

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 14 -

Deciding to make over the bar and actually *doing* it were two very different things.

The sisters quickly decided there was no way to salvage the floor in the bar. But thanks to an abundance of foot-sized holes in the hardwood, they could see the concrete beneath, and thus, their industrial-meets-nautical-chic vision was born.

Ripping up floorboards was easier said than done. It was filthy, sweaty, nasty work, especially because neither one of them could manage to pry open the windows, adding stagnant air into the mix. They were making progress, though, and by noon on Saturday, they'd managed to fill an entire industrial-sized garbage bag with No Name's former flooring.

Piper tied up the end of the bag with a flourish, trying desperately not to shed tears over the abysmal state of her manicure, and dragged it toward the curb. Or she tried to drag it, anyway. The damn thing wouldn't budge. "Hey, Hanns, help me get this thing outside."

Her sister dropped the crowbar she'd bought that morning at the hardware store, shouldered up beside Piper, and took hold. "One, two, *three*."

Nothing.

Piper stepped back, swiping her wrist across her forehead with a grimace. "I didn't stop to think about the part where we actually had to move it."

"Me either, but whatever. We can just disperse it among a few bags that won't be so hard to carry."

A whimper bubbled out of Piper's lips. "How did this happen? How am I spending my Saturday dividing up garbage?"

"Reckless behavior. A night in jail . . ."

"Rude." Piper sniffed.

"You know I love you." Hannah peeled off her gloves. "Want to break for lunch?"

"Yes." They took two steps and slumped onto side-by-side stools. As exhausting and difficult as this bar makeover was shaping up to be, with a little distance, the amount of work they'd done in just a few hours was kind of . . . satisfying. "I wonder if we could paint the floor. Like a really deep ocean blue. Do they make paint for floors?"

"Don't ask me. I'm just the DJ."

Now that the idea was in Piper's head, she was interested in getting the answers. "Maybe I'll go with you to the hardware store next time. Sniff around."

Hannah smiled but didn't look over. "Okay."

A minute of silence passed. "Did I tell you I crashed a memorial party for Brendan's wife last night? Walked in with a tray of shots like it was spring break in Miami."

Her sister turned her head slowly. "Are you shitting me?"

"Nope." She pulled an imaginary conductor's wire. "The Piper train rolls on."

To Hannah's credit, it took her a full fifteen seconds to start laughing. "Oh my God, I'm not laughing at . . . I mean, it's a sad thing, the memorial. But, oh, Piper. Just, oh my God."

"Yeah." She smacked some dust off her yoga pants. "Do you think my lipstick purse is ugly?"

"Uhhh . . ."

Hannah was saved from having to answer when the front door of No Name opened. In walked Brendan with a tray of coffees in his hand, a white, rolled-up bakery bag in the other. There was something different about him this morning, but Piper couldn't figure it out. Not right away. He was wearing his signature sweatshirt, beanie, and jeans trifecta as usual, looking worn in and earthy and in charge, carrying in with him the scent of the ocean and coffee and sugar. His silver-green eyes found Piper's and held long enough to cause a disturbing flutter in her belly, before he scanned the room and their progress.

"Hey," he said, in that raspy baritone. "Hey back," Piper murmured.

Piper, I don't just go putting my arms around girls.

She'd lain awake half the night dissecting that statement. Pulling it apart and coming at it from different angles, all of which had led to roughly the same conclusion. Brendan didn't put his arms around girls, so it meant something that he'd put them around her. Probably just that he wanted to have sex with her, right? And she was . . . interested in that, it seemed, based on how her nipples had turned to painful little points the second he ducked into No Name with his big gladiator thighs and thick black beard. Oh yeah. She was interested, all right. But not in the usual way she was interested in men.

Because Brendan came with a whole roll of caution tape around him.

He wasn't a casual-hookup guy. So what did that make him? What else even *was* there? Apart from her stepfather, she'd come across very few serious-relationship types. Was he one of them? What did he want with *her*?

There was a good chance she was reading him wrong, too. This could very well just be a friendship, and since she'd never had a genuine friendship with a man, platonic intentions might be unrecognizable to her. This was a small town. People were kind. They tipped hats.

She'd probably been in LA too long, and it had turned her cynical. He'd just put his arms around her last night to be decent. *Relax, Piper.*

"Is that coffee for us?" Hannah asked hopefully.

"Yeah." He crossed the scant distance and set the tray down on the barrel in front of the sisters. "There's some sugar and whatnot in the bag." He tossed the white sack down, rubbed at the back of his neck. "Didn't know how you took it."

"Our hero," Piper said, opening the bag and giving a dreamy sigh at the donuts inside. But first, caffeine. She plucked out a Splenda and one of the non-dairy creamers, doctoring the coffee. When she glanced up at Brendan, he was following her actions closely, a line between his brows. Memorizing how she took her coffee? No way.

She swallowed hard.

"Thank you. This was really thoughtful."

"Yes, thank you," Hannah chimed in after taking a sip of hers, black, then riffing through the white bag for a donut. "It's not even made out of cauliflower. We really aren't in LA anymore, Pipes."

"Cauliflower? Jesus Christ." Brendan pulled his own coffee out of the tray

—and that's when Piper realized what was actually different about him this morning.

He'd taken off his wedding ring. After seven years.

Piper's gaze traveled to Brendan's. He knew she'd seen. And there was some silent communication happening between them, but she didn't understand the language. Had never spoken it or been around a man who could convey so much without saying a single word. She couldn't translate what passed between them, or maybe she just wasn't ready to decipher his meaning.

A drop of sweat slid down her spine, and she could suddenly hear her own shallow breaths. No one had ever looked her in the eye this long. It was like he could read her mind, knew everything about her, and liked it all. Wanted some of it for himself.

And then she knew, by the determined set of his jaw and his confident energy, that Brendan Taggart did not think of her as a friend.

"This donut is incredible," Hannah said, her words muffled by the dough in her mouth. "There's caramel in this glaze. Pipes, you have to try—" She cut herself off, her gaze bouncing back and forth between Piper and Brendan. "What's happening here?"

"N-nothing," Piper said in a high-pitched voice. "I don't know. Um.

Brendan, do you know if it's, like, possible to paint concrete?" Her flustered state seemed to amuse him. "It is."

"Oh good, good, good." Exasperated with her own awkwardness, she hopped off the stool. Then she knocked into another one in an attempt to give Brendan a wide berth. "We've decided to go with an industrial-meets-nautical theme. Kind of a chic warehouse vibe, but with like, fisherman-y stuff."

"Fisherman-y stuff," he repeated, sipping his coffee. "Like what?"

"Well, we're going with darker colors, blacks and steels and grays and reds, but we're going to distress everything a little. Most of the boats in the harbor have those muted, weathered tones, right? Then I was kind of thinking we could integrate new and old by hanging nets from the ceiling, but I could spray-paint them gold or black, so it's cohesive. I'm just rattling all of this off, though. It might be . . ." Her hands fluttered at her waist. "Like, I might have to rethink everything . . ."

Brendan's expression had gone from amused to thoughtful. Or maybe . . . disapproving? She couldn't tell. It seemed like weeks had passed since the first night she'd walked through the doors and he'd made it clear No Name

belonged to the locals. So he probably hated her ideas and the fact that she wanted to change anything in the first place.

"Right," he said, rolling the word around his mouth. "Well, if you want nautical, you're not going to overpay for anything in the tourist shops up at the harbor. There's a fishing supply store in Aberdeen where they throw in netting for free with most purchases and everything doesn't have a goddamn starfish glued onto it." His lips twisted around a sip of coffee. "I can't help you with gold spray paint."

"Oh." Piper let out a breath she wasn't aware she'd been holding. "Thanks. We're on a budget, especially after our little trip to the winery, so that's helpful."

He grunted and walked past her, stepping over the gap in the floorboards. It seemed like he was heading toward the back staircase, so Piper frowned when he continued past that, stopping in front of yet another piece of plywood that had been nailed over holes in the wall. Only, when he ripped off the wood with one hand and tossed it away, there was a door behind it instead.

Piper's mouth fell open. "Where does that lead?"

Brendan set down his coffee on the closest surface, then tried the rusted knob. It turned, but the door didn't open. Not until he put his big shoulder against it and shoved . . .

And Piper saw the sky.

A fallen tree and, of course, more spiderwebs, but there was sky. "An outdoor space?"

Hannah hopped up, mouth agape. "No way. Like a patio?"

Brendan nodded. "Boarded it up during a storm a few years ago. Wasn't getting much use anyway, with all the rain." He braced a hand on the doorjamb. "You want this cleared out."

The sisters nodded along. "Yeah. How do we do that?"

He didn't answer. "Once the tree is gone, you'll see the patio is a decent size. Dark gray pavers, so I guess that's in keeping with . . . What is it, your theme? There's a stone hearth back in the corner." He jerked his chin. "You want to put up a pergola, get a waterproof cover. Even in damp weather, you'll be able to use it with a fire going."

What he was describing sounded cozy and rustic and *way* outside their capabilities.

Piper laughed under her breath. "I mean, that sounds amazing, but . . ."

"We're not leaving for crab season until next Saturday. I'll work on it." He turned and strode for the exit, pausing beside the impossible-to-lift trash bag. "You want this on the curb?"

"Yes, please," Piper responded.

With seemingly zero effort, he tossed it over his right shoulder and walked out, taking the smell of salt water and unapologetic maleness with him. Piper and Hannah stared at the door for several long minutes, the wind coming in from the patio cooling their sweaty necks. "I think that was it," Hannah finally said on a laugh. "I don't think he's coming back."

Brendan *did* come back . . . the next day, with Fox, Sanders, and a man named Deke in tow. The four of them hauled the tree out through the front of the bar, and with an indecipherable look in Piper's direction, Brendan promptly left again.

Bright and early on Monday morning, he was back. Just strolled in like not a moment had passed since his last dramatic exit, this time with a toolbox.

Piper and Hannah, who were in the process of prying sheetrock off the perfectly good brick wall, glanced through the front door to see a pickup truck loaded with lumber. One

trip at a time, Brendan brought the wood through the bar to the back patio, along with a table saw, while Piper and Hannah observed him with their heads on a swivel, as if watching a tennis match.

“Wait, I think . . .” Hannah whispered. “I think he’s building you that freaking pergola.”

“You mean *us*?” Piper whispered back. “No. I mean *you*.”

“That’s crazy. If he liked me, why wouldn’t he just ask me out?” They traded a mystified look.

Hannah sucked in a breath. “Do you think he’s, like, courting you?”

Piper laughed. “*What?* No.” She had to press a hand to her abdomen to keep a weird, gooey sensation at bay. “Okay, but if he is, what if it’s working?”

“Is it?”

“I don’t know. No one’s ever built me anything!” They hopped back as Brendan stomped through the bar again, long wooden boards balanced on his wide shoulder. When he set the lumber down, he grabbed the rear neck of his sweatshirt and stripped it off, bringing the T-shirt underneath along with it, and sweet mother of God, Piper only caught a hint of a deep groove over his

hip and a slice of packed stomach muscles before the shirt fell back into place, but it was enough to make her clench where it counted. “Oh yeah,” Piper said throatily. “It’s working.” She sighed. “Shit.”

“Why ‘shit’?” Hannah gave her a knowing smirk. “Because Mom made that ominous warning about fishermen?” She made a spooky woo-woo sound. “It’s not like you’d let it get serious. You’d keep it casual.”

Yes. She would.

But would Brendan?

Builds a Pergola Guy didn’t seem like the casual type. And his lack of a wedding ring was almost more a presence than the actual ring had been. Every time their eyes met, a hot shiver roared down her spine, because there was a promise there, but also . . . patience. Maturity.

Had she ever dated a real man before? Or had they all been boys?

* * *

It was Wednesday afternoon during their lunch break. Brendan, Deke, Fox, and Sanders ate sandwiches from paper wrappers, while Hannah and Piper mostly listened to the crew pitch theories about their upcoming crabbing haul

—and that’s when it hit Piper.

She pulled out her phone just to be sure, blowing sawdust off the screen. And decided the oversight couldn’t stand for another moment.

“Brendan,” she called, during a break in the crab conversation. “You still haven’t posted your first picture on Instagram.”

His sandwich paused halfway to his mouth. “That’s not required, is it?”

Fox gave her an exaggerated nod behind the captain’s back, urging her to lie. “It’s totally required. They’ll delete your account otherwise.” She studied her phone, pretending to scroll. “I’m shocked they haven’t already.”

“Can’t look at pictures if your account is gone, boss,” Deke said, so nonchalantly Piper could only imagine how accustomed these guys were to pranking each other. “Just saying.”

Brendan flicked a look at Piper. If she wasn’t mistaken, being called out for stalking her Instagram account had turned the very tips of his ears a little red. “I can put up a picture of anything, right? Even this sandwich?”

How far could they take this without him calling bullshit? Already it was an unspoken game. Get the captain to post a picture on the internet by any means necessary. “Has to be your face the first time,” Hannah chimed in,

scrubbing at the hair beneath her baseball cap. “You know, facial recognition technology.”

“Yup.” Sanders pointed his sandwich at Hannah. “What she said.”

“The light is perfect right now.” Piper stood and crossed the floor of No Name toward Brendan, wiggling her phone in the air. “Come on, I can pose you.”

“Pose me?” He tugged on his beanie. “Uh-uh.”

“Just give in. We all do it, man,” Sanders said. “You know those engagement photos I took last year? Two hours of posing. On a goddamn *horse*.”

“See? You only have to pose with a sawhorse.” Piper put a hand on Brendan’s melon-sized bicep and squeezed, loosing an unmistakable flutter in her belly. “It’ll be fun.”

“Maybe we don’t have the same idea of fun,” he said dubiously.

“No?” Aware she was playing with fire but unable to stop herself, Piper leaned down and murmured in his ear, “I can think of a few fun things we’d both enjoy.”

Brendan swallowed. A vein ticked in his temple. “One picture.” “Fabulous.”

Piper pulled Brendan to his feet, tugging the reluctant giant outside, his boots crunching through the construction debris. A rapid shuffling of barrels told her Hannah and the crew were following them to the patio, eager to catch this rare, sparkling moment in time.

“Everyone is going to remember where they were when Brendan took his first picture for the gram,” Deke said with mock gravity.

“First and last,” corrected the captain.

“Who knows, you might form a habit,” Piper said, coming up beside Brendan where he stood behind the sawhorse. “Okay, so shirt on? Or off?”

Brendan looked at her like she was insane. “On.”

Piper wrinkled her nose at him. “Fine, but can I just . . .” She pinched the sleeve of his sweaty red T-shirt between her fingers and tugged it up, revealing the deep cut of his triceps. “Ooh. That’ll work.”

He grunted, seeming annoyed at himself for being flattered. But he *definitely* flexed that tricep a little.

Piper hid her smile and moved to stand a short distance away, phone at the ready in portrait mode. “Okay, left hand on the sawhorse, pick up the drill in your right.”

“Big tools!” Hannah called. “Yay, symbolism.”

“This is ridiculous.” He looked around. “It’s obvious I’m not drilling anything.”

“Distract them with your smile,” Hannah said, in between long sips of her fountain soda. “Show them those pearly whites.”

“Who is *them*?” Brendan wanted to know. “Piper is the only one following me.”

Everyone ignored that.

“Post some content and I’ll consider it.” Sanders sniffed.

“Smile like we’re hauling in a hundred crabs per pot,” Fox suggested. “We *have* done that. Do you remember me smiling then?”

“That’s a valid point,” said Deke. “Maybe Cap’s just got resting asshole face.”

Finally, Piper took pity on Brendan and approached the sawhorse. “I forgot to tell you something. It’s kind of a secret.” She crooked her finger at the man, gratified when he leaned down as if compelled. His sweaty warmth coasted over her, and she went up on her toes, eager to get closer. Maybe even requiring the added proximity. “I’ve been ordering your suggested dishes off the takeout menus, and you were right. They’re the best ones.”

She caught his smile up close with the tap of the screen.

“Look at that,” she whispered, turning the phone in his direction. “You’re a natural.”

The corner of his lips tugged, taking his beard along with it. “Are you going to tap the heart on it?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Oh, she was openly flirting with the captain now. Did that mean the third wall was back up? Or was she in some undiscovered flirting territory that lay on the other side of the rubble? “I’d tap it twice if I could.”

He made a sound in his throat, leaned in a little closer. “I know they don’t require a picture to keep your account active. This was about making you smile, not me.” His gaze fell to her mouth, taking its time finding her eyes again. “Well worth it.” With that, he set down the drill and pinned his crew with a look. “Back to work.”

All Piper could do was stare at the spot he’d just vacated. Goose bumps. He’d given her goose bumps.

* * *

Throughout the course of the week, as Brendan constructed the pergola over the back patio, it was impossible for Piper not to feel a growing sense of . . . importance. There was a warmth in her middle working its way outward with every whirr of the saw, every swing of his hammer. She’d thought nothing could make her feel sexier than a pair of Louboutins, but this man building her something by hand not only turned her on, it made her feel coveted. Wanted. In a way that wasn’t superficial, but durable.

So. That was terrifying.

But it wasn’t just Brendan’s work making her feel positive, it was her own persistence. Piper and Hannah came down the stairs every morning and got started, hauling debris,

hammering up the sagging crown molding, sanding the window frames and giving them fresh coats of paint, and organizing the storage spaces behind the bar. A warm glow of pride settled in and made itself at home with the completion of each new project.

On Thursday, in the late afternoon, the sounds of construction ceased on the back patio, the hammer and saw falling silent. Hannah had gone to spend the afternoon with Opal, so it was only Piper and Brendan in No Name. She was sanding down some shelves behind the bar when his boots scuffed over the threshold, the skin of her neck heating under his regard.

“It’s finished,” Brendan said in that low timbre. “You want to come look?” Piper’s nerves jangled, but she set down her sandpaper and stood. He watched her approach, his height and breadth filling the doorway, his gaze only dipping to the neckline of her tank top briefly. But it was enough for his

pupils to expand, his jaw to tighten.

She was a dusty mess. Had been for the last six days. And it hadn’t seemed to matter at all. In dirty jogging pants or sequins, she was still pergola worthy. Had he busted his hump simply because he liked *her* and not just how she looked? The possibility that he’d shown up to see her, help her, without anything in return, made her comfortable in her own skin— ironically, without any of her usual beautifying trappings.

At the last second, he moved so she could slide through the doorway, and it took all of her self-control not to run her hands up Muscle Mountain. Or lean in and take a hearty drag of real, actual male exertion. God, with every passing day, she was growing less and less enamored of the groomed and coiffed men of her acquaintance. She’d like to see *them* try to operate a table saw.

Piper stepped outside and looked up, startled pleasure leaving her mouth in

the form of a halting laugh. “What? You . . . Brendan, you just *built* this?” Face tipped back, she turned in a slow circle. “This is beautiful. Amazing. This patio was a jungle on Sunday. Now look at it.” She clutched her hands together between her breasts. “Thank you.”

Brendan cleaned the dirt off his hands with a rag, but he watched her steadily from beneath the dark band of his beanie. “Glad you like it.”

“No. I *love* it.”

He grunted. “You ready?” “Ready for what?”

“For me to ask you to dinner yet.”

Her pulse tripped all over itself. Got up. Tripped again. “Did you think you needed to build a pergola to convince me?”

“No. I, uh . . .” He tossed down the rag, shoved his hands into his pockets. “I needed something to keep me busy while I worked up the nerve to ask.”

Oh.

Oh *no*. That worrisome little flurry in her belly went wild, flying in a dozen directions and careening into important inside parts. She needed to do something about this before . . . what? She didn’t know what *happened* with serious men. Men who courted her and didn’t just go putting their arms around women all willy-nilly. “Wow. I—I don’t know what to say. Except . . . I will absolutely have dinner with you, Brendan. I’d love to.”

He averted his gaze, nodded firmly, a smile teasing one corner of his mouth. “All right.”

“But . . .” She swallowed hard when those intense green eyes zipped back in her direction. “Well. I like you, Brendan. But I just want to be up front and say, you know . . . that I’m going back to LA. Part of the reason we’re fixing up the bar is to impress Daniel, our stepfather. We’re hoping the display of ingenuity will be a ticket home early.” She smiled. “So we both know this dinner is casual. Friendly, even. Right? We both know that.” She laughed nervously, tucking some hair into her ponytail. “I’m just stating the obvious.”

His cheek ticced. “Sure.”

Piper pursed her lips. “So . . . we’re agreeing on that.”

A beat passed as he considered her. “Look, we both know I like to put things into neat little boxes, but I . . . haven’t been able to do that with you. Let’s just see what happens.”

Panic tickled her throat. “But . . .”

He just went along packing up his tools. “I’ll pick you up tomorrow night.

Seven.”

Without waiting for a response, he turned and walked into the bar, toward the exit.

She took a moment to internally sputter, then trotted along after him. “But, Brendan—”

One second he was holding the toolbox, the next it was on the ground and he was turning. Piper’s momentum brought her up against Brendan’s body, *hard*, and his boat captain forearm wrapped around her lower back, lifting her just enough that her toes brushed the concrete. And then he bowed her backward on that steel arm, stamping his

mouth down onto hers in an epic kiss. It was like a movie poster, with the male lead curling his big, hunky body over the swooning, feminine lady and taking his fill.

What?

What was she thinking? Her brain was clearly compromised—and it was no wonder. The mouth that found hers was tender and hungry, all at once. Worshipful, but restraining an appetite like she'd never encountered. As soon as their lips connected and held, her fingers curled into the neck of his T-shirt, and that arm at the small of her back levered her upright, flattening the fronts of their bodies, and oh God, he just devoured her. His lips pushed hers wide, his workingman's fingers plowed into her hair, and his tongue snuck in deep, invading and setting off flares in her erogenous zones.

And he *moaned*.

This huge, gritty badass of a man moaned like he'd never tasted anything so good in all his life and he needed to get more. He brought them up for a simultaneous gasp of air, then he went right back to work, his tongue stroking over hers relentlessly until she was using her grip on his collar to climb him, her mouth just as eager, just as needy.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

They were going to have sex, right then and there. That was the only place a kiss like this could lead. With him moaning for an entirely different reason, those sturdy hips of his holding her thighs apart to take his thrusts. How had they been orbiting each other for over a week without this happening? With every slant of his hard mouth, she was losing her mind—

The door to No Name opened, letting in the distant sounds of the harbor. "Oh! I'm sorry . . ." Hannah said sheepishly. "Um, I'll just . . ."

Brendan had broken the kiss, his breathing harsh, eyes glittering. He stared at her mouth for a few long moments while Piper's brain struggled to play

catch-up, his hand eventually dropping away from her hair. *No*, she almost whined. *Come back*. "Tomorrow night," he rasped. "Seven."

He kept his eyes on Piper until the last possible second before disappearing out the door. At which point, she staggered behind the bar and uncapped a beer from the cooler. Thank God they'd had the foresight to fill it with ice. Piper drank deeply, trying to get her libido back in check, but it was no dice. The seam of her panties was damp, her nipples stiff and achy, her fingers itching to be twisted once again in Brendan's shirt.

"I'm going to need your help, Hanns," she said finally. "Like, a lot of it."

Her sister stared back, wide-eyed, never having seen Piper knocked sideways by a man. "Help with what?"

"Remembering that whatever happens with Brendan . . . it's temporary." "Will do, sis." Hannah came around the bar, opened her own beer, and

stood shoulder to shoulder with Piper. "Jesus. I've never seen you this worked up. Who knew your kink was outdoor living spaces?"

Piper's snort turned into a full-fledged laugh. "We have a date in approximately twenty-four hours. You know what that means?"

"You have to start getting ready now?" "Yup."

Hannah laughed. "Go. I'll clean up here."

Piper kissed her sister's temple and jogged up the back stairs, going straight to her closet. She pressed the mouth of the beer bottle to her lips and perused her choices, wondering which dress said *I'm not the settling-down type*.

Because she wasn't.

Especially not in Westport. She just needed to remind Brendan of that. With a firm nod, she chose the emerald-green Alexander Wang fit-and-

flare velvet minidress. If she was just here to have fun, she'd have the *most*

fun. And try to forget how involved her heart had been in that kiss.