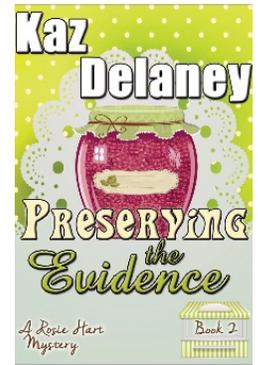


# Preserving The Evidence

by  
Kaz Delaney

## CHAPTER ONE



TEXAS SUMMERS TAKE NO prisoners; they're full-on from day one. It was only seven in the morning, but already a sheen of perspiration dotted the brow of my houseguest, Midge Moylan, as she wandered up the wide front steps leading to the porch. Her concentration was taken completely by the newspaper she held in her hand and her face alternately frowned and cleared as she perused each article or heading.

"Happy?" I looked up from the list I was making for jobs that had to be done that day. 'From the Hart'—my dessert stand at the Airlie Falls Craft and Farmer's Market—had taken off like there was a hungry big cat after it and I was having trouble keeping up supplies. So I was looking for things that would freeze ahead to help bulk out all the non-freezables that would be created fresh for the stall.

The porch was deep and shady, and one of my favorite places in the farmhouse home I'd inherited—well, one of two houses—from Miss Alice Auchinschloss who'd passed away early last spring. Midge took one of the padded wicker chairs at the matching round table and reached for the coffee pot that sat between us. As owner and editor of the *Airlie Falls Gazette*, our weekly newspaper, Midge was always anxious on publication day, scouring the paper from beginning to end searching for mistakes.

She shrugged, the cotton tee shirt she wore with her soft pj bottoms slipping off her shoulder as she did. "So far, so good," she answered somewhat absently. "I'm not sure how Clay's going to take this challenge to his mayoral position, though. It's looking like election time in Airlie Falls is going to be a very different affair this time around."

"Someone's running against Clay Fencott for mayor?"

She nodded, passing the paper over for me to read. "Frederick Clausen," I read out loud. "*Representing a bright and prosperous future. Promising wealth and success for Airlie Falls by bringing it into the twenty-first century.*" I looked across at her. "What does he even mean by that? And do we *want* to be brought into the twenty-first century? I mean we're not exactly locked in the past but I figured it was the old-fashioned values and slower pace that drew people here—and kept them here. I know it works for me."

"It works for most people around here, Rosie—but it was a big, full-page, paid ad and I'm not financially secure enough to turn it away. Besides, who would vote against Clay?"

A heaviness settled over me as I read. In a very short time I'd come to view Clay as a father figure and I was obviously very fond of him. His son, Jonah, was my boyfriend. We'd only been together for a few months but both had hopes of this building into a 'forever' thing—and so far, so good. But my support for Clay ran deeper than as the father of the man I loved. He and his wife Fiona—Jonah's mother, who'd become one of my closest

friends—had welcomed me with open arms during one the scariest times of my life, when I'd been accused of murder. And I would always owe them for that.

"But he's been mayor for twenty years!" I said unnecessarily. "The town loves him. And Fiona. Between them they've turned Airlie Falls into a thriving community."

"I know and that was one of the reasons I gave myself for accepting the advert. As you just said, everybody loves them, so what could it hurt? Trust me, money was a motivator, but I had to satisfy my conscience as well. Besides—it's a free country and all... Bill of Rights. First amendment. Democracy et cetera et cetera."

I really felt for her; running a small-town—*very* small-town—newspaper was always going to be fraught with conflicts like this. The community members become like family and so to report against them is very tricky. She and I had bonded over murder of all things and when her rented accommodation needed urgent repairs I'd offered one of my spare rooms out here at the farm, and that had stretched into months—and so far we were both enjoying the set-up.

"You've done the right thing, Midge," I reassured her. "I might not personally like the content but it had to be included."

Her eyes opened wide as she listened and as always I was struck by the likeness we shared. Both small-boned and dark-haired, blue-eyed and what others had described as 'having delicate features.' Being such a clumsy clogs, that description never sat well with me—but, ironically I could see how it fit Midge.

As my mind jumped around, my anxiety over the mayor situation eased and I began to giggle. "Do you think this Clausen guy has any idea what he's up against? Clay is an institution. And obviously Clausen hasn't met Fiona. He'd be one tough dude if he could face her and stick around to take her on for round two."

Midge was chuckling her agreement from her side of the table.

I adored Fiona but she had a reputation. In her late fifties, Jonah's mom was tall and stately, drop-dead gorgeous, had a heart as big as Texas, and was adored by everyone who encountered her. But she also had an iron-strong will that wouldn't bend in the most fierce of tornadoes. And that made her a fierce opponent.

"So, what chance do we give him? Clausen, I mean?"

Midge tilted her head to one side as she thought it out. "If he gets ten votes, I'd be putting money on the fact that he paid for nine of them."

The clump of boots momentarily startled us both out of our discussion. We hadn't heard Jonah's truck because he'd parked down by the road and walked up the long drive, but I suspected our laughter might have drowned it out anyway.

His boots hit the steps heavily as he made his way to us, scraping out a chair and reaching for the coffee pot before he'd even said hello. Tiny, who'd been lying at my feet, whimpered and crawled on her belly to greet her old master. Poor baby. If ever a dog needed a pet psychiatrist for guilt issues—it was this one. Grinning, I watched her make such a fuss of seeing Jonah, reaching to him with her huge plate-sized paws—like she was making up for defecting to me when Jonah had loaned her as a guard dog several months before when a murderer had targeted me.

"Does this mean we're officially taking each other for granted?" I asked cheekily as he poured the piping coffee into a mug. "You haven't even kissed me."

He grinned and leaned across to right his wrong and lifted a salute to Midge. “No, Rosie darlin’, it means I’m officially the owner of two new healthy calves whose mothers both had difficult births and I sat up all night keeping the vet company.”

“Yay!” Shrugging, I added, “Oh, okay, so not yay about having been up all night, but yay on the two new babies being born safe and well.”

His answering grin was tired. “So, what were you lovely ladies gigglin’ about when I arrived?”

I think we both felt the burn of embarrassment. “Your mom and dad facing off with Fred Clausen,” Midge admitted.

“How is Clay?” I asked. “Coping?”

He took a long draw of coffee and leaned back in the chair. “Y’all know Dad,” he began, “he’s being philosophical about it all. Reckons that if it’s time for someone else to take over, then so be it. He’ll bow out gracefully and give the other guy—or gal—his full support.”

Typical Clay. “And Fiona?”

Now he took more time answering. “She’s fine for the most part. She’d be happy for Dad to pull back a bit. Being a dedicated mayor *and* the town dentist for all these years has taken its toll.”

There was a ‘but’ coming and I was pretty sure I knew what it would be. I’d gotten to know Fiona very well over the past months. “But she’s worried Clausen isn’t the right person to take the reins?”

“Got it in one,” he said, lifting his cup to drain the last of his coffee. Holding it out as I offered a refill he added, “Mom makes it her business to know everybody and it’s thrown her off course to realize there’s someone in town she doesn’t know. That would be bad enough—but someone she doesn’t know who wants to take over as mayor? That’s got her in a spin.”

“So, what’s the deal there?” I asked. “Can anybody just turn up and set himself or herself up as a candidate? I thought there’d be more to it than that?”

Midge nodded. “There is. I checked him out before I put the ad through. To sit on council the person has to be a resident and have lived here for a prescribed time. It appears Clausen owns some property about ten or fifteen miles out of town. He’s owned it for years.”

“Just *owned* it or lived there?”

“Well,” Midge answered slowly, “that’s where it gets tricky. It’s a substantial property and there are several dwellings on it, and the thing is, while I couldn’t irrefutably prove he *has* lived out there, I also couldn’t prove he *hasn’t*. There are regular utility bills in his name and he gets mail delivered there.” She shrugged. “Yet—”

“Yet,” I finished for her, “I bet none of us has ever seen him in town, right? And you can’t find anybody who has?”

She nodded, her mouth set in a line of grim acceptance.

“Quite frankly,” I said, “I have to wonder why someone would want to become mayor of Airlie Falls. We’re not exactly a hub of commerce or a potential jewel in any political crown.”

“No argument from me. And y’all know my mom, these are the things that are botherin’ her,” Jonah said. “His mayoral duties aside, Dad takes things in his stride, believing the truth will surface, and worrying when there’s an obvious need to worry.”

Whereas Mom does the worrying first, and doesn't give up on the worrying until she's satisfied everything's as it should be."

Nodding I went back to the paper lying on the table. Fred Clausen's photo stared back at me and I tried to imagine if I'd vote for him if I didn't have all this extra knowledge or emotional attachments to Clay and Fiona. Of course it was an impossible task—we can never 'unknow' what we know.

The photo showed him to be possibly Clay's age—late fifties, early sixties. He certainly didn't have Clay's looks or presence—both of which Jonah had inherited in spades—and he also didn't have that sense of calm authority and warmth. Also things that Jonah had inherited.

No, Fred Clausen—while certainly good-looking—was more polished and worldly. Slick. Clay was a stunning man to look at, but he wore those looks with humor and humility. Clausen's features were tight; his mouth was curled into a smile that had a kind of cruel quality about it that some women went crazy for. Not me. Plastic—that's what I saw. And I just hoped his ethics and his dedication to the community he'd be representing were more substantial.

Jonah tilted his coffee cup toward Midge. "Guess you'll also be writing up that mysterious body story this week."

That jolted me out of my reverie. And when we both leaned forward he grinned. He knew we were both hooked on mysteries. It was one of the reasons Midge had become a journalist. I had no such noble rationale for my curiosity; I was purely and simply a cozy mystery junkie. "Body?" I managed to get out first. "And you're just telling us now."

"Mysterious body?" Midge added. "Where? Who?"

Tired as he was, the cheeky grin was firmly in place. "Well, I'd say that's why it's a mystery. They don't know."

I narrowed my eyes feigning beastly intent. "Okay, Cowboy. Spill." My hand darted toward him. "Or I take the coffee."

Laughing, he settled back, petting Tiny who now had her head lying in Jonah's lap. "You two and your mysteries. They sucker you in every time." He paused and drew breath. "Okay, though I've gotta warn you, I don't know much. Eric told me—"

"Eric?" I asked. Not wanting to miss a teeny bit of this story.

"Vet," they answered in unison.

"Janet Falkes's son," Midge expanded. "Sheriff Kinnead's nephew. His mama is the Sheriff's sister; the receptionist cum dispatcher down at the Sheriff's department."

I nodded. I'd met Janet several times and I really liked her. "So?"

"So," Jonah continued. "Eric heard from his mom that one of the farmers found a body out on Redrock Road."

"No ID?"

He shook his head. "That's one of the puzzling things. On the surface it looks like he died an accidental death, and yet he had no identification."

"Drifter?" I offered.

Jonah tilted the brim of his ever-present Stetson to cut the angle of the sun that was becoming more determinedly cheerful. "Apparently he'd be a very well-dressed drifter if he was," he answered.

Midge put her mug down and I could tell she was already writing the story in her head. "You said one of the puzzling things? There was more?"

“Yeah, this is probably the zinger. According to the Sheriff, the body had been moved.”

“Why move a body if the death was accidental?” Midge asked, though I figured it was a self-directed question.

“Someone in the wrong place? Maybe he stopped to, you know,” Jonah inserted a little whistle where words should have been.

I frowned. “To pee? But then what? Someone conked him on the head and he fell into a ravaging poison ivy and it killed him?”

“Or maybe he was moved to protect someone or something? Or deflect attention from a certain area?” Jonah shrugged. “Those are the big questions.”

I nodded, my mind conjuring all the reasons he might have been moved. “And why it’s a mystery. If he hadn’t been moved, it would simply have been deemed accidental.” We all sat and pondered that for a moment until I asked, “So, how, specifically, did he die? Was he old or young?”

He answered the last question first. “Young guy. Late twenties. As for cause of death, early reckoning is some kind of bite. Or maybe it’s a flora thing. There’s definitely some kind of allergy associated with his death—so your crazy guess about poison ivy wasn’t that far off the mark. Apparently it looked like he was severely allergic and was bitten, consumed something or encountered something that set it off.”

“Gee,” Midge muttered. “Next time you say you don’t know much remind me to grab a pen and ream of paper.”

I was on a different track. “Tragic,” I said softly. Somehow that allergy fact had made it all a bit too real. Sure, Midge and I were caught up in the salacious details of a mystery right here on our doorstep, but we couldn’t forget this was a real person, not a character in a book. A real person who’d died a sad and probably painful death. A young life cut short. Reading my mind, Jonah reached across to cover my hands with his. “At least he wasn’t alone, I guess...” I whispered.

They both looked at me. “Well,” I explained, “if he was well dressed but had no ID, and there’s no vehicle to identify and he was moved—he wasn’t alone.”

“Unless,” Midge said slowly, “here’s another possibility: He was moved after he died. Like, as if someone found him and moved him to a different place.”

Tragedy aside, it was this part of any puzzle that drew me in. “But, why take the ID?”

“To slow up the identification process?” she offered. “But why?”

Jonah set his cup back on the table. “You two are making this way too complicated.”

I shrugged—I didn’t think so. And one look at Midge confirmed she was with me on that. We pumped Jonah for information for a few more minutes, finally satisfied he had nothing more to offer.

I stretched, feeling my T-shirt start to cling, even at this early stage of the day. “Gosh,” I continued, “what a week for sleepy little Airlie Falls! The mysterious death of that poor young man, and a late election challenge!”

Jonah grinned. “It’ll be standing room only in Merline’s beauty parlor this week.”

Yep, like most small towns the hotbed of gossip was the beauty parlor. Merline herself admitted that any time a disaster or scandal hit Airlie Falls her business trebled, so she’d be geared for a big week. And in a weird way it one of those quirks I loved about this town.

A scraping chair brought me back to the present. Midge was going up to shower and change, and I decided Jonah needed something more than just coffee if he intended to get any work done. I flicked a kiss at his forehead, laughing when Tiny cocked her head for one

as well. "I'll go get some scrambled eggs and sausage. And no," I said as he started to rise, "I don't need help. You stay here in the sun and catch a few zzz's while I get that food."

Tiny was on her feet instantly, ready to follow me. If there was one human word she recognized it was 'food.'

For once though, Jonah stayed where he was. He didn't always comply when I issued orders but I could see his exhaustion was really catching up. His building company always had a lot of projects he had to juggle, and on top of that, lately, all his spare time had been spent helping me get this house renovated and the overgrown yards into some kind of working order.

I was thrilled by my new vegetable gardens and the work we'd put in to breathe new life into the fruit orchards—to say nothing of my simply stunning state-of-the-art kitchen and luxurious bathrooms.

The calves that had kept him awake last night were part of his hobby farm, and had nothing to do with me, but suddenly I felt the weight of guilt that he hadn't had much downtime lately. I'd have to make sure he got more of that.

AFTER PROMISING TO call it quits early, Jonah left and I cleaned up, and after ensuring Tiny had enough water and food, I made my way to Brenda Kinnead's place, on a big parcel of land on the edge of town. Not acreage, but enough space for a small orchard, trained berry vines and thriving vegetable gardens. Most of which she used for the produce for her market stall. Her husband was Frank Kinnead, the Sheriff who had his office right here in Airlie Falls. We'd gotten to know each other when he'd suspected me of murder earlier in the year.

At the time, Brenda had become quite famous for her jams and preserves, and demand was high, but all the work was taking its toll and when I'd been cleared of the murder I offered to help her out.

However, as I traveled to help Brenda that morning my mind wasn't solely on the wonders we might create. Electoral placards were dotted around town and as yet another smiling image of Clay whizzed by my side window I felt another jerk of concern spear through me. All the times in the past weeks that I'd driven past all the campaign signs reminding people to vote for Clay I'd barely registered them. Clay was mayor and he would stay mayor. Who could do a better job? No other candidates had thrown their hats into the ring; it was, as apparently it had been for years, a one-horse race.

Until now.

Less than a week until the election someone had joined the race. It was ludicrous really. Did this guy actually expect to win? The election was timed to coincide with the market weekend because farm and ranch folk would be in town. What could you do in a week to change the thinking of a whole town?

My thoughts slowed. What could you do, indeed? Especially with a dead body to distract and confuse the issue.

I wasn't sure how reflecting on the election challenge had so smoothly taken me back to the conversation about the mysterious body but barely noticing the shift, it was what now took center stage.

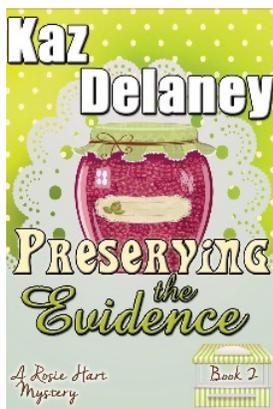
My own words at the time drifted back. I'd marveled at the juxtaposition of two random — yet significant—events in our peaceful little town. I'd even made a joke about it

but now, in the quiet of the car and with more clarity, it suddenly seemed that maybe the two incidents weren't as random as I'd first imagined.

When I added the puzzling facts surrounding the discovery of the body, that triggered an uncomfortably familiar churning in my stomach.

I hoped I was having a drama queen moment. Because surely the other scenario flitting around in my head couldn't be true, could it? The scenario that was whispering crazy suggestions. Like, that maybe there was nothing random about the discovery of the body; that the timing was deliberate.

And to consider that meant there was nothing accidental about that man's death...



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