

FISHERS OF MENACE

by Wendy Heuvel



Chapter 1

Splash.

A piece of muffin fell into Cassie Bridgestone's tea.

"Argh!" Cassie fished out the soggy chunk with a spoon and wiped the crumbs off the café table.

Her best friend, Lexy, and sister-in-law, Maggie, stifled their snickers.

"What's with you this morning?" Maggie twisted her cup on its saucer.

"She's nervous about the new tenant." Lexy giggled. "She's hoping he's tall, dark, and handsome."

Cassie frowned. "You know that's not it. I woke up jittery. Not sure why." She wiped more crumbs from her lap. "Besides, the tenant is an old retired guy. He's not even good-looking."

"I thought you hadn't met him yet." Maggie furrowed her brow and popped a piece of doughnut into her mouth.

"I haven't." Cassie smirked. "But that doesn't mean I haven't researched his online profiles."

The girls laughed.

"So, you're admitting you checked him out? I knew it was time to find you a date!" Lexy winked.

"You both know I'm not ready. Besides, I did no such thing." Cassie sat up straight in her chair. "You don't think I'm going to rent a store and an apartment to just anyone, do you? I check out all the applicants."

"Did any of the other applicants offer you a year's rent up front?" Maggie grinned.

"Without even seeing the place?" Lexy added.

"That might have helped with my decision." Cassie relaxed her shoulders again, and they all shared another giggle. Even though it was brief, she loved this weekly tea time, and the quaint Tea Garden was the perfect place to meet.

Cute, frilly curtains and flowery paintings adorned the windows and walls, and a delightful display of fresh pastries and chocolates called out from behind the glass counter, begging to be eaten. On their table, an antique teapot and dainty teacups surrounded a bouquet of colourful flowers in a porcelain vase.

“What about your vacation rentals? Any manly prospects for this weekend?” Lexy asked, a hopeful gleam in her eye.

“Only if your type is big, smelly fishermen.” Cassie gulped her last sip of crumbly tea. “It’s the bass tournament weekend, remember?”

“That could be my type.”

Maggie almost spit out her tea.

“What? Not all of them are big and smelly.”

“That’s right!” A petite woman with a black bob approached the table. “My Zachy happens to be medium-sized and smelly.”

“See?” Lexy laughed.

“Good one, Anna.” Cassie greeted her friend with a wave. “Want to join us?”

“I can’t. Just picking up takeout.” She grabbed a cardboard tray with three cups from the counter. “I’m heading to the bait shop to help the boys.” Bubba’s Bait Shop was one of the sponsors for the fishing tournament, and Anna dated Bubba’s son, Zach.

“I’m sure they’ll have their hands full over the next few days.” Cassie smiled. “Maybe next time?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Anna waved. “We’re still on for tomorrow though, right?”

“Of course.” Cassie nodded.

“What’s tomorrow?” Maggie asked.

“Anna and I are going birdwatching.”

“And that’s why we don’t get together more often.” Lexy put her cup down and flipped her dark hair over her shoulder. “You prefer birds over excellent company.”

“Maybe?” Cassie laughed as she fished some change out of her wallet and tossed it on the table.

Anna giggled and headed toward the door. “Have a great day, you three!”

The girls waved, and Lexy checked her phone. “Ugh. Yup. It’s time to go, ladies. Work beckons.”

Maggie picked up her purse and glanced at Cassie. “I’ve got a couple hours of work at the office, and then I’ll be in for my shift.” She referred to the real estate office where Cassie’s brother, Rick, was an agent. Maggie often helped her husband with paperwork since it wasn’t his strength, but her main job was working in Cassie’s shop, Olde Crow Primitives.

“Sounds good. See you then!” Cassie exchanged hugs with Lexy and Maggie and stepped out of the café into the sunshine.

It was going to be another beautiful day in the village of Banford and a great weekend for the fishing tournament. She lifted her long purse strap over her head and pulled at the curly hair that got snagged in the process.

As she walked down Main, she admired her little town. She wished she hadn’t wasted

seven years living in the city. On the other hand, maybe it made her appreciate Banford even more.

Across the street, the owner of the Candle Barn swept her shop's front step. Next door, a waitress at Java Junction wiped a few of the outdoor tables, and people streamed in and out of Drummond's Bakery, letting the scent of freshly baked cinnamon rolls waft out into the street. Cassie smiled as she approached her building on the corner of Main and First. Across the way, a boat engine roared to life as it exited the lock station and headed upriver.

She turned the corner at her building. Mr. Daniel Sawyer was to meet her at eight thirty at the entrance to the store he'd leased from her. She was grateful to finally have someone take over the empty space. It'd been vacant for about six months, and although the rent from the apartments and vacation rentals upstairs covered the vacancy, it would be nice to have the space occupied again. Especially since he was turning it into a used bookstore.

A bookstore would nicely compliment her Olde Crow Primitives store and The Chocolate Shoppe in the same old, stone building. And it would be another great fit for the small, cozy town.

Cassie examined the storefront as she passed her shop. She had changed the window displays last week to a summer theme and had included some cute rustic items and wooden fishing décor, as a lot of the tournament participants brought their wives for the weekend. Banford was known for its cute stores and was a big draw for ladies on a day out.

Poking her hand into her purse, she grabbed her keys as she rounded the corner of the building. As she looked up, she let out a small gasp.

A ruggedly handsome man leaned against a black SUV. He was smartly dressed and wore expensive shoes—definitely not one of the fishermen invading the town for the weekend. What was he was doing there?

He smiled at her as she approached the door with her key extended. Cassie felt heat rise to her cheeks and focussed her attention on the lock.

She heard him step behind her.

“Are you Cassie?” His voice was deep and soothing.

She whirled around in surprise. He removed his sunglasses and stared at her with intense, blue eyes. It took her a second to find words.

“Ah, yes. Can I help you?”

“I'm Daniel.”

The keys fell from her grasp and jingled as they landed on the stoop. He bent to pick them up, and as he handed them to her, she realized her mouth was slightly agape. She swallowed.

“Daniel Sawyer.” He offered his hand for her to shake. “Your new tenant?”

She accepted the handshake, her hand a clammy mess. She dropped the keys again. Why was she being such an idiot?

Daniel laughed as he picked them up a second time. “Slippery hands today?”

“Yeah, I guess.” She took the keys from him and fumbled with the lock again until the latch clicked.

“We were to meet at eight thirty, right?” Daniel ran his hand through his hair. “I didn't

mess up the time?”

“No. Yes. I mean, yes. Eight thirty.” She pushed the door open and stepped into the shop. “Sorry, I... I expected someone... older.”

Daniel smiled. Cassie’s stomach flipped. She wished it wouldn’t have.

“Let me guess—you searched online and found a picture of my father?”

Cassie felt the heat in her cheeks again. She turned away and flipped the light switches on. “You caught me.” No sense trying to hide it.

“You won’t find me online as Daniel Sawyer.” He turned around to get a good look at the room. “Wow! This is a great space! It’s way better than the pictures portrayed it!”

The store was long and narrow, running the entire width of the back of the building. Large windows with wooden grilles and deep windowsills lined two walls, and a stone fireplace stood at the far side.

“This is perfect!” Daniel walked farther into the room, causing the floor to creak as he stepped on the old, wooden planks.

Cassie grimaced. “Sorry. There’s nothing I can do about the squeaks.”

“No, it’s fine. It adds character.”

The muscles in his neck bulged slightly as he admired the high, tin ceiling. He turned to her again and locked his gaze on hers.

Butterflies fluttered around in her stomach, but Cassie quelled them by quickly looking away and heading toward the door on the back wall. “I’ll show you to your apartment now.”

They stepped through the doorway and ended up in the building’s stairwell. “My shop is through there.” Cassie pointed down another hall. “And so is an entrance to The Chocolate Shoppe. You can access the parking lot through that door there.” She pointed to a big exterior door.

She started up the stairs, aware her neck burned as he followed closely behind.

“This is a nice building. Do you own the whole thing?”

“Yes. I acquired it from my grandmother.” Why was she explaining that to him?

“I see. How long ago did she pass?”

Cassie chuckled. “She’s still alive; she just wanted to retire. She lives in the manor at the edge of town. We co-own the building, until I pay her off.”

“Oh! That sounds like a good business deal.”

“It is.” Why was she still telling him her personal information? They emerged on the second floor. “A nice lady named Betty lives there.” Cassie pointed to a door marked 2B. “And that’s my apartment, 2A, if you need anything.”

“Good to know.” He smiled.

Cassie’s face grew hot again. She quickly stepped into a small room. “Through here is the laundry room.” She opened a cabinet. “You can store your laundry soap, and whatever, here. There’s no fee for the washers or dryers, but I ask that you keep them clean and make sure clothes don’t get left in them. And...” Cassie frowned.

“What is it?”

“My laundry baskets are missing.”

“So, don’t borrow the laundry baskets...” Daniel chuckled.

Cassie grinned as they left the room and ascended the next staircase. “Up here on the third floor is your apartment. There are two other apartments on this floor I rent out short-term to vacationers. Like this week—for the fishing tournament.”

They reached the top, and Cassie was surprised she felt a bit out of breath.

The stairs had never bothered her before.

She made sure to hold the keys tightly this time as she unlocked Daniel’s apartment door.

“Fishing tournament? Is that why it’s so busy in town on a Tuesday morning? I chose to move to Banford because it was supposed to be a sleepy town.” Daniel followed her into the apartment.

“It is. Trust me.” Cassie handed Daniel the set of keys. “But the tournament is a big draw. First prize is thirty thousand dollars, a boat, and a trailer. People come from all over the province to participate.”

“Wow! That’s a pretty big prize for a small town.”

“Yes. Three local businesses work together to sponsor it—the bait shop, the marina, and the car dealership. They also get part of the money as a grant from the tourism committee.”

Daniel nodded his head in approval. “Smart.”

“The tournament starts Thursday and runs until Sunday. But lots of fishermen like to arrive early and scout the waters for a couple days first. The guys staying in the vacation apartments up here have already arrived.” She nodded toward the hallway.

“But it’s a sleepy town the rest of the year, right?”

“Yes, though tourism does keep the town hopping in the summer—and during the Christmas Festival.”

Daniel laughed. “Maybe I should’ve stayed in Toronto!”

“It’s never as busy as that.” His gaze rested upon her again, so Cassie turned to avoid it. “I’d show you around the apartment, but there’s not much to show. It’s small, like I mentioned in our emails. Kitchen, living room, bathroom, and bedroom.” She whirled around and pointed to each place as she spoke.

“It’s perfect.” Daniel’s eyes were still only on her, not the apartment.

Cassie’s thoughts said to think he was a bit creepy—except he wasn’t. Not in the least. He seemed sincere, and kind. “Well, I’ll leave you to it.” Cassie headed to the door. “I have to go open my shop. If you need anything, let me know.”

“Thank you, Cassie.” His smile made her stupid stomach flip again. “The movers should be here soon with my things. I’ll be busy with them for most of the day. But maybe I’ll pop into your store later and check it out.”

“Sounds good.” Again, with the warm cheeks. Ugh! She gave a quick smile, bolted out the door, and quickly descended the stairs to her apartment.

“Meow!” A big, round, orange-and-white tabby greeted her.

“Hi, Pumpkin! We’ll go down in a minute!” Cassie cooed. Her cat was her steadfast companion and came to work with her every day.

But first, Cassie wanted to check something. She hurried to her office and rummaged

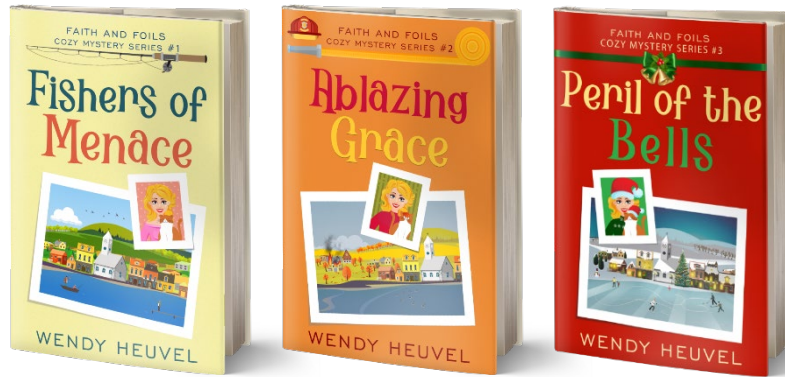
through the papers on the top of her desk. When she found the stack she was looking for, she flipped the pages until she saw Daniel's lease.

It was right there on the application. His birthdate. He was only a couple of years older than her own twenty-eight years. How did she not see that before? She stared at the roughly copied black-and-white photo of his driver's licence. Now that she knew he wasn't an old guy, she could see it in the blurred photo—if she squinted. She made a mental note to accept only full-colour scans as identification from now on.

She recalled he said you wouldn't find him online as Daniel Sawyer. She checked the name on the lease again. No other name or variation was listed.

Something didn't make sense, but she couldn't put her finger on it. At any rate, she'd have to think about it later. Tossing the stack of papers back onto her desk, she rushed out the door with Pumpkin at her heels. It was time to open her shop.

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