

Outfoxing the Fisherman, A Seaside Shape-shifting Mystery

by Rachel, of A Gaggle of Girls ©2007-8

Chapter 1 -

The weak morning sun woke me from a fitful sleep. The night before had been foggy, and I needed to check the lights regularly - a burnt out bulb could cause boats to crash into the rocks. There were alarms that should sound when a bulb burned out, but in foggy situations I didn't trust the alarms. The foghorn doesn't help, either - the deep, low sound hurt my ears and head, and it was impossible for me to sleep with it sounding frequently. I stretched, then looked out the window to see that the fog had continued - yep, the fog horn would be a necessary evil this morning. I got out of bed, smiling when I smelled the coffee brewing - I had set the coffee-maker in the kitchen last night to make the coffee early in the morning. I knew I'd need it. Before I drank some of the precious brew, I dutifully walked up the short staircase to the lighthouse tower room. I checked yet again that the bulbs were all functional, that the foghorn was still working, and that the fog lights were set properly.

It was now mid-April, and there were more boats in the water every day. The locals just needed a reminder from the lighthouse about the dangers that lurked under the waters near the lighthouse, but as summer approached, there would be more and more visitors and tourists sailing or motoring in. This mid to late spring time was also when the weekend boaters would be getting back into their boats, their rusty skills needing every warning possible.

My lighthouse was perched on a peninsula of land across the harbor from the mainland of Stonespoint, Massachusetts. Stonespoint is a small community on the North Shore with a population of about 5,000 in the winter, but the summer population is much higher, plus the tourists who come for day trips or for weeks, staying in "quaint" Bed and Breakfasts. Year-round families usually have at least one boat - a sailboat for fun, and a motorboat for working. We have independent lobstermen and fishermen who are still eking out a living along the shores of Massachusetts. Unfortunately, local independent lobstermen are now the minority, much of the industry is being taken over by large corporations. Thankfully, most of the local restaurants and a few local stores prefer to buy from local fishermen and lobstermen, and many locals and tourists agree. We have some clams here too, but our clams aren't as well known as the Ipswich clams - most of the clammers are only gathering enough for their family.

Spring to early Summer is when most of the accidents happen around my lighthouse. On the right of my lighthouse is Stonespoint's harbor, but rocks prevent boats from coming too close to my peninsula on that side. Our harbor has a relatively small opening, so while sailing or motoring into it can be tricky, once you are inside, it provides a wide shelter for the boats. Visitors and rusty boaters often forget about the sharp rocks, so we have damaged boats each year, despite the lighthouse warnings and buoys. On the left of my peninsula the waters come in across a sandbar, which can also maroon boaters on a low tide. The peninsula itself is local conservation land. It's mostly sand and rocks, with a winding path through some scrub brush and plants to the lighthouse. A mix of dunes and a jetty, with a few plants tossed in, my special peninsula isn't big enough to handle cars, so I don't have very many visitors in the colder months. Thankfully, I have 2 small boats that have a shallow draft, so I can sail or motor over the rocks or the sand bar to get supplies, mail, and entertainment - or I can always walk or run along the path to my little Honda Civic parked in the small parking lot for the conservation land.

Almost all the lighthouses in the United States are automated, and few require a keeper unless the lighthouse is also a bed & breakfast. My lighthouse is a bit different - because of the peninsula's shape and location, it can't be connected to the town utilities. The lighthouse needs to have 2 generators - one

for main power, and one for backup. We also have the older kerosene lamps for the light in the tower, and candles in sconces around the lighthouse just in case both generators fail. In the three years I've been here, that's only happened once, thankfully. There are also other jobs to fulfill - working closely with the harbor master, dealing with debris on either side of the peninsula, keeping the peninsula free of litter, and keeping up the historic lighthouse itself.

I sat, sipping my much-needed morning coffee as I looked out the many windows at the migrating birds. The caffeine wasn't enough to keep me from falling into a light doze as I watched the birds settle on some bird feeders I had set up on the balcony, eat, then continue on their way. The mix of dull and bright colors was mesmerizing.

I was startled out of the trance by my marine radio. I kept one on the lighthouse channel - 13, at all times; the general channel for the harbor was programmed on a second marine radio that was turned on once my brain was on as well.

"Harbor master to Stonespoint Light. Vix? You up?" I heard through the faint static. Ruyz Veloso, the local harbor master was calling me on the radio. Phone service, or actually cell phone service, was spotty.

"You think I could sleep through the foghorn, Ruyz?" I replied.

"Weather guy on Channel 4 says it'll burn off soon." Ruyz offered.

"Good! I could use a break. Anything else new?"

"Nope, so far so good. I've got to go do a patrol in an hour, you want a coffee and a bagel?"

"Please!" I begged. I loved to cook, but I needed to be motivated. Cooking breakfast after very little sleep and not enough caffeine was never a happy prospect.

"Will do. I'll radio when I'm close. Harbor master out."

"Thank you! Stonespoint Light out." I smiled into my coffee. Seeing Ruyz was always something to look forward to, with or without coffee and a bagel!

Stonespoint Light was pretty isolated in the fall through spring. In summer, I ran a sailing camp on the sandbar side of the peninsula - we had several widgeons for kids to rent, or else they brought their own little boats. We'd sail in the mornings, have lunch on the beach, and then sail in the afternoons. It was great to be able to sail all summer, and the teenagers were a lot of fun. I enjoyed having my own camp, because I could say I would always kick out any troublemakers. In the three summers, though I had been lucky enough to only have to do that once, in my first year - no one bothered me after that. The local kids have been fabulous, friendly, helpful, and fun. I was really glad I had chosen to run the camp, and not just because it brought in a bit of extra money!

The camp was a nice supplement to my income, as being a lighthouse keeper doesn't exactly pay big bucks. As long as I had my kitchen, my generator, books, and my wifi, I'm happy. Thank goodness for the card in my MacBook that lets me have satellite wireless anywhere, because when you're this isolated the internet is an amazing friend. It's also handy to have a job that includes housing and utilities when you're working on a smallish income.

I threw on a long-sleeved v-neck, and a pair of jeans before pulling on my waterproof boots. This was another morning when I was glad I had a fast metabolism and a naturally warm body, as a foggy spring morning wasn't warm. If it was anyone else coming with coffee and a bagel, I would have left it at that. But Ruyz was one of the more eligible bachelors in Stonespoint. He was a fabulous harbormaster - suave enough for the summer folk, but he was Portuguese, so he knew the local community. Becoming friends with him was my first "job" after becoming lighthouse keeper - it was essential for me to have a good relationship with the harbormaster for so many reasons. Unfortunately, even after three years of knowing each other and developing a good friendship, I'd still be struck dumb for a moment upon first seeing him. Ruyz's dark eyes, dark hair, and lightly tanned skin glowed with life and energy. His personality shone through his eyes, and they'd sparkle, along with a quick grin. I couldn't just go out onto the rocks to see him without trying to make myself look nice, rather than just having rolled out of bed!

I washed my face, then brushed my thick red hair, and looked in the mirror - what could I do with it on a day this damp? I ended up wetting a brush and then pulling it back into a quick french braid. I couldn't look more different than most of the year-round residents of Stonespoint - about 75% of the year-round population was of a sturdy Portuguese descent, whereas I was petite, with brown eyes so pale they looked golden, and bright red hair. Ruyz had once joked that if all the lights went out, my hair could serve as a beacon at the top of the lighthouse. He said it with a friendly smile, though, so I didn't need to hit him. Any thought was blown out of my head by another blast of the low, deep foghorn. This fog had better burn off quickly or I'd go nuts. I added some lip gloss with a touch of color and decided I looked as good as I was going to look. I took a walk around the wrap-around balcony of my wooden lighthouse, and then went downstairs and walked around it on the ground. I looked up at the light cutting through the fog, and made sure it was working from all the angles. I also checked for any boats on the rocks - occasionally boats would get loose from their moorings in the harbor and end up on my "front yard". Thankfully, all looked secure. I needed to go in and listen to both the forecast on the marine radio as well as the Accuweather forecast on WBZ.

Both forecasts thought the fog would lift soon, so I looked at my to do list. If the fog lifted, I could start working on cleaning up the path through the brush and rocks of the peninsula. If it didn't, I needed to stay close to the lighthouse, so I could keep track of the foghorn and the various lights needed as the day progressed. I'd much rather be outside today - I had been stuck inside near the fireplace too much over the winter, and I loved the new smells of spring. The indoor To Do List items were more mundane and handy-person tasks, but the outdoor To Do List items would have more wildlife to spot and more physical activity.

The static from the radio cut through my thoughts again. "Harbormaster to Stonespoint Light. Vix, I'm leaving now with your coffee."

"Thanks, Ruyz! I'll be out by the rocks. Stonespoint Light out."

"Harbormaster out."

I belatedly realized that I hadn't turned on the main marine channel on my second radio, but there was no chatter there - the fog was lifting slowly, so most folks were staying close to home. I walked out of the lighthouse and down onto the very rocks that could damage boats. Ruyz rode in a Boston Whaler, so it could go almost anywhere, it had a very shallow draft. I got out as far as I could along the walks, enjoying the invigorating sea breeze. You could almost see the fog lifting as the breeze and the sun worked their magic. The foghorn blasted again, but somehow the knowledge that I would be able to turn it off soon made it much less annoying.

"Yo! Vix!" I heard, as I gazed out at the fog and the hidden horizon.

I looked up and smiled. "Hey, Ruyz!"

"Catch my line." He tossed a rope to me, which I caught and as he turned off the motor, I helped maneuver his gently drifting boat over to where I was standing.

"So, come here often?" He asked, grinning at me once we were face to face.

"Only when some handsome man offers me caffeine!" I replied, grinning back at him.

"Lucky me! I heard the foghorn a few times as I was getting to sleep last night, so I knew you didn't sleep well. I thought you deserved a little treat."

"Most of the time I love this job, but the foghorn drives me mad."

"Trust me, it drives anyone who's out on the water mad, too!" Ruyz smiled at me. "Here's your bagel and coffee - want to sit on a rock to eat with me?"

My face brightened, this was a special treat. "I'd love to. You don't have a busy schedule today?"

"Nope. Not much going on with the fog. Once it lifts things will get busy quickly, but I think we've got another half hour's worth of fog and foghorns. That should be enough time for coffee and a bagel." He tied his boat to a hook that was drilled into one of the rocks for that purpose, then got out and joined me, sitting on a rock with our coffee and bag of treats.

"Well, then, let's enjoy the relative calm. What did you bring out here?" I reached for the bag.

"No, no, no - there are surprises in there! First is the drinks - for you, a soy latte with vanilla," Wow! He remembered my favorite type of coffee! I thought. "For me, a large mocha. And now for the food - an everything bagel for you, and one for me. Plus..."

"Plus what? This is already a wonderful breakfast!" I looked at him, surprised. It was so wonderful to have a latte and a bagel, even more wonderful to have a handsome visitor who liked me well enough to remember my favorite kind of coffee and bagels. I didn't need anything else!

"I know how much you like raspberries," Ruyz said, "and there were finally some at the store that looked good. So we can have bagels, coffee, and raspberries."

The foghorn sounded again. "Don't forget the foghorn!" I laughed. "That just makes the morning complete."

"Fog is a mixed blessing for sure - it means we get a quiet breakfast, but only in between bursts from the foghorn."

"I was cursing the foghorn just a few minutes ago, but now I'm feeling very grateful for it! Thank you so much for thinking up this breakfast, Ruyz - I've been longing for all three of these things, but it's a busy time right now. It's hard to leave when there's so much to do. I'm fixing up things here and there that

were damaged by the winter storms. Once the fog blows off, I need to check and clean up the path, too."

"No problem. I'm happy to bring you treats - it gives me a good excuse to take a coffee break every so often! Plus the lovely company, of course."

I laughed. "Oh, of course! With our lively intellectual discussions about the weather."

"Hey!" He protested, "The weather is an important part of both of our jobs. It's not like we're two old biddies whining about the weather and our rheumatism over the back fence! I could talk to you about something else... Um, lets see, movies are out. TV is out. Hey, you seen any funny YouTube videos recently?"

"There's always the classic one of the guys dancing on treadmills..." I replied. "But you're right - I'm not up on most of the usual stuff. One day I'm going to take the time to learn how to identify all the beautiful birds in my area, at least. I keep jotting down notes about the 'pretty brown one' or 'the one with white-tipped wings'. At least I know the sea gulls, cormorants, black capped chickadee, blue jays, cardinals, and um, I think that's it."

"I still can't believe you have about a dozen bird feeders, live in a lighthouse near conservation land, and yet can't identify the different birds!" Ruyz laughed. "I'll have to come up there and sit with you someday and bring you a good book about them - my grandmother sat with me for ages teaching me all the different birds." His face shone as he smiled, "Good times."

We sat and chatted, with regular interruptions of the foghorn, until the fog started to lift. We parted ways so he could check out the harbor before it got too busy, and I could check out the maritime radio to know when I was safe to turn off the evil foghorn. Once the foghorn was finally off, I was jumpy, and needed to go for a run.