

FISHERS OF MENACE

by Wendy Heuvel



Chapter 2

The next morning, Cassie tied her runners and hung her binoculars around her neck. She checked the time on her phone to see it wasn't quite seven, then shoved it into her shorts pocket, kissed Pumpkin on the head, and bolted out the door and down the stairs, into the morning sunshine.

Outside, Cassie hurried down the street at a brisk pace, the river to her left as she headed to Bubba's Bait Shop. She took a deep breath of the fresh, cool air.

The tournament would begin the next day, and boats bobbed in the water as fishermen tested for the best spots. She smiled at the familiar sound of a line being cast into the water.

Birds fluttered in the trees and bushes beside the sidewalk, singing sweet melodies to her. "Good morning, Lord." Cassie warmed as she thought of God. Although she wasn't a morning person, she enjoyed the time once she was up and moving around. Especially if it involved a walk by the river.

Anna would be waiting for her at the bait shop. Bubba was letting the girls use one of his fishing boats.

With the influx of people into Banford this week, they wanted to check on the group of Henslow's sparrows nesting downriver in a weedy field. The Henslow's sparrows were an endangered species, and this was the first time in years they'd been found breeding in Ontario. There would only be time for a quick check on the birds before Cassie had to open her store, but she didn't want to miss this opportunity.

They couldn't do much to help the birds, but she felt an obligation to check on them, regardless. The Banford Bird Club, which Cassie and Anna were both a part of, had decided not to publicize the fact that the sparrows were nesting there. They knew it would bring birders from all over the province, hoping to catch a glimpse of the rare species so they could add it to their life lists. They decided to make sure the birds had successfully hatched and fledged before they officially announced and documented their presence.

Cassie's mood suddenly shifted as an image of Daniel popped into her mind. He never did visit her

in the shop the day before. Not that she wanted him to. Or did she? No. She was definitely not interested in him. He was a good-looking man, but he was her tenant and that was what he would remain. Besides, she didn't want a man in her life right now.

All the same, Cassie decided she would check in on him later. When he'd said the day before that the movers would be coming, she hadn't expected to see three trucks lining the street around the side of her building. From her store, she could hear people going up and down the stairs and banging in the bookstore all day long. She'd wanted to check in on him then, but she didn't want to give Daniel the wrong idea. He might think she was interested in him or checking on why he hadn't come into her store.

A chickadee flew in front of Cassie and landed on a nearby branch, bringing her mind to the present. She turned onto the walk to Bubba's.

Cassie tucked her hair behind her ear and pushed open the door to the bait shop. The bells on the door jangled. A number of people already browsed inside.

"Hey, Cassie!" Bubba waved.

She headed to the counter. "Hi, Bubba. Busy place this morning!"

Bubba grinned from ear to ear. "Yup. Can't beat the business during the tournament."

Cassie noticed two burly fishermen in hip waders and plaid shirts examining a wall of fishing lures. She recognized them as two of her vacation apartment renters. "Hi, Mitch. Hi, Jake." She waved as the men turned.

"Oh hello, Cassie." Mitch nodded, while Jake waved and smiled.

"Is the apartment okay? Did you sleep all right?"

"It's great, thank you." Jake gave a thumbs-up. "We didn't wake you this morning, did we?"

"No, no. I was up early of my own accord." She took a few steps toward them. "A day out scouting the waters before the tournament tomorrow?"

"Absolutely," Mitch answered. "We'll spend time fishing on the Rideau any chance we can get! The lakes and rivers are built up way too much where we're from."

An old man pushed past Cassie on the way to the cash register with an old minnow bucket in hand. "So why come up here and clutter our river then?" He scowled.

"Play nice, Lloyd." Bubba eyed the man over a display of fishing lures on the counter.

Lloyd scoffed as he put the bucket on the counter. "Fill it with a dozen baitfish, and I'll take a carton of leeches."

"Hey," a bald man in another aisle piped up. "I thought there was no live bait allowed in this tournament!"

"Calm your panties." Lloyd sneered. "I'm not in the stupid tournament. I fish for pleasure, not for money."

The bald man narrowed his eyes but returned to looking at the display of rods in front of him. "Not that you'd be much competition, anyway," he muttered under his breath, but still loud enough for all to hear.

"What's that?" Lloyd asked.

"Let it go, Lloyd." Bubba dipped his net in the bait tank to capture a few more little fish and

dumped them in the bucket.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” another man joined in. “I’m catching the biggest bass this year.” He stood tall and pushed his glasses up his nose.

Bubba laughed. “Sure you are, Eric.”

Eric smirked and approached the counter with a fishing net.

“Actually, the tournament is ours. No question.” Mitch stuck his chest out and beamed.

“Shut up,” Jake whispered and elbowed Mitch in the side.

Cassie grinned as Mitch’s puffed chest and ego deflated at the same time.

“All right, all right.” Bubba hit the buttons on the cash register and handed the bucket to Lloyd. “That’ll be \$20.85, please.”

Lloyd pulled a twenty and a loonie from his dirty coat pocket and slammed them onto the counter. “Robbery. That’s what this is.”

“You could always catch your own bait instead of buying Bubba’s,” Eric teased.

“And you could always go home and leave the river in peace like it should be!” Lloyd retorted.

Eric raised his hand and was about to say something else when a woman stepped up beside him, put her hand on her hip, and stared him down. Eric lowered his hand.

Bubba smirked. “You tell him, Marjorie.”

Lloyd dropped the change in his pocket and muttered as he shuffled to the door. “Miserable tournament. People should stay at home.”

He pulled the door open and stepped out, letting it almost slam on Anna as she proceeded to walk in. “Morning, Cassie, Bubba.” She waved. “Ready to go?” Binoculars swung from her neck, though they appeared too heavy to hang around her short, small frame.

“Most definitely.” Cassie gave Anna a quick hug. “Good luck today, guys.” She waved at Jake and Mitch.

“Be safe. The river is busy this morning.” Bubba waved as they stepped through the back and a door marked Employees Only.

“Phew. I’m glad you showed up.” Cassie blew out a breath. “It started to get dicey in there.”

“Men and their fishing.” Anna rolled her eyes and followed Cassie down the steps to a dock behind the shop.

“And women!” Cassie added, thinking of Marjorie.

“Let’s hope no one interferes with the sparrows.” Anna stepped into a small fishing boat. Cassie stepped in after her, almost losing her footing as the boat rocked.

Anna laughed. “Careful there, sailor!”

Cassie shot her a joking frown and sat. “My safety depends on the captain.”

“Then you better say those prayers you like to say!” Anna laughed as she pulled the cord to start the motor.

The boat lunged forward before Cassie could grab onto something. She felt herself being jerked backward but caught herself before she fell right off the seat. “Easy there, Andretti,” she shouted over the noise of the motor.

“He raced cars, not boats.” Anna winked. She evened out the throttle and headed upriver to the

nesting site.

Cassie tilted her head up and enjoyed the wind flowing through her hair. She spotted an osprey with a fish in its talons and pointed it out to Anna, who gave her a thumbs-up in return. The male osprey was on his way to bring his female partner breakfast, as she sat on the eggs in their nest. The osprey let out a screech loud enough to be heard over the boat motor, announcing his arrival as he glided to the nesting platform. Barely visible above the edge of the massive nest of twigs, the female eagerly took the fish.

A white movement on the island ahead caught Cassie's eye. A great egret!

Anna must have spotted it, too, because she let off the throttle. The boat slowed until it came to a stop. She pointed to the island, but Cassie already had her binoculars to her eyes, scoping out the white shape.

"What's it doing out this way?" Anna asked.

"It must be from the colony farther upriver." Her eyes lit up. "Maybe they'll start a new nesting colony closer to us next year!"

Anna focussed her binoculars on the bird. "It's so beautiful."

The two girls stared at the bird for a few minutes, enjoying its white plumes as they danced in the breeze.

"And look!" Cassie pointed to the shore. "There's a green heron in that tree!"

Anna shifted her binoculars to the direction Cassie pointed.

"How did you ever see him?" Anna asked. "I can barely see it with my binoculars!"

"It's easy. You can tell by the shape of his body and the way he's sitting. And no other bird around here with the same shape would have the dark colouring like that."

Anna shook her head. "I wouldn't even have spotted it in the first place."

Cassie grinned. "Years of birding experience."

"Eagle eye, more like it." Anna put her binoculars down and started the boat again.

"Or heron eye?" Cassie grinned at her own joke.

Anna rolled her eyes and shook her head. A few moments later, she slowed the boat. This time, they were midriver. A creek headed off the shore on one side, and a grassy field was on the other. She approached the field at a slow pace, until she cut the engine altogether.

Anna grabbed the oars and dipped them into the water. She quietly and slowly rowed them a bit closer to the grassy field.

"I think we might already be too late in the day." Cassie sat ready, binoculars in hand. Henslow's sparrows woke even earlier than most birds.

"Oh, I hope not!" Anna sighed. "Why do they have to be so quiet during the day? There's probably more of the silly things all over Ontario, but no one can ever find them or get up early enough to hear them!"

Cassie laughed. "You might be right."

They approached the shore, trying to find the balance between being close enough for a good look yet far enough away not to disturb the birds. The grasses swayed in the small breeze. Bullfrogs and spring peepers sang loudly from the swampy creek across the river.

“What’s that?” Cassie pointed. A reed of grass moved differently than the rest. She expertly focussed her binoculars on the spot and briefly caught a glimpse of the cute yellowish-brown bird. “There! Did you see it?”

“No,” Anna sighed. “Of course not.”

Cassie pulled out her phone to glance at the time. “We have a bit longer before I have to open the store. Let’s sit and wait awhile.”

“Thanks! I hope that—”

A loud hum filled the air as a boat came speeding up the river. The engine roared louder as it quickly approached them.

“He’s going way too fast!” Anna yelled, over the sound of the motor.

Cassie waved her arms, trying to catch the driver’s attention. Nesting site aside, the boat sped much too quickly for being this close to the shore—and to their little boat.

“Slow down!” Cassie yelled.

But it was no use. There was no way her shout would be heard above the roar of the engine.

The boat zoomed past, and a hand waved back at her.

Eric and Marjorie.

Cassie braced herself as the wake threatened to capsize them. Anna rowed to turn into the waves and lessen the blow, but it wasn’t enough to eliminate all of the impact.

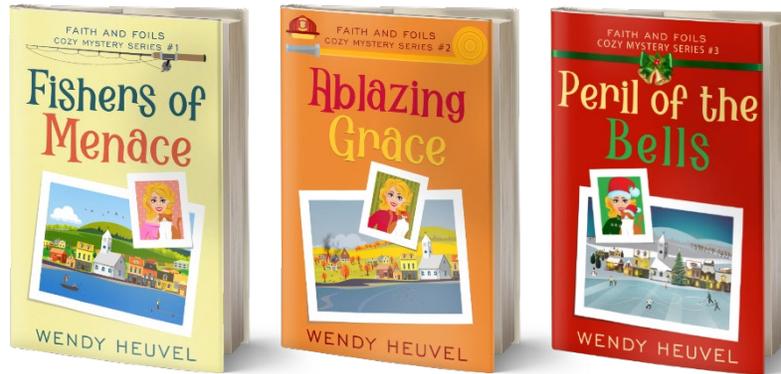
Cassie and Anna gasped as the chilly water surged over the side of the boat and soaked them. They grasped the sides, preparing to be thrown overboard, but the boat held its own and rocked mightily without tipping.

Anna held up her soaking wet binoculars. “Oh no!”

Cassie frowned and examined her own wet Nikons.

“Argh! What were they thinking?” Anna looked upriver, but Eric and Marjorie were long gone.

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