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# SECRETS, LIES AND LAVENDER

Cape Danger - Book Five

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TESSA CARR



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Tessa Carr  
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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

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## Chapter 1

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**W**ide eyed, Andrea Woods approached the front door of *Mellie's Antique Attic*. It was festively decorated for Christmas, with lights woven through garland that went all the way to the top of the three-story building. As she took the steps upward, however, the door opened from the inside.

She stopped, staring. The handsome man holding the door for her on the left was followed by another, who was grinning at her. On the right hand, another man stood, staring down at her. He was the tallest of the three, with dark brown eyes the color of espresso. At the moment, they held an element of seriousness which seemed to be directed at her. Definitely the most handsome of all of them, something about his expression seemed to dance all the way down her insides, causing them to clench.

She managed to look away, embarrassed that she'd been staring, but as she stepped over the threshold, her heel caught, and she stumbled forward. The last man, of the three, reached forward, quickly, steadying her with an arm around her waist. His touch sent shivers down her spine.

"Whoa, young lady. Are you all right?"

Her cheeks turned crimson. "Yes... Thank you," she murmured softly.

Oh, my. If these were the kinds of men who inhabited antique shops, she might enjoy this business after all.

*Stop it, Andrea. You're off men for good, remember?* It was something she'd told herself time and time again.

The bells on the front door tinkled as it closed behind her, and Mellie waved at her from behind the counter. The sounds of a melodious chime came from the background, and she realized it was coming from a Grandfather clock in the corner.

"Andrea, it's good to see you." Mellie's smile was slightly tight, but she hid it quickly.

Andrea smiled. "You're lying, but thanks anyway. You're sweet to say it." She looked around the ground floor. "I know you said eleven, but I came a little early. I hope it's all right."

Mellie shook her head. "No, it's fine. I never dreamed you'd be interested in owning an antique shop. Are you ready to look around?"

Andrea returned her smile. "I can't wait. Everything looks charming."

"Thanks. We work hard at it. This is all older stuff." She paused, tilting her head. "What made you call? It's been a year since I've seen you."

Andrea took a deep breath before answering. "I know. But Christmas is approaching fast, and I just had a desire to touch base with you. I missed you." She looked around the room. "Mellie, I'm amazed at the way you've arranged everything. Are you sure you want to give this up?"

Mellie's smile was rueful. "No. But I can't keep it. My other job is too important to leave it, and I can't do both. But before you make a decision on buying it, let me show you the upper floors and tell you what I need for it. Remember, I told you I own all this stuff."

They moved around the shop, stopping only long enough for

Andrea to beg Aaron and Sally to stay on. She made them an offer she hoped they wouldn't refuse.

"We'll think about it," he promised.

"Good!" She turned back to Mellie after they had finished covering the last of the three floors. It was almost noon, and she was almost dancing with excitement. "It'll be a little steep for me to buy you out, but I think I can swing it. This is something I've always wanted to do. Noticing Mellie's expression, she paused. "You look so curious. I know what you're thinking. You're wanting to know what I've done with the real Andrea."

Mellie looked uncomfortable. "Well, the truth is I haven't seen you for a year."

"And you figured I'd gone back to being," Andrea paused, "*Andrea the bitch*, for lack of a

better phrase. The answer is I've tried hard to bury her." She leaned against the piano next to her. "Twenty-eight years of acting catty and malicious is a long time, and changing was hard. But I'm still trying. If you ever see me acting like that again, just shoot me, okay?" At Mellie's laugh, she continued. "No, I'm serious, Mellie. I cringe when I think of how I treated everyone, especially those I considered my friends."

"Time for lunch," a deep male voice announced from the doorway, "and I'm starving."

Andrea looked from one to the other, wondering if she should back out.

"It's Max," Mellie informed her with a grin. "I was going to call you," she said over her shoulder. "Andrea and I were going to lunch, but our plans were to discuss selling the shop."

Max grinned. "You can discuss whatever you want, but Adam's meeting us at Pandora's in fifteen minutes."

Andrea, uncertain, shook her head. Her brain was whirling. Adam was the one who had reached down and caught her, sending those tell-tale shivers down her spine. "Perhaps I should just wait and talk to you later—"

But Max was already shaking his head. "Nah. Adam won't bite. And you can ride with us if you want."

"Please come," Mellie said, grinning. "You'll like him, I promise."

Andrea bit her lip. A few seconds later, however, she agreed.

When they passed the front counter, Max glanced toward Aaron. "Are you closing up, or do you want us to bring you back something?"

"Sally says she's in the mood for a taco salad. If you can swing that, we'll stay here."

"Will do," Max said, closing the door behind him.

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ANDREA SAT in the back seat, wondering why she hadn't refused the lunch invitation after all. It really didn't matter who Adam was. She shouldn't care. She'd promised herself she was finished with dating, and with men. After four husbands and an attempt at reconciliation with Johnny, her first, she'd decided she would never marry again. He might have been any woman's dream, but after a few weeks of seeing each other again, he had wondered at her change in disposition.

"I'm at a loss," he'd said, staring at her. "You've changed." He'd shrugged. "I don't know who you are anymore."

She hadn't responded. Instead, she stared back, thinking, *but you cared about me when you thought I was still a bitch? I guess I don't know you anymore, either.* But she couldn't make herself go back to what she'd been before; she just couldn't. All the people she'd hurt, even her friends, which were few.

After Johnny's statement, she wasn't sure if any man would ever have her again.

The worries in the back of her mind tugged at her, increasing her trepidation at having lunch with two people from the FBI.

She'd have to be cautious; the secrets she held would have to be guarded so carefully

She lowered her gaze to her lap sadly. Those secrets couldn't be shared; not with friends.

*Not with anyone.*

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SHE HEARD MELLIE'S VOICE, suddenly, from the front seat, "We're here."

Andrea looked out the window. The tall man she recognized as Adam was walking toward the car. His face held the same curious expression it had that morning when he'd caught her and brought her back to her feet, and he seemed to be staring straight at her.

She stared back. *Oh, my gosh, what a gorgeous man,* she thought. But her second thought was to scold herself for even thinking of him that way.

*No,* she said to herself. *You're off men. For good. Period.*

She tried to convince herself it was true as she watched Max move out of the car and around the front to open Mellie's door. She reached for the handle on her own side, but the door opened before she got the chance.

She looked up. Adam was on the other side, grinning down at her.

"And who might you be, young lady?"

She gulped, barely hearing him. She couldn't remember being at such a loss for words, ever before. He reached toward her, and she ignored his hand as she stood up outside the car abruptly, throwing her long legs over the side and staring back up at him with her chin out.

"Who wants to know?"

He raised a brow that looked strangely like a warning.

*Careful, she thought, the old Andrea is supposed to be under six feet of dirt, remember?*

He stood back and waited for her to move back so he could close the door.

"I do. I'm Adam Reese, a buddy of Max's, which makes me a friend of Mellie's."

"Who says?" Mellie threw back, grinning.

Adam chuckled. "Max, control your girl."

Max laughed softly. "Trying as hard as I can, my friend. It's difficult." Fixing his gaze on Andrea, he announced, "Adam, meet Andrea Woods."

Andrea, standing at five foot ten, felt small next to the man now looking down on her. He was an inch or two taller even than Max. Six foot six? Seven? She was still staring at him when he raised a brow and took hold of her arm, tugging her out of the way so he could close the door.

"Oh, sorry," she murmured apologetically.

"Nothing to be sorry for." His eyes crinkled at the corners and he turned, closing the door. He hadn't let go of her arm. As if she'd been unable to make the decision herself, he began marching her toward the curb where Mellie and Max waited.

"Come, Andy. It's lunch hour. I don't want them to run out of steaks before I get one."

"It's Andrea."

She frowned at the way she sounded. *Shut up*, she declared inwardly, *and be nice*.

He turned her to face him, a stern expression on his otherwise handsome face. "You look like an Andy to me. So, deal with it."

She opened her mouth, and closed it again, as he brought her through the door and inside.

When the server guided them toward the booth, Max and Mellie sat next to each other on the other side, and Adam stood back, motioning her to slide in. When he moved in next to her,



his large frame took up most of the seat, and she found herself unsure of what to say. This wasn't a date. What must he be thinking?

Mellie turned to Max. "Where's the new guy you're supposed to be breaking in?"

"Gresham? He wouldn't come. He decided to go for a cruise in his new Porsche convertible and impress the ladies in town. Chances are, he'll drive by the PD on the way, to show it off. I hear there's no love lost between them."

Andrea knew surprise showed on her face. "A convertible? In *December*?"

Max rolled his eyes. "Don't ask. Gresham's a little different."

Adam shrugged. "To each his own. I'd rather drive my Chevy."

Max looked across the booth at Adam. "We dragged Andrea along with us because she had questions about the shop. She's thinking of buying it."

Adam cocked his head. "You mean she didn't come just to sit with me? I'm devastated."

Andrea couldn't help herself. She began laughing. "Bless your heart," she retorted. "You'll get over it."

"No, I won't. I'll be scarred for life. All right. Ask your questions while I sit here and mourn."

She was still struggling not to laugh when the server arrived, took their orders, and left.

Mellie leaned forward, glancing at her husband. "She wants to know why Aaron and Sally had decided to quit."

Max didn't miss a beat. "They thought it was too dangerous to keep working for her," he added quickly.

"Yeah, yeah, she knows that already." Mellie's tone was scolding and Max raised a brow, but Mellie ignored him. "It really had nothing to do with the shop."

"Sure, it did." Max tossed out. "It was when you bought the seventeenth century desk that it became bad. And before that,

the Mafia was after you. It's no wonder Aaron decided to quit. Smart man, in my opinion."

Mellie stared across at Andrea, who was looking from one to the other with amusement. "I think we'll have to talk about this later."

"I think you're right," Andrea agreed.

"Well, that's settled. So," Adam said, grinning down at her, "it's my turn. Tell me about yourself. Where did you come from? Do you live here?"

She found more than a little irritation creeping into her voice. She'd already decided she'd buy the shop. But she needed to know a few more things about it, and if she was to get to the bank on a Friday afternoon, she needed to know it *now*.

Mellie glanced up at Max, who cleared his throat. Adam turned to face him.

"She's not a suspect, Adam. Don't interrogate her."

Adam grinned, giving her a wink. "All right. I'll shut up." He pointed to his watch. "But make it fast."

"It's just," Andrea said, a little impatiently, "the banks will close for business in two hours. I just wanted to know as much as possible about the shop, so I can get this done before the weekend."

"I'd think the weekend would be a good time to think it over before making a decision." Adam's deep voice caused her to look up at him with an expression that clearly said, *butt out. I didn't ask you*. Adam arched a brow, continuing to study her.

Mellie, watching them, frowned and began explaining the history of the shop; when she bought it and how long she'd owned it. When she finished, she eyed Andrea across the table. "And that's about all there is."

"I see," Andrea voiced thoughtfully. "It sounds like a good opportunity. I'd really like to buy it."

Mellie nodded. "I hate giving it up. I just don't feel as if I have a choice."

Max glanced from Mellie to Andrea. "She doesn't. So, tell us what you've been up to this past year. I've heard all about the mayhem that happened a year ago, from Mellie."

"Traveling, spending time with friends." She lowered her gaze to the table, biting her lower lip. She couldn't say, '*Staying out of town to avoid trouble...*' She couldn't even make herself finish the thought. These men both worked for the FBI, and she couldn't afford to spill secrets.

Adam fired more questions at her, and she did her best to give him answers. At the same time, she made them as vague as possible, leaving out details. If they knew how few friends she had to visit, they'd know she was lying.

Next to her, she sensed, rather than saw, Adam's friendly smile turn to a frown. When she chanced a glance up at him, his expression told her he was not at all pleased with her answers. She sighed.

She was lousy at keeping secrets, and worse at telling lies.

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ANDREA HEAVED a silent sigh of relief when they finished lunch. They were almost ready to leave, when Mellie's phone rang and she pulled it from her purse. Glancing at the caller ID, she frowned.

"It's one of the churches. They'll need something, and I don't think Nikki's available today." Her gaze flew to Andrea's. "I'm so sorry. I know you need to go to the bank—"

Next to her, Adam interrupted, "No problem, Mellie. I'll take her."

"I-I don't know how long it will take," she said, thankful he was willing to take her, yet hoping he'd limit his curious questions.

"I'm in no hurry," he answered, his eyes traveling over her face.

She looked away, shaking her head. "Well, if you're sure."

"I'm sure." He rose, taking her arm to help her out of the booth. But his demeanor toward her seemed to have changed somewhat.

He led her toward his car, an earlier model fifty-seven Chevy Bel-Air in a copper color. It looked pristine.

"Oh my. It's *beautiful*," she said, looking it over with admiration.

"Thank you." He guided her toward the driver's side and opened the door, and she slid across on the bench seat.

"Fasten your belt. You'll have to use the one next to me. The other one doesn't work." He grinned as he looked down. "That way, I can keep an eye on you."

Andy gulped. "I see."

He waited until she clicked it closed and continued. "About the car; my dad had one of these. I always wanted one like it, so when this one came up for sale, I grabbed it. It gets fourteen and a half miles per gallon, but my SUV only gets fifteen in town, so I use this one as my daily driver. It's more comfortable anyway. Which bank?"

"Sterling. On Kingshighway."

"On my way."

Andy tried to keep her thoughts together, but it was difficult. Adam's masculine scent, mixed with his aftershave, drew her in like a moth to a flame. She tried to keep her eyes ahead on the road, but she could tell he was watching her.

As they pulled up into the parking lot, she glanced up from beneath her lashes to see him studying her. A half-smile lifted a corner of his mouth.

"Here," he dictated. "Slide across to this side. I'll go in with you, but I won't follow you

in to talk to them if it'll make you feel more comfortable."

It didn't take as long at the bank as she feared. When she

came out of the cubicle after speaking to the woman who handled her accounts, he rose.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes," she said softly, "everything's all set."

"Max will be pleased," he murmured as he led her back to the car. "He's been ready for her to sell it for a long time."

She tilted her head upward. "Why?"

His eyes roamed her face as he guided her inside. "We never really got to that part, did we?"

She shook her head. "No, we didn't."

He grinned. "That was primarily my fault." When she glanced at him oddly, he continued. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

She lowered her gaze and turned to face the front. Glancing away, she whispered, softly, "*I hope so, too.*"

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ADAM KEPT an eye on her as he drove her back toward the shop. She didn't seem at all assured she'd made the right choice. And why was she in such a hurry to get this done?

"What are you going to call it?" he asked curiously.

When she turned those big doe-eyes to him, she looked as though the question hadn't occurred to her. "Pardon?"

"You have a name for the shop in mind, surely. Or don't you?"

"I..." She licked her lips, a gesture that had an instant effect on him. "I hadn't really thought about it. I might leave it the same as it is now."

"Ah. I see. I'll change the subject then. At the risk of being blunt, as we men often are when we want to know something," he paused, "is there a man in your life?"

She turned to him, shocked. Her cheeks turned a delightful shade of crimson. "No," she said in little more than a whisper.

He grinned. "All right, next question. Do you have dinner plans for tonight?"

She gulped. "Um, no. I was just going to stay home and watch TV and eat pizza. I'm a very dull person."

"I'm quite sure that's not true. But if you're up for it, I'd love to take you somewhere to eat."

A smile crossed her full lips. "I'd like that. Very much."

It was the first time he'd seen that genuine a smile on her face. "You're gorgeous when you smile, you know. I'd like to see it more often."

He managed to get her address out of her as he pulled up in front of the shop and opened the door, helping her out of the car.

Sending her inside the shop with a hand to the small of her back, he smiled. "All right, young lady. See you at six."

"Six," she echoed. "I'm looking forward to it." The smile she turned on him almost took away any doubts he had about spending time with her. Those soft brown eyes lit up and seemed to bring light to the whole room.

Adam returned to the car. He was still sitting there a minute later and staring at the front door of Mellie's shop. This young lady was a puzzle. She was beautiful. No, make that breathtaking. She was tall for a female, yet small enough to fit under his arm, with a slim build that held full breasts and a shapely bottom on which his hands had earlier ached to plant a hard smack. But there was definitely a tumultuous storm going on inside. She was hiding something, something very important.

He, on the other hand, was just determined enough to find out what it was.