

## It Happened One Summer Novel - Chapter 1

The unthinkable was happening.

Her longest relationship on record . . . over in the blink of an eye. Three weeks of her life *wasted*.

Piper Bellinger looked down at her lipstick-red, one-shoulder Valentino cocktail dress and tried to find the flaw but came up with nothing. Her tastefully tanned legs were polished to such a shine, she'd checked her teeth in them earlier. Nothing appeared amiss up top, either. She'd swiped the tape holding up her boobs while backstage at a runway show in Milan during fashion week—we're talking the holy grail of tit tape—and those puppies were on point. Big enough to draw a man's eye, small enough to achieve an athletic vibe in every fourth Instagram post. Versatility kept people interested.

Satisfied that nothing concerning her appearance was glaringly out of place, Piper trailed her gaze up the pleated leg of Adrian's classic Tom Ford suit made of the finest sharkskin wool, unable to quell a sigh over the luxurious peak lapels and monogrammed buttons. The way her boyfriend impatiently checked his Chopard watch and scanned the crowd over her shoulder only added to the bored-playboy effect.

Hadn't his cold unattainability attracted her to him in the first place?

God, the night of their first meeting seemed like a hundred years ago. She'd had at least two facials since then, right? What *was* time anymore? Piper could remember their introduction like it was yesterday. Adrian had saved her from stepping in vomit at Rumer Willis's birthday party. As she'd stared up at his chiseled chin from her place in his arms, she'd been transported to Old Hollywood. A time of smoking jackets and women

traipsing around in long, feathered robes. It was the beginning of her own classic love story.

And now the credits were rolling.

"I can't believe you're throwing it all away like this," Piper whispered, pressing her champagne flute between her breasts. Maybe drawing his attention there would change his mind? "We've been through so much."

"Yeah, tons, right?"

Adrian waved at someone across the rooftop, his expression letting whoever it was know that he'd be right with them. They'd come to the black, white, and red party together. A minor soiree to raise money for an indie movie project called *Lifestyles of the Oppressed and Famous*. The writer-director was a friend of Adrian's, meaning most

of the people at this gathering of Los Angeles elite were his acquaintances. Her girls weren't even there to console her or facilitate a graceful exit.

Adrian's attention settled back on her reluctantly. "Wait, what were you saying?"

Piper's smile felt brittle, so she turned it up another watt, careful to keep it one crucial notch below manic. *Chin up, woman.* This wasn't her first breakup, right? She'd done a lot of the dumping, often unexpectedly. This was a town of whims, after all.

She'd never really noticed the pace of how things changed. Not until lately.

At twenty-eight, Piper was not old. But she *was* one of the oldest women at this party. At every party she'd been to recently, come to think of it. Leaning on the glass railing that overlooked Melrose was an up-and-coming pop star who couldn't be a day older than nineteen. She didn't need tape from Milan to hold up her tits. They were light and springy with nipples that reminded Piper of the bottom of an ice cream cone.

The host himself was twenty-two and embarking on a film career.

*This was Piper's career.* Partying. Being seen. Holding up the occasional teeth-whitening product and getting a few dollars for it.

Not that she needed the money. At least, she didn't think so. Everything she owned came from the swipe of a credit card, and it was a mystery what happened after that. She assumed the bill went to her stepfather's email or something? Hopefully he wouldn't be weird about the crotchless panties she'd ordered from Paris.

"Piper? *Hello?*" Adrian swiped a hand in front of her face, and she realized

how long she'd been staring at the pop star. Long enough that the songstress was glaring back.

Piper smiled and waved at the girl, pointing sheepishly to her glass of champagne, before tuning back in to the conversation with Adrian. "Is this because I casually brought you up to my therapist? We didn't go in depth or anything, I promise. Most of the time we just nap during my appointments."

He stared at her for several seconds. Honestly, it was kind of nice. It was the most attention she'd gotten from him since almost slipping in puke. "I've dated some airheads, Piper." He sighed. "But you put them all to shame."

She kept her smile in place, though it took more determination than usual. People were watching. At that very moment, she was in the background of at least five selfies being captured around the roof, including one of Ansel Elgort. It would be a disaster if she let her sinking heart show on her face, especially when news of the breakup got out. "I don't understand," she said with a laugh, sweeping rose-gold hair over her shoulder.

“Shocking,” he returned drily. “Look, babe. It was a fun three weeks. You’re a smoke show in a bikini.” He shrugged an elegant Tom Ford–clad shoulder. “I’m just trying to end this before it gets boring, you know?”

Boring. Getting older. Not a director or a pop star. Just a pretty girl with a millionaire stepfather.

Piper couldn’t think about that now, though. She just wanted to exit the party as inconspicuously as possible and go have a good cry. After she popped a Xanax and posted an inspirational quote on her IG feed, of course. It would confirm the breakup, but also allow her to control the narrative. Something about growth and loving herself, maybe?

Her sister, Hannah, would have the perfect song lyric to include. She was always sitting around in a pile of vinyls, those giant, ugly headphones wrapped around her head. Damn, she wished she’d put more stock in Hannah’s opinion of Adrian.

What had she said? Oh yeah.

*He’s like if someone drew eyes on a turnip.*

Once again, Piper had zoned out, and Adrian checked his watch for the second time. “Are we done here? I have to mingle.”

“Oh. *Yeah*,” she rushed to say, her voice horrifyingly unnatural. “You couldn’t be more right about breaking things off before the boring blues strike. I didn’t think about it like that.” She clinked her champagne glass against his. “We’re consciously uncoupling. *Très* mature.”

“Right. Call it whatever you want.” Adrian forced a wan smile. “Thanks for everything.”

“No, thank *you*.” She pursed her lips, trying to appear as non-airhead-like as possible. “I’ve learned a lot about myself over the last three weeks.”

“Come on, Piper.” Adrian laughed, scrutinizing her head to toe. “You play dress-up and spend your daddy’s money. You don’t have a reason to learn anything.”

“Do I need a reason?” she asked lightly, lips still tilted at the corners.

Annoyed at being waylaid, Adrian huffed a breath. “I guess not. But you definitely need a brain that functions beyond how many likes you can get on a picture of your rack. There’s more to life than that, Piper.”

“Yes, I know,” she said, prodded by irritation—and more than a little bit of reluctant shame. “Life is what I’m documenting through photos. I—”

“God.” He half groaned, half laughed. “Why are you *forcing* me to be an asshole?” Someone called his name from inside the penthouse, and he held up a finger, keeping his gaze locked on Piper. “There’s just nothing to you, okay? There are thousands of Piper Bellingers in this city. You’re just a way to pass the time.” He shrugged. “And your time has passed.”

It was a miracle Piper kept her winning smile intact as Adrian sailed away, already calling out to his friends. Everyone on the roof deck was staring at her, whispering behind their hands, feeling sorry for her—of all the horrors. She saluted them with her glass, then realized it was empty. Setting it down on the tray of a passing waiter, she collected her Bottega Veneta satin knot clutch with all the dignity she could muster and glided through the throng of onlookers, blinking back the moisture in her eyes to bring the elevator call button into focus.

When the doors finally hid her from view, she slumped back against the metal wall, taking deep breaths in through her nose, out through her mouth. Already the news that she’d been dumped by Adrian would be blasted across all the socials, maybe even with video included. Not even C-list celebrities would invite her to parties after this.

She had a reputation as a good time. Someone to covet. An “it girl.” If she didn’t have her social status, what *did* she have?

Piper pulled her phone out of her clutch and absently requested a luxury Uber, connecting her with a driver who was only five minutes away. Then she closed the app and pulled up her favorites list. Her thumb hovered over the name “Hannah” momentarily, but landed on “Kirby,” instead. Her friend

answered on the first ring.

“Oh my God, is it true you begged Adrian not to break up with you in front of Ansel Elgort?”

It was worse than she thought. How many people had already tipped off TMZ? Tomorrow night at six thirty, they would be tossing her name around the newsroom while Harvey sipped from his reusable cup. “I didn’t beg Adrian to keep me. Come on, Kirby, you know me better than that.”

“Bitch, I do. But I’m not everyone else. You need to do damage control.

Do you have a publicist on retainer?”

“Not anymore. Daniel said me going shopping doesn’t need a press release.”

Kirby snorted. “Okay, boomer.”

“But you’re right. I do need damage control.” The elevator doors opened, and Piper stepped off, clicking through the lobby in her red-soled pumps, eventually stepping out onto Wilshire, the warm July air drying the dampness in her eyes. The tall buildings of downtown Los Angeles reached up into the smoggy summer night sky, and she craned her neck to find the tops. “How late is the rooftop pool open at the Mondrian?”

“You’re asking about hours of operation at a time like this?” Kirby griped, followed by the sound of her vape crackling in the background. “I don’t know, but it’s past midnight. If it’s not already closed, it will be soon.”

A black Lincoln pulled up along the curb. After double-checking the license plate number, Piper climbed inside and shut the door. “Wouldn’t breaking into the pool and having the time of our lives be, like, *the* best way to fight fire with fire? Adrian would be the guy who broke up with a legend.”

“Oh shit,” Kirby breathed. “You’re resurrecting Piper twenty fourteen.”

This was the answer, wasn’t it? There was no better time in her life than the year she turned twenty-one and ran absolutely buck wild through Los Angeles, making herself famous for being famous in the process. She was just in a rut, that was all. Maybe it was time to reclaim her crown. Maybe then she wouldn’t hear Adrian’s words looping over and over again in the back of her head, forcing her to consider that he might be right.

*Am I just one of thousands?*

*Or am I the girl who breaks into a pool for a swim at one o’clock in the morning?*

Piper nodded resolutely and leaned forward. “Can you take me to the Mondrian, instead, please?”

Kirby hooted down the line. “I’ll meet you there.”

“I’ve got a better idea.” Piper crossed her legs and fell back in the leather seat. “How about we have *everyone* meet us there?”