

## It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 7

After the groceries had been purchased and organized in the mini-fridge, the Bellinger sisters decided to go exploring—and escape the grunge of the upstairs apartment. Now Piper sat perched on the wooden railing overlooking the harbor, head tilted to allow the early afternoon breeze to lift the hair from her neck, sunshine painting her cheek. She looked inspired and well rested, fashion-forward in a scoop-back bodysuit and skinny jeans. Chloe ankle booties that said, *I might go on one of these boats, but someone else will be doing the work.*

“Hanns,” she said out of the side of her mouth. “Lift the phone and angle it down.”

“My arms are getting tired.”

“One more. Go stand on that bench.”

“Piper, I’ve gotten no fewer than forty shots of you looking like a goddess.

How many options do you need?”

She gave an exaggerated pout. “Please, Hannah. I’ll buy you an ice cream.”

“I’m not a seven-year-old,” Hannah grumbled, climbing onto the stone bench. “I’m getting sprinkles.”

“Ooh, that would be a cute picture of you!”

“Yes,” her sister replied drily. “I’m sure all nineteen of my followers would love it.”

“If you’d let me share just *once*—”

“No way. We talked about this. Tip your head back.” Piper complied, and her sister snapped the pic. “I like being private. No sharing.”

Piper swung herself off the rail, accepting her phone back from Hannah.

“You’re just so cute, and everyone should know it.” “Uh-uh. Too much pressure.”

“How?”

“You’re probably so used to it by now, you don’t stop to think of how . . . all these strangers and their responses to your posts are determining your enjoyment. Like, are you even experiencing the harbor right now, or are you trying to come up with a caption?”

“Oof. Below the belt.” She sniffed. “Is ‘Feeling a little nauti’ cute?” “Yes.” Hannah snorted. “But that doesn’t mean you can tag me.”

“Fine.” Piper harrumphed and shoved her phone into her back pocket. “I’ll wait to post it so I won’t be checking for likes. I can’t get any reception, anyway. What should I look at with my eyeballs? What does reality have to offer me? Guide me, O wise one.”

With an indulgent grin, Hannah locked her arm through Piper’s. They each got an ice cream from a small shop and headed toward the rows of moored fishing vessels. Seagulls circled ominously overhead, but after a while, the sight of them and their shrill calls became part of the scenery, and Piper stopped worrying about being shat on. It was a clammy August afternoon, and tourists in sandals and bucket hats shuffled past signs advertising whale watching and boarded boats that bobbed in the water. Others stood in circles on the edges of the docks dropping what looked like steel buckets into the blue.

Piper noticed up ahead the white building proclaiming itself the maritime museum and recalled what Brendan had said about Henry Cross’s memorial. “Hey. Um . . . not to spring this on you, but apparently there’s a memorial for our father up here. Do you want to go look?”

Hannah considered. “That’s going to be weird.” “So weird,” Piper agreed.

“It would be weirder for his daughters *not* to visit, though.” She chewed her lip. “Let’s do it. If we wait, we’ll keep finding reasons to put it off.”

“Would we?” Not for the first time today, it occurred to Piper how little they’d spoken about the weird elephant in the room. Also known as the blurry start of their lives. “Finding out about Henry is something you’d want to avoid?”

“Isn’t it?” They traded a glance. “Maybe following Mom’s lead on this is just natural.”

“Yeah.” Only it didn’t feel natural. It kind of felt like a chunk was missing

from her memory. Or like there was a loose string in a sweater that she couldn’t ignore. Or like perhaps Brendan’s judgment had gotten to her in the supermarket. Her mother and grandparents had kept important details about Henry from her, but she could have found out about him on her own, right? Maybe this was her chance. “I think I want to go.”

“Okay.” Her sister studied her. “Let’s do it.”

Piper and Hannah continued along the harbor, scanning for the memorial. They returned the wave of an elderly man who sat on the museum lawn reading the paper. Shortly after, they spotted a brass statue outlined by the sea. Their steps slowed a little, but they kept going until they stopped in front of it. Gulls screeched around them, boats

hummed in the distance, and life continued as usual while they stood in front of an artist's rendering of their long-lost father.

There he was. Henry Cross. He'd been standing there, immortalized, the whole time. A larger-than-life brass version of him, anyway. Maybe that's why his frozen smile and the metal ripple of his fisherman's jacket seemed so impersonal, foreign. Piper searched for some kind of connection inside of her, but couldn't find it, and the guilt made her mouth dry.

A plaque positioned at his feet read: *Henry Cross. Deeply Missed, Forever Remembered.*

"He looks like a young Kevin Costner," Piper murmured. Hannah huffed a sound. "Oh shit, he really does."

"You were right. This is weird."

Their hands met and clasped. "Let's go. I have that Zoom call with Sergei in ten minutes, anyway."

Hannah had agreed to do some remote administrative work while in Westport, and she needed time to brush her hair and find a good background.

Their pace brisk, the sisters turned down the street that would guide them back to No Name and their apartment, but neither spoke. Hannah seemed deep in thought, while Piper tried to contend with the guilt—and a mild sense of failure—that she hadn't been . . . grabbed by her first encounter with Henry.

Was she too shallow to feel anything? Or was the beginning of her life so far removed from her reality, she couldn't reach it so many years later?

Piper took a deep breath, her lungs rejoicing from the lack of smog. They passed fishermen as they walked, most of the men on the older side, and every single one of them gave the sisters a tip of the cap. Piper and Hannah

smiled back. Even if they stayed a year in Westport, she'd probably never get used to the friendly ease of the locals, as they went around acknowledging other humans for no reason. There was something kind of nice about it, though she definitely preferred the bored indifference of Los Angeles. Definitely.

There was also something to be said for not looking at her phone as she walked. If she'd been responding to comments on her post, she might have missed the woman putting fresh fish into the window of her shop, two seagulls fighting over a French fry, a toddler trundling out of a candy shop stuffing saltwater taffy into his mouth. Maybe she should try to put her phone down more often. Or at least take in the real moments when she could.

When they reached No Name, Piper was surprised to find a man leaning up against the door. He appeared to be in his sixties, slightly round at the middle, a newsboy cap resting on top of his head. He watched them approach through narrowed eyes, a slight curve to his mouth.

“Hi,” Hannah called, getting out her keys. “Can we help you?”

The man pushed off the door, slapped a hand against his thigh. “Just came to see Henry and Maureen’s girls for myself, and there you are. How about that?”

After living two decades without hearing her father’s name at all, it was a jolt to hear it out loud, have it connected with them. And their mother. “I’m Piper,” she said, smiling. “This is Hannah. And you’re . . . ?”

“Mick Forrester,” he said affably, putting out his hand for a shake, giving each sister a hearty one. “I remember when you were knee high.”

“Oh! It’s nice to meet you as adults.” She glanced at Hannah. “My sister has a work thing. But if you’d like to come in, I think there’s still some beer in one of the coolers.”

“No, I couldn’t. I’m on my way to lunch with the old-timers.” He smoothed his thick-knuckled hands over his belly, as if pondering what he’d order to fill it. “Couldn’t let a day pass before I stopped by to say hello, see if you girls ended up favoring Maureen or Henry.” His eyes twinkled as he looked between them. “I’d have to say your mother, for sure. Lucky, that. No one wants to look like a weathered fisherman.” He laughed. “Although, Henry might have had that ocean-worn look about him, but, boy, your dad had a great laugh. Sometimes I swear I still hear it shaking the rafters of this place.”

“Yeah.” Inwardly, Piper winced at this stranger having more substantial memories and feelings for her own father. “That’s kind of the only thing I remember.”

“Shoot.” Hannah’s smile was tight. “I’m going to be late to the meeting.

Piper, you’ll fill me in?”

“Will do. Good luck.” Piper waited until Hannah had disappeared, the sound of her running up the back stairs of No Name fading after a moment. “So, how did you know Henry?”

Mick settled into himself, arms crossing over his chest. A classic storytelling stance. “We fished together. Worked our way up the ranks, side by side, from greenhorns to deckhands to crew, until eventually I bought the *Della Ray* and became my own captain.” Some of the luster dulled in his eyes. “Not to bring up a sad subject, Piper, but I was right there in the wheelhouse when we lost him. It was a dark day. I never had a better friend than Henry.”

Piper laid a hand on his elbow. "I'm sorry."

"Hell, you're his daughter." He reared back. "I'm the one should be comforting you."

"I wish . . . Well, we don't remember much about him at all. And our mother . . ."

"She was hurting too much to fill in the blanks, I'm guessing. That's not unusual, you know. Wives of fishermen come from tough stock. They have nerves of steel. My wife has them, passed them on to my daughter, Desiree." He gave a nod. "You might have met her husband, Brendan, the other night when you arrived."

*Desiree.* That was Brendan's late wife's name? Just like that, she was real.

Someone with a personality. Someone with a face, a voice, a presence.

Sadness had turned down the sides of his mouth at the mention of his daughter. "Wives of fishermen are taught to lock up their fears, get on with it. No crying or complaining. Your mother rebelled against the norm a little, I suppose. Couldn't find a way to cope with the loss, so she picked up and left. Started over in a place that wouldn't remind her of Westport. Can't say I wasn't tempted a time or two to do the same after my daughter passed, but I found it was worth staying the course."

Piper's throat felt tight. "I'm sorry. About your daughter."

Mick nodded once, weariness walking across his face. "Listen, I've got a lot more to tell you. Since you're staying awhile, I figure we'll have chances. A lot of us locals remember your father, and we never miss a chance to

reminisce." He took a piece of paper out of his back pocket, handed it over to Piper. An address was written on it, blunt but legible. "Speaking of locals, I figured there's one who'd be more eager to catch up than any of us. This here is the address for Opal. I wasn't sure if you'd had a chance to stop over and see her yet."

Was Opal a woman Piper was supposed to know? No clue.

But after visiting Henry's memorial and not being moved the way she should have been, she wasn't up for admitting her cluelessness, on top of the lingering guilt. Plus, there was something else she'd been wondering about and didn't want to miss her chance to ask.

"Opal. Of course." Piper folded up the piece of paper, debating whether or not she should ask her next question. "Mick . . . how exactly did Henry . . . ?" She sighed and started over. "We know it happened at sea, but we don't know the details, really."

"Ah." He removed his hat, pressed it to the center of his chest. "Rogue wave is what did it. He was standing there one minute, gone the next. She just snatched him right off the

deck. We always thought he must have hit his head before going into the drink, because no one was a stronger swimmer than Henry. He had to be out cold when he went overboard. And that Bering Sea water is so damn frigid, there's only a minute's window before it sucks the breath right out of a man's lungs."

A shudder caught her off guard, goose bumps lifting on every inch of her skin. "Oh my God," she whispered, imagining the robust man made of brass being pitched over the side of a boat, sinking to the bottom of the ocean all alone. Cold. Did he wake up or just drift off? She hoped it was the latter. Oddly, her thoughts strayed to Brendan. Was he safe when he ventured out on the water? Was all fishing this dangerous? Or just crab fishing? "That's terrible."

"Yeah." Mick sighed and replaced his hat, reaching out to pat her awkwardly on the shoulder. Until he touched her, Piper didn't realize her eyes were wet. "I promise I won't make you cry every time I see you," he said, obviously trying to lighten the mood.

"Just once in a while?" She laughed.

Amusement lit his eyes again. "Here now, listen. We're having a little party on Friday night. Just us locals having some drinks, a potluck. Sharing memories. Consider yourself and Hannah invited." He pointed toward the

harbor. "Up that way, there's a bar called Blow the Man Down. We'll be in the party room downstairs, around eight in the evening. I hope we'll see you there."

"I do love a party." She winked at him, and he blushed.

"All right, then." He gave her the signature Westport hat tip. "Great meeting you, Piper. You have a good day now."

"You too, Mick."

"Henry Cross's daughter," he muttered, heading off. "Hell of a thing."

Piper stood and watched him walk for a little before going inside. She didn't want to interrupt Hannah's Zoom call, so she took a seat on one of the barrels, letting the quiet settle around her. And for the first time, No Name felt like a little more than four walls.