

## It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 12

Obviously they visited the winery first.

Brendan was right about Piper loving the selfie spot—damn him—a jewel-toned wall painted to look like stained glass, vines crawling up the sides and wrapping around a neon VINO sign. Essentially an altar at which to worship the social media gods.

Hannah was not a drinker. Thanks to four glasses of wine, many attempts were made to get a non-blurry picture of Piper before an adequate one was selected.

Piper applied a filter before swiping over to Instagram. Automatically, she tapped her notifications. “Oh, look at that.” Her pulse stuttered. “Brendan followed me.” She tapped his profile and choked. “Oh. I’m the *only* one he’s following. He just joined.”

Hannah squished her cheeks together. “Oh boy. Rookie move.” “Yeah . . .” But it was a really, really endearing move, too.

How did she feel about Brendan looking at her plethora of side boob and booty? Even her most modest pictures were kind of provocative. What if her lack of modesty turned him off? Did he really create a profile *just* to follow her?

Maybe Hannah had a point about social media having too much ownership over her thoughts and enjoyment. Now she was going to spend the next three days wondering which pictures Brendan looked at and what he thought about them. Would he laugh at her captions? If this Instagram feed was his glimpse into Piper Bellinger’s life, would it override the real-life impression she’d given him?

“You should have seen this little record shop, Pipes,” Hannah said around

a sip of wine. Leave it to her sister to wax poetic about a record store after too much to drink, instead of an ex-boyfriend or a crush. As far back as she could remember, Hannah had been hunkered down in headphones, her face buried in song lyrics. When she turned sixteen, Piper brought Hannah to her first concert—Mumford & Sons—and the poor girl had almost passed out from stimuli. Her soul was made of musical notes. “They had a poster for a 1993 Alice in Chains concert. Just tacked to the wall! Because they haven’t had a chance to take it down!”

Piper smiled at her sister’s enthusiasm. “Why didn’t you buy anything?”

“I wanted to. There was a really nice *Purple Rain* LP, but they had it way underpriced. It would have felt like stealing.”

"You're a good apple, kid." Piper had the niggling urge to scroll her Instagram feed and see everything through Brendan's eyes, but she determinedly ignored it. "So. What's Fox like?"

Hannah set down her glass. "Uh-uh. Don't ask me like that." "What? He's cute."

"He's not my type."

"Not depressed and bitter enough?"

Her sister snorted. "His phone dinged like a hundred times in twenty minutes. That's either one passionate girl or several admirers, and my money is on the latter."

"Yeah," Piper admitted. "He did have that playboy look about him."

Hannah swung her feet. "Besides, I think he was just doing the wingman thing. He wasted no time extolling Brendan's virtues."

"Oh?" Piper took a too-casual gulp of wine. "What did Fox have to say about him? Just out of curiosity."

Her sister narrowed her eyes. "Tell me you're not interested in him." "Whoa. I'm not. His wedding ring is like, welded onto his finger."

"And he's mean to you." Hannah shifted her weight on her stool, looking as if she was working up to saying something. "You've been tread on by some mean guys lately, all right? There was Adrian. The one before him who produced that sci-fi HBO pilot, whose name I can't remember. I just want to make sure you're not falling into a bad pattern."

Piper reared back a little. "A pattern where I pick men who'll make me feel shitty?"

"Well . . . yeah."

She replayed her last three relationships. Which didn't take that long, since

collectively they'd lasted six weeks. "Shit. You might be onto something." "I am?" Hannah's eyebrows shot up. "I mean . . . I know."

"Okay, I'll be more aware of it," Piper said, rubbing at the dull ache in the center of her chest. If her sister was right, why was she picking bad apples on purpose? Did the idea of a *good* relationship scare her? Because she didn't think she could pull one off? It was not only possible, but probable. Still, putting Brendan in the "bad apple" category didn't quite sit right. "None of those other guys were the type to apologize. They definitely weren't the kind of guys who'd pine for their dead wife. I think maybe I'm just curious about Brendan more than anything else. We don't grow them like him in LA."

"That is true."

"We had an actual conversation without sexual overtones. Neither one of us checked our phones even *once*. It was fucking weird. I'm probably just . . . fascinated."

"Well, be careful." Tongue tucked in the corner of her mouth, Hannah started folding a bar napkin into an airplane. "Or have some fun with Fox instead. Bet it would be way less complicated."

Piper couldn't even remember the guy's face. Only that she'd classified it as attractive.

Now, *Brendan's* face. She could recall crow's-feet fanning out at the corners of his eyes. The silver flecks dotting the green of his irises. His gigantic, weathered hands and the breadth of his shoulders.

She shook herself. They'd had a meal together yesterday. Of course she recalled those things.

*Can you even remember Adrian's voice?*

"I think maybe I'll just stick to myself on this trip," Piper murmured.

Two hours later, they weaved down the sidewalk on the way home. It was well past time to put her little sister to bed. At four o'clock in the afternoon, but who was keeping track?

Crossing the street toward home, Piper's step slowed. It appeared they had a visitor. A little old man with a toolbox and a smile like sunshine.

"Ma'am."

"Um, hi." Piper nudged Hannah into alertness, nodding at the man waiting outside No Name. Come to think of it, returning home to find a local at their door was beginning to be a habit. "Hi. Can I help you?"

"Actually, I'm here to help you." With his free hand, he plucked a slip of paper from the pocket of his shirt. "I own the hardware store down on West

Pacific. My sons have the run of the place now, but they have little ones, so they don't make it in until later in the morning. When I opened up today, there was a note taped to my door."

He held it out to Piper. How could this possibly pertain to her? With a mental shrug, she took the note and scanned the four blunt lines with a burgeoning clog in her throat.

*No Name bar. Upstairs apartment. Piper Bellinger.*

*Needs padding installed on the base of the top bunk. She keeps hitting her head.*

*Captain Taggart*

“Oh my,” she breathed, fanning herself with the note. *Am I levitating?*

She'd just decided to be friends-only with the sea captain. *This* definitely wasn't going to help divert her rather irritating attraction to him.

“He left some cash to cover it,” the man said, reaching out to pat her arm. “You're going to have to help me up the stairs once we're inside, I'm afraid. My legs decided they'd had enough living when I turned seventy, but the rest of me is still here.”

“Sure. Of course. Let me take the tools.” Grateful for something to distract her from Brendan's gesture, Piper claimed the dusty box. “Um. Hannah?”

“What?” Owlsh eyes blinked back. “Oh.”

Yawning, Hannah transferred her drunken weight onto the side of the building so Piper would be free to unlock the door. They all went inside, traveling in a comically slow-moving pack toward the stairs. Piper hooked her right arm through the old man's left, and they followed Hannah's uneven gait up toward the apartment. “I'm Piper, by the way. The girl from the note.” “I probably should have checked. My wife would have had some questions

if I'd let some stranger squire me up to her apartment.” She laughed, helping him up the fifth stair and the sixth, their pace slow and steady. “I'm Abe. I saw you walking yesterday in the harbor. I'm usually sitting outside the maritime museum reading my newspaper.”

“Yes. That's how I recognize you.”

He seemed pleased that she remembered. “I used to read the paper outside every day, but it's getting harder to climb the stairs to the porch. I'm only able to get up them on Wednesdays and Thursdays now. Those are my daughter's days off from the supermarket. She walks me over and helps me climb them, so I can sit in the shade. The other days, I sit on the lawn and pray the sun isn't too bright.”

Keeping hold of Abe, Piper unlocked the apartment door. Once they were inside and she'd shoved a bottle of water into Hannah's hands, Piper gestured to the bunk. “This is the one. You might be able to see the outline of my head on those boards by now.”

Abe nodded and crouched down *very* slowly to access his toolbox. “Now that we're in the light, I can see that bruise you're sporting, too. Good thing we're getting this fixed.”

While Abe got to work nailing memory foam to the top bunk with a nail gun, Piper tried to avoid Hannah's teasing pokes in her side. "Brendan no like Piper boo-boo. Brendan fix."

"Oh, shut up," she whispered, for her sister's ears alone. "This is just what people do in small towns like this. Maybe he's trying to rub LA's awfulness in my face."

"Nope. First the lock. Now this." Wow. She'd really slurred that s. "He's a real champ."

"I thought you didn't even like him. What happened to 'Leave my sister alone, you bully'?"

"At the time, I meant it," Hannah grumbled.

"Look, I'm just biding time until I can get back to my natural habitat. No distractions need apply."

"But—"

"You wouldn't be encouraging me to make time with a crab fisherman, would you?" She gave Hannah a once-over, followed by a sniff. "I'm telling Mom."

Hannah rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to deliver a rejoinder, but Abe interrupted with a jolly "All finished!"

God, how loud had they been at the end of that conversation?

Abe must have interpreted her worried expression, because he laughed. "I hope you don't mind me saying, it was nice listening to some bickering between sisters. Ours have grown up, gotten hitched, and moved out, you know. I spend a lot of time with my sons at the shop, but they have the nerve to get along."

Piper stooped down to help Abe put everything back in his toolbox. "So . . . um." She lowered her voice several octaves. "Do you know Captain Taggart well?"

Her sister snorted.

"Everyone knows the captain, but he does like to keep to himself. Doesn't

do a lot of jawing, just comes into the shop and buys what he needs. In and out." Abe slapped his knee and stood. "He's downright focused."

"He is," Piper agreed, thinking a little too long and hard about those green- and-silver eyes. How they tried so hard to stay above her neck. When Abe cleared his throat, she realized she'd been staring into space. "Sorry. Let me help you down the stairs."

"I'll be on my way," Abe said when they'd reached the first level, a smile wreathing his mouth. "Say, have you gone to see Opal yet?"

Opal. Opal.

Piper rooted around her memory bank for that name. Hadn't Mick Forrester mentioned an Opal and written down the woman's address? Why did everyone think she would visit this person? Obviously, she needed to get some answers. "Um, no. Not just yet."

He seemed a little disappointed, but hid it quickly. "Right. Well, it was nice to meet you, Piper. Don't forget to give me a wave when you see me outside the museum."

"I won't." She handed him the toolbox carefully, making sure he could take the weight. While watching him head for the door, his feet shuffling, the stiffness in his legs obvious, an idea occurred. "Hey, Abe. I've got a pretty flexible schedule here, and the museum is only a quick walk. So . . . like, I don't know, if you wanted to sit outside and read your paper more than twice a week, I could walk over and help you climb the porch."

Why was she nervous this little old man was going to turn her down? Is this what a man felt when he asked for her number?

Her nerves settled when Abe turned to her with a hopeful expression. "You would do that?"

"Sure," she said, surprised by how nice it felt to be useful. "Friday morning? I could meet you outside the hardware store after my run."

He winked. "It's a date."

\* \* \*

Hannah had sworn off booze, so they avoided any more trips to the winery. Instead, they cleaned. Even put up some green-and-white striped curtains in the apartment. On Brendan's suggestion, they visited the lighthouse and took a day trip to the beach, although the abundance of rocks and the need for a sweatshirt by three P.M. made it nothing like the coastline in California. Still,

Piper found herself relaxing, enjoying herself, and the rest of the week went by faster than expected.

She went out on her run Friday morning, finishing up outside the hardware store where Abe waited, a rolled-up newspaper tucked under his arm. He peppered her with questions about life in Los Angeles on the walk over to the maritime museum—he was yet another man who'd rarely ventured outside of Westport—and she left him in the Adirondack chair with a promise to meet him again tomorrow morning.

Piper walked down to the end of one of the docks in the harbor and dangled her feet over the side, looking out at the wide mouth of the Pacific.

What was Brendan doing at that very moment?

She'd kind of hoped distance and time would rid her of the adamant tingle she felt every time she thought of him. But three days had passed, and his image still popped into her mind with annoying regularity. This morning, she'd woken up with a start, jerked into an upright position, and the memory foam had blocked her forehead from ramming into the upper bunk. And she'd drifted back down to her pillow with an enamored sigh.

Was he thinking about her?

"Ugh, Piper." She surged to her feet at the end of the dock. "Get your life together." She needed another distraction. Another way to absorb some time, so her thoughts wouldn't keep drifting back to Brendan.

Maybe now was a good time to solve the mystery of this Opal character. Piper had taken a picture of the address Mick gave her outside No Name,

and she scrolled to it now, tapping it with her thumb. Distraction achieved. She'd told Mick she'd visit the woman, and with a whole day in front of her, there was no time like the present.

She punched the address into her map app, snorting to herself when she arrived after a mere two minutes of walking. Opal lived in an apartment building overlooking Grays Harbor, and it was kind of weird, buzzing someone's apartment without calling ahead of time, but the vestibule door unlocked immediately. With a shrug, Piper took the elevator to the fifth floor and knocked on the door of apartment 5F.

The door swung open and a woman Piper estimated to be in her late sixties leapt back, a hand flying to her throat. "Oh God, I thought you were my hairdresser, Barbara."

"Oh! Sorry!" Piper's cheeks burned. "I wondered why you buzzed me up so fast. You are Opal, right?"

"Yes. And I'm not buying anything."

"No, I'm not selling anything. I'm Piper. Bellinger." She put out her hand for a shake. "Mick told me I should come see you. I'm . . . Henry Cross's daughter?"

A different kind of tension gripped Opal's shoulders. "Oh my Lord," she breathed.

Something charged the air, causing the hair on the back of Piper's neck to stand up. "Did you . . . know me when I was a baby, or . . . ?"

"Yes. Yes. I did." Opal pressed a hand to her mouth, dropped it. "I'm Opal Cross. I'm your grandmother."

\* \* \*

*I'm your grandmother.*

Those words sounded like they were meant for someone else.

People who got ugly knitted sweaters on Christmas morning or fell asleep in the back of a station wagon after a road trip to Bakersfield. Her mother's parents were living in Utah and communicated through sporadic phone calls, but Henry's . . . well, she'd stopped wondering about any extended family on her biological father's side so long ago, the possibility had faded into nothing.

But the woman hadn't. She was standing right there in front of Piper, looking as if she'd seen a ghost.

"I'm sorry," Piper whispered finally, after an extended silence. "Mick told me to come here. He assumed I knew who you were. But I . . . I'm so sorry to say I didn't."

Opal gathered herself and nodded. "That isn't too surprising. Your mother and I didn't end on the best terms, I'm afraid." She ran her eyes over Piper once more, shaking her head slightly and seeming at a loss for words. "Please come in. I . . . Barbara should be here for coffee soon, so I've got the table set up."

"Thank you." Piper walked into the apartment in a daze, her fingers twisting in the hem of her running shirt. She was meeting her long-lost grandmother in sweaty running clothes.

Classic.

"Well, I barely know where to start," Opal said, joining Piper in the small room just off the kitchen. "Sit down, please. Coffee?"

It was kind of disconcerting the way this woman looked at her as if she'd returned from the dead. It felt a little like she had. As if she'd walked into a play that was already in progress, and everyone knew the plot except her. "No, thank you." Piper gestured to the sliding glass door leading to a small balcony. "B-beautiful view."

"It is, isn't it?" Opal settled into her chair, picking up a half-finished mug of coffee. Setting it back down. "Originally, I wanted an apartment facing the harbor so I could feel close to Henry. But all these years later, it just seems like a sad reminder." She winced. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be so casual about it all. It helps me to be blunt."



"It's fine. You can be blunt," Piper assured her, even though she felt a little jarred. Not only by the sudden appearance of a grandmother, but by the way she spoke of Henry like he'd only passed yesterday, instead of twenty-four years ago. "I don't remember a lot about my father. Just small things. And I haven't been told much."

"Yes," Opal said, leaning back in her chair with a tightened jaw. "Your mother was determined to leave it all behind. Some of us find that harder to do." A beat passed. "I'd been a single mother since Henry was a little boy. His father was . . . well, a casual relationship that neither of us had a mind to pursue. Your father was all I had, besides my friends." She blew out a breath, visibly gathering herself. "What are you doing back in Westport?"

"My sister and I . . ." Piper trailed off before she could get to the part about confetti cannons and police helicopters. Apparently the need to make a good impression on one's grandmother was strong, even when meeting her as a fully grown adult. "We're just taking a vacation." For some reason, she added, "And doing a little digging into our roots while we're here."

Opal warmed, even appearing relieved. "It makes me very happy to hear that."

Piper shifted in her chair. Did she want her father to become a more . . . substantial presence in her life? A serious part of Piper didn't *want* sentimental attachment to Westport. It scared her to have this whole new aspect of her world, her existence opened up. What was she supposed to do with it?

She'd felt so little at the brass statue—what if the same happened now? What if her detachment from the past extended to Opal and she disappointed the woman? She had clearly been through enough already without Piper adding to it.

Still, it wouldn't exactly hurt to find out a *little* more about Henry Cross, this man who'd fathered her and Hannah. This man people spoke of with a hushed reverence. This man who'd been honored with a memorial up on the harbor. Would it? Just this morning during her run, she'd seen a wreath of flowers laid at its feet. Her mother had been right. He *was* Westport. And although she'd felt less emotion than expected the first time she visited the brass statue, she was definitely curious about him. "Do you . . . have anything of Henry's? Or maybe some pictures?"

"I was hoping you'd ask." Opal popped up, moving pretty damn quickly for a woman her age, crossed to the living room, and retrieved a box from a shelf under the television. She took her seat again and removed the top, leafing through a few pieces of paper before pulling out an envelope marked *Henry*. She slid it across the table to Piper. "Go ahead."

Piper turned the envelope over in her hands, hesitating momentarily before lifting the flap. Out spilled an old fisherman's license with a grainy picture of Henry in the laminated corner, most of his face obscured by water damage. There was a picture of

Maureen, twenty-five years younger. And a small snapshot of Piper and Hannah, tape still attached to the back.

“Those were in his bunk on the *Della Ray*,” Opal explained.

Pressure crowded into Piper’s throat. “Oh,” she managed, running her finger over the curled edges of the picture of her and Hannah. Henry Cross hadn’t been some phantom; he’d been a flesh-and-blood man with a heart, and he’d loved them with it. Maureen, Piper, Hannah. Opal. Had they been a part of his final thoughts? Was it crazy to feel like they’d deserted him? Yes, he’d chosen to perform this dangerous job, but he still deserved to be remembered by the people he loved. He’d had Opal, but what about his immediate family?

“He was a determined man. Loved to debate. Loved to laugh when it was all over.” Opal sighed. “Your father loved you to pieces. Called you his little first mate.”

That feeling Piper had been missing at the memorial . . . it rode in now on a slow tide, and she had to blink back the sudden hot pressure behind her eyes.

“I’m sorry if this was too much,” Opal said, laying a hesitant hand on Piper’s wrist. “I don’t get a lot of visitors, and most of my friends . . . Well, it’s a complicated thing . . .”

Piper looked up from the picture of her and Hannah. “What is?”

“Well.” Opal stared down into her coffee mug. “People tend to avoid the grieving. Grief, in general. And there’s no one with more grief than a parent who has lost a child. At some point, I guess I decided to spare everyone my misery and started staying home. That’s why I have my hair appointments here.” She laughed. “Not that anyone gets to see the results.”

“But . . . you’re so lovely,” Piper said, clearing her throat of the emotion wrought by the pictures. “There’s no way people avoid you, Opal. You have to get out there. Go barhopping. Give the men in Westport hell.”

Her grandmother’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “I bet that’s more your department.”

Piper smiled. “You would be right.”

Opal twisted her mug in a circle, seeming unsure. “I don’t know. I’ve gotten used to being alone. This is the most I’ve talked to anyone besides Barbara in years. Maybe I’ve forgotten how to be social.” She exhaled. “I’ll think about it, though. I really will.”

Offering a relationship to this woman wasn’t a small thing. This was her grandmother. It wasn’t just a passing acquaintance. It could be a lifelong commitment. A relationship with actual gravity. “Good. And when you’re ready . . . I’m your wingwoman.”

Opal swallowed hard and ducked her head. "It's a deal."

They sat in companionable silence for a moment, until Opal checked her watch and sighed. "I love Barbara to death, but the woman is flakier than a bowl of cereal."

Piper pursed her lips, studied the woman's close-cropped gray hair. "What were you planning on having her do?"

"Just a trim, like always."

"Or . . ." Piper stood, moving behind Opal. "May I?" "Please!"

Piper slipped her fingers into Opal's hair and tested the texture. "You don't know this, Opal, but you're in the presence of a cosmetic genius." Her lips curved up. "Have you ever thought about rocking a faux hawk?"

Twenty minutes later, Piper had shaped Opal's hair into a slick, subtle hill down the center of her head, using the lack of a recent haircut to their advantage by twisting and spiking the gray strands. Then they'd broken out a Mary Kay makeup kit Opal had caved and purchased from a door-to-door saleslady—leading to her current suspicion of solicitors—and transformed her into a stunner.

Piper took a lot of pleasure in handing Opal the mirror. "So?"

Opal gasped. "Is that me?"

Piper scoffed. "Hell yes, it's you."

"Well." Her grandmother turned her head left and right. "Well, well, well." "Considering that night out a little more seriously now, aren't we?"

"You bet I am." She looked at herself in the mirror again, then back to Piper. "Thank you for this." Opal took a long breath. "Will you . . . come back and see me again?"

"Of course. And I'll bring Hannah next time."

"Oh, I would just *love* that. She was so tiny last time I saw her."

Piper leaned down and kissed Opal on both cheeks, which she seemed to find inordinately funny, then left the small apartment, surprised to find herself feeling . . . light. Buoyant, even. She navigated the streets back to No Name without the use of her phone's map, recognizing landmarks as she went, no longer unfamiliar with the friendly smiles and circling seagulls.

The envelope holding Henry's possessions was tucked into her pocket, and that seemed to anchor her in this place. She stopped outside of No Name, taking a moment

to look up at the faded building, and this time . . . she tried to really see it. To really think about the man who made his livelihood within its walls, once upon a time. To think about Maureen falling in love with that man, so much that she married and conceived two daughters with him.

She was one of those daughters. A product of that love. No matter what Piper felt for her past, it was real. And it wasn't something she could ignore or remain detached from. No matter how much it scared her.

Feeling thoughtful and a little restless, she went to find Hannah.

\* \* \*

Piper and Hannah stared down at the phone, listening to their mother's voice through the speakerphone. "I reached out to Opal several times throughout the years," Maureen said. "She's as stubborn as your father was. She saw my leaving as a betrayal, and there was no fixing it. And . . . I was selfish. I just wanted to forget that whole life. The pain."

"You could have told me about her before I came," Piper intoned. "I was blindsided."

Maureen made a sound of distress. "I was right on the verge and . . ."

Maureen sighed. "I guess I didn't want to see your faces when I told you I'd been holding on to something so important. I'm sorry."

Twenty minutes later, Piper paced the scuffed floor of No Name while Hannah sat cross-legged on a barrel eating French fries, a thousand-yard stare in her eyes. Her sister was still processing the news that they had a freaking grandmother, but she probably wouldn't reach full understanding until she could be alone with her records.

Reaching out to rub Hannah's shoulder comfortingly, Piper looked around and surveyed the space. Was she suffering an emotional upheaval from the shock of finding a long-lost family member . . . or was she starting to develop an interest in this place?

They'd been so young when Maureen moved them. It wasn't their fault they'd forgotten their father, but they couldn't very well ignore him now. Not with pieces of him everywhere. And this disheveled bar was the perfect representation of a forgotten legacy. Something that was once alive . . . and now corroded.

What if it could be brought back to life? How would one even begin?

Piper caught her reflection in a section of broken glass peeking out from behind a piece of plywood. Her talent for finding the most flattering lighting could not be discounted, but there were only a couple of cobweb-covered bulbs, with no light fixtures. It was basically anyone over twenty-five's worst nightmare, because it highlighted every crevice in a

person's face. The place had a certain speakeasy vibe that could really benefit from some soft, red lighting. Moody.

*Hmm.* She was no decorator. Maureen paid an interior designer to come in annually and refresh the house in Bel-Air, and that included their bedrooms. But Piper understood atmosphere. What inspired people to stay awhile.

Some men went to bars to watch sports. Or whatever. But what *packed* a bar full of men? Women. Appeal to the ladies, and men started coughing up cover charges just for a chance to shoot their shot.

Where would she even start with this place?

“Just for the sake of argument, let's say we wanted to pretty this place up. Considering we have limited funds, do you think we could make it worthwhile?”

Hannah appeared caught off guard. “Where is this coming from?”

“I don't know. When I was talking to Opal, I started thinking how unfair it

is that Henry's own family never grieved him. Sure, it was mostly Mom's decision, but maybe this is a way to make amends. To . . . connect with him a little bit. To have a hand in the way he's remembered. Is that silly?”

“No.” Hannah shook her head. “No, of course it's not. Just a lot to take in.” Piper tried a different tack. “At the very least, this could be a way to convince Daniel we're responsible and proactive citizens of the world. We could make over the bar, show him how dazzlingly capable we are, and get

an early trip home to Los Angeles.” Hannah raised an eyebrow.

“That's not a bad idea. Not bad at all.” With a blown-out breath, her younger sister hopped off the stool, wiping her hands on the seat of her jeans. “I mean, we'd need a DJ booth, obviously.”

“Over there in the corner by the window?” Piper pointed. “I like it. People walking by would see MC Hannah spinning and trip over themselves to get inside.”

The sisters had their backs to each other as they completed a revolution around the bar. “This place isn't big enough for a dance floor, but we could build a shelf along the wall for people to set their drinks. It could be standing room only.”

“Ooh. That's totally an option for a new name. Standing Room Only.” “Love.” Hannah pursed her lips. “We'd have to do a lot of cleaning.” They shared a groan.

“Do you think we could fix these chairs?” Piper asked, running her finger along the back of a lopsided seat. “Maybe polish the bar?”

Hannah snorted. “I mean, what the fuck else are we doing?”

“God, you’re right. Can you believe it has only been *five days*?” Piper dug a knuckle into the corner of her eye. “What is the worst that can happen? We do a ton of work, spend all of our money, Daniel isn’t impressed and forces us to finish out our sentence, which should really just be *my* sentence?”

“Don’t split hairs. And the best that can happen is we go home early.” They traded a thoughtful yet noncommittal shrug.

In that moment, the final shard of sunset peeked in through the grimy window, illuminating the mirror behind the plywood. There was a white corner of something on the other side, and without thinking, Piper moved in that direction, stepping over empty bottles to scoot behind the bar and pinch the white protrusion between her fingers. She gave it a tug and out came a photograph. In it, two people she didn’t recognize appeared to be singing in

this very establishment, though a much cleaner version, their hair proclaiming them children of the eighties.

“Oh. A picture.” Hannah craned her neck to get a better look at the area behind the plywood. “You think there’s more?”

“We could pull this board down, but we’re either going to end up with splinters or a herd of spiders is going to ride out on the backs of mice, holding pitchforks.”

Hannah sighed. “After cleaning that upstairs toilet, I’m pretty desensitized to anything unpleasant. Let’s do it.”

Piper whimpered as she took hold of the plywood, Hannah’s grip tightening alongside hers. “Okay. One, two, *three!*”

They threw the wood board on the ground and leapt back, waiting for the repercussions, but none came. Instead, they were left staring at a mirror covered in old pictures. They traded a frown and stepped closer at the same time, each of them peeling down a photograph and studying it. “This guy looks familiar . . .” Piper said quietly. “He’s way younger in this shot, but I think he’s the one who was in here Sunday night. He said he remembered Mom.”

Hannah leaned over and looked. “Oh my gosh, that’s totally him.” Her laugh was disbelieving. “Damn, Gramps. He could get it back then.”

Piper chuckled. "Recognize anyone in yours?" "No." Hannah took down another. "Wait. Pipes."

She was busy scanning the faces looking back at her from the past, so she didn't immediately hear the hushed urgency in Hannah's tone. But when the silence stretched, she looked over to find Hannah's face pale, fingers shaking as she studied the photo. "What is it?" Piper asked, sidling up next to her sister. "Oh."

Her hand flew to her suddenly pumping heart.

Whereas the brass statue of Henry had been impersonal and the fishing license had been grainy, an unsmiling man making a standard pose, this photo had *life* in it. Henry was laughing, a white towel thrown over one shoulder, a mustache shadowing his upper lip. His eyes . . . they leapt right off the glossy photograph's surface, sparkling. So much like their own.

"That's our dad."

"Piper, he looks just like us."

"Yeah . . ." She was having trouble catching her breath. She took Hannah's hand, and they turned it over together. The handwriting was faded, but it was

easy to make out the words, *Henry Cross*. And the year, *1991*.

Neither of them said anything for long moments.

And maybe Piper was just overwhelmed by the physical proof that their birth father had really existed, a picture discovered while standing in his bar, but she suddenly felt . . . as if fate had placed her in that very spot. Their life before Los Angeles had always been a fragmented, vague thing. But it felt real now. Something to explore. Something that maybe had even been missing, without her knowing enough to acknowledge it.

"We should pretty up the bar," Piper said. "We should do it. Not just so we can go home early, but . . . you know. Kind of a tribute."

"You read my mind, Pipes." Hannah laid her head on Piper's shoulder as they continued to stare down at the man who'd fathered them, his face smiling back from another time. "Let's do it."