. Hands that weren't steady.

The reputation I'd earned as someone who solved mysteries—including a murder or two—was well-earned, and I had only myself to blame. I seemed to have a sixth sense where real life puzzles were concerned and I was helpless to ignore them. So, there was no way I could ignore what I sensed was happening here. "Is everything okay? Y'all look..."

Alarm flicked through Francine's eyes. I caught it just before she lowered them to the tray. "Of course, everything's fine, darlin'. Why wouldn't it be? Don't you be worrying your pretty head about us."

I also didn't miss the brief look that passed between my two elderly friends.

And so, I wasn't surprised when Edith took up the baton and affected a poor imitation of her usual girlish giggle to add, "Why goodness! Are you thinkin' it's time we got some of that magic make-up they're always advertisin' on the television? The one that takes twenty years off your age?"

Not fooled by their banter, I eyed them both carefully. The joy and enthusiasm that was such an intrinsic part of them was just not there. But before I could dig more, the ladies had whisked the trays from my hands and headed out the back.

Concerned, I turned to Donna-Lee, the manager of the Sweet Treat. She was arranging a tray of Bourbon Sea Salt Caramels and, as the sisters disappeared into the prep room, I lifted my hands in appeal.

Donna-Lee raised her eyebrows and shook her head. "It's that man! That so-called great-nephew. I'm sure of it," she whispered. "We're all really worried about them. I've worked here for twenty years—since I was just sixteen—and I've never seen them like this!"

Edith and Francine had told me about their guest a couple of weeks earlier. They'd been jumping out of their skin with excitement—and all because this man Dwayne, their great-nephew, had arrived unexpectedly. Completely inexplicably out of the blue. The aunts had lost contact with Dwayne's father and grandfather over sixty years previously and had never expected to see anyone from that family again.

To have their great-nephew seek them out was like a dream come true.

"What's worrying them?" I asked quietly.

"I'm not sure. I'm just guessing from what I've heard—their conversations with each other; the noises up there but," she hesitated, raising her gaze heavenward, "We all think he's changing their home around. Renovating or something..."

I frowned, following her lead and lifted my own gaze. Of course, all we saw was the pristine store ceiling, but above that was the sisters' residence. As far as I knew, they'd lived there since they were very young. "Why?"

"Good question. Why does anyone start pulling walls out of a perfectly good house? Especially the house of people he's only just met?"

Very good question.

Edith returned a moment later, and even though Donna-Lee and I had stopped talking, she knew. It was there in the look she cast over us both. And in the way her mouth thinned into a firm line.

Guilt swamped me. "Miss Edith, we weren't gossiping for gossip's sake. We're really worried about you."

She opened her mouth, probably to argue and my heart broke when no words came. Her lips trembled, and she stood before us, blinking rapidly as though to fight back tears. I

moved toward her, but Francine was closer, offering a whispered word of comfort as she placed a protective hand on her sister's shoulder.

Edith lifted her own hand to cover Francine's, and the two beautiful ladies stood in silent tableau until Edith was able to regain some composure. Finally, Francine drew herself up and spoke. "We're so sorry for this display. We don't usually air our concerns in public."

I shook my head. "Miss Francine, you have nothing to apologize for but please... If there's a problem we, your friends, would like to help." When she didn't answer, I bit the bullet. "I know you have Dwayne staying here. Is that working out?"

Neither woman looked at me, but I noted the hand on Edith's shoulder tightened its grip. Francine remained stoic. "It's to be expected there'd be a few bumps along the road when a long-lost relative comes back into your life. We're still gettin' to know each other."

Drawing in a deep breath and praying for the right words, I tiptoed deeper into their distress. "I guess there would—especially if I recall correctly you'd never met him before he just turned up? And you haven't seen his father since he, himself, was just a toddler? Over sixty years?" Both women stared ahead but remained silent and alarm bells started tinkling in my ear. "Did either of you hear from his daddy? Or his granddaddy to say he'd be coming? His granddaddy would be your brother-in-law, right?"

Edith's hand moved to rest upon her chest. It was quivering. "He's already passed, Rosie. Last winter—coming up a year from what Dwayne told us. Only made it to eighty-six years."

"Shocking. He was still a young man," Francine added, shaking her head in what seemed to be bewilderment.

"I guess I was just wondering—"

Edith cut me off. "How we knew it was our nephew and not someone pretending to be him?" she finished for me.

That shocked me into temporary silence. I hadn't expected them to be so astute. My mistake.

"Rosie honey, we're not complete fools." Francine's words were delivered gently but still they shamed me. "But the thing was he knew so much about our family history, things he couldn't have known unless family members had passed them down."

"And the clincher for us was to ask ourselves why anyone would bother to do that," Edith continued to explain. "We're just a couple of third generation candy makers. We're not rich by monetary standards. There's no prize for claiming to be related to us, so that's how we knew Dwayne must be genuine."

Any shame I'd felt flew right out the window. And the alarm bells were now clanging. *They'd taken in a complete stranger on his say-so. He could be anybody!* "That's how you came to your conclusion?" Astonished as I was at the sisters' revelations, I'd failed to keep the alarm out of my voice, but due to a customer entering the store, thankfully only Donna-Lee noticed.

She simultaneously rolled her eyes and shook her head, echoing my own disbelief. This was crazy.

My head reeled with possibilities. Of course, it was possible Dwayne was exactly who he claimed to be. After all, why would someone assume a relationship for no apparent gain? Or was there a gain the sisters weren't aware of? No, that made no sense. The ladies were smart and savvy; and they'd been adamant there was no benefit to be had. But I still

couldn't shake the possibility that he wasn't who he said he was. And if so, that put my elderly friends in danger.

An unpleasant curling began low in my stomach. Never a good sign. It meant my suspicions were taking root.

Because I also had to add one more fact to my concerns: he was rearranging their house. Although, was it possible the renovation was a planned thing? Something the ladies requested? I'd taken Donna-Lee's *guess* and immediately added my own interpretation and turned it into fact. But what if it hadn't been like that at all? Maybe they'd asked him to do it. Was the novelty of having a capable male around the house prompting them to go all out? But then why were they appearing to be so distressed? Donna-Lee seemed to think it had something to do with the renovations. Why?

A dozen random explanations scooted through my mind. Some of them plausible. Things like being distressed by the mess. Or the length of time to be inconvenienced as work progressed. I'd check with my boyfriend, Jonah, who was a builder, but even I knew time could blow out if it was a one-man job. Jonah would know if other contractors were involved. These rural communities were small and tight, and I knew for a fact that contractors were light on the ground around here.

Or was it money?

Was it costing more than expected?

Was Dwayne demanding money to complete the job?

And just how big was the 'job'?

As all these possibilities rolled over in my mind, the door leading to the private quarters opened and a man stepped out into the store. It gave me a start; like the bogeyman stepping out of your dreams. Gulping back some calming breaths, I stared at him, assessing him—trying to see right inside him.

But then he turned, and I saw more than I had expected to see.

He was a charmer.

It was there in his looks, for starters. Despite his dirty work clothes and the coating of dust that clung to him, he was good looking. Very good looking. Younger than I'd expected. About ten years older than me, so maybe late thirties? Tall, with dark wavy hair that fell over his forehead; smooth, lightly tanned skin. Dark eyes that seemed to look right into your soul. Somehow I knew that when he smiled there'd be dimples and strong, even white teeth.

He was perfect.

Perfect for conning little old ladies.

A smidgeon of shame wriggled through me. I'd judged him quickly, and I guess if I was honest, I'd have to admit my opinion had been half-way formed before I'd even laid eyes on him. So, yes, before we'd even exchanged words, I'd judged this man—Dwayne—and found him guilty. But even if I was wrong he was going to have a big job ahead proving his heart was in the right place.

Because despite the fact that our acquaintance was short, I considered Miss Francine and Miss Edith to be friends. And I didn't take kindly to anyone messing with my friends.

He made his way toward me, hand outstretched, smile in place. Dimples too. Of course. "Allow me to introduce myself: Dwayne Morris." His northern accent sounded alien here in the land of drawling Texans. The clipped formality of some words interspersed with

the languid stretch of others distinguished him as a newcomer. Instinctively I accepted his hand in greeting. “Miss Francine and Miss Edith are my great aunts,” he continued.

I nodded. “Rosie Hart. I supply the desserts for the coffee bar.” I tipped my head toward the left side of the store down which a shiny chrome-edged bar stretched toward the back of the building. Stools topped with bright pink vinyl fit right in with the candy-colored décor. Soda bottles, milkshake machines, a coffee machine and a variety of shake, soda and sundae glasses sat decoratively on glass shelving behind the bar.

His eyes sparkled when I pulled my hand from his—as though we shared a secret, which we certainly did not—and smiling, he patted his flat stomach. “So you’re the one responsible for tempting me away from my healthy eating regime! Miss Rosie, your baking is as pretty as you are. I have to say though, I expected someone older and—well—how can I say this? Rounder?”

I wasn’t sure how I would have responded anyway, but I didn’t get a chance.

“Not a sweet, tiny thing like you.” He was on a well-practiced roll, not pausing for me to comment. His hand reached up to touch my hair. “A fairy with a mass of long dark curls. My favorite kind.”

I automatically pulled away from his hand. *Oh, give me a break!* He wasn’t the only one on a roll. Parts of *me* were on a roll now as well—my stomach for one. Other parts wanted to get into some rolling action. Specifically, my eyes. Only respect for Francine and Edith saved him.

Of course, he had no way of knowing he was flat-lining. It was evident he was used to people falling at his feet. I wasn’t going to be one of them. I was used to comments about my size and stature and all the ‘elf’ and ‘fairy’ comparisons I’d endured over the years had made me immune to both cruel barbs and false flattery.

Thankfully, I was also completely immune to his brand of charm; however, I could clearly see how others—men *and* women I presumed—would be taken in by it, and his beauty. I’d seen it back when I’d been in finance; seen intelligent women—and men—make irrational decisions because an attractive face and charming demeanor convinced them to trust against their better judgement.

He’d really worked on his whole presentation. He leaned in close as he spoke, creating an air of intimacy, his aim to shut out the rest of the world. Vulnerable ones would stand no chance. I leaned back away from him, foiling his intention and caught Donna-Lee’s eye over his shoulder. Honestly, it was a laughable situation—so I did just that. I laughed. Immediately, I was sorry.

His expression changed—perhaps *twisted* was a better description—and I had to quickly rectify my mistake. I wanted to wheedle some information and putting him offside had been a bad move, so I grabbed the moment to address his clothes before he closed up on me. “You’ve been busy by the looks of things?”

Had I imagined the wariness that had crept into his manner? Or again, was I looking for it and connecting dots where no connection existed? There was no denying something had changed within him though, because he was suddenly serious. “Just helping out my aunts with some long overdue upgrading and repairs.”

Edith was bidding farewell to their customer and Francine joined us. “I see you’ve met our great-nephew?”

“Yes, he was just telling me about the changes he’s making to your home.”

This time I was in no doubt about what I was seeing. Francine definitely flinched. Given that, it felt heartless to press forward but I reminded myself that to do so could ultimately help her and Edith.

Almost like I'd conjured her by my thoughts, Edith also joined us. I slipped an arm around her waist and turned my attention back to Dwayne. "Are you a builder, Dwayne?"

He was slow to respond. His head rocked from side to side as he composed his answer, which I thought was weird. Eventually he said, "Noooot really." After a long sigh, he added, "I picked up any skills I have when I was in college—yes, a long time ago." His soft laugh was self-deprecating, inviting his audience to rush in with assertions of how youthful he looked. No one did and after a somewhat embarrassed cough, he hurried on. "Yes, so, I worked for a builder for four years while I was studying and then I took a year off before joining the family business where I worked full-time. Over the years I've kept my hand in."

"Lucky for you then, Miss Edith? Miss Francine?" I said giving Edith a gentle squeeze.

"Yes," Edith answered slowly, not looking across at Francine, "he certainly seems to have a lot of knowledge."

Smiling at Dwayne, I said, "You said there were some necessary upgrades? I suppose that's not unusual in a building this old."

Across from me Francine bristled. "My grandfather built this here place with his own hands. It's successfully served as home and business for over a hundred years!"

Dwayne's eyes narrowed. "I'm sure my distant grandfather did an amazing job. In fact I know he did—I'm finding some skillful architecture. But Aunt Francine, time takes its toll. That damp in your walls was a problem that was way overdue. And dangerous to your health!"

I felt Edith tense. "We understand, Dwayne. It's just very difficult for us to see parts of our family history destroyed."

"Our Mama chose that wallpaper after Uncle Tom handed over the house to us," Francine explained, heat still tempering her words. "One of my earliest memories is our Daddy hanging it and Mama was so happy. She thought it was the prettiest thing she'd ever seen. I remember her dancing me and Merilee—our older sister—around the room, with little Edith on her hip."

A single line of tears found a crevice in her face and ran down over her soft cheek like a river finding a well-worn pathway. My heart tightened and no one seemed to know what to say to fill the silence that followed.

Donna-Lee saved the day by moving everybody to the coffee bar. "I think it's time we sampled Rosie's treats, so we know how to describe them to the customers. What do y'all think?"

Her bright delivery eased some of the tension in the store, and after helping the ladies to one of the five café tables set back from the bar, I assisted Donna-Lee with the desserts.

When I'd been asked to supply *The Sweet Treat*, we'd decided to include some cakes, cookies or bars that contained candy, or were based on candy, so that it reflected the store. Today's order was just a small one and consisted of a selection of candy cookies, Mars Bar bars, lemonade cupcakes and Coca-Cola chocolate cake.

Having settled everyone and served food and drinks, Donna-Lee took a plate back to the main counter. I'd accepted a shake but declined any food. Dwayne tucked in despite his earlier declaration of a healthy food regime, but the sisters just nibbled and mostly pushed

food around their plates. I wasn't offended. I knew they usually appreciated my baking but it was evident they were too emotional to enjoy anything.

It wasn't a relaxed group and that was throwing up more red flags. In turn, that ignited a conflict about what I should do. There were other jobs that needed my attention, yet to walk out would feel like I was abandoning my friends who might need my support.

When Edith admitted to a headache I saw my opportunity to help them. Turning to Dwayne, I put it to him that perhaps he could ease off the renovation and allow the ladies to relax in their home for the rest of the afternoon. "A few hours won't make a big difference, will it?"

That handsome face lost a chunk of appeal when his mouth turned down in a sulky pout. "Well—"

Anger surged through me and I cut him short. "Of course it won't. And let's not forget this is Miss Francine and Miss Edith's home and given the work they do each day, it's important for them to have balance and proper relaxation time."

Dwayne nodded, blustering in his eagerness to agree with me while blaming me for jumping to conclusions and misunderstanding his intention.

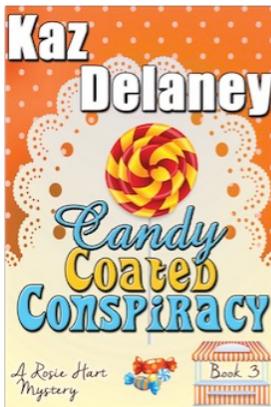
Spearing Dwayne a quieting glance, Donna-Lee supported me by assuring she could handle the store and promising to call in help if they got a rush. I was surprised that Dwayne responded so readily to Donna-Lee's silent admonition—and pleased. With the ladies ushered upstairs and Dwayne left to his own devices, I was now free to leave. But with my worry for the sisters so deeply implanted in my head, a change of plan was needed.

I needed some background on this family and there was only one place that might offer those answers. It was a long shot but maybe I'd learn something.

Basically I had one major aim. To discover if Dwayne Morris was who he said he was.

And if he wasn't—what in the heck was he doing in their home?

And why...?



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