

## It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 4

Brendan Taggart was the first Westport resident to spot the women.

He heard a car door slam out by the curb and slowly turned on the barrel that passed as a seat in No Name. His bottle of beer paused halfway to his mouth, the loud storytelling and music filling the bar fading away.

Through the grubby window, Brendan watched the pair exit on opposite sides of a taxi and immediately wrote them off as clueless tourists who obviously had the wrong address.

That is, until they started hauling suitcases out of the trunk. Seven, to be exact.

He grunted. Sipped his beer.

They were a ways off the beaten path. There wasn't an inn for several blocks. On top of misjudging their destination, they were dressed for the beach at night, during a late-summer rain, no umbrella to speak of—and visibly confounded by their surroundings.

It was the one in the floppy hat who caught his eye right away, purely because she looked the *most* ridiculous, a lipstick-shaped purse dangling from her forearm, wrists limp and drawn up to her shoulders, as if she was afraid to touch something. She tilted her head back and gazed up at the building and laughed. And that laugh turned into what looked like a sob, though he couldn't hear it through the music and pane of glass.

As soon as Brendan noticed the way the rain was molding the dress to Floppy Hat's tits, he glanced away quickly, going back to what he'd been doing before. Pretending to be interested in Randy's overboard story, even though he'd heard it eighty goddamn times.

"The sea was boiling that day," Randy said, in a voice equivalent to scrap

metal being crushed. "We'd already hit our quota and then some, thanks to the captain over here." He saluted Brendan with his frothy pint. "And there I was, on a deck slipperier than a duck's ass, picturing the bathtub full of cash I'd be swimming in when we got home. We're hauling in the final pot, and there it was, the biggest crab in the damn sea, the motherfucking grandpappy of all crabs, and he tells me with his beady little eyes that he ain't going down without a fight. Noooo, sir."

Randy propped a leg up on the stool he'd been sitting on earlier, his craggy features arranged for maximum drama. He'd been working on Brendan's boat longer than Brendan had been captaining it. Had seen more seasons than most of the crew combined. At the end of each one, he threw himself a retirement party. And then he showed up for the next season like clockwork, having spent every last dime of last year's take.

“When I tell you that sucker wrapped a leg around the arm of my slicker, right through the pot, the mesh, all of it, I’m not lying. He was hell-bent for leather. Time froze, ladies and gentlemen. The captain is yelling at me to haul in the pot, but hear me now, I was *bamboozled*. That crab put a spell on me— I’m telling you. And that’s when the wave hit, conjured by the crab himself. Nobody saw it coming, and just like that, I was tossed into the drink.”

The man who was like a grandfather to Brendan took a pause to drain half his beer.

“When they pulled me in . . .” He exhaled. “That crab was nowhere to be found.”

The two people in the crowded bar who hadn’t already heard the legend laughed and applauded—and that was the moment Floppy Hat and the other one decided to make their entrance. Within seconds, it was quiet enough to hear a pin drop, and that didn’t surprise Brendan one bit. Westport was a tourist stop to be sure, but they didn’t get a lot of outsiders stumbling into No Name. It was an establishment that couldn’t be found on Yelp.

Mainly because it was illegal.

But it wasn’t only the shock of non-locals walking in and disrupting their Sunday-night bullshit session. No, it was the way they *looked*. Especially Floppy Hat, who walked in first, hitting the easy energy of the room with shock paddles. In her short, loose dress and sandals that wrapped around her calves, she could have stepped out of the pages of a fashion magazine for all those . . . tight lines and smooth curves.

Brendan could be objective about that.

His brain could point out an attractive woman without him caring one way or the other.

He set his beer down on the windowsill and crossed his arms, feeling a flash of annoyance at everyone’s stupefied expressions. Randy had rolled out the red carpet in the form of his tongue lolling out of his mouth, and the rest of the men were mentally preparing marriage proposals, by the look of it.

“Little help with the luggage, Pipes?” called the second girl from the entrance, where she’d propped open the door with a hip, struggling under the weight of a suitcase.

“Oh!” Floppy Hat whirled around, pink climbing the sides of her face— and hell, that was some face. No denying it, now that there wasn’t a dirty windowpane distorting it. Those were the kind of baby blues that made men sign their life away, to say nothing of that wide, stubborn upper lip. The combination rendered her guileless and seductive at the same time, and that was trouble Brendan wanted *no* part of. “Sorry, Hanns.” She winced. “I’ll go get the rest—”

"I'll get them," at least nine men said at once, tripping over themselves to reach the door. One of them took the suitcase from Floppy Hat's companion, while several others lunged into the rain, getting stuck side by side in the doorway. Half of those jackasses were on Brendan's crew, and he almost disowned them right then and there.

Within seconds—although not without some familiar bickering—all seven suitcases were piled in the middle of the bar, everyone standing around them expectantly. "What gentlemen! So polite and welcoming," Floppy Hat crooned, hugging her bizarre handbag to her chest. "Thank you!"

"Yes, thanks," said the second girl quietly, drying the rain off her face with the sleeve of a UCLA sweatshirt. *Los Angeles. Of course.* "Uh, Pipes?" She turned in a circle, taking in their surroundings. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

In response to her friend's question, she seemed to notice where she was standing for the first time. Those eyes grew even bigger as she catalogued the interior of No Name and the people occupying it. Brendan knew what she was seeing, and already he resented the way she recoiled at the dust on the mismatched seats, the broken floorboards, the ancient fishing nets hanging from the rafters. The disappointment in the downturned corners of her mouth spoke volumes. *Not good enough for you, baby? There's the door.*

With prim movements, *Pipes*—keeper of ridiculous names and purses—

snapped the handbag open and drew out a jewel-crusted phone, tapping the screen with a square red nail. "Is this . . . sixty-two North Forrest Street?"

A chorus of yeses greeted the strangled question.

"Then . . ." She turned to her friend, chest expanding on quick breaths. "Yes."

"Oh," responded UCLA, before she cleared her throat, pasting a tense smile on a face that was pretty in a much subtler way than Pipes's. "Um . . . sorry about the awkward entrance. We didn't know anyone was going to be here." She shifted her weight in boots that wouldn't be good for anything but sitting down. "I'm Hannah Bellinger. This is my sister, Piper."

*Piper.* Not Pipes.

Not that it was much of an improvement.

The floppy hat came off, and Piper shook out her hair, as if they were in the middle of a photo shoot. She gave everyone a sheepish smile. "We own this place. Isn't that crazy?"

If Brendan thought their entrance had produced silence, it was nothing compared to this.

Owned this place?

No one owned No Name. It had been vacant since he was in grade school.

Originally, the locals had pooled their money to stock the place with liquor and beer, so they'd have a place to come to escape the tourists during a particularly hellish summer. A decade had passed since then, but they'd kept coming, the regulars taking turns collecting dues once a week to keep the booze flowing. Brendan didn't make it over too often, but he considered No Name to be theirs. *All* of theirs. These two out-of-towners walking in and claiming ownership didn't sit right at all.

Brendan liked routine. Liked things in their place. These two didn't belong, especially Piper, who noticed him glowering and had the nerve to send him a pinky wave.

Randy drew her attention away from Brendan with a baffled laugh. "How's that now? You own No Name?"

Hannah stepped up beside her sister. "That's what you call it?" "Been calling it that for years," Randy confirmed.

One of Brendan's deckhands, Sanders, disentangled himself from his wife and came forward. "Last owner of this place was a Cross."

Brendan noticed the slight tremor that passed through Piper at the name. "Yes," Hannah said hesitantly. "We're aware of that."

"Ooh!" Piper started scrolling through her phone again at the speed of light. "There's a custodian named Tanner. Our stepdad has been paying him to keep this place clean." Though her smile remained in place, her gaze crawled over the distinctly *not* clean bar. "Has he . . . been on vacation?"

Irritation snuck up the back of Brendan's neck. This was a proud town of long-standing traditions. Where the hell did this rich girl get off waltzing in and insulting his lifelong friends? His crew?

Randy and Sanders traded a snort. "Tanner is over there," Sanders said. The crowd parted to reveal their "custodian" slumped over the bar, passed out. "He's been on vacation since two thousand and eight."

Everyone in the bar hoisted their beers and laughed at the joke, Brendan's own lips twitching in amusement, even though his annoyance hadn't ebbed. Not even a little bit. He retrieved his bottle of beer from the windowsill and took a pull, keeping his eyes on Piper. She seemed to feel his attention on her profile, because she turned with another

one of those flirtatious smiles that *definitely* shouldn't have caused a hot nudge in his lower body, especially considering he'd already decided he didn't care for her.

But then her gaze snagged on the wedding band he still wore around his ring finger—and she promptly looked away, her posture losing its playfulness.

*That's right. Take it somewhere else.*

"I think I can clear up the confusion," Hannah said, rubbing at the back of her neck. "Our father . . . was Henry Cross."

Shock drew Brendan's eyebrows together. These girls were Henry Cross's daughters? Brendan was too young to remember the man personally, but the story of Henry's death was a legend, not unlike Randy's evil crab story. It was uttered far less often lest it produce bad luck, whispered between the fishermen of Westport after too much liquor or a particularly rough day on the sea when the fear had taken hold.

Henry Cross was the last man of the Westport crew to die while hunting the almighty king crab on the Bering Sea. There was a memorial dedicated to him on the harbor, a wreath placed on the pedestal every year on the anniversary of the sea taking him.

It was not unusual for men to die during the season. King crab fishing was, by definition, the most dangerous job in the United States. Every fall, men lost their lives. But they hadn't lost a Westport man in over two decades.

Randy had dropped onto his stool, dumbfounded. "No. Are you . . . You ain't Maureen's girls, are you?"

"Yes," Piper said, her smile too engaged for Brendan's peace of mind. "We are."

"Holy mackerel. I see the resemblance now. She used to bring you girls down to the docks, and you'd leave with pockets full of candy." Randy's attention swung to Brendan. "Your father-in-law is going to shit himself. Henry's girls. Standing right here in his bar."

"Our bar," Brendan corrected him quietly.

Two words out of his mouth were all it took to drop a chill into the atmosphere. A couple of the locals shrunk back into their seats, drinks forgotten on the crates that served as tables.

Brendan finished his beer calmly, giving Piper a challenging eyebrow raise over the glass neck. To her credit, she didn't blanch like most people on the receiving end of one of his looks. A stony stare through the wheelhouse window could make a greenhorn shit himself. This girl only seemed to be evaluating him, that limp wrist once again drawn up against her shoulder, that long mane of golden-rosy-honey hair tossed back.

“Aw. The deed says otherwise,” Piper said sweetly. “But don’t worry. We’ll only be killing your weirdly hostile vibe for three months. Then it’s back to LA.”

If possible, everyone retreated farther into their seats.

Except for Randy. He was finding the whole exchange hilarious, his smile so wide Brendan could count his teeth, three of which were gold.

“Where are you staying?” Brendan asked. The sisters both pointed up at the ceiling. Brendan bit off a laugh. “Really?”

Several patrons exchanged anxious glances. Someone even hopped up and tried to rouse Tanner at the bar, but it was nothing doing.

This whole situation was absurd. If they thought the bar was in shambles, they hadn’t seen anything yet. They—especially *her*—wouldn’t last the night in Westport. At least not without checking in to one of the inns.

Satisfied with that conclusion, Brendan set his beer aside and pushed himself to his feet, kind of enjoying the way Piper’s eyes widened when he reached his full height. For some reason, he was wary of getting too close to her. He sure as hell didn’t want to know what she smelled like. But he called himself an idiot for hesitating and strode forward, picking up a suitcase in each hand. “Well, then. Allow me to show you the accommodations.”